The original Greek meaning of the Greek term *symmetria* pertains to the commensurability of parts: the idea that all dimensions of an object (e.g., a building) can be expressed as ratios of whole numbers. This is the same as saying that none of the dimensions of the object relates to any of the others as an irrational ratio, such as that of the diagonal of a square to its side, a diagonal of a cube to its side, or the Golden Section (the diagonal of a pentagon to its side). The authors trace this use of the word in Greek mathematical writings and cite Roman authors (including Vitruvius) who used the Greek word transliterated into Latin to express this same meaning. A convincing number of examples from medieval Latin mathematical texts shows that this use of the cognates of Greek *symmetria* did not survive into the Middle Ages; rather, the two standard terms were *commensurabiles* and *communicantes*. The Renaissance brought the revival of the use of the Latin and Italian cognates derived from the Greek original term, still used in order to express the concept of the commensurability of ratios. The authors do not attempt to provide a full survey of the use of these terms in Renaissance architectural writings; the use of the term in the works of some major commentators on Vitruvius, such as Daniele Barbaro, is left undiscussed—arguably, this would merely make the book thicker, without providing any new insight into the use of the term in the Renaissance. However, the account of the Renaissance use of *symmetria* includes an extremely important reference to a passage in Serlio, in which the word is used in its modern sense to refer to the situation when parts on the left and right side of a building’s central axis are evenly deposited. As the authors show, this meaning only really came into use in seventeenth-century French architectural theory—and one is easily tempted to think that this was a lasting consequence of Serlio’s sojourn in France. The traditional meaning of the term is still preserved in Galilei’s work, but the use of the cognates derived from the Greek *symmetria* in French scientific circles was rare until the Revolution. Then suddenly, in the years 1793–1815, their use explodes. It was in these years that the scientific uses of the derivations of the Greek *symmetria* were established as technical terms in various scientific disciplines. The authors carefully analyze the formulation of the concept that is expressed by the term *symmetry* in modern geometry by Adrien-Marie Legendre (1752–1833) and the preceding attempts by Euler and Kant.

For an architectural historian, these final chapters are particularly valuable and interesting reading, since they provide a good account of the use of an important element of our terminology in other disciplines. The author’s argument that the modern formalized concept of symmetry was only developed by Legendre is certainly convincing. But one does become skeptical when the authors attempt to argue that the modern understanding of symmetry (in the sense of equivalence between the left and the right side of an edifice) was never articulated in ancient times. This is obviously a very strong claim that cannot be defended simply by citing Vitruvius and showing that he did not use the term *symmetria* in the way we use *symmetry* in modern English—besides the only surviving Roman architectural treatise, there exists a substantial body of descriptions of architectural works in Greek and Roman literature. These sources needed to be systematically surveyed before the authors’ claim could be validated when it comes to the *surviving* Greco-Roman sources. As for the claim that this articulation never occurred in any ancient writings at all, I simply do not see how it can be proved.

Architectural historians will enjoy Giora Hon and Bernard R. Goldstein’s book because it neatly summarizes the use of an important set of etymological cognates that have played an important role in the history of architectural theory. The book will be a stimulating read in many postgraduate architectural history programs. The connections that the book establishes when it comes to the use of the term in various scientific traditions provide an architectural historian with valuable insights and the wider perspective we often need.

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**Notes**

1. “[I]n contrast to material culture, the written culture does not exhibit any articulation of the concept of symmetry as we know it today” (13). The authors then try to differentiate between ability to recognize symmetry, the possession of the concept of symmetry, and the articulation of the concept of symmetry. The lengthy methodological introduction (1–65) would have profited much from the consideration of the recent related debates in the philosophy of history. See for instance Gad Prudovsky, “Can We Ascribe to Past Thinkers Concepts They Had No Linguistic Means to Express?” *History and Theory* 36 (1997), 15–31 and Mark Bevir “The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism,” *History and Theory* 31 (1992) 276–98. For a discussion of methodological problems pertaining to the attribution of concepts to historical figures, see most recently Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, “Making Sense of Conceptual Change,” *History and Theory* 47 (2008), 351–72.

2. This is not as huge a task as it may seem. For instance, a complete survey of all ancient sources writing about architecture (over 130 authors but excluding Vitruvius) was published in Russian in 1940. The book is masterpiece of Soviet scholarship; it is about 500 pages and it covers more or less all that was written on architecture in ancient times, from Homer to the fifth century A.D. V. P. Zubov and F. A. Petrovsky ed. and trans., *Архитектура Вечного Дома* (Moscow: Vsesoyuznaya Akademnya Arhitekturi, 1940).

Robin Karson

**A Genius for Place: American Landscapes of the Country Place Era**

Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (in association with the Library of American Landscape), 2007, xiii + 428 pages, 483 b/w illus. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 9781558849636

In 1971 landscape historian Norman Newton suggested that a focus on country estates would lead to an impression that landscape architecture was “geared solely to magnificence for the opulent few” (xiv). Nevertheless recent historians have discovered a remarkable breadth in the period Newton named the Country Place Era. Mark Girouard’s *The English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (1980) established the country house as a significant domain of research. Robin Karson’s *A Genius for Place* significantly contributes to this research by expanding it to the landscape.
Her book raises the standards for research in the history of landscape architecture while encouraging future scholarship.

In 1904 Barr Ferree defined “the great country house as . . . a new type of dwelling, a sumptuous house . . . placed on an estate . . . with a garden which is an integral part of the architectural scheme” (xvi). Hewitt considered the landscape an essential element, although primarily a setting for the architecture. By focusing on the partnership of patrons and landscape architects, Karson, who has written extensively on Fletcher Steele and serves as executive director of the Library of American Landscape History, selects seven examples organized chronologically into three parts, each of which is focused on a decade of design between 1910 and 1939. The individual sections offer biographies of the landscape architects and discussion of design and construction. Drawing on diverse resources, including her own previous publications, Karson identifies the gardens at Gwinn (1907–1912) and Stan Hywett Hall (1912–1915) as representative of an emerging American style. Both were designed by Warren H. Manning, Charles A. Platt, and Ellen Shipman. Dumbarton Oaks (1920), the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House (1926–27), and Winterthur (1926–27) are used to discuss innovation in work of Beatrix Farrand, Jens Jensen, and Marian Cruger Coffin. The final section considers Val Verde (1925–1935) by Lockwood de Forest and Naumkeag (begun in 1926) by Fletcher Steele, analyzed as early investigations of modernism and abstraction.

The essays are informative, providing fresh insights into the designers and designs. This is no simple feat, as Farrand and Jensen have been the focus of monographs, as have Dumbarton Oaks and Winterthur.1 Karson offers additional insights into how the designers were informed by their professional communities and how they challenged contemporary practice. For example, whereas Farrand’s design for Dumbarton Oaks is often described as more formal near the house and more informal and naturalistic in the park, Karson points out that a small woodland was originally brought right up to the house. Others have noted this, but Karson situates the observation within the context of the contemporary discussion of the use of the wild garden as a type within diverse landscapes. This is rarely considered in the literature of landscape history.

While Karson’s choice of sites seems reasonable, the book is as much focused on promoting a preservation agenda as on critical analysis, and so she has selected only projects that retain considerable spatial integrity and are open to the public. She writes in part “to provide useful context to the stewards of these landscapes.” (ix) Having begun as a catalogue for an exhibit that opened in 2000, the multiple purposes for the book—history, description, and stewardship—are both a strength of the project and a challenge. The book will serve as an excellent resource for the stewards of historic landscapes. As a historical work, it is a substantial contribution, even if it does not reflect the breadth of practice or the diversity of designers who practiced during the period.

Expanding on Hewitt’s scholarship, Karson considers the role of the emerging profession of landscape architecture in the early twentieth century, when, for the first time, patrons were able to select professional designers to develop their landscape visions. Karson attempts to describe concerns and intentions of the young profession as its members shaped private estates, public spaces, and institutional landscapes and made the transition from Oldsmeadian traditions to twentieth-century modernism. She engages the issues of professionalism, class, gender, and the influences of modern art and literature. The progressive agendas of patrons and designers enhance the narratives. While understanding these contexts is key in the study of landscape history, the limited selection of sites under study makes these discussions seem forced at times.

Karson’s book features duotone photographs by Carol Betsch, and like Robert Cheek’s photographs for Hewitt’s book, these are combined with archival images. This pairing provides a rich dialogue across time, an important perspective as landscapes are necessarily engaged in growth and change and thus can be hard to interpret. Betsch’s photographs are often full page, and one wishes a similar treatment had been given the archival images, including those by notable photographers Mattie Edwards Hewitt and Samuel Gottscho. Color would have added much to the descriptions of gardens by Shipman and de Forest as well.

The field of landscape architectural history is still establishing its place in the academy. Recent monographs on landscape architects include those on Farrand, Coffin, Steele, the Olmsted Brothers, and Charles Platt. Two books, Mac Griswold and Eleanor Weller’s The Golden Age of American Gardens (1989) and Denise Otis’s Grounds for Pleasure (2002), set a broad stage for a more inclusive history of garden and landscape design. Karson’s book, joining other recent publications in the Library of American Landscape History, is an essential contribution that offers much to the scholar as well as to the landscape architecture student and practitioner, while simultaneously suggesting a wealth of future research projects. There is still a need for more comprehensive study of American landscape architecture, and one hopes that a reader of this book will take up the challenge.

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Fernando Luiz Lara
The Rise of Popular Modernist Architecture in Brazil

The core of Fernando Luiz Lara’s The Rise of Popular Modernist Architecture in Brazil is a survey of five hundred houses built in the 1950s in the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, the state capital of Minas Gerais. The