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 the 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 Olmstedian 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 Cheeks’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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Notes

Fernando Luiz Lara
The Rise of Popular Modernist Architecture in Brazil
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008, 176 pp., 49 b/w illus. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 9780813032894

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
majority of them have superficially modernist exterior features such as asymmetrical openings, butterfly roofs, and angled or curved exterior canopies. Against the ebullient and extroverted modernism of their exteriors, Lara found that the plans of these houses were mostly very traditional, with room arrangements very much like earlier twentieth-century houses, or even those built in colonial times. Supplementing the formal analysis of the elevations and plans of these houses, Lara interviewed twenty-one householders, each of whom had been responsible for its construction and had been in continuous occupation since the house was built.

Belo Horizonte is famous in the history of twentieth-century architecture for the four buildings at Pampulha, on the edge of the city, built in the early 1940s to designs by Oscar Niemeyer—the Chapel of Saint Francis, the Casa do Baile, the late Club, and the Casino. A key question is the relationship between these works of high architecture and the houses surveyed by Lara, all of which were designed by their owners and their builders without the involvement of an architect. To the architectural profession, these houses are kitsch: they mimic architectural modernism, borrow its emblems, but lack the integrity or criticality of true modernist architecture. Lara’s purpose, however, is to take them seriously as cultural products with their own value, and to do so he designates them as “popular modernism.”

The interviews with the surviving original owners reveal that many had visited Pampulha before building their houses and were familiar with the phenomenon of Brazilian architectural modernism. But when it came to designing their own houses their procedure seems to have been to copy elements not from architecturally distinguished examples but from more ordinary nearby buildings, and to take ideas from friends and relations; there seems to have been no conscious intention to emulate authentic models of high architecture, neither actual buildings nor images published in magazines. In other words, the vogue for modernist architecture was generated spontaneously among the citizens of Belo Horizonte and not handed down to them from above.

Versions of popular modernism are common all over the world, and architectural history has always found them hard to study. Lacking architectural authorship or explicit intentions, they tend to be seen as no more than debased versions of the authentic; nor are they a true vernacular, since their origins so obviously do not lie within an enduring building tradition but are derived from high architecture. Lara’s aim is to find a way to study this devalued form of building activity and to bring it into the fold of architectural history. His method, broadly speaking, is structuralist, in that he positions popular modernism within three different scales of cultural value—high versus low, periphery versus center, and modern versus traditional.

The theoretical possibilities suggested by the houses of Lara’s study are manifold. It could, for example, be productive to consider them in terms of Frankfurt school notions of culture and the discussions by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin of style versus Fashion. Or, alternatively, they might lend themselves to Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. It is slightly disappointing therefore to find that Lara chooses to locate his discussion entirely within architectural theory, ill-equipped as it is to deal with non-architectural building activity. In so far as architectural theory has been concerned with ordinary building, it has always been so in order to appropriate the “everyday” into high architecture: Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour’s study of Las Vegas, referred to by Lara, and their study of Levittown, are good examples of this.1 However, the Belo Horizonte case is the reverse; it is a matter of the appropriation by the everyday of elements of high architecture—and here architectural theory has little to offer. Lara mentions as an analogy the Los Angeles Case Study Houses, yet these, all designed by architects, are hardly relevant. A more appropriate analogy might have been the Los Angeles Dingbats mentioned by Reyner Banham in his Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies, but which Banham, too, was at a loss to know how to deal with.2

Lara’s book is more successful in its other main theme, which is to throw light on the exceptional status of architectural modernism in Brazil. Unlike elsewhere, modernism in Brazil was not an act of rebellion against bourgeois culture, for there was no bourgeois against which to rebel. As Guilherme Wisnik has argued, Brazil’s problem was that it became modern too easily and as a result modernism was absorbed uncritically, becoming, as it still is today, the dominant orthodoxy.3 Brazil has, in a sense, no past—it is eternally modern. Seen in this context, the assimilation of modernism happened effortlessly and unquestioningly. The houses studied by Lara offer an especially vivid demonstration of this process, and the satisfaction and pleasure that the owners still take in their houses confirms the enduring acceptance of modernism. Brazilian commentators have struggled to explain why their country never experienced postmodernism, and while Lara suggests that these houses might be seen as proto-postmodernist in their dissonant and emblematic use of modernist architectural features, they deserve attention most as evidence for the enthusiasm with which Brazilians embraced modernism and developed a singular version of it.

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Notes

Robert A. Maxwell
The Art of Medieval Urbanism: Parthenay in Romanesque Aquitaine

In this refreshingly original study Robert Maxwell examines the medieval town of Parthenay. While his book might seem to promise a monographic approach, in fact he delivers what might more properly be