

# VIEW

---

**LALH WINS  
THE 2009  
ARTHUR ROSS AWARD  
FOR HISTORY  
AND PUBLISHING!**

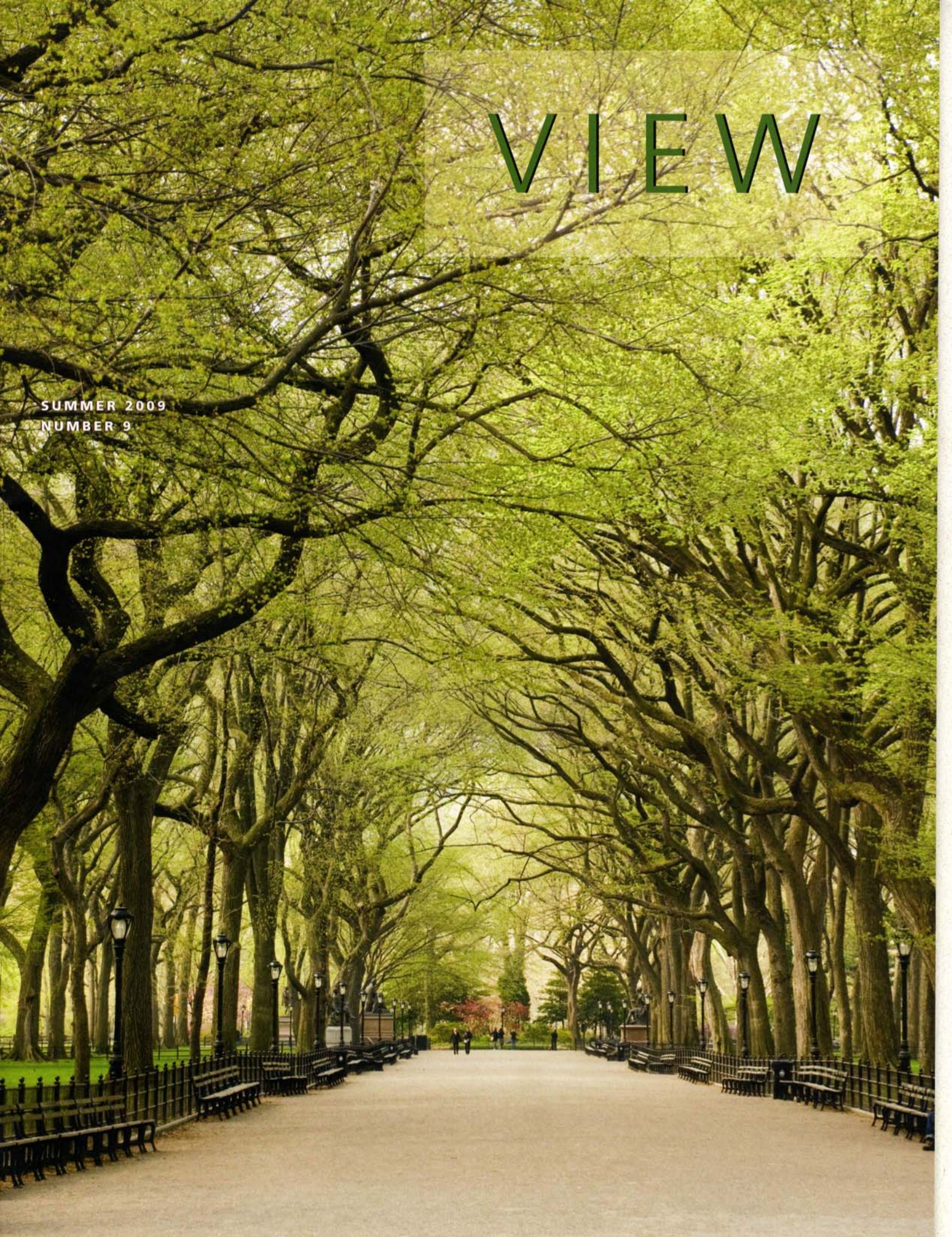
---

“For artfully fostering the heritage of American landscape design and influencing the landscape profession through scholarship and publications.”

SUMMER 2009  
NUMBER 9

# VIEW

SUMMER 2009  
NUMBER 9



# Parsons Park Rebounds



Steep drops in grade are navigated by flights of steps in Harlem's St. Nicholas Park. Photo by Carol Betsch.

"A DOMINANT NOTE must be followed with a harmonious treatment, a high hill made higher, a rugged slope more rugged, a deep valley made deeper, thus invariably following nature's lead," Samuel Parsons Jr. wrote about his 1906 design for St. Nicholas Park in New York City's new and fashionable Harlem neighborhood. Nature led with a bold hand on the long, narrow lot chosen for the park, strewing great chunks of Manhattan schist above ground and molding a bedrock ridge along the western boundary. Dropping two hundred feet from the ridge, the terrain slopes sharply, west to east, across the park, which is only one block wide on average. This was a rich

canvas for Parsons (1844–1920), a protégé of Calvert Vaux and an admirer of the picturesque character of Central Park, which he staunchly defended during his nearly three decades in various positions with the city's parks department.

One of Harlem's distinctive "ribbon parks," St. Nicholas is sandwiched between St. Nicholas Avenue on the east and St. Nicholas Terrace, which traces the curving ridge on the west. The lot originally stretched eleven blocks south from West 141st Street. In 1909,

---

By JANE ROY BROWN



Rocky outcroppings bordering St. Nicholas Avenue. Photo by Carol Betsch.

the city extended the southern boundary to 128th Street, the “Point of Rocks,” an outpost for Washington’s troops during the Battle of Harlem Heights in 1776. Parsons’s design, created while he served as the city’s park commissioner and landscape architect, “both preserved and enhanced the picturesque landscape,” observes Francis R. Kowsky in his introduction to the new LALH reprint of Parsons’s *The Art of Landscape Architecture* (1915).

At the 135th Street entrance, Parsons cut a long flight of steps through a massive ledge, highlighting the prominent ridge and rugged stone. A circuit of paths strung together the scattered eruptions of bedrock, transforming them into destinations along the route. Thickly planted canopy trees created a forestlike scale, copious shade, and an illusion of greater space. In the park’s roughly elliptical central space, an expanse of grass showcased a cluster of ledges.

St. Nicholas Park was a beloved neighborhood green space for decades, but, like other parks throughout New York City, its condition deteriorated during the city’s fiscal crisis of the 1970s. The Department of Parks & Recreation repaired St. Nicholas Park’s playgrounds in the 1990s, but the big turnaround began a few years later, when the department assigned a gardener to the park. “This is what historically has worked in Manhattan,” says the district’s Parks & Recreation manager, Mark Vaccaro. “The gardener is always in the park, and people get to see them and know them.” Prompted by the possibilities they saw taking shape, community groups and local officials pressed for repairs.

Between 2005 and 2009 the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation spent more than \$2,800,000 refurbishing paths, steps (including the dramatic rock-ledge staircase), and sidewalks. Although

none of this work benefited from a cultural or historic landscape report, it was sensitive to the existing fabric and could be said to fulfill Parsons’s greater intent. As Kowsky writes, “The preservation of rural scenery, urban parks, and a faith in the common man were the major themes of [his] long career as a landscape architect.”

Other additions, initiated by various city agencies and organizations, lack a historical connection but serve a variety of public needs. A friends group built a dog run, and the National Park Service moved the Hamilton Grange National Memorial, the home of Alexander Hamilton, to the park’s north corner, which was part of Hamilton’s property. In the early 1990s a streetscape-improvement project included a new entrance and plaza at 135th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue, featuring formal, terraced plantings. Though attractive in its own right, this addition is the least sympathetic to Parsons’s naturalistic design.

More in keeping with the original concept is a 2008 Urban Forest Management Plan written by Joseph Disponzio, preservation landscape architect for the parks department. “Tree canopy is as much an aspect of the park as its design structure,” says Disponzio. Guided by the document, Jeff Martin, a landscape designer with the parks department, recently drafted a planting plan for seventy-five young trees. “It calls for replenishing the Parsons canopy and native species,” he says. “For example, we’re reintroducing his elms in a staggered, naturalistic row on the eastern edge of the park, and we’re also replacing clusters of trees along path junctions, notably tulip poplars on the southeast corner of the large lawn.” The trees started going into the ground this spring, one hundred years after Parsons oversaw the original planting.



Above: Bow Bridge, Central Park, New York City. Photo by Sara Cedar Miller. Courtesy Central Park Conservancy.  
 Opposite: View from the front porch of the mansion, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park. Photo by Nora Mitchell.

an urban nation, and he shared Olmsted's concerns about the poverty and disease that would surely arise as a consequence of cities' growth. Copeland's 1872 plan for Boston would, in fact, provide an unprecedented system of linked open spaces—a precursor to Charles Eliot's later planning efforts for the city. Tishler's introduction also covers Copeland's two unsuccessful entries into the Central Park competition and his 1866 plan for Oak Bluffs, a community on Martha's Vineyard that included several large parks for residents, a model that predated Olmsted and Vaux's design for Riverside, Illinois, by three years. In another article in this issue of *VIEW*, Jane Roy Brown writes about recent preservation initiatives at the Woodstock, Vermont, estate of Frederick H. Billings, now a National Historical Park, which offers a vivid example of Copeland's landscape principles realized.

"One wonders how many such farms were developed in the years following the publication of Copeland's book," Tishler writes. "And of course one wonders how many farms already in business instituted technical and aesthetic practices he recommended. . . . That Copeland deeply influenced farming is beyond doubt; that he was a key early force in shaping the future of land-

scape architecture and city and regional planning is also well established. Perhaps the reprinting of *Country Life* will help to bring a new focus on a man whose brief life burned bright indeed, and on his articulation of the practical ideals of rural life, so much needed in an urban time."

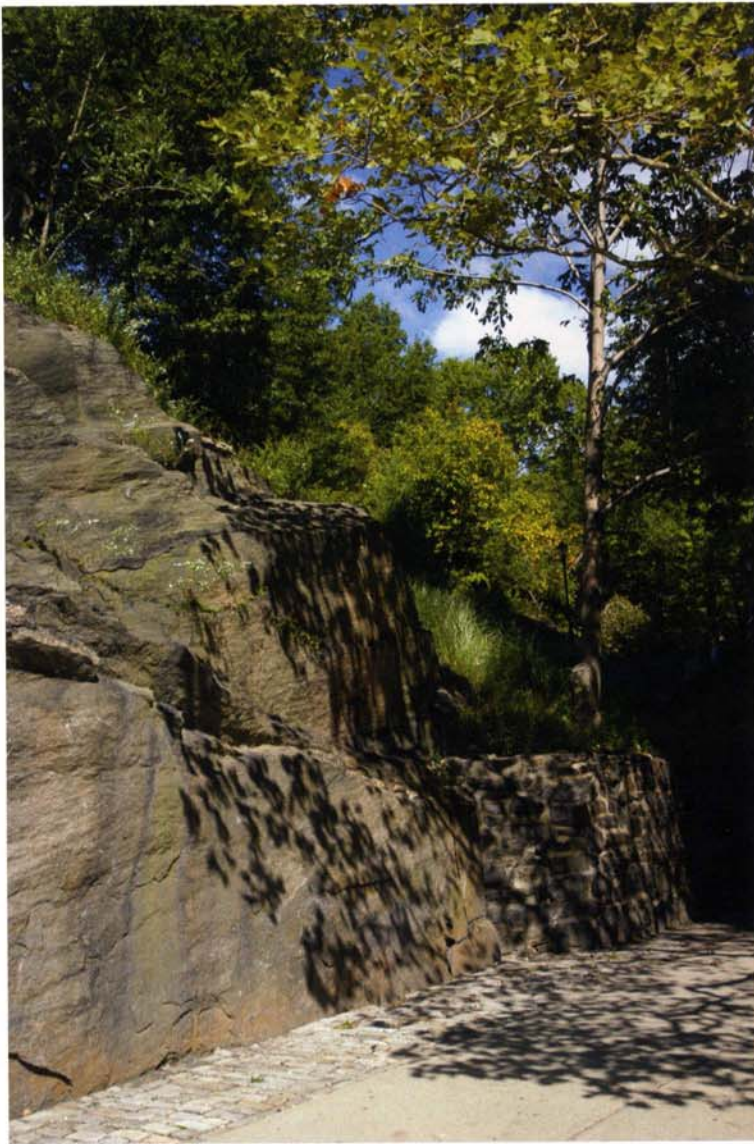
In his new introduction to *The Art of Landscape Architecture*, Francis R. Kowsky makes the case that **Samuel Parsons Jr.** (1844–1923) was a cultural soldier who "fought to a finish those who would destroy the Park," as one contemporary put it. The park was Central Park in New York City, where Parsons served as superintendent for much of his active career, and the fight was

his near-continuous battle to fend off proposed incursions that ranged from automobile speedways to endlessly proliferating statues. Parsons battled entropy, too, arguing that the degraded state of the elms lining the Mall—"the few poor, dilapidated, moribund survivors"—was a disgrace. One year before his death, he chaired the Society for the Elms on the Mall, which managed to raise \$40,000 to



Samuel Parsons Jr.  
*National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (1906)

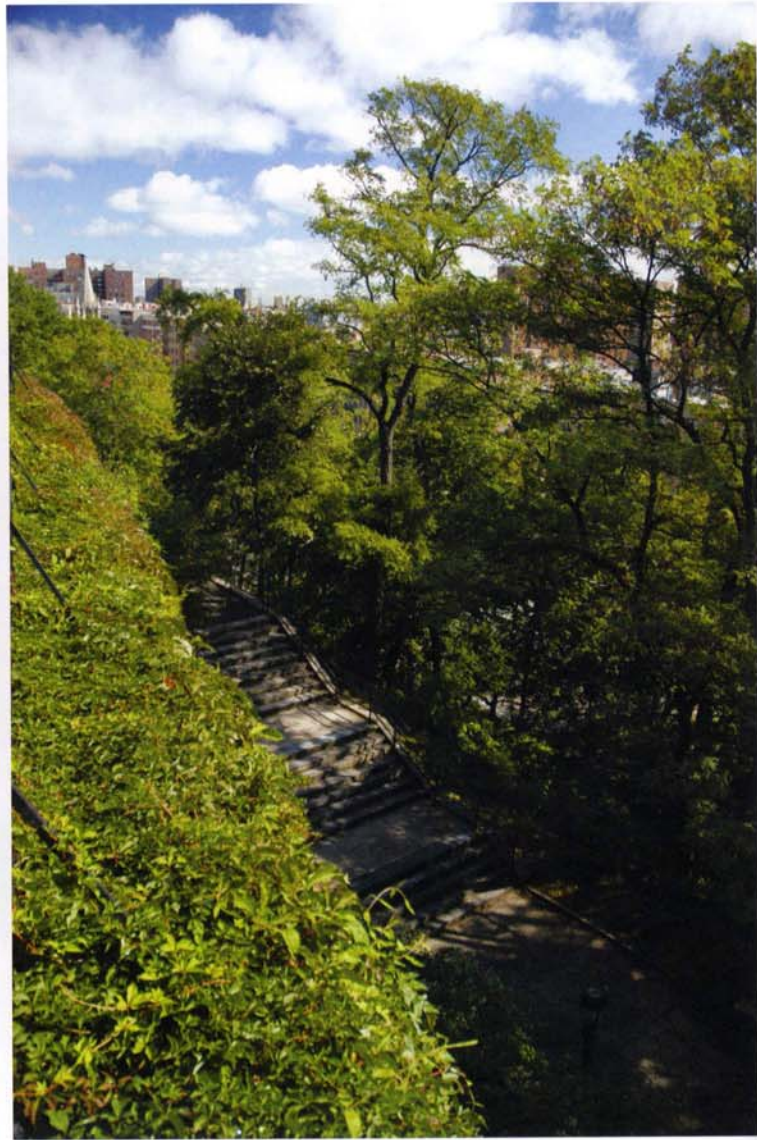




Rock face borders the sidewalk in Parsons's design for St. Nicholas Park (New York City). Photo by Carol Betsch.

plant forty 50-foot trees. Preserving the integrity of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's Greensward plan was Parsons's passion and professional mission, and, as Kowsky notes, he executed it with admirable success.

Parsons was also an accomplished landscape designer. Examples of his work can be visited throughout Manhattan, including several vest-pocket parks, such as De Witt Clinton, Thomas Jefferson, Hamilton Fish, and John Jay parks. In his various roles as landscape architect for New York City, Parsons also created re-designs for Union Square and City Hall Park, and he laid out the Broadway Mall. Arguably his most brilliant park design was St. Nicholas Park, a response to the dramatic, rocky topography of West Harlem. Parsons maintained a national practice as well, executing projects ranging from smaller parks to cemeteries, planned communities, and campuses throughout the nation, from Birmingham to San Diego. He was also a key player in the creation of the American Society of Landscape Architects, whose inaugural meeting was held in his office. A prolific writer,



View north along St. Nicholas Terrace. Photo by Carol Betsch.

Parsons contributed frequently to a range of professional and popular magazine and wrote six books, the last of which was *The Art of Landscape Architecture*, published in 1915.

Parsons's engaging text promotes an approach to landscape design rooted in the Romantic tradition of his professional forebears, Calvert Vaux and Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau, whom he considered the two greatest exponents of his art. This assessment, published in a 1915 article on Italian villas in *American Architect*, pointedly ignores Vaux's better-known partner, Olmsted, whom Parsons felt had overshadowed his mentor. Just before writing his book, Parsons visited Pückler's extensive park in Silesia, and in 1917 he supplied the introduction to an ASLA-sponsored reprint of the German prince's 1834 volume, *Hints on Landscape Gardening*. His allegiance to Pückler's Romantic principles is evident throughout *The Art of Landscape Architecture*, even as he wrestled with the scope of the emerging modern profession.

Copiously illustrated with images of Pückler's park, Central Park, Goethe's cottage at Weimar, the Boboli

gardens, Villa d'Este, Durham Cathedral, and several American estates, *The Art of Landscape Architecture* arrived at a heady moment in the emerging field. The century's second decade was a period of rapid growth in America and in the profession, too, owing to a burgeoning number of landscape commissions that included new towns, parks, and college campuses as well as residential estates. The pool of design ideas was also expanding, as landscape architects brought increasingly imaginative work into both the public and private spheres.

Parsons's own designs tended to be conservative, and yet, as Kowsky notes, certain of them may have influenced later practitioners. He points to the similarity of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, in Bear Run, Pennsylvania, to Parsons's work for John A. Staples in Balmville, New York. Parsons's dramatic and spare design for St. Nicholas Park is also exuberant in its celebration of natural forms, in this

case the rocky cliffs that explode from the earth's surface at the northern end of Manhattan Island.

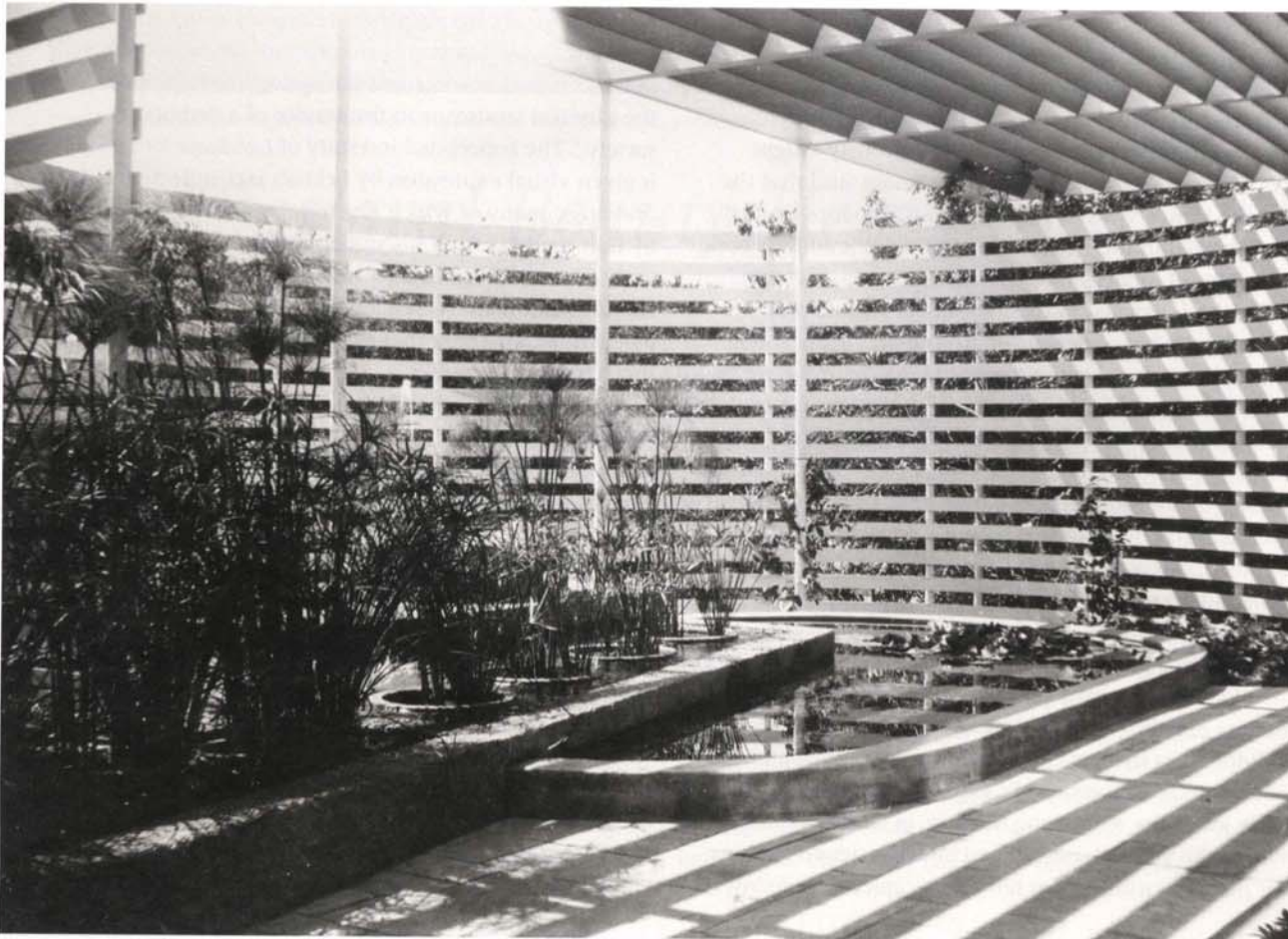
**Garrett Eckbo's** modernist manifesto, *Landscape for Living*, is the most recent in the ASLA series. "This is the United States of America, 1937 A.D.—"

Eckbo wrote in a seminal article for *Pencil Points* that foreshadowed his 1950 book. "Automobiles, airplanes, streamlined trains, mass production, the machine, new materials, new thoughts, new social concepts, a more abundant life. Why not express that, instead of English Tudor, or Italian Renaissance, or French modernistic, or Spanish-Moorish? Why must we be slaves to the ages?" In *Landscape for Living*, Eckbo continued his diatribe against Beaux-Arts formality and urged a rejection of the "palliative" naturalism that was frequently recommended as an alternative.

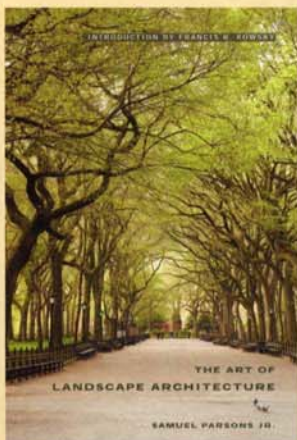


Garrett Eckbo, 1946. *Architect and Engineer*, September 1946.

Goetz Garden, Holmby Hills (Los Angeles), 1948. Courtesy Environmental Design Archives, Berkeley.



## NEW FROM THE ASLA CENTENNIAL REPRINT SERIES



### *The Art of Landscape Architecture*

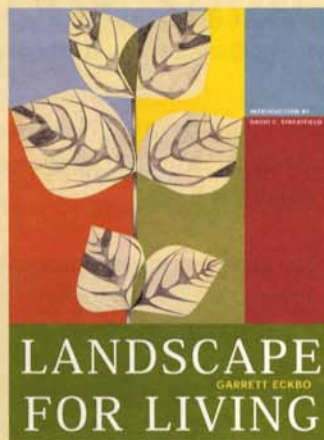
Samuel Parsons Jr. (1915)  
 The first American book to summarize the principles of landscape design for the modern profession  
 Introduction by Francis R. Kowsky  
 UMass Press/cloth, \$39.95

Samuel Parsons Jr. (1844–1923) was one of the most well known names in the field of landscape design in the early twentieth century. A protégé of Calvert Vaux, Parsons worked with the architect until Vaux's death in 1895. As superintendent of planting in Central Park and landscape architect to the City of New York for nearly thirty years, Parsons was, until his resignation in 1911, the last direct link in the city to the ideals of Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted.

The most widely read of Parsons's several books, *The Art of Landscape Architecture* (1915) was an affectionate summing up of the theories and built work that had inspired America's first generation of landscape architects. Parsons illustrated his book with photographs depicting a wide range of landscapes, including several of the park designed by the German landscape gardener Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau.

A new introduction by Francis R. Kowsky explores Parsons's contributions to the nascent profession of landscape architecture, his championing of the work of Pückler-Muskau, his defense of Olmsted and Vaux's vision for Central Park, and his own successful landscape designs.

"Samuel Parsons is without a doubt the unsung hero of Central Park, having spent his entire career defending it from those who would have compromised Olmsted and Vaux's masterpiece. The LALH reprint of Parsons's book with its wonderful new introduction by Frank Kowsky is a must-read for those who love the Park and want to have a deep understanding of Parsons's role in protecting this enduring national treasure and work of art."  
 —Douglas Blonsky, President of Central Park Conservancy and Central Park Administrator



### *Landscape for Living*

Garret Eckbo (1950)  
 An influential manifesto on modernism in landscape design  
 Introduction by David C. Streatfield  
 UMass Press/cloth, \$39.95

Garrett Eckbo (1910–1996) was one of the most highly respected and influential American modernist landscape architects. He worked assiduously to overthrow the Beaux-Arts system of landscape design and to develop an approach that would address the social and economic challenges of the modern world.

*Landscape for Living* presents a synthesis of Eckbo's thinking and professional work and sets forth his theoretical approach to achieving the "total landscape." Illustrations throughout the book feature his own designs for gardens, parks, and institutional projects, group housing from his graduate years, work for the Farm Security Administration, and projects by the firm of Eckbo, Royston & Williams. The LALH edition is indexed.

David C. Streatfield's introduction chronicles Eckbo's life to 1950, from his lonely childhood through his rebellious years at Harvard and well into his distinguished career as a landscape designer, prolific author, and committed social activist, interpreting Eckbo's densely written text as a reflection of this history.

"David Streatfield has contributed both new knowledge and insightful analysis to our appreciation of the 1950 modernist manifesto through which Garrett Eckbo sought to persuade American landscape architects, their clients, and the broader public that a new era—radically transformed by science, technology, and the promise of social change—demanded more than formulaic historic styles and soothing scenery in its designed landscapes. The revolutionary temper and optimism of this classic work seem more than ever timely and inspiring."  
 —Catherine Howett, professor emerita, University of Georgia