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# The American Garden: Two Divergent Paths

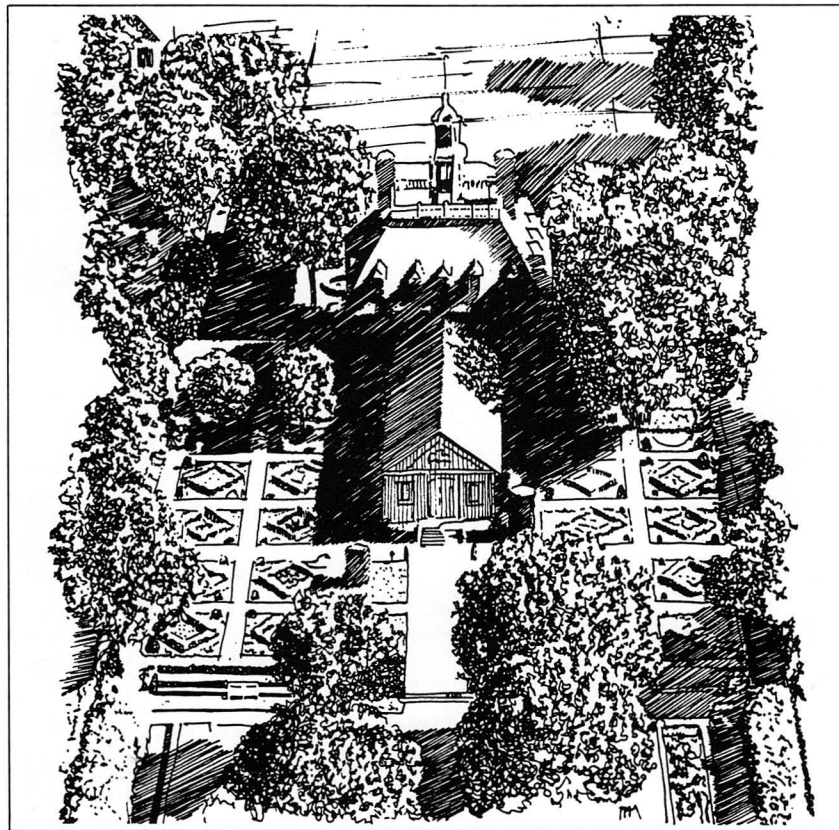
Patrick Mooney

It is not yet possible to say that there is any such thing as an American garden in the sense in which one can speak of an Italian, French, Dutch or English Garden.<sup>1</sup>

While we may disagree with this statement, it must be admitted that America has not given rise to vernacular styles of landscape design which are as distinctively original as its vernacular building styles. Since colonial times American gardens have been adaptations of European models. As recently as May 1985 that a "magazine of creative living," *House and Garden*, offered its readers the opportunity to plan the flower garden of their dreams by ordering "English Garden Design adapted for the United States."<sup>2</sup>

The act of imitation expresses admiration for the model and an unquestioning acceptance of the philosophy and aesthetics which gave rise to that prototype. For a new art form to develop both the aesthetics and underlying philosophy of existing forms must be rejected. This essay discusses the English garden and its transfer to America. It also examines the work of the Danish-American landscape architect Jens Jensen and shows how his rejection of European ideas led him to develop distinctly American landscapes.

The English landscape movement was in the beginning an intellectual, literary



Earliest large formal garden in America; Governor's gardens, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1723.

and philosophical movement ignited by the essays of such men as Pope, Addison and Burke. It was Lord Shaftesbury, who first compared the beauties of nature to that of the formal garden of the day.

The Wilderness itself, as representing Nature more, will be more engaging and appear with Magnificence beyond the formal Mockery of princely Gardens.<sup>3</sup>

Although garden historians of the eighteenth century have frequently described the English landscape movement as a taste revolution, it was in fact an evolutionary process which had its philosophical roots in the art and literature of seventeenth century Europe.<sup>4</sup> Given the opportunity of hindsight, this evolution can be easily traced to earlier styles. In its most simplified interpretation the English landscape garden may be seen as a reaction to the

overly elaborate formalism and geometry of previous garden styles.

The English do not have the sense of order which created the French style, neither are they given to obvious extremes. For this reason the great English gardens of the sixteenth and seventeenth century appear as a succession of parts which although they are entities in themselves, are not unified into a whole.

The predominant concept of the landscape movement was the effect of invocation of emotions by association with qualities of nature. The gardens became three-dimensional pictures in which paths led first to one perspective and then to another and another, each of which was intended to create a different emotion in the heart of the beholder. In its own way, the landscape garden was as formalized as the earlier garden styles it replaced. It was governed by a common aesthetic vocabulary understood by designer and viewer. The rules were set by men of taste and exercised by these same men. In the final analysis, taste and not nature was the arbitrator.

Gradually, however, the understood language of the landscape movement ceased to be spoken and the style began to die. Garden ornament no longer had an understood association but degenerated into a gaudy toy. The elaborate aesthetic created by Pope, Kent, and Shenstone became

separated from the design practices with which it was associated. Garden design became an exercise in invention and novelty without any defined or accepted aesthetic.<sup>5</sup>

While the industrial revolution and the rise of the middle class provided a catalyst for the dethronement of the landscape style of gardening, the real impetus came from the dramatic and sudden increase in the introduction of exotic plants during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, plant collectors went out from Europe to all parts of the world. A continual trickle of plant introductions which had begun in the Middle Ages gradually became a raging torrent as zealous collectors sent back specimens from around the globe. This increase in introductions was coupled with improved methods of transport, propagation, culture and especially hybridization.

One result of these new introductions was the development of a new gardenesque or eclectic style of landscape in which the plant was the dominant element. This style was advocated in England by J.C. Loudon in his *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* and in America by Andrew Jackson Downing. In his book *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening Adapted to North America* published in 1841, Downing persuasively expounds the gardenesque principles of Loudon.

Like Loudon, he firmly advocated the use of exotic plant material in a naturalistic style. He was, however, not above using disjointed arabesques of flower beds liberally dolloped into the "natural" exotic landscape. Such a style is difficult to define but there were consistent design features. The gardenesque feature of dotting specimen shrubs about the lawn is evident. Showy ornamental trees such as Copper Beech or Camperdown Elm were favored and foundation plantings were obligatory. The curved line especially in walks or drives was also a consistent element whether related to the topography or merely for style.

The rise of the natural or picturesque style in America may be in part due to a reaction against the previous rigidly formal style. Whereas in England this change in taste resulted from a glorification of nature which sprang originally from the writing of Jean Jacques Rousseau, in America it carried political overtones. Many considered the geometric or formal style to be characteristic of autocratic societies. Downing expressed the view that in a country which lacked an hereditary wealthy class, in which "the rights of man are held to be equal" that such gardens were unlikely to be built.<sup>6</sup>

With the rise of the gardenesque style, the garden had lost its associations with the evocation of emotions. The idea of the garden as a special exterior

place resulting from the use of degrees of enclosure appears hardly to have been enunciated. The visual concept of the garden as a collection of showy exotic plant material was universally accepted in Europe and widely adopted in America. Thomas Jefferson indesigning Monticello borrowed liberally from European garden ornament of the time for his temples and columns, and we know that he read and recommended to others the prominent essays on garden design being written in Britain at the time.<sup>7</sup>

With few exceptions, American colonial and federal gardens are generally considered to have been symmetrically formal and free from the naturalistic effects of the English landscape movement until the time of Jefferson's Monticello at the end of the 18th century.<sup>6</sup>

In America colonists were surrounded by virgin forests. This wilderness contained the very real natural dangers of everyday life: Indians, wild animals, raging rivers, impenetrable thickets and bogs. By removing the wilderness and replacing it with the very defined natural order of the formal garden the colonist was creating for himself the garden as a refuge which symbolized his control over his environment.

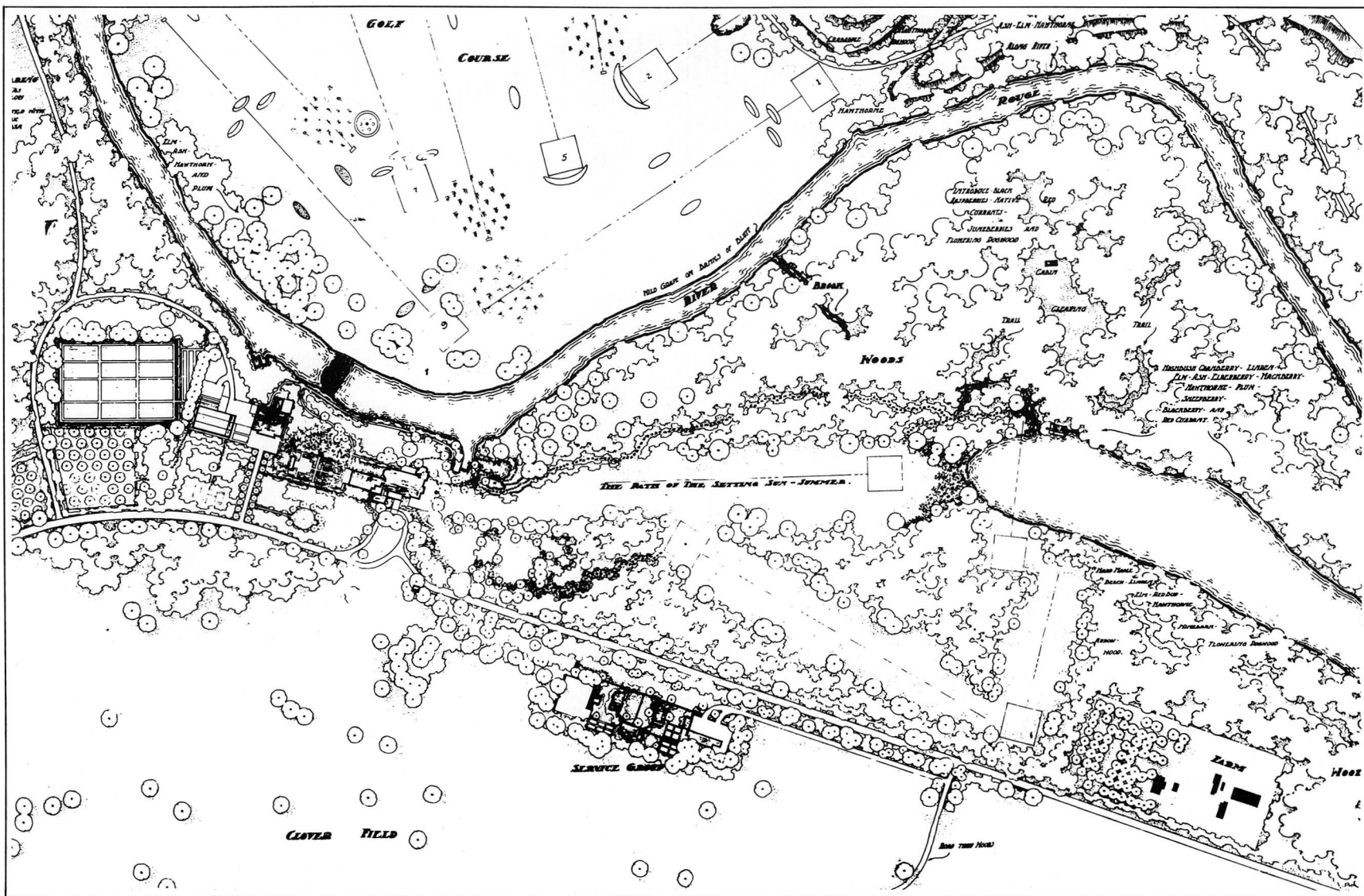
J.B. Jackson has theorized that the American attitude is essentially that of an engineer.<sup>9</sup> By this he means that we regard the landscape as a place from

which we extract energy. This may be in the form of food, water power, fossil fuel or it may be psychic energy. Whatever the form the landscape is considered to exist so that we may extract from it that which we need. In colonial America this necessitated to subduing the wilderness, clearing the forests and harnessing the streams. The formal garden which was ubiquitous in the colonies as well as the grid system of lots and townships established at this time, are indicative of the need to subdue the environment so that the extraction of energy could occur.

As we have seen the English or natural style had evolved into the ornamental landscape of the plant. The evolution of an American identity together with the emulation of all things English allowed this gardenesque style to be transplanted to America under the influence of Downing's writings.

Although Downing died only eleven years after the publication of his treatise on landscape gardening his impact on public imagination was such that he continued to mold public taste in the rebuilding which occurred after the Civil War.<sup>10</sup>

Downings acknowledged successor was the great American landscape Architect Frederic Law Olmstead Sr. Olmstead's principles as exemplified in his major parks include the preservation and use of natural



Jens Jensen's plan of the meadow and lake for the Henry Ford Estate, Dearborn, Michigan.

scenery, the avoidance of all formal design except in the immediate vicinity of the building, the use of mature trees and shrubs, and the locating of open lawns and meadows in central areas. While Olmstead certainly understood landscape design as functional place making he is considered to have extended Downing's principles in America.

In time the gardenesque style of landscape as advocated by Downing was widely adopted in America and in many ways persists today. Certainly there can be no question that many designers and the public in general subscribe to the notion that a garden,

whatever its form, is a collection of showy "ornamental" plants.

While this idea has found wide acceptance, there have been some designers who marched to a different drummer. Perhaps the prototype of such men is Jens Jensen. When Jensen and his future wife Anne Marie arrived in America from their native Denmark in 1884, the ideas of Downing and Olmstead were already achieving wide acceptance. It was a period of intense development of parks and private estates. The Jensens settled in Chicago where Jens found work with the Chicago West Park Commission. He began almost immediately to experiment with native plant

materials. In 1888, he planted his "American Garden" in Washington Park. This consisted chiefly of native perennial wild flowers which he gathered himself from the surrounding region. Although the garden no longer exists it was an immediate success both horticulturally and with the public. It was not, however, until 1900 when Jensen set out on his own that he began designing the prairie landscapes on which his reputation rests.

About this same time his friend, Frank Lloyd Wright, was designing his prairie houses in the suburbs of Chicago. Both men were responding artistically to the region. Wright's houses fit the landscape

with their careful siting and low horizontal lines. Jensen's design also attempted to draw its artistic direction from the natural landscape of the region.

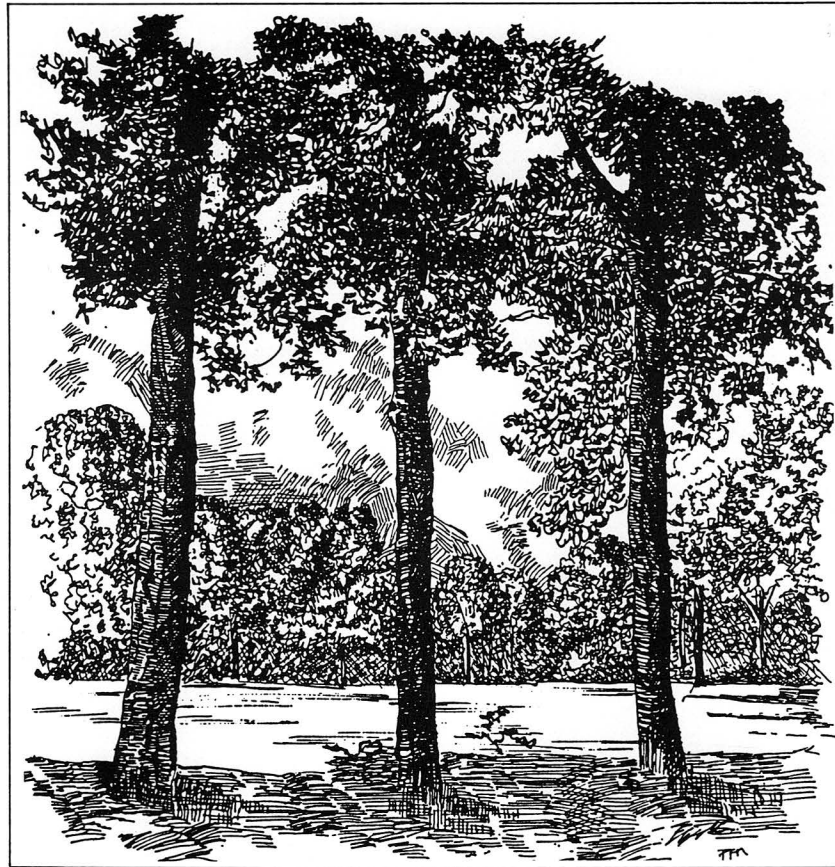
Just as Wright was rebelling against the Beaux Arts style of the eastern architects, Jensen was at odds with the eastern landscape architects who were designing formal gardens around New York, Philadelphia and Boston. Like Downing, but emphatically more so, Jensen considered formal gardens to be the outmoded manifestations of political absolutism. The natural landscape of the rolling wooded prairie of Illinois symbolized for him the freedom and opportunity of the New World. It was

therefore a more appropriate source of inspiration for American designed landscapes than the ornamental gardens of Europe. It was this rejection of European traditions on essentially ideological grounds that led Jensen to develop new American forms of landscape design.

Also in 1900 the magazine *Country Life in America* was founded. In an early issue, Wilhelm Miller, a horticulture professor at the University of Illinois, contributed an article entitled *An American Idea in Landscape Art* in which he advocated the use of native plants in natural planting wherever possible. In time Miller became the recognized spokesman for the "prairie style" of landscape architecture. His ideas, which gained a wide audience for a period of over twenty years, were subscribed to by Jensen although Jensen may have originated his own ideas independently.<sup>11</sup>

Jensen's early work was very much in the style of Andrew Jackson Downing. Slowly and throughout a long career he began to distinguish himself. He acquired a great knowledge of native plant materials which was most unusual in his day, and he developed great skill in manipulation of space. Jensen is perhaps most remembered for his meadows. These were designed to create an illusion of distance and space and simultaneously control views and direct movement. As his career progressed he drew his inspiration increasingly from nature, becoming less and less influenced by his predecessors.

In 1934, after Anne Marie's death, Jensen closed his practice and moved to Ellison Bay, Wisconsin, where he founded a school known as The Clearing. The Clearing was a settlement placed in an open space of forest. It was also a symbolic place where the mind could be clear of trivia, and where the student could come to know his or herself through an elemental understanding of nature. Jensen felt that the artist was a spiritual



Jens Jensen "meadows" show skill in the manipulation of light and shade, space and volume. leader and that an artist's message grew in importance as he comprehended the world in which he lived.

The site planning for The Clearing evolved slowly through a number of revisions. Stephen Christy tells us that

The Clearing merely sets the stage for the experience which Jensen believed essential to everyone. It is in this sense a very nearly undesignated landscape and yet it is the most highly designed of all if one considers the aim of design is not to impose a solution but to multiply infinitely the possible number of solutions.<sup>12</sup>

It may be said of Jensen that he managed to achieve a distinctly American garden which might not be considered a garden in the European sense. This is partly due to the fact that it was a landscape rather than a place of horticulture and partly because it con-

tained very few introduced plants. Like the proponents of the English landscape movement, Jensen understood the garden as a place designed to evoke emotional response in the viewer. He designed the landscape as a series of spaces which varied in character and created spatial experience as one moved through them. In this sense he harkened back to the original proponents of the landscape movement before its evolution into the garden of the plant. His art sprang from a deep understanding and love of plant material and he so revered the natural landscape that he effaced his own designs. If a visitor felt that the landscape had been untouched by man this was to Jensen the highest compliment.<sup>13</sup>

Although Jensen may be considered to have developed a new American landscape design, his work is largely unknown today. Consequently there is little hope that others will follow his lead in seeking to develop vernacular land-

scape styles. There are many people who work and design with native plants and many others who design landscapes using a wealth of exotic plant material in a variety of styles. The later approach reflects the nature of the present day society. When the French, Dutch, Italian and English garden styles developed, they were the art gardens of a limited cognoscenti who could be bound by a single design aesthetic. In our increasingly diverse and stratified society it is unlikely that any single garden aesthetic could be widely adopted or that the discussion of design philosophy or garden design could ever capture the public imagination as was formerly the case. We live in an age which will be remembered for its technology, its environmental indifference, its ideologies but not for its art, its philosophy, or its gardens.

#### NOTES:

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