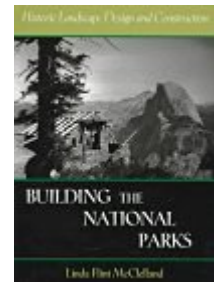


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda Flint McClelland. *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction*. Baltimore, Md. and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xxv + 591 pp. \$39.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5583-2; \$73.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5582-5.

Reviewed by Jodi Allison-Bunnell (University of Montana–Missoula)
Published on H-Environment (June, 1999)



Building the Landscape

This administrative history begins with mandate that created the national parks in 1916, which stated that the Park Service was to preserve these lands for future generations to enjoy. The book is a product of the recent push to preserve park structures and landscapes by designating them for national historic status. As such, it focuses on development of the distinctive style of architecture for American national parks. It covers years 1916 to 1942, the years in which a cohesive style of landscape design that blended the natural and the cultural developed, and the accompanying struggle over policy, influence, and priorities. Those struggles centered around the Service's central and most difficult mission: to develop the parks for services and enjoyment while preserving and promoting the natural landscape. There was a call to preserve the "wild landscape" as it was widely perceived to disappear, and the necessity of removing select land from economic activity to promote preservation. Recreation was only a by-product of that mission.

Central was the landscape architect's solution: creating the illusion of not disturbing the landscape while simultaneously manipulating both the vegetation and the built environment. Landscape architects became architects of scenery, putting forth "an interpretation of natural beauty" (p. 12) and promoting scenic vistas to best effect. Just as Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., made the shaped rock outcroppings of Central Park appear "natural," the tension between untouched and shaped landscape played out in the development of the parks. Workers on the Wawona Road in Yosemite National Park, for example,

stained the rocks exposed by blasting for a tunnel with a mixture of oil and lampblack to give them a aged and weathered appearance, erasing the "unsightly scar" created by that construction (p. 359).

The book is divided into four sections. The first section examines the origins and underpinnings of the design ethic, including the influence of the nineteenth-century English gardening tradition and the subsequent importance of Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. A section on Downing, in particular, focuses on his translation of English design elements to the American landscape, including a celebration of "wilderness" as the sublime and picturesque and the necessity of proper embellishments for pleasure grounds: rustic seats, shelters, and bridges built of native materials with naturalistic designs. His primary concern for road construction was in laying out pathways that would open up and frame the most splendid scenery that the landscape had to offer. In turn, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., drew on the ideas of Downing and others to further develop the ideals of park architecture that called for the designer to develop "passages of scenery" to frame the best elements of the landscape for the park visitor. Olmsted carried his ideals into the first national park when he prepared a preliminary report on the development of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove, first set aside as a park by Congress in 1864. His design, with its attention to careful placement of roads, established that goal that became foremost for the National Park Service: make the parks accessible for visitors, but protect the scenic

values from ruination. Essential to the further development of the park architecture was the advent of an indigenous American style of architecture and landscape design, from the Prairie Style, the Arts and Crafts movement, and the ideas of Henry Vincent Hubbard and Frank Albert Waugh. Central to this were “the preservation of existing vegetation and rock formations, the creation of naturalistic rockwork, the development of vistas and viewpoints, the construction of rustic shelters, and the planting of native vegetation” (p. 62). Further influences were the Shingle Style, Adirondack camps, San Francisco Bay area architect Bernard Maybeck, and the Craftsman style.

The second section examines policy and process in the Service between 1916 and 1927. When the National Park Service took charge of its parks and monuments in 1917, it inherited lands and structures that had been under numerous jurisdictions, including the U.S. Army, the railroads, and private organizations. Stephen T. Mather, first leader of the national parks, first needed to bring together formerly separated units together with one common purpose. This manifested itself in architecture as well as administration: a series of national park conferences between 1911 and 1917 examined architectural and design matters, including roads and trails, accommodations, and development of campgrounds (pp. 126-27). By 1918, a statement of policy was developed to guide the administration of the parks; its three fundamental principles echoed the 1916 enabling legislation in their emphasis on preservation, public access, and governance according to national, not special, interests (p. 134). In addition, this statement created a landscape design based on “landscape preservation and harmonization” (p. 135). The Park Service’s first landscape engineer, Charles E. Punchard, Jr., established his role as a park steward who was also concerned with day-to-day activities as he balanced preservation with public access. He also established a strong tradition of respect for and consultation with landscape experts, as well as engineers, for guiding park design. The design of such massive engineering projects like Glacier National Park’s Going-to-the-Sun Road, for instance, was a cooperative effort between landscape architects and engineers to give visitors a well-built road that opened the maximum number of scenic vistas.

The third section highlights the years 1927 to 1932. During this period, the responsibilities of the Park Service’s landscape architects expanded as the Service received additional funds to develop parks and the need for advance planning grew. Thomas Chalmers Vint, the head

of the Service’s Landscape Division during this period, guided the landscape program into a highly developed administration of master planning with a well-trained staff, based on the principles developed earlier. This team in particular focused on the development of park roads and their accoutrements: bridges, guard rails, overlooks, and tunnels. In addition, the development of visitor services facilities, including campgrounds, lodges, and amphitheaters, as well as a policy of native plant use, characterizes this era.

All of these policies and developments provided a sound base for further park construction after 1933, the focus of the book’s fourth section. McClelland includes the crucial role of the Public Works Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps projects, programs which provided thousands of hours of labor, skilled and unskilled, for the fulfillment of Vint’s administrative vision. In addition, many of these programs made additional architectural and design staff available to the Service. This was particularly timely, as the Service took on responsibility for many additional sites during this period. McClelland includes a number of detailed case studies, many from western national parks, including Mount Ranier, Yosemite, and Grand Teton. In addition, the Service’s programs for planning, rustic design, and landscape naturalization extended to state, county, and metropolitan parks in the 1930s. The struggles of the Service to provide for and maintain its structures with the increase in visitor numbers—and expectations—after World War II, including Mission 66, provide an interesting echo of the Service’s contemporary struggles.

Smoothly written, well-researched, and with copious and well-captioned illustrations, this is a fine administrative history. The level of detail is appropriate, and the narrative draws together many themes in a clear and easily understood manner. However, it fails to engage the problematic concept of “untouched” nature and the all-important tension between actuality and illusion that is so central to the early landscape architects’ activities. Certainly the shape they gave to the national parks is crucial to the American notion of “wild” and “untamed” landscape, but this work leaves that influence largely unexamined. The book also deals with the Park Service largely in isolation; any ties between the architectural development in the national parks and in the recreational facilities of the national forests is also absent. Such a comparison, if only brief, would lend value to the work. Certainly one of the challenges of both agencies is the lack of a strong public differentiation between the agencies’ missions; how have design elements contributed to

widespread perceptions?

As the National Park Service contemplates the end of its first century and the beginning of its second of providing landscapes and recreation for all Americans, works like this are of great value. For instance, the Park Service currently faces important decisions about the future of the private automobile in the parks; history shows its centrality in the American ideals of parks. In addition, the current trend in the Park Service and the Forest Ser-

vice toward higher park fees and user-fee based funding of recreational activities is a time in which both agencies must re-examine their missions, their pasts, and their future.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Jodi Allison-Bunnell. Review of McClelland, Linda Flint, *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. June, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3143>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.