
REVIEWS

Making a Landscape of Continuity: The Practice of Innocenti & Webel.

By Gary R. Hilderbrand. Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997, hardcover \$45

By Dean Cardasis

Making a Landscape of Continuity: The Practice of Innocenti and Webel describes a firm which for more than 60 years has predicated its success upon adapting a pre-modern landscape tradition. Derived from an exhibition of the same name, it is a gracious and intelligent appreciation of its subject, one that should be useful to designers and informative to a general audience. While uncritical in its treatment of Innocenti and Webel, the book raises important critical issues addressed by landscape architects throughout this century. Paramount among these are the persistent intellectual framework "formal verses natural", the nature of pictorialism in spatial design; the dialectic of history and innovation, and, especially, the meaning and value of continuity itself.

Consider Richard K. Webel, chief protagonist of the book and the perfect "modern" landscape architect—according to the precepts of Hubbard and Kimball's *An Introduction to the Study of Landscape Design* (1917). Hubbard and Kimball was the "bible" for aspiring landscape architects when Webel was a student at Harvard in the mid-twenties—and a book burned by modern landscape rebels in the thirties. It divided all landscape history into formal (humanized) and informal (naturalized) styles, it preached "adaptation" of



Field residence, Long Island, 1932-1934, photograph by Samuel Gottscho

European historic precedent and the utility of classical formulae, emphasizing a pictorial and typological approach as the basis for contemporary design. Webel learned its method well and, on graduating, became a Fellow at the American Academy in Rome

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where he experienced great historical landscapes directly. Here he produced beautiful representational watercolor plans and cross sections, some of which are reproduced in the book. Having thus internalized a relationship between pictorialism and real space, Webel returned to the United States three years later. With this academic training,

supplemented by practical experience in the offices of Warren Manning, Bremmer Pond and especially Vitale and Geiffert, Webel began a decade of teaching at Harvard in 1930, a decade during which he saw his own design foundation severely challenged and ultimately rejected. He opened his practice with Umberto Innocenti in 1931.

Umberto Innocenti is presented as the perfect complement to Webel. Although he too had academic training as a landscape architect, it was Innocenti's practical horticultural background and field experience at Vitale and Geiffert which best equipped him to manage their jobs on the site. In the earlier years of the firm (Innocenti died in 1968) he was at the sites almost continually, challenging the crews, talking to the clients, making the adjustments to Webel's plans when conditions warranted it. It was Innocenti who supervised the planting of extremely large trees which helped to instantly create

the impression of a landscape which had always been there. Innocenti's considerable skills, and to a minor extent those of Janet Darling Webel, are revealed in a very favorable, if less brilliant, light than those of RKW, as he is referred to by his son Richard C. Webel. It is the younger Webel, we are told, now the managing partner of Innocenti and Webel, who provided much of the material and insight for the book and whose own account of his father's practices—an annotated assemblage of RKW's recollections—provides an insightful and affectionate contribution, that complements Gary Hilderbrand's thoughtful, essay.

Of course, the centerpiece of the book is the catalogue of work itself—fourteen projects of several types executed between 1931 and the present, a small (perhaps too small) sampling from the hundreds of the firm's commissions. Selected projects range from great estates on Long Island to large-scale corporate and public works and include the Evelyn Marshall Field Residence (1932-1934), Reader's Digest Headquarters (1952-1968), Rector Park (1984-1986) and Furman University (1952-present). Although project types vary and span several decades, the work presented is remarkably consistent in many ways, underscoring the book's theme of continuity. In almost all these projects we find orthogonal, pictorial compositions on large sites; single species of trees planted regularly on center in straight rows, forming powerful spatial allees; and a clear appreciation for craftsmanship in design. Many of these projects,

especially the earlier ones, are represented through the meticulously composed, spatial black-and-white photographs of Samuel Gottscho, and all benefit from Hilderbrand's equally meticulous, lucid, and thought-provoking descriptions. Unfortunately only half include plans and/or sections, some of which are too small or illegible to be of much use. Various appendices, including an illustrated chronology, complete this story of a firm that despite tremendous change throughout the twentieth century has adhered to the principles of design and methods of practice from which it sprang in the 1920s.

Contemporary designers stand to benefit much from this particular work and from revisiting pre-modern design principles, generally. The author cites our penchant for mathematical ordering and, especially, our affinity for using trees to make physical space as the main constants in landscape design, connecting us even beyond this century. In the work of Innocenti & Webel such uses often result in an inspiring spatial clarity as when perfect scenes "painted" from a single privileged vantage point are transmuted into continuous spatial landscape experiences. One important caveat: From a contemporary perspective it should be clear that continuity in spatial design depends upon responding to the realities of our own time, as well as upon coming to terms with the "tried and true" lessons of history.

The author, generously, suggests that Innocenti and Webel would do things differently now, but there is little evidence in the

catalogue to support this notion in any meaningful way. And it must be noted that profound, evolving spatial ideas reflecting breakthroughs in science, art and culture extant from the beginning of the twentieth century find little expression in this work. As such, it is a landscape continuous with some things, but severed from others.

For students of design such criticism should take nothing away from the work, and certainly not from its excellent, affirming presentation in this book. In our premillennium reevaluation of the relevance of history to design, as we look for continuity with our heritage and fluency with our world, we will benefit from this book's appreciation of the centrality of space in these designs. Look for it especially on a perfect summer afternoon among wonderful old gardens out on Long Island, just past Jay Gatsby's place. There, at the other end of a long blue allee of those "mature and well-bred leafy aristocrats" are Innocenti and Webel, staring back at the rolling clouds and occasional flashes over the Atlantic, looking almost as if they had always been there.

Dean Cardasis is an associate professor and director of the graduate program in landscape architecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; director of The James Rose Center for Landscape Architectural Research and Design in Ridgewood, New Jersey; and a practicing landscape architect.

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