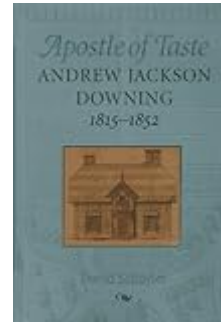




David Schuyler. *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing 1815-1852.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. xii + 290 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5229-9.



Reviewed by Samuel D. Albert (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C)

Published on H-Review (June, 1998)

The Apostles and Their Leader

The figure of Andrew Jackson Downing looms large over the American landscape; in his own lifetime he influenced American development in horticulture, landscape design, and architecture. Through his multifaceted activities, he significantly helped to shape middle-class American taste. The role he played was consequential: even after his death in 1855, at the young age of 37, his influence continued to be felt, as documented in David Schuyler's recently published book, *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852*. Schuyler, a professor of American Studies at Franklin and Marshall College, has charted the range of Downing's pursuits—from private horticulturalist and locally active citizen in Newburgh, New York, to architect, to nationally-active horticulturalist and landscape architect.

The book treats Downing's life chronologically. The first of the nine chapters covers Downing's childhood and early life in Newburgh, which remained Downing's home until his death. It was in this Hudson River town that Downing and his brother managed the family nursery and where he wrote his two major works: *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Architecture*

(1841 and various later editions), his pioneering book of landscape design, and his influential text on house design and decoration, *Cottage Residences* (1842 and various editions), with the architect Andrew Jackson Davis serving as his illustrator. Chapters two and three are devoted to documentation and analysis of these two works, examining their wide-reaching influences in architecture, landscape design, and American middle-class aesthetics.

Chapters four and five discuss in greater length the sources and theoretical underpinnings of Downing's writings, their more tangible effects and his own gradual interest in, and shift towards, architecture rather than landscaping. Chapter six analyzes Downing's architectural development, a theme which chapter seven, devoted to the combined efforts of Downing and his English partner, Calvert Vaux, develops even further. Chapter eight is dedicated to the great landscape architecture projects of Downing's later life, particularly his redesign of the Mall in Washington, but this chapter also explores his influence in the design and creation of planned suburbs, such as Llewellyn Park in New Jersey. The ninth and final chapter deals with Downing's premature death from a

boiler explosion and continues to discuss the influence he had on American life following his tragic death. Schuyler has a great command of the vast Downing literature; he is equally conversant with the *Treatise* and *Cottages* and their various editions and with *The Horticulturalist*, which Downing edited, as well as with the numerous letters and contributions Downing made to other magazines and periodicals. The physical organization of the book is quite pleasing: a pithy quote heads up each chapter, while the body of text is followed by a brief recapitulation and a glimpse of the next chapter. In his analysis of Downing's life Schuyler brings out several overarching themes. Downing's period of activity, from the late 1830 until his death in 1852, coincides with great changes in American history. The United States was coming into its own as a nation; westward expansion, driven by the 1849 California Gold Rush was increasing in intensity. Science and mechanization were improving life, though not necessarily making it any more civilized. Downing sought to civilize; civilize the landscape, civilize the architecture, civilize the citizenry. He felt his overall life mission was the improvement of the lives of Americans, through the physical improvement of their structures, the aesthetic improvement of their landscapes, and improvement of their minds through education.

Schuyler emphasizes Downing's belief in the role of taste in the creation and advancement of civilization; responding to a simple lament of a reader of *Horticulturalist*, whose hometown lacked architectural sense, Downing "ordained" (Schuyler's word) this reader, and his audience in general, "Apostles of Taste." Schuyler employs this religious metaphor often, as a leitmotif for Downing's life, as reflected in the book's title, in a chapter heading—"A Gospel of Taste," and in the repeatedly-used phrase "Apostle of Good Taste." But he fails to explore the deeper significance of this phrase or Downing's use of it. If readers and subscribers of Downing's magazine were "Apostles," what role did Downing postulate for himself, as the one who appoints Apostles? The implications of religious fervor as a means of the general improvement of taste are left unexplored. In an America only recently swept by a wave of religious awakenings and religiously-inspired movements seeking to create a heavenly place on earth, what was the popular reception to a movement whose leader felt his mission to civilize and whose apostles sought to improve taste?

Downing believed that increasingly cultured societies had increasingly sophisticated taste. One fosters the other: by improving taste, cultural growth was assured. To elevate the level of civilization in the

United States, though, not just the landscape needed to be changed. Downing first planned landscapes, siting structures within them. But realizing the importance of appropriate and tasteful structures in improving the physical and cultural landscapes, he moved from merely siting structures to designing them, thereby enhancing their aesthetic value. He progressed from designing structures (and their placement in the landscape which he also designed) to outfitting them as well—designing their interiors—by describing appropriate fittings and furnishings. Each stage, each intervention, was an attempt to elevate the general taste of America. Several values defined Downing's civilizing mission. Above all, he valued "truth"—the fitness of a material to its use and display—a value which extended from the interior fittings of a house to its gardens. He was a booster of native plant varieties, because they were truthful, they belonged in the American landscape. He criticized the use of ailanthus not for its unpleasant smell, but for its foreignness; it was a "moveable pigtail of an indiaman" (p. 118) and deserved no place in a truthful American landscape. Truthfulness is not the only aspect of Downing's aesthetic which Schuyler considers. Several short discursive digressions in the analysis of Downing's aesthetics grapple with issues of gender and class, aspects of Downing's work which haunt the background of his ideas.

The second aspect of Downing's activity is as architect, or, more precisely, architectural broadcaster, using books and magazines to publicize his architectural plans and theories, many of which were rendered by A.J. Davis into a visible reality. It is in his analysis of Downing's architectural activity in chapter 6, "Towards an American Architecture," that Schuyler's organization and analysis is weakest. The architectural discussion of the book is muddled and rather unclear, with numerous illustrations taken from Downing's publications, but whose purpose in Schuyler's book are never made clear to the reader, as there are few comparisons.

Downing's decision to invite Calvert Vaux from England to the United States, would have great consequences for American architecture and landscape architecture. According to Schuyler, Downing's own straitened financial circumstances and his close attachment to his birthplace would not allow him to leave Newburgh, so any potential partner had to relocate. Few established architects would be willing to make such a move. By bringing in a younger architect (Vaux was almost a decade younger), Downing could assure his dominance in the partnership, an aspect of his relationship with Davis that had always been problematic (p. 161). The suitability of

an English-trained architect—at a time when most “architects” were merely builders without any formalized training, who merely claimed the title, pleased Downing, whose own tastes, as evidenced in his writing, were clearly Anglophilic. After Downing’s death, Vaux stayed in this country and went on to form an association with Frederick Law Olmstead, their partnership yielding such works as Central and Prospect Parks in New York, the Emerald Necklace in Boston and influencing landscape designers, architects, and urban planners.

Though this book treats all of Downing’s life more than adequately, it leaves something to be desired in its coverage of the American scene, in its situating Downing within a larger American context. There are slight hints throughout the book that the American world was changing at this time; the vast business of improving the country, rather than merely settling it or surviving in it, had taken hold in the United States. The life of the colonial farmer, who farmed by luck and chance was ending; scientific agriculture was emerging in its stead.

A uniquely American style and fashion were emerging, which Downing, through his landscape designs, through his agricultural popularizing, through his architectural and design activism helped to create and to spread, like a missionary, like an “Apostle of good taste” among the tasteless gentiles.

Downing’s influence should not be underrated, his intellectual afterlife is evidence of that: long after his death his writings which continued to shape middle-class taste, his work for the Mall in Washington—though removed by the Macmillan plan—influential in landscape design throughout the United States, and his architectural collaboration with Vaux, all fundamentally altered the face of the American landscape and cityscape, leaving us all to benefit from the gospel of this chief Apostle of good taste.

Copyright (c) 1998 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:

/reviews

Citation: Samuel D. Albert. Review of Schuyler, David, *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing 1815-1852*. H-Review, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2088>

Copyright © 1998 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.org.