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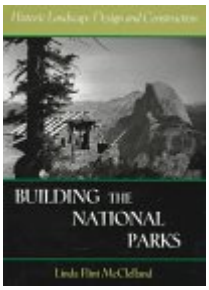
Linda Flint McClelland. *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction.* Baltimore, Md. and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xxv + 591 pp. $39.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5583-2; $73.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5582-5.



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Exterior Decorating

It would be helpful if we always thought of ourselves as in nature when we stepped outside our front door, or even when we read our email. But too often we need to retreat further from humans' influence to be reminded of nature. For more than a century, national parks have helped North Americans find nature. Of course, parks are not just natural spaces; they have been prepared for our arrival. We know this when we see four lane highways and ski runs in the parks, and we debate their right to be there. But with such obvious signs of human interference in parks, we may miss the fact that this scenic overlook, that hillside, those trees were also carefully chosen and placed there by landscape engineers, architects, and landscape architects. Linda Flint McClelland's *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction* pulls back the curtain and shows that landscape design infiltrates everything the parkgoer sees and experiences.

There was clearly a need for this book. Much national park research of the last twenty years has involved the cultural influences in park policymaking: how aesthetics decided the landscapes chosen, how conceptions of race and wilderness demanded the removal of natives, and so on. But though books have focused on the works of administrators (such as in Alfred Runte's *National Parks* and *Yosemite) and scientists (in Richard West Sellars'* Preserving Nature in the National Parks*), none had dealt primarily with those who most obviously "constructed" the parks: landscape designers. Evidence of* Building the National Parks*' topicality is that it arrives the same year as Ethan Carr's* Wilderness by Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service_.

Though the back cover blurb begins, "Recalling the era of the great lodges at Yellowstone and Yosemite…," McClelland's book in fact ignores this period entirely, choosing instead to cover 1916 to 1942, from the creation of the National Park Service to the end of the Public Works Administration-sponsored park relief programs. At five hundred pages, this book is an encyclopedic treatment of that era, and *Building the National Parks* will doubtless serve as a reference book for environmental historians for decades. It covers its ground so thoroughly, minutely describing designers' formulation of the correct slope for roadbanks, the appropriate trees to ensure the brightest fall foliage, the aesthetics of culverts. All this detail is valuable: it impresses on the reader how much attention has gone into every element of park landscapes.

The book consists of four sections. Part I introduces the great men of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century design such as landscape designer A.J. Downing, park designer F.L. Olmsted, and architect H.H. Richardson, whose work would influence park design throughout this century. With a more than one hundred page close reading of design texts, this section is almost a book on its own. Part II shows the state of park design at the creation of the Park Service in 1916 and follows early policymaking to 1927. The core principles of national park design were born: 1)that nature should be preserved intact whenever possible, and 2)that interference with nature, when necessary to fulfill the park mandate for public use, should harmonize with the surrounding environment. The present-day individuality of the parks may be credited to the decision by designers of that period to follow those two broad principles, rather than adopt system-wide models. Part III, covering 1927 to 1933, deals with work that emerged from the newly-created San Francisco field office. There, designers dealt with increased pressure for park facilities while themselves moving toward "landscape naturalization"–a greater reliance on native species and an attempt to make human presence even less visible in the parks. Part IV deals mainly with park development that came out of New Deal programs administered by the Public Works Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps. Perhaps fittingly, this section moves away from the evolution of park design principles, dealing more with the physical work accomplished in the parks when the Service was given men, money, and opportunity. In a speedy twenty-five page concluding section, the author covers the last fifty years of national park design history.

McClelland's position, stated in her second paragraph, is that "During the formative years of the National Park Service, from 1916 to 1942, landscape architects, architects, and engineers forged a cohesive style of landscape design which fulfilled the demands for park development while preserving the outstanding natural qualities for which each park had been designated. This style subordinated all built features to the natural, and often cultural, influences of the environment in which they were placed. Through time it achieved in each park a cohesive unity that in many cases became inseparable from the park's natural identity" (p. 1). This is a provocative, even aggressive claim. By her use of "subordinated all built features," the double "cohesives," and the words "became inseparable from the park's natural identity," the author confers on park designers a blanket success in transcending the cultural and making their work truly natural. The reader looks forward to McClelland's defense of such a position, but she hardly takes it up again. In its five hundred pages, *Building the National Parks* never takes time to question the meaning of parks to our culture, or why some park development is deemed appropriate while some is not, or whether a place can truly be made natural by people. Instead, the author catalogues what park designers believed about design and what they subsequently did; she never critiques the results or considers other possible courses of action.

This is most evident in discussion of CCC work. In the 1930s, with unprecedented funds and manpower, the National Park Service ridded parks of their natural clutter like never before. McClelland recounts how, in Grand Teton National Park, two hundred men over two years cleared thousands of acres of dead and submerged timber around Jackson Lake, but she never questions the validity of such work or asks at what point such human intervention in a park gets out of hand, if ever. Describing the landscaping of a Yosemite intersection, she cites the numbers of each species planted and concludes, "One enrollee spent 15 days watering, and the total project required 494 enrollee and 50 civilian man-days" (p. 354). Perhaps she just means to present this as a "fact" and not to imply either approval or criticism. But appearing in a book that begins with such an unequivocal endorsement of National Park Service landscape design, such statements seem suffused with the author's pride.

I may seem to be faulting McClelland because she has found less to criticize in Park Service actions than I would. But it is quite clear in the history she recounts that park staff themselves debated park design philosophy and practice. For instance, the author quotes from a lengthy 1928 memorandum defining the landscape architect's role in the Park Service but ignores what seems obvious: that the memo had been written to settle an internal turf battle between engineers and landscape architects. Nowhere in *Building the National Parks* is there a dialogue among park staff about what design work should be done (or, after the fact, if it should have been done as it was). It is as if the finished product had been the only possible course of action. This results, I think, from McClelland's general reliance on design publications and Department of Interior Annual Reports, rather than archival correspondence, as the backbone of her research.

The uncritical tone of the book may also be due to its origin as an internal document for the National Register of Historic Places, where McClelland is an historian.

The foreword tells us that the book was originally written to help the agency better understand the park landscapes and to see which deserved nomination as historic places. The transition from government publication to scholarly book has not been a smooth one. Introductions (to sections, chapters, or the book as a whole) do not provide broader cultural context; nor, in some cases, do they even summarize what is to come. Conclusions tend to be poorly edited (Part I ends with nearly identical forty-word sentences three sentences apart), hurried (p. 192), or non-existent (p. 157). There are startlingly few incidents used to highlight policy shifts, and, when they are given, their relationship to a broader argument tends to be implicit. A good example: at one point the reader is told that "The planning for the park headquarters for Big Bend National Park reflected the changing attitudes of administrators and planners in the post-war era" (p. 461). In the story that follows, the planning is described so poorly–with no reference to how it differed from the past–that the attitudes it is supposed to demonstrate are far from clear. Finally, the decision to discuss influential design professionals but exclude discussion of actual pre-1916 park design work is unfortunate, if for no other reason than that later designers had to harmonize their work with existing structures.

Building the National Parks does not fulfill the promise of its title. "Building" is an aggressive word here, suggesting that parks are not just products of nature, but are in fact manmade. The note on the author mentions that the earlier, in-house version of this book had been titled–more passively–"Presenting Nature." McClelland's desire to engage in broader questions about the meaning of park landscape design was a good one, but that purpose needed to move beyond the title to the text itself.

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