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Surrey-upon-Forbes

Barry Hannegan

The Uses of Memory and the Grape Vine

Although I have been looking at and into gardens in the Pittsburgh area for some five years, I am constantly reminded that there is surely much that I have not heard about and still more that I have not seen. It only takes a new discovery to warn that, if I have overlooked such and such until just now, there is the certainty of more discoveries to come. A classic instance of the blend of astonishment, chagrin, and delight that a new "find" in a well-known location produces was set in train last year by a remark from an East End garden maven that I should look, if I had not already done so, at the garden behind the building at 5505 Forbes Avenue. The building, a well-designed example of a vernacular version of the Tudor, I remember from my childhood; it was one of the things that most impressed me on the itinerary of the old #68 trolley on its runs between McKeesport and Oakland. I recall, too, some sense of uneasiness when that house, for such it was, sprouted a vast and alien addition to its eastern flank that was to accommodate the needs of the congregation of Temple Sinai, which had acquired the property in 1947. The long tenancy of the congregation has proved to be beneficial to the preservation of the house itself, while the brash addition has mellowed into one of the more interesting examples of expressionist architecture here in Pittsburgh.

A Voyage of Revelation and Recognition

Armed thus with memories and anticipation, I ventured from Murdoch Street through the sumptuous gateway of stone piers and wrought-iron grillwork onto the grounds of Temple Sinai. After making my way past the low west wing of the house, it was a matter of just a few steps when the area to the building's rear came into view: had the shallow terrace on which I stood been a peak overlooking the Pacific, I could hardly have been more dumbfounded. There, in a very restricted space, was an elegant, richly designed city garden formed by a series of sophisticated built features, all executed in the same stone as the house itself.

For all the surprise, indeed disbelief, at finding myself in this quite extraordinary place, there was a faint tugging of familiarity, but it was only on reaching the stepped tank at the garden's inner end that I identified the origin of my sense of *déjà vu*. Surely, this pool was directly based on the pool garden at "Marshcourt," one of the most evocative and compelling examples of the work of Sir Edwin Lutyens!

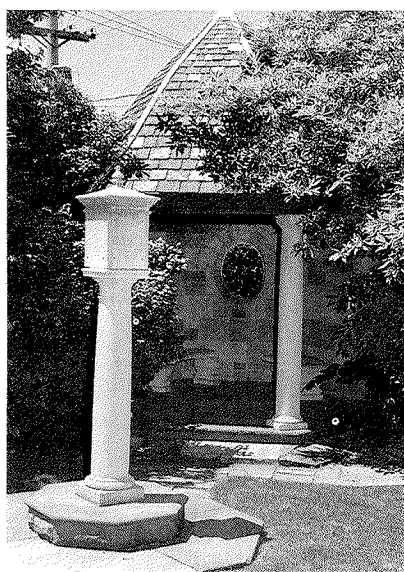


The same stepped coping descending to the water, the same square stone planting boxes interrupting the suave steps, the same proportions of basin and surround—the Lutyens design was too idiosyncratic for this pool to have any other source. I could barely wait to get to one or another of the volumes on Lutyens to verify my reading of this situation. And once I did sit down with such a book and began leafing through the illustrations, one feature of the garden after another mirrored up at me from the pages. The entire garden, in all its built features, was an anthology, a discerning selection, of some of Lutyens' best early country house gardens.

The Origins of Stone and Water

The garden once seen and its artistic inspiration identified, it became imperative to find out who had been responsible for its improbable creation. The house, we know, was designed in 1909 by Louis Stevens for John Worthington. Stevens was a Pittsburgh native who enjoyed an active career between 1908 and 1952 (he died in 1961) as an eclectic architect of considerable facility. Worthington was associated with Standard Oil, and was known for having been a close friend of Lloyd George and the collector of what was held to be the largest private library devoted to Welsh culture and history. The house was published in the Pittsburgh Architectural Club *Yearbook* for 1910 where it appears as a modest, although capable, Tudor exercise. The elaborate porte-cochere and attendant construction at the east end have disappeared, removed when the house was converted to

(continued)



The sundial, minus its bronze gnomon, and the entrance elevation of the little summer pavilion in the Worthington garden. Below: The sundial at "Woodside" in Buckinghamshire, England, one of Lutyens' earliest gardens, dated 1893.



Right: Looking eastward along the central grass panel of the garden at 5505 Forbes Avenue. The new wing of 1914/1915 with its pair of polygonal bays lies ahead, with Murdoch Street running behind and below us.

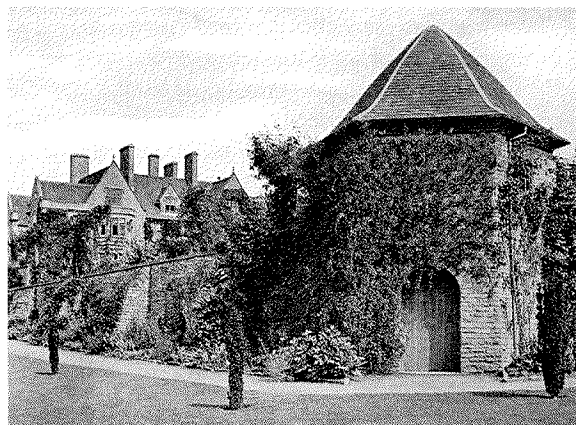


The view from the summer pavilion, past the sundial, to the rear of the house. This photograph was published in the *Architectural Record* for March 1925, and shows roses growing in the plot below the terrace, just where they bloom again.

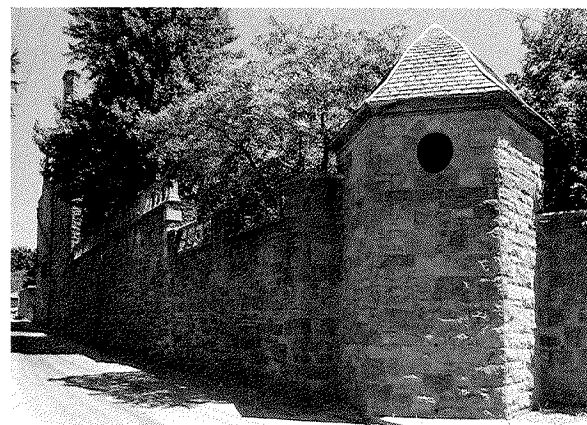
Right: Looking westward from the vantage of the terrace in the angle of the house ell. The contrast between this view and the one above of the same garden demonstrates Stevens' very appreciable skill in introducing variety into a restricted space.



The garden house at "Abbotswood" in Gloucestershire, England, a creation of 1901 by Lutyens. Note the oval window.



The retaining wall and exterior of the garden house at "Abbotswood."



The exterior of the summer pavilion at the Worthington house and the garden walls. The sweep of the wall that merges with the rear elevation of the house further along Kittanning Way is superb—we might be in Hampstead. Note the oval window.

religious use. On the opposite flank there was a modest glazed porch, supplanted later by the sizable library wing that still reaches laterally toward Murdoch Street. Those features absent in the original version of the house were likely all part of a very substantial enlargement of the building, again designed by Stevens, that took place in 1914/1915. The *PAC Yearbook* for 1915 shows us the major addition of that campaign which was the new wing behind the house, containing a new dining room and running northwards to the alley, Kittanning Way. This ell was very nearly the size of the original house and created the enclosed space that holds the garden.

It seems a reasonable assumption that the garden was also the result of the 1914/1915 building program. Certainly, the water garden is so closely linked to the new wing that it cannot have existed in anything like its present form before the addition. If we allow that even the design of the wing itself echoes Lutyens, then all of the portions of the Worthington property that derive from his examples can be safely seen to be a single, unified project.

Drawers of Drawings and of Checks

Whose idea would this stylistic source have been? The architect? or the client? We can assume that Stevens, a fashionable specialist in residential design, knew something of Lutyens' work; this knowledge might have been culled from the pages of *Country Life*, where Lutyens' country houses appeared regularly. Then, too, Stevens' father was English and a building contractor. Could this circumstance have encouraged a more particular interest in Lutyens, whose residential work was in both the literal and idiomatic senses so very *à la page*? But Worthington could just as readily have identified the English architect's work as the point of departure for the additions to the house on Forbes Avenue. Worthington's enthusiasm for things British is documented, and what would have been more reasonable than that the revised dwelling should illustrate the best of current English domestic design? Only further research can tell us if either architect or client had actually seen

any of Lutyens' houses and gardens, but there is a likelihood that at least Worthington would have had the chance. What is even more likely, however, is the immediate source of Stevens' knowledge of his English models. In 1913, *Country Life* published Lawrence Weaver's handsome folio volume, *Houses and Gardens by E. L. Lutyens*. It is from that source that we have taken all but one of the comparative illustrations used in this note, and it will be seen that every Lutyens feature in the Worthington garden does find its counterpart (parent?) in the book of 1913. As has been the case so often in the transmittal of design information, the printed page here surely served to bring echoes of English country house life to Pittsburgh.

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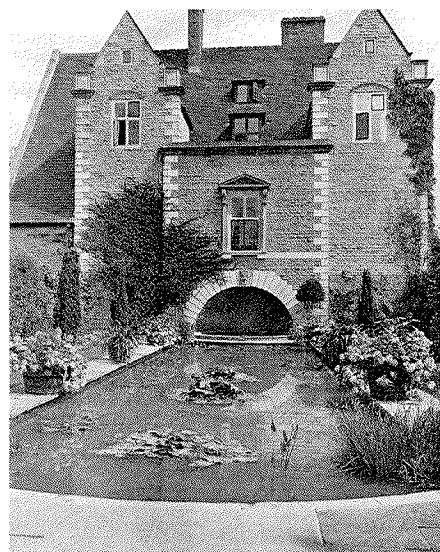


Above: The tank/pool at the Worthington house. The stairs at the far end, with their contrasting flights of concave and convex treads, are of a type that appears frequently in Lutyens' work. However, ultimately, they descend from Bramante's great stairs at the Belvedere in the Vatican of c. 1500.



Left: The pool garden at "Marshcourt" in Hampshire, England, another work of Lutyens of 1901. Are the polygonal bays with their flat roofs the source for the garden elevation of the new wing at the Worthington house?

Below left: A detail of the niche fountain at the Worthington house. The circular basin here would have supplied water to the tank via a small rill cut into the stepped coping. Below right: A niche fountain with circular basin incorporated by Lutyens into his additions at "Abbotswood."



Historic Landscape Preservation

In 1997, the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation established a Department of Historic Landscape Preservation, with Barry Hannegan as its director. The Department addresses all historical aspects of the planted environment—its character, development, significance, and change--and involves itself with current issues of urban planning and land use, insofar as these may affect the historic landscape of Allegheny County.

Advocacy

Through an active program of publication, lectures, and symposia, the Department seeks an expanded public awareness of our region's cultural landscape heritage and its great value as a major amenity and distinguishing element of the region's history.

Research and Documentation

The Department has created the Survey of Historic Parks and Gardens, which now contains information on more than 115 historic designed landscapes within Allegheny County. Sites include parks, cemeteries, and private gardens, many of which have been entirely lost but which are recorded through surviving photographic and textual documentation.

Technical Assistance

As a means of encouraging appropriate treatment of historic designed landscapes, the Department makes its historical and technical expertise available to neighborhood-based groups and municipal and civic associations.

Your Support Is Welcome

You can help protect this region's historic landscape tradition by making a contribution to the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation in support of the Historic Landscape Preservation Department. Your gift would be tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law. Simply make your check payable to "PHLF" and reference it "Landscape Preservation."

We also welcome your involvement as a volunteer as we continue to survey the county and research this region's rich landscape heritage. Please call Barry Hannegan at (1-412) 471-5808 to let him know how you would like to become involved. We hope to hear from you soon. Your help is needed and will be much appreciated.

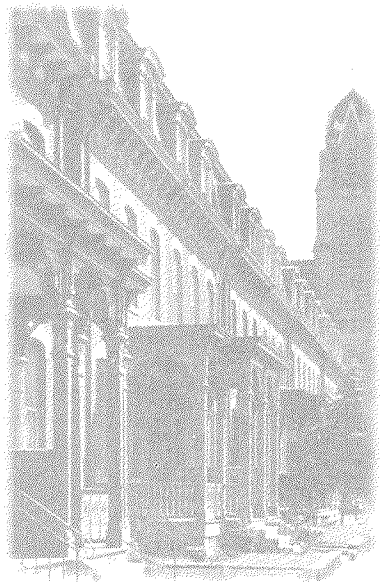
PHLF News is published four times a year for the members of the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, a non-profit historic preservation organization serving Allegheny County. Special issues, devoted to a particular theme or program area, are published on occasion.

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Support the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation in its work to:

- Identify, document, and work to save architectural landmarks, historic neighborhoods, and historic designed landscapes in Allegheny County;
- Provide loans and technical assistance to community-based organizations that propose feasible plans for historic properties;
- Participate in urban planning issues as an advocate for historic preservation;
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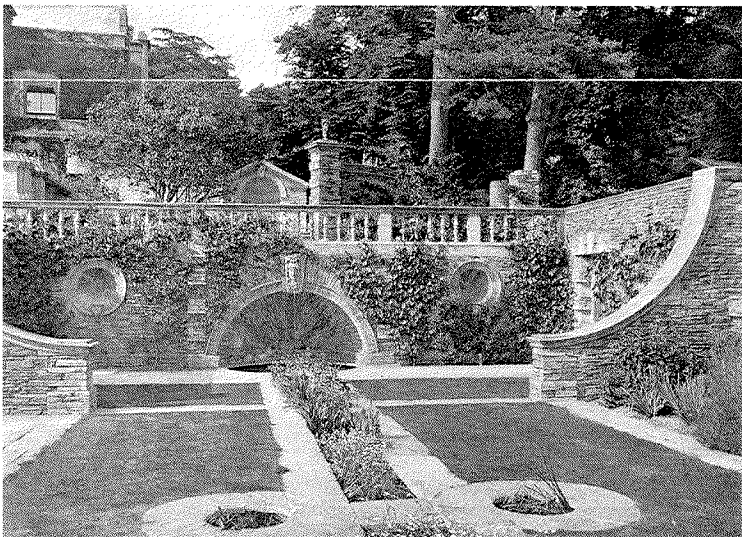
The tank area at the Worthington house. The rear screening wall with its oeil-de-beuf niches and the capping balustrade appear to be taken directly from “Hestercombe” in Somerset, England, designed by Lutyens in 1904. Were the loop pools flanking the narrow canal at “Hestercombe” the models for the little circular reserves, which I suspect once held water, at the ends of the Worthington tank?

Linkings of the Past, of the Present, and, Miraculously, of the Future

Conditioned as we are still by Romantic notions of genius, creativity, and individuality, we might be a little uneasy with Stevens’ wholesale appropriation of some of Lutyens’ best garden features. But why? The canard that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery acknowledges that we like to duplicate what we like, if someone else has it. Too, the history of taste is filled with examples of copies and reproductions, from the ancient Roman enthusiasm for replicas of Greek sculpture to the Lochoff paintings after Italian Masters in the cloister of the Frick Fine Arts Building at the University of Pittsburgh. And Stevens’ creation is not just a copy; it is a sensitive and adroit amalgamation of features, selected for their compatibility, which are woven into a neat unity that belies their scattered sources. This facility at selecting and adapting was highly developed in the architects of a century or so ago, and frequently accounts for the rich subtleties to be savored in a building, or garden, of the time.

On a par with the remarkable quality of the garden itself is its exceptional condition. Unless one looks very closely, the original vision is miraculously intact. This is no accident. At one time, the present owners used the garden as a playground for children in a Temple educational program; the lawn was a recreational area, while the pool was drained and turned into a vast sand box. However, the Temple has happily returned the garden to its original use and appearance. In this, it has been immeasurably helped by Mel Bodek, a member of the congregation, who since 1983 has been the garden’s caretaker. It was he who restored the rose garden, salvaging some of the few surviving plants and obtaining a gift of more from Jackson and Perkins, one of the country’s major suppliers of roses. However, what lifts his concern for the garden to an exceptional, indeed unique level of commitment is his creation of an endowment that will provide funding for continuing maintenance well into the future. I know of no other garden, or designed landscape of any description in the Pittsburgh region, that enjoys this kind of protection. Mr. Bodek’s enlightened generosity guarantees the continued enjoyment of this remarkable place, now aptly called the Rebecca and Melvin Bodek Rose Garden.

The photos of the garden at Temple Sinai are by William Rydberg, PHOTON.



The walled pool enclosure and canal at “Hestercombe.” Here again is a circular basin set within a semi-dome niche and fed by a stream of water issuing from a mascarón in the arch’s keystone.

What more could one want? Here we have a wonderful historic garden in the city, recollections of one of the century’s greatest architects, exemplary preservation, and an act of true philanthropy. Add a cloudless late afternoon in summer when the roses are at their headiest, and you will know why I and Landmarks care deeply about our landscape heritage.

Recognition to Be Given

On Monday evening, October 26, Mel Bodek will receive an Award of Merit for restoring and maintaining the garden of Temple Sinai, and establishing an endowment for the garden’s continued care. Mr. Bodek is one of more than twenty individuals and organizations that will be recognized by Landmarks during a membership reception at the Frick Art & Historical Center. Call Mary Lu Denny at Landmarks at (1-412) 471-5808 if you would like to attend the reception.