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Untermeyer Gardens: A Secret Paradise in Yonkers



Canals representing the rivers of Eden flanked with a ribbon of colorful marigolds. European weeping beeches serve as a living curtain while representing the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life. Photo by Jessica Norman.

By Samantha Diliberti

“As we go through this main gate, I want you to imagine we are walking through the gates of Paradise,” said Stephen Byrns, chairman of the Untermeyer Gardens Conservancy as our tour group entered the Walled Garden of Untermeyer Park.

The Walled Garden is only one of the many breathtaking features of the 43-acre Untermeyer Park, located along the Hudson River in the City

of Yonkers. Founded in 1912 by Samuel Untermeyer, a successful and well-known lawyer of the time, Untermeyer Park was once known as “America’s Most Spectacular Garden.” It consisted of a sprawling 150 acres kept by 60 gardeners.

Accepting visitors from all over the world, the garden once hosted a crowd of 30,000 people in one day for a flower show in the 1930s – an event captured and recorded in the New York

Times.

Today, the Garden is known as “America’s Greatest Forgotten Garden.” After the death of Untermeyer, the garden was divided and the City of Yonkers obtained 43 acres of it. Unfortunately, the city inadequately cared for its portion of the garden, leaving it to decay into an ancient-ruinous state.

Stephen Byrns founded the non-profit Untermeyer Gardens Conservancy to raise funds to

restore the garden back to its original grandeur.

The Walled Garden, previously deprived of the floral color and babbling water tourists appreciate today, now enjoys beautiful marigolds planted along its flowerbeds and full mosaic-lined reflecting pools. Untermeyer based his Walled Garden design on ancient Persian gardens, which are the oldest type of garden. Persian Gardens are rectangular in shape to represent the

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Newly planted hydrangea border on the lower terrace subtending the exuberant 3-year-old west border. Columnar sweetgum trees accent the corner tower of the crenelated Walled Garden.



Corinthian temple frames the view to the Hudson River and New Jersey Palisades.

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“paradise” written about in the Bible, with four rivers that cross each other, as referenced in the Book of Genesis.

Upon entering the Walled Garden, visitors hear the water trickle, see the goldfish swimming in the reflecting pools, appreciate the colorful flora and feel a sense of serenity amongst the perfect symmetry. Each aspect of the garden was carefully planned and mapped to represent an ancient icon or reference. The gardens offer a hands-on history lesson in which visitors can experience the sensation captured by centuries-old artistic and religious practices.

The Walled Garden hosts an amphitheater with a mosaic-tiled floor and the Temple of the Sky, which offers views of the Hudson River through marble pillars. Just a few steps from the Temple lays a forgotten swimming pool where visitors begin to appreciate the tremendous amount of work necessary to restore Untermeyer Park to its original state. The empty swimming pool is decorated with a dilapidated mosaic floor that makes it easy to imagine the former beauty and wealth of the grounds.

Crossing from the swimming pool, visitors are led to the vista steps, which cascade toward the overlook to provide beautiful views of the Hudson River. The vista steps were modeled after the stairs at the Villa D’Este in Italy, which lead to a view of Lake Como. Although the vista steps have yet to undergo significant rehabilitation, the tree-lined view to the Hudson remains beautiful.

During the tour, Byrns painted a picture for visitors of the previous state of the park. Standing at the top of the vista steps, he explained that there used to be the sound of cascading water, which flowed along the steps, and symmetrical trees that once framed the view of the Hudson River.

Walking down the vista steps, the view of the Hudson River is framed by two ancient Roman monolithic columns. The columns are 2,000 years old and carved of one piece of stone. Standing at 25 feet tall, they offer the same sense of strength and beauty as those seen at the Panthe-

on in Rome. However, standing at the overlook, visitors are reminded of the decay and neglect the garden experienced for years, as the columns suffer marks of graffiti and childish carvings.

Untermeyer Park encourages exploration. If a visitor is able to resist reaching the end of the vista steps where the Hudson River waits, he or she can wander off the designed path to explore the hidden color gardens that used to be. Along the vista steps, behind the trees, small paths lead to alcoves that were once filled with plants and flowers of a designated color.

Byrns related that the garden’s nonprofit is working to recover up to six of the color gardens that once lined the vista steps, in the hopes of one day restoring the flora that lived there.

The Temple of Love, perhaps the most tragically beautiful aspect of the garden, is a tower of rocks that are capped with an iron temple overlooking the Hudson River. Climbing its spiral steps, visitors feel as though they are ancient knights climbing to rescue a princess. Visitors are repaid for their efforts upon reaching the top, where there is a breathtaking view of the Hudson River and a beautiful view of the sky through the intricate temple ceiling.

Byrns explained that water also once flowed from this temple, and one can only wish to have the opportunity to see the Temple of Love restored to its previous state.

Today, Untermeyer Park walks visitors through a myriad of emotions, from serenity and awe, to tragic yearning for the beauty that once was. The Walled Garden offers a glimpse of the grandeur that once existed and hope that Untermeyer Park will once again enjoy prestige. To date, the conservancy has secured \$850,000 in both public and private funds to restore the park.

Most impactful is the fact that the Untermeyer Gardens, a forgotten paradise, live within the boundaries of Yonkers. Byrns noted that the restoration of the gardens has generated significant press coverage and has helped to change people’s attitudes about Yonkers.

“Developers have decided to take a second look at opportunities in the downtown area as a result of what we are doing,” he said.

Perhaps sharing the city’s secret garden will not only help in the restoration of Untermeyer Park, but also aid in Yonkers’ resurgence.