Untermyer Gardens: A Secret Paradise in Yonkers

By Samantha Diliberti

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

Today, the Garden is known as “America’s Greatest Forgotten Garden.” After the death of Untermyer, the garden was divided and the City of Yonkers obtained 43 acres of it. Unfortunately, the city inadequately cared for it, and after years of neglect, the garden lost its way to decay into an accent- raneous state. Stephen Byrns, founder of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, has raised funds to restore the garden back to its original grandeur. The restoration of Untermyer, previously deprived of the floral color and babbling water tourists appreciate today, now enjoys beautiful marigolds planted along its flowerbeds and full mosaic-colored 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 Book of Genesis.

The Walled Garden is rectangular in shape to represent the Book of Genesis. European weeping beeches serve as a living curtain while representing the Tree of Knowledge. The gardens offer a hand-on history lesson in which visitors can experience the emotion captured by centuries-old artistic and religious practices.

The Walled Garden boasts an amphitheater with a mosaic-flowered field 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 can appreciate the enormous amount of work necessary to restore Untermyer 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. Climbing the overlook, 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 ones at the Villa D’Este in Italy, which later served as a model for the view of Lake Como. Although the vista steps have yet to undergo significant rehabilitation, the two-level view to the Hudson remains beautiful.

During the tour, Byrns painted a picture for the visitors of the present state of the park. Standing at the top of the vista steps, he explained that here used to be the sound of cascading water, which flowed along the steps, and symmetrical fountains 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 marble columns. The columns are 2,000 years old and carved of one piece of stone. Stand at 25 feet tall, they offer the same sense of strength and beauty as those seen at the Parthenon on in Rome. However, standing at the overlook, visitors are reminded of the decay and neglect the garden experienced for years. On this occasion, visitors suffer marks of graffiti and childish carvings.

Untermyer Park encourages exploration. If a visitor is able to reach the end of the vista steps where the Hudson River waits, he or she can wander off the designated 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 seeing the flora that lined them. 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 overhanging 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 river from behind the intimate 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, Untermyer Park visitors walk through a myriad of emotions, from serenity and awe, to tragic yearning for the beauty that once resided. The Walled Garden offers a glimpse of the grandeur that once existed and hope that Untermyer Park will once again enjoy prestige. To date, the conservancy has secured $850,000 in both public and private funds to repair the park.

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

Yonkers has 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 Untermyer Park, but also in Yonkers’ resurgence.

Newly planted hydrangea border on the lower terrace subtending the exuberant 3-year-old west 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 Surrender of Yonkers. Founded in 1912 by Samuel Untermyer, a successful and well-known lawyer of the time, Untermyer Park was once known as “America’s Most Spectacular Garden.” It consists of a sprawling 150 acres kept by 60 gardners.

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