

## Place Maker: Stephen F. Byrns

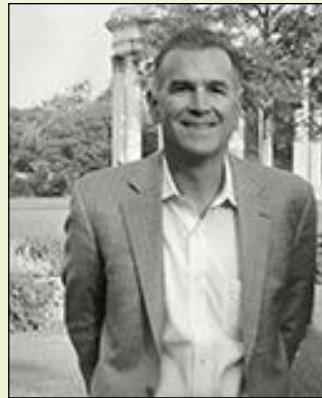
Before his death in 1940, the prominent New York City attorney and humanitarian Samuel J. Untermyer could not give his estate garden away. After years of exuberantly planning, designing, and cultivating his retreat overlooking the Hudson River in Yonkers, and regularly opening his gardens to the public, he was rebuffed by the state, county, and city in his efforts to have it preserved in perpetuity. Now, seven decades later, an enthusiastic architect and former Yonkers resident, Stephen F. Byrns, has taken up the mantle. His passion for the project is a tribute not only to the original creator but also to the present climate, in which gardens are being renewed and celebrated on a massive scale.

Samuel Untermyer, the original place maker, was a lawyer who revolutionized the financial and business world through establishing precedents that led to antitrust laws and fiduciary regulations, even as he himself grew wealthy through astute investments. Originally from Virginia (his father served in the Confederate Army), he went to City College, clerked in a New York law firm, and earned

his professional degree from Columbia Law School. By 1933 he understood the threat of Hitler's regime and its stance against Jews, and courageously set out to raise public awareness, together with representatives of other nations. He became the head of the World Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League, which called for the boycott of German products.

He lived in Manhattan at 2 East 54th Street, not far from John D. Rockefeller Jr. But the elaborate pile of a granite mansion in Yonkers called Greystone, previously owned by former New York governor Samuel J. Tilden, was where he and his beloved wife Minnie oversaw the creation of a spectacular garden based on classical motifs.

Around 1915 Untermyer hired the Beaux-Arts architect William Welles Bosworth to design it – a natural choice, since Bosworth had already distinguished himself by designing the extensive gardens at Kykuit, the Rockefeller estate in Tarrytown, New York. At Greystone's peak, Untermyer engaged sixty gardeners, and the garden became a setting for the cultural life he and his wife generously shared with friends and the public. Orchids were delivered from his greenhouses to the city daily to refresh



his ever-present boutonnière.

In 1946, six years after Untermyer's death, the City of Yonkers finally made the decision to acquire sixteen acres of the original 150-acre garden. These included the walled enclosure called the Greek Garden, the 650-foot-long vista path descending to the river, and two of the original colored gardens – each of which had been devoted to a single hue (pink, blue, yellow, red, and white). Even this partial rescue was a sacrifice for the city, as it meant giving up a sizable portion of taxable real estate. For decades, though, the property languished. While some improvements were made in the seventies, the city lacked the resources to maintain the gardens properly.

In the 1990s, when Byrns himself lived in Yonkers in a house on the river, he and other members of the community attempted to prevent the construction of a nursing home over the original Italian garden. Unfortunately, these efforts failed. St. John's Riverside Hospital was also built to the north – another lost cause. Byrns then moved to Riverdale, where he served on the board of Wave Hill for ten years. In 2010, however, he resigned, stepping down at the same time from the New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission after a six-year term. He was ready for something different.

That August he was inspired to found the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy after his former Yonkers neighbor, the artist Richard Hass, told him that the fountains in the Untermyer Garden had been turned on. "It was an amazing sight," Byrns recalls, "and it transformed my summer." As it turns out, it transformed his life.

In September Byrns happened to be in Rome at the same time as Marco Polo Stufano, the consummate plantsman who had overseen the famed restoration of Wave Hill. As they visited the Villas d'Este and

Aldobrandini, among others, Byrns reports, “I made my sales pitch to him, and he replied that he would join us.”

Stephen Byrns now divides his time 60-40 between his Manhattan architecture firm BKSK and his duties as founding chairman of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy. His brand-new office is a simple, one-room affair in the Charles A. Cola Community Center: a single-story building with a hipped roof similar to that of the former carriage house near the garden entrance.

Restoring gardens has been in Byrns’s blood since he worked at age twelve to revive plantings at his great-aunt’s house in St. Joseph, Michigan, after his parents purchased the residence to turn it into their family home. At Princeton University he learned how to view history as an interdisciplinary expression of politics, economics, and culture from the eminent professor and historian Carl E. Schorske. When he received his degree from Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, its dean was James Stewart Polshek, a model of social responsibility. Byrns’s prize-winning designs have been characterized by his firm as “weaving together the uniqueness of residents,

local histories, and physical settings in order to celebrate context,” which helps explain his attraction to the Untermyer property.

The Untermyer Gardens have been fortunate in their horticulturists. Marco Polo Stufano felt that he was, in a sense, “coming full circle” when he arrived, because he had learned about the place as a student at the New York Botanical Garden’s School of Horticulture from his great teacher and mentor, the acclaimed horticulturist Thomas H. Everett. In 1927, so the story goes, when the Kew-trained Everett arrived from his native England in steerage, Untermyer’s agent was at the docks looking for gardeners, and Everett was hired. He remained there for a year. To complete the circle, Timothy Tilghman, head gardener since the Untermyer restoration began in 2011, had worked at Wave Hill for four years under Stufano. Although Stufano retired in 2001, he still serves as an informal advisor, and Tilghman considers him his mentor.

The centerpiece of the 16-acre grounds was the walled Greek Garden – despite its name, a hybrid of styles. In the July 1918 issue of *Architectural Record*, Bosworth referred to it as “an Indo-Persian garden,” elaborating, “Many of these so-called Mughal gardens are rectangular in form with a cross of water ways intersecting at the center and

bordered with formal *plate bandes* of flowers.” The plan also called for high, crenellated walls, with octagonal towers topped by summerhouses at the corners. “This form must have come from high antiquity and seems likely to have taken its origin in Greek tradition” – hence his creation’s popular name. The result was a garden of striking grandeur – Bosworth’s finest in America before Rockefeller Jr. sent him to restore Versailles; he remained in France the rest of his life.

The outer wall, with its incised diamond-lattice design, includes carefully spaced pilasters and iron fasteners for vines. It is interrupted on the south side by the main entrance, which was inspired by the massive Lion Gate at Mycenae, built in the thirteenth century BCE. Here, though, the gate is guarded not by lionesses, but by Artemis, goddess of the hunt, depicted in a flowing relief above the lintel. (The free range of her prey is soon to be checked by a deer fence.) When I first entered the garden under two giant weeping beeches and viewed its crossed canals and wide lawns, surrounded by classical follies, I had the delightful impression that the Mughal four-river or *charbagh* landscape around the Tomb of Humayan in Delhi had been set down in



the middle of the Agora in Athens, where philosophers once held forth under their classical stoa, now scattered in ruins around the edges.

As Tilghman explains, although the gardens are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, improvements are monitored by the New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation with the goal of evoking its appearance as of 1940, the year of Untermyer’s death. Unable to afford his lavishness, they are treating the gardens as a rehabilitation rather than a restoration. Untermyer planted the gardens with seasonal splash, from spring tulips to fall chrysanthemums, but the look of public gardens has changed in the last

decades – in New York thanks in large part to Marco Polo Stufano. Today many gardens in the city’s parks feature a *mélange* of common hardy perennials or annuals with diverse foliage, textures, and subtle seasonal variety. This approach also makes the garden an educational and public resource for local at-home gardeners.

At the Untermyer Gardens, instead of Bosworth’s English yews, Tilghman has lined the canals with more easily maintained but equally dramatic Japanese hollies. On the opposite side of the parallel path, he has planted fastigate beeches, whose foliage suggests the

Persian Garden, Untermyer Gardens.

golden glow originally achieved with standards of yellow-flowering lantana. While naturalizing bulbs are planted under the beeches, the borders between the hollies are reserved for special summer displays.

As any traveler to India or Pakistan knows, the ubiquitous flower of the subcontinent is the marigold, which flourishes everywhere in gardens and pots. Last summer, in keeping with the Indo-Persian theme – and with a nod to Untermyer’s seasonal extravagance – the garden featured an overflow of marigolds along the waterways, in pleasing contrast to silvery

helichrysum and dichondra. This popular display was complemented by the large numbers of local visitors in colorful, swirling saris.

For the perimeter borders, Tilghman's goal is a romantic mix "to make the plantings softer and more mysterious against the garden walls and balustrades," so that "the rhythmic order plays with the architecture and makes it appear more intimate." This effect has been achieved on the garden's east side (along Broadway) with a mixture of azaleas, rhododendron, and other woody plants and shrubs that form the background to an ever-changing assortment of shade plants. Along the west side, choices made to accommodate full sun include long-blooming red, pink, and yellow "Knock Out" roses. Come March, Tilghman and Stufano review these borders together, catalogues in hand. Then they vary the selections after editing out plants that did not survive. On a lower terrace, Tilghman is planting a solid mass of hydrangea – two dozen or more varieties – near a row of cherry trees that provide airy blossoms in spring, which are visible from the upper garden just above the balustrade.

Mostly intact, the gardens' classical structures, with their mosaic floors, are a powerful presence.

They introduce a veritable dictionary of motifs from antiquity. Where else can one see, locally, examples of all three classical orders: Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian? The stoa on the east side, a small porch furnished with pots of tropical plants, feels intimate in contrast to the majestic, open-air, circular Temple of the Sky opposite, which cries out for staged performances. Below it a waterfall once emptied into a swimming pool paved with a mosaic of aquatic creatures; this will require millions to restore. At the far end of the gardens, the amphitheater seats an audience above a reflecting pool and a floor with scrolled mosaic designs based on the famous remains of a fresco from Tiryns (1400–1200 BCE). Bosworth did his homework, but he also knew how to engage contemporary artists; he commissioned the sculptor Paul Manship to create the twin sphinxes on high, paired columns of veined cipolino marble. Placed at the end of the garden vista, they are the perfect eye-catchers.

Like the Conservatory Garden in Central Park (whose cast of Walter Schott's *Three Dancing Maidens* fountain in Berlin comes from the forecourt of Untermyer's Greystone mansion), the garden is surrounded by open woodland with carriage drives, making of the whole a major city

park. At the north end, the long, downhill path (soon to be lined with cryptomeria) leads to a viewing platform from which one can gaze across the river to the Palisades. Returning uphill on a trail winding through woodland, one arrives at the Temple of Love, a charming tempietto under a lacy, wrought-iron dome, perched above another work in progress: a genius of a rockery with a yet-to-be activated cascade of water, and built-in drainage for cascades of flowers.

In a mere five years, Stephen Byrns has reinvigorated one of America's most enchanting gardens, and yet he is more focused on all that remains to be done – notably, replanting the meadow gardens and the floral sundial at the edge of the woodland and reestablishing the carriage drives. He dreams of negotiating a land swap with the hospital to reclaim three more of the original color gardens. But when the fountains bubble over into the four "rivers" in his paradise of a garden, he is no doubt reminded of that first moment he saw them and committed himself to becoming a place maker. He shares this all-consuming passion with Samuel Untermyer, who once said, "I find a strong appeal in the practical, experimental and scientific aspect of gardening." – Paula Deitz