pyramid as a work looking beyond its own time for something timeless; he saw Richardson “seeking his inspiration back in the time before architecture took form.” The monument was perhaps the purest expression of the new, distinctively American and modern approach to architectural design that Richardson developed toward the end of his life, after working with Olmsted. Hitchcock judged it to be “perhaps the finest memorial in America.”

Historians since have not only agreed, but have analyzed the Ames Monument as a critical moment in architectural history. Mark Wright identifies it as “the fulcrum on which Richardson’s work pivots – before and after” and suggests that the architect’s “imaginative confrontation with the harsh landscapes of the Western United States” resulted in a “new primitivism” reflected in his successive buildings. The formal characteristics that identify Richardson’s later buildings – simplicity, mass, rich surface detail – were expressed in Wyoming more freely and independent of any style, even in his own version of the Romanesque. Subsequently Richardson produced some of his greatest works, including the Crane and Billings libraries, the Robert Treat Paine House, and the Marshall Field Wholesale Store. His experience of designing the Ames Monument and his collaboration with Frederick Law Olmsted played a role in their success.

Today, the monument remains in very good condition. As Olmsted predicted, the severe weather conditions of southeastern Wyoming, far from deteriorating its surfaces, “no more than improve it.” The most serious damage has been due not to weather but vandalism. In the 1980s, the two porings – simplicity, mass, rich surface detail – were expressed in Wyoming more freely and independent of any style, even in his own version of the Romanesque. Subsequently Richardson produced some of his greatest works, including the Crane and Billings libraries, the Robert Treat Paine House, and the Marshall Field Wholesale Store. His experience of designing the Ames Monument and his collaboration with Frederick Law Olmsted played a role in their success.

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Before his death 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-uncle’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, crenelated walls, with octagonal towers topped by summer-houses 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 Humayun 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 several 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 golden glow originally achieved with standards of yellow-flowering lanterns. 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. 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 overlooking the pond. 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 create the twin sphinxes 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.

Paula Deitz is editor of The Hudson Review, a magazine of literature and the arts published in New York City. She writes about art, architecture, and landscape design for newspapers and magazines here and abroad. Of Gardens, a collection of her essays, was published in 2010 by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Dan Flores, Professor Emeritus at the University of Montana, is a writer who lives in the Galisteo River Valley outside Santa Fe, New Mexico. He is the author of eight books, most recently Visions of the Big Sky: Photographing and Painting the Northern Rocky Mountain West (2010). His next book, Coyote America, will be published in 2016.

Joni Kinsey is Professor of American art history at the University of Iowa, with research specialties in American landscape imagery and western art. She is the author of four books, Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992; Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996; The Majestic Grand Canyon: 150 Years in Art, First Glance Books, 1998, and Thomas Moran’s West: Chromolithography, High Art, and Popular Taste, University Press of Kansas, 2006. Her recent articles have focused on Grant Wood and controversies about Regionalist art in the 1930s, and the art of the western federal surveys in the 1870s and 1880s. In 2014 Kinsey was a Fulbright Scholar in Great Britain, working on a book about Thomas Moran’s reputation as “The American Turner” and his transatlantic landscapes in the context of imperial expansion.

Paula Panich is a Los Angeles-based writer, printmaker, and teacher. She has contributed to The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, Gastronomica, the Harvard Review, the North American Review and is the author of several books, including Cultivating Words: The Guide to Writing about the Plants and Gardens You Love.

Asher Price is a staff reporter at the Austin American-Statesman and co-author of The Great Texas Wind Rush: How George Bush, Ann Richards, and a Bunch of Tinkerers Helped the Oil and Gas State Win the Race to Wind Power.

Elihu Rubin is assistant professor of architecture, urbanism, and American studies at Yale University. He is the author of Insuring the City: The Prudential Center and the Postwar Urban Landscape (2012), which received the Lewis Mumford Prize for Best Book from the Society of American City and Regional Planning History and the Kenneth Jackson Award for Best Book on a North American topic from the Urban History Association.