



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Stephen Byrns stands within the Temple of the Sky at Untermyer Gardens. For photos of this year's Yonkers Arts Weekend Fashion Show at Untermyer, see page 28.

## Resurrection of gardens earns stewardship honor

By Jackie Lupo

YONKERS — Untermyer Gardens Conservancy founder and president Stephen Byrns was honored on May 1 with the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art (ICAA) Arthur Ross Award for Excellence in the Classical Tradition, in the category of Stewardship.

The ICAA, headquartered in New York City, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting classicism in architecture and the allied arts. The annual awards program was established in 1982 by former ICAA honorary chairman Arthur Ross (1910-2007), an investor and philanthropist with a passion for the classical tradi-

tion, and Henry Hope Reed (1915-2013), an architectural critic and one of the founders of the ICAA.

“Stewardship” usually implies continued care for something in good condition. Byrns has labored since 2011 to bring the Yonkers landmark overlooking the Hudson, with its Persian walled garden and classical monuments, back to the glory it enjoyed a century ago, when millionaire attorney Samuel Untermyer hired classically trained architect William Welles Bosworth to design a landscape to rival John D. Rockefeller’s Kykuit gardens in Pocantico Hills, which Bosworth designed in 1906.

“It was here, but it was a wreck,” Byrns said of the property’s condition

when he arrived in 2011. “It’s a very kind of radical stewardship.”

Only 43 acres of Samuel Untermyer’s original 150 acres along North Broadway (Route 9) remain in one piece, now existing as a public park owned by the City of Yonkers. But those acres include some of the most impressive features of the former estate: the Persian garden, the Temple of Love, the Vista, and the Temple of the Sky.

As an architect for 35 years, Byrns, 62, worked in various genres, including modern, but he has always had a passion for the classical in both landscapes and buildings. Before taking on the restoration of Untermyer Gardens as a public/private partner-

ship with Yonkers, Byrns was a director of Wave Hill, a restored public garden in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. He also spent six years as a member of the New York City Landmarks Commission. In 2016, Byrns decided to leave the architectural firm he co-founded 32 years ago, BKSK Architects in Manhattan, to devote himself full time to the gardens. Their rejuvenation is a project for years to come, despite the progress made in the past six.

Byrns noted that the centerpiece of the property, the Persian garden, has “a great sense of antiquity.” Mostly Persian in design, it has a classical,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

# Untermeyer

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Greco-Roman overlay. "The walls, the towers, the canals, that's all pure Persian," Byrns said. "But when you come inside, the plan is Persian and the layout is Persian, but there are lots of classical architectural elements. The columns at the end with the sphinxes are Ionic, but the idea of putting sculptures on top of columns probably goes back to Persepolis. The round Temple of the Sky is pure classical — Hellenistic. When you come in and pass through the Gates of Paradise, there are some blocks of stone that are a reference to the Mycenaean era, which is pre-Hellenistic, about 1200 B.C. Hellenistic is like 400 B.C. Persian is like 500 B.C. There are all these different layers of time."

This summer, the Conservancy will celebrate the rededication of the Vista, a set of steps leading west toward the river, with the view of the Palisades framed by two immense ancient Roman columns imported from Italy a century ago. "It's based on the [16th-century] Villa d'Este on Lake Como in Italy," Byrns said. "That single feature may be the most monumental garden feature in America."

To renovate the Vista, the Conservancy removed dozens of invasive trees, mostly Norway maples, from the edges of the stairway, planting cryptomeri, a type of cypress, in their place, as in Samuel Untermeyer's era. The stairs have been repaved with turf joints, railings have been installed on both sides of the stairs, and more than 2,000 variegated yellow "hakonechloa aureola" plants (also known as Japanese forest grass) are being installed adjacent to the stepped walls next to the stairs. "We're going to have potted plants of flowers at the top

of the vista, which Samuel Untermeyer had," Byrns added.

Around the Temple of Love (modeled after the original Temple of the Sybil in ancient Rome), where architectural work was completed last fall, 1,000 new plants will be added this year. Japanese cherry trees will replace a group of invasive trees that blocked the view. "It will be like a bowl full of pinkish flowers in the spring," Byrns said.

Later this year, the canals in the Persian garden will be relined and replumbed to correct chronic leaks, and a lighting system will be installed. Near Warburton Avenue, at what used to be the western entrance to Untermeyer's estate, security lighting will be added and graffiti removed from the ruined gatehouse, which was made structurally sound. The missing head of one of the two sentry animals at the gates — a unicorn — will be replaced.

Future projects depend on robust fundraising. Byrns' vision includes planting a garden inside the ruined gatehouse. This, he explained, would include "removal of a lot of graffiti — including Satanic. There were animal sacrifices there. We want to exorcise that, replace the graffiti with artistic graffiti, not Satanic."

The massive, circular columned Temple of the Sky remains buttressed because of structural problems. "We hope to do a more elaborate analysis of the problems, to then make the repair that's required," Byrns said. "We don't know if it's a million-dollar repair or a quarter-million-dollar repair. We need to do more investigation. My dream, my goal, would be to do the repair in 2018. And my super-optimistic goal is to do the pool [where the mosaics, in ancient Roman style, are in dire need of repair] in 2019. That, we need to raise millions of dollars for — so probably in 2020."