

Modern landscape design style of Fletcher Steele

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ABSTRACT. *Steele is one of the most successful and outstanding landscape designers in contemporary America. He has a great influence on the development of landscape design. Steele's success has also benefited in part from his unique perspective in developing relationships with customers. He stressed the importance of integrating all elements in garden design, including vegetation, the building itself, and the preferences of people who use premises later.*

KEYWORD: *Modern landscape; Landscape design; Art.*

He is the “transitional figure between the traditional and modern landscape design” by integrating the traditional element of vegetation with modern masonry and inert (Treib, 1993). Steele contributed enormously to developing the American eclectic style, which is known as a decorating style that borrows elements from a wide range of styles and integrates them by utilizing color, texture and shape, composition, patterns, etc. Being one of the most prominent modern American landscape architects, Steele had written many articles that have exerted significant influence on future generations such as James Rose, Dan Kiley, and Garrett Eckbo who have completed architecture study at Harvard University and contributed to major breakthroughs in the field (Treib, 1993). Hence, Steele's contribution to modern American Architecture not only lies in him being a truly eclectic figure but also comes from his enormous influence on future generations. Even though Steele's designing style altered a bit along with social development, he has always treated landscape architecture as a form of art. Throughout his working life from 1915 to 1971, Steele created more than 700 gardens (Karson, 2003). He is generally considered to be the key figure in the process of the transformation from decorative art formalism to modern landscape design. His garden “is always dazzling and novel”, which is a constant exploration beyond the scope of traditional landscape design. His garden “is always dazzling and novel”, which is a constant exploration beyond the scope of traditional landscape design. Steele's design philosophy stems from two main beliefs: landscape design is an art form equivalent to painting and music; garden is designed for pleasure.

Although Steele regards landscape architecture as an important form of art that is designed to please users, compared with other types of arts such as painting, sculpture, music, etc. the American architecture developed and evolved the slowest

due to several constraints. On the one hand, landscape architecture embraces little autonomy because it is primarily designed to be used by human beings directly (Treib, 1993). With human involvement, it must present particular practical features, which, to some extent, hindered the development of conventional landscape architecture. Secondly, landscape architecture generally requires the involvement of vegetation, which requests architects to have sound knowledge of horticulture and ecology (Treib, 1993). Due to these unconquerable factors, Steele blames the slow development of the landscape architecture primarily on general American architects' reluctance to adopt new ideas (Treib, 1993).

Steel is a stubborn and critical person in nature. He reads extensively and developed independent thinking ability. During his study at Williams College, he performed poorly academically, which, to some extent, resulted in his lack of interest in the subject. He then successfully enrolled at Harvard University, where he began to study Landscape Architecture, which he showed great passion, especially for the Beaux-Arts curriculum. However, the theoretical knowledge bored Steel soon, which pushed him to seek opportunities for real-life experience and practices.

Steele's design philosophy stems from two main beliefs: landscape design is an art form equivalent to painting and music; garden is designed for pleasure. Many of his early designs show the influence of traditional art design, but with the improvement of his ability and artistic taste, his garden has become more expressive, interesting and unique. Unfortunately, in Steele's lifetime, his garden design was only accepted by a few people. His emphasis on expressiveness and detail runs counter to the popularity of his peers who advocate the creativity and functionality of space. In spite of this, Steele's design and writing as the theoretical and artistic basis of landscape design add a lot of color.

He met Warren Manning, the mentor who enlightened Steel and guided him on the path of exploring landscape architecture. Steel claimed that what he had learned from Warren Manning for a few days was more than everything he had obtained from the school. Intrigued by the real-life practice, Steel dropped from Harvard University and started an apprenticeship with Warren Manning for around six years to get firsthand experience. Nevertheless, discrepancies and nuances on aesthetic appreciation started to accumulate. Steel decided to leave Warren Mining to pursue his own style, which was a critical transitional period in his career development.

After leaving Warren Mining, Steele took the journey to Europe to explore the traditional English style. Upon completing the four-month trip in Europe, where he was primarily exposed to many landscape architecture that was fundamentally different from the American style, Steele realized that every landscape architecture has its own characteristics that fit the specific region (Karson, 2003). And the American landscape architects must make an effort for the emergence of the new developmental era. Rather than being confined to the comfort zone of traditional Beaux-Arts orthodoxy, Steele decided to try something new. He borrowed the idea and inspiration from the European architectures that he observed and created his own landscape design style that not only focuses on the vegetation and garden but paid more attention to make the design match the surrounding features (Karson,

2003). Steele claims that the majority of landscape architects lack understanding of vegetal elements in outdoor architecture, they do not know how to use vegetation to reinforce the design but regard plants as requirements that may hinder their design (Treib, 1993).

During the first years that Steel left Warren Manning, he secured a job at a private practice that provides designing service for people, especially reach people who adopt the lavish living style. As a workplace novice, he earned a minimal salary but had to learn how to live a luxury live to get close to his clients and understand their taste. Steel believes understanding clients' needs is the prerequisite for successful landscape architecture.

Apart from Warren Mining, Mabel Choate is another crucial figure who imposed a profound influence on Steele's artistic development. The longstanding partnership between them has accelerated the professional development of Steel. It was during the corporation that Steel completed some of his most extraordinary and magnificent landscape architecture, such as the Afternoon Garden, Chinese Garden, Blue Steps, Rose Garden, etc. Mabel is the owner and heiress of the Naumkeag estate in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The estate is spacious and witnessed the most flourishing period of the family. Mabel and Steel met each other on Steel's lecture at Massachusetts Garden Club when he tries to obtain more clients. Through the interaction with Mable, Steel realized the importance of figuring out the dreams of clients' hidden selves. Mabel is a passionate reader, painter, and gardener herself who inspired Steel to be adventurous and explorative (Treib, 1993).

After the lecture, they walked together when Mabel expressed his wishes to renovating the outdoor room (Treib, 1993). Steel was assigned as the designer for Mabel's spacious garden, later named as Afternoon Garden. The design became a hit suddenly as it is a mixed design of the European tradition and New England tradition. Mabel has a unique taste for luxury art and horticulture; therefore, she invested a considerable amount of money in the design. To satisfy Mabel's special crave for vegetations, Steel accommodated more than 30 types of fuschias and flowers (Sutherland, 2016). Four magnificent marble fountains were established as well. Right in the center of the garden laid a pool, which is designed to reflect the light and movement. The overall design is exquisite and luxurious and adopted different textures and techniques, which presents Mabel's special taste for expensive design.

A decade later, Steel took over another work of Mabel, which is the Chinese Garden. Mabel conducted a one-month trip in Beijing with the Garden Club of America when she developed a strong passion for the Oriental marble and the landscape design. Returning to America, Mabel expressed her desire to bring oriental style back home (Treib, 1993). Steel then started to investigate the Chinese landscape architecture style and came up with his own one. The Chinese Garden has a small mountain, which is one of the most common characteristics of the Chinese landscape architecture design. Besides, Steel finds that Chinese gardens face inward, which is entirely different from the American style. Many empty spaces were left as well, which is believed to be one of the features of the Chinese garden. The use of

blue roof tiles and marble slabs closely restored the Asian style. The whole style remains high authenticity, with many elements of the Steel's style added apart from the oriental features (Sutherland, 2016). Mabel was very satisfied with the design and felt that it had met her expectation of creating a private garden that brings about exotic experience.

In the 1920s, influenced by the French garden decoration, Steele introduced the European modern garden design theory to the United States, which greatly promoted the modernism process in the American garden field. In 1926, Steele got to know Ms. Joett. During the two years, they jointly completed the design of a series of small gardens in the village of Joett, and the design of a series of small gardens in the village of Naomkoji, which turned Naomkoji into a classic work in the early 20th century. It became a classic work in the early 20th century. "Afternoon" garden afternoon "the afternoon space draws on the form of California traditional garden, in which you can see the scenery of distant mountains. In addition to pools and fountains in the garden. "Afternoon" garden, the terrace garden grassland of Naomkoji manor is arranged with curved gravel belt and rose flower bed in the middle. It is a satisfying experiment that the curve form of far Bear Mountain starts from the grassland in the South and ends in the forest. This is the first attempt to integrate the background geomorphic form into the foreground in a unified design. This is the first attempt to integrate the background geomorphic form into the foreground in a unified design. The solid stone steps form a strong contrast with the thin and curved white handrails. The strong contrast, under the background of carefully planted birch, forms an interesting visual effect. The "blue ladder" in Naomkoji manor clearly shows his imaginative treatment of the area with perspective. This design is not only a garden, but also a sculpture, which is appreciated by people. The graceful curves and other decorative effects in the "blue ladder" have obvious new artistic features.



<https://tclf.org/pioneer/fletcher-steele>

The Blue Steps is another landscape masterpiece of Steel at Naumkeag that cannot be ignored. As is indicated by the name, the Blue Steps is the cascading stairs in the estate. It was initially built to prevent people from falling on the steep hill that is full of lilac (Sutherland, 2016). The Blue Steps is featured by multiple levels, and each step is facilitated with a water spring that springs out of water. There are four divisions of the stairs and each with steps that reach to a platform. The stairs are built with blue bricks; however, the original idea was to make them in yellow and red, but it did not work out for the holistic style. The design presents people with a different visual feast when viewing from different dimensions. Watching from far behind, it looks like a cascading water fountain with half-circle water insets. When looking from the sky, it provides a vertical line that is made of water spring. In terms of the railings, Steel borrowed the idea from the Art Deco style and made them clean, simple, but modern lines (Treib, 1993). He adopted the traditional European style clipped hedge by using wood cords in vertical lines for earth retention instead of the conventional used concrete or stone. This specific design has been praised for showing high creativity and innovation because it gives a unique but natural design look with a vertical line of half-circle water insets presented to the viewers. The inspiring partnership between Steel and Mabel marked the mature stage of his landscape design. Instead of trying to fill in the estate, Steel learned the importance of having empty space in landscape design.

Steele's design approach was deeply influenced by Beaux-Art, which he learned at Harvard University for the first ten years of his career. Most of Steele's well-known landscape architecture design in Naumkeag combined the European traditions and New England traditions, which made his unique style of eclectic that paves the road of modern American landscape architecture. He primarily regards the

landscape as a whole rather than seeing each part of separately and combine them awkwardly (Treib, 1993). Symmetry is an essential element for Beaux-art. Steele tries to bring a defined and organized feeling to his design and always insisted on order. The harmony between different elements is of considerable significance in his commercial and artistic design.

His design in later years brings more new ideas as he listened more to the views of clients and integrated the requirement with his style. "He was unique in his dedication to the notion that gardens can be life-altering works of art, and he was very unusual in his working methods and level of involvement with his clients," as commented by Robin Karson (2003), an award-winning author. According to his biography, Steele has always had a passion for looking into the deeper layer of people whom he worked with and discovered inspiration from them (Karson, 2003). When designing gardens for clients, he constantly talks to them to seek different perspectives that may not easily reveal to people but are important elements that may affect his design. He is also reported to have the habit of checking the bookshelves of clients to understand their taste as to the design landscape that suits more for the expectation of clients (Karson, 2003).

Steele was born in Rochester, New York. Most of his works focus on the layout of suburban houses, and most of his works are manor scale. Since his independent opening in Boston, he has traveled all over New England, all the way to New York in the north, Leicester, Illinois, Detroit and deathville, North Carolina. His final work is an unusual quiet but influential garden designed a few miles away from his home. Steele died before it was completed.

Most of his works are designed for the upper class. He used to lean towards Italians and "academies" to find the source of design. Although he praised the French avant-garde garden design, when he tried to use modern concepts in his design, it seemed that he was repairing an outdated structure with modern fragments. In 1925, styrie visited the "International Exhibition of modern arts and crafts" in Paris, which was greatly inspired. Since then, its design is more bold and the situation is more ABSTRACT. In depth analysis of the French avant-garde garden and apply to their own design practice. French landscape designer ferra and others have a deep influence on stiri. The modernist use of materials, such as cement trees and spinning reflective balls, liberated Steele's designs. The blue steps, in stobury, Mo., are one of his famous works, influenced by modern abstract. sculpture.

Steele generally engaged in a very systematic and thorough design process. Prior to designing, he would, first of all, determine all the elements in the garden, such as form, line, pattern, texture, silhouette, composition, scales, proportion, and decide where to put everything (Karson, 2003). Steele is especially good at integrating seemingly contrast elements together, which is one of the critical design styles and approaches for his artwork. The use of dark and light, the integration of open space and barriers, the utilization of colors all presented a comfortable and soothing atmosphere. He is obsessed with balancing new and old elements in his design. Most of his landscape designs combined the traditional Italianate and Beaus-Arts models and English traditions. Despite instilling modern techniques in the design, he always

tried to integrate the traditional elements which show his eagerness to adopt new ideas that are essential for modern American landscape architecture.

To conclude, Steele is one of the most successful and prominent modern American landscape architects who exerted massive influence on the development of garden designs. He is a typical eclectic figure who is keen on integrating contrast elements. His study of landscape architecture starts from an era when American architects were reluctant to adopt new ideas. His eclectic style has contributed significantly to the integration of traditional Beaux-Art and new English traditions, which he observed and learned from his trip to Europe. Steele's success also partially led by his unique perspective of developing a relationship with clients. He highlighted the importance of integrating all elements in garden design, including vegetation, architecture itself, and the preference of people who will use the premise afterwards. Steele regards the work of landscape architecture as any other art form that requires inspiration and delicate design.

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