

American Curves: The Public Works Legacy of Gilmore D. Clarke and Michael Rapuano

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abstract:

Few landscape architects in U.S. history have had greater impact on the form and character of the American city than Gilmore Clarke and Michael Rapuano. Steeped in the Beaux-arts formalism then in vogue at nearly all American design schools, Clarke graduated Cornell in 1913 and worked for Charles Downing Lay in New York before being recruited by the Bronx River Parkway Commission to build a "landscaped road" in Westchester County. Over the next two decades, Clarke led an extraordinary team of designers and engineers in creating the first regional infrastructure for the automobile in America: a vast network of parks and recreation grounds braided with sinuous strands of parkway. In effect, Clarke carried the Olmstedian ideal into the motor age, expanding it to regional scale. The Westchester parkways were literally "gardens for the machine," fusing romantic pastoralism with state-of-the-art transportation technology.

One of the landscape architects Clarke recruited was Michael Rapuano, fifth recipient of the Prix de Rome in landscape architecture and 1927 graduate of Cornell. Rapuano's tenure in Westchester was brief; within a few years both men were called upon by Robert Moses to lead an ambitious program of park development in New York City. Moses had already looked to Westchester as a template for the park and parkway system he was building on Long Island, and Clarke had already provided design direction on its crown jewel, Jones Beach State Park. Now Clarke and Rapuano would help bring to life Moses' dream of a modern, integrated, metropolitan landscape: a vision articulated in the 1920s of "weav[ing] together the loose strands and frayed edges of New York's arterial and metropolitan tapestry."

Clarke was appointed consulting landscape architect to the New York City Parks Department in 1934; Rapuano accompanied him as top designer and right-hand man. The pair worked on scores of projects together throughout the city, ultimately leading to the founding of Clarke & Rapuano, one of the first interdisciplinary design and engineering practices in the United States. The firm would help plan nearly all the public works of the Moses years, and consult on major park, highway, housing, and infrastructure projects throughout the nation. The two men forged a nearly flawless working relationship, enabling "one of the most fruitful collaborations in American design history¹. " The elder Clarke was the firm's steady anchor and society presence; the youthful Rapuano, working class son of immigrants, was the firm's design genius; even late in life, he spent hours with junior designers at their drafting tables.

This lecture will explore the legacy of Clarke and Rapuano, and situate their work in the context of landscape design history in 20th-century America. It will argue that while most of Clarke and Rapuano's design work was superficially conservative—formally derived from classical precedents—it was at the same time profoundly modern. Like Moses himself, Clarke and Rapuano had great faith in the motor car and the freedoms and convenience it promised. Their early work, especially, represents a fleeting moment of fusion between modernity and the Beaux-arts formalism that, in America, was most closely associated with the exclusive garden designs of the so-called "county place era." Clarke and Rapuano took the Beaux-arts to the people, effectively creating a vast civic estate that millions of Americans still enjoy today.