

Designing the American Century: The Public Landscapes of Clarke and Rapuano, 1915 to 1965

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Cornell University Professor Thomas Campanella's remarkable new book is about two of the most important early - to mid-20th-century landscape architects – in fact, designers more broadly – who are now largely forgotten. *Designing the American Century: The Public Landscapes of Clarke and Rapuano, 1915 to 1965* sets out to restore the reputations and contributions of Gilmore Clarke and Michael Rapuano. Campanella succeeds spectacularly thanks to the sheer scope and quality of Clarke and Rapuano's oeuvre. That they were interesting characters further reinforces their redemption story.

Why did they become obscure? Simply put, they were Robert Moses' favorite designers, and after Robert Caro's complete – and largely justified – classic takedown of New York City's 'power broker', associated individuals were also marginalized. Arguably, even during the height of Moses's power, his compatriots stood in his shadow. As Campanella observes, Clarke and Rapuano specialized in public works with many authors, rendering their contributions more anonymous.

Gilmore Clarke and Michael Rapuano were both Cornell graduates with American Academy in Rome affiliations. Clarke was the older of the duo by about twelve years. He graduated from Cornell in landscape architecture in 1913. The Cornell program fused its land-grant heritage and deep horticultural

traditions with the evolving approaches developed by Frederick Law Olmsted and his associates. Campanella explains the important role Cornell played in early 20th-century landscape architecture education. After working for several years, Clarke served as an officer in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during World War I in Europe. His military service deepened his understanding of civil engineering works, most notably roads and bridges.

Michael Rapuano was the son of immigrants from southern Italy. He earned his landscape architecture degree from Cornell in 1927, then spent three years as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. There, he helped restore the gardens of Villa d'Este in Tivoli. This experience helped him learn about complex topographies, which proved useful in subsequent projects, including the masterful Brooklyn Heights Promenade. Rapuano and Clarke's inventive scheme saved the neighborhood from the most deleterious consequences of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, creating an urban landmark. Rapuano would remain involved with the American Academy for the rest of his life, joined by Clarke, who held various positions including trustee. Meanwhile, Clarke also taught city planning at Cornell and served as dean there.

After Rapuano returned to the United States in 1930, at the beginning of the Great Depression, he



Fig. 1 - Playland at Rye Beach, 1927. Earl Purdy, delineator. New York Public Library.

went to work for Clarke at the Westchester County Park Commission. They designed numerous parks and parkways for the county just north of New York City (Fig. 1). Clarke's leadership garnered the attention of Robert Moses, who used Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs to launch a vast reworking of New York City's infrastructure. Clarke contributed his landscape architecture and civil engineering acumen to these civic works, with Rapuano as his "steadfast aide-de-camp" (*infra*, p. 90).

From this New Deal seedbed, the multidisciplinary firm of Clarke & Rapuano emerged, beginning in 1935 and formally established as a partnership in 1939. The partners would lead an astounding number of important projects, working extensively for Parks Commissioner Moses but also expanding beyond New York to other parts of the United States, as well as Canada, Mexico, Italy, and the Netherlands. Clarke and Rapuano also served on the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C., which led to many projects in the nation's capital.

In *Designing the American Century*, Campanella brilliantly describes the scope and depth of Clarke and Rapuano's practice. He clearly outlines and analyzes the types of public works they undertook -- parks,

parkways, public housing, zoos, gardens, world's fairs, city plans, and even a major airport. He especially highlights the more prominent role landscape architects once played in roadway design (Fig. 2). Clarke and Rapuano were, according to Campanella, the "High Priests of the Super-Road" (*infra* p. 256). Clarke's civil engineering expertise contributed, as did the inclusion of engineers in their firm. Campanella also illuminates many in the supporting cast -- such as engineer (and longtime partner) Leslie G. Holleran and landscape architect (and Clarke's life partner) M. Betty Sprout.

The pair's work ranged from everyday places for people to live to the sites of grand extravaganzas. Clarke and Rapuano began their involvement in housing during the 1930s with New Deal undertakings in Manhattan and Brooklyn, then expanded their efforts across the region and beyond for both the private and public sectors. Their work addressed housing issues faced by the poor but also, in a few cases, participated in exclusionary practices based on race. Still, they added considerable open space and recreational areas to their housing projects, as well as thoughtful pedestrian and automobile connectivity.



Fig. 2 - Henry Hudson Parkway and Riverside Park looking south toward 79th Street roundabout, November 1937. Photograph by Fairchild Aerial Surveys, Inc. Gilmore D. Clarke Papers (15-1-808), Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University.

Clarke and Rapuano were involved in four world's fairs, including two in New York City (1939 and 1964), where they held major master planning responsibilities. The site of the 1939 New York World's Fair was a vast ash dump in Flushing Meadows, in the borough of Queens. It was relatively isolated but mostly city owned. The swampy wetland was covered with a mat of cinders, requiring extensive land-fill and soil remediation. Campanella calls the transformation of this barren wasteland a "Cinderellaic metamorphosis" (*infra*, p. 220).

Twenty-five years later, Clarke and Rapuano contributed to the design of another New York City World's Fair, held on the same Flushing Meadows-Corona Park site as the impactful 1939 event. Clarke conceived the fair's centerpiece, the "Unisphere." Cam-

panella observes, "Clarke's stainless globe has become the exalted icon of Queens – Gotham's most populous borough and among the most diverse communities on Earth" (*infra*, p. 245). Campanella connects the world's fair experiences to other international activities, such as a 1954 sports center in Montreal and the 1960 Floriade in Rotterdam. In the Netherlands, Clarke and Rapuano collaborated with leaders in Dutch landscape architecture.

Clarke and Rapuano were active in many urban renewal efforts across the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Campanella presents a balanced view of their contributions: "For better or worse, Clarke and Rapuano helped chart the course of slum clearance and urban renewal in postwar America, an era of convulsive change that left the nation's cities



Fig. 3 - United Nations World Headquarters, 1955. Photograph by Don Morgan. Collection of Domenico Annese.

reeling, broken, and racially divided” (*infra*, p. 308). Jane Jacobs emerged as the leading critic of the kind of urban renewal exemplified by Clarke and Rapuano. While acknowledging this justified criticism, Campanella also highlights the benefits to urban life that resulted from their work. Their legacy, he concludes, is “as mixed and bittersweet as the century they helped build” (*infra*, p. 352).

Designing the American Century is an invaluable contribution to the interwoven histories of urbanism and landscape architecture (Fig. 3). Thomas Campanella offers a rich and nuanced analysis of the complexities of the 20th-century city, as well as the major contributions of Gilmore Clarke and Michael Rapuano. In clear, jargon-free prose, he pre-

sents both a cautionary tale and an optimistic perspective on the potentials of landscape architecture and city planning. *Designing the American Century* should be read by everyone interested in cities and urban design.

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Note

¹ Thomas J. Campanella, 2025, *Designing the American Century: The Public Landscapes of Clarke and Rapuano, 1915 to 1965*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.