



GARRISON, NEW YORK

Russel Wright's Manitoga

High Above the Hudson



In 1942, Russel and Mary Wright purchased seventy-nine acres on the east side of the Hudson River near the hamlet of Garrison, New York. Wright approached the forest as a sculptor, slowly revealing its character and bringing out its most subtle and beautiful features. Present threats to the property (now run by Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center) come from the hemlock woolly adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*) that infest the hemlocks and from the deer that are browsing upon stressed hemlocks' few seedlings. Issues of increased storm water flow and vegetation management also threaten Wright's careful landscape design. In addition to basic preservation planning, interim protection and stabilization efforts must be undertaken to treat the hemlocks, manage the deer population and control the on-site erosion. Ultimately, donations and/or grants are needed to support these - and other - essential historic landscape restoration activities.

HISTORY

Russel and Mary Wright began to look for land in the Hudson Valley in the late 1930s. By then, Wright already was well known as a prolific designer of objects for the home including furniture, appliances, textiles, and dinnerware. Through his elegant and functional designs, he brought modernism to millions of Americans - especially his enormously popular "American Modern" line of dinnerware, introduced in 1939. The sheer variety of Wright's designs reveals his desire to reinvent the American home: because of his success in doing so, he is now widely considered a cultural icon of the mid-century era.



In 1942, the Wrights purchased 79 acres of steeply sloping land on South Mountain, which rises to an elevation over 700 feet. The property, which they called Manitoga, had once been logged and occupied by a quarry, which had long been abandoned. When the Wrights purchased it, the site was thickly covered with second growth woodland, scarred by quarry pits, and generally unappealing. Wright's design and management of the site began almost immediately and significantly before construction of his modern home and studio, known collectively as "Dragon Rock". He later explained that he and his wife had begun the process by compiling a list of all their wishes, including such things as a place to swim (for her) and a view of the river (for him). Wright's approach to landscape design was based on the delicate manipulation of natural elements. A keen observer, Wright studied the land and its character intensively: he climbed rocks to discover the most dramatic views, identified the water sources, familiarized himself with the landform, contemplated the light, observed the native vegetation and marked seasonal variations. He achieved these and other goals by a process of careful "editing" of the landscape over many years. Although he undertook some major changes, such as clearing, blasting, and/or earthmoving, his actions generally were as simple as pruning a single limb to reveal a view.

Manitoga's fern meadow exemplifies Wright's restrained exploitation of nature, as he created it by removing all of the vegetation that might otherwise keep the ferns from multiplying or obscure the view of them. Other focal points along the paths, created in similar ways, include a carpet of violets, various water features (brooks and waterfalls) that were crossed or viewed, and rock outcroppings grouped for visual interest or arranged to frame specific views, including glimpses of the Hudson River. Interestingly, many of the large estate houses in the Hudson Highlands were constructed to take advantage of the extensive river views made possible by the region's steep topography. While the river dominates the views from many of these retreats, at Manitoga the river is only one element in a much more complex visual experience.

Wright cast the entire landscape design into an overall frame provided by the canopy of eastern hemlocks (*Tsuga canadensis*), whose dense shade and low-branching character created the dramatic settings of light and shadow along the paths. Unfortunately, many of these trees have been lost to a region-wide exotic insect infestation (the hemlock woolly adelgid).

Manitoga's landscape design was conceived in relation to the steep topography of the site and its most conspicuous feature, the abandoned stone quarry, within which Wright positioned the largest and most substantial built feature, his house and studio, known collectively as Dragon Rock. Among his most major and obvious changes was the re-routing of a stream into the quarry pit to create a thirty-foot waterfall, while damming its other end to create a pond. He carefully designed the path of the waterfall by placing boulders in strategic locations to control the speed and direction and the sound of the flow. The pond, waterfall, exposed bedrock of the pit, and enclosing vegetation became the major visual components of the view from the house, which was set into the north side of the quarry. Likewise, the house and its cliff are the dominant elements of viewing spots along the path that encircles the top of the quarry, the shortest and most intimate of the site's many designed walks. This path is also the most highly embellished, with banks of ferns, lilies, moss, and laurel planted or encouraged to spread around the rim and along the sloping walls of the quarry to provide a lush and sensual experience. Wright arranged or grouped specific elements to be enjoyed in specific lights, at certain times of day, and during particular seasons. Here, and throughout the property, Wright used the concept of "garden rooms" to denote small natural alcoves created with a specific and distinctive character. For example, the play of light on its thick green carpet helps to convey the mood of the "moss room," which extends along a long and narrow space on the outer edge of the quarry wall. In his "secret room," Wright took advantage of an isolated ledge in the quarry wall. He established a path to it but ensured his privacy by disguising the approach with hemlocks and tumbled quarry block so that only he could find it. Although garden rooms are most fully developed near the house, others occur throughout the site.

Other than the views from the house, the rest of the landscape was experienced primarily from the series of walks that Wright created. These path loops extend from the quarry as progressively longer walks in a progressively less managed landscape.



Despite their naturalistic appearance, every detail of these paths was carefully planned so that the visitor would experience a series of directed sequences as he/she progressed through what Wright called a “forest garden.” Each walk had a name that reflected its particular character or the time, place, or season for which it was created. Names such as Autumn Path, Winter Path, Morning Path, White Pine Path, and Fern Meadow Path identified the intended experience. The Morning Path travels east to take advantage of the rising sun, while views on the Autumn Path are enhanced by “the medium of color” during the fall months. White Pine Path was rerouted and named to lead a visitor around the exposed roots of an enormous white pine overturned in a storm: White Pine Path also was known as the Fern Meadow Path because it passed through a wide, damp area with a ground cover of ferns. Lost Pond Path — one of the site’s most rugged climbs — leads to what Wright described as a “lost, secret place.” Wright emphasized the remoteness and isolation of the pond by not clearing the trail the entire distance to its site. This also heightened the hiker’s sense of surprise when he/she emerged at the water’s edge. Further, Wright also expanded the range of experiences within the landscape by laying out trails that could serve multiple purposes. For example, the Autumn Path and the Sunset Path follow the same trail but provide different experiences depending on the season or the time of day.

In general, Wright focused on materials and features that were native to the site. He used the numerous hemlocks, large boulders and small watercourses that dominate the site for structure, while making extensive use of moss, ferns, laurel, and native wildflowers for embellishment. Wright’s design for Manitoga is especially tactile: there are things to touch, to hear, to see and to smell, and there are places in which the volume of the space is an important part of the design. As with his designs for furnishings, Wright intended these elements to work together to create specific settings or scenes.

Wright laid out the forest garden for himself and his guests, later stating that, “My aim was to have this unusual piece of land be the most important part of the whole project.” He conceived the design as a series of scenes and, as with a play; there were specific directions for the enjoyment of each. He posted maps in the foyer of the house for the convenience of visitors. They could enjoy the sequences as Wright intended them or discover alternate experiences by combining parts of different paths, taking different directions or following designated routes at other times of the day or in different seasons. Wright himself took advantage of the opportunity to “mix and match” by constantly refining the landscape, creating new focal points and renaming paths. Although created for personal use, Wright clearly intended to share the landscape with the public and allowed visitors to Manitoga even before his death.

Manitoga is the resource most significantly associated with Wright’s productive life. In addition, within Wright’s oeuvre, Manitoga is the work that best epitomizes his ideas about American lifestyle and design. An intensely personal work, Manitoga was designed entirely in reference to Wright’s own taste, the needs and lifestyle of himself and his family, and the specific natural character of the site.

In 1984, Manitoga, Inc. - now Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center - was established to preserve Wright’s legacy, his home, landscape, products and philosophy and to share these with the public. Manitoga now encompasses 75 acres, including all of the most important features of Wright’s landscape design: it recently has been designated as a National Historic Landmark. The grounds are open for self-guided hiking year round and as well as for guided tours of the house and landscape from April - October. Run by a private non-profit organization, with a small staff and a dedicated Board of Directors, Manitoga also plays an integral role in the cultural life of its local community.

In fact, Manitoga’s preservation planning and site preservation already has begun. It has an active Landscape Committee. The site also has benefited from volunteer on-site consultations by Darrel Morrison (FASLA), Leonard Hopper (FASLA), Donald L. Walker Jr. (L.A.), Steward T.A. Pickett (Ph.D., Senior Scientist at Institute of Ecosystem Studies), and William Cullina (Nursery Directory of the New England Wildflower Society) in collaboration with its knowledgeable Landscape Curator, Ruth Parnall, L.A. Thus far, their expertise has been directed at preserving Mary’s Meadow and the Laurel Field, regenerating the forest wildflowers, and managing storm water. However, there are additional challenges ahead.



THE THREAT

The primary threats to the site relate to 1) vegetation management and maintenance, and 2) the preservation of the Manitoga's paths and related landscape character and features. As was noted above, hemlock woolly adelgid is killing its eastern hemlock, and deer are browsing whatever few seedlings the stressed hemlocks manage to produce (in fact, the deer browse all tree seedlings except black birch [*Betula lenta*]). Several of Russel Wright's paths and views depend on the deep shade cast by the branching pattern of hemlocks. The drama of the Morning Walk (with its bright openings at the easterly end of a hemlock "tunnel") has been lost; the Secret Room (a niche in the quarry wall where Wright would evade unwanted visitors) is now clearly in view and visitors no longer can experience the orchestrated sequence at the trailhead that once dove from sunlit Mary's Meadow up a rocky hemlock-darkened slope. Manitoga, Inc. can implement the recent policy recommendations of the Landscape Restoration Committee. These will keep hikers safe from falling trees, will treat adelgid where feasible, identify and protect hemlock seedlings where they occur, and address the deer browse issue. However, the three latter items will require funding and personnel beyond the site's current resources.

Due to lack of funding, Manitoga's staff has been unable to care for the special features along Russel Wright's paths, particularly in the outer landscape, and they are now seriously in need of restoration. For example, the Laurel Field is a hillside of high oak canopy, with an understory of mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) cascading toward a glade rimmed with other ericaceous shrub species. The laurels have grown rangy, blocking the impressive view up the slope and forming a tall wall around the glade. The display of flowering dogwoods in Mary's Meadow used to be glimpsed from the living room and terraces of Dragon Rock. The intervening slope is now clothed in mature hardwoods and shrubs. The present view of the quarry from the house is beautiful, but the tour interpretation of the original view -Wright's reminder of his late wife's favorite feature-is not supported by the present landscape. The stonework on paths is meant to guide walkers and look as if it is part of rock outcrops. Soil erosion makes these unusable, however, and hikers circumvent the steps. Ferns meant to brush one's legs in passing have been trampled, and the erosion worsens.

Manitoga is now in the process of inventory and assessment of the threat to the character and features of Russel Wright's paths. It then will establish a protocol and obtain costs estimate for restoring the design intent and effect. Thus, Manitoga will be ready to undertake landscape preservation projects as funding and/or volunteer labor become available.

HOW TO HELP

Donate funds to help Manitoga treat woolly adelgid where feasible, identify and protect hemlock seedlings where they occur, and address the deer browse issue.

Donate funds and supplies - and volunteer labor - to help preserve Manitoga's paths and restore other landscape features.

Underwrite a lecture series to show case Russel Wright's genius in ecological landscape design and management

Donate funds to publish existing and potential manuscripts (with color photographs) about Russel Wright's landscape.

Support a staff position as Coordinator of Landscape Volunteers.

Support a full-time landscape assistant.

Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center

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