LEISURE & ARTS

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

The Roman Roots of Gotham's London Plane

By Thomas J. Campanella

It has long been a mystery in New York just how the London plane (*Platanus acerifolia*) came to be the city's most abundant shade tree. With its exfoliating, mottled bark and cotton-ball fruit, the plane is a ubiquitous presence in all five boroughs. According to a recent census, London planes represent 15% of the city's tree population and nearly 30% of its canopy. The plane's maple-like leaf (*acerifolia*, literally) has been the symbol of the Parks Department for 75 years. But aside from a general association with Robert Moses, the roots of this Gotham standard have long been obscure.

Despite its name, the London plane is actually a cross between the American sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) and the Oriental plane of central Asia (*Platanus orientalis*), first propagated at the Oxford Botanic Garden about 1670. Though long known in New York, the tree was planted only sporadically prior to the 1930s. Frederick Law Olmsted makes no mention of London planes in his Greensward Plan for Central Park. He did use sycamores, but only as a specimen tree, and never in formal plantings. For such uses—the mall in Central Park, for example, or along Eastern or Ocean parkways—he preferred the American elm, icon of New England. Olmsted was a Connecticut Yankee, after all, who attended college in that once greatest of elm-bowered cities, New Haven.

Though lacking the elm's lissome beauty, the London plane is an ideal city tree—fast-growing, tolerant of pollutants and pruning, untroubled by pathogens or insect pests. In the 19th century it became the public tree of choice in many European capitals—first in London, then Paris (it was Haussmann's favorite), later Rome. Platanus orientalis was well known to the Romans—Pliny devoted several pages to it in his Natural History, claiming the tree grew best with wine ("Thus we have taught even our trees to be wine drinkers"). The London plane was a later arrival, planted in great numbers by King Umberto I after Unification in 1870. By 1900 it was the most common street tree in Rome, constituting 35% of the urban forest; the storied *Pinus pinea* made up only 1%. Respighi's "Pines of Rome" notwithstanding, the Italian capital is really a city of planes.

It was via Rome that the plane came to have such universal presence in New York. The conduit was Michael Rapuano, a young landscape architect with Italian roots of his own. Son of Neapolitan immigrants, Rapuano studied landscape architecture at Cornell University and in 1927 won a coveted Rome Prize fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. He noted planes in his travels around Europe, and knew well the great trees shading Roman thoroughfares near the academy—on the Janiculum and Viale di Trastevere and along the Tiber. A latter-day Xerxes,

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One of the approximately 90,000 London Plane trees in New York City.

Rapuano fell in love with the plane and carried his affections back to New York.

Upon returning from Europe in 1930, Rapuano took a job with Gilmore D. Clarke of the Westchester County Park Commission. A brilliant designer, he soon became Clarke's right-hand man. Westchester was then the envy of city planners world-wide, having built the first parkways and park system of the motor age. Robert Moses so admired the "Westchester model" that he replicated it on Long Island, and—in 1934—recruited Clarke to lead his New Deal-funded reconstruction of the city parks.

Clarke, in turn, deputized Rapuano to head the Department of Landscape Design—an elite "skunk works" charged with system-wide park planning and design. The five-person staff included two other Rome Prize recipients—Thomas D. Price, who was at the academy with Rapuano, and Richard C. Murdock, a Cornell classmate. From their pooled expertise Rapuano distilled a lean and spare "public-works Baroque" style that proved well suited for urban parks and playgrounds. Clarke and Moses standardized these innovations to create a uniform park-design identity for the entire city.

Though U.S. landscape architects had long mined the Renaissance to create sumptuous private estates, Rapuano was among the first to use an Italianate lexicon for the design of public parks. He quoted freely from the great villas. The curving *cordonate*, or stair ramps, at Carl Schurz Park and Dinosaur Playground refer to those at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, which Rapuano measured and drew, and at the Villa Farnese at Caprarola, documented by another Cornellian and Rome Prize winner, Ralph E. Griswold.

Rapuano's signature was a mall tapered to "force" the perspective, thereby extending or foreshortening its apparent depth. Inspired by Bernini's Piazza di San Pietro, Rapuano employed this device in many parks—Battery, Randall's Island, Cadman Plaza, Orchard Beach, Jacob Riis. He also used it, at St. Peter's scale, as the armature for the 1939 New York World's Fair. These Italian borrowings brought a distinctive new landscape aesthetic to the city, one that complemented well the Anglo-Romantic heritage of the Olmsted era.

The most visible of Rapuano's Roman keepsakes, however, were the plane trees he specified in nearly every New York project. He typically arrayed the trees in formal grids—in Bryant Park and the lower portions of Riverside Park in Manhattan, or Cadman Plaza and Leif Erikson parks in Brooklyn. This technique was itself inspired by Roman example—the gridded plane groves, or *boschetti*, planted around 1611, that flank the Villa Aldobrandini in nearby Frascati, which Rapuano knew well both from visits and Price's measured drawings.

Today the London plane is firmly rooted in the hearts and minds of New Yorkers, an arboreal symbol of the city. There are some 90,000 planes in the five boroughs. Many of these older trees were planted, aptly enough, by the Roman Landscape Contracting Co., once among the busiest landscapers in the region. On weekends in later years, Rapuano often invited the Roman workhands—mostly Italian immigrants themselves—to his Buck's County, Pa., dairy farm. They would bring homemade wine and sapling planes, which Rapuano set in disciplined rows about the rambling homestead—city trees still, in spite of the country.

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