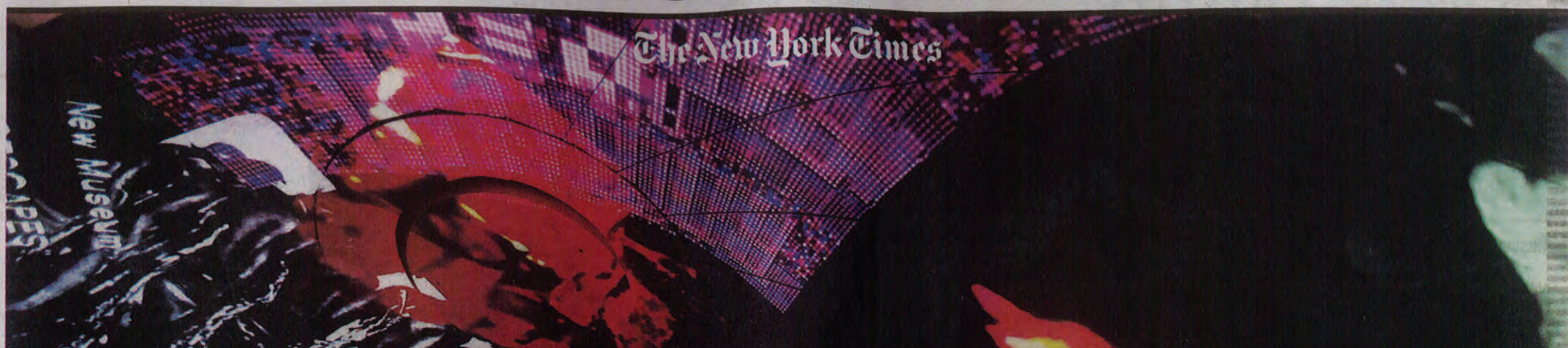




Reclaiming Wild Ambition Gone to Seed



LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The view when entering Untermyer Gardens in Yonkers, now known as "America's Greatest Forgotten Garden."

By EVE KAHN

I SLIPPED between crumbling stone gateposts with rusted hinges and crept under a fallen tree to reach vandalized stone statues of a lion and a unicorn. I climbed through a doorless, ruined cottage and up muddy steps to see ancient columns stained with graffiti. I wandered along the ghosts of grottoes and bone-dry channels that once flowed from fountains.

I fell into the state that Woody Allen's characters in "To Rome With Love" keep wallowing in: Ozymandias Melancholia. But all the while, whistle blasts from passing Metro-North trains reassured me that I could get home eventually by public transportation.

I have spent hours in the past few weeks pushing aside vegetation at Untermyer Gardens,

which the corporate lawyer Samuel Untermyer laid out around 1912 on a cliff here and eventually ended up in city hands. He oversaw 60 gardeners and 60 greenhouses on 150 acres overlooking the Hudson River.

"America's Greatest Forgotten Garden" is its slogan now. Untermyer died in 1940, at 82, and this city has somewhat haphazardly maintained 43 of his acres. His palatial 1860s house, Greystone, was razed in 1948. There is no trace of his terraces for vegetable beds, millions of daffodils and thousands of orchids.

Visiting now requires long pants and sleeves, hiking footwear, insect repellent, snacks and water. There are no restrooms, no maps. Bring a friend, but not because it's dangerous; you will likely want to share the wonders you will see in the overgrowth.

Continued on Page 26

Restoring Wild Ambition Gone To Seed

From Weekend Page 19

In the past year a new nonprofit organization, the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, has made huge strides in the botanical restoration and raised \$100,000. It needs millions more to turn the property into the robust tourist attraction it was in Untermyer's day.

The main entrance, beside a generic stucco community center at 945 North Broadway, is barely marked. But then you notice the crenelated and turreted brick walls typical of Persian gardens.

"Now we're passing through the gates of paradise," Stephen F. Byrns, the conservancy's founder and board chairman, said as he led our group inside.

Four reflecting pools representing ancient rivers and the elements earth, air, fire and water form quadrants in Untermyer's Persian garden. Zigzags, vines and scallops course through the restored mosaic pavements. Carp have settled into a lily pond at the base of marble sphinxes by the sculptor Paulanship. Thorny junipers have just been cleared off the seats of a semicircular amphitheater.

The gardens' original Beaux-Arts architect, William Welles Bosworth, was a Rockefeller family favorite. But Untermyer, the son of a Virginia tobacco farmer with Jewish and German heritage, seems to have not cared much about assimilating with other American millionaires.

He earned his fortune as a mergers specialist and then fought against corporate trusts, subway fare increases, anti-Semitism and inflated utility bills. Writers for The New Yorker in the 1930s and '40s described him as a "Superman of Law" who spoke in a "gruff, croupy, dictatorial tone."

His wife, Minnie, the daughter of a German-born newspaperman in St. Louis, became an art and music patron. The couple filled their house with tapestries and old master paintings and organized poetry readings and concerts on the lawns. Isadora Duncan's troupe performed there, and observers compared the dancers' chiffon costumes to petals in the wind.

Untermyer was so compulsive about upgrading his gardens that he brushed his delphiniums with various pollens to create hybrids. On Tuesdays the public could roam the estate, and he eavesdropped on their comments. He bought manure fertilizer by the ton. On his Yonkers slope, he once told an interviewer, "It is ungrateful soil, thin and stony."

During our recent tour, the conservancy's only staff member, the horticulturist Timothy Tilghman, was dragging hoses and gearing up for deliveries of hardy perennials like sedum, euphorbia and ribbon grass. (Pro bono planting advice is coming from the horticulturist Marco Polo Stufano, renowned for his work at Wave Hill in the Bronx.)

Mr. Tilghman guided us to a columned pavilion and swimming pool,

The Garden Paths

UNTERMYER GARDENS Open daily, dawn to dusk; most weekends the walled Persian section opens at noon. The main entrance is at 945 North Broadway, just south of St. John's Riverside Hospital, Yonkers; (914) 512-0436, untermyergardens.org; free; guided tours are \$5; free for children 12 and under. The tour schedule is on the gardens' Web site.

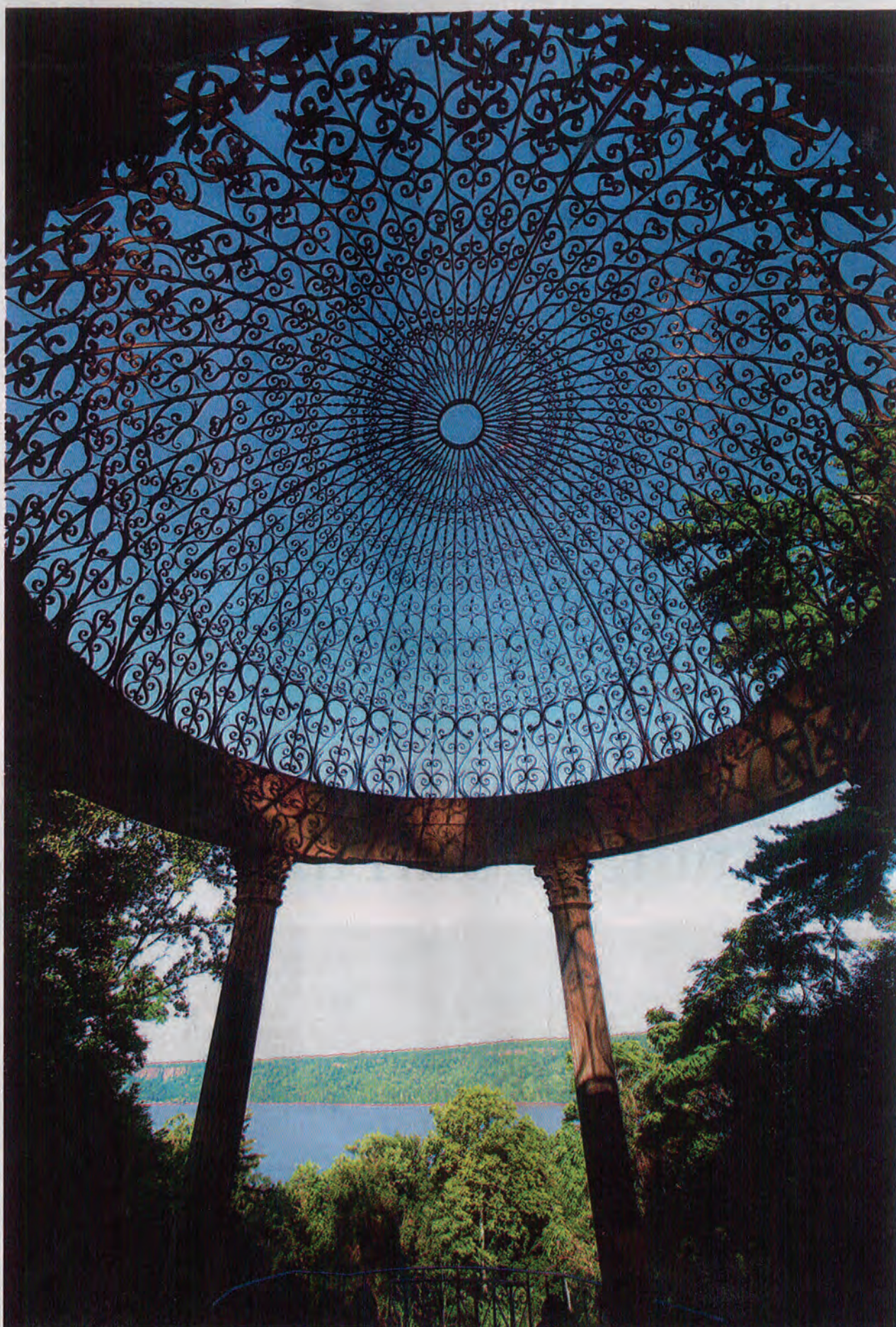
Mentioned in the article:

SAW MILL RIVER COALITION sawmillrivercoalition.org.

SCIENCE BARGE Open Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 6 p.m.; on the Hudson River, just north of the Yonkers Pier (for GPS, use 99 Dock Street), Yonkers; (914) 513-7354.

OLD CROTON AQUEDUCT TRAIL MAP aqueduct.org/images/freemap1.png.

WHERE TO EAT IN YONKERS Cafe Hudson, 1 Van Der Donck Street, (914) 816-2046, cafehudson.com; Dolphin, 1 Van Der Donck Street, (914) 751-8170, dolphinrbl.com; X20 Xaviers on the Hudson, 71 Water Grant Street, (914) 965-1111, xaviers.com/yonkers.



At the Untermyer Gardens in Yonkers: top, a gazebo and tile mosaics; center, Timothy Tilghman, left, a horticulturist for the recently established Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, and right, the interior of an unrestored gatehouse; and above, part of the Temple of Love, in rock formations below the property.



ONLINE: GARDEN SCENE

More photos of Untermyer Gardens in Yonkers:
nytimes.com/arts

where mosaic images of sea creatures and a Medusa head are disintegrating. Visitors sometimes chuck loose tiles into the Persian garden streams. "Everybody loves a splash," he said, only a little wearily.

The need for repairs everywhere does not faze him, he added. "The potential for this place is just stunning," he said. "I feel lucky because of it." The public takes advantage of every improvement; in a new grassy bowl, he'd seen children wheel in a red wagon and lay out a picnic.

He led our group down a stone staircase, modeled after a counterpart at the Villa d'Este on Lake Como in Italy. The bottom landing has stunning views of the Palisades across the river and twin Roman columns, 23 feet tall, weathered now down to the dark marble veins. Mr. Byrns said he believed they were the tallest ancient columns made from single stone chunks in the Western Hemisphere.

They are favorite targets for graffiti, too, along with the Temple of Love, a domed folly on a manufactured boulder outcropping. Legend has it that the temple was built for an Untermyer family wedding; heart motifs are in the rusted filigree roof. Teenagers had smashed so many bottles on the rocks that walking there was unsafe until recently. "These paths looked like they were mulched with glass," Mr. Tilghman said.

Boy Scouts and Yonkers parks department workers have helped cart away debris and excavate artifacts. Crumpled pipes show where Untermyer's gardeners planted what The New Yorker in 1940 called the "only living sundial in the world": a clock face with Roman numerals, all made from flowers. A pruned triangular evergreen cast a shadow on the correct time.

Mr. Tilghman kept clipping and snapping off raspberry and Japanese knotweed branches that blocked our way. He showed us where neighboring hospitals had taken over parts of Untermyer's acreage. Along one hospital

fence, pachysandra, a ground cover newly imported from Asia in Untermyer's day, conceals the foundation of Greystone.

The mayor of Yonkers, Mike Spano, stopped by during our tour. He remembered posing for his wedding photos in 1995 against an Untermyer colonnade. (He is married to the TV personality Mary Calvi.) As the sun beat down on his dark suit, he kept casting longing looks toward the empty swimming pool.

"I want to make this a destination again," he said.

Parts of Yonkers are already becoming newly vernal, although the city has a reputation still marred by government corruption and school budget and desegregation battles. Along the downtown waterfront, a "sculpture meadow" full of carved stone furniture is a short walk from new restaurants and a Science Barge with greenhouses for demonstrating organic farming. The Saw Mill River downtown has been "daylighted" — brought out from under asphalt — and drifts of aquatic plants will serve as eel habitat.

A few days after my guided Untermyer visit, I went back alone to try another access route that Mr. Tilghman had suggested. An unmarked dirt path, part of the Old Croton aqueduct trail, leads south from a hairpin turn on Odell Avenue, just east of the Hudson riverbank and Greystone train station. Ordinary suburban backyards and picket fences run along one side of the path; on the other — sic transit gloria mundi.

Vines are pouring into the Untermyers' roofless granite gatehouse. A lion statue's magnificent, calm face is smeared with graffiti. A unicorn is headless. (Both animals are attributed to the sculptor Edward Clark Potter, known for the New York Public Library's lions.)

I headed uphill, on the newly cleared original carriage road. I forded streams in the ungrateful, thin, stony soil, all the way back up to the Temple of Love.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES