

BELOW: *Wright's studio, chiseled into a former quarry—the heart of a healed landscape with echoes of Walden and scene shifters the Olmsteds and Capability Brown.*
RIGHT: *Light and contrast, prime tools in Russel's design kit, were used to dramatize elements so that their key features stood out boldly.*

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Dream of Nature

Written and
Photographed
by David Andrews

RUSSEL WRIGHT, SOWING THE SEED OF ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS





In the postwar years, Russel Wright was the star of the station wagon way of life, informal and woodsy, the Ralph Lauren of his day with a loopy signature that instantly branded his nature-inspired designs for the home.

IT'S A STEAMBATH DAY IN THE CITY BUILT ON A SWAMP AS I GRIND GEARS GOING UP Meridian Hill, one of the steepest grades in the nation's capital. The heat came early this year with the firestorm following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. My boss has just dropped in on the offices of the *Afro American*, on 16th Street at the base of the hill, in part to tout Summer in the Parks, a program promising relief for a city that needs it, the brainchild of designer Russel Wright.

I'm learning stick shift to keep her '53 Ford idling, Bonnie-and-Clyde style, as she ducks in to pitch the media lords of the city. Junior Bridge—her very name speaks of youth and possibility in the years before hope went out of fashion. A wide-eyed high schooler, I was glad to be along for the ride, in that summer of 1968.

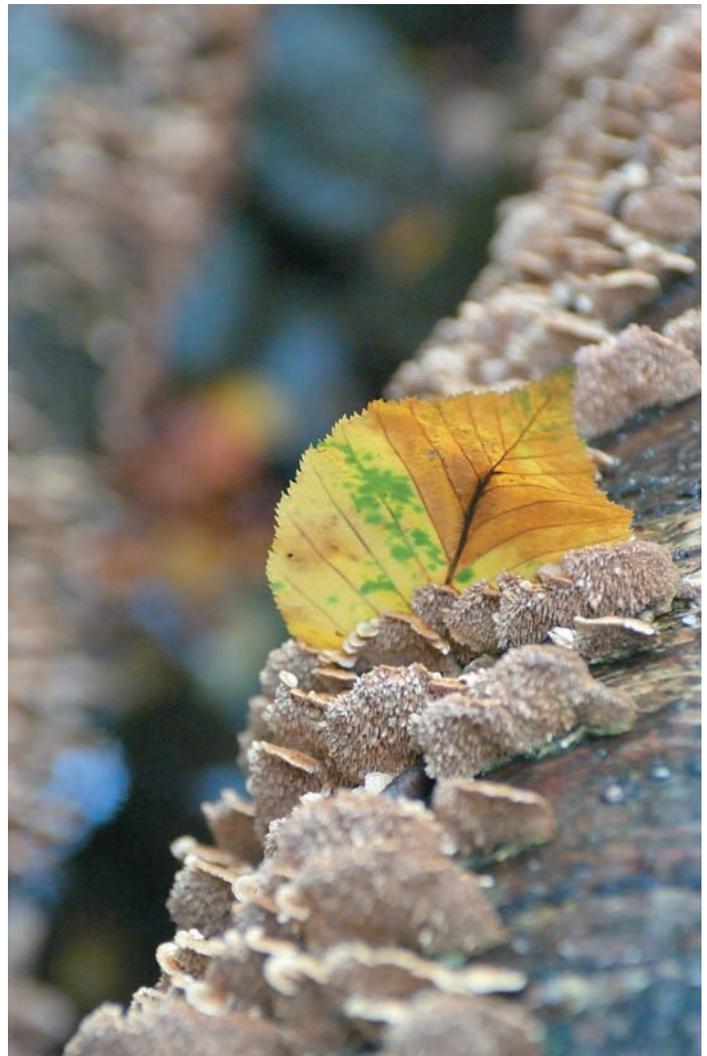
Stage right, the program will unfurl in a grand old dame of a park erected thanks to the doyenne of 16th Street, Mary Henderson, early in the century. Henderson lined the avenue with embassy buildings, the host of many an international soirée, to enrich her real estate investments. Now the area is in decline, hastened by the riots. Our destination—a Chateau-style delicacy, one of Henderson's last—is home base, headquarters of DC Parks and Recreation, which has joined hands in the venture with the National Park Service and the Smithsonian.

Meridian Hill Park remains a signature spot in the city, an Italian Renaissance wedding cake with tiers of water stepping down the slope in stately fashion. Since the water has been off for some time, it's an ideal place to signal Wright's intent—to awaken parks to a new purpose.

In the postwar years, Russel Wright was the star of the station wagon way of life, informal and woodsy, the Ralph Lauren of his day with a loopy signature that instantly branded his nature-inspired designs for the home. But with his wife's death in the early '50s, he gradually withdrew into the hills of the Hudson River Valley, transforming a ravaged landscape into his magnum opus, a work of art wedded with ecology, the word now on everyone's lips. That brought him to the attention of the National Park Service.

WRIGHT BEGAN AT PRINCETON, A 17-YEAR-OLD WEEKEND APPRENTICE TO SET DESIGNER Norman Bel Geddes, a future rival in the emerging industrial design profession. Wright soon succumbed to the allure of the avant garde theater—afire with the new in the 1920s—first as a summer-stock set designer for future filmmaker George Cukor, then plying his trade in New York. His wife Mary Einstein, a niece of Albert and student of sculptor Archipenko, soon shifted Wright to the decorative arts. But the theater lived on as a metaphor.

Their first apartment, a tiny space at 165 East 35th Street, tipped the hat to Hollywood, mixing Bauhaus minimalism with classical columns that opened into closets. Mary starred in a short film shot at the apartment—sprawling seductively on the bed in a slinky gown, touching up her makeup at the built-in vanity—the epitome of the liberated woman surrounded by the unbridled fantasy of lamps made from aluminum tubes and chairs crafted from bent sheet metal.



LEFT: *The sinuous volumes of American Modern reached perfection as an interknit set, the spaces between pieces as powerful as the pieces themselves.*
ABOVE: *Along the Autumn Path at Manitoga, like a Japanese tour garden meant to walk in, not just look at, its trails a journey into the forest's secrets.*

Russel quickly moved past what he called his “t-square and compass period.” His American Modern dinnerware—with a quarter of a billion pieces sold over a 20-year run that began in 1939—echoed the sensuous forms of the surrealists, toned down for a middle-class audience. Maternal references were ever-present, perhaps most emblematic the pregnant profile of his American Modern pitcher. Customers came in droves, a near-riot following a Gimbel's ad for a shipment of Wright ware. The ergonomics of his objects, delivered with a dose of whimsy, presaged the user-friendly designs of today.

He had an uncanny ability to dramatize. His works were inherently marketable—flexible, easy to use, durable. He tapped the table’s drama with “stage sets” of lamps, linens, glassware, and flowers. He and Mary, as co-strategist, were relentless with the new tools of multimedia promotion, portraying her as an everyday housewife in the world of ease created by his products. Their best-selling *Guide to Easier Living* showed how to live a life of spontaneity, free of rigid Victorian codes, surrounded by beauty. Americans caught the fever, and so did museums, with exhibitions on design for the contemporary lifestyle. Wright had gone beyond



Wright’s theatrical bravado is alive and well as I ascend a gravel drive, twisting and turning through a forest tunnel, the sound of a waterfall creating anticipation like an orchestra tuning up. Two low-slung buildings peek through the trees seductively. I pull into a courtyard enclosed with a wall of vegetation, relieved by window-like openings into the forest and through a trellis where the sound of water beckons. The centerpiece is an island of boulders, with an iron ring jutting out, the evidence of quarrying days. Between 1957 and 1961, Russel’s home and studio—a pair of blue-gray glass boxes—were edged into the side of a quarry, their low profile demure behind a screen of sycamore, dogwood, and mountain laurel, roofs alive with growth. “Dragon Rock,” Wright’s daughter called it, after a figure discerned in the contours of the quarry. I watch as water cascades over the edge, feeding a pond where there was once a vast void.

“With neither the overwhelming sculptural force of Fallingwater nor the cool machined aura of Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, Dragon Rock was quiet in the presence of nature,” says Donald Albrecht in *Russel Wright: Creating American Lifestyle*. Architect David Leavitt designed the house, guided by Wright. Each room frames its own view. Spaces dissolve into one other—or segue to stone set pieces, terraces for barbecues or relaxing. The intimate one-level studio, notched in the quarry wall, gives an eye-height view of nature in wrap-around widescreen.

But the real story is the site, “Manitoga,” Algonquin for “Place of Great Spirit.” Wright’s intent was not just a preserve but a multi-sensory experience akin to being inside a work of art. He hoped visitors would “feel in a new and intensely personal way the meaning of our eternal natural legacy.”

Wright worked with the grain of nature. “There are no geometrically arranged trees or shrubs, no exotic species from distant places, no plants clipped or trained into balls or bumps,” says Carol Levy Franklin in the *Manitoga Design and Management Guide*. Wright kept a light touch, pruning and placing so native plants, especially wildflowers, would flourish.

“Most of us respond without reservation to the dramatic landscapes of the West,” Levy says. “Wright took on a more difficult task: to help the average person [see] the far subtler and seemingly chaotic world of the northeastern deciduous forest.” The land itself tells the story, not explanatory signs. Wright edited to let nature speak in plain terms—so features stood out; so there was only canopy and understory, no shrubs in between; so ganged species created layers each distinct in its own autumn shade. He created journeys from open to enclosed, from light to dark, from meadow to wilderness. Stone was his signature material, jutting out of

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an ambition to design everything for the home—he had re-defined the home itself. After Mary’s death, he had nothing left to prove.

THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY IS A STUDY IN CONTRASTS, ITS FORMER FACTORY TOWNS A foil for the Gilded-Age getaways of the rich, where outcrops over a billion years old stare down on one of the nation’s fabled waterways. The Wrights came here in 1942, to an 80-acre slice of hill denuded by loggers and stonecutters, then in the early stages of recovery. Great blocks of granite had been chiseled out to help build New York City. A logging trail, just wide enough for a team of horses, had been incised into the site, abandoned quarries covered with vines and brambles. It was, writes Wright, a “nondescript piece of woods . . . considered useless land . . .” Today it is a national historic landmark.

LEFT: *American Modern* sold over a quarter of a billion pieces, the popularity of Wright’s products owed in part to relentless radio interviews, speeches, books, store appearances, displays, and newspaper and magazine articles. RIGHT: Boulders burst inward in the amphitheater space of the living-slash-dining room at Dragon Rock, where hemlock needles are pressed in the walls, tree branches double as towel racks, and bathtub water pours out of rocks, a “green” roof repaired thanks to a Save America’s Treasures grant.



DON FREEMAN



the mountainside like a boney spine. He artfully arranged boulders with an old winch truck he got from the phone company for \$50. The experience around Dragon Rock was his most orchestrated, an overture of all the site's elements. "The quarry, when Wright found it, was a great dry hole, its bottom filled with cut stones, debris, brambles, and young trees," says Levy. He blasted channels out of the ledges—diverting a stream—then broke up the pool with a large rock that lures swimmers in summer.

I ascend to the quarry's highest spot, then down to a birch grove on a mossy plateau next to the rim. A swath of mountain laurel glows in late afternoon light. It is a place of pause with a view of the entire tableau—house, quarry, waterfall—perched on a precarious drop over the edge of a cliff. Wright tapped into the danger of the site, evoking fear and awe like the paintings of Thomas Cole.

The next day I head up the Morning Walk, along a path once used by cordwood sleds. When Wright started, small hemlocks dominated both sides. He encouraged the strong by getting rid of the scrawny, and most of the deciduous plants too. Now the trail is an allée of green. I pass through a forest he left untouched. "It is rather like looking at the bottom of the sea through a glass window," he writes. "Here you witness the dramatic cruelty of the forest. The corpses of fallen trees are being devoured by decay or are caught in the arms of the younger ones. Roots attack the boulders." Lost Pond, another filled-in quarry at the site's pinnacle, evokes the primeval. Manitoga is a journey from quarry to quarry, from the designed one at the bottom, to here, where Wright intervened hardly at all. A few steps away is the grandest vista, which, he wrote, "looks like a perfect misty monumental painting by one of the Hudson River painters," and was likewise delicately crafted. I descend via a quick zigzag, pausing at Sleeping Buddha Terrace, a long horizontal rock shouldered into the hill.

"Russel came here and was rejuvenated by nature—and thought others should be too," says Kitty McCullough, head of the Russel Wright Design Center, headquartered at Dragon Rock. His awareness grew. "The Hudson was catching fire, it was full of debris," Kitty says. "Nobody would have thought of swimming in it. The fisheries had died. The more Russel designed, the more he became aware of the environment."

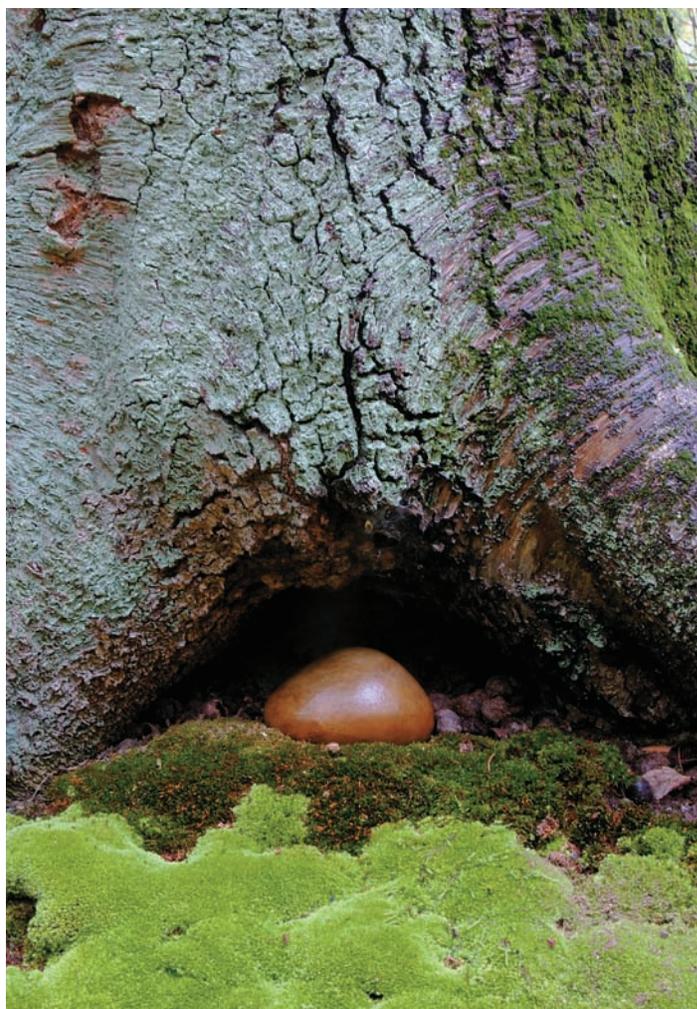
HE WAS NOT ALONE. DON NICE, AN ESTEEMED MODERNIST PAINTER, MOVED HERE IN THE '60s. "The first week of spring I was on the porch and a huge brown U.S. Army airplane came down to about a hundred feet, dumping DDT in the marsh right in front of me. You soon had fish without fins." In a key court case, citizens protesting a planned pumping station at the foot of Storm King Mountain—majestic across the river from where we sit—gained legal standing in a decision that favored preserving scenic beauty. The environmental movement had a powerful new weapon—the law.

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Pete Seeger, who built a cabin here in the '50s, tells me about a picnic at Russel's house. "And I met René Dubos, then a scientist with the Rockefeller Research Institute. I'll never forget what he said: "Think globally, act locally, that's the key to the future.'" In the words of former senator and governor Gaylord Nelson, creator of Earth Day: "Everybody around the country saw something going to pot in their local areas, some lovely spot, some lovely stream, some lovely lake you couldn't swim in anymore."

As the environmental movement gathered steam, Seeger's sloop *Clearwater* became a vehicle for awakening awareness—movable classroom,

laboratory, forum, place of song—first on the Hudson then on the national stage. He sailed down to Washington, parked on the Potomac, and went up to serenade Congress with fellow folksinger Don McLean. Then he made his pitch. "I had a big pie chart with the federal budget on it," he says. "A circular piece of cardboard, with different slices in different colors. And I said, 'This slice of pie is education. This slice of pie is health. This huge slice of pie—that's the defense department. And this tiny sliver you can hardly see is what they call the environment. So much for the federal budget,' I said, and sailed it like a frisbee over the audience." Washington's politics of theater would prove fertile soil for Russel Wright.



LEFT: Russel enhanced the chances that favored natives like fern would flourish as the landscape recovered; today, his touch is almost indistinguishable. "Instead of imposing rigid forms and preconceived patterns on the place, Wright sought to make contact with the fluid structure and connecting patterns," writes Carol Levy Franklin in the *Manitoga Design and Management Guide*. **ABOVE:** Moss, another favorite, appears frequently along the four miles of paths, the entire site a choreographed composition with build-ups, thematic variations, and climaxes.

IN 1967, STANLEY CAIN, DOI ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE, CAME BACK from Manitoga so awed he set up a Washington meeting with Wright, NPS Director George Hartzog, and other officials. During a luncheon at Cain's club, while rhapsodizing about enticing people to the wilderness parks, Russel was told they were already brimming with visitors. Instead, he was given a car and driver for a day and a half to gather ideas on furthering the city's beautification initiative being championed by the First Lady. "Washington seemed to me the most pampered, pompadoured city that I had ever seen," he writes in his reminiscence about Summer in the Parks. "So I asked the driver to go further out, and the park areas became more and more neglected and shabby"—notably in Anacostia, a largely black neighborhood that stood in high contrast to the white suburbs and monumental core. "Thus I began to have a cause," he writes. He soon had a retainer, and a proposal, which Hartzog, highly enthusiastic, mustered through his congressional committee, with a half-million-dollar budget.

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THE SUMMER IN THE PARKS "SHOW WINDOW" WAS TO LOOK OUT ON DOWNTOWN FROM the banks of the Anacostia River, the plan crafted with Wright's new coproducer, NPS publications art director Tedd McCann, who left a copy in papers he bequeathed at the University of Maryland. It is a vision of its time. A new freeway—which had recently severed the neighborhood from the water and the rest of the city—would be used to advantage, enticing motorists from its elevated perspective. A tree-top-level boardwalk would provide "an agreeable viewing place for boat regattas and water skiing as well as a grandstand for viewing the finishing of bicycle races," the journey from event to event "an event in itself," band shells and a dance pavilion throbbing in the tropical night—"the louder the better"—since the freeway would buffer the sound. Locals would stream in by foot, bike, car, and special shuttle, visitors from the opposite shore by boat. "Good crowd density is essential to the success of any space for entertainment," opined the plan. "Excitement is created by containing people and pushing them

up against each other," the nighttime alight with colored bulbs and "moving light paintings." In the day, the park would be a beehive with a beauty care center, sewing center, typing center, tot center, car repair center, teen center, and senior center, one of the goals teaching trades to the poor.

But the idea was dashed, largely by budget. "We do not have a particularly good image in this town," McCann writes in a memo threatening to quit. "As someone once said to me, 'Show me your black superintendent, show me a Negro in your high command. You have planted a lot of flowers and bulbs but what have you done in *my* community' . . . I thought of the debris-strewn and smelly barren stretches along the Anacostia in contrast with Haines Point, with Pershing Square and Columbus Island . . . While I have not dealt with the problems from the Olympian heights of 1600 Pennsylvania, neither do I view beautification programs as the first priority in solving this city's ills." The program soldiered on, taking advantage of the fact that most of the city's parks were federally owned and

operated—"hundreds of scattered sites" from the Monument and the Mall to "small triangles of a few hundred square feet," McCann writes—community parks, downtown parks, grand old magnets, and an emerald necklace of places out on the far edge.

Wright's core intent, in the words of a National Park Service press release, was to introduce "kids of the asphalt and concrete" to the wonders of nature: "What does an inner-city boy do after discovering his reflection in a park lagoon? Well, he might want to watch the ripples after tossing a stone into the water instead of at a windowpane. So, the National Park Service dumped a load of stones—reasoning that city boys could make all the waves they wanted—at Washington, D.C.'s Aquatic Gardens. Then the Park Service built small rafts because somebody remembered that a boy automatically becomes a pirate captain or Robinson Crusoe when sailing his own ship."

A series of "spectaculars" lit up the city, the first drawing a throng of 20,000 with fireworks and Cab Calloway hi-de-ho-ing across a stage at Meridian Hill Park. "African Night," later in the season, "even brought Summer in the Parks into the good graces of many of the Black Militants,"

ABOVE: Russel thrived under limits of time and money, designing portable, easy set-up gear. He took on the Summer in the Parks project in part because the nation's capital was "so damn vital and exciting right now," he told the *Washington Post*. "It is the center of the best Negro brains in many different fields, and it is the battlefield for their rights at present." RIGHT: Poster for a "spectacular" in the program's signature hues.

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says a program booklet with McCann's papers. "One of the added social benefits of the spectaculars was to mix up different elements of the city. The rich and the poor and their children dug the proceedings all alike." There was something for everyone: a powwow, a horse show, the First National Jousting Championship. In the vein of the then-in-vogue vest pocket park, small spaces throughout Washington became outdoor rec rooms, easy set-up "furniture" designed by Wright. Jazzmobiles brought music, much of it flavored like the strains of dashiki-clad South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela, programming tailored to local wants. Surprise trips—to a "secret island," a Civil War fort, sailing on a Chinese junk—captured the era's spontaneity, kids told nothing more than to show up and expect a day of fun and lunch, no reservations. "The idea was to keep them coming, keep them surprised," says the booklet. By the end of the summer, the *Washington Post* was calling the program "a happening."

Washington was a happening place in those days, the air alive with danger and amusement. Just a few months before, to the chanting of shamans and the tinging of finger bells, protesters assembled to levitate the Pentagon, and met a rain of billy clubs. It was protest as performance, Mall marches a pageant of swashbuckler shirts, Daniel Boone buckskins, musketeer hats, sarapes, sarongs, and saris, a nod to history and legend, the bible and the comic book.

TODAY IS BICYCLEDELIC DAY IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL, August 19, 1968, as I help ready an Orville Wright five-seater for display in the shadow of the Monument. The Smithsonian has unlocked the vaults, and out rolls an array of spoked wonders—high-wheelers, wood-wheelers, even an 1860 "bone shaker"—soon joined by French Gitanes, Italian Cinellis, British Carltons, and American Schwinn as riders of the National Capital Open storm past. Parks for people, people for parks—that was the program's motto—and kids from all over the city compete in a bike race and rodeo, entertainment by the King George Unicycle Riders. The next morning I help set up the display on the soundstage of Panorama, one of the first magazine-style TV shows, hosted by a young Maury Povich.

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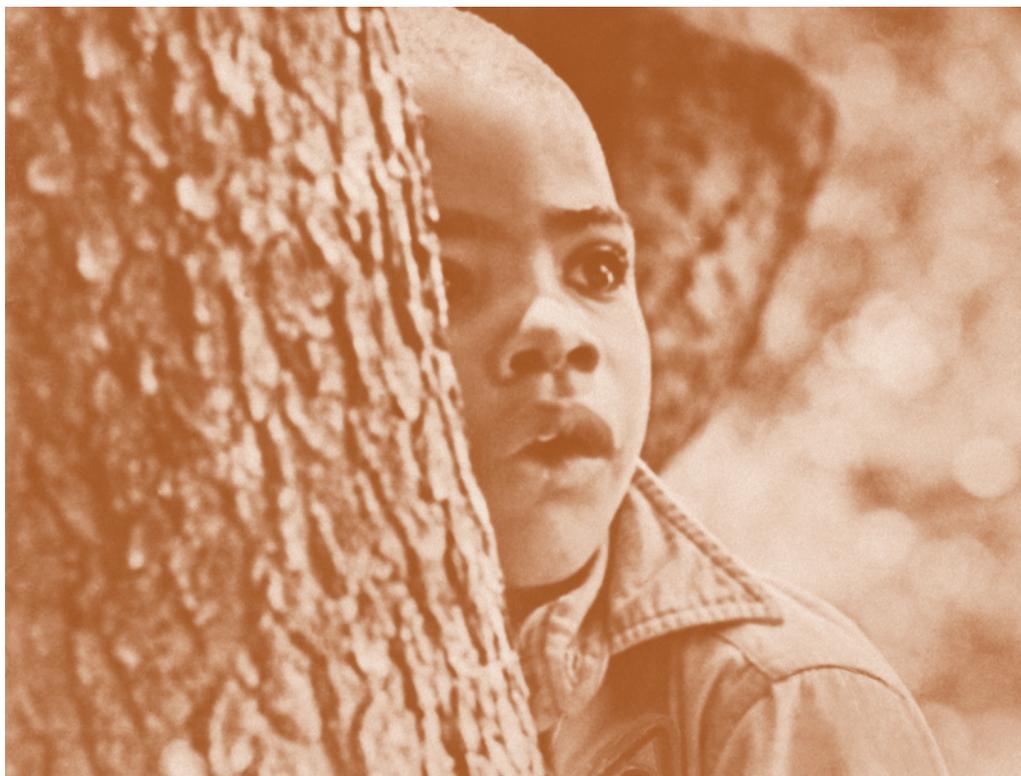
Summer in the Parks was a media darling, thanks in good part to Wright's savvy. "The biggest chore of all was to keep the program surfaced in the alphabet soup that characterizes the federal bureaucracy," writes McCann. Russel asked McCann's kids to draw what a summer in the park meant to them; two drew a tree, the third added a smile. From that, national cartoonist Robert Osborn came up with the "laughing tree," a catchy symbol that seemed to "grin enthusiasm" in the words of the *Post*. The symbol, with the program's signature blue, white, and green, was splashed on stationery, handbills, balloons, sun shades, buttons, tee-shirts, refreshment stands—and a dozen or so vehicles that made "a constant

neighborhood impact," writes McCann. "The kids from four to twenty-four knew who you were and what you did. On the city streets from early morning to late at night, the cars tied the whole program together."

He sums up the program's legacy: "Washington after [the] uncertainties of spring badly needed some one thing to get it back together once more. In its own way Summer in the Parks accomplished that."

WRIGHT DIED IN 1976, AND TODAY THE CENTER NAMED FOR HIM MANAGES HIS COMPOUND, in some ways like Monet's Garden before restoration. The bones are in good shape, but the rest needs care. Dead hemlocks disfigure the upper slopes, victims of insects. Deer browse the seedlings, further disrupting the forest succession. Still, I sense Russel's dream as I stroll the site.

Pete Seeger puts Wright's life in perspective, quoting Martha Graham: "All artists are filled with a blessed unrest trying to reach the infinite. They never make it, but they never give up trying." Russel blazed a vision of hope across the 20th century. Perhaps a new century will see that hope fulfilled.



NPS/PAPERS OF TEDD MCCANN

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ABOVE: Cover image of the *Summer in the Parks* booklet, which puts the effort in perspective: "In the summer of 1968, with store windows still boarded up and April's rubble still in the lots where buildings had been, Washington was crawling with show mobiles and soul mobiles and myriad attempts to make life more fun . . . Summer in the Parks carried on with a vengeance the idea that it can be a joy to live in the city." **LEFT:** A Manitoga moment.