

John D Rockefeller, Jr.'s Design Sensitivity: Something Money Cannot Buy

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Inherent in the activities of much of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s development of Forest Hill, his work on Mount Desert Island in Maine and in his work to preserve the Palisades in New York and the Redwood Trees in California, is an extraordinary design sensitivity. His passion for "the outdoor world" and "his eye for nature" was augmented with the ability to imagine, to visualize, to give form to, and to design. He knew what to preserve and what to restore. He knew what to select and what to discard. It wasn't just his love of the outdoor that caused him to work to preserve it. It was the appreciation of the intricacies of design (whether it be human design or God's design). This manifests itself in the land he chose to preserve, the projects he built and in his selection of designers that worked with him.

Design is an activity based in synthesis. It is the study of all the forces as they impact the subject at hand. While most businessmen are notorious for missing the aesthetic, Rockefeller is notable for enhancing it.

Ann Rockefeller Roberts, granddaughter of JDR Jr. a landscape architect, knew him as one sort of man, but uncovered the proof of his natural creative and visual talent when she explored his records and letters. Being a modest man, he had never revealed this aspect of himself to her in any direct way. So, as it was with her, it remains for us to walk the carriage paths and live or visit in the subdivision he built so that we will come to know more about the man through the physical manifestation of his ideas.

Built in 1929, the Forest Hill homes were a subdivision plan utilizing mass production techniques but with the aesthetic valued highly as a conceptual component. The adjoining 266 acres, now known as Forest Hill Park, where JDR Jr. spent his youth (until he was 19), was given to the city with a \$10,000 landscape design plan by A. D. Taylor. For many a designer, it is painfully obvious that if your potential client does not value design, he or she will not pay for it. Ten thousand dollars in 1938 was a handsome fee.

An architect, discouraged by the difficulty of getting his ideas built, remarked that "if you want to be a great designer, become a businessman." Evidently, JDR Jr. was both.