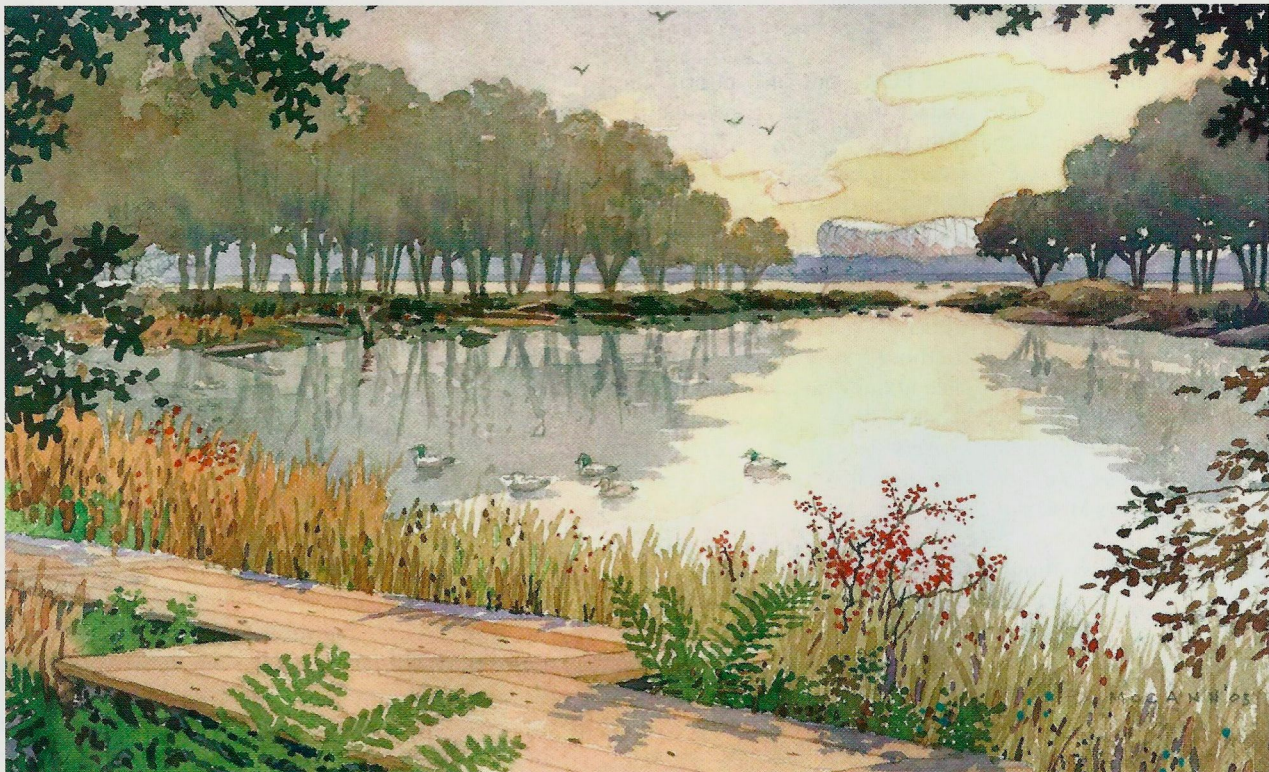


Beijing Gold

That parkland you'll see at the 2008 Summer Olympics? A Rutgers center designed it, beating out dozens of international competitors *By Bill Glovin*



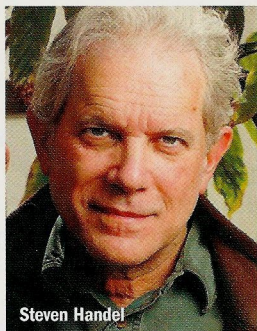
Steven Handel had always wanted to visit Beijing and in January 2004 he finally got his chance. On the 30-minute ride from the airport to the hotel, he peered out the car window like a five year old visiting Yankee Stadium for the first time only to have rain shut down the game. "China is world famous for its biodiversity, but the highway was lined with only poplar trees; too little parkland and open space were surrounded by modern skyscrapers and new construction," says Handel, an urban ecologist. "I immediately thought to myself that our plan for their Olympic Park was more important than I had ever imagined."

The trip was the culmination of months of hard work. The summer before, Sasaki Associates, one of the world's leading landscape architecture and planning companies, had invited Handel and his group, the Rutgers' Center for

Urban Restoration Ecology (CURE), to join them in an international competition to design the site for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Jean Marie Hartman, an associate professor of landscape architecture and one of more than a half dozen CURE members who worked on the project, says, "Sasaki had a design concept; what they needed from us was to help them build an ecosystem from scratch. That meant everything from selecting native plant species to calculating water movement through the site."

Handel was in Beijing to present the final design plan to 50 Chinese officials. The Sasaki-CURE team had made it to the final cut, the last three firms competing out of 51 from around the world. "Winning

These two watercolor renderings that depict a vision for Forest Park were among a series put on public display in Beijing and used by CURE director Steven Handel in his winning presentation.



Steven Handel

was a long shot, but there was the chance to showcase our skills at an Olympics, one of the world's great stages," says Handel, a professor of ecology and evolution at Cook College.

A few days after returning to New Jersey, Handel got the news he was waiting for. The Sasaki-CURE team's design was China's top pick.

In his office, Handel pulls out one of the architectural drawings that had been on display in Beijing as part of the competition and spreads it across his desk. "Beijing was designed during the Ming and Qing Dynasties so that everything flows out from the throne of the Emperor in the Forbidden City through a central axis in rings," he says, tracing the path to the Olympic site on a map with his index finger. "The Olympic site is located in the northern side of the city's fifth ring."

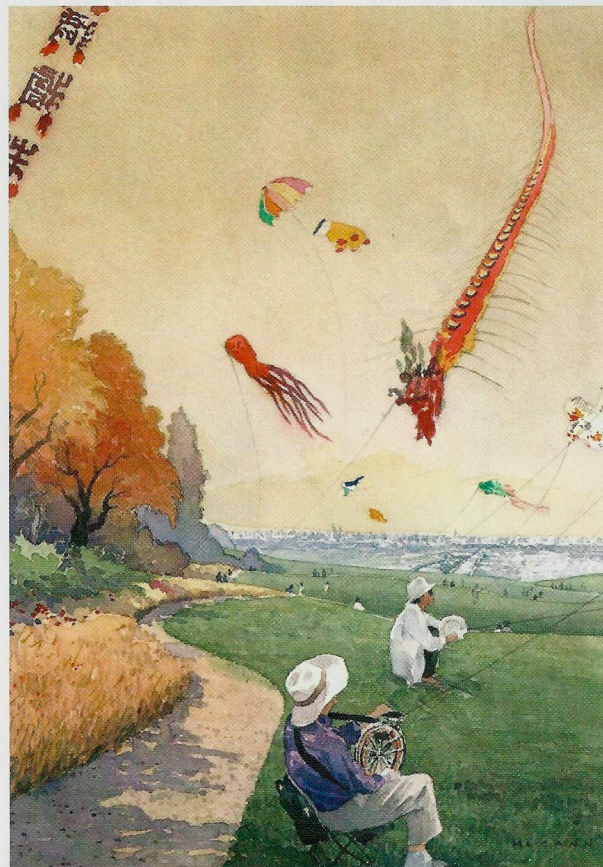
While Sasaki concentrated on creating public spaces and structures for the 700-acre athletic complex, CURE focused on turning 1,500 acres of adjoining farmland into a lush park. Forest Park—which will be about twice the size of Manhattan's Central Park—is expected to add a much-needed recreation and natural area to the capital of the world's most populous country. "Forest Park will be a major tourist attraction; it's where the natural ecological history and biodiversity of Beijing will be on display years after the Olympics are over," says Handel.

For ideas tailored to the region, Handel leaned heavily on J.S. Ma, a former botany professor in China who now works at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, CURE's institutional partner. "Ma suggested, in a very precise way, native species of plants that were appropriate for a lakeshore, meadows, shrublands, and small forests—all elements that we incorporated into the park," says Handel.

For now, their role in the project appears to have come to a premature end. Sasaki hoped that it might also win a building contract for a portion of the \$37 billion the Chinese government is spending on the Olympic infrastructure. Handel hoped that China would take up his proposal to create an ecological training program for Olympic land managers. So far neither the building contract nor the teaching program has come to pass.

But Handel believes that winning the Olympic competition has led to two more projects that will keep him and CURE busy: a project for a huge public park on a former landfill in Dublin, Ireland, and a collaboration with Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates to design the Brooklyn Bridge Park, a 1.5-mile stretch of the waterfront.

Yet China remains close to Handel's heart. "As I was



“Forest Park will be a major **tourist attraction**; it's where the biodiversity of Beijing will be on display **years after the Olympics** are over.”

being driven to the airport in Beijing by a Chinese official, I asked him about future projects together and he coolly said, 'How many of us,—apparently alluding to Chinese firms—'did you use in your Olympics in Atlanta?'" says Handel. "Yes, it's disappointing that we aren't more involved. But we helped create the plan that was considered the most comprehensive for landscape architecture and ecological integrity. That's a great credit to Rutgers. Years from now I'll be watching the Beijing Olympics on TV to see how much of our design becomes a reality." □

Bill Glovin is senior editor of RUTGERS MAGAZINE.