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'Little Pentagon,' Lots of Ivy Give Fitler Square New Look

(staff article)

The office of Norman Rice, an architect, happens to be at 2400 Pine Street. And that's across the street from Fitler Square, one of Philadelphia's little parks. For years, the view from Rice's office was a pretty dismal one, as often is the case with those little parks. What he could see was a half acre of practically all concrete. It had a few trees, some evergreens and the old-style Fairmount Park type of bench, limited in seating capacity, easily upset and moved around.

So, when Rice had a chance to handle the job of redesigning the park, he was happy to take it. Not the usual job for an architect but, Rice explains, "an architect, who has a feeling for bricks, mortar and wood, has the same feeling about space and planting, even though he may not have the technical knowledge of plant names." Rice set out to make the park over. He wanted a pleasant, open green space for neighbors and visitors, something greatly needed in the neighborhood.

Now there are twenty one benches, and most of them are twice as long as the old ones. They are also fixed into the ground to make it impossible for the over-playful to disturb them. Three of the former six entrances have been eliminated to give more green areas. New underground water pipes have been brought in so plants can be watered. In selecting the planting for a ground cover, Rice decided not to use grass because it would be an invitation, in such a small park, for people to walk across it and kill it. Besides, the many large shade trees would also prevent grass from growing.

English ivy was finally chosen because it immediately created an overall green effect and grows well under the trees. Because of its nature, too, people have been discouraged from walking on it. Over 13,000 ivy plants, which remain green all year, were planted. Purple winter-creeper gives the edge added color. Two species of Japanese holly were selected for the park's shrubs. Both are evergreen. Firethorn bushes were also planted and will flower late in the summer.

Some of the old diseased sycamore trees were removed and three or four new trees of a different variety will be planted in the fall. The only building in the square, an old wood caretaker's shack, was replaced with one of brick. The architect calls it his "little 'Pentagon'" since it has five sides like the government's famous building.

Rice quickly says that the new beauty of the park would not have come about without the help of others. "A lot of the credit," Rice said, "for the rebuilding of Fidler Square, as well as many other parks and playgrounds in the city, should be given to Frederic R. Mann, Commissioner of the Department of Recreation, Robert W. Crawford, Deputy Commissioner, and to C. Gregory Bassett and Edward Maurer of their staff. They have envisioned and accomplished a nationally famous recreational building program. It's also to their credit that they have employed the services of the many outstanding local architects who have already created a great many beautiful and functional parks and playgrounds for the children and adults of the city."

The Fidler Square redevelopment program was done at a cost of approximately \$23,000. Over \$8,800, which was the largest dollar amount of any of the contracts for rebuilding the park, was spent for new top soil, fertilizing and plantings.

(from the [Philadelphia Architects and Buildings](#) website)

Written by Emily T. Cooperman

Norman Rice (Born: 3/17/1903, Died: 12/1/1985)

Classmate, colleague, and longtime friend of Louis I. Kahn, Norman Rice was born in Philadelphia. He graduated from Central High School and studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania with Kahn, where they both earned B.Arch. degrees in 1924. During his senior year, Rice served as a teaching assistant in graphics. After graduation, he worked as a draftsman and designer with a number of Philadelphia firms, including Paul Cret, John Molitor, Zantzinger, Borie & Medary and Tilden, Register & Pepper, and also worked with Kahn on the Sesquicentennial Exposition while both were in Molitor's office. In part because of the frustrations of the experience of watching city corruption in action, by 1928 Rice was by his own account "disillusioned [and] inclined to quit architecture" and left the United States "eager to see great European buildings everyone imitated." After traveling widely in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, Rice landed in the Paris office of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, working there with Jose Luis Sert, among others, between 1929 and 1930. Rice returned to Philadelphia in 1931, revitalized by his exposure to Le Corbusier, and joined the firm of Howe & Lescaze during the seminal PSFS Building project.

In 1932, Rice established an independent practice in Center City Philadelphia that lasted for some fifty years. He was very active in the profession, serving as a director of the Philadelphia Chapter of the AIA in 1953 - 55 and 1962 - 63, its vice - president in 1958-59, and president in 1960-61. He led the Pennsylvania Society of Architects in 1964-66, and subsequently chaired its commission on Architectural Design. In 1971, he was named to the Pennsylvania State Art Commission, and remained on it until 1980. Rice joined the national AIA in 1945 and was made a fellow in 1964.

Rice returned to Penn as a teacher in 1963, continuing there until 1977; he co-taught a Master's studio with Kahn and Robert Le Ricolais until Kahn's death in 1974. Rice also taught at the Philadelphia Museum School of Art in the 1950s.