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City In The Woods: The Life and Design of an American Camp Meeting on Martha's Vineyard

Ellen Weiss

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During the nineteenth century, Methodist camp meetings -- woodland revivals lasting several days -- flourished throughout the United States. These tented villages often evolved into permanent communities with unique campground cottages and distinctive spatial configurations. The Wesleyan Grove camp meeting, founded on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, in 1835, is the premier example of this distinctive American design. Anonymous planners and builders at the site innovated the richly decorated miniature cottages and maze-like layouts that were replicated at dozens of late Victorian campgrounds across the country. In 1867, Oak Bluffs, a planned resort that mimicked the eccentric architecture of Wesleyan Grove, was laid out next to the already famous camp meeting. Together, these two extraordinary communities generated a sense of otherworldliness, a magical environment that remains virtually unchanged today. Now in paperback, City in the Woods chronicles the growth of Wesleyan Grove from a few tents in the wilderness to famed city of cottages, and of Oak Bluffs, the "fairyland" next door. Ellen Weiss probes the ways in which the social and religious ideals of nineteenth-century evangelism spawned this remarkable place, traces the history of its physical forms, and recalls how the site was observed by visitors in its own time. She suggests that the continuing American propensity to live in nature, in the suburbs, is rooted in the spiritual strength of the camp meeting and the astonishing community type it generated. Weiss's charming and absorbing account will appeal to architectural, cultural, and religious historians as well as to Vineyard tourists and residents enchanted with this unique city.

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