

Parsons, Kermit Carlyle, ed. *The Writings of Clarence Stein: Architect of the Planned Community*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. Black-and-white illustrations, bibliography, index. US\$59.95 (cloth)

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in the United States that spans, and indeed lies at the heart of, the twentieth century (xxi). The result is an engaging account, but one that is unfocussed and flawed.

The authors, who live in Manhattan and teach American studies at SUNY-Old Westbury, use Long Island as a microcosm of suburban development. In the first half of *Picture Windows* they draw upon architectural journals and previous research to trace the evolution of land development, housebuilding, and housing policy through the first half of the century. Having sketched development of the early, very affluent Long Island suburbs, they examine several attempts to provide well-planned subdivisions and/or affordable homes to a broad middle class. They feature Sunnyside Gardens, New York, in the 1920s, Greenbelt (outside Washington, D.C.) in the 1930s, and finally Levittown, Long Island, in the 1940s and 1950s, interweaving these studies with an account of federal housing initiatives from the 1930s onwards. In the second half of their book they use interviews to reconstruct how the early post-war suburbs were viewed. They emphasize that outsiders and the new suburban residents used different criteria to judge these "mass suburbs." They then trace the failures and successes of attempts to promote racial integration, the changing experience of suburban women, and the impact of a growing numbers of new immigrants. They conclude by contrasting the affordable mass suburbs of the early post-war years with the more class-divided suburbs of today, exemplified by the growth of exclusive, gated enclaves. They suggest that cohousing—a type of cooperative development—is one of the more progressive ways forward.

Picture Windows is fluently written, and deals with several aspects of the post-war suburbs that excite general interest, notably the changing role of women. The authors made significant contribution to a series of articles on Long Island history that were published in *Newsday* (see www.lihistory.com/about.htm). Closer to home, their book was recently reviewed prominently (and favourably) in the *Globe and Mail*. As popular non-fiction the book works well. Unfortunately, it adds little to what urban and social historians already know, while perpetuating some myths. Both problems are implied in the authors' stated goal of examining "the intellectual, economic, and political forces behind the opening of the suburbs to middle- and working-class families." The breadth of their concerns means that they are able to say only a little that is new on any topic. The issue on which they present the most substantial new evidence is the role of suburban women. Here their account is interesting and nuanced, but does not take us far beyond the discussion that the Canadian social historian Nikki Strong-Boag offered a decade ago: the post-war suburbs were better than snobbish outsiders, and the first generation of feminist critics, were prepared to recognize.¹ More original is their account of the activities and significance of the U.S. Senate Joint Committee on Housing of 1947–8. Chaired by Senator McCarthy, the neglected public hearings of this committee helped to put the brakes on public housing and to endorse the sort of suburban development that Levittown came to symbolize.

The larger problem with the book is that it accepts the inaccurate, conventional narrative of American suburbs. The authors assume that suburbs began as upper- and upper-middle-class sorts of places and that it was only after 1945 that "a new class of people" (xx) were able to settle there. They also accept the conventional view that homes could not become affordable until "modern methods" of construction had been adopted by large builder-developers such as the Levitt brothers. As a result, although they do emphasize that the large-scale promotion of homeownership had a downside, they offer slight qualification to the accepted view of the Levitts as folk heroes.

In fact, as recent urban historical scholarship has shown, working-class suburbs were common before World War II.² In comparative, international terms, the American building industry was already very efficient by the 1940s. There was room for improvement but, through the use of subcontracting, the adoption of new materials and methods did not depend on large-scale production. Across the United States, during the early post-war boom, one third of all homes were owner-built and another third were erected by small contractors. Much the same was true in Canada. These amateur and professional builders made other types of suburbs. Until historians pay more attention to such places and builders, popular accounts such as *Picture Windows* will reinforce inaccurate stereotypes of the history of North American suburbs.

Notes

1. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-60," *Canadian Historical Review* 72 (1991), 471–504.
2. For an overview of this literature, see a special upcoming issue of the *Journal of Urban History*.

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Parsons, Kermit Carlyle, ed. *The Writings of Clarence Stein: Architect of the Planned Community*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. Black-and-white illustrations, bibliography, index. US\$59.95 (cloth).

For my doctoral research, I had the pleasure of visiting archives that held the correspondence and other writing of many prominent North American regionalists. As I read through the papers of Lewis Mumford, Catherine Bauer Wurster, Benton MacKaye, and Howard W. Odum, I felt that I was learning about individuals with whom I was already well acquainted. When I visited the architecturally extraordinary Kroch Archives at Cornell University, I was in for more of a surprise. Although I had read Clarence Stein's landmark volume *Toward New Towns for America*, I did not know much about his life. My extended exposure to his papers helped me to achieve a deep admiration for Stein as a man. It is a pleasure to report that Parsons's remarkable book will help to bring this same sense of Stein's

personal and professional achievements to much a wider audience.

Many people have some notion that Stein was an architect, regionalist, and community planner. A closer look at his career reveals just how important his contributions were in these interrelated fields. Stein was born in 1882 and benefited from a progressive education in New York City. After studying at the prestigious *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris in 1911, he returned to New York and began a lifelong architectural practice. Stein's interest in planning grew in this period, leading him to accept the chair of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) community planning committee. In the early 1920s his interest in new towns and regionalism found expression in the planning of Sunnyside Gardens and Radburn, as well as his participation in the Regional Planning Association of America. In 1951 he published his single major work, *Toward New Towns for America*, and enjoyed growing professional admiration for a lifetime of innovative professional practice. The 1960s found Stein enjoying a working retirement that included being awarded the AIA's Gold Medal. He passed away in 1975 and was honoured by tributes from his wide circle of friends and colleagues.

There are deeper, more intangible aspects to Stein's contributions. In many ways he was the glue that held the disparate membership of Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) together. He was a close friend of Mumford and MacKaye, maintaining a decades-long bond with his colleagues through often-daily correspondence. His relative wealth helped to underwrite many of the activities of the RPAA. Stein's marriage to actress Aline MacMahon dusted him with the glamour of Hollywood, and the couple's posh apartment overlooking Central Park added an exotic dimension to gatherings of insurgent intellectuals. It was Stein who best translated the British concept of the Garden City into the language of North American culture. Perhaps his most remarkable achievement was simply to have survived personal mental-health challenges that beset him in mid-life.

Kermit Parsons has done us all a great service. In this post-modern age it is no longer adequate to simply write biographical sketches based on a particular interpretation of another person's life. Although works such as *Lewis Mumford: A Life* (1989) by Donald Miller are useful, one always wonders through what filters the details of the biographical subject were perceived. There is no such questioning with this volume. While there may be quibbles that this or that document was not included, there is no question that a balanced view of Stein emerges from the careful layering of Stein's own words.

On an organizational level, Parsons has also got it right. He provides a minimum of introductory material, heads each chapter with equally limited comment, and then lets Stein speak for himself. Contextual information on the women, men, and events that Stein writes about is provided on the page where the references occur. For added background, an ample variety

of photos are included, as is a chronology of the key events in Stein's life. The whole package is prefaced with transparent explanation of the editorial decisions that Parsons made to modernize spelling, smooth syntax, or to omit superfluous passages. The hand of Parsons' hand is evident throughout the work, but the reader is given ample evidence of where and why this intrusion occurs.

This is not a volume to read from cover to cover. In the finest sense of the word, it is a reference source, an inspiration to be brought out again and again for review and reflection. For both mainstream and radical planners, the words of Clarence Stein provide a touchstone. His articulate vision for creation of ecologically sustainable and socially just cities remains vital in the new millennium. As many of us continue to struggle with the challenges of transforming contemporary cities and regions, there is comfort in knowing that we walk in the footsteps of such a remarkable predecessor.

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Ziskin, Rochelle. *The Place Vendôme: Architecture and Social Mobility in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xvi, 224. Black-and-white illustrations, bibliography, index. US \$74.95 (cloth).

The Place Vendôme, still a major landmark in the fashionable financial district of Paris, owes its origins and much of its present appearance to the military failures of Louis XIV. Originally planned as a royal square to commemorate the king's victories and accommodate a massive equestrian statue of the king by the sculptor François Girardon, it was reconceived at the end of the seventeenth century, to be built by private investors according to the design of the superintendent of royal building, Jules Hardouin-Mansart and subsequent royal architects (most notably Robert de Cotte), as a residential square in the tradition of the Place des Vosges. The original entrepreneurs were drawn from the ranks of upwardly mobile royal financiers, whose enthusiasm for investing in lots on the Place Vendôme increased when their natural patron, the new controller general, Michel Chamillart, built a magnificent residence bordering on the square. The loss of the War of the Spanish Succession, the Regency, the *chambre de justice* of 1716-7 and the rise of John Law, not to mention other changes in sovereign and royal ministers, may have influenced the development of royal finances, but they did not diminish the significance of the Place Vendôme as the residence of the king's financial agents. Throughout the eighteenth century, royal financiers and their descendants would build and rebuild the fine *maisons* (not *hôtels*) of the square. In doing so, they would reflect their bourgeois social origins, marriage strategies, and noble aspirations; relations between the sexes and the place of women in the social hierarchy of households; and the ways in which the financiers