

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*.

Richard Harris
School of Geography and Geology
McMaster University

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