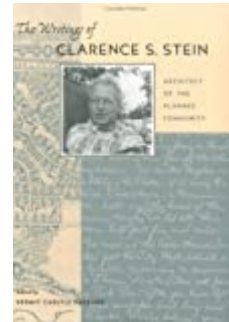


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Kermit Carlyle Parsons, ed.** *The Writings of Clarence Stein: Architect of the Planned Community*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xxxiv + 717 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5756-0.



**Reviewed by** Tridib Banerjee (School of Policy, Planning, and Development, University of Southern California)

**Published on** H-Urban (January, 2000)

Appearance matters. The first thing to note about *The Writings of Clarence Stein* is that it is a very handsome book, amply illustrated, and nicely designed. But this book is certainly more than just a collector's item. Indeed *The Writings of Clarence Stein* is a significant contribution to the annals of planning. It should be seen as a valuable sourcebook of planning history of the first half of this century. The book should be of interest to planning and urban historians, community and housing planners, regional planners, and urban designers.

Kermit Parsons, the editor of this tome, is a professor of city and regional planning at Cornell University and a well-known planning historian. By editing this sizable volume containing the correspondence and writings of Clarence Stein, Parsons has reminded us that the practice of planning in America, which grew out of the professions of architecture, civil engineering, and landscape architecture, began with reformist visions about the design of communities, neighborhood, and even regional landscape. In these new hours of the twenty-first century, when the practice of planning has been severely injured by anti-planning rhetoric fomented by the ideology of market liberalism, and stripped of its essential humanity and normative content, it is refreshing to read the Stein papers, and to reflect on how planning began in the early part of the last century. Indeed this collection

could not have come at a better time. As we suffocate today from the banalities of zoning administration, Environmental Impact Reviews (EIRs), Geographical Information System (GIS) mapping, computer models, public hearings, owner participation agreements, and interest group politics, the Stein papers are like a breath of fresh air.

Clarence Stein (1882-1975) was a key member of a group of planners and architects—Henry Wright, Benton MacKaye, Lewis Mumford, Catherine Bauer Wurster, Rexford Tugwell, Clarence Perry, to name a few—who through their designs, plans and writings tried to make cities and communities more livable in the face of inexorable and explosive growth at the turn of the last century. Stein himself began his career as an architect, and continued his practice of architecture for a good part of his life, but concentrated in later years on the design of large housing complexes. Although a talented designer, he was concerned more with designing decent, affordable, and livable housing complexes that could contribute to an overall sense of community, rather than gaining personal fame through glamorous, “signature” architecture. Indeed, as Parsons points out, Clarence Stein may have been the only architect of his stature who dedicated his career to the cause of a genuine social architecture, one that was based on social concerns rather than aes-

thetics of form. His professional ambit would grow further when he became one of the founding members of the Regional Plan Association, an independent organization that, over the years, authored many innovative planning ideas, and still continues to serve as a thinktank of urban policy. Stein began his career primarily as a community architect, but later became more of a community and regional planner, and an advocate for social reform. He believed that the design of the built environment was important for creating livable communities, promoting civic life, and encouraging good citizenship. His design talents will continue to live through such well-known projects as Radburn in New Jersey, and Baldwin Village in Los Angeles, but Stein was more than a physical designer; he saw himself as a social reformer, and worked hard to achieve the kind of institutional reform that will make his social vision possible. In many ways, his ideas were an integral part of a collective vision, shared by a small group of like-minded intellectuals: architects, planners, writers, and social critics.

The bulk of the materials included in the volume is biographical in nature—some 600 pages out of a total of 645 pages, not counting front matters, appendixes, index, etc.—consisting primarily of Stein’s unpublished essays, lectures, memos, notes, professional drawings and reports, sketches, and correspondence with friends, relatives, and professional colleagues. Most of Clarence Stein’s original manuscripts and drawings included in this volume are now part of the Cornell University Archives (Collection 3600: Clarence S. Stein Papers), housed in the Carl A. Kroch Library Rare and Manuscript Collection.

Stein’s personal and professional letters comprise more than ninety percent of the five hundred and thirty-two items included in this volume. His personal letters were frequently addressed to his wife, Aline Stein, an actress of considerable renown. Professional letters were often written to close friends and colleagues. The list of recipients reads like the Who’s Who of the architectural and planning field: Benton Mackaye, Lewis Mumford, Catherine Bauer, Vernon deMars, Carl Feiss, Albert Meyers, Frederic J. Osborn, Pietro Belluschi, and many others. Benton Mackaye and Lewis Mumford were two colleagues with whom he corresponded throughout his professional life. This volume includes some 59 letters written to Benton Mackaye, the earliest dated November 16, 1921, and the latest, October 12, 1967. It includes another 42 letters written to Lewis Mumford; the earliest was written on May 24, 1924, and the most recent, on January 2, 1968. Many of these letters to his colleagues contained his interpretations, ruminations, and critical

analyses related to planning and design of urban communities. These are often accompanied by his sketches—of buildings, landscapes, people—that he made during his travel, or as part of professional assignments.

The editor has skillfully organized these materials chronologically in eight sections, reflecting what he felt are the distinct periods of Stein’s remarkable professional career. Typically, each section contains a medley of letters, unpublished essays, official memos, narratives for professional reports, short notes, photographs, and sketches. Most of these writings are brief, and not more than three pages in length. Each section begins with a brief introduction in which Parsons discusses the context, maintains the continuity, paints the backdrop, and fills in the gaps for the readers to follow the correspondence. These pithy introductions are very useful for the reader. Indeed, like a skilled artist who can create the most expressive painting with the minimal brush strokes, Parsons has completed a picture that is tantamount to a posthumous autobiography of Clarence Stein.

The first section of the collection defines the period of Stein’s early education in New York and Paris that spans from 1903 to 1911. It contains some 41 letters written by Stein to his parents and his brother while Clarence was in Paris studying architecture in L’Ecole des Beaux Arts. This section includes some early photographs and some excellent charcoal sketches made by young Stein during his travels in Europe. The second section, titled “Home Again”—after the title of an autobiographical note written by Stein soon after he returned from Europe—contains materials on Stein’s early career as an architect and a civic reformer in the next nine years. In this section we find many of his initial essays on the planning of neighborhoods, cities, and regions, reflecting the influence of the Garden City movement. At least one memo captures his thought about cooperative ownership of workers housing, a radical idea in those days. The third section of the collection, “Regional Planning, Community Architecture, and Collaboration 1920-1929,” focuses on an important period of Stein’s career. During this period, he met Benton Mackaye and other future colleagues and co-thinkers like Frederick Ackerman, Henry Wright, and Lewis Mumford. It is during this period, notes Parsons, “Stein called the first meeting of his so-called atelier, a club of architects, economists, social reformers, community designers, urban critics, and writers, who ultimately named themselves the Regional Planning Association of America,” (p.104-105). These letters and essays provide background information about some of the major planning initiatives of that time, and in particular about the

origin of the Regional Plan Association. Parsons titles the next five-year period “Years of Success and Stress,” covering some of Stein’s reactions to the years of economic depression and widespread poverty. His views were expressed in his letters to Benton Mackaye, Lewis Mumford, and his wife Aline Stein who was spending much of her time in Hollywood those days. The social and economic upheavals of those years had a profound effect on Stein’s thinking. According to Parsons, Stein felt that (a) the revolution was at hand, and (b) capitalism could not and perhaps should not survive. He expressed his political views quite openly in these letters.

“Years of Success and Stress” is the longest section, containing some 182 letters, notes and essays. These were also some of the most productive and successful years of Stein’s professional work, supported by various programs of the New Deal. Particularly noteworthy was his consulting work on the Greenbelt Towns for FDR’s Resettlement Administration. Parsons includes in this section many of Stein’s professional works and photographs of historical significance. The following section, “A Time of Troubles,” reveals a private aspect of Stein’s life—the beginning of what turned out to be his long struggle with mental depression. It began with a serious episode of depression that required him to spend some time in a sanitarium. Unfortunately, he continued to suffer from recurring episodes of mental illness throughout the next decade. Overall, the forties were a productive period for Stein, as evident in the materials presented by Parsons in the section entitled “The War and Postwar planning 1940-49.” Stein continued to design large scale housing projects and attempted to write a book on city planning, later abandoned.

Parsons calls the following decade “Fulfillment and Recognition,” because this is when Stein was at the peak of his career and being recognized widely among both the architecture and planning fields, receiving the highest honors given by their respective professional organizations. The final section, titled “Satisfactions” shows that even in his twilight years Stein was still quite involved in regional planning issues, new towns development, and the Regional Plan Association. Finally, there are four appendixes at the end devoted to: (a) a chronology of Stein’s important life events; (b) a list of his architectural, housing, and planning projects; (c) short biographical sketches of personalities mentioned in Stein’s letters and memos; and (d) a complete bibliography of Stein’s published writings, and published articles about Stein, and the Regional Plan Association. These are also important source materials for planning students and scholars.

A major surprise in this collection is the almost total omission of an important protagonist of the reform movement, and the RPA initiatives—Clarence Perry. Perry is commonly associated with the conceptual schema for the neighborhood concept and principles that were used in the RPA’s 1928 plan for New York and its environs, and later adopted by the American Public Health Association’s popular book of standards, *Planning the Neighborhood*. The neighborhood unit became so popular that this concept was used as the central organizing concept for structuring the ordering principles for neighborhood planning. Curiously, Perry’s name never appears in Stein’s writings or correspondence, at least those that are included here. Yet, it is well known that the legacy of the neighborhood unit concept and principles shaped Stein’s plan for Radburn and other garden cities. Parsons talks about Perry and his contribution only once, and even that acknowledgment comes in a footnote. This omission is curious indeed, and somehow it even escaped the keen eyes of the editor.

One of the main contributions of this edited volume is that it is more than just a biography of Clarence Stein. It is a precious documentation of the evolution of the field of planning at the turn of the century, through the post-depression era. Most planners and planning students come to know of, or read, Mumford, Stein, Mackaye, and the like along their professional education or career. They also come to know about garden cities, neighborhood units, and the Regional Plan Association. However, few would associate such writings and projects with the social and political upheavals of the time at the national scale, or the personal initiatives, dedications, and passions of a handful of architects and planners who managed to secure the attention of FDR and his administration. Nor, for that matter, would many connect the movement for healthy cities and communities with anti-urban sentiments of the intellectuals at the turn-of-the-century and the reform movement that were antecedents to the thinking and works of Clarence Stein and his colleagues. The letters, essays, and professional memos reveal the intellectual context of a very important phase of the American planning history.

Looking back, one might conclude that Clarence Stein represented an era when planning was elitist. One might argue that the visions of cities and neighborhoods were shaped by the omniscient megalomania of a handful of well-bred and well-heeled architects and planners and their political patrons, who believed that they knew what was good for the country and the common people, but had little understanding what the common people

really liked or wanted. This skepticism prevailed in the fifties through the seventies, when much of the visionary and normative thinking was purged by either the political exigencies of time, or the systematic deconstruction by the social scientists of what they saw as the excesses of “environmental determinism” in the failed outcomes of urban renewal or inner city freeway development. The rise of participatory planning—or as some would say, democratization of planning—led to further atrophy of normative planning. The time of the “elite” planner by then had clearly passed. Planning became technical and scientific, and later, merely bureaucratic, thus drawing the ire of the public. Planning has been roundly chastised, and indeed tamed, during the anti-government sentiments of the eighties and the nineties. Planning visions and the passions for good society that drove the planners like Clarence Stein seemingly have become a thing of the past. Today it might surprise a planning student to learn that there was a time when a planner like Clarence Stein could write directly to the President of the United States (Stein’s memos to FDR, pp. 195, 249) advising him on national policies on housing or urban development.

There is no question that practice of planning has

become more democratic today, thanks to the legacy of advocacy planning, interest group activism, and grass-roots citizen movements. Perhaps we are all better off for these changes. In the process, however, the planner has been marginalized. The “vision” thing has almost disappeared from the practice of planning, and the planners’ role has largely been reduced to keepers of rules, regulations, and interminable legalese. At the same time, unrelenting criticisms of big government—over regulation and bureaucracy—have further eroded the normative foundation of planning. The planner today is the classic anti-hero, in stark contrast to the heroic accomplishments of Stein and his colleagues, based on their normative visions and passions for social reform. Today we might choose to call them elitist, but they may remain the real heroes in the field. By editing this collection of Clarence Stein’s letters and writings Kermit Parsons has given us a major account of the early accomplishments of the field of planning.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Tridib Banerjee. Review of Parsons, Kermit Carlyle, ed., *The Writings of Clarence Stein: Architect of the Planned Community*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. January, 2000.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3679>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).