ARCHITECTURE VIEW: CLARENCE STEIN THE CHAMPION OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD ...

Huxtable, Ada Louise
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Clarence Stein— The Champion of The Neighborhood

The exhibition that commemorates the work of the American town planner Clarence S. Stein at the Washington, D.C., headquarters of the American Institute of Architects (1735 New York Ave., N. W., until Jan. 31) is rather desultorily arranged on several floors and has very little text. It consists mostly of site plans and color photographs showing happy children and contented old folk in green, traffic-free surroundings of the kind that illustrate planning manuals and magazines with predictably platitudinous uniformity.

Stein was the early champion of the neighborhood, the region, the greenbelt town and regeneration within cities, and the show's examples of his work in these areas are considerably augmented by the December issue of the A.I.A. Journal, which, in effect, supplies a text, in the form of memoirs of Stein by Lewis Mumford and Douglas Haskell, and some indication of Stein's influence abroad. There will be a tour of the United States and Europe for the exhibition later.

In spite of its casual modesty, this is an important exhibition—more important for what it does than for what it shows. As a commemorative gesture—Stein died in 1975 at 93 and his most influential work was done in the 1920's and 30's—it revives his reputation and makes his work visible again.

This admirable act has some irony: Stein is in the common, anomalous position of a prophet not so much without honor as one totally forgotten or taken for granted. He is caught between a younger generation that has never heard of him and an older generation that is suffering the stigma of being out of fashion, with its pieties trapped uncomfortably in the process of change.

The irony, of course, is that Stein, as a planner and humanist, prefigured everything the younger generation throws at the older generation about the social responsibilities of architecture, about community, amenity and the quality of life-concepts so overworked and underpracticed today that they are almost dangerous clichés.

Stein was a man of his time, and ahead of his time, a social reformer who carried out his ideas of bettering the human condition through community design. He understood the relationships between the built world and people's physical and spiritual needs and his plans were sensitive to those needs in the most primary and heart-warming sense.

Working with his partner Henry Wright, he was responsible for the now-classic (and still extraordinarily pleasant) schemes of the 1920's for Radburn, N.J., and Sunnyside, L.I., for the noble Federal greenbelt town experiments of the 1930's in Greenbelt, Md., Greenhills, Ohio, and Greendale, Wis., and for Chatham Village in Pittsburgh and Baldwin Hills Village in Los Angeles.

Stein and Wright set goals and patterns that still serve as models. These are the planning prototypes for the best of the post-war British and Scandinavian New Towns and for America's two (ultimately) successful new communities, Reston, Va., and Columbia, Md.

The hallmarks of all these pioneering projects have become basic to good planning everywhere. They include separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and superblock streets with interior green space and houses on traffic-free cul-de-sacs. They have connecting footpaths and overpasses. There is always a progression of related outdoor areas from private gardens to landscaped public circulation and shared common land, and a town center combining shopping and leisure activities.

Many of these principles permeate new towns from Stevenage and Harrow in England to Vallingby and Farsta in Sweden. They are found as far afield as Chandigarh in India and Wadi Faliq in Israel. Stein's innovations are simply accepted, like sliced bread.

The fact that the recent rise in social and environmental consciousness through design and architecture barely recognizes this pioneer has a certain poignancy. But even sadder is the fact that when the planning debt is beginning to be acknowledged and the planning need is clearer than ever, the economic obstacles to rational development in the United States are so great that Stein's aims and principles may be close to unattainable. Certainly the difficulties are far more serious than they were in the 1930's when the government was inclined toward great social experiments and the dollar costs were far less.

The show is not only a tribute, it is a refresher course in recent history. That is why one wishes for something more than its truncated text. One can, of course, read Stein's book, written in 1953, "Toward New Towns in America," which draws together his rich experience. It was reissued in 1956 and 1966 and is still pertinent today.

Stein obviously did not work in a vacuum. He owed much to the ideas and practice of the English garden city

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planners; he was a student of Ebenezer Howard, Raymond Unwin, Patrick Geddes and, in this country, Frederick Law Olmsted. He had numerous and devoted associates and allies; in addition to his partner, Henry Wright (who died in 1936), there were Burton MacKaye, Stuart Chase, Catherine Bauer and Lewis Mumford.

They all endorsed a kind of sensitive and humane physical planning that was part of the climate of the 1920's and 30's, when the answer to many of the ills of society seemed to be a better place to live. It was a rational, compassionate and somewhat simplistic philosophy. For the middle class, it worked. And it is certainly not without a great deal of relevance now.

But it is an ideal that has been subsequently exploded by racial tensions and by the discovery that social malaise lies in a bedrock of complex human problems and existent inequities to which better physical planning offers few answers. For many people, it opens few doors. And some of its most basic and widely used principles—the public ownership of land, for example, to avoid speculative exploitation and to provide the community facilities that require long-term investment—are still unacceptable in the United States.

Stein was not unaware of these complexities, or the need to press for constant change. "The planner's shield should be a simple device—a question mark," he has written. "When an idea becomes conventional, it is time to think it through again."

Don Canty, the editor of the A.I.A. Journal, makes the essential point in his introductory essay: "What a difference such ideas would have made if tested widely in the 1930's . . . and applied to postwar suburban development, and subsequent urban redevelopment. What a difference they still could make —which is the real message of the commemoration of Clarence Stein."