

✦ **In Recognition of Henry Wright (July 2, 1878—July 6, 1936)**

National Register plaque dedication, Sunnyside Gardens, November 11, 2006

“If I had my way, over the gate of every university I would carve a great question mark.”

—Henry Wright, quoted by Clarence Stein in *American Architect and Architecture*, August 1936

A member of my pantheon of great town and regional planners, Wright was one of the founders of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA). Along with his long-time collaborator, Clarence Stein, Wright brought the Garden City movement to America, in his pioneering work with the Emergency Fleet Housing Corporation (EFHC) during World War I. Wright designed several model worker housing developments up and down the Eastern Seaboard for EFHC [including Colonial Terraces in Newburgh, NY], which became prototypes for his later work at Sunnyside Gardens, Radburn, and the New Deal Greenbelt Towns. These remain models of human-scaled, compact and livable communities that inspire town planners today.

—Robert D. Yaro, President, Regional Plan Association

Henry Wright... was [RPAA's] most innovative housing designer and most skilled and fussiest analyst. He worked comfortably at the regional scale and on small projects. His thorough study of the many variables in residential land planning (topography, parcel shape, tree cover, views from the site, sun angles, traffic noise, etc.) produced excellence in his work with Stein on three brilliant, innovative, large-scale residential layouts—Sunnyside, Radburn, and Chatham Village.... Wright always thought clearly, and he always asked tough questions in his role as the RPAA's goad to explore issues further and seek better ideas or improved designs.

—Kermit C. Parsons, “Collaborative Genius: The Regional Planning Association of America,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Autumn 1994

He was entirely free of ambition and egoism. He didn't care a scrap who accomplished things or who got the credit, so long as the result was worth accomplishing.... He made topography a vital element in architecture and planning. More than any other single man he changed design from a paper study, later to be placed on land, to a concept in which land and soil and trees and vegetation were integral with the structures. The whole concept flowered as one. His collaboration on Chatham Village in Pittsburgh [and] his summer school's later brilliant exhibit of models of hillside housing, were not only achievements in aesthetic organization, but opened the eyes of a whole profession to the superior possibilities of hitherto discarded types of terrain.

—Albert Mayer, “Henry Wright,” *Survey Graphic*, September 1936

During [his 20s and 30s, in St. Louis], he developed the then revolutionary conception that... the design of buildings, roads, walks and gardens should be an integrated process intended to serve the purpose of living instead of selling.... He was endowed with marked originality, an always youthful, searching mind, and a personality of unusual charm, and was regarded as one of the ablest men in his profession.

—*National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York, 1939)

In St. Louis [he] developed a special skill as site planner for subdivisions, by preference on difficult or unusable sites, such as Forest Ridge near Forest Park.... Wright developed further the innovations of [Frederick Law] Olmsted and [Raymond] Unwin, diminishing the amount of space wasted on unnecessary or excessively wide streets or roads, and using this savings to provide more useful open spaces for gardens and playgrounds.... Wright's experimental open-mindedness, his skill in quantitative cost-analysis, his ability to bring together specialists in many different fields, and not least his sense of community, family, and personal needs, placed him apart from more rigid, fashionable theorists with their neat geometric solutions. Henry Wright's site plan for Chatham Village, Pittsburgh, in its very freedom from mechanistic clichés, remains one of the timeless masterpieces of contemporary urban design.

—Lewis Mumford, “Henry Wright,” in Arnold Whittick, ed., *Encyclopedia of Urban Planning* (New York, 1974)

Henry Wright, architect, landscape architect, regional and town planner, is internationally known as a town and housing planner and a leader in the movement for the building of better communities.... In Radburn, freed from the [street grid] of New York City, the garden city principles of Ebenezer Howard were combined with the community unit concepts of Raymond Unwin and others to perfect the superblock community unit. The organizational and educational skills of Henry Wright, combined with his vast experience in many disciplines, made the creation of Radburn a reality.

—Laurence Koplik, Architect; President, Radburn Conservancy

Henry Wright, landscape architect and community planner *extraordinaire*, continues to offer progressive designers a model for professional practice: one in which attention is directed toward affordable housing, community design, and environmental responsibility; and research and design are integrated (understood to be two sides of the same coin), so that those goals may be achieved. The results at Sunnyside Gardens speak for themselves; Wright, working with Clarence Stein and Frederick Ackerman, produced an exemplary design, firmly attached to modernist principles all the while integrated with what Lewis Mumford called the “vernacular of everyday life.”

—A. Eugene Sparling, Architect, & Marta Gutman, Architect and Associate
Professor of Architecture, City College of New York

Undated observations above have been contributed specifically for today's celebration.

🏡 National Register Historic Districts designed in whole or part by Henry Wright

*St. Louis–Clayton, MO: **Hi-Pointe–De Mun** (roughly bounded by S. Skinker Blvd., Clayton Rd., Seminary Place, De Mun Ave., and Northwood Ave.)*

*Clayton, MO: **Brentmoor Park, Brentmoor, and Forest Ridge** (Big Bend and Wydown Blvds.)*

*Camden, NJ: **Yorkship Village** (now called Fairview Village or Fairview District, roughly bounded by Newton Creek, Crescent Blvd., Mt. Ephraim Ave., Olympia and Hull Rds.)*

*New York, NY: **Sunnyside Gardens** (irregular pattern between 43rd St. and 52nd St. from Barnett Ave. to Skillman Ave. and Queens Blvd.)*

*Fair Lawn, NJ: **Radburn** (irregular pattern between Radburn Rd. and Erie RR. tracks); also a National Landmark*

*Pittsburgh, PA: **Chatham Village** (roughly bounded by Virginia Ave., Bigham St., Woodruff St., Saw Mill Run Blvd., and Olympia Rd.); also a National Landmark*

*Arlington, VA: **Buckingham Village** (roughly bounded by N. Oxford St., Fifth St. N., N. Henderson Rd., First St. N., N. Pershing, N. Thomas St., and Second St. N.)*

Refreshments and flowers for today's celebration have been provided by our Sunnyside neighbors and these fine local restaurants and merchants: Daco Romano Bakery & Café, Donato's Restaurant & Pizza, La Flor Café & Bakery, La Marjolaine French Pastry, Nunziato Florist, Sunnyside Gardens Farm, Türkiyem Deli.

We are grateful to these well-wishers and contributors: Kenny Bassuk/Moncourt Apts., Merry Chang, Robert Corridan/Artistic Masonry, John Dermody, Emre Edev, Zoë Epstein, Brian Flannery and Brigidanne Flynn/Colonial Terraces, Emily Goldman, Marta Gutman, Paul Goldberger, Selvin Gootar, Rich Hogan, Joseph Jerome/All Saints' Church, Allison Karn, Felice & Larry Koplik/Radburn Conservancy, Matthew Kuhnert/National Building Museum, Brad Lander, Christina & Drew Lowenstein, Fiona Lowenstein, William Menking, Marlyn Molloy, Catherine & Morgan O'Flaherty, Georgette Ortiz, Gene Oyler, Caroline Pasion, Richard Plunz, Nina Rappaport, Dennis Redmond, Liz & Herbert Reynolds, Irma Rodriguez, Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, Tony Rohling, Leslie Saville, Ronald Shiffman, Eugene Sparling, Jason D. Stratman/Missouri Historical Society, Lindsey Summers, Nina Teng, Mary and Rose Tibaldi, Michael Tomlan, Karolina Tosi, Jimmy Van Bramer, David Vater/Chatham Village, Thaisa Way, Liivia Westervelt, Jocelyn K. Wilk/Columbia University Archives, Kevin Wolfe, Dorothy Wong, John Wright, Tom Wright, Robert Yaro.



The Henry Wright memorial plaque has been placed at 43-05 47th Street, Sunnyside Gardens, Queens. The Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance's National Register Plaque Program is supported by the New York City Council/Councilman Eric Gioia, the Citizens for NYC, the Family of Eileen and Martin Lydon, Mary and Rose Tibaldi, Marguerite Bessante, Martin Skala, and many anonymous donors.

“HENRY WRIGHT, 1878-1936”

[A memorial article, written in the month following Wright's death, by his great friend and partner, Clarence Stein, for *American Architect and Architecture*, August 1936, pp. 23-24]

Henry Wright was like a flame that suddenly lighted up and thus clarified and simplified what seemed complicated problems. He was an original. His reasoning was his own—based on his own experience and observation. A varied experience in architectural, site, landscape, and subdivision planning formed the sound basis of his conclusions. His was an unusually active mind—an inquisitive, analytical mind—that constantly drove him on from one problem to another, and from one solution to a still better solution of a problem. His ingenuity forced him to follow his reasoning to its ultimate conclusion and to fight for that conclusion. No matter what sacrifice was needed, financial or otherwise, he made them for his beliefs. He was always big enough and brave enough to attack his own past opinions when he found a better means of attaining the end towards which he was working.

His objectives did not change. Most architects have many unrelated jobs; from the time Henry came to see clearly what he wanted to attain, he had one job. This was the building of better communities—the rehousing of urban Americans in more desirable communities in a practical way. It was all one job—the planning of Sunnyside [Gardens], Radburn and Chatham Village; his ceaseless analytic writing; his reports on city and state planning; his teaching at various universities.

Henry Wright dealt with essentials. He never had patience with the endless details that lie between conception and ultimate execution, though he carefully considered all the factors of each problem. His flame went on to light up other problems. That active mind of his was constantly driving him ahead. It drove Henry on to new tasks—searching always for means to a simpler and finer way of living in modern communities. His mind jumped with intuitive speed from needs and facts to conclusions and conceptions of form and arrangement.

He had what seemed a supernatural sense of site and the possibilities of relating buildings and living to the facts of nature—to the sun, the winds, the views, but, above all, to the form of the land—so as to get the maximum use in terms of good living, of open spaces, attractive views, quiet and safety at a minimum expenditure for roads, foundations, and yard work.

This apparent intuitive sense grew out of the fact that he combined the training of an architect with the long experience of a landscape and site planner. He served his apprenticeship as architectural draftsman in the office of Root & Siemens in Kansas City before and after taking the course in Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1902 he worked on the landscape plans for the Louisiana Exposition under George Kessler. Wright stayed on with him and became chief designer of extensive projects of park planning and land subdivision.

Subdivision work had a particular fascination for Wright. Here his architectural vision of future homes combined with his training in landscape planning. Subdivision was, at that time, wholly a matter of dividing a piece of land into a maximum number of salable lots with as many front feet as possible available for sale. The ultimate location of house in relation to site and to its neighbors and to the ultimate cost of public utilities, finished roads, and of grading or yard work was always left for the future. Henry Wright, even then, as a young man, could not see things that way. Land, road utilities, grading, house were all one—must be conceived of as an integrated unit to serve living, not selling. It sounds simple to us now after these years of housing education, but it was revolutionary then. So many of Henry Wright's other conceptions in the years that followed seemed revolutionary, but were ultimately accepted as the common sense basis for practical attainment.

To have freedom to carry out his work in his own way, Wright set up his own office in 1909. It was a brave thing to do. Henry was married and had two children. He gave up a secure position and a good salary so that he might try to carry out his own conceptions. Again and again in the future he was to do the same thing—to risk all for the attainment of an ideal: to try out what seemed to him a better, more logical way of using land and building to improve living. Mrs. Wright always shared with Henry a willingness to sacrifice comfort and gain for beliefs.

Wright had the opportunity to plan a number of small suburban developments outside of St. Louis with house and land development related, and in certain cases he was architect of house as well as site planner [Brentmoor Park, Brentmoor, Forest Ridge, and elsewhere]. These were homes of the wealthy or modestly wealthy and were too limited in scope, so he turned to civic affairs. He helped to organize, and was secretary of, the St. Louis City Plan Association, 1909-10. He urged the St. Louis Chapter of the A.I.A. [American Institute of Architects] to study the critical city plan situation in 1916, and directed the study and exhibition of the Chapter which laid the foundation for a forward-looking city planning program.

His real opportunity to make practical application of his theories of community development came soon afterwards as a town planner for the Housing Division of the Emergency Fleet Corporation in 1918. The Production Division under Robert Kohn, with Frederick Ackerman in charge of design, had the difficult task of trying to harness civil engineer, landscape architect, and architect as a team to design towns. Wright, with his background as house designer, city and site planner, and subdivider, was invaluable. He was greatly influenced, at this time, by the theories and reasoning of Raymond Unwin, as expressed in *Town Planning in Practice* [1909]. With the war over the work ceased, but enough had been done in Chester, Pa., Newburgh, N. Y. [Colonial Terraces], and elsewhere, to give Henry Wright confidence in his approach to the problem of community development and for him to determine that his future work must be in connection with providing better homes and communities for the large masses of the people.

There was then no chance of carrying on private practice to attain this end. He returned to St. Louis and, as architect for the City Plan Commission, prepared and administered rules for land subdivision control. He attempted to guide the subdividers to relate their plans more closely to the requirements of better living at moderate cost. But more and more he saw that the slow, unrelated processes of land subdivision and speculation, followed by scattered building of houses, was inexcusably wasteful and antagonistic to the attainment of desirable housing. At this time, he wrote a report for St. Louis on the economics of land subdivision that contained the seed of much of his future thinking, writing and work.

I became acquainted with Henry at that time as a result of our association on the Committee on Community Planning of the A.I.A., and our work with Charles Whitaker on the Journal of the A.I.A., and finally, in 1921, in planning a small industrial workers' community. This project was not carried out. But by working together we found that we were interested in the same objectives, although we had quite different contributions to make in their attainment. We found that we could not fit our conceptions into the pattern of the existing city, its manner of physical growth and the economic or social methods of bringing about that growth. We turned to Ebenezer Howard's Garden City as fundamentally the most valid answer to the problem of American city development.

Garden Cities, we felt, must be built in America to meet American ways of living. In 1923, Alexander Bing (a man of vision and leadership with practical experience in large operations), Henry Wright and I co-operated in the plan of a small self-contained community within the boundaries of New York. This development would have exemplified, on a small scale, most of the principles of the Garden City; the retention of the land increment by the community; large scale, organized, comprehensive and related planning, construction, and management; industry and business within walking distance of the homes; the elimination of costly though unessential elements which were customary in American city planning. It was impossible to secure sufficient finances for this project, but as a result of these studies the City Housing Corporation was formed, Sunnyside [Gardens] was built, and ultimately a major step toward the future rebuilding of America with modern communities was made in the conception and partial creation of Radburn.

Wright wrote of the Radburn Idea for which he was to such a large extent responsible—

The application of this social plan to Radburn was an event, in my judgment equal in significance to that other "social" plan of Ebenezer Howard (1898). The Garden City Plan (1898) fitted into the old condition of its day, but Radburn (1928) had to meet an entirely new set of conditions. City Planning had been engrossed in the solution of traffic movement, adjusting old time street systems to new demands of the motor car, but no completely new town had recognized the necessity of meeting the human problems of danger, noise, and nuisance accompanying the convenience of the new vehicle. The "Radburn Idea" attacked the problem as a related whole. (From "The Autobiography of Another Idea," *The Western Architect*, 1930.)

Those were busy years for Henry Wright. He became consultant to the New York State Commission of Housing and Regional Planning, and in the report on a Plan for the State of New York he did pioneering work in this country. The report was a masterly analysis of past, present, and possible future physical developments of the State. It blazed the way for the many subsequent State plans.

This report was merely one sign of the broadening scope of Henry's life work. Although he continued with the study of the detailed problems of plan organization of apartment and house units and their relation to each other [and] to the site, his main interest was the broader picture.

His thinking was stimulated by a group of men who sometimes came together as the Regional Planning Association of America and who approached, from a variety of angles, the problem that absorbed Henry. There was Frederick

Ackerman, Lewis Mumford, Stuart Chase, John Bright, Frederick Bigger, Henry Klaber, Benton MacKaye, Robert Kohn, Charles Whitaker, Alexander Bing, among others [including Clarence Stein himself]. Henry's original angle on all that was discussed was always provocative and stimulating. The apparent solution never satisfied him. If it were generally accepted, he immediately questioned it. He had to get at the roots or foundations and see how the whole works built up and why. He never got over the boy's inquisitive taking apart the works of a watch, but he always found a new and original and generally a better way to put it together.

Writing and public speaking at first were difficult for Henry Wright. But he felt the need of passing on his experience particularly to the younger generation. He lectured at a number of universities. His unassuming mastery of his subject and his simple sincerity in time made him an easy speaker. He spoke first as a technician in the architectural schools. But this did not satisfy him. His subject was broader than architecture or site planning or city planning. He gathered around him professors and students of economics, sociology, government, engineering, as well as architecture and city planning, and with them discussed the broader problems of community building.

So that he might have more constant contact with them, for a number of summers he invited a group of younger instructors and advanced students to his simple farm in New Jersey. They worked out projects in community planning and in their spare time remodeled the old mill to serve as drafting room and dormitory. In the evening they discussed endlessly, spurred on by the provocative mind of Henry Wright.

His book, *Rehousing Urban America*, was published by the Columbia University Press early in 1935. It is unquestionably the best technical book on housing in America. A volume that was to sum up Henry Wright's experience and point of view on housing never could be finished. His mind and imagination flew ahead of his pen. The first part of the book was always obsolete for him before the end was reached no matter how fresh it might be for others.

He started the Housing Study Guild in association with Albert Mayer, Carol Aronovici, Henry Churchill, and Lewis Mumford for the clarification and development of thinking in regard to housing through discussion and research. Last year he was appointed Associate Professor at the Columbia School of Architecture for a term of four years, and was given the freedom to carry on his work with his students according to the methods he had developed at his farm.

Most of our lives have no plot. Henry Wright's life had a definite theme. He devoted his life to a cause with a singleness of purpose. But he was never a propagandist: he preached no cure-all. His ever youthful, searching mind and his integrity would not permit him to freeze his point of view and become doctrinaire. He once said to me, "If I had my way, over the gate of every university, I would carve a great question mark." Technically and intuitively he probably knew more about housing than anyone in this country. But he always remained the seeker after new truth whose brilliant flashes constantly lighted the way for those of us who were fortunate enough to work with him. —Clarence S. Stein