

## **☛ In Appreciation of Lewis Mumford (1895-1990)**

National Register plaque dedication, Sunnyside Gardens, December 11, 2004

**I applaud your good work in getting the plaque up. Lewis Mumford was one of the most prominent public intellectuals of the twentieth century. Indeed, no one has surpassed, and few have approached, his prodigious scholarship on the history of cities.**

—Kenneth T. Jackson, Professor of History and the Social Sciences,  
Columbia University; former President, New-York Historical Society; author of  
*Empire City: New York Through the Centuries*, editor, *The Encyclopedia of New York City*

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**It is wonderfully fitting that Lewis Mumford is being honored in the place where he lived, because much of his long and distinguished career was devoted to helping us understand what makes a place truly livable. As critic, teacher, historian, philosopher and planner, he articulated a compelling and optimistic vision of what cities should be—and offered an insightful warning about the forces that can destroy a city’s human scale and rob it of its soul.**

**He helped us realize how much we need communities that are attractive, efficient, supportive places to live and work. He reminded us that creating and preserving livable places isn’t someone else’s job. Whether or not we choose to call ourselves preservationists, all of us are deeply in his debt.**

—Richard Moe, President, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington, DC

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**Sunnyside Gardens Historic District, the home of Lewis Mumford, was listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places in 1984. How appropriate it is that this ceremony is being held today at Mumford’s home since this noble man wanted, above all, to see people find a place called home and share a sense of neighborhood cohesiveness.**

**Though not himself an architect or planner, Mumford was one of America’s most influential thinkers who helped shape our environment. Mumford’s vision of what makes a community vibrant and sustainable is a model that is needed as much today as it was in the 1920s when Sunnyside Gardens was planned. We can all learn from Mumford’s belief that society could be improved through ethical and ecologically sound planning.**

—Kathleen Howe, Historic Preservation Specialist, New York State  
Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

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**The Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance is to be commended for its recognition of the enduring contributions of Lewis Mumford to chart a course for rational and sustainable development.**

—John Young, Director, Department of City Planning, Queens Office, New York City

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**Lewis Mumford was a man who thought deeply about the nature of cities and human society—and put his thoughts into practice by moving to a neighborhood that embodied his ideals of a community. He would have been thrilled to know that the Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance is working to preserve this neighborhood, so that his ideas of a working and livable community will be here for future generations to learn from.**

—Simeon Bankoff, Executive Director, Historic Districts Council, New York City

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**It is so important that Lewis Mumford’s legacy is to be commemorated at Sunnyside, undoubtedly in his mind the one place in New York City which most embodied the urban vision which he embraced. Relative to understanding the modern Western urban condition, Mumford’s intellectual production represents a breadth and depth which no other thinker has managed to equal. This humble plaque on a house in Queens will mean much to thinkers of future generations struggling with similar questions, and who will look to the example of Mumford’s work for guidance.**

—Richard Plunz, Director, Urban Design Program, Columbia University,  
and author of *A History of Housing in New York City*

**“Lewis Mumford and Sunnyside Gardens,” Keynote Address by Casey N. Blake**  
Professor of History and American Studies, Columbia University; author of *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford* and many other writings on Mumford and his colleagues. © 2004 Casey N. Blake

In the city, Lewis Mumford believed, time is made visible. With the unveiling of this plaque today, America’s greatest urbanist is made visible on the site of the community he helped inspire, and where he lived with his wife Sophia and two children, Geddes and Alison, during some of the happiest days of his life. I’m grateful to Herbert Reynolds for inviting me to witness and participate in this event honoring Mumford’s life and times, and to James Geddes Morss, Mumford’s grandson, for gracing us with his presence today.

As I said, Lewis Mumford was the greatest urbanist the United States has ever produced. He was a master historian of city life and urban design, a theorist of urban and regional planning, an architectural critic who both championed modernism and held it accountable for some of the worst failures of modern city life, and a scourge of Robert Moses and other enemies of urban culture who bulldozed the traditional city in the name of “progress.” Mumford spent his entire adult life defending human-scale urban communities—old and new—against the highway, the homogeneous bedroom suburb, and the skyscraper downtown. It was urban life in all its variety that Mumford championed—the informal sociability of city living, its mixing of people from different social backgrounds, its local-level networks of self-governance, its public rituals, and its capacity to foster trust and civic identity among people who were otherwise strangers. This was the “culture of cities” Mumford spoke for throughout his long and distinguished career.

Of course, Mumford wrote about more than cities. He was also a great historian of technology, an eminent moral philosopher, a cultural critic, and a public intellectual who hammered out hundreds of short articles on the great events of his day—war and peace, education, art, literature, and politics. In short, Mumford was a civic moralist who seized every opportunity to promote a generous understanding of the possibilities that democracy offered individuals to live fuller, more meaningful lives in concert with others.

It was for this very reason that Mumford so admired the design of Sunnyside Gardens and treasured the years he spent here with his family. Mumford agreed entirely with Sunnyside’s planners—his friends and colleagues, Clarence Stein and Henry Wright—that urban design existed for people, not the other way around. He believed in building urban neighborhoods as if people really mattered. He signed on enthusiastically to the humane vision of planning that Stein espoused in his book, *Toward New Towns for America*. Stein wrote there that the planner “creates a setting in which people—the kind of people that will live there—will fit, where they will live a varied life, a convenient life, a beautiful life; where they will grow and change, and their surroundings can also change with them.” [p.226 in the 1966 edition]

Stein captured perfectly Mumford’s approach to urban planning and to Sunnyside in particular. Mumford admired Sunnyside as a setting that met people’s needs for space, light, and green space. But beyond that, Sunnyside offered its inhabitants the chance to live a “varied life,” to “grow and change,” to govern themselves at the local level, to rework the environment they initially found here, and—above all—live beautiful lives.

In the memoir he wrote toward the end of his life (*Sketches from Life*, 1982), Mumford devoted an entire chapter to what he called “Sunnyside Pioneering.” Not “Sunnyside Gardens” or “The Sunnyside Plan,” but *Sunnyside Pioneering*—literally, a new way of living as important as that of the Europeans who settled in North America. And what’s striking about that chapter is how few words he devoted to Sunnyside’s physical environment. What he really cherished from those years was the vitality of the Sunnyside community. Sunnyside’s “pioneers” seized the occasion to create an intellectual and political life that Mumford believed was richer than anything he found in America’s greatest college towns. “Not even in Cambridge or in Stanford or Hanover,” he recalled, “have we ever found better intellectual companionship, or more vivid, enlivening discussions.” In its green commons, gardens, and pathways, in its halls, cellars, and community rooms, Mumford and his neighborhood created spaces for “social parties, for political discussions, for literary evenings, for dancing and activities in which two or three score of people might take part.” [p.419]

This informal activity among neighbors who had previously been strangers to one another provided the infrastructure for Sunnyside’s robust political and civic life during the twenties and thirties “Even the local politics of running the nursery school, or attending to the upkeep of the common inner green, added an extra essential political dimension to our lives,” he wrote. [p.419] The bonds of trust forged here created democratic citizens.

Mumford believed with the ancient Greeks that human beings are political animals. But he also knew that men and women do not live for politics alone. They hunger for beauty, for meaning, for a glimpse of the transcendent. That’s what made them human, more than tenants, more than taxpayers and homeowners. And here too, Sunnyside—in Mumford’s words—“enhanced its [own] human character.” [p.413] In one of the most beautiful passages in his memoir, Mumford recalled a cold winter night when he and his neighbors found fun, friendship, and a shared wonder at what this life might offer us mere mortals. I’d like to read that passage to you, by way of conclusion. [p.420. *This passage is reprinted as the final paragraph on the accompanying sheet, “Lewis Mumford on the virtues of living in Sunnyside Gardens.”*]

I understand that Sunnyside Gardens has changed since those early days, in ways perhaps both good and bad, but I wish for all of you here that Lewis Mumford’s legacy will inspire you to embrace the world in “the pure joy of being,” knowing that life at this moment holds nothing better than the bonds of civic trust and community. 🍷

## Lewis Mumford on the virtues of living in Sunnyside Gardens

Mumford published two major autobiographical narratives. These were meticulously excerpted by the Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance for the December 11, 2004 dedication, and those excerpts are slightly expanded below. Square brackets [ ] give page numbers in the published editions.

• From *Green Memories: The Story of Geddes Mumford* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947):

We settled in Sunnyside, Long Island, in September 1925; and that continued to be our winter home until June 1936. Some of our friends and relatives had preceded us there by a few months; others joined them; and a succession of young writers, on the point of being parents, found a temporary haven in Sunnyside. People mockingly [12] called it the maternity ward of Greenwich Village. [13]

We spent our first year and a half in a co-operative apartment house on Forty-eight Street, or Gosman Avenue. [27] In the spring of 1927 we moved to a little row house, built on a terrace at right angles to the street, and half a dozen steps above its level.... Most of our memories of this terrace are pleasant ones; for the pairs of poplars, which accented the strong vertical lines of the chimneys in front of the houses, were handsomely placed; and in the rear, our house was fortunate enough to have a full view of the wide green common, beautiful and serene at every time of the year, but never more lovely than when children scampered over the grass in the spring twilight. [29]... When the snow fell on a winter night on the dark slate roofs, the skyline toward Manhattan emitted a rosy glow, and... the snow stayed white longer in Sunnyside than it did in the city. [28]

Sunnyside...was a village [26].... It had been framed to the human scale and its gardens and courts kept the friendly air as, year by year, the newcomers improved in the art of gardening and the plane trees and poplars continued to grow. [31]... Playmates in Sunnyside were indiscriminately either Jew or Gentile. [59]... We loved the open greens of Sunnyside. [61]

• From *Sketches from Life: The Autobiography of Lewis Mumford, The Early Years* (New York: The Dial Press, 1982), Chapter 24: "Sunnyside Pioneering":

We had decided that rents in Greenwich Village or Brooklyn Heights, the only parts of inner New York that attracted us, would be too steep for our purse; so we settled on the sole place that seemed possible for us—the new housing development that Clarence Stein and Henry Wright were now planning at the barren, weedy edge of Long Island City.... There was an inviting emptiness, with gardens, play space, and young trees lining each side of the street.

For the next eleven years... we watched the houses march from one block to another, becoming more commodious and more comely.... When we moved to Sunnyside, only one block and a row had been built [Colonial Court]: this was a tiny patch of urban order [410]... but it was already unlike any of the blocks that speculative builders were beginning to put up.... Even the first unit of Sunnyside had a playground with a somewhat premature tennis court in the center of it. From the beginning, furthermore, the project mingled one-, two-, and three-family houses, along with cooperative apartments.

The wasteland around Sunnyside was formidable; for it had been held in speculation for more than a generation.... But as this new housing grew under our friends' direction, it created its own environment; and if you knew your way about, you might follow a footpath through a network of rear gardens and green lawns for almost half a mile, with all sorts of charming vistas. [411]

After a couple of years... we moved to the westernmost portion of Sunnyside [Madison Court]: to a... house that was part of a series of terraces, running through from one street to the next, designed in this case by Frederick Ackerman—one of our Regional Planning group. When we had watched these rows going up, we had asked each other: "Who would ever live in such rabbit hutches?" The surprising answer was: *We would!* By the time these houses were built, the first row, which had a wide green in the rear as well as a narrow terrace with poplars between the facing rows, was really charming. [415]

Among the many dire pronouncements that wiseacres made when Sunnyside was founded was... that New Yorkers had no interest in gardens, and that no one for the sake of keeping the rear greens open, would walk a quarter of a mile to the garages that were... provided at the edge of the tract.... As so often happened, the wiseacres were wrong: their predictions, based on past experience, did not apply to fresh possibilities. New Yorkers who had never bothered to raise even a potted geranium in their apartments worked at their little pocket handkerchiefs of gardens as if this had been a lifelong passion. Within a few years the atmosphere of Sunnyside was neither desolate nor yet suburban; and by now the place is an oasis of green.

What made this neighborhood unit uniquely good, apart from [411] the comeliness of its design, was the fact

that, like Greenwich Village and far more than Brooklyn Heights, it was a mixed community, in which one might mingle without undue intimacy with one's neighbors. Manhattan was sufficiently close at hand for us to enjoy the advantages and opportunities that it could supply.... We were less than twenty minutes from Times Square by subway, and only half an hour by bus... from the great Public Library on Fifth Avenue. In addition, we could get much companionship and social intercourse in an area within the walking distance of a three-year-old child: from tennis to social dinners, or just casual droppings-in without even the necessity of a phone call.

But we had still another advantage: the varieties of houses provided for people with a variety of occupations and incomes, ranging from a grocer's clerk with an income of fifteen hundred dollars a year to physicians and lawyers who earned more than ten thousand—then quite a decent professional sum. This gave the place exceptional educational opportunities, for people who live in one-class neighborhoods all too easily lose their sense of social realities. [412]

When Sunnyside began to grow, no one had anticipated that in a few years its layout would help generate a more active social life once people of different vocations, interests, and appetites were drawn so conveniently together. The finishing touch to the essential idea of community came, not from the architects but from the [418] nascent groups of neighbors who wanted community rooms for many different purposes.... Man, as Aristotle observed, is a political animal!... Not even in Cambridge or in Stanford or in Hanover, three admirable university towns [surrounding Harvard and Stanford Universities and Dartmouth College], have we ever found better intellectual companionship, or more vivid, enlivening discussions. Even the local politics of running the nursery school [419]... [where my wife] Sophia began working... in the early 1930s [417]... or attending to the upkeep of the common inner green, added an extra essential political dimension to our lives.

As I write this account, the liveliest memories of these local meetings come back to me. Whether they fostered poetic recitations or political debates, they proved something even more important: namely, that with a little leeway for experiment, the democratic process would still function provided the local unit allowed a mixture of political, religious, and social beliefs—and of occupations, too. This makes for a more satisfactory all-round life, based on personal participation, than any one-class community, however wealthy, can offer. [419]

The years we spent in Sunnyside were not merely sustaining to our family relations. They confirmed by experience many of the things my friends and I in the Regional Planning Association had begun to speculate upon and actively promote as necessary for renovating our great overgrown metropolises, with their overpowering impersonality and loneliness... the crime-inviting emptiness of high-rise housing projects...or the dreary down-to-earth blankness of the Levittowns. In contrast, Sunnyside enhanced its human character.

In town-planning circles during the fifties there were numerous denunciations of “the neighborhood” as no longer a natural unit of the city.... But... I know from our varied experiences of Greenwich Village, Brooklyn Heights, and Sunnyside—three genuine neighborhoods—how essential this unit is to the improvement of urban life....

If Sunnyside was to teach me in the most direct way possible... how good a well-planned quarter of the city might be, it also taught me another lesson [413].... Buildings are vehicles of the spirit only so long as the spirit that produced them remains alive and at intervals renews itself.... Sunnyside still stands.... [and] our daughter [Alison] noted much later that the Sunnyside students in the High School of Music and Art formed an identifiable, cohesive group: outstanding in ability, poised and balanced. In those modest gardens not just flowers but healthy human beings could and did grow—and perhaps will keep on growing.

Often on my trips between Boston and Washington, the train has taken me—but all too swiftly—past Sunnyside Gardens... and I would fasten my eyes to the windowpane, eagerly, to see how well the houses have stood up, and how the slim trees now have grown so heavy in foliage.... Yes, much of the original charm remains, thanks to the pride of those who first took over Sunnyside, thanks even more to the original imagination of the planners and their financial sponsor, Alexander Bing. [414]

[Let] a.... communal scene... stand for a hundred other impromptu meetings and relaxed encounters.... This was a night in winter when the snow, which had been falling all afternoon, mantling the gabled roofs, outlining the branches of the plane trees, haloing the street lamps, turning bushes into huge white mushrooms, ceased falling around ten o'clock. Then, as if by a whispered command, we neighbors all sallied forth on the streets, hushed in their whiteness, with not even the track of an auto visible: plowing our way through the inner courts, tossing snowballs at each other, licking samples of the fresh snow, pausing silently to take in the muted rosy beauty of the night sky over Manhattan, by turns breathless with delight and shouting with laughter as we encountered some familiar face, ruddy with the same intoxication. We embraced one another then, and we embraced the world in the pure joy of being: knowing life at that moment held nothing better. [420] 🍷



The Lewis Mumford memorial plaque has been placed at 40-02 44th Street, Sunnyside Gardens, Queens. The reception following the unveiling was held in All Saints' Church Undercroft, with all refreshments donated by Sunnyside Gardens neighbors.