

SUNNYSIDE GARDENS, Borough of Queens

Sunnyside Gardens, in northwestern Queens, was the creation of architects Clarence Stein and Henry Wright and the City Housing Corporation led by developer Alexander Bing. Constructed between 1924 and 1928, it consists of a series of nine “courts” or rows of townhouses and nine small apartment buildings (four to six stories tall), built on all or part of 16 blocks, a total of more than 600 buildings. The area under consideration also includes the Phipps Garden Apartment buildings, two courtyard apartment buildings constructed in 1932 and 1935, and Sunnyside Park. In addition to the buildings, many elements of the original landscape, including large street trees and some courtyard plantings are still extant.

This huge complex is one of the most significant planned residential communities in New York City and has achieved international recognition for its low-rise, low density housing arranged around landscaped open courtyards. Sunnyside Gardens was the first practical application of the architecture and planning concepts developed by the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA). This diverse group, brought together by Clarence Stein, met from 1923 to 1931 to examine the roots of the country’s housing crisis and try to find new approaches to providing quality housing for low-income workers. The concepts developed by this group were improved and expanded at their subsequent developments at Radburn, NJ and Chatham Village in Pittsburgh, as well as the greenbelt towns developed by the WPA, and they have come to be accepted by many planners and architects since that time.

The RPAA consisted of approximately ten core members and others who joined at different times, bringing together various fields of expertise. There were several architects including Stein, Henry Wright, Frederick Ackerman and Robert Kohn, all of whom had been involved with the design and construction of workers housing during World War I. Charles Whittaker, editor of the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* provided a forum for the group and their ideas, including many articles by prolific author Lewis Mumford. Conservationist Benton MacKaye and developer Alexander Bing were also instrumental in the formation of the group’s ideas and projects.

The RPAA promoted concepts of regional planning, encouraging the dispersal of population into smaller, regional cities. They invented new forms of large-scale community layout and design associated with new ideas about the social structures within a community. The designers developed new systems for economies of design and construction to make the buildings more available to low-income families while still providing high quality buildings. Other efforts of the RPAA included the creation of new financing systems to enable lower cost development, as well as new concepts to guide urban growth that included open space preservation. The ideas of this group led to new state and national planning and housing policies and laws that encouraged greater equity in housing production, location and design.

The City Housing Corporation, a limited dividend company, was created by Alexander Bing to build at Sunnyside and to show that solid, well-designed homes could

be built for working people and still allow for a 6% return on an investor's capital. At Sunnyside Gardens, the first American adaptation of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City, the buildings covered only 28% of the land, allowing for a particularly large amount of open space to integrate elements of rural and urban living. The houses were built in rows, usually near the perimeter of the block, allowing for central open courts for recreation and community use. They were designed in a simplified Colonial Revival or Art Deco style with a variety of rooflines and arrangements for visual interest. Sunnyside included apartments as well as single-, double- and triple-family houses, for purchase or rent. The original population included office and factory workers from a variety of backgrounds. The physical arrangement and amenities as well as the community organizational system fostered the developers' goal of creating a neighborhood that would meet the social as well as physical needs of its residents.

The planners and architects wanted to ensure that their carefully designed neighborhood would continue so they attached easements to the deeds of the property sold at Sunnyside. These easements related to the open space in the courtyards, the pathways through the courts as well as the actual buildings, including what colors the wood could be painted and the fact that no changes could be made to the front or rear of the houses without permission of the trustees of each court association. Although easements were not unusual for such developments, the banks holding the mortgages insisted that they were to last only for forty years.

Long-time resident Lewis Mumford called Sunnyside Gardens "an exceptional community laid out by people who were deeply human and who gave the place a permanent expression of that humanness."