
THE REGIONALIST VISION OF HENRY WRIGHT: LESSONS IN SUSTAINABILITY

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This paper examines archival writings of landscape architect, architect, and planner Henry Wright, his contemporaries in the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), and more recent explorations of new regionalism, green infrastructure, and sustainability to assess the elements of Wright's community planning, site design, and broader regionalist ideas that prefigured these modern movements. As Planning Advisor to the New York Commission of Housing and Regional Planning, his contributions towards a 1926 proposal for statewide planning form a critical component of this examination. His book, *Rehousing Urban America*, published in 1935, just a year before his death, advocates for more efficient design and development of moderate income and working class housing. Further, his lesser known articles on town planning, land development, and the economics of housing design offer arguments for regionalism and affordability consistent with sustainability principles. These proposals include new town designs integrating intensive mixed use urban areas punctuated with outlying parks as part of a balanced regional network of communities. A comparative and critical analysis of these contributions within the context of his RPAA colleagues and regional scholarship today highlights his legacy.

Keywords

regional Planning, Sustainability, site design

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INTRODUCTION

Though lesser known than his Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) colleagues – architect Clarence Stein, urban critic Lewis Mumford, and conservationist Benton MacKaye – Henry Wright played a key role in implementing and promoting communitarian regional planning ideals in the 1920s and 1930s. In doing so, he embraced what Stephen Wheeler characterizes as “ecological regionalism” and more recently Philip Berke describes as “environmentally sustainable urban form”.¹ After earning his degree in architecture at the University of Pennsylvania in 1901, Wright returned home to Kansas City working initially in the architectural firm of Van Brunt and Howe.² A “short trip abroad” in 1902 made a particularly profound impression on him. Reflecting back, he observed about a visit to Waterford, Ireland, “I passed through an archway in a blank house wall on the street to a beautiful villa fronting upon spacious interior gardens. That archway was a passage to new ideas . . . I learned then that the comforts and privacy of family life are not to be found in the detached dwelling, but rather in a house that judiciously relates living space to open space, the open space in turn being capable of enjoyment by many as well as by few.”³

Given these broader interests, when the opportunity arose, he began work with nationally prominent landscape architect George Kessler in 1903 to assist in designing the World’s Fair site in St. Louis. Subsequent jobs in park, boulevard, and subdivision design soon followed. In Kessler’s firm, he honed his expertise in site planning, including grading and infrastructure development. A 1913 article in the *Architectural Record* describes his layout of Brentmoor Park in St. Louis, “It is the intention here more especially to bring out the value of group planning and placing of residences in the proper relation one to another, rather than to give detailed attention to any one of the buildings.”⁴ After a period of private practice, Wright was among a group of prominent landscape architects and architects employed in Washington, D.C. with the Emergency Fleet Corporation designing communities for war workers during World War I. As Town Planning Advisor, his interest in working class housing and efficient site design deepened. Through Robert Kohn, who oversaw the program, he met Stein, Mumford, and MacKaye, among the cofounders of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) in 1923. During the 1920s and until his death in 1936, his advocacy and practice embraced many of the elements that came to characterize new regionalism, green infrastructure, and sustainability.

As a regionalist, Wright does not sit easily within Emily Talen’s category of “planned communities” where she places him and his colleague Stein.⁵ Rather than “utopian ideas” regarding “the correct functioning of society within urban areas and the formation of new towns, villages, or neighbourhoods according to specific principles,”⁶ Wright designed sites to accommodate open space and buildings to achieve efficiencies in design and capital outlays and also longer term operation and maintenance of the project. Further, his attention to the region, most evident as Planning Advisor to the New York Commission of Housing and Regional Planning from 1923-1926, attests to a broader planning process that more inclusively addressed existing conditions and growth pressures as well as local and regional needs. As Carl Sussman (1979) notes, Wright and his RPAA colleagues developed their housing and new town philosophies from a basis in regionalism,⁷ what Berke calls bioregionalism – “melding [the Garden City’s] polycentrism with the idea of self-sustaining communities in natural regions.”⁸ This paper begins by introducing Wright within the context of the RPAA and then reviews recent material to characterize these concepts related to modern planning movements. After identifying criteria of these movements, I more closely examine Wright’s own writings, to indicate key elements aligned with these criteria, documenting his legacy to regional planning, green infrastructure, and sustainability in site and housing design. That legacy is more profound than anticipated, attesting to the need to revisit and better understand the historic linkages between these key ideas in planning and design.

WRIGHT'S PLACE WITHIN THE RPAA

In his assessment of the “collaborative genius” of the core membership of the RPAA, Kermit C. Parsons labels Wright “the analyst” – whose attention to detail combined with a visionary quest for perfecting his work complemented the approach of his partner Stein “the manager.”⁹ These skills resulted in Stein supporting Wright to be the principal author of the 1926 proposal for a state-wide plan for New York. Like the rest of his colleagues, Wright was a communitarian regionalist rather than a metropolitanist, defining the region based on its characteristics, including topography, climate, ecology, culture, economy, history, natural resources, soil, and geography.¹⁰ Consistent with the tenets of Howard’s garden city, cities and towns sought an interconnected balance with the surrounding countryside rather than service to a major metropolitan area.¹¹ Scottish biologist and planner Patrick Geddes also significantly influenced the RPAA membership. He visited the U.S. and attended an RPAA meeting shortly after the group formed. After reading Geddes’ 1915 book *Cities in Evolution*, Mumford began corresponding with him, encouraging him to visit as the RPAA was instituting its mission. Certainly Geddes’ holistic regional perspective and call to survey before planning resonated with the membership. As he noted in his book, “each true design, each valid scheme should and must embody the full utilisation of its local and regional conditions, and be the expression of local and regional personality. ‘Local character’ . . . is attained only in course of adequate grasp and treatment of the whole environment, and in active sympathy with the essential and characteristic life of the place concerned.”¹² Wright, like the other RPAA members, considered this communitarian regionalism an integral aspect of his philosophy and practice.

Within this context, the communitarian regionalist viewpoints among the RPAA membership differed. Addressing regionalism more consistently and explicitly in their writings, Mumford and especially MacKaye focused on a broader rural and ecological context. Meanwhile, Wright and Stein adhered to a more urban perspective consistent with their education and training. Roy Lubove characterizes Wright and Stein’s emphasis in his classic exploration of the RPAA, “The kernel of the RPAA’s program was the cooperation of the social architect and planner in the design of large-scale group and community housing, financed in some measure by low interest government loans, and directed toward the creation of the regional city.”¹³ Indeed, the regional city became their touchstone.

DEFINING THE NEW REGIONALISM, GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Tracing the philosophy of the RPAA as foundational to current movements in the new regionalism, green infrastructure, and sustainability, modern scholars document a normative approach that privileges place, broadly defined, with an emphasis on decentralization resulting in a balance between the natural landscape and interconnected, discrete communities.¹⁴ In his study examining historical and current characteristics of regionalism, Wheeler identifies recent planning initiatives such as Peter Calthorpe’s work in the Salt Lake City region, state-wide growth management efforts, and concepts of liveability and sustainability that link equity, environment, and economics. Holistic and interdisciplinary with efforts to mitigate the negative externalities associated with growth and focus on physical, social, and economic planning, the new regionalism reflects many of the elements advocated by the RPAA.¹⁵ Further, Michael Neuman’s exploration of planning and landscape architecture’s reengagement with physical design, which he terms “regional design,” involves “the arrangement of human settlements in harmony with the regional landscape. It considers the way a system of places – cities, towns, and villages – is connected via infrastructure . . . and cushioned from each other by large landscapes that allow the settlements to ‘breathe’ . . .”¹⁶ This description of current practice restores updated elements of the garden city as the preferred means to accommodate growth.

The garden city, which RPAA members rechristened the regional city, acted as a defining principle for their advocacy and practice. Ebenezer Howard's garden city integrated landscape as a key design element that, especially as translated and envisioned by Wright and Stein, had circulation and other functional and social uses beyond aesthetics.¹⁷ Berke defines the "polycentrist" vision of the RPAA as essential to current "green community dimensions,"¹⁸ including "harmony with natural systems, human health, spiritual well-being and renewal, and liveable built environments."¹⁹ While he does not attribute it to the RPAA, his final dimension of "fair share community," which "minimizes use of the earth's resources and the harm imposed on other places in pursuit of the community's own goals,"²⁰ also exemplifies the work of the RPAA membership, including Wright.

These dimensions mirror the characteristics of sustainability, defined as "a dynamic process in which communities anticipate and accommodate the needs of current and future generations in ways that reproduce and balance local social, economic, and ecological systems, and link local actions to global concerns."²¹ Certainly understanding current and future needs as a means to "balance local social, economic, and ecological systems" within a broader region resonated with the RPAA. As their founding documents maintain, the purpose of the organization was to "study man's physical environment as influenced by social, economic and aesthetic needs and the technical means of creating new environments [and] serving these needs – with special emphasis on America and the future."²² The outcome of this study, a regional plan, "would be defined not by boundary lines but by conditions geographic, climatic, and economic, having to do with natural resources . . . so that industry, housing, shopping, farming, recreation and the amenities of life would yield a maximum of comfort and convenience to all."²³ The resulting "cluster of balanced cities" or regional city would offer "a more intimate relationship between the producers of things so that we may minimize the senseless waste now involved in transportation to and from city and countryside."²⁴ Liveability, place-based economy, sensitivity to natural systems and features, and balance all reflected key elements of the RPAA's communitarian regionalism. A proposal to draft a plan for the State of New York was among the key initial projects the group embraced with Wright as the primary author and illustrator.

STATE PLAN FOR NEW YORK

In 1923, New York Governor Alfred E. Smith established a commission to examine the status of housing across the state. As a long-time supporter of the governor and emerging expert on housing Stein was appointed chair and advocated for a broadening of the commission's name and mission to embrace regional planning as a key issue related to housing need. As the RPAA maintained in its defining principles, "The provision of adequate homes for workers is inseparably tied up with the problems of regional and city development."²⁵ The New York State Commission of Housing and Regional Planning conveyed its report to the governor in May 1926 "containing a series of studies of forces which have shaped the economic history of the State" with the intent "to find a basis for state planning."²⁶

With the assistance of MacKaye, who collected the required data, Wright drafted maps and diagrams and wrote the narrative documenting the evolution of state conditions – physical, economic, and social – through a series of epochs and called for a system of regional and statewide planning to properly direct future growth. The first epoch of statewide development that resulted in "scattered small-scale industry serving local markets" struggled due to a lack of fully understanding and taking advantage of the natural resources available and produced fragmented and isolated communities.²⁷ The second epoch harnessing steam power and railroad networks resulted in greater concentrations of population creating health, economic, and congestion crises. The current epoch of electric power and the automobile if not properly directed through regional planning agencies and a statewide plan to provide overall structure promised an acceleration of these conditions resulting in "intense city concentration . . . [and] the loss of human values."²⁸ Further, Wright documented the "economic wastes of congestion" including artificially high land prices and over-burdened transportation networks, which have an impact on both personal travel and the cost of goods.²⁹

Concerns about protected watersheds, the extension over time of New York City's reach for its water supply, and the location of the state's park reservations in relation to its population centers also documented the environmental impacts of the state's growth without planning oversight.³⁰ As Wright observed, "The best utilization of the State must be governed by the physical contour and distribution of resources."³¹ Modeling Geddes' valley section, a cross section of a region identifying opportunities for human activities based on environmental and geographic characteristics, Wright prepared a map of the region from low lands on the shores of Lake Ontario to the slopes of the Adirondack Mountains promoting the survey of the landscape to inform subsequent planning (see Figure 1).³² More importantly, the composite maps illustrating regional opportunities for development, protection, and reforestation anticipated the more sophisticated layered mapping that landscape architect Ian McHarg popularized over a generation later as a tool to better assess natural systems and opportunities for conservation and development (see Figure 2).

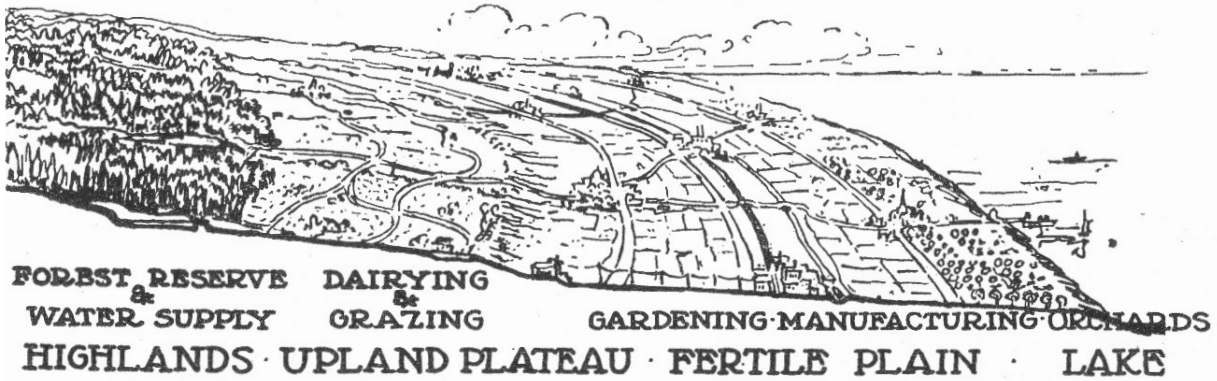


FIGURE 1 Visualized Regional Development of a Typical Section of the State. Showing the designation of land based on characteristics from the lake shore on the right to the mountains on the left.

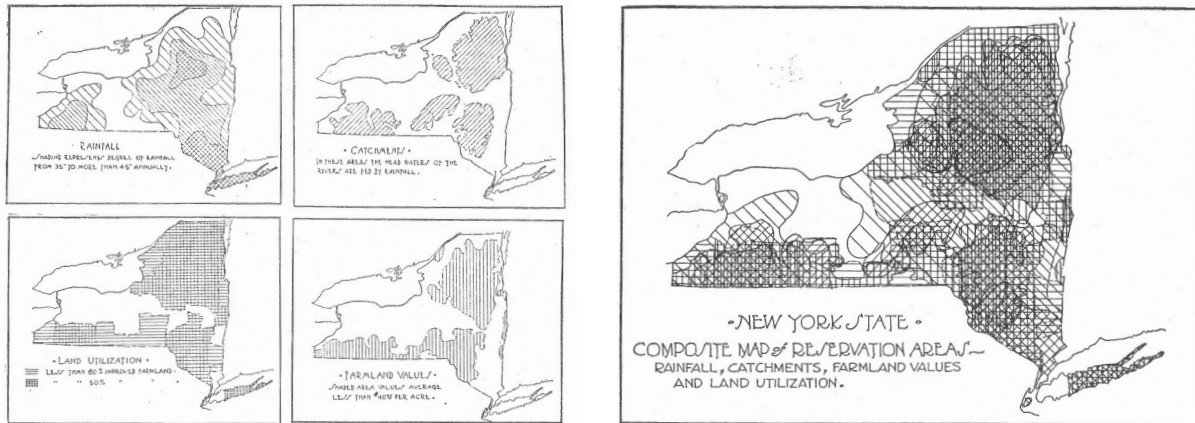


FIGURE 2 Composite Map of Reservation Areas. Those areas with the most hatching in the composite map of rainfall, catchments, farmland values, and land utilization are best suited for reforestation.

The region then would provide the basis for planning. As Wright maintained, “A State plan will not attempt to limit this local action with hard-and-fast outlines; it would, rather, attempt to help the several regions solve their problems” by facilitating coordination among these regions along holistic plans “based upon accurate and comprehensive knowledge.”³³ With the promise of decentralization, properly anticipated and managed, a new era of networked regional cities was possible. Throughout the period of the 1920s and until his death in 1936, Wright consistently honed his vision, detailing the design and function of these communities from the individual housing unit to the street network, neighbourhood, and park system. Efficiency, affordability, and quality of life were critical considerations in communitarian regionalism.

In 1935/36, Wright’s design with fellow town planner Allan Kamstra and architects Albert Mayer and Henry Churchill of a federal greenbelt town, Greenbrook, New Jersey, offered a template of what might be possible in a regional city. The agency overseeing the program, the Resettlement Administration, intended the greenbelt towns, based on Howard’s garden city concept and Wright and Stein’s adaptation at Radburn, New Jersey, “America’s first scientifically planned garden town,” to offer a model “for orderly, efficient expansion” of the metropolis.³⁴ Wright and his colleagues intended these to be “demonstration[s] in modern community building” through the application of careful analysis and planning methods.³⁵ The concept then was more than the mere application of Clarence Perry’s neighbourhood unit concept.³⁶ At Greenbrook they applied clustered housing to optimize the use of open space, superblocks to accommodate flexible site design, a mixture of housing types and uses to establish complete communities, and infrastructure developed in response to anticipated use rather than standardized expectations. Though the only one of the four planned greenbelt towns never developed, Greenbrook reflected the maturation of Wright’s innovation in housing and site design that anticipated many later sustainability and green infrastructure concepts.

EFFICIENCIES IN HOUSING AND SITE DESIGN

As Wright maintains in his 1925 contribution to the RPAA landmark issue of the *Survey Graphic* entitled “The Road to Good Houses,” “Building houses individually takes an extravagant amount of land; yet it provides neither sufficient garden-space or privacy.”³⁷ Instead he argues, efficiencies gained in clustering housing, building streets based on the amount of trips generated by adjacent land uses, introducing large scale development techniques to save on construction costs, and designing and planning for the “complete community” creates a more desirable and healthful living environment as opposed to the crowded tenement or the wasteful sprawling suburbs.

Just five years later, Wright outlined a more comprehensive and detailed vision of urban design using the Radburn Idea to envision an intensively developed community with the apartment house as the primary residential unit (see Figure 3).³⁸ “Improvements are to be had, first through a better disposition of space in streets – open spaces and building areas, and second, through a regulated maximum bulk or density which may be secured either through a proper relation of built to open space on each individual site, or, better, a combined bulk and pooled open area for each given block.”³⁹ This city to accommodate over one quarter million population in a 3-square mile area included a higher density residential/commercial core bounded by major thoroughfares with less intensive detached and row house neighborhoods at the edges. It featured a street system designed to block cut-through traffic, a combination of neighborhood parks, larger city parks, and park belts comprising just over 25% of the city’s land area, and industrial jobs easily accessible just outside the 1 ½ mile radius from the center.

By 1931, as a recognized expert in large-scale design, construction, finance, and management, Wright was appointed Research Secretary to President Herbert Hoover’s Committee on Large-Scale Operations of the Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership. In that capacity, he documented the benefits of a large-scale approach to develop complete communities containing amenities such as child care and parks and designed to consider the relation between interior and exterior spaces to ensure adequate light and air (see Figure 4).

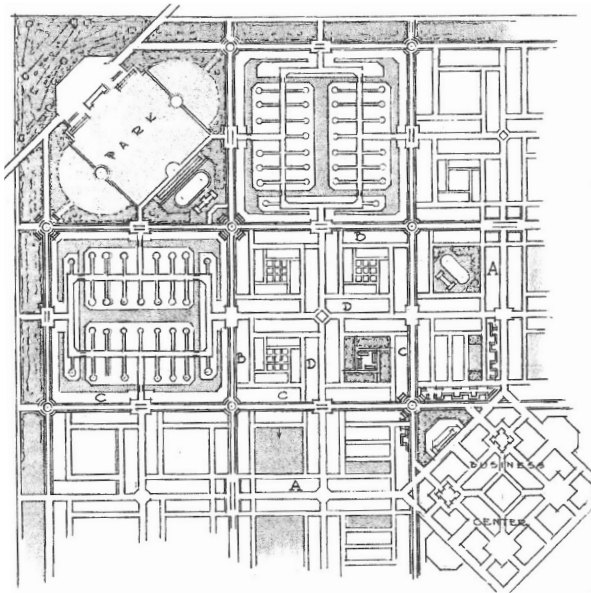


FIGURE 3 A quarter section of Wright's Regional City. Showing the denser urban center, the street system (designated A, B, C, and D). The design of neighborhood streets closer to the business center discourage cut through traffic. Neighborhood parks and the larger park at the corner have different functions.

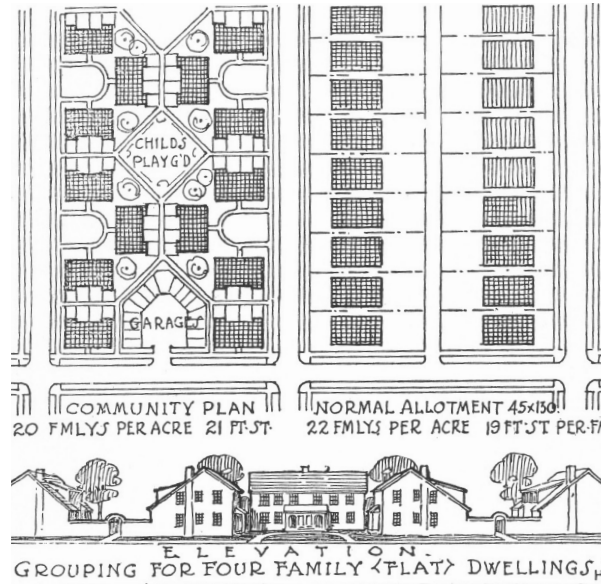


FIGURE 4 Grouping for Four-Family Dwellings. As Wright explains in his note for this illustration, "Another way of rearranging individual houses so that wasted space is converted into playground, and windows no longer look straight into one another as with the upper right."

Using Sunnyside Gardens, Radburn, and the recently completed Chatham Village as examples, he addressed the focus of the committee on "the application of the best technical experience and business practice to the production, ownership, and operation, on a sound income producing basis, of low-cost dwellings of desirable standards, planned so as to provide socially integrated communities."⁴⁰

His ongoing research and advocacy in housing, as member of the American Institute of Architects Committee on the Economics of Site Planning and Housing, as founder of the Housing Study Guild, and as key participant on the National Association of Housing Officials (NAHO) Housing Commission attest to this comprehensive approach to addressing housing need.⁴¹ With *Rehousing Urban America*, Wright had the opportunity to articulate the compilation of this vision "to the technicians who must plan and to those who must be prepared to conduct and maintain the new communities appropriate to our social advancement."⁴² Most of the book is dedicated to detailed studies of interior designs for individual attached residential units assembled in various recommended configurations as the building blocks of communities. Attention to construction and maintenance costs forms a central component of his study as does again examples of his and Stein's work, his other projects, and architects he admired in the U.S. and overseas, particularly in Germany.

At the same time, as he does in many of his other publications, Wright adopts a comprehensive outlook to provide context for these more detailed housing studies. To address this issue of truly "rehousing urban America," he acknowledges the need to consider both rehabilitating the central city and introducing new methods of developing and designing group housing as part of complete communities in the outlying areas as alternatives to suburban sprawl. All of these issues are interconnected. "The success and value of any housing scheme must be looked upon with respect to what will and should be done about many other aspects of the preservation and improvement of our cities; such as the forms and location of future industrial activity, and the spread of employment with suitable disposition of increased leisure time."⁴³

In his book, Wright also anticipates the loss of city population – though his references to the “breakdown of industry” and loss of urban population to the country appear related more to the crisis of the Great Depression than to the current issues associated with city abandonment and shrinking cities in the U.S. today. But his caution then remains relevant, “We are not going to be content to cut off all outward expansion; but on the other hand, if we dash about in uncertainty, first doing a little slum clearance, then rehabilitating a section of blight, and then improving our methods of land subdivision and expansion, with no co-ordinated purpose, we are going to end in chaos and a more general breakdown of our cities than anything suggested by our present difficulties.”⁴⁴ Coordinated planning, particularly at the regional level was essential to fully understand current conditions and anticipate and accommodate future opportunities.

LEGACIES AND IMPLICATIONS

In affordable housing, new town design, and communitarian regionalism, Wright consistently connected cost efficiencies, functionality, and site design for health and livability. Starting with the individual unit, he grasped the dynamics between interior floor plans, site characteristics, and community building and applied this insight broadly to understanding and engaging regional needs and opportunities. Even prior to the Great Depression, he advocated for government engagement to close the housing gap for the lowest income, and durable construction materials and techniques to secure lower operating costs for the long term, a key consideration in sustainability today. Yet, concerns regarding health revolved more around housing condition, play facilities, and layout, particularly regarding air circulation and adequate natural light, than the complexities today of opportunities for adequate exercise and local access to healthy foods. Similarly, considerations of diversity did not extend to race but rather focused on introducing a range of housing types to accommodate various lower and working class incomes. Today social equity has broader implications than income. Wright’s application of composite mapping offered a sophisticated means at the time to create a more holistic regional perspective; his approach anticipated the more robust layered mapping popularized by Ian McHarg in the 1960s and 1970s. His integration of park systems and protection of watersheds reflect a consideration of natural networks through identification and protection but also as functioning systems, a prequel to green infrastructure.

Arguably the new regionalists of today encounter a much more complex regional landscape with greater political fragmentation and significantly more layers of governmental and non-governmental activity and oversight as well as shrinkage and abandonment as additional concerns. Yet the roots of new regionalism as well as sustainability and green infrastructure can be found in Wright’s work as a houser, architect, and planner. In his 1932 indictment of contemporary planning practice, Wright intoned, “The fact that we propose to cast [subdivisions] in new and novel forms, to adopt the advanced principles of super-block planning for the gridiron or even the curvilinear landscape method, or to plan various closely related areas on the theory of ‘neighborhood units’ – all of these merely begging the issue, of what the actual needs and absorption abilities of the city really are and of what to do with the growing dry rot at the center of the city.”⁴⁵ He then outlined what he believed to be the best approach. “What we need is not more miles of arteries or more acres of plans or even more planning vision, but more business common-sense effort in the interest of selecting and developing from the welter of excellent plan ideas, a sensible and well-balanced and economic program which will conserve the best resources of each given area for the eventual, most efficient and well-coordinated operation of a comfortable existence for all its population.”⁴⁶ His application of these elements, in a sustained and integrated way, offers a model to guide current research and practice.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Kristin Larsen, AICP, PhD (Cornell), MAURP (Florida), BSBA (Florida), is an associate professor and director of the School of Landscape Architecture and Planning at the University of Florida. Under her direction, the first fully online graduate degree in urban planning was launched in fall of 2012. Her specialties include housing policy, neighborhood planning, urban and planning history, and historic preservation. Her publications include peer-reviewed articles for *Planning Perspectives*, *Journal of Planning History*, *Housing Studies*, and *Housing Policy Debate*. Her book, *Community Architect: The Life and Vision of Clarence Stein*, is due out in September 2016.

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Image sources

- Figure 1: New York Commission of Housing and Regional Planning. Report of Commission of Housing and Regional Planning to Governor Alfred E. Smith and to the Legislature of the State of New York. May 7, 1926, Plate LVII, 82.
- Figure 2: New York Commission of Housing and Regional Planning. Report of Commission of Housing and Regional Planning to Governor Alfred E. Smith and to the Legislature of the State of New York. May 7, 1926, Plate LIII, 79.
- Figure 3: Henry Wright, "The Place of the Apartment in the Modern Community," *Architectural Record* 67, no. 3 (1930): 207-238, 232.
- Figure 4: Henry Wright, "The Place of the Apartment in the Modern Community," *Architectural Record* 67, no. 3 (1930): 207-238, 217.