

# HILLSIDE HOMES

1935-1997



Eastchester Heights

1997-Present

Our story starts with World War I:

During WWI, for the first time in its history, the US government built Houses for workers:

The **United States Housing Corporation (USHC)** was a federal agency that existed during World War I. Its purpose was to build housing for wartime production workers near arsenals and shipyards.

USHC is notable for having employed some of the nation's first city planners and landscape architects, including such individuals as Henry Wright, **Clarence Stein**, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr



1882 - 1975

Clarence Stein was born in Rochester, New York into an upwardly-mobile Jewish family. While a youth, his family moved to New York City, where he attended the Workshop School of the Ethical Culture Society, developing his sensibilities within the context of Progressive thought. The challenge during WWI of designing large scale housing with a public purpose became his life's goal.

World War I came to an end in 1918. The cessation of almost all housing construction during the war years was not immediately felt. But on the return of the men from the armed forces, the demand for housing grew; the shortage was soon evident and the cost of rent began to increase.

Tenant-protest groups were organized; a wave of rent strikes resulted. The housing situation for a large segment of the population became desperate. But for the more affluent, new signature apartment buildings were being built in NYC along the Grand Concourse and near Central Park.

Stein was one of many young architects who sought to contribute socially progressive solutions to the problem of housing for low income people.

The New York State Legislature and Governor Alfred E. Smith took notice of the drastic shortage of shelter for working and poor people. In 1926, the governor was responsible for the introduction of the **Limited Dividend Housing Companies Act** (now Article IV of the PHFL) providing :

- a state-controlled bank to finance low-rental housing.
- a State Board of Housing (including Stein)
- it permitted municipalities of 1,000,000 population or more to grant partial tax abatement on the new housing (Stein's idea)
- the sponsors would agree to limit the rental to \$11/room/month in the Bronx, \$12/room/month in Manhattan
- it limited sponsor's return to 6%
- the project under the control of the State Board of Housing.

The Amalgamated Housing Cooperative (1927-present) was the first housing built under this law. In 1935, so was Hillside.

# Then the Great Depression Hit

- Eventually 25% unemployment
- Mass evictions
- Great hardship

Stein and other socially active architects and planners sought to find new ways to design and build housing that workers and low income people could afford.

Stein in particular designed and redesigned apartment layouts that would be spacious enough but economical to build. His idea was to build housing that would foster a community. That idea would in 1935 become Hillside.

The Federal Government was desperate to find a way to alleviate unemployment. The WPA would fund Hillside providing many jobs especially to construction workers.

Clarence Stein, *American Architect*, 1936 page 17

HILLSIDE was conceived from the beginning as a complete integrated community of apartments within the larger framework of the city in which families of limited income might find the setting for what President Roosevelt has called "a more abundant life." We were convinced that to secure this it was not sufficient merely to build spacious well lighted and well-ventilated apartments. Nor was it enough to organize the open spaces between the buildings so as to secure broad views of green from every window. Something more was needed. We must plan so as to facilitate the development of a full community life.

This required first of all a site that would spaciouly house a group of people large enough to form a community that could develop and preserve its individual character inspite of its surroundings. To give it unity the neighborhood must be centered around common interests such as an adequate play space and community facilities. An attractive site of about seventeen acres of sloping land\* located next to a school was chosen and the preliminary studies made with a playground as the center feature of the scheme.

\*Sloping land (a hill side) allowed apartments to be built in the basements so there was more rental income and the goal of \$11/room/month could be met.



Aerial Photo during the construction





Times Wide World Photo.  
A view of the ceremonies held yesterday in connection with the opening of the Hillside Homes on Boston Post Road.

**A crowd of 5,000 gather for the Hillside Homes Dedication June 29, 1935**

On June 29, 1935 one of the speakers explained:

"Hillside Homes will eventually accommodate 1416 families. It is already occupied by 177 families and more are moving in at the rate of twelve a day. The land on which the project is built includes fourteen acres, five of which are covered by 108 four-story walk-up buildings and four six-story elevator structures, while the remaining nine acres are devoted to gardens, parks, playgrounds, terraces, and wading pools."

Clarence Stein in 1949 wrote about Life in Hillside

The 1400 families that moved into Hillside in 1935 came mainly from the surrounding Borough of the Bronx. The wage-earners were white-collar workers, predominantly salesmen, with average annual salaries of about \$2,500.

The playground, nursery school, clubrooms, and the safe green courts drew families with children. Almost a third of the population was below 21 years ( 3,000 adults, 1,430 children). A good many of those children, now grown up, have returned from the war to bring up their own youngsters in Hillside.

Hillside for twelve years has been a neighborly community, buzzing with activity. This was the result of the combination of the physical plan and the development of community activities. The two and a half acre playground is the central feature. Here, for all ages, is everything from ballgames to wading pool. Here, on summer evenings, the whole community, some 4,500 strong, gather, or lean out of surrounding windows, to enjoy pageants, festivals, or dramatic productions. A shelter built in the hillside offers protection from sun and rain, with toilets at either side.

Clarence Stein, American Architect Magazine, 1936 page 17

## THE SOCIAL, RECREATIONAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

Community activities at Hillside range all the way from tap dancing to psychology.

All the activities without exception have been inaugurated by the tenants themselves and are supported by them. Miss Louise P. Blackham has been engaged to assist in the educational, social and recreational affairs of Hillside. Through her, arrangements are made for the establishment of classes or for the formation of clubs, since it is, of course, necessary to schedule the uses of the various clubrooms and the community meeting-room. The tenants suggest the activities and enlist Miss Blackham's aid in organizing a group or club. Teachers' have been provided by WPA for art, singing and dancing. and speaker are provided by the Adult Education Division (if the New York public schools).

The nursery-school has enrolled approximately 100 children of pre-school age. The parents pay a nominal sum each month to provide for two teachers and a nurse. Student assistants are also assigned to this work by Teachers College Columbia University.

Space is lacking to even enumerate the many group activities in which the tenants are engaged. They vary from purely social clubs or hobby and handicraft classes. to the cultural societies for the study of music, drama or literature as well as the arts. An athletic association has been formed and has a large membership. The gymnasium of the neighboring school is used as well as the large playground.

The development of the community activity is thus a natural outgrowth of the community activity presented through the facilities provided.





1935





Does anyone recognize where this is?



**Six-story building on Corsa Avenue**

The community flourished. It changed ownership a few times. It eventually declined, for various reasons – suburban flight, incompetent management, crack cocaine.

By the mid-90's, nearly half of the 1,400 apartments were vacant. The playground was used for pit-bull fights, and the maze of courtyards was a haven for drug dealers.

In 1997, a new owner bought the whole property for \$5,000,000 and changed its name to Eastchester Heights.

"We wanted to quickly change everyone's perception of this place," Mr. Frank said. "We wanted to make it clear to the drug dealers that there's a new landlord paying attention, and we wanted tenants to feel the community was worth saving."

The new landlord focused on Mr. Stein's communal spaces. Courtyards were cleaned and landscaped. Graffiti was removed. The playground got new equipment for toddlers and top-of-the-line backboards on the basketball court. Community rooms were refurbished for new after-school programs and clubs.





On Dec 8, 2021, Eastchester Heights received major refinancing

## **Taconic, Clarion Close on Wells Fargo Loan for Eastchester Heights Complex**

December 8, 2021

Taconic Partners and Clarion Partners closed on a \$130-million loan from Wells Fargo for Eastchester Heights, a rental apartment complex at 3480 Seymour Ave. in the Bronx. The financing provides funding for ongoing renovations at the property, which ownership acquired in 2007 and which contains 1,416 rent stabilized units located on five city blocks. The closing of the loan comes on the heels of a 200,000 square foot rooftop solar installation in July.





Now can we have your  
comments, questions and  
especially your memories

Thanks  
Jay Hauben

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RNA House History Club Website

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/RNA-House/history/>

See also

**Amalgamated and Park Reservoir Co-op History Reading  
and Discussion Group**

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/amalgamated/history/>