

## **Houser: The Life and Work of Catherie Bauer**

H. Peter Oberlander and Eva Newbrun.  
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Right after she graduated from Vassar in 1926, Catherine Bauer took off for the grand tour of Europe. She had studied English literature, had considered studying architecture, and was interested in the arts. So the idea of checking-out the European scene seemed a fitting way to cap off her B.A. degree. As things turned out, the post-graduation tour proved powerfully influential on that impressionable young woman. She was so taken by the things she saw and the people she met that she would never be the same. She'd readily won acceptance everywhere she went, even in the inner circles of the Parisian cognoscenti, and the trip became the start of a lifelong career of inquiry and advocacy in housing and urban development.

Peter Oberlander and Eva Newbrun have traced her career in meticulous detail and written a highly readable account of her life and times. Ostensibly a biography of Catherine, their book is simultaneously a biography of the Housing Movement that she helped to spawn and of the early City Planning Movement in which she was an active participant. The book is intrinsically also a love story, a careful chronicle revealing her devotion to public service, a detailed account of her romantic alliances, and an open display of the authors' own admiration and personal affection for this exceptional woman.

European cities were way ahead of the Americans back then. They'd built a lot of decent housing for low-income residents and had turned to modern architects to design them. When Catherine first saw the modern architecture and public housing of Sweden and Germany, she responded as though she'd just discovered the Grand Canyon and had to tell the world about it. So she wrote a lot and became something of a pioneer, championing the cause of adequate housing for Americans with low incomes. The Labor Movement provided a supportive base, and she later became its lobbyist for housing reform, a drafter of the key federal housing legislation, and a Washington insider.

Catherine came into the public arena just after the Progressive Movement had initiated its attacks on big-city machine politics and on over-crowded tenement slums. The spirit of reform was in the air, and

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she somehow caught its temper and then got absorbed into the second-generation cadre that carried the Progressive's crusade through the '20s and on into the New Deal.

It was no doubt her youthful exuberance, curiosity, self-confidence, and quick mind that led to early friendships with the leading figures in housing and urban planning—the likes of Lewis Mumford, Clarence Stein, Malcolm Cowley, Philip Johnson, and Henry Wright. Through them she quickly found her way into the inner circles of the avant garde intelligentsia of New York and Washington—and Paris, and Berlin, and London, and Stockholm, and so on.

These were the people who were inventing the utopian images of a happy future in which cities would be decent settings for modern life—settings complete with affordable and well-designed modern buildings, parks, public services, and facilities. It was to be a world shaped by rational planning and cultural sophistication, served by technically skilled professionals, and governed by public-spirited, selflessly devoted political leaders. Well before the New Deal appeared, they saw the federal government as the locus of leadership and regulation in the public interest. In the heyday of the prosperous '20s, their image was for more than mere reform and elimination of the sins of the past. The goal was a deliberately designed, brave new world.

Caught up in her group's optimism, this bright young woman became an outspoken voice for urban betterment, writing for some of the nation's leading magazines, speaking at some of its prestigious forums. Then, in 1934, following further research visits to Europe, she published *Modern Housing*. The book quickly became the bible of New Dealers searching for ways of building decent, safe, and sanitary housing while simultaneously promoting construction that would ease unemployment.

Ahead of her times, she became a model of the liberated woman—comfortable among the aristocrats in the field, accepted as peer by the men leading the crusade, a self-confident and assertive champion for her own ideas and beliefs.

The compass of her interests and engagement widened over the years, expanding from architecture to housing, to the physical city, to the socio-economics of urbanization, to conservation and management of natural resources across extensive terrains. Then, in tune with ideas behind the National Resources Planning Board, she sought to promote rational planning for the nation's regions. Activated by the opportunities for orderly growth promised by expanding electric power in the Columbia River basin, she was intent on promoting a rational development scheme that would encompass both the built and natural

environments. Later on, with renewed vigor, she extended those concerns to potential developments in India and other developing nations in Asia and elsewhere.

And, *inter alia*, ever since her youthful years, she was constantly alert to the effects of developments on the poor and less-privileged peoples. When, in the '50s, before Americans discovered poverty and before the Civil Rights Movement, when American city planners were still exclusively focused on the physical plants of their cities, Catherine was out on the lecture circuit, decrying the plight of poor and black populations, denouncing the lily-white suburbs.

Well before she joined the city planning faculty at Berkeley, Catherine Bauer had already left her marks on the world. She had been uncommonly influential wherever she'd gone, and her voice remained equally compelling at Berkeley. She championed her department's program to expand its faculty into newly emerging fields of inquiry, to establish a parallel research institute, to offer the Ph.D. degree, and to join working alliances with several distinguished departments within the University.

Throughout her lifetime, wherever she went, the worlds she touched were changed. Oberlander-Newbrun's account goes a long way toward telling how that happened. But even their insightful review doesn't quite expose the underlying source of the magic that made her such an exceptional person. How was it, coming from ordinary circumstances, that *this* woman became such a powerful agent for human betterment. Why *she*? What made *her* extraordinary?

If only we could find the recipe, we might try cloning her and so extend her successful career through succeeding generations of Catherine Bauers.