

Marjorie Sewell Cautley (1891-1954) ♀
Landscape Architect of the Garden City Movement



For Phipps Garden Apartments, “the landscape gardening by Marjorie S. Cautley was rich, varied, and imaginative.” Throughout Sunnyside Gardens, “The street trees... almost arch over the streets.... And then there are the inner courts! In midsummer they seem almost too rich and luxuriant.”

—Clarence S. Stein, *Toward New Town for America*, 1957
(the principal architect she worked with on all four major projects below).

Career highlights: Landscapes of Sunnyside Gardens (1924-28), Radburn (Fair Lawn, NJ, 1928-30), Phipps Garden Apartments (1931-32 & 1935), Hillside Homes (Bronx, NY, 1935); landscape consultant for the State of New Hampshire (10 CCC park projects, from 1933); book *Garden Design: The Principles of Abstract Design as Applied to Landscape Composition* (1935), numerous magazine articles and interviews; lecturer on site planning and landscape design, M.I.T (1934-37) and Columbia University (1935-37).

< *Marjorie Sewell Cautley portrait, about 1930, gift of Patricia C. Hill, courtesy Cornell University Rare and Manuscript Collections #4908.*

"Garden City Landscapes for Sunnyside Gardens and Phipps Garden Apartments" by Thaisa Way
adapted from her "Garden City Landscapes: Designs by Marjorie Sewell Cautley" in Jewell and Mozingo, eds.,
Women in Landscape Architecture: Essays on History and Practice, 2012.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States, as the private and public domains came together in transformative ways under the influence of the Progressive, Country Life, and reform movements, the progressive agenda underscored the importance of environment. Residential landscape design was central in efforts to improve society and at the core of landscape architecture’s purpose. The Garden City Movement was one manifestation of this belief in the significance of environment and place. According to planner and landscape architect Henry Wright (quoted by Alan Mather, "Henry Wright," *Pencil Points* 21, January 1940), the successes of the “new towns” of Radburn, New Jersey, and Sunnyside Gardens in New York were “definitely and irrevocably related to [their] site and setting.” These residential sites and settings were designed by Marjorie Sewell Cautley. The work of Cautley for the Stein-Wright design team is particularly interesting as it simultaneously reveals the ideals of the garden city movement as well as a feminist inscription on the land. An analysis of Cautley’s landscape designs specifically reflects her experience as a professional landscape architect and a woman and mother.

Cautley’s designs and writing on landscape architecture and public landscapes propose three significant social objectives: to fully and dynamically integrate natural landscapes into the lives of the lower and middle classes; to design landscapes that would best serve the significant needs of women and children; and to actively and consistently involve the community in the design process. Her designs reveal the high value she placed on community participation, conservation of land and nature, and collaboration with architects and artists.

Cautley’s garden city designs did not merely frame the architecture or the plan as many modern architects imagined. Instead her designed spaces actively engaged the community in experiences of nature and landscape. Although many professional city planners focused on the architecture and engineering aspects of the landscape plans (even when they were trained in landscape architecture), she considered the horticultural maintenance and stewardship to be critical elements of the design’s ability to meet the needs of the residents and users.... While Stein and Wright argued for the economy of the architecture, Cautley designed economically feasible landscapes supporting the development of affordable-housing projects. Cautley was adamant that the planning should give careful attention to landscape construction costs and should forecast appropriate maintenance plans and expenses. At least 5% of the cost of the buildings, she argued, should be dedicated to the landscape.

Cautley's solid knowledge of plant materials and horticultural requirements was an outgrowth of her childhood experiences in a family of plant collectors, enthusiastic gardeners, and painters, including her mother, who was a respected painter of native flowers of California as well as a portrait painter. Her parents encouraged her to read and to practice her painting, music, and gardening, common activities for educated young women, even in the middle classes. Cautley's education at Cornell University in the "landscape art" program expanded and refined her knowledge and skills by emphasizing a comprehensive command of plant materials and the ability to apply this knowledge to the design process. Throughout her practice, she kept abreast of current discussions in the fields of landscape architecture and city planning and often wrote on the importance of horticultural concerns within these discourses.

Cautley initiated the design process by closely observing the existing topography, soil, climates, and vegetation, and developed her plan accordingly, creating transitions between a variety of landscapes both naturalistic and formal. Although Cautley was recognized for her use of native plants, she did not limit her palette to botanically-defined native plants; rather, she included plants that "naturally" blended into the landscape aesthetically and ecologically. The choice to use native or locally naturalized flora that might survive the local climate as well as the city atmosphere, use little water, and require minimal care was a significant component of Cautley's plan to create low-maintenance, thereby affordable and viable landscape designs in keeping with the goal of the housing developments and garden cities. Thus it was not an ideological argument for the use of native plants but an economic and practical response to the project, and more generally an approach Cautley would consider appropriate as she sought to develop housing plans that were economically sensible, functionally appropriate, and aesthetically valuable.

She argued vehemently for the importance of landscape in any vision of better communities and healthier living. For Phipps Garden Apartments where private gardens were limited to a few ground-floor apartments, Cautley created additional spaces for groups of apartments, each surrounded by a small, neat hedge with formal flowerbeds and benches for the residents. Similarly, Sunnyside Gardens common areas were laid out as small horticulturally distinct garden courts. Terraces and sitting areas often embraced views of the center garden courts and the boundaries of private home gardens. Because the hedges and plant materials defining the edges of the home gardens or other types of small gardens were below eye-level, they formed visual distinctions without blocking the views to and from the private and communal landscapes. The open views blurred the edges of private and public, suggesting a more communal lifestyle for residents, particularly mothers and children. These views back and forth might encourage residents to imagine their extended family encompassed the larger neighborhood. Similar to the traditional front porch, the home gardens allowed the experience of standing physically within one's private space while simultaneously being visible to the immediate neighborhood....While these views are often described in aesthetic terms as open and expansive, they are also functional. Shrubs and trees did not entirely block one's view from inside the house to the private yard area or the larger common park spaces.

She produced films of the construction process, including workers and community members. These films emphasized the active participation by women and children as well as hired workers to create the community gardens and parks. At Phipps Garden Apartments, she filmed children planting bulbs while mothers visited and watched. Husbands and fathers were shown helping with the larger planting projects. [[View her films from our Web page.](#)]

Cautley firmly believed in the landscape architect as a planner in the future of the community and a public servant. Like many of her colleagues, she championed the middle-class family and believed in the power of good design to improve their lives. She drew on her experience to design the garden city landscapes as models of her own vision of the potential of nature and the land to shape and serve community and individuals. 🍀



The **Marjorie Sewell Cautley Way** honorary street sign, unveiled November 21, 2015, is posted at the northwest corner of 45th St. and Skillman Ave. (Lewis Mumford Way), Sunnyside Gardens, Queens.

For help toward this achievement, thanks to Jason Banrey, Adrian Benepe, Soja Bobrow, Dorothy Cavallo, Merry Chang, Cornell University, Evan Fay Earle, Elaine Engst, Rayna & Estéban Erlich, Amy Fitzgerald, Eden Gallanter, Florence Gootar, Selvin Gootar, Rachel Gordon, Christabel Gough, Lee Hill, David Hornung, Darren Kazemi, Felice & Larry Koplik, Larry Lipnik, Demetrice Mills, Catherine O'Flaherty, Sean O'Grady, John O'Leary, Janice Parsons, Deena Patel, Arthur Pearson, Gerry Perrin, Herbert Reynolds, Liz Reynolds, Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, Memo Salazar, Allison Smith, Martha Straus, Ellen Tarlow, Abraham Thomas, Michael Tomlan, Christina Vega, Matt Wallace, Thaïsa Way, Gary Wedow, Christina Wilkinson, Dorothy Wong. Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance programs are funded in part by the New York City Council, Council Majority Leader Jimmy Van Bramer.