

2005 AICP National Planning Landmarks and Pioneers

Lots to Learn from Billerica, Arnstein

By Ruth Eckdish Knack, AICP

New England landmark, Billerica Garden Suburb, and a social advocacy pioneer, Sherry Arnstein, have been added to the AICP roster of National Planning Landmarks and Pioneers this year. Both of them, although cited for very different reasons, are significant reminders of planning's diverse history. The selections were made by a jury chaired by Eugenie Ladner Birch, FAICP. The other members are Eugene Carr, FAICP; Philip Clark, FAICP; Jim Peters, AICP; Christopher Silver, AICP; and Carol Thomas, FAICP.

Shades of Ebenezer Howard



The ideas of British garden city guru Ebenezer Howard took root in 1914 in the Billerica Garden Suburb a few miles south of Lowell, Massachusetts. Just as Howard influenced British and, later, American, new town planning, Billerica is a potential model for 21st century suburbs.

Two events led to the garden suburb, according to Patricia Henry, who compiled its history for her master's degree thesis at the University of Rhode Island and who grew up in Billerica.

The first event took place in 1909, when the state appointed the Massachusetts Homestead Commission, with the goal of helping workers acquire homes. The second was the 1912 decision by the Boston and Maine Railroad to build maintenance shops in the town of Billerica, with the encouragement of the Billerica Board of Trade.

The board, seeking to avoid speculation and more overcrowded tenements, then decided to implement the recommendation of the homestead commission to set aside a new town site in North Billerica primarily for the railroad workers. The new town was to be based on Ebenezer Howard's garden city model.

To carry out that scheme, the board of trade called on the commission's city planner, Arthur

C. Comey, to prepare a site plan. Landscape architect Warren H. Manning was an adviser. Billerica Garden Suburb was incorporated two years later.

The garden suburb plan is interesting on three fronts — physical, historic, and economic — says Howard H. Foster, Jr., historian of APA's Rhode Island chapter, who recommended the designation. "It builds on the tradition of planned communities (with a site plan that follows the garden city model), but it's unique because the state was involved in the process and because it takes a progressive approach," he says.

That approach was based on establishing a limited dividend housing corporation (with a maximum five percent dividend on shares). The surplus was to be used for improvements and maintenance. Workers, including those who made just \$10 to \$12 a week, could buy shares in housing co-ops (co-partnership). The community also offered home ownership and rental units.

The 56-acre site, on the Concord River, was just 200 feet from the North Billerica rail station (from which a free train took workers to the shops). Street names like Letchworth and Port Sunlight are reminders of the town's English legacy.

When she was growing up, says Patricia Henry, the garden suburb, with its small lot sizes and small houses, was considered an "affordable" neighborhood. Today, housing prices have shot up, and the neighborhood's location, just 25 miles from Boston, makes it vulnerable to teardowns. In addition, parking has become a problem, often imperfectly solved by paving sideyards.

Billerica is notable, says juror Carol Thomas, FAICP, because of its innovative financing and its contemporary relevance. "Figuring out how to get affordable housing in a pleasant — and planned — environment is a very current issue," she adds.

Climbing Arnstein's Ladder



AICP exam takers are (or should be) familiar with the question: "What is 'Arnstein's ladder'?" The answer is found in "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," published in 1969 in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*. Its author, Sherry Arnstein, who died in 1997, is AICP's newest national planning pioneer, honored for her contributions to planning practice and theory.

John Gaber, the Auburn University planning professor who recommended Arnstein, says his research on citizen participation had made him curious about Arnstein. So he started

searching.

He learned that Arnstein was a New York native who moved to Los Angeles as a child. She studied physical education at UCLA and then worked briefly as a social worker in San Francisco. Moving to Washington, D.C. in the late 1950s with her husband, George, she did community relations work for a hospital and then worked as a magazine editor.

A meeting with Robert Kennedy led to a consulting assignment in 1963 with the Kennedy administration's President's Commission on Juvenile Delinquency. Her job: to help communities develop programs to improve job opportunities, housing, and schools.

A couple of years later, Arnstein was drafted by the Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare to help desegregate Southern hospitals.

When President Lyndon Johnson started the Model Cities program in 1966, Arnstein became the chief adviser on citizen participation not only for Model Cities but for the entire Department of Housing and Urban Development. She designed guidelines that "brought neighborhood residents into planning and policy-making activities," says Gaber.

After HUD, Arnstein went back to consulting on public policy for a wide array of public and private clients. Eventually, she returned to the health field, serving as executive director of an osteopathic medicine association. She died in 1997.

Rules for citizen participation

But it was *the* article that made Arnstein nationally and internationally known. "A Ladder" has been reprinted 80 times and translated into five languages, Gaber points out. Its message is simple — but radical: "Citizen participation without the redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless."

"It's the combination of her pioneering work formulating the citizen participation process for the Model Cities program and her post facto analysis of how well participation has been integrated into the planning process that has forever changed the way that planners work," says Gaber.

The ladder is Arnstein's way of expressing the various ways in which public agencies and citizens interact. There are eight rungs, divided into three categories. The lowest rungs, labeled "manipulation" and "therapy," are in the nonparticipation category. One step up are the three rungs in the tokenism category: "informing," "consultation," and "placation."

The top three rungs symbolize degrees of citizen power. They are "partnership," "delegated power," and, at the very top, "citizen control."

In Gaber's words, "This hierarchy challenged planners to respect the politically disenfranchised and to understand that planning is part of a larger democratic process."

Practitioners could no longer view themselves as simply technocrats."

Since Arnstein, citizen participation has become a cornerstone of the profession, Gaber continues, and the guidelines she set forth have been incorporated into the AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct.

To Eugenie Ladner Birch, FAICP, chair of the AICP National Planning Landmarks and Pioneers jury, Arnstein's influence is clear. "She provided a framework for citizen participation that is still used today," Birch says. "Her taxonomy accurately showed us that there are different types of participation — and that it is essential that planners understand the differences."

This is a good time, Birch adds, for APA members to consider the rich history of the profession, both nationally and locally. "It's important for young people coming into the field, for the public, and for all of us who are in practice, to know about the precedents and the people whose work informs what we do today," she says. She ends with a pitch to "keep those landmark and pioneer nominations coming."

Ruth Knack is the executive editor of Planning.

Images: Top — A home in the Billercia Garden Suburb today. Photo by Patricia Henry.
Bottom — Sherry Arnstein with former President Harry S Truman. Photo courtesy George Arnstein.

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