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The Life, But Not the Times, of Catherine Bauer

Catherine Bauer was arguably the most important member of the group of idealists who called themselves “housers.” Dedicated to raising the quality of urban life in twentieth century America, these housing experts sought to apply the wisdom and experience of their European counterparts in improving shelter for lower-income and working class families as well as those more affluent members of society for whom the private housing market already functioned successfully. Gail Radford’s *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* [1] deals extensively with Bauer’s important contributions to housing thought in the 1930s, and other analysts of American housing policy have duly noted her influence, but until recently no one had written a full-scale biography of this important figure. In *Houser: The Life and Work of Catherine Bauer*, H. Peter Oberlander, a Professor Emeritus of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia, and Eva Newbrun, an educator and writer from San Francisco, have taken on the task.

Oberlander and Newbrun have written a detailed biography that sketches Bauer’s life story in great detail. Born in Elizabeth, New Jersey in 1905, Bauer grew up in a comfortable middle class home and graduated from Vassar College in 1926. During her extensive travels in Europe in the late 1920s and early 1930s, she became enthralled with the modern architecture of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus School. In 1934 she published *Modern Housing* [2], an indictment of the United States for failing to provide high quality housing in wholesome working class communities; the book received generous critical praise and became the bible for later generations of housers. Through her friendship with Lewis Mumford, she became involved in the Regional Planning Association of America. Complementing her activities as a writer and architectural critic, she became a political activist and lobbyist whose collaborative work with organized labor helped shape both the Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937 and the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Act of 1949. After her marriage to architect William Wurster in 1947, she taught at Harvard University and the University of California at Berkeley. In her later years, she became especially interested in town planning in third world countries, especially India. In 1964 she died after apparently having fallen while hiking alone in the rugged hills near her Berkeley home.

The authors have thoroughly mined Bauer’s papers, which are located at the Bancroft Library on the University of California at Berkeley campus, and conducted extensive interviews with the surviving friends and colleagues of their subject. As a result, *Houser* provides a comprehensive account of Bauer’s life that seldom stints on the particulars. If the reader yearns to know where Bauer stayed during her trips abroad, such information is readily available in the book.

Nor do the authors hesitate to elaborate on her sex life during the years prior to her marriage to William
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Wurster. Urban historians have long known about her prolonged, passionate love affair with Lewis Mumford, but now we learn that Bauer was amorously involved with architect Oscar Stonorov and economist Leon Kerserling as well. Bauer’s romantic relationships with other housers are assuredly part of the story and deserve to be recounted, but the authors’ relentless emphasis on the personal side make the reader desire more discussion of the professional.

In other words, the book tells us all that Bauer did but often fails to consider the impact of her deeds. Urban historians will cry out for more context, more discussion of the impact Bauer’s ideas had on a number of different publics in twentieth century America. Students of housing policy will be disappointed, for example, with the scant mention made in the book of Bauer’s important 1954 article, “The Dreary Deadlock of Public Housing,” a highly influential essay that called into question a generation of public policy decisions urged by many housers (including Bauer herself). The authors deal in some detail with the impact of her landmark book, Modern Housing, but comment relatively little on the reaction to her other important written work.

Houser is written in a lively style and contains a wealth of information about Catherine Bauer’s life. It’s a fun book to read. Because the authors’ focus is so narrow, however, we are left craving more discussion of Bauer’s impact on housing in the twentieth century. The definitive biography of Catherine Bauer, fully informed by urban history, will tell us much more about the housers and the causes for which they fought.

Notes


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