

# Roosevelt and Rexford: Resettlement and its Results

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## Abstract

The Greenbelt Towns program emerged in the late 1930s as a novel demonstration of suburban town planning in three communities: Greenbelt, Maryland; Greendale, Wisconsin; and Greenhills, Ohio. This paper discusses the scattered federal programs and policies from which the Greenbelt Towns emerged and briefly describes two other new town precedents, Ebenezer Howard's Garden City and the Regional Planning Association of America's involvement in Radburn, New Jersey. It further examines the physical and social development of the Greenbelt towns, the demonstration's eventual failure, and how the program influenced and continues to shape government involvement in urban development and housing.

## Introduction

The United States emerged from the boom years of the 1920s to face the Great Depression and hardship it had never known. By 1933 nearly a quarter of the nation's population was unemployed and up to 60 percent lived in poverty. Cities were in crisis as unemployed and impoverished people constructed shantytowns in public spaces and pleaded for government relief. City planning had yet to achieve prominence and, in the face of economic collapse, was viewed by some as a less than critical task. Though many planners were un- and underemployed in the early 1930s, President Roosevelt's New Deal provided sudden opportunities for planners to address the country's economic problems through both urban and rural programs.

The Greenbelt Towns program emerged in the late 1930s as a novel demonstration of suburban town planning in three communities: Greenbelt, Maryland; Greendale, Wisconsin; and Greenhills, Ohio. Although it

lacked the longevity of other New Deal programs such as the Federal Housing Administration or the Social Security Act, the Greenbelt Towns program brought unprecedented government involvement to housing development. Its novelty, the characteristics that it shares with non-governmental new towns programs, and its iconoclastic proponent, Rexford Tugwell, give the Greenbelt Towns a unique place in American planning history.

This paper examines the Greenbelt Towns' emergence from Depression-era federal housing policy and their impact on subsequent federal policy. Though it was only one of many Resettlement Administration efforts, this program received special attention from Resettlement Administrator Rexford Tugwell and from President and First Lady Roosevelt. I discuss the scattered federal programs and policies from which the Greenbelt Towns emerged and briefly describe two other new town precedents, Ebenezer Howard's Garden City idea and the Regional Planning Association of America's involvement in Radburn, New Jersey. I also examine the physical and social development of the Greenbelt Towns, the demonstration's eventual failure, and how the program influenced and continues to shape government involvement in urban development and housing. The Greenbelt Towns provide an unusual example of federal government involvement in large-scale planning efforts; since the 1930s, the federal government has been reluctant to assume responsibility for large planning projects or to interfere with the private market. Indeed this reluctance is the reason why federal government support of the Greenbelt Towns quickly dissolved.

## **Historical Context of the Greenbelt Towns**

The Greenbelt Towns emerged from a federal government that had previously done little to provide and develop housing (unlike governments in Europe, which moved quickly to sponsor social housing during this period; Cam 1939). Following Franklin D. Roosevelt's election in 1932, however, his New Deal impacted nearly all urban planning activity. Between 1933 and 1940, eight major planning programs relieved unemployment through temporary federal, state, and local public works. They cleared slums, built rental public housing, and provided homeownership protection and new town resettlement (Hancock 1988). Roosevelt passed 14 major pieces of legislation within the first 100 days of his term including raising agricultural prices to provide farm relief, initiating the Civilian Conservation Corps to address unemployment, providing federal assistance to the unemployed, passing an emergency relief bill, and creating the Tennessee Valley Authority (Edsforth 2000).

Early in the Depression, the housing industry slowed to a stop, leaving many Americans in poor quality units. As the economy worsened in the early 1930s, a housing shortage developed, reflecting the huge need of the “submerged” middle class (Friedman 1968). Between 1932 and 1937, the government relied on limited, temporary programs designed to reduce unemployment as well as provide decent housing (Cam 1939).

In 1933 Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act, which included the creation of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works (PWA). The PWA was created to give employment to the building trades, provide homes for those with low incomes, and replace slums (Cam 1939). A subsidiary, the Public Works Emergency Housing Corporation, built units in slum areas and, when necessary, sought the condemnation of properties belonging to owners unwilling to sell. However, following a ruling by the Sixth Court of Appeals that the government did not have the power to condemn private land for public housing projects, the PWA turned its focus to vacant land. Legislation extending the PWA through 1937 shifted its mission from housing to jobs for the unemployed (Cam 1939). Congress used the PWA’s experience with housing and employment in drafting the 1937 Wagner-Steagall Housing Act, the first federal legislation focused primarily on housing, which permanently established the U.S. Housing Authority (Cam 1939). Similar to previous federal programs, Wagner-Steagall funded states and jurisdictions to eliminate unsafe and unsanitary housing, eradicate slums, provide decent, safe, and sanitary housing, and reduce unemployment. Under this Act, the federal government gave technical assistance and provided funds, but devolved the responsibility for creating housing to local Public Housing Authorities (Cam 1939).

Between April and August 1935, the government created new work relief programs and progressive taxes along with the Social Security Act and the National Labor Relations Act. On April 30, 1935, the Resettlement Administration was created under the aegis of the U.S. Department of Agriculture as part of the National Industrial Recovery Act and Emergency Relief Appropriations Act. It had four main tasks: suburban resettlement, rural rehabilitation, land utilization, and rural resettlement. Within these tasks, its three broad goals were aiding marginal farmers, enabling rural families to resettle in fertile areas, and providing an affordable alternative to slums. The Administration was to build low-cost housing in complete communities adjacent to existing industrial centers (Sternsher 1964; Arnold 1971; Stein 1966; Cam 1939), and it would demonstrate the promise of planned suburban and rural development by building houses to match people with land in an economically efficient way (Edsforth 2000). The combination of technological advances and economic hardship hurt farmers and was intensified by drought in 1934.

Under these circumstances two problems emerged: the need for land reclamation from inappropriate and inefficient agricultural use; and the need to resettle families displaced from their farms (Myhra 1983). It was within this federal environment that the Resettlement Administration proposed and created the Greenbelt Towns demonstration.

Though President Roosevelt supported rural subsistence homes and farm management as an intermediate “back to the land” approach, Rexford Tugwell, the director of the nascent Resettlement Administration, wanted to move the rural poor into cities to take advantage of the economic opportunities available there (Myhra 1983). Influenced by communities planned around automobiles, Tugwell suggested building satellite cities on cheap land, akin to garden suburbs, that would have curving and semi-elliptical roads, but would also preserve natural park areas (Myhra 1983). Tugwell was primarily interested in the suburban resettlement and land utilization tasks of the Resettlement Administration and wanted to build new towns, in which both urban and rural residents would settle, rather than just redevelop existing neighborhoods. He believed that slum clearance would be too complicated and expensive (Gelfand 1975):

My idea is to go just outside centers of population, pick up cheap land, build a whole community and entice people into it. Then go back into the cities and tear down whole slums and make parks of them (Buder 1990, 176).

Within the wider context of the Resettlement Administration, the Greenbelt Towns program amounted to a serious exercise in social and economic planning, a solution to rural poverty in the 1930s that moved people closer to urban areas and to economic opportunity (Friedman 1968; Myhra 1983).

Although Tugwell’s plan was to relocate rural families to cities, it was primarily moderate-income families living in cities who moved to the Greenbelt Towns. Suburban resettlement of the urban middle class was unlike the other projects of the Resettlement Administration, but unfortunately it was often confused with them and the resulting controversy led many to label Tugwell a socialist (Alanan and Eden 1987; Arnold 1971). Between 1935 and 1940 the federal government built 95 new communities, most of them rural. The Resettlement Administration, which supervised all federal community and land rehabilitation, was the most powerful planning authority created (Hancock 1988). Interestingly, international scholars saw the Resettlement Administration and its Greenbelt Towns as an atypical planning model for a nation reluctant to interfere with the private market (Arnold 1971).

The Resettlement Administration struggled in the face of extensive rural poverty and resistance to its attempts to undermine the political power of large Southern landowners by giving federal assistance to sharecroppers and tenants. Despite the number and creativity of Roosevelt's programs, the New Deal failed to achieve real economic recovery, and it took government spending, investment, and borrowing associated with World War II to significantly reduce poverty and end the Depression (Edsforth 2000).

## **Predecessors to the Greenbelt Towns**

The Greenbelt Towns emerged at a time when new town and other planning experiments were quite common, and it is likely that other new town movements and philosophies influenced Tugwell and the Resettlement Administration. Stein (1966) argued that the Greenbelt Towns were greatly influenced by Ebenezer Howard's Garden City, Clarence Perry's Neighborhood Unit, and the plan of Radburn, New Jersey, noting that the official purposes of these towns included providing work for the unemployed, creating affordable, safe, and healthy living environments, and demonstrating the principles of the Garden City (Stein 1966).

Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, Englishman Ebenezer Howard hoped to popularize a new concept in town planning: the Garden City, a town of approximately 30,000 residents that would be financially self-sufficient, providing housing for people of all social classes, commercial space, and industry for employment. As opposed to the crowded conditions in London, a Garden City would be surrounded by a greenbelt buffering it from encroaching development and providing space for agriculture and recreation. Once the city reached a population of 30,000, a new city would be built nearby and connected to the first via rail. More important than its physical layout was the social impact such a city would have, since Howard believed that the residents should own the land cooperatively and govern themselves (Mumford 1961). As early as 1907, W.D.P. Bliss, in his *Encyclopedia of Social Reform*, called for bringing the Garden City to America. He advocated development that combined individualism and socialism, and promoted the American Garden City Association to draw working class families to villages and the advantages of urban life (Buder 1990). Raymond Unwin, a prominent English urban planner who implemented Howard's Garden City idea at Letchworth and Welwyn, toured the United States and wrote "A Housing Program for the United States" in 1934, which influenced New Deal slum clearance and housing legislation (Creese 1966).

Forest Hills Gardens, New York was developed by the Russell Sage Foundation in 1912 and became the model for Clarence Perry's Neighborhood Unit thesis. Perry, a sociologist, defined the Neighborhood Unit as the area including one elementary school, a community center, and commercial services that all residents could reach by walking no more than a half a mile. The Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) drew on Perry's Neighborhood Unit for its Radburn, New Jersey, development in the 1920s. The RPAA planned Radburn as a Garden City of decentralized, self-contained settlements that conserved open space, controlled cars, and promoted community life (Mumford 1968). Fulmer (1941) cites Radburn as the American version of the Garden City, but without the collective ownership and protective greenbelt crucial to Howard's original plan. Though never completed, Radburn provided an inspiring model of the future for the next 60 years.

## The Greenbelt Towns Come to Life

### Purpose

Tugwell proposed that the Resettlement Administration address poverty and match people with land by building 3,000 new towns (Myhra 1983). These towns, or "rurban housing" programs, had three purposes: first, to provide employment to thousands of jobless workers; second, to exemplify a new type of community planning that provided urban conveniences without congestion; and third, to demonstrate a better use of suburban land (Arnold 1971; USFSA 1938). While Tugwell believed in promoting collective society through state intervention, Roosevelt was reluctant to support ideas that ran contrary to America's individualistic and free market values (Buder 1990). Given the resistance to government-planned communities on such a scale, it is not surprising that the Resettlement Administration limited the program to a demonstration project. The objective of the Greenbelt Towns demonstration was to obtain a large tract of land, build a community surrounded by a greenbelt, provide leased housing for families of modest incomes, set up a municipal government, and encourage commercial activity, all within a limited budget (Stein 1966). The Suburban Resettlement Division of the Resettlement Administration, under the direction of John Lansill, was put in charge of the Greenbelt Towns and told to avoid siting communities where there were multiple existing owners (for the ease of acquiring land) and where expensive residential development was expected. The communities were eventually to have 750 to 1,250 housing units and 3,000 to 5,000 residents (Stein 1966; Cam 1939).

Since the Greenbelt Towns program was created under the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act, the Resettlement Administration was instructed to make plans very quickly, which caused confusion and led local communities to misinterpret the projects. Plans were often given to the Construction Division of the Suburban Resettlement Division before they were finished (Architectural Record 1936), and construction had to accommodate unskilled workers since an explicit purpose of the Greenbelt Towns was to ease unemployment. In Greenbelt, Maryland, this required that there be two shifts of workers, substantially reducing the efficiency of construction. Labor costs in all of the towns were approximately 70 percent of total construction costs (excluding land), much higher than the private industry standard of 30 to 45 percent (USDA 1937; Sternsher 1964; Arnold 1971). These towns were considerably more expensive to build than the other Resettlement developments (average cost per unit in the Greenbelt Towns was \$15,968, compared with \$9,114 for units in the Division of Subsistence Homesteads).

To identify possible sites for Greenbelt Towns, the Suburban Resettlement Division conducted thorough economic research on the hundred largest cities in the United States. Like the program itself, this research and other government data-gathering during the New Deal provided jobs as it guided policy decisions (Gelfand 1975). The analysis used projected population growth, manufacturing employment and wages, wholesale and retail sales, and industry; the optimal sites were near cities with stable, diverse economies likely to provide jobs long into the future (Cam 1939; Architectural Record 1936). In addition, the Resettlement Administration wanted to ensure that selected cities did not have much suburban development and demonstrated a need for low-cost housing. Stein surmised that even before the economic research was complete, the shame of the Hoovervilles in downtown Washington, D.C., was the impetus for choosing nearby Prince George's County, Maryland, as the site for Greenbelt, the first new town (Architectural Record 1936; Stein 1966).

## Physical Development

The Suburban Resettlement Division eventually committed to four sites based on accessibility to employment, land prices, topography, fertile soil, and proximate parkland and wooded areas (Architectural Record 1936; Fulmer 1941): Greenbelt, Maryland (outside Washington, D.C.); Greenhills, Ohio (Cincinnati); Greendale, Wisconsin (Milwaukee); and

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<sup>1</sup> Tugwell apparently resented the extra demands placed on his project; "when relief laborers at Greenbelt were forced to use shovels instead of bulldozers, Tugwell reportedly infuriated Roosevelt by suggesting the president might like them to use spoons" (Arnold 1971, 115).

Greenbrook, New Jersey (Bound Brook/New Brunswick). Each town had its own team of planners, engineers, and architects, resulting in different layouts and plans. Frederick Bigger was the overall chief of planning for the proposed communities, and shared with the four teams community and regional planning principles gained from his work on Radburn and Chatham Village in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Bigger recognized that despite their separation from the main cities and other suburbs, the four towns would exist within larger regions and had to accommodate both existing conditions and growth (Bauman and Muller 2002). Wide latitude for creativity allowed the original plan of Greenbelt, Maryland, to be based on Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine*, complete with 50- to 60-story skyscrapers; John Lansill convinced Tugwell, whose idea this had been, to plan for single and low-rise multifamily units instead (Myhra 1983). Stein (1966) saw little evidence of this kind of creativity and individuality in the type of housing development that the federal government pursued later in the twentieth century.

Greenbelt Town planners emphasized high quality site planning, adequate infrastructure, a mix of housing types, open space separation from other suburbs, minimal commuting, resident-owned cooperative businesses, a community center, and recreation (Hancock 1988). Despite the autonomous planning teams, streets in Greenbelt Towns were often contoured, allowing for large residential blocks complete with trees and playgrounds. To Stein (1966), this allowed Greenbelt, Maryland, to be discovered, not invented, in a crescent-shaped plan dictated by nature. The surrounding belts of land allowed the communities to be close to food-producing agricultural land, provided space for recreation, prevented overcrowding and the invasion of undesirable people and land uses, and more generally fostered the union of urban and rural life (Dreier 1936). The towns addressed several problems of modern motor traffic by using underpasses and paths to separate pedestrians from vehicles and facing houses towards an interior lawn, away from the street (USFSA 1938). Buildings in Greenbelt, Maryland were spaced widely, at right angles to the road, so as not to interfere with or create blind spots for vehicular traffic. The social focus of the town was also its physical center, and included the community center, government center, cultural, religious, and education services, entertainment, recreation, and the marketplace. The town was divided into superblocks of fourteen acres, five of which were built by the Resettlement Administration between October 1935 and 1937 (Stein 1966). The contemporary architectural critic Mumford applauded the concrete block and brick materials used at Greenbelt as an improvement over the "bogus rustic and the pseudo-historical" design of existing American suburbs (1938, 452). The federal government retained ownership of the entire town, allowing for greater flexibility in design; for example, individual lot boundaries were not clearly marked and units were clustered (Architectural Record 1936).

The planners of Greenbelt and the other towns included the utilities, community amenities, and infrastructure necessary for growth. As of 1941, Greenbelt had 885 units and could be expanded to 3,000. An additional 1,000 homes were built by the Federal Works Agency under the 1940 Lanham Defense Act for employees of the War and Navy Departments. The design and structure of the units was similar to the existing development, but the quality of construction was inferior, the site planning was worse, and the new development strained existing schools and community facilities (USDA 1941; Arnold 1971).

## Residents

Before designing the towns, the planning teams solicited the opinions of families with modest incomes living in nearby cities. The surveys included demographic data about the families as well as preferences for size and type of dwelling unit and community amenities. Responses indicated that Washington, D.C., families were smaller than those in the other selected cities, that families in Cincinnati wanted to keep their own stoves when they moved, and that potential residents in Milwaukee wanted to live in detached homes (Architectural Record 1936). Results from thousands of surveys identified the typical Milwaukee family as a four-person household with a male wage-earner who traveled between fifteen and twenty minutes to a skilled factory job and had an annual salary of \$1,400. These families were, on average, younger than both the city and U.S. population. Responding to survey requests, planners included such community amenities as an auto service station, movie theater, drug store, health services, barber shop, village fire and police services, tennis courts, an amphitheater, and a tavern (Alanen and Eden 1987).

The government encouraged younger families to apply for units in the belief they would adjust more easily to life in a new community. As a result, Greenbelt was initially a very young community: the first residents moved into apartments and row houses designed for married couples with and without children, and the plan even included some smaller units for bachelors (there was no mention of accommodations for single women). Its planners wanted Greenbelt to have a population representative of nearby Washington, D.C.: 70 percent government workers, 30 percent holding non-government jobs; 30 percent Catholic, 7 percent Jewish, and 63 percent Protestant. While Greenbelt may have achieved religious diversity, in terms of race and education its population was very homogeneous, similar to Radburn (Stein 1966). New residents of the defense homes were typically older, had higher incomes, and bigger families than the original Greenbelt residents.

Preference was given to poorly housed families having limited incomes, who paid rent ranging from \$21.75 to \$45.85 per month (\$306 to \$645 in 2007 dollars) (Stein 1996). The government's preference for families with no more than six people, only one person (male) employed outside the home, and paying no more than 25 percent of its income for housing, seriously limited the number of eligible families in Washington, D.C. To meet the restrictions and be able to afford rent in Greenbelt, many families would have to have two incomes (USDA 1937; Fulmer 1941). Though housing was to be affordable for moderate income households, the towns were also expected to be completely self-supporting, require no annual subsidy, and repay some of the government investment (USDA 1937). Limiting the incomes of families housed in the Greenbelt Towns was also designed to appease those who were critical of using taxpayer money to compete with the private market (Fulmer 1941).

Whether a direct consequence of government planning or not, many residents of the Greenbelt Towns participated actively in their communities. Tenants exhibited pride and a sense of security typically associated with homeowners (Fulmer 1941). Shops in the commercial centers were operated as cooperatives, returning the profits to their patrons. While initially very successful, especially in Greenbelt, these cooperatives languished as the towns' populations became less stable (Arnold 1971).

### **The Other Greens: Greenhills and Greendale**

Though Greenbelt is likely the best-known of the Greenbelt Towns, two others were constructed simultaneously. The Resettlement Administration's initial research noted the high political competence of planning departments in the Cincinnati, Ohio, area, and Cincinnati's high concentration of German-Americans was seen as an asset because of the perceived German cultural values of industry, thrift, and efficiency (Alanan and Eden 1987). In Greenhills, located five miles north of Cincinnati, the federal government built 676 housing units within a curvilinear street layout. Greenhills included elements of the Radburn plan, most notably cul-de-sac car courts that facilitated easy access to homes. With 112 one-bedroom apartments, 40 two-bedroom apartments, 18 single-family four-bedroom homes, 6 single-family three-bedroom homes, and 260 two-bedroom units, 208 three-bedroom units, and 32 four-bedroom units in row houses, Greenhills provided housing for families of many sizes (Stein 1966).

Milwaukee became a serious candidate for a Greenbelt Town because of its reputation for strong metropolitan planning, its socialist-leaning politics, and its experiences with other Garden City-like developments

(Alanen and Eden 1987). Greendale, outside of Milwaukee, was based heavily on Radburn, especially its pedestrian scale, central grouping of public buildings, and street plan. Its streets and pedestrian paths were separate, promoting efficient travel. Unlike Radburn and Greenbelt, it was not developed in superblocks, and had no expansive town parks or pedestrian underpasses (Alanen and Eden 1987). Of the 572 units initially built at Greendale, 274 were single-family detached units, a higher proportion than in either of the other two towns (USDA 1938). Greendale is celebrated among the Greenbelt Towns as having the highest level of cooperation between its urban and rural populations as a result of the agricultural use of its greenbelt and open space (Stein 1966). Greendale, however, did not provide housing for the poorest families and did little to alleviate Milwaukee's housing crisis. Its racial homogeneity (all white) reflected the income restrictions and segregationist policies of the Resettlement Administration; there were separate projects for blacks (Alanen and Eden 1987). Despite the planning team's intentions, Greendale never became a community of interdependent places and intersecting lives, and its collective plans were never realized (Alanen and Eden 1987).

### **Greenbelt Towns as Garden Cities**

Although there was no explicit mention of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City in the Greenbelt Town plans, some historians cite it as a model for the Greenbelt Town planners and many elements of the Greenbelt plan are characteristic of Howard's concept. Greenbelt, Maryland, provided a healthy living environment for those of modest incomes, but it did not attract a significant number of industries or jobs. Like its predecessors, the garden suburbs, Greenbelt never became the commercial and industrial center that some of its planners envisioned. While Washington, D.C. provided plenty of jobs to Greenbelt residents and some were able to find jobs closer to their homes, no concentration of jobs ever existed within the town. This led to increased transportation costs and more time spent commuting (Stein 1966).

While the other Greenbelt Towns used their open space for agriculture and recreation and cultivated a stronger connection between the urban and rural populations, Greenbelt dedicated most of its open space to recreation and gardens (Stein 1966). As in Howard's original concept, Greenbelt's land remained in public ownership, though some smaller plots were sold to churches or private developers, neither of which threatened the town's plan. Tugwell believed in Howard's idea and knew Garden City planner Raymond Unwin. Creese calls the Greenbelt Towns the "closest derivative of garden city theories" and compares the towns

to Wythenshawe, a garden suburb of Manchester that had a greenbelt, generous provisions for open space, and pedestrian paths (Creese 1966). Despite these similarities, one source claims that the impetus for the Greenbelt Towns came not from the Garden City but from an analysis of population growth at the fringe of cities. Suburban resettlement began to complement the existing trend (Gelfand 1975).

The Greenbelt Towns were also influenced by the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), a group of planners and architects who championed Garden Cities and decentralized regional development. Radburn was recommended as a model of town development as early as 1931 in President Hoover's Conference on Building and Home Ownership (Fulmer 1941). First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt served on the board of the corporation that developed Radburn and later on defended the Greenbelt Town program (Arnold 1971). Several RPAA members were recruited to participate in New Deal agencies and projects, though only those involved with the Greenbelt Towns had any real influence. Clarence Stein, Henry Wright, and Stuart Chase advised the Resettlement Administration in its planning of the Greenbelt Towns (Buder 1990). With guidance from RPAA members, Greenbelt more closely followed the example of Radburn than did the other two completed towns. Greenbelt's superblocks, housing units, and specialized circulation separating pedestrian and vehicular traffic were all derivative of elements of the Radburn plan. Its row houses were grouped around dead-end auto courts with principal rooms facing away from the service side of the unit and towards the garden and park interior of the blocks. Like Radburn, each Greenbelt Town was initially developed as a single neighborhood, with school facilities, community buildings, shopping, government offices, and recreation at the center. All homes were within a half a mile of the community center and accessible via garden paths (Stein 1966).

### **Greenbrook and the Demise of the Demonstration**

A fourth Greenbelt Town, Greenbrook, New Jersey, was planned and started, but stopped by legal action seven months into construction. Five miles west of New Brunswick, New Jersey, Greenbrook was the most likely of the four towns to integrate industry into its plan: 750 units were to be built on 125 acres well within a 40-minute drive of 50,000 industrial jobs (Stein 1966). However, local citizens challenged the federal government in court, saying that federal jurisdiction would threaten home rule, that it would cost more to build and provide services to the new town than it would provide in revenue, and that Greenbrook would cause their property values to decrease by housing lower income people. Some even alleged that building a new town near New Brunswick was

a political maneuver designed to turn the town Democratic by the 1936 election (Arnold 1971).

Though the Resettlement Administration eventually won popular support for the project, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled that: first, Greenbrook was unnecessary as a job generator because sufficient opportunities for employment existed; and second, the development would detract from the local community by introducing industrial workers to the rural community and by lessening local autonomy based on the concerns cited above (Arnold 1971). This decision limited further federal involvement in housing, establishing it as a state issue, and effectively stopped all new Greenbelt Town activity (Myhra 1983). Newspapers nationwide welcomed the decision as a blow to all federal housing programs, and criticized Congress for giving too much power to the president. *The Harvard Law Review* disagreed, arguing that the federal government was the only agency capable of such comprehensive and worthwhile projects. Conflicts like these turned the federal government's attention to alternative programs sponsored by the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act that were financed federally but controlled locally (Arnold 1971).

To some, the controversy over Greenbrook signaled the end of the Resettlement Administration and of comprehensive New Deal planning, but there were other limitations to the demonstration: none of the towns attracted any significant industry, leaving the residents dependent on central cities for employment; high building costs resulted in only 2,267 units built across the three towns, just 60 percent of the total units planned. Furthermore, the towns excluded African-Americans and those with very low incomes; the workers who built the homes were ineligible to live there. As land prices escalated, they became single-class communities, too expensive for the poor (Hancock 1988; Gelfand 1975). Mumford (1938) argued that their greatest shortcoming was their disconnection from the Tennessee Valley Authority, where the federal government was heavily involved in social and regional planning. Opponents of the Resettlement Administration would not support government competition with the private market, saw the Administration's programs as socialism disguised as cooperative planning, and refused to accept that one-third of the nation's population was ill-housed (Arnold 1971).

The Resettlement Administration had planned to divest itself of the towns when they were complete, but they remained under federal control so that the government could expand them and use their infrastructure to capacity (Arnold 1971). By the end of 1947, the towns had been administered by five different agencies, and from 1947 through 1954 they were administered by the Public Housing Administration

(Arnold 1971). In 1949, Public Law 65 allowed the transfer of the towns to private ownership, permitting veterans groups and other nonprofit associations to purchase the towns through direct negotiation. The Greenhills Homeowners Corporation bought the complete townsite in 1950. The Greenbelt Veteran Housing Corporation purchased Greenbelt's row houses and some of the remaining undeveloped land in 1952, with everything else sold at public auction. That same year 97 percent of Greendale residents purchased their homes; the Milwaukee Community Development Corporation purchased the undeveloped and commercial land (Arnold 1971).

## Lasting Effects

The Greenbelt Town program's success in building three complete towns in 18 months did not go unnoticed by future government programs in housing and urban development. Government interest in new towns resumed during the Kennedy Administration, but there was little support until President Johnson called for a significant proportion of all new growth in the country to occur in new towns (Biles 1998). Johnson saw New Towns as a way to expand housing, while architects and planners used it to promote comprehensive regional planning. The 1960s New Town was again based on a complex, multipurpose vision, with transportation, public facilities, leisure facilities, and housing for up to twenty thousand people, as well as economic self-sufficiency (Biles 1998). Like Howard's Garden City and the Greenbelt Towns, New Towns were also expected to house low income families. The proposed New Towns Act stipulated government-insured mortgages for private developers, and federal low interest loans to states for land acquisition. Perhaps discouraged by the government's past record in new town investment (recovering only 53 percent of its \$36 million investment in the Greenbelt Towns), the Mortgage Bankers Association, the National Association of Home Builders, and inner-city advocates such as big city mayors all opposed the federal government devoting resources to developing new, greenfield towns (Biles 1998; Gelfand 1975).

The 1965 Urban Development Act included a provision for New Towns, but lacked sufficient incentives to attract major developer investment. Although the later New Communities Act (part of the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968) included long term loans with repayment based on revenue from the resulting towns, its opponents predicted that the Act would lead to socialism, financial disaster, white flight, and center city deterioration (Biles 1998). Thirteen New Towns were funded, but none was ever financially viable, in part because the Nixon Administration withdrew nearly all federal support in the 1970s, but also because of the

lagging housing market. It was also hard to justify federal investment in middle-class suburbs while the poor languished in cities (Alanen and Eden 1987). By 1976 all but one of the New Towns was bankrupt, and by 1981 the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development had foreclosed on nine of the towns. The program was officially terminated in 1983, after fifteen years and a \$590 million investment (Biles 1998).

Thus, the 1960s saw the same resistance to expanding the government's role in housing that the Greenbelt Towns encountered in the 1930s, when the building, real estate, finance, and mass media industries clearly preferred private enterprise and the free market to public planning (Arnold 1971). The federal government is not solely responsible for the financial failure of nearly all of the 1960s New Towns; better knowledge, more effective leadership, and less opposition from private interests could have stimulated further government interest in urban development and housing.

Although the federal government did not remain involved in large-scale new town planning, it is probable that private developers looked to government experience with the Greenbelt Towns as a model for new town planning. Birch (2002) places the Greenbelt Towns in the second of five generations of Garden City planners starting with Unwin's Letchworth and Welwyn and the RPAA's Radburn. Among the later generations are Robert E. Simon and James W. Rouse, developers of 1960s new towns Reston, Virginia and Columbia, Maryland, respectively, and the New Urbanist developments of Seaside and Celebration (Birch 2002).

## **Lessons from the Greenbelt Towns**

Though the federal government has proposed only one comprehensive town planning and development program since the 1930s, the Greenbelt Towns remain an important part of federal planning history. In addition to illustrating the government's capacity for comprehensive planning, the Greenbelt Towns were close derivatives of the Garden Cities and Neighborhood Unit planning movements, both of which remain important and legendary as theories of city planning. These precedents notwithstanding, the Greenbelt Towns were created in the absence of comprehensive experience with new town planning or systematic empirical research on its effects. That the knowledge base underlying their creation was thin seems especially obvious given the divergent and possibly incompatible purposes they were expected to serve (i.e., innovative design, employment for unskilled workers, infrastructure development, and subsidized living for low-income families, all while producing an adequate return on the original economic investment).

Given their singular status, however, it is not surprising that the Greenbelt Towns received twelve million visitors between July 1, 1936, and June 30, 1937 (Cam 1939), showing that despite the public's reluctance to support federal involvement in town planning, people were intrigued by the program and sought opportunities to see its results.

The Greenbelt Towns program reminds us that while challenging times often give planners their best opportunities to influence community change, even under exigent conditions the most original and constructive proposals lead inevitably to well-worn political debates over the wisdom of government social engineering and interference with private markets. Past critics of planned communities were able to justify their skepticism when a single small community fell short of the rather unrealistic expectations that in a matter of months it would generate employment, house low income families, and establish an aesthetically pleasing physical connection between gritty cities and the bucolic countryside. Planners today should approach these opportunities and the resulting debates armed with practical theories and sound empirical knowledge in advocating for evidence-based state or federal action.

The opposing forces remain formidable: even in post-Katrina New Orleans the federal government has been reluctant to assume wide-scale involvement in planning. On the grounds that he did not want to set the precedent of government involvement in real estate, President Bush declined to support a bill to finance reconstruction throughout Louisiana by buying and consolidating flood-damaged properties and selling them to developers (Baum 2006). Despite the vast need and unprecedented opportunity to re-plan an entire city, it appears that the federal government and the American public will once again rely on private interests to enact change, playing minor supporting roles in what could be a renaissance of government involvement in comprehensive city planning. The Greenbelt Towns emerged from federal policies designed to alleviate unemployment and create new types of communities. Although it is unlikely that the federal government will support such a program in the future, should there be support for government intervention in the planning or re-planning of cities marked by physical, social, or economic distress, planners should consider the Greenbelt Towns a lesson of how well-intentioned government investment can ultimately be undermined by our reliance on, and comfort within, the private market.

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