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Wartime Housing from 1917-1918 and its Place in the American Planning Tradition

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ABSTRACT

The housing and town planning contributions of the Emergency Fleet Corporation (E.F.C.) and the United States Housing Corporation (U.S.H.C.) from 1917-1918 were the focus of a considerable backlog of ideas relating the provision of alternatives to the congested and "unhealthy" living conditions of the industrial laborer. They were also a rallying point for many noteworthy reformers, theorists, and practitioners as they prepared to face the immediate global conflict, the prospect of reconstruction and a new era of progress. The already substantial need for adequate housing had been intensified due to the demands of wartime production of ships and munitions. Reformers had long recognized the necessity of government involvement in the housing problem. For, while the efforts of philanthropic organizations and paternalistic industrialists were responsible for significant models, they had failed to produce the momentum necessary to deal with such an urgent and pervasive need. As the United States prepared to enter the war, it became increasingly clear that, while we had failed to follow the European example of government involvement in housing following the industrial revolution, we could not deny the importance of industry in fueling the war machine and the dependence of this effort on the availability of a reliable and efficient work force of ever increasing numbers. The actions of the Allies had been both decisive and highly effective in this area leaving little doubt that the government would soon be faced with a major commitment and a bold, if some-what abortive, entry into the field of housing. Thus a collection of the country's most skilled practitioners in the fields of architecture (housing), landscape architecture and the emerging field of town planning, with full government support and in the patriotic pitch of the time, undertook to create worker's towns and villages on an unprecedented scale.

Within a brief twelve-month period between the initiation of the program and signing of the armistice in 1918, the E.F.C. had completed 26 projects, providing 8,949 homes, 119 apartments, 21 dormitories and 9 hotels.' Funds were made available to the U.S.H.C. on July 25, 1918. During the 109

days between this date and the signing of the armistice, plans had been initiated for 128 sites and construction was underway on 40 sites.' All told, these two organizations had provided housing for 360,000 workers and their families.' It would be misleading to assert that these projects represented a major breakthrough in the theory of town planning; rather I hope to examine them as the result of the thoughtful, though speedy, synthesis of the most forward thinking of the time regarding the provision of worker housing and at the same time shed some light on the development of the field of Town Planning in this country at this pivotal time in its growth.

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The idea of industrial towns was certainly not new to America. We can trace their development from Lowell, Mass. and the many towns of the Boston Associates in the early 1800's through to Pullman, Indiana in 1885. Planned by Beman & Barrett, Pullman proved an important model, due to the provision of major civic amenities and the sensitive architectural development of its modified gridiron plan. The plans of Lowell and Pullman may be compared with the plans for Tacoma, Wa. for the Northern Pacific Railroad and Vandergrift, Pa. for the Apollo Iron and Steel Company by F. L. Olmsted. Tacoma and Vandergrift represented the late Victorian ideal of the romantic suburb and contrast sharply with the puritanical austerity of Lowell. Of the planned industrial communities which followed, Fairfield, Ala. (fig. 1) and Kistler, Pa. exemplify the more formalized synthesis of these earlier models which was to characterize the wartime efforts of the E.F.C. and the U.S.H.C.. George Miller, the planner of Fairfield, and John Nolen, the planner of Kistler, were both contributors to these efforts, the later also being a central figure in the development of the field of City Planning.⁴

The event most often credited with establishing the field of urban planning in the period prior to W.W.I is the Columbian Exhibition of 1893. However, the City Beautiful movement which it inspired, with its emphasis on civic beautification, cultural amenity and Beaux-Arts planning, though influential

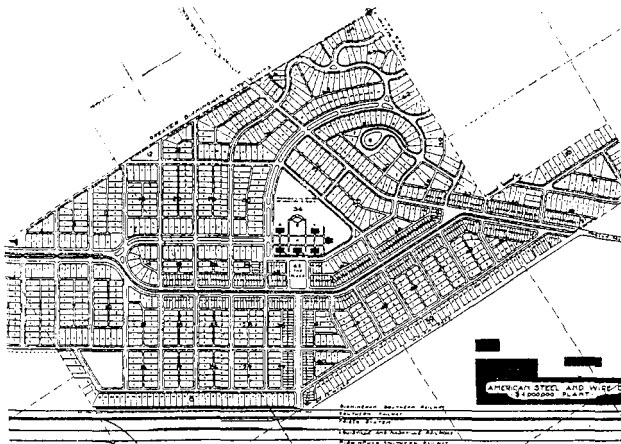


Fig. 1. Fairfield, Ala. by George Miller, 1910.

in the physical planning of the pre-war period, was soon to give way to a new breed of planner. John Nolen was to prove an important transitional figure who, along with the teacher and author Charles Robinson, regarded city planning, not simply as an aesthetic exercise, but as a "problem" which could be solved through the adoption of a more scientific method. This call for a broadening of the scope of city planning efforts, and its method of operation, was supported by the growing reform movement. From the very beginning they had attacked the problem of our nation's cities by focusing on the conditions of the working poor, rather than on the provision of a cultural amenities and infrastructure which largely served the growing upper and middle classes.

Aside from paternalistic private endeavors in the field of housing such as Lowell and Pullman, the plight of the worker in the early 1900's had been left largely in the hands of philanthropic reform associations. These associations were largely concerned with urban improvements as a means of benefiting the public health.⁵ Two members of such organizations, Lawrence Veiller and Otto Eidlitz, were to figure prominently in defining the scope and the philosophies of the E.F.C. and the U.S.H.C. - Eidlitz as director of the Bureau of Industrial Housing and Transportation and president of the U.S.H.C. and Veiller as secretary of the National Housing Association, whose members were to become key figures in both the E.F.C. and U.S.H.C.⁶ Prior to this, both had been authors of revisions to the N.Y. Tenement Act of 1867 and members of the Tenement House Commission.⁷ Though the effects of such legislation were substantial, the efforts of such reformers were unsuccessful in establishing direct government involvement in the field of housing. It was not until 1915 that the state of Massachusetts passed legislation authorizing the expenditure of state funds for the construction of model worker housing.⁸ Thus, at Lowell in 1917, A. C. Comey (later a planner for the U.S.H.C.) and the Massachusetts Homestead Commission constructed the first government experiment in worker housing.⁹ Here we observe the impact of Ebenezer Howard's garden city ideal on the thinking of reformers and practitioners alike. The work of the Homestead Commission at Lowell can also be seen as owing

much to the influence of the country life movement, with its emphasis on relieving congested urban conditions, providing a healthy environment and improving educational opportunities.

A more refined expression of these aims, however, can be seen at Forest Hills Gardens on Long Island. Here, in 1911, the J. R. Sage Foundation was to construct a garden suburb based on the English model.¹⁰ Though it was by no means worker housing, Forest Hills Gardens was conceived as a planned neighborhood complete with schools and shops. Planned by F. L. Olmsted Jr. with Grosvenor Atterbury as architect (Olmsted was later to head the town planning division of the U.S.H.C. and Atterbury was a member of the committee on wartime housing at the N.H.A.), Forest Hill Gardens, not only proved a valuable precedent for the immediate wartime programs; but, in its use of a hierarchical street pattern, and limited introduction of the "superblock" (first seen in Port Sunlight and later popularized by Unwin) was also influential in the development of Clarence Perry's Neighborhood Unit Theory and the post-war work of Clarence Stein and Henry Wright (Wright was assistant for town planning at the E.F.C. and Stein was also a collaborator in their efforts).¹¹

THE ENGLISH EXAMPLE

In the "Report of the U.S.H.C." dated December 3, 1918, John Cross, Chief Architect of the U.S.H.C., opens with the statement that "The great examples of modern workmen's villages are to be found in Great Britain and Germany." In the area of government support of housing there was the early work of the London County Council, Housing of the Working Classes branch founded in 1893. In the area of industrial towns, there were the examples of Port Sunlight (fig. 2) and Bourneville. Then, as already touched upon, there was the influence of Howard and the Garden City movement. However, in this context, we must also recognize the important role of the Town Planning Conference of 1910, which was to be the first formal meeting to unite leading planners from Europe and America. It was here that the American contingent of Burnham, Robinson and Bassett met with Brinckman, Stubben and Eberstadt of Germany, Henard of France and Howard, Geddes and Unwin of England. Unwin discussed the Town Planning Act of 1909, his work at the Garden City of Letchworth in 1903 and Hampstead Garden Suburb of 1905 (fig. 3), while citing the influence of Sitte, Stubben and Brinckman on this work.¹² Unwin advocated a more medieval pattern as proposed in Sitte's book *The Planning of Cities According to Artistic Principles* of 1889 which was translated into French in 1902 (and only much later in English), and which was familiar to Unwin prior to the planning of Hampstead.¹³ In his book, *Town Planning in Practice*, of 1909 he cites numerous examples in support of Sitte's theories and of their implementation in his work. While *Town Planning Practice* does not show up on the selected bibliography of references available in the library of the U.S.H.C., Unwin's visit to the U. S. in 1911 (and the publication in the U. S. of his articles "Improvement of Towns" in 1901 and "The Relation of Land Values

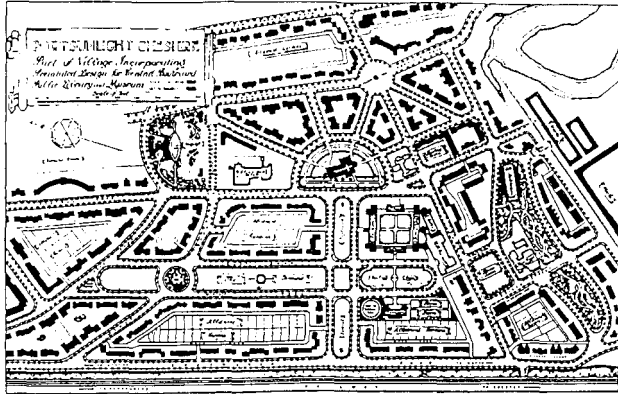


Fig. 2. Port Sunlight by Prestwich & Mawson, 1910.

and Town Planning," in 1914) would suggest a broader acquaintance with Unwin's important work."

If we examine writing on Town Planning in the U.S. during this period we find many references to European models. Graham Taylor, in his 1915 book *Satellite Cities, A Study of Industrial Suburbs*, cites Fairfield, Ala., with its "modern plan," as offering a glimmer of hope amidst a Dickensque portrayal of the greed and corruption which seemed to predominate other American examples. The English example is championed by Taylor for the provision of adequate controls to prevent the squalor which soon developed in outlying areas; and also for the adoption of the Garden Suburb model. The cooperative ownership and management of public facilities, pioneered in England, is also championed as a means of instilling civic pride and freeing the worker from the control of the industrialists. John Nolen, in a companion article "Factory and Home," likewise calls for cooperation between labor and management for the provision of healthy and attractive communities near the work place, and cites numerous English examples along with those from America, Germany, France and Switzerland. He also expressed great admiration for the Garden City movement and English achievements in housing and town planning during his travels in Europe, and acknowledged a debt to Unwin for his tremendous influence in this area.¹⁵

Charles Robinson's book *City Planning* of 1916 opens immediately to a 1572 plan of Brussels accompanied by the following caption: "The distinction between major and minor streets is marked; there will scarcely be failure to note how rare is the straight line, every thoroughfare taking graceful curves and varying in width." Later, in a section entitled "Minor Streets for Humble Homes," largely devoted to English and German Garden cities and suburbs, he states "Camillo Sitte in analyzing the beauty of medieval towns, has called attention to how largely it is due to the way the buildings were grouped in street pictures" – a technique he credits certain Garden Suburbs with utilizing very effectively.¹⁶ This emphasis on closed vistas and the grouping of houses in relation to the street was to reappear again and again in the various handbooks of the E.F.C. and the U.S.H.C. and is a feature

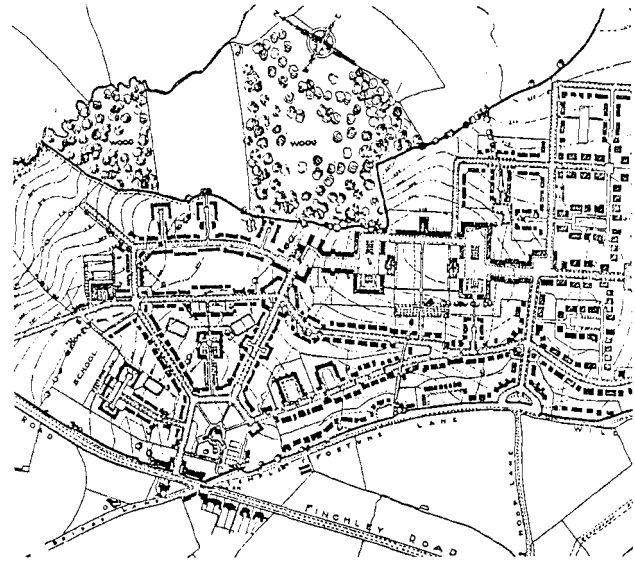


Fig. 3. Hampstead Garden Suburb by Parker & Unwin, 1905.

which distinguishes the works of these two organizations when compared with earlier works in this country. Robinson also features drawings of Unwin's proposals for the provision of amenities internal to the block. This informed exposition of the planning techniques utilized in these English examples is further complimented with numerous photographs of the Krupp workers villages near Essen, Germany (fig. 4).

Perhaps more important in establishing the policies and objectives of the wartime housing programs in the United States; however, were a series of articles written between September of 1917 and February 1918. These articles, published by the *Journal of the A.I.A.*, and collected in a book entitled *The Housing Problem War and Peace*, focused on the British initiatives in the production of wartime housing, and covered a broad range of issues illustrating the need for a more long-term commitment to the problem of working class housing. Charles Whitaker, editor of the *Journal of the A.I.A.* and a leading reformer, sent Frederick Ackerman to England in October of 1917 to gather the information and the thorough documentation which accompanies the articles presented. Of the projects illustrated, Well Hall at Eltham, Kent and Queensferry can be seen as representative. Well Hall is clearly more extreme in its medieval aspirations and Queensferry represents a more formal interpretation of these same influences with limited prospects and local symmetries. The unified yet varied architectural development of the projects shown was also important in setting the standard for projects in the United States. Ackerman was also quick to point out the differences between the British and the American experiences in the area of housing and our "relative lack of accomplishment along broad social lines of cooperative undertaking"; yet, it was with the most lofty ideals and armed with knowledge of the most current theories and models, that a remarkable cast of the country's most gifted experts were gathered in this unprecedented collaborative effort.

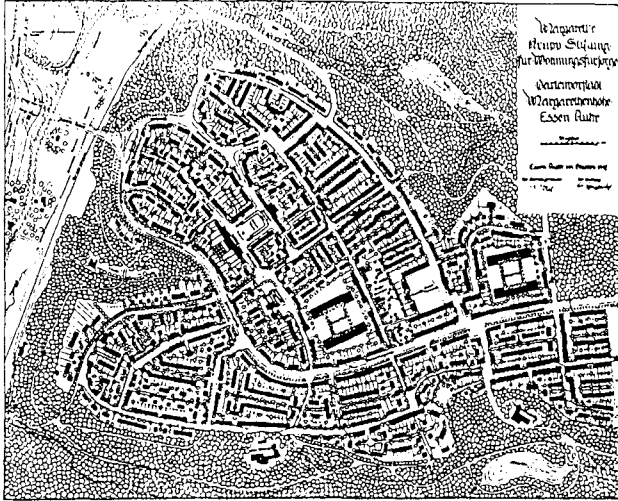


Fig. 4. Krupp worker village at Essen, Germany.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE E.F.C. AND THE U.S.H.C.

On May 3, 1917, Samuel Gompers, then labor representative to the Council of National Defense, recommended the establishment of a sub-committee to investigate the problem of the provision of housing to meet possible wartime needs. As the result of a survey, this subcommittee recommended that permanent housing be provided. The ensuing battle against the bunkhouse mentality of many members of Congress represented the first and most significant of a series of hard fought victories. A committee was then formed under the direction of Otto Eidlitz to produce a report which was issued to President Wilson on October 31st. At this time Eidlitz, along with Lawrence Veiller (secretary of the N.H.A.), proceeded to assemble a collection of advisors and assistants to face this large scale effort. Early in 1918 Veiller produced a report entitled "Standards Recommended for Permanent Industrial housing Developments"; however, it was not until July 25, 1918 that funds were allocated for the acquisition of land.¹⁸ Veiller's Standards were significant, not only in the thoroughness of their presentation, but in the scope and quality of the advisors consulted in their compilation. Along with a real estate consultant, a sociologist, engineers, numerous architects, landscape architects and town planners, those advisors included: Grosvenor Atterbury, A.C. Comey, Robert Kohn, John Nolen and F.L. Olmsted Jr.¹⁹ In addition to the above, other prominent contributors to the work of these two organizations included: Henry Wright, St. Louis, architect, assistant director of the Town Planning Comm. of the E.F.C. and J.S. Pray, landscape architect, chairman of the School of Landscape Architecture at Harvard University, instructor in city planning and town planner for the U.S.H.C." Truly a remarkable cast of characters. Not since the Chicago Plan of 1909 had such a distinguished group of professionals been gathered together. Yet here the range of disciplines represented and the tenor of their arguments illustrate a marked

shift in the focus of the urban debate and opens the door to the development of the field of city planning as a distinct discipline.

TOWN PLANNING PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

Volume two of the Report of the U.S.H.C. offers perhaps the most comprehensive coverage of the objectives and principles put forward by these two organizations and well as complete documentation of a large number of the mostly unrealized projects of the U.S.H.C. Firstly we are assured that "good appearance" is a financial asset which can be achieved for little or no extra cost. The formal treatment of the street was discouraged as it too often leads to an institutional feeling; however, given buildings of an appropriate scale, intersections could become points of interest punctuating less monumental groupings of houses. F.L. Olmsted Jr. offers the following summary:

"The experience of the corporation (U.S.H.C.) has merely confirmed in this respect a generally accepted opinion of town planners that in residential developments, especially for smaller houses, comparatively short street vistas in proper scale with the houses are extremely important, whether secured by absolute discontinuity of the minor streets or by moderate curves or angles in them; and that such departures from the theoretical economy of the rectangular plan need not involve, if well designed, an appreciably greater cost per house for streets, utilities and land."?

The curving of streets in response to changing topography was also supported as offering not only variety and picturesque interest, but offering savings in the necessary cut and fill required to adapt difficult topography to the demands of the gridiron.

The "Suggestions to Town Planners" speak more directly to the large-scale problem at hand. The design of the development itself should respond to the context, providing access to existing facilities or institutions. If adequate facilities were not accessible, they were to be provided in order to offer a complete range of activities and services, both commercial and institutional. The separation of certain functions according to some notion of zoning was also proposed. In addition, community facilities should be grouped together to assist in economy of construction, maintenance and operation, and to form a focal point of substantial character. Of primary concern was the relationship of the major thoroughfares to such civic centers, the surrounding towns or city centers, railroad stations and, most importantly, to the industry served. Such thoroughfares should carry traffic through or past the town as efficiently as possible, with particular attention to the communication and configuration of divisions necessitated by such intrusion. Care should also be exercised to provide a clear distinction between the primary and secondary circulation serving these resultant neighborhoods. Trolley lines

were also a key component of most plans to give access to the city center and ensure an adequate supply of workers from surrounding areas. Transportation had been a key issue in the discussion of possible alternatives to the provision of permanent housing and was to remain a primary component of efforts to increase the efficiency of outlying industrial areas. Lastly, a variety of open spaces, for use as parks or playgrounds, were seen as an essential amenity; and one which offered opportunities to take advantage of significant natural features. Lacking such natural features, a park could also be seen as providing a setting for the civic center or another major civic element.

CONCLUSION

The signing of the armistice brought an abrupt end to the work of the E.F.C. and the U.S.H.C. Projects which had not started construction were discontinued, and projects which had started were only completed where extreme continuing need could be demonstrated. In the end, all funding was completely cut off on January 1, 1919. The momentum gained in the patriotic tide of wartime efforts was almost entirely lost; and forward looking talk of reconstruction gave way to highly unfortunate Congressional accusations of extravagance and fraud.?? That the efforts of these organizations went beyond the provision of housing to meet the immediate needs of wartime production was not to be questioned, for such aims were clearly within their stated objectives and to the ultimate benefit of the American people. F. L. Olmsted Jr., in an article entitled the "Lessons of Government Housing," points to the physical, social and economic qualities of these projects as object lessons for those involved in the production of housing to a similar end."²³ However, he also warns that the high standards of these models would most likely never be duplicated due to the unprecedented involvement of experts in the fields of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Engineering, Construction, Real Estate, Finance, Labor Management, Social Work and Town Planning in a collaborative environment "under the inspiration of war service."²⁴

The importance of the collaborative model was also not lost on the circle of people under the employment of Charles Whitaker who had been so influential in publicizing the cause of wartime housing through the *A.I.A. Journal*. In New York in 1923 an informal group of architects formed an association initially known as the Garden City and Regional Planning Association and later renamed the Regional Planning Association of America. This group was made up of many prominent figures in the wartime housing efforts including: Frederick Ackerman, Henry Wright, Clarence Stein and Robert Kohn. These architects were joined by other leading reformers and the writer Lewis Mumford. Together they sought to promote the Garden City ideal and the work of its leading exponents Patrick Geddes, Raymond Unwin and Thomas Adams. This group was to have a profound influence on the various plans for the New York state region produced between 1923 - 1926, the philosophy of the T.V.A. and the

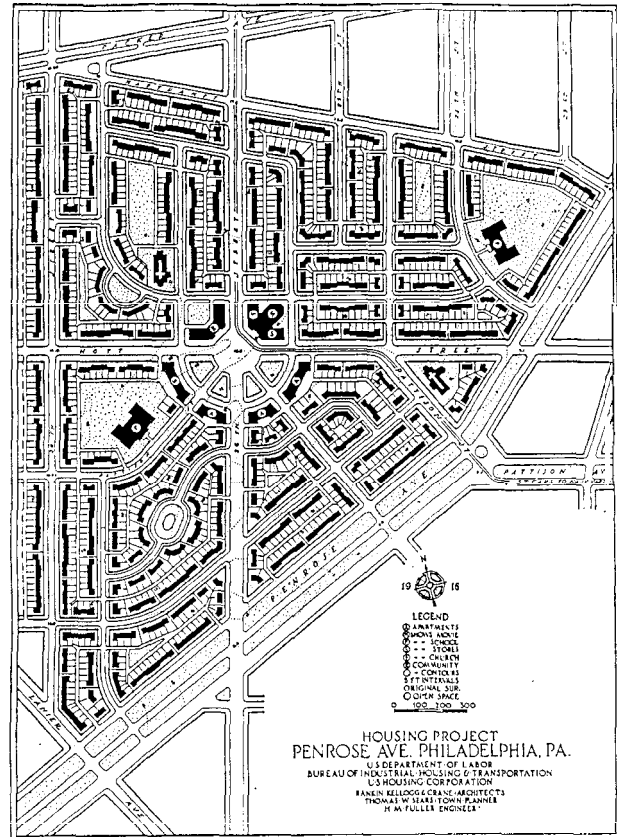


Fig. 5. Penrose Avenue by Thomas W. Sears, Lichtfield 1918-1919.

program for the construction of "greenbelt towns." Stein and Wright were also to produce many of the most notable housing prototypes of the post-war years including Sunnyside, Radburn, Chatham Village (with Ackerman) and lastly Baldwin Hills Village, perhaps the most complete statement of the ideas put forth in Radburn.

Looking back, we can mourn the loss of leaders such as Charles Whitaker who, as president of the AIA, appreciated the broader goals and responsibilities of the architectural profession. However, it is also important to note the anti-urban underpinnings of much of the ideology surrounding many reform movements of this time and the pro-automobile bias of Robert Moses, Lewis Mumford and countless others who shaped the still nascent field of urban planning at this critical time in its growth. Dignified workers villages soon gave way to slum clearance programs. Trolley lines and graceful parkways led to the massive Federal Highway programs of the 50's. We must also remember that Raymond Unwin was accused of bowing to political pressure in abandoning the Garden City ideal for the more expeditious Garden Suburb model. Likewise, it was not long before Sitte's talk of composing "street pictures" and Robinson's hierarchical street patterns and curving streets gave way to the mindless and numbing tide of "romantic" suburbs which swept this country following World War II. It is important to reiterate that, whether in Bridgeport Conn. or in Philadelphia, Pa. (fig. 5),

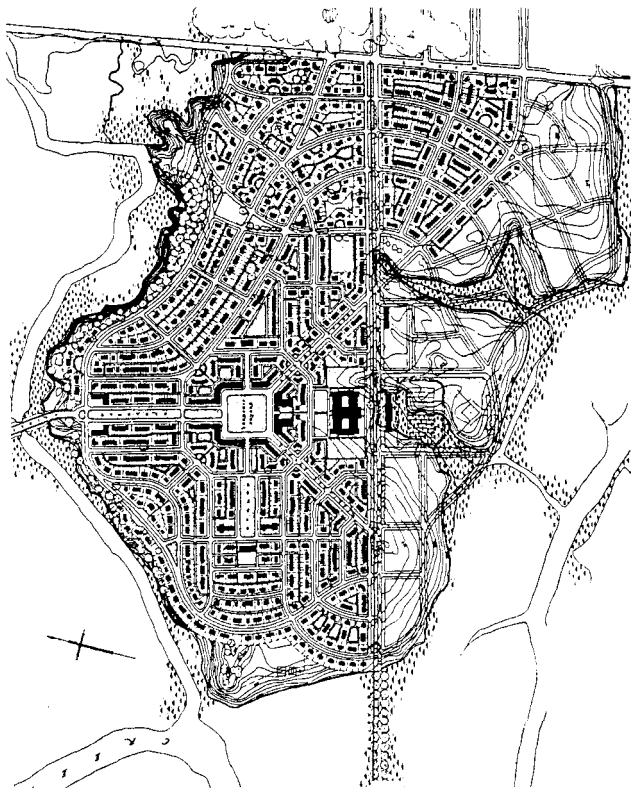


Fig. 6. Yorkship Village by Electus Pliny Rogers, collaborator. 1918-1919.

many of the projects of the E.F.C. and the U.S.H.C. were tied to urban industrial centers. If they were not, ample civic, cultural and shopping amenities were provided and public transportation remained a key component. The influence of places like Yorkship Village (fig. 6) on the products of the Congress of New Urbanism is quite obvious. What is less clear is whether the work of the E.F.C. and the U.S.H.C. represents a viable model for a true urbanism or whether such models alone are going to mend our over attenuated metropolitan regions. If this work, or the work of the "New Urbanists" inspires us, I hope that I can also make us mindful of our relationship to the forces which shape our built environment and of the professions role in engaging fellow

practitioners, economic and political powers and the public at large, in this critical task.

NOTES

- ¹ "Quantity House Production Methods, Construction Branch, Emergency Fleet Corporation," *American Architect*, Vol. 115, (1919).
- ² Edith Wood, *Recent Trends in American Housing*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1931), p. 74.
- ³ Giorgio Ciucci, *The American City*, (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The M.I.T. Press, 1979).
- ⁴ Nolen referred to himself on his drawings during his prolific early years as a landscape architect. On his contributions to the U.S.H.C. he is referred to as a town planner and in the 1920's he adopted the title of city planner.
- ⁵ Giorgio Ciucci, *The American City*, (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The M.I.T. Press, 1979).
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Charles Whittaker, Ed., *The Housing Problem War and Peace*, (Washington, D.C.: *The Journal of the A.I.A.*, 1918), p. 94.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95
- ¹⁰ Giorgio Ciucci, *Op. Cit.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 225 (Footnote refers to information in parenthesis).
- ¹² Graham Shane, "The Street in the Twentieth Century," *The Cornell Journal of Architecture*, vol. 2, (1982).
- ¹³ Walter Creese, Ed., *The Legacy of Raymond Unwin*, (Cambridge, MA and London England: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), pp. 93-94.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3. See also Ciucci, Giorgio, *Op. Cit.* p. 211. John Reps, whom I am indebted to for his support and enthusiasm for this project, suggests that every U.S. planner of this period would surely have had a copy of Unwin's book.
- ¹⁵ Giorgio Ciucci, *Op. Cit.*, pg. 214. See also Creese, Walter, *Op. Cit.* p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Charles Robinson, *City Planning*, (New York and London: G.P. Putman & Sons, 1926).
- ¹⁷ Charles Whitaker, *Op. Cit.* pgs. 3 & 18.
- ¹⁸ U.S. Department of Labor, *Report of the United States Housing Corporation*, dated Dec. 3, 1918. pg. 7 and vol. 2, pg. 17.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 505 and *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, No. 7, p. 41. It should also be noted that the inclusion of a sociologist, at that time a field still in its infancy, can be seen as illustrative of the trend toward a more positivist or scientific approach to the solution of social problems.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.* pg. 59. and U.S. Department of Labor, *Op. Cit.*, vol. 2.
- ²¹ F.L. Olmsted, Jr., "Lessons from Housing Developments in the U.S.H.C.," *Monthly Labor Review*, U.S. Department of Labor, vol. 8, (1919), p. 37.
- ²² F.L. Olmsted, Jr., *Op. Cit.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*