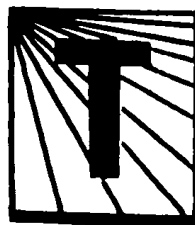
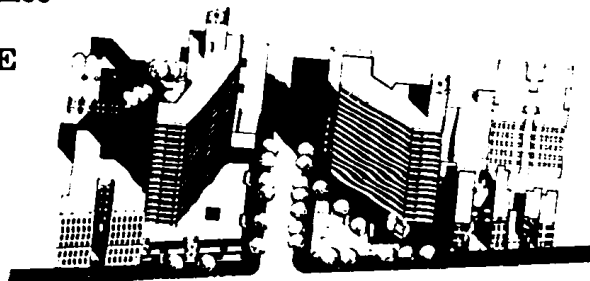


THE FIRST PUBLIC HOUSING: Sewer Socialism's Garden City for Milwaukee

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he Garden Homes section of Milwaukee, Wis., was apparently the first instance in the United States of what we now call public housing. In addition to being an early example of such housing, the project is interesting for the models on which it was based, namely, idealist schemes in Britain and Germany. Publicly-supported housing for low and moderate

income families was to be based not, as we think of it today, on minimum standards, but on standards equal to or better than those guiding private builders. Credit for this idealist effort in housing goes to socialists who dominated Milwaukee politics during the post-World War I period.

It was Socialist dominance over municipal and county government in Milwaukee that made the publicly-supported Garden Homes project possible. Milwaukee has had a long and distinctive tradition of socialism which is traceable to nineteenth century German sources. The city's own version of socialism, of which Garden Homes is a product, was called "sewer socialism," a politics less concerned with philosophy and more with applying socialist principles to the practical problems of public works, governing, etc. Garden Homes was the result of applied socialist thinking: when private efforts fail to meet the housing crisis, the city should intervene directly to have housing constructed.

Following World War I Milwaukee, like other cities, faced a severe housing shortage. Congested conditions in some neighborhoods had turned them into virtual slums. In response to the crisis, a Milwaukee Housing Commission was formed to study the problem. Organized in June, 1918, by Socialist Mayor Daniel Hoan, the Commission had eleven members representing business, civic, union, and Socialist interests in the city.

After almost a year of study, the Commission issued a report outlining its recommendations. These included city-wide zoning and proper planning of public services such as sewers, water, streets, transportation, and lighting. In addition the report

questioned the desirability of owning one's own home and recommended the economies and advantages of cooperatively owned housing.

In 1919, primarily due to the Commission's support and lobbying, the Wisconsin legislature passed a bill enabling cities and counties to engage in housing activities. The new law also authorized the formation of cooperative housing corporations, thus paving the way for establishment of the Garden Homes venture.(1) Having obtained state permission, the Housing Commission immediately formulated plans to build and finance a demonstration housing project. The Garden Homes Corporation was founded in March, 1920, with several Commission members serving as directors of the new company.

The corporation's purpose, as set forth in a prospectus written by Mayor Hoan, was to "promote the economic erection, co-operative ownership and administrative of healthful homes." Specifically, the corporation was concerned with satisfying the needs of those who would otherwise be unable to afford a decent home, in particular, lower income workers.

One of the first tasks was to sell \$250,000 worth of preferred stock in order to finance construction and administrative expenses. Unlike later public housing programs such as the Greenbelt Cities in the 1930's, Garden Homes was forced to rely entirely upon local resources. The Housing Commission had made an attempt in 1918 to obtain federal assistance, but the situation in Milwaukee was not deemed critical enough to impede the nation's war manufacturing effort.

The City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County formalized their support for Garden Homes by investing \$50,000 each. It was this commitment along with Housing Commission's role as initiator of the project that justifies calling the project the first publicly-supported housing in the United States.(2) The remaining stock was to be sold to private interests. Mayor Hoan and Galbraith Miller, a Garden Homes director, launched a solicitation campaign designed to attract important local businessmen. Although stock sales proved disappointingly sluggish, enough capital was acquired to begin construction.

A special committee appointed to search for potential development sites chose a 29-acre tract at the city's northern boundary. The decision was apparently based upon the site's optimization of eight criteria, including proximity to schools, streetcar service, parks, and employment. Purchased in July, 1920, the land was subsequently platted in 163 lots. Block 8, the center of the development, was given to the city as a park. Block 11 was sold to the school board as a site for a future school. (See Figure 1.)

Construction began ceremoniously on September 19, 1921, when Mayor Hoan turned the first shovelful of earth. By November, 1922, the first fifty homes were ready for occupancy. House plans were standardized and kept simple for economy's sake, although a variety of floor plans was available.

When construction ended in 1923, the project's success was evident. In less than three years, the demonstration project of the Garden Homes Company contained 105 single family houses, ten duplexes, and one apartment building. It was claimed that by joining the cooperative effort, families saved as much as \$1,500. on the cost of their homes. This savings was considerable when homes cost \$4,300 to \$4,700.

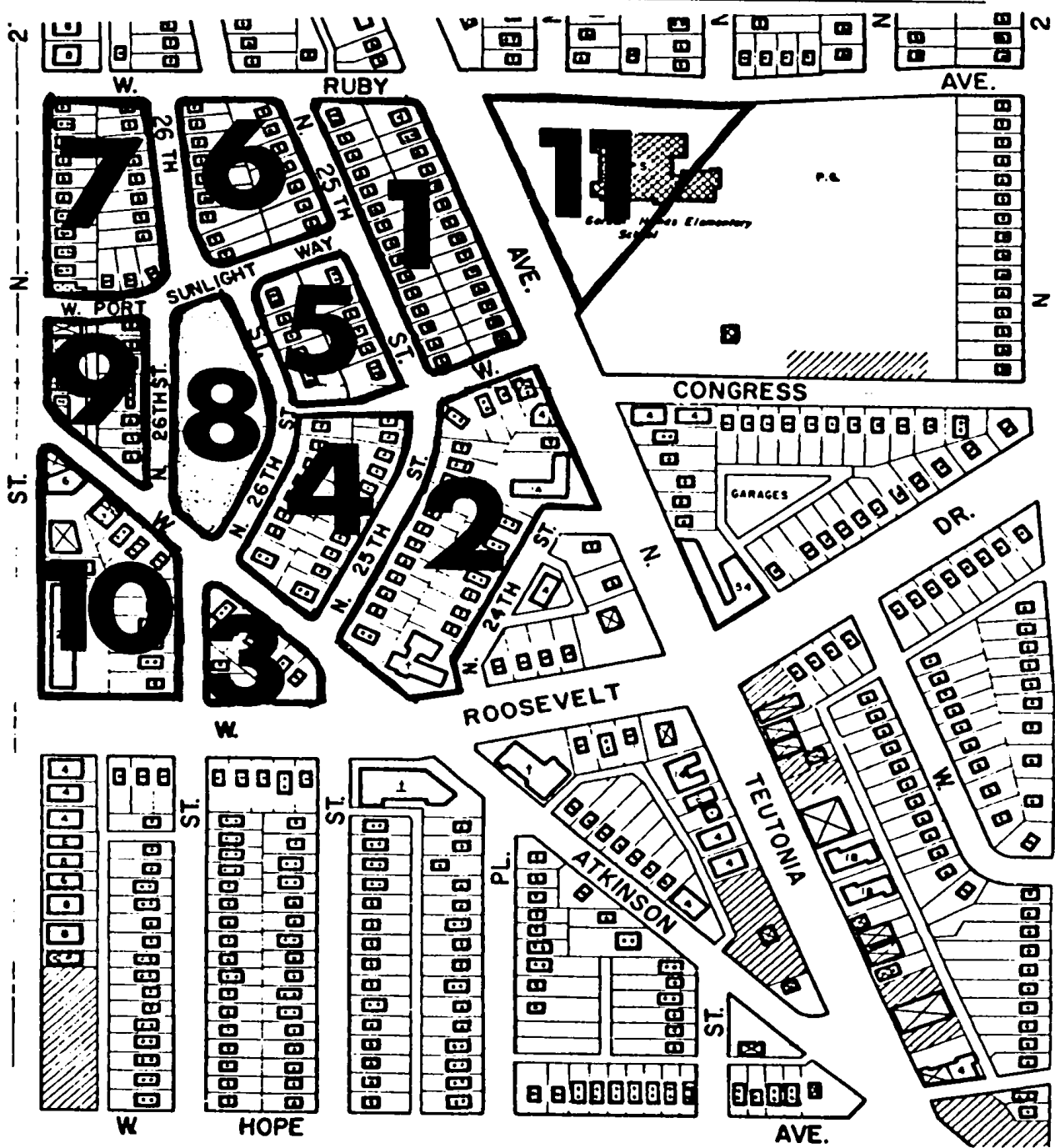


Figure 1.

The Garden Homes development as it exists in 1974, with the original block numbers. Note that only Port Sunlight Way retains its original name.

The Garden Homes project was cooperatively owned; each tenant leased his home and agreed to make an investment in Garden Homes stock equal to the value of his premises. The benefits of this co-partnership scheme were many. After a downpayment of about \$500 a tenant's monthly rent was \$30. to \$50 , depending upon the size of his house. This amount covered his stock payment, taxes, fire insurance, interest, repairs, depreciation, company administration, and, interestingly, life and disability insurance.

An investment in a Garden Homes dwelling was unbeatably secure when compared with an individual home owner's mortgage. Tenants were protected from sudden evictions or foreclosures. If a co-owner became unemployed, the company carried him for a reasonable period. The cooperative system was also designed to thwart any dangers of speculation and price inflation. This point was articulated by William Schuchardt, an architect in charge of site selection and buildings at Garden Homes. Certain Milwaukee businessmen had questioned the economic advantages of co-op housing over individually-owned homes:

For a comparatively short time, let us say five or ten years, the initial owners of individual homes may seem to have all the advantages enjoyed by the co-partnership stockholder. But the succeeding owners will not be likely to get these same homes at the attractive prices which in a spirit of semi-philanthropy were made to owner number one. If the homes are attractive and are built in attractive neighborhoods the increased value will be very naturally capitalized by the owner when and if he wished to move to another locality. When a certain proportion of the number of houses have so changed hands the original scheme of procuring homes for wage earners at rock bottom prices and keeping them on a low price level is defeated. If, on the other hand, the selling of individual homes is not possible the speculative prices can never be obtained and the cost of the homes will always be on a low level. The selling of small homes at cost as has been done in Milwaukee does not offer a permanent solution of the housing problem as such but merely lets a few lucky individuals in on a philanthropic scheme.(3)

EUROPEAN PRECEDENTS

Within the state and perhaps the Midwest, Garden Homes was an early effort to incorporate ideals for "model workers villages" developed in Britain and Germany during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Among those ideas were the inclusion of green space in conjunction with homes, and laying out streets to conform to natural terrain. Through coordinated development excessive costs associated with speculation could be avoided. Garden Homes was in its organization and its physical character, a model village of its time, though, it must be admitted, it seems to have had no impact on subsequent housing policy. It was not until 1948 that Milwaukee again undertook a public housing project.

The first model villages in Europe were a response to terrible living conditions which had developed in large industrial towns. Overcrowding, minimal consideration for light and air, poor arrangements for sanitation, and no provision for public parks made life in Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Halifax, and Bradford, England, intolerable.

To correct these conditions several industrialists built new factories and new housing outside the large industrial centers. In each successive scheme more and

more amenities were provided; densities decreased, and opportunities for home ownership became more available. Port Sunlight, outside Liverpool, was such a town. It was developed beginning in 1887, by the Lever Company, manufacturers of soap. With an average density of 10 dwelling units per acre, housing took the form of grouped townhouses which formed "super-blocks."⁽⁴⁾ In the center of the housing blocks household gardens were provided. Grouping housing reduced the amount of land needed for streets and made possible the provision of community gardens.

The layout of Port Sunlight was formal, with wide, straight streets focused on major civic buildings. It was in Bournville, the Cadbury Chocolate Company town outside Birmingham, England, that the more informal, curvilinear street layout came into use. There had been a tradition of informal landscape design in Britain for more than 100 years. What was called the "English garden" was based on fitted paths, roadways, and buildings into a sympathetic relation with the natural landscape. However, this organic approach to landscaping had always been confined to park design; when it came to laying out residential subdivisions, formality usually prevailed. At Bournville in 1895, we see an attempt to introduce the curvilinear mode as streets are fitted to contours.⁽⁵⁾

The next major efforts to establish new standards for housing developments were at Hampstead Garden Suburb outside London, and then at Letchworth which was to be a full-fledged "garden city" developed by an enlightened private corporation.

The history of model villages in England would seem far removed from the concerns of a growing city in Wisconsin.⁽⁶⁾ But the British examples were not remote or irrelevant, for when streets in the Garden Homes subdivision were named, they were called Port Sunlight, Bournville, Hampstead, and Letchworth. Most of these names were subsequently changed to match those of the surrounding street grid, and so only Port Sunlight remains.

How was the British model village idea transported to Milwaukee? Architect William Schuchardt was probably most responsible. He was the first chairman of the Milwaukee Housing Commission and later the person in charge of the committee on sites and buildings of the Garden Homes Company. Schuchardt had graduated from Cornell University in 1895, and afterwards went to Paris to study architecture. He was probably the most knowledgeable and certainly the hardest working member of the Garden Homes team. He spent six months of 1911 in Britain and Germany studying garden cities and cooperative housing. His influence on the physical characteristics of Garden Homes is apparent. The simplified Georgian design of the houses reflects his guidance, for many of Schuchardt's own building designs were in the Georgian Revival style.

While the precedents for physical development at Garden Homes were clearly British, the models for financing the project seem to have been German. Cities in Germany had since the late nineteenth century been supporting efforts by philanthropic and cooperative organizations to fulfill working class housing needs when private enterprise was unwilling to do so.⁽⁷⁾ The German contributions in the area of cooperative development and the British models for physical layout were joined to make a comprehensive approach to workers' housing; this

approach, which was used in Garden Homes, was outlined by Barry Parker and Raymond Urwin, leaders in the effort to improve living conditions in urban settings:

If a few of those who wish to secure a country home were to purchase such an estate or farm among them, they could get all the advantage of cheap land themselves. If they could obtain many other equally solid advantages. The houses could be grouped together and so arranged that each would obtain a sunny aspect and an open outlook; and portions of the land could be reserved forever from being built upon to secure these views.(8)

THE "GARDEN" IN GARDEN HOMES

In order to provide open green spaces, it was necessary to reduce the size of individually-owned parcels, The "commons" idea we find at Garden Homes has a long history, but was seldom incorporated into nineteenth century residential areas for the working class. Eighteenth century London "squares" offered private gardens to residents bounding the park. Colonial America offered a town commons as a center of civic life that double-functioned as revenue-support through rents for crops and grazing.

The green at Garden Homes was not to be a private park, and was not conceived as a town center. It was to provide for public recreation. This was a change from typical nineteenth century notions about the role of parks. Parks had been thought of primarily as civic monuments, or as amusement centers which charged admission and were furnished with dance halls, bowling alleys, manageries, and other entertainments. In Milwaukee at the turn of the century there was a call for a different kind of park, a place near each home that provided outdoor recreation to guard against disease and ill-health.

It was probably Charles Whitnall, a Socialist and reformer and one-time city treasurer, who was responsible for encouraging the provision of public park space at Garden Homes. Whitnall was the most outspoken advocate of parks and garden-type residential areas. He wrote several pamphlets which promoted city planning concepts similar to those popularized in the early twentieth century by world-renounced landscape architect Werner Hegeman. Whitnall was probably responsible for enlisting the help of Hegeman in laying out the Garden Homes site.

To the modern eye the garden-like quality and curvilinear approach to layout are not remarkable at Garden Homes, for the ideas and intentions embodied there are now commonplace in newer sections of Milwaukee and its suburbs. Perhaps the Garden Homes project is in part responsible for establishing the new patterns. And even by itself it could hardly be called a prototype or a strong effort to explore the new ideas. The site was small and cramped between existing roads. What Garden Homes did do was suggest that environmental quality might be available in workers' housing if individuals and local government cooperated.

The name, "Garden City," from which "Garden Homes" no doubt derived, was at the time both a fresh symbol and a cliché. Ebenezer Howard had more than two decades earlier outlined a theory of urban development that made size,

organization, and densities life-enhancing rather than life-inhibiting. By 1900, there were at least ten towns in the United States called "Garden City." Milwaukee itself had a residential section northwest of downtown that was nicknamed "Gartenstadt" because of an abundance of simple, well-kept homes with fenced-in flower gardens and vegetable plots.

In 1919 the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association in Britain provided a definition:

A Garden City is a town designed for healthy living and industry; of a size that makes possible a full measure of social life, but not larger; surrounded by a rural belt; the whole of the land being in public ownership or held in trust for the community.

While Garden Homes was far from being a Garden City, it was a first and conscientious effort to provide a model for better housing available to moderate and low income families. In recognition of this effort the Garden Homes project area was, in 1974, given landmark status in the city of Milwaukee.

IMPACT

Garden Homes failed as a model. It did not set a precedent for low-moderate income housing. In fact, the experiment was abandoned within five years. On the surface, residents' dissatisfaction seemed to be in reaction to a special street assessment in 1925. Residents had expected the Garden Homes Company to bear the cost, and accused the organization of "misrepresentation." But more probably it was the opportunity to *own* (instead of lease) the house, and the desire to *profit* from sale of the house that caused residents to abandon the effort.⁽⁹⁾ By 1927, all property had been sold either to occupants (who had first choice), or to others. The Garden Homes Company was liquidated.

NOTES

(1) An account of the Housing Commission's activities and the state's early housing laws may be found in David B. Cady's unpublished thesis, "The Influence of the Garden City Ideal and Federal War Housing on American Housing and Planning reform, 1900-1930," University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1966.

(2) The only other housing that might be called "public" was sponsored by the federal government in response to housing demands near war-related industrial plants. The Emergency Fleet Corporation and the United States Housing Corporation created housing developments which reflected "the influence both of the British new-towns movement and of the neighborhood-organization program in America." Blake McKelvey, *The Emergence of Metropolitan America, 1915-1966*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers, 1968, p. 26.

(3) A letter to Mayor Daniel Hoan, in the Hoan Collection, Milwaukee County Historical Society.

(4) Curvilinear streets had been used by F.L. Olmstead and Calvert Vaux in their design of Riverside, Ill., in 1869. Their scheme also included strips of park land. While there is no doubt about the importance of this American contribution, it appears that the Garden Homes Project was indebted more to the British precedents. One reason may be that Riverside was a wealthy suburb, while the British examples were for the most part built for workers with modest incomes.

Olmstead had worked in Milwaukee, designing Lake Park in 1893, and West Park (now Washington Park) in 1895. He also consulted on the development of Kohler, Wis., a company

town north of Milwaukee near Sheboygan. Done about 1912, this project also used curvilinear streets.

(5) The history of model villages in Britain is treated well by Walter Creese in *Search for Environment: The Garden City Before and After*, New Haven: Yale, 1966.

(6) The German contributions to improved housing are outlined in T.C. Horsfall, *The Improvement of the Dwellings and Surroundings of the People, the Example of Germany*, Manchester: University Press, 1905, second edition.

(7) Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, "Co-operation in Building," in *The Art of Building a Home*, London: Longmans, Green, 1901, second edition.

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(9) Cady. *op. cit.*, 110.

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