

Susan L. Klaus

**A Modern Arcadia: Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and the Plan for Forest Hills Gardens**

Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002, xii + 208 pp., 114 b/w illus. \$39.95, ISBN 1-55849-314-X

Millard F. Rogers, Jr.

**John Nolen and Mariemont: Building a New Town in Ohio**

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, xiv + 261 pp., 62 b/w illus. \$47, ISBN 0-8018-6619-7

Two of the most comprehensively planned suburbs of the early-twentieth-century United States are the welcome focus of recent monographs. *A Modern Arcadia: Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and the Plan for Forest Hills Gardens* by Susan L. Klaus and *John Nolen and Mariemont: Building a New Town in Ohio* by Millard F. Rogers, Jr., make bold claims for their respective communities' position as the most prominent experiment in planned suburban development, and prompt questions about just what underlies those assertions.

Forest Hills Gardens, Klaus contends, "set a new standard for suburban development." "A landmark in community planning in this country, . . . Forest Hills Gardens is a living lesson in planning history" (5). Begun in 1909, the suburb was the product of a creative collaboration between landscape architect and planner Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., architect and housing reformer Grosvenor Atterbury, real estate developer William E. Harmon, and civic activist Robert DeForest, vice-president of the Russell Sage Foundation, which underwrote the project as an exercise in demonstrating "both the practicality and the profitability of good design and comprehensive planning" (4). In eight efficient chapters, Klaus outlines the foundation's ambitions for Forest Hills Gardens, its planning and construction, architecture and landscape design, and marketing and management. She records a few of the original residents'

responses to the place, and in a final chapter ruminates on its legacy.

Several principal themes weave through *A Modern Arcadia*. Klaus clarifies the Sage Foundation's targeted public for its planned suburb: white Protestant middle- or upper-middle-class Americans, not the laboring man many contemporaries expected the foundation to support. Indeed, the developers believed that "its first residents would be critical to the success or failure of the project" (125). Aspiring buyers had to furnish social and financial references, making Forest Hills Gardens one of many exclusive planned suburbs in the nation at the time. Klaus emphasizes the economic more than the social aspects of the experiment, however, noting that the Sage Foundation intended the suburb "to be a demonstration as much in the economics of suburban development as in community planning and building techniques" (12). From the outset, the collaborators endeavored to show that an intelligently designed, attractive suburb could turn a profit and inspire widespread imitation. Although Klaus consistently returns to this theme as she narrates the suburb's development, revealing the foundation's immense investment in infrastructure and the disappointing returns from the sale of property, she does not draw the obvious conclusions. As a product of philanthropy, Forest Hills Gardens was a poor model for the private real estate market, its design and construction heavily underwritten by the foundation. The project, like many such suburbs, prioritized aims other than short-term profit.

Chief among those aims, according to Olmsted, was the physical expression in a modern residential suburb of the new science of town planning. Klaus devotes her second chapter to outlining Olmsted's training and stature in the nascent planning profession, and her fourth chapter to illustrating how he applied his practical approach to urban design at Forest Hills Gardens. She illustrates the suburb's development with an abundance of high-quality maps,

floor plans, planting plans, perspective drawings, and photographs, and assesses the suburb's achievements in town planning from at least four perspectives, the first being Olmsted's. Writing during the 1920s, he singled out five elements key to the success of Forest Hills Gardens: a single vision guiding the project; unified design of buildings, streets, and landscape; a comprehensive master plan; the employment of consultants with the requisite artistic and professional training; and a single manager in charge of the entire operation (163-64). To these features, Klaus wisely adds first-rate infrastructure and the foundation's construction of key buildings and housing groups to establish standards of design and craftsmanship (164-65).

A second, more critical perspective was offered by Clarence Perry, a planning theorist and resident of Forest Hills Gardens for thirty years. Invoking the six criteria crucial to defining the planned neighborhood unit—small size, firm boundaries, open spaces, institutional sites, local commercial area, and internal street system—Perry found much to praise, including how well the design fostered a rich community life. In some respects, the plan "did not go far enough," however (131). The suburb lacked adequate space for active recreation and a sufficient range of commercial facilities; the community complex was located near the school rather than in Station Square, which Perry viewed as a traffic, not a civic, center. Boundaries on two sides were too porous and through streets exposed Forest Hills Gardens to too much commuter traffic. Few recent residents share these criticisms, according to Klaus. They complain, instead, about the upkeep of green spaces, lack of compliance with architectural guidelines, and crime. In defense of the suburb, however, the author notes that people vote with their feet to live there. "That this community, now nearing its one-hundredth anniversary, remains visually distinctive, has changed so little, and continues to suit new generations of residents is perhaps the truest testament to . . . the quality and flexibil-

ity of its original plan and design" (162-63).

While that assessment seems sound, Klaus occasionally goes too far in her praise for the suburban designs of the Olmsted firm, characterizing them as demonstrating "the benefits of foresighted planning that addresses the challenging social, economic, and environmental issues facing us today" (161). Who is the "us" in this statement? Surely Klaus is overlooking the majority of metropolitan dwellers who are priced out of Olmsted suburbs, never mind the environmental profligacy of such a high-consumption lifestyle. Despite an instance or two of tunnel vision, however, *A Modern Arcadia* is a well-written and well-illustrated study. Klaus seeds her book with valuable nuggets of secondary argument in addition to her principal themes. Among the riches are a forceful account of the debt American suburbs such as Forest Hills Gardens owe not to the garden city concept but to Parker & Unwin's interpretation of it, valuable observations about the similarities between City Beautiful design and the Arts and Crafts movement, and an analysis of Atterbury's experiments with economies of scale in concrete construction. If that were not enough, the book includes a level of detail about the initial terms of sale and marketing of houses that I have not seen for any comparable suburb. And in a pointed discussion of the forms and rationales of deed restrictions, Klaus documents Edward Bouton, who served as general manager of Roland Park and Forest Hills Gardens simultaneously, uttering an early instance of the economic rationale (threatened property values) to justify the exclusion of Jews and other persons "not likely to have harmonious relations" with the intended community (116).

Like *A Modern Arcadia*, Rogers's *John Nolen and Mariemont* reconstructs an experiment in applying town planning principles to the development of a heavily subsidized suburb that the author considers "the national exemplar of town planning in America" (xiv) and "the finest work of Nolen's career" (xi). Sited

east of Cincinnati on land overlooking the Little Miami River, Mariemont developed according to the vision of three individuals: the wealthy financial backer Mary Muhlenberg Emery; her business agent, Charles J. Livingood; and urban designer Nolen. In an intensely detailed account drawn from the voluminous correspondence between Nolen and Livingood, Rogers reconstructs Mariemont's planning and construction from 1920 to 1925, when Nolen was directly involved in the suburb's design. The value of this study to architectural and planning historians lies in the precision of the chronology. Rogers's contention that "their exchange of ideas, suggestions, queries, and orders created a rare, perhaps unique record in the history of American town planning" (xii) is on the mark.

From the Nolen-Livingood correspondence, readers gain insight into what contributions each member of the triumvirate made to Mariemont. Of the town planning principles Nolen articulated in a 1925 lecture—the establishment of an official planning authority, provision for the legal side of city planning, a sound financial policy, education of public opinion, timely positive publicity, a citizens' advisory committee to build support, and guidance from planners throughout construction—all but the last two were implemented in Mariemont. Detailed letters between Nolen and Livingood show the latter advising on the development of the natural features of the site; the layout of streets; the apportionment of space between housing, public land, and roadways; marketing and publicity; and the provision for future governance. Nonetheless, Nolen had a strong-minded client with a clear vision for the suburb. Theirs was never an equal partnership; Livingood masterminded (one might say micromanaged) the design decisions, though always after consultation with Nolen's firm. Livingood fashioned the new town's purpose and commissioned all the housing groups, selecting revival styles with an English flavor. He determined the range and

location of public buildings, shops, and services as well as the ratio of rental to purchased housing. Nolen was sometimes chagrined by his client's decisions. He criticized the high density of housing as well as the disparate design of the housing groups, but he reserved his strongest admonition for the retention of planning services and adherence to town planning principles. A dozen years after Forest Hills Gardens, the author shows, Nolen practiced a broader, more functional, and more bureaucratized approach to professional planning.

Rogers provides genuine enlightenment about two questions key to understanding Mariemont's design. Was it a garden city? Was it a commercial development? Livingood was clearly taken with the garden city model; he traveled extensively to visit planned communities and cited Letchworth, Port Sunlight, and Hampstead Garden Suburb as influences on his thinking. Rogers carefully delineates the garden city features that Livingood replicated, such as an industrial district, those he discarded, and elements he clearly intended to provide but never brought to fruition, such as a greenbelt, farm, pensioners' neighborhood, and town square commercial district. Although Livingood borrowed from the appearance, infrastructure, and plans of the English models, he "did not follow Howard's garden city concepts explicitly" (12). On the question of whether Mariemont presented a viable model for commercial real estate development, Rogers is much clearer than Klaus about the importance of philanthropy to the success of the planned community. Like Olivia Sage at Forest Hills Gardens, Mary Emery stayed in the background while Mariemont was being constructed, but she had capitalized the project with \$7 million of her fortune by 1925. Mariemont, Rogers argues, "was touted as a commercial development, not a philanthropy. But philanthropic it was, for [its] birth depended exclusively on the wealth of its generous founder, Mary Emery, who . . . never realized any financial return on her support" (214).

There is a third question, however: Was Mariemont a community for wage earners? Rogers does not have a persuasive answer. The correspondence shows that Livingood intended the "town to be for all classes of people" (24), but did things turn out that way? Rogers wants to think so, and he points out references to "people of small means" (50) and the use of philanthropy to keep Mariemont "within reach of wage earners" (52), but his accounting of the occupations of household heads is anecdotal and other evidence sheds doubt on the affordability of the suburb's housing. Lots sold for \$1,800 to \$3,600 and houses, "predicted to range from \$3,000 to \$7,000," went "higher in actual sales" (177). "Rents were scaled from \$25 to \$120" a month (177), more appropriate for a middle-than a working-class budget. During the 1940s, Rogers admits, the "village gradually evidenced an upper-middle class population" (183). Livingood characterized residents as "a picked class, the discerning kind" (193), making Mariemont, like Forest Hills Gardens, sound like a planned, exclusive suburb. The issue is important because of what a planned, working-class community might have to teach us about affordable housing. Rogers strives but fails to make the case that Mariemont succeeded in any sustained way in providing working-class families the opportunity "to produce local happiness" (203).

Both Klaus and Rogers make special claims for the historic importance of their communities. In Forest Hills Gardens, the combination of "physical plan, architectural design, landscape treatment, and progressive real estate policy was unique" (145). Regarding Mariemont, Rogers claims that "in the United States, no real estate or neighborhood development had approached this one" (51). Such boasts have been the stock in trade of planned, exclusive suburbs since the post-Civil War era, and most have a distinctive feature or two on which to base the assertion. The question both books leave unanswered is what is truly original and valuable in the planning and design of the places under

discussion. Neither Klaus nor Rogers can resolve this issue because they do not frame their studies sufficiently in relation to the scholarly literature on planned, exclusive suburbs and suburban planning history. Nor do they engage with precedents created by early planning professionals, such as H. W. S. Cleveland, or by enlightened developers, including J. C. Nichols of Kansas City Country Club District fame (1905) or Dr. George Woodward of Philadelphia, whose planned development in St. Martin's (1903) Livingood must have known, since he commissioned housing groups from Woodward's entire stable of talented architects.

Both Forest Hills Gardens and Mariemont contribute features of distinction to the long history of planned suburbs, to be sure. In the New York suburb, it is the town center that combines commerce, a transportation hub, parkland, and a range of attached housing. In the Ohio community, it is the integration of shops and housing in the high-density Dale Park section and of industry in the Westover section. Each place, like other planned, exclusive suburbs, can point to a dazzling array of design amenities, high-quality landscaping and architecture, and comprehensive planning. Assessing the value of what has been achieved in a planned suburb is a complicated matter, in other words. What, if anything, in our planned communities is actually unique? We must tackle these issues, but we can do so only if we engage with a wider range of scholarship, and think critically about what our definitions of planned communities and professional planners encompass.

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