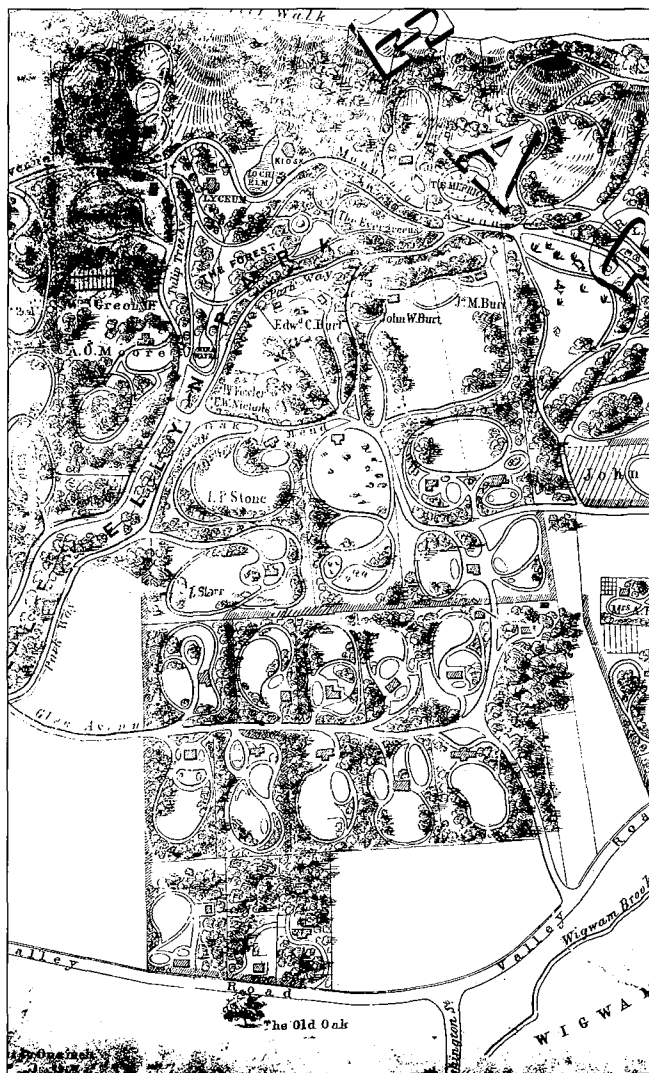

HOW TO BUILD A SUBURB

BY WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI

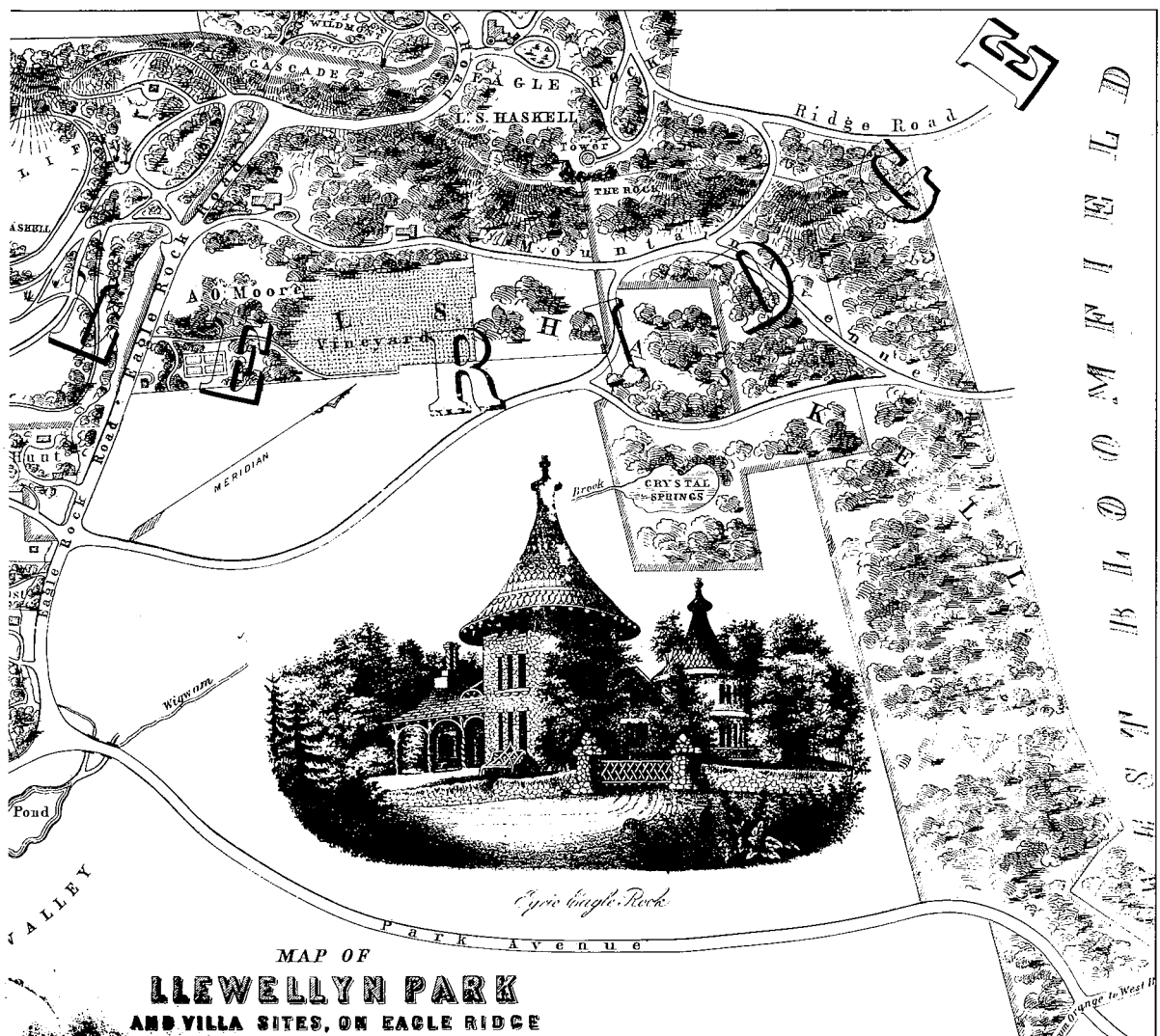
Even its
defenders concede that the modern
American suburb has many
shortcomings. An antidote may be
found in the ideas of the nation's
earliest suburban pioneers.

When the Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier visited New York City in 1935, he found it strange that many of the academics, professionals, and businesspeople he met did not live in the city but in the suburbs. This was unheard of in Paris, where most people who worked in the city lived in the city. There were outlying towns such as Auteuil, Boulogne-sur-Seine, and Neuilly where some rich Parisians built villas, including a few designed by Le Corbusier himself, but in the 1930s not many middle-class people owned the cars needed to commute to such distant locations. To most Parisians, *les banlieues* (the suburbs) referred chiefly to the dreary industrial districts that ringed the city like a sooty pall. Only workers who



manned the factories lived there.

Suburbs in the New World were different—not industrial but residential, and not proletarian but professional and managerial—and one senses grudging admiration as Le Corbusier describes the American suburban landscape with its generous, unfenced lots and its green amplitude. Always attracted to technology, he was impressed by the comfortable trains that linked Connecticut to Manhattan and made the leisurely suburban way of life possible. But there is an underlying sarcasm in his description of the suburban



commute: "After a stimulating cocktail they [the commuters] pass through the golden portals of Grand Central Terminal into a Pullman which takes them to their car; after a ride along charming country roads they enter the quiet and delightful living rooms of their colonial style houses."

The notion of a decentralized city ran counter to all of Le Corbusier's urban theories, and he would have none of it. In *When the Cathedrals Were White* (1935), the chronicle of his American visit, he roundly condemned the concept of suburban living,

New Jersey's 19th-century Llewellyn Park is a prototype of many postwar American suburbs. Unfortunately, with its gated entrance, social homogeneity, and exclusively residential character, it is also in many ways a model of what not to build.

convinced that the city of tomorrow would be a concentrated vertical city, not exactly Manhattan, but a version of Manhattan nevertheless.

He was wrong. The historian Fernand Braudel once observed that the French visitors to 19th-century northern England, hor-

rified at the ugly, jerrybuilt factories and crowded mill towns, could not have dreamed that it was precisely Manchester and Glasgow, not London, that were the harbingers of the new industrial-age cities soon to spring up in France and all over Europe. In 1935, when Le Corbusier saw the houses of the American suburbs, he could not imagine that it was they, and not the towers of Manhattan, that were the precursor of the postindustrial urban future.

Le Corbusier was too caught up in his own urban theories to stop and ask, Why are their cities like that? Had he asked, he might have found that the different form of American cities represented a long-standing desire on the part of their inhabitants for a different way of life.

Unlike Parisian workers, Americans lived in suburbs by choice and had been doing so for more than 100 years. The architectural historians Christopher Tunnard and Henry Hope Reed date the earliest New York suburbs to 1814, when a ferry service for commuters was started between Manhattan and Brooklyn, and New Yorkers who could not afford a house in the good parts of Manhattan settled in suburban Brooklyn Heights. Soon, the commuters ventured farther. Landscape historian John Stilgoe quotes the editor and writer Nathaniel Parker Willis, who complained in 1840 that "there is a suburban look and character about all the villages on the Hudson which seem out of place among such scenery. They are suburbs; in fact, steam [Willis was referring to the steamboats that linked the villages to Manhattan] has destroyed the distance between them and the city." Similar patterns were unfolding in other cities. Henry Binford of Northwestern University

traces the origin of the first suburban communities around Boston to 1820, and Rutgers University historian Robert Fishman dates the first West Philadelphia suburbs, which were reached by horse-drawn omnibus, to the 1840s.

By the time of Le Corbusier's visit, suburban living was a well-established fact of American life: one out of six Americans lived in the suburbs. These outlying areas were growing rapidly. Of the six million new homes built between 1922 and '29, more than half were single-family houses, and most were in the suburbs. More significantly, suburbs were growing faster than cities. Between 1860 and 1920, the number of people living in urban areas had increased from only 20 percent of the population to more than half, but by the 1930s and '40s, the rate of urban growth slowed to almost zero. The use of streetcars and buses, a good indicator of urbanization, peaked in the mid-1920s and fell thereafter. One of the most urbane cities in America, Boston, started losing population as early as 1930. In the entry on Chicago in its 1949 edition, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* noted that the decade 1930-40 had seen the smallest increase in population in the city's history, and added that "the rate of regional growth about the city seems to be increasing as the rate of strictly urban growth declines." By 1950, New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, and many smaller cities had all stopped growing. The metropolitan regions surrounding these cities were vigorous even before 1950, but that year is probably as good as any to mark the end—or, more accurately, the beginning of the end—of traditional concentrated cities.

One reason why it is not easy to identify clearly what has happened and is happening to cities is that urban terminology is

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very inaccurate. Terms such as *city* and *suburb* are used as if they represent polarities. In fact, they are often only polemical categories: depending on your point of view, either bad (dangerous, polluted, concrete) cities and good (safe, healthy, green) suburbs, or good (diverse, dense, stimulating) cities and bad (homogeneous, sprawling, dull) suburbs. The reality is more complicated.

Like *bourgeois* or *capitalist*, *suburb* is one of those words that are difficult to use in a precise discussion because they describe something that has become a stereotype. And like most stereotypes, *suburb* is composed of clichés. For example, compared with urban housing, suburban housing is held to be monotonous, although urban tenements and industrial-age rowhouses are equally standardized and repetitive. Another cliché holds that suburban areas are rich, white, and white-collar. While this was true of the first suburbs, suburban areas have grown to include a variety of incomes, classes, and, increasingly, ethnic and racial groups. (One manifestation of this growing diversity is the appearance of ethnic restaurants and food stores in suburban malls.) Indeed, it is the cities that are more likely to be homogeneous, containing more than their representative share of the poor, of blacks, and of Hispanics.

Only in a legal sense is the difference between urban and suburban clear: everything inside the city limits is urban, and everything outside is suburban. On the ground, there is often little distinction in the physical appearance of urban and suburban neighborhoods or the life they contain. Of course, there is a marked contrast between crowded inner city neighborhoods and the outer suburbs, where large houses stand on one-acre lots, but these are the two extremes. In most cities—especially those newer cities that grew in the postwar period—urbanites live in houses, mow lawns, drive cars, and shop at malls, just like their suburban neighbors. Even New York, once

one leaves Manhattan, is composed of many neighborhoods in which houses with front gardens and backyards line the streets.

Most American cities grew—and grow, at least in the West and Southwest—by annexing surrounding towns and villages, hence producing urban areas that include neighborhoods that are suburban, even rural, in character. Houston and Minneapolis annexed entire counties and created an apparently anomalous hybrid: bucolic outer suburbs inside the city limits. Some annexed suburbs, such as New York's Queens and Staten Island, maintained a suburban atmosphere; others were physically transformed and grew denser and are now indistinguishable from the rest of the city. Suburbs were not always integrated into the adjacent central city. Academic enclaves such as Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Berkeley, California, started as suburban villages and developed into small, independent cities without losing their small-town, suburban character. Brooklyn, by contrast, was already the third-largest city in the United States when it was annexed by New York City in 1898.

The Connecticut suburbs that Le Corbusier described were the offspring of what John Stilgoe has characterized as "borderlands": 19th-century residential enclaves typically one or two hours outside the city that were cherished for their semirural character and their sylvan surroundings. Stilgoe makes the point that the "women and men who established these communities understood more by *commuting* and *country* than train schedules and pastures," and what drove them was a search for better, healthier, more restorative surroundings than were available in the city. They were not simply leaving the city for the country but rather creating a new way of life that contained elements of both.

But trains were expensive, and less wealthy commuters relied on horse-drawn rail cars, which were pulled on tracks and were later replaced by electrified streetcars.

Stilgoe deplores the kind of dense inner suburbs that sprouted along streetcar lines, where people lived "without the joys of genuine city life and without the pleasures of borderland residence." This judgment may be too bleak. Another Harvard historian, Alexander von Hoffman, argues in *Local Attachments* (1994) that the evolution of Jamaica Plain in Boston demonstrates that streetcar suburbs could provide some of the advantages of city life. By 1850, this farming community had grown large enough to incorporate itself as a separate town of about 2,700 people. Over the next two decades the town grew, chiefly as a result of the arrival of middle- and upper-class commuters, who traveled by horse-drawn rail car from Boston. In 1873, the townspeople voted for annexation by the City of Boston, a change that promised jobs, development, and growth. Growth did come, fueled by inexpensive electric streetcars and later by the railroad, and at the turn of the century the population had mushroomed to almost 33,000, the equivalent of a small city.

Was Jamaica Plain merely a residential appendage to Boston? Von Hoffman presents compelling evidence to the contrary. The railroad did bring upper-middle-class commuters, but it also brought factories; people commuted out of the area but also into it (much as they do in contemporary "edge cities"). "During the second half of the 19th century, Jamaica Plain matured from a fringe district to a heterogeneous city neighborhood, a type of urban area that heretofore has not been generally recognized," he writes. "It evolved into a local urban community, not as an isolated or segmented district, but as part of the larger growth patterns of Boston." Such outer-city neighborhoods, unknown in Europe, were physically different from their inner city counterparts—instead of tenements there were small houses, and the den-

sity of buildings was generally lower—and while their location and character were suburban, their residents' way of life was urban.

The presence of suburban elements in cities such as Berkeley or in urban neighborhoods such as Jamaica Plain is a reminder, as the architect Robert A. M. Stern points out, that the suburb is defined by neither location nor legalities alone. "The suburb is . . . a state of mind based on imagery and symbolism," he writes. "Suburbia's curving roads and tended lawns, its houses with pitched roofs, shuttered windows, and colonial or otherwise elaborated doorways all speak of communities which value the tradition of the family, pride of ownership and rural life." Stern also suggests that as long as the image—not necessarily the reality—of a freestanding house on a tree-lined street is maintained, the suburban ideal can be applied in a wide variety of situations, an observation that explains the surprisingly rich diversity of suburbs.

Suburban growth in America was the result of coincidences. First, there was the availability of land. Then there was the pressure of the growth of the commercial downtown, which engulfed the traditional downtown residential neighborhoods of the rich and the middle class. There was transportation—the railroad (which in many cases was already in place) and the streetcar. Above all, there were businessmen who had the resources and the vision to undertake the task of creating new communities.

The first comprehensively designed suburban residential development was Llewellyn Park, in West Orange, New Jersey, begun in 1853 by a young, successful Manhattan merchant, Llewellyn S. Haskell. Haskell intended his project, which he called a "villa park," to be a healthy and picturesque alternative for New Yorkers who wanted ready access to the city, about 12 miles away. Llewellyn Park attracted enterprising individuals; its most famous resident was probably Thomas Alva Edison, who lived there for more than 40 years and

established his laboratory nearby. For ordinary folks, however, the high cost of commuting to New York and the price of the generous lots were prohibitive. Llewellyn Park was exclusively residential; no industrial, commercial, or retail uses were allowed. Deed restrictions included rules about architecture and landscaping—fences, for example, were banned. Such enforced homogeneity became the pattern for many of the early suburbs. Moreover, developers used their own discretion to ensure that the new home owners were socially acceptable.

Haskell's architect, Alexander Davis, did not simply subdivide the 400-acre parcel of mountainous terrain on Eagle Ridge into building lots. He carefully manipulated the landscape to produce a natural experience. He heightened the illusion of a virgin forest by leaving a heavily planted 50-acre nature preserve, cleft by a ravine, in the center of the development. Today, the visitor to Llewellyn Park is impressed not only by the terrain and the planting—Haskell spent more than \$100,000 on landscaping—but by the romantic appearance of the houses themselves. Their Gothic, Swiss chalet, and Italianate styles were chosen not for their cultural connotations but simply for their pleasing aspect.

The skillful Davis was the author of *Rural Residences* (1838), a popular book of house patterns for architects and builders. His ideas were influenced by his friend and frequent collaborator, Andrew Jackson Downing, whose *Cottage Residences* (1842) and *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850) were the most widely read books on domestic design of the period. Downing recommended that houses be designed in an irregular, picturesque manner; the rambling architecture was to be augmented by naturalistic landscaping and informal street layouts. This approach became the hallmark of all early American suburban developments, although the actual architectural styles varied. The preferred style in Garden City,

founded in 1869 as one of the first Long Island suburbs, was Italianate; at Short Hills, another New Jersey development, the society architects McKim, Mead, and White were commissioned to design a model home in the English cottage style.

The entire development of Llewellyn Park, including the nature preserve and the streets, was treated as private property, and public access was restricted by a peripheral fence and a gatehouse—which also became common practice. This type of exclusive enclave represents one branch of the suburban tradition. In its contemporary guise, the exclusive enclave has become a new kind of town, comprised uniquely of private homes, socially homogeneous, and privately governed. The chief legal vehicle of the enclave is the home owners' association (also pioneered at Llewellyn Park), which enforces the rules established by the original property developer and administers the commonly owned landscaped areas. Over time, the amenities of such enclaves have come to include not only gardens but recreation areas such as golf courses, tennis courts, riding paths, and swimming pools. The home owners' associations administer common services such as garbage collection, road maintenance, and policing—in other words, many if not all of the functions normally carried out by municipal governments.

These types of communities, called Common Interest Developments, have proven very popular with developers and buyers alike. According to Evan McKenzie of the University of Illinois at Chicago, there are currently some 130,000 such developments in the United States, housing about 30 million people, or 12 percent of the population. McKenzie estimates that by the year 2000 as many as 30 percent of Americans will be living in some form of community association.

If McKenzie is correct in suggesting that Common Interest Developments "are not only the present but the future of American

housing," the further development of enclaves is likely to accentuate the existing inequalities between rich and poor communities. That would be a shame, because the exclusive enclave is only one model available to suburban developers.

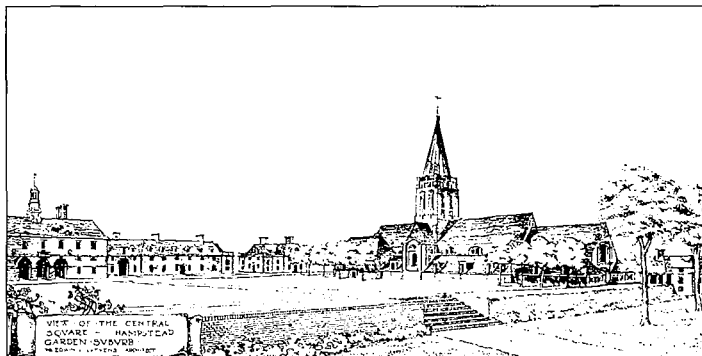
The Anglo-American garden suburb represents a very different ideal. In America, its antecedents were developments such as Riverside, on the outskirts of Chicago, planned by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1869. Nine miles from the Loop on the Burlington and Quincy Railroad, Olmsted transformed 1,600 acres of farmland into a beautiful park-like setting. The landscape approach is similar to that in Llewellyn Park (Olmsted, too, planted thousands of trees), but Riverside had no gates, and its scale was truly urban. It also had a commercial town center. Today, the graceful streets display the soundness of Olmsted's vision. Chicago was ideal for suburban development since it had a ready-made commuter system in place—the railroad. The 1880s saw many similar upper- and upper-middle-class suburbs—Winnetka, Highland Park, Lake Forest—stretching as far as 30 miles from the Loop.

The British branch of the garden suburb tradition originated in an urban movement that was analogous to but different from the City Beautiful. In 1898, Ebenezer Howard, an English court stenographer inspired by the American Edward Bellamy's best-selling futuristic novel, *Looking Backward* (1888), published a book containing a working blueprint for a new kind of city. In *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (later retitled *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*), Howard elaborately explained how to build completely new, economically self-sufficient communities. These "garden cities" would be planned at a relatively low density to avoid the over-

crowding and squalor of Victorian industrial cities. They would be surrounded by greenbelts to preserve the countryside and would include industry and commerce to provide employment to their inhabitants. Howard acquired a wide popular following. In 1899, a group of British industrialists, businessmen, and social reformers formed the Garden City Association and in relatively short order marshaled the resources to start building the first garden city.

Founded in 1904 in Hertfordshire, some 30 miles from London, Letchworth Garden City was an ambitious undertaking that encompassed almost 4,000 acres and was intended to house 30,000 people. Howard had written nothing about the actual design of the proposed city, but the plan devised by Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker, two young architects who were members of the association, became a model for all later garden suburbs. Unwin and Parker came up with a loose, villagelike layout, and for the buildings they adopted an informal domestic style loosely based on the traditional architecture of British country towns. Although Letchworth incorporated Howard's novel ideas about urbanism, to most people it looked comfortably familiar.

Letchworth was followed by a second garden city: Hampstead Garden Suburb. As the name suggests, it was not a true city but a suburb, located a short subway ride from London. The developer of Hampstead was Henrietta Barnett, a friend of the famous



Hampstead Garden Suburb

housing reformer Octavia Hill and a social activist herself. Barnett saw the new suburb as an opportunity to offer working-class Londoners an alternative to the crowded inner city. Accordingly, Hampstead incorporated housing for people in various income brackets and included rental cottages and flats affordable to clerks and artisans. (Barnett was unable, however, to realize her dream of rehousing slum dwellers.)

With Letchworth under his belt, Unwin, one of the most talented urban designers of the period, produced in Hampstead a plan of great sophistication and subtlety. It incorporated a picturesque street layout, extensive landscaping in the residential areas, a range of innovative housing types, and a compact town center. The site covered more than 300 acres, and at an average density of eight houses per acre—about half the density of a typical inner city neighborhood—there was plenty of parkland and other open space. Nevertheless, compared to many later suburbs, Hampstead was densely peopled. The Long Island suburban communities built by William Levitt after World War II, for example, usually had a density of about four houses per acre, and many contemporary suburban developments average less than that.

Unwin's plan was neither a simple grid nor a Beaux-Arts diagram but rather a complex composition that took advantage of topography and natural features. There was variety in the road system: avenues, side streets, cul-de-sacs, and service lanes were all integrated into the plan. "It was not deemed enough that a road should serve as a means of communication from one place to another," said Unwin, "it was also desired that it should offer some dignity of approach to important buildings, and be a pleasant way for the passer-by."

This comprehensive planning was based on the visual and spatial experience of a place. It was similar to Olmsted's approach but distinctly more urban; Hampstead was a conscious attempt on

Unwin's part to capture some of the charm of the traditional country towns he so loved. The housing groups, designed by Unwin and Parker and by the notable Arts and Crafts practitioner M. H. Baillie Scott, were based on English vernacular architecture. Edwin Lutyens planned the town center in a more formal manner, with a large rectangular green flanked by two churches and a housing terrace, all designed in masterful fashion by himself.

Hampstead has been called "the jewel in the suburban crown." It is one of the most beautifully designed suburbs of the period—indeed, of any period—and influenced suburban developers everywhere, especially in the United States. One of these developers was George Woodward of Chestnut Hill, an outlying neighborhood of Philadelphia.

In 1873, Woodward's father-in-law, Henry Howard Houston, a successful Philadelphia businessman, acquired more than 3,000 acres along the scenic Wissahickon Creek, in and around Chestnut Hill. Eleven years later, Houston persuaded the Pennsylvania Railroad (of which he was a director) to build a spur line through his property, linking Chestnut Hill to the city. He then began an ambitious effort to fashion a new suburban community by constructing a large hotel; for recreation, he created a lake for canoeing and an arboretum for promenading; for worship, a church. He also deeded land to the Philadelphia Cricket Club (which moved from downtown) and convinced the managers of the annual Philadelphia Horse Show to relocate the event to Chestnut Hill. The last two moves were motivated not by philanthropy but by business. Houston wanted to attract Philadelphia socialites to his real-estate venture, and he succeeded. He built about 100 houses for predominantly upper-class families.

When Houston died in 1895, Woodward took over the direction of the family business. He displayed a not-uncommon characteristic of turn-of-the-century subur-

ban developers: a blend of entrepreneurship and idealism. A physician by training, Woodward was a reformer, progressive politician, and state senator, and also president of Philadelphia's Octavia Hill Association. Following the example of the British reformer, the association engaged in building and rehabilitating low-rent housing and model tenements for workers. Although a businessman, Woodward regarded Chestnut Hill as more than merely a real estate venture. His ideas about architecture were inspired by both John Ruskin (Octavia Hill's mentor) and the English poet, craftsman, and utopian socialist William Morris. Many of the Woodward houses are in the Arts and Crafts style. All are characterized by solid, honest construction and good craftsmanship. Woodward was also familiar with the Garden City movement and with projects such as Hampstead Garden Suburb.

One of the design issues that Unwin had addressed in Hampstead was the formation of a town composed uniquely of small, detached houses. "So long as we are confined to the endless multiplication of careful fenced in villas, and rows of cottages toeing the same building line, each with its little garden securely railed, reminding one of a cattle-pen, the result is bound to be monotonous and devoid of beauty," he had written. Unwin's solution was to group individual houses into terraces, picturesque clusters, and large quadrangles or courts. This created larger common spaces, as well as a variety of house types and building forms along the street. A small group of houses served by a narrow driveway instead of a wide road also saved money and land.

The houses Woodward built in Chestnut Hill included terraces of rowhouses surrounding landscaped courts, clusters of houses whose freestanding character was disguised by connecting stone walls and outbuildings, and interesting groups of attached cottages that produced the visual effect of larger

houses. Woodward also pioneered the use of quadriplexes consisting of four dwellings arranged in a cruciform plan, sharing a central core. Between 1910 and 1930, Woodward commissioned about 180 houses. He sent his young architects—H. Louis Duhring, Robert Rodes McGoodwin, and Edmund Gilchrist—to England and France to study traditional architecture; as a result, Chestnut Hill acquired several picturesque streets composed of Cotswold-style cottages as well as a group of eight houses, known locally as the French Village, designed by McGoodwin in the Norman style.

The houses built by Woodward, including smaller dwellings for young families as well as the large houses, were not sold but rented. (He did sell individual lots to people wishing to build their own houses.) This assured a high degree of conformity with Woodward's architectural ideals. But no effort was made to physically separate the development from the surrounding neighborhood. It had no gates—it was not an exclusive enclave. Access to the parks was unrestricted, and the streets were all public thoroughfares. In fact, it was not easy to tell exactly which parts of Chestnut Hill the Woodwards owned. Moreover, the neighborhood encompassed various income groups, including a large Italian community composed mainly of the families of masons who had been attracted to the area by the Woodward construction projects (which were all built using local stone), as well as other artisans, domestic servants, and local shopkeepers.

Houston and Woodward were unable to innovate in the street planning of Chestnut Hill. They had to adhere to the layout established earlier by the city of Philadelphia, a continuation of William Penn's downtown grid. The regularity was somewhat relieved by the rolling topography of Chestnut Hill and by the ragged edge of nearby Fairmount Park, as well as by several angled roads dating from the colonial era, but it was not the sort of plan that the builders of garden suburbs preferred.

Woodward did introduce an Unwinesque, crescent-shaped group of houses that flanked a public green, and he created a public park, but his design for a formal approach road was never implemented.

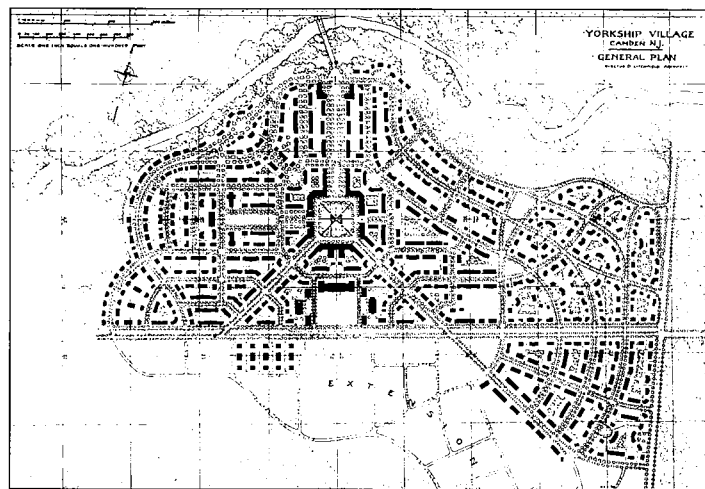
For a fully realized planned garden suburb in the United States, one must turn to the village of Mariemont, built in the 1920s on the outskirts of Cincinnati overlooking the Ohio River. Like Chestnut Hill, Mariemont was the work of an enlightened developer, Mary M. Emery, who wanted to create a model community that would demonstrate the value of modern (that is, Garden City) planning ideas. In 1914, she engaged John Nolen, a Philadelphia native and an experienced planner and architect who had been active in the City Beautiful movement. Starting from scratch on 420 acres, Nolen created a formal town center focused on a village green and bisected by a boulevarded avenue, with streets radiating out into the village. The plan is an extraordinarily subtle exercise in axial formalism combined with a very relaxed form of grid planning, which is all the more impressive when one appreciates that this is among the first suburbs planned expressly for the automobile. Nolen provided space for on-street parking and rear lanes giving access to garages.

Emery intended Mariemont to be an affordable community, and it included a variety of lot sizes as well as low-rise apartment buildings and commercial buildings with flats above stores. The housing was designed by several architects of national stature.

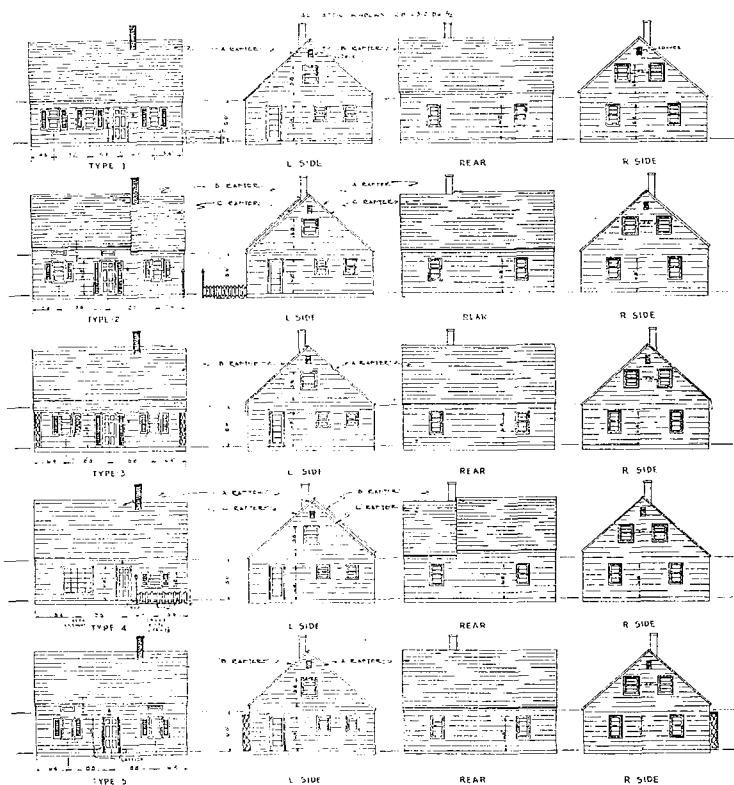
The development of Chestnut Hill and Mariemont coincided with a general increase in suburban construction that lasted from about 1910 to 1930. Garden suburbs

appeared in all parts of the continent. Country Club District, in Kansas City, Missouri, which was founded in 1907, grew over the next three decades and finally encompassed more than 4,000 acres. Shaker Heights, in Cleveland, developed into one of America's most beautiful garden suburbs. Forest Hills Gardens, 15 minutes by rail from Manhattan, was the American suburb that most resembled Hampstead. Lake Forest, north of Chicago, included an exemplary market square, forerunner of the regional shopping center. In Montreal, the Canadian National Railway commissioned Frederick Todd in 1910 to plan the Town of Mount Royal, a garden suburb linked to downtown by CNR tracks. A few years later, Todd was hired by the Canadian Pacific Railway to design the Town of Leaside, just outside Toronto. This suburban boom was caused by the increased congestion of traditional urban neighborhoods, which encouraged people who could afford it to seek alternatives, and by the advent of automobile ownership that, especially after 1920, made outlying areas accessible and freed developers from dependence on railroad companies. Above all, there was the innate attraction of the garden suburbs themselves.

Whereas most people today equate sub-



The design of Yorkship Village, with a regular hierarchy of streets organized around a town center, was typical of the garden suburb.



Five versions of the Cape Cod were sold at Levittown on Long Island. The community had few town-like qualities, but the houses had features that evoked the small town: shutters, picket railings, cross-and-bible doors.

urban development with negligent planning and incompetent design, the earliest garden suburbs were distinguished precisely by the sophistication of their layouts and the quality of their architecture. What is impressive is the consistency of this quality. This was as true in North America as it was in Britain. A small group of exceptional planners—Elbert Peets, the Olmsted brothers, Nolen, Todd—set the example, and others followed. It is also striking how many talented architects worked in the garden suburbs. Good planning and imaginative architecture made the garden suburbs popular with the buying public, but more important, they also assured their longevity. Like Chestnut Hill and Mariemont, all the garden suburbs of the 1910s and '20s have remained attractive places to live. Some, such as River Oaks in Houston, Beverly Hills and

Palos Verdes outside Los Angeles, and Coral Gables near Miami, have become synonymous with wealth.

The architectural and urbanistic qualities of the garden suburbs made them particularly attractive—and in the long run drove up real estate values. But as the example of Chestnut Hill shows, these places were by no means elitist. Nor were they always middle class.

Garden suburb planning was used in public housing and in developments for the working class. In 1918, shortly before the end of World War I, the New York Shipbuilding Company of Camden, New Jersey, built Yorkship Village, a community of about 1,000 dwellings intended for its workers. The plan of Yorkship, designed by Electus D. Litchfield, a New York City architect, bears some resemblance to

Mariemont's: there is a square green in the center, flanked by shops with flats above. Two diagonal avenues lead from the green to a boulevard, where a streetcar line connected Yorkship with Camden. Most of the dwellings are tiny rowhouses arranged in small terraces. The plan, which includes a system of rear service lanes, is carefully designed to avoid long, unobstructed vistas and to create a sense of intimacy through pleasant, closed spaces.

Yorkship Village (now known as Fairview) has survived intact. It continues to be a solid community still close to its blue-collar roots. The small houses are well tended, shops still surround the shaded village green, and there is an active community association. It's hard not to credit Litchfield's careful planning, whose human qualities are still evident,

with the vitality of this community, which exists in the city of Camden, a sad example of urban decay and devastation.

The period from 1900 to 1930 is a largely forgotten chapter in the history of the American suburb. The early garden suburbs of this era display none of the clichés of later suburban planning. They were clearly intended to offer a green alternative to the city, but their developers understood that town planning was an important tool in achieving their aims.

Compared with contemporary suburban developments, the garden suburbs were paragons of urban design. Instead of confusing layouts of cul-de-sacs, there were carefully planned hierarchies of avenues and streets interspersed with parks and squares. Instead of the ubiquitous bungalow, there was variety: rowhouse terraces, clusters, twins, and courts, as well as free-standing cottages and villas.

By the 1920s, the automobile had to be accounted for, and it was integrated in subtle ways: instead of lines of garage doors on the street, there were service lanes and garages at the end of backyard gardens; to prevent high-speed traffic, secondary roads were kept relatively narrow.

Above all, the garden suburbs were less spread out. Instead of one-story ranch houses, homes had two or three floors; instead of being set back behind large front lawns, houses were often close to the street. Small lots produced compact neighborhoods in which, despite the automobile, one could walk to the store, to school, or to the park. The garden suburb designers did not think of their work as an alternative to the city—still less as antiurban—but rather as a part of the long tradition of city building.

Suburban construction slowed down during the Great Depression and did not resume until after World War II. The postwar suburbs were different from their predecessors, however. They came to be called subdivisions—aptly so, for little artistry went into

their planning. It's almost as if a sort of amnesia set in and the garden suburb was forgotten. There were several reasons for this shift. The postwar suburbs were marketed chiefly on the basis of low price, and the selling price of houses was kept affordable by reducing overhead costs. Developers quickly realized that they could dispense with the niceties of architectural design and urban planning without harming sales.

Scale also differentiated the postwar suburban developments: they were huge. Railroad and streetcar suburbs had to be compact since people still walked a great deal; automobile suburbs could spread out—and starting in the late 1940s, they did. One of the most famous, Levittown on Long Island, eventually housed about 80,000 people; the second Levittown, outside Philadelphia, had about 60,000 residents. Compared with the garden suburbs, these were really small cities: the second Levittown included light industry, office buildings, 10 elementary schools, two high schools, recreation areas, swimming pools, and about 18 churches. Size was an important ingredient in the economic success of these subdivisions, since it was by mass-producing the houses (on site, not in factories) that the Levitt brothers in 1949 were able to market a four-room Cape Cod cottage for \$7,990. (Thanks to the GI Bill of Rights, no down payment was required, and the low monthly charges were actually cheaper than the rent for a comparable city apartment.) Although it was small—750 square feet—the two-bedroom house included an unfinished attic and such amenities as underfloor radiant heating, a fireplace, and a Bendix washing machine.

This achievement was made possible by standardizing house construction. What is less obvious is that the urban planning was also standardized. The basis for the new mode of planning was the individual lot for a detached house (virtually the only kind of housing available in the postwar suburb) and the



Some developers and designers are trying to revive various pre-World War II models of suburb building. One product of the trend is the new town of Kentlands, in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

need to handle car traffic. High-speed arterial roads cut the developments into large blocks, which were further subdivided by feeder roads usually culminating in cul-de-sacs around which the lots were clustered. There was nothing resembling a public center. Schools, recreation facilities, and shopping centers were scattered throughout the development—large buildings surrounded by parking lots. It was assumed that people would drive from place to place, and indeed, the low density of the postwar suburb (with predominantly one-story houses on large lots) made walking impractical.

Unlike the builders of garden suburbs, the subdivision developers did not seek

out prominent architects and planners. In order to save money, they preferred to use either stock plans or in-house architects. In any case, by 1945 the planners and architects of Unwin and Nolen's day were either dead or retired, and the succeeding generation of architects had no interest in suburban housing. These architects were caught up in international modernism, and when they did design housing, it was more likely to be publicly funded shelter for low-income people, such as the infamous Cabrini-Green project in Chicago. As for city planners, they had moved away from physical design altogether, preferring to concern themselves with statistical and policy analysis. The indiscriminating buyers must bear some of the blame for the bland subdivision as well, but the architectural profession and professional schools' departure from the design of suburbs and suburban housing after 1930 contributed greatly to this decline in quality.

The failure of the postwar subdivisions was, paradoxically, a result of their great commercial success. The making of suburbs, which had been an honorable branch of town planning, became simply a way of marketing individual houses. By concentrating entirely on making houses affordable, the developers overlooked the chief lesson of the 1920s garden suburbs: subdivisions should consist not only of private dwellings but also of public spaces where citizens can feel that they are part of a larger community. Suburbs are located outside the traditional city, but that does not mean that they cannot be urban, too. Civic art belongs in the suburbs just as much as in the cities.