

The Story of Greendale: A Utopia Unrealized

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“Strangers who read my description in praise of Greendale may think I am writing about Utopia, but those who live there know that Greendale is not a phantom, but a fact. It is a living, growing reality.” Clarence Stein¹
Community Pledge: I pledge allegiance to my village, to its ideals, its institutions and ...to its people, with the firm knowledge that their success is my success, and believe that this will make Greendale a better community in which to live.”²

The Greenbelt program was an attempt by the Federal Government to create public housing for low-income families. Between 1935 and 1938, the Roosevelt Administration painstakingly planned and executed three Greenbelt communities in America. One such place was Greendale, Wisconsin. Families of modest means were promised a piece of the American Dream and an escape from the grime of city life. These communities were created with careful intention and purpose. This paper focuses on how the utopian ideals of Greendale were actually implemented and how close Greendale came to becoming a utopia.

The Greenbelt towns were inspired by the writings of Ebenezer Howard, author of *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Reform* in 1899.³ Howard’s Garden City separated residential areas

¹ John M. McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier: Planning and the Politics of Growth 1910-1960* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 123.

² Greendale Pamphlet, May 1939, Box 1, folder 3, Raymond Miller Collection, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

³ Joseph L. Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Program 1935-1954* (Ohio State University Press, 1971), 4.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

from industry with a large greenbelt of farms, parks, and gardens. Residents would have jobs nearby, but live in the fresh, clean air of the country. These cleaner, healthier communities partnered with industry but were protected from it. Most modern suburbs in America exhibit some form of Garden City principles.

Howard's ideas percolated in the imaginations of men like Rexford Guy Tugwell. Tugwell was a former professor and advisor to President Roosevelt.⁴ As a part of Roosevelt's "Brain Trust,"⁵ Tugwell saw the need after World War I to build large-scale communities to house the growing population of industrial laborers coming to cities for work.⁶ Tugwell and Roosevelt both felt American cities were turning into slums and the Garden City principles could house the many unemployed, low-income people in beautiful, healthy communities.

Greenbelt Town Program

During Roosevelt's famous first "Hundred Days" he signed the National Industrial Recovery Act into law, which included \$3.3 billion for public works projects.⁷ Roosevelt decided to allocate \$31 million for the Greenbelt town program in September 1935. Stipulations included the need to use relief workers, or the unemployed, for the construction of the towns and for land to be "purchased and construction begun by December 15, 1935." Towns were to be completed by June 30, 1936.⁸

⁴ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 95.

⁵ Arnold R. Alanen and Joseph A. Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made: The New Deal Community of Greendale, Wisconsin* (Madison, Wisconsin: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1987), 3.

⁶ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 9.

⁷ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 85.

⁸ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 43.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

The Greenbelt program was intended as a large-scale building effort to house low-income families in a cooperatively based community. Ideologically and physically, the program was extremely ambitious. Building a community – not just clearing slums and building new low-income housing – was unique. This was an attempt to “achieve a more equitable mix of social classes”⁹ outside of the city. Since the plan needed large tracts of land, building on the perimeters of cities was most practical. Tugwell and the other planners had great intentions for these towns. They “dreamed of a better order, of a world made over”¹⁰ where ordinary citizens would build their own community and construct a strong sense of “grassroots democracy.”¹¹ The planners sought to build a wholesome, modern, cooperative community that married city and country life.¹² Tugwell felt “3,000 such projects”¹³ should be built rather than just the three.

City of Homes

Milwaukee was put on a list of over twenty cities as a possible site for Tugwell and Roosevelt’s New Deal program.¹⁴ There was initially some debate over whether or not Milwaukee even had slums and thus needed low-income public housing. Milwaukee was known as a City of Homes,¹⁵ since most of the buildings were single family or duplexes, not the row houses or apartment buildings favored on the East Coast. Yet, since Milwaukee “did not require

⁹ Alanen, and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 41.

¹⁰ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 194.

¹¹ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 5.

¹² The Story of Greendale, 1948, Box 1, Folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

¹³ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 201.

¹⁴ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 38-39.

¹⁵ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 5.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

building permits until 1888 (when the city already had over 200,000 residents) [this] allowed developers to carve out small lots” creating “tightly packed neighborhoods”¹⁶ that were indeed slums.

As with other growing industrial cities, the slum conditions were attributed to the acute lack of affordable, safe housing within the city limits. According to one Inspector of Buildings in the 1930's, Milwaukee's estimated housing shortage was nearly 9,000 units.¹⁷ The problem was especially heightened for families with children. A man new to Milwaukee wrote in to the local newspaper to express his frustration at the obstacles his family encountered when trying to find a suitable place to live. He listed several reasons for the lack of available houses for rent, including excessive rent, unnecessarily furnished, and landlords that would not accept children. The remaining option for tenants was “a shack you wouldn't be found dead in, in a neighborhood to match”¹⁸

While the need was definitely present in Milwaukee for more affordable housing, this was not the only consideration the Greenbelt planning committee considered. Milwaukee's “great diversity of industry and growth in industrial employment”¹⁹ was a deciding factor. Places like Detroit were disqualified because they were too dependent on a single industry, which might affect the newly built community if that industry declined. In hindsight, this proved to be true, showing the impressive foresight and careful planning that went into the Greenbelt towns.

¹⁶ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 6.

¹⁷ Greendale Pamphlet, May 1939, Box 1, folder 3, Raymond Miller Collection, UW-Milwaukee.

¹⁸ Clipping, Editorial, *Milwaukee Journal*, February 22, 1939, Box 1, folder 3, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

¹⁹ Greendale Pamphlet, May 1939, Box 1, folder 3, Raymond Miller Collection, UW-Milwaukee.

Milwaukee had other unique strengths that impressed the Greenbelt planning committee. Since the turn of the century, Milwaukee's leadership pursued a decentralized development agenda that favored "rurban" (new construction outside city limits) development over in-fill construction.²⁰ This method of development was seen as less expensive and more practical than buying smaller lots within the city, demolishing the most dilapidated of them and then building new housing in its place.²¹ The Greenbelt planners also favored this approach as a way of reducing costs and making construction easier and faster.

Milwaukee's Socialist mayors were an unusual and beneficial element that helped Milwaukee ultimately secure a Greenbelt town. Milwaukee's series of mayors were known as "sewer socialists" for their fiscally conservative policies that focused on municipal services for the workingman.²² The city had also experimented with public housing previously with two projects, Garden Homes and Parklawn.²³ These developments had mixed success but showed Milwaukee's commitment to building housing for its poorer citizens. Therefore, the Greenbelt planning commission was greeted with enthusiasm for the newest prospective project and cooperated more than any other city.²⁴

Planning of Greendale

The Greenbelt program's most practical aspect was providing construction jobs to the many unemployed men in the wake of the Great Depression. The Greendale site was intended to

²⁰ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 37.

²¹ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 93.

²² McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 16.

²³ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 32-33.

²⁴ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 59.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

house a population of 12,000, which entailed building over 3,000 homes.²⁵ Determining the actual size and budgeting for Greendale proved to be one of the most pivotal moments in the implementation of the program. The planners wanted to keep the community as big as possible in order to support administrative and maintenance costs. Yet more importantly, the communities had to stay on budget and maintain their rigid schedule. This meant starting out small.

Before construction began at Greendale in 1936, questionnaires were sent out to help determine what facilities residents wanted in their planned community. Most respondents preferred detached homes and requested a tavern, theater, library, and community hall.²⁶ An impressive attempt was made at architectural and design homogeneity. All units were to be furnished with furniture especially built for the Greenbelt homes.²⁷ Ultimately, this idea was abandoned due to expense.

Engineers were particularly excited about developing former pastureland into a village because of the ease of new construction compared to in-fill development. Two thousand men were involved in Greendale's construction, building everything from "a temporary three-mile spur track extension of an electric railway [which] transported the men and materials"²⁸ to the original 366 buildings. The designers of Greendale intended "every acre of ground [to be] set aside for a definite purpose."²⁹

Thus the great experiment in federally funded planned communities began. The "Farm Security Administration purchased 3,410 acres of farm and wooded land, bounded on one side

²⁵ The Story of Greendale, May 1948, Box 1, Folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

²⁶ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 95.

²⁷ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 45.

²⁸ Civil Engineer Article, February 1938, Box 1, folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

²⁹ The Story of Greendale, May 1948, Box 1, Folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

by 700-acre Whitnall Park,”³⁰ eight and a half miles from downtown Milwaukee. The actual greenbelt was very important to the design, so “500 acres were immediately turned over to the County for the continuation of the Root River Parkway which formed the greenbelt around the community.”³¹ Tracy Augur, general advisor for the Greenbelt program noted, “The width of the protective belt should be such that persons living at the edge of the community will not be tempted to walk across it to shopping facilities which may spring up in the surrounding territory, but will instead find it more convenient to go to their own shopping centers within the community.”³²

The physical planning of the towns was also unique. The hope from the beginning was that “the towns would provide a yardstick against which architects and builders could measure similar projects.”³³ The importance of “natural light, fresh air, and access to the healing natural environment”³⁴ was a central tenet in its construction. Indeed, the Story of Greendale stressed the importance of nature in “building healthy, normal children.”³⁵ Landscape architects planted mostly native, rural plants “linking the rural area to the village center by a network of pathways, and agricultural land that could [in the future] include 17 dairy farms, a natural history museum, recreation area, hiking and cross-country ski trails.”³⁶

³⁰ Greendale Pamphlet, May 1939, Box 1, folder 3, Raymond Miller Collection, UW-Milwaukee.

³¹ Greendale Book, Box 1, folder 3, Raymond Miller Collection, UW-Milwaukee.

³² Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 92.

³³ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 89.

³⁴ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 23.

³⁵ Document: The Story of Greendale, May 1948, Box 1, Folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

³⁶ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 40.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

The greatest portions of units built were two and three bedroom, single-family homes.³⁷ The houses were exceptionally built, but not showy. The beamed ceilings drew many compliments.³⁸ The layout of the homes experimented with eliminating the dining room and enlarging the living room to include a dining alcove. These features were thought to lend “greater convenience” and “save much drudgery for the housewife.” Basements were also done away with.³⁹ Eleanor Roosevelt visited in 1936 and commented that the community was “absolutely wonderful” and “laid out beautifully.” She also teased the builders about obviously not having a woman on the planning team, because they had put coal bins in the laundry area. Eventually, the builders moved them.⁴⁰ Each home had an “average of 5,000 square feet of yard space for lawns, vegetable and flower gardens.” For residents who still needed more garden space, 50 x 50 foot plots were available for \$1.50 in the rural area surrounding the central development.⁴¹ Indeed the expectation was, according to the US Department of Agriculture, that “living in Greendale will be as healthful, safe and pleasant as modern knowledge can make it.”⁴²

Another distinctive feature was the way the streets were designed. Automobiles were a big part of the design from the beginning since ownership had increased so much by the 1930s.⁴³ Four different types of streets were designed to facilitate traffic flow and ensure pedestrian

³⁷ The Story of Greendale, May 1948, Box 1, Folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

³⁸ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 58.

³⁹ US Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, Information for Greendale Applicants, Box 1, folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File 1938-1965, UW-Milwaukee.

⁴⁰ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 50.

⁴¹ The Story of Greendale, May 1948, Box 1, Folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

⁴² US Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, Information for Greendale Applicants, Box 1, folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File 1938-1965, UW-Milwaukee.

⁴³ Greendale Pamphlet, May 1939, Box 1, folder 3, Raymond Miller Collection, UW-Milwaukee.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

safety. Many of the residential streets were curved, a design feature first used in one of American's earliest suburbs, Radburn, New Jersey. These gently curving residential streets ended in cul-de-sacs or 'courts' as they were known in Milwaukee.⁴⁴

Early Days of Greendale

In early 1938, tenant selections commenced. The process was intended to fill the community with people who would enjoy building the “patterns of community life”⁴⁵ from the ground up. Residents were seen as “pioneers”⁴⁶ who could realize the kind of life planners had envisioned for these neighborhoods. Over 3,000 applied to rent homes in Greendale that year.⁴⁷ The application process was a rather arduous one. Applicants needed to register by request or referral to the main office. If deemed eligible, they were sent an application. Families accepted for investigation were interviewed. A social worker would then do a home visit, where she rated things like cleanliness, personal habits and attitudes.⁴⁸ Social workers also looked into families' “debt to determine if they were trying to pay it off or were unconcerned.” Also, references were required, as well as a physical examination.⁴⁹

The application's two most important criteria were income and household size. Prospective residents needed to make within \$1,000-\$2,200 a year, with some consideration for those making less than \$1,000 and those with four kids or more making up to \$2,400. A family

⁴⁴ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 38.

⁴⁵ The Story of Greendale, May 1948, Box 1, Folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

⁴⁶ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 41.

⁴⁷ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 137.

⁴⁸ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 54.

⁴⁹ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 141.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

of six was usually the cutoff point, but exceptions were made for households of seven in the “exceptional case” if “house size and family composition permit.” Other stipulations included a requirement that applicants be at least 21 years of age by July 1, 1938.⁵⁰

Soon after its establishment, Greendale had its own elementary and junior high school, dairy, newspaper, credit union, post office, other small businesses, and cooperatively owned and run grocery store, super service station, and barber.⁵¹ The student population grew rapidly that first year with 400 students during its first month of operation and 525 by the following spring.⁵² High school students went to nearby schools outside of Greendale.

As of October 4, 1938, Greendale had attracted 482 residents. Most families had 1 to 2 children and had moved from either Milwaukee or West Allis. Most were educated beyond high school and had an “income median of \$1660 irrespective of family size.” The average rent was \$42.65 and most were American by descent (90.8%). German (3.3%) and Austro-Hungarian (2.7%) immigrants were also represented.⁵³ A survey taken in 1978 of 25 original residents asked them why they had moved to Greendale. The results showed residents felt “it was an ideal place to raise a family,” some liked “the low cost,” or “open space design.” Some said moving to Greendale was primarily to “improve their children’s health” or they simply enjoyed “living in the country without the country.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ US Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, Information for Greendale Applicants, Box 1, folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File 1938-1965, UW-Milwaukee.

⁵¹ The Story of Greendale, May 1948, Box 1, Folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

⁵² Greendale Pamphlet, May 1939, Box 1, folder 3, Raymond Miller Collection, UW-Milwaukee.

⁵³ STATS on Residents as of 10/4/38, Box 1, folder2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW- Milwaukee.

⁵⁴ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 56.

Activities were an important aspect of community life. During the first two years of operation, Greendale had “over fifty organizations.”⁵⁵ There was a group for just about any interest, including athletics, chess, typing classes, dancing, drama, bowling leagues, Men's Glee Club, Boy and Girl Scouts, Junior Citizen's Association, and a Women's Club to mention just a few.⁵⁶ There were so many meetings during the early days that people eventually began to withdraw from all the social interaction. A newspaper article titled, “Lonely out there in Greendale? Never!” recounts the “marathon visiting” residents participated in all day Sundays and nearly every night.⁵⁷

Whatever their reasons for moving to Greendale, the new residents were indeed pioneers. Within the first year of operation, “nearly 650,000 people [were] reported to have visited Greendale” just to look around.⁵⁸ The community was an interesting experiment for outsiders. By November 1938, Greendale had successfully campaigned to become incorporated as a village to maintain local control over administrative issues.⁵⁹ Greendale began to establish itself as a real-life community, not just an ideal.

⁵⁵ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 170.

⁵⁶ Greendale Pamphlet, May 1939, Box 1, folder 3, Raymond Miller Collection, UW-Milwaukee.

⁵⁷ Clipping, Louise Gattol, “Lonely out there in Greendale? Never! Just Loads of Company,” *Milwaukee Journal*, September 14, 1938, Box 1, folder 3, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

⁵⁸ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 49.

⁵⁹ The Story of Greendale, May 1948, Box 1, Folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

Realities of Greendale

Greendale's early days were noted for its geographic isolation as much as its community spirit. Transportation was a problem faced by those without cars. While the application strongly encouraged renting to people with cars,⁶⁰ those that depended on bus service were better off car-pooling. After a "six month's trial service [started on] October 10, 1938, the Electric Company claimed it was losing money" and petitioned the Public Service Commission to discontinue bus service to Greendale. The request was rejected and it was ordered to stay in operation for 60 days after the expiration of the six-month trial period ending on April 10, 1939.⁶¹ Women were especially affected by the isolation since they rarely had their own cars or opportunity to leave the community. The distance also made telephone service expensive. Since telephone companies would have to change their boundaries, they were reluctant to invest in the extra infrastructure. Surveys were distributed to residents to find out their needs and desires concerning telephone service as the community grew. The "10¢ long distance call to Milwaukee"⁶² was not affordable to most residents.

While limited bus and telephone service were early inconveniences of living in Greendale, they were not insurmountable design flaws. The utopian ideals might have triumphed, but the most basic of those ideals were never realized. Greendale failed to achieve the most basic of its tenets – to house truly low-income families. Planners also intentionally excluded African Americans from the all-white suburb, and the resident selection committee

⁶⁰ Application for Greendale, Box 1, folder 2, Greendale Clerk Development File, UW-Milwaukee.

⁶¹ Greendale Pamphlet, May 1939, Box 1, folder 3, Raymond Miller Collection, UW-Milwaukee.

⁶² Clipping, "Greendale Telephone Rates to be Studied," n.p., nd., Box 1, folder 5, Raymond Miller Collection, UW-Milwaukee.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

disqualified families if both the husband and wife had jobs.⁶³ The reality was that Greendale was far from a utopia.

The original estimate of 3,000 units was hacked down to a mere 572.⁶⁴ Therefore, the price of the each unit went up. Ultimately, Elbert Peets, Greendale's town planner, acknowledged that the community was "not the place to house the least fortunate economic group."⁶⁵ This undermined the government's original purpose for building the town at all. Rents in Greendale ended up being in the "same range as 60% of all rents in Milwaukee for 1940."⁶⁶ Even early on in the construction phase, it was known that "only those who earned \$1.15 per hour could meet the \$1200 minimum income requirement for residency" and the "unskilled workers classified as 'common laborers' received sixty-nine cents per hour at Greendale."⁶⁷ As a result, the very towns that the government intended for "low-income housing" were out of reach for many of the neediest.

Eleanor Roosevelt commented she was "disappointed with the lack of planning for blacks." While only 7,500 of Milwaukee's 570,000 population were African American in the 1930s,⁶⁸ the income restrictions made sure Greendale was racially and economically segregated. Milwaukee's suburbs thus became increasingly segregated as income and minimum lot size restrictions became common.⁶⁹ Even as the African American population grew steadily after the

⁶³ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 142.

⁶⁴ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 145.

⁶⁵ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 35.

⁶⁶ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 54.

⁶⁷ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 144.

⁶⁸ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 51.

⁶⁹ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 219.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

1940s, the suburbs, especially Greendale, remained radically segregated. Even the praised greenbelt often acted as a “geographic barrier, with poorer neighborhoods on one side and wealthier suburbs on the other.”⁷⁰ This lack of governmental planning and public will to integrate races and social classes within the suburbs signified the failed ideals of the Greenbelt program.

Current Perspectives

The fact that a Socialist city, at least for a time, did not create a lasting community that embraced the idealistic goals of the Greenbelt program has resulted in a great deal of scholarship on the topic. Joseph L. Arnold's book *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, John M. McCarthy's *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, and Arnold Alanen and Joseph Eden's book *Main Street Ready-Made* focus on why Greendale failed to meet its founding ideals. Both Joseph L. Arnold and Arnold R. Alanen and Joseph A. Eden examined the implementation of the Greenbelt towns and why Greendale in particular never realized its full potential. McCarthy's book focused on how Milwaukee's long ingrained policy of decentralization and annexation benefited communities like Greendale, but also fueled the animosity between city and suburbs and perpetuated racial segregation.

The scholarship notes how the Greenbelt towns would have been America's first steps toward diminishing class segregation. Joseph L. Arnold laments the missed opportunity to give low-income families a chance to live outside the city in a place that could have given them voice in an autonomous community. Had very low-income groups been admitted alongside moderate-

⁷⁰ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 55.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

income residents, Greendale would have been a far more meaningful experiment in community building.

Arnold examines the interaction between the interested parties and tries to answer why the Greenbelt program was “a story of a road not taken”⁷¹ in American history. Arnold presents many reasons for Greendale's inability to fulfill its intentions. Namely, he shows how the constraints placed on the program from its very beginnings “ultimately crippled”⁷² it. From the program's inception, it only received half of the money originally approved for it.⁷³ Roosevelt reasoned that half was enough to start the program, and the rest of the money would be available later. Also, the tight timeline and bureaucracy involved in approving sites hurt the project's overall execution. Had the program been fully funded and given the proper amount of time to plan, Greendale may have reached an economy of scale that allowed for low-income housing.

Arnold points out that as early as 1937, some members of Congress called to stop the “wasteful”⁷⁴ spending on Greenbelt towns. Thus, Congress shifted the public focus from the intentions of the program to its price tag. The debate about the actual cost of the three towns was muddled. The use relief workers in the construction of the towns should have been deducted from the overall cost, but were not. Such oversights made the partisan New Deal program an easy target for Republicans to criticize.

Leading up to World War II, “the government raised rents an average of \$5 a month in response to critics who claimed suburban living was wasteful.” Still, the mood of the nation seemed to have changed. Where there was once a sense of adventure in community building, it

⁷¹ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 247.

⁷² Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 43.

⁷³ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 43.

⁷⁴ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 194.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

was replaced by isolation and distrust. The private sector had been opposed from the beginning to the government's involvement in real estate. Developers, bankers, and the mass media soon followed suit and condemned the New Deal program as competition with the free market. This anxiety over government-sponsored projects left the Greenbelt program without support.

The cooperative nature of the communities was even equated with Socialism, if not Communism. The Greenbelt towns increasingly became “un-American” in the general public’s mind. Rexford Tugwell was ridiculed as a “communist mastermind” that built these towns in order to control its residents and abolish private property.⁷⁵ The cooperatively owned and run stores Tugwell had hoped would strengthen the bonds within the community and symbolize the democratic nature of the towns, were abandoned within a few years along with the general enthusiasm for the towns themselves.

Arnold R. Alanen and Joseph A. Eden’s book *Main Street Ready-Made* notes that the government thus backed off the idea of public housing in the suburbs and let private interests dominate the housing markets once again.⁷⁶ Congress was eager to sell the Greenbelt towns to the private sector, yet it was not a simple process. In 1944, the Federal Public Housing Authority (FPHA), which managed the Greenbelt towns, decided they would sell faster if expanded to their original, intended size. The FPHA felt the completed towns “should be maintained as at least three outstanding examples of good community planning...which could do much to influence future development by private enterprise throughout the country.”⁷⁷ Greendale was to maintain ownership of the village and lease the commercial center, industrial sites, greenbelt, and other

⁷⁵ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 197.

⁷⁶ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 75.

⁷⁷ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 230.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

open spaces to private developers as the village saw fit. Four new villages were proposed in the surrounding land.

By 1947, the towns had not sold. There was an apparent lack of interest in the model communities. The idea then emerged to subdivide the towns “into the smallest feasible units” and give veterans preference in buying the homes. Luckily, the government body overseeing the sale of the towns was restructured and decided to keep the towns as whole units in order to “safeguard the educational and demonstrational value of these examples of community planning” after all.⁷⁸

Again, the promise of housing war veterans in the Greenbelt towns gained support.⁷⁹ In 1949, the Greendale American Legion Community Development Corporation planned to purchase the land in and around Greendale for expanded development, but the organization needed the financial backing of Milwaukee.⁸⁰ Milwaukee’s Mayor Zeidler was agreeable to the partnership because it would develop large tracts of land on the city’s periphery. Unfortunately, some residents of Greendale feared being annexed into Milwaukee and formed a rival group, the Greendale Cooperative Veterans Homes Association, to challenge the deal.⁸¹ The fear of annexation was shared by most Milwaukee suburbs. In general, the basis of this fear laid in losing local control and having to deal with “urban problems,”⁸² most notably low-income, minority groups confined to the inner core. Milwaukee’s steady path of mayors acknowledging the lack of affordable housing, but choosing to focus on Milwaukee’s right to annex land in order

⁷⁸ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 232-33.

⁷⁹ Alanen and Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made*, 75.

⁸⁰ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 234

⁸¹ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 148-49.

⁸² McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 202.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

to grow rather than redevelop the inner city lasted for decades.⁸³ This tactic scared the suburbs, and opposition to becoming city residents grew more adamant. Due to infighting among Greendale residents, the sale to the Greendale American Legion Community Development Corporation fell through. In the absence of another large developer willing to buy the entire community, Greendale was sold piece-meal in 1952.⁸⁴

Conclusion

The governmental experiment in suburban public housing thus ended. The ideals and intentions of these communities were entirely unique in real estate development practices of the day. The Greenbelt towns represent the missed opportunities for addressing racial and class segregation in America, but also provide lessons in how to move forward building low-income housing. Today, these communities are studied mostly because of their failure to live up to their intentions; yet Arnold R. Alanen and Joseph A. Eden's book *Main Street Ready-Made* hints at some of the important lessons to be drawn from this monumental, government-led project. The physical layout of the town provided residents a safe, walk-able neighborhood that fostered community spirit. These elements of the community were greatly enjoyed by the residents. Planners now realize that prospective residents want to live in places that foster community spirit and interaction with neighbors. The founding principles of Greendale outline how community building could work. Suburbs that incorporate walk-able, natural environments situated close to transit and the amenities of city-life are again in vogue in Urban Planning circles today. Greendale was a tribute to Garden City principles in its inception and a pleasant place to raise

⁸³ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 7.

⁸⁴ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 236.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

families from its establishment, but strayed far from its utopian ideals. Greendale was never the town it was intended to be, but the ideas behind it remain possible.