

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Gregory C. Randall.** *America's Original G.I. Town: Park Forest, Illinois.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xviii + 236 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6207-6.

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Gregory C. Randall's book, *America's Original G. I. Town*, analyzes the historical circumstances that led to planning, construction, and social change in Park Forest, Illinois, the first and most complete planned community built immediately after World War II. Randall discusses Park Forest (in south-suburban Chicago) in relationship to utopian planned communities of late-nineteenth-century England, and in particular as an outgrowth of New Deal-era planned Greenbelt communities such as Greendale, Wisconsin. In doing so, he develops a detailed overview of the ideas behind residential community-planning, contributing to a useful and growing body of literature regarding the sociology and historical emergence of suburbia.

From his perspective as a planner and landscape architect, with personal childhood ties to Park Forest, Randall vacillates between discussing people and circumstances on one hand and the physical fabric of the community as a built object on the other. Randall's introductory comments differentiate between his intended treatment of the topic as "bones" (the physical infrastructure and how it came to be built) and "flesh" (the values, institutions and events by which residents imbued the community with personal meanings).

Communities traditionally evolve from slow, evolutionary changes through a variety of unplanned economic and social circumstances. Randall contrasts that process of unplanned growth with sweeping, revolutionary changes in new communities that were enabled by the U. S. government's continuing role in providing financial incentives to developers, beginning with the Greenbelt communities and continuing throughout the shortages of post-war housing. In doing so, government

agencies affected the direction of land-use planning and design, while exercising a measure of control over the marketplace for scarce housing units as demand dramatically increased during the post-war transition.

The book painstakingly introduces the key personalities who played central roles in the speculative development. Randall provides excellent background about the Roosevelt-era relationships formed among Phil Klutznick, Carroll Sweet Sr., and Nathan Manilow, who allied at the end of World War II in founding American Community Builders (ACB). As its parent company, ACB played a central role in the Park Forest speculative land development venture. Biographical sketches of each member of the development team show how experience and political connections gained from New Deal-era housing programs helped to facilitate post-war development of the project. While his treatment is generally fair, balanced, and dispassionate, at times Randall's detailed discussion of the personalities runs the risk of celebrating the developers' genius and foresight rather than characterizing them as essentially products of their time. The project was, after all, an exercise in land speculation.

In discussing the planners' motivations and personalities, Randall excuses some of the more blatantly controlling management practices by the ACB development team. We can certainly appreciate that those practices were more acceptable in 1950 than they would be today, but shenanigans (like the company's contrivance of the PARK FOREST NEWS, a publication to rival the residents' own successful newspaper and Klutznick's increasingly "love it or leave it" approach to tenancy in the village, achieved through tenant interviews and buy-outs) seem to reflect a shift from original benevolence in

envisioning the community toward intolerant manipulations and overt financial exploitation. Over time, an uplifting social agenda seems to have yielded to a heavy-handed and controlling exploitation of the community that ACB's speculators had created. As but one example, ACB's ineptitude in assuring proper school facilities – though explainable by tax structure, state districting, political boundaries and the like – is clearly unacceptable from the standpoint of the developers' ability to anticipate how the growing community's needs would be met. The ability to anticipate more accurately would seem to be a fundamental part of the planning process.

Park Forest may be regarded as a timepiece of a distinctive set of events. The community was a product of its time, and, as such, it provides a measurement scale for how far our contemporary values in residential community have changed from the modest expectation of the war-conditioned, "greatest generation". How can we not be a bit humbled by the modest expectations of homeowners and rental tenants fifty years ago? The book does a rather nice job characterizing the context of post-war family decision-making, including enthusiastic discussion of other reflections of the time and place which are available for us to examine, particularly movies such as *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, that capture the spirit of the time. Park Forest also provided the basis for William H. Whyte's 1956 sociological analysis of *The Organization Man*.

*America's Original G. I. Town* is greatly enriched by the author's examination of original source documents, such as the planners' correspondence and photographic archives of the Park Forest library. Randall does a fine job illustrating the way people came together voluntarily to form and actively participate in civic and social organizations. As survivors of the Great Depression and two world wars, Park Forest's first residents were notably "joiners" who sought out opportunities to become involved in social clubs and civic decision-making bodies as another way to make their mark. It would be difficult to overlook the extent to which this kind of community involvement has changed and continues to change in contemporary society. The developers wisely encouraged natural social relationships and governance to emerge and evolve, even though at times these processes were uncomfortably guided by the management company's unseen hand. It is also interesting to note the success with which the developers utilized independent published media like *COLLIER'S MAGAZINE* and local newspapers to promote consumer interest in their project.

I wish the book had placed more of a human face on events and included more anecdotes that describe the experiences of community residents as the project became established over time. Clearly any community is imbued with acquired meanings and an acquired "fit" between people and place. Specific housing needs of post-war veterans receive a bit less attention than the book's title might predict, but perhaps this can be excused by the extent to which all families were products of the war experience. Despite Randall's background as a designer, the book seems a bit thin in terms of its ability to give us a clear sense of the experiential quality of Park Forest's actual physical setting. Maps and illustrative materials developed by the author are helpful from the standpoint of orientation, but I kept hoping to get a better feel for the scale and texture of being on one of the village's streets, the view from the living room, or the experience of walking through the park spaces. Randall's own design ideas for rehabilitating the failed Park Forest retail center are reflected late in the book, and the possibilities he poses from the perspective of a designer, though departing from historical analysis, are interesting and engaging.

Randall does a little more than scratch the surface in discussing construction-management practices that were the basis of experimentation in mass-produced, manufactured housing soon after the war. Most of the practices used to build houses and apartments at Park Forest were cautious and not too adventuresome, but it was a delight to see at least passing mention of the fascinating story of the Lustron Corporation's venture, and details of how it failed, largely as a result of its association with Senator Joseph McCarthy. Rapidly-changing events in government's commitment to manufactured housing eliminated the prospect of 2000 Lustron homes in Park Forest, a circumstance that might have had as much impact on the market for manufactured housing as it would have had on the physical fabric of the Park Forest community.

The book's most important lesson – clearly set forth and substantiated by excellent examples throughout – is the value of flexibility and willingness to compromise, essentially a reactive approach to planning. What other lessons does Randall mean for us to learn from this clinically descriptive approach to a single residential environment among many new communities that grew out of a variety of approaches to necessary social and economic relationships? Perhaps as important as any aspect of the book is the extent to which it poses questions about the process and academic discipline of community planning. Criteria for evaluating success in planning often differ

from consumers' measures of success in terms of livability. Park Forest's "prospectus" aside, readers from other disciplines may be disappointed, as I was, that planners seem so disinclined toward identifying measurable criteria that could potentially form a basis for critical evaluation of planning successes and failures.

Randall's claim that the village of Park Forest changed the American social and physical landscape "more than the previous 170-years of expansion" seems difficult to substantiate. Important as Park Forest may be as a case study, it might better be seen as representing a point on a continuum that included not only the English Garden Cities and New Deal Greenbelt communities, but also the Roosevelt-era subsistence homestead communities, imaginative company towns like Morgan Park in Minnesota, and retail developments like Kansas City's Country Club District. It must occur to many readers that the North American landscape is littered with as many failed community-building experiments that have grown out of the Park Forest model as there are successes. Maybe that is an indication that we did not learn the key lessons of new town planning particularly well. Or quite possibly, in the United States, market forces and individual self-interest will always outweigh the good intentions of environmental planning.

The book poses interesting questions, but some of the answers suggested by Randall seem less compelling. From the perspective of architects and landscape architects, perhaps the largest "hero" of Randall's treatment is landscape architect Elbert Peets, the celebrated designer of the New Deal Greenbelt community of Greendale, Wisconsin. I was disappointed in the rationale by which Peets's original lot layout design was compromised by ruthless and exclusively short-term cost-cutting motivations. Park Forest, like other overtly planned environments, entailed substantial re-engineering of the natural physical and social landscape, perhaps reminiscent of

the movie "The Truman Show." The book is greatly enhanced – in fact the writing virtually sparkles – when Randall discusses the geological and prehistoric "canvas" on which Park Forest was created. If designers and investors are collectively going to manipulate natural environments and the generally spontaneous processes by which communities are established and evolve, then we had better do an exceptional and uncompromising job of it, more completely and accurately anticipating the consequences of our planning. In fairness, the project's several shortcomings should probably be forgiven, if only because it was not undertaken as an academic exercise but was, instead, an idea realized in the face of necessary compromise.

Randall has enticed me to visit Park Forest. I understand that it remains quite livable, enhanced by changes to dwelling units made by subsequent generations of residents. Though the community of Park Forest is still viable today, it could not quite capitalize on the more exciting opportunities envisioned by its planners. The development was unable to compete with changing economic forces of mass retail marketing, was unsuccessful in promoting linkages to mass transit, and has been largely absorbed into the fabric of south suburban Chicago. Missed opportunities at Park Forest reflect, in microcosm, broader failures in the fabric of America's communities in the late twentieth century: sprawl, abandonment, social isolation, dissatisfaction with schools, and the like. Given who the residents of Park Forest were – well-educated, energetic young families conditioned by the experiences of economic depression and war and eager to exploit new, individual opportunities – it seems unlikely that the community could have been anything less than successful, regardless of how well or inadequately its planners carried off their mission. With greater commitment by the developers and better follow-through on the part of federal agencies, perhaps it could have been even better or had more enduring impact on America.

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