

Public Housing for Respectable DC Residents: Greenbelt and Langston Terrace

Introduction

New Deal planners imagined the greenbelt developments as a large-scale solution to urban overcrowding in the midst of the Great Depression, but in the end, between the three finished projects in Maryland, Ohio, and Wisconsin, less than 3,000 units were built. Greenbelt, Maryland, in particular, was intended both as a solution to urgent local housing needs and the blueprint for a suburbanizing America; its head planner imagined that the government would be able to replicate the project and private industry would follow. Instead, the greenbelt developments remain an anomaly: relatively dense garden city-style housing built with federal funds for middle-income families.¹ Planners saw Langston Terrace as Greenbelt, Maryland's Black equivalent and built it for DC's Black middle class. There was less emphasis on the possibility of replication, but its structure and eventual residents were very similar. Given that most housing projects in the second half of the twentieth century were built for the very low income, why were these two communities planned in the first place?

This paper argues that the Great Depression caused a national housing shortage that was especially severe in Washington DC. This led to middle-income families' widespread desperation to move to modern developments like Greenbelt or Langston Terrace. The Roosevelt administration attempted a variety of solutions and for the first time in US history, some of these solutions were direct. These direct solutions included Greenbelt and Langston Terrace, both

¹ At the time they used the term "moderate", but today moderate is usually used to refer to households that make 50-80% of an area's median income. This was not what they meant.

created with utopian ideals, both catering to those of moderate means, and both segregated. I also argue that these aspects made them relatively similar environments in the 1930s, but increasingly different as the twentieth century wore on.

Urban Housing before the Depression

In the late nineteenth century, most Americans still lived in cities or rural areas.² However, around the beginning of the 1920s, investors turned more aggressively towards building suburban communities on the outskirts of cities, and away from the assortment of housing types that they had built in the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries.³ Developers had previously built rowhomes in a variety of sizes with the intention of renting or selling them to low or relatively low-income residents as well as tenements for the poor to rent rooms in.⁴ Both were profitable in the nineteenth century, however, corners were systemically cut, and neither was necessarily safe. Then, WWI pushed the cost of lumber up,⁵ while reformers made crowded tenements more difficult to build.⁶ After the war, construction costs remained high.⁷ The industry also shifted away from a model where an investor or developer built and rented out a building, to a model where they built and sold a building, partly due to growing

² "City Life in the Late 19th Century | Rise of Industrial America, 1876-1900 | U.S. History Primary Source Timeline | Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress | Library of Congress," web page, Library of Congress, accessed December 10, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/rise-of-industrial-america-1876-1900/city-life-in-late-19th-century/>.

³ Richard Harris, "The Rise of Filtering Down: The American Housing Market Transformed, 1915-1929," *Social Science History* 37, no. 4 (2013), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24573941>.

⁴ Harris.

⁵ Joseph L Muller and Charles W Slifko, "Lumber Industry under Wartime Conditions," 1942, 6.

⁶ Harris, "The Rise of Filtering Down."

⁷ Robert Fogelson, *The Great Rent Wars: New York 1917-1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press), accessed October 23, 2022, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/cato/v34i1/f_0030314_24524.pdf. In 1920 the rental vacancy rate in NYC was 0.3 percent. In present day rental markets seven to eight percent is considered a healthy vacancy rate that allows renters to find apartments and move when needed. In 2021 the vacancy rate in NYC was 4.54 percent. "2021 New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey Selected Initial Findings" (NYC Department of Housing and Preservation & Development, 2022), <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hpd/downloads/pdfs/services/2021-nychvs-selected-initial-findings.pdf>.

demand for suburban subdivisions, partly due to regulations pushed by progressives.⁸ In concert with this shift, the federal government, encouraged by real estate interests, published a campaign encouraging home ownership.⁹ As a result, developers turned away from building housing targeted at the lower income audience and moved towards creating exclusive suburban communities.¹⁰ Despite this general shift away from financially accessible options, some growth in multifamily construction continued, peaking in 1927, as extreme shortages pushed rents up.¹¹ This growth did not last.

In the US, garden cities were one particularly idealistic reflection of the trend of new suburban housing. Many proponents of garden cities saw the benefits of the suburbs and sought to both improve upon them and make them more accessible. Ebenezer Howard, a British urban planner, wrote about garden cities in 1898 as a way of capturing both the benefits of the countryside and city, by creating small, centrally planned, self-sufficient cities just outside of central cities.¹² From the beginning, proponents of garden cities struggled with the tension of making them accessible to the general public and not just the wealthy, while also making a profit.¹³ Nevertheless, this concept influenced US city planners, who emphasized city slums as a root of working-class disorderliness.¹⁴ Progressive reformers saw a connection between urban

⁸ Harris, "The Rise of Filtering Down."

⁹ Paul C. Luken and Suzanne Vaughan, "'...Be a Genuine Homemaker in Your Own Home': Gender and Familial Relations in State Housing Practices, 1917-1922," *Social Forces* 83, no. 4 (2005), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3598405>. See Figure 2, for an image.

¹⁰ David C Wheelock, "The Federal Response to Home Mortgage Distress: Lessons from the Great Depression," *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review*, 2008.

¹¹ Fogelson, *The Great Rent Wars: New York 1917–1929*; Michael Bocker and Christopher Hanes, "The 1920s American Real Estate Boom and the Downturn of the Great Depression: Evidence from City Cross Sections" (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, February 2013), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w18852>. See Appendix A for relevant chart.

¹² Joseph L. Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952* (Ohio State University Press, 1971), 5.

¹³ Arnold, 16.

¹⁴ Jennifer Karen Kerns, "A Social Experiment in Greenbelt, Maryland: Class, Gender, and Public Housing, 1935-1954" (dissertation, University of Arizona, 2002), 52, UMCP HBK Maryland Room.

reform and creating good citizens, explaining that “with dwellings of a different type, the character of the people will be altered.”¹⁵

Founded in 1929 and based on the garden city ideal, Radburn, New Jersey was the closest precursor to the greenbelt towns.¹⁶ Planners originally designed Radburn with multiple villages, each divided into smaller neighborhood units. Yet, Radburn was constructed with only one village.¹⁷ Each house faced towards the parks and away from the main streets.¹⁸ However, houses in Radburn were expensive. The square footage devoted to parks brought the price up, past what low- or moderate-income families could afford.¹⁹ It allowed only those with above average income to leave the city for its parks.

Notably, mortgages in the 1920s—presumably including those that the new residents of Radburn signed—were not yet a standard 30-year, fixed rate contract. People bought houses using a mix of financing options including a 5-year ‘balloon mortgage’ with a loan-to-value ratio of 50 percent and an 11–12-year option that would be paid off at the end of the loan and begin with a much higher loan-to-value ratio. The first of these loan options meant a high down payment, low interest rates, and a loan that would not be paid off after five years so the borrower would need to refinance. The second meant higher monthly payments, but after the length of the mortgage, it would be fully paid off. Some borrowers split their loans between types to maximize

¹⁵ Howard Gillette Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty : Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 140.

¹⁶ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952*, 15.

¹⁷ The construction of Radburn, NJ was halted by the Depression. As Arnold put it on page 17 “The only rapidly growing new towns in America in 1933 were the tarpaper ‘Hooverilles.’”

¹⁸ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952*.

¹⁹ Arnold, 15–16.

borrowing limits.²⁰ Either option became a liability after the stock market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression.

The Great Depression

In 1929 the financial system screeched to a halt. Homeowners had difficulty making monthly payments, and as banks collapsed borrowers with balloon loans couldn't access new credit. By 1935 banks had foreclosed on about half of urban mortgages.²¹ Meanwhile, developers stopped new construction. Millions of building trade workers became unemployed.²² In fact, Radburn is a perfect example; it was originally planned to be four times as large but as both credit and personal income dried up its investors were unable to complete it.²³ Nationally, multi- and single-family housing starts plunged.²⁴

Unsurprisingly, the rental market was also in crisis. Formerly stable families found themselves unable to pay rent, month after month. Some cities passed rent moratoriums, but as the years wore on rental houses decayed and electricity, heat, and water could and would be turned off.²⁵

²⁰ W. N. Loucks, "The Philadelphia Building and Loan Association Plan of Financing by Second Mortgages," *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 5, no. 1 (1929): 62–70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3138512>.

²¹ J. E. Morton, *Urban Mortgage Lending: Comparative Markets and Experience*, National Bureau of Economic Research. Financial Research Program. Studies in Urban Mortgage Financing: 6 (Princeton University Press, 1956).

²² J. Paul Mitchell, *Federal Housing Policy and Programs: Past and Present* (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1985), 7.

²³ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952*, 17.

²⁴ Bocker and Hanes, "The 1920s American Real Estate Boom and the Downturn of the Great Depression," 47. This can also be seen in Appendix A.

²⁵ Edith Abbott and Katherine Kiesling, "Evictions during the Chicago Rent Moratorium Established by the Relief Agencies, 1931-33," *Social Service Review* 9, no. 1 (1935): 34–57.

Unlike most cities during the depression, DC was growing rapidly.²⁶ The New Deal meant that jobs in the federal government grew from 63,000 in 1933 to 166,000 in 1940.²⁷ In 1937, one *Washington Post* reporter wrote “Great Growth of D.C. Sends Costs Souring: Population Climb Causes Larger Demands for Service.”²⁸ Among various costs and benefits, this exacerbated the housing crisis.

In DC the most crowded and unsafe areas were the Black neighborhoods, near the city center and towards the south and east. White residents in the northwestern areas of the city prevented Black residents or neighborhoods from expanding into less crowded white neighborhoods like parts of Georgetown up through Chevy Chase and Takoma.²⁹ “Transient campus” grew where they could, consisting of hundreds of homeless Black people.³⁰ Slightly luckier newcomers found housing in alley dwellings and one survey along North Capitol St—the road dividing much of NW and NE DC—found many occupied buildings were “almost unfit for human habitation.”³¹

Solutions

Most reformers in the Federal government acknowledge the problem and hoped to remove slums and replace them with more wholesome public housing but struggled to build the

²⁶ US Census Bureau, “Historical Population Change Data (1910-2020),” Census.gov, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/dec/popchange-data-text.html>.

²⁷ Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 251.

²⁸ James D. Secrest, “Great Growth of D.C. Sends Costs Soaring: Population Climb Causes Larger Demands for Service. Bill Approved by Senate Unit to Provide for 10 Million Boost. Tax Situation Makes News For All U.S. Problem Vexes Both the President and Citizenry of Capital. Officials Sought Solution in Larger Grant From U.S.,” *The Washington Post* (1923-1954), July 4, 1937.

²⁹ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, 253.

³⁰ Asch and Musgrove, 250.

³¹ “Survey of Housing Here Shows Deplorable Conditions,” WTR, 6 Jan. 1933; interview with clerk at Aitkens Realty Office, quoted in Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, 253.”

necessary public housing.³² Some sought to ban alley dwelling as they believed it fostered moral deficiencies like crime, poverty, disease, immorality, and infant mortality.³³ Ideally, this would be followed with public housing for the residents, yet funding for this stalled in Congress, while private homebuilders also took issue with government interference in the market. In the end, elimination of alleys usually resulted in the displacement of residents and the concentration of DC's Black population.³⁴

The Public Works Administration built Langston Terrace for DC's Black residents.³⁵ It was located at Benning Rd and Twenty-First St NE, not far from the Anacostia River, a Black area far from any white neighborhoods. Greenbelt's planners pointed to Langston Terrace as Greenbelt's Black equivalent. They had reasons to see the connections between the two as there were similarities beyond federal funding. Langston Terrace was built as one community, with centrally located courtyards and schools within walking distance, near the first Black suburban community in DC. It went beyond the bare minimum and had playgrounds and sculptures scattered across the large campus, inspired by the same ideals of giving children room to play and grow.³⁶ Of course, it was also within city bounds, located near the first Black DC public schools,³⁷ and the complex consisted of 158 apartments and 116 townhomes.³⁸ It did not need to be fully self-sustaining as—for better or for worse—it was part of the city. Residents recalled

³² "Razing Slums In D.C. Likely To Begin Soon: U. S. Authority to Consider Applications for 12 Projects at Once. Razing Slums In D.C. Likely To Begin Soon Alley," *The Washington Post* (1923-1954), July 1, 1938.

³³ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital*, 253. Asch and Musgrove quoting William Henry Jones' 1929 study.

³⁴ Asch and Musgrove, 256.

³⁵ Asch and Musgrove, 249.

³⁶ Asch and Musgrove, 250.

³⁷ *The Langston Terrace Dwellings Oral/Video Hilltop Campus Schools History Project*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fESdIORfgL0>.

³⁸ District of Columbia Housing Authority, "Langston and Additions," 2018, https://dcha.us/img/guest_uploads/temp_KAgPIVt8k51589646459TI0SFw35cAUexDCniD3U.pdf.

shopping at Black-owned businesses along Benning Rd.³⁹ Yet this equivalence was also an excuse, to avoid politically difficult conversations around integration.

Langston saw incredible demand. Officials received 2,700 inquiries, so competition was tough. PWA officials looked for model Black citizens, whose current housing was unsafe. Admission was not based on income or how burdened applicants were by their rent, instead, they were judged first by how great their need was in terms of their current living conditions, with consideration for things like hazardous living conditions, overcrowding, and proximity to vice and crime.⁴⁰ Its early citizens had fond memories of the community and schools and one resident recalled that as a child he had no real awareness that he lived in “low-income” housing, likely because original residents were not truly selected on income.⁴¹

Still, in the depression, even those of moderate income faced difficulty in DC’s diminished housing market. When interviewed about her life at Greenbelt, Bernice Brautigam spoke extensively of the DC apartment she lived in before moving to Greenbelt. Although her husband made about \$1,200 a year, an amount that was above the median family income for the time and they were both white,⁴² they lived in a rowhouse converted into apartments. It lacked an in-unit bathroom and modern appliances. She specifically noted that the kitchen—which was really two hotplates and an icebox—was in fact a closet converted into a kitchen. Mrs. Brautigam also recalled roaches.⁴³ This was the only apartment that she and her husband could

³⁹ *The Langston Terrace Dwellings Oral/Video History Project*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQUT_ETGTIY.

⁴⁰ Kelly Quinn, “Making Modern Homes: A History of Langston Terrace Dwellings, a New Deal Housing Program in Washington, D.C.” (dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2007), 50.

⁴¹ *The Langston Terrace Dwellings Oral/Video History Project*.

⁴² “Incomes of Families and Single Persons, 1935-36,” *Monthly Labor Review* 47, no. 4 (1938): 728–39.

⁴³ Bernice Brautigam, Greenbelt Oral History Project, 1985, UMCP HBK Maryland Room, https://av.lib.umd.edu/media_objects/np1939827.

find, and they paid more for it than they would pay once they moved to Greenbelt, where their ‘rent’ was 20 percent of their income.

Similarly, Mrs. Dorothy East was also only too happy to move out of a problematic apartment in the city. Mr. East worked at the Library of Congress, and she had been a teacher until she became pregnant. They worked hard and were able to afford a two-bedroom apartment directly beside the Capitol—however, their “apartment was on the first floor at the back, where the coal was dumped all year round, because they heated the water with coal. And our floors were like walking on sugar” due to the coal.⁴⁴

Reformers across the board recognized the problem of poor housing and saw that the private market had failed the provided the necessary housing. Most reformers had lofty ideals that were dragged down to earth by financial and social constraints. Tugwell, who would go on to head the creation of Greenbelt, Maryland believed in eliminating the slums and resettling people elsewhere, in garden cities. He said that he would happily “go just outside centers of population, pick up cheap land, build a whole community and entice people into it. Then go back to the cities and tear down whole slums and make parks of them.”⁴⁵ Unfortunately, in the end, a relatively small number of residents would live in cities like Greenbelt or Langston Terrace, and they did not come from the worst of the slums—although they certainly saw the modern apartments and townhomes as a step up.

Outside of direct action, the Roosevelt administration worked to strengthen the private housing market. This was the beginning of federal mortgage insurance and the 30-year mortgage,

⁴⁴ Dorothy East, Greenbelt Oral History Project, 1985, UMCP HBK Maryland Room, https://av.lib.umd.edu/media_objects/np1939827.

⁴⁵ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Modern Library ed. (Modern Library, 1993), 310.

with lower monthly charges. Policymakers saw easier borrowing as one potential solution to their housing crisis.⁴⁶ If individuals were more able to take on loans, they could pay to construct their own homes. Similarly, if investors were more able to take on loans and saw more demand, they would also construct more homes. Although difficult to measure, economists Grebler, Blank, and Winnick believe it is likely that these actions contributed to the building and purchasing of homes in the late 30s and after.

Planning Greenbelt

The Greenbelt Development was built under the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1935 as a program in the Resettlement Administration. The newly created Resettlement Administration primarily consolidated other programs under a new organizational structure, but the greenbelt cities were a wholly new program. Three were built, with the intention that more would follow and play a more significant part in solving the housing crisis of the 1930s.

The administration originally planned to build and sell off the co-ops and achieve affordable housing in that way. The residents would buy into the co-op and pay a monthly fee, much like purchasing a condo, only because the federal government had constructed and sold it, the goal would be to break even, rather than profit. Construction moved forward, but costs and controversies grew, and as a result number of units were cut, damaging long-term affordability. The Resettlement Administration realized this was not possible if affordability was to be maintained. Thus, after the Resettlement Administration completed the three settlements the

⁴⁶ Leo Grebler, David Blank, and Louis Winnick, *Capital Formation in Residential Real Estate, Trends and Prospects*, Studies in Capital Formation and Financing: 1 (Princeton University Press, 1956), 238.

federal government-maintained ownership.⁴⁷ In an attempt to approach a break-even point, planners also raised income restrictions from \$1,100 to \$1,200.⁴⁸

Economists and planners in the Roosevelt Administration believed cities were unhealthy—and saw planned communities like the greenbelt towns as a solution. Tugwell spoke of rehousing slum-dwellers in communities like Greenbelt, on the suburban fringe, and turning the slums into parks.⁴⁹ Of course, due to overcrowding and concentrated poverty, both exacerbated by the Depression, much of DC was an unhealthy place to live.⁵⁰ Like most reformers of the time, Tugwell saw cities as dirty as a problem that caused “moral decay” and poverty. He wanted families to be surrounded by nature,⁵¹ hence Greenbelt’s relatively remote location. In 1935, the town was surrounded by parks, many of which would later be built into highways and suburbs. Townhouses were chosen as the primary housing type because while the houses were built to be durable and safe, the community was meant to be modest, and made up of relatively low-income residents. In the eyes of planners townhomes were cheaper and more efficient than single-family homes, but allowed families access to a healthier lifestyle more like that found in small towns.

With these plans, we can see the early influences of suburbanization, yet what we now imagine as a classic suburban development hasn’t yet solidified.

Planning Langston

⁴⁷ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952*, 126–30.

⁴⁸ Carol Christensen, *The American Garden City and the New Towns Movement*, Architecture and Urban Design 13 (UMI Research Press, 1986), 82.

⁴⁹ Kerns, “A Social Experiment in Greenbelt, Maryland: Class, Gender, and Public Housing, 1935-1954”; Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952*, 26.

⁵⁰ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, 250–52.

⁵¹ Kerns, “A Social Experiment in Greenbelt, Maryland: Class, Gender, and Public Housing, 1935-1954,” 52–53.

The architects of Langston wanted it to be modern healthful housing that would essentially be the opposite of the inner city. The planners' goals aligned with those of Greenbelt in how they wanted future residents to live. However, as a fully federally funded permanent rental community, they never planned or hoped for replications of Langston to be the dominant form of housing in the U.S.

Hilyard Robinson was the head architect who wanted to create a space that would inspire and uplift residents.⁵² He believed that “[t]he Negro architect may become a determining force and indispensable factor in the struggle for more abundant living”⁵³ and would echo the language used by other reformers as he sought to improve conditions for DC’s Black slum-dwellers.⁵⁴ He even made plans for a community near Howard inspired by both Europe’s superblocks and Radburn’s planned superblocks, and although that failed, he took those plans and modified them to use in Langston.⁵⁵

In another similarity, Robinson liked the location: it overlooked the river and was near sprawling greenspace in the form of parks.⁵⁶ Within the project, car traffic was limited by a one-way street and pedestrians have a wealth of pathways.⁵⁷

⁵² “Harvey Linsley Page,” DC Office of Planning, 1978, <https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/Architects%20Bios%20P%20and%20S.pdf>.

⁵³ Hilyard Robinson, “Opportunities for the Negro Architect” *The Negro History Bulletin*, April 1940, quoted in Quinn, “Making Modern Homes: A History of Langston Terrace Dwellings, a New Deal Housing Program in Washington, D.C.,” 90.

⁵⁴ Quinn, 120–21.

⁵⁵ Quinn, 131.

⁵⁶ Quinn, 128.

⁵⁷ Quinn, 129.

Although Robinson and the other architects differed from Greenbelt's planners in some aspects of their backgrounds, their work had similar influences and they hoped to influence the communities they planned in similar ways.

The First Greenbelters

Residents began to move into Greenbelt Maryland in 1937.⁵⁸ Two factors combined to make the three greenbelt towns more exclusive than intended. Due to the severe shortage of housing, the Resettlement Administration received an overwhelming number of applications. They received 5,462 applications, 3,783 of which were eligible. Of those thousands of families, 879 were accepted.⁵⁹ Eighty percent of accepted applicants were from DC,⁶⁰ 70 percent were government employees.⁶¹ Due to the high costs of construction, and the goal of making them self-sustaining in the long term, the income floor was raised (residents would pay 20% of their income towards 'rent'). Together, this meant that the resettlement agents were extremely picky when reviewing applicants.

The first few qualifications were clear cut. There was the income restriction: residents would make between \$1,200 and \$2,000 a year, a moderate income for the time.⁶² When the Barcuses moved into Greenbelt, Mr. Barcus was a teacher in the 1930s making near the minimum, \$1,260.⁶³ In fact the national median income of American families in 1935-6 was

⁵⁸ Cathy Knepper, *Greenbelt, Maryland: A Living Legacy of the New Deal* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 209.

⁵⁹ Cedric Larson, "Educational Activities of the Federally Planned Community of Greenbelt, Maryland" (M.A. thesis, George Washington University, 1939), 157, UMCP HBK Maryland Room.

⁶⁰ Larson, 159.

⁶¹ Robert Brugger, *Maryland: A Middle Temperament 1634-1980* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 514.

⁶² Christensen, *The American Garden City and the New Towns Movement*, 82.

⁶³ Evelyn Barcus, Greenbelt Oral History Project, 1985, 35, UMCP HBK Maryland Room, <https://hdl.handle.net/1903.1/39499>. In his interview Mr. Barcus said he was making 1,150, which would have been below the minimum, so it seems more likely that Mr. Barcus remembered incorrectly.

\$1,160⁶⁴ and the median employed white individual in DC made 1,440 dollars yearly.⁶⁵ In other words, the average family in the US was too low income to move into the new community.

Residents were white.⁶⁶ In the case of Greenbelt, MD, the mostly white rural areas surrounding Greenbelt were already highly suspicious of the settlement and would not have tolerated anything else.⁶⁷ Federal authorities needed local permission in order to establish a Greenbelt Housing Authority and a municipal charter. State senators asked questions about taxation, the race of the future residents, and if they would be a burden to the county. Eventually state senators were assured that Greenbelt citizens gave the planners the permission they needed.⁶⁸

However, over 5,400 applications had to be cut down to under a thousand.⁶⁹ The relatively conservative local's distrustfulness, as well as the controversy around the project, pressured planners to choose respectable white people. However, they may have chosen similarly without the added pressure: the garden city ideals fit a certain kind of person, or rather, a certain kind of family.

Another restriction required that wives and mothers stay at home.⁷⁰ Nearly all women who moved into Greenbelt were already mothers or became them relatively quickly. Finally,

⁶⁴ "Incomes of Families and Single Persons, 1935-36," *Monthly Labor Review* 47, no. 4 (1938).

⁶⁵ Steven Ruggles et al., "IPUMS Ancestry Full Count Data: Version 3.0 [Dataset]," IPUMS, 2021, https://cps.ipums.org/cps-action/data_requests/download. The author of this paper downloaded the 1940s census data and found this figure.

⁶⁶ Kerns, "A Social Experiment in Greenbelt, Maryland: Class, Gender, and Public Housing, 1935-1954," 54.

⁶⁷ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952*; Kerns, "A Social Experiment in Greenbelt, Maryland: Class, Gender, and Public Housing, 1935-1954," 79-80.

⁶⁸ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952*, 129.

⁶⁹ Larson, "Educational Activities of the Federally Planned Community of Greenbelt, Maryland," 157.

⁷⁰ Kerns, "A Social Experiment in Greenbelt, Maryland: Class, Gender, and Public Housing, 1935-1954."

planners chose families based on their interest in having a better place to raise their children and interest in a cooperative way of life.

The families that moved in were excited to move out of overcrowded apartments and rowhouses in the surrounding area. Residents emphasized how friendly their neighbors were. Mrs. Barcus recalled walking her children or “pushing her babies” to the shopping center with her friends “a lot.”⁷¹ When asked about safety Mrs. Barcus brought up the underpasses and how pedestrians never needed to go on the streets. Two of her children stayed in the city after they grew up. Overall, Mrs. Barcus was extremely happy with her time in Greenbelt.

Historian Jennifer Kerns discusses the way that the combination of requiring women to stay home with children, and, more radically, the series of underpasses trails that allowed residents to traverse the town without encountering cars. She writes that the town leaders remarked upon a child being killed by a car as unusual in 1938, implying that this was an extremely uncommon occurrence in Greenbelt.⁷² Baltimore with its much larger population saw 76 deaths caused by cars in the year 1917 alone.⁷³

However, residents, especially women, sometimes chafed under the restrictive rules that governed Greenbelt.⁷⁴ Laundry had to be carefully managed, the co-op rules required that it be taken inside before men returned from work (4 PM). When the Barcuses discussed restrictions in early Greenbelt, laundry was top of mind, it was one of the first things Mrs. Barcus complained

⁷¹ Barcus, Greenbelt Oral History Project, 1985.

⁷² Kerns, “A Social Experiment in Greenbelt, Maryland: Class, Gender, and Public Housing, 1935-1954,” 110.

⁷³ Joseph L. Arnold, *History of Baltimore: 1729-1920* (UMBC departments of History, the Center for Digital History Education, the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, and the Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, 2015), 260.

⁷⁴ Kerns’s dissertation “A social experiment in Greenbelt, Maryland: class, gender, and public housing, 1935-1954” discusses the reasons for this and the effects on residents in detail.

about.⁷⁵ She also complained that radios had to be off by midnight and recalled a time when she had fallen asleep while pregnant and been visited by a police officer because she had left the radio on.

Those allowed in were not people who, in the 1930s, could be picky, yet they were also a far cry from those most in need of housing. In the 1930s even those in the upper half of the income distribution were desperately in need of new housing. Despite her complaints, Mrs. Barcus repeated that she was from the Eastern Shore and wasn't a Greenbelt native but would "never leave."⁷⁶

The First Residents of Langston Terrace

In contrast, rent in Langston Terrace, the newly built and highly demanded Black public housing project in the city, was only \$6, about one fourth of what a Greenbelt citizen might pay. The median employed Black DC household earned a yearly income of 605 in 1940⁷⁷ and although reformers struggled in finding funding, Langston wasn't particularly controversial.⁷⁸ Residents were similarly chosen for their respectability. However, as a part of the city they did not need new cooperative businesses or new schools. The infrastructure was already there, making Langston considerably cheaper.

Those that applied were mostly government employees, in moderate income professions. Professions that often put them in contact with the highest ranked people in the Federal

⁷⁵ Barcus, Greenbelt Oral History Project, 1985; J. Walsh Barcus, Greenbelt Oral History Project, 1985, UMCP HBK Maryland Room, https://av.lib.umd.edu/media_objects/zc77sq88v. She also recalled that they were not allowed to own dogs and that they couldn't wear shorts in the shopping center.

⁷⁶ Barcus, Greenbelt Oral History Project, 1985.

⁷⁷ Ruggles et al., "IPUMS Ancestry Full Count Data: Version 3.0 [Dataset]." The author of this paper downloaded the data and found the figure.

⁷⁸ Likely due to the location and obvious need.

government. Two applicants included letters from the First Lady, Mrs. Roosevelt, yet neither was eligible because their current housing situations were considered acceptable even if their current rents were burdensome.⁷⁹ The few non-federal employees tended to have extremely respectable jobs; one was even a member of the famous Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porter Union at the Pullman Company.⁸⁰ These were not the homeless masses living in the streets of DC. They were largely housed members of the middle class, paying steep prices for poor living conditions or even more for comfortable living conditions.⁸¹

Those that moved to Langston when it opened in 1938 had a positive experience in the new development. They were the residents that the federal government saw as respectable and living in unsafe or unhealthy conditions.⁸² Mrs. Eloise Greenfield, recalled meeting up with her friends in the open spaces directly outside her apartment. Mr. James N. Short, who lived in Langston as a child, recalled “a sense of community was everything...we had a lot of pride here in Langston Terrace.”⁸³ Similar to early Greenbelt residents, they created their own public services included a library and planned classes and dances.⁸⁴

Although Langston was intended as a community of permanent renters, many of its residents connected to it in permanent ways, much like Greenbelt’s former residents. These interviews were done locally with interviewees who appear involved in the local summer camp.

⁷⁹ Quinn, “Making Modern Homes: A History of Langston Terrace Dwellings, a New Deal Housing Program in Washington, D.C.,” 51–52.

⁸⁰ Quinn, 52.

⁸¹ This led Quinn to conclude that pay was a problem for the Black community, and that Langston was a scheme by the federal government to make up for discrimination in pay. Certainly, there was discrimination and Black middle-class residents almost definitely fared worse in the housing market, but DC’s white middle-class residents were also very unhappy with their living conditions. To me this suggests a deeper problem in the housing market.

⁸² Quinn, “Making Modern Homes: A History of Langston Terrace Dwellings, a New Deal Housing Program in Washington, D.C.,” 50.

⁸³ *The Langston Terrace Dwellings Oral/Video History Project.*

⁸⁴ *The Langston Terrace Dwellings Oral/Video History Project.*

Although Mr. Short's family moved out of Langston once they could afford to buy a house, he stayed in the area for his entire life.⁸⁵ Mrs. Greenfield also remained in the city and remembered her childhood in Langston fondly.⁸⁶

Historiography

There are a few general histories of Greenbelt, including "The New Deal in the Suburbs; The Greenbelt Town Programs, 1935-1953" by Joseph Arnold, "Greenbelt, Maryland: A Living Legacy of the New Deal" by Cathy Knepper, and "Greenbelt: History of a New Town 1937-1987". They are written between 1971 and 2001 and each emphasizes the town's importance to urban planning. They discuss how it was built so that residents could walk throughout the town, without encountering cars, and how the rowhouses were built facing away from the roads, towards gardens and fields. Nearly all cover that it was part of the New Deal and an anomaly in federal housing policy. Most mention that it was intended to be more affordable and thus was built more densely than other planned communities, like Radburn, NJ or Columbia, MD. Arnold and Knepper both go into detail throughout.

Arnold correctly identifies the key fact that original residents were of relatively moderate wealth, compared to the average citizen in the United States during the Great Depression. He writes that the government identified families earning less than \$1000 dollars a year as the "relief group", while those earning \$1000-\$1,999 were categorized as "low-income" (and \$2000-\$2500 was middle income) and that the average Greenbelt, MD family earned \$1,560.⁸⁷ Arnold seems

⁸⁵ *The Langston Terrace Dwellings Oral/Video History Project*.

⁸⁶ "Eloise Greenfield's Biography | Scholastic.Com," accessed December 11, 2022, <https://archive.vn/20130201191924/http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/contributor.jsp?id=3186>; "Eloise Greenfield, Late Children's Book Author, Inspired Generations of Black Writers and Readers," NBC News, accessed December 11, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/elioise-greenfield-pioneering-childrens-book-author-dead-92-rcna1648>.

⁸⁷ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952*, 138.

muddled about this in the conclusion, possibly mixing the original intention with what happened in practice.

He concludes that Greenbelt was symbolically a failure—it did not become the model for the American suburbs—and finds it was most historically significant in its complicated goal of creating an affordable suburb. In fact, he goes as far as writing that “[the towns’] overall design, site planning, and architectural innovations are now antique.”⁸⁸

Arnold points out that even at its best, Greenbelt did not offer the problems he saw in the early 1970s: Urban blight and deep segregation as the wealthy left for the suburbs. Garden Cities had attempted to grapple with blight in the 1930s by bringing lower income people out of the cities, but in practice failed to do so. All the while, they had perpetuated racial segregation. Arnold eventually argues that projects, federal or private, built on the Greenbelt model but with greater opportunities for economic and racial integration are the solution.

Knepper focuses on development in Greenbelt and the resident’s reactions to it. She tells the relatively standard story of the creation of Greenbelt first following its construction and then the residents as they moved in. Knepper does not identify original resident’s income level as clearly or carefully. At one point she calls them “well educated and upwardly mobile” which is true, in a way, their finances certainly improved as the nation escaped the depression. However, she also refers to the original citizens as “poor” or in “near poverty,” which is more questionable.⁸⁹ As discussed, their pre-Greenbelt living standard was lower before they moved to Greenbelt, and lower than the standard that US citizens would come to expect in the 1950s. Yet,

⁸⁸ Arnold, 243.

⁸⁹ Knepper, *Greenbelt, Maryland: A Living Legacy of the New Deal*, 222, 227.

the data shows that compared to other families at the time, every family that moved into Greenbelt was above average income.

In the concluding chapter, Knepper discusses Greenbelt as it is today and what it means. She discusses the ways that Greenbelt has influenced the New Urbanists movement, with their emphasis on dense walkable centers and transit-oriented development, often just outside of central cities, yet in her book, published in 2001, she concludes that neither offers a true solution to urban decay. And of course, that version of New Urbanism was not; instead, today's planners face new challenges.

Others focus on a specific topic. In "A Social Experiment in Greenbelt, Maryland: Class, Gender, and Public Housing, 1935-1954" Kerns focuses on class and gender and how the planner's ideas of what a proper middle class family should be was projected onto the residents. She mentions that the income level and application process already filtered out those in the greatest need but potentially under-emphasizes how ready many of the residents were to fit that model.

In the very early years, women like Mrs. East were prevented from working, but that did not stop her from returning to work later. Her family's income grew more quickly than most and as a result, they moved out of the townhouses and into a farmhouse nearby, which according to her, they got a good deal on because the federal government wanted the area to remain mostly greenspace.⁹⁰ Then Mrs. East was free to return to work. Later, as incomes climbed during the war those limits were ignored for current residents.

⁹⁰ East, Greenbelt Oral History Project.

Kern also discusses how it was standard for families to take on boarders for pay, but that this was not allowed in Greenbelt. In the 10 interviews of long-time Greenbelt residents that I listened to, none mentioned a desire or history of doing this. None of the residents mentioned they or any of their neighbors having a problem with this rule or having housed boarders in their previous residences. Some may have been boarders, in their DC homes.

Those institutionalized pressures existed but the population was already white, already middle class, and was picked because they had a special interest in raising their children in a healthy environment, which Kern discusses in detail. Kerns is right that residents, particularly women, sometimes chafed under strict rules instituted by planners, and that those rules were centered on a particular idea of middle-class family structure, but potentially misjudges the extent that residents bought into that idea.

Modern works on Greenbelt continue to emphasize its importance to the New Urbanism movement. Amanda Kolson Hurley, a local journalist, argues that to address shifting demographics, social inequality, and climate change we need to rethink suburbia. She uses Greenbelt, MD and other unusual suburbs as examples of how suburbia can be denser, walkable, and generally more environmentally friendly.

Hurley wrote her book for today's audience where climate change is the most pressing concern for planners, and many American cities are no longer seen as consistently blighted. Instead places like NYC, DC, and San Francisco—and their surrounding suburbs—are expensive and suffer from housing shortages. Now, in these cities, low-income residents are being pushed

from inner cities to the outskirts, facing long commutes. Hurley builds on the ideas Knepper mentions in her conclusion but discusses the solutions that Greenbelt can offer us in 2019.⁹¹

Kelly Quinn an African American studies student writes about Langston Terrace in her 2007 dissertation. She details the application process as well as the construction and discusses how each reflected African American life at the time. However, there are few other works with a strong focus on Langston Terrace.

In 2013, students living in the area attending a summer camp based in Langston created a short documentary. Histories of DC like “Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital” by Chris Asch and Geroge Musgrove discuss it. The documentary is wholly positive—it is clear that a lot of children enjoyed and appreciated living and going to school there in the 1930s and 40s—while Asch and Musgrove use it and other stories to discuss increasing segregation within the city, and mention that by the 2000s Langston was known for “drug-related violence.”⁹² In 2016, a DC history buff complained on a local blog that he “brought a former work colleague, with a degree in urban architecture, over to look at the Langston Project and we were profiled and stopped by a police officer in a patrol car trailing us.”⁹³

There is less literature available and fewer primary sources that can be easily accessed because historians have done less to preserve Langston’s history. On the one hand, Langston was not as eccentric as Greenbelt. It was planned as public housing and it remained public housing. It

⁹¹ Amanda Kolson Hurley, *Radical Suburbs: Experimental Living on the Fringes of the American City* (Cleveland, OH: Belt Publishing, 2019).

⁹² Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, 249.

⁹³ Inked, “Frozen Tropics: Videos on the History of the Langston Terrace Dwellings,” *Frozen Tropics* (blog), January 25, 2016, <https://frozentropics.blogspot.com/2016/01/videos-on-history-of-langston-terrace.html>.

was located in a relatively standard place for new development, and it never had its own governing structure. However, it was a first in many ways. It was the first federal public housing development that allowed Black residents and it was planned and executed by mostly Black architects and workers. Its residents were renters, yet from the few primary sources widely available, it seems many of the early residents stayed in the area. Federal documents are available, but fewer preservation efforts have been made, likely due to residents' and former residents' limited resources, as well as Greenbelt's resident's elevated sense of their own community and interest in preserving it.

Arnold, Knepper, and Hurley all conclude with what Greenbelt means in the context of urban planning at the time of their publication. Asch and Musgrove allude to how New Deal policy put Langston Terrace on a track that brought it to its 2010s state. Trends in planning have changed since Arnold and Knepper wrote their books, and that is reflected in each of their conclusions. Arnold sees hope for real integration, and signs of it when looking at the new developments around Greenbelt and the older, moderately priced Greenbelt Co-op, but believes that we must look exclusively towards the wealthy suburbs for integration.⁹⁴ Knepper's book, published in 2001, barely acknowledges that difficult problem of white flight and segregation, instead focusing on the community that still exists in Greenbelt, Maryland.⁹⁵

My paper is similarly reflective of the time in which it was written. I emphasize the housing shortage in DC and how that led to a host of attempted solutions, amongst them both Langston Terrace and Greenbelt. Both of which were interesting case studies, neither of which

⁹⁴ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952*, 243–46.

⁹⁵ Knepper, *Greenbelt, Maryland: A Living Legacy of the New Deal*, 240–41.

was truly successful in solving the housing crisis, but both of which gave 1930s and 1940s residents a better place to live.

Conclusion

I argue that the multi-layered crisis of the Great Depression created a unique housing crisis in DC as relatively well-off workers got good government jobs yet could not find decent housing. The Federal Government knew that it needed to solve this problem and sought a variety of solutions, one of which was the greenbelt developments, originally planned for families of average income, but financial restraints pushed planners to make the income qualifications higher. Greenbelt, MD became a unique and unrepeated example of federally sponsored housing. Meanwhile, despite its similarly lofty goals, Langston Terrace became a prototype for public housing in the twentieth century: limited and segregated, originally for a similarly respectable Black middle class, but eventually contributing to the concentration of poverty and disinvestment in Northeast DC.

In our layered crises of 2022, these projects offer a mixed legacy. We face another slump in housing production—following a sharp spike in housing costs—and the added challenge of a suburbanized county unprepared for climate change.

Originally Greenbelt was housing for the white middle class, yet Greenbelt is regularly misunderstood as originally being a low-income community. The decades following these communities' construction saw the movement towards publicly funded low-income housing that concentrated poverty and increased segregation.⁹⁶ Notably, Greenbelt maintained its status as a

⁹⁶ Though now areas around Langston see new changes, with current owner-occupied units in Ward 5 being valued at a median of \$570,000 and rowhouses closest to Langston Terrace being sold in 2022 for as much as \$800,000. "ACS Housing Characteristics DC Ward," accessed December 11, 2022, <https://opendata.dc.gov/maps/acs-housing-characteristics-dc-ward>. Zillow Inc, "Real Estate & Homes For Sale - 64359 Homes For Sale," Zillow, accessed December 11, 2022, https://www.zillow.com/homes/carver-langston,-NE-DC_rb/.

moderate-income neighborhood while Langston became public housing for low-income DC residents. In an ironic twist, suburbia grew up around Greenbelt, MD and ate up most of its precious greenspace, while the parks around Langston remained. In 1971 Arnold stated that “permanent integration can occur only when low-income housing is scattered in very small numbers throughout the entire community” and that Greenbelt had not succeeded in that, although it had come closer than most.⁹⁷ Instead, both neighborhoods set us another track, with very little integration in race and only moderate variation in income, in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first.

These communities were important because they broadened the idea of what public housing can be. Greenbelt, in particular, offered structural inspiration to the New Urbanism movement in the 1990s and is still regularly discussed by urbanists. Now, in the twenty-first century, Langston could offer new inspiration as public housing in a city with climbing housing costs and rapid demographic change.

⁹⁷ Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs; the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1952*, 245.

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Figure 1

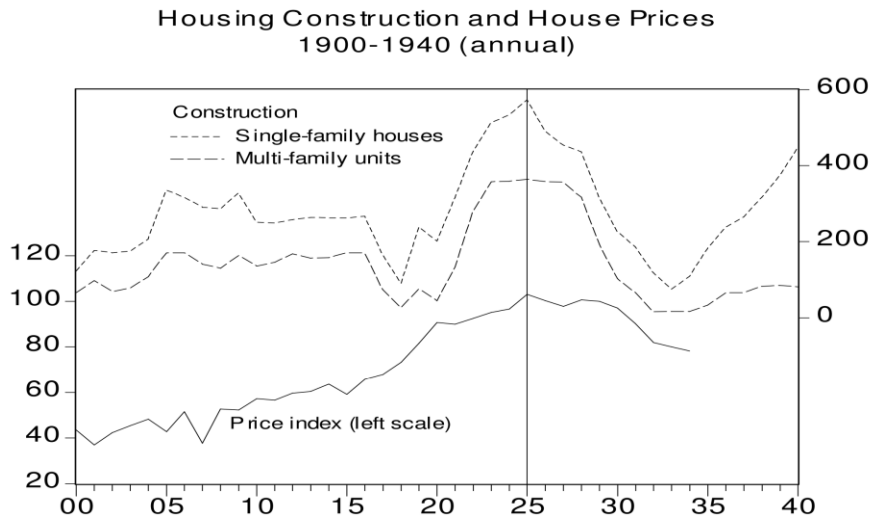
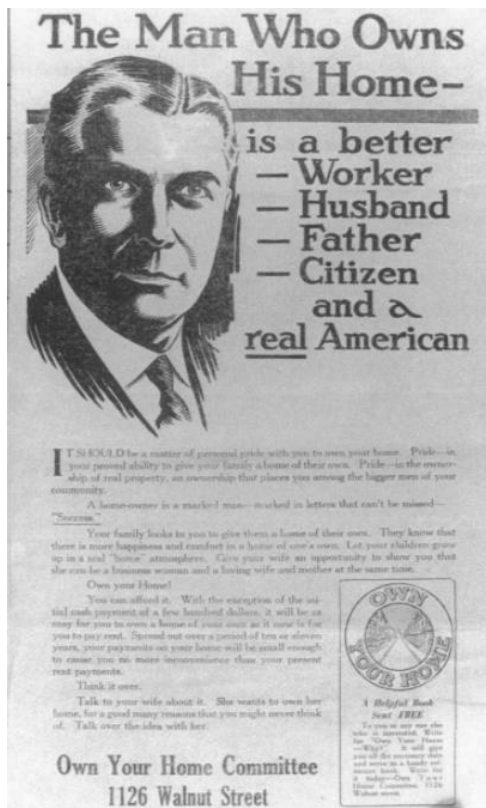


Figure 2



Source: Own-Your-Own-Home Section; Real Estate Division; U.S. Housing Corporation, Record group 3; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD pictured in Luken and Vaughan. ““...Be a Genuine Homemaker in Your Own Home’: Gender and Familial Relations in State Housing Practices, 1917-1922”