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Greenbelt, Maryland

Preservation of a Historic Planned Community

GREENBELT: 2 BR, 1 BA townhouse in historic area. Walk to shopping, movies, fitness center, indoor and outdoor pools, library, and community center. \$39,900.

A classified ad highlights the charms of Greenbelt, Maryland,—a historic planned community built by the federal government in the 1930s during the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Homes in old Greenbelt, a suburb of Washington, DC, are available at reasonable prices, yet offer access to incredible community amenities.

What is remarkable about the historic center of Greenbelt is the extent to which the original planned community of residences in a park-like setting adjacent to a town center, remains intact. There have been some modern structures built, and some modifications to the exterior of homes, but for the most part, the core historic area has been remarkably preserved. Development pressures are ever present but have been largely resisted due to an extraordinary sensitivity to the town's historic values.

Greenbelt in Brief

Greenbelt, Maryland, is one of three planned communities built by the federal government along garden city principles during the

New Deal of the Roosevelt Administration. Rexford Guy Tugwell, director of the Resettlement Administration, spearheaded the project, as part of the New Deal Communities Program. Other federal green towns were built in Greendale, Wisconsin, and Greenhills, Ohio.

The Greenbelt project had several goals: to provide useful employment; to demonstrate a new type of community; and to provide affordable housing in suburban areas.¹

Tugwell was inspired by the Garden City Movement popularized by an English planner, Sir Ebenezer Howard, and by the 1927 development of Radburn, New Jersey, designed by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. A number of Radburn's revolutionary features were incorporated into the plan for Greenbelt: the superblock of housing and open space where vehicular traffic is excluded; extensive use of walkways and underpasses to facilitate pedestrian movement; placing the service entrance of residences at the street side of the house, and the main entrance in the rear facing parkland; and establishing the elementary school as a focal point for the community.²

Additional original features in Greenbelt a commercial town center, a gas station, a police and fire station, a manmade lake, a swimming pool, athletic fields, numerous playgrounds, community gardens and an extensive "green belt" of open space and woodlands. Some of the original green belt has been preserved, but much of the land was condemned for the construction of the Baltimore-Washington Parkway and the Capital Beltway, while other lands were sold off for commercial and residential development.

The original development of 800 residential townhouse and apartment units built in 1937 was supplemented by 1,000 units of defense housing built by the Farm Security Administration in 1941-1942.³

Later new town developments such as Reston, Virginia, and Columbia, Maryland, were based on many of the design principles pioneered in Greenbelt.⁴

Community Building/Elementary School in Greenbelt, Maryland. Photo courtesy Elizabeth Jo Lampl.



Greenbelt is also significant for its development of cooperative forms of enterprise, including a housing cooperative, a coop grocery store and pharmacy, a community newspaper, and a cooperative nursery school, all of which continue to operate today.⁵

Historic Preservation Efforts

On November 25, 1980, the Greenbelt Historic District was officially entered on the National Register of Historic Places.⁶ The listing proved to be a significant factor motivating preservation efforts when in 1983, the Prince George's County Board of Education proposed to demolish the Center School, one of the most architecturally significant structures in the community.

In 1983, a tip from a reporter alerted Richard Striner, president of the newly formed Art Deco Society of Washington, to a small budget item in the *Washington Post*. The article signaled the intention of the Prince George's County Board of Education to replace the Greenbelt Center School with a new structure. The impending destruction of the Greenbelt Center School, the cultural and architectural centerpiece of the historic Greenbelt community, propelled Striner into action.⁷ Earlier in 1983, the Art Deco Societies of America recognized the school as among the 10 finest examples of art deco architecture in the country.⁸

The Greenbelt Center School was designed in 1936 by Douglas Ellington and Reginald D. Wadsworth, the architects for Greenbelt. But unlike the residential buildings designed in the International Style, the school is a streamlined Art Deco masterpiece with fluted struts adorning the sides and front of the building. Sculptured bas-relief panels appear below the bank of five large windows that admit light to the combined auditorium and gymnasium. The panels use images of workers to depict the preamble to the Constitution: "We the people...to form a more perfect union...establish justice...insure domestic tranquility...provide for the common defense...promote the general welfare." The panels were sculpted on-site by Lenore Thomas. The design is reminiscent of architect Paul P. Cret's Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington DC.⁹

The local PTA strongly supported razing the building to erect a larger, more modern school for Greenbelt's children.¹⁰ Faced with local opposition, the Art Deco Society used a three-pronged strategy to save the building: extensive publicity in local newspapers and on

local television; liaison with local and county preservation groups such as the Prince George's County Cultural and Historical Trust and the Historic Preservation Commission; and enlisting the support of a long list of prominent scholars and elected officials.¹¹

In order to protect the Greenbelt Center School from further threats, the Art Deco Society of Washington and the City of Greenbelt filed a successful application with the Prince George's County Historic Preservation Commission to designate the school as a "county historic site" and to include it in the county's Historic Sites and Districts Plan.¹² The Prince George's County Historic Preservation Ordinance establishes restrictions against alterations or demolition of designated "historic sites." The application received final approval from the Prince George's County Council in 1984.¹³

The school was threatened again in 1988, when the Prince George's County Board of Education proposed a school expansion plan that would preserve only the façade of the building. Ultimately, the City of Greenbelt engineered a land swap with the County, which enabled a new elementary school to be built outside the historic district, and the original school to be converted to a community center.

Today, the community center has been sensitively renovated and houses a museum exhibit room, nursery school, senior center, café, active sports and arts programs, studio space for artists, and provides space for other community activities. A permanent exhibit of historic photographs documenting the planning, construction, and early years of Greenbelt lines the corridors of the community center.

The Greenbelt Museum

The Greenbelt Museum was established in 1987, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Greenbelt, to educate the public about the history of Greenbelt and the value of planned communities.

The City of Greenbelt purchased the house at 10-B Crescent Road for use as a museum in 1986.¹⁴ The purchase price of \$53,400 was authorized by a bond issue that was approved in a voter referendum.¹⁵

The building was one of the units constructed in the first wave of federal construction in the 1930s in Greenbelt. It is a concrete block, flat-roofed, two story duplex. It features a small kitchen, combined living/dining room, upstairs bathroom, master bedroom, and a small chil-



Mother and Child statue in Greenbelt, Maryland, commercial center, by Lenore Thomas, Works Progress Administration.

children's bedroom. It overlooks a large, open common area.

Most of the museum's artifacts were donated by Greenbelt residents, who used them during the 1930s and 1940s. Of special interest is the government commissioned furniture designed to fit the small rooms of the Greenbelt homes. One could fully furnish a home with Danish modern furniture for \$240, paid in regular installments of \$5 per month.¹⁶

The beautifully restored unit stands in stark contrast to the neighboring half of the duplex which has a rear addition, has been covered with vinyl siding and has new vinyl windows and shutters.

The museum mounts various special exhibits in the house from time to time on topics such as textiles, Art Deco timepieces, and "Women at Work." In 1998, Friends of the Greenbelt Museum received grants from the Maryland Historical Trust and the Maryland Humanities Council to mount an exhibit in the community center: "Fashionable, Functional, and Frugal: Modern Style Comes Home, 1930-1946."¹⁷ The exhibit features modern-style depression glass, streamlined chrome appliances, Bakelite knock-knacks, furniture, and other stylish objects.

The Greenbelt Museum maintains an active partnership with the University of Maryland's American Studies Program. The University sends students in its Material Culture classes to the museum to "curate" individual objects in the collection. Dozens of the students' research papers and photographs of the objects are posted on the University's "Virtual Greenbelt" web page. This web site contains a slide show on the history, planning, and construction of Greenbelt, complete with historic photos from the Library of Congress. The internet address is <<http://www.otal.umd.edu/~vg/>>.

National Historic Landmark Designation

On February 18, 1997, in recognition of the 60th anniversary of Greenbelt, the commu-

nity was designated a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of the Interior. This recognition of the historical significance of Greenbelt is a major honor for the community. The documentation of the historic resources of Greenbelt contained in the nomination was thoroughly researched by consultant Elizabeth Jo Lampl, and edited by Carolyn Pitts of the National Park Service.¹⁸ The nomination form contains a detailed chronology of major land transfers and development, and an extensive bibliography of published and unpublished sources.

Possible Designation as Historic District

Since 1992, Greenbelt citizens have considered additional means to provide protection for their historic community. The Greenbelt Historic District Study, published in February 1994, summarized a series of potential strategies, including historic district designation for old Greenbelt under the Prince George's County ordinance.¹⁹

Subtitle 29 of the Prince George's County Code contains the regulations governing the preservation of historic resources in the County. The regulations lay out requirements for Historic Area Work Permit applications to be reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission prior to any construction, exterior modification, relocation, grading, demolition, or placement of signs in historic areas. These permit provisions require adherence to design guidelines and are the teeth of the county historic preservation ordinance. The permit process provides an orderly mechanism for consideration of historic preservation objectives in managing change within the historic district.

To illustrate how the permit process would impact Greenbelt, extremely specific design guidelines have been proposed by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, in consultation with the Greenbelt City Planning Department and Greenbelt Homes, Inc., the housing coop.²⁰ The draft guidelines are based upon the design requirements laid out in the Greenbelt Homes, Inc. member handbook, but are stricter in defining how additions and modifications can be made in a manner compatible with the original design. Pre-existing alterations would be grandfathered.

A county historic designation would make certain replacement and maintenance costs eligible for county property tax credits. Retroactive benefits would be available for improvements completed up to five years prior to designation. A

Maryland state income tax deduction is already available for rehabilitation of historic sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In spring 1999, residents of Greenbelt Homes, Inc. voted to designate the original town as a historic district. The Greenbelt City Council must now decide whether or not to apply for historic district designation from Prince George's County. If the Greenbelt City Council gives a green light, the next step is for the Prince George's County Council to consider the designation.

The historic area of Greenbelt faces continual challenges. Roosevelt Plaza, the commercial center, is currently undergoing renovation, and while the city has a façade easement, individual property owners previously secured zoning approval from the County to increase the height of their buildings. Parking shortages sometimes result in suggestions to widen roads.²¹ The continued operation of the historic movie theatre was threatened, but citizens and the city government have banded together to promote the theatre.

Conclusion

Greenbelt today is a community remarkably attune to its historic roots. It is a community whose citizens and city government have been inspired to put resources into historic preservation. The Greenbelt Museum does an excellent job of educating residents and visitors about Greenbelt's history and contributions. The citizens have realized the benefits of a vibrant community center, a beautiful system of parks, pathways, and open space, and architecturally intact residential, civic, and commercial buildings. The recent referendum on historic district designation was an important validation of residents' willingness to retain the integrity of their community and to protect it from future development.

Notes

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