

H-Net Reviews

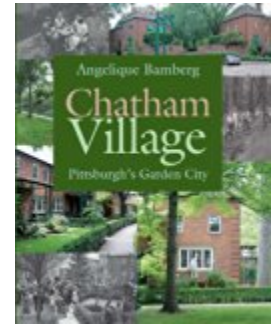
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Angelique Bamberg. *Chatham Village: Pittsburgh's Garden City*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011. Illustrations. 208 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4406-5.

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The Best Laid Schemes for Environments and Men?

Historians of art and architecture have much to contribute to environmental history. In her *Chatham Village*, Angelique Bamberg delves into fundamental issues regarding the ways people interact with the spaces where they live and play. Bamberg's handsomely illustrated and often illuminating book recounts what she calls "a housing revolution that wasn't" (p. ix). The Depression-era Chatham Village project was an attempt by private enterprise to provide affordable housing in a comprehensively planned community. Though Chatham Village did not spark a nationwide transformation in housing policy and neighborhood design as its planners had hoped, Bamberg celebrates the urban enclave as an important and influential example of effective urban planning. We also learn, however, of the shortcomings of the Chatham Village model.

Bamberg first assesses Chatham Village as what she calls an "ideal community": a physical expression of social ideals (p. 167). The village exemplified the ideals of Charles Fletcher Lewis, a journalist, newspaper editor, and the first director of the Buhl Foundation. Under Lewis's direction, the Buhl Foundation sought to ameliorate the shortage of high-quality, affordable housing in Pittsburgh. Fletcher was suspicious of state "paternalism" and believed that private enterprise could plan a model community that not only provided attractive housing for working Americans and an alternative to unchecked sprawl, but also turned a profit (p. 52). To achieve these ends, Lewis employed as consultants three members of the Regional Planning Association of Amer-

ica (RPAA): Clarence Stein, Henry Wright, and Frederick Bigger. Influenced by European planners and architects, the RPAA advocated for public regional planning boards that would integrate housing, green space, recreational features, and transportation into a landscape conducive to social harmony. Lewis, on the advice of his consultants, compromised his vision early in the planning process, as the plan for freestanding, low-cost dwellings for purchase gave way to row houses, rented by middle-class families. Though his consultants expressed skepticism about private industry's ability to address large-scale housing and social problems, Lewis pressed on undeterred.

Lewis and the architectural firm of Ingham and Boyd set out to plan a "whole community": a neighborhood unified in design (p. 168). Houses, designed in the colonial revival and arts and crafts styles, faced community lawns, gardens, and children's play areas. Parking garages and curvilinear streets facilitated automobile use. Homes featured modern amenities, but underground utility and power lines kept the village's gardenlike appeal intact. A twenty-five-acre greenbelt surrounded Chatham Village, physically setting it apart from nearby neighborhoods. This rarely implemented holistic approach, according to Bamberg, was responsible for the village's decades of stability and success.

The community was exclusive in another way—as we learn from Bamberg's discussion of Chatham Village as a "real community," in which she describes residents' lived

experience (p. 168). As a consequence of property managers' desire for a level of stability that would yield the most profit from their long-term investment, prospective renters had to go through a rigorous screening process that favored white Protestants with middle-class incomes. Those who made it through the screening process had many opportunities to participate in community building by reading the newsletter, attending social functions, and joining clubs. Though Bamberg emphasizes continuity over change, she does well to treat Chatham Village as an evolving community. Phase two of development brought an apartment complex to the village. Residents became more racially and culturally diverse over time, and more childless couples have come to inhabit the neighborhood. Further, what was once a community of renters has since 1960 been a collective of homeowners. Despite these changes, Bamberg writes, "cooperative ownership has tended to perpetuate the physical and social controls that ensured the community's original success" (p. 129).

Bamberg traces the influence of Chatham Village in several directions, to federal housing projects, newer private communities, and the ideas of New Urbanism. Few planned communities, she believes, have lived up to the example set by Lewis. When one remembers that Lewis himself compromised his vision, it may be easier to understand why other planners were unable to emulate Chatham Village exactly (if, indeed, this is always a desirable goal). That is to say: Bamberg might have turned the same critical eye toward Chatham Village that she points at other housing developments. For instance, Bamberg asserts that Chatham Village's "renown must largely be attributed to the inexhaustible efforts of Charles Lewis

to advocate for the Chatham Village model and the ability of private capital to solve America's slum-housing crisis" (p. 134). However, Chatham Village, as Bamberg's own narrative suggests, also demonstrates the limits of Lewis's plans for profit-seeking companies to solve large-scale housing problems. Real-estate firms seeking greater profits than the 4-6 percent dividend Chatham Village regularly took in did not follow that model. Further, Lewis's desire to prove the village's profitability led him to exclude the working class and racial minorities because he considered them to be less stable. In light of these facts, it is fair to ask: Why was Lewis's private "paternalism" more desirable than state "paternalism"? Does the Chatham Village approach address large-scale social problems or actually create a self-contained neighborhood to block them out? How would the champions of Chatham Village address the reality that for such a model to work on a broad scale countless Americans would have to rise into the middle class?

Nevertheless, Bamberg makes a valuable contribution to the history of planned communities in the United States. Her book makes a fine complement to such housing studies as David Schuyler's *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (1988) and Gwendolyn Wright's *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (1983). *Chatham Village* also serves as an optimistic counterpoint to more skeptical studies of regional planning, like Robert Caro's *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (1975). Scholars, students, and laypeople interested in urban and regional planning, architecture, landscape design, outdoor recreation, and the social history of housing will find much to learn and debate.

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