

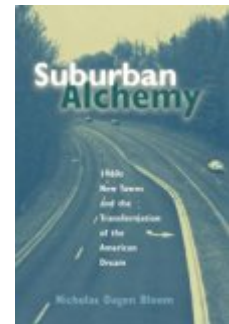
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Nicholas Dagen Bloom.** *Suburban Alchemy: 1960s New Towns and the Transformation of the American Dream.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001. 333 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8142-5075-4.

**Cathy D. Knepper.** *Greenbelt, Maryland: A Living Legacy of the New Deal.* Creating the North American Landscape. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xvii + 275 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6490-2.

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## Bringing New Towns Up to Date

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The idea of creating new settlements from nothingness has long fired the human imagination. In the twentieth century it found appropriate tinder in a series of new towns created to free modern humankind from a variety of ills. The two books reviewed here are detailed examinations of specific outcomes of this new town movement in the United States. They represent important departures from previous histories of new towns. Instead of dwelling on the physical plans and the economics and politics that brought new towns into being, they concentrate on the social life that came to pass after the inspired planners finished their blueprints. With this focus the two books add to our understanding of the modern movement to create better living environments through design, while at the same time placing the “planned” part of “planned community” in proper perspective.

Cathy Knepper’s text is a chronicle of Greenbelt, Maryland, one of three new towns built during the depression under the New Deal’s Resettlement Administration. The first chapter of the book explains the genesis of Greenbelt’s plan within this context. The creation of the towns was promoted as a way of providing needed work for the construction industry and as a means of demonstrating the latest planning theories. Although this his-

tory, with its heritage in Britain’s Garden Cities and the theories of Lewis Mumford, has been amply treated elsewhere,[1] Knepper provides a good background for the story to come, paying particular attention to the philosophies of the Roosevelt Administration’s planners and the reaction of the national press to their work. Greenbelt, with its proximity to Washington, D.C., received more attention from government officials and reporters than its sister towns in Ohio and Wisconsin. The sense of uniqueness created by this attention caused the first carefully selected families of Greenbelt to closely identify their new community with the ideals of its creators. This was nowhere more evident than in the cooperative organizations supported by the pioneer residents, which are described by Knepper in her second chapter. These new formations ranged from clubs with interests in politics, sports and hobbies to new cooperative retail ventures meant to fill the storefronts of the new town center and the needs of the citizenry.

Over the next decade and a half Greenbelt struggled to maintain the identity thus formed in the early years. First the community faced the sudden erection of poorly designed homes and an influx of new residents as part of a defense worker housing program. Then it struggled with the dwindling interest of its landlord, the Federal Government. The manner in which the residents of

Greenbelt countered the latter problem is illustrative of the traditions that the New Deal era had instilled. A mutual housing association was formed, which was able to purchase the majority of the units in the town and some vacant land from the government in December of 1952.

>From that point forward, Greenbelt was on its own, and Knepper devotes the next two chapters to the new “Threats to Greenbelt’s Plan and Cooperation.” One of the principal problems was the loss of the Greenbelt plan’s physical integrity. The swath of verdant land meant to surround the town was only partially maintained, and this damage was exacerbated by the incursion of several multilane highways through the community, including the Baltimore-Washington Parkway and the Capital Beltway. These “highway canyons” separated the original planned area of Greenbelt from the areas within the community’s political boundaries that would be built up in later decades. While Greenbelt realized little success in influencing the arrangement of these roads by outside agencies, the community did display an unusual level of cohesiveness and sophistication when it came to dealing with the developers that closely followed the trail of the steamroller. These fights tended to unite the community and remind it of its heritage as a specially planned project.

Knepper admits that Greenbelt also experienced some internal conflicts. These occurred over the management of some of the community’s unique cooperative undertakings, including the grocery store and the housing corporation. They also resulted from events shaking the rest of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, the author still concludes that “community traditions acted to unify Greenbelt, healing differences caused by disagreements over matters such as the proper management of Greenbelt Homes or political differences regarding the war in Vietnam. The persistence of these traditions enabled Greenbelt to maintain its identity” (p. 178). Indeed, the regular discussion of internal conflicts is something that many suburban areas sadly lack.

Knepper’s book on Greenbelt is finely illustrated and detailed in its analysis. She explains in the introduction that she has “combined the methodologies of history and ethnography” in her research. The book benefits from this approach, with the interview material (both her own and that of previous oral history projects) somewhat reducing her reliance on local newspaper articles for evidence. The use of ethnographic methods provides support for conclusions like this: “Greenbelters feel a fond-

ness for their town on an emotional level, an appreciation that goes beyond such tangible factors as structure and institutions” (p. 234). In fact, Knepper’s approach could have been taken even further with an examination of the growth of middle-class identity in the new town. Such examinations in other suburban projects have been accomplished using similar methods,[2] and the findings would be of particular relevance in the case of Greenbelt, which transitioned from a housing project for low-income Depression-era workers to a middle-class suburb. It would also have been helpful to provide a more thorough examination of the concept of “utopia” in Greenbelt. This term was utilized by a variety of agents, including the original planners, outside press and the residents themselves. I suspect that each group had a different understanding of the concept of utopia, and a delineation of the different definitions would be a valuable addition to this book.

While the author did make the attempt, the use of ethnographic methods in the research still does not compensate for her dependence on the local newspaper as a source. The problem is one that continually bedevils community histories, and it attempts to treat archived press articles as both an insight into community sentiment and as an “objective” record of events. This problem seems particularly acute in the case of Greenbelt’s newspaper, which was run by community volunteers. In fact, Knepper relates an incident in which the paper was sued for libel by a developer who thought it was stoking community bias against his building proposals. Greenbelt’s *News Review* lost its case in the lower courts, but appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in its favor. During the various trials, the newspaper fought its legal battles with a largesse raised from the community. Knepper includes this incident as an important event in the battle between the community and developers, but she fails to realize its implications for her methodology.[3] The close ties between Greenbelt and its news organ make surviving articles an excellent primary source for understanding Greenbelt’s spirit, but they may not be an accurate record of the intentions or impacts of outside forces. At times, *Greenbelt, Maryland* seems to be as much a history of the community newspaper as it is a history of the community itself.

After the New Deal greenbelt communities, the next major push for new towns came in the 1960s. Nicholas Bloom focuses his book, *Suburban Alchemy* on the three most complete examples of 1960s new towns: Reston, Virginia; Columbia, Maryland; and Irvine, California. After a brief discussion of the suburban critique that

helped give rise to these projects, Bloom proceeds with a description of each of his three subject communities and their developments. This initial summary is often too vague, and we learn things like the development of Irvine started “during the 1960s” (p. 56). While the lack of precision in this first section is not detrimental to the book’s main focus, it is unfortunate. Unlike the greenbelt town program, the physical development of the later generation of new towns has not yet been thoroughly studied by historians. Bloom provides a good outline of the philosophies involved in the planning of Reston, Columbia and Irvine, but given the lack of existing work in this area, this portion of his book could include more detail.

Since Bloom is tackling three communities at once, he chooses to address his subject thematically rather than chronologically. As is frequently the case, this organizational approach can lead to a conflation of different events over time. The examples that Bloom uses to illustrate his arguments are drawn widely from the three decades of history relevant to his subject communities, with the result that events from the late 1960s are described on the same page with events from the 1990s. However, this manner of organization also allows Bloom to concentrate more explicitly on the topics that interest him, the subject of the third and fourth parts of his book.

Bloom’s discussion of “civic renewal” in the 1960s new towns reveals many of the same themes that Knepper found in Greenbelt. Early residents identified with the idealistic goals of the planners and developers who were creating their communities. They adopted these philosophies as their own and activated them in order to encourage involvement within the community and as an effective opposition toward concepts antithetical to the founding principles. This civic spirit promoted the growth of institutions like local papers, social-service organizations, arts clubs and town-wide festivals.

Bloom also provides a thorough examination of social and cultural issues, such as race and gender, in the new towns. These are valuable topics, and ones that Knepper only touches upon briefly. With respect to race, Bloom shows how the 1960s new towns, particularly Reston and Columbia, became integrated communities. Reston adopted a subtle approach, which was in part influenced by its location in conservative Virginia. Columbia, led by outspoken developer James Rouse, sought to create a colorblind community. Bloom relates that this goal was not completely achieved, but even its partial failure is illustrative of the complex nature of race relations in communities that were started with social reform in mind.

The 1960s new towns were planned before the women’s movement began to radically alter gender relations in America. Nevertheless, Bloom finds that their sprawl-fighting design, provision of key community institutions and generally open atmosphere gave women a stable base from which they could demand access to previously restricted political and economic spheres. He is less positive about the ability of new towns to deal with that other product of the 1960s and 1970s—generational conflict. The founders attempted to provide outlets for teenage energy, but even in new towns teenagers shunned the mores of their elders and pursued a growing counterculture. The result was conflict over the use of public facilities and a continued isolation of teens from suburban community life.

To make these findings, Bloom, like Knepper, relies heavily on newspaper articles. His work does not significantly benefit from interviews. He lists eighteen in his bibliography, but rarely cites material from them. Although this is still a subject of debate, the lack of interviews does seem to be a limitation in a work of recent social history. Furthermore, when Bloom uses primary documents, he is vague in his citations as to their whereabouts. With only the name of the archives listed (no box or folder designations), it will be difficult for future researchers to track down his sources. Bloom’s book would also benefit from better illustrations, including clearer printing of the photographs that are thrown in, and from an appendix like Knepper’s, which quantifies the physical and demographic changes over time of the community being studied. In addition, several copies of the book which I examined contained an unfortunate publishing error which results in Chapter 9 being printed twice and most of Chapter 10 and some of Chapter 11 being omitted.

*Suburban Alchemy* covers a lot of ground. Any one of the important topics Bloom introduces could be explored as its own study for just one of the three communities. Bloom certainly acknowledges this fact, and his book effectively supports his argument that, “by blending different aspects of community life in one text, the wider significance of the new town emerges” (p. 4). His approach points to the similarities between the three new towns, and begins to explain the minor differences in their histories. Such deviations usually stem from the immediate geographic and social settings of the projects, or from particularities in the founding principles that became magnified as development progressed.

Both of these books set their histories of the new

town movement in the same context. They begin with references to Lewis Mumford, the grandfather of the movement in the United States, and they end with brief discussions of the New Urbanists, the movement's latest progeny. Knepper and Bloom note the similarities between the goals for Greenbelt, Reston, Columbia and Irvine and those of New Urbanist projects. In fact, I would argue that it is possible to go beyond these bids for current relevance and, with both books in mind, speculate on additional findings that can be sought from the study of new towns. Three come readily to mind: new towns as experiments, new towns as microscopes, and new towns as examples of small town ideology.

First, part of the potential lure of new towns for historians is their experimental quality. The development of large planned communities is in many ways controlled, and their progress almost always documented. Furthermore, new towns readily provide discrete entities for study. Their physical boundaries, and often their social ones, are distinct. Within this laboratory setting, innovations were introduced, and new town historians should examine the outcome. For instance, in Greenbelt cooperative forms of economic organization had a thorough testing. The results, as Knepper relates, were largely successful. In fact, the main Greenbelt cooperative eventually expanded into other suburban communities in the Washington area. The 1960s new towns were also full of experiments, and Bloom shows us how concepts like mixed housing types and new school systems first tried in Reston, Columbia and Irvine were later adopted in other areas.

Second, historians study new towns as microscopes through which one can view larger patterns in society. For instance, in his 1981 book *Zane Miller* (who served as editor for Bloom's book) found the later-day development of Greenhills, a Resettlement Administration town like Greenbelt, to be symptomatic of trends effecting the rest of the built environment.[4] Knepper and Bloom add to such previous findings by demonstrating that new towns can also lend important insights into social history. Certain trends become visible in the lives of new town residents, magnified by a propensity to civic vocalism and the existence of important cultural institutions. Thus, Greenbelt became a stage for the dramas of the McCarthy era when one of its citizens was accused of communist subversion. The false allegation and resulting dismissal of the man from his government job might have passed unnoticed had it not been for the fact that his protest was amplified by the involvement of the entire community. A decade later new towns like Reston,

Columbia and Irvine represented the spirit of the 1960s, namely a feeling that American society was flawed but that it could be fixed through bold new visions. With respect to social history, new towns act not so much as representative examples, as exaggerations, and as such they are certainly valuable to the study of elusive narratives.

Finally, both Knepper and Bloom are enthusiastic about the civic activism that the histories of new towns reveal. It is not difficult to see the similarity between the festivals, cultural institutions and citizen involvement in local government that they describe and the quintessential life of small-town America, but during much of the twentieth century, small towns have been derided by intellectuals. It was an ideology of rugged individualism that drove the growth of the suburbs, but the tide has now turned back toward a desire for the sense of community found in small towns and, apparently, new towns. Surely, though, the ideal of small town life is as open to criticism as any it might supersede. It is important to realize with respect to new towns that their championing of a small-town lifestyle is not always positive. Knepper quotes from one interview in which a Greenbelt resident compares their community favorably to the friendliness of a small Southern town. This is an apt description, although I have talked to others in Greenbelt who point out that the flip side of internal hospitality is external hostility. Some of the very elements that make new towns into cohesive communities can be intimidating to outsiders. Regardless of such specific judgments though, as intellectuals and planners of the New Urbanist school begin to favor small town life, studies like those of Knepper of Bloom show how some facets of that life have been developed from bare beginnings in the last sixty years. Such histories will add to our understanding of the small town ideal.

The possibility of examining new towns as experiments, microscopes, and as built examples of small town ideology comes from the sum of Knepper and Bloom's work. More histories in a similar vein could expand upon these three categories of conclusions and further assist in updating the study of new towns. Rightfully both Knepper and Bloom regard the initial planning of new towns as only a small part of this history. These communities were designed to be places for people to live, and it is therefore important that we understand how life was actually lived there in the many years after their original genesis.

#### Notes

- [1]. For example, see: J. Arnold, *The New Deal in*

- the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1954* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971); P. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1959); O. K. Fulmer, *Greenbelt* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941); D. Ghirardo, *Building New Communities: New Deal America and Fascist Italy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989); C. Stein, *Toward New Towns for America* (New York: Reinhold Publishing, 1957); P. Wagner, "Suburban Landscapes for Nuclear Families: The Case of Greenbelt Towns in the United States" *Built Environment* 10, no. 1 (1984): 35-41.
- [2]. For a recent example, see: R. Baxandall and E. Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
- [3]. For one work on the partiality of the press with respect to community development, see: H. Thomas, "The Local Press and Urban Renewal: A South Wales Case Study" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 18 (1994): 315-333.
- [4]. Z. Miller, *Suburb: Neighborhood and Community in Forest Park, Ohio, 1935-1976* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981).

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