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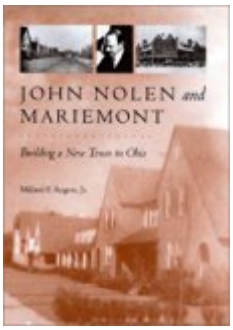
Millard F. Rogers, Jr.. *John Nolen and Mariemont: Building a New Town in Ohio.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xiv + 260 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-6619-7.



Reviewed by Bruce Stephenson

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One of the most pleasant walks in an American community is found along the parkway connecting Mariemont, Ohio's town center to a scenic vista overlooking the Little Miami River. The shaded, tree-lined corridor provides a gentle transition from civic buildings to Tudor revival apartments, to duplexes and single-family homes incorporating various interpretations of English architecture. Within fifteen minutes from leaving the town square, one encounters the parkway's terminus: the Concourse, a half-moon, green jewel encapsulating a picturesque view of the surrounding landscape. A stone pergola with a timber trellis marks the park edge, providing framed overviews of the Little Miami River Valley. On a midsummer day, viewing the "distant blue-gray hills" one can verify Robert Livingood's 1924 claim (in a letter to John Nolen) that the Concourse would "be one of the show places in the United States ... for it has this great advantage--the sun does not set in the eyes of the visitor" (p. 147).

Millard F. Rogers, Jr.'s carefully crafted work, *John Nolen and Mariemont: Building a New Town in Ohio,* analyzes the origins and evolution of a planning experiment still yielding important results. Rogers delved into the rich cache of materials found in the John Nolen Papers[1] to produce the definitive history of an American new town, "too valuable to ignore," according to New Urbanists Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (hereinafter, "DPZ").[2] Nolen along with town patron Mary Emery and her adviser Livingood presented Mariemont as a "National Exemplar" for city builders in the 1920s. This early planning triumvirate never saw their hopes fully realized, but Rogers reveals how this distant vision has gained icon status for the path-breaking work of DPZ.

Rogers captures the strain of utopianism that permeated planning in the 1920s. While the visions of urbanists Lewis Mumford and Clarence Stein have received much attention, Nolen's work is only now receiving its due. Nolen is the focal point of this book, yet Rogers's synergetic writing intertwines the philanthropic ambitions of Mary Emery and the haughty, yet thoughtful executor Livingood into an enlightening account of town building. The story of Mariemont is not only a tale of city planning; it recalls a vision of enlightened

capitalism and community-building presently in scant supply. The contrast between Mariemont and Celebration, Florida[3] is important reading not only to understand shifts in American culture, but American capitalism as well. In contrast to Disney's bottom line, "Mariemont's birth depended exclusively on the wealth of its generous founder, Mary Emery, who never realized any financial return on her support" (p. 214).

In contrast to many academic tomes, Rogers never writes off Emery or Nolen as elitist or paternalistic. Rather, he places them in their time and honors them for their idealism and commitment. Emery, after the death of her wealthy, industrialist husband, became "Cincinnati's leading patron of causes and programs" (p. 8). She was especially determined to provide a new standard in the field of "housing and community conditions" to "benefit wage earners of different economic grades" (p. 72). Through Livingood's influence, the English Garden City became the appropriate vehicle for Emery's endeavor. Nolen, the nation's most accomplished planner in the 1920s, "venerated the garden city ideal" (p. 11) and was the obvious choice for the job to craft a town plan for the 420-acre site located ten miles east of downtown Cincinnati on a plateau overlooking the Little Miami River.

Nolen (1869-1937) pioneered the city-planning profession in America with a blend of Progressive idealism and business acumen. In 1920 he reached the apex of his career in timely fashion. Prosperity, new technology, and more efficient production techniques offered untold opportunities to create a new order of urban life. The desire to channel America's amazing productive powers into building healthy civic communities united the conservative Emery (Robert Taft was her attorney) and the Progressive Nolen. "The solution of many of our most difficult problems connected either with the increase of wealth or the sharing of what makes life most worthwhile is to be found," Nolen wrote Livingood in 1921, "in the kind of town planning work and endeavor Mariemont represents." (p. 44) Nolen believed meshing town planning and "the constructive imagination in business" would produce a "widespread public welfare" that would set a new, modern standard for the pursuit of happiness. "For lovers of mankind this is in many respects ... a dramatic moment," Nolen announced when Mariemont's plan was unveiled before the Cincinnati Commercial Club (p. 50).

Rogers goes into incredible and sometimes excruciating detail explaining the planning, consultation, and construction of Mariemont before the Great Depression stifled development. If the details are sometimes mundane, the story is captivating: egos conflict, opportunities are lost, and ideals are realized. Rogers makes sure the business of planning shares equal billing with lofty notions of design and architecture. In the end, American planning is always a business venture. Yet, the keen eye of Mariemont's founders realized that a well-designed town would not only enhance living standards, but it might just challenge market forces to produce better communities.

Did Mariemont succeed? The town never became a haven for workers of "various, economic grades." If Mariemont failed to produce a model workers' community, it still provides a model working community. Careful planning integrating apartments, single-family homes, shopping, and civic buildings makes Mariemont a shining alternative in a disjointed suburban landscape designed to market segments. For planners confronted with NIMBYism every time the word multi-family is mentioned, Mariemont offers proof that good design can mix uses, create community, and enhance property values. Perhaps the success of Mariemont is best measured in the quality of life the town's children enjoy. Mariemont residents send their children to exemplary public schools, and the town's pedestrian orientation allows them to safely navigate their way not just to school, but also to parks, shopping, and other

neighborhoods. This daily fact of life placed Mariemont on the national news (ABC, July 21, 1999). The 3-minute piece contrasted the seemingly idyllic life of the Mariemont teen with their cohort struggling to find community in the disconnected subdivisions spreading over the nearby Kentucky countryside. Something as complex as city planning offers few simple barometers, but perhaps Marie Emery offers the means to judge Mariemont. These questions were posed in the *Mariemont Messenger* shortly before her death in 1926: "Good Morning. Is the sun a little brighter there in Mariemont? Is the air a little fresher? ... And the children? Do you feel safer about them? Are their faces a bit ruddier? Are their legs a little sturdier? Do they laugh and play a lot louder in Mariemont? Then I am content." (p. 177)

Millard Rogers, Jr. has written an exemplary book that will appeal to practitioners as well as historians. His description of the Garden City ideal and its transference to Ohio is especially noteworthy. Unfortunately, Rogers fails to compare Mariemont to other Nolen new towns such as Venice, Florida or Kingsport, Tennessee. Rogers aptly explains Nolen's connection to DPZ, but he never contrasts Mariemont with Seaside or Kentlands. Yet these are omissions of context not concept. Millard Rogers, Jr. fulfilled the promise that *John Nolen and Mariemont: Building a New Town in Ohio* offered. It will be a challenge for other authors to place Mariemont in the greater context of American city-planning history.

Notes

[1]. Rare & Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, N.Y.

[2]. Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York, 2000), p. 103.

[3]. See Doug Frantz and Cathy Collins, *Celebration, U.S.A.: Living in Disney's Brave New Town* (New York, 1999); Andrew Ross, *The Celebration Chronicles: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Property Value in Disney's New Town* (New York, 1999); Richard Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse* (New Haven, 2001).

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