

Greenbelt, Maryland

A Living Legacy of the New Deal

by Cathy D. Knepper

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001
xvii+275. Maps, Notes, Bibliographic References, Index
\$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-8018-6490-9

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Strolling through many of the streets of Greenbelt Maryland, one might not realize the uniqueness of this suburb just outside Washington, DC. Its distinctiveness lies not only in its history as one of the few federally planned towns in the United States, but also in the ideals the town has represented. In this excellent text, Cathy Knepper of Amnesty International and an independent scholar, explores the history of Greenbelt from its genesis in the New Deal through the present. Overcoming generations of challenges, Knepper argues, Greenbelt citizens have maintained the cooperative, community-minded spirit of its founders. The book is, therefore, as much a social history as a political and economic one. Simply put, it is as unique as its subject.

From the first chapter to the last, Knepper's fondness for Greenbelt and symbiotic foundations is obvious. While constructed as a works project along with two other towns, one in Wisconsin and the other in Ohio, Greenbelt had a location just outside the nation's capital; thus, it received special attention from the Roosevelt administration and its first citizens, all of whom perceived the effort as an experiment in collaboration. Eleanor Roosevelt, for one, proved a reliable ally. The people, for their part, worked together in clubs and businesses, encouraged by the bureaucrats. The cooperative grocery store was only the best example.

This situation became increasingly difficult, Knepper explains. World War II meant a flood of new residents and cheap new housing. The government, preoccupied, lost interest. In the subsequent decade, highways cut across the town and essentially divided residents. Green fields and farmland had separated the town from its neighbors, but the growth of Washington swept over Greenbelt just as it did the other surrounding communities. More threatening was the anti-communist McCarthy era, which branded the community as evil socialists or worse, a charge businessmen had leveled since the town's inception but one that now resonated. "Greenbelt's experience with McCarthyism changed the lives of a number of individuals," Knepper writes (100). When one resident, an innocent Jewish employee of the Navy, lost his job as a security risk, the town rallied on his behalf and aided in his ultimate acquittal.

To Knepper's credit, she does not depict Greenbelt as some utopia and acknowledges divisions within its citizenry, the most obvious over financial management. Nevertheless, the people reacted to these challenges with a surprising commitment to the town's traditions. They had no intention of becoming just another patch of indistinguishable sprawl. When newcomers arrived, they were welcomed with parties and information to bring them into the fold. When the government decided to sell the town, the people formed a cooperative, Greenbelt Homes, Inc., to purchase it. They collectively—and not totally successfully—battled developers, and they endured through the turbulent 1960s, weathering potential divisions over the Vietnam War and racial relations. Such fights, perhaps ironically, reinforced their sense of community; it increased their emotional attachment to the ideal. If nothing else, it gave them a forum for debate.

In recent years, Greenbelt citizens have enjoyed celebrating the city's accomplishments, the planning for the festivities just another illustration of their continued commitment to working together. Not everyone shares the same degree of commitment but, if nothing else, "Greenbelt's principles focus on a life of action and involvement" (237). The recent popularity of New Town Developments, Knepper implies, recognizes as much. Such neo-traditional, neo-urban design may result from private and not public investment and may lack a regional approach, but its insistence on higher density, mixed use development revolving around a town center essentially accepts Greenbelt's founding principles.

One might argue that Knepper needs to develop further issues of race and class, although she does venture into some discussion of fair housing. In addition, she might have explored more Greenbelt's impact on private planned developments, which frequently market themselves as "communities." Her research is solid, nevertheless, employing oral histories and a number of manuscript collections, including those in the Roosevelt presidential library and the National Archives. Her favorite sources appear to be local newspapers, which help make her story a narrative. She ties her research together with a fluid writing style; the book is an easy read. As such, it should find a large and general audience. It should prove useful across an array of courses, from American environmental history to civil engineering.

Knepper concludes by noting that Greenbelt—"a town in which planning clearly makes a difference, where foresight creates a place truly enjoyed by its residents" (241)—embraces the ideals of the Depression-era city planner Lewis Mumford, a man ahead of his time. Really, her book successfully implies, these are ideals we all should embrace.

It is, in the end, a point larger than just the story of one town.