

Journal, Vol. 1, #11, Jan. 1911
New Boston, Vol. 1, No. 9, January 1911

A SUBURBAN TOWN BUILT ON BUSINESS PRINCIPLES

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Forest Hills Gardens, whose landscape features are described by Mr. Olmsted in the following article, is a business investment of the Russell Sage Foundation. The town is situated within the boundaries of New York City, and while not differing materially from other Long Island real estate enterprises, emphasizes English garden city features that are so often unknown in our American suburbs. Ample playground and recreation facilities are provided and minute attention is given to an attractive city plan that conforms to the tentative plan of Greater New York. This idea of a well-rounded policy of suburban development—a policy that coincides with the plan of the greater city—might well be applied to the outlying sections of any large community. It is so seldom that an American town plans its growth with an idea of future development that the example of Forest Hills Gardens is noteworthy.—*Editor.*

The Russell Sage Foundation, as a means of earning the income which it uses in various lines of philanthropic work, has invested a part of its capital in a suburban land company operating in the Borough of Queens, in New York City. This concern, the Sage Foundation Homes Company, has bought a tract of some 160 acres on the Long Island Railroad sixteen minutes from the Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan and is developing it into building lots. As a business proposition the enterprise differs in no essential respect from those of other land companies except in this: that whereas the ordinary land-company will put upon the market only the same old standard article in the way of city lots that is already selling successfully in the vicinity, the Sage Foundation Homes Company is willing to risk something by introducing to some degree what may be regarded as novelties in the New York retail land market, novelties which it believes the public will appreciate and pay for, which if successful will be copied by others and raise the general standard, but which are not sufficiently certain in their appeal to induce the average real estate man to try the experiment on his own account.

There is a speculative element in any transaction in city land, but what the Sage Foundation Homes Company is doing, as many land development concerns all over the country are doing, is not mere gambling in land values,

as in the case of those land speculations where the only source of profit is the unearned increment. It is conducting, in fact, a process of manufacture and merchandising. As raw material it has bought agricultural land at wholesale, although at suburban prices which include a large and purely speculative advance secured by previous holders. It is manufacturing that land in some cases partially and in other cases wholly, into good individual suburban dwellings, with all that term implies in the way of equipment and surroundings. Finally it is marketing the product at retail, in various styles and stages of completion, to suit the purchasers and tenants, from the vacant lot on a clean, paved, planted street, to the non-housekeeping apartment of one to four rooms and a bath in a building with a restaurant, a garden and a squash court.

Its profits, as in the case of other well-conducted land companies, are those of the manufacturer and merchant who performs an actual service to the community; they depend not at all on holding land for a speculative rise, but on turning it over as quickly as possible to the retail purchaser at reasonable retail prices, with the least possible loss through accumulated interest and taxes.

In laying out Forest Hills Gardens there has been an attempt to secure the full benefit resulting from three important principles in city planning, the advantages of which are coming to be more and more

clearly recognized as part of the rapidly advancing expert knowledge of the subject.

One of these principles relates to the main thoroughfares, which should be direct, ample and convenient, no matter how they cut the land. Two eighty-foot streets are carried straight through the property, on lines 1,260 feet apart, fixed by the location of bridges under the railroad and in accordance with New York city's tentative street plan covering adjacent territory. A boulevard 125 feet wide, also coinciding with the city's tentative street plan, is provided along the line where the property fronts on Forest Park, a 536 acre tract forming the largest reservation of public park lands in the Borough of Queens. In addition, two avenues seventy feet wide, with an ample set-back of buildings, radiate from Station square, where the most important of the eighty-foot streets passes under the railroad, on direct but gently curving lines, so located as to secure the best grades and the most agreeable setting, through the midst of the property to the entrances of Forest Park and to the boulevard which is to follow its easterly boundary. These two important lines would be wholly unprovided for under the usual rectangular layout of New York streets and blocks. Other streets secondary to the above in importance are sixty feet in width, also with a set-back for buildings, and follow lines which are direct but carefully related to the topography and which connect with the adjacent street layout of the city's tentative plan.

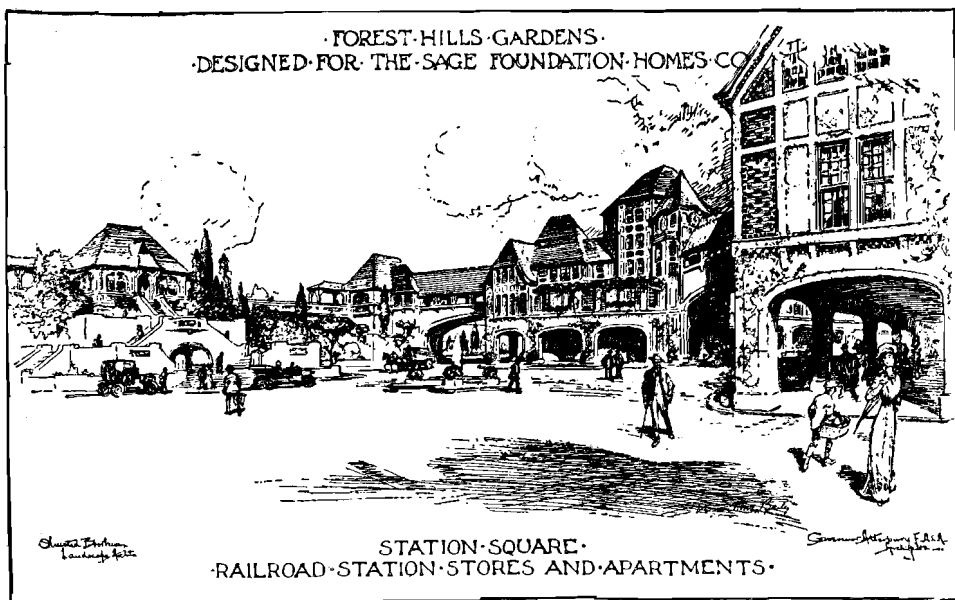
A second principle, which is very important to supplement the first, but which has been too generally ignored in American street layouts, is that those streets which are not needed as thoroughfares should be planned and constructed to meet the purposes of quiet attractive residence streets. To this end the local streets at Forest Hills Gardens are laid out so as to discourage their use as thoroughfares. While not fantastically crooked, they are never perfectly straight for long stretches; and their roadways, well paved with bituminous macadam, are narrow, thus permitting additional space

to be devoted to the front gardens which will be one of the characteristic features of the whole development. Probably one of the most notable characteristics of Forest Hills Gardens from the point of view of the homeseeker, when the plans are fully realized, will be the cozy domestic character of these local streets, where the monotony of endless, straight, wind-swept thoroughfares which are the New York conception of streets, will give place to short, quiet, self-contained and gardenlike neighborhoods, each having its own distinctive character.

A third principle that has controlled the design of Forest Hills Gardens is the deliberate setting apart of certain areas for the common use and enjoyment of the residents. The fortunate location of the tract on the very borders of Forest Park has, of course, made it wholly needless to provide any large park within the tract itself, but in spite of this advantage, a public green has been formed at the point where the two main avenues divide, within view of the station and central to that part of the property which is farthest from Forest Park. This will form the residential focus of the community just as the neighboring Station square will be its business focus. The portion of the green lying between the roads and devoted wholly to lawn and paths and ornamental planting occupies one and one-half acres, but the size of the whole open space of the green, from building line to building line, is about three and one-half acres. Beyond the upper end of the green and upon its axis is reserved a public school site and in connection with it, sufficient space for a school playground and for school gardens.

The Station square itself, although primarily a traffic center, is of considerable size, and the whole of the surrounding architecture, including the railroad station and its approaches, is being developed as a single composition, with a regard for the pleasure which the residents may derive from its use, that is impossible in the individualistic development of business centers which usually occurs even in the most costly and most fashionable suburban districts.

In addition to the school playground and the green, a space of about an acre



and a half, surrounded by streets, is being held in another part of the tract for use as a public recreation ground. The most novel recreation feature is that of enclosed "block playgrounds." These are spaces of varying shape and size, occupying the interior portion of some of the blocks and intended for the exclusive use of those living on the surrounding lots. They cannot be used for the active, noisy games of large boys and will not be open to the general public or to loafers, but will provide places where the smaller children of the block can find room to play instead of being forced out upon the streets. They will be reached through gates, directly from the back yards of most of the houses in these blocks.

Where land is of such high value as is bound to be the case within a quarter of an hour of Seventh Avenue and 32nd street, such a liberal provision of land for common use and enjoyment is possible, upon a sound commercial basis, only by paying a round price for it; and in the last analysis the price must be paid by the occupants of the lots. It is therefore a fair question how that price is to be paid—just what loss is to be set off against the gain.

The question may be answered in two ways. On the one hand, lots having

such advantages are thereby made more desirable, and are actually worth more to their occupants and worth more in the open market, lot for lot, than similar properties without these advantages; just as lots on a paved and sewered street are worth more than upon a street that is unimproved, the increased market value going to cover the cost of the improvement. In the opinion of most students of city planning and of many experienced and progressive real estate operators of large practical experience, land set apart for public recreation purposes in reasonable amount and in an intelligent manner, adds considerably more to the saleable value of the adjacent lots than it costs to set it apart. In other words, for a slight increase in lot prices the wholesale dealer in land can profitably afford to give something which is worth to the purchaser more than the amount of the necessary increase in the price of lots. On the other hand, it is possible by a reduction in the size of the back yards, so slight as not to reduce their practical usefulness, to save enough land for these neighborhood purposes without increasing the prices. Some of the lots in Forest Hills Gardens, therefore, being intended for homes of moderate size, are made shallower than the customary New York lot

