

The Derailed Power Broker:  
Rexford G. Tugwell's American Crusade for Planning  
and Professional Authority

by

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Rexford Guy Tugwell, 1891-1979

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## Introduction

### Rexford G. Tugwell, the New Deal, and the American Planning Profession

Rexford Tugwell has long been a controversial figure of the New Deal. Tugwell was a Columbia University economist who became a key member of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Brain Trust in 1932 and proselytized on the failure of laissez-faire economics to protect the American public, before and after the Great Depression. Initially appointed Undersecretary of Agriculture, Tugwell became an increasingly notorious government official when he became head of the Resettlement Administration in 1935. The creation of the utopian Greenbelt Towns was an attempt to decentralize overcrowded cities and create a higher standard of living for modest-income urban workers, and as well as an attempt to create a model of economic planning. This would allow the Greenbelt satellite city experience to be replicated for every metropolitan center in the United States, thus dispersing urban populations and reversing the allegedly problematic trend of overcrowded cities.<sup>1</sup> Tugwell envisioned the Greenbelt Towns to be elevating for modest-income clerical workers and their families because they delivered the promises of a modern built environment: light, air, and state of the art domestic appliances.

My research seeks to synthesize Tugwell's personal writing, which often comments on the nature of change in democratic society, with his public writing

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<sup>1</sup> *Greenbelt Towns: A Demonstration in Suburban Planning: Basic Program*. Washington, D.C.: Resettlement Administration, 1936.

articulating his economic philosophy—informed by a combination of pragmatism, progressivism, and institutionalism—, into a discussion of the federal government’s role in planning. I will also analyze the history of Greenbelt, Maryland, the pilot of the greenbelt town program, as a living primary source because it serves as an extension of Tugwell’s ideology and thus an embodiment of his political inconsistencies: the tension between collectivist social reform and anti-urban decentralization which presents a conservative definition of community defined by a powerful centralized government.

The Greenbelt Town Program rapidly became the most ambitious program of the RA. Tugwell projected the Greenbelt towns to be experiments in low-income collectivist living and to create a replicable model for the creation of model suburban communities while filling the immediate requirement of employing unskilled laborers to construct the towns. This task not only proved counterproductive, as employing more unskilled laborers made the town construction, and thus rents, exclusionary to the low income communities they were meant to serve, but it also posed a challenge to the American political mainstream: the Greenbelt towns’ utopianism stamped Tugwell’s reputation with inconsistent yet damaging labels—radical, utopian, socialist, communist—that ensured his tenure at the RA would be brief. By May of 1936, the D.C. Court of Appeals sided with the residents of Franklin Township, New Jersey, declaring construction of the planned community of Greenbrook unconstitutional for infringing upon state’s rights. The FERA of 1935 gave the federal government no right to construct subsidized housing, the court argued, and in addition, for

delegating lawmaking power to the Executive Branch, the court declared that the FERA itself was unconstitutional. Though construction at the three other Greenbelt towns was allowed to resume, the Court ruling decisively ended the Greenbelt town program, Tugwell's career in the New Deal, and federal involvement in total community building. In November of 1936, Tugwell resigned and the RA folded into the Farm Security Administration. Tugwell had envisioned 3,000 greenbelt towns acting as satellite cities across the United States, but by the end of his tenure, only three were to be completed, and they were eventually sold in the 1950s. For the rest of his life, Tugwell would reflect on his role in the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal's political legacies and missed opportunities to create permanent social welfare reforms in his public and personal writing.<sup>2</sup>

Tugwell's private writing consists of his diary entries from 1932-35, included in the Tugwell Papers at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, and his correspondences with Roosevelt from 1936-37, to substitute for Tugwell's absence of a diary during those years. His public writing includes numerous books, journal articles, and speeches, starting with his work as an economist at Columbia University in the 1920s to his death in 1979. I will analyze the history of Greenbelt, Maryland, the pilot of the greenbelt town program, as a living primary source because it serves as an extension of Tugwell's ideology and thus

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<sup>2</sup> Among others, some notable works are: Tugwell, Rexford G. "The Meaning of the Greenbelt Towns." *The New Republic*, February 17, 1937, 42-43; Tugwell, Rexford G. *The Brains Trust*. New York: Viking Press, 1968; Tugwell, Rexford G. *Roosevelt's Revolution: The First Year, a Personal Perspective*. New York: Macmillan, 1977.

an embodiment of his political inconsistencies: the tension between collectivist social reform and anti-urban decentralization which presents a conservative definition of community defined by a powerful centralized government.

I will contextualize the political failure of Tugwell's greenbelt towns within the tenuous history of government planning in American life, and explore the dimensions of backlash to both Tugwell's ideology. Planning had a dual interpretation as independent government power; it was seen as promoting the public interest through design interventions and as a mechanism for coordinating public and private land uses.<sup>3</sup> The emergence of planning was a response to the industrial city rooted in landscape architecture and progressive ideals, exemplified by Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (1902), which directly inspired the greenbelt town program. The major goal of my project is to establish the contradictions of planning embodied by Tugwell in the New Deal moment, which attempted to synthesize social reform and utopian romanticism of Howard and his 19<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries, with the rise of empirical social science. The rise of American social science offered bureaucrats such as Tugwell a patina of expertise but resulted in an overreliance on social engineering to create public welfare.

### **Tugwell as a Political Figure**

While there is an enormous amount of scholarship on the New Deal and

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<sup>3</sup> Klosterman, Richard. "Arguments for and Against Planning." *The Town Planning Review* 56, no. 1 (January 1985): 10.

the Garden City tradition in urban planning, there are only a few scholars that focus on Tugwell as a New Deal political figure. Their scholarship is comprised of three main works: Paul Conkin's 1959 *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program*, which looks at all the community building projects of the RA, Bernard Sternsher's 1964 *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*, which analyzes the development of Tugwell's economic beliefs in the 1920s to his resignation in 1936, and Joseph Arnold's 1971 *The New Deal in the Suburbs; a History of the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1954*, which focuses on the RA's Suburban Resettlement Program and the difficulties encountered in the implementation of the greenbelt town program.

Published following the complete government liquidation of the Greenbelt towns to the private sector in 1952, Conkin's book traces the community program as it passed hands through multiple New Deal bureaucratic agencies in order to emphasize the intellectual continuity of the program rather than focusing on the short tenure of the Resettlement Administration (1935-1937). Furthermore, Conkin's situates the repudiation of the community program within American intellectual historical thought, concluding that the 100 built communities (only three of which are greenbelt towns) serve as historical monuments to the New Deal moment, reflecting "a conscious break with individualism," and "the reforming zeal of their creators."<sup>4</sup>

A narrative of failure is central to the other main secondary sources on Tugwell and the Greenbelt town program, and perhaps the central question for

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<sup>4</sup> Conkin, 7



historians studying the program is: why did they fail? As Arnold's 1971 *The New Deal in the Suburbs* asks "Why did the towns elicit so little response from the public and such a negative one from real estate and construction interests? Was it the nature of the particular program under which the towns were built or was it something about the towns themselves?"<sup>5</sup> These historical questions betray the authors' sympathy on behalf of Tugwell's non-mainstream politics, and, revealingly, disappointment with the fact that Tugwell's visions were never allowed to come to fruition. Sternsher's 1964 account *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal* responds to Tugwell's reputation as a subversive character in the New Deal, stating in the preface, "There is something to be said for setting the record straight. Indeed, the reader may find in this book what he will consider an overreadiness to grapple with any critic of Tugwell. Before condemning this inclination, the reader should bear in mind just how distorted the popular image of Tugwell really was."<sup>6</sup> Sternsher's account attempts to restore fidelity to the public perception of Tugwell's role in the New Deal, not only considering his political influences and programs but also the nature of the "distorted image which a large sector of the press deliberately created and disseminated in the 1930s."<sup>7</sup>

### **Tugwell as Auto-Historiographer**

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold, Joseph L. *The New Deal in the Suburbs; a History of the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1954*. [Columbus]: Ohio State University Press, 1971, xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Sternsher, Bernard. *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964, vii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Tugwell himself left behind a great deal of scholarship, reflecting on his role in the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal's political legacies and missed opportunities in books and journal articles for the rest of his life. After his 1936 resignation, Tugwell was frank about the failure of the greenbelt town program, forever attributing it to the "American prejudice"<sup>8</sup> of individualism. In 1937, he published an economic defense of the greenbelt town budget in *The New Republic* titled "the Meaning of the Greenbelt Towns," as the cost of the greenbelt town program was critics' greatest source of ammunition against the RA (which was concomitant with Tugwell's reputation in the press as a radical), and broadly spoke to the rising conservative backlash against the New Deal and Roosevelt's second term. Tugwell contributed to his own historiography in 1959 publishing "The Resettlement Idea" in *Agricultural History*, in which he painstakingly analyzed backlash to the RA in the 1930s while firmly holding to his conviction to the program. Tugwell rebuffed his critiques in favor of addressing advice to "younger successors in government service,"<sup>9</sup> who "are moved by injustices and human needs."<sup>10</sup> In addition, Tugwell published political memoirs about FDR and members of the Brain Trust, such as *The Brains Trust* in 1968 and *Roosevelt's Revolution: The First Year, a Personal Perspective* in 1977, joining the chorus of New Left scholars who characterized the New Deal as mild medicine.

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<sup>8</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G. "The Resettlement Idea." *Agricultural History* 33, no. 4 (October 1959): 163.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

## Recent Scholarship

More recent scholarship on Tugwell includes Michael Namorato's 1988 *Rexford G. Tugwell: A Biography*, which follows Tugwell's death in 1979 and the entirety of his professional career. Although Tugwell mostly remained notorious for his involvement with the RA, Namorato attempts to appreciate Tugwell's legacy by emphasizing the long, often overlooked trajectory of his career in economics. In spite of his failures, Tugwell continued to advocate economic planning through government work and his academic career, working with the New York City Planning Commission in 1938 with to draft a regional plan of the city—which was handily overruled by Robert Moses,<sup>11</sup>—his work as the governor of Puerto Rico in 1941, and his return to an academic post in economics at the University of Chicago in 1946.

Following the 1988 publication of Tugwell's biography, in 1992 Namorato published *The Diary of Rexford G. Tugwell: the New Deal, 1932-1935*, releasing excerpts from Tugwell's diary that had previously only been accessible through the Tugwell papers at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York. The publication of Tugwell's biography and subsequent release of his diary from 1932-1935 can best be understood as Namorato's attempt to preserve Tugwell's disappearing legacy, especially in the field of economic history. David Whitten's Foreward to *The Diary* poses a challenge to researchers not to leave Tugwell's legacy to history, rhetorically asking the reader "Who was

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<sup>11</sup> Moses referred to Tugwell as a "Planning Red." Caro, Robert A. *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975, 15.

Rexford G. Tugwell?

Not one in a thousand randomly chosen Americans will know the name...The books and articles will serve only researchers concentrating on Rexford Tugwell. There will be few. What will be left to history? What will join the contours and what will be overwhelmed?<sup>12</sup>

Tugwell increasingly figures less in historical scholarship. Today, the body of New Deal scholarship tends to focus on the Keynesian economics as a response to the Depression, the political legacy of Social Security and the welfare state, government patronage of the arts in the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and American environmentalism, and the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), which contemporary urban historians and African-American studies scholars argue was the most influential New Deal housing program in creating the racialized postwar urban crisis and shift to suburbanization.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Greenbelt town program in the history of the American city**

While Tugwell himself seems not to have been sufficiently canonized within New Deal scholarship or American economic history, the greenbelt town program is recognized as an important moment in American urban history, not because it provided a successful or replicable model for low-income housing, but

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<sup>12</sup> Whitten, David O. Foreword. In *The Diary of Rexford G. Tugwell: The New Deal, 1932-1935*, by Rexford G. Tugwell, edited by Michael V. Namorato, X. New York: Greenwood Press, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 111; Woodard, Komozi. "Course Syllabus: Rethinking the Racial Politics of the New Deal and the War on Poverty." E-mail message to author. November 19, 2012.

because it represents to urban scholars an iteration of the ever-influential Anglo-American Garden City movement, whose influence on the planning profession in the West cannot be underestimated.<sup>14</sup> The three Greenbelt towns and especially the pilot, Greenbelt, Maryland, retain their position as standard footnotes within comprehensive studies of American urban history<sup>15</sup> because they embody an adaptation of Ebenezer Howard's English Garden City movement<sup>16</sup> in the United States during the New Deal moment, which enabled a brief window to occur in which Americans were potentially receptive to Howard's anti-urban, anti-capitalist sentiment and collectivist ethos. My thesis lies at the nexus of New Deal historiography (focusing on collectivist economics) and American urban history. My research attempts to recover Tugwell not only as an economic figure, which has been chronicled, but as a *planner* and a key figure in American urban history. Seeking to understand not only Greenbelt's physical design and its expression of Garden City principles, I explore how it arose within the context of New Deal thought and how it functions as a statement of Tugwell's ideology. I explore Greenbelt not merely as a Garden City experiment, as it is traditionally understood in urban planning literature, but as the *New York Times* called it, "a unique experiment," in which the New Deal administrators attempted to institutionalize the creation of model communities.

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<sup>14</sup> Perkins, Kristin L. "Roosevelt and Rexford: Resettlement and Its Results." *Berkeley Planning Journal* 20 (2007): 25-42; *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, edited by Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, 222-44. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Howard, Ebenezer, and Frederic J. Osborn. *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1965. Originally published in 1902.

In 1951 Clarence Stein, the influential planner and garden city historian (who also played an advisory role in the Greenbelt project) published an optimistic review of the American garden city movement in *Toward New Towns for America*. Stein viewed the greenbelt towns as the most recent projects on the continuum of the garden city movement in America, which started with his new town projects: Sunnyside, New Jersey in 1924, and Radburn, New Jersey in 1929. Stein acknowledged Greenbelt's prohibitively high construction costs and general economic inefficiency, perhaps placating himself to the Greenbelt critics in order to better establish and argument for the design potential of new towns. Ultimately, for Stein, the greenbelt towns still served as successful precedents for the role of the planner in creating a total community. In 1951, he believed that it was time to make "the next major step toward building New Towns," and to achieve a "complete change in the form of the urban environment."<sup>17</sup>

### **The New Left and Historical Revisionism**

The 1960s and '70s were major years of reevaluation for New Deal historiography that stood in contrast to conservative critiques of the New Deal as paternalistic extension of the government into the private sphere. In the 1960s, the New Left was highly critical of the New Deal for not solving the problems of inequity it sought to ameliorate. In 1966, Howard Zinn wrote in his anthology *New Deal Thought* that the New Deal failed to solve the fundamental

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<sup>17</sup> As quoted in Klaus, Susan L. *Links in the Chain: Greenbelt, Maryland and the New Town Movement in America : An Annotated Bibliography on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of Greenbelt, Maryland*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Washington Area Studies, George Washington University, 1987, 27.

issue of “how to bring the blessings of immense natural wealth and staggering productive potential to every person in the land.”<sup>18</sup> Tugwell, as I have mentioned was a prolific writer from beginning of his academic career as an economist in the 1920s until his death in 1979, largely found himself in agreement with the Leftist New Deal critics of the 1960s and 70s. In his 1968 *Brains Trust*, which won the Bancroft Prize in History, Tugwell criticized the entirety of the New Deal program as “mild medicine,”<sup>19</sup> and especially Roosevelt for neglecting an opportunity to “emerge from the orthodox progressive chrysalis and [lead] us into a new world. He chose rather rickety repairs for an old one.”<sup>20</sup> The overall sentiment of the New Left critiques of the New Deal is that of a lost opportunity for radical institutional reform to permanently transform the United States into a more equitable society.

In 1969, Jerold Auerbach criticized the New Left perspective of the New Deal for stubbornly measuring its progress based on the “methodology of *their* present...the gospel of the New Left in the sixties.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, Auerbach finds the New Left survey of the New Deal problematic because by refusing to acknowledge liberal reform from as liberal for its time, they have overlooked the major changes in American society that the New Deal engendered, and thus “refuse to grapple with the difficult analytical problem of the nature of

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<sup>18</sup> Zinn, Howard, ed. *New Deal Thought*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966. xvi

<sup>19</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G. *The Brains Trust*, New York: Viking Press, 1968, xxi.

<sup>20</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G. *The Brains Trust*, xxi.

<sup>21</sup> Auerbach, 28.

revolutionary, or even radical, change.”<sup>22</sup> In the New Left studies of the New Deal, Tugwell is sometimes mentioned as a radical, but these studies generally do not revisit the socioeconomic planning behind the Greenbelt Town Program as part of their political memory of the New Deal.

I seek to elevate Tugwell to the status of a planner, defying the traditional separation between national economic planning and urban planning, and yet, ascribing Tugwell greater authority as a planner also complicates his standing among New Left scholars as a voice of reason within the New Deal that represents the path regrettably not chosen.

### **“Planning” in an American Context**

Despite the fact that the greenbelt towns are notable in their failure to become models for private developers, urban historians have a tendency to view the Greenbelt towns somewhat nostalgically because the time period in which they were built was the height of planners’ optimism and professional authority.<sup>23</sup> Richard Klosterman’s 1985 article “Arguments For and Against Planning” outlines planning’s contentious status as an independent function of government since its emergence as a profession in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to its widespread discredit in the 1980s. Planning had a dual interpretation as independent government power; it was seen as “promoting the general or public interested

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Fishman, Robert. *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier*. New York: Basic Books, 1977.



over the narrow”<sup>24</sup> through design interventions in the built environment and alternatively as a “mechanism for coordinating the impacts of public and private land uses” and “considering the future consequences of present actions in isolation from day-to-day operating responsibilities.”<sup>25</sup> Tugwell’s Resettlement Administration embraced both perspectives on planning in its attempt to establish economic and social harmony.<sup>26</sup>

During the period of the Resettlement Administration, Klosterman describes the “great debate” over the role of government in planning that was waged between proponents such as Tugwell and laissez faire economists and concludes that up until the 1950s, planning maintained a controversial seemingly “secure”<sup>27</sup> **role** in public life. The professional authority of planning was based on the belief that “the conscious application of professional expertise, instrumental rationality, and scientific methods could more effectively promote economic growth and political stability”<sup>28</sup> than the unplanned free market. However, by the 1960s, support for planning began to chip away; social scientists criticized planners’ emphasis on the physical city as restrictive and their understanding of urban development policy as naïve. In addition, Marxist critics in the social sciences were convincing in their argument that traditional

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Reflected in Tugwell’s academic scholarship as an economist. See Tugwell, Rexford G. "Human Nature and Social Economy I." *The Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 17 (August 14, 1930): 449-57 and Tugwell, Rexford G. "Human Nature and Social Economy II." *The Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 18 (August 28, 1930): 477-92.

<sup>27</sup> Klosterman, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 13

planning practices “served the interests of society’s wealthiest and most powerful members”<sup>29</sup> under the guise of representing the public interest. By the 1980s, economic trends toward deregulation and privatization increasingly limited the government’s role in planning, leaving “an open question” whether the goals of planning are best achieved through the Tugwellian approach of the 1930s or through new partnerships in the private sector.

The widespread affects of suburban sprawl have led some planners, designers, and historians to contend that the Greenbelt towns, with their focus on community, pedestrian accessibility, and intended proximity to metropolitan transportation networks are precedents that should have been copied.<sup>30</sup> Writing on the fiftieth anniversary of Greenbelt in 1987, Howard Gillette noted that despite the political impossibility of creating collectivist planned communities under Ronald Reagan’s Presidency, the greenbelt towns “offer a particularly useful perspective on enduring issues of metropolitan development,” because “the problems which gave rise to the new town movement initially—congestion, poorly planned growth, and lack of adequate amenities to secure the goal of a decent living environment—persist.”<sup>31</sup>

## **A New Synthesis**

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>30</sup> Gillette, Howard, Jr. "Introduction." Introduction to *Links in the Chain: Greenbelt, Maryland and the New Town Movement in America : An Annotated Bibliography on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of Greenbelt, Maryland*, edited by Susan L. Klaus, 5-7. Washington, D.C.: Center for Washington Area Studies, George Washington University, 1987.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 5.

My study of Tugwell and the Greenbelt town program will pick up from the critical questions about the program's failure raised Arnold in 1971: "Was it the nature of the particular program under which the towns were built or was it something about the towns themselves?"<sup>32</sup> Seeing as the communitarian orientation of Greenbelt still provides an ideal for enlightened suburban development, I dispose of the theory that it was the nature of the towns themselves that led to the program's termination. I argue that the alternative—that the program's deficiencies led to its termination—is also not a sufficient explanation to explain the particular fate of the Greenbelt town program. The nature of the program was damaging, but this is because Tugwell's political reputation spurned negative, suspicious press coverage and thus colored the public's perception of the program. What about the political character of Rexford Tugwell was necessary for other politicians and the press to destroy, and why was the Greenbelt Town Program, viewed as an encroachment rather than a bold response to one of the world's worst economic collapses?

## **Structure**

The thesis is structured around three chapters. The first will describe Tugwell's 1930s technocratic adaptation of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City idea, which resulted not in a garden city for industrial workers but a government-subsidized garden suburb for modest-income families, and its legacy for suburbanization. Disassociating Tugwell from Howard's Garden City idea reveals

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<sup>32</sup> Arnold, xiii.

Tugwell's original intent for the program, and prompts a historical re-evaluation of Greenbelt. I argue that Greenbelt is a unique case because Tugwell's original vision for the town was distinct from the way in which its architects and planners presented its final built form, complicating the traditional understanding of the town's goals. Architects and planners used the English garden cities as precedents and saw Greenbelt as enacting the tradition's high ideals, yet Tugwell justified the project through the terms of social science and the intellectual environment of scientism in the 1920s that he partook in as an economics professor at Columbia. Tugwell prized efficiency over aesthetics, and originally wanted engineers to design the site rather than the utopian planners that he distrusted. Though Tugwell was often derisively called a utopian, in his professional role, he too spurned the word. In addition, I argue that the origins of the Greenbelt town program are unique because it materialized as a response to the Great Depression rather than a response to the industrial city, Howard's inspiration, both of which offered different solutions to address distributional issues of capitalism; Howard through political decentralization, and Tugwell through political centralization. In addition, the Greenbelt town program was politically calculated response to the New Deal, which presented a moment for social scientists like Tugwell to make a case for a new role for the government, which he had dreamt for throughout the 1920s. Tugwell was more interested in the primacy of the planner to remake and reshape American life, and ultimately centralize the American government along the lines of technocratic expertise—than the act of physical planning.

The second chapter will detail the controversy surrounding Greenbrook, New Jersey, a Greenbelt town that was rejected by the area residents who feared the intrusion of government subsidized housing would decimate the Franklin Township tax base and thus place a burden on taxpayers. The battle between disgruntled Greenbrook landowners and the RA escalated into a lawsuit that reached the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C, *Franklin Township v. Tugwell*. The court ruled in favor of the Franklin Township residents, agreeing that Greenbrook would burden taxpayers, and in addition, the federal intrusion into the housing presented a conflict to state's rights. The court also questioned the constitutionality of the RA as a whole, and the Emergency Relief Act of 1935, which delegated Roosevelt the power to form the RA. Relying on precedents of recent Supreme Court cases in which the National Recovery Act had been declared unconstitutional, with *Franklin Township v. Tugwell* the U.S. Court of Appeals similarly conferred that the legislation authorizing the creation of the RA was an unconstitutional delegation of legislative authority to the President. The Franklin Township case is illustrative of the setbacks Tugwell experienced between progressive reform and the United States' democratic institutions. In addition, the Franklin Township case, which ended the Greenbelt town program and Tugwell's career within the New Deal, had long lasting effects for the direction of the federal role in subsidized housing. Because of this case, and other Supreme Court crackdowns on New Deal administrations involved in housing, such as the PWA, it was no longer politically feasible for the government to build new towns. Housing construction justified in the service of

public works and job creation alone was no longer able to escape the growing scrutiny of Congress and the Supreme Court, and thus, the government became the funder to municipalities, who could optionally organize city planning authorities. Bringing the obscure Franklin Township case to the fore of urban planning shows how the climate of the New Deal was influential in creating the conditions for slum clearance and defining the federal role in urban planning in the United States to this day.

Finally, the third chapter follows Tugwell to his post as Commissioner of the New York City Planning Commission, which was formed in 1936, as a result of the shifting role of federal involvement in urban planning which is described in chapter 2. As Commissioner, Tugwell promoted the same decentralist planning ideals as he did as Director of the Resettlement Administration, but in his new role promoted these ideas under the guise of “regional planning.” Once again, what Tugwell was really after was not a more beautiful or designed landscape, but a reorientation of land use along the lines of a decentralized population and thus, capital in urban centers and the structures that enabled it. In his position as Commissioner, Tugwell came into conflict with Robert Moses, who branded him a communist and used the 1938 Red Scare to belittle his “utopian” ideas. Ultimately, Moses’ characterization stuck. While the two men had similar ideas about the powerful role of the planner, Tugwell’s career was consistently derailed because he wanted to use the planner’s bully pulpit as way to create a superpolitical sphere for planners—whom he optimistically wanted to elevate to the “fourth power” of government— to reorganize and reimagine

the country, rejecting a characteristic reliance on the private sector to drive land development.

In addition, the diaries Tugwell kept during this time period draw him out as a complicated political character. Placing the New Deal in a global context illuminates the status of national, regional, and city planning, and how planning debates reflected the American anxiety about the rise of illiberal political orders abroad. Tugwell noted that Germany's military victories were not surprising, given that the country was so discipline and admirably organized around a national identity. Tugwell critiqued Western business democracies for being unable to cultivate a strong rallying point in national purpose where he believed Hitler had succeeded. Tugwell's admiration for the governmental organization of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany reflected the US anxiety at the time, starting with the Great Depression and amplified by the fear of World War, that democracy had reached its end.

I attempt to bridge the lenses of American political and economic history, with the critical historiography of urban planning which criticizes the paternalism of grand urban visions, especially those of Tugwell, which was conservative in its anti-urban, decentralist plans. By bridging these two fields of history, I will emphasize Tugwell's historical importance as well as complicate his standing—obscure as it may be—as an unsung radical hero. This contradiction will demonstrate that Tugwell defies a conventional political narrative and complicates conventional American political dichotomies of conservatism and liberalism.

## **Conclusion**

These historical questions highlight conflicts in American intellectual history. Planning blurs the line between federal and municipal politics. Because of Tugwell's interest in urban planning as a vehicle for socioeconomic reform, he is more often aligned with economic aspects of planning rather than with his consequential role in American urban planning. Tugwell's greenbelt town program offered a recipe for total social reform through a planned town; it at once represented the highest ideals of an American public welfare and the heavily criticized paternalism and social engineering in the 1960s. Where, then, do we place Tugwell, if the prevailing narrative of his political career is once of sympathetic failure, but in the history of planning, his thirst for power only rivaled Robert Moses?

The perspective of planning complicates Tugwell's legacy. While Tugwell an ardent critic of the limits of American individualism, his planning ideal of promoting decentralist communities exposes a nostalgia for pastoral life, and his vision to elevate economic planning and physical planning to an executive authority exposes his desire for social engineering through a strong centralized state. By analyzing Tugwell's political character through the American political and economic history in conjunction with the history of urban planning and the American city, Tugwell not only emerges as a more important historical character than is acknowledged, but also one that whose vision of a centralized government is too conservative for him to retain his status as an unsung



American leftist hero.

## I

### **Greenbelt, Maryland: A Planned Community for Substantial Citizens**

Both left and right wings of the political spectrum evolved their own version of rationalized state planning (all with its modernist accouterments) as a solution to the ills to which capitalism was so plainly heir, particularly as manifest in the 1930s. This was the kind of confused political and intellectual history that had Lenin lauding Taylorist and Fordist production technology while the unions in Western Europe refused it, Le Corbusier appearing as an apostle of modernity while consorting with authoritarian regimes (Mussolini for a little while, and then the Vichy regime in France), Ebenezer Howard forging utopian plans inspired by the anarchism of Geddes and Kropotkin only to be appropriated by capitalist developers, and Robert Moses beginning the century as a political 'progressive' (inspired by the utopian socialism depicted in Edward Bellamy's *Looking backwards*) and ending up as the 'power broker' who 'took the meat axe' to the Bronx in the name of the automobilization of America.<sup>33</sup>

-David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990)

When Greenbelt, Maryland, the pilot community of the Greenbelt town program, opened to new residents in 1936, it drew an audience. Spectators came to watch the beginning of this unusual experiment, in which the federal government not only intervened in the housing market but also constructed a total community from a plot of previous undeveloped land formerly known as Berwyn. A rare excursion into federally subsidized housing, Greenbelt's planners also intended it to be a model, and defined its virtues in opposition to the shortcomings of the real estate industry that had failed to provide affordable, livable housing for the urban poor.

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<sup>33</sup> Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

By moving into the planned community, Washington, D.C. families, who had been screened through a rigorous tenant-selection process, were retiring from urban life. Embarking on a new suburban frontier that had previously only been accessible to the wealthy, the select few who managed to get one of the 885 initial units they called themselves “pioneers.”<sup>34</sup> Greenbelt’s plan, designed by architects Hale Walker and Douglas Ellington, clustered community amenities such as the elementary school, a library, a pool, and cooperative shops around a sweeping network of cul-de-sacs and garden fronted homes, with delicate overpasses for cars that made it possible to meander the entire site on foot. The greenbelt encircling the plan sealed the town from encroachment, protecting it from predatory real estate and limiting its population size to—as well as sealing its reputation as a distant utopian experiment.

And yet, the final built form of Greenbelt was very different from what its originator, Rexford Tugwell, had initially conceived. In 1972, John Lansill, the director of the Greenbelt planning staff, claimed that on a speculative trip to Beltsville, Maryland, in February 1935 shortly before the Resettlement Administration was created, Tugwell expressed his vision for “a group of skyscrapers fifty or sixty stories high, cruciform in plan and very widely spaced, containing housing, administrative, and commercial space” resembling Le

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<sup>34</sup> Belair, Felix, Jr. "Greenbelt--An Experimental Town--Starts Off." *The New York Times*, October 10, 1937, Magazine sec. <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FA0E17FD385A157A93C2A8178BD95F438385F9>.

Corbusier's Ville Contemporaine.<sup>35</sup> While Mardges Bacon, author of *Le Corbusier in America*, concludes that Tugwell's interest in Le Corbusier was "probably academic,"<sup>36</sup> for Tugwell, there was little separation between academics and practice; he believed that his academic expertise qualified him to possess political power and direct for the national interest.

Tugwell sought new forms to give shape to his revolutionary economic thought, and while he eventually agreed to let a diverse group of planners and architects realize the greenbelt towns, his interest in Ville Contemporaine, Le Corbusier's valorization of twentieth century technology and centralization of power, is an apt metaphor for how Tugwell's ideology differed from the Garden City even as the Greenbelt towns appropriated its nucleated form: (can give brief description here). For Howard, the decentralization of the Garden City was a correction to urban signified a societal shift towards economic and political decentralization; a shift away from cities and thus the inconsistency between Tugwell's ideology for Greenbelt and its design.

### **Tugwell as Technocrat**

Tugwell, a Brain Trust advisor to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt who became the head of the Resettlement Administration in 1935, believed that the Great Depression brought about "a moment when the worst elements in

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<sup>35</sup> Myhra, David. "Rexford Guy Tugwell: Initiator of America's Greenbelt New Towns, 1935-1936." In *The Physical City: Public Space and the Infrastructure*, edited by Neil L. Shumsky, 212-24. New York: Garland Pub., 1996, 183.

<sup>36</sup> Bacon, Mardges. *Le Corbusier in America: Travels in the Land of the Timid*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001, 166.

American life were completely exposed,"<sup>37</sup>: the fallacy of laissez-faire capitalism and the invisible hand, myths he blamed for propagating the "viciously false paradox"<sup>38</sup> that men were "advancing co-operation when they were defying it."<sup>39</sup>

Tugwell, an economist at Columbia University before joining the Brain Trust in 1932, was a member of the burgeoning intellectual environment<sup>40</sup> of the American social sciences in the 1920s, in which professionals increasingly valorized science and pursued its autonomous authority.<sup>41</sup> Tugwell interpreted the Great Depression as a political mandate for economic reform, and his leadership in New Deal an opportunity to apply his scientific expertise to transform the role of the federal government.<sup>42</sup>

### **Technological Utopianism**

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<sup>37</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G., and Michael V. Namorato. *The Diary of Rexford G. Tugwell: The New Deal, 1932-1935*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1992, 272.

<sup>38</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G. "Design for Government." *Political Science Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (September 1933): 321.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Conkin, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Ross, Dorothy. *The Origins of American Social Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 399-400. "The depth of the reaction from politics to science placed added emotional freight on science. Rice believed that 'civilization no longer has time to wait for undirected trial-and-error progress. Not was 'cold rationality' sufficient. The solution was to make science itself '*the object of emotional attachment*.' Science was a field for unflinching heroism and devotion"; "Social science was to be an autonomous body of knowledge, pursued in a way to develop its scientific character, yet it was to be directed at and constituted in accordance with the technological capacity for control."

<sup>42</sup>Conkin, 330. "The tremendous, frenzied governmental activity of the early New Deal can be understood only in relation to the depression. The depression resulted in both fear and anger among large groups of people. For a brief time the old individualistic, capitalistic society was widely condemned. The caution, complacency, and natural conservatism of most Americans were shattered, and millions looked to the federal government for a new, more security society."

Though Tugwell consistently denied that that the Greenbelt towns had utopian influences, the intellectual tradition of the American utopians of the late nineteenth century inarguably inspired the ideology of the Greenbelt town program. The stigma of the “utopian” label persisted throughout Tugwell’s career and marginalized his influence on the American politics. In 1936 *The Washington Post* published Felix Bruner’s “Utopia Unlimited,” a series of investigative exposes on the Tugwell’s broad power—and flexible budget—as head of the Resettlement Administration, and in the late ‘30s, Robert Moses maligned Tugwell’s Master Plan for New York by referring to it as utopian watercolor painting. Tugwell self-consciously resisted the word “utopian,” instead preferring the broad authority of “planning,” as a vision for society and directive to action qualified by expertise. Though “utopian” often carries pastoral or romantic connotations, and “planning” connotes professionalism, these two concepts wove together seamlessly in the outpouring of technological utopian literature from 1883 to 1933.<sup>43</sup> Even as Tugwell emphasized the economic, efficient, and scientific aspects of planning, the intellectual climate of scientism was compatible with technological utopias, wherein an administrative elite harnesses the promise of technology in order to achieve a new society. Howard Segal defines technological utopianism as “a mode of thought and activity that vaunts technology as the means of bringing about utopia.”<sup>44</sup> A technological utopia presents a vision of a perfect society in which planning assumes primacy.

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<sup>43</sup> Segal, 94

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

In both his public and personal writing, Tugwell was as prone to grandiose statements about the potential revolutionary power of a new economic system as he was to declare free-market capitalism moribund. In 1924, Tugwell wrote that in national embrace of a new economic science “lies the possibility of a remade world—no less.”<sup>45</sup> In 1933 article “Design for Government,” Tugwell equated Adam Smith’s theory of the invisible hand with a myth, writing, “The jig is up. The cat is out of the bag. There is no invisible hand. There never was.”<sup>46</sup> Tugwell intended to revolutionize economics and awaken it to a social awareness. The quote evidences Tugwell’s intention to revolutionize economics by making it more scientific, and also the ability of a new economic science to literally create a new world order, indicative of the Progressive era obsession with expertise and skilled managers as well as his undeniable utopian impulse. In addition to being an example of town planning, Greenbelt is also a historical monument. Tugwell was initially interested in national economic planning as a way to address agricultural problems, and devoted much of his scholarship to rural poverty and land use management. Tugwell’s expertise on agricultural issues and rural poverty—made him as an ideal candidate for the Brains Trust in 1932 and eventually granted him a post in the Department of Agriculture, where he served as Undersecretary until 1934, before the formation of the Resettlement Administration. The severity of the Great Depression

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<sup>45</sup> As quoted in Ross, 399. Rexford Tugwell, “Introduction” to *The Trend of Economics*, ed. Rexford G. Tugwell (New York: Knopf, 1924), ix-x.

<sup>46</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G. “Design for Government.” *Political Science Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (September 1933): 321-32.

broadened Tugwell's critique of American laissez faire capitalism from rural poverty to urban poverty and led him to boldly proclaim a (revolution) of the entire economic system was in order.

Tugwell's belief that the scientific planning extended from the physical environment to the administration of society at large ultimately reveals the influence of the utopian writers Henry George, Henry Demarest Lloyd, and Edward Bellamy. Responding to the corrosive social and economic inequality and displacement that resulted from the American Industrial Revolution in the 1850s, these writers envisioned a state that would forge a "middle way" between the communitarian values of American's pre-industrial past and its industrial transformation apparent by the 1880s.<sup>47</sup> George, Lloyd, and Bellamy, and the scores of other technological utopians were troubled by. Though many Americans acknowledged these problems, and many were taken up by Progressive reformers the wholesale manner in which the utopians suggested change diverged from the mainstream, piecemeal process of reform.

Their highly idealized conception of community life drew specifically from three intellectual trends: the American republican tradition, the protestant evangelical ideal of sacred community, and the English artisanal tradition of a moral economy.<sup>48</sup> As Derek Phillips notes in *Looking Backward: A Critical Appraisal of Communitarian Thought*, the assertion that community is lost is nothing new to American or European intellectual history. However, George,

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas, John L. *Alternative America: Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Henry Demarest Lloyd, and the Adversary Tradition*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1983.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



Lloyd, Bellamy, and their contemporaries were distinguished from a long tradition of utopian thought not only by their reassertion of an *American* communitarian ideal but in their optimistic belief that technology would provide the means to create a new society.<sup>49</sup>

The technological utopians' literature retains a legacy distinct from earlier other utopian movements, even though they did not define themselves self-consciously as a group, because they inspired planning experiments that testify to the persistence of their ideology—and its adaptability to multiple interpretations. Bellamy's 1881 *Looking Backward* and its 1897 sequel, *Equality*, profoundly influenced Ebenezer Howard's Garden City and early twentieth century social reformers.<sup>50</sup> Collectively, *Looking Backward* and *Equality* catalogue the evolution of Bellamy's vision of utopia, from a "great city"<sup>51</sup> to a regional village, akin to the decentralized satellite cities associated with the Garden City movement and the Greenbelt towns. *Looking Backward* remains the most popular utopian novel ever published in the United States,<sup>52</sup> and *Equality* is comparatively obscure, yet Utopian scholar John Mullin points out, both works are essential to understand the trajectory of Bellamy's thought.<sup>53</sup> Mullin believes

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<sup>49</sup> Mullin, John R. "Edward Bellamy's Ambivalence: Can Utopia Be Urban?" *Utopian Studies* 11, no. 1 (2000): 62. Accessed March 3, 2013. JSTOR.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward*. New York: Ticknor, 1888, 55.

<sup>52</sup> Segal, Howard. "Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward and the American Ideology of Progress Through Technology." *OAH Magazine of History* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 20-24. Accessed March 3, 2013. JSTOR.

<sup>53</sup> Mullin, 60.

that with the publication of *Equality*, Bellamy arrived at the conclusion that the decentralized village was “a better way to reach utopia.”<sup>54</sup>

*Equality* is obscure compared to the canonical influence of *Looking Backward*, yet as a sequel is a catalogue the evolution of Bellamy’s vision of utopia, from a “great city” to a decentralized vision of utopia wherein technology has negated the necessity of densely populated and economically centralized cities. While both of Bellamy’s works present conflicting visions of what shape technologically utopian American landscape should take, as *Looking Backward* pictures “a great city” and *Equality* a regional village, both works established the primacy of the planner.

Tugwell believed that the agglomeration of experts in the Resettlement Administration could correct—or model a viable solution for—the inefficient dispersal of Americans crowded in urban and rural slums through the creation of collectively owned communities that lay at the periphery of town and country, echoing British planner Ebenezer Howard’s 1898 Garden City idea.<sup>55</sup> The three main objectives of the program stated were

To provide useful work for men on unemployment relief, to provide low-rent housing in healthful surroundings for low-income families, [and] to demonstrate the soundness of planning and operating towns according to certain garden city principles.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Howard, Ebenezer, and Frederic J. Osborn. *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1965, 53-53. Howard’s 1902 *Garden Cities of To-morrow* was originally published in 1898 as *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*.

<sup>56</sup> Sternsher, Bernard. *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964, 70.

Like Howard, Tugwell grasped the connection between the housing problem and the nature of the industrial economy, which was presented in even more severe terms after the stock market crash in 1929. The greenbelt towns' structural approach and "tacit acceptance that the problem could not be solved by unaided private industry"<sup>57</sup> echoed Howard's impulse behind the Garden City idea, a response to the excesses capitalism.<sup>58</sup> Howard's Garden City idea and Tugwell's dream of 3,000 greenbelt towns in America were both "ambitious and complex statements of the belief that reforming the physical environment can revolutionize the total life of a society."<sup>59</sup> Both thinkers believed that decentralist planning would serve "as an active force, distributing the benefits of the Machine Age to all and directing the community on the paths of social harmony."<sup>60</sup>

However, Howard and Tugwell had very different conceptions for how to achieve and maintain this structural change. The main difference between the Garden City idea and Greenbelt is the how they envisioned the role of the government, a difference visible in the greenbelt town program's tension between two competing objectives: creating low-rent housing and quality-paying jobs for unskilled laborers. Whereas for Howard decentralization of the

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<sup>57</sup> Christensen, Carol A. *The American Garden City and the New Towns Movement*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1986, 88.

<sup>58</sup> Gillette, Howard, Jr. "Introduction." Introduction to *Links in the Chain: Greenbelt, Maryland and the New Town Movement in America : An Annotated Bibliography on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of Greenbelt, Maryland*, edited by Susan L. Klaus, 5-7. Washington, D.C.: Center for Washington Area Studies, George Washington University, 1987, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Fishman, Robert. *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier*. New York: Basic Books, 1977, 37.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 93

physical environment meant an attendant decentralization of political and economic power,<sup>61</sup> Tugwell believed in the centralization of government authority, wherein successful choreography of the greenbelt towns reflected the state's positive control of the framework of industrial society.<sup>62</sup> For Tugwell and his contemporary institutional economists, the logic of social welfare was consistent with the logic of social control.<sup>63</sup> While Howard's Garden City envisioned an "urban revolution,"<sup>64</sup> that would result in a multicentered society, Greenbelt was a "satellite city,"<sup>65</sup> from its inception, a case study for Tugwell to introduce institutional economics to the federal government while maintaining the status of metropolis as a true center.

Thus, the Resettlement Administration employed a "greenbelt" vocabulary in its naming and design, but was driven by a different ideology: to respond to a crucial moment in American history that necessitated a solution to distributional issues in society as well as an argument for the country to be remade through the institutionalization of planning by expert technocrats. Tugwell's Greenbelt ideology cannot simply be understood as a reaction to the industrial city but a response to the possibilities of New Deal, a time of political

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 84

<sup>62</sup> Buder, Stanley. *Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 176.

<sup>63</sup> Ross, 412. See Rexford G. Tugwell, "The Economic Basis for Business Regulation," *AER*, 11 (December 1921): 643-58.

<sup>64</sup> Fishman, 40. "Howard did not conceive the Garden City as a specialized 'satellite town' or 'bedroom town' perpetually serving some great metropolis. Rather, he foresaw the great cities of his time shrinking to insignificance as their people desert them for a new way of life in a decentralized society."

<sup>65</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G., and Michael V. Namorato. *The Diary of Rexford G. Tugwell: The New Deal, 1932-1935*, 272.

upheaval,<sup>66</sup> and the emergence of scientism and institutional economics that Tugwell contributed to in the 1920s.

In *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, Howard predicted the end of the metropolitan city. The modern city had shown the extremes of wealth and power, and twentieth-century technology would empower small communities to decentralize it.<sup>67</sup>

These crowded cities have done their work; they were the best which a society could construct, but they are in the nature of things entirely unadapted for a society in which the social side of our nature is demanding a larger share of recognition.<sup>68</sup>

After the Great Depression, Tugwell foresaw the same role for laissez-faire capitalism: its failure would inspire a new bureaucratic order to create an economy that would act as an ethical instrument of progress.<sup>69</sup>

### **Greenbelt's Separation Between Ideology and Design**

The Greenbelt towns are often likened to a derivation of the Garden City idea and are often superlatively named the best or closest derivation of the idea, in competition with a host of other early twentieth century American

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<sup>66</sup> Conkin, 178. "The Roosevelt administration never developed a coherent policy in housing or planning. As with much else about the New Deal, actions in these areas were important mainly as a break with past aloofness, signifying a new era of federal involvement."

<sup>67</sup> Fishman, 15. "Their ideal cities thus stand at the intersection of nineteenth-century hopes and twentieth-century technology."

<sup>68</sup> Howard, 146.

<sup>69</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G. "Human Nature and Social Economy I." *The Journal of Philosophy* vol. 27, no. 17 (August 14, 1930): 449-57.

iterations.<sup>70</sup> However, “derivation” implies the incorrect assumption that the Garden City idea was *the* ideal framing both the ideology and design of the Greenbelt towns. While the similarities of the designs of the greenbelt towns and the British Garden Cities, such as Letchworth (1903) and Welwyn (1920), point to an Anglo-American cross-fertilization of ideas, they have allowed many scholars to overestimate the ideological similarity between Howard’s Garden City and the Greenbelt towns.

While the goal for both the Garden City and the Greenbelt towns were to realize “their social thought in three dimensions,”<sup>71</sup> when tracing the line of influence from the Garden City to Greenbelt, it is necessary to separate ideology from the physical plan. Tugwell and Howard were the initiators of ideas that ultimately were refined and realized by various teams of architects and planners. Most of Howard’s original diagrams contained the a prominently displayed N.B.: “Diagram Only: Plan cannot be drawn until site selected.”<sup>72</sup> As Lewis Mumford notes in his introductory essay to *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, “Howard’s greatness did not lie in the field of technical planning”<sup>73</sup> but his ability “to outline the nature of a balanced community and to show what steps were necessary...to bring it into existence.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Perkins, Kristin L. "Roosevelt and Rexford: Resettlement and Its Results." *Berkeley Planning Journal* 20 (2007): 25. The historiography of the greenbelt town program, by and large, categorizes it as a Garden City derivative.

<sup>71</sup> Fishman, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Howard, 52-53.

<sup>73</sup> Mumford, Lewis. "The Garden City Idea and Modern Planning." Introduction to *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, by Ebenezer Howard, 29-40. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1965, 32.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Similarly, Tugwell's most significant contribution to the greenbelt town program was originating it. Joseph L. Arnold, author of *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, contends that Tugwell, John Lansill, Director of the planning staff, and Frederick Bigger, Chief of planning, all deserve to be mentioned equally in a discussion of the towns.<sup>75</sup> Demonstrative of Tugwell's distance from the technicality of the three towns' site planning was his initial choice of engineers to design them; from his perspective, professional planners were "impractical and utopian."<sup>76</sup> Only after an intervention by Tracy Augur, the chief town planner of the Tennessee Valley Authority and a member of the Regional Planning Association of American (RPAA), were planners and architects hired to design Greenbelt, Greendale, Greenhill, and Greenbrook.<sup>77</sup> The internal structure of the program was reorganized so that each of the towns had a unique team of planners,<sup>78</sup> allowing them to have distinct designs as well as providing employment to talented architects, many of whom were involved with the RPAA and had been virtually unemployed since 1929. After Tugwell's compromise

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<sup>75</sup> Arnold, 48.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 47. Based on Arnold's interview with C.B. Baldwin.

<sup>77</sup> Franklin Tp. in Somerset County, N.J., et al. v. Tugwell (United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia May 18, 1936) (Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, Dist. file). Franklin Township, New Jersey residents' lawsuit against Tugwell blocked construction of Greenbrook. The U.S. Court of Appeals agreed with the residents that Executive Order 7075 did not provide Tugwell sufficient legal basis to build a federally subsidized new town, which Franklin Township residents believed would lower their regional tax base. For more scholarship on Greenbrook, see Fine, Morris. "Greenbrook—The Town That Never Was." *Plan Canada* 8 (July 1967): 58-70; Shaffer, Daniel. "Resettling Industrial America: The Controversy over FDR's Greenbelt Town Program." *Urbanism Past and Present* 8 (Winter/Spring 1983): 18-32.

<sup>78</sup> Arnold, 48.

with Augur, the RA chose town planner Hale Walker and architects Reginald Wadsworth and Douglas Ellington to design Greenbelt, Maryland.

Clarence Stein correctly noted in his 1951 *Toward New Towns for America* that the Greenbelt towns were the products of “three basic conceptions”<sup>79</sup>: the Garden City, the Radburn Idea, and Clarence Perry’s Neighborhood Unit, as the diverse planners of the greenbelt towns referenced a plethora of design precedents that were based on decentralist principles. While this analysis is a helpful corrective to the overly simplistic idea that the greenbelt towns were simply iterations of the Garden City idea, which overlooks the influence of the design of the superblock in Radburn, and Perry’s centralization of the community around schools, the greenbelt town program’s ideology as envisioned by Tugwell remained distinct from its design.

### **The Regional Planning Association of America and the Garden City**

If Greenbelt is said to selectively appropriate the Garden City idea, then it is because of the influence of the Regional Planning Association of America. The RPAA, founded in 1923, was a small, informal group of architects, planners, and social critics who sought to bring Garden City principles to an American audience, and in the process developed their own philosophy of regionalism as an “organic ideology” of the human environment.<sup>80</sup> Mumford’s view of regionalism was a selective appropriation of Howard’s Garden City idea, in which decentralized urban life provided the answer to “America’s larger picture

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<sup>79</sup> Stein, 120.

<sup>80</sup> Buder, 166.



of a natural order that had to determine the development of civilization.”<sup>81</sup> Mumford’s philosophy sought to situate the American village of the past in a new decentralized landscape that would replace the overcrowded city; it was at once forward-looking and undeniably nostalgic. As Mumford stated, “The future of our civilization depends on our ability to select and control our heritage from the past, to alter our habits and attitudes, and to project fresh forms.”<sup>82</sup> In addition to Mumford, many other members of the RPAA idealized the New England village as the a prototype for new American regionalism, underscoring the use of the Garden City idea to recover an unreachable imagined past of harmonious community life.<sup>83</sup> This nostalgic bent, coupled with new the emerging influence of scientism that largely defined Tugwell’s attraction to decentralist resettlement, colored the design outcomes in Greenbelt.

The Radburn superblock, designed by Stein and Wright, with its creation of an unimpeded pedestrian experience through the town, reflects a shift in the use of design from earlier English Garden city precedents such as Letchworth. The superblock’s separation of pedestrian pathways from automobiles enhanced social contact in the town and asserted the potential for design to be a sociological tool rather than merely an aesthetic one.<sup>84</sup> Thus, the Radburn superblock provided an argument for design and planning—and the agency of the designer—to humanize new technology in accordance with community values. In all of its ventures, the one of the RPAA’s most consistent goals was to

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>82</sup> Spann, 56

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 56

<sup>84</sup> Buder, 169

promote the status of planners. They believed that once citizens witnessed firsthand the impact of a designed town, planning would acquire a more prominent role in the public sphere.<sup>85</sup>

Tugwell denied that greenbelt town program was a direct interpretation of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City idea or the regional planning platform of the RPAA. He argued that the idea came from "some studies of our own population movements which showed steady growth in the periphery of cities...In other words, it accepted a trend instead of trying to reverse it."<sup>86</sup> Writing in defense of the program in an article "The Meaning of the Greenbelt Towns" in 1937, after his resignation from Roosevelt Administration and the RA's diffusion into the Farm Security Administration, Tugwell certainly felt the need to save the towns' reputation by downplaying their utopian impulse; the program was widely derided by the press and Congress for espousing collectivism and for its high cost.<sup>87</sup> However, a widely cited entry<sup>88</sup> in Tugwell's diary makes evident that his utopian ambition for the greenbelt town program was more rational than romantic:

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 180

<sup>86</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G. "The Meaning of the Greenbelt Towns." *The New Republic*, February 17, 1937, 43.

<sup>87</sup> Bruner, Felix. "Utopia Unlimited: Resettlement Administration Cost Is 40 Cents of Every Dollar Actually Spent to Date." *The Washington Post*, February 13, 1936. ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Bruner, Felix. "Utopia Unlimited: Executive Order Gives Tugwell Power to Administer Projects Calling for \$364,790,000." *The Washington Post*, February 10, 1936. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Felix Bruner's "Utopia Unlimited" series was the most influential criticism of the economic inefficiency of the program from the press.

<sup>88</sup> Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. [New York]: Random House, 1961, 310. While its origins are unclear, Jane Jacobs seized on this quote in the publication of *The Death and Life of the American City*, used to demonstrate the anti-urban and paternalistic tendencies endemic to the planning profession.

My idea is to go just outside centers of population, pick up cheap land, build a whole community, and entice people into it. Then go back into the cities and tear down whole slums and make parks of them.<sup>89</sup>

Showcasing his incongruous embrace of social welfare and authoritarian politics, Tugwell's personal reflection on the program is consistent with his 1937 justification that the towns were built based on a demographic trend. His anti-urban attitude is based on his personal conviction as a social scientist that it would be cheaper to build affordable housing on undeveloped land than on cost-prohibitive city blocks, and that this suburban resettlement has the reciprocal effect of making cities more streamlined and livable. His objection to slum clearance, a position he maintained in 1937, was not emotional but grounded in the logic of cost-effectiveness. It also was an argument for the philosophy of the RA over the Public Works Administration, a department that completed slum clearance projects in the model of European social democratic housing, and competed with the RA for funding. The greenbelt town program of suburban resettlement, Tugwell wrote,

Invites comparison not only with other suburban projects but with the whole theory of slum clearance...We now have in being tree complete little cities which might have been planned differently but which were nevertheless planned and are operable units for community living, not just rows of self-cancelling houses.<sup>90</sup>

Contrasting Tugwell's descriptions of the program objectives, the Resettlement Administration pamphlet on the greenbelt towns, published in

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<sup>89</sup> Buder, 176. Buder and others, including Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*, attribute this quote to page 34 of Conkin's *Tomorrow A New World*, however, I have not been able to place the quote in Conkin's book.

<sup>90</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G. "The Meaning of the Greenbelt Towns." 43.

1936, stated its mission within the ethical humanist rhetoric of the Regional Planning Association of America. Attempting to convey the significance of total community building, the RA stated that they were not simply in the housing field, but trying to “put houses and land and people together in such a way that the props under our economic and social structure will be permanently strengthened.”<sup>91</sup> The 1936 pamphlet, more likely written by a combination of administrators such as Lansill and Bigger (a member of the RPAA), than Tugwell, who was concerned with administrative duties, reflects the influence of the RPAA in framing the design of greenbelt town program. Though there are distinct traces of Tugwell’s scientific planning in the pamphlet, such as the “Study for Site Selection,” complete with graphs on population growth and growth of industrial employment, overall, it is a document that reflects the RPAA’s desire to recreate the American village in a twentieth century urban context while unabashedly drawing influence from the Garden City experiments in England.

Through its rhetoric and visuals, the Greenbelt pamphlet made its connections to the Garden City clear. Under the headline “Tested by Experience,” the pamphlet traces the inspiration for the greenbelt towns to Ebenezer Howard, and includes images of garden city developments, such as Welwyn, as design precedents. The pamphlet devotes a page to a perspectival rendering of the spatial relationship between “City” and “Greenbelt Town,” in which a typical street grid—filled in with high rise building, factories, and the fog of their

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<sup>91</sup> *Greenbelt Towns: A Demonstration in Suburban Planning : Basic Program*. Washington, D.C.: Resettlement Administration, 1936.

pollution—disperses and extends outward into a vast green space marked in its periphery by an elegant, curved, organic-shaped greenbelt. The diagrammatic quality of the rendering, as well as its assertion that an urban-rural spatial compromise supplant the city, echoes Howard’s influential Town-Country diagrams, and Howard and Tugwell’s preponderance given to socioeconomic reconstruction over the specifics of design, which were to be articulated by various teams of architects and designers.<sup>92</sup>

### **Functionality vs. Regionalism**

While the RPAA was initially ambivalent about the use of government power to achieve their goal of a decentralized, regionally planned America, maintaining the same hesitations as Howard, The Great Depression had awakened many RPAA members to “radical fantasies.”<sup>93</sup> With the creation of the Resettlement Administration in 1935 they “saw the opportunity to create entire rebuilding of America along the lines of planned communities like Radburn.”<sup>94</sup> The stock market crash in 1929 ultimately compromised the RPAA’s vision for Radburn to become a self-sufficient garden city, as Alexander Bing’s philanthropic City Housing Corporation (C.H.C.) could not afford to build more than 400 houses, which amounted to a community of 1,400.<sup>95</sup> While many individual RPAA members such as Mumford and Stein disagreed about the role of the government to enact their plans, it was generally accepted that no more garden cities would be built after the Great Depression without state

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<sup>92</sup> Fishman, 37.

<sup>93</sup> Spann, 178

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 179

<sup>95</sup> Buder, 168

involvement. Despite initial resistance to the powerful centralized government to enact regional planning, many RPAA members became either officially involved in the RA and other New Deal programs or consulted them, including Augur, Bigger, Stein, Wright, and Stuart Chase.

Stein, the co-designer with Wright of Sunnyside Gardens and Radburn, was a central figure in establishing the RPAA's influence on the legacy of Greenbelt's design. While he was never offered a position within the RA, he was asked to consult the program,<sup>96</sup> and with *Toward New Towns for America* he carved himself a niche as historian of the Garden City movement in America. His interpretation of the plan of Greenbelt is striking in its contrast to Tugwell's; although 14 years had passed since the completion of Greenbelt, the gap between the Tugwell's ideology and its design ideology persisted. Tugwell characteristically staked his claim on functionality and rationality rather than naturalism. In 1937, he wrote,

We have always been afraid that Greenbelt would be expected to demonstrate something to which it could not possibly have contributed much. To show where we wanted emphasis placed we chose the name. Greenbelt refers to the land, to the fixing of the plan, to the functional uses of area, to the better living to be had by protection from crowding within and encroachment from without.<sup>97</sup>

In contrast, Stein discussed the site in the context of landscape architecture. He wrote that "The essential shape of the Greenbelt town plan was

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<sup>96</sup> Parsons, K.C. "Clarence Stein and the Greenbelt Towns: Settling for Less." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 56, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 161-83. ProQuest.

<sup>97</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G. "The Meaning of the Greenbelt Towns." 43.

indicated by nature. Here, as in many other great plans, the planners' job was primarily to discover, not invent.<sup>98</sup> Stein's emphasis on the environmental aspect of Greenbelt, and its source of inspiration the "organic ideology" of the human environment references the intellectual contributions of The RPAA. Stein's interpretation reiterated Benton MacKaye's adage that planning is revelation. The RPAA developed theories of site planning, but while Tugwell saw site planning as a physical manifestation of scientific planning and management, Stein drew artistic inspiration from the site, the source of each unique regionalist design adaptation. However, both Stein and Tugwell agreed on the merits of Greenbelt, emphasizing the light, air, and space made available for young families.<sup>99</sup> While Tugwell's ideology had failed to win the hearts of most Americans, politicians, and journalists, due to the influence of the RPAA and planners Ellington, Wadsworth, and Walker, Greenbelt was a recreational dream for its inhabitants. While in most cases Tugwell's ideology is repudiated or forgotten, according to Arnold, "The town's most enduring legacy is the models they provided in physical planning."<sup>100</sup>

### **Social Planning**

Seeking to construct a civic-oriented populace to inhabit their model community, Greenbelt administrators made social planning as central to the creation of Greenbelt as town planning. Greenbelt enlisted specific techniques to

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<sup>98</sup> Stein, 127.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Arnold, 30.

prevent class antagonism and social stratification within the community, including socioeconomic eligibility requirements, the establishment of cooperatives, and the delegation for a city-manager form of self-government.<sup>101</sup>

Greenbelt's eligibility requirements were highly exclusionary. Greenbelt followed the local segregation rules in Prince George's County, and thus did not allow black families to apply for housing. Though the RA employed blacks laborers to build the town, these laborers were not allowed to become residents. In addition, the eligibility requirements barred working wives, which disqualified a third of Washington, D.C.'s white families from consideration.<sup>102</sup> Only single-earner families who made less than \$2,200 per year were eligible to live in Greenbelt, which produced a striking degree of economic homogeneity within the town. In 1939, approximately ninety percent of household incomes in Greenbelt ranged between \$1,200 and \$2,000.<sup>103</sup>

Even for families who met the eligibility requirements, as Arnold describes, the screening process was rigorous: families were interviewed by a five-person selection committee and visited at their current residents by a social worker, who examined their cleanliness and personal habits.<sup>104</sup> Applicants were appraised for their possession of "questionable family life and social attitudes," whether they were members of a "socially acceptable organization," and if they

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<sup>101</sup> Form, William H. "Status Stratification in a Planned Community." *American Sociological Review* 10, no. 5 (October 1945): 606. JSTOR.

<sup>102</sup> Christensen, 82.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Christensen, 82.



seemed “a well-integrated family group,” among others.<sup>105</sup> As a result of this selection process, seventy percent of the original tenants of Greenbelt were government workers. While Greenbelt planners could not longer guarantee racial or socioeconomic diversity, they sought to make the town inclusive by replicating the religious profile of the tenants after the demographics of Washington, D.C.: thirty percent Catholic, seven percent Jewish, and sixty-three percent white Protestant.<sup>106</sup>

While the tenant selection process ensured economic homogeneity, Greenbelt’s cost was more restrictive than had been initially intended. While Executive Order 7200 stated the RA’s aim to resettle industrial workers, Greenbelt’s pioneering population largely consisted of white-collar workers. Conkin concurs that with an average unit cost of \$15,395, Greenbelt was not low cost housing.<sup>107</sup> While the RA initially sought to house low income residents who earned an annual income between \$1,000 and \$1,999, by the fall of 1936, the RA had to reposition itself towards families of “moderate income,” who earned between \$1,200 to \$2,000 a year, because the physical facilities’ operating costs had rendered the former budgeting option untenable.<sup>108</sup> This was an ironic compromise, given that the RA had published pamphlets reporting that half of all Americans who lived in cities made less than \$1,200 a year.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Christensen, 83

<sup>106</sup> Stein, 128

<sup>107</sup> Conkin, 320.

<sup>108</sup> Arnold, 138-139

<sup>109</sup> Christensen, 82.

In addition, labor expenses resulted in a decrease in the number of units that could be built, which hampered Greenbelt's chance of becoming economically self-sufficient by attracting industry. Because of the towns' inability to attract industry and become economically self-sufficient, it became a middle-class town that was collectivist within its own borders but relied on commercial and transportation networks outside. An isolated bedroom community, Greenbelt had "constant transportation difficulties."<sup>110</sup> After the Farm Security Administration's subsidized bus service to Greenbelt was declared unconstitutional by the attorney general, residents eventually resolved to carpooling and bus transfers.<sup>111</sup>

While Greenbelt provided schools, recreational facilities, and commercial areas that offered cooperative models to its residents, its incomplete realization of the original greenbelt ideology transformed the town into a different housing experiment than envisioned. Greenbelt's small size, exclusivity, and physical isolation made it reliant on the proximity of other urban and regional centers, a key distinction from Howard's Garden City. Greenbelt was not a garden city but a garden suburb that retained some of Howard's principles in the design but did not share his vision of creating a truly decentralized society. Neither Greenbelt nor any of the other greenbelt towns successfully attracted industry that would have allowed them to form part of a true Howardian network of regional, decentralized cities eventually capable of replacing major industrial cities. While all three greenbelt towns allowed for free allotment gardens, Greenbelt's land

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<sup>110</sup> Conkin, 320.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

was not amenable to farming,<sup>112</sup> which hindered the town's economy from integrating urban and rural economics.

Greenbelt was decentralized, and self-sufficient in rhetoric, but not economically self-supporting. While Greenbelt's administrators spoke of it as a community, according to William Form, who conducted a study of Greenbelt's social stratification in 1945, Greenbelt had the same sociological characteristics typical of a suburb.<sup>113</sup> In the end, the Suburban Resettlement Division of the RA lived up to its title. Greenbelt and the other greenbelt towns "were essentially bedroom communities, government sponsored suburban developments."<sup>114</sup>

## **Conclusion**

One member of the RPAA whose technocratic fervor rivaled Tugwell's was Stuart Chase. Chase's 1932 article "A New Deal for America," not only coined the phrase "New Deal," but also prescribed a rough outline of what was to become the Resettlement Administration's greenbelt town program. Like Tugwell, Chase "wanted a technocratic utopia of rational order and efficiency"<sup>115</sup> in which an elite of scientific managers would succeed business managers in their determination of the economy. Chase specifically suggested that the government develop "a massive program to rehouse the American population in planned communities like Radburn, employing hundreds of thousands in

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<sup>112</sup> Christensen, 86

<sup>113</sup> Form, William H. "Status Stratification in a Planned Community." *American Sociological Review* 10, no. 5 (October 1945): 605-13. JSTOR.

<sup>114</sup> Orvell, 177

<sup>115</sup> Spann, 172.

construction...”<sup>116</sup> While other members of the RPAA did not share his vision, Chase advised the RA in 1935 and found an ally in Tugwell. Chase was a loyal believer of Tugwell’s school of collectivism, government interference, centralization of economic control, and social planning.<sup>117</sup>

While designers took control of the image of Greenbelt, Tugwell’s social management compromised the success of the town. The town’s competing objectives—and funding basis—of creating employment for unskilled laborers meant that the town became prohibitively expensive for low-income, and especially industrial, workers. Tugwell and institutionalist economists were motivated by social welfare concerns yet authoritarian in their practices; they “made a high art of the new liberal determination to work out from the world as it is.”<sup>118</sup> However, Tugwell’s pragmatic experiment became an ironic failure in which the workers the RA hired to construct the town, after its completion, were too poor to be eligible for the subsidy meant to assist poor urban workers.<sup>119</sup>

It became a testament to the power of a technocratic centralized government’s to become “blind to what cannot be measured.”<sup>120</sup> Tugwell’s overreliance on quantitative measurement in the site selection process, which he commissioned economist Warren Vinton to complete, and his emphasis on social

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>118</sup> Ross, 413.

<sup>119</sup> Christensen, 82.

<sup>120</sup> Ross, 476

management allowed him to neglect “the institutional and cultural contexts in which they must work—”<sup>121</sup> the long-term viability of the project as a whole.

Tugwell sought a new economy that would act as an ethical instrument of progress<sup>122</sup> and allow Americans to live well at a low cost, yet, his dilemma was “to determine, as a politician, just how much change...the American people would accept.”<sup>123</sup> While he spent his career contemplating how to reconcile human nature with a social economy, Tugwell was unable to prove that the centralized government could become a leading force to achieve it. His ideology became an example of the precarity of the state involvement in total community building while slum clearance continued. However, Greenbelt and the other greenbelt towns have contributed to the American search to define the perfect form of community life, which, in the twentieth century, took the privileged that could leave out of the city and into the suburbs.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G. "Human Nature and Social Economy I." *The Journal of Philosophy* vol. 27, no. 17 (August 14, 1930): 449-57.

<sup>123</sup> Sternsher, Bernard. "Tugwell's Appraisal of F.D.R." *The Western Political Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (March 1962): 77.

<sup>124</sup> Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

## II

### Greenbrook, New Jersey: The Town That Was Never Built

The greenbelt towns, John Lansill wrote, “Are a return to the first American way of life.”<sup>125</sup> In 1954, George Warner declared the greenbelt towns America’s foremost democratic communities, for they “inspire and motivate all who share the belief that democracy is preserved only to the extent that we practice it in our daily lives.”<sup>126</sup> Lansill, the Director of the Suburban Resettlement Division of the Resettlement Administration, lauded the greenbelt towns for allowing communities a measure of self-government, renewing the communitarian ideal of colonial New England towns. In his view, the renewed the greenbelt towns—model communities—offered a solution to the rapid urbanization and rural decline that began as a result of the American Industrial Revolution and were brought back to public attention by the 1929 Stock Market Crash and the Great Depression. The greenbelt towns, Lansill argued, would not suffer from blight, dislocation of values, haphazard growth, or dangerous speculative activity.<sup>127</sup> Lansill and the other RA officials fervently believed if the greenbelt model were embraced by the housing industry, American life would be

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<sup>125</sup> Lansill, John S. Introduction. *In Greenbelt: The Cooperative Community; an Experience in Democratic Living.*, by George A. Warner, 13-22. New York: Exposition Press, 1954, 20.

<sup>126</sup> Warner, 8.

<sup>127</sup> Lansill, 20.

redeemed: “the smoke and grime and disease of blight and slums must give way to sunlight, health, and safety.”<sup>128</sup>

Lansill and others’ assertion of Greenbelt’s Americanness and democratic ethos had, however, did not extend to the process of their implementation. As I showed in Chapter 1, the creation of a “democratic” community in Greenbelt, was achieved through the means of social engineering and establishing homogeneity within the town. The example of Greenbrook, New Jersey, the greenbelt town that was planned but never built, shows how the greenbelt towns’ promise of democratic engagement hung tenuously on the preservation of its elite bureaucratic planners’ vision; Lansill warned that Greenbelt would only be a democratic utopia so long as “the plans and the ideology of the greenbelt planners are eternally safeguarded.”<sup>129</sup> And yet, a cornerstone of American democracy, the federal court system, was a decisive factor in ensuring that the greenbelt towns did not become the model for American housing development.

Only three Greenbelt towns were completed: Greenbelt, Maryland, Greenhills, Ohio, and Greendale, Wisconsin. Though the RA’s Suburban Resettlement Division had drawn plans and acquired land for the fourth proposed Greenbelt town, Greenbrook, New Jersey, the project never broke ground. The local citizens of Franklin Township did not want to foot the bill for a federal experiment that uplifted the poor at their detriment. Fearing the prospect of a migration of low-income residents into their rural community

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>129</sup> Lansill, 20.

would depress their property values and result in a rise in municipal taxes, area residents launched a legal challenge against the project, *Franklin Township v. Tugwell*, which ultimately resulted in a three-to-two decision by U.S. Court of Appeals validating the residents' disapproval.<sup>130</sup> Not only did the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia stop the construction of Greenbrook, they declared the project and the foundations of New Deal public works programs unconstitutional. *Franklin Township v. Tugwell* concerned three major constitutional issues: delegation of legislative power to the President, infringement of states' rights, and the misappropriation of national emergency relief through the Welfare Clause.<sup>131</sup>

On May 1, 1935, Roosevelt's created the Resettlement Administration by executive order, and only a year later, the May 18, 1936 *Franklin Township* ruling brought the greenbelt town program to a close. The Township residents' challenge to Greenbrook and Tugwell's authority in the RA exposed the legal vulnerability of the program. In addition to their usurpation of states' rights, the greenbelt towns faced formidable challenges from real estate developers. According to Daniel Schaffer, Greenbrook's fate exposed how the Suburban Resettlement Division's "nonspeculative, comprehensive approach to land use...violated the sacred principles of American real estate development, one of the nation's strongest bastions of private enterprise and local control."<sup>132</sup> Lacking a constitutional source of funding and implementation scheme, the greenbelt

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<sup>130</sup> Arnold, 72.

<sup>131</sup> *Franklin Township v. Tugwell*, 85 F (App., D.C.) 208 (1936).

<sup>132</sup> Schaffer, Daniel. "Resettling Industrial America." *Urbanism Past & Present* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 22.



towns could not become institutionalized by the federal government or replicated by the private sector. *Franklin Township v. Tugwell* illustrates of the type of backlash Tugwell, the greenbelt towns, and the New Deal as a whole received, and how this backlash became formative in defining the role for the federal government in housing. Partially as a result of Greenbrook and other New Deal legal challenges, the federal government turned to municipal governments. As Joseph Arnold stated, “The story of Greenbrook reveals a small, but highly instructive, episode in the history of the New Deal and in the development of public attitudes toward a host of political, social, and economic questions connected with the government’s housing program.”<sup>133</sup>

### **The New Deal in the Courts**

In the *Franklin Township v. Tugwell* decision, Van Orsdel relied on three recent Supreme Court cases spawned by New Deal programs: The Panama Case and the Schechter Case, which debated the constitutionality of the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act, and the Butler Case, which declared the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act unconstitutional. the U.S. Court of Appeals rejection of the use of emergency relief funding was not surprising given the constant conflict between multiple New Deal programs, such as the NRA and the AAA, and the Supreme Court during Roosevelt’s first term.

#### *Federal agents and the taxpayers’ interest*

In the majority opinion for *Franklin Township v. Tugwell*, Associate Justice Josiah Van Orsdel rejected defendants’ argument that by suing federal

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<sup>133</sup> Arnold, 61.

administrators, the plaintiffs were effectively suing the United States, “which had not consented to be sued.”<sup>134</sup> “We are not impressed with by this contention,”

Van Orsdel wrote.

The action here is one to restrain agents of the United States from performing allegedly illegal acts. The authority of the agents to do the things of which complaint is made is challenged. That such a suit is not one against the United States, but against the officials who are threatening performance of such illegal acts, is well settled.<sup>135</sup>

Van Orsdel went on to use the Stimson Case as a precedent for distinguishing government agents from the government, citing “The suit rests upon the charge of abuse of power...; it is not a suit against the United States.”<sup>136</sup>

The court’s citation of the Stimson Case underscored that the “threatening” agent was not the United States but its administrators whom illegally used federal power. Tugwell, Lansill, and Morthengau were liable for their abuses of power and thus constituted individual defendants.

Furthermore, the court affirmed the right of the taxpayer to challenge a municipality’s creation of debt or increase in the tax burden.<sup>137</sup> Though in the Greenbrook case the taxpayers were not threatened directly by the Township municipality but by the RA, an outside agency, the court concluded that the “injury to the citizen is the same, and the right to prevent the injury should be the same.”<sup>138</sup> Given that Franklin Township only had a population of 6,500, and that the majority of the Township’s tax revenue came from real estate, the court

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<sup>134</sup> *Franklin Township v. Tugwell*, 85 F (App., D.C.) 208 (1936).

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

concluded that the construction of Greenbrook and the 750 families it would immediately introduce to the community would result in a loss of one-fourth of the taxable real estate area. With Greenbrook's projected population growth, the court concluded, the Township would ultimately lose three-fifths in area of its taxable real estate and approximately three-fifths of the value of its taxable real estate.<sup>139</sup>

Not only would the construction of Greenbrook fragment and incorporate land held by Franklin Township, but its population would also impose additional municipal duties on the Township, such as providing increased health, police, and fire protection, road maintenance, and educational facilities.<sup>140</sup> Because the Township would simultaneously lose taxable property while gaining municipal responsibilities, and the taxpayers faced the consequences of the Township's municipal indebtedness, the court ratified that the plaintiffs had justiciable interest of both the Township, as a corporation, and individual residents, as taxpayers, to challenge Tugwell, Lansill, and Morgenthau as agents of the United States.

However, not all plaintiffs' legal claims were justified by the municipal taxpayer's interest. Van Orsdel distinguished the legitimacy of plaintiffs' legal concerns individually. The court did not grant justiciable interest to plaintiff Margaret Alsop's claim that Greenbrook's intrusion of low rental housing in would depress the values of her rental property.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

In *Franklin Township v. Tugwell*, The U.S. Court of Appeals denied that the Resettlement Administration had the authority to build Greenbrook because its source of funding, the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935, was unconstitutional. The ERAA's passage awarded President Roosevelt the discretion to allocate four billion dollars to various forms of public works in order to alleviate unemployment. The ERAA, which created the Public Works Administration (PWA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) funded an array of projects including highways, rural rehabilitation, water conservation, rural electrification, housing, the Civilian Conservation Corps, loans and grants for state projects, sanitation, reforestation and environmental remediation.<sup>142</sup> The ERAA included a provision to allow the President to acquire land for projects through eminent domain. Believing the ERAA of 1935 to be a "valid and lawful exercise of legislative power,"<sup>143</sup> Tugwell, Lansill, and Morgenthau urged the court to dismiss the constitutional questions. However, the court argued that these questions could not be dismissed, finding the RA's existence, established by the ERAA of 1935 and Executive Orders 7027 and 7200, tantamount to an unconstitutional delegation of legislative power. "The most stupendous single appropriation ever made by a legislative body,"<sup>144</sup> the ERAA appropriated \$4,880,000,000 for public works projects, with the single budgetary restriction that the President could not increase any of the funding for individual relief

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

projects by more than 20 percent.<sup>145</sup> (needs transition) Executive Order 7027 established the RA, and 7200 prescribed the RA's functions:

To administer approved projects involving rural rehabilitation, relief in stricken agricultural areas, and resettlement of destitute or low-income families from rural and urban areas, including the establishment, maintenance, and operation, in such connection, of communities in rural and suburban areas.<sup>146</sup>

Based on the Panama and Schechter cases, which declared the National Industrial Recovery Act an unconstitutional delegation of legislative power, the Court concurred that the ERAA, was unconstitutional by the same logic. In judging the NIRA, the Supreme Court in the Panama decision developed a "three-fold test" which judged whether the law delegated legislative power: "Whether Congress has declared a policy with respect to the subject; whether Congress has set up a standard for the President's action; whether Congress has required any finding by the President in the exercise of the authority conferred."<sup>147</sup> By, this standard, the U.S. Court of Appeals concluded that the ERAA's dearth of funding restrictions or program regulations made it unconstitutional.<sup>148</sup> Just as Felix Bruner had written in "Utopia Unlimited," the U.S. Court of Appeals confirmed: Tugwell had an inordinate amount of power, and flexibility in both budget and the type of relief program the RA could administer. Van Orsdel concurred with the Schechter decision, repeating Supreme Court Justice's wary pronouncement:

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

“This is delegation running riot.”<sup>149</sup> None of the ERAA’s provisions, Van Orsdel concluded, justified the executive branch’s involvement in housing.<sup>150</sup>

Outside of these restrictions, if they may be called such, the President is free to inaugurate any conceivable kind of housing project. His discretion, in the language of the Schechter decision, is ‘virtually unfettered.’ He is at liberty to set up agencies and prescribe such rules of conduct and fix such standards as he may deem proper.<sup>151</sup>

The only phrase the Court could identify that even suggested the possibility for the administrative agencies to conduct housing projects was “useful projects,”<sup>152</sup> which he argued was even more vague and had less legal grounding than the NIRA.

Van Orsdel’s majority opinion did not attempt to conceal his disbelief and disdain for what he intuited as the massive expansion of Presidential power in the housing field. “It logically follows,” he wrote, “that the President, not the Congress, is to decide where and when and how, if at all, this enormous sum of money is to be expended for ‘housing.’”<sup>153</sup> Van Orsdel emphasized that the Resettlement Administration did not legally equate to a Housing Administration, and that “resettlement” as a goal was distinct from creating model communities.<sup>154</sup> In addition, Van Orsdel’s decision engaged in fear mongering, entertaining the possibility that given the ERAA’s free reign, “if the President were so disposed, he could use the entire sum appropriated in building houses

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

exclusively for our coloured population.”<sup>155</sup> Though Van Orsdel also suggested that that the President could just as easily “exclude that portion of the population from any benefits whatsoever,” the implication of Van Orsdel’s suggestion is that the use of executive authority, if unchecked, could become a tool to radically reshape the country against the wishes of mainstream Americans.

The court found that both the President and Congress had transgressed their constitutional roles, but States’ rights posed the major legal challenge to the ERAA. However, despite Van Orsdel’s ominous warning of an overly powerful executive, he argued that this was “merely incidental”<sup>156</sup> to a larger issue: “Congress’s assertion of a power which it does not possess.”<sup>157</sup> Had Congress or Tugwell directly established the Resettlement Administration rather than through executive order, Van Orsdel argued, they would still be acting without legal authority.<sup>158</sup> According to Van Orsdel, the fundamental question, was whether or not Congress had the authority to create the Resettlement Administration. Citing the Butler Case that declared the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act unconstitutional, the court found that in addition to providing the President with legislative authority, the ERAA lacked the right to regulate the industries in which it intervened.<sup>159</sup> Given that the Constitution never explicitly

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

delegated the power to intervene in housing to Congress,<sup>160</sup> it had no right to regulate housing, or resettle low-income Americans.

While Van Orsdel acknowledged that Congress had the power to tax and spend for the general welfare without interfering with states' rights, he denied that the emergency of the Great Depression justified Congress's the power to tax for purposes "exclusively within the reserved powers of the states."<sup>161</sup> The RA projected a the national issue of economic depression onto local particulars, and thus had no grounds to under the general welfare clause. Van Orsdel and the court concurred that with the proposal to build Greenbrook as a model community in New Jersey, the RA had inappropriately directed its energies to "matters of local concern" and disrupted "the federal balance established by the Constitution between the general government and the States."<sup>162</sup>

### **Public Relations**

In contrast to the brusque tone of Van Orsdel's majority opinion, the Suburban Resettlement Division's internal memos show that the public relations campaign started in response to the first injunction was wildly successful. While the Franklin Township Committee went on record opposing Greenbrook on October 29, 1935, by March 3, 1936, the Township Committee officially withdrew from their lawsuit against Greenbrook.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Lansill papers, Outline for Project Book, Background History, Attitudes Toward the Project



While Greenbrook may represent the rejection of the RA's ideological fervor, scholars such as Arnold and Morris Fine argue that the case of Greenbrook was a failure of public relations. The Suburban Resettlement Division, as per usual, conducted the land acquisition process secretly so as not to arouse local controversy. This secrecy had major consequences for Greenbrook. Planners wanted to acquire land quietly, Franklin Township residents grew suspicious. After the Franklin Township residents filed their first injunction against the Resettlement Administration, RA officials swept into the town and embarked on a massive public relations campaign, assuring residents that Greenbrook would be a boon to the amenities of the area. While the RA managed to convince many Franklin Township residents to reconsider their initial aversion to the idea, ultimately, private landholders remained wary of what they perceived as the threat of a large government land grab, and proceeded to take the issue to the court, filing a personal injunction against Tugwell.

### **The Shift to Municipalities**

In 1935, the Supreme Court had declared the Public Works Administration land acquisition through eminent domain had been declared unconstitutional and set a murky legal terrain for the RA. In the mid thirties, the United States still had not clear definition of what the federal rule in public housing was to be, and thus the New Deal programs that attempted to fund public housing had to address the issue circuitously, under the auspices of unemployment relief. It was not until 1937 when the Supreme Court would

begin to ratify New Deal housing programs and Congress would create a legal pathway to allow for federal funding of public housing. Facing a public relations crises because of Roosevelt's years of agitating and his 1936 re-election, which as interpreted to be the people's mandate, the Supreme Court reversed their conservatism of the First New Deal. However, by that point, Tugwell had already resigned, because of his radical stigma was thought to compromise Roosevelt's reelection and because of the political damage of the Greenbrook defeat, not only to the greenbelt town program and the RA but to the entirety of the New Deal program. After Tugwell's resignation, the RA notably reorganized under the new title of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), and no more greenbelt towns were proposed. In 1937, the United States Housing Act or the Wagner-Steagall Act created a role for the federal government to create public housing through slum clearance, which Tugwell had tried to deter public housing from with the greenbelt towns, which sought inexpensive undeveloped land.

## **Conclusion**

The US Court of Appeals decision in *Franklin Township v. Tugwell* legally only blocked the construction of Greenbrook; construction at Greenbelt, Greendale, and Greenhill was allowed to continue. In order to save the program, Tugwell did not appeal the decision, fearing that a Supreme Court decision would not result in the program's favor. The failure of Greenbrook is emblematic of the failure of the program and the controversial nature of Tugwell in the New Deal. Greenbrook and the greenbelt town program were doomed because of the discourse of states rights, the lack of a legal precedent for a federal housing

program, and Tugwell's insistence on the program, which reflected his disdain for central democratic process and transparency and his lifelong quest to enact experimental planning in a superpolitical sphere.

### III

#### **New York, New York: In Search of a Regional Plan and a Superpolitical Sphere**

On August 2, 1941, Tugwell wrote in his diary “I must say, there is no outcry at my leaving New York.”<sup>164</sup> Just as Tugwell resigned from the Resettlement Administration in 1936 on the heels of Roosevelt’s reelection campaign, once again, his stubborn planning vision failed to capture the hearts and minds of the public. Tugwell had spent the past three years as Chairman of the New York City Planning Commission, drafting a master plan that aimed to reorder the city by tripling the acreage of open land. Drawing from his premonition that open space was a necessary respite from dense and chaotic urban life, Tugwell envisioned for the New York City regional plan a Greenbelt-like transformation from its current land holdings to one-third open space by 1990, and in the process alienated key constituents: elected city officials, who held veto power over the commission, and business leaders. Robert Moses, the Parks Commissioner who had turned down Mayor LaGuardia’s offer to be Chairman of the fledgling city planning commission, derisively labeled the master plan’s five pages of text and three maps as “water color planning.”<sup>165</sup>

Though Tugwell scoffed at the suggestion of hiring “utopian” planners for the Greenbelt towns in 1935, preferring to entrust the duty to engineers, the

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<sup>164</sup> Tugwell diary

<sup>165</sup> Gelfand, Mark I. "Rexford G. Tugwell and the Frustration of Planning in New York City." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 51, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 151-60.

scant specifics of his regional plan betrayed a utopian impulse behind his goal of elevating planning to a semi-autonomous “Fourth Power,” of government.<sup>166</sup> The commission report stated that their master plan was “influenced but not bound by the fixity of existing uses and present legal and financial limitations.”<sup>167</sup> There was a statement of vision but virtually no explanation as to how the newly formed New York City Housing Commission would oversee this massive transfer of land holdings, or how the city would recuperate a loss from a tax funds in a shift towards one-third city owned, non-commercial, non-residential space, besides the hope that the planning commission would gain the power to will the plan to action.

In 1940, Tugwell wrote in his diary that the future would no longer “simply happen,” but would be “created.”<sup>168</sup> While his own planning initiatives consistently proved difficult to enact, Tugwell maintained that it was the job of the planner to succeed “beyond the sphere of what politicians consider possible.”<sup>169</sup> Firmly grounded in the social sciences and his academic background in economics, Tugwell believed that his expertise legitimized the bold plan as not utopian but based in fact, and yet, he was undeniably utopian in the sense that he refused to reconcile the contradiction between his vision of a

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<sup>166</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G.. "The Fourth Power." *Planning and Civic Comment* 5, no. 2 (April 1939): 1-31.

<sup>167</sup> As quoted in Gelfand, 151.

<sup>168</sup> Tugwell Diary, 30 December 1940

<sup>169</sup> Gelfand, 152.

planned economy operating amidst the dominance of private enterprise and the profit motive.<sup>170</sup>

### **The New York City Planning Commission**

Tugwell's career extends beyond his ill-fated experiment in new town planning with the Greenbelt town program and the Resettlement Administration, and follows the trajectory of planning career that that took him to the newly formed New York City Planning Commission in 1938, where he continued to push for decentralization of urban populations, expansion of green space and greenbelts and other forms of open space, and, most importantly, a permanent role for bureaucratic expertise in planning the built environment, economy, and thus, nation.

The failure of the Greenbelt town program and the 1937 Wagner Steagall Act marked the shift in federal involvement in housing from total authority to funder. The act allowed municipalities to organized city planning commissions that could request funding from the federal government. As the New Deal programs clashed with the conservative Supreme Court, the scene of the planner had moved from the federal government to city government. Tugwell's legacy with the Greenbelt town program failed to materialize a federal new town program, and so the New York City Planning Commission, one of the first experiments of its kind, offered Tugwell a new theater to argue for the enhanced role of the planner in American government.

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

Similar to his desire to establish a role for planning in executive branch during his tenure at the Resettlement Administration, as the City Planning Commissioner, Tugwell attempted to closely align himself with Mayor LaGuardia and the city's executive branch. Just as Tugwell had expounded his energies on cultivating a close personal relationship with Roosevelt, Tugwell met with LaGuardia frequently in order to. Since the Wagner Steagall Act had shifted the scene of planners' power to cities, Tugwell wanted to use his influence as Commissioner in New York to become the model for future planning commissions in other American cities. In a talk given at the Annual Meeting of the American Institute of Planners held in New York in 1940, Tugwell urged his city planner colleagues to align themselves with the executive:

Cities have slavishly followed in their organization the division of power in the federal setup into three branches—legislative, executive, and judicial. This may not be the best type of municipal organization. In New York City, the relationships of the planning department are strongest with the executive.<sup>171</sup>

While Tugwell was denied the freedom to make model communities in the RA, Tugwell hoped that with the City Planning Commission, he would be given more authority and creative freedom to orchestrate the citywide Master Plan. Though eventually Tugwell became frustrated with his lack of ability to pass his Master Plan, he was initially optimistic that city planning agencies would become major actors in planning the United States.

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<sup>171</sup> Tugwell, Rexford G.. "Planning in New York City." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 6, no. 2 (1940): 33-34. Accessed February 16, 2013. JSTOR.

Writing in his diary on November 14, 1940, Tugwell recalled his conversation with LaGuardia: "I said I felt the Planning agency in this government to be the most advanced governmental device in this country and that I would do anything to furthering it."<sup>172</sup>

### **Planning and the Rise of Illiberal Orders**

Though the popular press and conservative members of Congress viewed Tugwell as one of the most radical New Deal administrators,<sup>173</sup> Tugwell's views on economic planning enjoyed widespread support in the post depression moment. As John Jordan notes in *Machine-age Ideology*, by 1933, most Americans had come to accept the necessity of making economic plans, and had weaned from the predominant laissez faire ethos of the federal government in the 1920s.<sup>174</sup> Tugwell's notoriety partially arose because of his willingness to be a whipping boy to debut Roosevelt's more radical ideas; for example, even after Tugwell left the New Deal in 1936, Roosevelt wrote to him to stoke the idea for reforming the Supreme Court—his "court-packing scheme," as it came to be

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<sup>172</sup> Tugwell Diary, 14 Nov 1940.

<sup>173</sup> "Those who spoke for the [art] programmes may thus stand as equivalents to the Brains Trust of Rexford Tugwell, as individuals whose thinking was far to the left of Roosevelt's own and of the majority of those whom he appointed to office. Such weavers were increasingly marginalized (or resigned, as in Tugwell's case) as the 'social Keynesianism' of the early New Dealers gave way to the 'commercial Keynesianism' of the 1940s, but they had played an important role in formulating one strand in New Deal ideology." Hemingway, Andrew. "Cultural Democracy by Default: The Politics of the New Deal Arts Programme." *Oxford Art Journal*, February 2007, 272.

<sup>174</sup> Jordan, John M. *Machine-age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism, 1911-1939*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994, 232.



known—that ultimately failed.<sup>175</sup> That Tugwell was outspoken about reforming the *lassiez faire* system in order to preserve democracy, albeit while attempting to reorient it away from private property, was not a major departure from the views of many Americans during this time.<sup>176</sup>

Within the national call for a more planned economy, the 1930s were marked by a debate over whether planning would take shape through business-oriented processes or the efforts of an activist government.<sup>177</sup> Towards the end of the 1930s, Americans' growing anxiety over the rise of totalitarian governments of the Right and Left abroad, and the outbreak of World War II, increasingly inflected the debate on what shape planning was to take in American society. As Ira Katznelson notes in *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, "Parliamentary democracies were widely thought to be weak and incapable when compared to the assertive energies of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, imperial Japan, and the Communist USSR."<sup>178</sup> Benito Mussolini touted the vibrancy and freshness of his political experiments, writing in 1932 "all the political experiments of our day are antiliberal," which included an ominous premonition: "The liberal state is destined to perish."<sup>179</sup>

While attempting to save liberal democracy, the American government made illiberal alliances during the New Deal before the United States entered

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<sup>175</sup> Roosevelt PPF, Aug 12 1937: "Don't hint in any way that I have written you this but I wish you would use it as a trial balloon of your own."

<sup>176</sup> Jordan, 232.

<sup>177</sup> Jordan, 233.

<sup>178</sup> Katznelson, Ira. *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013, 12.

<sup>179</sup> As quoted in Katznelson, 5.

World War II. The United States attempted to maintain a friendly relationship with Fascist Italy despite its brutality towards its own citizens and Ethiopians partially because they were keen to pick up some administrative lessons, particularly those about “how to find a way out of economic collapse and modernize the federal government.”<sup>180</sup> Tugwell, who had taken a trip to the USSR in 1927 with Stuart Chase for similar reasons, was interested in those experiments.

### **Tugwell Looks Abroad**

Tugwell’s valorization of the independence of city planning commissions paralleled directly related to his tendency to identify with the illiberal orders abroad. Writing in his diary in 1940 while commissioner of the City Planning Commission of New York City, Tugwell expressed admiration for the organizational abilities and discipline of both Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Though Tugwell wrote about the politics of the City Planning Commission in his diary, these years were also consumed by Tugwell’s thoughts on the relationship between democracy and dictatorship and desire to eventually return to the federal government, where he hoped to be placed in a “conjunctural” role, which he never clearly explained but can be best described as a role that embodies the visionary or goal-setting function the executive branch with ample autonomous authority; in other words, the role he had sought as RA administrator that had

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<sup>180</sup> Katznelson, 17.

ultimately elided him due to the crackdown of Greenbrook in *Franklin Township v. Tugwell* by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia.

Tugwell's praise of totalitarian regimes in his diary, while striking and at times disturbing, conforms to Katznelson's assertion that the New Deal years were marked by bleak uncertainty about the future of democracy, even as its collective inheritance secured liberal democracy. On February 6, 1940, when Roosevelt asked Tugwell for advice on "how [Tugwell] thought the country could be brought to the realization that the Allies may well lose this war," Tugwell wrote, "With my feelings in the matter I could give him no encouragement. I told him that I—and I felt many Americans—distrust Chamberlain and Daladier as much as they do Hitler and Stalin."<sup>181</sup> Tugwell was ultimately skeptical of "Western business democracies" and applauded Germany's ability to create to a narrative or vision of national purpose that was beyond a faith in capitalistic markets. On July 8, 1940, Tugwell reflected on the national depression following the fall of France to Germany. For Tugwell, the fall of France "ruthlessly exposed" her "inner rottenness."

For [the French] have been rushed into a totalitarian government quite easily, showing how little there was to 'democratic' pretensions before. And Britain, many of our people will feel sure, is little different...The forces which made Germany Nazi are having their affect everywhere. No one here wants to give up democracy, but there are many who feel it has terrible weaknesses.<sup>182</sup>

For Tugwell, the fall of France confirmed his belief in the weakness of "Western business regimes." The weakness of democracy in this form—which he

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<sup>181</sup> Tugwell Diary, 6 Feb 1940.

<sup>182</sup> Tugwell Diary, 8 July 1940.

believed brought France to its fate and would likely yield the same result in Great Britain—is that its emphasis on selfish profit seeking fails “to create worthwhile objectives and to achieve any national discipline.”<sup>183</sup> England, like France, Tugwell wrote, would not “resist the power of German disciplined technique.”<sup>184</sup>

When Tugwell encountered backlash from the Committee of the Council for his Master Plan’s increasing commercial zoning regulations, he believed that they had been pressured to challenge him by the Real Estate Board, who had spoken out against the proposed changes. For Tugwell, this indicated that the Committee of Council was corrupt. “The Council, as usual, was eager to respond [to the zoning amendment],” he wrote in his diary on July 30, 1940. “They can be counted on to do their best to prove that Hitler is right: that legislatures are corrupt, always anxious to be subservient to any special interest, always ready to act against the public interest.”<sup>185</sup> Throughout his career in politics, Tugwell conflated legislators with corruption, and the executives with honesty. Just as he attacked members of Congress for their blind adherence to laissez faire economics and creating an economic system that caused the Great Depression, Tugwell saw the Council as stalwart and protecting vested interest. Tugwell desired executive authority in his positions in the government, whether federal or municipal, because he thought it was the surest way to escape corruption and forge a direct connection with the public good. Tugwell trusted that planning

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Tugwell Diary, 30 July 1940.

professionals and experts like himself should take the lead role in the directing the government.

When Tugwell's Master Plan was defeated, he abdicated his post to become the Governor of Puerto Rico, where he believed he would have more freedom to conduct experiments in planning.<sup>186</sup> According to Jordan, this was the inevitable outcome of Tugwell's desire to work in a government unimpeded by "the responsibilities of checks and balances."

By his own experience, though, Rexford Tugwell could never escape the responsibilities and challenges of disagreement and compromise: for him, as the other social engineers, there was no 'superpolitical' place to escape the illogic of politics.<sup>187</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The role of the federal government in urban planning came into sharp definition during the 1930s. Largely as a result of the failed federal interventions into urban planning in the New Deal, federal planning authority transferred to the municipalities. Thus, the American planning tradition was not only influenced by the New Deal but also bred under the outbreak of World War II.

The history of American planning is often cast as an internal story that conforms to American prejudices and what is politically possible. Just as Katznelson aims to examine "the ways in which illiberal political orders, both within and outside the United States, influenced key New Deal decisions,"<sup>188</sup> the examples of totalitarian governments which influenced New Deal administrators

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<sup>186</sup> Tugwell Diary, 29 Jan 1941

<sup>187</sup> Jordan, 251

<sup>188</sup> Katznelson, 7.

like Tugwell ultimately left a legacy beyond the scope of New Deal programs and into the American urban planning tradition.

## Conclusion

Their ideal cities, they knew, could never be constructed all at once. But at least a 'working model' could be begun, even in the midst of an old society. This model would demonstrate both the superiority of their architectural principles and also serve as a symbol of the new society about to be born. Its success would inspire emulation. A movement of reconstruction would take on momentum and become a revolutionary force in itself. Rebuilding the cities could thus become, in a metaphor all three favored, the "Master Key" that would unlock the way to a just society.<sup>189</sup>

-Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier* (1982)

### "New Deal Utopias"

In 2009, Chicago-based photographer Jason Reblando embarked on a road trip to visit the three greenbelt towns. Reblando, who started his career by photographing portraits of American public housing, sought to capture what he called "New Deal Utopias." Upon his arrivals, Reblando was consistently surprised to find the towns largely intact, even thriving. Greenbelt was on the eve of celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary. His interactions with town residents left him impressed with their sense of place in history. "The residents were very interested in their New Deal legacy," he told Lens, *The New York Times* photojournalism blog, "and they were very keyed in on preserving that legacy."<sup>190</sup>

Some of Reblando's photos could easily be mistaken for photos taken in the 1930s. In Greenbelt, a clothesline strung between tree canopies in a

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<sup>189</sup> Fishman, 19.

<sup>190</sup>Gonzalez, David. "New Deal Utopias." *The New York Times Lens Blog* (web log), March 5, 2012. <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/05/new-deal-utopias/>.

landscaped front yard droops with the weight of neutral toned shirts and pants. Others photos reveal the towns' age. A motorway in Greenbelt gracefully floats atop an underpass, as if celebrating engineering's potential to choreograph both a modern and a pastoral experience, balancing the pedestrian and the automobile driver's views of the world. While contemporary American suburbs are more commonly associated with sprawl, monotony, and big box stores than nature, Reblando's photos offer the viewer a glimpse into a time when suburbs offered residents a connection to their surroundings.

As evidenced by Reblando's original pursuit of "New Deal Utopias," the greenbelt towns are historical monuments that invite the public to explore the recent American past. Reblando's immersion in the towns and interactions with their residents, however, complicates a completely periodized view of the greenbelt towns as New Deal artifacts. Just as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, a work of technological utopianism, comments on late-nineteenth century American society but endures because it satisfies the timeless, impossible quest for utopia, the greenbelt towns' existence in 2013 testifies to the crucial role of adversarial thought in American life and the visions of change it provides us with.



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