

# Village Green

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Graduate Research Scholar 2003-2004

Village Green, formally known as the Baldwin Hills Village was conceived and designed as a utopian response to the current social, economical and philosophical movements prior to the time it was planned.<sup>1</sup> It was designed by five architects, Reginald Johnson, Lewis Wilson, Edwin Merrill, Robert Alexander and consulting architect, Clarence Stein. The intent of Reginald Johnson was to create a new kind of residential community and to provide affordable housing which was made possible by using government financing through the Federal Housing Administration. The ideas or theories that took form was a successful cohesion of site planning, architecture, and landscape architecture in which the creators of Village Green, took many different issues that needed to be addressed at the time and successfully managed to create one of the few models of urban planning that was ahead of it's time.

There were three events that took place in American history that created serious issues that need to be addressed: the American Industrial Revolution; the Great Depression; and the Garden City Movement.<sup>2</sup> The American Industrial Revolution, during the late 1800's and early 1900's, was a major turning point in American history that changed the way people lived. The events of the Great Depression prompted Franklin D. Roosevelt to create the Federal Housing Act of 1934, which was to provide adequate housing and revitalize the economy by providing jobs during the Great Depression. The Baldwin Hills Village was one of the few successful private developments that used more public funds than any other project of the time. It was constructed at a cost of \$3,312,800.00 million dollars in which \$2,600,000.00 million in mortgage loans at 4% for 28 years was provided by the FHA.<sup>3</sup> The remainder of the funds came from private investors. The design phase started in the late 1930's which took about 5 years and construction began in 1941 and completed in 1942. .

The Village Green is about 20 minutes from Downtown Los Angeles heading south west. It is located on one large 64 acre super block of mostly flat terrain, which gave the architects more freedom in designing the space to accommodate the separation of pedestrians and automobiles. It consists of 95 buildings with 629 residences in cluster of 17 cul-de-sacs or courts. All the automobile circulation is directed to the edge of the site and no streets cut through the site. Residents enter through the garage courts and there is ample parking provided for visitors along the perimeter. The front door faces small garden parks to facilitate social interactions and provide community space. Many of us have one time or another have lived in neighborhoods that were designed in a grid pattern with detached homes with its own private lot. This type of grid pattern has the front yard facing the street as opposed to the Village green in which the front door faces the small garden parks that is safe for children to play in away from the automobiles and the streets which is very dangerous. There a long concrete walkways surrounded by green lawns lined with mature olive and sycamore trees. There are long rows of buildings that provide a perimeter of the space inside which is three distinct major central parks aligned on a central west-east axis.

The Architecture is classified as a simplified version of the modern style of architecture called "robust vernacular."<sup>4</sup> The materials are reinforced concrete, stucco/wood/brick veneer. One of the beautiful aspects of Village Green was the fact that the style of architecture was simple, unassuming and it took a backseat for the overall purpose of the project which was to a tranquil and safe residential community that would facilitate a quality of life and a way of living that was ahead of its time.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, Sam Hall. "Urban Idylls: The Planned Communities of Baldwin Hills Village and Crestwood are Hardly Utopia, but They're Closer Than Most." *Los Angeles Times* 26 January 1986;

<sup>2</sup> Wong, Dorothy. NPS. National Register of Historic Places Form. *Baldwin Hills Village*. Washington D.C. 2000: 18

<sup>3</sup> Wong, Dorothy. NPS. National Register of Historic Places Form. *Baldwin Hills Village*. Washington D.C. 2000: 4

<sup>4</sup> Bauer, Catherine. "Description and Appraisal...Baldwin Hills Village." *Pencil Points* September 1944: 58-62.

Many of the ideas and theories that was the foundation of the Baldwin Hills Village at the time it was conceived were by far ahead of its time. These are ideals back then that were we consider as “normal” or as our right to have which is a safe place to live that facilitates a quality of life for us that allows us to have peace, tranquility, and an environment that allows us to have social interactions with our family, our neighbors and our community. The evolution of the utopian ideas on paper provided by Ebenezer Howard in his book, the Garden Cities of Tomorrow and how the theories takes form and creates a livable space is very much evident in the success that is apparent in Village Green.

The Baldwin Hills Village went through several years of ownership. The first was Rancho Cienega Properties, Inc. which consisted of the Anita Baldwin, the architects and various investors. It was sold in 1949 to the New England Mutual Life Insurance Company of Boston.<sup>5</sup> This company did not share the ideals behind the project and rules and policies were initiated, one of which was that no children would be allowed. Many of the aspects of the Baldwin Hills project included a nursery, school and play areas for the children. Potential residents were carefully selected based on professional background, income, ethnicity and religion. In 1973, the Baldwin Hills Village changed ownership once again to be converted to condominiums by Terramics, a real estate development company and was renamed Village Green. Village Green was now owned by its residents, which was the original intention of its creators.

Village Green has won numerous awards and they are: in 1942, the Southern California of the AIA honored it with a Distinguished Honor award; in 1945, the New York Museum of Modern Art selected it as one of the 47 outstanding examples of contemporary architecture and selected it for a traveling exhibit, which the gave Baldwin Hills Village exposure and prominence and made it nationally known. In 1972, the American Institute of Architects honored it with its Twenty-Five Year Award for and enduring significance in architectural design. In 1977, Village Green was declared a Cultural Landmark by the Cultural Heritage Board of the city of Los Angeles. In 1993, it was granted the National Register of Historic Places and in 2001, it was declared a National Historic Landmark.<sup>6</sup>

Village Green is a beautiful and wonderful place to live. There are many residents that have lived there for over 20 years. It is a space that must be experienced first hand in order to understand why it is so special. It is hard to believe that this place is so close to Downtown Los Angeles. It has been described as an urban forest in the midst of a highly populated major city, yet it was so quiet and serene with a wonderful breeze flowing through the property. Site planning, architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning that utilized all the great ideal of its time and has managed to retain is historical significance through all the changes it went though and provided a cultural landscape that has been studied and imitated that one wonders why these type of projects were not replicated over and over in many parts of the country.<sup>7</sup> The architecture; the landscape; and the space planning, all work together simultaneously to create a one of kind living environment unlike any other.

Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that the success of Village Green is tied to its unique site in Southern California in the city of Los Angeles due to the weather, the influence of the automobile on the lifestyle of the individuals.<sup>8</sup> The ideas or theories that took form with a successful cohesion of site planning, architecture, and landscape architecture in which the creators of Village Green, took many different issues that needed to be addressed at the time and successfully managed to create one of the few model of urban planning that was ahead of it's time.

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<sup>5</sup> Stein, Clarence. *Towards New Towns for America*. Chicago, Illinois: The University Press of Liverpool, 1951: 170

<sup>6</sup> Wong, Dorothy. NPS. National Register of Historic Places Form. *Baldwin Hills Village*. Washington D.C. 2000: 28

<sup>7</sup> Gallion, Arthur. *The Urban Pattern*. Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc.

<sup>8</sup> Stein, Clarence. *Towards New Towns for America*. Chicago, Illinois: The University Press of Liverpool, 1951

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