

# Inside Ford's Garden City: Social and Spatial Logics of a Hybrid Suburbanity

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## Northward Aspirations, c. 1900

Highland Park, MI at the turn of the last century was an open prospect. As farmland in the path of Detroit's northerly growth, it was developed quickly thereafter and according to multiple competing ideals. To the city's middle class it was an untouched place to build a new way of family and community life. It was a space set apart from the congestion of the city. To the industrialist Henry Ford, it offered the flexibility of abundant land well connected to rail networks. To managers and laborers across the city the village of Highland Park became a site of new industrial job opportunity. The multifaceted identity of this place recalls British Urban Theorist Ebenezer Howard's Garden City. Highland Park was understood as both a hub of social and economic opportunity and an open, healthful place close to nature.

Howard believed that the best of both conditions could be had, while ameliorating the ills of both; a thesis illustrated in his well-known Three Magnets diagram.<sup>1</sup> What I call "Ford's Garden City" at Highland Park achieves the paradox of a Town-Country not through planning or the cooperative social model Howard advocated for but in a *laissez-faire* capitalist environment animated by competing ideas.<sup>2</sup> Here suburban and urban ideals, capital and labor, city and satellite town, and social and ethnic groups are all set in tension. As a case study it suggests that the spatial and social dynamics of such a hybrid environment are more complex and fraught than the idealized Garden City vision suggests.

## Christian Citizenship

Highland Park was long connected to Detroit's center by its principal northerly avenue, Woodward. Electric traction streetcars ran city residents out to the Highland Park Club Race Track and its pastoral setting as early as 1886. Woodward also lent the social and racial prestige of the generally wealthy, Anglo-Saxon spine of Detroit to the village.<sup>3</sup> It was here in 1908 that Rev. William F. Faber founded St. Alban's Episcopal Church.



Fig. 1. St. Alban's Communicants, Early Photo

An early photograph from church records depicts an elegantly dressed group gathered proudly in an open field. (Fig. 1) The photograph suggests the middle class aspirations placed on Highland Park's open land. The village offered a *tabula rasa* on which to build a better way of life.

They grew to sixty-seven communicants by 1911, presiding over thirty baptisms, six marriages and twelve burials in that time. In the decade that followed they built a modest, sparingly adorned, single aisle church on Glendale Avenue. It was constructed with thrift in three phases to manage costs, and was described on the day that its cornerstone was laid as, "a house that stands...not for churchmanship alone, but for Christian citizenship," implying the application of Christian morality and culture to the civic life of the growing community.

The village's population grew quickly during St. Alban's early years, passing four thousand. Alban's was one of eleven Protestant churches in the area, clearly a dominant force in local culture. A local newspaper's social calendar underscores this in the many church activities advertised, such as: lecture courses, business meetings, bake sales, and the gatherings of mens', womens' and young peoples' clubs.<sup>4</sup> The early photograph was sealed along with prayer cards into the cornerstone of the church as it was laid in 1911, (Fig. 2) a traditional gesture anchoring the community to the site and suggesting faith in its longevity.



Fig. 2. Laying of the Cornerstone

The year St. Alban's was founded Henry Ford and architect Albert Kahn walked the site of the Highland Park Club Race Track to make plans for a new auto plant. Novel in its approach to manufacturing and its functionalist design, "the plant was conceived as a conduit of the productive process, a structure for organizing the flow."<sup>5</sup> The mass production of automobiles on Ford's moving assembly line quickly drew

thousands of workers to the village, introducing a working class element, spatial and social, that would challenge the ideal of Christian citizenship. As the plant's Model T came to lead in market share nationwide, local growth continued to accelerate. The population swelled beyond forty-six thousand by 1920, a record prompting the New York Times to report, "Detroit Suburbs Ahead In Census: Ford Auto Plant Boosts Population of Highland Park 1,000 Per Cent."<sup>6</sup>

### Bright Homes and Gardens

A large scale homebuilding operation commenced in the center of Highland Park as pressure for housing grew. Adjacent to Ford's plant on the former Racing Club's property two lumber operations, a builders' supply and a coal yard opened, all linked to the Grand Trunk line. Framing lumber, shingle and lathe, sash and door and pipe were all warehoused for supply to local builders.<sup>7</sup> As production at Ford's factory grew, this small and open city filled in as a patchwork of subdivisions within a gridiron of orthogonal blocks. Many of these neighborhoods outside of the village center would resemble what Howard described as "Bright Homes and Gardens," an openness to nature that would become the middle class suburban ideal.

White collar heads of households predominated in these areas, many commuting to Detroit offices. As early as 1915 auto garages became common in the village's more prestigious neighborhoods. Still a majority of Highland Park's workforce, managers and laborers, worked for Ford or at smaller auto plants in the village.<sup>8</sup> As immigrants surged to the Detroit area from southern and eastern Europe Highland Park remained remarkably homogenous as Anglo Saxon and Protestant. Even among its foreign-born population many were of English or Canadian origin.<sup>9</sup> Adjacent to the diversity of Detroit and the heavily Polish factory town of Hamtramck, Highland Park set itself apart by the prestige of its relative exclusiveness.

Many of Ford's foreign workers commuted into Highland Park. In 1914 Ford employed fourteen thousand workers in the center of Highland Park, of which seventy-one percent were foreign born. Nearly two thousand of these workers were of Polish origin, almost none of whom lived within the village itself.<sup>10</sup> Indeed in 1916, as the factory workforce continued to grow, thirteen thousand of Roman Catholic origin worked in the village,<sup>11</sup> which had only one nascent

Catholic Church yet to construct their permanent building, St. Benedict's.

Highland Heights was among the most prestigious of Highland Park neighborhoods, largely constructed between 1910 and 1915. An upwardly mobile, middle class population constructed an environment there to support their aspirations for family life and values of Christian citizenship. Its blocks were distinguished by exceptional openness to nature with broad lots and streets and generous tree cover. Residences lined these blocks uninterrupted by commercial shops. Craftsman bungalows are common in the neighborhood (Fig. 3), including exceptionally large and curious variations of the vernacular type. Other styles contemporary to the period, such as Colonial and Prairie Foursquare are prevalent. Eighty-foot street widths and sixty-foot lot fronts made these the most open and among the most desirable blocks in the village.<sup>12</sup>

These homes reflect the residential ideals of the progressive era as promoted by architects and social reformers. The bungalow expressed a preference for aesthetic simplicity, efficiency of space and use, openness to nature and a more informal family life, ideas compatible with Christian citizenship. The style rose to prominence after 1905 with its proliferation in magazines and pattern books. Prefabricated bungalow kits were available through companies such as Sears and the Michigan-based manufacturer Aladdin Homes. Highland Heights' bungalows were an alternative to both the formality of the Victorian residential ideal and of the crowded quarters of the city. The bungalow porch celebrated a more open relationship



Fig. 3. Highland Heights Bungalow

between the home and the beauty of nature, creating a healthy open-air place for the family to gather. Rather than the inflexible Victorian parlor, hall and library Highland Park's outer neighborhoods provided informal living rooms for modern parents to engage with and nurture their children.<sup>13</sup>

Between Highland Heights and the village center developed an intermediary zone of residential blocks on narrower streets and lots, dominated by the Prairie Foursquare style. Maximizing available space on two full floors, the style proved an exceptionally efficient approach to narrower sites. Hipped roofs and accentuated eave lines suggest horizontality despite the two stories, reflecting the prairie ideal of dialogue with the site. Their floor plans share the progressive values of economy, openness and flexibility with the



Fig. 4. Ford's Highland Park Plant

bungalow. Some laborers boarded in this zone, and while this was a concession to the middle class ideal, the damage was minimized by the vetting of tenants. Standards of behavior can be found in several "for-rent" ads addressed to the laboring class, "... fine large front room, steam-heated, for one or two gentlemen of refinement. Breakfast if desired." Close proximity to "Ford's" is cited as an amenity.<sup>14</sup> Beyond this intermediate zone is the center of the village, where industry and commerce mixed with crowded laborers' residences.

### The Urban Core

Highland Park's core developed as a bustling center for workers and production operating day and night. Shift change at Ford's plant saw the hurried circulation of thousands. Crowds poured off of incoming streetcars while others lined up to depart. (Fig. 4) Adjacent shops on Manchester Ave. served sandwiches to workers and auto parts to the factories from under outstretched canopies. Workers from across ethnic, racial and class lines converged in and animated the space. With this diversity and concentration of activity, the space must be described as urban, and a stark counterpoint to suburban outer Highland Park.

A 1915 survey of citywide streetcar use shows that the largest single point of unloading on the entire Woodward line was at Ford's plant, where "17.2% of the total northbound traffic alights." At shift change this created a nuisance for travelers not associated with the plant, as crowds of workers filled the trains to capacity, leading the survey to propose special cars that would skip past the congested factory stop.<sup>15</sup> The Ford Market, adjacent to the streetcar stop, carried food staples, blue work shirts and overalls, reporting sales of 2,200 loaves of bread on a Saturday.<sup>16</sup>

In the crowded zone just south of the plant (Fig. 5) the residential fabric was interspersed with a motion picture house, drugstores and other shops. Three and four-story, flat roofed residential hotels and tenements threw shadows on its low, gabled frame houses. Each structure stands close to the next as small cottages and Foursquares fill narrow twenty-five foot lots. Residences in this area were exceptionally crowded and many male immigrants and auto laborers boarded there, driving a 2.6:1 male to female ratio in the 1915 census.<sup>17</sup> Cots could be

found three and four to a room, occupied in shifts. Italian, Armenian and Irish immigrants resided here among several other nationalities. Most residents were lower-skilled workers taking advantage of the flexibility of renting and the benefits of close proximity to work.

The way of life in this zone was an affront to the middle class ideal of the closed nuclear family, and also to the industrial ideal of the workman. It was associated with excess, not thrift, and with easy movement rather than commitment to place, work and family. The company journal "Ford Times" reported that laborers were known to spend absence days shopping for better work and purchasing consumer goods frivolously, "spend[ing] their money, and more too, in the gay life," late into the evening.<sup>18</sup>

### Power and Resistance

With Ford's mass of laborers growing and the "boarding menace" taking hold in central Highland Park, a measure of control was established by the village government. A new charter was passed in 1912 which illustrated election law, official's responsibilities and property regulations such as building setbacks. Tucked in the "Miscellaneous" section, between property assessments and voting regulations are two ordinances banning "saloons for the sale of spirituous and intoxicating liquors within the corporate boundaries of this village."<sup>19</sup> This local prohibition was established six years before the State of Michigan's ban and eight years before the 18th Amendment and the Volstead Act sealed national prohibition. The movement for a dry Highland Park reflected the values championed by the middle-class Protestant majority, liberal reformers and the Ford Motor Company, all of whom stood to benefit from controls on the behavior of the laboring immigrants in their midst, those boarding near the plant and the thousands of inbound commuters. Drinking continued unabated in the saloons of Detroit and adjacent Hamtramck, but it would not be tolerated mere blocks from Highland Heights and other prestigious neighborhoods.

A 1915 map of Hamtramck Township, in a working class zone under construction just east of the Highland Park border, two saloons had already opened despite the sparseness of development there.<sup>20</sup> Free movement across municipal boundaries therefore of-





Fig. 5. Workers' Housing South of the Plant

ferred a means of resistance to this control. This "wet" zone just beyond the village would be developed as "Negro War Housing" during WWI as the northward migration of blacks further stressed the local housing market. Ford, known for his openness to hiring black workers undoubtedly employed residents of this area who were conveniently near, but beyond the rail tracks and outside of the corporate limits of Highland Park.<sup>21</sup> Beyond the tensions of maintaining early prohibition and racial and ethnic exclusivity, the village also grappled with labor unrest.

On the public street near the plant's gate a Union threat grew in March 1913. The International Workers of the World (IWW) solicited laborers as they stepped out for lunch, seeking to organize them in demand of an eight-hour workday. Following public speeches in this regard the company became fearful of the free movement of its employees on the public streets beyond its gates, leading the police to make arrests and the company to ban outside lunches.<sup>22</sup> The strictness of this response was also paired with a subtler, incentive-based measure. The eight-hour workday was implemented in 1914 as part of Ford's larger compensation overhaul dubbed "the five-dol-

lar day". This program raised laborer's wages to five dollars per day, of which roughly half was earned-pay and the other half profit sharing. This profit sharing could be withheld at the company's discretion- a powerful control over employee behavior inside and outside the plant.

Ford's Sociological Department made recommendations on profit sharing after visiting workers' homes to assess the stability of their lifestyles. Those making efforts toward a stable and healthy home, free from drinking and boarding, and who displayed thrift in the use of their pay would receive the shared profits. English language and citizenship classes were also offered to assist Highland Park's immigrants through the company and the municipal high school. Assimilation courses and the potential of profit sharing represented an invitation to middle-class American lives for many migrant and immigrant laborers; an exceptionally coercive and effective paternalism.

The exercise of municipal and corporate power on immigrant laborers illustrates the desire of powerful agents to control the social and built landscape

and thus define Highland Park by their own ideals. They sought to defend and maintain the dichotomy in Highland Park's composition; a powerful center of economic and social opportunity with an open, healthful and moral middle class character. The great contradiction in this struggle is that these agents sought to control and exploit immigrants and auto laborers even as they relied upon them to drive the powerful economy of the village, thus making its independence from Detroit possible.

### Implications for Urbanism Today

Ford's Garden City illustrates important and challenging themes within today's design discourse on "Retrofitting Suburbia," as presented in the valuable recent publication of that name.<sup>23</sup> It offers an example of two spatial and social ideals quickly growing in juxtaposition without the mediation of zoning laws or other centralized planning. These conditions lead to an urban core of exceptional density and mixed use meeting one group's needs set in tension with the suburban ideal of the surrounding middle-class village. To observe their intertwined growth renders the social and spatial logics of the place legible. The municipal boundary and the threshold between public and private space are seen to be exploited tactically both for control and in resistance. In Ford's Garden City, the potential fractiousness of metropolitan life is laid bare.

The village at once suggests the great potentials in hybrid suburbanity and also its seemingly intractable challenges. Despite income and ethnic diversity within today's suburbs, the separation of groups within and between adjacent suburbs remains a prominent condition. Zoning laws and other controls continue to bar many immigrant and low income workers from more exclusive enclaves where they may work but cannot live. Highland Park reiterates the high social stakes in advocating hybrid suburbanity. It underscores tensions inherent in the very conception of the Garden City. Density, heterogeneity and robust public space then and now threaten an evolving yet persistent middle class suburban ideal. While seeking hybridity, it suggests, design discourse must continue to cultivate a politics that defends and promotes urban diversity in the suburbs, toward an inclusive reconciliation of Town and Country.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962). p. 41-49. Originally published 1902.
- 2 On Howard's vision for social reform through cooperative ownership of the Garden City see: Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), 27-51.
- 3 Analysis of Anglo Saxon clustering on the Woodward corridor is found in Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality*, (Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 40-59.
- 4 "Laying of Cornerstone of St. Alban's Church," Highland Park Times, Friday, Nov. 3, 1911. This issue and other documentation of St. Alban's Church can be found at St. Albans Episcopal Church Records 1909-1976, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
- 5 Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art and Design in America*, (Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 63.
- 6 "Detroit Suburbs Ahead In Census," *New York Times*, May 16, 1920.
- 7 Insurance Maps of Detroit, Michigan, Volume 7, Sheet 1, 1910 and Volume 10, Sheets 75-79, 1915, Sanborn Map Publishing Company.
- 8 Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality*, 354, 358-359.
- 9 Clarence Hooker, *Life in the Shadows of the Crystal Palace, 1910-1927: Ford Workers in the Model T Era*, (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997), 54.
- 10 Stephen Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company 1908-1921*, (State University of New York Press, 1981), 76-77.
- 11 Hooker, *Life in the Shadows of the Crystal Palace*, 86.
- 12 Insurance Maps of Detroit, Michigan, Volume 10, Sheets, Sanborn Map Publishing Company, 1915. p. 68-70. See also, "Highland Heights - Stevens' Subdivision Historic District," MI State Historic Preservation, accessed at [www.mcgi.state.mi.us](http://www.mcgi.state.mi.us).
- 13 Clifford Edward Clark, *The American Family Home, 1800-1960*, (The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 131-157, 171-183.
- 14 *Highland Park Times*, December 17, 1915, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
- 15 Barklay, Parsons and Klapp, *Report on Detroit Street Railway Traffic and Proposed Subway*, Published for the Detroit Board of Street Railway Commissioners, 1915, 29, 65.
- 16 "Trade at Ford Stores; Save Money," *Ford News*, 8, v. III, n. 2, August 22, 1923.
- 17 Clarence Hooker, *Life in the Shadows of the Crystal Palace*, 60.
- 18 Steven Meyer analyzes this *Ford Times* depiction of "the dude employee," wasteful of his earnings and ill prepared for the workday after evenings spent in café's, Stephen Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 73, 80.
- 19 *Charter of the Village of Highland Park*, Chapter XIV: Miscellaneous, Sections 15-16, adopted July 13, 1912, 61-62.

- 20 Insurance Maps of Detroit, Volume 10, Sheet 96, 1915.
- 21 L. C. Whitsit, Map of the City of Highland Park, Wayne County, Michigan, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 1927.
- 22 Joyce Shaw Peterson, *American Automobile Workers, 1900-1933*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
- 23 Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs*, (John Wiley and Sons, 2009).

### IMAGE CREDITS

Fig. 1, 2: St. Albans Episcopal Church Records 1909-1976, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Fig. 3: Photograph by the Author, 2010.

Fig. 4,5: Acc. 1660, Box 130, Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.