

1 **PAST FORWARD: Roots and Recovery in the American City**

2 Fig. 1. Aerial view of Indianapolis' north side ca. 1945 with the Indianapolis Canal in the foreground and Fall Creek in the
3 background. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society



4
5 **Introduction: On Roots and Recovery**

6 A Klee drawing named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about
7 to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his
8 mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His
9 face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single
10 catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel
11 would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a
12 storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the

13 angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to
14 which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm
15 is what we call progress.¹

16 — Walter Benjamin, 1939

17 Walter Benjamin's vivid narration of Paul Klee's drawing may lead one to explore the
18 relationships between history and progress, and between people and their environment. In recent
19 years there has been a focus in the United States by federal, state and local government agencies
20 and funding programs on the development of "sustainable communities." For example, in 2009
21 the federal housing, environmental and transportation agencies have provided funds for the joint
22 HUD/EPA/DOT Sustainable Communities initiative.² The sustainability concept is broadly
23 applied from bioswales and higher-density housing to job training programs and tax breaks.
24 Current difficult economic conditions highlight the need for these efforts to be both innovative
25 and effective. These efforts being potentially critical to the recovery of the economy and the
26 challenge of maintaining or improving the real or perceived high standards of living in the
27 United States raises important questions: What is sustainable environmentally, economically, and
28 socially? Or, in general, what will help to define America's next generation of progress? These
29 questions are critical in that they acknowledge the broad range and inequalities of standards of
30 living and environmental considerations, particularly among urban and ethnic or racial groups,
31 that have perpetuated historically.

32 In his 2011 State of the Union Address, President Obama articulated a goal for a "Sputnik
33 moment" for America to "win the future."³ He illustrated the argument with perhaps an ill-

¹ Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 257.

² "Sustainable Communities – About Us." December 2011. Web.

³ "Remarks by the President in the State of the Union Address." February 2011. Web.

34 considered reference to the nation's past achievement of putting cars in driveways.⁴ To be fair,
35 education, energy, production, infrastructure, and technology are all necessary and prudent
36 components of America's plot toward progress. But this is not the first time the country has been
37 here, as the car, or two or three, in every driveway illustrates. With this in mind, it is important
38 that the impacts of progress on people, cities, and the environment be more comprehensively
39 considered. With 'blight' effectively still in the toolkit for the policymakers, designers, builders,
40 and bankers who help shape urban regeneration, one wonders what lessons from the past have
41 either been not been learned or forgotten. Can a better understanding of cities' roots help
42 promote their current and future recoveries?

43 The research presented in this paper is framed in a qualitative and historic socioeconomic
44 context, and also as a personal narrative. There are a number of studies and documents on how
45 people and cities impact and coexist with the environment. However, the *how* of the interaction
46 between people and their environment can be examined from a different approach. Cities are
47 resilient places of memory, and along with nature, can be our greatest teachers. Perhaps our
48 cities and their inhabitants promise and progress for the future may have something to do with
49 their recovered past.

50 While researching my own family history at the Indiana Historical Society, I stumbled
51 upon an repository of post-war articles and reports about Flanner House, a social services
52 organization that worked in Indianapolis dating back to the turn of the twentieth century. The
53 documents include reports, flyers, photographs, and even building plans relevant to the
54 organization's work transforming a slum in the inner city into a community with garden plots

⁴ *Ibid.*

55 and newly constructed homes.⁵ The story found in these documents is compelling in that it
56 narrates the historical decline and recovery cycles of the city, while depicting the challenges and
57 triumphs of the city and its people.

58 Fig. 2. Albert A. Moore, Agricultural Director of Flanner House. Image Credit: Family Photo



59
60 My grandfather was one of those people. Albert Allen Moore was born in Nashville,
61 Tennessee in 1905; he graduated from Tennessee State University in 1934 with a bachelor's
62 degree in Agriculture. Like many blacks escaping the Jim Crow South between World War I
63 and II, he moved northward for a better life. He came to Indianapolis where he eventually found

⁵ Lou, Emma, and Lana Ruegamer. *Indiana Blacks in the twentieth century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. p. 78.

64 work as the Agricultural Director for Flanner House. He taught other blacks from the Great
65 Migration how to farm vacant lots within the city. His work, essentially what we today might
66 call urban agriculture, literally became the foundation of Flanner House's larger mission to
67 improve the quality of life for the urban community. With their increased role in community
68 development, Flanner House received acclaim for their innovation in encouraging residents to
69 save money and use their own skills and labor to build their own homes and improve their
70 communities. This comprehensive framework allowed the families who participated in these
71 programs to at least partially circumvent the racist practices of the various socio-economic
72 structures of the time, and climb the economic and social ladder. This research investigates the
73 two key components of the Flanner House neighborhood environmental and social development
74 work: the Garden Program and the Fall Creek Homes project.

75

76 **Discussion I: A Context for Cooperation and the Flanner House Gardens Program**

77 After the Civil War and throughout the twentieth century blacks from the Jim Crow south
78 who moved north faced significant challenges. As the black population in northern cities grew
79 from the significant migration, in most cases segregation into identifiable neighborhoods became
80 more defined. These neighborhoods quickly became overcrowded, underserved, and disinvested.
81 During the Great Depression—and much like today—blacks were more affected by the
82 depressed economy than whites. Despite these conditions the black communities that formed in
83 the northern cities were still strong and had social, economic, and intellectual power within them.



85

86 In Indianapolis black leaders including Dr. Benjamin Osborne, a follower of Marcus Garvey,

87 began to directly address the distressed state of their communities. In 1933 Dr. Osborne began

88 an organization called the Consumer Unit, acting on his mission to “lift [the Indianapolis Negro]

89 out of the mire of economic serfdom to a point of economic stability by producing and marketing

90 some of the necessities of life instead of remaining a dependent consumer factor.”⁶ The
91 organization was conceived as a large-scale cooperative that would produce and sell food.

92 Fig. 4. Farm on the north side of Indianapolis ca. 1933 Image credit: Indiana Historical Society



93
94 He assembled over one thousand members but was not able to raise enough money to realize the
95 project. After the lack of success with the Consumer Unit project Osborne attempted another
96 project. This time he asked for assistance from the federal Rural Resettlement Administration
97 for his Homestead Project. The program would have allowed low-income city workers to buy
98 homes at a reduced cost; they could afford the mortgages because they would grow their own
99 food on the land to provide additional income. While the program was not explicitly for blacks,
100 white landowners and organizations feared the project would be for predominantly black
101 residents and successfully lobbied the federal government to not fund the project.⁷ Instead, in

⁶ *Ibid.*

102 1935 the New Deal government approved and built Lockfield Gardens in Indianapolis, one of the
103 first segregated public housing developments in the United States.⁸

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106 Fig. 5. Lockfield Gardens, public housing in Indianapolis. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society



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⁷ Lou, Emma, and Lana Ruegamer. *Indiana Blacks in the twentieth century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. p. 78.

⁸ "Lockefield Garden Apartments Records, 1935–1954." Indiana Historical Society. 5 February 2011. Web. http://www.indianahistory.org/library/manuscripts/collection_guides/m0786.html#HISTORICAL



114
115 A cooperative model similar to the one that Dr. Osborne envisioned but failed to implement in
116 the 1930s was later successfully carried out by Flanner House in Indianapolis in the early 1940s.
117 With donated funds and land Flanner House began a comprehensive urban agriculture program
118 as a part of a “Self-Help Services” unit. During and after World War II people in the community
119 experienced higher food prices, in part due to shortages in Europe.⁹ Access to affordable and
120 healthy food became a critical issue to the social and economic health of the black community
121 that had formed on the city’s north side. Through the Garden Program, families and individuals
122 were offered plots of land and given access to tools, mechanical plowing, seed, canning facilities,

⁹ “More Than 60 gardeners have registered for garden plot here,” Unknown newspaper article, Moore family records

Fig. 7. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society



Okra patch of the Green family is harvested by Zemer Green. Zemer is one of 12 children of a family who work 6 gardens in the Flanner House project. Besides \$25.00 in cash and money to pay for the seed profited already, Mr. and Mrs. Green do not know what they would do to feed their children without the produce from their gardens.

and consultation with the Agricultural Director. They also provided indoor training that focused on home economics, canning, food preparation, and nutrition. The program grew over several years to include six hundred garden plots on nearly one hundred acres of urban land on the city's near north side. Over two hundred families participated in the program.

While the program focused on food and agriculture, economics and community foundations were always important considerations.

Documents show that Moore also envisioned and directed these Self-Help programs as a social bridge to

142 connect young people and seniors, men and women, those from the rural south, and those who
143 grew up in the city and had never seen a farm. The gardens were especially encouraged as an
144 activity for teenagers, mothers with young children, and seniors. These groups were not as able
145 to get regular paying work; however, through the gardens, they were able to contribute to the

146 sustenance of their families. Also, the program needed to be affordable, and had the promise to
147 provide people with supplemental income. While some families cultivated land for food for their
148 own households, others used multiple lots to generate extra produce to sell for additional income.
149 In a newspaper article promoting the garden program Moore states:

150 We have done everything
151 possible to keep cost down
152 on this program. Annual
153 membership is only one
154 dollar and the cost of
155 plowing is \$1.25 per plot.
156 The plot is approximately
157 one-sixth of an acre, which is
158 large enough for the average
159 family. Anyone seeking to
160 raise a larger quantity of
161 food for canning purposes
162 can obtain additional plots
163 for the cost of plowing. . . .
164 In the fall they may can their
165 surplus produce at Flanner
166 House Cannery.¹⁰

Fig. 8. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society



Ed Morris sets an example with his well kept garden. Employed at Stewart-Warner, he directs his energy also as President of a group of Veterans planning to construct Self-Help homes in the Indianapolis Redevelopment Project and as Treasurer of the People's Co-Op grocery store.

167 In today's dollars, this would be the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

168 equivalent of a family in an inner city being able to have access to one-sixth of an acre of plowed
169 urban land for around twenty dollars per year.

170 After WWII, the program included recent veterans in its education programs under the GI
171 Bill. By 1944, Flanner House had constructed a large cooperative building that included a larger
172 cannery, community meeting spaces and classrooms, and a cooperative food market. The new
173 facility became a source of pride and a positive example for the development and recovery of a
174 undervalued and underinvested community. It served as tangible proof for the residents and
175 leaders in the community, and the city and state governments, of the greater potential for the
176 people and place, despite and regardless of race, station, or background. Flanner House later
177 opened a credit union; many Garden Program members would save money from selling their
178 canned produce to start businesses, educate their children, and even buy homes.

179 **Discussion II: The Fall Creek Homes Project**

180 With a seed group of
181 only 21 low- to middle-income
182 blacks, Flanner House initiated
183 the Fall Creek Homes project, a
184 large development near
185 Downtown Indianapolis. The
186 plan included over 300
187 residential units, open space,
188 and even a watershed plan for
189 Fall Creek. The group got
190 approval from the City Planning

Fig. 9. A group meets to discuss plans for new self-help housing.
Image credit: Indiana Historical Society



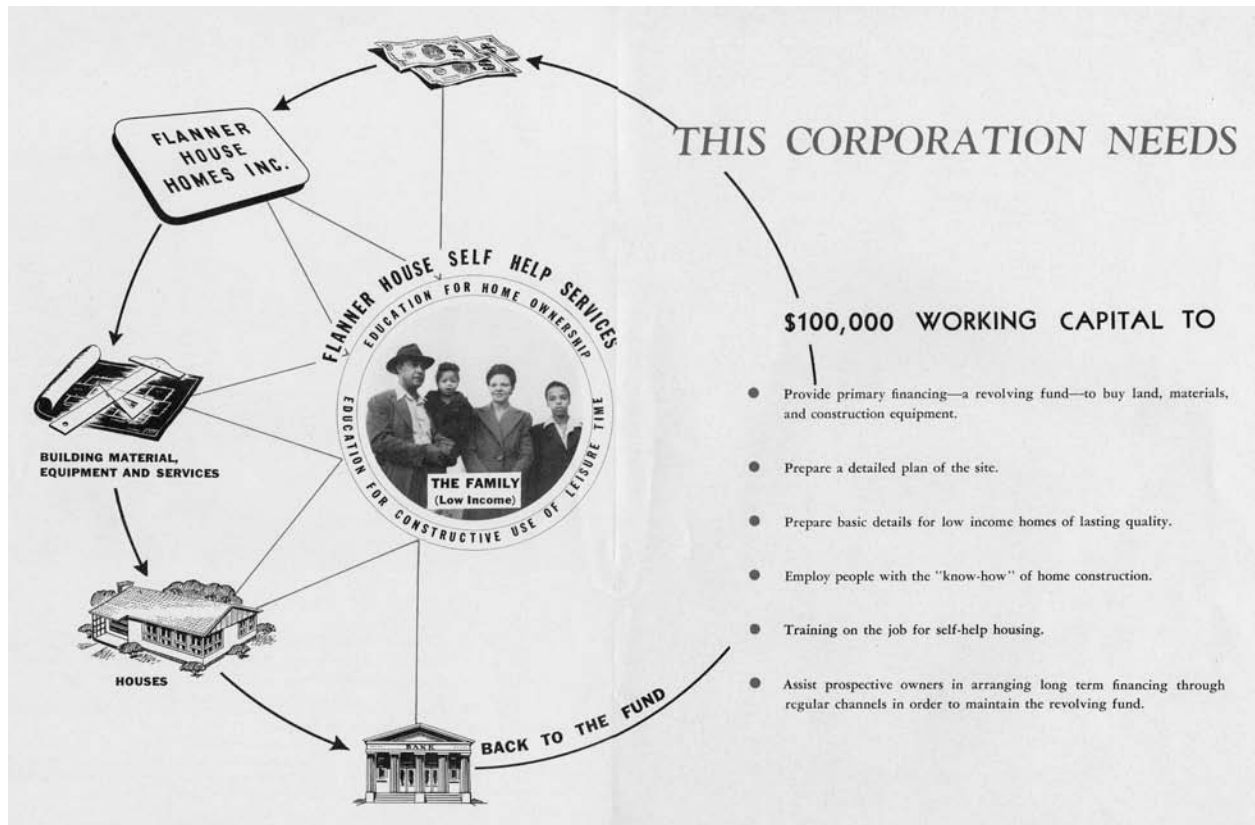
191 Commission in 1945 to acquire and plot a tract of land along the creek. The Commission,
192 however, may have had multiple motives in this plan to improve the living conditions of the
193 city's growing black population. Many in the Indianapolis black community suspect that the
194 Commission's agenda was to create a "place" for blacks to go so they would not move into the
195 nearby established white neighborhoods.

196 Many of the individuals who participated in the program were recent World War II
197 veterans, and worked in a variety of occupations from postal clerks and police officers, to
198 workers in the automotive and pharmaceutical industries in the city. They earned anywhere from
199 \$3-4,000 thousand dollars per year, roughly equivalent to today's approximately \$35,000 median
200 personal income. The premise of the program was simple—people would be trained in the skills
201 needed to contribute to the construction of their own homes, thereby significantly reducing the
202 costs of housing. After work and on weekends, the small group with no construction experience
203 worked on a pilot home; it took them nearly 6,000 hours to complete.¹¹

204 A fund was established for the program, including a significant contribution from the
205 city's pharmaceutical magnate, Eli Lilly, Jr., provided for the purchase of the land, construction
206 equipment and materials to build the homes. Once the homes were completed, they were
207 purchased using FHA mortgages. The proceeds from the sales were directed back into the
208 housing fund and other Flanner House programs serving the community.

¹¹ Kimbrough, Joyce. "An Adventure in "Self Help" Building," Indiana Historical Society. 5 February 2011. Web.
<http://images.indianahistory.org/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/dc018&CISOPTR=3438&REC=11>

209 Fig. 10. A diagram from one of Flanner House's publications explains how funding works for the home construction program.
 210 Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

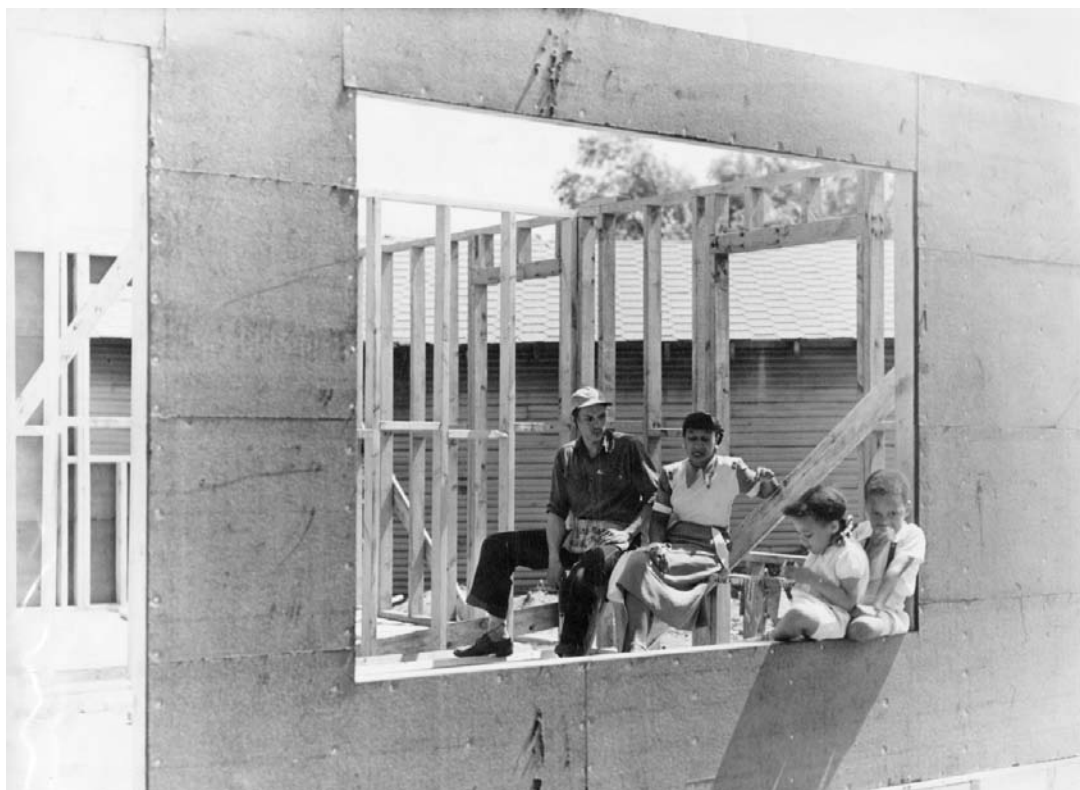


211
 212 With lessons learned from the pilot home, and with individuals dividing tasks suited to their
 213 interests and abilities, the group was eventually able to construct the homes in just over 2,100
 214 hours. These modest houses, similar in layout and design to those constructed throughout the
 215 United States after WWII, were designed by Hilyard Robinson, a prominent black architect from
 216 Washington, D.C. known for his work with affordable housing. With significantly reduced labor
 217 costs, the homes were constructed for 40 percent less than what they would have cost using
 218 conventional housing development models.¹²

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 220
 221

¹² *Ibid.*

222 Figs. 11 & 12. A break from work constructing one of the Fall Creek Self-Help Homes. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society



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224

225 The Fall Creek Homes project was successful in that it created one of the first substantial
226 black communities with working and middle class homeownership in the city. While
227 homeownership is a keystone of America’s capitalist society, this community also based its
228 foundation on the model of community equity encouraged and championed by Flanner House’s
229 Self Help programs. The irony of the ‘Self-Help’ programs is that it was largely a cooperative
230 structure, with people in the community helping each other in the most basic needs for food,
231 shelter, and a combination of communication and education. The program gained national
232 acclaim, and eventually the model was exported to other contexts, including less urbanized areas
233 in other regions. Flanner House honed their program into an essentially corporate model,
234 complete with branding, slogans, and endorsements.¹³

235 Fig. 12. The Flanner House Cannery ca. 1942. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

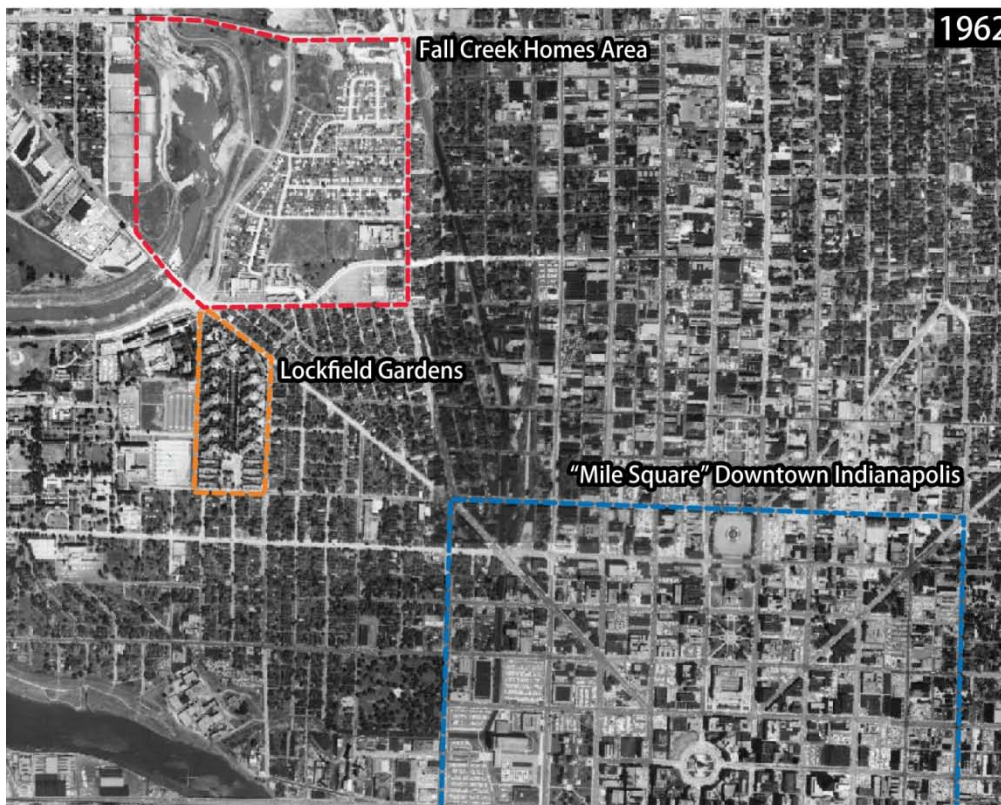
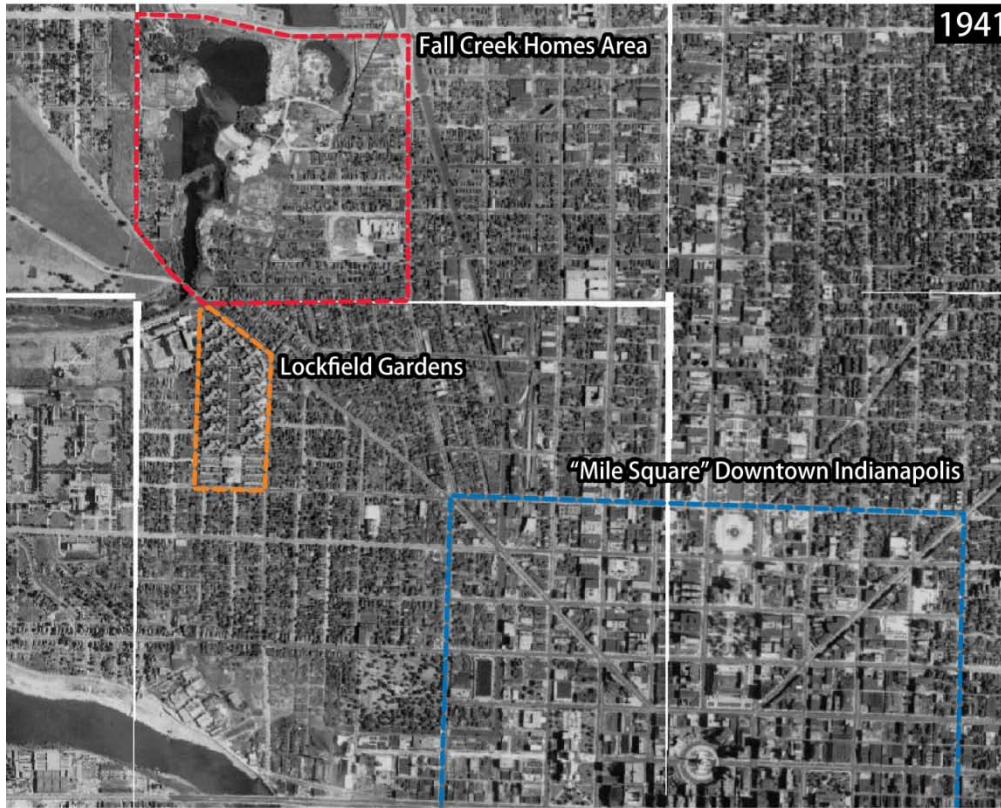


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¹³ Fundamental Education.” Indiana Historical Society. 5 February 2011. Web.
<http://images.indianahistory.org/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/dc018&CISOPTR=4830&REC=19>

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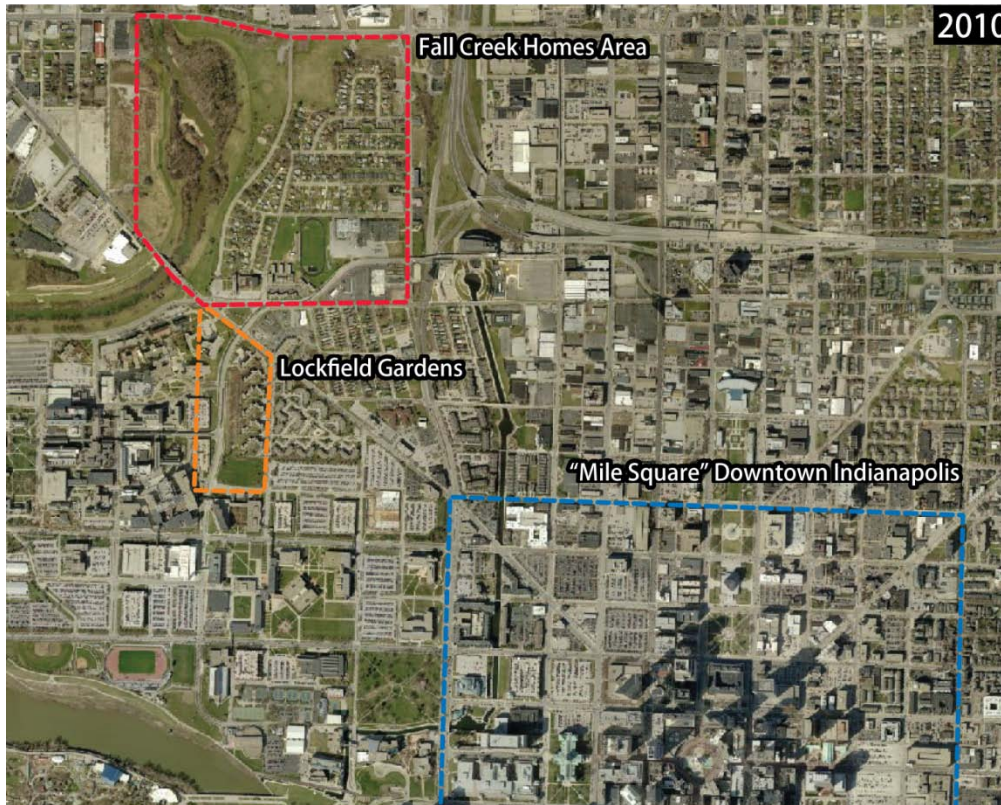
13 Aerial photos of the Flanner House/Fall Creek Homes area ca. 1941, before the homes were completed, and a photo from 1962 showing the condition afterward. Note the Lockfield Gardens Housing development immediately to the south of the area.



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241 **Conclusion: Now Past Forward**

242 Fig.14. Aerial photos of the Flanner House/Fall Creek Homes area ca. 2010. The neighborhood is now listed on the National
243 Register of Historic Places and remains an affordable community near the downtown. Note the I-65 Interstate to the east and the
244 IUPUI campus development to the south.



245

246 I will conclude by citing a curious piece of propaganda and prose from Flanner House’s
247 “New Frontier” plan that I think is still an appropriate charge for us today in order to “win the
248 future”; it states:

249 What is it about? About people. About their needs. Their abilities. The land the live on.
250 The land they till. The food they grow. About the cities they live in. About the jobs they
251 do. How they do them. And about the houses in which they live. About what people
252 know. And don’t know. And what they ought to know. Ought to know how to help make
253 America still greater.¹⁴

¹⁴ “Fundamental Education.” Indiana Historical Society. 5 February 2011. Web.
<http://images.indianahistory.org/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/dc018&CISOPTR=4830&REC=19>

254 According to a federal 2009 HUD “worst case housing needs” study, over seven million
255 American households paid more than one-half of their income for rent or lived in severely
256 inadequate conditions, or both. These figures are up 42 percent since 2001. The national
257 unemployment rate doubled during the same period. While race and geography are still a critical
258 factor in poverty, the HUD study found that housing needs increased in urban, suburban, and
259 rural areas, and in all regions, and among all racial and ethnic groups.¹⁵

260 Many of the economic challenges we see today echo those of the past, but of course there
261 are differences. The impact of globalization and urbanization since World War II are key
262 examples. Changes and progress in society are tangible as well — in 1933, Dr. Osborne’s
263 Homestead project was stopped primarily because of overt and statutory racism. We have a long
264 way to go; but we have come a long way. The challenge is to continue to find a path, despite
265 difficult circumstances, toward progress. In a globally connected and competitive world defined
266 by rapid change, innovation, and resiliency, moving forward may not be adequate. We may need
267 to move *past forward*, that is to say a conscious recognition and assessment of what can be
268 learned and gleaned from the past while adapting models for the present and future.

269 In some cases the contemporary manifestations for self-help urban redevelopment have
270 been associated with gentrification and identifiable “urban pioneer” groups such as artists, recent
271 college graduates, gays, hipsters, bougies, and yuppies with either overt or camouflaged middle
272 class and capitalistic value systems. The tangible and marketable benefits of gentrifying
273 neighborhoods make them difficult to stop, or at least without the help of troubled national and
274 global economies. But there are exceptions. Habitat for Humanity built a home using a self-help

¹⁵ “HUD Worst Case Housing Needs 2009 Report to Congress.” 5 February 2011. Web.
http://www.huduser.org/Publications/pdf/worstcase_HsgNeeds09.pdf

275 housing model in 1969, twenty-five years after Flanner House completed their first pilot home.¹⁶
276 Other similar organizations have produced thousands of housing units for low- and middle-
277 income people in a broad range of communities. Individuals, families, small cooperatives, and
278 other groups have found ways to redevelop in varied contexts nationwide. It is important that
279 cultural differences in approach and action in urban spaces are acknowledged in formulating the
280 market and value systems for the control and consumption of those spaces. We know the current
281 rules—those who are able to consistently add the most (market) value in the shortest amount of
282 time usually win. The same circumstances of gentrification can be found in the north side of
283 Indianapolis, though not yet to the same degree found in larger cities. During these difficult
284 economic times there should be an interest in limiting the potential division and conflict between
285 the bicycle-riding, CSA-shopping hipsters taking advantage of low-cost space, and the people –
286 who are often lower-income, immigrants, or racial or ethnic minorities – who also inhabit these
287 communities. Much like Benjamin’s Angel of History, some of these groups who may have
288 been long-time residents watch their communities smashed by the storm of progress, and the
289 pioneering people that came with it.

290 The potential for today, however, seems to be our expanding notion of community,
291 identity, and place. It is no longer theoretical to say that Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and other
292 social media and technology changes the way that people’s communications collectivity define
293 their world. A 60-year old lady from the neighborhood and a 25-year old newcomer can both
294 “like” or “follow” or “+1” the same neighborhood CSA or locally owned juice shop. It is a
295 potential tool that can be used to support the types of networks and cooperative models the
296 Flanner House used in their work improving its community. One wonders what the outcome of

¹⁶ “Timeline -- Habitat for Humanity Int'l.” Habitat for Humanity. 28 December 2011. Web.
<http://www.habitat.org/how/history/timeline/timeline2.aspx>

297 Dr. Osborne's Consumer Unit would have been if he had a cool facebook page and kickstarter
298 account. What could have Albert Moore done if modern microfinance could have helped fund
299 his gardens, or if he could google and blog the latest cultivation techniques? Access to
300 information and improved social connectivity are means for us to challenge and push beyond our
301 individual moves forward, and instead toward a more comprehensive and common move
302 forward. In this respect, I think the course of action in a Midwestern community over sixty years
303 ago seems progressive even for today. The Flanner House Gardens and Fall Creek Homes
304 communities showed that there is the potential to be a pioneer in your own back yard. They
305 demonstrated that it is possible to colonize your own neighborhood. They combined community,
306 cooperative, and corporate models to achieve their difficult yet ambitious aims, and they left a
307 compelling legacy for future generations.

308 Fig. 15. Young boy and corn plants in one of Flanner House's Gardens. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society



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