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Past Forward: Roots and Recovery in the American City

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Today's focus on the development of "sustainable" communities as being critical to the recovery of the economy and the challenge of maintaining our high standard of living raises important questions: What is sustainable environmentally, economically, and socially? Who will be a part of the future economy and how will they participate? Or, in general, what do we mean by progress? Cities are resilient places of memory, and along with nature, can be our greatest teachers. Perhaps our cities', and their inhabitants', promise and progress for the future just may have something to do with their recovered past. In researching my own family history, I stumbled upon an online repository of post-war articles and reports about Flanner House, a social services organization that worked in Indianapolis dating back to the turn of the twentieth century. The documents included photographs, reports, and even building plans relevant to the organization's work transforming a slum in the inner city into a community with garden plots and newly constructed homes. This story is compelling in that it narrates the historical decline and recovery cycles of the city, while depicting the struggles and triumphs of the urban fabric, and the people therein.

Keywords

urban agriculture, urban communities, Flanner House, Hilyard Robinson, urban redevelopment, FHA, gentrification, community garden, Indianapolis, Fall Creek Homes, black neighborhoods, inner-city, housing, affordable housing, food, garden, nutrition, sustainability, homeownership, green space, urban environment, urban ecology

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INTRODUCTION

On Roots and Recovery

> A Klee drawing named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.
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> — Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", 1940/1982

Walter Benjamin's vivid narration of Paul Klee's drawing may lead one to explore the relationships between history and progress, and between people and their environment. In recent years there has been a focus in the United States by federal, state and local government agencies and funding programs on the development of "sustainable communities." For example, in 2009 the federal housing, environmental and transportation agencies began providing funds for an interagency Sustainable Communities initiative (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2011a). The sustainability concept is broadly applied, from bioswales and transit-oriented development, to higher-density housing and new industrial and jobs-focused development on brownfield sites. Current difficult economic conditions highlight the need for these efforts to be both innovative and effective. These efforts being potentially critical to the recovery of the economy and the challenge of maintaining or improving the real or perceived high standards of living in the United States raises important questions: What is sustainable environmentally, economically, and socially? Or, in general, what will help to define America's next generation of progress? These questions are important in that they acknowledge the broad range and inequalities of standards of living and environmental considerations, particularly among urban and ethnic or racial groups, that have perpetuated historically.

In his 2011 State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama articulated a goal for a "Sputnik moment" for America to "win the future" (Obama 2011). He illustrated the argument with perhaps an ill-considered reference to the nation's past achievement of putting cars in driveways. To be fair, education, energy, production, infrastructure, and technology are all necessary and prudent components of America's plot toward progress. But this is not the first time the country has been here, as the car, or two or three, in every driveway illustrates. With this in mind, it is important that the impacts of progress on people, cities, and the environment be more comprehensively considered. With blight still in the vocabulary and toolkit for the policymakers, designers, builders, and bankers who help shape urban regeneration, one wonders what important lessons from the past may have been overlooked. Might a better understanding of cities' roots help promote their current and future recoveries?

While researching my own family history at the Indiana Historical Society, I stumbled upon a repository of post-war articles and reports about Flanner House, a social services organization in Indianapolis. The archives include reports, flyers, photographs, and even building plans documenting the organization's work transforming a slum in the inner city into a community with garden plots and newly constructed homes. The Flanner House, originally the Flanner Guild, was founded in 1898 to serve as a community center for the growing black population in the city. It has served thousands of people by providing education, health, employment, recreational, and other services (Flanner House 2011a). Today the organization still provides a range of community services including youth programs, senior centers, and a charter school. The story of the Flanner House is compelling in that it narrates the historical decline and recovery cycles of the city, while depicting the challenges and triumphs of the city and its people. My grandfather was one of those people.

Figure 1. Albert A. Moore, Agricultural Director of Flanner House. Image Credit: Family Photo

Albert Allen Moore was born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1905; he graduated from Tennessee State University in 1934 with a bachelor's degree in Agriculture (Figure 1). Like many blacks escaping the Jim Crow South between World War I and II, he moved northward for a better life. He came to Indianapolis where he eventually found work as the Agricultural Director for Flanner House. He taught other blacks from the Great Migration how to farm vacant lots within the city. His work, essentially what we today might call urban agriculture, became the foundation of Flanner House's larger mission to improve the quality of life for the urban community. With their increased role in community development, Flanner House received acclaim for their innovation in encouraging residents to save money and use their own skills and labor to build their own homes and improve their communities. This comprehensive framework allowed the families who participated in these programs to, at least partially, circumvent the racist practices of the various socio-economic structures of the time, and climb the economic and social ladder. This research investigates the two key components of the Flanner House neighborhood environmental and social development work: the Garden Program and the Fall Creek Homes project (Figure 2).

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

METHODS

The research presented in this paper is framed in a qualitative and historic socioeconomic context, and also as a personal narrative. There are a number of studies and documents on how people and cities impact and coexist with the environment. However, the *how* of the interaction between people and their environment can be examined from a different approach: Cities are resilient places of memory, and along with nature, can be our greatest teachers. Perhaps our cities and their inhabitants promise and progress for the future may have something to do with their recovered past. In this case, the research is based primarily on the recovery of information for how the Flanner House programs worked, based on documents found in the Indiana Historical Society's archives as well as through oral histories taken from people in the family and community who knew about the Flanner House programs. Fortunately, the Flanner House was well organized and well documented, and their records were preserved. These records included countless photographs, the organization's annual reports (including financial data), program brochures and flyers, and press articles. From these I have been able to get data about their programs, e.g., how many gardens were managed, or families were served, or how much money it took to fund their construction projects. More importantly, I have been able to get information on the Flanner House's agenda and approach, how they developed, what resources they engaged, and the physical environment and social context in which they operated, as evidenced by the thousands of photographs in the archive(Indiana Historical Society 2011a).

DISCUSSION

A Context for Cooperation and the Flanner House Gardens Program

After the Civil War and throughout the twentieth century blacks from the Jim Crow south, who moved north, faced significant challenges. As the black population in northern cities grew from the significant migration, in most cases segregation into identifiable neighborhoods became more defined. These neighborhoods quickly became overcrowded, underserved, and disinvested (Figure 3). During the Great Depression blacks were greatly affected by the depressed economy—much like today. Despite these conditions, many black communities that formed in the northern cities had strong social, economic, and intellectual power within them.

Figure 3. North side of Indianapolis slum conditions. Image Credit: Indiana Historical Society

Given this context, black leaders like Dr. Benjamin Osborne, a follower of Marcus Garvey, began to directly address the distressed state of their communities. Marcus Garvey was a founder of the Black Nationalism movement that spanned the West Indies, North America, and Africa; and it is likely that Osborne was involved in Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association sometime during its peak in the 1920s. In 1933 Osborne began an organization in Indianapolis called the Consumer Unit, acting on his mission to "lift [the Indianapolis Negro] out of the mire of economic serfdom to a point of economic stability by producing and marketing some of the necessities of life instead of remaining a dependent consumer factor" (Thornbrough and Ruegamer 2000). The organization was conceived as a large-scale cooperative that would produce and sell food.

He assembled over one thousand members, but was not able to raise enough money to realize the project. After the lack of success with the Consumer Unit project Osborne attempted another project to improve the quality of life in the black community. This time he asked for assistance from the federal Rural Resettlement Administration for his Homestead Project. The Homestead Project would have allowed low-income city workers to buy homes at a reduced cost. The intention was that workers would be able to afford the mortgages for the homes because they could use their land to grow their own food for sustenance and sell surplus crops for additional income. While the program was not explicitly for blacks, white landowners and organizations feared the project would be predominantly for black residents and successfully lobbied the

federal government to not fund the project (Thornbrough and Ruegamer 2000). In 1935 the New Deal government approved and built Lockfield Gardens in Indianapolis, one of the first segregated public housing developments in the United States (Indiana Historical Society 2011b; Figure 4).

Figure 4. Lockfield Gardens, public housing in Indianapolis. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

A cooperative model similar to the one that Dr. Osborne had envisioned, but failed to implement in the 1930s was later successfully carried out by Flanner House in Indianapolis in the early 1940s. With donated funds and land Flanner House began a comprehensive urban agriculture program as a part of a "Self-Help Services" unit: During and after World War II people in the community experienced higher food prices, in part due to shortages in Europe (Moore 2011). Access to affordable and healthy food became a critical issue to the social and economic health of the black community that had formed on the city's north side. Through the Garden Program, families and individuals were offered plots of land and given access to tools, mechanical plowing, seed, canning facilities, 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 approximately five years to include six hundred garden plots on nearly one hundred acres of urban land on the city's near north side. Over 200 families participated in the program (Moore 2011; Figures 5 & 6).

Figure 5. Farm on the north side of Indianapolis ca. 1933. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

Figure 6. Flanner House's Self-Help Programs included the city's youth. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

Figure 7. Photo documentation of youth who participated in the Garden Program. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

Figure 8. Young boy and corn plants in one of Flanner House's Gardens.
Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

While the program focused on food and agriculture, economics and community foundations were always important considerations. Documents show that Albert Moore, in his capacity as agricultural director, also envisioned and directed these Self-Help programs as a social bridge to connect young people and seniors, men and women, those from the rural south, and those who grew up in the city and had never seen a farm. The gardens were especially encouraged as an activity for teenagers, mothers with young children, and seniors (Figures 7 & 8). These groups were not as able to get regular paying work; however, through the gardens, they were able to contribute to the sustenance of their families. The program also had the promise to provide people with supplemental income and needed to be affordable to the participants. While some families cultivated land for food for their own households, others used multiple lots to generate extra produce to sell for additional income. In a newspaper article promoting the garden program and its affordability Moore states:

> We have done everything possible to keep cost down on this program. Annual membership is only one dollar and the cost of plowing is $1.25 per plot.[1] The plot is

[1] In today's dollars, this would be the equivalent of a family in an inner city being able to have access to one-sixth of an acre of plowed urban land for around $20 per year.

> approximately one-sixth of an acre, which is large enough for the average family. Anyone seeking to raise a larger quantity of food for canning purposes can obtain additional plots for the cost of plowing. . . . In the fall they may can their surplus produce at Flanner House Cannery (Moore 2011).

After WWII, the Flanner House's gardening and educational programs were able to use funds from the 1944 GI Bill that was meant to provide various opportunities for returning veterans (Figure 9). By that time, Flanner House had already constructed a large cooperative building that included a larger cannery, community meeting spaces and classrooms, and a cooperative food market. The new facility became a source of pride and a positive example for the development and recovery of an undervalued and underinvested community. The cannery's edifice and its vitality as a place of production, employment, and exchange served as tangible proof for people within and outside of the community as well as of the greater potential for the people and place – despite and regardless of race, station, or background. Flanner House later opened a credit union; many Garden Program members would save money from selling their canned produce to start businesses, educate their children, and even buy homes.

Figure 9. Photo documentation of veterans who participated in the Garden Program. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

The Fall Creek Homes Project

With a seed group of only 21 low- to middle-income blacks, Flanner House initiated its other project, the Fall Creek Homes, a large development near Downtown Indianapolis (Figure 10). The premise of the program was simple—people would be trained in the skills needed to contribute to the construction of their own homes, thereby significantly reducing the costs of housing. The plan included over 300 residential units, open space, and even a watershed plan for Fall Creek. The Flanner House's proposal to acquire and plot a tract of land along the creek for the project was approved by the City Planning Commission in 1945. The Commission, however, may have had multiple motives in this plan to improve the living conditions of the city's growing black population; many in the Indianapolis black community suspected that the Commission's agenda was to create a specific "place" for blacks to live so that they would not move into the nearby established white neighborhoods.

Many of the individuals who participated in the program were recent World War II veterans, who worked in a variety of occupations from postal clerks and police officers, to workers in the automotive and pharmaceutical industries in the city. They earned anywhere from 3,000 to 4,000 dollars per year, roughly equivalent to today's approximately $35,000 median personal income. After work and on weekends, the small group without any construction experience worked on a pilot home; it took them nearly 6,000 man-hours to complete (Kimbrough 2011).

A fund was established for the Fall Creek Homes project, including a significant contribution from the city's pharmaceutical magnate, Eli Lilly, Jr., in order to provide for the purchase of the land, construction equipment and materials to build the homes. Once the residents completed the homes, they were purchased using FHA mortgages. The proceeds from the sales were directed back into the housing fund and other Flanner House programs serving the community (Figure 11). With lessons learned from the pilot home, and with individuals dividing tasks suited to their interests and abilities, the group was eventually able to construct the homes in just over 2,100 hours. These modest houses, similar in layout and design to those constructed throughout the United States after WWII, were designed by Hilyard Robinson, a prominent black architect from Washington, D.C. known for his work with affordable housing. With significantly reduced labor costs, the homes were constructed for 40 percent less than what they would have cost using conventional housing development models (Kimbrough 2011).

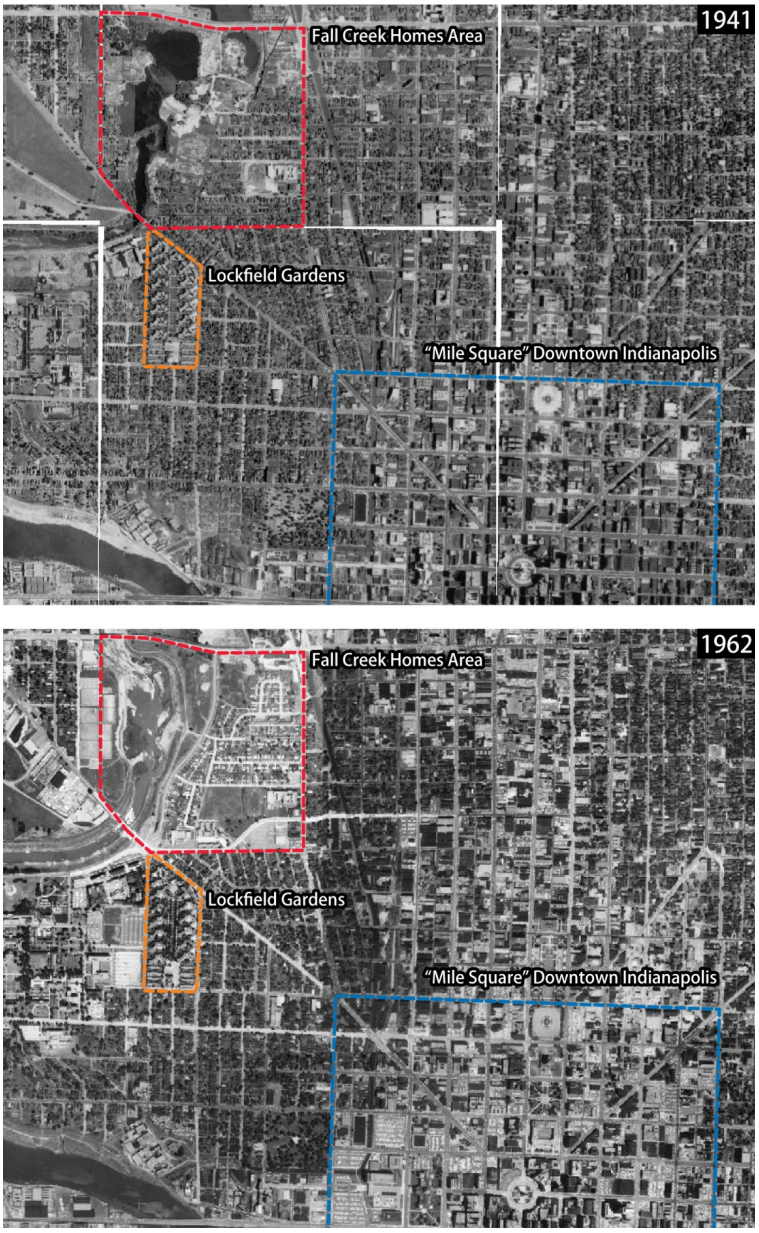

Figure 10. Aerial photos of the Flanner House/Fall Creek Homes area ca. 1941, before the homes were completed and a photo from 1962 showing the condition afterward. Note the Lockfield Gardens Housing development immediately to the south of the area. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

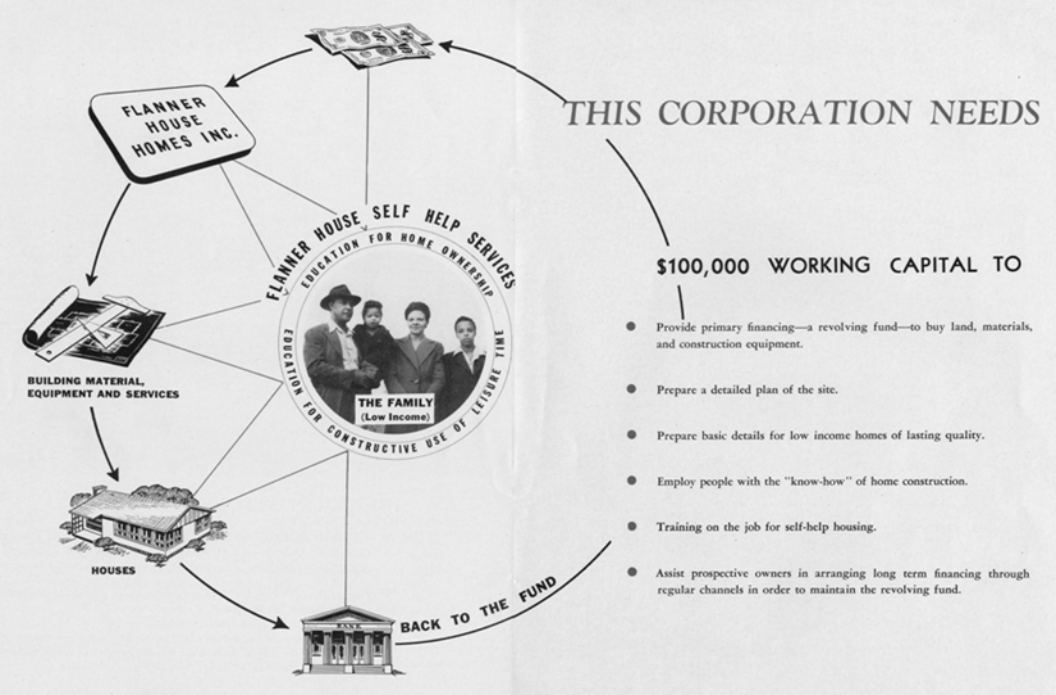

Figure 11. A diagram from one of Flanner House's publications explains how funding works for the home construction program. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

The Fall Creek Homes project was successful in that it created one of the first substantial black communities with working and middle class homeownership in Indianapolis. While homeownership is a keystone of America's society, this community development also based its foundation on the model of community equity encouraged and championed by Flanner House's Self Help programs. The 'Self-Help' programs embraced self-sufficiency, but they were largely a cooperative structure, with people in the community helping each other, not just themselves. Much like Osborne's 1930s vision for the Consumer Unit, the programs helped people to produce, rather than primarily consume, the most basic needs: food, shelter, health, communication and education. The program gained national acclaim, and eventually the model was exported to other contexts, including less urbanized areas in other regions. Flanner House honed their program into an essentially corporate model, complete with branding, slogans, and endorsements.

CONCULSION

Now Past Forward

The Flanner House's programs are a precedent for how a comprehensive approach can work to address the serious social challenges that are ultimately legible in the urban built and natural environment. While their work addressed tangible problems such as scarcity, space and resource management, urban planning and infrastructure, finance and organization, their success was based, simply, on people. They focused on people at the scale of the individual (self-help) and also at the scale of the community (cooperative). Their models were not a bottom-up or grassroots approach, or a top-down master plan, but a hybrid that focused instead on facilitating

and building a sustainable context for the necessities of human sustenance, interaction, and production. The Flanner House accomplished this through their garden and housing programs–by teaching people young and old how to negotiate the earth, climate, economy, and resources for personal, family, and community use (Figure 12). They provided the hardware (land, facilities, tools, and infrastructure) and software (people, organization, capital, and knowledge) to make it work. The Fall Creek Homes neighborhood is a testament to the viability of this model (Figure 13). It is now on the National Register of Historic Places in part for its significance as an innovative urban development model. While other inner city areas of Indianapolis saw significant declines in the 1960s through the 1990s, this community did not see the same level of disinvestment and vacancy. Further, as Indianapolis' inner city areas have gentrified over the recent decades, including Lockfield Gardens' conversion to market-rate housing, the Fall Creek Homes community has resisted the large and rapid increases in property values, rents, and demographic shifts that have caused displacement in many black and minority or lower-income communities in similar contexts.

Figure 12. . The Flanner House Cannery *ca.* 1942. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

According to a 2009 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) study that focused on "worst case housing needs",, over seven million American households paid more than one-half of their income for rent or lived in severely inadequate conditions, or both. These figures are up 42 percent since 2001. The national unemployment rate doubled during the same period. While race and geography are still a critical factor in poverty, the HUD study found that housing needs increased in urban, suburban, and rural areas, and in all regions, and among all racial and ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2011). Many of the economic challenges we see today echo those of the past, but of course there are differences. The impact of globalization and urbanization since World War II are key examples. Changes and progress in society are tangible as well — in 1933, Dr. Osborne's Homestead project was stopped primarily because of overt and statutory racism. The Flanner House Homes were still the construction of a racially segregated neighborhood. We have a long way to go; but we have come a long way. The challenge is to continue to find a path, despite difficult circumstances, toward progress.

Part of the challenge is that in some cases today's manifestations of self-help urban redevelopment have been associated with gentrification and identifiable "urban pioneer" groups such as artists, recent college graduates, gays, hipsters and young professionals. The tangible and marketable benefits of gentrifying neighborhoods make them difficult to stop as they often become tied to larger real estate market forces. But there are exceptions. For example, Habitat

for Humanity built a home using a self-help housing model in 1969 (twenty-five years after Flanner House completed their first pilot home); and they have continued their work on a large scale internationally (Habitat for Humanity 2011). Other similar organizations such as the Enterprise Community Partners have produced thousands of housing units for low- and middle-income people in a broad range of communities, and many now actively incorporate sustainable building practices, and even community gardening, into their development models. Individuals, families, small cooperatives, and other groups have found ways to redevelop in varied contexts nationwide.

Figure 13. Construction of the Fall Creek Self-Help Homes. Image credit: Indiana Historical Society

The potential for today, however, seems to be our expanding notion of community, identity, and place. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media and technology have changed the way that people's communications collectivity define their world and activities. They are potential tools that can be used to support the types of networks and cooperative models the Flanner House used in their work improving its community. One wonders what the outcome of Dr. Osborne's Consumer Unit would have been if he had a well-trafficked Facebook page and a Kickstarter account. What more could have Albert Moore potentially done if modern microfinance or online crowdfunding portals like Ioby.org could have helped fund his gardens, or if he could Google search and blog about the latest cultivation techniques? Access to information and improved social connectivity are means to challenge and push beyond individual actions in the urban environment, and can instead advance toward a more comprehensive and common move forward. In this respect, the course of action in a midwestern community over sixty years ago seems progressive even for today. The Flanner House Gardens and Fall Creek Homes communities showed that there is the potential to be a pioneer in your own backyard. They demonstrated that it is possible to colonize your own neighborhood. They combined the community, cooperative, and corporate models that have been outlined in this paper in order to achieve their difficult yet ambitious aims. They have left a compelling legacy for future generations.

I will conclude by citing a curious piece of propaganda and prose from Flanner House's "New Frontier" plan that I think is still an appropriate charge for us today in order to move forward; it states:

> What is it about? About people. About their needs. Their abilities. The land they live on. The land they till. The food they grow. About the cities they live in. About the jobs they do. How they do them. And about the houses in which they live. About what people know. And don't know. And what they ought to know. Ought to know how to help make America still greater (Flanner House 2011b).

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