

GREENBELT COMMUNITY BUILDING
(Greenbelt Center Elementary School)
15 Crescent Road
Greenbelt
Prince George's County
Maryland

HABS MD-979
MD,17-GRBLT,1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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HABS No. MD-979

Location: 15
Crescent Road, Greenbelt, Prince George's
County, Maryland.

Present Owner: Prince George's County Board of Education,
14524 Elm Street, Upper Marlboro, Maryland.

Present Use: Elementary School

Significance: The Greenbelt Community Building is a focal
point of activity for this important, early
planned community. It was first used as a
combination community meeting hall and school
building and later exclusively as a school.

Greenbelt is a product of the Great Depression
of the 1930s. It is a cooperative planned
community, conceived and constructed by the
Resettlement Administration, an outgrowth of
Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal idealism.
Greenbelt was an early experiment in social
and economic welfare. The intent was to
provide affordable rental housing for low- to
moderate-income groups in an environment that
encouraged self help through a cooperative
living program, as well as provide jobs
(construction) for those on relief.

The Greenbelt Community Building is
architecturally significant as a good
surviving example of the 1920s-1930s Art
Deco/Art Moderne styles. Its sleek,
streamlined form, with minimal architectural
ornamentation, exemplifies the styling of the
period.

Furthermore, the artistic depression-era bas
relief sculptures which line the facade are
both architecturally and historically
significant. Carved by Works Progress
Administration (WPA) artist Lenore Thomas,
they reflect the social and economic concerns
of the post-depression era, an interest in the
common man and the pursuit of democratic
ideals. They are both optimistic and forward-
looking.

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PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The Greenbelt Community Building was constructed in 1937, with an addition in 1968.
2. Architect: Resettlement Administration architects Reginald Wadsworth and Douglas Ellington designed this building as well as all the other buildings that made up the original Greenbelt community.
3. Original & subsequent owners: The building was originally owned by the federal government and loaned to Prince George's County as an elementary school. In 1953 the government dedicated it to the City of Greenbelt. It was sold to its current owner, Prince George's County Board of Education, in 1959.
4. Contractor: The Greenbelt Community Building, like the other original buildings, was constructed under the direction of the federal government, using a civilian work force.
5. Original plans & construction: The original section, built in 1937, included twelve classrooms for kindergarten and elementary grades, a music room, arts & crafts workshop, homemaking room, health room, social room and auditorium/gymnasium. It was built as a combination school and community center, also housing the Greenbelt Public Library.
6. Alterations & additions: A major addition was made to the rear of the building in 1968.

B. Historical Context:

The Greenbelt Community grew out of a social concern for the plight of the low- to moderate-income groups most effected by the economic devastation of the Great Depression. It was planned and constructed by the Resettlement Administration, an initiative of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies. There were three goals of Greenbelt (and the other two planned "green towns"). One goal was to provide useful work to men on unemployment relief. Another was to demonstrate the soundness of planning and operating towns according to garden-city principles. The third was to provide low-rent housing in

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healthful surroundings, both physical and social, for families of moderate means (Skolnik, 3). The community thus allowed for self help through a cooperative system of government. Although the property was owned by the federal government, the residents actually managed and operated the town, headed by the elected city manager. Stores were cooperatively owned so that through active participation low prices could be obtained for groceries, furniture, etc. Thus, through the encouragement of community participation and cooperative management it allowed the residents to help themselves to recover from hard economic times.

A careful screening process was performed to determine who would be allowed to participate in the program. The applicants were to represent a cross section of the Washington metropolitan area, they were to reflect family values (the female head of house with children did not work) and the annual income had to be within a certain range. In fact, once a family's income exceeded the maximum they were expected to move on.

The physical environment was another important part of the Greenbelt concept. It was one of three "green towns." All three, Greenbelt in Maryland, Greenhills in Ohio, and Greendale in Wisconsin, were planned to create a pleasing environment of clustered housing surrounded by open green space. The crescent-shaped plan of Greenbelt conformed to the natural lay of the land leaving wooded areas and open areas for recreation.

The idea for clustered housing with large open green spaces originated with Ebenezer Howard, as outlined in his 1898 book, Garden Cities of Tomorrow. The first garden city in the United States was Radburn, planned in 1928. This concept eventually grew to be widely accepted, developing into the garden apartments commonly seen today. It was still considered a new planning concept in the mid-1930s. The man responsible for Greenbelt was Rexford Guy Tugwell, who became the Director of the Resettlement Administration. He convinced Roosevelt that the Greenbelt project would provide needed housing and create jobs (in the building industry) while demonstrating that garden city planning techniques could effectively be applied to housing low income residents.

The Center school opened in the fall of 1937 with seven teachers and twenty-four students. The school, as

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planned, was centrally located within one-half mile of all homes and could be reached by paths and underpasses to protect the children from traffic hazards. The Center school was probably the most important building in the community. It served not only as the school but as the center of activity for Greenbelt. It was used in the evenings as a town hall and meeting area, and for adult education and recreation. Church services were held here on Sundays. According to the architect Douglas D. Ellington, the combined school and community building was an "effort to draw community activities into closer contact with child education by combining the community hall with the grade school in one building. This not only saved the cost of an extra building but also made possible greater social unity" (Williamson, 35).

As reflective of the New Deal philosophy, Greenbelt displayed concern for, and faith in, the common man. The philosophy was based on cooperative, self-governing individuals collectively holding and managing a self-contained living environment. Although touted by many as communistic, it seemed to work very effectively. The faith in democracy evident in Greenbelt is reflected in the bas relief sculptures seen on the walls of the Greenbelt Community Building. Created by Works Progress Administration artist Lenore Thomas, they represent the precepts outlined in the preamble of the United States Constitution. The five panels are captioned "We the people, To form a more perfect union, Establish justice, Insure domestic tranquility, Provide for the common defense, and Promote the general welfare." These reliefs and what they represent encapsulate the philosophy of Greenbelt.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The architectural design of the Greenbelt Community Building evolved from the Art Deco and Art Moderne styles popular during this period. As reflective of Art Deco, the building exhibits geometric forms with strips of windows and a facade with a series of set backs with streamlined buttresses. However, the building lacks some of the more elaborate ornamentation found in Art Deco. The smooth wall finish relatively void of ornamentation, with rounded corners and flat roof, are reflective of Art Moderne. In fact,

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the building itself is very understated, focusing all attention to the bas relief. The hard-edged low relief found under the windows was used in both styles.

2. Condition of the fabric: The building appears to be well maintained and in good condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The original section of the building is L-shaped and is one story high with a basement. The front consists of a large rectangular main block with a front projection. Along this projection are found the four buttresses with windows between, and bas reliefs beneath. To either end of the building is a single-story entry projection. The main entry is located at the southwest corner, at the crux of the L.

2. Foundations: The foundation is of concrete, painted forest green for accent.

3. Walls: The walls are brick painted white. Along the front projecting wall are four curving, aerodynamic, fluted buttresses which extend from the belt courses in the roof line to the projecting foundation.

4. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The main doorway is located within the single-story projection to the westerly side of the south-facing facade. The walls of the projection curve into the recessed doorway. Above the main doorway is the first of a series of bas relief panels captioned, "We the People." The double doors are of heavy wooden construction with a single large light in the top portion. Another entry is located in the easterly single-story projection, balancing the facade. This entry is to the side and has a ramp for handicapped access leading to it. The third entry to the original portion of the building is located at the east side. Above this entry is a large section of glass block, allowing outside light to flood the interior corridor.

b. Windows: There are five large horizontal bands of windows, one band each between and to the sides of the four curving buttresses that line the facade. Each band is composed of ten push-out

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casements, two bays across and five bays high within a framework of narrow metal surrounds.

5. Roof:

a. Shape: The building has a flat roof.

b. Cornice: Near the top edge of the flat roof are found belt courses of stretcher brick. On the front projection of the main block there is a double belt course, on the stepped back section of the main block is a single belt course and on the single-story front projections are a triple row of belt courses.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The original building is L-shaped with the main entry in the crux of the L. A center corridor runs through each leg of the L with classrooms to either side. To the front of the building (behind the large facade windows) is the combination auditorium and gymnasium.

2. Flooring: The floors are covered with linoleum tiles.

3. Wall finish: The interior walls are made of glazed concrete block, rounded at the corners. In the top portion of the wall, above the doorways, are dispersed large patches of glass block to allow natural light to come into the central corridor from the outside-facing classrooms to either.

4. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The interior doors are wooden with nine lights in the top portion. The doors in the east-west corridor, where the specific-use rooms are, have labels painted on them such as "Library," "Arts and Crafts Room," etc.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The Greenbelt Community building faces south onto Crescent Road. It fronts on a green space with a limited playground behind it. To the east of it is the shopping center and to the west (also fronting sideways onto the green space) is the Greenbelt branch of the Prince George's County Library.

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2. Historical landscape design: The Greenbelt Community Building is located to the center of the original community. It was then within one-half mile of all the homes, and directly next to the commercial center of the town. A system of walkways and underpasses linked this area--the town center--with the surrounding homes. This system was designed for pedestrian safety.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Dillard, Tracy & Richard Striner. Maryland Historical Trust State Historic Sites Inventory Form, Greenbelt Community Building, November 1983.

Hauenstein, Thomas. National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, Greenbelt Historic District, November 1979.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Skolnik, Alfred et al editors City of Greenbelt, 25th Anniversary, 1937-1962. Greenbelt: Greenbelt News Review, 1962. Excerpts from that newspaper.

Williamson, Mary Lou, editor. Greenbelt; History of a New Town, 1937-1987. Norfolk, Virginia: The Donning Company, Publishers, 1987.

IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of the Greenbelt Community Building was undertaken as part of a cooperative project between the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert J. Kapsch, chief, and the Maryland National Capital Park & Planning Commission on behalf of the Prince George's County Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) to document select sites throughout the county. A memorandum of agreement was signed in August of 1988 and the project, to span one year, began in January of 1989. The site selection was made by Gail Rothrock, director, and Susan G. Pearl, research historian, of the HPC. They also provided access to their research and information on file with the HPC, as well as their extensive knowledge of county history. The large format photography was undertaken by HABS photographer Jack E. Boucher. The historical report was prepared by HABS historian Catherine C. Lavoie who accompanied the photographer into the field for on site investigation and architectural description.

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