

Special Feature

## Green Acres: The Greatest Planned Neighborhood You've Never Heard Of

by Ted Orosz, AICP, and Sean Di Luccio

Urban planners and urban designers are familiar with developments such as Radburn, New Jersey; Sunnyside, New York; and Greenbelt, Maryland. Another development of that era, also very important to the evolution of the profession, largely has been forgotten. This paper presents the history of Green Acres, New York, a neighborhood just east of New York City in Nassau County.

Green Acres lies on the border of Queens and Nassau counties just south of Sunrise Highway, a major state highway that spans the length of Long Island. Although Green Acres is part of the Valley Stream Central High School District and is served by the Valley Stream Post Office, it is not part of neighboring Valley Stream, a large incorporated village of about 37,000 people that borders Green Acres to the north and east. Instead Green Acres is an unincorporated part of the Town of Hempstead, which has an enormous population of 759,000 people. Green Acres is located in the hamlet of South Valley Stream, which has a population of about 6,000.

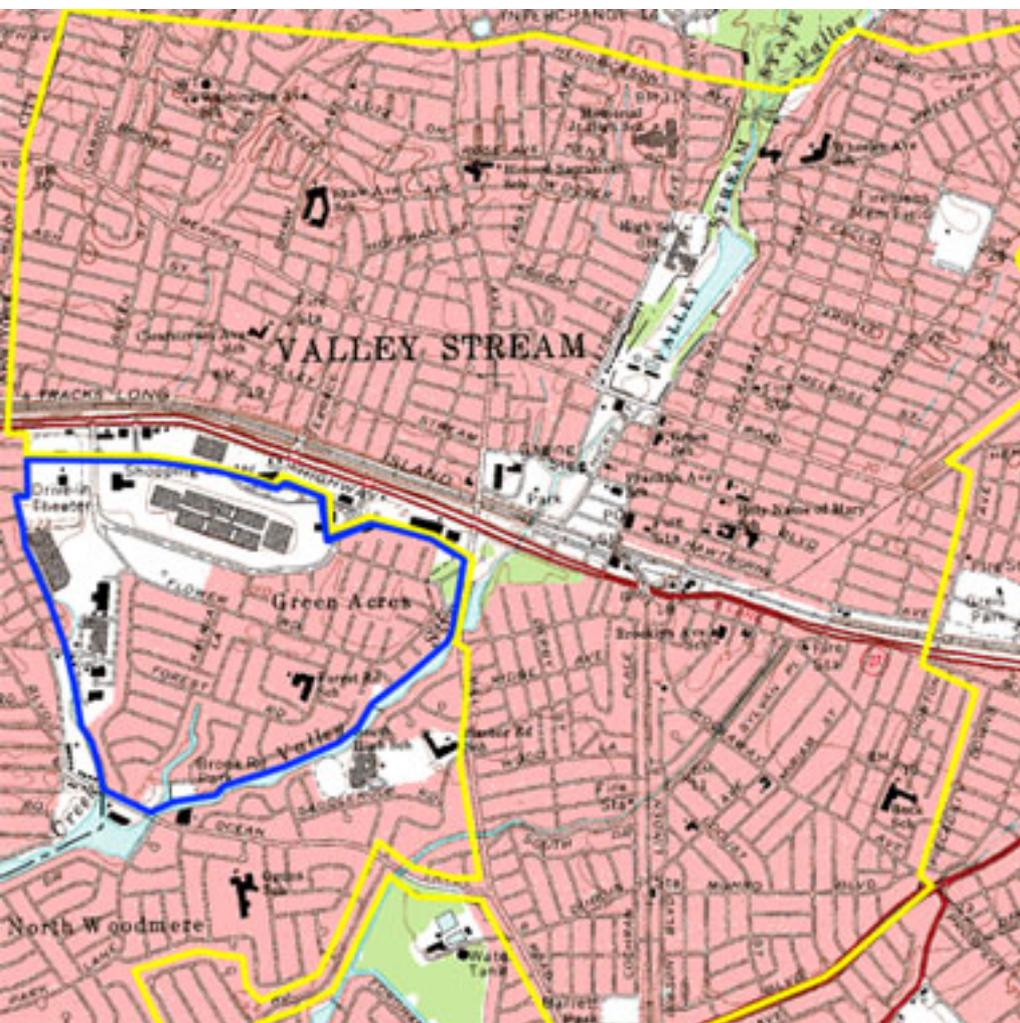


Figure 1

A map of the Green Acres in relation to the rest of the Valley Stream area. The New York City boundary borders the neighborhood the west; the village boundary is yellow, and Green Acres is outlined in blue (Source: U.S. Geological Survey. Used with permission.)

Next to Green Acres neighborhood is a large shopping center called Green Acres Mall. When it opened in 1956, it was

one of the largest shopping malls on Long Island and, due to almost continuous expansion, remains so today. In the early 1990s, the mall developed an unsavory reputation from several well-publicized incidents: a 1990 shooting at the movie theater (*New York Times*, December 27, 1990) and a dispute that led to a stabbing in 1994 (*New York Times*, August 16, 1994). Consequently, in the late 1990s the residents of Green Acres took a vote and renamed their neighborhood Mill Brook. So in this paper we will refer to the neighborhood as either Green Acres or Mill Brook.

## **BACKGROUND**

Nassau County was originally a part of Queens County. In 1898, however, New York City absorbed (incorporated) the four surrounding counties of the Bronx, Brooklyn (Kings County), Staten Island (Richmond County), and the western half of Queens County. The eastern half of Queens County, then primarily farmland, became the new County of Nassau. A generation later, with excellent rail service and a parkway system being built by Robert Moses, the county was prime for rapid suburbanization.

In 1928, Columbia Field airport opened on the far western border of Nassau County just south of the Long Island Rail Road's south shore mainline. Long Island was a very important area in the history of American aviation. Both Grumman and Republic Aircraft were based on Long Island, and Charles Lindbergh's famous transatlantic flight to Paris took off from Roosevelt Field in Nassau County. Columbia Field, which would become the future site of the Green Acres Mall and Green Acres neighborhood, also played an important role in the development of aviation. In 1929, the field was renamed Curtiss Airfield, and for several years it was the largest and busiest airfield on Long Island (Source: Town of Hempstead website, Landmarks Preservation page). Most famously, the Ninety-Nines, a groundbreaking group of women aviators, first met at Curtiss Field on November 2, 1929. Famed aviator Amelia Earhart was the first president of the group (Source: The Ninety-Nines, Inc. International Organization of Women Pilots website). The airfield was short-lived, however, and closed during the height of the Depression in 1933.

In 1935, with the hope of both jump-starting the construction industry and providing desperately needed housing, planner and architect Clarence Stein, co-founder of the Regional Planning Association, was asked by the Resettlement Administration to help plan new towns near big urban centers. At this time, Stein was well-known for his collaborations with Henry Wright in the planning of such developments as Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, Radburn in New Jersey, and Chatham Village in Pittsburgh. More than 20 towns were planned across the country, but only three were built: Greendale in Wisconsin, Greenhills in Ohio, and Greenbelt in Maryland. In his book, *Toward New Towns for America* (Stein, 1951), however, Stein mentions four planned towns. The fourth town is his Valley Stream project.

Stein's plan for Valley Stream was to use the entire airfield site. His team prepared a plan for 18,000 residents, far more than live on the site today. Stein describes housing for 4,500 families, thus presuming an average household of four people. The density was 13 units per acre on the site, which now is made up of the Green Acres neighborhood and Green Acres Mall (Stein 1951).

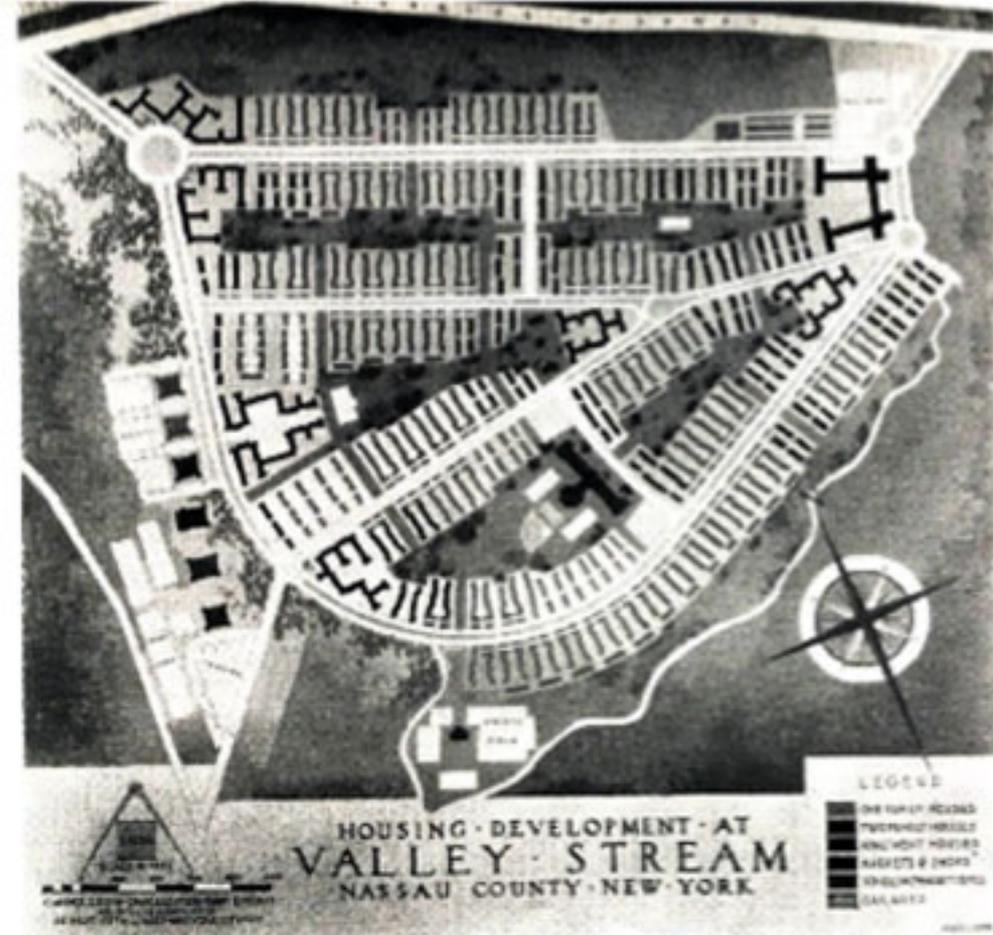


Figure 2

Reprinted from Clarence Stein's *Toward New Towns for America*. Used with permission of MIT Press.

To quote from Stein (1951, p.115-117):

"Valley Stream, which is characteristic in general of the design of all four. Even though it was only a project, I think its plans formed an important step toward the development of the Greenbelt Towns and ultimately toward New Towns in America. The site consisted of 350 acres of flat land just beyond the New York City border. It was well-drained, and its sand and gravel soil could be economically used for large-scale building. The property was surrounded on three sides by well built up areas. The Town Plan followed the Radburn pattern with super-blocks, underpasses, central parks and an even more complete separation of pedestrian and auto."

Stein concludes his chapter on Valley Stream: "Our studies for Valley Stream served as the basis for my future recommendations to the Resettlement Administration that were to be used in the Greenbelt Towns."

Stein's team recommended a greenbelt to surround the site, and land was to be dedicated for a school at the center. He also proposed reusing the airport hangars as commercial space. Unfortunately the plan was never realized, which Stein attributed to the ineffectual working of a large, complicated, slow-moving government bureaucracy.

## DEVELOPMENT BY CHANIN

By 1936, the Chanin Companies had taken control of the site. Architect and developer Irwin Chanin is known for his construction of the legitimate theaters in Times Square, including the Richard Rodgers, Biltmore, Brooks Atkinson, Golden, Royale, and Majestic. He is also the architect and developer for both The Century and The Majestic apartments on Central Park West, and most famously, the Chanin Building, an ornate office building near Grand Central Terminal, which was the tallest building in Midtown Manhattan when it was finished in 1928 (*New York Times*, February 26, 1988). Today the Chanin Building is a New York City Landmark.

Chanin and his team planned for a development of 1,800 single-family houses for the Green Acres site, about 40 percent the density of Stein's plan. Ground was quickly broken on May 22, 1936 (*Valley Stream Mail*, May 22, 1936). At that time, work began on 24 houses, but 400 houses — a diverse mix of brick capes and colonials — were built before World War II. It was subsequently referred to as Green Acres Phase I, but today is known by locals as the "old section."

It is clear that Chanin's site plan, and ultimately his marketing approach, presumed that residents would have cars.

Nevertheless, the pedestrian network was a major selling point. Every street, except for the primary access roads, was a cul-de-sac. This guaranteed slow automobile traffic, but more important, it created an opportunity for an off-street pedestrian network.

At the end of each cul-de-sac, a small path connects the road with the green space. The backyards empty into this network of linear parks and walking paths that circle the community, and it was understood, as in Sunnyside and Radburn, that the parkland was shared public space and a treasured resource.

The October 1936 issue of *Architectural Record* published an article about Green Acres's unique planning characteristics (Mikkelson 1936). "About 90 per cent of all homes in the community will front on ... cul-de-sac lanes. ... From the head of each cul-de-sac a short concrete footpath leads into the general park system. ... These footpaths are so arranged, in turn, that the shortest and most direct route between points on its borders is by way of the footpaths."



Figure 3

The pedestrian path and green space circling the neighborhood made Green Acres a safe and easy place to play. Reprinted from *A Romance with the City* by Irwin S. Chanin and Diana Agrest, courtesy of Cooper Union Press.

Development stopped during World War II, but work resumed in the 1950s. Between 1951 and 1959, the Chanin Company built Green Acres Phase II (Agrest 1982). This phase included the construction of the shopping center, the elementary school (built by the school district), as well as the remainder of the residential neighborhood. During Phase II, garden apartments also were built, creating an appealing buffer between the single-family homes and the shopping center. Phase II houses are essentially a standard post-war residential development, with connecting curvilinear streets and no cul-de-sacs or pedestrian paths except for the area adjacent to the old section. One nice touch, however, is that all utility lines run through backyards, giving the streets a somewhat more elegant and less cluttered appearance.

Thus it is the old section — the area built before World War II — that is the unheralded planning landmark. While Chanin and his team laid out their own site plan, the similarities to Stein's plan and thinking are readily apparent. In each case a complete network of pedestrian paths was a fundamental feature. In each case an elementary school was planned for the center of the site. Like Radburn, the blocks end in cul-de-sacs leading into the shared park. Two great architects/ planners collaborated, although not directly, to make this neighborhood unique and special.

The Green Acres, or Mill Brook, neighborhood today is still a very appealing single-family suburban neighborhood. There are only three main access points to the neighborhood, making it a very secure, quiet, self-contained development. It is possible to get from every residence in the original Green Acres neighborhood to the Forest Road School without crossing any major streets. For this reason, most of the students in the community are able to walk to school, which is a wonderful amenity for prospective homeowners.



Figure 4  
 The street plan for the old section of Green Acres, showing the large use of cul-de-sacs and the network of pedestrian paths. The elementary school is denoted by a flag. Credit: Sean Di Luccio.

### THREATS FROM STORMS AND NEGLECT

A new concern for the neighborhood is tidal flooding. The area is quite low in elevation, no more than 10 feet above sea level, and the waterways all serve as tidal inlets. Consequently, many houses in the neighborhood are prone to flooding from both rainstorms and tides. The community suffered significant damage during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The tidal inlets that border the community overflowed their banks in the storm surge and flooded hundreds of residences, turning streets into rivers.

The neighborhood recovered quite well, and in spring 2014 a storm resilience plan proposed by the Mill Brook Civic Association was awarded a \$3 million grant through the New York Rising Community Reconstruction Program for the "Best Use of Green Infrastructure." The plan calls for the use of green resiliency strategies to improve coastal protection, including a terraced pathway, erosion and sediment control elements, permeable pavements, living shoreline, bioswales, and educational signage. The plan also includes several sustainable and cost-effective strategies such as storm water retention and tidal flow management, as well as improving open space, natural habitat, power grid reinforcement, and the strengthening of communication networks and crisis coordination (*Newsday*, April 30, 2014).

Marc Tenzer, the longtime president of the Mill Brook Civic Association, who worked very hard on the grant application, said in a July 2014 interview: "The neighborhood will be completely revitalized by the improvements made possible by the state grant."

Unfortunately, flooding is not the only challenge the community faces today. With an increase in crime in the surrounding area and the mall's bad reputation, many of the older residents have left Green Acres, often for places further east on Long Island. Only a handful of residents living in the old section are aware their neighborhood is a groundbreaking planned development.

Today, the pedestrian paths and shared green space are neglected and underused. Some parts of the paths are in fair

condition but some are in abysmal shape, effectively ignored by the Town of Hempstead. Many of the sidewalks are overgrown with weeds, and are filled with cracks. The grass in many areas also has been neglected. About a third of the trees in the shared pedestrian path have fallen during the past decade due to age and the storms that have affected the area, and none has been replanted.



Figure 5

Green Acres slightly after opening (top) and Green Acres as of March 2014 (bottom). Credit: Sean Di Luccio.

Note in Figure 5 the bare ground and addition of fences, which were relatively rare until the early 2000s. A pedestrian bridge that connected the Green Acres neighborhood to Valley Stream South High School across the stream has been demolished by the Town of Hempstead, despite outcry from the community, because it was deemed structurally unsound and an unsavory hangout for high school students (*LI Herald*, September 18, 2008).

Many new homeowners have fenced their backyards, making the open green space much less inviting and much less accessible. There has been some talk about having the old section receive historic designation, but a majority of residents oppose such an action, so it has never been pursued. This historic planned neighborhood has survived the test of time in many ways, but is now hidden in plain sight, nestled in the clutter of suburbia.

## CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Co-author Sean Di Luccio, who spent his first 20 years in Green Acres, writes: "I was lucky enough to grow up in the old section of Green Acres. The memories I have growing up in Green Acres are all good ones. My house connected with the shared pedestrian path in the back. Before the residents fenced their yards, I have fond memories of my neighbors walking across the path and knocking on my back door asking to hang out. If your neighbors lived on the other side of the path from you, they knocked on your back door, never your front door.

"I have great memories of meeting up with my friends in the path and we played sports until one of our parents would enter the path and call us in for dinner. This sounds like a situation from the 1950s, but it was as recent as 10 years ago.

"I didn't realize how special Green Acres was until I learned that every neighborhood wasn't like mine. I educated myself more about the history of the neighborhood, and I fell in love with the art of planning so much that I am pursuing planning as my undergraduate major. I will never forget the memories I had in Green Acres and the friends I made."

Marc Tenzer, president of the Mill Brook Civic Association, adds, "We moved there because it was such a great place to live and raise a family. Although we are so close to New York City, it is like living in a small intimate village."

In conclusion, it is a shame how neglected the shared pedestrian paths and green space have become. Green Acres is an important planning milestone both culturally and historically. Walking through the old section reminds one that planners had a very different vision for America's suburbs than the auto-centric society that was ultimately built in the 1950s. Residents, officials, and planners alike should recognize Green Acres's rich planning history and designate the neighborhood as a Planning Landmark.

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*Sean Di Luccio grew up in the old section of Green Acres, although he moved away in June 2014. He is now in his final year of undergraduate study at the State University of New York at New Paltz, studying planning. He most recently completed an internship at the Long Island Rail Road in the Strategic Investments Department.*