

Garden Apartments

Three Preservation Case Studies in Virginia

Arlington County, Virginia, is one of the smallest and most densely populated counties in the nation. Its 187,000 residents live in an area of about 26 square miles. Located just across the Potomac River from Washington, DC, the county is probably best known for Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington House, Fort Myer, and the Pentagon. But it has a number of other historic resources that tourists rarely visit. Foremost among them are its garden apartments.

Garden apartments are low-density, low-scale, multi-family residential developments that have their roots in the English garden city and the German superblock concepts. General characteristics include low-density superblock development, buildings clustered around landscaped courtyards, separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and the use of shallow building plans and staggered setbacks to increase ventilation and light.

In the United States, garden apartments gained popularity in the Depression years of the 1930s as a response to a severe shortage of rental housing for moderate- and middle-income families. They became even more prevalent during World War II, as the need to house defense workers grew critical.

Three Arlington garden apartments played significant roles in the growth and development of this housing type. Colonial Village, Buckingham, and Fairlington were cited as national prototypes at the time of their construction. All are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and all continue to serve critical housing needs today.

Because of their size and large percentage of open space, garden apartments present enormous preservation challenges, particularly in dense urban areas. Other issues, especially housing, are bound to be part of the process. To be successful, preservation planning should begin long before the redevelopment scheme is filed. The survival stories of Arlington's garden apartments offer preservation lessons.

History

At the turn of the century, Arlingtonians could hardly have foreseen the explosive growth that lay just ahead. In 1900, the rural county had a mere 6,400 residents. By 1930, the population had increased to 26,600. Then, in the next 10 years, the number of residents more than doubled, as President Roosevelt's New Deal programs drew workers to the Washington area. One New Deal program was the Federal Housing Administration, established in the National Housing Act of 1934. Part of its mission was to insure mortgages for large-scale rental housing complexes built by private developers.

Colonial Village, the first garden apartment complex in Arlington, was also the first FHA-insured, large-scale rental housing project in the nation. Built in four phases between 1935 and 1940 on 55 acres, its 245 Colonial Revival-style buildings occupied only about 18 percent of the land. The project was a success both in providing low-cost housing and in convincing developers and mortgage lenders that rental housing could be a safe investment during the Depression.

Buckingham, Arlington's second garden apartment, was begun in 1937. It, too, was an FHA-insured project. Sited on 100 acres, it was nearly double the size of Colonial Village. Buckingham was the last design of Henry Wright, a prominent advocate and prophet of the garden city movement. Its developer, Allie Freed, president of Paramount Motors Corporation, had founded the Committee for Economic Recovery. The Committee's members, nationally prominent businessmen, aimed to reform the building industry by using the auto industry's economies of scale, demonstrate the economic viability of rental housing using only private capital, and promote economic recovery. Buckingham was the Committee's premier demonstration project.

Both Colonial Village and Buckingham were widely featured in national publications and professional journals, leading to widespread emulation of their innovative plans.

Buckingham was still under construction as Americans began preparing for war. The need for housing became critical as manpower requirements shifted to meet war production needs in offices and factories across the nation. In response, the federal Defense Homes Corporation (DHC) was formed in 1940 to finance defense housing in localities where there were shortages that could not be alleviated through privately financed projects. DHC intended that the housing it built would be sold at war's end to become a permanent part of the community.

Fairlington, constructed between 1942 and 1944, was located just two and a half miles from the Pentagon, completed in 1943. With more than 3,400 units on 322 acres, Fairlington was DHC's largest project and also the largest apartment project in the nation at that time. Its Colonial Revival-style brick apartment buildings and attached townhouses, many with front entrance porches or stoops, were more varied in form and detailing than those of the other two developments.

Preservation

By the 1970s, all three garden apartments faced redevelopment pressure. Arlington, which 30 years earlier had been the "outer limits" of suburban development, now was in the inner ring. Two regional transportation projects—the Metro network of surface and underground transit, which opened its first Arlington segment in 1977, and the I-66 expressway, which opened in 1982—sparked significant changes. In response, the county's policy was to concentrate mixed high-density uses around the Metro stations.

Colonial Village. In 1977, Mobil Corporation's real estate company purchased Colonial Village, which had remained a rental community since its construction. The property's location, within walking distance of two soon-to-be-opened subway stations, made it a prime candidate for redevelopment. Tenants, preservationists and the Arlington County Board became concerned about the future of the village. Tenants formed the Colonial Village Preservation Committee advocating local historic district designation of the entire village, and in late 1978 the county board designated a small portion of it. (In a local historic district, exterior modifications must be reviewed and determined to be compatible with the district's historic character. The owner must obtain a permit before work can

begin.) The board also formed a committee consisting of the developer, planning commissioners and representatives of the tenants' association and other civic groups to negotiate a compromise.

A year later, the county board approved a phased development site plan that accomplished a range of objectives: conservation, affordable housing, and redevelopment. Elements included sale of some units to affordable housing groups, some condominium conversions, long-term rental of some units, some demolition and rezoning for three 12-story office towers, and construction of a new condominium building and townhouses. In all, the exteriors of 75 percent of the units were preserved through historic designation or conservation.

Buckingham. Buckingham's preservation story is longer and more convoluted. Complicating factors throughout the process included multiple ownership, multiple tenant organizations, cultural differences, a lack of shared information, and competing and often hostile interest groups.

Buckingham remained under single ownership until 1981, when a new owner converted part of the property to cooperative units and later sold other portions, resulting in multiple ownership of the project. Tenants, many of whom were recent immigrants, feared displacement. In 1985, the Buckingham Tenants Association asked the county's architectural review board to initiate the historic district designation process for Buckingham. The review board asked the Arlington County Board for funds for a study, but its request was denied.

The matter lay dormant for several years until 1991, when one owner announced plans to demolish its portion of Buckingham to build new condominiums and townhouses. In May of that year the review board voted to initiate historic designation procedures for the entire complex, based on studies undertaken by graduate students at a nearby university. After a public hearing, the review board voted in September to recommend that the county board designate Buckingham as a local historic district and asked the county board to hold a public hearing to consider the matter. That hearing was deferred for many months. Most preservationists came to believe that the county board was using the "threat" of historic designation in an attempt to extract affordable housing and other concessions from the owners.



Colonial Village. The complex's location near the subway line and major commuter routes necessitated trade-offs. The developer was allowed some higher density development (background) in exchange for preservation and conservation of existing buildings and affordable housing. Photo courtesy Judith Greig.

In the meantime, in 1988 the Buckingham Tenants Association and the Arlington Housing Corporation (AHC), a private, nonprofit housing sponsor, had begun exploring options for tenant ownership of part of the property. In early 1993, they presented a preliminary affordable housing proposal to the county board, and the board appropriated funds for further study.

Finally, in 1993, the county board held a hearing and designated a portion of Buckingham as a local historic district. It also approved an affordable housing deal, which hit a snag within weeks, however, because of foreclosure.

The new owner, Paradigm, worked out a new affordable housing plan. Paradigm also undertook substantial rehabilitation within the historic district, using a combination of Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit and Low-Income Housing Tax Credit.

Fairlington. Fairlington's story is very different. True to its goals, Defense Homes Corporation sold Fairlington in 1947 to two Texas businessmen whose company, Fairmac, continued to own and operate Fairlington as a rental community until 1968. After initially considering and then rejecting demolition and high-rise redevelopment, the new owner began conversion to condominiums in 1972. Tenants were given an opportunity to purchase before units were offered to the public. Conversion of the entire complex was completed and all units were sold by 1978, thanks to a savvy marketing cam-

paigned and attractive financing. While the interiors were renovated, the exteriors were left virtually unchanged. (A 1975 newspaper ad said: "These homes were solidly crafted to last generations; we left well enough alone.") The project won an award from the Northern Virginia chapter of the American Institute of Architects and was cited in *House & Home* ("Hottest Condo Conversion in the Country?" August 1975).

In 1988, the North Fairlington Historical Designation Committee was formed in response to a plan by one condominium board to replace the community's slate roofs with asphalt shingles. The committee was successful and, in anticipation of Fairlington's 50th anniversary, began exploring the community's eligibility as a historic district. In 1997, Fairlington was found eligible for listing on the National Register, and the committee geared up to complete the nomination application. Six volunteer teams were assembled (survey, photography, finance, communication, data input, and volunteer management), a web site <<http://www.fairlington.org>> was established, a bank account opened, and training began. In two days in January and May of 1998, volunteers surveyed and photographed all 1,064 of Fairlington's buildings. The completed nomination was submitted to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources in September, and Fairlington was listed on the National Register on March 29 of this year.

Conclusion

Early garden apartments are an important part of our cultural heritage. Preserving them can be challenging because of the very features that make them significant—their large size, low-density plan and low-scale buildings. But by planning for change using a combination of planning and zoning tools, local historic district overlay zones, housing and preservation tax credits, and sensitive rehabilitation—and above all by fostering community awareness of their history—these projects can be preserved so that they can continue to serve our communities.

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