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Building Main Street: Village Improvement and the Small Town Ideal

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Abstract
Before the American small town was enshrined as an ideal, it was a space of dynamic and pioneering progressive reform, a narrative that has been largely untold in histories of professional planning and landscape history. Archival research shows that village improvement was not simply a prequel to the City Beautiful in the years following the 1893 Chicago Expo, but a rich and complex history that places the residential village at the center of debates about the middle landscape as a civic realm comprised of complimentary and oppositional pastoral and urban worldviews. The second half of the nineteenth century saw an extensive movement in village improvement that affected the physical, economic, and social infrastructure of rural settlements of all sizes in every region of the country. As a concept referenced by planners working on comprehensively-designed suburban communities, the small town ideal has never been historicized with respect to the history and theory of the nineteenth century village landscape improvements. This study broadens

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the study of village improvement to include the history of ideas and debates surrounding rural development on the national and local level between the 1820s and 1880s and, in doing so, argues that the discussion-born theory of village improvement within a national rural reform movement led by some of the nineteenth century's most respected and influential reformers including B.G. Northrop (education), Col. George Waring (sanitation), N.H. Egleston (conservation), Isabella Beecher Hooker (women's rights), and F.L. Olmsted, Sr. (landscape architecture) was modeled on the Laurel Hill Association in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and that the local practice of this one society over the same period in line with the national movement together comprised the most active sustained discussion about the civic society and physical infrastructure of rural settlements in American history. This narrative tracks reform movements in rural settlements over several decades, beginning with landscape gardening through sanitation and up to the professionalization of city planning and the country life movement. Planning veered from broadly conceived urban pastoralism and multi-disciplinary rural improvement that viewed the village as an extension of the city toward preservation planning that viewed the small town as an increasingly idealized pastoral space, past-looking and unchanging. This trend was in line with an associated shift from planning as a series of fine-grained locally led practices to expert-driven professionalized planning as grandiose comprehensive vision.

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