

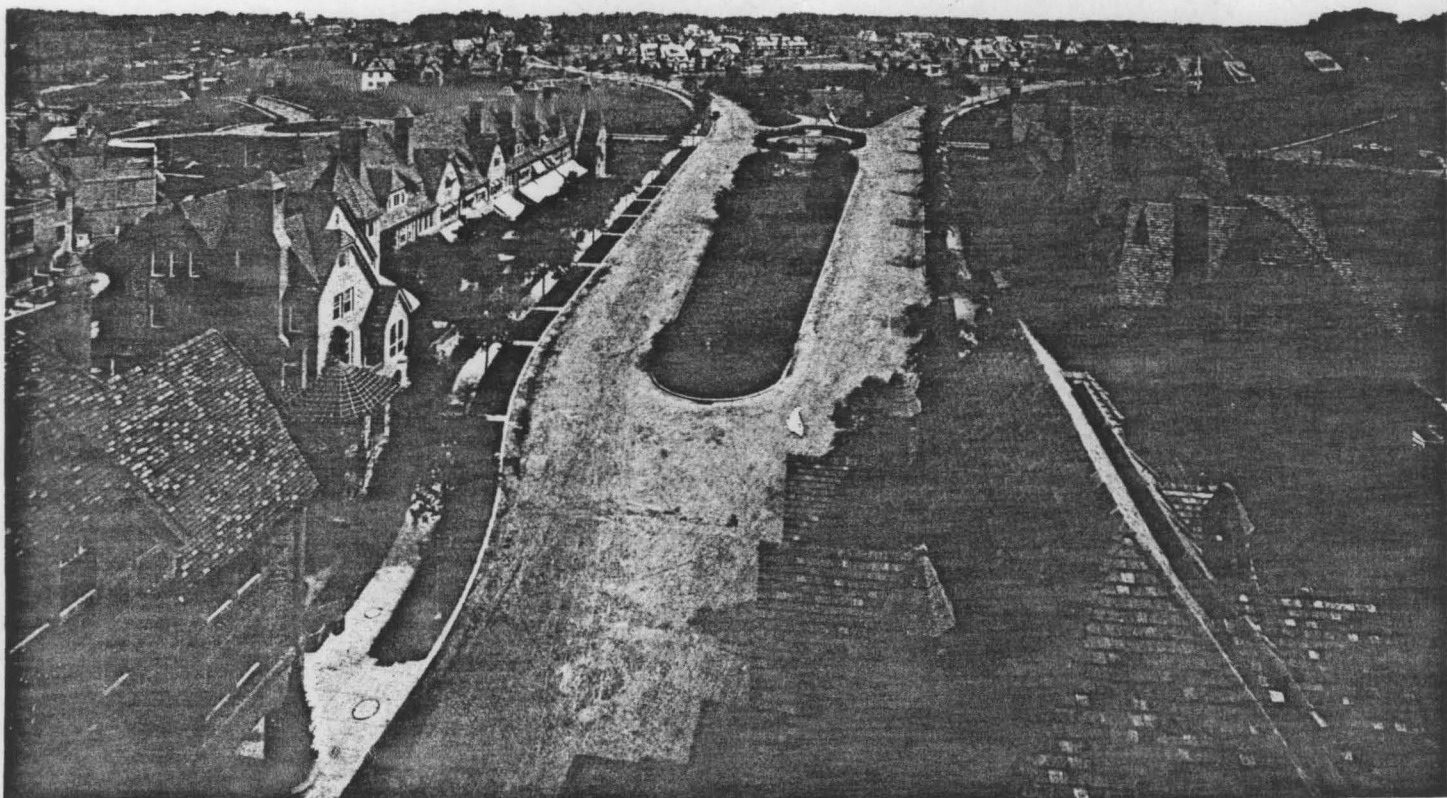
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THE VILLAGE GREEN FROM HOTEL TOWER.

## Forest Hills Gardens from the Town Planning Viewpoint

By Charles C. May

IT has become trite to make the Russell Sage Foundation development at Forest Hills the subject for pages of rhapsodic eulogy. Much of what has been written has been marked by fulsomeness rather than by discrimination. The emphasis, too, has been placed very largely upon details—a house here and there, a group or two selected at intervals, and the customary glimpses of Station Square.

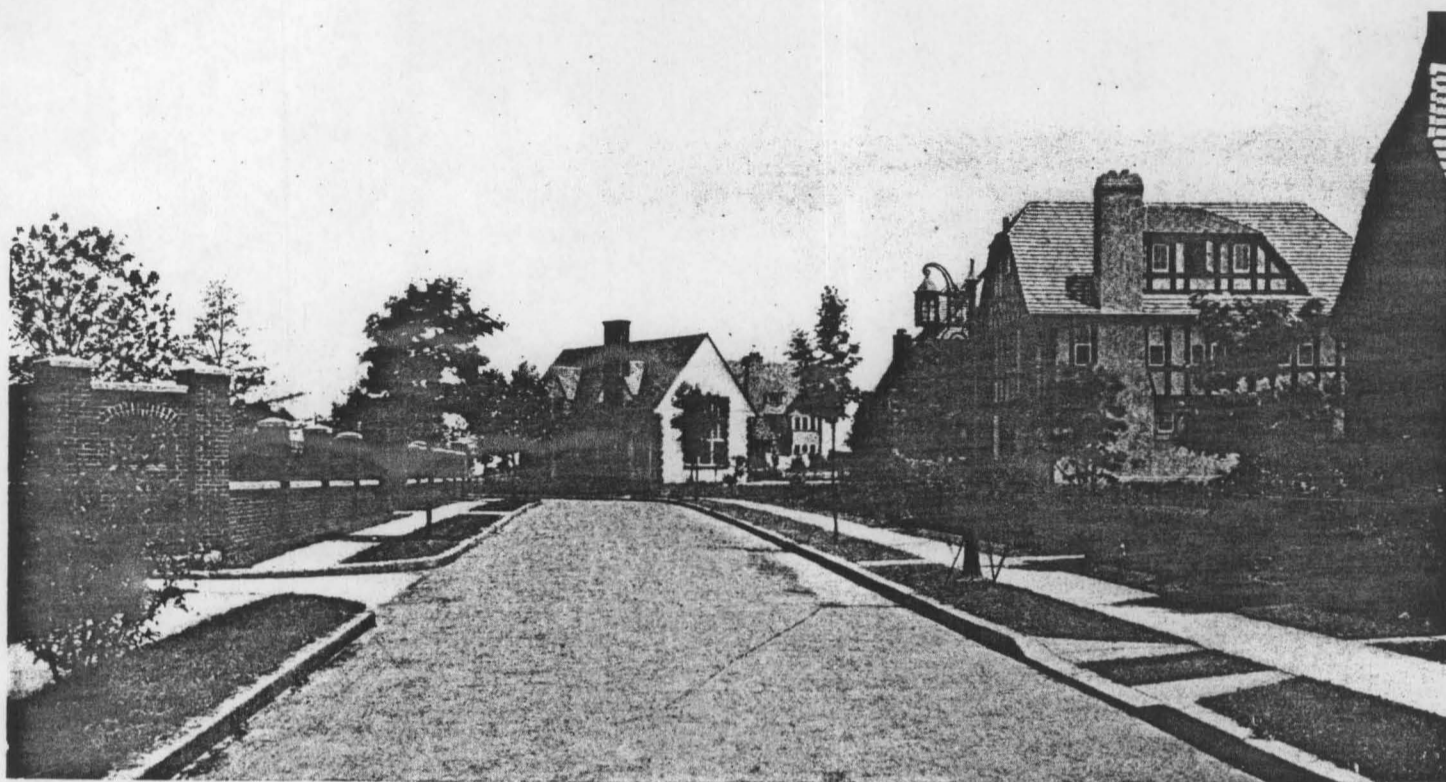
Yet in the majority of this mass of published material there has been little more than appreciation of obvious aspects; there has been only the slightest attempt to get beneath the surface of things; to seek after causes; to analyze into its elements the development of ideas made objective in the views with which we have become familiar.

We do not advocate a general picking to pieces of street picture, vista and details—destroying the enjoyment of the flower by tearing apart its petals; but we *would go far enough* in such a process to give, if possible, a more general under-

standing of the kind of problems involved. This is a really tremendous task—transforming within a space of five years a flat expanse of meadow and woodland, into the populous organization of a town, alive with activity, filled with the picturesque, and already beginning to hint at weathering. Good taste is everywhere evidenced, but good taste has not alone built this machine, put life into it and set it working—these things come only through prayer and fasting—and eternal hard work.

Now that Forest Hills is just beginning, in certain spots, to give hints visually of the aspect which has existed since 1909, in the minds of its creators, Messrs. Grosvenor Atterbury and Frederic Law Olmstead, it is interesting to observe in how many respects the distinction and quality which it is universally held to possess, are due to, and proportionate with its exemplification of the principles of town planning; how the knowledge and employment of these principles has lifted

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VISTA, ROCKROSE PLACE.

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it above the average run of real estate development; and further, when the latter share in some degree these qualities, how often it is because they too have grasped and utilized the methods of the town-planner.

Any attempt at analysis must go back to the very anatomy of the district, that is to say, its street system, and the way its own street layout is tied in with the broader one of the city itself. So we find the circulatory system of Forest Hills attached very definitely to the main traffic arteries leading from the Queensboro Bridge on the one side and from Brooklyn on the other; the two being cross connected within Forest Hills itself by the three main lines of communication.

Any great emphasis placed upon a clean cut, well-developed circulation system might have seemed over-academic back in 1909 when the prospect seemed to promise no more than the usual light traffic requirements of the village. Since then the demands have multiplied amazingly—due not only to the unexampled increase of motor traffic within the period, but particularly to the totally unforeseeable emergency load imposed by gatherings of many thousands of people, such as for the past two years have occurred at the West Side Tennis Club. The ease, orderliness and lack of congestion with which these masses of people and streams of vehicles were handled was impressive.

It was made possible by the possession of a system of main traffic arteries, independent of the short residential streets, and the articulation of this system with the natural lines of travel to and from both boroughs of the Greater City. It was a most striking instance of the way in which a well-planned street system lends itself to unforeseen demands that would swamp an ill-considered, inflexible layout. It is, moreover, a warning to the town planner against the sin of under-planning, the temptation to provide only for requirements within sight at the moment. The factor of safety can never be foregone with impunity.

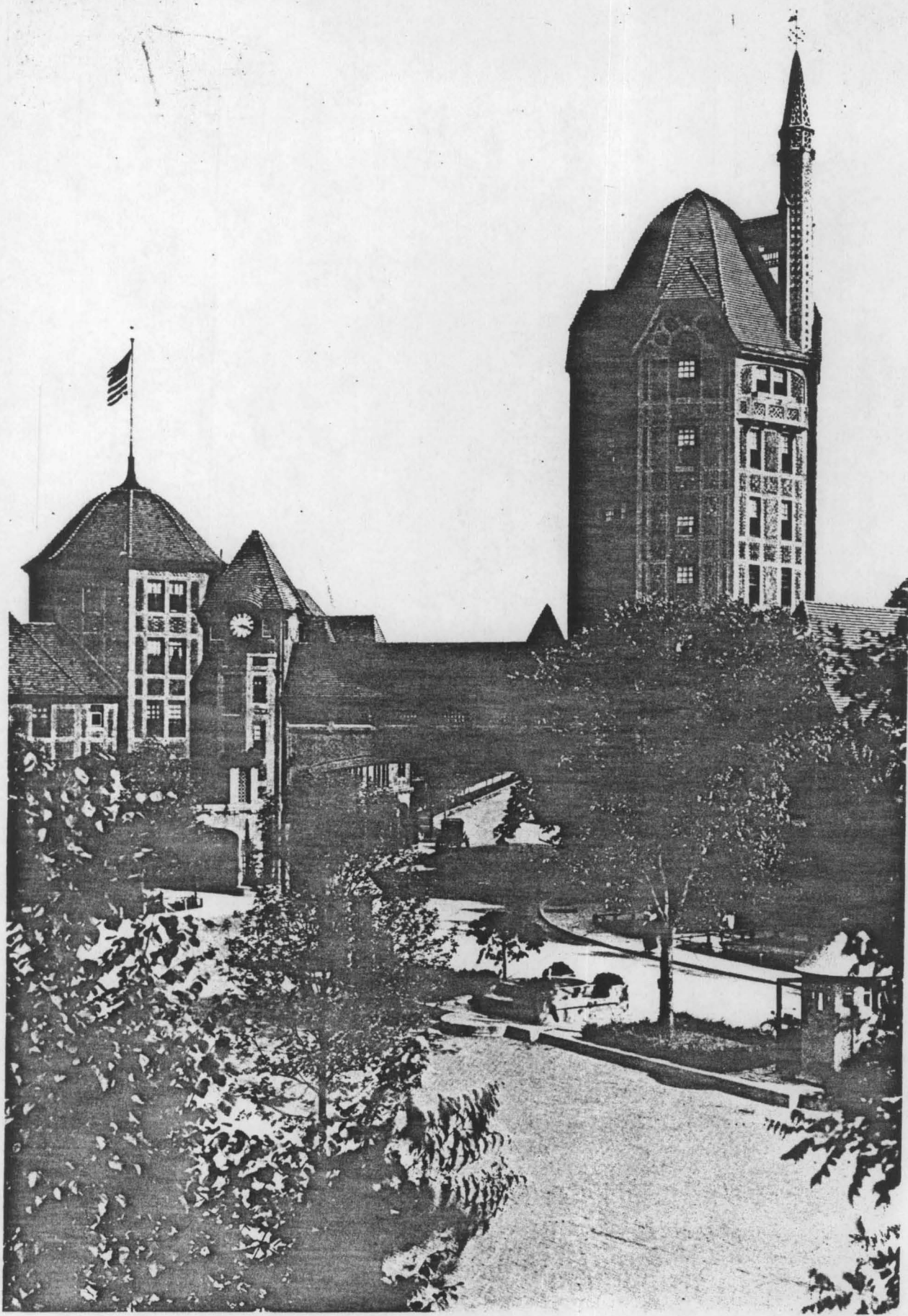
A walled town in America would be perhaps insulting to the genius of our institutions. Certainly it would be a

rank anachronism. Yet we remember and recognize the charm, and self-contained unity gained by so many mediaeval European towns by virtue of the encircling wall that binds together all the loose ends of settlement and prevents them from straggling. The contrast presented by the usual American town needs no comment other than to point out the fact that encircling walls and dread of attack might have saved us from the universal aspect of these outskirts—the regions of squatter huts, of corrugated iron architecture and of scavenging goats—such a region, by the way, as some of that neighboring Forest Hills itself.

Forest Hills would doubtless be spared such conditions at its outer boundaries by the benevolent restrictions of its rulers, but their task is made superfluous by the fortunate fact that the community is delimited by well defined boundaries along the greater portion of its periphery. The railroad embankment is doubtless not commonly regarded as an asset to the village as a whole, yet it plays an important function in preserving the entity of the development on that side, exactly as the bordering turnpike does on the other. One needs only to recall the treatment of many railroad cuts and embankments among the suburbs of Boston to realize how the objectionable elements may be discounted, and the embankments clothed with growing things till they possess a double value to the community—for the loveliness they show forth in themselves and for their service in bounding the settlement. Some such treatment, we have no doubt, is slated for Forest Hills.

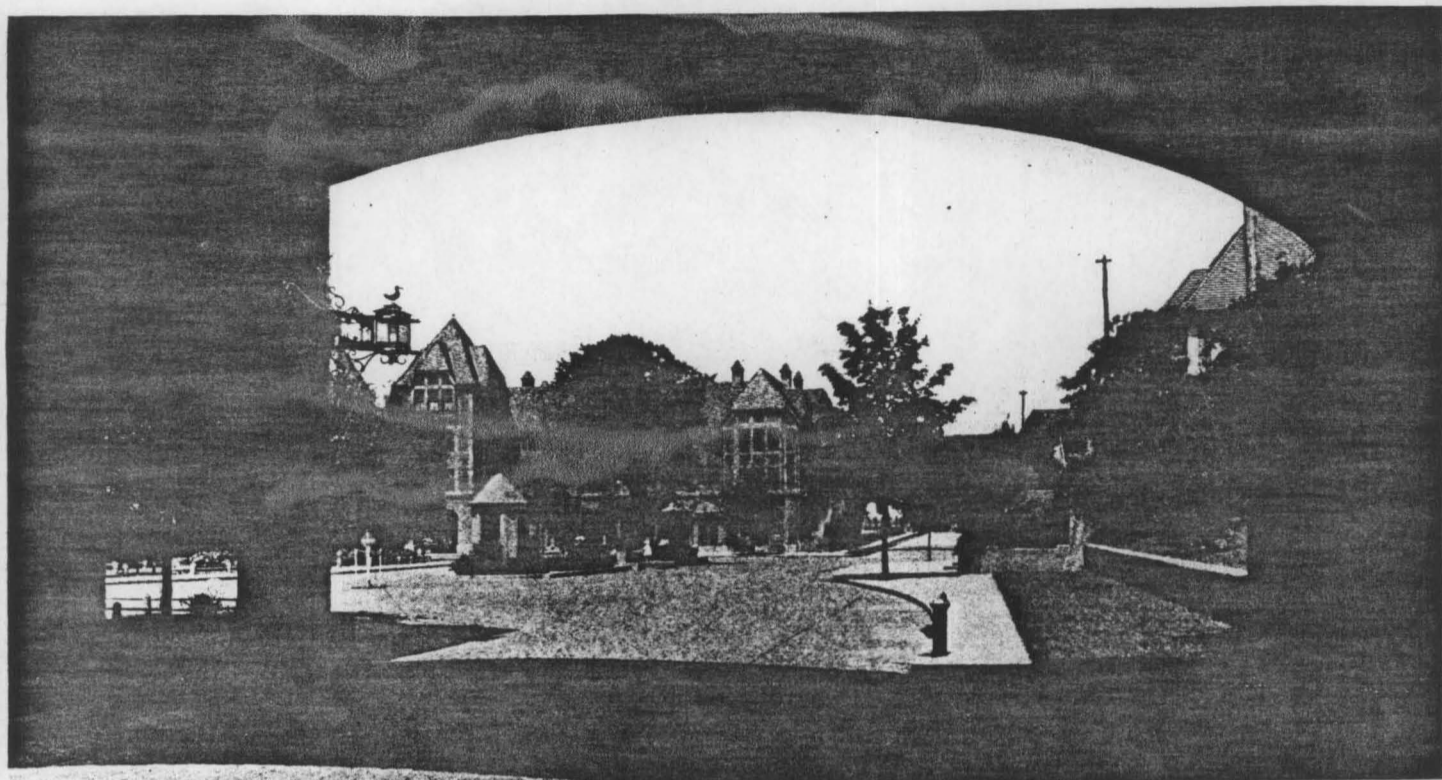
A further value lies in the point of vantage from which one first views the station square and the village beyond. Here was a natural, or rather a pre-determined feature seized upon and utilized in the permanent development, just as were the clumps of forest, the knolls, and the other none-too-numerous landmarks of the village site. This utilizing fixed conditions as determining points in the design, is so elementary a principle of the town-plan that mention of it ought to be superfluous—and so it would be if transgressions of the law were less than every-day occurrences.

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STATION SQUARE SHOWING HOTEL.

Grosvenor Atterbury, Architect.



STATION SQUARE FROM THE EAST.

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One can picture with not much mental strain, a traveler of a future century standing at certain points in and near Station Square and (if we conceive him equipped with no more than this-century knowledge as regards town planning) pondering whether this picturesque grouping of irregular ground-plan, this piling-up of roof masses, these fragmentary vistas, were actually the result of deliberate planning on paper, or were not the ultimate expression of a gradual growth along unrestricted lines. Such discussions we are familiar with concerning the traditional examples of European mediaeval towns. The case for conscious design in these entirely irregular, apparently haphazard arrangements of plan, street widths and lotting, has been most forcibly presented by Camillo Sitte, the eminent German town planner. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the entire method in German street and site planning of the present day is molded upon his reasoning. In many respects the plan of Forest Hills is akin to those of the modern German school. There is the same picturesque irregularity, the same variety of street width and setback. There is breadth without monumentality; balance without symmetry. In the planning of open squares the streets diverge at peculiar angles—with this difference, that in the German work the vista almost never leads *through* the square or enclosed place; almost invariably the vision is limited by the opposite side of the square, and the greatest care is used in the location of buildings which are to perform the function of closing these vistas.

The street plan of Forest Hills is based upon a judicious balance between straight and curvilinear roads. The former are never numerous to the point of becoming tedious; the latter never degenerate into the aimless wandering lines which become so exasperating when carried to excess. One cannot afford to be dogmatic as to a proportion between the two sorts of street, nor can one lay down rules beyond the most general. No town-plan is worthy the name unless it is governed by—in fact, is the direct outcome and expression of, the local, fixed conditions. It is axiomatic that in rolling or hilly country the curved street is the logical means to avoid steep grades,

to afford the best building sites, and to take advantage of the finest outlooks. Where not subject to the dictates of grades, however, the use of curves is more inclined to artificiality, more of a temptation toward stunts, and more apt to be abused. There is, besides, the undesirable drawback, that, curved streets of short radius, used for residential side-streets, lay exaggerated difficulties upon the site planner—that is, the greater the irregularity of roadway, the greater will be the problem of subdivision into lots, and the successful and economical placing of houses.

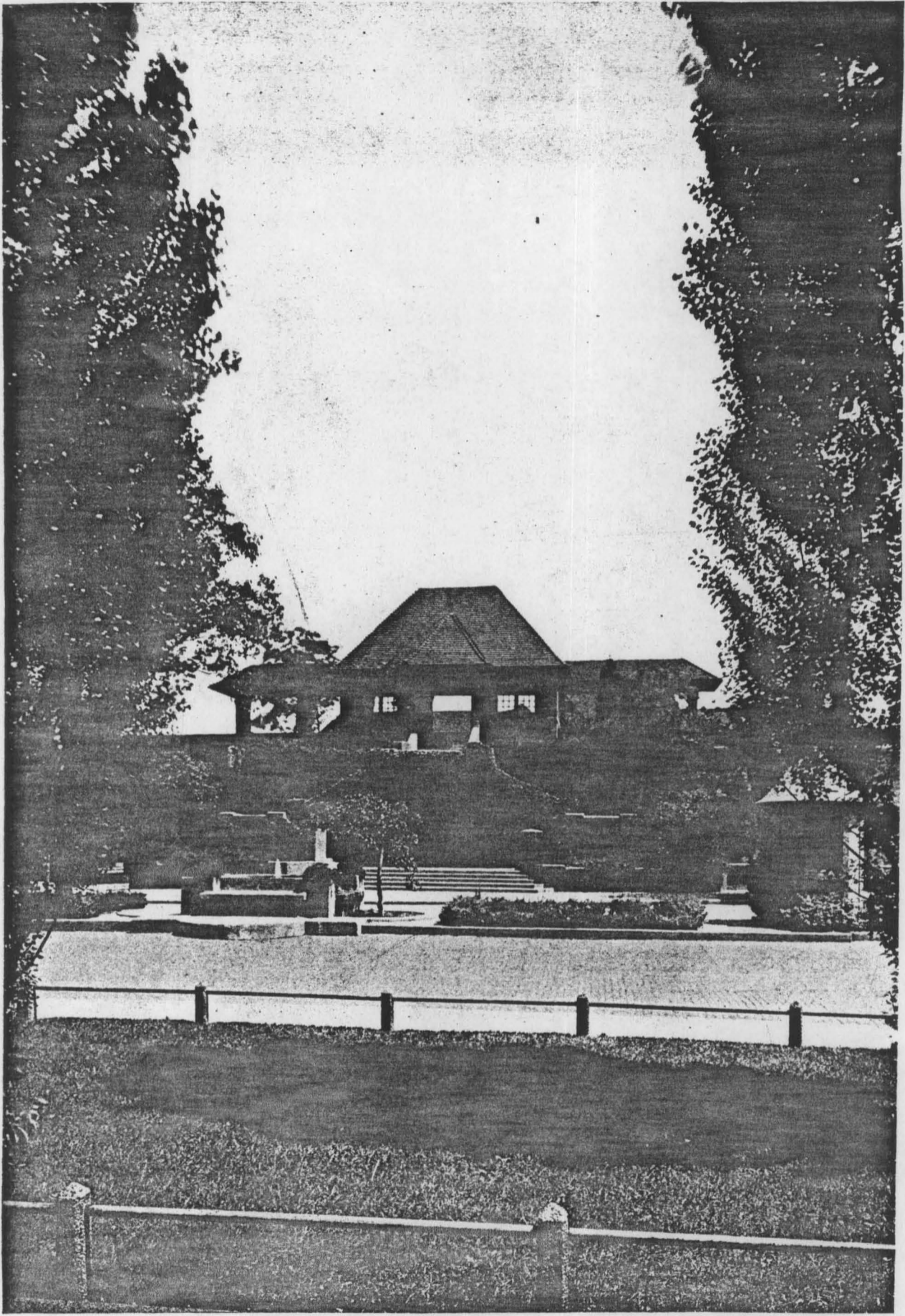
As Mr. Raymond Unwin points out, it is comparatively easy to design an interesting, picturesque house or group of houses for a lot of regular outline, where such a need arises; but in the converse problem, when the call is for a quiet, unbroken mass of dwelling and roof to be placed on a lot of broken, eccentric shape, the difficulties are immeasurably magnified.

The individual problem, then, carries its own set of conditions which must dictate, or at least suggest to the town planner the solution of his street layout problem, nor can any set of rules replace his own study, knowledge, resourcefulness and restraint.

Coming back to Forest Hills, we note that its whole system of roadways, starting from the more or less fixed arteries of through traffic, is based upon and built up from the two main streets whose wide curves converge at the village green. With these two as the motive of the design, the pattern of the plan has been elaborated, and it will be found that most of the other curved streets have their reason in the local topography. Either they skirt the base of a knoll, they explore the lines of a piece of woodland, or they swing around to bring into its most advantageous view an important building site. In other words, they have a reason for existing; they are not curves for the sake of curving.

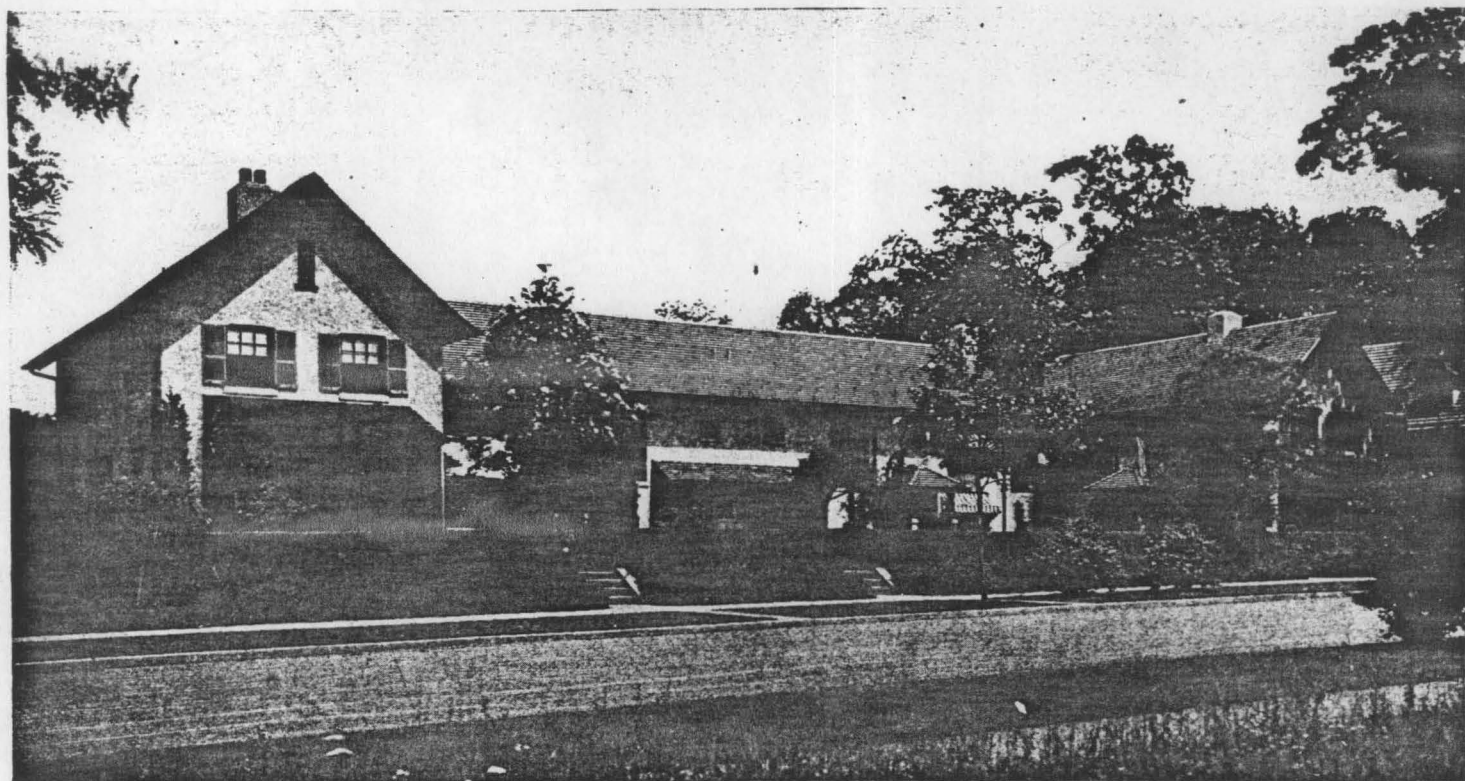
Except for a few of the main traffic streets, Forest Hills is very modest in the widths of its roadways. The idea of living on a boulevard has a glamour about it which has attained a certain vogue. Forest Hills has turned its back upon

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RAILROAD STATION FROM HOTEL.

Grosvenor Atterbury, Architect.



TYPICAL GROUP AND PLAN.

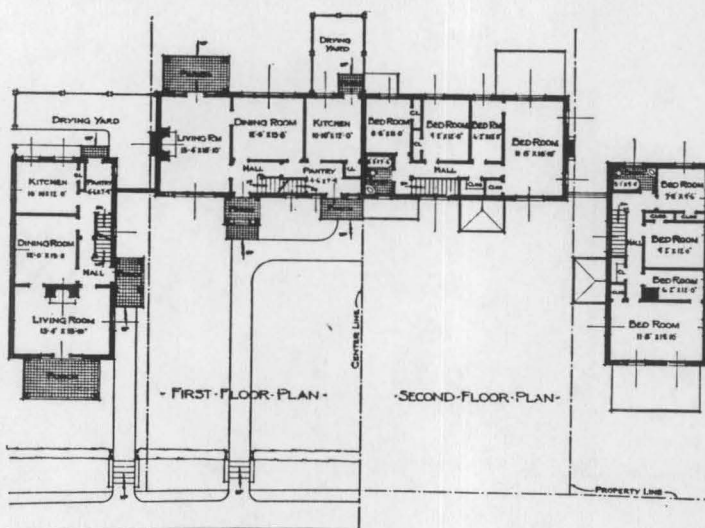
Wilson Eyre, Architect.

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the principle, and Forest Hills is thereby the gainer. Residential streets of boulevard width have some distinct drawbacks—their excessive costs, not only for construction and upkeep, but for the otherwise saleable area they occupy; their temptation to motor and other traffic to make use of roadways where they do not belong; such roadways, if confined to local traffic, could properly be made of lighter, less costly construction, and less tangible than the above but perhaps most important of all—their utter destruction of that sense of homely intimacy which is always connected with the address “Road,” “Place,” “Lane,” “Close,” but never by any chance suggested by “Boulevard” or “Avenue.”

The soundness of this principle of fitting the kind of street to the kind of work it is expected to do, is just now in a fair way of being recognized by New York City; for these matters of street width and street use are inextricably tied up with the others of zone restriction and height restriction.

Precedent has been followed with only occasional deviations in the matter of the lotting of Forest Hills. That is to say, the 20 or 25 x 100-ft. lot has been taken as the typical unit, and the larger landholds are simply multiples of the small ones. Treated in the ordinary, time-dishonored manner, this shape of lot means inevitably that the street picture becomes a succession of gable ends—of deadly monotony if of common type, and of jarring angularity, if of unrelated design. It is in this respect probably, that the beneficent results of the town planner's skill is most apparent to the lay mind. Nowhere does a street present the unfortunate vista of eternal angles which would have been the result of unrestricted or



misdirected growth. An even spotting of minute dots (as individual dwellings, are when viewed from the town planner's scale) has been avoided chiefly in two ways—first, by variations in the set-back from the street and grouping a number of single houses into a composition of large scale; second, by combination of a greater or smaller number of dwellings under a single roof of dominating size and design. There are, of course, additional methods produced by endless variations and combinations of the above two primary ones—the commonest being the composition whose elements are a central group of two or more dwellings, flanked by single-family houses, in various relations to the central mass.

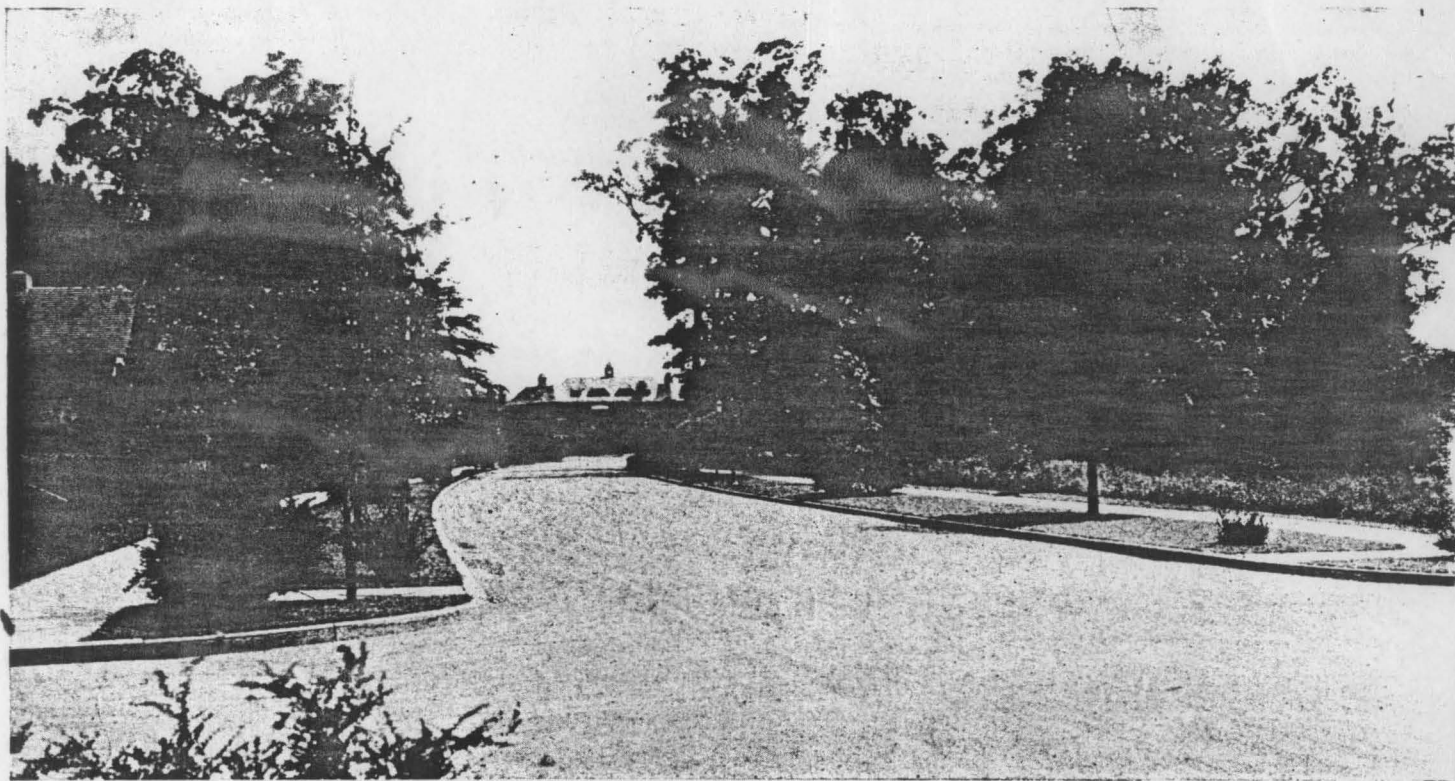
Another method of lotting, with a view to bettering the street picture, has some unquestioned advantages, and is now being tried out in other town planning projects. This adopts a different shape of lot unit, increasing its width at the expense of its depth so that the single-family house of ordinary size may present to the street, not its acute-angled gable end, but its more reposeful, horizontal eave line. Such an arrangement undoubtedly composes better, considered from the street elevation, and where the country is level, and no large proportion of multiple-unit houses is possible, the street picture is considerably improved in actuality. On the other hand, in hilly country, and where the individual house unit is in any decided majority, one finds a long vista of gable ends, jutting one above another in a distressful succession, with the usual added disadvantage of having one side of the street appreciably higher than the other.

In such cases, therefore, the revised arrangement tends to

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WENDOVER ROAD FROM GREENWAY NORTH.



CLOSED VISTA LOOKING UP GREENWAY NORTH.

*(Continued from page 167)*

defeat its own end so far as the improvement of the street picture is concerned. The ideal (or the best looking compromise), is perhaps that suggested when, in the former system of lotting, a special group is set back and turned lengthwise to the street; or in the latter, when in a similar group, the flanking houses are set close to the street and their roofs lines emphasized. In either case the antithesis is most welcome.

To produce such variety without making the blocks abnormally thin, or too irregular in depth, several alternatives suggest themselves, though no one of them is wholly ideal. The block may, for example, be kept the typical depth, with the usual shaped lotting at the ends; toward the middle of the block, the lot shape may be changed, deducting, say 25 feet from the depths of lots that would naturally back up to each other. The fifty feet thus withdrawn could then be utilized for private parking space dedicated to the use of all land owners of the block. The plan has numerous features in its favor, and the difficulties that arise as to title and maintenance of the private park, have proved, in the several instances where the scheme has been tried, to be not too great.

A second scheme reduces the depth of the block by only 25 feet, making the lots facing on one street 100 feet deep as against 75 feet for those abutting at the back. The same grouping of the two forms is then possible, provided, of course, the groups are reciprocally arranged on the two streets.

The economic questions involved must be studied for the individual cases as they occur. So many different elements govern the decision: the character of the land area to be subdivided; the class of development to be planned; the cost of land on a square foot basis; the comparative desirability of frontal space on the streets affected.

One may possibly feel some surprise that the map of Forest Hills shows no examples of the close, a form of grouping so frequent in the English garden suburbs. This intimate arrangement of houses, sequestered from the main streams of traffic, has such decided qualities to recommend it that it must ultimately be more generally adopted in this country. The

present American aversion to it seems to be a survival of the leaning of primitive man toward a house always on Main Street, and a porch always on the front of the house. Since the latter practice is no longer the *sine qua non* that it was ten years ago, we may properly indulge hopes for a growth in appreciation of the close. The nearest approach to such a treatment in Forest Hills occurs in Ivy Place, which, while accessible from two directions and not, therefore, strictly a close, is yet so sequestered, so removed from the traffic currents that pass outside its limits that it possesses, or will possess as time softens its lines, most of the charms which characterize the close proper. May it serve as an educational feature—a decoy to induce American taste to a sounder basis for its judgment of values.

When one comes to the point of examining the several groups separately, one finds a surprising variety in size, form, treatment and placing. Their charm of design and setting either speak for themselves in the photographs, or have been amply spoken for in print. We are here chiefly interested in their relation to each other, to the streets, and to the town plan in general. It is apparent at once as we emerge from Station Square that the group, considered as a town planning device, is valuable in forming a transposition from the broad massing of the square to the comparatively minute spotting of the individual houses beyond. To visualize this value, one has only to conceive the Village Green cleared of its present buildings and their places filled with single-family houses. The result is almost a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Only in lesser degree important is the other function of the group, already mentioned—that of introducing at strategic points in the plan, larger, quieter building and roof masses; increasing the general scale of the development, and of avoiding pepper-and-salt dots of small houses, spread over acres of land. Such a collection, no matter how cleverly designed may be each house of the collection, produces tedium after a period and if persisted in, nausea.

Perhaps the most interesting of the group designs is that just off Station Square along the railway embankment—a c

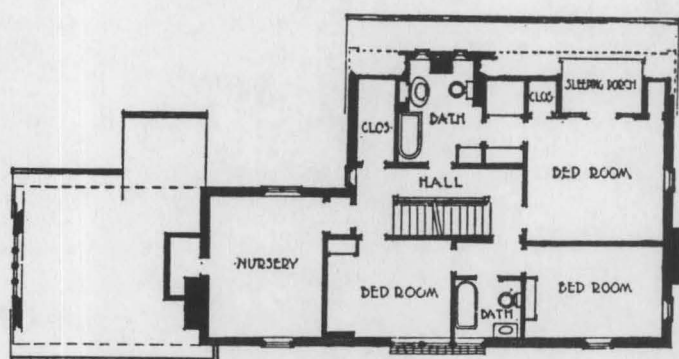
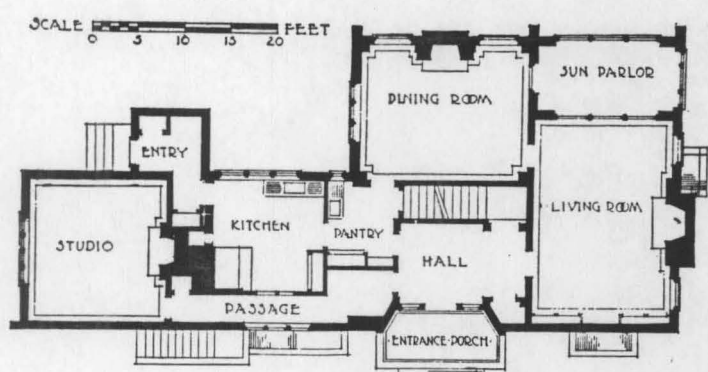


noticeable at the point where Markwood Road branches out from Greenway North.

The central unit of this extensive group is effectively placed to give a focal point to close the long vista up Greenway North. Its mass is, logically, normal to the line of the main approach, and its side wings are bent to carry the roof lines naturally about into line with those of the two minor branches. The two separate houses of the group, however, instead of continuing this movement, are placed parallel with the central mass of the central unit—a setting which is certainly questionable. As shown in the photograph, the relation established is not an important one in actuality, whereas it results in at least two distinct disadvantages: the complexity of roofing angles, preventing any repose in the difficult transition from one branch road around the corner into the other; and an awkward relation of the separate houses to the side street, where the real parallelism cannot be seen at all, while the house itself, presenting its exterior corner to the passer-by, suffers both in its effectiveness and in its outlook.

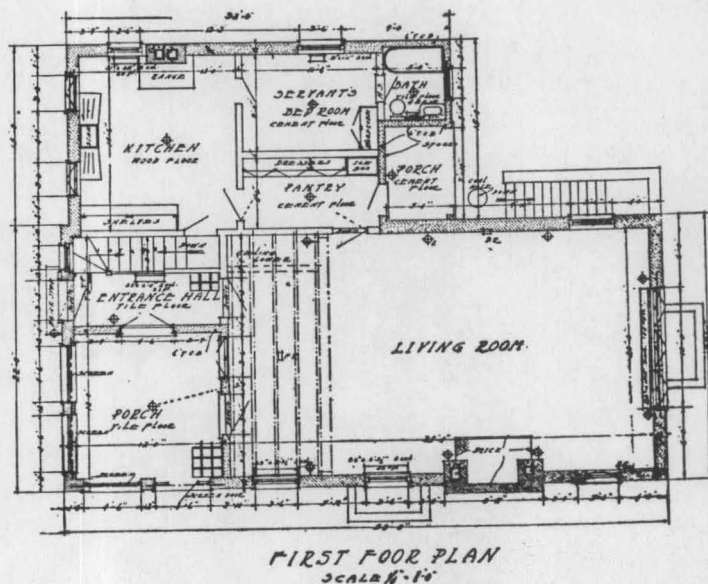
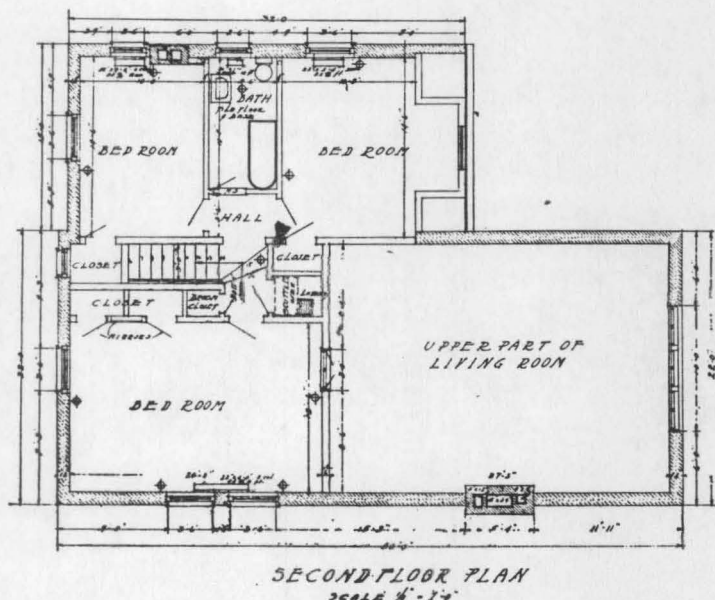
The street and yard planting in Forest Hills is quite beyond comparison with that of any similar operation, at least when the elapsed time of production is taken into consideration. Here, again, if one were to venture suggestion it would be that from now on the emphasis might be well placed upon the provision of trees of dominating size at various points in the extent that now lacks them, rather than elaborating the display of low-growing shrubbery already bewildering in its profusion.

Not the least among the achievements at Forest Hills has been the success in minimizing the visual effects of constant new building—a condition that usually results in a scene of wide-spread devastation, slow to return to the normal. Considered as a major operation in town-building, these wounds to the landscape have been marvelously quick to heal. Even the scars will soon have disappeared—which is eloquent testimonial to the technique of the operators.



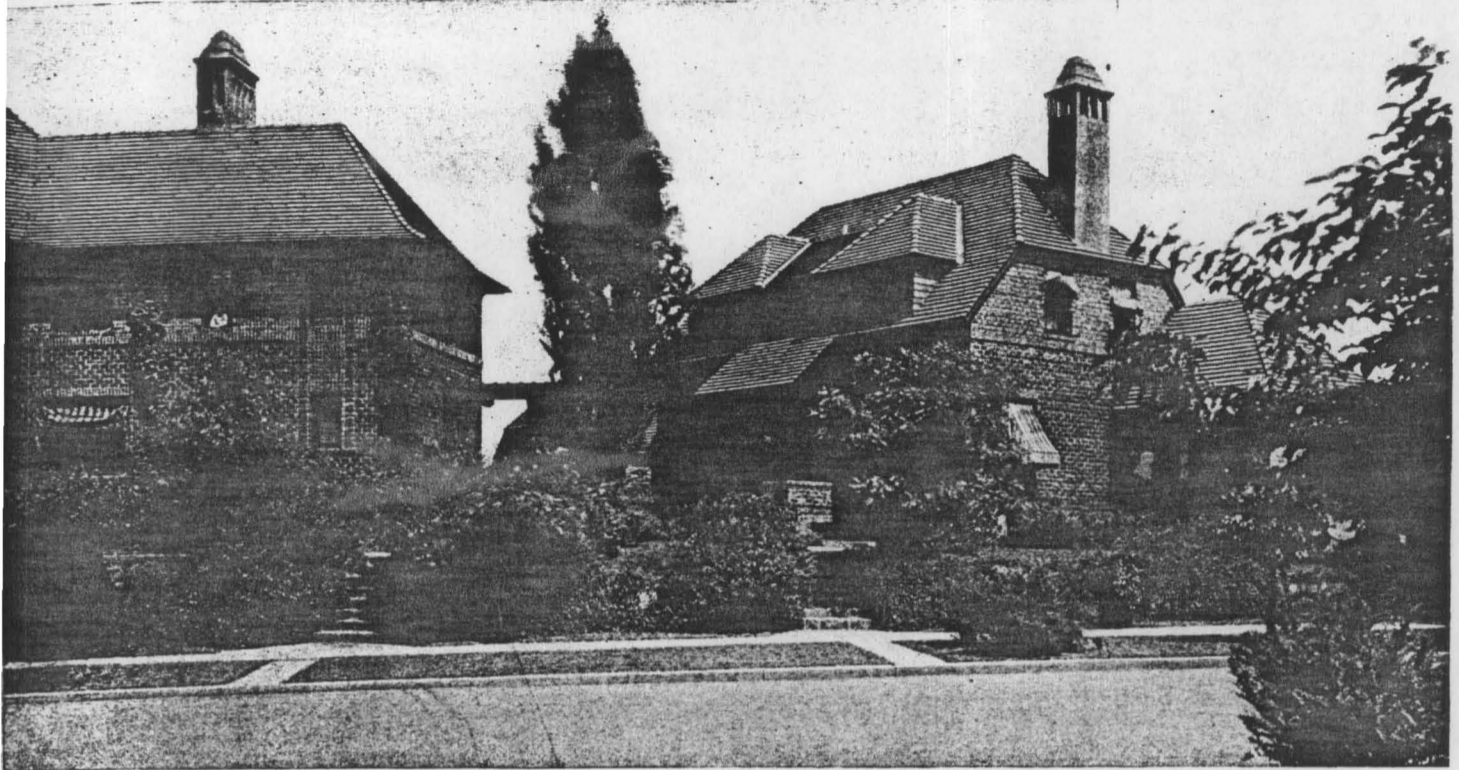
PLANS, HOUSE, BOARDMAN ROBINSON, FOREST HILLS GARDENS, LONG ISLAND.  
(See plate CXXIII)

Albro & Lindeberg, Architects.



PLANS, HOUSE, MRS. ELLEN B. KENDALL, FOREST HILLS GARDENS, LONG ISLAND.  
(See plate CXXIV)

Fred'k J. Sterner, Architect.



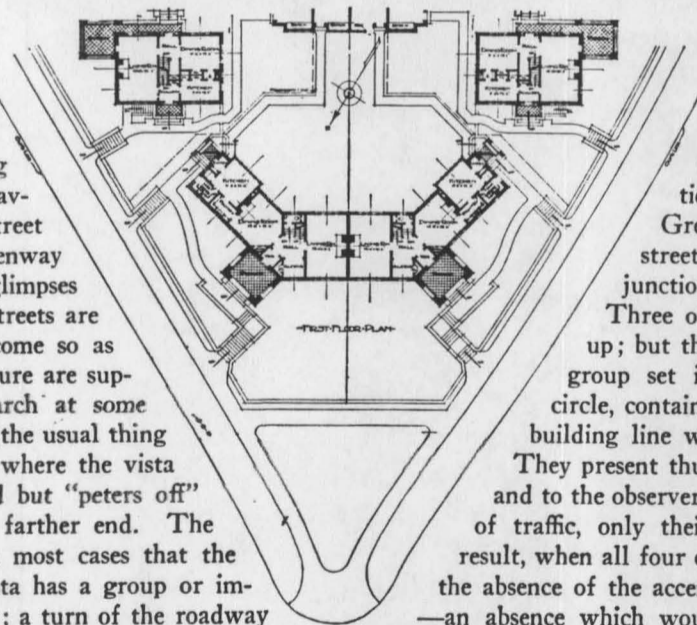
DETACHED UNITS (plans below) GROUP AT GREENWAY NORTH AND MARKWOOD ROAD.

lection of fourteen houses planned in the general form of a crescent. Such a form is obviously the logical one, not only to utilize best the land, but to develop for the residents the best possibilities of the situation. A straight-line group, such as are most of the others, would have forced each householder to face forever (or until his lease expired) the unrewarding aspect of the railroad embankment. The deep crescent affords what amounts to a private park in the middle, provides outlooks for everyone, and ignores the embankment.

The several photographs reproduced herewith will afford ample proof of the painstaking care and study that has been lavished on the building up of the street picture. Driving along Greenway North or Greenway South, the glimpses to right and left down the side streets are uniformly satisfying, or will become so as the remaining motives of the picture are supplied. One would have to search at some length to find one of the streets (the usual thing in the self-growing community) where the vista is neither terminated nor framed but "peters off" indecisively into oblivion at the farther end. The plan of Forest Hills provides in most cases that the vision be satisfied—either the vista has a group or important buildings at its extremity; a turn of the roadway lends decision and interest to the perspective; or the buildings are arranged to form a confining frame for a view of open country beyond. Of the first method, the group of stone-walled houses is an excellent example; of the second, note the charming little house by Mr. Frederic J. Sterner on Rockrose Place.

In any achievement of the extent of Forest Hills, it would be a miracle if there were no spots to be found subject to criticism, legitimate or at least debatable; in a task that has been the subject of such constant, long-continued and inten-

sive study as has Forest Hills, it would be a marvel were there no spots where the temptation to over-study had not been indulged. It is, in fact, on this score that Forest Hills has been oftenest criticized. The procession of pictures is of such length, it is so entirely inevitable that each street corner will answer to its name and produce its picture; the danger seems to be lest in Forest Hills beauty shall become bromidic.



Among so much that is studied with elaborate care, any detail that hints at lack of consideration stands out the more plainly. Such a point appears to have occurred at the intersection of Slocum Crescent with Greenway North; where the general street layout expresses so important a junction in the form of a *rond-point*. Three of the corners are not as yet built up; but the fourth, instead of a dwelling or group set in relation to the radius of the circle, contains a pair of houses set on the same building line with the rest of Greenway North. They present thus, both to the centre of the circle, and to the observer approaching up the important line of traffic, only their forty-five degree corner. The result, when all four corners are built up, will be simply the absence of the accent in the town plan as laid down—an absence which would seem a loss. If expressed in plan, as at present and in buildings, trees and shrub planting, as apparently contemplated, this little place would have proved a delightful recall of the larger open spaces just behind, as well as a logical point of interest in the general layout. The lack will never be one to challenge the attention of the layman; it does seem from the town-planning view-point, that the most has not been made of one of the opportunities.

In contrast to this, a case of over-elaboration, a straining of relationship more important on paper than on the ground, is