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ABSTRACT

The conservation of Mid-Century Modern building materials and architectural features can be challenging and unpredictable because of the experimental and nontraditional nature of many materials. Preservation planning tools such as Historic Structure Reports and Cultural Landscape Reports can provide a framework for identifying and prioritizing architectural repairs and conservation treatments. Using preservation planning to approach material conservation can prevent the loss of historic fabric and promote sustainable and fiscally responsible treatment options.

The Village Green, also known as Baldwin Hills Village, provides an exemplary case study for how preservation planning tools can effectively manage architectural conservation on a large scale over a long period of time. Built between 1941 and 1942, The Village Green is nationally recognized as a pivotal and progressive experiment in multiple-family housing. The product of architects and planners Reginald John, Lewis Wilson, Edwin Merrill, Robert Alexander, and Clarence Stein, the site has been designated as a National Historic Landmark with 162 contributing structures. Architectural Resources Group completed a Historic Structure Report and Mills Act application for The Village Green in 2010, which was awarded a Mills Act Property Tax Abatement Program contract from the City of Los Angeles. The completion of a Cultural Landscape Report for the property was completed in 2013.

Mid-century Modernism was a design movement, roughly spanning 1930 through 1970, that reflected the development of 20th century industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities. The Modern era was a time of rapid technological and scientific advances, resulting in the wide introduction of many new and inexpensive, but often experimental materials. Design features were frequently changed or adapted with the intent to improve living or working conditions. The Village Green is a product of 20th-century mass production techniques, new building materials, and progressive theories of housing design and urban planning. Special consideration may be needed to provide conservation treatments that are in keeping with those materials and philosophies, and proactive preservation planning tools can efficiently address potential issues.

This article discusses the completion of this series of planning documents and how conservation decisions were approached within the process. It focuses on planning tools and documents, decision-making criteria for maintenance, conservation and repair, and specific Modern materials that pose special challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Planning is a critical step in any successful conservation process, but is a particularly critical step when dealing with architectural materials on a large scale and architectural materials of varying quality. Planning and management strategies function best when they are long term and comprehensive. Routine maintenance tasks are absolutely necessary to prevent deterioration and damage to a historic resource. But those maintenance tasks, even if limited to a minimal schedule, can cumulatively alter the visual appearance and historic character of a building or site. Timely and well-executed maintenance activities will sustain the historic character and integrity of a site over time, but are most effective when planned well in advance.

This article provides an overview of several preservation planning tools and incentives used commonly in the architectural world, primarily through the lens of a Mid-Century Modern case study in Los Angeles. The conservation of Modern building materials and architectural features can be challenging and unpredictable because of the experimental and nontraditional nature of many materials used, making preservation planning even more critical for the continuation of historic character.
2. THE VILLAGE GREEN

The Village Green is a 68-acre garden apartment complex in the Baldwin Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles. Originally called Baldwin Hills Village, the site is recognized as a pivotal and progressive experiment in multiple-family housing. It has 95 residential buildings containing 629 apartment units, an administration building, and numerous garage structures. The property is notable for its site plan, which boasts acres of common green space to be enjoyed by all residents. As seen in figure 1, each building faces a small “finger court” and has lateral access to the main green, which is an expansive central lawn that is the nucleus of the complex.

Parking and vehicular access are restricted to the perimeter of the site plan, completely separating pedestrian activity from vehicular traffic.

The product of notable architects, planners, and landscape architects Reginald D. Johnson, Lewis E. Wilson, Edwin E. Merrill, Robert E. Alexander, Clarence S. Stein, and Fred Barlow, Jr., the Village Green has been recognized for its exceptional significance with designation as a National Historic Landmark (in 2001) and as a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument (1977), as well as listing on the National Register of Historic Places (1993). It is widely considered to be the culmination of the work and ideas of Clarence Stein, the leading proponent of the Garden City Movement in the United States.

The site plan for The Village Green drew from Clarence Stein’s 1929 Radburn Plan, which featured the following Garden City Planning Principles:

- Use of superblock site planning
- Specialized roads planned and built for one use instead of shared uses
- Complete separation of vehicular from pedestrian traffic
- Houses turned around to face pedestrian zone
- Park as a backbone of the site plan

The site plan epitomizes the Garden City Planning Principles listed earlier. Buildings are oriented to and around green spaces and pedestrian paths, while garages and vehicular access are limited to the edges of the site. The massive superblock site has no internal vehicular traffic. Construction on Baldwin Hills Village was begun in February 1941 and continued through December 1942. The cost of the

Fig.1. The site plan of Baldwin Hills Village as it existed upon completion (Courtesy of Cornell University Archives)
The project was approximately $3.3 million. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s new Federal Housing Administration provided critical financing by insuring $2.6 million worth of mortgages. The local contracting firm of Marks–Charde began the work, but was replaced by the Herb Baruch Construction Company after the beginning of World War II.

The style of the buildings, now characterized as Vernacular Mid-Century Modern, was originally described as “contemporary California architecture” in the *Los Angeles Times*. The simplicity of the style was typical of the era, but it also illustrates the designers’ goal of creating cost-efficient housing that focused more on spatial layout than on high-style architectural design.

The long, sleek lines of the building facades are reinforced by long spans of stucco finish and wide eaves, as seen in figure 2.

Balconies and ground floor patios break up the flat look of the facades, and the placement of steel casement windows and wood doors provides a visual rhythm. Private patio spaces are enclosed by wood fence walls, hedges, or brick walls. Secondary spaces, including garage courts and laundry drying yards remain intact and fully separated from residential zones.

Notable events in the history of the Village Green include a flood in 1963, after the Baldwin Hills dam located in the hills above the site broke. Parts of the complex were flooded, causing damage to multiple buildings and a large section of the landscape. All damage was repaired, but some small changes did occur, particularly to some landscape features. Between 1972 and 1977 the complex was converted from rental housing to condominiums. During the conversion period, many buildings were renovated.

Fig. 2. 2008 view of typical Village Green building façade (Courtesy of Lacey Bubnash)
and some small changes made, particularly to windows and doors, but the overall character of the complex remained the same.

3. HISTORIC STRUCTURE REPORTS

A Historic Structure Report (HSR) was prepared for the Village Green Owners’ Association (VGOA) in 2009–2010. A full copy of the report can be downloaded from <villagegreenla.net/Village_Green_HSR.pdf>. The HSR follows standards for HSRs identified by the National Park Service, and includes the following components: a narrative developmental history of the property; a summary of significance; a physical description of the site and buildings; an assessment of existing conditions; materials conservation recommendations; the recommended approach to treatment per the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards; and recommendations for continued use, configuration, treatment, and further study.

The impetus for the HSR was twofold: The Village Green Owners’ Association was looking for guidance regarding the appropriate care, preservation and maintenance of the property; and the document would be submitted to the Los Angeles Department of City Planning’s Office of Historic Resources as required, supporting documentation for the application for a Mills Act Property Tax Abatement contract. The HSR was written to provide an essential planning tool for the historic site, not simply a research report to be shelved. The primary goal of the document was to be practical; it must provide clear recommendations and it must create guidelines or framework for consistent decision-making for future work. The document forms the foundation from which preservation and related decisions will be made.

Although The Village Green benefits from many layers of historic designation and the protection that each affords, a comprehensive preservation plan or comparable planning document had never been completed until 2010. As a generally well-maintained residential property, the homeowner’s association that manages the site had not previously seen long-term preservation planning as a priority. But as Los Angeles civic policy has become more encouraging of historic preservation over the past decade, the significant opportunities presented by completing relevant planning documents became more apparent to VGOA leadership.

Challenges faced in preparing the HSR were primarily related to the large size of the site and numerous contributing structures located within it. The site benefits from a vast amount of photographic and written documentation, which greatly aided in completing the HSR efficiently. Of particular importance to the project was photography from the Robert Alexander archive at Cornell University, and the Julius Shulman archive at the Getty Research Institute, which thoroughly depicts the property as it has appeared throughout its history. In addition, a number of previous studies completed about The Village Green were consulted, including the National Register of Historic Places nomination and the National Historic Landmark nomination.

Even with the strong background information available, extensive fieldwork was still necessary. As a large site containing nearly a hundred residential buildings and dozens of additional support structures, the systematic documentation of existing conditions was a challenge to the project team. Using existing site plans, the team divided the property into groups on the basis of building floor plans, of which there are eight variations that are repeated throughout the site. In figure 3, each of the floor plan types can be seen indicated in a different color.

This consolidated the work substantially; for instance, each building plan type was described only once, reducing the number of architectural descriptions from nearly 100 to fewer than 10. Each building was then thoroughly investigated for conditions and materials failures; the documentation of these conditions was categorized by building type, which helped to present findings in an organized and systematic manner.
Fieldwork was primarily carried out over a two-month period, with additional follow-up visits periodically scheduled during the several-month-long report-writing period. Survey tasks were structured as having either a general focus, or by building type (as described in the previous paragraph). For example, after focusing on documenting and describing the overall character of the site, team members in the field worked to fully document the exterior of one of each residential building type. Secondary and ancillary buildings were also surveyed.

To limit intrusion to residents and accelerate the fieldwork process, only selective interiors were visited by the project team. The goal of the interior fieldwork was primarily to document floor plan layouts and historic finishes where they remain. As private spaces, residential interiors will not be as closely guided by the recommendations in the HSR, and unit owners will retain the ability to renovate their homes.

An important component of any HSR is the identification of character-defining features. A character-defining feature is an aspect of a building’s design, construction, or detail that is representative of the building’s function, type, or architectural style. For an important historic resource to retain its significance, its character-defining features must be retained to the greatest extent possible. An understanding of a building’s character-defining features is a crucial step in developing a rehabilitation plan that incorporates an appropriate level of treatment.

At The Village Green, character-defining features were identified both at site and individual building levels; for example, the spatial arrangement of buildings clustered around a central green space is character-defining, as are stucco wall finishes and steel windows. Additionally, great care was taken to identify materials and character-defining features that are unique to the Mid-Century period and that may require special attention. These materials were differentiated from materials that are currently mass-produced and easily replicated. For example, the plywood that was used throughout the site was identified as appropriate for replacement in kind, while other less readily available materials like the historic steel windows, light fixtures, and Louvre glass were identified as candidates for retention and repair with conservation treatments.
The HSR provides a clear roadmap for property owners regarding areas of deterioration, alterations to the original design of the buildings (such as replacement doors and windows), and prioritized list of work recommendations. The recommendations were divided into three categories: safety and security measures; building maintenance; and rehabilitation. These items were then listed in terms of high, medium, and low priority, which helped inform the 10-year work plan required for the Mills Act application. All recommended treatment and work items meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

The HSR enabled The Village Green to be awarded a Mills Act contract, which not only presents a financial benefit to property owners but also enables the completion of rehabilitation work heretofore beyond the monetary means of The Village Green Owners' Association. The completion of work described in the HSR and in the Mills Act 10-year work plan will, over time, improve the conditions of the site and buildings and restore many original features that have been lost. This is a public benefit on both a local and national scale; The Village Green is nationally acclaimed and its future protection and rehabilitation ensures its survival for future generations of residents and admirers.

Additionally, the Village Green is one of numerous garden apartment communities in Los Angeles. Because of their low-density nature, many are threatened with redevelopment. The investment that the Village Green property owners have made with the completion of an HSR, the award of a Mills Act and the ongoing rehabilitation of the property make it a model to all garden apartment communities. It conveys the fact that rehabilitation of these types of properties is not only possible but also can been extremely successful and offer financial benefit to property owners. The HSR itself is available to the public online and can thus provide a model for the systematic documentation of properties of similar size and scale and their rehabilitation in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards.

4. CULTURAL LANDSCAPE REPORTS

The HSR focuses on the built environment of the Village Green; a recommendation of the HSR was the completion of a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR), which was prepared in 2012 and focuses on the care, treatment, and preservation of the historic landscape. The full document was not available online at the time of writing but may be available in the future. Planning for landscape issues is equally important to architectural issues, particularly if sustainability is an issue under consideration. Before completion of the CLR, there were no clear standards for treatment of landscape features at the Village Green, particularly with regard to maintaining the historic character of the site.

A CLR provides guidance for issues inherent to any designed landscape, including treatment of trees, grass, and sidewalks. Although landscape features require maintenance and rehabilitation just like buildings and structures, they are more often overlooked or misunderstood. The Village Green landscape retains its essential character, but over time changes, often poorly documented, had occurred throughout the site. Some large-scale landscape modifications were made after the 1963 flood, and many plantings were added when the site was converted to condominiums in the 1970s. A CLR was needed to clarify what landscape features are historic and identify plant maintenance and replacement priorities for the future; for example, by identifying nonhistoric plants that require frequent watering, those plantings can be targeted for replacement with historically appropriate, drought-tolerant plantings to reduce water usage throughout the site. Specifically the original landscape, as completed in 1941, had many more areas of ground cover. To day, most of those areas have been converted to grass, which requires more water than most ground-cover plantings. Restoring ground cover in a smart way will reduce water usage and restore the site to its original appearance.

Additionally, the Village Green site has matured to the point that many original trees are suffering from old age. A guiding document was needed to identify treatments for trees with mature
canopies that may no longer reflect the original design intent; for example, sun and shade conditions created by the landscape must also be managed as part of a tree maintenance program. Although building maintenance at the Village Green has generally always occurred under the control of facilities managers, some landscape features, such as individual trees and flower beds, have received care or attention from residents as well. The CLR presents design and maintenance priorities in a systemic and consistent manner and provides guidance on issues (like individual flower beds) where resident opinions likely vary.

5. MILLS ACT

The Mills Act Historical Property Contract Program allows qualifying owners to receive a potential property tax reduction and use the savings to help rehabilitate, restore, and maintain their buildings. The Mills Act is the single most important economic incentive program in California for the restoration and preservation of historic buildings by private property owners. Enacted in 1972, the Mills Act legislation grants participating local governments (cities and counties) authority to enter into contracts with owners of qualified historic properties who actively participate in the restoration and maintenance of their properties to receive property tax relief. The City of Los Angeles adopted local Mills Act legislation in 1996. Since then, over 600 properties have benefited from the program.

A formal agreement, generally known as a Mills Act or Historical Property Contract, is executed between the City of Los Angeles and the property owner for a revolving 10-year term. Contracts are automatically renewed each year so that the term of the contract always extends for 10 years. Property owners agree to restore, maintain, and protect the property in accordance with specific historic preservation standards and conditions identified in the contract. Periodic inspections by city and county officials ensure proper maintenance of the property. The City may impose penalties for breach of contract or failure to protect the historic property. The contract is transferred to new owners if the property is sold, and is binding to all successive owners.

A Mills Act contract for the Village Green was executed in 2010. With 629 individual condominium units, it is the largest Mills Act contract in the county of Los Angeles. Major work items that will need to be completed in the coming years include a complete reroofing of all buildings (totaling an estimated $2.6 million); corrective measures for buildings with settlement issues due to soil subsidence ($50,000 for consultation with a structural engineer and unknown cost for recommended work); stucco repair and painting of all building exteriors (estimated $3.2 million); and repair of the brick walls at rear patios (estimated $1.2 million). Because extensive planning documents have been completed for the site, these projects are all clear in scope, size, goals, and expectations. All future projects will benefit from previous recommendation and design guidelines created in the HSR and CLR documents. These documents encourage appropriate methods which retain the site’s integrity and historic significance.

Mills Act funds can also support restoration projects; for example, a proposed project includes a historic paint analysis at the Village Green to identify original paint colors. Historic film footage indicates that the original finish colors may have been much brighter than the current paint scheme. This project will likely be completed after more immediate, remedial repairs are finished. Another restoration project includes a mural in the administration building that has been damaged and covered. Mills Act funds can be used to conserve the mural at a future date. Other scheduled Mills Act projects include tree pruning, landscape maintenance, sewer repairs, plumbing replacement, replacement of nonhistoric windows and doors, and general maintenance of the buildings, landscape, and site.

The benefits of the Mills Act go beyond simple cost savings. Although the Mills Act does not specifically reward sustainability, using Mills Act funds for projects that will reduce energy or water use provides a double benefit to Village Green ownership. Too often construction projects occur without owners fully realizing the long-term implications of improvements, new systems, or other architectural or...
landscape alterations. The 10-year planning cycle required by the Mills Act, coupled with the long-term recommendations laid out in the HSR and CLR, guarantee that all future projects at the Village Green will be well-conceived and unlikely to have unintended consequences.

6. CONCLUSIONS

There must be a balance between change and continuity for a historic site to remain useful and relevant. Change is unavoidable in any material, building, or site exposed to human contact and typical weathering. The key to successful, long-term preservation of any historic site is to highlight the continuity of character-defining features while acknowledging some level of change. Finding this balance between preservation and continued use is greatly aided by planning documents like HSRs and CLRs, which identify both opportunities for change and priorities for preservation.

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FURTHER READING


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