



LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Baldwin Hills Village (Village Green)

Serenity in Southern California



Baldwin Hills Village, now known as Village Green, is a 68-acre residential development that was built during 1941-42. It was declared a National Historic Landmark in 2001, with a period of significance of 1935 to 1942. The landscape planning and layout is a major element in the design. Living units all open out onto landscaped common areas – the landscaping serves as the organizing element and the buildings are a background element. Parking and roadways are at the perimeter. The Village Green Owners Association has supported developing a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) that will be the foundation for understanding – and developing management strategies for sustaining – this great modern American designed landscape. Public recognition would further validate this effort.

HISTORY

The design is the result of a successful collaboration between architects and landscape architects. The architectural team included Reginald Johnson and Merrill, Wilson and Alexander, associated architects, with noted American urban planner Clarence Stein as the consulting architect. Fred Barlow was the original landscape architect. Stein considered Baldwin Hills Village the most fully realized example of his “Radburn Idea”, which was his adaptation of British Garden City idealism to the American Environment. For Stein and other Garden City designers, providing green space in close proximity to living units promoted social well-being within a planned community. Thus the Radburn Idea envisioned communities organized into “superblocks” that relegated vehicular traffic to the perimeter and focused living units toward interior shared gardens and lawns, as well as child-friendly walkways and play spaces.



Soon after construction the site was recognized by the AIA for its design quality. It was declared a City of Los Angeles Cultural Heritage site in 1977 and a National Register property in 1993. Village Green became a National Historic Landmark in 2001.

Over time, some changes have occurred in the landscape. However, many of these changes have been documented, and the essential character of the site thus far has been retained. The “as planted” drawings by Fred Barlow from 1942 are in the Village Green archives, although the plant list was lost. The record is sparse for changes made from 1940 until 1963. In 1963, the Baldwin Hills Dam broke and the site was inundated. Landscape architect Merrill Winans developed another landscaping plan with different goals and objectives. Much of the tree landscaping was retained but with additional species and plantings. The shrubbery was changed significantly with a new esthetic and different species. Village Green Owners Association also has these landscape plans, dated 1966. Between 1966 and 1995 changes were made on the basis of plant preferences without reference to historic plans. In 1995 Village Green developed a Master Plan; however, it was not fully directed toward cultural landscape preservation and thus has limited usefulness for preservation. Currently, Village Green has excellent landscape consultants, but without long range comprehensive planning and analysis, their task is almost impossible.

The Village Green Owners Association recognizes that its designed landscape is integral to its heritage as well as to its National Historic Landmark status. In addition to creating a CLR report, the association has also voted to adopt the Secretary of the Interior’s “Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes”. The recent formation of Friends of Village Green, a 501(c)(3) preservation organization, will open opportunities to obtain grants to help document, recognize and preserve this legacy.

Village Green is fortunate to have good local and regional preservation organizations that can offer guidance. It is a member of both the California Preservation Foundation (CPF) and the LA Conservancy. Village Green sends members to the annual CPF Conference, which provides a valuable opportunity to meet other people and organizations working for preservation. Village Green has had regular contact with the University of Southern California’s Program in Historic Preservation, and some of the USC faculty members have taken an interest in Village Green projects.

THE THREAT

Currently, there are two types of threats to the landscape:

- Threats related to design, plant management or growth.
- Threats related to decision-making in the context of a condominium association.

Threats related to design, plant management or growth: The Baldwin Hills Village/Village Green landscape design is fairly well documented. The Village Green Owners Association holds Barlow’s original landscape architectural drawings in its archive, including a set dated 1942 and marked “as planted”. However, the specifications binder in which all the trees and shrubs were numbered and keyed to plant lists has been lost. The Association has done its best to recreate the tree and plant lists from existing plantings and old photographs. In addition, as the site matured, many original trees have grown to the extent that their canopies (as well as the sun and shade conditions they produce) are very different from the original design intent. Some trees are suffering from old age, and some of the original plant choices were not appropriate to Southern California. The Association does not yet have a systematic vegetation management plan to deal with the long-term



evolution and management of the landscape including a new interest in environmentally appropriate plantings. The 1966 Winans landscape plan made significant changes to the Barlow plan. This, coupled with random planting, has resulted in many additional species and plantings.

Threats related to decision-making in the context of a condominium association: Village Green is a 629-member condominium association, which makes a Cultural Landscape Report particularly important. Decision-making is a challenging process, and consensus is elusive. Trees and plants develop constituencies of people who are simply fond of them. For a time, a memorial tree program was carried out resulting in very personal choices for new tree species and locations. Homeowners with a love of trees may support these plantings even though these plants do not contribute to the original design. An additional problem is that Village Green is a privately owned National Historic Landmark. Thus it is necessary to navigate a fine line between projects that provide a public benefit in preserving a Landmark and a private benefit in increasing value for owners. Ultimately, however, it is the designed landscape that is both the most significant element of the site and the element that contributes the most to the value of individual units.

In sum, Baldwin Hills Village is a great American designed landscape. Without a CLR -- and the management plan that would derive from this -- the conditions and problems it faces cannot be addressed in a systematic and consistent manner.

HOW TO HELP

- Spread the word to increase awareness of the historic significance of Baldwin Hills Village/Village Green and encourage its owners association's efforts to preserve this cultural landscape.
- Ask to take a tour of Village Green. The Village Green Landmark Committee gives occasional presentations and tours to outside groups, preservation classes, and other interested community groups. This program can be expanded, and more residents can become docents to maximize Village Green's usefulness as an educational resource. Visitors now are given a generalized site and landscape tour. If there is public interest, this can be expanded into a "Fred Barlow Landscape" tour, and other tours can be developed to highlight trees or the site's "Radburn Idea" heritage.
- Consider contributing funds (which are tax deductible) to help support the development of a Village Green Cultural Landscape Report and/or help Village Green to identify grant sources and potential donors. Village Green is currently working with a preservation consultant to document existing conditions in the landscape. This is all being done with volunteer workers and is very time consuming. Donations and successful grant applications will speed up the work by allowing Village Green to hire professional consultants.

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