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**INNOVATIVE URBAN HOUSING IN SOUTH CHESTNUT HILL**

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In the 1880s railroad executive and entrepreneur Henry Howard Houston (1820-1895) arranged construction of a rail line to Chestnut Hill's west side, where he had assembled 3,000 acres of land. There he began work on a planned suburb, anchored by construction of the Wissahickon Inn (today part of Springside Chestnut Hill Academy), the Philadelphia Cricket Club, and St. Martin's Episcopal Church. He also built several large estates and numerous single-family detached and semi-detached houses. When Houston died, his sizable estate passed to his wife and three children, the youngest of whom, Gertrude, had married Dr. George Woodward in 1894.

Dr. Woodward (1863-1952) held a medical degree, but practiced only briefly, and with his wife eventually picked up what Henry H. Houston had started, and continued to develop more housing in the area, primarily in the southern part of Chestnut Hill. Eventually the Woodwards would develop over 180 houses in the area.

Woodward was a man of many interests. He was a Progressive, active in Philadelphia's Octavia Hill Association, whose mission was to provide low-cost rental housing, principally in the poorer parts of the city. The Philadelphia organization was modeled after London's Octavia Hill Association, which was formed in 1886 to provide affordable rental housing in the industrial city by renovating existing terrace (row) housing. Octavia Hill (1838-1912) was an English social reformer who believed that the quality of the physical environment influenced well-being and behavior. This belief appears to have been shared by Woodward.

Dr. Woodward was also aware of the English Garden City Movement, which had its origins in Sir Ebenezer Howard's influential 1898 book, *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, reissued in 1902 as *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*. Howard argued for the development of small towns, separated from the central city by a greenbelt, but connected by rail, a description that seems apt for Chestnut Hill. His ideas led to the development of the English towns of Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City, where houses were built in clusters. According to local historian David Contosta, Woodward had "heard about these ideas at the meetings of the National Housing Conference, which he attended between 1911 and 1929."

One can see the influence of this thinking in the development of housing by Dr. Woodward in the southern part of Chestnut Hill. The most illustrative examples consist of housing groups or clusters within a few blocks of both sides of Germantown Avenue. All but one of the eleven examples listed below were developed between 1910 and the Great Depression.

The eleven groups of houses are described briefly below. (Names in parentheses are given by the author for convenience.)

1. **Half Moon Court**, 7919-25 Lincoln Drive, Duhring, Okie & Ziegler, architects, 1927. Two single family detached houses and one pair of semi-detached houses, organized in a curve that defines a common open space facing Lincoln Drive.
2. **Linden Court**, 103-113 W. Willow Grove Avenue, Edmund B. Gilchrist, architect, 1915-16. Six attached dwellings organized in a U-shape around a landscaped court.
3. **The Cotswold Court**, 8000 Lincoln Drive, 135 W. Willow Grove Avenue, and 8001 Navajo Street, Robert R. McGoodwin, architect, 1915. Three single family detached houses organized in a U-shape around a landscaped court.
4. **Cotswold Village**, 8003-8015 Navajo Street, Edmund B. Gilchrist, architect, 1916. Three single family detached houses and four semi-detached houses (2 buildings) that define a variety of open spaces by alternately siting the buildings parallel or perpendicular to the street.
5. **"Cotswold Row,"** 8008-8012 Crefeld Street, Edmund B. Gilchrist, architect, 1921. Three attached houses with no setback on the street; all open space is to the rear.
6. **"Willow Court,"** 42-52 W. Willow Grove Avenue, Duhring, Okie & Ziegler, architects, 1915. Six semi-detached houses organized around a landscaped court facing the street.
7. **Roanoke Court**, 8014-8028 Roanoke Street, H. Louis Duhring, architect, 1931-33. Two semi-detached houses flanked by two rows of 3 attached dwellings sited in a "U" that defines a landscaped court, with a walled parking court with two 4-car garages between the housing cluster and the street
8. **Worker Housing**, 15-41 Benezet Street (north side), Duhring, Okie & Ziegler, architects, 1910. Fourteen semi-detached houses on shallow lots. The houses are not set back from the street.
9. **Quadruple Houses**, facing Benezet St. and E. Springfield Avenue, Duhring, Okie & Ziegler, architects, 1910. Two buildings of four attached houses each. Each set of houses is organized around "+"-shaped party walls.
10. **Winston Court**, 7821-7835 Winston Road, H. Louis Duhring, architect, 1925. One single family detached house, two semi-detached houses, one row of four attached dwellings and one row of six dwellings, organized around a landscaped court facing Winston Road.
11. **"Springfield Court,"** 22-32 E. Springfield Avenue, H. Louis Duhring, architect, 1919. Three sets of semi-detached dwellings (6 houses total) organized around a landscaped court facing East Springfield Avenue.

Woodward relied on three architects for these projects: H. Louis Duhring, Edmund B. Gilchrist, and Robert Rodes McGoodwin. All three architects were based in Philadelphia, but were also familiar with European models, as was Dr. Woodward, through extensive travel. Indeed, the "Grand Tour" in Europe was considered an important part of an architect's education, not only for American architects, but also for architects from other countries, including European ones. It was also a time when American architectural schools were relatively new, and were greatly influenced by historical precedents. Duhring and McGoodwin were graduates of Penn, which had a degree-granting architecture program founded in 1890, and Gilchrist attended classes there. Both Duhring and McGoodwin were awarded travel scholarships and traveled extensively in Europe. David Contosta, in his book *Suburb in the City*, says that Woodward sent the three architects to England and France to

study country architecture. He also reports that the three architects and their client met in Woodward's office weekly and discussed their designs as a group, an unusual form of collaboration. The experiences of these architects, combined with Dr. Woodward's knowledge and interests, resulted in a creative stew that came to fruition in the Chestnut Hill projects.

Stylistically, most of the south Chestnut Hill projects reflect European, principally English and French vernacular precedents. All of them were designed as single-family houses, including detached, semi-detached, and attached dwellings, many organized around landscaped courts. All of the units were intended for rental, and most, if not all, remain in the portfolio of the George Woodward Company. While two of the housing clusters (Linden Court and Springfield Court) are constructed of brick and reflect a Colonial Revival style, the others employ local Wissahickon shist as the primary building material. This material echoes the stone used for buildings in the English Cotswolds, although our local stone is gray, not beige, as it is in the Cotswolds. Roofs are typically slate. A rich palette of native plant materials is used to enhance the developments and visually relate them to the nearby Wissahickon Valley. Collectively, these clusters of housing contribute greatly to the image of Chestnut Hill as an environment. However, most residents and visitors walk past these developments without consciously recognizing what makes them different from most urban and suburban housing.

To appreciate what is creative and different about these Woodward projects it is important to understand the prototypical housing types at that time and, indeed, still today. The dominant urban house type, especially in the industrial cities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the rowhouse. Block after block of rowhouses were built in Philadelphia, London and other cities. Buildings were constructed in continuous rows without front yards; density was relatively high. Thus, one of Philadelphia's sobriquets, the "city of homes," reflects the predominance of the rowhouse, in contrast to the tenement housing that was typical in New York City. The prototypical house of the suburbs, in contrast, was the single family detached house, sitting on its own lot. There is a front door facing an ornamental lawn that goes down to the street. A rear lawn serves as semi-private open space for each house. Density is low, and a strong sense of community is often lacking, partly the result of low density and dependence on the automobile. The clusters that Woodward and his architects designed were neither of these. They were based on a model that combined urbanity with the benefits of the natural environment that made suburban living attractive to those who wanted to escape the density, pollution, and lack of open space of the city.

Of the eleven projects listed above, seven are groups of houses that define landscaped common courts that face the street. This model affords benefits to both the residents and to the public, resulting in urban streets that provide greenery and variety compared to the row house and the suburban street of repetitive single family detached houses.

Organizing buildings around landscaped courts was not a new idea, but doing so with single family housing, albeit rental units, was not typical. Numerous apartment complexes are organized around landscaped courts, including examples in Chestnut Hill.

Woodward's housing groups have a certain consistency but also diversity. Part of the variety among the clusters is related to the sizes and shapes of the development parcels, requiring the architects to respond appropriately. Individual clusters, while designed as wholes, are often comprised of various single family house types: detached, semi-detached, and attached units.

Much has been written about the houses built in 1910 by Dr. Woodward on the 100 block of Benezet Street east of Germantown Avenue. A row of fourteen semi-detached dwellings on the north side of the block, designed to provide low-cost rental housing to working class families, reflects Dr. Woodward's embrace of the ideals of the Octavia Hill Association. They were designed to rent for between \$30 and \$40 per month. Because the building lots are shallow, these houses have no front yards. In order to express the individuality of the units, the architects changed the designs of each pair of houses, alternating the primary materials from stucco and brick to stone. The architects also alternated the location of front porches and front doors, resulting in what *The Architectural Record* in 1913 referred to as "a certain uniformity without monotony."

On the south side of this block of Benezet Street are two buildings that local researcher Jefferson Moak considered "the crowning jewels of Woodward house designs—the quadruple houses." Each building accommodates four single-family attached houses, not in a row, but in a back-to-back configuration. Two of the units of each building face Benezet Street and two face East Springfield Avenue. Each building appears from the street to be a semi-detached house. The buildings are set back from the street, providing each dwelling unit with two exposures, a front yard setback of 30 feet and a side yard of 19 feet. Unlike twin houses, each unit of the quadruple houses has two party walls, resulting in construction cost savings, similar in that respect to a row house. It is not clear who originated this idea. It is probable that this creation was a collaborative effort between Dr. Woodward and his architect, H. Louis Duhring. Three more sets of quadruple houses were constructed by Dr. Woodward in West Mt. Airy.

Interestingly, Frank Lloyd Wright also designed quads. His famous "Suntop Houses" in Ardmore, PA. of 1939, were constructed some 29 years after the Woodward houses. Wright designed a set of four quads, intended as low-cost housing, but only one quad was built. The Ardmore houses are much smaller than the Woodward houses, with spaces arranged vertically in split-level fashion, and included carports. Wright's site plan is decidedly suburban, with buildings disposed on the block informally, with no walls relating orthogonally to the adjacent streets, and with a considerable amount of land devoted to driveway access to the carports.

Wright's accommodation of the automobile in his Suntop project reflects the increasing importance of cars in American life. The majority of Woodward's Chestnut Hill clusters do not provide off-street parking spaces, since they were built between 1910 and 1921, when automobile ownership was relatively low. However, the later projects, such as Winston Court (1925), Half Moon Court (1927), and Roanoke Court (1931-1933), provide some off-street parking. Roanoke Court, in particular, provides a one-car garage space for each dwelling. The design of Winston Court includes vehicular access to each dwelling unit,

either directly from a street, or from a private cul-de-sac within the development. Nevertheless, both projects adhere to the model of organizing a variety of single-family housing units around landscaped courts.

In conclusion, the housing developed by Dr. George Woodward in south Chestnut Hill and designed by the architects H. Louis During, Edmund B. Gilchrist, and Robert Rodes McGoodwin, represents a significant attempt to create urban housing that incorporates landscaped open space. These examples were designed as rental housing, but each group is comprised of one or more single family housing types: single family detached, semi-detached, and attached dwellings. Each of the clusters is designed as a unified whole; the typical housing group surrounds a landscaped court. There is design diversity, yet visual unity. Some of the variety is related to the different sizes and shapes of the development parcels. They are quintessential Chestnut Hill, representative of the title of David Contosta's book about Chestnut Hill, *Suburb in the City*.

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