

# HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION APPLICATION

*Final @ HP  
1/26/2011  
2:04 PM*

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## 1. Name of District

Historic: Garden Homes Historic District

and/or Common: \_\_\_\_\_

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## 2. Location

Approximate boundaries W. Ruby Street to W. Atkinson Avenue; N. 26th Street to N. 25th Streets; W. Port Sunlight Way from N. 27th Street to N. 25th Street; W. Congress from N. 25th Street to N. Teutonia Avenue.

Aldersperson: Ashanti Hamilton

District(s): First

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## 3. Classification

### Ownership

public  
 private  
 both

### Present Use

agricultural  
commercial  
educational  
entertainment

park  
cemetery  
religious  
 private-  
residence

government  
industrial  
military  
museum

transportation  
other

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## 4. Owner of Property

Name: Joseph Bova, one of forty-four owner-occupants

Street & number: 4468 N. 26th Street, one of one hundred and four households

City: Milwaukee

State: WI

Zip: 53209

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## 5. Representation Existing Surveys

Inventory: 104 households

Date: 1921-1923 constructed

federal

state

county

local

Depository for survey records:

Organization City of Milwaukee

Street & number \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_

Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Previous historic designation:

National Register Date 1990 Name Garden Homes Historic District

City of Milwaukee Landmark Date 1974 Name Garden Homes Housing Project and Park

Other

Name of Program State of Wisconsin Register of Historic Places

Date designated 1990

## 6. DESCRIPTION

Acres: 29

Number of city blocks: Eight

Number of buildings: 104

**General Condition of buildings in district**

- excellent
- good
- fair
- deteriorated
- ruins

**Major landscape features:**

- park/recreational area
- boulevard
- hill
- valley/ravine
- river/stream
- pond/lake
- cemetery
- undeveloped land

**Principal street(s):**

4300 and 4300 blocks of N. 25th and 26th Streets; W. Congress from N. Teutonia to N. 25th St.; W. Port Sunlight Way, 25th to 27th Sts.

**List of non-contributing buildings:**

None

**Visual landmarks & locations:**

Garden Homes Park, W. Atkinson on the south to W. Port Sunlight Way on the north, one block

**District characteristics:**

Predominant building height: Two-story

Predominant building material:

- brick
- wood
- stucco
- stone
- terra cotta

**Relationship of buildings to street:**

Frontage offset per typical house location in the City of Milwaukee

**Written description: (Continue on a separate sheet, if necessary)**

Garden Homes incorporated the fundamental principles of England's garden cities. The fan-like subdivision has the character of a small village with two-story, stuccoed and vinyl-sided cottages in a simplified Colonial Revival style. The major architectural features used to differentiate the boxy houses is a one-story covered entry porch. The houses were built according to nine basic designs that varied by reversing floor plans and an addition of front-gabled models.

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## 7. SIGNIFICANCE

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### Areas of significance:

- |                      |                          |                     |                       |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| agriculture          | × economics              | law                 | science               |
| × architecture       | × education              | literature          | × social/humanitarian |
| art                  | engineering              | military            | theater               |
| commerce             | exploration/settlement   | music               | transportation        |
| communications       | industry                 | philosophy          | other (specify)       |
| × community planning | invention                | politics/government |                       |
| conservation         | × landscape architecture | religion            |                       |

### Period of most intensive development:

1921-1923: Mayor Daniel Hoan builds Garden Homes Project, 105 homes.

### Written statement of significance: (continue on a separate sheet, if necessary)

Per Milwaukee Code of Ordinances, Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 320-21 3.e, the Garden Homes Historic District meets the following significant criteria: e-1, e-3, e-4, e-6, e-7 and e-9.

The Garden Homes housing project is historically significant as the nation's first municipally-built, public housing cooperative. The development was intended as an experiment to ease a working-class housing shortage and to generally improve the quality of city life.

The Garden Homes housing project, which was built early in the development of municipal social welfare programs in America, was the forerunner of the municipal, low-rent, public housing projects commonly found in America today. It was the first municipally-sponsored project in the United States to incorporate the fundamental principles of England's Garden City form of urban planning, production-line construction techniques and patented labor saving materials.

Garden Homes was America's first and last major experiment in municipally-built cooperative housing, earning it a unique place in the history of American public-housing.

The Garden Homes Project, although it failed as a community-owned cooperative, proved that through effective planning, low-cost public housing could be built in an attractive and healthful environment. The project is also a reminder of Milwaukee's Socialist municipal government. With all the political squabbling aside, Garden Homes also proved that government housing was feasible and in some cases very desirable when the private sector was unable to meet immediate housing needs. Despite being forced to disband, the Garden Homes housing corporation always remained faithfully solvent demonstrating, at least in the short-run, that public housing could be administered without waste and graft. Ultimately Garden Homes probably paved the way for public acceptance of the new Federal government sponsored low-income housing that was built in Milwaukee during the 1930s. Milwaukee, at that time, was one of the first cities in the nation to show an interest in the possibilities of Federally-sponsored public housing.

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## 8. Major Bibliographical References

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"Garden Cities of Today" (book). Ebenezer Howard, 1898.

"Garden Homes Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, OMB No. 1024-0018, City of Milwaukee

"Utopia Revisited: The Garden Home Housing Project in Milwaukee," Mr. Paul Jakubovich, Wisconsin Preservation, July/Aug. 1993

"Garden Homes Housing Project and Park," Milwaukee Preservation Commission, 1974

"Garden Homes," Landscape Research, City of Milwaukee Department of City Development, (date unknown)

"The First Public Housing: Sewer Socialism's Garden City for Milwaukee," Wayne Attoe and Mark Latus, Journal of Popular Culture, Summer. 1976

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## 9. Boundary Description

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### Legal property description:

Beginning at the intersection of the north curb line of West Atkinson Avenue and the east property line of 4316-4322 North Twenty-fifth Street, then northeasterly along the rear property line of all the properties with frontage on North Twenty-fifth Street to the intersection of the north curb line of West Congress Avenue and the west curb line of North Teutonia Avenue; then west to the rear property line of 4402 N. Twenty-fifth Street; then northeasterly along the rear property line of all properties with frontage on North Twenty-fifth Street to the south curb line of West Ruby Avenue; then west to the rear property line of 4485 North Twenty-sixth Street; then south along the rear property line of all properties with frontage on North twenty-sixth Street and West Port Sunlight Way to the north curb line of West Atkinson Avenue then southeasterly to the point of beginning in the City of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin.

### Boundary justification:

The district is distinguished from its environs by the visual cohesiveness of its village-like atmosphere of small, stuccoed and vinyl-sided, two-story cottages of uniform design located on a curving, semi-radial street plan arranged around a central, boulevard-like park. The adjacent neighborhoods stand in sharp contrast to the district and are composed of mid-twentieth century, ranch style, single-story, tract housed located on a gridiron street plan.

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## 10. Form Prepared By

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Name/Title: La Mar Woods, President and Joseph Bova, Member

Organization: Garden Homes Neighborhood Association

Street: 5633 N. 64th Street, #1

City: Milwaukee

State: WI

Zip: 53218

Telephone (days) 414-524-9908

(evenings) 414-367-9156

Date: January 21, 2011

Return to: **Historic Preservation Commission  
City Clerk's Office  
200 E. Wells St. Room B-4  
Milwaukee, WI 53202**

**(414) 286-5722**

Historic Homeowners: Owner-Occupant LHD Supporters ✓

- ✓ 4321 N. 25th Street
- 4334 N. 25th Street
- ✓ 4339 N. 25th Street
- ✓ 4344 N. 25th Street
- 4350 N. 25th Street

- ✓ 4353 N. 25th Street
- ✓ 4360 N. 25th Street
- ✓ 4365 N. 25th Street
- 4366 N. 25th Street
- 4370 N. 25th Street

- 4371 N. 25th Street
- ✓ 4377 N. 25th Street
- 4378 N. 25th Street

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- 4402 N. 25th Street
- 4408 N. 25th Street
- ✓ 4415 N. 25th Street
- 4424 N. 25th Street
- 4428 N. 25th Street

- ✓ 4440 N. 25th Street
- ✓ 4441 N. 25th Street
- 4456 N. 25th Street
- ✓ 4457 N. 25th Street
- 4466 N. 25th Street

- ✓ 4477 N. 25th Street
- 4481 N. 25<sup>th</sup> Street
- 4485 N. 25th Street

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- ✓ 4352 N. 26th Street
- ✓ 4362 N. 26th Street
- ✓ 4375 N. 26th Street

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- 4401 N. 26th Street
- ✓ 4444 N. 26th Street
- 4450 N. 26th Street
- ✓ 4458 N. 26th Street
- ✓ 4462 N. 26th Street

- ✓ 4463 N. 26th Street
- ✓ 4468 N. 26th Street
- ✓ 4469 N. 26th Street
- ✓ 4473 N. 26th Street
- ✓ 4484 N. 26th Street

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- 2465 W. Congress Street
- 2457 W. Congress Street
- 2453 W. Congress Street
- ✓ 2449 W. Congress Street

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2610 W. Port Sunlight Way

44 = Total owner-occupants  
24 = ✓supporters, 01-26-11  
% = 54.5% support LHD

W. RUBY AVE.



National Register  
Garden Homes  
Historic District  
NR Listed 05-04-1990

N. 27th St. N. 27th St. N. 27th St.



N. 26th St.

W. ROOSEVELT

PRODUCED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF CITY DEVELOPMENT INFORMATION CENTER  
Design file: W:\Historical\h-p032.dgn  
Plot file: p032.plt  
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Author: J. J. WILSON



## UTOPIA REVISTED: THE GARDEN HOME HOUSING PROJECT IN MILWAUKEE

by Paul Jakubovich

The Garden Homes housing project in Milwaukee is the nation's first and only municipally-built, public housing cooperative, earning it a unique place in the history of American public housing. The property, composed of 105 living units in 93 free-standing buildings constructed between 1921 and 1923, is bounded today by North 27th Street and West Ruby, North Teutonia and West Atkinson avenues.

The development of these small, stuccoed blocks trimmed with Colonial Revival style wooden porches can trace its origins to the city's stunning 1910 municipal election of the nation's first Socialist mayor, Emil Seidel. One of the planks of the Socialist platform was the construction of city-built, low-cost homes for workers. Seidel told the Milwaukee electorate, "We do not expect to usher in the cooperative commonwealth in one or five years, but we do intend to do all our limited means permit to make Milwaukee a better place to live in."

Although Seidel failed to make public housing in Milwaukee a reality before his defeat in the 1912 election, the city's second Socialist mayor, Daniel W. Hoan, elected in 1916, succeeded. Mayor Hoan created a housing commission to tackle the city's housing shortage,

which was worsened by the moratorium on new housing construction during America's involvement in World War I.

In September of 1918, the chair of Milwaukee's housing commission, William H. Schuchardt, went to Washington, D.C., in an effort to obtain Federal assistance to construct new public housing in Milwaukee. For the first time in U.S. history, Federal government aid for housing construction was made available to manufacturing centers that could prove that a lack of working-class housing was hindering the production of war materials. Because Milwaukee could not prove such a relationship, the request for Federal aid was denied.

Eventually, the Federal government built about 30,000 units of war-time housing—about half of which were only dormitories or barracks—but none was built in Milwaukee and all were sold rather than maintained as public housing.

A lack of adequate working-class housing became a key community issue in Milwaukee prompting Walter Davidson, vice-president of Milwaukee's Harley-Davidson motorcycle company, to comment in 1920 that, "The housing question is one of the most momentous the city has before it."

After World War I, Milwaukee's

housing commission proposed a municipally-sponsored, low-cost cooperative housing project to ease the local housing shortage. Under the commission's plan, called the Garden Homes Project, occupants would not own their homes initially; instead, they would purchase housing corporation common stock equal to the value of a house. The tenants would pay for their stock by making a 10% downpayment and subsequent monthly payments spread over 20 years. The payments were to cover interest, taxes, upkeep and other fixed costs. Tenants would also receive life insurance benefits and an annual 5% cumulative dividend on their equity.

The initial cost of the project was to be financed through the sale of preferred stock carrying a 5% per annum cumulative dividend, which would be purchased by city and county governments, and other interested investors. As the occupants of the houses paid on their common stock (only occupants of the houses could hold common stock), the preferred stock would be retired. It was expected that after about 20 years all of the preferred stock would be retired and the property would be wholly owned by the residents who at that time could elect to disband the housing corporation and convert the development to individual ownership.

The financing plan was based on a prototype from England where about 60 cooperative housing associations had been established by 1919. Cooperative housing was promoted by English author Ebenezer Howard whose highly influential book published in 1900, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, was the basis for the plan of Letchworth, England, the first true, totally planned cooperative community.

In 1919 at the urging of Mayor Hoan and his housing commission, legislation was enacted by the State of Wisconsin that for the first time in U.S. history allowed the creation of public housing corporations. The Garden Homes Company was formally incorporated under this enabling legislation in 1921.

Commenting on the new housing legislation in 1919, housing commission member William George Bruce said, "The [Garden Homes] Company itself should be the contractor and every possible element of profit should be squeezed out. This is not a question of charity. It is an investment for the benefit of the entire community.

The housing corporation's original prospectus stated the following objectives:

1. To promote the economic erection, cooperative ownership and administration of healthful homes.
2. To place said homes in areas platted in accordance with the best ideas of city planning so as to provide the greatest utility as well as healthful conditions and

attractive surroundings.

3. To encourage the occupation of modest homes at cost and within the means of those who now cannot acquire and retain their own homes.
4. To avoid the dangers that too frequently accompany the individual ownership of houses and speculative building devoid of public spirit.
5. To harmonize and join the interests of resident and investor by an equitable use of the profit arising from the increase of values and the careful use of property.
6. To provide ample space for playgrounds and recreation for both old and young.
7. To provide an opportunity for intensive gardening under instruction thus maintaining the home in part by this means.

The Garden Homes project was intended to provide housing for families earning a modest \$1,200 to \$1,500 per year in 1920.

Raising funds through the sale of preferred stock proved difficult for the housing corporation, delaying construction. Some local politicians were reluctant to appropriate city funds for the plan because they charged it did not guarantee individual ownership of the homes. According to a *Milwaukee Sentinel* report some opposed the plan because it "hinted something strongly of Sovietism."

Despite the added problem of a downturn in the local economy, the Garden Homes planners pro-

ceeded with their project. Start-up financing totaling \$177,300 was secured through the sale of preferred stock. City and county governments made initial investment of \$50,000 each and 38 local business leaders invested a combined total of \$77,300 along with a pledge to eventually invest \$300,000.

On July 25, 1921, the Garden Homes Company purchased for about \$28,000 the 29 acres of farmland known as the Groelling tract on which the development stands today. Mayor Hoan presided over the groundbreaking ceremonies for the project on September 22, 1921. On Wednesday, November 1, 1922, David Harper, the son of the city's building inspector, moved into a cottage located at 4356 North 26th Street and became the first occupant of the Garden Homes project.

There were about 700 applicants for the 105 units that were eventually built. In 1921 Mayor Hoan said that the units would be sold only to individuals who could not otherwise afford a home, and it was the job of the Garden Homes board of directors to select the individuals most in need of housing to live in the project. Applicants who had personal savings in excess of \$1500 were automatically rejected and urged to purchase a home through the private sector.

The 2-story, stuccoed houses in the development were built according to the designs of Milwaukee architect William H. Schuchardt, who donated his professional services and was a



member of the Garden Homes board of directors. Schuchardt's designs for the Garden Homes cottages no doubt were influenced by his 1911 visit to garden cities in England and Germany.

Each of the Garden Homes cottages has the same basic floor plan and is architecturally undistinguished, but as an assemblage they comprise a picturesque, working-class village with a decidedly European character that is unlike any other residential neighborhood in the city.

The homes were built at a cost of about \$4,500 each, which was about 25% less than the cost of a comparable new house in the city at that time. Costs were cut by using a standardized plan and production line techniques at the building site. The homes were constructed in consecutive order, and each crew of tradesmen progressed from one house to the next, performing virtually the same job each time. Because of the heavy municipal involvement in the project, some city construction equipment was used to further defray costs but not at the expense of delaying regular city projects.

From a purely technical standpoint, Garden Homes is an exercise in American ingenuity. It was not the nation's first example of mass-produced housing, but the use of energy and labor-saving materials to reduce costs placed the development far ahead of its time. Of particular note was the use of a patented new material called flaxolinum keyboard sheathing as an

underlayment for the exterior stucco. Made of compressed flax straw, with molded keyways to hold the stucco applied over it, the material was reportedly first used on the Garden Homes project.

Garden Homes became the focus of intense public debate in the city and was opposed by many business leaders, the local real estate board, and politicians. Some business leaders were irked that Garden Homes construction workers were paid high, union-scale wages at a time when Milwaukee was generally considered a non-union or "open shop town." Others feared that a Socialist success at Garden Homes would bolster the Socialist party platform with the Milwaukee electorate.

Shortly after the 105 houses in the project were completed and occupied, the development encountered

some major difficulties. Because there apparently had not been a suitable location for the project within the city limits, the project planners purchased a site outside Milwaukee with the intention of annexing it to the city. Construction of the project began before the area, lying partly in the Town of Wauwatosa and partly in the Town of Milwaukee, was formally annexed to the city. The two townships subsequently tried to legally block the annex-

*A typical floor plan from Sept. 7, 1921 Milwaukee Journal*

27 Wednesday, September 7, 1921

410 - Terrace

FIRST-FLOOR PLAN - 10' x 15'

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ation by filing three separate lawsuits. The legal battles delayed street improvements in the project area for months and long after the first house was occupied the streets were still a muddy quagmire. The case was of such importance that it eventually reached the Wisconsin Supreme Court, which, on December 7, 1925, upheld the decision of a lower court that the annexation was legal.

More problems developed in 1925 when the city assessed the project's residents between \$300 and \$750 each for street and storm sewer improvements. The residents angrily protested the assessment claiming misrepresentation of the actual cost of their homes. A few residents moved out in protest. On March 11, 1925, a *Milwaukee Journal* newspaper article appeared with the title: "Garden Homes Losing Charm, Many Residents Leaving 'Utopia' to Evade Assessment." The article reported that George Altpeter, chief of the city annexation division who lived in the Garden Homes from its beginning, said "Seventy-five percent of the inhabitants will pull away and sell their stock if the special assessment is enforced."

William H. Schuchardt, the designer of the project and the vice-president of the Garden Homes Company, expressed his disillusionment with the situation at that time and said, "I am through striving to do something helpful for anybody. It is a most thankless job. I have given time and money to the Garden Homes

Corporation, and now there is most unwarranted grumbling."

Despite the reported widespread dissatisfaction, a vote in March, 1925, showed that Garden Homes' residents were split over the controversy with 38 in favor of individual ownership of the project's homes, 32 in favor of continuing the original cooperative ownership plan, and the others unsure. Later it was reported that many of the Garden Homes residents wanted individual titles to their properties in order to sell them at their appreciated values. The single family houses which had cost about \$4,500 each to build in 1921-23 were estimated to be worth about double that amount by 1925.

Responding to the tenants' demands, in June of 1925 the state legislature enacted the Garden Homes Law Amendment which permitted the sale of the project's homes instead of leasing them. On Friday, July 17, 1925, the Garden Homes Company board of directors formally decided to disband the cooperative ownership of the development and convert the project to individual ownership. Tenants were given the opportunity to purchase their homes at prices between \$4,700 and \$5,500.

With the change to individual ownership the Garden Homes Company functioned only to sell the housing stock and pay off all loans—a problem-plagued process that took more than ten years.

After purchasing their homes,

many residents did indeed sell them. By the late 1930s only about 40% of the original tenants still lived in the subdivision.

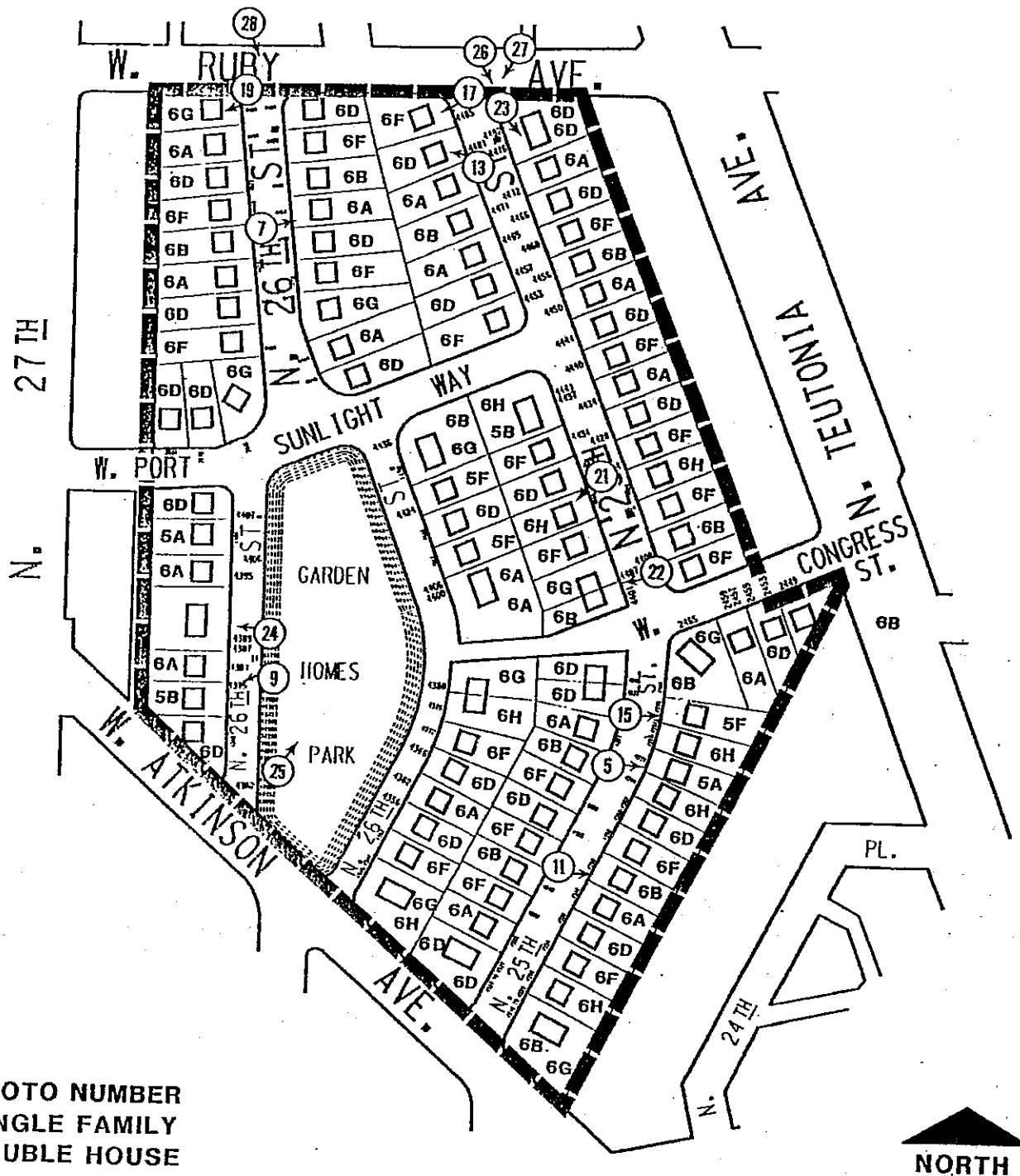
Despite its problems, the Garden Homes Company remained financially solvent. Property taxes and special assessments were paid to the city; loans were repaid in a timely manner to both the city and the county with 5% interest; and the bank loans were repaid with 6% interest.

William Schuchardt, the project's designer, left Milwaukee in 1927 for a teaching position in city planning at Cornell University in New York. He never again was active in Milwaukee public or professional circles. Emil Seidel, the city's first socialist mayor who initially proposed cooperative housing, purchased a Garden Homes cottage at 4431 N. 25th Street in the late 1920s after the development was privatized.

[Editor's note: The Garden Homes Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places and the State Register of Historic Places in 1990 because of its significance in the areas of community planning and development, and its importance to social history.]

*Author Paul Jakubovich is a historic preservation consultant in Milwaukee. ♦*

# GARDEN HOMES HISTORIC DISTRICT



- ① = PHOTO NUMBER
- = SINGLE FAMILY
- ▭ = DOUBLE HOUSE

NUMBER AND LETTER NEXT TO EACH UNIT  
 DENOTES ARCHITECTS MODEL NUMBER DESCRIBED  
 IN DETAIL IN SECTION 7 OF THE NRHP REGISTRATION FORM

105 ORIGINAL UNITS  
 93 ORIGINAL FREESTANDING BUILDINGS