By the 1880s, Riverside and Pullman were identifiable points or localities—literally free-standing satellite towns only 22.5 kilometers apart—within a nascent Chicago metropolitan region where scattered outlying settlements had not yet begun coalescing to form a conurbation. But these two towns would not remain inconspicuous points on the map. Despite their modest size, they were soon widely acclaimed as two of the finest planned communities in the nation: Riverside, an exemplary residential suburb (Figure 1), and Pullman, the quintessential company town (Figure 2). Admittedly differing in purpose and appearance, both towns nonetheless demonstrated creative design, innovative ensemble, and urban engineering that would be emulated in communities elsewhere.

This study, through a retrospective and comparative view of their early development, traces the events and processes that brought renown to these communities at a particular period. Accessible points, which once attracted numerous visitors, the towns were ultimately engulfed within the urbanizing region spreading outward from Chicago. Nevertheless, Riverside's remarkable design still stands in sharp contrast to that of neighboring western suburbs, while Pullman remains a distinctive, if aging, south side neighborhood of Chicago.

Foundations of Pullman and Riverside

The sites chosen for Riverside and Pullman were undeveloped tracts beyond the city of Chicago (as then delimited), though neither so distant nor remote as to be sequestered. Nevertheless, the development of the two towns was undertaken with markedly divergent objectives. Riverside was initiated in 1868 with Emery Child's formation of the Riverside Improvement Company. Upon securing a 648-hectare tract along the Des Plaines River 14.5 kilometers west of Chicago's central area, the investors proposed to establish a dormitory or "bedroom" community where affluent families might enjoy pleasant surroundings without, of course, surrendering urban amenities to which they were accustomed (Riverside Improvement Company 1871) (Figure 3A). For their efforts, the developers naturally expected to realize a generous return. In need of an innovative and marketable community design, they engaged Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. and Calvert Vaux, the country's foremost landscape architects, to prepare a plan.

By 1880, George M. Pullman, prominent manufacturer of railway sleeping cars, had acquired 1,620 hectares in the Calumet district, about 21 kilometers south of downtown Chicago. Unlike the Riverside group, Pullman intended to establish a self-contained town comprising a manufacturing works of the Pullman Palace Car Company and a residential area where his employees and their families would be housed. He entrusted the town planning to two professionals—Solon Beman, an architect, and Nathan Barrett, a landscape designer.

While George Pullman maintained a mansion in Chicago, his industrial town was purposely distanced from the city he regarded "a repository of vice, disorder, and ugliness" (Buder 1967, 118). Practical considerations influenced his selection of the locale as well, especially the lower cost of land in the Calumet district compared with Chicago, and the access to iron and steel industries in nearby towns. And there was plentiful clay to be dredged from the bottom of Lake Calumet for making bricks to construct housing and industrial buildings in Pullman (Buder 1967).
Both towns had access to water bodies and railroads. The water bodies were integrated into the storm-water drainage systems installed in each town. In other respects, the water features were perceived rather differently. In Riverside, areas along the Des Plaines River, with its graceful meander, were reserved by Olmsted for parks. By contrast, diminutive Lake Calumet, on the eastern edge of Pullman and connected to nearby Lake Michigan, was envisaged the site of an interior harbor (Figure 2). With the lake proving too shallow for larger vessels (Doty 1893), the Pullman Company relied on railroads to service its operations. The lake later became a center for recreational activities and events (Buder 1967).

Trackage already running through the locales of Riverside and Pullman provided essential rail links with Chicago. Once town building was under way, depots were erected and a schedule of rail services set. The railroad was indispensable for Riverside’s commuters who worked in Chicago (Figure 3B), though not so for the Pullman labor force who mostly lived within walking distance of their workplace. With the railroad, and later the streetcar, Pullman residents were never isolated, and could travel easily to Chicago for visits or other business.
The Town Plans

Olmsted and Vaux’s plan for Riverside emphasized “gracefully curved lines, generous spaces, and the absence of sharp corners, the idea being to suggest and imply leisure, contemplativeness and happy tranquility” (Olmsted and Vaux 1868, 17). The pleasing physical plan, especially the curvilinear street pattern adjusted to local topography and drainage, deliberately attempted to preserve the natural landscape (Figure 1); indeed, Olmsted set aside more than 283 hectares for public use. Riverside was subdivided into large lots, generally 30.5 meters wide and 61 meters or more deep. The tree-lined streets, open spaces, and wooded plots were deftly blended into a setting described as “a village in a forest.”

Viewed casually, the grid plan of Pullman, especially if compared with Riverside, appears quite ordinary (Figure 2). But on closer scrutiny, one discerns that Beman and Barrett skilfully executed an ingenious plan. Their plan separated the industrial and residential districts by a wide boulevard (Florence Boulevard, or 111th Street), a wall along the south end of the manufacturing zone, and a town center. Among the other attractive elements of Pullman were a landscaped pond (Vista Lake) fronting the company headquarters, and a grid with an interspersion of open spaces (Arcade Park) and other features (the Market Square, where fresh meat and produce were sold; the elementary school). Paved streets, sidewalks, fenced backyards, and paved alleys were ubiquitous (Ely 1885). With buildings set back from streets of 20 meters width, fronts of houses lining most streets were actually separated by 30.5 meters or more, resulting in untypically commodious surroundings for a working class district of that day.

Early Development

The pace of growth differed markedly in the two communities. In the early 1870s homes were under construction in Riverside along with a hotel, water tower, business block, and railroad depot. That initial spurt was not sustained, however, being deterred by a series of events including disruptions following the Chicago fire of 1871, the depression of 1873, and rumors of disease and an unhealthy environment in the vicinity of Riverside (Bassman 1936; Chamberlin 1874). Although the Riverside plan is ranked among Olmsted and Vaux’s finest achievements, their actual involvement was brief as they terminated their association with the developers in early 1870 (Roper 1973). Then in 1873, the company declared bankruptcy. Fortunately, others would guarantee that subsequent development did not deviate from Olmsted’s design, most notably William LeBaron Jenney, a leading architect and Riverside resident, who is also credited with the design of the hotel, several homes, and the water tower that became the community’s landmark. Despite reversals, Riverside gradually was taking form with a network of gas-lighted paved, streets, asphalt sidewalks, and service alleys. Through the 1870s, a number of homes were built and occupied (each connected to gas and sewer lines), private and public grounds dedicated, and schools and other facilities constructed (Collins 1985).

Riverside was already represented on maps of the Chicago area when ground was first broken for Pullman in the spring of 1880. In direct contrast to the sporadic growth of Riverside, Pullman would be completed and fully occupied within a few years. The population reached 8,600 in 1885 (Buder 1967). Not overlooking the higher density of housing, the working families of Pullman did benefit from amenities and services, including the provision of gas, water systems, paved streets, sufficient windows to provide cross ventilation and sunlight, and roomy basements. The company maintained the buildings, streets, parks, and front lawns, and arranged for the daily removal of garbage, ashes, and rubbish. Occupants had only to keep the inside of their homes clean and tidy.

Anticipating a diversified work force, a novel mix of housing types was introduced into the plan, predominantly row houses accommodating two to five families (Figure 3C), supplemented with tenements or “block houses,” and detached or semi-detached single-family dwellings. The housing assigned an employee signified his status within the company (for example, unskilled single men in tenements, foremen in multi-level units, managers in detached residences). A tendency toward monotonous facades in row housing of that day was resisted by Beman who incorporated variations in the building designs (Ely 1885).

The plans for Riverside and Pullman each included a central area adjacent to the rail depot (Figures 1 and 2). A welcome openness characterized both town centers, in Riverside by preserving a commons area, and in Pullman by the spacious Arcade Park and the artificial Vista Lake. While the towns grew before zoning and related controls were being generally adopted, certain functions could be regulated (for example, industry was prohibited in Riverside, as were saloons in Pullman) and commercial activities were confined to designated buildings in the central areas. Riverside had its “Green Block,” a structure housing a variety of commercial enterprises (Bassman 1936), though it was not comparable to the impressive, mul-
tifunctional Arcade Building and the nearby Market Square in Pullman (Doty 1893). A well-appointed hotel was opened in each town center to accommodate visitors.

The Political and Social Setting

Neither Riverside nor Pullman was constituted a political division at its founding. Riverside, however, incorporated as a village in 1875, and retained its status through later periods as newer suburban communities grew around it. Pullman, founded as a small industrial enclave within the jurisdiction of Hyde Park, never incorporated, and was administered by an agent appointed by and responsible to Mr. Pullman (Lindsey 1942). But in 1889 Pullman would grudgingly accede to the annexation of all of Hyde Park—including including his model town—by the city of Chicago.

Riverside was a community of property owners of independent means. They were expected to fulfill certain obligations, for instance, to begin building a home within a year of purchasing the lot, ensuring a 9-meter setback of the house from the front property line, and planting two trees on the front part of the lot (Riverside Improvement Co. 1871). Such stipulations were no inconvenience to Riverside’s landowners who took pride in their exclusive community of elegant, single-family homes designed by leading architects.

Pullman was totally under company management. Workers spent their days in Mr. Pullman’s employ, returning afterwards to rented housing (no town property could be purchased). Residents shopped in company-managed facilities and enjoyed leisure time in company-maintained recreational facilities. Rents, reputedly higher than those paid elsewhere in the region, were not considered unreasonable because of the installed utilities and community services. Nevertheless, those who used the “public” library in the Arcade Building had to purchase memberships, and the Green Stone Church was available—at a charge—to any religious group for services and ceremonies. While the Riverside developers focused on attracting affluent families, Pullman was seeking to mold a contented, loyal work force, respectfully appreciative to be occupants of his model company town.

Retrospect

In the closing decades of the 19th century, Riverside and Pullman, two of several outlying points of new settlement near Chicago, achieved prominence as exceptional models of planned towns. Now subdued within the mosaic of an urbanized area, the communities are less easily identifiable as the focal points of attention they once were, though both continue to merit mention in works on planning history and are designated historic landmark districts.

Without diminishing the innovative aspects of the towns, their characterization as model communities does require qualification. Riverside, the commuter suburb, was undeniably attractive—Kenneth T. Jackson would say “blatantly elitist” (1985, 86)—yet such a community was certainly not an alternative for resolving the problems of low-income, poorly housed working people crowded in the cities. George Pullman seems to have been persuaded, as were others of that time, that “problems associated with slum housing and even those of morality could be controlled in an ideal community” (Pacyga and Skerrett 1986, 427-428). Critical observers, unimpressed by what was being hailed “the world’s most perfect city” (Buder 1967, 73), characterized the town as a medieval barony “inhabited by serfs and chattel rather than free men” (Cohen 1961, 1). Sadly if inevitably, the Pullman experiment founded. Townspeople grew resentful of an overbearing, paternalistic employer, culminating in the famous Pullman strike of 1894 (Lindsey 1942). Some years later, the courts brought an end to the company’s domination of the community.

If Riverside and Pullman did not fully achieve their founders’ expectations, neither did they totally fail. Neither town experienced uncontrolled incremental growth, and both had an impact on planning thought and practice in subsequent periods.

References


