

The Phoenix Homesteads Project: Overlooked But Not Forgotten

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THE PHOENIX HOMESTEADS PROJECT

Ensnconced in the heart of Phoenix, Arizona, four miles from the downtown core, is an 80 acre community that has flourished for nearly 60 years as a verdant oasis in the concentric rings of stucco and asphalt developing around it. The Phoenix Homesteads Project was an experiment in rural rehabilitation, affordable housing, community sustainability and vernacular design that was surveyed, platted, constructed and landscaped by the federal government in the midst of the Great Depression. That it came to a free enterprise conclusion and survives as a desirable residential neighborhood is a fact that challenges many of the myths that lend form to the desert city today. Lessons drawn from the project's inception, realization, and ultimate success could inform modern endeavors regardless of the decades that have intervened.

THE MYTH OF THE WEST VS. GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

Accounts of self-sufficient pioneers, scrappy prospectors, and resourceful entrepreneurs who tamed the elements dominate the lore of how the West was won. Explorers on horseback were followed in close succession by pioneers in their covered wagons, prospectors towing mules, and homesteaders traveling the railways and wagon roads.

The Homestead Movement of the 19th century, which promoted free ownership of land by people who were willing to settle on and cultivate it, reached its climax with the signing of the Homestead Act in 1862. After decades of opposition from Southern slave owners, Eastern employers who feared losing their low-paid employees and Eastern landowners worried about the threat to established land values, the Act was finally signed into effect by President Lincoln when Southern participation in the federal government ceased. One hundred and sixty acres of public land was offered up, free of charge, to anyone who: was either 21 years of age and older or head of a family, was a citizen or had filed for citizenship, and had lived on and cultivated the land for at least five years. By the turn of the century,

80 million acres had been claimed by homesteaders.¹

The homesteaders saw themselves as the innovative pioneers of the new American agricultural frontier.² Many versions of homesteading contribute to the image of homesteaders as hard-working, motivated, noble characters pitting themselves against the wilderness for survival. But by the early twentieth century, there was already an atmosphere of nostalgia surrounding the frontier that was heightened by reports of a diminishing supply of public land and the sense that the frontier era had passed.³

One seldom-mentioned twist on the Homestead Act, known as The Subsistence Homestead Program, was an important factor in shaping parts of the West but had little to do with "pioneering spirit". Rather than encouraging individuals of gumption and courage to strike out on their own, stake a claim and hang onto it through luck, grit, and determination, the Subsistence Homestead Program set the limits of the enterprise and all but guaranteed its ultimate success.

Initiated by the Roosevelt administration in the midst of the Great Depression, the Phoenix Homesteads Project was one of several subsistence farming communities in the western states that were developed from start to finish by the federal government. (A subsistence homestead is defined as a house and out-buildings located upon a plot of land on which the members of a homestead family can grow a large portion of the foodstuffs that they require. It signifies produce for home consumption rather than commercial sale. The homestead provides subsistence alone; cash income must be drawn from an outside source).⁴ The experimental program had several economic, social, and architectural agenda which were met with decidedly mixed reactions by the citizens of Phoenix.⁵

New Deal legislation attempted to improve the efficiency of agricultural production, which had been reduced by the return migration of the urban unemployed to the land during the Depression. Increased farm tenancy caused surplus produce, which reduced market prices and therefore the standard of living of all farm workers. Soil erosion and misuse of sub-marginal land increased the disparity between

farming costs and income for the average farmer by detracting from the possibilities for efficient production. Federally sponsored subsistence farming projects were established to aid in the redistribution of unemployed people from industrial centers to the countryside in a manner that would improve the standard of living of low-income groups in an agricultural setting.⁶

The central motive of the Subsistence Homestead Program was to demonstrate the economic value of a livelihood which combined part-time wage work and part-time gardening or farming.⁷ As it was critical that the subsistence farmers not become competition for the established commercial farmers, land was purchased near small or large industrial centers and subdivided into one to five acre farming plots. Low income families were located on the tracts if they could prove suitability for both agricultural pursuits and non-farm employment in the nearby industrial centers. The Subsistence Homestead Programs were almost always sponsored by a local corporation and the applicant families went through an extensive selection process that reviewed their past employment records, abilities, character traits, and physical fitness.⁸

The program also had the express purpose of exploring whether "a social group with a common background, could through cooperation, add to its income, reduce living expenses, and achieve better standards and conditions of living".⁹ The Division of Subsistence Homesteads operated under the belief that only group activities and cooperatively owned equipment could give the small farmer the productive efficiency needed to survive competition of the large commercial farmers. Cooperative farming was believed to also bring the joys of social participation, the ability to work together, the economic security of an organized group and a new set of social rather than individual goals and values.¹⁰ Obviously, cooperative farms represented a departure from free enterprise.

Local detractors viewed the program as "socialist, communistic and paternalistic". The experimental nature of the program caused some national debate as well. Cooperative agriculture was referred to as "antiquated Jeffersonianism" and the New Deal communities were dubbed "Russian cooperatives" regardless of the fact that participation was completely voluntary. Supporters lauded the effort to ease the rural condition through the cooperation of industrial and agricultural interests. During the initiation of New Deal legislation in Arizona, the Arizona Republic newspaper published polls that showed a nearly 50/50 split between those who favored the economic relief brought to the area by New Deal projects, and those who were suspect of the consequences of the "government dole". The general public opinion shifted gradually from an initial, guarded appreciation of the relief efforts to a firm demand for economic recovery.¹¹ In hindsight, we can look at the Subsistence Homesteads program as the first time in the nation's history that solutions to an agricultural economic crisis were linked with long range land use planning.¹²

THE UNIVERSAL DWELLING VS. A VERNACULAR RESPONSE

Housing stock in Phoenix, as in many other southwestern cities that experienced significant growth spurts after World War II, consists mainly of row after row of ranch style houses on one-quarter acre lots. Built of slump block until the 1970s and of wood frame covered with stucco ever since, these single-family dwellings are oriented to the cardinal points (like the city grid) but often without regard to the brutal effects of the sun. Increasingly thin-walled and large-windowed, any connection of these homes with the realities of the climate seem to be incidental. The ubiquitous clay tile roofs and faux arches are a pastiche of gestures to a regional architecture that never really existed in the Sonoran Desert. By way of contrast, the Phoenix Homesteads Project manifested an entirely different approach to land use and residential construction.

The Subsistence Homesteads Program was representative of early federal efforts at land use planning for rural subdivisions that incorporated experiments in the design of low-cost home types, the use of indigenous materials, and regionally appropriate styles.¹³ The Phoenix Homesteads Program, built in two phases from 1935 to 1937, was comprised of 60 lots plus community buildings, common public areas and agricultural fields.

Phoenix was identified as a major trade center and a non-agricultural source of part-time employment. Phase One of the Phoenix Homesteads was intended as a demonstration project to show that underproductive farmland could be resettled through federal reclamation. An eighty acre parcel four miles from downtown Phoenix was purchased and laid out in a community pasture and 25 farm lots, measuring just under an acre each. The size of the lots (120'x300') had been carefully arrived at in order that they be capable of producing enough produce for a family of five, without creating surplus.¹⁴ The sites were fully surveyed, analyzed by soil experts, and expertly appraised before the loans were given by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads to a local corporation (Rural Homes in Arizona, Inc.) which was formed to administer the project and coordinate financing.

Local engineer and designer Robert T. Evans was retained as engineer for the project. A popular designer, Evans was responsible for many adobe residences in the romanticized "Pueblo Revival" style. His designs for the Phoenix Homesteads tract resulted in sturdily built adobe homes, with four to six rooms each, including bathrooms. Twenty houses had two-bedroom configurations, while the remaining five had only one bedroom. There were no heating or cooling systems built in, but the 16" thick walls compensated for that omission. The houses were slow to gain heat during the day, due to their mass, and re-radiated the heat into the cool desert nights. Fireplaces provided added heat during wintry weather. Although the adobe was excavated from and formed near a large pit on the site, the complex detailing, irregular massing,

and use of slab stone on the roofs slowed construction and drove the cost up higher than the budgeted \$2000 per unit. The framing of the heavy timber roofs was articulated at the eaves and gables, the wooden windows had multiple light casements, the chimneys were battered, and the interiors walls were covered with plaster. Evans landscaped the streets as well, lining them with rows of alternating Washington Palms and Aleppo Pines.¹⁵

The buildings and yard on each lot were specifically arranged; with a small orchard along the sides, a chicken run, a hen house, a cow shed, and space for a small fruit and vegetable garden in back of the main house. There were several varieties of trees included in the orchard: four varieties of peach, two of apricot, two of plum, two of pear, and two of fig. Ornamental trees included olive, pecan and date. Citrus trees included grapefruit, orange, and lemon.¹⁶

The quality and size of the houses on the Phoenix Homesteads tract represent the conclusion of a debate between President Roosevelt and several members of his administration; a debate that continues today on the topic of shelter provided by the government. Some of his program directors (McFadden, for example) held the conviction that housing provided for the unemployed and destitute should be temporary relief shacks of inexpensive construction materials, without the luxuries of indoor plumbing and electricity. Roosevelt, on the other hand, took the position that these projects should be a demonstration of a new way of life and successfully argued for the construction of dwellings that would possess at least firmness and commodity.¹⁷

When Phase One was under construction, President Roosevelt reorganized several agencies dealing with rural resettlement into one coordinated program called the Resettlement Administration. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads was encompassed within this umbrella agency, and some conceptual changes were reflected in Phase Two of the Phoenix Homesteads project. A growing emphasis on collective farming and structured social and community organization was revealed by the reduction of individual lot size, the inclusion of a community building and more area given to common agricultural fields. A change in economic purpose resulted from the improved agricultural economy, and the farm acreage was given over to cash crops such as alfalfa and cotton, intended for commercial sale.¹⁸

Phase Two, known as the Arizona Part-Time Farms-Tract #2, was developed with 35 homes clustered in a T-shape that focused on a community building. The "multi-family" housing tract was divided into lots that measured 60'x 150', and was surrounded by agricultural fields and cooperative pastures. The project, completed in 1937, was planned by Resettlement Engineer Richard Whitehead. All architectural designs were the responsibility of San Francisco architect Vernon De Mars, a career public servant and noted expert on public housing. The housing designs emphasized economy and low-cost construction, which entailed uniform house plans, efficient heating and cooling systems, and locally available materials such as adobe. The presence of

regional stylistic characteristics was evident, but in more subtle ways.¹⁹

Two different floor plans were employed in the second phase of housing, with a variety of color schemes. Both models had an overall rectangular shape and enclosed 800-900 square feet of space. The concrete floors were pigmented and scored every two feet to resemble tile. All the houses had low-pitched roofs framed with heavy timber beams and insulated with 6" of adobe. The structural beams were exposed within the houses, extending through the walls at the roof line. The adobe walls were plastered smooth and a sill-high skirt was painted in contrasting earth tones. Wrought iron light fixtures were included in the original construction, as were heavy timber lintels and lattice verandahs. Multiple-light floor to ceiling windows that opened from the bottom improved ventilation and acted as additional doorways. Centrally located oil burning heaters provided winter warmth and hot water tanks were placed above the ceiling to maximize the livable space of the houses. Experiments with heating were undertaken for several years after the houses were newly constructed. A trash-fueled incinerator was designed to heat water, but was abandoned because not enough refuse was produced to maintain the fire. The solar water tanks on the roofs functioned well but some oil-burning heaters within the dwellings were replaced by units that burned kerosene. Each lot was landscaped with a variety of trees, shrubs, fruits, and garden plots for subsistence purposes. Herb gardens were platted near the kitchen entrances.

The community building, located at the intersection of the housing clusters, was also the site of the borrow pit where the adobe bricks were manufactured. An outdoor theater and sunken garden were constructed in the pit after the earth was removed. The building became an important element in the community, and served at various times as a headquarters for the Resettlement Administration's Management Division, a nursery school, a meeting place for 4-H clubs, a bridge club, a dramatics club, and a location for demonstrations and discussions sponsored by the Agricultural Extension Service, and classes, receptions and parties.

THE FREE ENTERPRISE SYSTEM VS. THE GOVERNMENT DOLE

In 1936, the Rural Homes of Arizona, Inc. was replaced by The Phoenix Homesteads Association, a "farm association" made up of all the occupants of the homesteads. Members of the association would sell their spare-time labor at prevailing farm wages to the association to offset the cost of living on the project, and profits would be divided equally among project residents. Another purpose of the farm association was to take over the responsibility from the federal government for the sale of each homestead.

After the completion of the Phoenix Homesteads project in 1937, the Resettlement Administration was transferred to the Department of Agriculture. Later the same year the program underwent a change again, and was reorganized as the Farm

Security Administration (FSA) of the Department of Agriculture. Due to improvements in the agricultural and national economies, the concept of FSA projects evolved from part-time subsistence farming to full-time cooperative commercial farming. By 1939, residents of the Phoenix Homesteads community, as well as those living in many of the other 58 Subsistence Homesteads project communities, were working full-time at industrial jobs and leaving the management of farm affairs up to the association's board of directors. The board of directors hired several farm, poultry and dairy workers to commit their full-time efforts to farm operation. The residents continued to cultivate their home gardens.²⁰

The federal government recognized that the residents were not deriving their primary incomes from working on the farm, and in 1942 transferred the project to the Federal Public Housing Authority. Farm associations were allowed to pre-pay the purchase price of housing sold by the FSA, so in 1948 the Phoenix Homestead Association paid the indebtedness in full to the United States, which released all interest it had in the property. The individual homesteaders, who had been given the opportunity of entering into either a lease or a 40 year purchase contract with the farm association, all eventually paid off or sold their homesteads. The community building was sold to the Creighton Elementary School District for use as its district offices, and therefore continues to house activities relevant to the community. The Phoenix Homesteads Association is the oldest continuously operating home-owners association in the Salt River Valley.

Surviving residents of the Depression indicate that their lives in the Phoenix Homesteads project were far better than many. They had independence, decent homes, ample food, and a fine environment for growing families.²¹ Although ready to live in a cooperative colony when it offered them the only security they could find, the residents did come to dislike depending on neighbors they viewed as less competent. They were eager to own their own farms or houses, and the experimental project eventually came to a private property conclusion.

The result of the project was the establishment of an agricultural toehold outside of Phoenix that eventually led to the successful operation of commercial farms, and the replication of lot patterns in the neighborhoods that grew up around the Homesteads District as it was swallowed up by urban growth.

The Phoenix Homesteads project, which remains intact as a historic district, merits study as an experiment in cooperative living and working that differed widely from the stereotypes about the development of the West that prevailed during its inception and linger to the present day. Many homesteaders of the late 19th and early 20th centuries failed in their efforts. Some did well enough to gain the deeds to their land; but others gave up within months, forced out by hardships and economic circumstances. In retrospect, they are seen as innocent victims of greedy capitalists, venal government officials, a hostile environment, and an irreversible national movement toward an industrial economic base and an urban-based population.²²

By contrast, the homesteaders of the Phoenix Homesteads project were successful and prosperous, supported by the government until their personal efforts allowed them to repay their debts in full. Regardless of its socialist origins, the Subsistence Homesteads program concluded in parallel with the American dream; hard-working citizens were able to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" and enter the mainstream of suburban life.

This project is also interesting as a model for comparison to contemporary affordable housing communities because it incorporated means of vocational and social support as well as residences that used local materials to best advantage. Operating costs of the homes were kept low by the sensitivity to the micro climate and some costs of living were defrayed by the cooperative facilities (shared equipment, social and recreational spaces) and the edible landscaping. In contemporary affordable housing experiments, such as the West H.E.L.P. community in Greenburgh, New York, or SOM's Mott Haven and Bushwick family housing sites in New York City, the provision of an infrastructure of daycare, health care, personal and vocational counseling, and sponsorship by employers has proved to increase the chances of assimilation of the disadvantaged into a role of productive citizenship.

Its history unknown to most Phoenicians, the Phoenix Homesteads Neighborhood is now seen as a quaint collection of authentic adobe homes, their frugal living spaces counteracted by the fruitful, shady lots on which they repose. Perhaps the most important lesson provided by this particular experiment is that carefully planned projects can, even when initiated by principles counter to the prevailing societal myths, evolve into situations indistinguishable from those held to be ideal.

NOTES

¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

² Allen, Barbara. *Homesteading the High Desert*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 1987.

³ op cit, Allen.

⁴ Conkin, Paul K. *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program*. Cornell University Press, 1959.

⁵ Christian, Jan. *The New Deal in Phoenix*. Arizona State University, Arizona Collection, 1977.

⁶ United States Department of Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form. Phoenix Homesteads Project, 1987.

⁷ op cit, Conkin.

⁸ op cit, U.S. Dept. of Interior.

⁹ *ibid*.

¹⁰ op cit, Conkin.

¹¹ op cit, Christian

¹² op cit, U.S. Dept. of Interior.

¹³ *ibid*.

¹⁴ *ibid*.

¹⁵ *ibid*.

¹⁶ *ibid*.

¹⁷ op cit, Conkin.

¹⁸ op cit, U.S. Dept. of Interior.

¹⁹ *ibid*.

²⁰ *ibid*.

²¹ op cit, Conkin.

²² op cit, Allen.