

Five Fields

FIVE FIELDS
IN HISTORIC LEXINGTON

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When I describe where I live now, I like to say that I was thrown out of Paradise. In truth, I left voluntarily. Paradise was where my wife and I bought our first home, a small, two-bedroom Cape Cod-style house in a 1940s development. Young couples with small children owned most of the houses, which sat on tiny lots. When the families grew, they moved out, because the lots were too small to expand. Barely 15 years after we left the neighborhood for a larger home, the area had almost completely repopulated itself with couples much like we had been, men and women in their early thirties, with one or two children and possibly a third — and the prospect of a move — on the way.

Not so long ago, I walked back in time, into a similar Paradise. The site this time was Five Fields — The Architects Collaborative’s 80-acre development in Lexington, Massachusetts. TAC developed Five Fields immediately after its better-known experiment in suburban living, Six Moon Hill, also in Lexington. Many of the architects lived at Six Moon Hill and wanted to apply their expertise to a larger site where they could exert near-total control. Because the AIA code of ethics prohibited them from directly owning a development,

they created a company called Site and Shelter, Inc. that purchased the former Cutler Farm. With the active participation of the legendary Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius, a TAC partner, they started selling pitched-roof, shoeboxy, International Style one-family homes to young professionals. By 1952, the complete plan had evolved. TAC offered 62 lots around a five-acre Common Land. Fifty years later, no lot has been subdivided, and the lovely common area, which wraps around twin ponds landscaped with weeping willows contributed by resident Hideo Sasaki, is still open for Frisbee, touch football, swimming in the community pool, or Capture-the-Flag, as it has been for five decades.

I visited Five Fields for the first time earlier this spring, in the company of Sam and Vivian Berman, one of the original homesteading couples. They had moved to Boston from New York City, and they knew they wanted to live in a contemporary house. Vivian, an artist, had heard of Walter Gropius. Sam, who worked in his father’s trucking company, had not. Of the several home types available, they chose the “Maxipac,” a 2,500-square-foot, bi-level, concrete-block rectangle designed by Gropius and the young architect Richard Morehouse. “Everybody who moved in was young,” Vivian recalls. And fecund, too. By 1954, Five Fields’ 56 resident families (some had purchased two lots) had spawned

100 children! The first families were classic “early adopters”: engineers working at Polaroid or Raytheon; some writers; academics from the nearby universities. They created an astonishing community. Children and grown-ups staged summer theatricals; one year, the grown-ups tackled Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone*, while the children over nine assembled sets and memorized a youth version of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. Together they enjoyed hootenannies, swim races, and lavish summer barbecues. Very few of the children went away to summer camp, because Five Fields was a summer camp. The kids didn’t intermarry, the Bermans theorize, because, like their own offspring, they always regarded their Five Fields friends as siblings.

The problem with Paradise is that no one ever leaves. Because the lots were large, the houses could be expanded almost infinitely. “First settlers” like the Bermans still occupy nine of the homes and 17 other residents have been there 30 years or more. Only recently has the natural exodus to retirement communities affected Five Fields. The original, spacious TAC layout had other unintended consequences. There are now only a dozen original TAC designs in the area. The modest, planar, glass-and-clapboard “chicken coops,” as the locals derided them, have morphed into attractive, rambling contemporary homes. Most of the additions enhance the contemporary style of the original houses. But in one instance, a builder razed a TAC house and threw up a jagged, ugly mini-mansion that looms over the interlocking ponds of the Common Ground.

Just as no one wants to move out, few can afford to move in. A smaller Five Fields home now costs about \$700,000; a larger one just sold for almost \$1 million. So here is the difference between the Paradise where I once lived and the magnificently tasteful, TAC-conceived Eden: Mine proved to be re-usable, and theirs did not.

Alex Beam is a columnist for *The Boston Globe* and is the author of two novels and, most recently, *Gracefully Insane* (Public Affairs), the story of McLean Hospital.