

## Eken Park (Coolidge Street)

ANNA VEMER ANDRZEJEWSKI (WITH NATE MILLINGTON, ALYSSA O'CONNOR, ELLISHA BOSCHUETZ, NICK WOBORIL, AND JOEL PACHEFSKY)

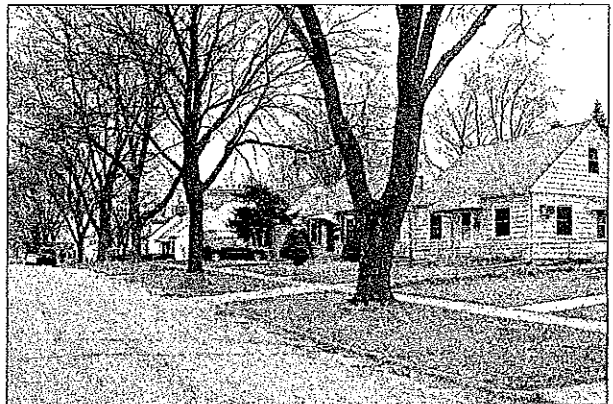
The Eken Park neighborhood is located on Madison's near east side; it is bounded by East Washington Avenue, Packers Avenue, North Street and Aberg Avenue. Although the neighborhood developed in multiple stages beginning in the early twentieth century, the tour focuses on the north side of Coolidge Street that abuts the two-acre Eken Park. This part of the neighborhood was developed during the 1940s, and today represents a remarkably preserved example of a World War II-era mass-produced housing development (a very early example of a type of development that would proliferate in the post-World War years). This sort of development pattern is rare in Madison, but the presence of such a neighborhood shows that it existed here as elsewhere in the country during World War II and its immediate aftermath. The Coolidge Street section also shows the close proximity of home and work during the mid-twentieth century, as it was developed to support industries on Madison's east side, including Oscar Mayer.

The neighborhood is named for one of the first landholders/farmers in this part of Madison, Iver Eken, who purchased the land that would become Eken Park in 1888. The Eken farm was passed down through several generations of the Eken family until Iver's descendants began subdividing parcels for development during the 1920s. The Eken family continued to reside in the farmhouse—a heavily remodeled structure located at the southwestern corner of Eken Park near the intersection of Mayer Avenue and Dexter—until 1947 when Olena Eken (Iver's daughter) passed away. The land that would become the neighborhood greenspace, Eken Park, was donated to the City of Madison by Selma Eken before her death in 1940.<sup>1</sup>

The development was ideally positioned to capitalize on the industrial employment centers located on Madison's east side, as an article in the *Capital Times* from July of 1924 attests:

Eken Park, a recently platted East Side residential district, promises to become one of the most popular home sections in that part of the city...Employees of the East Side industrial plants are taking advantage of the close proximity of the plat to their work and area purchasing the lots, Mr. Reese [the developer] stated. Sixteen homes have already been erected in the park. Oscar Mayer's packing plant and the Northwestern road round-house are only short distances from the plat.<sup>2</sup>

City directories from the early to mid-twentieth century confirm that a sizable number of Eken Park residents worked for Oscar Mayer (to the west) as well as the French Battery Company (now Ray-O-Vac, whose headquarters were located to the east).<sup>3</sup> This first plat was annexed to the City of Madison in 1927, thus



Coolidge Street, looking west. Photo Anna Vemer Andrzejewski, 2012.

from: VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE FORUM 33RD ANNUAL MEETING, MADISON, WISCONSIN 2012  
Friday, Nov 1: focusing Madison: where we live, where we work

extending city sewers to the area and prompting further development.<sup>4</sup>

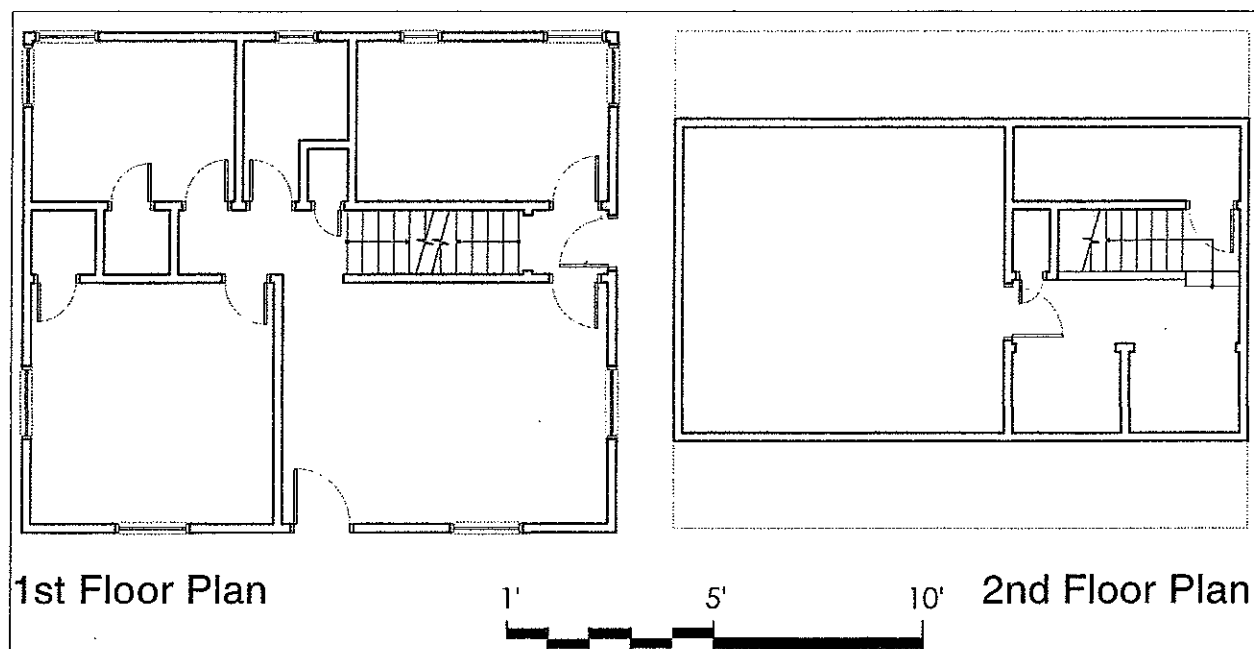
In 1942 John Tilton—an ambitious businessman from Rochelle, Illinois—came to Madison with the intent to build forty houses on Coolidge Street as part of the “John W. Tilton Subdivision.”<sup>5</sup> Tilton’s foray into the Madison housing market represented an extension of his business. His company, Leader Homes, had already built over forty homes based on his 1938 “Leader Model Home” in Rochelle—a two-story Georgian model—as well as others based on a model home for war workers in Rochelle and Rockford as well as Beloit, Wisconsin. In 1947, Tilton developed 120 more houses in Eken Park on the same model along a half-mile portion of Myrtle Street (just north of Coolidge). Tilton erected thirty-six or thirty-seven three-story reinforced concrete six-plex apartment

buildings near the Tenney Park locks in 1947 or 1948 known initially as “Tilton Terrace” (now Sherman Terrace). Local historian Burr Angle estimates that Tilton invested over three million dollars in the Madison housing market during the 1940s.<sup>6</sup>

The Coolidge Street houses, each measuring roughly 28' x 30' in size, stand on uniform lots measuring forty-five feet wide and 110 feet deep. The basic one-and-one-half story model was used with minimal variation outside of a few gabled dormers, some later additions, and the reversed plan. The house at 2426 Coolidge shows the basic elements of the plan. The centrally-placed door offers entry into a single large communal living space, which doubles as a living/dining space. The kitchen is located behind this space, which may also be entered through a side door adjacent to a narrow driveway. Ac-



Facade of House at 2426 Coolidge Street. Photo Anna Vemer Andrzejewski, 2012.



First and Second Floor Plans. Fieldwork by Andrea Truitt and Anna Vemer Andrzejewski. Drawn by Rowan Davidson.

cess to the full basement is located in the transitional space between the kitchen and living area. The two small bedrooms—each containing a closet—are located on the opposite side of the house. A small bathroom and a stairway that provides access to the upper half-story are positioned just behind the living room. Ornamentation on the interior and exterior of the houses is minimal, probably to keep costs down. Tilton standardized construction as much as possible using prefabricated components, and the houses were erected quickly (in the span of a few months). The houses were put on the market during the summer of 1943 at a cost of \$5,650. By 1947, when Tilton erected the next series of buildings on Myrtle Street, the cost had risen to \$9,975 because of increased building costs.<sup>7</sup>

Although not “company housing,” Tilton’s Coolidge Street houses obviously reflect ties with neighboring industries, particularly Oscar Mayer, in whose shadow the houses stand today. Prior to the relocation of Packers Avenue during the mid-1960s, Tilton’s houses extended farther westward toward Oscar Mayer; thus the houses were easily within walking distance of the factory. Despite the fact that many residents today commute beyond the neighboring

industries, the form of the houses has changed very little since their construction seventy years ago. A few houses have received modest additions, some display modern siding or replacement windows, and others now have adjacent garages—but the basic appearance reflects the 1940s arrangement.

Perhaps this organizational pattern has contributed to the camaraderie felt by residents of Eken Park, who according to local accounts, remain a tightly knit and highly neighborly bunch. Eken Park itself serves as a neighborhood gathering place, including for a large reunion held in August of 1991, which brought back the children of residents who lived there during the 1930s and 1940s. Those at the celebration recalled the tightness of the neighborhood; one remarked that “back then, the neighborhood was family. You belonged to the neighborhood—and all the homes were open to you.” Another described the spirit of cooperation that was part of the neighborhood ethos: “We were close. We had to be. No one had anything, so we had to help each other out.”<sup>8</sup>

**Endnotes**

- 1 Joan Phelan (East Side History Club), "Eken Park" and "Eken Brothers," unpublished manuscript.
- 2 "New East Side Park Popular Home Section," *Capital Times* (14 July 1924).
- 3 Madison city directories.
- 4 "Eken Park Folks to Petition Council for Annexation to City," *East Side News* (24 March 1927); and "Welcome Eken Park," *East Side News* (July 1927).
- 5 "Leader Construction to Build 40 New Houses at Madison," *Rochelle Leader* (15 April 1943).
- 6 Burr Angle (East Side History Club), "John William Tilton," unpublished manuscript.
- 7 John Newhouse, "House Costs Up Half, Tilton Says, and Double That if Building Alone," *Wisconsin State Journal* (1 June 1947).
- 8 Mike Flaherty, "Kids of Eken Park Recall Magic of Neighborhood," *Wisconsin State Journal* (25 August 1991).

## Prefabulous Madison: Prefabrication in the Capital City

JIM DRAEGER

Two Madison brothers parlayed a horse watering trough business into a prefabricated building firm after one of the brothers bought a new Dodge car in 1919. George and Arthur Trachte got an idea to bolt the corrugated metal, side panels of their horse troughs to a steel frame to create a car garage. Soon, others began asking the Trachte brothers to build their garages, and the company transitioned to specialize in portable modular steel buildings. Their distinctive sixteen-inch wide ribbed panels make Trachtes (as they are locally known) easy to spot. Trachte Company buildings found many practical industrial, commercial and residential uses throughout Madison and beyond.

Trachte was not the only one eyeing this new industry. In the depths of the housing collapse spawned by the Great Depression, Forest Products Laboratory researchers decided to give the nascent house prefabrication industry a boost by sponsoring a model home. Local modernist architects Beatty and Strang were hired to design the Aladdin Lamp House, a prefabricated stress-skin plywood house exhibited at the 1934 Madison Home Show. Its pioneering

wall panel construction became an industry standard, but locally it was more influential for giving Madisonians their first exposure to this emerging housing fad.

For the thousands of people visiting the home show, the Lamp house may have seemed like a glimpse into the future. Some adventurous residents may have been inspired to go pre-fab, like the families who bought two steel framed houses produced by Harnischfeger Company, a Milwaukee-based mining equipment manufacturer in 1936. The company turned to housing as an attempt to diversify manufacturing as the economic collapse crippled their mining business. Madison also saw the erection of an American Motohome in 1937, a factory built steel and asbestos wall panel modular house along the shore of Monona Bay. Oddly enough, although the house remains an architectural curiosity even today, not a single mention was made in either of Madison's local newspapers despite its futuristic International Style appearance and its modular construction that allowed the house to be completed in a week's time.

Wartime rationing of building materials brought a halt to the construction of prefabricated houses in Madison. After the war, a building boom made possible by VA loans led to acute housing shortages, and a number of local builders stepped forward with prefabricated solutions. Blackhawk Park, just west of campus along Craig Street was Wisconsin's largest prefabricated subdivision, with 136 homes supplied by the Harnischfeger Company, which had beefed up capacity during the war, producing houses for military installations and defense factory sites. A similar, but smaller neighborhood of 40 Harnischfeger houses was erected in Eken Park to serve blue-collar workers of the nearby Oscar Mayer plant and other eastside industries.

Postwar Madison saw large numbers of pre-fabs produced by Harnischfeger and a variety of other national and regional companies including Green's Ready Built Homes, GBH-Way Homes, Walnut Home-Way Houses,

National Homes, and Gunnison Homes with concentrations built in the Olbrich Park and Sunset Village neighborhoods. Madison's most famous homegrown prefabricator was Marshall Erdman, noted as the contractor for Frank Lloyd Wright's Unitarian Church in Shorewood Hills and for his role as contractor of Wright's late 1950s pre-fabs (see Andrzejewski essay). Erdman created his own U-Form-It houses in 1950 and began a long history of prefabricated houses that by 1958 accounted for almost \$3 million dollars of home sales each year. By the 1960s Erdman had moved along to prefabricating medical clinic buildings like the Doctors' Park complex in Shorewood Hills (see entry).

The combination of easy financing, Madison's expansive growth, a growing creative class of university and government employees, and the pragmatic and efficient construction techniques of prefabrication combined to create a receptive local climate for this house type.



Trachte Building on Commercial Avenue, near Eken Park. Photo Anna Vemer Andrzejewski, 2012.