

Public Housing in the United States, 1933-1949; A Historic Context

Volume II

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Cover Image: Harlem River Houses, New York, New York (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Gottschow-Schleisner Collection)

Cover Background Image: Neighborhood Gardens, St. Louis, MO (National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1985)

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INTRODUCTION

The origins of the Federal public housing program can be traced to a series of significant government initiatives begun in the 1930s to combat the converging problems of unemployment, expanding slums, and insufficient housing during the Great Depression. Additional government programs in the early 1940s provided housing for defense industry workers and their families in overcrowded manufacturing centers during World War II. Nearly 700 large-scale public housing projects, built either as "low-rent" housing during the Great Depression or "defense" housing during World War II, continue to operate today within the Federal public housing program. These projects comprise approximately 125,000 dwelling units and are in the inventories of nearly 250 local Public Housing Authorities in 39 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

The following narrative addresses the political, social, and architectural trends that shaped the program between 1933 and 1949, as well as earlier influences that contributed to Federal involvement in the program. In doing so the report provides an analytical framework for understanding the historic role and significance of individual public housing projects in the United States.

The period under consideration begins with the Public Works Administration's housing construction program undertaken as an unemployment relief effort under the *National Industrial Recovery Act* of 1933. This program led to the passage of the *United States Housing Act* of 1937, which established the concept of Federal subsidies to local public housing authorities and set the cornerstone of the modern program. The report continues with a discussion of the relevant government housing programs during World War II, and concludes with passage of the *United States Housing Act* of 1949. This act renewed Federal subsidies to local housing authorities after public housing had languished in the immediate postwar years. The 1949 Act tied public housing construction to urban redevelopment, serving to relocate families displaced by federally funded construction and highway projects. It also began a new era of public housing construction, often characterized in larger urban areas by vast high-rise developments built during the 1950s and 1960s (which are beyond the scope of this context).

Below are some of the key legislative and administrative issues that reformers, legislators, and government housing officials addressed in the early years of the public housing program.

- Should government be involved in the construction of housing, or is that role more properly reserved for private enterprise?
- Should the Federal government own and operate public housing directly, or should the Federal role be one of subsidization and regulation of local government housing efforts?
- Should public housing replace large, contiguous tracts of inner-city slum property, or should it be built on vacant land, whether within a city or surrounding it?
- Should the Federal government fund public housing only in times of emergency, such as the Great Depression and World War II, or should it create a long-term program with a permanent stock of government-owned housing?

- Should public housing design meet only the most basic standards of health, safety, and comfort within a carefully prescribed budget, or should innovative housing design be encouraged both for the benefit of the residents and the community as a whole?
- Should the Federal government require racial integration in public housing, or should it allow segregation to continue according to local custom, as long as equal public housing accommodations are provided to all races?

The answers that evolved during this period determined the character, design, location, and social impact of the projects built in the 1930s and 1940s and continue to have ramifications on the program today. These and other legislative, design, and social issues are addressed in the course of this report.

Housing Reform Before the Great Depression

Prior to the 1930s, the Federal government was removed from the housing debate. Its role in providing for the social welfare of its citizens was limited, with the expectation that local governments and private charities should address such matters. Yet the need for better housing was imperative. State, local, and private housing measures since the mid-nineteenth century had neither improved the dreadful living conditions in the slums nor provided a substantial increase in the supply of adequate new housing available to the poor.

Agitation for reform in American housing, particularly as it applied to accommodations for the poorer segments of the population, generated considerable debate during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Federal efforts, however, to eliminate the nation's slums and to replace them with decent, low-rent housing for the urban poor did not begin until spurred by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Desperate to boost the stagnant construction industry and to create jobs, the government cleared slums and built housing under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

A number of factors contributed to the development of public housing in America, some of which had been brewing for more than half a century. The Progressive Era contributed standards of construction, health, and safety which were clearly incorporated into the designs of new housing. The Garden City movement, with its ideal of building new towns for the future, spread from Britain at the turn of the century, and gained many advocates in the United States, who honed their skills in the government-built defense housing projects of World War I and the residential suburban developments of the 1920s. Also, the rational-functional forms of European Modernist housing estates and the work of European Modernist architects became well known in the United States through the travels of important American writers, and through the Modern Architecture exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1932.

REGULATION OF THE SLUM

A product of the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the nineteenth century, slums appeared in cities throughout the nation. Social pathologies attributed to the slums—poverty, disease, crime, promiscuity, delinquency—encouraged early reform efforts. This degraded environment seemed to threaten the physical and moral welfare of its residents, and of society as a whole. Cultural differences further provoked concern, as massive waves of immigrants, mostly impoverished and unskilled in industry or modern agriculture, filled the slums of the northeast and north-central industrial centers. The perception arose that these newcomers, if left unassimilated in their miserable surroundings, could erode traditional American values and destroy the existing social order.

Some cities attempted to regulate minimum acceptable building standards to restrict the construction of the worst types of slum housing. New York City had the nation's first tenement house law by 1867, a few years after the bloody Civil War draft riots had erupted among Irish immigrants in the Lower East Side slums. A specially formed Council of Hygiene and Public Health investigating the draft riots in 1865 concluded that the "closely packed houses where the mob originated seemed to be literally hives of sickness and vice."¹ The law set minimum standards for ventilation, fire safety, sanitation, and weather-tightness,

¹ Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 187.

and prohibited the habitation of windowless cellars.² Yet enforcement was ineffective, opposition from property owners was strong, and any resulting improvements merely raised the price of decent housing beyond the ability of the poor to pay. State legislatures in Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia also passed tenement house laws before the turn of the century, with similar results.³

NEW YORK TENEMENT HOUSE LAW OF 1901

The legislature of the state of New York made several attempts to amend its Tenement House Law to make it a more effective weapon against the slums. Governor Theodore Roosevelt, who had battled tenement owners during his tenure as New York City's police commissioner, created a State Tenement House Commission in 1900, with Lawrence Veiller as its secretary. The commission recommended a prohibition on air shafts in future tenements, a maximum of 70 percent lot coverage, height restrictions for non-fireproof buildings, and private water-closets for every family. The new legislation created a professional inspection department and required that inspectors evaluate each tenement by an objective set of standards rather than according to personal discretion. It also recommended new standards to modify existing tenements, including the insertion of wall windows in interior rooms and the installation of more satisfactory fire escapes. The legislature passed the commission's proposals into law in 1901.⁴

Veiller established the National Housing Association in 1910, which published a "Model Housing Law" to encourage other states to enact municipal housing codes. Between 1901 and 1917, ten states passed tenement house laws based on New York's model. Veiller was dedicated to the reform of slum housing through regulation of the private market, and he insisted that any attempts to build public tenements would be improper, inefficient, and subject to corruption. He predicted the political manipulation of tenant constituencies under such a program, as well as ponderous contracting processes and a dearth of qualified civil servants able to administer municipal housing. Private enterprise would be "driven out of the field" by public competition, and only city governments would build "accommodations for the poor."⁵

NINETEENTH-CENTURY MODEL TENEMENTS

No mechanism was yet in place to ensure that housing built to these new standards would become available to the poor. Some businessmen and philanthropists, especially in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati, felt that the private sector could overcome this problem by investing in "model tenements." They believed that well-designed, well-built housing at reasonable rents would ensure full tenancy, and could provide acceptable returns of up to six percent to the benevolent investor. In exchange for superior

² Robert W. De Forest and Lawrence Veiller, ed., *The Tenement House Problem* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), pp. 94-96.

³ Marian L. and Howard A. Palley, *Urban America and Public Policies* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath & Co., 1977), pp. 162-163.

⁴ Roy Lubove, *The Progressive and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890-1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), pp. 3-68.

⁵ Lawrence Veiller, *Housing Reform: A Hand-Book for Practical Use in American Cities* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), pp. 79-82.

accommodations, owners insisted that tenants pay their rents promptly, and often required them to abide by strict standards of cleanliness, hard work, and moral behavior.⁶ Yet the movement ultimately failed because it did not attract enough investors willing to risk their capital in philanthropic ventures, and because its inherent requirement to provide both a small profit and decent shelter placed it beyond the means of families living at subsistence levels.⁷

A NATIONAL REFORM MOVEMENT

As states dealt with the inadequacies of their tenement house legislation and the model tenement movement struggled to provide a trickle of decent housing for the poor, reformers of the Progressive Era focused national attention on the housing problem. Before World War I, the settlement house movement, inspired by Jane Addams in Chicago, Robert Woods in Boston, and Lillian Wald in New York, brought the problems of immigrants in the slums to the attention of middle-class America. Settlement workers provided educational and social services to immigrants, raised money for parks and libraries in the slums, and lobbied for tenement house reform. Reformers in Washington, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and other major cities surveyed the slums, compiling the grim statistics of poverty—overcrowding, mortality rates, crime rates—as quantifiable proof to the public of the horrors faced by the residents.⁸

During the same period, Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant and photojournalist, chronicled the slums of New York City in *How the Other Half Lives*. Using angry prose and dramatic photographs, Riis described the dangers of slum life to a national audience:

Tenements . . . are the hot beds of the epidemics that carry death to rich and poor alike; the nurseries of pauperism and crime that fill our jails . . . that turned out in the last eight years around half million beggars to prey upon our charities; . . . because above all, they touch the family life with deadly moral contagion.⁹

He urged local governments to provide effective tenement regulation, to condemn and destroy the worst neighborhoods, and to ensure proper education and health standards for children.

⁶ Alfred T. White, *Improved Dwellings for the Laboring Classes: The Need and the Way to Meet It on Strict Commercial Principles in New York, Brooklyn, and Other Cities* (New York: n.p., 1877; New Haven, CT: Research Publications, Inc., n.d., American Architectural Books Based on the Henry-Russell Hitchcock Bibliography, microform series 69000, reel 107, part 1385), pp. 21-27.

⁷ J. Paul Mitchell, "Historical Overview of Direct Federal Housing Assistance," in *Federal Housing Policy and Programs Past and Present*, ed., J. Paul Mitchell (New York: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1985), p. 190.

⁸ John A. Garraty, *The American Nation: A History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 539-540.

⁹ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Dover, 1971), p. 2.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TAKES NOTICE

Spurred on by Riis and other reformers, Congress appropriated \$20,000 in 1892 for the Commissioner of Labor to study the slums in the nation's 16 largest cities. The Commissioner wrote a lengthy constitutional defense of the appropriation as an acceptable Federal intervention in an otherwise local matter. Inadequate funding, however, forced a reduction in the scope of the investigation. Surveyors compiled statistics on housing quality, public services, employment, immigration, literacy, drunkenness, and disease in parts of Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City, and Chicago.¹⁰ Congress took no further action. The Commissioner submitted another report in 1895 on a study of European slums, which noted the success of model tenements in Europe, and concluded that "proper housing of the great masses of working people can be furnished on a satisfactory commercial basis."¹¹

In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt convened the President's Homes Commission for another examination of the slums, this time in Washington, D.C. The commission reported that the slum problem had advanced far beyond the capabilities of any city to rectify it, and it called for an unprecedented Federal intervention into local affairs, recommending both purchase and condemnation of slum properties by the Federal government, and direct Federal loans to property owners to finance reconstruction of urban neighborhoods. The commission believed that "a little government aid extended to these unfortunates to build habitable dwellings would tend immensely toward their uplifting."¹² These zealous recommendations went unheeded.

WORLD WAR I HOUSING PROGRAMS

The country's mobilization for World War I, rather than the continuing problem of slums, proved to be the direct impetus for the first Federal intervention in the private housing market. The enormous increase in industrial production and the resulting concentrations of population near shipbuilding and ammunition production centers created a serious shortage of housing for war workers of moderate income. Congress created the U. S. Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC) and the U. S. Housing Corporation (USHC) in 1918 to address this shortage. The EFC's charter authorized it to make loans to limited-dividend realty companies incorporated by private shipbuilding firms to construct housing for shipyard employees. The agency supervised the planning, design, and construction of 28 projects in 23 cities, including more than 8,000 houses and 800 apartment units owned by the realty companies under this program. In contrast to the EFC, the USHC had the unprecedented opportunity to undertake direct construction and management of housing for workers at arsenals and navy yards. The USHC built 27 new communities, consisting of nearly 6,000 single-family houses and 7,000 apartments, in 16 states and the District of Columbia.¹³

¹⁰ Carroll D. Wright, *The Slums of Baltimore, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia*, Seventh Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894), p. 101.

¹¹ E. R. L. Gould, *The Housing of the Working People*, Eighth Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), p. 19.

¹² The President's Homes Commission, *Report of the Committee on Social Betterment* (Washington, D. C.: The President's Homes Commission, 1908), p. 263.

¹³ Robert Moore Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing: Economic Aspects of the Federal Program* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), pp. 74-78.

Following the armistice, Congress acted to remove the Federal government from active participation in housing and to reaffirm its faith in the ability of private enterprise to fulfill the nation's housing needs. It quickly dismantled the administration and production structures of the wartime housing agencies. Beginning in 1921, the government sold all USHC housing and any EFC housing acquired through mortgage defaults. Many Congressmen demanded that issues of wartime housing and peacetime social reform be kept distinct. Senator William Calder of New York stated his uneasiness toward the "social uplifters and reformers" who seemed to operate the housing program, wondering if they were using the war "to work out some schemes of their own."¹⁴ Yet two important precedents were in place: Federal loans to private housing corporations and direct public construction to meet housing needs during a national emergency. These concepts served to broaden Federal housing policy during the 1930s.¹⁵

EMERGING NATIONAL HOUSING MOVEMENT

After the war, many housing experts began to encourage a more active government role in clearing the slums and housing the poor. Awareness was growing that restrictive laws alone could not solve the housing problem. Edith Elmer Wood, who had been active before the war in the effort to eliminate the notorious alley slums of Washington, D.C., presented the first significant challenge to Lawrence Veiller's regulatory approach to housing reform. Writing in 1919, Wood stated that the "best restrictive legislation is only negative. It will prevent the bad. It will not produce the good . . . at a given rental." She blamed the slum problem not on greedy landlords or insufficient housing regulation, but on the inherent abuses of modern industrial society: workers crowded into inner-city neighborhoods to be near their employment, but low wages and high property values forced them to accept substandard housing. She called for the control of housing as a public utility, just as the government already controlled the distribution and quality of water, electricity, transit, and education. Only if the "community itself undertakes to provide suitable houses at cost for such of its citizens as need them" could the United States avoid its next great housing problem.¹⁶

Wood proposed the creation of a national housing commission that could make low-interest loans to local communities and private limited-dividend corporations. She also proposed an amendment to the Federal Reserve Act to allow national banks to supply federally guaranteed loans to home buyers.¹⁷ In 1931, Wood, along with a wide array of social activists, urban planners, and architects, formed the National Public Housing Conference to promote "good housing through government loans and public

¹⁴ Harry Bredemeier, *The Federal Public Housing Movement: A Case Study of Social Change* (n.p.: Arno Press, 1980), pp. 43-44.

¹⁵ Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing*, p. 79.

¹⁶ Edith Elmer Wood, *The Housing of the Unskilled Wage Earner* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1919), pp. 20, 60, 239.

¹⁷ Roy Lubove, *Community Planning in the 1920's: The Contribution of the Regional Planning Association of America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1963), p. 27.

construction."¹⁸ This group would be instrumental in convincing the Federal government to undertake its first experiments in low-rent public housing.

The Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), whose members included writers Lewis Mumford and Catherine Bauer, and architects Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, also helped to bring housing to a national debate in the 1920s. The members of the RPAA were strongly influenced by a number of contemporaneous international developments, including the English Garden City movement, the success of large-scale European housing estates after World War I, and the work of European Modernist architects.

The Garden City model, as first espoused by Englishman Ebenezer Howard in the late nineteenth century, proposed the establishment of self-sufficient towns to solve the problem of housing affordability with new, nonspeculative forms of real estate. Several Garden Cities were constructed in England in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and the design vocabulary of these new cities was quite influential in the creation of new residential communities in the United States. Features such as winding streets, clearly delineated open spaces, large building blocks closed to vehicular traffic, and a definite hierarchy between major roads and secondary streets, were quickly incorporated into American public and private housing alike.¹⁹

After World War I, many European cities faced major housing shortages, which they addressed by creating, funding, and implementing extensive housing programs. For example, the Social Democrat-controlled city of Vienna, Austria embarked on an ambitious housing program in 1923, which rehoused nearly 10 percent of the city's population within the next decade. The large apartment complexes of "Red Vienna" included kindergartens, libraries, meeting halls, and health and recreation centers—all collective facilities which reflected the social agenda of the city leaders. Germany also created a great deal of publicly supported housing during this same period, which was generally regarded as more modern and experimental than what was being built in Austria. The German housing estates utilized new building materials, construction techniques, and architectural forms; these materials and techniques often increased amenities while reducing costs. In a novel site plan called *Zeilenbau*, buildings were arranged in parallel rows, so that each individual unit received the maximum amount of natural sunlight.²⁰

The work of the European Modernist architects was publicized in America mainly through the writings of housing scholar Catherine Bauer. Bauer spent a year in 1926-27 in Paris after graduating from college, where she first learned of the new developments in European housing and architecture. While in Paris she became acquainted with the work of the leading French Modernist architect Le Corbusier, and with the new technologies and new materials which were transforming the appearance and construction of European housing.²¹

¹⁸ Eugenie Ladner Birch, "Woman-made America: The Case of Early Public Housing Policy," in *The American Planner: Biographies and Recollections*, ed. Donald A. Krueckeberg (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 161.

¹⁹ Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp.31-32.

²⁰ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, pp. 60-61.

²¹ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, p. 65.

On a second European tour in 1930, which included visits to Sweden, the Netherlands, France, and Germany, Bauer was particularly impressed with the work of German Modernist architect Ernst May, especially as building director for the city of Frankfurt am Main. In 1925, May created a master plan for the entire metropolitan region surrounding and including Frankfurt, and housing was an integral part of this plan. May's finest accomplishment in the implementation of this plan, which created housing for approximately 10 percent of the city's population, was the suburb of Romerstadt. Located to the northwest of the old city, overlooking the Nidda River valley, the town contained several different types of garden apartment buildings and row housing; Bauer's favorite of these was a two-story rowhouse with a one-story apartment above, and a garden in the rear. The town's 1,200-unit housing development of mostly rowhouses, included shops, day care centers, laundries, and shared gardens.²²

The work of two additional European Modernist architects also influenced the development of American public housing, again made known to Americans by the writings of Catherine Bauer. German Modernist architect Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus, the national design school in Dessau, Germany, in 1918. He later came to America fleeing the Nazis (who had closed the Bauhaus), and in 1938 he was appointed chairman of the Harvard School of Design. Gropius is best known for his design of the glass and steel Bauhaus School, and for a number of office and factory buildings in his native Germany.²³ Dutch Modernist architect J. J. P. Oud, while serving as architect in charge of housing for the city of Rotterdam, designed a number of workers' housing complexes.²⁴

The Museum of Modern Art held its landmark "Modern Architecture International Exhibition" in the spring of 1932. Beginning at the museum in New York City, and traveling to cities across the nation, including Philadelphia, Hartford, Los Angeles, Buffalo, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Rochester, Toledo, Cambridge, and Worcester, the exhibition served to diffuse the ideals and designs of the Modernist movement.²⁵ The content of the exhibition was divided into the two distinct areas of architecture and housing. The section on architecture, organized by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr. and Philip Johnson, exhibited the work of important Modernist architects including Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, J. J. P. Oud, Mies van der Rohe, Raymond Hood, Howe & Lescaze, Richard Neutra, and the Bowman Brothers.²⁶ The smaller section on housing, organized by Clarence Stein, Henry Wright, Catherine Bauer, and Lewis Mumford, contained photographs of several German and Dutch housing estates and of only one American example, Radburn, New Jersey.²⁷

Influenced by all of these new ideas in architecture and housing, the central goal of the RPAA became making large-scale, planned residential communities accessible to low-income groups. They believed that such developments were essential components of a humane urban environment that should be integrated into all regional planning efforts. To this end they believed that government should concentrate on

²² Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, pp. 69-73.

²³ John Peter, *Masters of Modern Architecture* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1958), p. 218.

²⁴ Peter, *Masters of Modern Architecture*, p. 221.

²⁵ *Modern Architecture International Exhibition* (New York: Arno Press for the Museum of Modern Art, first printed 1932, reprint edition 1969), p. 3.

²⁶ *Modern Architecture International Exhibition*, pp. 5-6.

²⁷ *Modern Architecture International Exhibition*, p. 6.

increasing the supply and reducing the cost of new housing. Early RPAA recommendations for New York included creation of a central state housing agency, a state housing credit system, and municipal housing boards to acquire land and build housing.²⁸ To test their planning and development theories, RPAA members formed the City Housing Corporation to design, finance, and build two residential suburbs outside New York City: Sunnyside Gardens in Queens in 1924, and Radburn, New Jersey, in 1928. Each of these communities was an innovative example of Garden City design, intended to draw workers away from the inner city; but the high costs of privately financed, large-scale development prohibited either project from providing affordable housing to low-income families.²⁹

HOUSING PROGRAMS IN THE STATES

Despite all their efforts, housing reformers failed to convince the Federal government of the 1920s to take steps toward a housing program of any sort, whether regulation of the private market or construction of public tenements. Times were too prosperous for the Federal government to give serious consideration to housing programs for the poor. After a postwar construction slump, the 1920s proved a boom time for the American housing industry, producing 937,000 units in 1925, a record unsurpassed until 1949.³⁰ Following World War I, the initiative in housing legislation passed from the Federal government back to the states. Yet state programs targeted the middle class; they could not afford to provide housing for a permanent class of the poor.

The Massachusetts state legislature established a Homestead Commission in 1917 to buy land "for the purpose of relieving congestion of population and providing small houses and plots of ground for wage earners." The law required the state to sell these houses at cost, following a warning from the Massachusetts supreme court that a state housing program "not [become] a plan for pauper relief." In 1919, the Commission built 12 houses near Lowell, selling them to workers at long-term, low-interest mortgages. The state soon lost interest and dissolved the program.³¹

The California state legislature enacted the Veterans Farm and Home Purchase Act in 1921 to assist men returning from World War I. The state issued \$10 million in bonds to set up a revolving fund allowing veterans or their widows to borrow up to 95 percent of the price of a new house or farm at 5 percent interest.³² Repayment of the fund by the qualifying veterans assured that taxpayers would not subsidize the program, precluding housing from becoming a public burden. One legislator proudly asserted that the program was "self-sustained and free from any element of charity, while building substantial law-abiding, home-owning citizens."

The New York state legislature made several attempts to stimulate the housing market during the 1920s. The legislature passed a 10-year real estate tax exemption on all new construction completed before April

²⁸ Lubove, *Community Planning in the 1920's*, pp. 33-34.

²⁹ Lubove, *Community Planning in the 1920's*, pp. 45-51.

³⁰ Peter G. Rowe, *Modernity and Housing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 103.

³¹ Dorothy Schaffter, *State Housing Agencies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), pp. 15, 25-33.

³² Schaffter, *State Housing Agencies*, pp. 183-184.

1924.³³ With no limits on rent or selling price, however, this law produced scant housing for low-income families.³⁴ In 1922, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company convinced the legislature to amend the insurance code, permitting insurance companies to invest their burgeoning profits in housing. Metropolitan Life Insurance Company opened its first housing development in 1924 in New York City as a direct result of this action.³⁵ To ensure that this housing would reach the working class, the code required rents not to exceed a very low \$9 per month per room, at a time when newly built apartments in New York City rented for at least \$15 per room.³⁶

The *New York State Housing Law* of 1926 provided further incentives to private builders. It exempted limited-dividend housing corporations from state and city taxes and granted them the right of eminent domain to condemn and assemble large tracts of land on which to build new housing projects. The act stipulated a maximum of 6 percent return to investors and set specific rent ceilings. Only six corporations in New York City took advantage of this act by 1932, building 11 garden apartment projects with housing for more than 1,700 families.³⁷

Privately financed developers also attempted to address the housing needs of low-income families in a few large-scale projects. In 1928, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., built the Paul Lawrence Dunbar Apartments as New York City's first cooperative development for African Americans.³⁸ Philanthropists in Chicago built economic level of the middle class. Like the projects built under the New York Housing Law of 1926, the high costs of large-scale development prohibited these projects from providing housing to low-income the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments and the Marshall Field Garden Apartments in 1929.³⁹ Despite extremely low profit margins, none of these projects could reduce rents to reach below the families.

By the eve of the Great Depression, housing reform had reached a turning point. State and local governments clearly had demonstrated that they could not provide adequate housing for the poor, while the Federal government was unwilling to fill the void. Private developers, no matter how well intentioned, could not build decent housing at a price the poor could afford. Edith Elmer Wood expressed the fondest hope of many housing reformers in 1931 when she called for a "major statesman to make housing on the grand scale the chief plank in his platform."⁴⁰ Their aspirations came true only when the crushing economic circumstances of the Great Depression forced the Federal government to intervene.

³³ Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 150.

³⁴ Edith Elmer Wood, *Recent Trends in American Housing* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), p. 107.

³⁵ Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, p. 151.

³⁶ Louis H. Pink, *The New Day in Housing* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), p. 140.

³⁷ Edith Elmer Wood, "A Century of the Housing Problem," in *Urban Housing*, ed., William L. C. Wheaton, et al. (New York: The Free Press, 1966), pp. 3-4.

³⁸ Edith Elmer Wood, *Recent Trends in American Housing*, p. 226.

³⁹ Devereux Bowly, Jr., *The Poorhouse: Subsidized Housing in Chicago, 1895-1976* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), pp. 8-16.

⁴⁰ Wood, *Recent Trends in American Housing*, p. 246.

Public Housing as Public Works

The Great Depression refocused attention on the inequities of the housing market and on the smoldering slum problems of America's cities, as economic collapse devastated home ownership and the residential construction industry. Housing construction had fallen steadily beginning in the late 1920s to a low of 93,000 units by 1933, down a full 90 percent from the record high in 1925.⁴¹ Fourteen million Americans, one-third of them from the building trades, were unemployed, and 273,000 families lost their homes to mortgage foreclosure in 1933 alone.⁴² Decaying inner city neighborhoods became even more congested by people forced out of better, less affordable housing. The condition of the already decrepit housing stock available to the poor worsened as property owners deferred maintenance, and new construction came to a near standstill. Migrants from farms and small towns exacerbated the slum problem as they crowded into cities in search of employment or public relief.

A NEW DEAL FOR HOUSING

In his first inaugural address in March 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed his firm intention to lead the nation into recovery through unprecedented, but unspecified, government intervention. Although he acknowledged the "tragedy" of foreclosure on small homes and farms, he indicated no particular housing program or plan of attack against the slums. He declared with certainty only that "our greatest task is to put people to work," and called on Congress to provide him with emergency powers necessary to create employment.⁴³

The prospect of Federal funding inspired the National Public Housing Conference (NPHC) to promote low-rent housing construction and slum clearance as legitimate forms of unemployment relief, creating both much-needed construction jobs and useful permanent dwellings. The NPHC, under the leadership of president Mary Simkhovitch, convinced Senator Robert F. Wagner during the spring of 1933 to include housing activities in any upcoming public works legislation.⁴⁴ Wagner, a Democrat from New York who had grown up in the slums of Manhattan, would become the statesman whom housing reform activist Edith Elmer Wood had sought to lead the housing cause.

Congress responded quickly to the new President's request for action, passing the *National Industrial Recovery Act* (NIRA) in June 1933. Title II of this act allotted \$3.3 billion for the formation of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works (PWA) to provide "massive work relief activities quickly." True to his word, Senator Wagner inserted authorization for the PWA to include among its lists of projects "construction . . . under public regulation or control of low-cost housing and slum clearance." To this end, the PWA could make loans to limited-dividend corporations, award grants to state or local agencies, or build projects on its own.

⁴¹ Rowe, *Modernity and Housing*, p. 103.

⁴² Gertrude S. Fish, "Housing Policy during the Great Depression," in *The Story of Housing*, ed. Gertrude Fish (New York: Macmillan, 1979), p. 196.

⁴³ Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, 9 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1941), Volume 2, pp. 11-15.

⁴⁴ J. Joseph Hutchmacher, *Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 206.

Title II provided an additional \$25 million to establish a Division of Subsistence Homesteads to build rural communities to provide for the redistribution of the "overbalance of population in industrial centers."⁴⁵

When the Resettlement Administration absorbed it in 1935, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads had begun 50 communities to provide for the relocation of urban families from the slums or farm families from submarginal lands. This division also served families displaced by New Deal crop reduction or rural electrification programs, unemployed miners at Arthurdale, West Virginia, and urban working-class African Americans at Aberdeen, Virginia.⁴⁶

PWA LIMITED-DIVIDEND HOUSING PROGRAM

President Roosevelt placed the PWA within the Department of the Interior and appointed Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes as its Administrator. Ickes established a Housing Division to carry out the PWA's slum clearance and low-rent housing mandate. The primary purpose of the Housing Division was to "reduce unemployment and to restore purchasing power" by employing workers in the construction trades and from the building supplies industry. Beyond this immediate goal, however, the Housing Division also hoped to "awaken . . . a feeling of local responsibility" for the long-term housing needs of the urban poor.⁴⁷

The PWA undertook its first housing projects by providing low-interest loans to limited-dividend housing corporations. This initial PWA program was similar to plans developed under the Hoover administration in 1932. An outgrowth of recommendations from the 1931 Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, Hoover's Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) drew in over 600 proposals for possible housing projects, of which only one was built.⁴⁸ Successful applicants to the PWA program who agreed to limit their profits could receive Federal loans of up to 85 percent of the project development cost at four percent interest over 30 years.⁴⁹ Like the RFC, the Housing Division received over 500 requests to finance various types of housing ventures. The Housing Division staff in Washington, D.C. carefully scrutinized the proposals to verify that they met minimum program standards for construction and financing.

Despite the PWA's liberal loan requirements, only seven projects met PWA requirements and eventually received funding [see Appendix II, Volume I: PWA Limited-Dividend Housing Projects]. These projects, all built between 1933 and 1935, included two unnamed projects in Altavista, Virginia, and Euclid, Ohio; Hillside Homes in the borough of Bronx, New York; the Carl Mackley Houses in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Boulevard Gardens in the borough of Queens, New York; Boyland (also called Boylan

⁴⁵ Hutchmacher, *Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism*, p. 208.

⁴⁶ Paul A. Conklin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), pp. 332-334.

⁴⁷ U. S. Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, Housing Division Bulletin No. 2, *Urban Housing: The Story of the PWA Housing Division, 1933-1936* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), pp. 14-16.

⁴⁸ Richard Pommer. "The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 37 (December 1978), p.236.

⁴⁹ U. S. Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, *Urban Housing*, p. 28.

Housing) in Raleigh, North Carolina; and Neighborhood Gardens in St. Louis, Missouri. Of these seven projects, all were built for white tenants, and all but Neighborhood Gardens were built on vacant land.⁵⁰

Early PWA architecture showed the influence of both the Garden City and the European Modernist movements. Architects for the PWA were encouraged to be creative, and there was little bureaucratic meddling in the design and construction of the limited-dividend housing complexes. As a result, many of the early PWA projects are innovative in their design and use of materials. PWA housing projects had a number of characteristics in common, including a rejection of the rehabilitation of existing slum housing, the use of the superblock to organize neighborhoods, minimal ground coverage by buildings, compact building interiors without corridors, on-site community centers, and a public art component.

The first PWA limited-dividend project to be completed was the Carl Mackley Houses in Philadelphia, designed by German Modernist architects Oskar Stonorov and Alfred Kastner, and constructed in 1934-35. The plan for the complex placed four three-story buildings in alignment with the sun for maximum natural light. The buildings were "bent" at the ends and indented in the center to create communal courts, with passageways running between them. The units were covered in burnt yellow and orange industrial tiles, which gave the complex a sleek, modern appearance [see Figure 1]. The interior of the site was enclosed by the buildings, and traffic was restricted from this area.⁵¹ "When completed, the complex contained nearly 300 apartments (most with porches), a pool, an auditorium, underground garages, a nursery school, basement rooms for tenant activities, and rooftop laundry facilities."⁵² Like many of the early PWA efforts, the completed design was an important illustration of the compatible molding of European design theories and Federal programmatic guidance.

The first apartments at the Carl Mackley Houses were completed in 1935, at which time tenants began to move in. Approximately one-quarter of the complex's early tenants were white-collar workers, as living in the Mackley Houses proved to be too expensive for many of the blue-collar hosiery workers for whom the complex was intended. Rents at the complex were set approximately 20 percent higher than originally planned, in order to pay off the Federal loan according to the terms required by the PWA.⁵³ The early residents did appear to enjoy living in their newly built community, taking advantage of amenities like the swimming pool, nursery school, and cooperative grocery store. The level of activity at the Carl Mackley Houses subsided substantially after World War II; the complex's nursery school closed in 1964, and in 1968 it was sold to private investors, to be operated as a moderate-income commercial rental apartment complex.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, p. 93.

⁵¹ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, pp. 129-130.

⁵² Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, p. 130.

⁵³ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, pp. 132-133.

⁵⁴ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, pp. 132-141.



Figure 1 - A representative building at the 284-unit Carl Mackley Houses in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the first PWA limited-dividend project completed in 1935. The buildings, covered in burnt yellow and orange industrial tiles, were particularly modern in appearance. (National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1998)

Another important PWA limited-dividend project, the 1,416-unit Hillside Homes, in the Borough of Bronx, New York, was built for white tenants on a vacant site. Designed in 1932 by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, and constructed from 1933 to 1935, the garden apartment complex contained storage, incinerator, boiler, and community rooms; workshops; offices; a playground; wading pools; and a nursery school.⁵⁵ As it was created by essentially the same design team, the concept for Hillside was similar to that of Radburn, except that Hillside had a higher density. The plan included a neighborhood unit which was superimposed within a superblock of residential streets and open space.⁵⁶

At the time of its construction, Hillside Homes was the largest Federal public housing project underway. One of the project's most interesting features was the inclusion of basement apartment units, which were accessed by walking down one-half story from the main entrance. The sides of these units opposite the stair were above ground level, where French doors led to private gardens enclosed by hedges. These units were an excellent way to build the project into the site's existing topography of rolling hills. The plan for Hillside Homes divided the site into five superblocks, and three acres of the project's center block was reserved for recreation fields.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Rowe, *Modernity and Housing*, p. 358.

⁵⁶ Rowe, *Modernity and Housing*, p. 202.

⁵⁷ Henry Wright, *Rehousing Urban America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), pp. 82-83.

Neighborhood Gardens, the limited-dividend housing project built in St. Louis for the Neighborhood Association provides an example of the coordinated efforts of local and Federal agencies that shaped early public housing. The Neighborhood Association was formed in 1911 by the merger of the Self-Culture Hall and the North Broadway Settlement, local Progressive-era organizations dedicated to bettering life in the poorest parts of the city.⁵⁸ Local housing studies undertaken in the early twentieth century had revealed a substantial slum problem in the areas of St. Louis known as Wild Cat Chute and Clabber Alley, where wooden shanty towns provided meager shelter to thousands of impoverished residents. Despite a series of reports highlighting the city's growing housing problems, the public attitude toward housing reform was characterized as "lethargic and indifferent."⁵⁹ Official government attempts to create housing reform through regulation had proved as ineffective in St. Louis as they had in other urban centers. The attitude of many was that real housing reform would not succeed until proof was available that the private sector could profit from slum clearance and the construction of new housing. The Neighborhood Association saw its task as providing just that proof.

In 1930, the Neighborhood Association established a Better Housing Committee and supported a study of low-cost housing in Europe by the Association's Managing Director J.A. Wolf. Upon his return from Europe, Wolf ardently pressed the Association to undertake its own housing construction program, similar to those he had seen in Vienna, Munich, and Frankfurt. Wolf cultivated public interest through articles in the local newspaper and by producing a series of models and drawings for a possible project in association with local architects Hoener, Baum and Froese. P. John Hoener served on the Neighborhood Association's Better Housing Committee as well as the President's Conference on Home Ownership, while his partner Ewald R. Froese had completed his own study of German public housing.⁶⁰

Key to the Neighborhood Association's efforts would be their ability to convince local businessmen to invest in the project through the formation of a limited-dividend housing corporation. In the end, financing was provided by the Neighborhood Association itself with members of the Board putting up \$10,000 apiece with the remainder obtained through a PWA loan of \$640,000. With PWA funding and project approval in hand, ground was broken for the new housing project in May of 1934. Construction of the 252-unit Neighborhood Gardens housing project occupied a full city block and employed 250 men working 30 hours a week. The three-story brick and concrete buildings [see Figure 2] were completed in 1935 and conformed to the typical public housing schemes being developed through the PWA program with low-rise construction organized around large open spaces and courts, low site coverage, flat roof, International-style architectural lines, and a number of community buildings and other public amenities.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Carolyn H. Toft, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "Neighborhood Gardens Apartments," September 1985, p. 8.1.

⁵⁹ Toft, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "Neighborhood Gardens Apartments," p. 8.2.

⁶⁰ Toft, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "Neighborhood Gardens Apartments," p. 8.2.

⁶¹ Toft, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "Neighborhood Gardens Apartments," p. 8.2-8.3.



Figure 2 - A representative building at Neighborhood Gardens in St. Louis, Missouri, a PWA limited-dividend public housing project completed in 1935. The 252-unit complex's three-story brick and concrete buildings featured flat roofs and International Style architectural details, common characteristics of the era's early public housing. (National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1985)

Like many of the earliest PWA-funded housing projects, the Neighborhood Gardens' imaginative use of materials, detailing, and unit configurations set the project apart as a striking example of modern domestic design, aptly integrating the needs and goals of its social service agency client, the PWA, and the visions of its skilled modernist architects. Even before the construction was complete prospective tenants flooded the offices of the Neighborhood Association. The Neighborhood Gardens project, however, would provide evidence of the financial and logistical problems faced by other PWA limited-dividend projects. While initially intended to serve as replacement housing for the impoverished slum residents displaced during project construction, the required rents of \$19 to \$33 per month were beyond the means of the majority of these people. The result was a residential complex providing housing to the "better class families" whose income had been reduced by the Depression.⁶²

As seen in the examples above, the PWA limited-dividend projects were of high quality in both design and construction. The overall results, however, were unsatisfactory; rents charged were beyond the means of low-income families, and none of the projects complied with the PWA's objective of creating new housing

⁶² Toft, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "Neighborhood Gardens Apartments," p. 8.3.

while at the same time clearing slum areas.⁶³ Like the RFC before it, the PWA loan program was impractical during the Depression. Most applicants could not bring to their project even the modest 15 percent equity required by the law, and the limited profit requirement proved too burdensome to attract significant interest from private developers.⁶⁴ One Housing Division official later explained the failure as an inherent result of limited-dividend financing: without a direct Federal subsidy, the projects could not be operated nor their debts liquidated unless rents were charged "which are more than can be paid by persons of truly low incomes."⁶⁵ The PWA limited-dividend housing program was an important first step, however, in establishing a Federal role in housing reform and in opening new doors to increased local-Federal cooperation.

PWA DIRECT-BUILT HOUSING PROGRAM

Anxious for more satisfying results while the emergency appropriations were available, Ickes suspended the limited-dividend loan program in February 1934 and announced that PWA would begin the direct financing and development of low-rent housing projects. From this point on the PWA acquired the land, let contracts for slum clearance and construction, and owned and operated the completed housing.⁶⁶ By the fall of 1937, when PWA ended its housing responsibilities, the Housing Division had completed or begun construction on 51 projects in 36 cities in the continental United States, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. [See Appendix III, Volume I: PWA Direct-Built Housing Projects.] Of these 51 projects, 21 were constructed for black tenants only; six contained segregated buildings for black and white tenants; and 24 were built solely for white tenants.⁶⁷ Overall, the PWA allotted approximately one-third of its total constructed housing units to black tenants.⁶⁸

The PWA's Housing Division quickly organized their operations to effectively direct the creation of new public housing. By July 1934, the PWA created the Branch of Initiation, staffed mainly by young architects, who began to assess the need within the many cities that had applied for new housing. The primary duty of this branch was to discern where the need for housing was greatest, and where justifiable projects could be built. The limited-dividend program had spotlighted the fact that few areas of the country had the necessary skills or knowledge to wade through the statistical, sociological, and technical information required to intelligently plan for large-scale public housing projects.

⁶³ John Hancock, "The New Deal and American Planning in the 1930s," in *Two Centuries of American Planning*, ed. Daniel Schaffer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 210.

⁶⁴ U. S. Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, *Urban Housing*, p. 29; Michael W. Strauss and Talbot Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 38.

⁶⁵ Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, p. 38.

⁶⁶ U. S. Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, *Urban Housing*, p. 30.

⁶⁷ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, pp. 100-101.

⁶⁸ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, p. 104.

The Housing Division's project initiators determined exactly where and what to build; their tasks included site selection, choosing the size and type of project, and preparing a detailed program for each complex.⁶⁹ Project initiators also investigated typical family sizes and ethnic background in the cities in which their projects were to be built; this helped to determine the size and distribution of dwelling units. The PWA usually recommended units which ranged from two to five rooms in size; and the average unit size in PWA projects ranged from 2.9 rooms in Birmingham's Smithfield Court, intended for black tenants, to 4.1 rooms in Boston's Old Harbor Village, which was occupied largely by Catholic families of Irish, Italian, and Lithuanian descent.⁷⁰

Upon formal approval of a proposed project, the Branch of Land Acquisition was brought in to supervise site development and acquisition; these responsibilities usually lasted anywhere from four to eight months for PWA-built projects.⁷¹ The PWA also created a Branch of Plans and Specifications, staffed by architects, engineers, landscape architects, and cost estimators, who worked closely with the related branches project initiators. As the deficient applications for the PWA limited-dividend projects clearly indicated that most American builders were not yet capable of designing large-scale public housing projects that met the standards of the Housing Division, the Branch of Plans and Specifications was created to assist local architects and engineers in this task.⁷² In the fall of 1934, the Plans and Specifications Branch began the preparation of a series of plans for the basic units of public housing complexes, including apartments and rowhouses of all types and sizes [see Figure 3]. Published by the division in May 1935 in *Unit Plans: Typical Room Arrangements, Site Plans and Details for Low Rent Housing*, these drawings and specifications formed the basis of PWA public housing design, and were used by local architects across the county.⁷³

As soon as PWA approval was given for a particular housing project, contracts were let with private architects and engineers chosen from the city involved. Local approval and recommendations by the host city were an important part of the contracting process. To the degree possible, the architectural contracts were made with groups of architects who sometimes formed informal consortiums to distribute the limited design work available during the depths of the Depression. The PWA contracts provided for the preparation of a set of plans and specifications to be developed in cooperation with the Housing Division branch staff, who visited the project sites to monitor progress on a regular basis.⁷⁴ As these local architects were more accustomed to designing individual buildings, and had little experience in planning larger sites, the Housing Division also assisted them in handling the planning and the topography of individual sites.

⁶⁹ Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, p. 58.

⁷⁰ Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, p. 73.

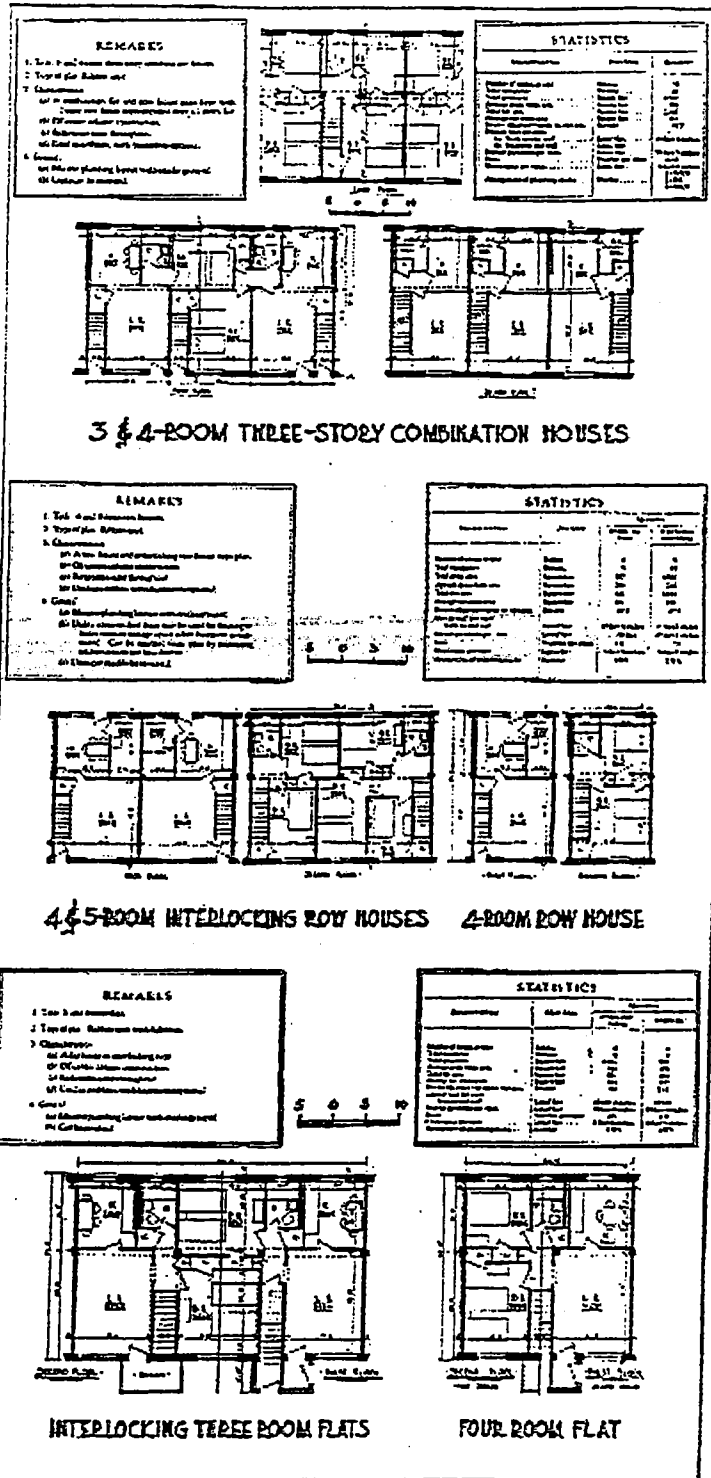
⁷¹ Horatio B. Hackett, "How the PWA Housing Division Functions," *The Architectural Record* (March 1935), p. 150.

⁷² Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, p. 66.

⁷³ Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, p. 67.

⁷⁴ Hackett, "How the PWA Housing Division Functions," *The Architectural Record* (March 1935), p. 150.

Housing



Surveys indicate that one-third of the population of the cities and towns in all parts of our country are housed in substandard dwellings and that this condition contributes a menace to health, morals, comfort, and to the happiness of this considerable part of our population. It is further shown that wherever these slum areas occur, the municipal costs of police and fire protection, the courts, and health and hospital services are excessive.

In 1933 the Federal Government attacked the housing problem for the first time, which private enterprise had never been able to solve successfully, and financed 52 demonstration projects through the P. W. A. to house approximately 22,000 families. In addition to this, 7 limited-dividend (privately owned) projects were financed through the P. W. A.

Following this and as a result of it, the United States Housing Authority was created, and low-rent housing for low-income families thus moved beyond the first experimental stage. The Wagner-Steagall housing bill legislation in 1937 launched a long-range program of Federal aid to State and local governments and other local agencies for housing and slum clearance, and thus decentralized authority replaced the central control that had been necessary to carry out the original demonstration projects.

The growth of slum areas in our cities and the continuation of their existence have been due, in great part, to the following causes:

(a) Low-rent housing was usually regarded merely as a commercial enterprise, often without regard for its social aspects.

(b) Constantly changing character of neighborhoods due to shifting population.

(c) Lack of city plans and misuse of land with resulting high land values.

(d) Excessive taxation of dwellings.

(e) Lack of interest on the part of landlords in keeping dwelling houses in proper condition with resulting lack of interest on the part of tenants in keeping them neat.

Continued on following page

Figure 3 - Several of PWA's Branch of Specifications and Plans standardized unit plans for public housing complexes. Plans such as these were used by local architects across the country. (Short and Brown, *Public Buildings*, 1939)

Experienced PWA site planners drew sketches that expressed the general ideas of the division as adjusted to specific sites.⁷⁵ The PWA advocated the lowest possible density of development in their public housing complexes; they specified a maximum of four-story buildings covering no more than 30 percent of the site. The only exception to this rule was in New York City (which had the highest land cost in the nation), where high-rise apartments with elevators were allowed.⁷⁶

Many of the PWA specifications were driven by a desire for economy. Attached dwellings were suggested for public housing complexes as they afforded considerable savings over detached housing models. Building attached units halved the necessary exterior wall area, and greatly reduced the length of sewer, water, gas, and electric lines. Suggested materials were based on a number of factors, including whether or not they were fireproof, efficiency, and initial and maintenance costs; the Housing Division thought that it was "economical in the long run to build well."⁷⁷

As a building type, public housing projects constructed in America between 1933 and 1937 are best defined as a grouping of multi-family, low scale, residential buildings which were organized on a site, around large open spaces and recreational areas, as part of a larger and deliberate plan [see Figure 4]. Typical city blocks were often combined to form superblocks as a way to organize the larger neighborhood, and a clear hierarchy between primary roads and pedestrian thoroughfares were an integral part of the site plan. The buildings usually took the form of several-story walk-up apartments and rowhouses. They were most often constructed of brick, simply designed and generally well-built, and contained modern conveniences in both kitchens [see Figure 5] and bathrooms. These public housing projects frequently had a non-residential component, including community centers, management offices, recreation and community rooms, nursery schools, and garages.

It appears that the only part of the design of PWA public housing not influenced by the Housing Division was the style in which the buildings were built; this decision was left to the local architect. As PWA public housing scholars Michael W. Strauss and Talbot Wegg wrote:

The style of buildings, whether they should be "modern," colonial, Spanish, or what-not, was on the whole left to the decision of local architects. They had only one watchword, simplicity. As a result there is, to the layman's eye, great variety in the exterior design of projects. New York, Chicago, Camden, Cleveland, and some others are modern; Jacksonville and Miami are of typical design; Charleston recalls the graciousness of its heritage; Boston is in keeping with the New England tradition; Dallas suggests the distinctive architecture of the Southwest.⁷⁸

As the Federal housing program matured, the use of standardized plans and model unit designs became more and more evident. Whereas the earlier limited development projects advanced a certain freedom of design and architectural innovation, later works were increasingly constrained by efforts to speed up

⁷⁵ Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, pp. 67-68.

⁷⁶ Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, p. 69.

⁷⁷ Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, p. 71.

⁷⁸ Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, p. 68.

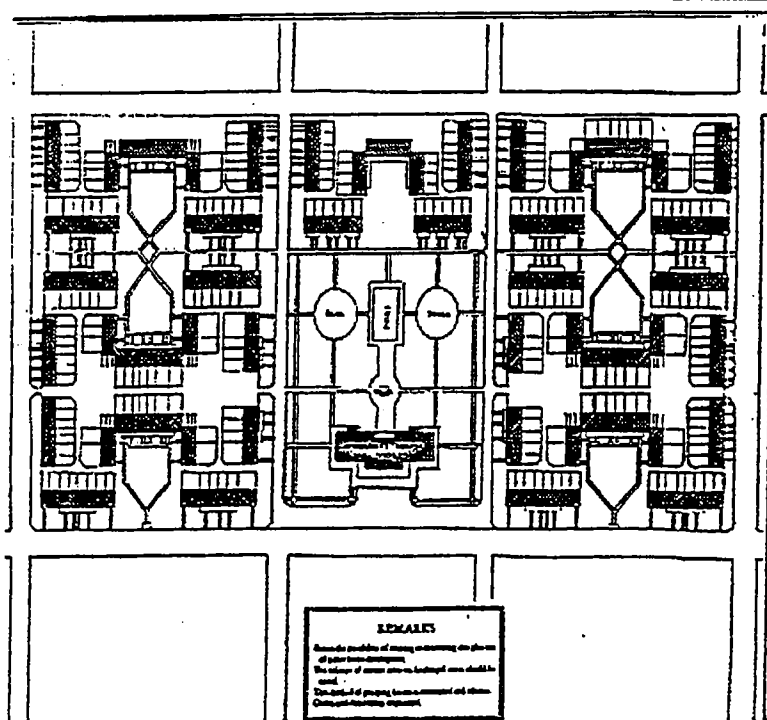
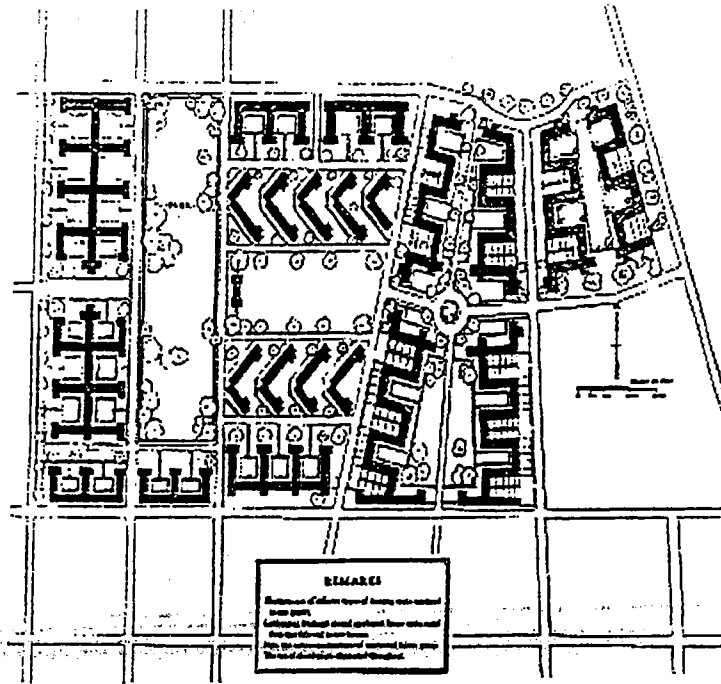


Figure 4 - Two of the PWA's Branch of Specifications and Plans standardized site plans for public housing complexes. These plans were modified for use at specific sites by architects across the country. (Public Works Administration, *Unit Plans: Typical Room Arrangements, Site Plans and Details for Low Rent Housing*)



Figure 5 - Representative kitchen interior, located at the 1,622-unit Williamsburg Homes in Brooklyn, New York, a PWA direct-built public housing project completed in 1938. (Short and Brown, *Public Buildings*, 1939)

development and monitor rising costs. The Housing Division's branches of Construction and Management were responsible for the final aspects of project development, including slum removal, construction supervision, and administration of tenant services.⁷⁹ The administration of the PWA's Housing Division was directed by Horatio Hackett, a Chicago architect-engineer with limited experience in housing reform issues before coming to the PWA. Among the consultants on staff were architects, Alfred Fellheimer and Harvard-educated Angelo R. Clas.⁸⁰

In the midst of the Depression, the design, planning, and construction of these projects employed thousands of people, and the projects themselves served to reinforce the concept that there was a role for the Federal government in public housing. The PWA direct-built housing projects provided housing for nearly 22,000 families at a cost to the Federal government of over \$130 million,⁸¹ and the PWA's slum clearance efforts eliminated about 10,000 substandard units.⁸² The PWA direct-built projects also added considerably to the housing stock of cities across the nation, including Atlanta (1,393 units); Chicago (2,414 units); Cleveland (1,849 units); Detroit (1,478 units); Memphis (1,082 units); and New York City (2,196 units).⁸³

The Housing Division opened Techwood Homes in Atlanta as the first federally owned low-rent housing project in the nation on August 15, 1936. Atlanta was the site of two early PWA direct-built public

⁷⁹ Hackett, "How the PWA Housing Division Functions," *The Architectural Record* (March 1935), p. 150.

⁸⁰ Pommer, "The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. 37 (December 1978), p. 236.

⁸¹ National Association of Housing Officials, Coleman Woodbury, ed., *Housing Officials' Year Book 1938* (Chicago: National Association of Housing Officials, 1938), pp. 120-133.

⁸² Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing*, p. 90.

⁸³ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, pp. 100-101.

housing projects: Techwood Homes, constructed in 1935-37 and intended for white tenants, and University Homes, constructed in 1935-37 and intended for black tenants. Both projects replaced two of the city's worst slum areas. The 604-unit Techwood Homes project replaced a nine-block area known as Techwood Flats, which was located between the Georgia Institute of Technology and the city's central business district; and the 675-unit University Homes project replaced the Beaver Slide slum, which was located between the campuses of Spellman and Morris Brown Colleges.⁸⁴ The major difference between the two Atlanta projects is the type of buildings which were constructed. At Techwood Homes, 13 three-story buildings and seven two-story rowhouses were built; while at University Homes 42 buildings were constructed, with a separate entry and a small plot of land for each unit.⁸⁵

According to Atlanta housing scholar Carol A. Flores, both of these projects exemplify the PWA's attention to health, comfort, and safety. At the University Homes site, central courtyards were provided to give residents access to sunlight and fresh air; while at the Techwood Homes site, the rowhouse units were given private yards, and the apartment buildings were set back from the streets to create open spaces.⁸⁶ To assure the comfort of the residents, the units at both projects featured utilities, including hot and cold running water, electricity, steam heat, modern appliances, well-designed kitchens, closets, and storage space.⁸⁷

Lakeview Terrace, the nation's third PWA direct-built housing complex, was constructed in Cleveland, "a city with no tradition in housing and small reputation in architecture, [which] was to become a center of urban housing under the PWA second only to New York."⁸⁸ The complex was built in 1935-37 for white tenants on a 22-acre slum area, which was originally part of Old Ohio City, founded in 1854 as the first location for the city of Cleveland [see Figure 6]. This site, a steep slope overlooking Lake Erie, was a challenging one. Forty-six red brick, International Style, two- and three-story apartment and rowhouse buildings and 118 garages were terraced down the slope [see Figure 7]. These buildings, containing a total of 620 units, covered approximately 26 percent of the site, and were arranged around a large playground and a community center containing an auditorium, gym, kitchen, club and game rooms, and a nursery school. Lakeview Terrace was the first American public housing complex to include a community center, and was also the first complex to be operated by a female manager, Mrs. Mary C. Maher. The complex included an early example of a retail component, 13 shops which were arranged around a small plaza at the main entrance. These shops were later demolished so that a high-rise building for elderly residents could be built in their place.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Carol A. Flores, "US public housing in the 1930s: The First Projects in Atlanta, Georgia," *Planning Perspectives* 9 (1994), pp. 410-411, 417.

⁸⁵ Flores, "US public housing in the 1930s," p. 420.

⁸⁶ Flores, "US public housing in the 1930s," p. 416.

⁸⁷ Flores, "U.S. Public Housing in the 1930s," pp. 416-419.

⁸⁸ Pommer, "The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s," p. 244.

⁸⁹ Jane Lauder, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "Lakeview Terrace," September 10, 1971, pp. 7.1, 8.2; C. W. Short and R. Stanley Brown, *Public Buildings: A Survey of Architecture of Projects Constructed by Federal and Other Governmental Bodies Between the Years 1933 and 1939 with the*



Figure 6 - Aerial view of the 620-unit Lakeview Terrace in Cleveland, Ohio, a PWA direct-built public housing project completed in 1937. Highly ordered and wholly planned, public housing complexes such as this stood out from their sprawling city surroundings. (Short and Brown, *Public Buildings*, 1939)



Figure 7 - Representative buildings at Lakeview Terrace featuring brick construction, flat roofs, casement windows, and stripped architectural details. (Short and Brown, *Public Buildings*, 1939)

Constructed in 1936-37, the 574-unit Harlem River Houses was the first PWA direct-built project to be constructed in New York City. Unlike the majority of the second phase of PWA public housing, the Harlem River Houses was not a slum clearance project; the sloping site in Harlem was vacant prior to the complex's construction. The project, which was the work of the design team of Archibald Manning Brown and prolific New York City apartment house architect Horace Ginsbern, consisted of three distinct groups of four- and five-story red brick, International Style buildings arranged on a 9-acre site for a low-density land coverage of approximately 30 percent. Amenities offered on site included a nursery school, health clinic, social and children's play rooms, and community laundries.⁹⁰

When the Harlem River Houses opened in October 1937, over 14,000 families applied to reside in the 574 apartments. The New York City Housing Authority was given the task of selecting residents, which they did by rating prospective tenants by conducting home visits, interviews, and after making sure that they could pay their rent.⁹¹ Once selected, "new residents could choose to participate in a wide range of social and educational activities. A 1939 management report noted that residents had organized a tenants' association, community newspaper, women's club, mothers' group to support the work of the WPA recreational programs for children, men's club, parent-teachers association of the nursery school, and Boy Scout troop."⁹² Early tenants seemed to appreciate living in such high-quality housing. Resident Melvin Ford, when interviewed for a 1939 magazine article, commented that he felt lucky to live at the Harlem River Houses, as he had a nicer place to live than he had before, or than where most people lived.⁹³

Constructed in 1936-38, the 274-unit Langston Terrace Dwellings were built on a 13-acre sloping site overlooking the Anacostia River in northeast, Washington, D.C. Like the Harlem River Houses, Langston was a project built for black tenants on a vacant site. The complex comprised attached brick rowhouse units [see Figure 8], ranging from 2 to 4 stories in height, which formed 14 separate blocks of housing arranged around a large, rectangular, open, common space. A number of Langston's defining features conformed to the PWA standards which were established in 1935, including the central common, high standards of construction, and low-density site coverage by buildings of 20 percent. A restrictive project budget encouraged the use of readily-available materials, and of basic unit plans that could easily be replicated. Within those constraints project architect Hilyard Robert Robinson was able to create a highly successful Modern design. So well received was his design that Federal housing officials often used the project as a demonstration model for the "possibilities of . . . low-rent housing."⁹⁴ Langston Terrace had a particularly fine public art component included in its design. A terra-cotta frieze entitled "The Progress of the Negro Race" crowned the arcade entrance to the complex, and five animal sculptures constructed of reinforced concrete were placed in the playground within the common area.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Joan Olshansky, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "Harlem River Houses," July 11, 1979, pp. 7.1, 8.1.

⁹¹ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, pp.165-167.

⁹² Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, p.168.

⁹³ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, p. 170.

⁹⁴ Glen B. Leiner, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "Langston Terrace Dwellings," December 1, 1986, pp. 8.1-8.2.

⁹⁵ Leiner, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "Langston Terrace Dwellings," pp. 7.1- 7.2, 8.1-8.2.



Figure 8 - Detail of building at Langston Terrace in Washington, D.C., a PWA direct-built public housing project completed in 1938, showing typical PWA-era details, including stripped, modern design, brick construction, and casement windows. This complex also featured a significant public art component, a terracotta frieze entitled "The Progress of the Negro Race." (National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1986)

The entire second phase of PWA projects operated under the terms of the George-Healey Act, which stated that the PWA should fix rents at an amount sufficient to pay for the operation of each project and to repay 55 percent of the total development cost at 3 percent interest over a period of 60 years. The balance of 45 percent was considered an outright Federal grant. The act also authorized the PWA, whose federally owned projects were exempt from property taxes, to make annual payments to local governments out of project rent revenues in compensation for municipal services.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing*, p. 88.

The substantial capital subsidy and the longer amortization period did allow the PWA projects to achieve lower rents than had been possible with the limited-dividend program. Total development costs, including site acquisition and clearance, averaged \$6,200 per unit. Since rents were based on development costs, however, the PWA projects still were only within the reach of the working poor and were unable to serve the majority of slum inhabitants.⁹⁷ The PWA, like all the other low-rent housing ventures before it, would not meet the housing demands of those with the greatest need.

PWA AND THE SLUMS

The PWA was determined to prove the feasibility of combining slum clearance with the construction of low-rent housing. Harold Ickes declared that the top priority of the Housing Division was to "seek out some of the worst slum spots on the municipal maps and abruptly wipe them out with good low-rent housing."⁹⁸ Through speeches and pamphlets, the PWA showed the public that slums and inadequate housing were problems faced by every community in the nation, not just big cities of the east:

Popular imagination seized on the noisome Lower East Side with its long-blocks and Devil's Kitchen as the essence of the American slum. Too frequently it was an American city's boast that "we have no slums in this town" simply because no five-story railroad flats dangled the day's wash over unpleasant back yards. . . . Meanwhile, Memphis and New Orleans had their "Arks," . . . Philadelphia had its picturesque "bandbox" or "high-hat" houses . . . San Antonio found itself with its "Corrals," single rooms inhabited by Mexican families of as many as eight or ten persons. Youngstown had its "Monkeys Nest". . . . There seemed to be no definite end in sight; the slums, the appendage of the poor, appeared to possess enduring life.⁹⁹

With Ickes' encouragement, the Federal Civil Works Administration (CWA) conducted a Real Property Inventory in 1934, examining living conditions in 64 cities nationwide. The CWA report declared that much of the nation's housing was "obsolete." It revealed that 2.3 percent of all dwellings were unfit for human habitation; 15.6 percent needed major structural repair; and only 37.7 percent were in good condition. Many units lacked indoor plumbing, were without access to a private toilet, or had no electricity, and one-third still relied on wood- or coal-burning stoves for heat.¹⁰⁰ The inventory gave statistical proof that the nation suffered from a grave shortage of decent housing, a claim that reformers had made long before the Depression. Edith Elmer Wood, now a consultant to the PWA, estimated that fully one-third of all Americans lived in housing so inadequate as to "injure the health, endanger the safety and morals, and interfere with the normal family life of their inhabitants."¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing*, p. 85.

⁹⁸ Harold L. Ickes, "The Federal Housing Program," *New Republic* 81 (December 19, 1934), p. 16.

⁹⁹ U. S. Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, Housing Division, *The American Program of Low-Rent Public Housing* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), pp. 1-2, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 196, Entry 3, Box 1.

¹⁰⁰ U. S. Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, *Urban Housing*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰¹ Edith Elmer Wood, *Slums and Blighted Areas in the United State*, U. S. Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, Housing Division Bulletin No. 1 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), p. 3.

The PWA also highlighted the economic costs of slums. Charles Palmer, the prime force behind the Techwood and University Homes slum clearance projects, reported statistics from Atlanta:

We found that every individual in the slum was costing the government \$33 more than was collected in taxes. Since 60,000 people in Atlanta are inadequately housed, this represents a subsidy to the slums of \$2 million, enough to amortize the investment and pay the interest on \$50 million worth of homes. . . . We figure it is better business to subsidize housing than to subsidize slums. As slums are eradicated, insurance rates and police and health expenditures go down and property values go up.¹⁰²

In each city where PWA housing was eventually built, the primary interest of the Housing Division's project initiators was slum clearance. Where slum clearance was not possible, local sponsors were offered projects on vacant land. In cities where clearing slums was the sole objective, local applicants refused to sponsor projects on vacant land, and the division was forced to withdraw. Cities such as Charleston and Louisville achieved limited slum clearance by demolishing a number of slum dwellings which were approximately equal to the number of units provided in the new housing complexes. Despite the PWA's strong commitment to clearing slums, nearly half of the PWA public housing complexes were built on vacant land.¹⁰³

While housing reformers generally agreed on the need for government subsidies to finance low-income housing, they were divided over the issue of slum clearance. Traditional reformers like Wood and Simkhovitch saw slum clearance as an integral component of public housing. Slum clearance would not only eliminate the blight, overcrowding, and disease caused by substandard housing, but its replacement with new low-income housing would allow the poor to continue to live near their places of employment.¹⁰⁴

Another group, originating from within the Regional Planning Association of America, believed that slum clearance was a waste of time and money. Catherine Bauer characterized slum clearance as benefitting only the real estate industry intent on selling slum property at inflated prices. She contended that new housing built on former slum sites would be so costly as to force "the dispossessed tenants . . . to move into some neighboring run-down district and crowd it more thickly than it was before."¹⁰⁵ Lewis Mumford prescribed a government housing program that would allow the poor to relocate to better housing outside of the cities, using Sunnyside and Radburn as models, stating, "if we wish to produce cheap dwellings, it is to raw land that we must turn. . . . The proper strategy is to forget about the slums as a special problem. . . . When we have built enough good houses in the right places, the slums will empty themselves."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Charles F. Palmer, *Adventures of a Slum Fighter* (Atlanta: Tupper and Love, Inc., 1955), p. 8.

¹⁰³ Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, p. 62.

¹⁰⁴ Wood, *Slums and Blighted Areas in the United States*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁵ Catherine Bauer, "Slum Clearance or Housing," *The Nation* 137 (December 27, 1933), pp. 730-731.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis Mumford, "Break the Housing Blockade," *New Republic* 80 (May 17, 1933), p. 8.

DEMISE OF THE HOUSING DIVISION

Legal issues of slum clearance became the greatest challenge faced by the Housing Division. The PWA acquired many of its slum sites by condemnation, invoking the power of eminent domain granted to it by the NIRA. Those sites held by a single owner or a small group of owners usually posed no significant problems. Complications arose as the number of owners multiplied; some slum sites had hundreds of owners with which the PWA had to negotiate.¹⁰⁷ In Atlanta, for instance, the Housing Division placed a blanket condemnation order over the entire 25-acre Techwood site; it paid 120 property owners \$450,320 in compensation for property appraised at \$558,554.¹⁰⁸

Inevitably, a few property owners on each site were unwilling to sell their property to the Federal government. A disgruntled owner challenged the PWA in 1935 when it attempted to condemn his property at a proposed site in Kentucky. In *United States v. Certain Lands in the City of Louisville*, a Federal district court held that the Federal government could not acquire slum property by eminent domain. According to the court, it was not a proper "governmental function to construct buildings in a state for the purpose of selling or leasing them to private citizens for occupancy as homes." The NIRA notwithstanding, the judge found that the Federal government had no police power in any state allowing it to condemn and destroy properties that it considers to be a menace to public health or safety.¹⁰⁹ The Federal government did not appeal this decision. As a result, the PWA built all subsequent housing on vacant land or on sites for which it could negotiate clear title.¹¹⁰

Although the Federal government no longer could undertake slum clearance as a legitimate function, state courts posed no comparable legal obstacles to slum clearance carried out by state agencies. The New York Court of Appeals found in 1936 that the state's use of eminent domain for purposes of slum clearance did constitute a public use. In *New York City Housing Authority v. Muller*, the court listed crime, disease, delinquency, and tax loss as "unquestioned and unquestionable public evils" that the state could alleviate through slum clearance. State-authorized local agencies should use their right of eminent domain "to protect and safeguard the entire public from the menace of the slums."¹¹¹ It became obvious that local governments, working under state enabling legislation, would have to build and operate housing if a Federal program was going to succeed.

Adverse court decisions were not the only cause for concern over the continuation of the PWA housing program. The Housing Division also faced budgetary battles with other New Deal agencies as it became evident that housing construction did not generate employment as quickly as other activities. In September 1935, President Roosevelt rescinded the Housing Division's \$120 million allotment from the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, which had been passed in April to supplement the NIRA relief agencies. The

¹⁰⁷ Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 225.

¹⁰⁸ *PWA Land Purchase Record*, July 18, 1936, Project 11-1100, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 196.

¹⁰⁹ William Ebenstein, *The Law of Public Housing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1940), pp. 32-34.

¹¹⁰ Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing*, p. 86.

¹¹¹ Ebenstein, *The Law of Public Housing*, pp. 57-63.

Administration rechanneled this money to finance other relief efforts, such as the Works Progress Administration, which could employ a greater number of people, on smaller, less costly projects.¹¹² The President then ordered that funding for the Housing Division be confined to those projects which it could "put into construction expeditiously," effectively curtailing the housing activities of the PWA.¹¹³

The Housing Division approved only one additional project after 1935—Baker Homes in Lackawanna, New York—using funds in the amount of \$1.5 million that were saved from previous appropriations. Lackawanna, an industrial suburb of Buffalo, was suffering from one of the most serious housing shortages in the country. When visiting the town, PWA project initiators discovered crowded slums worthy of clearing, and an overall housing vacancy rate of less than 1 percent. These two factors combined induced the PWA to build new housing in Lackawanna, as clearing the town's crowded slums prior to building additional housing would have left the slum dwellers with few viable housing options. Baker Homes was built in 1937-38 on a 12-acre vacant site. The 24 buildings, consisting of two-story apartments and rowhouses, were constructed of frame with a veneer of brick, for a land coverage of 25 percent. The apartment units had three rooms, and units in the rowhouses ranged between three and six rooms.¹¹⁴

STRUGGLE FOR LOCAL CONTROL

While the PWA developed its centralized low-rent housing program, it also encouraged state legislatures to enact laws that would enable local governments to participate in housing activities. Although Ickes was determined to retain Federal ownership as a means of ensuring the quality of the projects and the honesty of the program, he was willing to allow more local control and management.¹¹⁵ In September 1933, Ohio was the first state to pass legislation enabling its municipalities to clear slums and build and manage housing. Drafted by Cleveland city councilman Ernest J. Bohn in the hope of attracting PWA housing funds, the Ohio law allowed its cities to set up independent housing authorities that might act more expeditiously outside the confines of the municipal bureaucracy.¹¹⁶ In December 1934, at the request of Secretary Ickes, President Roosevelt wrote the governors of each state to encourage further legislation.¹¹⁷ By 1938, 30 states, the District of Columbia and Hawaii, had passed enabling legislation and nearly 50 communities had established housing authorities,¹¹⁸ and 13 PWA projects were under the management of their local authority.¹¹⁹

¹¹² Ellis L. Armstrong, ed., *History of Public Works in the United States 1776-1976* (Chicago: American Public Works Association, 1976), p. 529.

¹¹³ U. S. Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, *Urban Housing*, p. 37.

¹¹⁴ Strauss and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, pp. 60, 131-132, 207-208.

¹¹⁵ Charles Abrams, *The Future of Housing* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), p. 257.

¹¹⁶ Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 319-320.

¹¹⁷ Timothy McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1957), p. 41.

¹¹⁸ Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing*, p. 89.

¹¹⁹ National Association of Housing Officials, Coleman Woodbury, ed., *Housing Officials' Year Book 1938* (Chicago: National Association of Housing Officials, 1938), pp. 120-133.

Local housing officials formed the National Association of Housing Officials (NAHO) in 1933 to provide technical assistance to inexperienced public housing professionals and to encourage states and the Federal government to develop long-term housing policies.¹²⁰ In Autumn 1934, Ernest Bohn, president of NAHO, conducted three eminent European housing experts on a 14-city tour of the United States to solicit their evaluation of the American housing situation. On a stop in Cincinnati, Sir Raymond Unwin of the United Kingdom tried to allay one of the most widely held concerns about public housing:

I know that many persons over here believe that private enterprise is going to be interfered with by this work. Don't believe it. . . . You will see that although we have built 800,000 houses in England by public credit and through municipal enterprise, private enterprise has had the era of its life in the last two years.¹²¹

Immediately following the tour, NAHO convened a housing conference in Baltimore to discuss the Europeans' recommendations. The Baltimore conference produced *A Housing Program for the United States*, which presented the principles that would form the foundation of the permanent Federal public housing program. These principles reflected the tested British practices in providing public housing. The document called on the Federal government to create a permanent housing agency for coordination and guidance, but emphasized that "housing is essentially a local matter." Ultimate responsibility for planning and management had to rest with local authorities. It recommended that the Federal government should provide a substantial subsidy for local construction and that rents should be set according to the tenants' ability to pay. The report recognized slum clearance as an important goal, but recommended that high-cost, inner-city sites be avoided. The final location of housing, however, like all other housing matters, should be a local decision.¹²²

The PWA's highly centralized administration came under severe criticism almost from the beginning of the housing program. In *Modern Housing*, published in 1934, Catherine Bauer denounced the Roosevelt administration for having "only a half-hearted desire to tear down a few of the more spectacular slums" with no real commitment to providing a significant number of replacement units. Having just returned from an extensive tour abroad, Bauer praised the European efforts to allow local governments to produce "millions of low-rental, high-standard, modern dwellings in communities planned carefully to provide a maximum of amenity, pleasantness, efficiency, and long-time economy." She called on labor, as both builder and consumer of housing, to insist that government provide for its housing needs.¹²³

DRIVE FOR NATIONAL LEGISLATION

The recommendations of the Baltimore conference were crucial in forming a united coalition for public housing and for building support for a long-range Federal program. The National Public Housing

¹²⁰ Coleman Woodbury, "The First Year of the National Association of Housing Officials," in National Association of Housing Officials, Coleman Woodbury, ed., *Housing Officials' Year Book 1935* (Chicago: National Association of Housing Officials, 1935), p. 58.

¹²¹ Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890*, pp. 324-325.

¹²² "Summary of a Housing Program for the United States," in National Association of Housing Officials, Woodbury, ed., *Housing Officials Year Book 1935*, p. 54-57.

¹²³ Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1934), pp. 241, 90, 255.

Conference drafted a bill based on these recommendations; Senator Wagner introduced it before the Senate in 1935. The Labor Housing Conference had drafted a similar bill for Congressman Henry Ellenbogen of Pennsylvania to present before the House of Representatives. Local labor leaders in Philadelphia, under the direction of Catherine Bauer, had formed the Labor Housing Conference in 1934 to stimulate support for housing among local unions. Neither housing bill was acted upon in 1935.¹²⁴

Further support for public housing came when the American Federation of Labor (AFL) endorsed the efforts of the Labor Housing Conference in October 1935. The AFL backed a resolution which took its cues from both *Modern Housing* and *A Housing Program for the United States*. The resolution called for labor to demand better housing, and it urged the government to stop undercutting the Federal housing program by treating it as an emergency relief measure. Instead, the government should subsidize local efforts to ensure that large-scale, well-planned, low- and moderate-income housing could be provided for all families. Communities with good labor policies would be given preference in receiving housing subsidies, and only union labor would be employed for construction. The endorsement by organized labor gave the public housing movement the political clout which it desperately needed by engaging a major segment of Roosevelt's political base.¹²⁵

In December 1935, Senator Wagner began another campaign to see the housing bill through Congress. In a speech before the NPHC, he defended his stand on public housing against attack from the right:

The object of public housing . . . is not to invade the field of home building for the middle class or the well-to-do. . . . Nor is it even to exclude private enterprise from participation in a low-cost housing program. It is merely to supplement what private industry will do, by subsidies which will make up the difference between what the poor can afford to pay and what is necessary to assure decent living quarters.¹²⁶

Opposition began to organize. One of the strongest and most vocal rebuttals to the philosophy of Wagner and his allies came from the president of the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB), Walter S. Schmidt, of Cincinnati:

It is contrary to the genius of the American people and the ideals they have established that government become landlord to its citizens. . . . There is sound logic in the continuance of the practice under which those who have initiative and the will to save acquire better living facilities, and yield their former quarters at modest rents to the group below.¹²⁷

Other business organizations followed suit, with the National Association of Retail Lumber Dealers, the U.S. Building and Loan League, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce expressing fierce opposition to public housing legislation.

¹²⁴ McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, pp. 88-111.

¹²⁵ Mary Susan Cole, "Catherine Bauer and the Public Housing Movement," 2 vols. (Ph. D. dissertation, George Washington University, Washington, D. C., 1975), vol. 2, pp. 428-431.

¹²⁶ McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, p. 136.

¹²⁷ McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, p. 139.

Wagner and Ellenbogen collaborated on another bill in 1936, which easily passed the Senate in June, but again died in committee in the House. Public housing legislation was not a significant issue in the 1936 Presidential campaign, despite Wagner's insertion of a general commitment to housing for low-income families in the Democratic party platform.¹²⁸ Yet following his landslide reelection in November, Roosevelt gave his full support to the Wagner-Ellenbogen Bill, especially after the AFL declared that "organized labor is determined to place the United States Housing Bill on the statute books next year."¹²⁹

The President made his intentions clear to the nation in January 1937. He declared to Congress in his State of the Union address that housing was still one of the "far-reaching problems" for which the country had to find a solution. He cited the fact that millions of Americans continued to live "in habitations . . . which not only fail to provide the . . . benefits of modern civilization but breed disease and impair the health of future generations."¹³⁰ A week later he wrote a statement for the NPHC in which he characterized the nation's housing situation as an obstacle to "healthy democracy" and "inimical to the general welfare." He promised to help that body bring their cause "before the people."¹³¹

The President delivered his strongest show of support to public housing in his second inaugural address on January 20, 1937, in which he stated:

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished. It is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope—because the Nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out. . . . The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.¹³²

"One-third of a nation" became a rallying cry for the public housing movement.

The efforts of the PWA during the limited-dividend and direct-built programs had served a number of important objectives during the first half of the 1930s. Not only did they provide an important (if limited) source of public employment during the early years of the Depression and help replace a number of the country's worst urban slums with safe, modern housing, but more importantly they set the stage for the development of more extensive public housing programs during the late 1930s and early 1940s. In the end, the PWA Housing Division described its own work during the period as "demonstration projects," proving the essential feasibility of Federal involvement in public housing reform. These early projects provided essential opportunities for experimenting with and improving on new construction methods, design theories, and management principles, all of which added substantially to the body of local and Federal experience in planning, constructing, and operating large-scale public housing in the United States. During the depths of the Depression, the PWA housing programs provided local communities with more than 26,000 units of new public housing.

¹²⁸ McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, pp. 235-236.

¹²⁹ McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, p. 238.

¹³⁰ Rosenman, *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Volume 5, p. 637.

¹³¹ Rosenman, *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Volume 5, pp. 685-686.

¹³² Rosenman, *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Volume 6, p. 5.

As has been shown, the design of public housing flourished during the New Deal. Creativity took precedence over cost control, and many fine projects were built by the PWA in an attempt to provide the maximum employment opportunities for architects and construction labor alike. Yet public housing was becoming institutionalized within a large bureaucracy, influenced by the participation of local communities, and subject to the budgetary scrutiny of Congress. Especially after 1937, factors such as cost limitations and standardization of design soon brought a sense of sameness to public housing that continues to be a defining characteristic of the program even today.

UNITED STATES HOUSING ACT OF 1937

With Presidential support behind them, public housing advocates felt assured of ultimate triumph in their pursuit of a sustained Federal public housing program. The *United States Housing Act of 1937* passed both houses of Congress by a wide margin in November, establishing a firm Federal commitment to provide a supply of decent, low-rent housing to America's urban poor. This Act created the federally funded, locally operated public housing program which continues to function to this day. Enthusiasm for the program was high among local communities, and over the next five years more than 370 housing projects were built by local public housing authorities with Federal subsidies.

WAGNER-STEAGALL HOUSING BILL

Congressman Henry Steagall of Alabama, chairman of the House Committee on Banking and Currency, replaced Henry Ellenbogen as cosponsor of the Wagner Bill in 1937. Steagall personally opposed public housing, and had killed the bill in committee in 1936. He was willing to bring the bill out of committee under his own sponsorship only after the President gave it his unqualified support.¹³³ Conceding to Catherine Bauer, Steagall reportedly explained his conversion as a simple matter of party loyalty: "I'm against it, it's socialism, it's Bolshevik, it will bankrupt the country, but the leader wants it."¹³⁴ Wagner and Steagall reintroduced the housing bill into their respective houses of Congress in the summer of 1937.

Opponents of public housing testified in force before the House Committee. The Chairman of the Committee on Housing for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce declared that:

the government should [not] build publicly owned houses to improve the conditions of the poorest families, because it is inconceivable that the public can . . . supply the housing required. . . . Such a process will restrain private efforts on which we must rely if accomplishment over the next ten years is to meet requirements.¹³⁵

The Secretary of the National Lumber Dealers' Association felt that the government should restrict its housing activities to those areas in which private enterprise could not participate, stating:

When it is clearly demonstrated that the benefits of this legislation will go to wage earners in the group earning between \$1,000 and \$750 you are coming dangerously close to direct competition with private industry, which can demonstrate to you that it is today building low-cost houses for wage earners in this group.¹³⁶

¹³³ William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 135.

¹³⁴ Eugenie Ladner Birch, "Woman-made America," p. 169.

¹³⁵ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Banking and Currency, *Hearings on (H. R. 5033) (S. 1685), To Create a U. S. Housing Authority* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937; Bethesda, MD: Congressional Information Service, U.S. Congressional Committee Hearings, Microform Y4.B22/1:H81/3/rev, 1983), p. 249.

¹³⁶ U.S. Congress, *To Create a U.S. Housing Authority*, p. 273.

Many public housing advocates also came forth with their support, including Secretary Ickes, New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, and housing experts Edith Elmer Wood and Catherine Bauer. The most remarkable show of support, however, came from Stewart MacDonald, Administrator of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), the greatest rival of public housing among the Federal housing programs. MacDonald admitted the "undeniable need" for slum clearance in the nation's cities and noted the millions of low-income families who could never afford a private home and thus could not partake of the FHA's services.¹³⁷ After two years, the Committee finally relented and recommended that the bill be brought before the House for a vote.

Although there was a general feeling of support for the bill in both houses of Congress, there was much quibbling over the details of finance and operation. A group of rural Congressmen expressed concern that only large cities, and Wagner's New York City in particular, would benefit from the housing program. Time and again they charged that the program would "not be of the slightest service to the rural areas or towns or small cities," and that "it would not apply to more than six, eight, or ten cities in the country." Wagner argued that the housing program would "attack poor housing wherever it existed." Holding Wagner to his pledge, critics pushed through an amendment preventing the expenditure of more than 10 percent of USHA funds in any single state.¹³⁸

Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia, a staunch supporter of government economy, was only concerned with the cost of the program. He demanded assurances that the public housing program would not repeat the "extravagant" \$16,000 per unit construction costs found at the Resettlement Administration's Greenbelt towns. Byrd's amendment limited construction costs on each project to \$1,000 per room and \$4,000 per unit (excluding land, demolition, and non-dwelling facilities) in cities under 500,000 population, and \$1,250 per room and \$5,000 per unit in larger cities, a significant reduction from the earlier PWA average project cost of \$6,200 per unit.¹³⁹

Senator David I. Walsh, a proponent of slum reform from Massachusetts, added the "equivalent elimination" provision to the bill, which required the local authority to remove substandard slum units from the local housing supply in a "substantially equal number" to the public housing units it built. The local authority could meet this requirement by "demolition, condemnation, and effective closing" of substandard units, or through rehabilitation by "compulsory repair or improvement." Walsh was determined that slum clearance should remain a goal of public housing and not merely an afterthought. This stipulation also ensured that public housing would not add to the total number of housing units in a community, but would merely improve the quality of housing within the existing supply.¹⁴⁰ This stipulation was supported by many commercial landlords, who feared that expanded housing supplies would lower the rents that could be charged for their rental housing properties. A subsequent amendment in the House allowed deferment from the Walsh amendment if a locality could prove that it suffered from a serious shortage of housing.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ U.S. Congress, *To Create a U.S. Housing Authority*, p. 42.

¹³⁸ McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, p. 355.

¹³⁹ McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, pp. 324-332.

¹⁴⁰ McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, pp. 349-350.

¹⁴¹ McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, p. 393.

These modifications placated much of the immediate apprehension in Congress and allowed the Wagner-Steagall Bill to pass the Senate by a vote of 64 to 16 on August 6, 1937. It passed the House on August 18 by the wide margin of 275 to 86. President Roosevelt signed the bill into law on September 1 as the United States Housing Act of 1937.¹⁴²

UNITED STATES HOUSING ACT OF 1937

The United States Housing Act of 1937 established a permanent low-rent public housing program grounded in a partnership between the Federal government and local communities across the nation. It declared that the official policy of the United States government would be, for the first time:

To promote the general welfare of the Nation by employing its funds and credit . . . to remedy the nonsafe and unsanitary housing conditions and the acute shortage of decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings for families of low-income, in urban and rural non-farm areas.

It established the United States Housing Authority (USHA) within the Department of the Interior to take charge of the Federal program.¹⁴³ The USHA could not directly build or manage public housing, as the PWA had done; local public housing authorities (PHAs) established under state enabling legislation were given that function.

According to the provisions of the new legislation, the USHA would make 60-year loans to the PHAs for up to 90 percent of the development cost of low-rent housing or slum clearance projects, with local communities responsible for the remaining 10 percent.¹⁴⁴ To raise funds for these loans, the USHA could sell its tax-exempt bonds in amounts up to \$500 million.¹⁴⁵ To service the debt on the Federal loan, the USHA would make "annual contributions" to the PHAs to "assist in achieving and maintaining the low-rent character of their housing projects." This contribution, determined in a contract between the USHA and the individual PHA would enable the PHA to set rents no higher than necessary to pay annual operating costs of the project.¹⁴⁶ When asked in debate about families whose income would not allow them even to pay rent based on operating costs, Wagner replied "there are some people whom we cannot possibly reach; . . . this bill cannot provide housing for those who cannot pay the rent minus the subsidy allowed."¹⁴⁷

Congress authorized the USHA to enter into local contracts of not more than \$5 million in 1937, and up to \$7.5 million for the next two years; additional appropriations from Congress were necessary after 1939. The local government was also required to make a small contribution to the operation of the local public

¹⁴² McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, p. 402.

¹⁴³ *United States Housing Act of 1937, Statutes at Large*, 75th Congress, 1st Session, Chapter 896, September 1, 1937, Public Law 412, Sec. 3(a).

¹⁴⁴ *United States Housing Act of 1937, Statutes at Large*, Sec. 9.

¹⁴⁵ McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, pp. 395-397.

¹⁴⁶ *United States Housing Act of 1937, Statutes at Large*, Sec. 10.

¹⁴⁷ Lawrence Meir Friedman, *Government and Slum Housing: A Century of Frustration* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968), p. 109.

housing authority, equal to 20 percent of the Federal contract, usually in the form of an exemption for the public housing project from local property taxes.¹⁴⁸

With these subsidies, the local public housing authority could assure that its housing would be available only to families "in the lowest income group . . . who cannot afford to pay enough to cause private enterprise in their locality . . . to build an adequate supply of decent, safe and sanitary dwellings for their use."¹⁴⁹ It set the maximum income limits for tenants at no more than five times the rent plus utility costs, and six times for larger families.

UNITED STATES HOUSING AUTHORITY AND ITS HOUSING PROJECTS

Although Secretary Ickes had successfully convinced Congress to place the USHA within the Department of the Interior, President Roosevelt chose to appoint Nathan Straus as the USHA administrator. Ickes, who viewed Straus as a "dilettante" with ties to "that group of starry-eyed people in New York" avoided further direct contact with the public housing program.¹⁵⁰ With enthusiastic support from housing reformers, many of whom firmly believed that expanding the total supply of housing in a community would effectively lower the cost for renters in any given locale, Straus changed the emphasis of the Federal housing program. He quickly seized on the deferment clause of the Walsh amendment, and gave priority to construction over slum clearance:

If the public housing program is put first, low income families that now live in the slums will be immediately benefitted, the road will be cleared for the acquisition of slum properties at a fair price, and . . . the chief causes of slum and blight, the lack of decent housing at low rentals, will be remedied.¹⁵¹

Straus placed an enthusiastic Catherine Bauer in charge of granting deferments. By 1942, the USHA had built more than 100,000 new housing units but had eliminated fewer than 70,000 substandard slum dwellings. The USHA constructed more than one-third of its projects on inexpensive, vacant sites outside of the inner city slums, a practice that inspired much protest from the National Association of Real Estate Boards and commercial developers who wanted to reserve such prime parcels at the outskirts of cities for themselves.¹⁵²

Although willing to sidestep the Walsh amendment, Straus was eager to address the concerns of rural Congressmen by encouraging smaller cities to apply for support from the USHA. In testimony before the House, Straus declared that "we do not subscribe to the principle that slum conditions and the ill-housed poor are phenomena existing only in large metropolitan areas." By 1939, smaller communities, such as Paducah, Kentucky, and Twin Falls, Idaho, began applying for and receiving substantial allotments; fully

¹⁴⁸ *United States Housing Act of 1937, Statutes at Large*, Sec. 10.

¹⁴⁹ *United States Housing Act of 1937, Statutes at Large*, Sec. 2.

¹⁵⁰ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, Vol. 2, *The Inside Struggle, 1936-1939* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), pp. 218-219.

¹⁵¹ Nathan Straus, *The Seven Myths of Housing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), p. 92.

¹⁵² Roger Biles, "Nathan Straus and the Failure of U.S. Public Housing, 1937-1942," *The Historian* 53 (Autumn 1990), p. 39.

one-fourth of the USHA allotments went to cities with populations under 25,000.¹⁵³ The USHA further broadened its political base that year with the establishment of 205 local public housing authorities in thirty-three states.¹⁵⁴

The USHA was ultimately responsible for supporting the completion of public housing units for nearly 120,000 families at a total cost upwards of \$540,000,000. The 370 housing projects ranged in size from the relatively small projects built for Twin Falls, Idaho (28 units), Williamson, West Virginia (38 units), and Montgomery, Alabama (44 units), to the enormous Ida B. Wells Homes in Chicago (1662 units) and Allequippa Terrace in Pittsburgh (1851 units). Urban centers as diverse as Atlanta, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Toledo, Ohio each witnessed the local construction of six to seven USHA-sponsored projects during the 1930s. New York City would claim the largest USHA projects with the impressive Red Hook (2545 units) and Queensbridge (3148 units) Houses, both completed in 1939.¹⁵⁵

Unlike the centralized organization of the earlier PWA Housing Division, which was responsible for every component of project planning and administration, operations at the newly established USHA were increasingly decentralized. The major focus of responsibility now lay with the local PHAs, while the Washington bureaucracy provided program direction, financial support, and consulting advice. It has been remarked that the Federal government moved from the role of builder to that of banker during the period. Local housing authorities were now responsible for initiating, designing, building, and managing the local housing projects, while the USHA acted as the financial agent. Site analysis, land acquisition, tenant distribution, and project design became the direct prerogative of the local community housing agencies within the constraints of the Federal program. The USHA furnished technical guidance and design assistance, as well as project review, through the issuance of program standards, management guidelines, design models, architectural standards, and building prototypes.¹⁵⁶

The passage of the 1937 *United States Housing Act*, with its stringent new cost guidelines and objective of providing affordable housing to the poorer segments of the population, led to an increased emphasis on economy and greater standardization in American public housing. For example, though the new legislation revived the languishing Red Hook housing project in New York City, it also placed severe cost restrictions on the renewed project. Originally planned in 1935 with a varied combination of three- and four-story apartment buildings separated by broad boulevards; the design was revised to a series of regularized six-story buildings with elevators on the same multiblock site. The result was a total cost per room nearly half that of earlier PWA efforts in New York City, but at a density far exceeding the well-received Harlem River Houses and Williamsburg projects.¹⁵⁷ Among those entering into the debate over how best to provide

¹⁵³ Mark I. Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 64.

¹⁵⁴ Biles, "Nathan Straus and the Failure of U.S. Public Housing," *The Historian*, p. 39.

¹⁵⁵ See Appendix IV, Volume I: Federal Public Housing Projects 1933-1949.

¹⁵⁶ "Public Housing," *The Architectural Forum*, May 1938, pp. 345-349.

¹⁵⁷ Pommer, "The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 37 (December 1978), p. 256.

economical housing was the National Association of Housing Officials, which published its own report on standardized designs and plans for public housing projects in 1938.¹⁵⁸

The public housing complexes constructed after 1937 with USHA funding were generally built in the International Style, as the USHA found its “no-frills architecture” well suited to both their agency’s legislative and administrative cost restrictions. As a result, flat roofs, uniform fenestration, and little or no exterior ornamentation became defining features of USHA-funded public housing complexes. These later complexes also did not contain as many amenities as did the earlier PWA complexes.¹⁵⁹ The USHA did, however, approve a limited number of innovations in their projects. For example, Edison Courts, a 345-unit project constructed in Miami, in 1939-40, included solar panels on its roof to heat water in the complex’s laundry room.¹⁶⁰

An early project funded by the USHA was the 535-unit James Weldon Johnson Homes. Constructed in North Philadelphia and completed in 1940, this was the first public housing project to be built by the Philadelphia Housing Authority. The city’s public housing authority was committed to solving the housing crisis for low-income black residents, and the Johnson Homes were significant as the city’s first predominantly black housing complex. Planned by architects W. Pope Barney and Frank R. Watson, the complex was modeled after William Penn’s concept of a “green country town,” containing public courtyards and other more private outdoor spaces. The 18.4-acre site contained a combination of two- and three-story garden apartment and rowhouse buildings which were oriented toward the center of the site.¹⁶¹

The establishment and early efforts of the Philadelphia Housing Authority (Authority) reveal a common pattern of local activity and civic activism that accompanied enactment of the *Housing Act* of 1937 across the country. The Pennsylvania Legislature, in anticipation of the Act, had approved the *Housing Authorities Law of Pennsylvania* on May 28, 1937. The state law provided for the establishment of local housing authorities in communities that could provide clear evidence of an immediate need for safe, decent low-rent housing. The Philadelphia City Council identified just such a need in August of 1937, citing “numerous unsafe, insanitary, inadequate, or overcrowded dwellings” and an acute “shortage of decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings within the reach of persons of low income,” and quickly moved to establish a local housing authority under state law. The Philadelphia Housing Authority’s first volunteer members included influential local businessmen and professionals, including representatives from the building and real estate fields, and the President of the Building Trades Council of Philadelphia, James L. McDevitt. Labor had played an important role in the passage of the 1937 Housing Act and local interest in employment generating opportunities like public housing projects was keen.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ “Housing Standards,” *The Architectural Forum*, (May 1938), p.22.

¹⁵⁹Szylvian, Kristin M., “Bauhaus on Trial: Aluminum City Terrace and Federal Defence Housing Policy during World War II,” *Planning Perspectives* 9 (1994), pp. 232, 234.

¹⁶⁰Szylvian, “Bauhaus on Trial,” p. 234; Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*, p. 230.

¹⁶¹ Carol Benenson Perloff and Abby Victor, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, “James Weldon Johnson Homes,” March 15, 1995, Revised July 19, 1995, pp. 7.1, 8.5.

¹⁶²Carol Benenson Perloff, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, “Public Housing in Philadelphia,” March 15, 1995, pp. E.2.

The Authority's initial efforts focused on identifying the physical and financial needs of the local housing market. Funded with startup money from the City, the Authority undertook a number of studies to assess the most pressing needs of the program, including the location of the city's worst slums, the ethnic and racial dimensions of the housing problem, and the suitability of locations for possible new housing. The Authority evaluated many different factors in choosing possible sites, taking into account zoning regulations, comprehensive planning studies, population distribution, the condition of existing homes, the existence of community facilities such as transportation, schools, churches, and employment opportunities, and the existence of physical elements such as utilities and roads. From an initial list of 23 sites, the Authority eventually selected three sites for proposed low-rent housing projects. Taking advantage of the clause in the *U. S. Housing Act* that allowed deferring slum clearance in cases where severe overcrowding would result, the Authority was able to initiate housing project plans on vacant or nearly vacant land for two of its first three projects.¹⁶³

Armed with plans for the development of 2,859 units of low-rent housing the Authority approached the USHA for financial assistance and project guidance. By June of 1939, the Authority had contracts with the USHA for \$32 million of slum clearance and low-rent housing for Philadelphia. In addition to the James Weldon Johnson project discussed above, the Authority used the USHA money to complete the 1000-unit Tasker Homes in 1941 and the 1324-unit Richard Allen Homes project in 1942. The Authority also took over management of the PWA-built 258-unit Hill Creek housing project, which had been completed in 1938. To adequately handle the influx of applications for apartments in the city's new low-income projects, the Authority established field offices at each project for tenant selection and management. The field offices offered relocation services for those displaced from housing as a result of slum clearance and devised criteria assessing the suitability of applicants for housing units in the different projects. While financial need was the overriding criterion, the Authority, as a matter of policy, sought to make the racial balance of a project compatible with the surrounding neighborhood.¹⁶⁴

The Authority also saw an important role for itself in fostering public support for its programs and the new housing projects. The Authority took every opportunity to educate the public, potential residents, neighbors, and influential officials in their programs, using city newspapers, ground breaking and dedication ceremonies, tours of sample homes, radio broadcasts, and a host of pamphlets and printed material. The Authority also constructed models of the units to allow interested citizens a first-hand glimpse of the evolving public housing programs being undertaken in their community.¹⁶⁵ The Authority, like housing authorities established in hundreds of other communities during the 1930s, played an essential role in supporting, promoting, and carrying out local public housing reform. The projects they built in association with the USHA represented an enormous outlay of time, effort, and civic resources. In some cases these projects reflected the most significant Depression-era activities undertaken within a local community.

¹⁶³Perloff, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, "Public Housing in Philadelphia," pp. E.2-E.4; Philadelphia Housing Authority, "Clearing Slums in Philadelphia: First Annual Report of the Philadelphia Housing Authority, (Philadelphia, 1939), p. 17.

¹⁶⁴Perloff, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, "Public Housing in Philadelphia," pp. E.3-E.4.

¹⁶⁵Perloff, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, "Public Housing in Philadelphia," p. E.5.

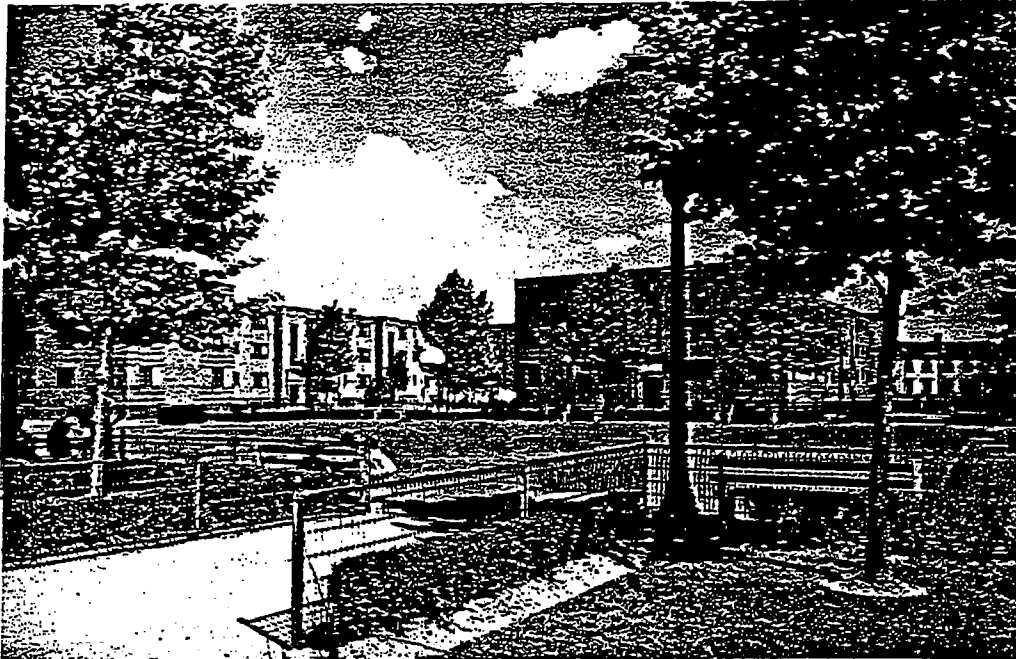


Figure 9 - Pennington Court in Newark, New Jersey, a 236-unit USHA public housing project completed in 1940. The agency's emphasis on unit plans and restrictive budgets resulted in an increasing standardization in both the plan and form of USHA public housing. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Gottscho-Schleisner Collection)

Fostering a sense of community was also important in the public housing financed by the USHA. In 1939-40, the Wilmington Housing Authority in North Carolina constructed two public housing projects, the 216-unit Charles T. Nesbitt Courts, intended for white tenants, and the 246-unit Robert R. Taylor Homes, intended for black tenants. The local housing authority organized a wide variety of social, educational, and recreational events for the residents of the two complexes, held in each neighborhood's community building. Activities at the Taylor Homes included a choir, a nondenominational children's Bible school, card clubs, dancing classes, a nursery school staffed by the Works Progress Administration, and publishing a neighborhood newsletter.¹⁶⁶

The Ida B. Wells Homes in Chicago, completed by the Chicago Housing Authority in January 1941, was the last of the prewar public housing projects to be constructed as a result of the legislation [see Figures 10 and 11]. When completed, it was the largest public housing project in Chicago and among the largest in the country. The complex, planned by the PWA and built by the Chicago Housing Authority, contained 868 apartments in three- and four-story buildings and 794 two-story rowhouses, which covered 24 percent of the total land area. The Wells Homes was the first public housing project in America to include a city park within its boundaries.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶Szylvian, Kristin M., "Public Housing Comes to Wilmington, North Carolina," *North Carolina Humanities* 3, 1 (Spring/Summer 1995), pp. 54, 56.

¹⁶⁷ "Report on Chicago Housing Authority Developments, Eligible for the National Register of Historic Places," April 18, 1994, Section II, Part D, n.p.



Figure 10 - Views of buildings arranged around an interior courtyard at the 1,662-unit Ida B. Wells Homes in Chicago, Illinois, a USHA public housing project completed in 1941. At the time of its completion, it was the largest public housing complex in Chicago, and one of the largest in the country. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration Collection)



Figure 11 - Interior view of the living room of the Vaughn family apartment at the Ida B. Wells Homes. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration Collection)

The USHA surmounted its first political hurdle in 1938 when Congress increased its funding from \$500 million to \$800 million. With the 1938 election, however, antagonism toward the program began to grow. A downturn in the national economy and a strong anti-New Deal sentiment brought in a Congress much more responsive to the complaints of private enterprise against public housing. Ironically, in 1939, a much brighter economy and a recovery in the construction industry made public housing seem superfluous. In an unusual action, the House of Representatives refused to consider a bill to extend the public housing program beyond its originally mandated three-year period.¹⁶⁸ Congress would extend no further funding to low-rent public housing until 1949.

From an architectural perspective, the increasing USHA emphasis on standardized unit plans and restrictive budgets conspired to significantly inhibit creativity in housing design. Economy of materials and design took precedence over the exploration of new design alternatives, resulting in what some critics have labeled an “unnecessarily barracks-like and monotonous” look.¹⁶⁹ The social-psychological elements of project planning so important in the earlier years were replaced by the goal of meeting minimum human needs of clean air and light within increasingly limited budgets. The result was the completion of substantial numbers of new modern housing units, but each lacking the aesthetic embellishments of earlier models. While the overall architecture of the housing projects built under the USHA did not match that of the PWA—although certain exemplary models were completed—the design work executed during the late 1930s and early 1940s still represents a significant body of modernistic architecture, of a scale and form unlike almost anything built up to that time in America.

During its three-year reign, the USHA greatly expanded the number of public housing units available to low-income residents across the country. These housing projects reflected significant cooperative ventures between local housing authorities and the Federal government to reduce slums, provide a much needed economic stimulant to a rebuilding economy, and supply adequate, safe housing to thousands of poor and low-income residents.

¹⁶⁸ Nathaniel Keith, *Politics and the Housing Crisis Since 1930* (New York: Universe Books, 1973), p. 38-39.

¹⁶⁹ Pommer, “The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 37 (December 1978) p. 256.

PUBLIC HOUSING IN WORLD WAR II

Just as Congressional interest in public housing began to wane at the end of the Great Depression, World War II provided new impetus for the continuation and expansion of Federal housing efforts. As German armies swept through western Europe in the spring of 1940 and overwhelmed the opposing French and British forces, the United States quickly turned away from its own domestic problems to confront the threats to its national security. Unlike its reaction to World War I, the nation almost immediately set itself on a course toward war. Industrial capacity increased tremendously, both at established manufacturing centers such as Chicago and Detroit and at new sites on the west coast and elsewhere throughout the nation. A great migration of civilian population moved toward these cities, and the nation's inadequate stock of urban housing soon became a serious threat to the productive potential of America's vital war industries. Decent and inexpensive housing for defense industry workers and their families became as much a part of the wartime construction program as did cantonments for the military or shipyards and factories for manufacturing the tools of war. The Federal government revived the public housing program in mid-1940, but changed the goal of the program from that of housing low-income families to housing defense workers on the homefront.

The prewar debate over the propriety of direct government housing construction quickly resumed. Although public housing advocates embraced their new role in the nation's defense effort, they struggled to ensure that the war would not undermine their long-range goal of a permanent low-rent public housing program. They encouraged the Federal government to place planning and management responsibilities for defense housing with the United States Housing Authority and its vast network of local housing officials, both to benefit from the experience of the pre-war housing program and to ensure continuation of that program after the war. They also argued for the construction of sturdy, well-designed defense housing projects that would readily convert to low-rent use after the war to meet the inevitable postwar housing shortage.

Private enterprise and its supporters in Congress, on the other hand, once again mounted a vigorous opposition to public housing. They claimed that only private industry could offer the speed and efficiency necessary to meet the immediate demand for defense housing. Government efforts, they argued, should concentrate on loans and mortgage guarantees to support private construction. Public construction should be limited only to temporary, inexpensive accommodations that would pose no competition on the postwar housing market. The success of this argument against government-built defense housing severely limited the extent of the public housing program during the war, and delayed resumption of the program for many years afterwards.

NATIONAL DEFENSE ACT

During the year and a half prior to the United States' entry into World War II in December 1941, an estimated 3 million war workers and their families—a total of about 8 to 10 million Americans—migrated to jobs in the nation's 200 or so defense industrial centers. Approximately 1.7 million of these workers found accommodations in existing housing, decent or otherwise, leaving 1.3 million families dependent on new construction.¹⁷⁰ Throughout 1940 and 1941, Congress passed a number of laws designed to increase public and private housing construction to meet this staggering demand.

Despite its reluctance to fund the public housing program after 1939, Congress included responsibilities for the United States Housing Authority under the *National Defense Act* in June 1940. Known as *Public Law 671*, this act had been proposed at the request of the nation's military leaders and received bipartisan support as a means "to expedite shipbuilding and other purposes" related to the ongoing defense buildup.

¹⁷⁰ Keith, *Politics and the Housing Crisis since 1930*, pp. 42-43.

Much to the chagrin of conservatives in the House of Representatives, however, these "other purposes" included a new and expanded role for public housing in the national war effort.¹⁷¹ Title II of P.L. 671 authorized the USHA to assist the more than 500 local housing authorities and to cooperate with the Navy and War Departments to make "necessary housing available for persons engaged in national defense activities." These included enlisted military personnel and civilian employees on military reservations, as well as civilian workers with families who were employed in essential defense industries.¹⁷²

Although P.L. 671 was generally an extension of the *United States Housing Act* of 1937, it exempted defense housing from several important limitations set by Congress on the original low-rent public housing program. For the duration of the emergency, the act provided the USHA with Federal powers of condemnation that would allow it to acquire large parcels of land that it could resell cheaply to local authorities without the threat of costly court battles. It also allowed the USHA to finance 100 percent of individual defense housing project costs, eliminating the requirement that local communities must contribute a 10 percent share to each project.¹⁷³ These new stipulations helped to centralize power back to the Federal housing agency away from the local authorities, allowing the Federal government more control over defense housing allocations.

More significantly, however, P.L. 671 abandoned the two hallmarks of the program which had defined the philosophy of public housing before the war. First, the act waived the low-income requirement for tenancy and made defense housing available to all workers facing the housing shortage. It ordered local authorities to "fix rentals" at variable rates to be within the financial reach of all families engaged in defense activities. Then the new act exempted local authorities from the "equivalent elimination" clause, no longer requiring the demolition of an equal number of slum housing units for all public housing units built.¹⁷⁴ Consciously or not, Congress gave credence to the earlier views of Lewis Mumford and Catherine Bauer that had proven so divisive among public housing advocates before the war. For a while, at least, the war had opened public housing to a wider spectrum of American society, and had shown that slum clearance was expensive, time consuming, and wasteful of available housing in a limited market.

The *National Defense Act* made no new appropriations for public housing, but instead allowed the USHA to use up to \$150 million in unexpended funds from its final \$800 million prewar appropriation.¹⁷⁵ All low-rent public housing projects that were in various stages of planning or construction were to be reassessed under P.L. 671 for their possible contribution to the national defense program. Only those projects which the President had determined to be in areas with "an acute shortage of housing" would be completed.¹⁷⁶ Projects under construction by local housing authorities in vital defense areas would be converted solely to use by defense industry workers and their families. Other projects in areas which did not suffer from the crush of migrant war workers, but which nonetheless continued to face severe housing

¹⁷¹ "Defense Housing," *Architectural Forum*, 73 (November 1940), p. 441.

¹⁷² *National Defense Act, U. S. Statutes at Large*, 76th Congress., 2nd and 3rd Sessions, Chapter 440, June 28, 1940, Public Law 671, Title II, Sec. 201.

¹⁷³ *National Defense Act, U.S. Statutes at Large*, Sec. 204.

¹⁷⁴ *National Defense Act, U.S. Statutes at Large*, Sec.204.

¹⁷⁵ "Defense Housing," *Architectural Forum*, p. 441.

¹⁷⁶ *National Defense Act, Statutes at Large*, Sec. 201.

shortages, were completed only when the supply of manpower and precious building materials would allow.¹⁷⁷

Local housing authorities in strategic defense areas quickly converted their unfinished projects from low-rent to defense housing. By the beginning of 1942, more than 65,000 low-rent public housing units which had been under construction or ready for occupancy in late 1940 were converted to defense housing by local housing authorities. In Los Angeles, California, for instance, the local housing authority was operating nine projects with nearly 2,700 units of housing exclusively for workers in the aviation and other defense industries. By contrast, the 610-unit Ramona Gardens, the first public housing project built by the local housing authority in 1940-41, was the only project in Los Angeles to serve the general low-income population during the war. Other housing authorities on the West Coast—San Francisco, Oakland, and Richmond in California and those in and around Seattle, Washington—soon had huge stocks of housing serving the aviation or shipping industries. On the east coast, housing authorities in Virginia, Philadelphia, and Baltimore provided housing for shipyard workers, those in Pittsburgh and Chicago served the steel mills, in Houston the petroleum industry, and in Detroit migrant workers who had come north to build tanks and trucks for the automotive industry.

A representative example of a USHA project which was converted to defense housing was San Felipe Courts, the largest of the four public housing complexes constructed in Houston, Texas, between 1939 and 1944. Built on the site of a former black slum, San Felipe Courts displaced poor black residents in order to create a public housing complex for poor white tenants. The project was designed in 1940, and the first 564 units were constructed between 1940 and 1942. When the United States entered into World War II, the project had to be reclassified to defense housing so that it could be completed. The remaining 436 units were then constructed between 1943 and 1944. The completed complex consisted of 68 two-story housing blocks, 12 three-story blocks, and two two-story Project Center buildings occupying a site of 37 acres. Set in parallel rows of thin rectangular slabs, their long sides facing north and south framing long rectangular garden courts, the buildings were of reinforced concrete and masonry construction [see Figure 12]. Conceived of as the Housing Authority of the City of Houston's premier housing project due to its size and prominent location, the completed design received critical attention. Architectural periodicals of the time noted the project's well-designed unit's plans, the integration of units of differing size into rowhouses, and the contrasting three-story blocks which occupied the central area. The project was one of only two Texas low-income developments to receive such recognition. The project architects were Associated Housing Architects of Houston, a consortium of twelve Houston architectural firms formed during the Depression. The lead project architect was Karl Kamrath, a respected modernist architect with the local firm of MacKie & Kamrath. J. Allen Meyers, Jr., was the landscape architect.¹⁷⁸ Because the project was reclassified, and not originally conceived as defense housing, it was better designed and built than other solely defense projects.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Herbert Emmerich, "Public Housing in 1941," in National Association of Housing Officials, Coleman Woodbury, ed., *Public Housing Officials' Yearbook 1942* (Chicago: National Association of Housing Officials, 1942), p. 10.

¹⁷⁸ Stephen Fox, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "San Felipe Courts Historic District," December 1987, pp. 7.1, 8.1-8.8

¹⁷⁹ Fox, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "San Felipe Courts Historic District," pp. 8.1-8.8.



Figure 12 - The community center at San Felipe Courts in Houston, Texas, a USHA housing complex that was converted to defense housing during World War II. The first 564 units were completed as public housing from 1940 to 1942, and the remaining 436 units were completed as defense housing from 1943 to 1944. (National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1988)

The USHA, however, was not content to merely convert existing projects into defense housing. Nathan Straus, chief administrator for the USHA, quickly realized that local housing authorities would have to pursue aggressive construction programs during the war in order to ensure public housing's survival after the war. By February 1941, Straus had approved new loans to 20 housing authorities under the terms of P. L. 671 for the construction of 6,344 units of defense housing. Straus recommended that all local housing authorities look to their postwar needs when planning defense housing. Permanent structures built as integral parts of the local housing program would, according to Straus, become "available to families from the slums on the same low-rent basis . . . as our regular program" after the defense emergency had passed. The first defense housing project, Moreno Court, opened its 200 units to defense workers and their families in Pensacola, Florida, in November 1940, just 87 days after construction had begun.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ Nathan Straus, "Public Housing, 1940-1941," in National Association of Housing Officials, Coleman Woodbury, ed., *Housing Officials' Yearbook 1941* (Chicago: National Association of Housing Officials, 1941), pp. 235-236.



Figure 13 - An individual building at the 442-unit Barry Farms Dwellings in Washington, D.C., a defense housing project completed in 1943. Housing of this era became increasingly severe and regularized and featured little architectural ornament. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Gottscho-Schleisner Collection)

Wartime construction would introduce significant new problems and urgencies into the national housing picture. The scarcity of construction materials and short time lines required major adjustments from peacetime standards in order to carry out the mandates of wartime housing. Design work, which had already become increasingly standardized under the USHA program, was restrained even more. The well-planned pedestrian courts and varied building units of early housing projects gave way to rows of increasingly severe and regularized buildings lacking all but minor architectural elaboration [see Figures 13 and 14]. Maximum program efficiency, which allowed the erection of projects like Pensacola's Moreno Court in just 87 days, became the watchword.

LANHAM ACT

The National Defense Act was merely the first step in the Federal wartime housing program. The military looked to the USHA and local housing authorities as the only means available at the time to provide an immediate program of defense housing. It soon became apparent, however, that sufficient production of housing for millions of migrating war workers would require a much greater effort on the part of the Federal government, as well as close coordination with private housing activities. Early in July 1940, President Roosevelt appointed Charles Palmer to the newly created position of Defense Housing Coordinator. Palmer was a highly regarded realtor from Atlanta who had been the driving force behind the construction of Techwood Homes, the nation's first direct-built public housing project built by the PWA in 1935-36. It now became his duty to analyze needs and allocate assignments for construction of defense housing by the public and private sectors.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Philip J. Funigiello, *The Challenge to Urban Liberalism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1978), p. 80.

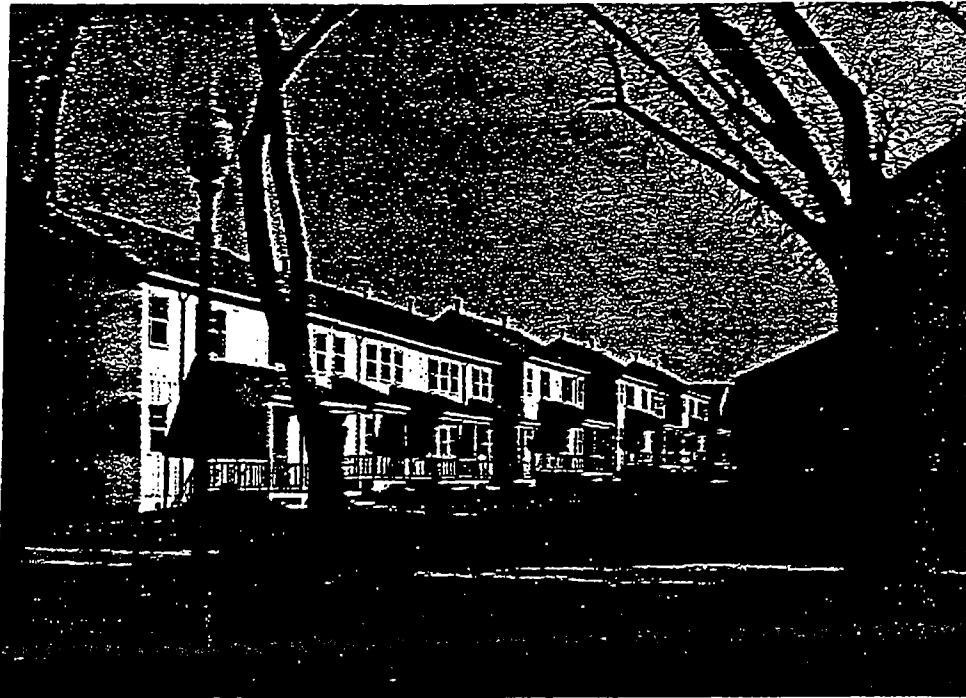


Figure 14 - An individual building at the 278-unit James Creek Houses in Washington, D.C., a defense housing project completed in 1942. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Gottscho-Schleisner Collection)

Palmer's office commissioned the Twentieth Century Fund, a prestigious New York research foundation, to undertake a general survey of housing conditions in the United States.¹⁸² *Housing for Defense*, written by Miles L. Colean and published in 1940, soon became the guiding doctrine of the nation's early wartime housing policy as advanced by Palmer. Drawing on the missteps and delays experienced during World War I, Colean insisted that the Federal government consider workers' housing as an essential component of the nation's defense program; he recommended that the government act at once to assure an adequate supply of dwelling units conveniently located near industrial activity, before the conflict drew the United States in as a full combatant.¹⁸³

According to Colean, however, government's primary role should be to facilitate private housing construction through Federal loans and mortgage insurance. He also advised the Federal government to coordinate all new industrial construction as much as possible around existing housing supplies and labor surpluses, so as to avoid all unnecessary construction or migration. Only as a "last resort" should the Federal government undertake direct housing construction, in order to avoid unnecessary competition with private enterprise. Since wartime wages would be relatively high, Colean felt that the vast majority of defense workers could easily afford housing on the open market. Public housing built by local housing authorities should be limited to its original intent: to provide shelter for those families whose incomes placed

¹⁸² Miles L. Colean, *Housing for Defense: A Review of the Role of Housing in Relation to America Defense and a Program for Action* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1940), p. vii.

¹⁸³ Colean, *Housing for Defense*, p. 126.

them clearly beyond the reach of even the most inexpensive private rental housing. He opposed opening public housing to all defense workers regardless of income, as P. L. 671 had allowed.¹⁸⁴

Colean's report immediately renewed the confrontation between public housing advocates and private enterprise. Congressional conservatives like Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia and Republicans from rural constituencies were quick to endorse the diminished role of public housing. They did not want defense housing funds to be appropriated to the USHA for its "socialistic experiments" in the big cities. They were more adamant than ever that public housing should not emerge after the war to compete with private enterprise.¹⁸⁵ Palmer declared in the *New York Times* in November 1940 that "sociology" was not part of his job and refused to support any Federal efforts that would provide public competition to the postwar housing industry.¹⁸⁶

In direct opposition to the USHA, Palmer drafted a new housing bill that would severely restrict Federal efforts to build public war housing. Introduced in the House on behalf of Palmer by Republican Congressman Fritz Lanham of Texas, the so-called "Lanham Act" was signed into law by President Roosevelt in October 1940. The Lanham Act provided \$150 million to the Federal Works Administration to provide massive amounts of federally built housing quickly and cheaply in the most congested defense industry centers. As can be expected in a wartime crisis, the Lanham Act emphasized both speed in construction and economy of materials. Between 1940 and 1944, the Federal government built approximately 625,000 units of housing under the Lanham Act and its amendments with a total appropriation of nearly \$1 billion. More than 580,000 Lanham Act units were of temporary construction, such as demountable plywood dormitories and trailers, that would pose no competition to private enterprise either during the war or after.¹⁸⁷

The Division of Defense Housing of the Federal Works Agency was created in April 1941 to undertake direct supervision of the new defense housing program. The timely completion of defense housing was paramount under the new program and the Lanham Act clearly spelled out maximum unit costs, which were much lower than USHA housing guidelines. As amended, the Lanham Act eventually required that the average cost of all permanent dwelling units be no greater than \$3750 per family unit, with no single unit exceeding \$4500, including construction costs, contractor's fees, and equipment. Where possible it was assumed that projects would be constructed for less, if local conditions allowed. These severe restrictions placed additional constraints on the architectural design and planning for new housing under the Lanham Act [see Figure 15].¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Colean, *Housing for Defense*, pp. 127-140.

¹⁸⁵ *Congressional Record*, October 25, 1940.

¹⁸⁶ Funigiello, *The Challenge to Urban Liberalism*, p. 84.

¹⁸⁷ Mary K. Nenno, "Housing in the Decade of the 1940s," in Gertrude Fish, ed., *The Story of Housing*, p. 248.

¹⁸⁸ National Housing Agency, Federal Public Housing Authority, Standards for Defense Housing, Lanham Act Projects, March 1942, p. 2.

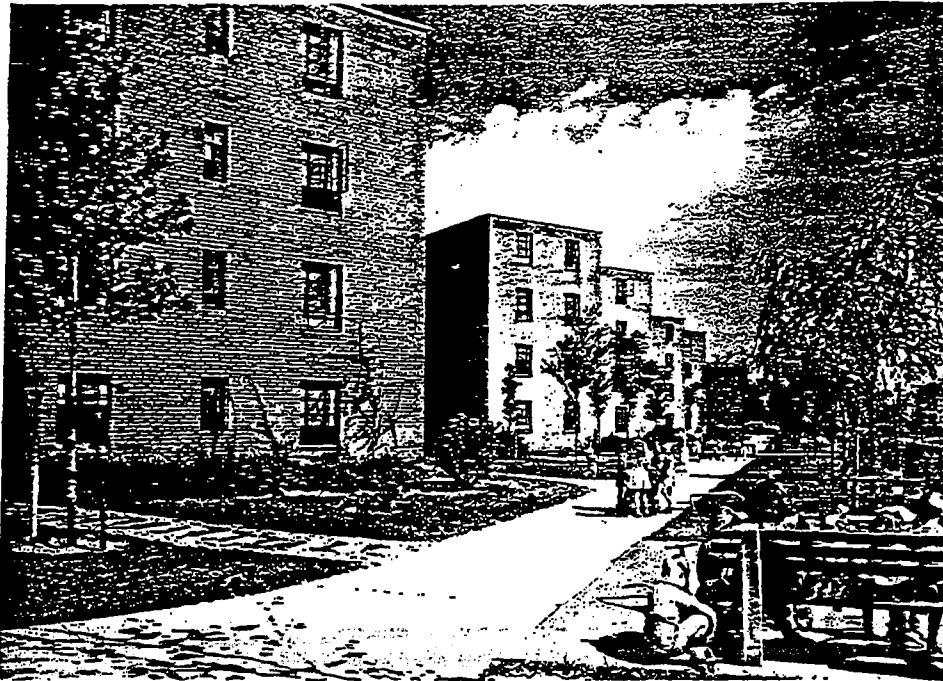


Figure 15 - A streetscape view of the 301-unit Joseph P. Bradley Court in Newark, New Jersey, a Lanham Act housing project completed in 1942. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Gottscho-Schleisner Collection)

While the scale of the new program dictated central control in directing certain aspects of the program, such as the preparation of standard plans, the mass purchase of scarce supplies, and the development of overall program guidelines, the construction and management aspects of the operation were quickly decentralized to regional offices. Wherever possible, local communities and public housing authorities actively participated in determining what type of development would occur in a particular area and the selection of architects. Where this partnering was not possible, the Federal government commissioned architects directly and supervised construction.

In Philadelphia, survey work undertaken by the Regional Defense Housing Coordinator and the Philadelphia Housing Authority determined that the City's long-range needs for low-rent housing dictated that a portion of the defense housing should be of permanent construction, with the idea that it would be converted to low-rent housing at the end of the war. Lanham Act funds for the construction of 2,400 units of defense housing were subsequently allocated to the housing authority, which was designated as agent of the Federal Works Administrator for the construction and management of the defense projects. The Federal government acquired and retained ownership of the land. The 2,400 units of permanent defense housing built in Philadelphia were distributed among four projects: Passyunk Homes, Abbottsford Homes, Bartram Village, and Oxford Village. Earlier construction efforts, funded by the USHA under *Public Law 671*, were responsible for smaller additions to the James Weldon Homes and Tasker Homes. In 1943, Lanham Act funds were also used to construct four temporary housing projects in Philadelphia, all of which were demolished after the war.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹Perloff, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, "Public Housing in Philadelphia," p. E.5-E.6.

In Philadelphia the architectural design aspects of project planning were managed by contracting with an architectural staff called the Technical Board, which coordinated the work of the various architects and construction contractors hired for the specific projects. The design contracts were awarded to consortiums of architects who could provide the manpower and technical expertise necessary for such large-scale projects. Many of the city's premier designers were involved in the war effort. The results of the severe limitations on budget and time were clearly visible in the built products, as rather unimaginative, repetitive buildings became more common. A combination of increasing standardization and war-time pragmatism resulted in a de-emphasis on aesthetics in favor of a more utilitarian approach to design and construction. The divergence was most apparent in communities where examples existed of housing projects built during several different eras.¹⁹⁰

Although many Lanham Act projects were managed by local housing authorities, the act specifically retained project ownership by the Federal government. To restrict the public housing program further, Congress amended the Lanham Act in July 1943 to stipulate that no additional housing could be built under this act after the war was over, and that existing units would be disposed of "within two years after the President should declare an end to the war emergency." It specifically forbade the use of such housing after the war as subsidized housing for low-income families.¹⁹¹

Public housing supporters quickly spoke out against the Lanham Act. Charles Abrams, of the New York Housing Authority, posed a telling question in the title of an article in *The Nation* published just four days after passage of the Lanham Act: "Must Defense Wreck Housing?" Abrams warned that temporary housing had a bad habit of becoming permanent housing after such previous emergencies as the Galveston flood and the San Francisco earthquake. He predicted that the temporary housing of the Lanham Act would become new slums "of vice and contagion" in the face of a postwar housing "famine." All the valiant work of the New Deal slum clearance program would be reversed by the "short-sighted plans" of real estate interests trying to protect their investments.¹⁹²

Nathan Straus continued to advocate the resumption of the low-rent public housing program after the war. He felt that only by continuing and expanding the wartime program would "community revitalization through slum clearance and the provision of decent inexpensive housing" progress after the war.¹⁹³ In testimony before Congress in October 1941, Straus accused Palmer of "heeding the siren song of the speculator" by accepting the "erroneous notion" that private enterprise could provide a large part of defense housing. He declared that Congress should entrust the entire defense housing program to the USHA which, because it functioned through established local housing authorities, could best serve both the Federal defense program and the needs of local communities and industry.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Perloff, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, "Public Housing in Philadelphia," p. E.5-E.7.

¹⁹¹ Paul F. Wendt, *Housing Policy: The Search for Solutions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963), p. 154.

¹⁹² Charles Abrams, "Must Defense Wreck Housing?," *The Nation* 151 (October 19, 1940), pp. 361-362.

¹⁹³ Biles, "Nathan Straus and the Failure of U.S. Public Housing, 1937-1942," *The Historian*, p. 42.

¹⁹⁴ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *To Transfer from the District of Columbia Departments and Independent Agencies to Other Localities*, H. Res. 209, 77th Congress, 1st Session 1942, Part 8, pp. 138-141.

Edith Elmer Wood also became an outspoken critic of the early defense housing program. Like Colean, she used the World War I experience to advance her argument, warning that "private enterprise will not produce housing for an emergency of uncertain duration . . . because there is too much risk involved."¹⁹⁵ She called on the Federal government to place existing dwelling units under strict rent control and to begin a massive program of public housing construction in coordination with the expansion of industry. Graduated rents, according to Wood, could make public housing available to a wider range of defense workers, rather than just to those of the lowest incomes. Looking to the future, she advocated that all new public housing built for the defense program should be well designed and of substantial construction, so that it could be incorporated into a city's public housing program after the war.¹⁹⁶

PLANNING FOR POSTWAR HOUSING

The Lanham Act was clearly a victory for private enterprise and foretold the difficult fight that public housing faced after the war. All told, local housing authorities built only 48,000 new units of defense housing during the war, hardly a dent in the inevitable need for low-income housing after the war. No bills for additional appropriations to the USHA were even suggested to Congress during the war. Private enterprise, on the other hand, flourished during the war. Congress showed itself to be far more favorable to allowing the Federal government to provide tents and trailers for temporary accommodations, while private developers received the benefit of an expanded Federal mortgage guarantee program in March 1941. Private developers built nearly 900,000 new housing units during the war, primarily small, affordable single-family homes built apart from the inner city near the wartime industrial centers. These new developments would form the nucleus of postwar suburbanization, and would further jeopardize the public housing program as it had been originally envisioned.¹⁹⁷

Nathan Straus resigned in disgust in 1942, with more than a sense of relief from the President. Roosevelt had blamed Straus' stubbornness in the face of an antagonistic Congress for the failure of public housing to gain more of the share of Federal housing money during the war.¹⁹⁸ The President took the opportunity of Straus' resignation to consolidate the public housing program and 16 other Federal housing agencies under the new National Housing Agency (NHA). Under the NHA, the public housing program and the various other Federal construction programs were further consolidated under the Federal Public Housing Administration (FPHA). For the rest of the war, the FPHA contented itself with the construction of temporary war housing and the administration of the existing public housing program. Public housing once again seemed to have faded from Federal priorities.

Concerns about housing shortages after the war, however, soon brought a revival of the public housing program back into the realm of postwar possibilities. In November 1944, the National Housing Agency had published a preliminary estimate of the nation's postwar housing need. It calculated that 12,600,000 non-farm dwelling units would be needed in the United States during the first 10 years after the war. The NHA estimated that 36 per cent of the total number of units required after the war would be needed in the \$30 or less per month rent range, which was considered to be low-rental housing for low-income families. The

¹⁹⁵ Edith Elmer Wood, "Building for Defense," *Architectural Forum*, 75 (April 1941), p. 28.

¹⁹⁶ Edith Elmer Wood, "Public Housing: Defense and Normal," *Public Housing Progress* 4 (February-April 1941), pp. 1-2.

¹⁹⁷ Nenzo, "Housing in the Decade of the 1940s," in Fish, ed., *The Story of Housing*, pp. 248-249.

¹⁹⁸ Biles, "Nathan Straus and the Failure of U.S. Public Housing, 1937-1942," *The Historian*, p. 45.

NHA inferred in its report that the nation could not expect private enterprise to supply new units at such a low monthly rent, citing the lack of profit opportunities that would entice private builders to enter this market.¹⁹⁹

In light of the NHA's pessimistic predictions for the supply of low-rent private housing, the FPHA surveyed local housing authorities to assess the postwar needs for additional public housing. Their survey asserted that no new public housing would be provided where low-rent needs could be met by existing housing or where a substantial gap did not exist between potential and actual rentals charged in public housing. Even with these restrictions, 336 housing authorities proposed the need for 360,000 new public housing units within the next five years, at a total estimated development cost of nearly \$2 billion. It was evident, in the opinion of the FPHA, that these estimates were legitimate and that they demonstrated an urgent need for a major postwar program of public housing construction.²⁰⁰ It was now up to Congress to provide new appropriations to expand the program to meet postwar housing needs.

The inevitable crisis in housing followed the war, with the nation's main focus on returning veterans. Although the G. I. Bill had guaranteed special loans for veterans when it was passed in 1944, the private construction industry was unable to gear up for the massive influx of veterans onto the market at war's end. Public housing was called on to provide a cushion for the veterans until their private housing needs could be met.

An executive order was issued in 1945 to give priority to veterans in disposition of defense housing projects built under *Public Law 671*. According to the law, these projects would revert to low-income status as soon as it could be determined that they were no longer required to serve specific war needs. Although these projects had remained in the inventories of the local housing authorities, the conversion process was to involve a gradual shift to low-rent status.²⁰¹ By February 1946, the FPHA had identified 132 of the 190 defense housing projects as no longer needed for war use. Local housing authorities, at the insistence of the Federal government, agreed to make defense housing projects available to veterans regardless of their income status, and immediately began the task of conversion.²⁰² This conversion process would continue into the 1950s, ending ultimately in the absorption of all P. L. 671 projects into the low-rent housing program.

The second problem facing the FPHA concerned the housing built under the Lanham Act. Although the original intention was to demolish temporary war housing, the extreme housing shortage caused local communities to move more slowly with their disposition. Local housing authorities in Chicago, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., among other cities, continued to operate non-permanent housing projects into the early 1950s, primarily to supplement veterans housing. Although the flimsy, temporary structures were eventually abandoned by local housing authorities, the postwar housing shortage convinced Congress to include a provision in the Housing Act of 1950 for the disposal of permanent Lanham Act housing by the

¹⁹⁹ National Housing Agency, *National Housing Needs* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), pp. 5-6.

²⁰⁰ National Housing Agency, *Fourth Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), p. 238.

²⁰¹ National Housing Agency, *Fifth Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946), p. 238.

²⁰² National Housing Agency, *Fifth Annual Report*, p. 259.

Public Housing Administration, the post-war successor to the FPHA. This act authorized the Public Housing Administration to dispose of emergency war housing through demolition or by sale to educational institutions, veterans' groups, nonprofit organizations, or local housing authorities.²⁰³ Over 24,000 dwelling units in 82 projects built under terms of the Lanham Act were transferred to local housing authorities for use in their public housing programs. Housing authorities were required to pay net operating receipts from these units to the Federal government over a 40-year period.²⁰⁴

PUBLIC HOUSING AFTER 1949

With post-war prosperity at hand, public housing proponents faced a long battle in Congress before they could be assured of its survival. Despite its detractors, however, public housing had become an integral part of Federal housing policy, and it continues to be built in the United States to this day. Public housing constructed in the United States after 1949 reflects changes in architecture, architectural theory, and public policy. The overall character of the architecture of later public housing is a striking contrast to the public housing that had preceded it. The humanizing scale of earlier complexes, created by placing low-rise buildings within carefully landscaped settings, was replaced with high-rise towers set in large, open courtyards. The high-rise tower, viewed as a symbol of economic efficiency, social order, and modern design, replaced the low-rise building as the preferred building type for public housing constructed after 1949.²⁰⁵

Beginning in the 1950s, many massive public housing projects were constructed across the country in an attempt to create large quantities of much-needed housing at a controlled cost. Subsequent studies showed that these high-rise complexes actually cost more than their low-rise relations, due to the combined costs of purchasing inner-city land, construction, and maintenance. These later projects had a simple, unified appearance, and by virtue of their size and placement, stood apart from their surroundings, in contrast to the earlier small-scale projects that were designed to blend with their surroundings. The monotonous standardization of "stripped modern" exterior architectural detailing gave later public housing a severe, institutional appearance, in contrast to the innovative designs and more residential quality of earlier complexes. Later public housing complexes had much higher site densities than did earlier ones, having both taller buildings with more units, and a greater number of buildings per complex. The interiors of later public housing complexes also contrasted with the earlier ones, having smaller units with smaller rooms, connected by long hallways.²⁰⁶

These physical changes in later public housing were mirrored by corresponding shifts in the era's public policy. One important aspect of that policy shift was in the constituency targeted for access to public housing. The early proponents of large scale public housing had envisioned their efforts as contributing to the betterment of low-income wage earners, both black and white. Fostering a "sense of community" among these marginal groups was a critical tenet of the early programs. The very poor and those at the lowest levels of the economic ladder were simply deemed beyond the reach of such housing programs; they would remain the responsibility of charity and social workers, the police, and the courts. In the late 1950s,

²⁰³ *Housing Act of 1950, Statutes at Large*, 81st Congress, 2nd Session, Chapter 94, Public Law 475, April 20, 1950, Title VI.

²⁰⁴ Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing*, p. 107.

²⁰⁵ Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*, pp. 233-237.

²⁰⁶ Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*, pp. 233-237.

however, the real possibility of eliminating poverty began to turn Federal housing programs from assisting not just the working poor, but also to serving the more economically disadvantaged segments of the urban population. The social, cultural, and economic changes this shift created would have lasting effects on public housing programs.

Among other changes resulting from era policies included the escalation of racial tensions due to the increased enforcement of segregation and the initiation of substantial urban renewal projects during the 1950s and 1960s. Conducted under the 1949 Housing Act and the 1954 Urban Renewal Act, urban renewal projects were seen as a way to correct society's ills with large Federal undertakings. Unfortunately, these projects displaced many poor blacks from declining inner-city neighborhoods, adding them to the waiting lists for public housing projects across the country. Where earlier public housing complexes contained a myriad of social and recreational offerings, including nursery schools, recreation centers, and playgrounds, later complexes contained few such amenities. Critics derided the public housing of this period as "warehousing." No longer a temporary respite for people hoping to improve their situations, later public housing complexes became places where people remained for the rest of their lives.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*, pp. 233-237.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this historic context report is to provide a means to evaluate the historic significance of properties currently operated under the Federal public housing program administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The period under consideration covers the Great Depression and World War II, beginning with construction of the first Federal housing projects by the Public Works Administration under the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933. It continues through the establishment of the permanent Federal public housing program under the *U. S. Housing Act* of 1937 and onto the various public housing efforts of World War II. The period concludes with passage of the U. S. Housing Act of 1949, which renewed funding for public housing after a period of inactivity following the war and began a new era of construction.

Research for this project was conducted primarily at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, the Library of Congress, and the Gelman Library at George Washington University in Washington, D. C. The following is a brief evaluation of the materials found at each of these locations. Please note that the bibliography for the current historical context included only those sources cited in the report. The project files, which are housed at the National Register of Historic Places offices in Washington, D.C., contain many other important sources, some of which are discussed below.

The National Archives has organized all of its holdings on public housing in Record Group (RG) 196. This includes documents of the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration from 1933 to 1937, the United States Housing Authority (USHA) from 1937 to 1942, the National Housing Agency during World War II, and the Public Housing Administration in the postwar years. RG 196 includes memos, policy statements, public information bulletins, press releases, speeches, statistical analyses, land acquisition records, and other official documents.

The vast majority of the files in RG 196 consist of the more than 500 applications made by local communities to the PWA loan program in 1933-34, prior to the PWA construction program beginning in 1935. RG 196 contains very few of the official publications of the PWA Housing Division. While PWA Bulletins Nos. 1 and 2, *Slums and Blighted Areas in the United States* and *Urban Housing* respectively, are readily available in area libraries, the very rare *Unit Plans* was only available from the Ohio State University Library. The most important documents in RG 196 are the full set of 36 bulletins published by the USHA, which explained Federal policy and gave direction to local housing authorities. Copies of the most pertinent bulletins, including those on site selection, tenant selection, slum clearance, and construction standards are available in the project files located at the National Register.

RG 196 also contains an unpublished treatise from the late 1940s on the history of race relations in public housing, a copy of which is included in the project files. This paper provides a reasonably candid insider's view on the subject written by an African-American official of the Public Housing Administration. The most important contemporary writings on racial policy in public housing are the published works of Robert Weaver, the highest ranking African-American official in Roosevelt's New Deal and, in 1965, the first Secretary of HUD. Weaver's works include his book, *The Negro Ghetto*, and many journal articles, several of which are included in the project files.

The collection at the National Archives does not contain a great deal of information on individual housing projects. While the Cartographic Division has a file of basic site plans for most of the PWA projects, all of the detailed architectural drawings for these projects appear to have been transferred by the Federal government to the local housing authorities along with the transfer of the actual PWA housing projects. Original architectural plans for those projects built by local housing authorities after 1937, if they exist at all, are likely located at the local housing authorities. The Photographic Records Division at the National

Archives maintains a file of photographs on public housing. Although most of these images document the local slum conditions that public housing was to replace, there are several good photographs of public housing projects built by local housing authorities after 1937.

The best single source for relevant images is the Prints and Photographs Division at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., as several of their collections contain original photographs and/or negatives of projects representing all three phases of public housing covered in this context report. The division has posted portions of several photographic collections on the Internet as part of the American Memory project (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem>). These images can be printed directly from the Internet or prints can be ordered for a fee from the library's Photoduplication Office.

The Farm Security Administration Collection contains over 40 images of the Ida B. Wells Homes, a USHA project in Chicago, and the Theodor Horydczak Collection contains a number of images of Langston Terrace, a PWA direct-built project in Washington. The Gottscho-Schleisner Collection has an excellent selection of USHA and defense public housing images, including Ft. Dupont Houses in Washington (USHA); Farnham Court in New Haven (USHA); Red Hook Houses in New York (USHA); seven USHA complexes in Newark; and Parkside, Barry Farms, and James Creek Houses, three defense housing projects located in Washington. This collection also contains images of Williamsburg Homes and the Harlem River Houses, two direct-built PWA projects in New York City. Additional images from these collections that have not been posted on the Internet can be examined at the Prints and Photographs Reading Room at the Library of Congress. Since only the on-line portions of these collections were examined for the purposes of this study, it is likely that the full collections contain images of additional public housing projects.

One other useful source deserves mention, *Public Buildings: A Survey of Architecture of Projects Constructed by Federal and Other Governmental Bodies between the Years 1933 and 1939 with the Assistance of the Public Works Administration*, which contains images of completed PWA direct-built housing projects in cities as diverse as Omaha, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Boston, New York, Birmingham, Dallas, and Miami.

Secondary sources came both from the Library of Congress and the Gelman Library at George Washington University. While Gelman Library contained only two secondary sources not available at the Library of Congress (both were dissertations), its open stacks and excellent collection on the subject made research somewhat more convenient than at the Library of Congress. The Library of Congress has a superb collection of period journals, which provide excellent insight into the philosophy, politics, and architecture of public housing in the 1930s and 1940s. These include articles in the *Octagon*, the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, and other journals by such important housing advocates as Robert Kohn, Edith Elmer Wood, Lewis Mumford, Clarence Stein, Albert Mayer, Catherine Bauer, and Charles Abrams. *Architectural Record* and *Architectural Journal* carefully followed the progress of public housing construction during the Depression and World War II. These magazines contained many articles on construction methods, financing, and brief descriptions of specific noteworthy projects, often with photographs and examples of plans. The architectural journals also contain a few advertisements in which manufacturers proudly tout the use of their products in public housing construction. Copies of pertinent articles and advertisements are included in the project files.

Works published in the 1930s and 1940s by Edith Elmer Wood, Catherine Bauer, Nathan Straus, and Michael Straus chronicle the social, architectural, and philosophical influences on public housing and are available at the Library of Congress or Gelman Library. The best recent secondary sources include Richard Pommer's article in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* on the architecture of the PWA

housing program. Timothy McDonnell's *The Wagner Housing Act* provides a detailed account of the political struggle for the creation of the Federal public housing program during the Great Depression. McDonnell provides an especially good synthesis of the Congressional debates on the subject. Books by Gwendolyn Wright, Gertrude Fish, Mel Scott, and Lawrence Friedman provide additional insights into the creation of the program. Philip Funigiello's *The Challenge to Urban Liberalism* includes an excellent chapter on the influence of World War II on public housing, as does *World War II and the American Dream*, compiled by the National Building Museum to accompany its wartime construction exhibit. Copies of the later two references are included in the project files. Finally, recent scholarship by Gail Radford and Kristin Szylyan provide excellent documentation of specific examples of PWA and defense public housing, respectively.

Other good references to individual public housing projects are located in the National Register property nomination forms and determination of eligibility studies, all of which are included in the project files. A list of the housing projects for which National Register documentation already exists is provided in "Appendix I, Volume I" of this report. Richard Plunz's book on housing in New York City and Devereaux Bowly's history of public housing in Chicago also provide comprehensive coverage of the architecture, social history, and politics of public housing in those cities. John Bauman's works on Philadelphia focus less on architecture, but are especially valuable for their discussion of racial policies in public housing. Dominic J. Capeci, Jr., also provides a chapter on race and public housing in *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit*. Arnold R. Hirsch and Raymond A. Mohl do the same for Miami, in *Urban Policy in Twentieth Century America*.

Other research efforts were less successful than more traditional research at the National Archives and Library of Congress. The National Register call for information and a questionnaire sent to local housing authorities provided minimal information. The questionnaire sent to the State Historic Preservation Officers provided some information about determinations of eligibility for public housing, although the responses were not as forthcoming as originally hoped. Travel to Atlanta and Chicago provided excellent tours of actual public housing projects. The Chicago Housing Authority was especially accommodating providing tours of every project built during the period under consideration. Research into the files at these housing authorities, however, was less fruitful. Historical data generally was unorganized, unlabeled, or missing. Both the Atlanta and Chicago historical societies have copies of original architectural plans and photographs relating to early public housing in their collections, copies of which may be ordered from these societies. The Ernest Bohn Collection on public housing is maintained at the Case Western Reserve University Library in Cleveland. Bohn was the influential president of the National Association of Housing Officials and the father of Cleveland's public housing programs. Researchers looking for site specific information may want to identify local historical societies in their area as a potential source for organized reference materials. Local newspaper archives are also likely to contain contemporary accounts and documentation.

The database of public housing projects incorporated as "Appendices II-IV, Volume I" of this report was compiled using three sources: HUD's current database, HUD's 1975 Consolidated Development Directory, and the National Housing Agency's comprehensive wartime list of all government housing published in 1943 and available at the Library of Congress. The 1943 book is an invaluable resource for this database as it lists essentially all housing projects relevant to this context (only a handful were built between 1943 and 1949), and provides the name of the government program under which they were built, reliable construction dates, and other pertinent information. All listings were cross checked in the 1943 book with the current HUD database and HUD's 1975 publication in order to determine which projects continue to function under the modern public housing program. The HUD database is not always reliable on exact construction dates, especially with the Federal projects built under the PWA and Lanham Act and later

transferred into the program. Construction dates for these projects usually reflect the date of transfer from Federal ownership to local ownership rather than the date of actual construction. Data for the lists of PWA housing came from the PWA bulletin *Urban Housing* and Straus and Wegg's *Housing Comes of Age*.

The database compiled for this context study that serves as the basis for Appendices II-IV, Volume I is maintained by the National Register of Historic Places. Queries regarding information in the database can be directed to the National Register office in Washington, D.C.

The Registration Requirements section was developed by a careful review and analysis of the research information compiled as part of this study and the work of other outside researchers. This material was synthesized with information contained in previous National Register evaluations completed by HUD, local housing authorities, state historic preservation officers, and the National Register. The final evaluation discussions borrow from previously completed National Register eligibility studies for public housing sites, National Register studies completed in association with other Federal government programs, and the general National Park Service guidance on applying the National Register Criteria for Evaluation.

This report is a working document that will continue to evolve as research and the evaluation of public housing projects proceeds. As our understanding of the architectural and historical development of public housing expands through the analysis of physical resources, revisions to the context study may be necessary.

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