REDEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC HOUSING

A long time back we thrashed the whole principle out and decided that we were in the business for housing fundamentally, and not for experimentation.

E. Roberts Moore

Historians have assumed that redevelopment followed the public housing movement in the sense that it reflected the social responsibility for livable cities that liberals won during the New Deal. But redevelopment went hand in hand with public housing; in New York, the cradle of the housing movement, redevelopment came before it. Struggles in the Progressive Era for model tenements that sheltered the lower middle class became commercial ventures after World War I, when Lower East Side boosters confronted the hazards of normalcy. With the 1920s’ boom, tenants who could afford $9 rents trekked to steam-heated flats and garden apartments in the outer boroughs, leaving downtown landlords with vacant tenements and financial ruin. Landlords responded with twenty years of schemes and promotions for government-aided revival that included public housing as they understood it. Amid constant talk about housing improvement, they kept sight on redevelopment that had no room for social justice.

Real estate boosters would consider any government deals, but pounced on New Deal public housing as an expedient route to redevelopment. They took advantage of the ambiguous character of early public housing, particularly the reluctance to shelter slum dwellers on the part of the reformers who launched the New York
City Housing Authority. East Siders helped propel the New York program, establish tenement clearance as the city's foremost urban policy, and create an agency with the mandate to act against seventeen miles of slums. But they never overlooked the chance to shift government subsidies for the worthy poor to worthier tenants who could pay higher rents. As a consequence, the Housing Authority spent the 1930s trying to reconcile impossible demands: to build quality public works to revive neighborhoods and to create low-rent shelter for the worthy poor.

The Housing Authority's uncertain mission left it vulnerable when city politics turned gusty after 1936. Struggling to build high-quality housing, the authority completed few projects and was labeled the timid representative of an older era. Recognizing the scale of progress that the times demanded, Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia and Park Commissioner Robert Moses bullied the authority toward an era of mass construction. Critics would later charge that Moses subverted the authority's lofty goals to create his public works empire. But New York public housing had compromised on low-rent promises long before Moses made it the disposal for the abuses of redevelopment.

White Collars

Redevelopment was the ambition of East Siders, who were convinced that they were at the hub of a metropolis struggling for modern form. During the 1920s, the growth of finance capital in Wall Street and the completion of subway routes to Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx profoundly affected how New Yorkers saw the future of their city. Between 1910 and 1920, the population in Manhattan had stagnated while that of the outer rim more than doubled. Subway routes, along with property tax relief on residential construction, touched off a building binge. Over 400,000 units were built between 1922 and 1929, a 15 percent surge in the city's housing supply. But subsidized garden apartments near transit lines in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens brought collapse to the Lower East Side. In 1910, some 530,000 New Yorkers, 1 in 8, occupied the dense tenements below 14th Street. By 1930, only 250,000 remained, 1 out of 25. Property owners who expected the skyscraper district to spread north craved public action to speed the rescue.1

Their expectations were encouraged by advocates of metropolitan rationalization, the New York Building Congress and the Com-
mittee of the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environ (RPNY). The Building Congress, organized by mortgage bankers and builders to get the construction industry through the recession of 1921, was a forum against waste, seasonal unemployment, and unsound investment. Led by architect Robert D. Kohn, firms such as George A. Fuller and Starrett Brothers and Eken, mortgage bankers such as Bowery Savings Bank president Henry C. Bruère, and trade publishers such as F.W. Dodge, the Building Congress debated how industry could work with government to create the transport and commercial facilities needed for Manhattan’s primacy. The RPNY went much further, popularizing the view that New York had to plan the city’s spread into its economic hinterland. Corporate funds made the RPNY New York’s planning think tank, where a research staff of 150 studied patterns of regional growth to bolster Manhattan real estate, smooth interregional transport, and foster stable neighborhoods. Its research was grounded in the machine age assumption that Manhattan was trading factories for the office towers that coordinated the region’s productivity.\(^2\)

The RPNY saw the Lower East Side in the context of the relentless struggle for profits on Manhattan’s expensive real estate. Only tremendous investment in skyscrapers could absorb the cost of real estate, railroad tunnels, and subways that sustained Manhattan as the regional dynamo. But up and down the urban hierarchy, what RPNY advisor Shelby M. Harrison described as the city “as a financial center, as an educational, music, and other arts center, as a hotel and amusement center, as a manufacturing and wholesale center, as a resident center, etc.,” severe economics drove out the less efficient. Columbia University economists Robert M. Haig and Roswell C. McCrea, who were RPNY researchers, pronounced this decentralization “already under way,” particularly for large-scale bulk fabricators. Producers of low-value standard items would relocate to the outer boroughs, taking along their low-paid, unskilled laborers. Although Haig and McCrea conceded that low-paid workers needed inner-city housing for job “accessibility . . . to a considerable number of concerns,” they were better off outside Manhattan.\(^3\)

RPNY planners were convinced that vacated districts would go for residential and consumption needs of the rich. They expected the region’s “central shopping district” to remain between 34th and 59th streets, although it would gradually change from a market for standardized purchases to the preeminent place for “style” merchandise. Below 34th Street, they foresaw the spread of the financial district and civic center. A good deal of space would also be taken by
Reclaiming Allen Street on the Lower East Side, 1927. Looking north from Houston Street, June 25, 1927, workers have cut away Old Law tenements to create a boulevard link with Second Avenue. In the late 1920s, the East Side Chamber of Commerce hoped the Allen Street widening and removal of the elevated would bring a surge in speculative apartment house construction. 305C (652), Borough President of Manhattan, Collections of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

transport arteries, particularly modern highways that would knit the metropolis together and catalyze neighborhood reclamation. Concrete arteries along the East River and through the tenement districts would restore to the Lower East Side the functions warranted by proximity to Wall Street.4

Few took that future more to heart than Manhattan settlement leaders, who met metropolitan change on their doorstep. Some had already closed down neighborhood guilds, their last link to social advocacy, to concentrate on social services; all struggled to reach clients whom Surrey editor Loula D. Lasker found were “putting on white collars.” Lower East Siders occupied Old Law tenements but craved such middle-class amenities as separate dining rooms, porcelain sinks, and radio aerials. Replying to an inquiry about demand for low-rent tenements, Henry Street Settlement director Lillian D. Wald proposed building more expensive apartments for people with
“higher standards of living.” The taste for improvement extended to automobile routes through the tenements. Wald joined taxpayers' groups that lobbied for a riverfront “East Side Motor Highway” and for widening Allen Street into a 137-foot boulevard. Cutting away tenements on Allen Street (which, according to another settlement leader, had been made the “worst street” in the city by black prostitutes) would begin what boosters called the “reclamation of the entire East Side.” Reformers and businessmen alike got behind one popular highway plan pushed by the National Committee on Slum Clearance, which proclaimed excess condemnation to be the way to housing improvement.5

Many ignored the fact that the schemes offered little for East Siders who earned working-class wages, under $1,500 a year. The plan proposed by Social Gospeler John Haynes Holmes called for boulevard development that would build apartments for “hundreds of thousands” earning $250 per month. Christadora Settlement on

The International Style for Chrystie-Forsyth, 1932. When the James J. Walker administration proposed to redevelop the stretch of Old Law tenements between Chrystie and Forsyth streets on the Lower East Side, architects Howe and Lescaze responded with a design, exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, for ten-story apartments cantilevered above plazas and shopping arcades. These and other proposals never survived the scandal that tarnished Mayor Walker, and the tenement rubble became Sara Delano Roosevelt Park. Reprinted from Architectural Record, March 1932, copyright 1932 by McGraw-Hill, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher.

Tompkins Square was headquarters of the landlord campaign to modernize Old Law tenements, which owners candidly expected to rent at much higher levels. Lillian Wald was an enthusiastic supporter of the Amalgamated Dwellings on Grand Street, acclaimed by reformers as a prototype for better working-class housing. But the Bowery Savings Bank, which held the mortgage, advised the business socialists in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers to charge $12.50 per room, which few garment cutters could afford. With good reason, Bowery president Henry C. Bruère said that the Amalgamated would start the rebuilding of the East Side.  

By the late 1920s, local bankers and realtors were working closely with settlement leaders to realize that goal. Organized by Bowery vice-president Orrin C. Lester, the East Side Chamber of Commerce hired Joseph C. Platzker to fill its East Side Chamber News with puffery on boulevards, modern stores, and real estate speculations. In October 1929, Platzker published Clarence A. Perry's lyrical account of neighborhood units designed for Wall Streeters that featured "a
club, a hotel, a library, a gymnasium, or swimming pool.” Platteker welcomed International Style modernism for Chrystie and Forsyth streets, the Old Law tenement blocks that Mayor James J. Walker had targeted for excess condemnation. Platteker featured architects Howe and Lescace’s proposal for ten-story cantilevered buildings along the length of the avenues. The attractive design would have employed industrial economies in construction; but, at $9 per room, the result still would have been housing that was low cost rather than low rent. These were relatively modest, however, compared to the Raymond Hood lookalikes that the RPNY said should line Chrystie-Forsyth, which would be transformed into a Manhattan “speedway.”

Few East Siders worried about displacing their low-income neighbors. Most observers agreed with the Survey’s Loula Lasker, who rejected fears that construction would “dispossess ‘the poor’ without making adequate provision for their re-housing.” She expected many to move to vacant dwellings, while others would claim units emptied by the rich and inherit “quarters hitherto beyond the possibilities of their purses.” Growing numbers, she added, were already hardened straphangers, having moved to low-rent outlying districts. Most urban theorists agreed. The era’s leading housing reformers, Henry Wright, Clarence Stein, and Lewis Mumford of the Regional Planning Association of America, wrote off tenements as relics of nineteenth-century industrialism. The metropolitan future, they argued, lay in towns planted in regional “greenbelts,” where there was room for a new communal civilization. Machine age intellectuals handed the Lower East Side to the well-to-do.

The Great Depression only intensified belief that the district was meant for better things. The 1929 stock market crash jolted real estate, but the East Side Chamber of Commerce commissioned planning studies to demonstrate that inner-city property could rebound. For one study, banker Henry Bruère squired Harland Bartholomew, the St. Louis planner known for reclaiming blighted districts with boulevard routes. Using Joseph Platteker’s real estate data, Bartholomew reported that the tenements and obsolete streets had brought the Lower East Side to “economic collapse.” He proposed 100-foot motorways to speed traffic through the financial district and divide the East Side into “self-contained communities” of superior standards. The Chamber of Commerce’s advisors, architects John Taylor Boyd, Jr., and Holden, McLaughlin & Associates, drew their own ambitious proposals. Emphasizing the East Side’s proximity to Wall Street, Boyd argued that motorways could reconstruct the immigrant portal into a “desirable residence area.”
Holden, McLaughlin sketched Houston Street as a two-level boulevard and transformed Chrystie-Forsyth into an express road lined with shopping arcades and high-rise apartments.9

Business leaders cultivated civic support for the campaign. In July 1931, Bowery vice-president Orrin Lester notified settlement leader Lillian Wald that East Side banks were providing $25,000 toward a district plan. A social worker on the Lower East Side Community Council knew few details, except that the banks were concentrating on commercial improvements. “Allen Street will, of course, be continued down to East Broadway,” she informed Wald, “and judging by the part of it that is already widened we can’t expect much in the way of housing.” By late 1931, city officials met at the Bowery Savings Bank to hear Lester and Bartholomew explain their plans. Pledging millions for highways and superblocks, the James J. Walker administration announced that work on Chrystie-Forsyth would encourage “a far-reaching scale of private investment in modern housing.” East Siders remained steadfast in their belief that the depression would purge real estate values in the outer boroughs, not those in the heart of the region. Government, they believed, would soon build middle-income apartments on Second Avenue.10

The Promise of Public Housing

The depression focused attention on government aid to revive housing as a means to put the unemployed to work. But New Yorkers were split on whether this meant incidental subsidies for limited-dividend projects or, as some were advocating, outright government responsibility to build public housing. Limited-dividends, standard dwellings built by private corporations for limited profit, were revered by those who resented government intrusion on the voluntary ideal. They entered a more promising stage under Governor Alfred E. Smith, when the State Housing Law of 1926 created a State Board of Housing to convey eminent domain and tax exemption to companies that built dwellings for under $12.50 per room. In late 1931, the former governor led the Housing Association of the City of New York, which proposed to raise millions of dollars for limited-dividends under the State Housing Law. The private ideal received formidable support from the lending community, which imposed the Bankers’ Agreement, a credit watch, on New York City’s capital budget. Harold Riegelman, attorney for the fiscal watchdog, the Citizens Budget Commission, offered an alternative that would
not involve public expenditures. Declaring a ten-year slum-clearance campaign, Riegelman proposed using excess condemnation to redevelop selected blocks on the Lower East Side. He would lease the parcels to limited-dividend companies, stimulating what he called “sympathetic rehabilitation by private owners.” Still others looked toward breakthroughs from industrial cooperation. The April 1932 conference of the Housing Association, which met in Al Smith’s office in the Empire State Building, heard avid talk about large-scale housing sponsored by limited-dividend companies and construction firms. Building Congress representatives Robert D. Kohn and Andrew J. Eken claimed that manufacturers of building materials could pool capital to deliver low-cost shelter.¹¹

Across town, a circle of socialists and planning intellectuals battled for a different concept of machine age housing. Housing economist Edith Elmer Wood, along with Mary Simkhovitch and her alter ego, social worker Helen Alfred, organized the Public Housing Conference, with branches in settlements throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn, to campaign for public involvement. Convinced that limited-dividends and excess condemnation were outmoded palliatives, they turned for inspiration to Europe, particularly to Social Democratic Vienna, and to sovereign entities such as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey for the powers to condemn land, build low-rent dwellings, and become public landlords. They collided with conservatives on the State Board of Housing and in Al Smith’s coterie, who would not give up on philanthropy. Facing a dead end in the city, municipal socialists looked to congressional action on public works for the jobless in 1932. Simkhovitch and Alfred pestered New York Senator Robert F. Wagner, Sr., to broaden the provisions of the Emergency Relief and Reconstruction Bill. They wanted Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) loans to municipal housing boards, although they expected Wagner at least to deliver a provision for federal funds to limited-dividend companies. Wagner inserted section 201A, authorizing RFC loans to limited-dividends, but Greenwich House was not the decisive influence. The State Board of Housing took Harland Bartholomew’s East Side studies to Washington to show Wagner that limited-dividends would generate thousands of construction jobs, and it was also said that Park Commissioner Robert Moses wanted funds for Chrystie-Forsyth. The stretch of rubble gave Moses a bureaucratic piece of the “housing problem” along with park space. Slum clearance was a phrase that opened many doors.¹²

Not much squeezed through, largely because Robert Moses
agreed with the spending priorities of the bankers and regional planners. As New York State park commissioner under Governor Smith, Moses had an enviable record of constructing recreation grounds and parkways. He was Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt’s natural choice to cochair, along with State Architect Robert D. Kohn, the State Emergency Public Works Commission that coordinated projects for the unemployed. Applications for RFC grants also fell under their jurisdiction. Conservative by temperament and monitored by the Citizens Budget Commission and the Regional Plan Association, Moses and Kohn loaded up with cost-effective public works, toll roads, and other self-liquidating projects. When the State Board of Housing proffered a few middle-income limited-dividends, Kohn rebuffed projects “pushed through by gum-shoe methods.” Public housing advocates were stymied. Helen Alfred complained to Edith Elmer Wood, “Between Mr. Kohn and the State Board I am aware now that we were blocked before we started.”

The sole survivor, the Knickerbocker Village limited-dividend, proved an embarrassment to all concerned. It was the brainchild of realtor Fred F. French, who couched his deals in machine age terms. Promising that Knickerbocker Village would redeem the Lower East Side’s notorious “lung block” between Monroe and Cherry streets, French coaxed social-welfare advocates to endorse $12.50-per-room modern apartments. After his agents scurried around for property options, critics sniped that he paid $13 per foot for land worth $7, and federal grand jurors warned the RFC of scandal. But the Moses committee knew that “something had to be done,” and recommended the mortgage. When word leaked about the land cost, Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, whose Public Works Authority inherited the RFC program, fumed. Slum clearance advocates swallowed hard at the deal and the middle-class tenants it served. “Even though the housing which replaces these rookeries rents for more than a working man can afford,” Brooklyn attorney and housing reformer Louis H. Pink reasoned, “it is entirely worthwhile to get rid of such plague spots.” Knickerbocker Village confirmed suspicions that East Side speculators were behind slum clearance.

Solid Investment

Robert Kohn harbored these reservations when, in the summer of 1933, Harold Ickes sought to get the New Deal into public housing.
Knickerbocker Village on the Lower East Side, 1934. The forbidding density of Fred F. French’s slum clearance, built with a mortgage from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, disappointed reformers, but pleased advocates of East Side property revival. In the background is the approach and monumental plaza of the Manhattan Bridge and the cleared acreage for the park at Chrystie-Forsyth. Courtesy of the La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, The City University of New York.

by appointing Kohn to head the Public Works Authority (PWA) Housing Division. As far as Kohn was concerned, federal involvement meant high-quality construction to invigorate local economies. Regarding most city governments as too corrupt to handle PWA grants, Kohn preferred to vest federal work in “a non-profit corporation organized by the best citizens.” “I would rather start that way,” he confided to housing reformer Edith Elmer Wood, “than trust local governmental agencies to manage the projects.” Meeting with New York friends, Kohn made it clear that slum clearance was a blue-ribbon crusade, and that realtors were participating as their civic duty. His audience could not demur. He waved federal dollars at a time when little public works money was available, and they were embroiled in the good-government revolt against Mayor Jimmy Walker. During a bitter mayoral race in the fall of 1933,
the reformers around Fiorello H. La Guardia spoke about housing, but had no concrete plans. While La Guardia battled for political survival, housers could only organize on the sidelines.\textsuperscript{15}

They formed the New York City Slum Clearance Committee (SCC), a citizens group that compiled data on the slums as part of the campaign for a municipal housing authority. “You and Kohn and I were partners in setting this thing up,” wrote Andrew Mills, Jr., president of the Dry Dock Savings Bank, to SCC director Richmond H. Shreve. Mills exaggerated slightly, for the original directors of the SCC, besides Orrin Lester and realtor Alexander S. Bing, included Thomas Holden of the New York Building Congress and George McAneny of the Regional Plan Association. Shreve, chief architect of the Empire State Building, and SCC secretary R. G. Wagenet were prominent on the New York Building Congress. Catherine F. Lansing, the Christadora settlement liaison with the East Side Chamber of Commerce, coordinated SCC social surveys. From the beginning, the SCC was committed to replacing Lower East Side tenements with high-quality housing that few tenement dwellers could afford.\textsuperscript{16}

Kohn reinforced this direction with the stern advice that Washington expected sound investment. Announcing that the PWA would commit only $25 million to New York (about enough to rebuild twenty square blocks), Kohn posed hard choices. He favored slum clearance in Manhattan and Brooklyn near existing parks, schools, and other amenities to minimize the cost of support facilities. But he wanted “river-front areas . . . avoided as their eventual economic use is for industry or higher-cost housing or parks.” Kohn had virtually ruled out low-rent housing for the Lower East Side.\textsuperscript{17}

Building quality housing on the Lower East Side was also the inclination of Langdon W. Post, the Greenwich Village insurgent named tenement house commissioner by newly elected Mayor La Guardia. Anxious to establish his agenda, Post summoned an advisory committee from mortgage banking, real estate, and city planning, including Joseph Platzker of the East Side Chamber of Commerce, Thomas Holden and Robert Whitten of the Building Congress, and Wagenet of the SCC. Their job, Post explained, was to choose areas that deserved “first attention” for clearance and to “demonstrate what sort of housing should be built.” The advisory committee borrowed real estate data gathered by Platzker and the Building Congress’s Land Utilization Committee (directed by Thomas Holden’s cousin, architect Arthur C. Holden) which supported their view that the East Side deserved more than low-rent
reconstruction. Langdon Post’s planning advisor, Robert Whitten, had already asked why the “central blighted area” should be used for anything other than business and industry. Firm against the “anomaly” of low-rent housing on expensive land, Whitten rejected the idea of increasing densities to absorb land costs. “The best use of a particular slum area,” he argued, “may be that of higher rental apartments, or that of commerce or industry.”

During the desperate winter of 1934, many neighborhoods claimed that higher use included public housing. When news spread about Kohn’s “$25 million,” Langdon Post and the SCC were deluged with offers they could hardly refuse. The Brownsville Board of Trade and the Pitkin Avenue Merchants Association pledged they would “line up” property owners to remove “slums of the worst kind” and put Brownsville’s construction men back to work. The Sands Street Board of Trade in downtown Brooklyn begged for slum clearance: “It will mean the injection of new type tenants into the section, a better type, as the majority of present tenantry does not pay its rental.” A committee of Italians on Elizabeth Street, calling themselves The New Deal Real Estate Owners League, enlisted the support of Il Progresso publisher Generoso Pope to demand prompt adoption of clearance plans for their district. Boosters welcomed public housing, whose tenants brought dollars to the neighborhood.

Aiming for commercial stability, the SCC ignored a long list of prospects, including wretched slums on Columbus Hill on the West Side, Chelsea, and Greenwich Village. Advisors such as Clarence Stein urged keeping Manhattan below 96th Street for gentrification and eventual white-collar uses. North of 96th in Italian East Harlem, the SCC worked with Helen Harris of the Union Settlement, who brought local property owners together to discuss site plans. One anxious owner, SCC staffer Catherine Lansing reported, “has gone about amongst the other landlords of the neighborhood to stir them up to agree to sell their property at low prices.” The SCC was not interested. Assemblyman Francis E. Rivers and realtor John E. Nail drove Shreve and Wagenet past sites in Central Harlem. But the SCC refused to view the ghetto’s needs as compelling. Lansing suspected, in any case, that approaches by black leaders were attempts to wangle jobs from the housing agency.

Without question, the East Side Chamber of Commerce made the most convincing case for slum clearance. Andrew Mills of Dry Dock Savings and Joseph Platzker personally presented maps for three sites to the SCC. But even Platzker’s extensive data could not
overcome skepticism about price. When a Chamber of Commerce delegation offered a twelve-block site between Grand and Rivington streets at the "sacrifice" of $6 per foot, Langdon Post sputtered about extortion, and the meeting ended in public name calling. SCC planners had already concluded that the East Side should be preserved for value-added commerce. Edith Elmer Wood recalled the prevailing opinion that "all the housing south [of 14th Street] . . . was not included" among active sites "because the Committee believed it was needed for business and industry." Besides this, Robert Kohn and Langdon Post remained suspicious of the Chamber of Commerce. As one observer remembered, they rejected "the housing project on the Lower East Side because . . . if land owners were allowed, as the phrase was, to 'stew in their own juice,' values would fall." They would not rescue slumlords.\

With Manhattan ruled out, the SCC gravitated toward outer-borough sites, such as Greenpoint and Red Hook in Brooklyn and the Queens waterfront. It eventually settled on the dilapidated, wood-framed dwellings in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where merchants and realtors coveted redevelopment, particularly the chance to sweep away a pushcart market. The campaign for public housing was orchestrated by the Manhattan Avenue Merchants Association, a vociferous group that held rallies, collected property options, and even staged radio programs to attract city interest. Success meant, in the words of its secretary, that Williamsburg would "regain its grandeur with new and up-to-date apartment houses in keeping with the competition of the newly established sections." With Williamsburg, public housing advocates cut the movement from its political roots on the Lower East Side. They had avoided the tenement districts for the best of progressive reasons, but they would later have to explain why they had not moved directly against the tenement evil.\

**Housing Authority**

The coalition of commercial builders and tenement reformers behind the SCC worked strenuously for a municipal housing authority. The movement's best legal minds, Brooklyn insurance attorney Louis H. Pink and Charles Abrams, a reformer friend of Langdon Post, pored over the law of special authorities to create an agency that could use the power of eminent domain, accept federal and state grants, and own and operate multiple dwellings. Mortgage bankers and philanthropists hesitated about handing that power to City Hall, but came
Reformers launch the New York City Housing Authority, 1934. At the inaugural session, February 20, 1934, the Housing Authority board gathers at the office of Tenement House Commissioner Langdon W. Post. Left to right: Brooklyn housing reformer Louis H. Pink, Jewish Daily Forward manager B. Charney Vladeck, Authority chairman Post, Greenwich House director Mary K. Simkhovitch, and Catholic Charities leader Monsignor E. Roberts Moore. (The blueprint is a reorganization chart of the Tenement House Department.) Forward Foto, Courtesy of the La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, The City University of New York.

around when La Guardia showed his anti-Tammany vigor. With the Public Housing Conference’s network of settlements and with support from the trade unions, the state legislature passed the municipal authority bill on February 4, 1934. To serve on the Housing Authority board, Mayor La Guardia chose his straight-arrow tenement house commissioner, Langdon Post, as chairman, and Mary Simkhovitch, Louis Pink, B. Charney Vladeck (American Labor party leader and manager of the Jewish Daily Forward), and Monsignor E. Roberts Moore (charities administrator of the Catholic archdiocese). Langdon Post’s staff consisted of legal counsel Charles Abrams, who was impatient to establish the authority’s eminent domain; economics
advisor Evans Clark, who wanted a housing system whose financial stability was modeled on that of public utilities; and technical advisor Frederick L. Ackerman, the architect who headed town planning for the U.S. Shipping Board. Catherine Lansing came over from the SCC to assist limited-dividends veteran Mary (May) Lumsden in setting up the management division.\(^\text{23}\)

From the start, the Housing Authority depended on the impetus provided by the SCC. The regional planners’ drive against blue-collar workers in Manhattan turned the SCC’s attention to mixed industrial zones, such as Williamsburg and Greenpoint in Brooklyn, and opportunities in Red Hook and the Queens riverfront. Chairman Post and technical advisor Ackerman, both of whom shared machine age assumptions, endorsed the regional planners’ proposals for re-locating industry in the outer boroughs. But the money to embark on site studies proved elusive. Despite Kohn’s $25 million promise, Post spent 1934 in fruitless negotiations with PWA officials, who doubted that Williamsburg was the place to start. Mayor La Guardia could offer nothing, and for a year the authority’s major source of funds was the sale of scrap from tenement demolition.\(^\text{24}\)

The chance to realize the housing vision came suddenly in early 1935, when Post heard that the PWA planned billions for public works, including an initial grant of $150 million for the city. To prepare for the windfall, he named an advisory committee chaired by planner Albert Mayer to “consider the whole future of the City.”
Several weeks later, Mayer’s group responded with blueprints for realizing the hopes of the regional planners. Crossing off nearly all of Manhattan south of 96th Street for public housing, it called on the authority to clear the low-rent portion of the estimated 403,000 tenants who lived on the Lower and Upper East Sides. They were to make way for commercial buildings and the apartment houses of the middle and upper classes.25

For the refugees, the Mayer committee proposed neighborhood units with a vengeance—a series of low-rent developments along Brooklyn’s East River basin. Borough politics soon transformed these into three immense projects: a 350-acre, 55,000-room development at Queensbridge in Long Island City, a 250-acre, 33,000-room reclamation of Red Hook in Brooklyn, and a 140-acre, 21,000-room project in the Bronx. Queensbridge alone, with a designated population of 61,000 and an estimated cost of $75 million, would have surpassed all PWA housing built to date. It would have required ten times the capacity of local schools, not to mention sewers and water mains. The tenant-selection process would have verged on social chaos, because the authority was already swamped with ten applicants for every (as yet unbuilt) unit. Questions about the population of this complex and the quality of life remained unexplored and scarcely considered.26

The Bronx project raised questions about how the evacuation of Manhattan could operate within Jim Crow barriers. The Housing Authority board agreed that something had to be done about Harlem’s slums. “It must come into the picture very soon,” advised Ackerman. But the board hesitated to embark on clearance that would push blacks beyond acknowledged racial boundaries. Already members worried about operations in Brooklyn, where the authority’s real estate advisor reported fears that “people from Harlem will make applications for Williamsburg.” The authority board was inclined to postpone Harlem decisions, but Albert Mayer’s committee proposed a drastic solution. The Bronx project would be earmarked “for the colored population now living in an area of Harlem so overwhelmed that migrations from it are already visible in several sections of the four boroughs.” The committee in effect drew a line that prevented blacks from moving below 96th Street and closed off the east by allocating any potential sites for black migration to predominantly Italian East Harlem. On the west, it respected the gentlemen’s agreement that kept Morningside Heights white. But the committee’s solution brought problems of another kind. Mayer’s planners were asking the Housing Authority to venture into the
city’s most segregated borough. The Bronx’s 15,000 blacks (1 percent of the borough) remained clustered in the Morrisania section. The project would have channeled 23,000 blacks into Hunt’s Point on the East River, where they would have confronted industrial employers who observed the color line and realtors who already were rethinking their welcome to government-aided housing.²⁷

In their pursuit of regional visions, Mayer’s group had gone beyond political reality. Board member Mary Simkhovitch warned that “the public will not be with us unless slum clearance is done.” Monsignor Moore questioned whether the planners had considered the consequences of drastic shifts: “$75,000,000 spent on Queensbridge will house 75,000; what will the effect be on taxation, on the City budget, on real estate values and so on?” Moore wondered whether the authority could afford to be seen draining Manhattan’s population to deflate the price of slum land. When he insisted on petitioning the PWA for a special grant to absorb the land costs for one Manhattan site, Corlars Hook on the Lower East Side, he was joined by Simkhovitch and B. Charney Vladeck. Their vehemence pulled the focus back to Manhattan and to two sites, Corlars Hook and Harlem. The Housing Authority could only succeed on the Lower East Side, the historic site of the tenement evil.²⁸

The New Deal, however, had other purposes in New York, all of them conflicting. Ike’s men wanted to build durable projects but actually approved a few isolated ones, never giant complexes. During months of negotiations over Williamsburg, PWA emissaries would consider only limited sites, preferably six to nine square blocks. Fearing that the authority would try to turn individual grants into a revolving fund, the PWA rejected authority attempts to link projects in a system. The PWA’s interest in physical planning was the minimum necessary to safeguard its forty-year mortgage exposure: fireproof construction, and location in residential areas restricted against blacks, undesirable ethnic groups, and industrial use. Beyond such basics, PWA analysts remained indifferent. Experience with limited-dividends had set their attitude that project design amounted to the assemblage of interchangeable units, regardless of city or neighborhood. They paid little attention to the size or makeup of the tenant market, except for rules that restricted occupants to the upper working class or better. PWA staff considered New York ideal for this standardization, because the city’s transit system would bring thousands of eligible tenants to the few projects they intended to build. Taking no chances, the PWA could not fail at worthy improvements.²⁹
Slum clearance at Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 1935. At Leonard and Maujer streets, August 21, 1935, crews demolish wood-frame tenements and rear houses for the Housing Authority project built by the New Deal’s Public Works Authority. The neat piles of lumber and other scrap material were sold for revenue by the cash-starved Housing Authority. Courtesy of the La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, The City University of New York.

Even with this limited involvement, Ickes’s mortgage officers insisted on total control of New York operations. After tortuous negotiations, the PWA agreed to build Williamsburg and Harlem River on its own terms. While Langdon Post and his associates fumed, the PWA contracted construction to federal specifications, with the intention to lease the completed projects to the authority. Supervising top-dollar work from afar, the PWA built Williamsburg and Harlem River with delays and cost overruns. Architects praised the design and workmanship, but insiders knew that the PWA allowed Harlem River to be “built without specific relation [of] construction costs to the rent paying ability of the prospective tenants.” In the meantime, Housing Authority proposals for Corlears Hook were sidetracked by the PWA’s commitment to fund the East River Drive, which, federal officials said, readied Lower Manhattan for middle-income redevelopment. B. Charney Vladeck’s idea to revive his neighborhood
Marking Corlears Hook for slum clearance, 1939. The State Emergency Relief Bureau, December 1939, surveys Old Law properties on the designated sites of the Vladeck Houses: the U.S. Housing Authority project, west of Jackson Street, and the city-built extension to the east. The structure with the central courtyard south of the Williamsburg Bridge is the Amalgamated Dwellings on Grand Street, which was joined after World War II by other Amalgamated projects, the Hillman Houses and the Corlears Hook Title I. Corlears Hook Park was also extended in connection with the proposed sweep of the East River Drive. To the far north is the "gas house district," redeveloped after World War II by Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village. Courtesy of Intera Aero Service, Houston, Texas, and the La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, The City University of New York.

was shelved as a waste of real estate. Weighted down by the PWA’s indecision, New York’s public housing ground to a halt in 1936.30 Frustrated at master planning, technical advisor Frederick Ackerman spent the interim assembling a melange of Housing Authority site studies, property maps, sun and wind orientations, and sketches of X, Y, and Z shapes on superblocks. Ackerman compiled them as “Thirteen Slum Areas” (1937), guided by his rueful conclusion that planning “in our economy must conform to the map of differential site valuations.” Except for a sliver of land between 96th and 110th
streets and at Corlears Hook in Manhattan, his technical staff turned
to Brooklyn's industrial basin for sites that were not already pre-
empted or that cost less than $4 per foot. Opportunities ranged from
63 acres in Greenpoint to 431 acres in Williamsburg–North English
Kills. They all had underutilized factories, schools with empty seats,
and streets and water mains. Most had fallen one-quarter below their
1920 population densities, and all thirteen sites had a total 1930
population of 236,026, making a coincidental 100 persons per acre!
Ackerman's staff figured that at a density of 150 persons per acre
they could absorb nearly 120,000 tenants in new projects. 31

Ackerman would reconstruct these outer-borough districts ac-
cording to his own notion of regional dispersal, not according to
what he called "make-believe 'green belt towns.'" He was convinced
that because the city had entered the "replacement" phase of capitalist
evolution, the "centrally located areas of stagnation, decay and obso-
lescence" deserved renewal on modern principles. In zones strewn
with quarter-vacant tenements and half-idle factories, the Housing
Authority could guide the reclamation of work place and residence.
Ackerman had fitted the authority's mission to the economic dol-
drums of the late 1930s. But he removed its center of gravity further
from Lower Manhattan, where the public expected to see action
against the slums. 32

The People's Will

While Housing Authority construction marked time, public housing
scored a breakthrough as a political issue. What parlor socialists
debated in the early 1930s became during 1936 a people's mat-
ter, particularly for those who were threatened by New Deal public
works. Demolitions helped create the city's rent crisis, sharpening
demands for low-cost housing, which authority propaganda kept
simmering. A reluctant Mayor La Guardia joined the fray, seizing
control of the Housing Authority that had bungled policy in his
name. He ultimately turned to Park Commissioner Robert Moses
on most housing issues. Moses had already proven that he had the
answers, or rather that the Housing Authority had none.

During 1936, low-rent housing became an intense concern for
many New Yorkers, largely because of the sudden impact of New
Deal clearance. As tenement commissioner and Housing Authority
chairman, Langdon Post should have monitored the pace of Old
Law demolitions, but slum clearance was scattered among agencies
responding to varied interests. When the U.S. Works Progress Administration (WPA) moved make-work demolitions into high gear, Post still had no overall control. At the same time, the wrecking ball swung by PWA-funded agencies such as the Triborough Bridge Authority proceeded with clearance objectives all their own. During 1937, some 25,000 apartment units were demolished in the five boroughs, 15,000 in Manhattan and Brooklyn. But no accounting was taken until 1938, by which time the greatest elimination of Old Law housing in the city's history had occurred. Mayor La Guardia reckoned that his administration had torn down or vacated 8,840 buildings. Most were rookeries and tenements, but they had sheltered a quarter of a million people.  

Without fully intending to do so, the authority had mobilized the housing dreams of ordinary people. The impact was evident in 1935, when 15,000 families, most living on the Lower East Side, applied for the authority's 122 units at First Houses. A year later, 14,000 black families submitted applications for Harlem River Houses' 577 apartments. When the authority embarked on larger projects later in the decade at Queensbridge, more than 16,000 applied. By June 1939, the list for the project at Red Hook in Brooklyn had soared to 62,000. For the Housing Authority's 11,000 units opened by 1940, the total number of applications had grown to 115,000. The authority had raised more hopes than its construction program could have possibly met. But generating popular enthusiasm would get projects built.  

Uncoordinated demolitions had far-reaching consequences for the city's political climate. At the depth of the depression, vacancy rates as high as 25 percent were commonplace for Old Law tenement blocks on the Lower East Side and in Yorkville and the South Bronx. But by late 1936, Housing Authority surveys were spotting sharp declines in vacancy rates and the first rent inflation since World War I. The apartment squeeze touched off tenant protests, fanned by depression radicals. In Harlem, Communists vied with black nationalist Garveyites as street-corner agitators against high rents. Their tenant organizations picketed landlords, staged rent strikes, and engaged in rent bargaining. On the Lower East Side, countless plans for low-rent sites stirred similar expectations. Although some residents were drawn to settlement committees coordinated by the Lower East Side Public Housing Conference, many joined affiliates of the Communist-dominated City-Wide Tenants Council. Originally formed in the spring of 1936 by united-front (and essentially middle-class) radicals in limited-dividends such as Knickerbocker
Village and in apartment houses such as London Terrace, the City-Wide talked glibly of forcing landlords to their knees. The Housing Authority struggled to stay abreast of popular demands.  

In late 1936, after the Multiple Dwelling Law (MDL) had been toughened to make tenement "owners" include mortgage holders, Langdon Post declared war on MDL violators. Many bankers realized that they had to make repairs by December 31, 1936, or face criminal charges attached to absentee ownership. Post expected to dramatize the slums and lend maximum publicity to housing reform struggles in Albany and Washington. Perhaps he also hoped that enforcement would deflate tenement values and ease their absorption by Housing Authority projects. But many Lower East Side landlords would not submit. As Dorothy Rosenman, a prominent member of the Women's City Club and the Welfare Council, delicately added, "Several banks took stock of their buildings and decided to close certain of them, and proceeded to do so gradually and in an orderly manner." Others boldly complained that Post was forcing them to abandon their properties. Post called this a brazen attempt by the banks to stay MDL enforcement. As Christmas approached, newspapers anticipated that landlords would shut 400 tenements on the Lower East Side.  

The City-Wide Tenants Council exploited the lockout with a drive for members. Hundreds joined the East Side Tenants Union, which threw picket lines in front of tenements and bank entrances. Asserting that they stood up against thieving landlords, tenant groups made settlement reformers seem impotent by contrast. In Yorkville, the Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association faced demands for action, and at the United Neighborhood Houses, an alarmed social worker warned that settlements had "to work with such groups even though the left wing element exists within them." Several Bronx unions threatened to clog the magistrates' courts with litigation, which scared liberals about "property confiscation" and the future of tenement reform.  

Startled by the uproar, Mayor La Guardia ordered the Housing Authority to hold public hearings on landlord intransigence, and the thankless task fell to Authority legal counsel Charles Abrams. When they were accused of rent-gouging, landlords retorted that unless they could meet rising costs they would have to abandon their tenements. Tenant groups and settlement leaders replied with eloquent exposés of landlord greed. Several tenants appealed for rent controls, which put that property owners' nightmare on the city agenda for the first time in a decade. Making its public debut, the City-
Wide Tenants Council demanded that the state legislature declare a housing emergency and freeze rents for low-income tenants. When Abrams tentatively endorsed the idea, including a freeze for those earning under $1,500 per year, the City-Wide organized a Consumers Emergency Council to work with liberal groups for passage. As far as property owners were concerned, Abrams had pulled the scab off a wound.  

Settlement leader and reformer Dorothy Rosenman led the efforts to find a middle ground. After chairing a meeting between the Housing Authority and leading savings banks, notably the Bowery, Dry Dock, and Emigrant, she reported their willingness to cooperate “on a sizable program of new low cost housing.” But talks about forming a mortgage pool to finance MDL repairs proved inconclusive when the banks demanded that the city first declare a moratorium on MDL enforcement. Stanley M. Isaacs, convinced that reformers had to placate property interests, warned that Abrams’s idea was arbitrary “class legislation” that would “ruin every effort that is being made to induce owners to comply” with the MDL. Isaacs feared it might precipitate further abandonment and “the crisis that all of us are so anxious to avoid.” Rosenman agreed that talk of a rent emergency jeopardized bills for tenement repairs that were stuck in legislative committee. Amid the rancor, Rosenman and Harold S. Buttenheim, editor of American City, called together voluntary agencies, liberal realtors, and tenant leaders to form a Citizens Housing Council. Heading their agenda was passage of the Wagner-Steagall Housing Bill in Washington and MDL revision in Albany, but they hoped for a forum to keep a lid on tenant unrest.

The Housing Authority never survived the political damage. In his tilt with landlords, Langdon Post had counted on support from Gracie Mansion, but he sadly misjudged Mayor La Guardia as 1937, a reelection year, approached. From the mayor’s viewpoint, the authority had turned klieg lights on landlords just before Christmas. Far worse, it appeared to have disinterred the Emergency Rent Laws of 1920, when the last thing Mayor La Guardia wanted was to antagonize property owners. Hostile city councilmen investigated the authority’s record and ridiculed Langdon Post, charging that he had failed to “bridge the gap” between the slums he demolished and the costly housing, such as in Williamsburg, that he had yet to finish. In the 1937 campaign, a challenger toured Williamsburg and jibed that La Guardia asked for “a rating from Dun & Bradstreet to get into a housing project.” Already on the defensive with the authority’s ten-
ant selection, Post announced an emphasis on cost-efficient projects, nothing as “pretentious” as Williamsburg.40

The 1937 mayoral contest cast a permanent shadow over the Housing Authority. After his reelection, La Guardia moved swiftly to ensure that he would never again be embarrassed by Langdon Post. “I have a lousy Housing Authority,” he raged at City Hall. “I want to get rid of the whole bunch.” He wanted “another Bob Moses” who could take hold . . . and get things done.” Within days, he fired “that piddling lawyer,” Charles Abrams, forced Post to resign, and even muttered against Mary Simkhovitch. La Guardia further humbled the authority by staffing the new City Planning Commission, which the voters had approved to advise the Board of Estimate on capital improvements, land use, and zoning. Charter reformers anticipated the commission’s potential for drawing master plans, including districts for slum clearance and new housing. As La Guardia’s opinion of the authority had sunk to rock bottom, it was widely assumed that Park Commissioner Moses would take over housing and planning. Wall Streeters who watched the city’s bond rating wanted Moses to chair the City Planning Commission. Simkhovitch offered to serve with him, because “I honestly believe I would fit in with your ideas & plans.” But Moses brushed the admirers off, saying that he believed “in accomplishing limited objectives.”41

La Guardia would not tolerate any more delays in the low-rent program. The Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937 had established the U.S. Housing Authority (USHA), which promised grants and long-term loans for municipal projects. The mayor took over negotiations with federal officials and forged the agreement that gave the green light to USHA-financed projects at Red Hook, Queensbridge, and Corlears Hook. To chair the New York City Housing Authority, the mayor named Alfred Rheinstein, an experienced builder he thought was another Bob Moses. More important, La Guardia accepted the logic of building a low-rent system based on American Labor party (ALP) ideas for city-guaranteed Housing Authority bonds. While the mayor called for rehousing 8,000 families a year over ten years, ALP leader and Housing Authority member Vladeck argued that modest increases in city interest guarantees could mobilize $100 million in construction funds and triple La Guardia’s goal. Vladeck envisioned a realm of self-liquidating projects on outer-borough tracts, serviced by 1 percent of the city’s budget.42

Urban liberalism at high tide carried the housing cause into the 1938 state constitutional convention. The ALP, CIO unions, tenant
leagues, and other left-wing groups supported the La Guardia administration’s resolve for a housing amendment to authorize broad city planning, slum clearance, and urban redevelopment, along with a city allowance to extend its debt ceiling. The Housing Amendment got staunch support from Robert Moses, a Republican delegate pledged to state action freed from what he called “pay-as-you-go” limits. At the convention, La Guardia’s stark words about disease-breeding, crime-ridden slums drove political leaders across a psychological Rubicon. The mayor conceded that rehousing might cost $4 billion, a “staggering figure,” but not “if you look ahead, for at least a generation.” Senator Robert F. Wagner, Sr., pushed for a $300 million revolving state fund to lend to local public housing authorities and limited-dividend companies. The idea was strongly endorsed by State Insurance Commissioner Louis H. Pink, who regulated the fiduciaries that were expected to invest in state housing bonds. Drafted by the liberals, the Housing Amendment gave cities the mandate to clear slums and blighted areas and authorized the state to borrow up to $300 million for capital grants to build low-rent housing.43

An extraordinary coalition maneuvered behind the ratification campaign. The Regional Plan Association and the New York Building Congress supported the amendment, particularly the public works features they held dear. The Public Housing Conference, the Welfare Council, the United Neighborhood Houses (which represented most settlements), the City-Wide Tenants Council, and the CIO Industrial Trades Council all rallied for its slum-clearance features. Moses remained influential in the struggle. He urged Mayor La Guardia to establish a blue-ribbon committee to educate voters, and when Dorothy Rosenman asked him to engage Al Smith for a radio speech, Moses remarked that he was using all his considerable pull with the politicians and newspaper publishers to gain passage. Ratified by the voters in November 1938, the Housing Amendment became Article XVIII of the state constitution.44

With Article XVIII, the people spoke for forceful measures to attack slums and renew the city. The legislature soon created a state housing commissioner to coordinate Albany’s program, and New York City consolidated MDL enforcement in a department of housing and buildings. The Board of Estimate’s advisory body, the City Planning Commission, got the green light to engage in master planning. Concrete programs had not yet been established, but Moses had immediate ideas on how to carry out Article XVIII. “We were handicapped at the Convention,” he reminded Mayor
La Guardia, “because we had no plan indicating just what the city wanted to do.” Moses urged the mayor to name a committee that included himself, Alfred Rheinstein, Louis Pink, and others to shape the city’s housing policy, although he made a strong pitch to “put all the city work under one man.”

Moving the Masses

The Housing Authority’s modest progress in construction obscured achievements in the prerequisite for slum clearance: the attitudes and machinery for mass removals. These required a steady concern for the worthy poor, a denial of responsibility for the larger numbers that were turned away, and a resolute focus on the greater good. As race increasingly became a determinant of worthiness in a housing program that was chronically short of funds, the authority needed to develop sophisticated rationales to explain why the system turned people away. Years before Robert Moses gloried in what he called the “dangerous” choices required of public works administrators, Housing Authority bureaucrats overcame their scruples about shifting people from one slum to another.

From its origins in early 1934, the Housing Authority faced the knotty question of what to do with site tenants. Handed the major share of the demolition campaign against Old Law tenements, the authority was unexpectedly saddled with removing tenants from 1,000 apartments. It followed tradition, seeking aid for the homeless from the Home Relief Bureau, the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, the Welfare Council, and police. Although he was improvising, Langdon Post assured the Public Works Authority that “the organization for this work is carefully constituted.”

This meager experience gave the New Yorkers added prestige at the June 1934 Chicago conference of the National Association of Housing Officials (NAHO). As spear carriers for the PWA Housing Division, NAHO warned federal officials that “failure to provide adequate re-housing for such [site] families would react strongly against all housing activities of the Federal government.” With New Yorkers in the vanguard, they appealed to the PWA to assume half the cost for site personnel to aid tenant removal. Money was also needed, they insisted, for surveys to identify the neighborhoods where “a large portion of displaced families probably will relocate.” But Robert Kohn’s men stood firm, and NAHO accepted the PWA offer to pay only for liaison with home relief and private charities. Removals that
the New Yorkers considered fundamental to the success of public housing remained orphans, shifted from one emergency, make-work agency to another. 47

Although the PWA refusal stemmed from the old emphasis on the worthy poor, many reformers agreed that the projects deserved citizens untainted by the slums. At the October 1934 Public Housing Conference in Baltimore, a British delegate insisted that families on relief were not suitable for projects that would lead the new order. Public housing would require sound administrative decisions rather than moral sentiments. At the conference there was “great emphasis,” noted attendee Catherine Lansing, on immediate inventories of families on clearance sites, not only for the socioeconomic data to rehouse them, but also to meet “the very real problem of loss of rent.” Exact records would help housing authorities maintain cash flow as well as facilitate orderly removal. A PWA spokesman at Baltimore conceded a “fundamental responsibility” for rehousing of site tenants, and delegates debated what this entailed. Planner Henry Wright pointed out that a “very large project” might absorb “a large proportion of the people by shifting them from one part to the other.” Arguing that “100% rehousing [was] practically impossible,” housing economist Edith Elmer Wood concluded that “the goal was not reinstatement of families on the site, but finding improved housing for as high a percentage as possible.” 48

Catherine Lansing returned to New York to recommend that the Housing Authority get rent collectors “in the field” as soon as it took title to the Williamsburg site. She argued that “failure to collect rents even for a few weeks or months starts up in the minds of the tenants an idea that ‘the City owns it’—why should we pay rent?” She called such thinking “reprehensible.” With the toughness her superiors expected, she added, “the function of the Housing Authority is the letting of homes—in other words the erection of buildings and the collection of rents.” 49

Housing Authority staffers, who struggled to reassure PWA mortgage officers, emphasized that New York would find a sturdy tenantry. May Lumsden, Lansing’s boss at tenant operations, advised Washington that tenants would be selected on the basis of “ability to pay the rent [i.e., a monthly income of four to five times the rent] . . . and good rent habits,” suitable family size, and residence in substandard conditions. She intended to measure those categories to the last digit on a ratings scale. At the same time, Lumsden downplayed Housing Authority responsibility for site tenants who failed the test. The authority should aid the removal of tenants

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and “make more dwellings available, insofar as possible.” But Lumsden remained vague on specifics, except to pronounce that public housing was not a welfare program. Rejecting notions that the authority should “manipulate” rents for the “particularly needy family,” Lumsden wrote that attacking poverty was the job of other government programs, not hers. At a Welfare Council debate on the subject, Catherine Lansing recoiled from arguments that dwelled on “social values” rather than the amortization of project costs. When social workers considered giving rent vouchers to project families on relief, she condemned their failure to base policy on the “ability to pay rent.”

The issue remained academic until the PWA project at Williamsburg forced hard choices. Most families had left the site voluntarily, with some expenses paid by the Home Relief Bureau. But charity workers warned that the authority would have to care for the remainder. Activists on the Charity Organization Society were ready to set up a “vacancy listing bureau,” but the Welfare Council wanted the authority to staff the site. They said the authority could tap the Brooklyn Real Estate Board and other sources to find the vacancies for a referral system. Lansing agreed “it would give the Housing Authority much prestige to sponsor it, and next to building new homes for the lowest income group, it would be the greatest step that the Housing Authority could take toward attaining their objective.” In June of 1935, social workers urged the authority to organize within the Emergency Works Division a central listing bureau that would gather lists of inspected apartments for tenants of cleared housing sites. The Vacancy Listing Bureau began in 1936 as a WPA-sponsored effort.

According to the Citizens Housing Council, the listing bureau depended on “the good-will of the real estate people” and on WPA allowances, until WPA cuts forced its demise in 1939. Although Mayor La Guardia was sympathetic, he complained money was not available to maintain the bureau. A Housing Authority staffer suggested running the bureau “through funds raised from private services such as real estate men, charity organizations, etc.” The only alternative was to establish a similar service in the Department of Welfare, which housing advocates rejected because that would stamp the projects as poverty zones. Repeated attempts by the Citizens Housing Council and the Charity Organization Society to get the city to resume its responsibility resulted in the creation of a rehousing bureau in the authority in 1940. Understaffed and demoralized, it remained a bureau in name only.
The task of explaining the contradiction between total removals and "Dun & Bradstreet" admissions standards fell to the Housing Authority's neighborhood advisory committees. Although appointed ostensibly to contribute to design of and tenant selection for the earliest projects, First Houses, Williamsburg, and Harlem River, these committees were never more than conduits for authority decisions already made. The experience of the East Harlem Council of Social Agencies, named to the advisory committee for the East River Houses in 1939, was typical. It distributed authority pamphlets and largely served, explained Catherine Lansing, to interpret income limits and "tell the families if they are eligible." The East River Houses committee had no say in such matters as project scale, range of apartment sizes, rents, or income limits. May Lumsden told the committee that these hinged on U.S. Housing Authority capital grants, total project cost, and other matters kept privy in Washington. Because these were not available until federal officials released them with appropriate fanfare, advisory committees could not advise. But when the details were revealed, committee members were expected to convince their neighbors about the desirability of projects that would displace many while providing homes to a relative few.\textsuperscript{53}

The advisory committees also took on the task of finding the worthiest poor, slum dwellers who were unaffected by the slums. On the Lower East Side, tenant selection for First Houses' 122 units went to an advisory committee of local settlement heads who applied May Lumsden's stringent ratings scale to 15,000 applicants. With the prestige of the New York program riding on it—Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt was expected to attend opening-day ceremonies—the charities experts bent to their work. Poring over applications and subjecting the survivors to relentless scrutiny that included inspections of their tenement apartments, the social workers boasted that they had found "the very finest type" of urban pioneers. When First Houses opened on June 22, 1936, Lumsden reported that every cent of rent was paid on time and the only wear and tear was chipped paint in the playground.\textsuperscript{54}

Determined to disprove the canard that blacks, as one member put it, "are not ready for low rental government housing," the realtors and social workers appointed to the Harlem Advisory Committee weeded out the "troublesome and delinquent." Their questionnaire asked for details on wages, debts, and employment, but applicants who passed the preliminaries faced another grilling on work habits, rent payments, and household standards to see how "constructive
the applicant is in the care of his apartment." The advisory committee developed its own point system, skewed toward evidence of family stability. Slum residence and low income could garner only 16 points out of 100, whereas a male breadwinner who was debt free and had $1,000 of life insurance along with some savings and "legitimate" employment could accumulate 40 points. Another 20 points went to families with neat apartments and no record of trouble with landlords. As word spread about the strictures, the committee reduced the life insurance requirement to $500 and dropped references to landlord disputes. Even so, Harlemites were furious when the committee's paternalist guidelines became public knowledge. The committee saved face by demanding that the Housing Authority put blacks in charge of Harlem River Houses and appoint a black to the authority board. Despite the uproar, Harlem River Houses opened in May of 1937 with a solid middle-class core among its 577 tenants.55

The Housing Authority reconsidered the local committees after Mayor La Guardia's 1937 purge forced changes in what May Lumsden called "spasmodic" tenant selection. Up to this time, she explained, the authority looked primarily to clearance sites to find families that met income and other qualifications, relying also on newspaper and radio publicity to announce forthcoming projects. To the authority's chagrin, the response came overwhelmingly from families in New Law tenements; relatively little came from occupants of Old Law slums. Large-scale operations anticipated by Alfred Rheinstein's appointment and U.S. Housing Authority grants convinced Lumsden it was time to place selection on a "permanent all-year round basis." She wanted early designation by the City Planning Commission of slum clearance areas, which would allow the authority to begin tenant recruitment by using schools and social agencies to distribute application forms. This would enlarge the pool of potential tenants who met eligibility standards. Under the PWA regime, the authority had organized one project at a time. With more predictable USHA grants and city planning, the authority could look forward to removing thousands of tenants in a citywide system.56

A comprehensive system, however, meant that race could no longer be treated with casual indifference. In 1934, Jim Crow rules were taken for granted when technical advisor Frederick Ackerman presented nearly identical room configurations for projects in Harlem, Williamsburg, and Queensbridge, with the observation that the Harlem project "will stand by itself." A year later, amid discussions on the Mayer committee's proposals, the Housing Authority
sidestepped the racial implications of processing tenants en masse. Monsignor E. Roberts Moore impressed upon May Lumsden and Catherine Lansing the need for an alternative to a central applications office, pointing out “that in Harlem, . . . we must keep this application office in the district and separate from the Williamsburg office, for various good reasons.” They found Moore’s suggestion “a wise solution to the problem.” The authority improvised a dual system that sent white applicants to headquarters on 14th Street and black applicants to the Harlem River site. “This will insure the [Harlem] applicants’ knowing where the houses are going to be built,” Lumsden explained to Langdon Post, “and will require them to make some sort of effort in behalf of getting an apartment.”

For years the dual system functioned despite demands by blacks for access that was color-blind. At first, the Housing Authority responded to the pressure, which intensified after a riot in Harlem in March 1935 by emphasizing that the Harlem River Houses would meet the problems of the black poor. Abysmal slums had sprouted in predominantly black areas around the Brooklyn Navy Yard and in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, Morrisania in the Bronx, and South Jamaica in Queens. Nevertheless, Langdon Post and his colleagues maintained that equal treatment meant separate, if not equal, efforts—one for whites at First Houses, Williamsburg, Red Hook, Queensbridge, and Corlears Hook, and another for blacks at Harlem River. But organized protests in Harlem and Brooklyn and the social consciousness that contributed to the formation of the New York State Commission on the Condition of the Urban Colored Population and, eventually, the City-Wide Citizens Committee on Harlem stirred demand for new projects and unprecedented access to old projects. By late 1938, the Housing Authority, which had overlooked black neighborhoods outside of Harlem, responded with blueprints for U.S. Housing Authority projects in Brownsville in Brooklyn and South Jamaica in Queens.

The promised construction and increase in black tenants strained the polite denials that served the dual system. In November of 1939, the Harlem Advisory Committee complained that Housing Authority chairman Alfred Rheinstein “could never be pinned down on anything” when asked which projects would accept blacks. Although Mary Simkhovitch conceded that there were only two black families in Red Hook (and, she reckoned, one in Williamsburg), she pointed out that among the projects finished or already started, 18.5 percent were in “predominantly colored sections,” which was three times the percentage of New York’s population that was black. When re-
minded that 18.5 percent was far less than the percentage of blacks who lived in slums, Simkhovitch explained, “You may say it is up to the white population to receive the colored people in equal numbers everywhere because that is justice. But you know very well we haven’t arrived at that condition of social justice.” The Housing Authority would not “kick over the whole business of housing.” If the authority placed equal numbers of blacks and whites in Red Hook, she pointed out, “the thing would not go.”

The Harlem Advisory Committee urged the authority to act boldly at South Jamaica, where a racially mixed neighborhood offered what James Hubert of the New York Urban League called a “rare opportunity” to lower barriers. But the authority eluded attempts to define quotas. Simkhovitch agreed, for instance, that the Bedford-Stuyvesant community in Brooklyn was “predominantly colored”—61 percent, a staffer added. But authority members refused to accept the corollary, as the minutes revealed.

_Monsignor Moore:_ I don’t think that because the population of an area is such a percentage white and such a percentage black that we should establish any such proportion.

_Mrs. Simkhovitch:_ We shouldn’t do that. I hope that is perfectly clear because when Red Hook and Queens[bridge] came along, that was kind of a reservoir into which people could be shipped from other areas of the city.

_Mr. Hubert:_ I have hopes that a project like South Jamaica can in addition to housing 400 families, point the way as to how this thing can be planned. I know the Housing Authority is not a missionary group.

_Mrs. Simkhovitch:_ We must stick to our guns. We are not missionaries.

The same day they met with the Harlem Advisory Committee, Simkhovitch and Moore fended off a similar delegation concerned about South Jamaica. Insisting that black applications to Queensbridge and Red Hook were pointless, Monsignor Moore explained that they were not located “where colored and white people both live.” When Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People favored creation of mixed projects, Simkhovitch pleaded for practicality. “We have to strike a happy balance,” she added. “We want to be just and at the same time we know that after all the colored population is only 4.7% of the whole population. . . . What we feel is the Housing Authority must think first of housing.”
Although blacks complained, the authority continued its evasion. When black tenants faced removal for the site of the Amsterdam Houses in Manhattan in late 1940, an authority spokesman remarked that he expected help from the Legal Aid Society and the Citizens Housing Council. "I don't see why they are so terribly worried," he assured a concerned politician, "as we have on all other projects been able to find shelter for site tenants." But as late as the fall of 1941, the authority assigned to the relocation task only one black employee, who had his hands full with the Amsterdam refugees. Black demands ran up against bureaucratic finesse that limited blacks to token presence in selected projects. Queensbridge opened for occupancy in March of 1940 with 90 black families (3 percent) out of 3,149. Williamsburg's 1 black family among 1,629 grew to only 17 black families by mid-1943. Red Hook's 2 families became 102 families (4 percent) among 2,504 by early 1944. The dual system relaxed, but the authority remained committed to exclusionary relocation.62

Although public housing emerged from the 1930s as less than the comprehensive low-rent system reformers had struggled for, it provided the bedrock for the massive upheavals to come. The Housing Authority pored over the city, spotting sites for future operations. It perfected site acquisition, spinning off specialty real estate firms that became de facto allies of the low-rent program. It routinized tenant removals within a system that relied on civil practice to remove tenants and philanthropic ministry for their rehousing. On this system of partial responsibility, the authority improvised policies of racial steering that divided the evictees into distinct streams. Few administrators mentioned race as the criterion, but steering was accomplished just as effectively with claims that blacks were better off near their existing neighborhoods and places of employment. Presiding over this grudging acceptance of Jim Crow was the generation of housers, Mary Simkhovitch and the others, who fought for public housing and ended the decade offering polite denials about the inequities that even a decent liberal program depended upon.

Public housing's partisans blamed the Housing Authority's disappointments on Mayor La Guardia's indifference, on PWA indecision, and on Jim Crow realtors. A favorite explanation was that "Washington" throttled the New York effort, particularly with the language written into the Wagner-Steagall Act, which required that for every low-rent unit built with USHA funds a unit of slum housing had to be razed. New Yorkers claimed that "equivalent elimination" forced on public housing the practice of building new units on slum
New York City Housing Authority projects, the La Guardia years, 1935–1942

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name, Borough</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Year opened</th>
<th>No. units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Houses, Manhattan</td>
<td>WPA</td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlem River, Manhattan</td>
<td>PWA</td>
<td>1937</td>
<td>577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamsburg, Brooklyn</td>
<td>PWA</td>
<td>1938</td>
<td>1,630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Hook, Brooklyn</td>
<td>USHA</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>2,545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vladeck, Manhattan</td>
<td>USHA</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>1,533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vladeck City, Manhattan</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensbridge, Queens</td>
<td>USHA</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>3,149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Jamaica, Queens</td>
<td>USHA</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East River, Manhattan</td>
<td>USHA</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>1,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallabout, Brooklyn</td>
<td>USHA</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clason Point Gardens, Bronx</td>
<td>USHA</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingsborough, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Lanham Act</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>1,166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwin Markham, Staten Island</td>
<td>Lanham Act</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Greene, Brooklyn</td>
<td>NYS</td>
<td>1944*</td>
<td>3,501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>17,048</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Construction began in 1941, completion delayed by wartime priorities.

Source: New York City Housing Authority, Eighth Annual Report (1941); Fourteenth Annual Report (1948).

tracts, which guaranteed masses of refugees, new units contaminated by contact with the old, and, in places such as Harlem, public units that remained segregated islands. With these compromises, public housing was doomed to fail.

But the heart of the problem lay with the housers themselves. Langdon Post and his colleagues advocated both inner-city slum clearance and planned, low-rent communities in the outer boroughs, but always preferred the latter. They remained good-government types, puritan builders, fiscal reformers. They could not bear to rescue slumlords and never saw the economic sense of devoting a renewed Lower East Side to working-class housing. They often talked about the splendid tenants and the civic democracy that were taking root in the projects, but they could barely disguise their condescension toward families who still bore the failings of the slums. Mary Simkhovitch was right when she warned, “the public will not be with us.” Realizing the political liabilities of its economic stringency, the Housing Authority embarked on equivalent elimination to move
against the Lower East Side and demonstrate to La Guardia’s city that it understood that public housing was first and foremost slum clearance. But by then it was already too late. The public was already moving to vest control of the Housing Authority in officials with fewer scruples about paying high prices to clear slums.