The War emergency has fused all interests and opinions in a common cause. In this same spirit we can expect those whom you name to lay a foundation for the reconstruction of the City of New York.

George McAneny

World War II provided the preconditions for the redevelopment of New York. The global conflict may have distracted the city from a social-welfare agenda, but the dire limit on resources forced the La Guardia administration to sort municipal priorities and anticipate postwar needs. Making choices about the future was Robert Moses’s stock in trade and inventorying city resources enabled him to complete his takeover as the mayor’s housing coordinator. One of Moses’s first determinations was to settle the future of the Lower East Side while the war held all parties to the common cause.

Moses’s ambition made possible Stuyvesant Town, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company’s mammoth project for the East Side “gashouse district.” Metropolitan Life would clear away 11,000 working-class tenants to plant 8,756 middle-class families in a city within the city. The startling breakthrough involved negotiations between willful giants and depended on Moses’s posturing as a public servant. It owed a great deal to the strong mayoralty created by La Guardia and the power aggrandized by his housing czar. But it could not have succeeded without the political environment of the People’s War, the tacit approval of the city’s left wing, and its preoccupation with the united front. It also depended on the grudging approval of a genera-
tion of city planners, who could support the ends, if not the means, of Moses-style renewal. The times as much as the man shaped the prototype for the redevelopment to come.

**Domestic Sacrifice**

Metropolitan Life's clearance of working-class homes was a consequence of left-wing rationales during World War II. Standing firm behind the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the left wing demanded that the New Deal fulfill public-housing promises and denounced moves toward wartime housing. That posture changed when the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Within days, the left wing sought cordial relations with La Guardia liberals and applauded projects that advanced war production. On Manhattan’s West Side, hopes for speedy completion of the Amsterdam and Chelsea low-rent projects ended when the community learned that defense shortages would halt construction. Liberals on the Chelsea Association for Planning and Action appealed to federal officials to expedite work to avoid “a lowering of morale.” Ruth Farbman of the Ethical Culture Society, who had counseled Amsterdam site tenants, could not bear to see them “evicted from one slum and moved into another.” But tenant activists remained philosophical. The Chelsea-Clinton Tenants League notified the Housing Authority that “the idea of giving up the struggle for materials is indeed a great disappointment; but that the tenants are prepared to make this sacrifice.”

Sacrifice became the byword at the City-Wide Tenants Council, which renamed itself the United Tenants League of Greater New York in recognition of wartime housing needs throughout the region. Shutting down its campaign for rent control and other protections for tenants in private housing, the United Tenants League poured all energies into homefront morale. After Pearl Harbor, the Citizens Housing Council learned that the new priorities meant getting “the cooperation of tenants, as well as landlords, on winning the war.” The switch cost the league members in Old Law tenements, whose residents still considered landlords the prime enemy. But it garnered new recruits in Housing Authority projects, particularly those linked with the war effort: Red Hook, and Fort Greene, near Brooklyn’s shipyards, and giant Queensbridge, a short walk from Long Island City’s airframe plants.

With total war, the left wing embraced the public projects with special ardor. When the federal government changed public housing
admission policies to give priority to defense personnel and began to impose income ceilings on nondefense occupants, the Queensbridge and Fort Greene tenant leagues rose against rules they said endangered the war effort. The anger at Queensbridge nearly got out of hand, until the tenant leader, to the amazement of the project manager, told the dissidents, “This is no time for rent strikes.” Federal housing officials heard the message and raised the income ceiling to $3,000 in late 1943. The controversy left the Housing Authority with a grudging respect for the United Tenants League’s ability to settle issues through “collective bargaining” and further entrenched left-wing activists in public housing. From bastions such as Queensbridge, they boosted morale wherever tenants could work for victory.3

Wartime fervor clinched Moses’s entrée into housing. He recalled that in October of 1941, “at Mayor La Guardia’s request, I surveyed the progress of housing development and recommended adoption of a unified plan for all rehabilitation.” With good reason, Moses focused on downtown Brooklyn. The place where Alfred Rheinstein stumbled had assumed even more importance with the crush of nearby ordnance production. “I cited the changes in the Navy Yard district as an example of the right way to replan rundown areas,” Moses explained, “but I criticized the City Housing Authority for refusing to go beyond the building of low-cost, government-subsidized housing.” One month later, after Mayor La Guardia won reelection to his third term, he appointed Moses to the City Planning Commission. Proclaiming greenbelts “dead,” Moses announced his readiness to make tough choices.4

From this position Moses completed his takeover of municipal housing. The war had frozen civilian activities, which gave planners the time as well as the obligation to think about the city’s future. In January of 1942, the Regional Plan Association called Mayor La Guardia’s attention to the opportunity “to explore the ways and means of redevelopment of whole neighborhoods.” Association president George McAneny expected the mayor to appoint a postwar planning committee to write a reconstruction agenda. Moses had already considered the mayor’s response. With his experience on the State Reconstruction Commission of 1919 and the Emergency Public Works Commission of 1932, no one was more qualified than Moses to give postwar planning the rationale it needed. Within days, Moses outlined a proposal for postwar planning in the kind of language that meant the most to La Guardia. He urged a mayoral
commission to create "a reservoir of public works" to battle postwar unemployment.5

With the nod from Gracie Mansion, Moses lost no time establishing himself as the mayor's postwar coordinator. He turned his City Planning Commission office into a clearinghouse for an official list of municipal projects. He was careful to lend Park Department and Triborough Bridge engineers to bureaucrats who wanted to be on the wish list, a service crucial for borough presidents, who depended on public works but lacked the technical help to get them started. Planning money was scarce, but Moses expected to tap the Regional Plan Association and the banks. He figured they would underwrite an advisory commission headed by someone of the stature of Nelson Rockefeller or the Rockefeller family's architect, Wallace K. Harrison. But his most important accomplishment was positioning the city as a full-fledged partner with state efforts, despite the fact that most of Albany's capital spending would occur beyond city limits. "There is practically no state institutional construction within the city," Moses warned La Guardia. "The most important state work to be done is in the field of public housing, and here the city stand has a lot to gain by the proper selection of additional projects and their design, and probably also the acquisition of land."6

Moses quickly disposed of the Housing Authority's postwar pretensions, which were weak to begin with. The holdover board, consisting of Mary Simkhovitch, Monsignor E. Roberts Moore, and housing architect William C. Wilson, was without a chairman and direction. Policy fell to legal counsel Maxwell H. Tretter and planning chief William C. Vladeck. In early 1942, the authority called on the City Planning Commission to cooperate on postwar reconstruction of the slums. But Moses had already briefed the mayor on the city's list of sites, adding that La Guardia could not "present an expanded program through the agency of Mrs. Simkhovitch, Tretter, and Vladeck," those "social workers and radicals." He warned La Guardia that Republican Thomas E. Dewey would probably win the gubernatorial election in November 1942, and cast a "critical" eye on the city's housing. In the coming contest with Albany, the mayor would get little help from the authority. Several weeks later, La Guardia named Edmond Borgia Butler, Fordham Law School professor and prominent layman in the Catholic archdiocese, to fill the vacant chairmanship. Moses assured the mayor that he and Butler would whip a housing program into shape.7

By the spring of 1942, decisions on public housing emanated
from the City Planning Commission, or rather from its self-styled “subcommittee” on housing, consisting of Commissioner Moses, his assistant, George E. Spargo, and his staff. While Spargo’s men worked on five state housing sites, Moses got his friends in the legislature to revise the public housing law to permit the City Planning Commission to pass judgment on specific sites that did not necessarily conform to the master plan. City Planning Commission chairman Edwin A. Salmon explained to Housing Authority chairman Butler that it would enable the commission “to adopt specific projects as a part of the Master Plan even though the details of some individual projects may be at variance with the standards.” By then, Butler also learned that the commission had chosen housing sites behind his back. Delivering the fait accompli, Salmon announced that postwar reconstruction must go through his commission, whose liaison with the state was Moses. Only the City Planning Commission, Salmon pointed out, had responsibility for large-scale neighborhoods. It had quit “talking in generalities,” Salmon lectured, “and is no longer giving blanket approval to vaguely defined improvements.”

With the Housing Authority humbled, Moses spent the summer of 1942 reviewing the city’s requests under the state postwar program: a site just east of St. Mary’s Park in the Bronx; another in Astoria, Queens; and a large plot on Oliver Street just north of the Brooklyn Bridge. He worked exclusively with William C. Wilson and George Spargo, who commented, “They [the Housing Authority] will undoubtedly say that they have never heard of them [the sites].” A month later, the City Planning Commission completed its work, except for a perfunctory public hearing. It approved the following: the John Lovejoy Elliott Houses for Chelsea, an expansion of the Amsterdam site, the Jacob Riis and Lillian D. Wald projects on the Lower East Side, and the Brownsville Houses; and it added the Lower Harlem (James Weldon Johnson) project, the Lower Bronx (St. Mary’s) project, and the Marcy project in Brooklyn, all designated part of the city’s “Post War Works Program.” To accommodate three projects, the commission enlarged, shifted, and—in the case of Astoria, Queens—created new clearance and replanning areas. More significantly, it redefined project density measurements as what it called “guides to desirable objectives rather than as binding requirements.” The commission no longer found it practical to apply “to individual projects limitations established as a general guide for large areas.” The city was notified that the City Planning Commission had assumed the prerogative to consider each project “on its merits.”
New standards of expediency accompanied the expansion of slum clearance.9

The rush to acquire sites under the postwar program, Moses warned Mayor La Guardia, would thrust on the Housing Authority the role of owner of slum property. The authority would face “difficulties” in managing clearance areas where it would have “to act as landlord until after the war.” Moses also worried about the condemnation costs for acquiring land and factories intermixed with the tenements, although he pointed out that “cost may be reduced by permitting tenants to remain for a time.” Moses raised with La Guardia the possibility that the expense of slum clearance might be eased by collecting slum rents for the duration that tenants resided in clearance areas. The management task dwarfed anything May Lumsden contemplated before the war.10

Public housing decisions had vast implications for the social geography of the city. During the war, when civic and welfare leaders on the City-Wide Citizens Committee on Harlem urged the La Guardia administration to consider dispersal of the Negro ghetto as part of postwar plans, the city chose to enlarge Harlem as a racial preserve. That decision came with the Lower Harlem public housing project on East 99th Street named for James Weldon Johnson. The borough presidents of Manhattan and the Bronx opposed Lower Harlem because it would block their hopes to extend Park Avenue as a high-class residential corridor into the Bronx. Spargo reminded Moses that “we considered this long ago in the Planning Commission and decided against it.” The plan would have disrupted Jim Crow boundaries and forced displacement of blacks into white neighborhoods. Those determined to expand low-rent housing found it simpler to rebuild Harlem housing within existing racial boundaries. Spargo scrounged for the last-minute votes on the Board of Estimate that approved Lower Harlem and Moses’s reconstruction of the ghetto.11

After the City Planning Commission delivered its decisions to the Housing Authority in 1942, the authority informed affected neighborhoods. Monsignor Moore notified Italian leaders in East Harlem not to expect the city to build middle-income projects on northern Park Avenue. Moore explained that the site was needed for a large project for Puerto Ricans. East Harlem social agencies found that the James Weldon Johnson site would have inadequate recreational facilities, including day care for only 100 children. Only 15 percent of the apartments were set aside for families of five and only 5 percent for families of six, which agencies called unrealistic
for the district’s needs. But hard decisions had already been made to erect tall, elevator-equipped structures that would pack maximum numbers, 600 per acre, on the site. Public housing was readied for the redevelopment to come.\textsuperscript{12}

The Elusive Private Sector

The wartime mood also removed political obstacles to generous subsidies for redevelopers. In 1942, City Corporation Counsel Paul Windels, working closely with Moses, Insurance Superintendent Louis Pink, and State Housing Commissioner Edward Weinfeld, drafted a new law that authorized the establishment of limited-dividend redevelopment companies supervised by the state housing commissioner and the Board of Estimate. Although Pink acted as virtual lobbyist for the New York Life Insurance Company, most lawmakers favored conciliating the holders of capital. The point man for such measures, Manhattan Assemblyman McNeill Mitchell, rejected "tying the companies and the banks down with so many restrictions that it would be impractical for them to invest."\textsuperscript{13}

Urging Windels on were New York Life executives and one eager director, former Governor Al Smith, who wrote to Moses in January of 1942 to urge him to "step on this proposition." With New York Life president George L. Harrison, Moses toured one site, Smith’s old neighborhood around Oliver Street, just north of the Brooklyn Bridge. While Moses courted the insurance giant, Windels put final touches on the legislation to meet what he called his "strong belief that these projects are private enterprises." Windels wrote into his draft a $15 rent limit and enough language about public purpose and blighted areas to meet the requirements for condemnation under Article XVIII. Moses added his own touches, such as requiring the construction of interior streets and parks at company expense, which he had reviewed with New York Life executives. That done, Moses’s staffers believed that Windels’s work, submitted as the revised Hampton-Mitchell Bill, met “practically all of the objections raised by the NYLIC.” Recommending the final version to Governor Lehman, Al Smith described “a great opportunity here [at Oliver Street] for housing at reasonable rentals, because people can walk to work in the downtown financial, business, and government district.”\textsuperscript{14}

With Governor Lehman’s signature, the Redevelopment Companies Law of 1942 permitted savings banks and life insurance com-
panies to invest directly in the stock of limited-dividend companies. It authorized municipal tax exemption on improvements for up to twenty years, although it still required the redeveloper to certify with the City Planning Commission that site tenants could find adequate housing. It also kept provisions requiring continued oversight of projects by the commission and the Board of Estimate. Although Windels had tried to free redevelopers from undue oversight, the City Planning Commission’s role had remained.  

Convinced that the Lower East Side was primed for redevelopment, Moses was anxious to get New York Life started under Hampton-Mitchell. In June of 1942, Moses advised the company to call property owners together and offer generous terms, but threaten to go elsewhere if they proved stubborn. He stood ready with alternate sites on the East River above 14th Street and south of Washington Square, although he favored “the Governor’s old neighborhood.” When the company dawdled over the summer, Moses considered Oliver Street for a low-rent project. But that failed to budge New York Life president Harrison, who said his company planned “no immediate action.” Moses turned up the pressure, alerting the City Planning Commission to end the delays on Oliver Street “on the assumption that somehow this area should be saved for life insurance or bank action.” He got Mayor La Guardia to send Harrison a last-minute appeal. “I am particularly anxious to have several insurance company and, perhaps later, savings bank projects at reasonably low rentals,” the mayor wrote, “because the entire problem should not be left to public housing.” But in the fall of 1942, Moses angrily wrote off New York Life’s “reactionary board.”  

Corporate inertia sabotaged Moses’s grand design for the East Side waterfront. He had expected the corporations to be adventurous, and, in his petulance, asked Bowery president Henry Bruère why he did not “do something about it.” “The same thing applies to other executives,” Moses went on. “My friend Lew Douglas [president of Mutual of New York Life Insurance], for example, after attending many conferences on the east side matter, finally backed out with the extraordinary excuse that it was ‘too thin.’” Having pledged generous public support, Moses wondered why powerful businessmen were so impotent. “We went as far as to offer the insurance and savings people full cooperation in the acquisition of all the land fronting on the East River Drive from 14th Street down . . . The public housing projects were to be placed back of the semi-public, that is, west of them. The heights of buildings were to be staggered so that the public projects would be taller and would still
have a view of the river. . . . Finally they said the whole thing was too thin and simply backed out."17

Moses tried to realize regional planners’ cherished ambitions for the East Side, but the private sector lacked the nerve. Reluctantly, Moses concluded that the city would have to take the area for the working class. “With the collapse of this [middle-income] program,” Moses noted, “the public housing projects were again located along the waterfront.” Two years later, Moses said on his thwarted plans, “I spent over two years of honest unremitting effort to persuade fiduciaries to build on the more desirable, less expensive, frontage on the East River. . . . It was agreed to hold back public projects and to give a reasonable opportunity to the fiduciaries to go along on this basis.”18

As New York Life bowed out, Moses turned to Frederick H. Ecker, imperious chairman of Metropolitan Life. Moses had been after the company for some time to create another Parkchester. In conversations with Mayor La Guardia, Ecker preferred an East Side location. “It has seemed to me,” he pointed out to the mayor, “to have an additional value in helping to anchor population in Manhattan.” Talks went far enough between Ecker and Moses (who kept La Guardia constantly informed) for an agreement in principle for a project north of 14th Street with maximum rental of $12.50 per room, and city condemnation and cession of interior streets, if the company paid to widen boundary streets and make other “incidental” improvements. Ecker objected to Metropolitan paying taxes on the ceded streets, but Moses assured him that the city would work it out. Mayor La Guardia gave the package his blessing.19

The undertaking made Moses and Ecker wary allies who tested the limits of their deal. Reminding La Guardia in November 1942 that “nothing presumably can be done for the duration,” Ecker wanted assurances that the city would not collect taxes on property turned over to the company that might lie idle for years. Mayor La Guardia promised nothing, but pointed out, “assuming that you collect reasonable rentals from structures which are safe and presently under lease, it seems to me that you will be doing a good stroke of business.” Ecker also worried about the city’s regulatory authority. Although Moses conceded that he would have to remove further municipal oversight from the Redevelopment Companies Law to “satisfy him,” he was convinced that Ecker would go ahead anyway. He told the mayor, “I base my confidence in their actually proceeding with the plan almost wholly on the personal interest of Mr. Ecker.”20

In early 1943, while Moses’s assistant, William S. Lebwohl, and
Assistant Corporation Counsel Jeremiah Evarts removed what Ecker called "the many features of control" from the Redevelopment Companies Law, Moses expedited the city's contract. Reminding his staff that Ecker was "anxious to pitch into this thing as quickly as possible," Moses concluded that "the informal approval of plans by the City Planning Commission should precede formal hearings." As he explained, "the acquisition of property by agreement is a tough proposition where large plots are involved and agreements with public authorities are required." Considered by the legislature in the spring of 1943, the Hampton-Mitchell Bill contained the usual limits on rents and dividends, but no mention of income limits on tenants. It shifted project oversight, however, to the state superintendent of insurance and the Board of Estimate, leaving the City Planning Commission with only incidental review. An additional feature allowed redevelopers that were wholly owned subsidiaries of insurance companies to end municipal oversight once redevelopment contracts were signed with the city. The bill extended municipal tax-exemption to a maximum of twenty-five years, although a further provision allowed redevelopers to free themselves from limits on dividends and rents by payment of exempt taxes. The legislature also ended the requirement that redevelopers certify the existence of adequate rehousing for site tenants. The measure's silence in regard to low-income site tenants and its laissez-faire attitude toward income limits sent a strong message about the class basis for the redevelopment process. Moses's struggle to free private redevelopers from pernicious regulation had succeeded.²¹

Liberals had little to say about the class displacement, but were vocal with their worries about the elimination of planning safeguards. A Citizens Housing Council appraisal warned that Hampton-Mitchell would "permit private corporations, with the approval of the supervising agency, to require any individual or even a community to turn over its real property to them and then may proceed to operate these properties without the necessary public controls." One council member, architect Ralph Walker, worried about neighborhoods being "left in the lurch if at any time the insurance companies wish to pay back taxes," while Arthur Holden charged that unscrupulous companies might use "redevelopment techniques as a mere pretext for assembling property." But Louis Pink advised Governor Dewey that the measure, which he said represented "the desire" of Mayor La Guardia, would "make the project immediately practicable." He added, "There will not be much building under this law immediately and if the amendments do not turn out as we
would like, there will be plenty of time to change them.” While symp-
thpathizing with liberals’ cautions, Governor Dewey concluded that
New York faced the issue of “housing or no housing” and signed the
measure.22

Moses was still arranging the fine print on the Metropolitan con-
tract when Ecker arbitrarily picked April 18, 1943, to unveil the
project. His timetable suddenly thrown off, Moses ordered his staff
to meet with the architects of Parkchester to rush the work. Moses
added his own planning particulars to correct what he considered
Metropolitan’s weakness for enclosed units and the “project” look.
These included: “Adequate setback of buildings so as not to blot
out and depress surrounding property. . . . Variation in height of
buildings so as to get away from a box-like institutional appearance
of most big developments of this kind. . . . Placing of the lower
buildings, if possible, around the borders and the higher ones inside.
I know this is unorthodox, but I think it is the right thing to do.”
Moses told his staff to write the Metropolitan contract to prohibit
the company from abrogating provisions, particularly payment of
back taxes no earlier than five years after construction, and to for-
bid “material changes” in the layout during the twenty-five-year tax
period. “This clause must be drafted with the greatest care so as to
answer the criticisms of those who say that the whole project might
be ruined by putting up additional buildings.” Moses wanted “pretty
strong” language to hold Metropolitan to that condition.23

Above all, Moses wanted speed. Although it was plainly impos-
sible, he expected the city to begin to vacate abandoned structures
in the gashouse district on August 1, with demolitions to start by
October 1. When Mayor La Guardia entertained a delay in City
Planning Commission hearings, Moses impatiently counseled him
that the banks and insurance companies were looking for the city to
maintain “business-like procedure.” “Projects like the Metropolitan
gather a certain momentum, and the thing to do is to keep them
going to a quick conclusion,” he reminded the mayor. Anything less
would open the field to the “radical housing boys, who don’t want
private capital hornning into their field.” Their questions about con-
stitutional authority and public benefit would derail the project. If
given the chance, Moses warned, they would stop it cold.24

On April 18, 1943, Mayor La Guardia and Frederick Ecker
unveiled the plans for Stuyvesant Town. The project for 24,000
middle-income occupants would encompass eighteen square blocks
across the Lower East Side. Sweeping away tenements long reserved
for the working class, it would change the social geography of the
Stuyvesant Town unveiled by the architects, 1943. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company’s redevelopment of the “gashouse district” on the East Side was applauded by proponents of private-sector investment in slum clearance. But the project’s dense high-rises, which cast shadows on the center oval, and inadequate provision for recreation space and community facilities disappointed planners. Metropolitan Life’s decision to build Stuyvesant Town for whites only scandalized liberals and helped touch off the post–World War II fair-housing movement. Courtesy of the Special Archive, Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority.

inner city. Its incentives toward the private sector would break the psychological logjam that kept corporations from investing in New York’s turbulent housing market. Its sheer audacity made Stuyvesant Town the jewel of Mayor La Guardia’s reconstruction program, and Moses’s bold plans for the gashouse district were proclaimed by urban experts as the model for revitalizing cities across the country.

The Walled City

Stuyvesant Town forced liberals to face the consequences of their talk about unleashing capital to rebuild the city. The point was hammered home that spring of 1943 by economists Alvin Hansen and Guy Greer, who made the rounds of New York civic groups to argue for large-scale endeavors. They told the Citizens Housing Council that renewal would require government subsidies to write down
the exorbitant cost of blighted real estate. They clinched their presentation with doleful statistics, collected by liberals themselves, on Manhattan’s stagnant property values and high foreclosure rates. Everyone agreed that government had to go to great lengths to lure private investment to save the city. With one stroke, Moses had engaged Metropolitan Life in the campaign.26

Although reformers accepted the private sector’s role, they worried about the side effects. Architect Robert C. Weinberg supported redevelopment, but criticized Metropolitan Life for failing to merge Stuyvesant Town into the City Planning Commission’s master plan. Sitting uneasily between 14th and 23rd streets, the project lacked clarity as a neighborhood unit and failed to provide schools and community facilities. Citizens Housing Council president Harold Buttenheim deplored the excessive floor coverage, which created a residential density that was higher than that of public housing. The transaction bothered some realtors as well. H. Robert Mandel objected to the “financial assistance and other benefits, not obtained by private developers,” and demanded that the city force Metropolitan to plow excess profits back into lower rents. Many questioned what Buttenheim called the “needless haste” with which the project was thrust on the City Planning Commission. Enraged by the “fascist” way in which Moses rammed Stuyvesant Town through city government, realtor Peter Grimm called the hearings a “travesty.”27

For many liberals, the last straw was Frederick Ecker’s offhand remark that Metropolitan Life planned Stuyvesant Town for whites. His words reflected the usual prerogatives of middle-income housing managers and the confidential understandings among the La Guardia administration, fiduciaries, and even some reformers that limited-dividends had to be able to choose their tenants. But Ecker blurted the news in mid-1943, when sentiments about the People’s War and racial justice had reached fervent levels. The Ethical Culture Society, the American Jewish Committee, and the Citizens Housing Council had already launched a City-Wide Citizens Committee on Harlem to examine ghetto conditions and debate strategies to dismantle Jim Crow. New York had taken tentative steps down the long road toward an interracial society. With his business-as-usual, Ecker spurned the moral message of the war.28

Deeply embarrassed, the creators of Stuyvesant Town preferred to dwell on New York’s economic future. Former Corporation Counsel Paul Windels dodged the discrimination charge by describing the project as a response to the erosion of real estate in the central city. Now head of the Regional Plan Association, he explained that
the question facing New York was, “How can we stop the [population] drift away from the city and maintain valuations in older areas?” The mayor, in whose name Moses and the others had acted, avoided talking about Jim Crow, but ventured that Ecker could not have meant what he said. Citizens Housing Council president Harold Buttenheim finally cornered La Guardia at City Hall and demanded an explanation. “Mayor La Guardia is quite concerned about the probability of a reactionary administration getting control of NYC the next election,” Buttenheim reported. “He urges a united action to provide full employment after the war by a combination of public and private effort.”

Moses kept emphasizing Stuyvesant Town’s impact on New York’s future, but he also secured high-powered legal help to defend the Metropolitan contract. He hired Assistant Corporation Counsel Evarts, who codrafted the Metropolitan agreement, as chief tactician for Metropolitan’s legal battery, which was headed by special counsel Samuel Seabury. A pillar of the New York bar and an anti-Tammany mugwump, Judge Seabury had been an imperturbable champion of racial minorities, a defender of beleaguered socialists, and the city’s leading proponent of municipal ownership. Now he fended off criticism of La Guardia’s franchise to a private corporation that included the right to turn away blacks.

United Tenants

The last hurdle for Metropolitan Life was the May 1943 Board of Estimate hearings on the grant of eminent domain. Despite Moses’s plan to squelch debate, representatives from the Citizens Housing Council, the Ethical Culture Society, the American Jewish Committee, social settlements, and the City-Wide Citizens Committee on Harlem berated the “walled” Jim Crow town. Attacks also came from small businessmen and property owners’ groups, infuriated by the company’s special privileges. But left-wing views were divided. The Socialist New Leader, for instance, accused Moses of railroad ing approval through the Board of Estimate. It worried about site families left “to forage for themselves when the property is condemned, forming new slums elsewhere.” Many radicals remained subdued. City Councilman Peter V. Cacchione, a Communist, voiced perfunctory skepticism, while the American Labor party simply urged “some provision” for site tenants. Among tenant groups, only the United
Tenants League and the Queensbridge Tenants League petitioned against the plan, and none testified from the public projects. United Tenants League secretary Catherine Masters asked the Board of Estimate “to persuade the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company to sit down with you and bring in the changes and improvements.” Worried that killing the project would jeopardize thousands of jobs, the CIO Industrial Trades Council said that Metropolitan Life should end its discriminatory policy.31

Preoccupied by the People’s War, the United Tenants League (UTL) gave large-scale redevelopment only glancing review. Although the UTL signed the Citizens Housing Council petition against the Stuyvesant Town contract, its president, Grace Aviles, refused to join liberals who rebuked Metropolitan Life’s plans to make amends by building another redevelopment in Harlem, the all-black Riverton. Far more important, amid the furor over the broad authority given Metropolitan Life, the UTL dropped long-standing qualifications to private-sector redevelopment. In September 1944, the UTL executive board proclaimed that “all progressive groups” could agree on a “united postwar housing program” for redevelopment of large inner-city areas. Given this consensus, the UTL saw no reason to antagonize the real estate industry. Old reformers must have been stunned to read the UTL board’s cavalier about-face: “This idea has even infiltrated the thinking of our most progressive and liberal organizations as a result of their concern with reducing the prices of slum property and not allowing the Government to be a ‘sucker’ for inflated slum property prices or the means of ‘bailing out’ slum property owners.” Because the UTL saw “redevelopment as a necessary instrument through which we will achieve an all-round housing program . . . , we cannot justifiably oppose Federal aid to urban redevelopement just because that aid is going to private industry.” The UTL would not question the city’s deal with the company.32

Even when redevelopment intruded on constituents, the United Tenants League remained above the fray. Days after eviction rumors raced across East 14th Street, the October 1944 UTL convention called on the Housing Authority to speed the Jacob Riis and Lillian Wald projects for refugees from Stuyvesant Town. The rank and file preferred to believe that tenants would be handled by expanded public housing. It would not look behind the corporate role. Praising the Hampton-Mitchell Law, the UTL convention reiterated, according to the account in the Daily Worker, “As part of the overall housing
program, encouragement should be given to private capital to invest in the field.” The *Worker* understandably added: “If private real estate owners and builders ignore this market, or fail to meet its demands, public housing can and must do the job.” But it reported the UTL’s confidence that “private capital will be prepared for the challenge.”

On the Stuyvesant Town site, tenants reacted in ways that would become ritual over the next twenty years. At first stunned, they denied the loss of their homes, then resented their betrayal, then groped for reassurance. A Stuyvesant Tenants League (affiliated with the UTL) was on the site to coordinate the response of local churches and community groups, but it was dominated by civic leaders willing to work toward the “very quiet exodus going on.” As the Stuyvesant chairwoman noted to city officials, “We want to initiate a campaign for moving expenses to be paid by the Met. and priority for these people on the Public Housing Projects lists.” The Stuyvesant Tenants League appealed to the city for fair play, particularly a gesture from Mayor La Guardia. When the mayor announced over WNYC that low-income tenants would be accommodated in public housing, the Stuyvesant Tenants League clung to the promise. The Community Service Society, which sent social workers to study rehousing needs, admired Metropolitan Life’s efforts at relocation. The company had contracted the task to Tenant Relocation Bureau, Inc., owned by realtor James Felt. Society observers praised Felt’s businesslike concern and added their imprimatur to the removals.

Site tenants expressed remarkably little anger, for people soon to lose their homes. They held no sit-protests and ran no cordon of baby carriages around City Hall. They had harsh words for Moses, but pointed no fingers at Mayor La Guardia. Their bitterness was undercut by the Stuyvesant Tenants League, closely advised by the United Tenants League. The Stuyvesant league remained conciliatory, admitting that “the pleading of the tenants’ case has been left up to [the company].” As the Stuyvesant secretary further explained, “Throughout all of our negotiations [for relocation housing], it has been our concern not to embarrass the city administration in any way. Our tenants have wished to demonstrate their feeling in this matter by a march on City Hall, but to date we have been able to restrain them.” It had been difficult, but they would avoid displays that might tarnish La Guardia. “Any demonstration that would be a matter of embarrassment to the Mayor would be a matter of deep regret to us.”
Civic Design

Moses’s plans encountered little disagreement from architectural and planning circles. Intimately familiar with his taste in redevelopment, many professionals sought to share its rewards. In late 1942, the Architectural League of New York and the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) sponsored a design competition expected to make “a serious contribution” to the redevelopment cause. They established a working relationship with Henry Bruère of the Bowery Savings Bank and the Regional Plan Association, who were gathering advice on rebuilding plans. Money came from the Bowery, with more expected from the New York Bank for Savings, New York Life, and Mutual of New York. Metropolitan Life’s favorite architects, Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, lent technical facilities. The first joint project focused on reconstruction of a 632-acre East Harlem district with something besides “the present gridiron plan,” which translated into a high-density, Parkchester-scale project north of 96th Street. Civic designers thereby hoped to mobilize “the vast pool of capital controlled by our great financial institutions.”

The Architectural League and New York AIA competition stimulated other clearance studies that were virtual anticipations of Stuyvesant Town. Among the first given peer approval were William Lescaze’s “Harlem Study” and Holden, McLaughlin & Associates’ “South of Canal Street Crossing.” Both called for massive clearance and highways for streams of automobiles. Lescaze carved superblocks north of Central Park, while trying “to discover if possible a means of continuing to provide facilities for the present residents.” Another study, by Morris Ketchum, suggested a cross-Manhattan tunnel at 34th Street. AIA referees endorsed the route, although they wondered about “the suburban shopper and the problem of what to do with her car.” Collectively, the submissions represented the best urban design at the height of the war. A June 1943 assessment by the New York AIA’s Committee on Civic Design concluded that no one was pursuing any better redevelopment studies than those represented by the contest entries, although it blamed the City Planning Commission for failing to undertake “constructive and coordinating ideas.” As for Stuyvesant Town, the New York AIA concluded “it should be considered water over the dam, but that we should attempt to investigate the probable effects of such enterprises on the surrounding neighborhood and on the future of the city.”

Months after the Metropolitan Life contract was approved by the Board of Estimate, the AIA’s Committee on Civic Design scru-
tinized Stuyvesant Town’s probable impact, but chose not to confront the project. “What kind of City do we want?” asked architect Jacob Moskowitz about the Stuyvesant Town “bargain.” “We have reached a stage in City growth that calls for a restatement of values and a taking of stock. Our growth has been toward bigness and congestion. . . . We have been pushing upwards unmindful of all consequences.” Uneasy about Moskowitz’s language, AIA colleague Robert C. Weinberg emphasized that although failure to conform to master plans was typical, the scale of Stuyvesant Town “magnifies all these questions.” Weinberg concluded it was time to demand a comprehensive land-use policy “officially recognized as a guide by all agencies involved in the development of New York.”

Most architects were more comfortable debating Stuyvesant Town as a planning lesson than as a moral crossroads. The AIA Committee on Civic Design called the project an “accomplished fact,” despite its “far-reaching consequences.” Stuyvesant Town’s 25,000 residents on fifty acres would burden neighbors for support facilities. But rather than denounce the density, the AIA committee saw the project as a useful model for planned neighborhood units. “Should we not determine,” the committee ventured, “whether the city should be developed in the direction of a group of integrated self-contained neighborhoods, new and old, preserving as far as possible existing communities like Greenwich Village, Chelsea and other historic neighborhoods?” The AIA could sanction the rearrangement of venerable districts as “self-contained neighborhoods,” which in places such as the Village opened the way for preservation by bulldozer. The AIA said nothing about the integrity of neighborhoods that lacked a worthy history. And, like Paul Windels of the Regional Plan Association, the critics kept their eyes on inner-city real estate values. Although they chided the city for going ahead with redevelopment without master plans, the civic designers could not deny Metropolitan Life’s good intentions.

Criticism mattered little, however, compared to the design profession’s readiness to rival Moses as rebuilders of New York. Holden, McLaughlin & Associates, apostles of small-scale, incremental change, joined the wartime binge for megablocks and superhighways. Deriding what it called the “overstressed ‘traffic flow’ aspect of city planning,” the firm published in the October 1943 Architectural Forum sketches of five cross-Manhattan expressways to rebuild “neighborhoods as organic parts of a living, growing city.” These included a double-decked South of Canal Crossing and an East Houston Crossing which would “consolidate the downtown residential
Holden, McLaughlin & Associates' proposed redevelopment of East Harlem, 1943. Leading architects vied with Robert Moses to suggest fanciful slum clearance for postwar New York, including this thirty-two-block redevelopment between the Harlem River Drive and Central Park at East 96th Street. The slabs surrounded by green space and sinuous arterial roads were typical of the modernism they thought Manhattan deserved. The planners also favored a low-rent portion further north, but did not include it in the sketch. Reprinted from *Architectural Forum*, October 1943.

district” and transform abutting property into parks and residences. For mid-Manhattan they proposed a Theatrical Loop Crossway on a shelf along 53rd Street between Fifth Avenue and the Hudson River, with access ramps and parking facilities, and an East Midtown Crossway connecting with the Queens-Midtown Tunnel. Holden, McLaughlin’s last idea, which *Architectural Forum* showcased, was for East Harlem: a 98th Street Crossway that curved from the East River Drive to a “worthy plaza terminus” at Park Avenue.40

With East Harlem, Arthur Holden cast aside his ideas for pooling equities for massive clearance by powerful authority. According to the firm’s research, the thirty-two-block district was a poverty zone, where 9,921 tenants paid an average of $23 in monthly rent. But if Park Avenue were turned east to the Harlem River Drive, the shift would link “the better class residential sections of the Bronx and Manhattan’s most desirable residential center.” By bringing the “‘greenbelt’ into the heart of the city,” Holden, McLaughlin anticipated construction of 9,240 new apartments with an average rent
of $76. Defensive about the high rents for a quasi-public endeavor, Holden claimed the redeveloper would set aside 20 percent of the units for low-rent housing. The scheme, which was more disruptive than any Moses ever proposed, was accompanied by an appeal to colleagues to plan for “the city as a whole.”

The project that William Lescaze developed in partnership with realtor James Felt was equally grandiose. On twelve square blocks north of Central Park, Lescaze envisioned wholesale removal of existing tenements for “superbuildings” surrounded by highways. Lescaze also emphasized the importance of planning to meet “human needs.” His drawings, however, looked like an attempt to clear human obstacles from traffic generated by Moses’s Triborough Bridge. As pillars of the New York AIA, Holden and Lescaze led the design group toward an imaginative response to urban redevelopment, but their sensibilities betrayed an affinity for the Moses style. Despite all the doubts among professional planners about the direction of Moses’s urbanism, few disagreed with his overall vision.

Housing reformers recognized what Stuyvesant Town signified for the inner city. During May 1944 “Housing Week” celebrations, Charles Abrams warned about business that “assumes the function of a body politic without being responsible for the social obligations to which a body politic is subject.” A year later, after unsuccessful legal challenges by Abrams and others against the Stuyvesant Town contract, the Citizens Housing and Planning Council (Planning was added during the war) still grappled with redevelopment. Social worker Loula D. Lasker and realtor Charles G. Dailey agreed “that the problem of displaced tenants would become much more acute after the war,” with Stuyvesant Town pointing “to what is ahead.” They urged the Citizens Housing and Planning Council (CHPC) to recommend policies to lessen hardship. On this occasion, Grace Aviles of the United Tenants League discounted the liberals’ fears with arguments remarkably similar to those of Robert Moses. She announced that the UTL favored enlarging the supply of low-rent units through government-aided rehabilitation of tenements and an increased income limit in public projects “until private enterprise fills the gap.” In April of 1945, CHPC executive Harold Buttenheim tried to arrange a conference with the UTL and welfare groups to explore redevelopment’s impact on tenant relocation. The conference never took place, perhaps because tenants still did not give relocation their highest priority.
Self-Relocation

Stuyvesant Town was an enormous undertaking but was only part of the postwar work under Moses's review. He saw the 14th Street project as clearance that would ripple across the East Side. In late 1944, he named George Spargo coordinator of Stuyvesant Town removals. Spargo had no idea where site tenants would go and made the mistake of indulging local realtors, who sought to pry open abandoned rookeries. Moses would have none of it. Housing reformers would get on his back, screaming that he was shoving people into slums. Despite the fact that Stuyvesant Town would add to the tenant load expected from cleared public housing sites, he ordered Spargo to find enough New Law flats or rehabilitated Old Law units. Although he recognized the problem of accommodating 11,000 site tenants, Moses knew Metropolitan Life would work out the "adjustment." 44

On January 17, 1945, tenants on sections of the Stuyvesant Town site were warned to vacate by summer. James Felt's Tenant Relocation Bureau kept a deliberate pace, eventually listing 3,000 apartments. Spargo was optimistic that most tenants would get housing if they took advantage of Felt's service. Spargo was further impressed by the applicants who "indicated that they wanted better quarters and would pay more for them. . . . There is still some ambition in this part of the East Side." 45

That was all Moses wanted to hear. When Mayor La Guardia was bothered by a flurry of belated protests, Moses described the extra effort being made for families still on the site. Not only did James Felt employ women interviewers fluent in several languages, he told the mayor, but his staff "takes families around in a station wagon without cost to examine new apartments." Nevertheless, although Felt's bureau listed several thousand apartments, only thirty-three tenants were housed through his agency. When site protests again unnerved the mayor, Moses had Metropolitan announce that tenants "need have no fear of being put on the street." Moses dismissed the noise, reminding the mayor, "if we hope to employ the building trades promptly after the war, we must clear the sites where they are to operate." 46

Moses was ready for hard measures. In mid-March of 1945, he complained to Frederick Ecker's son, a Metropolitan vice-president, that relocation had bogged down from "lack of drive, unified responsibility, ingenuity and understanding of public relations." Young Ecker replied that Metropolitan had worked responsibly with James
Felt, but an inspection by Harold Klorfein, Moses's expert on relocation at the Park Department, told a different story. Klorfein found that Felt could not do much for tenants who could not afford more than $10 per room or for those who could afford to pay more but found nothing suitable. Klorfein concluded it was time to apply real pressure. "Start spot demolition," he advised. "This brings home to tenants of nearby buildings the urgency of relocating." He reminded Moses that the Park Department used the technique "with considerable success." 47

When Stuyvesant Town removals ended in late 1945, officials looked back at an operation that cost next to nothing because most site tenants had moved themselves. Metropolitan Life estimated that Felt's direct expenses came to $172,000, or $57.30 per household. Stuyvesant Town was a triumph in what housing experts soon called "self-relocation." Whether their move was spurred by individual ambition, phased notices to vacate, or spot demolitions, tenants got out and found shelter somewhere. Moses soon boasted that the Stuyvesant Town experience was "put to good use in the removal of tenants from the path of various public improvements." 48

The immediate application was on the crushing relocations at other public housing sites on the Lower East Side. James Felt's office had managed the Lillian Wald site for the Housing Authority and completed property assembly for the Jacob Riis project. The authority was so pleased with the job that it wanted to extend Felt's contract to the James Weldon Johnson site in Harlem. Moses's staffers, in fact, hoped to convince Mayor La Guardia to give Felt the contract for Housing Authority relocations across the city. Moses wrote to La Guardia that "in relocating the tenants of Stuyvesant Town and Riverton, Mr. Felt built up a magnificent organization of interviewers and apartment inspectors," which would save the authority "a great deal of money." 49

The judgment that 11,000 had been moved without difficulty explained Moses's denial of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council's prediction of a shortage of relocation housing. "I am personally completely convinced," he said, "that there are plenty of vacant apartments, it is true, in pretty poor areas, which can be fixed up at comparatively little expense, to serve temporarily for homes for displaced tenants in public housing areas." Housing Authority chairman Edmond Borgia Butler joined Moses in blaming the state for delays in clearing the James Weldon Johnson site. Moses insisted that the state pick up the relocation cost for public housing sites, particularly the expense of site offices, referral lists, and tenement rehabilita-
tion. Moses proclaimed the job could be done—as long as Governor Dewey provided the subsidies. When the Housing Authority finally took title to the James Weldon Johnson site on September 14, 1945, 982 families remained. “The indications are that apartments will be found for all the residents,” the authority claimed, adding to the optimism about speedy and orderly removals.50

Experts on urban affairs recognized that Metropolitan Life’s engagement with redevelopment was a turning point for American cities. But for Moses, Stuyvesant Town established the New York approach. The wrangling with Frederick Ecker settled nearly all the elements that would make Moses-style redevelopment possible: secret negotiations that matched a private developer with a choice site, generous leeway regarding the pace of clearance, removal of supervision by pestering city agencies (particularly the City Planning Commission), and Moses’s indispensable role as coordinator. All of this was accomplished during Fiorello La Guardia’s last mayoral term, and by any measure Stuyvesant Town must be regarded as his most important legacy to postwar New York. The La Guardia administration worked closely with liberal Democrats anxious to tailor redevelopment legislation to the needs of private investment. When La Guardia and liberal Democrats failed to meet capitalists’ finicky demands, they tried again until they got it right. The Redevelopment Companies Law of 1943 was not perfect by their standards. They regarded the $15 rent ceiling, a legacy of the philanthropic sense of the 1920s, as an annoyance, and redevelopers never liked the notion of relocating tenants from bulldozed tracts even as they applied for the eminent domain that made the bulldozing possible. But compensating factors emerged, such as the readiness of specialty firms to subcontract relocations and the prospective enlargement of public housing during the war, both of which seemed to settle worries of where the displaced would go.

This last of Moses’s achievements proved the most crucial, because it brought peace of mind to the victims of large-scale clearance. Redevelopers talked glibly of opening space for Stuyvesant Town refugees in Housing Authority projects that had already been earmarked for the displaced from those sites, as well as for those on the Authority’s waiting list, which had swelled to more than 100,000 applicants. Redevelopers made special claims on public housing, a derangement of the system that Moses would soon practice when Title I necessitated. So would the left wing. At times, good “progressives” talked about expanding the public projects as if they were the
residential quarters of the ordnance plants they glorified during the war. But most of the time, they talked as if rebuilding the city were a matter of shifting tenants from one project to another. Like the Grand Remover, they would find the units.