

Safe and Sanitary Without the Costly Frills: The Evolution of Public Housing in Philadelphia, 1929-1941

IN THE late 1950s and early 1960s, commentators on the city, such as Lee Rainwater, Jane Jacobs, and Herbert Gans, denounced America's urban public housing as "federally built, and supported slums." The architecturally sterile and unkempt brick hulks brooding in the shadows of almost every inner city were doubly scored by the critics as vile sink holes "of pathological human behavior," and "dumping grounds" for segregated minorities.¹

Public housing in America was doomed, its fate sealed in several centuries of panegyric, rhetoric, and legal exposition extolling and defending the sanctity of individual property rights. The cost and quality of urban housing was determined by land value, population density, and the relative distribution of income, not the satisfaction of pressing societal needs. This study is an effort to probe the murky ideological corners of public housing and cast light on the intellectual stresses and flaws which precluded the ideal of "decent housing for all."

Paradoxically, the housing projects of the late thirties were the offspring of once visionary ideas inseminated in the springtime of the New Deal. It is the contention of this study that much of the failure of the New Deal housing effort can be traced to the confluence in the 1930s of two disparate streams of housing thought: the professional and the communitarian. By focusing on the failure of the New Deal housing reformers to resolve the conflict in these two philosophies, this paper will describe the emergence in Phila-

¹ Herbert Gans, "City Planning in America: A Sociological Analysis," in *People and Plans: Essays on Urban Problems and Solutions* (New York, 1968), 60-61; also Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Family Life in a Federal Slum* (Chicago, 1970); Charles Abrams, *The City is the Frontier* (New York, 1965), 19-53.

delphia by 1941 of a mongrelized housing policy which preferred a nebulous social goal, and posited, as its only clear objective, the destruction of the slum.

The "professional" housers emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when, as part of the "Progressive Era," a crusade against the slum was waged by settlement workers, journalists like Jacob Riis, and bureaucratic-minded health officers and housing experts such as Lawrence Veiller in New York, John Ihlder in Washington, D. C., and Bernard Newman in Philadelphia. The second stream, dubbed here as "communitarian," issued from the city planning movement which was inspired in the late nineteenth century by the Chicago Columbian Exposition and the publication in 1898 of *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, written by the inventive court stenographer Ebenezer Howard. More visionary than the professionals, the "communitarians" called for the mass rehousing of ill-housed urban Americans in well-planned neighborhoods.²

Unlike communitarians, professional housers treated every aspect of the urban malaise, particularly the housing crisis, as an outgrowth of the slum corrosion. Out of the barrage of evidence detailing the horrors of the nineteenth-century slum, reformers constructed a simple environmentalism; slums, they averred, contaminated the cityscape with crime, vice, poverty, disease and other defilements. Therefore, bettering the housing of the slum dweller would aid both sanitary and social control, and strengthen the normal bonds of an increasingly fragmented city.³

By World War I these bureaucratic-minded progressives had organized an efficiency-based attack on the slum. While Jacob Riis and many settlement workers perceived better housing as one part of a broad "neighborhood reconstruction," professional housers viewed tenement reform as the key to urban social regeneration. The main stratagem of their campaign called for pushing city and

² On "professional housers" as bureaucratic-minded, see Roy Lubove, *The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890-1917* (Pittsburgh, 1962); on "communitarians," see Roy Lubove, "New Cities for Old: The Urban Reconstruction Program of the 1930s," *The Social Studies*, LIII (November, 1962), 203-206.

³ John Sutherland and Allen Davis, "Reform and Uplift among Philadelphia Negroes: The Diary of Helen Parish, 1888," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XCIV (1970), 496-517.

state legislatures to enact Draconian tenement house laws matched by equally rigorous health ordinances and building codes. Lawrence Veiller, author of the exemplary New York Tenement House Law of 1901 and founder in 1906 of the National Housing Association, led this housing movement well into the twenties. Professional housers like Veiller and Newman scientifically gathered and processed reams of data on city demographic trends, industrial activity, health, sanitation, housing developments and home mortgages.⁴

While professional housers postulated that the main object of any housing program must be the eradication of the slum, until the depression most "housers" like Ihlder, Veiller, and Newman assailed proposals for public housing. Newman believed that, if properly policed, the small builder could supply good housing for the working class; he referred the benighted poor to such organizations as the Whittier Center Housing Corporation or the Octavia Hill Society, whose well-managed, limited-dividend rental units afforded models for good but inexpensive housing.⁵

While communitarians such as Henry Wright, Catherine Bauer, Carol Aronovici and Edith Elmer Wood villified the slum with the same rancor as Veiller professionals, they differed on their outlook for dealing with the problem. The communitarian position, which unfolded in the first quarter of the twentieth century, believed with Emile Durkheim, Charles Cooley, and Robert Park, that urbanization and industrialism had shattered the community structure of the city and spawned in its place a vitiating alienation. But the communitarians also assumed with Simon Patten that the age of rampant industrialization had ended. Planners in the twenties likewise discerned an urban population decline, which presaged a trend toward natural decongestion. This trend, according to Henry Wright,

⁴ Lubove, *Progressives and the Slums*; Newman correspondence in the Papers of the Housing Association of the Delaware Valley, Temple Urban Archives, Temple University, Philadelphia (hereinafter, HAP).

⁵ At the National Housing Conference held in Philadelphia in April, 1929, Newman expressed opposition to government aid in the form of subsidies for low-income housing, and stressed that "only through the education of the builder and his financial backers to the greater profits in lower sales prices can the low-income family be decently housed." *American City*, XL (April, 1929), 103; Lawrence Veiller, "How Cities Can Get Rid of Their Slums," *ibid.*, 101-102; Harry Moul, *The Work of the Whittier Center, 1893-1927* (Philadelphia, 1927), found in HAP.

the famous architect and co-planner with Clarence Stein of Radburn, New Jersey, heralded the long-awaited scrapping of artificial property values in slums and the dispersal of crowded populations into planned satellite communities. These would be motor-age towns utilizing the power technologies of electricity and the internal combustion engine to create what Lewis Mumford proclaimed as a new cooperative social order.⁶

The communiterians accented wholesale neighborhood planning. Faithful to the tenets of the German *bauhaus* school, modern housing advocates proposed to rehouse urban workers in super-blocks, large neighborhood complexes where functionally designed multiple dwellings were harmoniously grouped on artistically landscaped sites. These packaged environments aspired to restore the array of primary group contacts abraded in the whirl of nineteenth-century industrialism.⁷ Communiterians abjured the professionals' zeal for slum clearance. In their eyes the preoccupation with slums deflected attention from the primary task of better housing and achieved, in the words of the communiterian architect Henry S. Churchill, nothing more than "a mere facial uplift."⁸

With the creation in June, 1933, of the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration (PWA), housers of both persuasions believed they were heralding the dawn of a new age in urban housing, especially when Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior and Public Works Administrator, appointed as Housing Administrator Robert D. Kohn, chairman of the American Institute of Architects' Subcommittee on Housing. Kohn, a respected proponent of modern housing, now disbursed \$125,000,000 in federal monies "for the construction, alteration and repair . . . of low-cost housing and slum clearance projects." Imaginations soared.⁹

⁶ Among the housers described here as communiterian are such architect-planners and social thinkers as Henry Wright, Clarence Stein, Clarence Perry, Russell Van Nest Black, Carol Aronovici, Catherine Bauer, Edith Elmer Wood and Lewis Mumford. Henry Wright, "Sinking Slums," *Survey Graphic*, XXII (Aug. 1, 1933), 418-419. Edith Elmer Wood, "A Nation Scrapping its Slums," *Survey* (March, 1932), 668-669; Lubove, "New Cities for Old," 205-206.

⁷ Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (Boston, 1934), xv-xvii, 218-219.

⁸ Henry S. Churchill, "No Mere Facial Uplift Can Cure the Wrinkles of Our Cities," *American City*, L (June, 1935), 55.

⁹ Loula D. Lasker, "The Chance to Rebuild the U.S.A.," *Survey* (August, 1933), 420-421; on the creation of the National Public Housing Conference see Clarke A. Chambers, *Seedtime*

Dazzled by the vision of sweeping urban transformation, Philadelphia architects, planners, and housers worked overtime drawing blueprints for limited-dividend housing. The twelve proposals submitted to Washington suggest that Philadelphia planners were overwhelmed by the opportunities of modern housing. Plans for the Earlington, Pennypack Creek, Hill Creek, and Carl Mackley homes epitomized the latest in modern design. Most featured child-centered garden communities, attractively clustered two- or three-story apartment buildings arranged on traffic-free super-blocks with curvilinear streets, secondary systems of paths and lanes, and protected play areas.¹⁰

The only limited-dividend project built in Philadelphia was the thoroughly modern Carl Mackley homes sponsored by the hosiery workers union. In the Mackley project, four apartment buildings encompassing 284 units were masterfully articulated on four and a half verdant acres overlooking Juniata Park. The Mackley homes emphasized cooperative group life. A community swimming pool graced a setting of tidy flower gardens and sloping lawns. A wading pool and a nursery school benefitted both children and working mothers, and all tenants enjoyed an auditorium, recreation rooms, hobby workshops, cooperative gas station, parking garage, and grocery store.¹¹

The Mackley project stirred considerable enthusiasm in Philadelphia. Fired by the prospect of hundreds of Mackley-type projects, Philadelphia's socialist-tinged labor leadership under the tutelage of

of Reform, American Social Service and Social Action, 1918-1933 (Ann Arbor, 1967), 137; memorandum, Mary Simkhovitch to FDR, Jan. 27, 1934, in President's Official File (OF) 63, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL); Lawrence M. Friedman, *Government and Slum Housing: A Century of Frustration* (Chicago, 1968), 98-101.

¹⁰ On the Housing Division's limited-dividend program, see the following project submissions and correspondence: J. A. MacCallum to Victor Abel, Nov. 8, 1933; and Russell Van Nest Black to Robert D. Kohn, Sept. 9, 1933, approving "Proposed Low-Cost Housing Project of Hill Creek Home Inc.," in Record Group (RG), 196, file H-3000, Housing Division Records (HDR), National Archives (NA).

¹¹ Oscar Stonorov, a Russian-born architect, designed the Mackley Houses. The project was directed and then managed by William Jeanes, a Quaker who upon graduating from Harvard in 1931 visited Scandinavia and became enchanted with cooperative housing experiments. See PWA Press Release, No. 3052, Dec. 7, 1936, in RG 196, "Miscellaneous Materials-Carl Mackley Housing," File H-1, HDR, NA.

Catherine Bauer created in 1934 the Labor Housing Conference (LHC), a body Newman tagged as "the radical labor group." The LHC pressed the New Deal for a "real housing program" which would offer employment and perhaps encourage Mackley-type housing throughout America.¹²

Bauer and her fellow radicals drew much of the inspiration for their modern housing schemes from Europe. Anxious to learn more from Europe's experience with government-aided housing, the recently formed National Association of Housing Officials in the spring of 1934 invited to America three prominent European experts. Led by Sir Raymond Unwin, an esteemed British architect and past president of the International Federation of Housing, the Europeans toured Philadelphia and a dozen other cities.¹³

Interest in modern housing mounted during the Unwin tour, then peaked in late October at the NAHO-sponsored Baltimore Housing Conference. There, the three Europeans shared their recommendations for a permanent urban housing program. Their report gratified communitarian and professional alike. Public housing, they declared, "should be large-scale in which every effort . . . was made to reduce the cost of dwelling construction through care in design and purchase of materials." But, affirmed the experts, new housing must be closely related to slum clearance, and only heavy government subsidies could recoup the great expense of demolishing acres of tottering slums.¹⁴

In the glow of the Unwin trip, housers of all shades of opinion beheld the vision of resettling the proletariat in biotechnically sound housing. Even Philadelphia's Bernard Newman, while too pragmatic to entertain the Mumford-Bauer ideal of *neuva communitas* and always skeptical of government housing, was converted to the

¹² See, "A Statement on the Housing Situation in Philadelphia: Excerpts from a Petition Submitted to the Pennsylvania State Planning Board by the Philadelphia Labor Committee," Aug. 31, 1934, HAP; Newman referred to the LHC as the "radical labor group" in a letter to Carol Aronovici, July 10, 1934, HAP.

¹³ Ray Miller, Mayor of Cleveland, to FDR, June 16, 1933, enclosing "Resolution" calling conference, and tentative program, in OF 63, FDRL; Bernard Newman to Col. Horatio Hackett, Sept. 26, 1934, RG 196, HDR, NA.

¹⁴ "Summary of Report on the American Housing Program Drafted by the European Authorities," Oct. 24, 1934, in OF 63, Box 2, FDRL.

idea of large-scale public housing, especially the limited-dividend type.¹⁵

Consequently, Newman was exasperated in mid-1934 when the Housing Division terminated its much publicized limited-dividend program and placed greater emphasis on slum removal. Moreover, he was embittered at Kohn for surrounding himself with a staff of lawyers and architects who were novices to housing, rather than with experts like himself. So he went to Washington on June 26, 1934, to inspect the New Deal housing agency. On returning, he typed out a stinging four-page rebuke of the Housing Division entitled "How to Stall." His fusilade appeared just as Ickes was replacing architect Kohn with a new division head, Horatio Hackett, a military man, an authority on skyscrapers but not housing, the type of bureaucrat Newman disdained as a "library specialist."

"How to Stall" revealed the disillusionment of professionals like Newman who had been momentarily enthralled by the New Deal's promise of a grand limited-dividend housing program. Newman bitterly accused Ickes and the Division of capitulating to greedy realtors, jerry builders, and banking interests. He particularly scored the Division's recently unveiled slum clearance plans as too costly and as unabashedly rescuing the slum-lord while ignoring the objectives of sparking employment in the building trades and housing the ill-housed. Yet, in Newman's eyes, the Division's main shortcoming was its failure to formulate a comprehensive housing program. Writing to Ickes in early 1935, Newman stressed that the PWA had "not overemphasized the importance of slum clearance. Personally I feel that the amount allotted should be greatly increased. But," he added, "as important as slum clearance work is, it should not be allowed to be the sole contribution to better housing. . . ."¹⁶

The communitarian vision of modern housing was dimming by early 1935. Roosevelt and the New Deal backed away from experi-

¹⁵ Newman to S. Davis Wilson, July 14, 1933, HAP.

¹⁶ Transcript of conference with Hackett, June 26, 1934, HAP; Newman to Frank Walker, May 4, 1934, enclosing copy of "How to Stall on Federal Housing Program," RG 196, File H-3000 09, HDR, NA; "Public Statement on the Abolishment of the Housing Division and the Passage of the National Housing Act," submitted by the Labor Housing Conference, the Housing Study Guild, and the Federation of Architects, Engineers and Chemists, June 25, 1934, HAP; Newman to Aronovici, July 20, 1934, HAP.

ments with cooperative, collectivistic democracy and moved toward a more forthrightly progressive-professional alignment. Ickes' Housing Division previewed its new colors when on the eve of Newman's visit in June, 1934, it released \$144,000,000 slated primarily for slum clearance and secondarily for the construction of demonstration projects in selected cities. To assure that projects accorded with the community's long-range social and physical planning, Ickes created citizens' advisory committees in cities like Philadelphia which did not have local housing authorities. Philadelphia's twelve-member Advisory Committee on Housing included the usual agglomeration of businessmen, educators, and civic dignitaries. Newman, whom Ickes at first rejected as "having a definite opinion on the subject," was recruited as secretary.¹⁷

At its first meeting, held on October 31, 1934, in the offices of the Philadelphia Housing Association, the Advisory Committee identified slum clearance as its foremost mission and promptly designated several sites for renewal, specifically the excrescent slums adjoining historic Old Swedes Church in the city's Southwark area. The committee earmarked \$4,500,000 for the project to bulldoze the twenty-two acre slum and build more than 700 units of demonstration housing for white residents. Subsequent meetings involved futile haggling over where to locate a project for black residents.¹⁸

Black or white, the target was the slum. In 1935, numerous Philadelphia organizations, settlements, the Chamber of Commerce and Real Estate Boards all demanded a full-scale assault on urban blight. Most of this support was based on empirical concerns. Municipal leaders recognized that slums exacted enormous costs in health, crime, and welfare charges from the city. Slum tax income was disproportionately low, while tax delinquency remained astoundingly high; and finally, and most important, European and American experience indicated that slum clearance followed by the

¹⁷ James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York, 1956), 220-226; A. R. Clas, to Executive Director of the National Emergency Council, Oct. 14, 1935, RG 48, Records of the Secretary of the Interior, Central Classified Files, File 1-296, NA; on the PACH, see Harold Ickes to W. Logan MacCoy, May 4, 1934, RG 48 Central Classified Files, file 1-276, NA.

¹⁸ See Minutes of meeting of Philadelphia Advisory Committee on Housing (hereinafter PACH Minutes), Oct. 31, 1934, RG 196, File H-3000.703, HDR, NA. The problem of Negro sites was discussed in Hackett to Newman, Mar. 15, 1935, *ibid.*

building of large, protected low-cost housing projects would rescue endangered land values.¹⁹

The depression seared the slum into Philadelphia's consciousness. During 1934 and 1935, the Civil Works Administration conducted a *Philadelphia Real Property Inventory* and made available volumes of statistics on slum densities, housing which lacked basic sanitary facilities, and housing unsafe for habitation. By transforming this hard data into soft poignant vignettes of renters terrified by groaning main beams and crackling plaster, organizations like the Philadelphia Housing Association kept the muck of the slum peril well raked. But neither horror stories nor photographs of feces caked water closets arrested the city's attention as much as the fiery collapse on December 15, 1936, of two ramshackle band-box tenements in South Philadelphia.²⁰

The tragedy generated an outpouring of letters and petitions from settlements, the newly formed Tenants' League, and other civic groups imploring Washington to establish a permanent housing program. The main object around which the storm of activity swirled was the slum. By 1937, the obsession with the slum had shifted attention from the restructuring of urban communities toward the rehousing of the lowest income slum families and the provision of minimal shelter needs.²¹

Reconciling the architect-planner's penchant for modern housing with the amorphous standard of minimal housing needs enmeshed the New Deal in a scholastic quagmire. On the one hand, New Deal housers insisted that the PWA demonstration projects afforded "adequate open areas" and provided "the fundamentals of good clean living . . . without extravagances." Accordingly, Housing Division guidelines prescribed skillfully grouped, functionally de-

¹⁹ On support for slum clearance, see Helen Alfred, "The Challenge of the Slums," *Hygeia* (February, 1935), 122-127; Newman to John J. Cuerin, July 13, 1935, HAP; Karl Scholz, "Sources of Revenue to Finance Low-Rent Housing," an address before the Annual Meeting of the Philadelphia Housing Association, Mar. 29, 1937, Ihlder Papers, Box 42, FDRL.

²⁰ "Fire Hazards," press release of the Philadelphia Housing Association, Sept. 20, 1934, HAP; on the bandbox collapse, see John F. Bauman, "The New Deal and Negro Housing," *Pennsylvania History*, XLI (1974), 328-329.

²¹ S. Davis Wilson to Arthur Dubois, Feb. 14, 1936, RG 196, File H-3000.2, HDR, NA; a petition calling for the razing of "all slums and blighted areas" in Philadelphia, submitted at City Hall hearing, Dec. 31, 1936, HAP; Tenants' League flyer, "Join-To Help! Our Own One Third of a Nation!," HAP.

signed, neighborhood units. On the other hand, this apparent affinity for modern housing competed for luminance with the Division's vendetta against the slum; the outcome left public housing all but shorn of its social underpinnings. Division spokesmen promoted the fiscal as opposed to the social beneficence of super-block units. Arthur DuBois, the Philadelphia District Manager of the Housing Division, argued forcefully that massive, well-designed projects "created a nucleus in the slum and blighted district . . . [that served] as a spreading point for the regeneration of valuable and intensely developed districts in the heart of our cities."²²

DuBois' words spotlighted the Division's vainglorious effort to fuse the modern housing principles of the communiterians with the slum clearance gospel of the professional. The merger failed; government housing was already jumbled into a hodge-podge of agencies, including the Home Loan Bank, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, and the Federal Housing Administration; and all these agencies purveyed distinctive nostrums for ill-housed America. Secondly, the plan misfired because meshing housing and slum clearance forced the Division to explain every venture in the idiom of slum clearance. Division literature bristled with burglars and murderers whose twisted psyches "were to a large degree formed in childhoods spent in the slums." Not only would slum clearance check incipient crime, but, to unravel the Division's logic, it girded the city against tuberculosis, influenza, and other slum predators.²³

The rationale dictated that housing projects engender the extinction of the most sinister slums. Time and again, however, the Division's efforts to achieve this objective in Philadelphia produced only anomaly. Court decisions in 1935 forbade the Division from condemning land for housing purposes, and, to make matters worse, housing funds were always elusive. In December, 1934, \$110,000,000 of the \$150,000,000 allotted for PWA housing was diverted to relief, and when \$390,000,000 in funds were restored in June, 1935,

²² Arthur Dubois, a report to FEA of PW, Housing Division, n.d., RG 44, Box 377, NA; on conflict, see "Foreward" to symposium on Legal Foundation of American Housing Program, in *Law and Contemporary Problems*, I (March, 1934), 135-136; Merlo Pusey, "Our Housing Hodge-Podge," *Harpers*, 173 (January, 1936), 60-61.

²³ *Philadelphia Real Property Inventory*, "Release," Feb. 12, 1937, Bulletin, 49, "Crime and the Housing Situation," RG 196, Box 222, H-3000.3, HDR.

Roosevelt promptly slashed them by more than \$250,000,000 and ordered the Division to restrict its operations to swiftly executed projects on readily acquired land. As a result, decaying slum sites, such as the Old Swedes church area which required costly and time-consuming land acquisition, had to be ignored.

The city gawked in January, 1936, when a federal housing administration dedicated to slum clearance was forced by scarce funds and the inability to condemn land to break ground for Philadelphia's lone demonstration project in northeast Philadelphia—far from the slums. This Hill Creek project, which opened for occupancy in 1937, represented neither slum clearance nor, because high construction costs forced up the rent charge, true low-cost housing.²⁴

Certain clear assumptions emerged by mid-1937 as the Wagner-Steagall Act, designed to establish a permanent housing program, made its way through Congress. First, conquering the slum and its evils stood out as the main objective of an urban housing program. Secondly, prevailing wisdom argued that the government should dismiss as chimerical the vision of housing workers in functionally designed modern communities.²⁵

On September 1, 1937, Roosevelt signed into law the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act, founding the United States Housing Agency which would oversee the nation's first permanent housing program. Congress empowered the USHA to make loans to local authorities for up to 90 per cent of the cost of municipal slum clearance and housing projects.²⁶ The Pennsylvania legislature, eyeing millions in federal funds, expedited legislation enabling municipalities to create housing authorities. By mid-September, 1937, the Philadelphia City Council had formed a city housing authority.²⁷

²⁴ Minutes of Special Meeting of PACH, May 9, 1935, HAP, also A. R. Clas to J. Hampton Moore, June 15, 1935, HAP; A. R. Clas to DuBois, Mar. 21, 1936, in RG 196, File 3001.09, HDR, NA; on Hill Creek site see N-wman to Clas, July 25, 1935, RG 196, File H-3000 (2), *ibid.*

²⁵ Testimony of Helen Alfred, U.S. Senate, Committee on Education and Labor Hearings on S 4424, "Bill to Provide Financial Assistance to the States and Political Subdivisions for the Elimination of Unsafe and Insanitary Housing Conditions . . . and the Stimulation of Business Activity to Create a U.S. Housing Authority and For Other Purposes," 74th Congress, 2nd Sess., Apr. 20-29, 1935, pp. 132-133.

²⁶ Timothy McDonnell, S. F., *The Wagner Housing Act* (Chicago, 1937).

²⁷ *Journal of City Council*, Aug. 26, 1937; and "Progress by Local and State Agencies," National Association of Housing Officials, *Housing Yearbook* (Chicago, 1938), 106-107.

This Authority was composed of prominent Philadelphians who wished to clear slums and rehouse the lowest income group without threatening the private real estate market. The assumption that a declining urban population reduced the demand for poor housing, coupled with the understanding that public housing environments would snuff out crime and disease, strengthened the case that slum clearance would boost the sagging urban tax structure, curb the spread of blight, and raise real estate values.²⁸

All of these empirically-based assumptions about slum clearance and housing were expressed in policies regarding tenant selection, site selection, and project design. Since the Authority intended to rehabilitate the city socially and economically, selecting worthy tenants for the new housing was crucial. While the USHA earmarked public units for the lowest-income sector, this did not preclude an intricate scoring system from selecting tenants with ample redeeming qualities. The system, which was developed to test objectively "housing need," in effect blatantly favored, to use the Authority's words, "working adult(s) known to have regularly lived as an inherent part of a family group whose earnings are an integral part of the family income. . . ."²⁹

Although not a member of the Authority, Bernard Newman chaired the Authority's Subcommittee on Sites, and fought intrepidly to have projects located on slum sites rather than vacant lots. Much to Newman's chagrin, the federal strictures against building on sites under fifteen acres, and costing over \$1.50 per square foot, forced the Authority to erect two of its first three projects, the James Weldon Johnson and Tasker homes, on vacant land. While only the Richard Allen site required extensive slum clearance, all three projects were located in the inner city, and all served the Authority's policy of social and sanitary control. In addition, all three satisfied the Authority's mandate that projects

²⁸ "Report of the Philadelphia Housing Authority to its Advisory Staff," July 6, 1938, HAP; Newman to H. A. Gray, Oct. 13, 1937, HAP, Philadelphia Housing Authority Minutes (hereinafter HA Minutes), Mar. 11, 1939, found in Philadelphia Housing Authority offices, Philadelphia

²⁹ A sketch of the various Authority policies is found in a press release, Philadelphia Housing Authority, "Public Housing Under the Philadelphia Housing Authority," Apr. 28 1939, HAP; USHA, Bulletin, No. 22, "Initial Steps in Tenant Selection," RG 196, Bulletins on Policy and Procedure, HDR. NA.

have a "positive impact"; each was over fifteen acres and protected on at least one side by a "natural boundary": railroad tracks, a wide street, a park. Finally, the projects demonstrated the Authority's allegiance to "sectionalization," a policy described as recognizing "the preservation of the communities social structure by acknowledging the preference of certain groups (racial and ethnic) for certain sections of the city." Accordingly, the Johnson and Allen homes housed 95 per cent black families, while 95 per cent of the Tasker residents were white.³⁰

The standard of economy enormously influenced project design. On the grounds that they frivolously escalated costs, Newman disparaged as "delux appendages" even such modest project features as community buildings and meeting rooms. What survived the Authority's scalpel were the stark, *bauhaus*-type structures which furnished the basic human needs of clean air and light, while economizing mercilessly on the psychological needs for living space and amenities. Shaved footage left small twelve by thirteen-foot living rooms and cramped eight by ten-foot bedrooms; alcoves became dining areas and curtains substituted for closet doors.³¹

Plainly, in a decade when poverty was treated as a "mass problem," the Philadelphia Housing Authority transformed the plight of the "ill-housed" into a logistical problem. Debate at the Authority centered on the cost advantage of central heating and the savings to be gained from front as opposed to hall entrances, never on issues such as the relationship of design to social interaction.³²

The Philadelphia Housing Authority's three pre-war projects mirrored faithful adherence to the code of austerity. The projects embodied long parallel rows of grim two- and three-story brick apartment blocks. Each did have a community building, which enclosed management offices, nursery, classrooms and auditorium, and each had a play area sporting a spray pool. But aside from the

³⁰ HA Minutes, Sept. 22, 1937, Jan. 24, 1938, and Feb. 12, 1938; on site selection, see Newman to W. R. Tucker, Aug. 1, 1938, HAP; on positive impact, see Philadelphia Housing Authority, Press Release, Dec. 18, 1938, HAP; on "sectionalization," see HA Minutes, Dec. 29, 1937, HAP.

³¹ U.S. Housing Authority, *Design of Low-Rent Housing Projects* (Washington, D. C., 1939), 30-31.

³² *Ibid.*, 7-13.

simple white portico bedecking the doorways of the Tasker and Johnson homes, the manual on frills remained closed.³³

As this paper explains, the Philadelphia Housing Authority borrowed sparingly from the modern housing principles of the early thirties. In 1933 and 1934, Catherine Bauer and her communitarian cohorts marketed exciting plans to transform cities from dark industrialism into sparkling modernity. Living units adeptly arranged along super-block lines would, contended the communitarians, promote social interaction and, by rekindling the flickering spirit of cooperation, restore the social-psychological harmony of the pre-industrial city.

Twenty years later, Bauer confessed that the housing dreams of the thirties fatuously ignored the enduring spirit of privatism, the vitality of individualism, and the intricate web entangling real estate practice and public administration.³⁴ Moreover, while the slum clearance aspects of the housing plans comported with America's abhorrence of filth and poverty, many Americans cringed at the collectivistic trappings of modern housing, even the mild forms incorporated into the New Deal's public housing schemes. In order to expedite the housing program, and thereby spur the sagging economy, the New Deal excised the cooperative housing aspects highlighted in the Mackley project. In the process, it salvaged little more than the drearish shell of the super-block, a few meeting rooms trimmed with WPA murals, and a few playgrounds framed in child-resistant grass.³⁵

The essence of the vision had been lost. Communitarians had prophesied the advent of a new civilization wherein the worker,

³³ Philadelphia Housing Authority, *Report of the Philadelphia Housing Authority*, June 30, 1943, Temple Urban Archives; "Housing Projects for 1000 Families Starts Next Month," *Philadelphia Record*, July 11, 1939, p. 6.

³⁴ Catherine Bauer Wurster, "The Dreary Deadlock of Public Housing," in William L. C. Wheaton, *et. al.*, eds, *Urban Housing* (New York, 1966), 246-247; John P. Dean, "The Myths of Housing Reform," *ibid.*, 255-258.

³⁵ On the tedium of public housing, see Interoffice Memorandum from Jacob Crane to Regional Directors, July 25, 1940, RG 196, "Interoffice Memorandum thru 1941," Records of the Management Review Division, HDR, NA; Dorothy Canfield, "I Visit a Housing Project," *Survey Graphic* (February, 1941), 89-90; on fear of collectivism, see "Resolutions Submitted by Housing and Blighted Area Committee of the Pennsylvania Real Estate Association," in Philadelphia Real Estate Board, Minutes, Mar. 2, 1939, Temple Urban Archives.

liberated from the stultifying industrial environment, participated in the revival of a purposeful group life. Roosevelt's New Deal aroused hope that slum clearance and public housing might rid America of its pernicious slum. The beneficiary of public housing, however, was scarcely a victim of the tenement. In the Authority's language, it was "a fellow citizen on a socially desirable level," a person deemed capable of "regeneration." To effect this regeneration, housing authorities eschewed indulging clients with dependency fostering frills, and instead created appallingly Spartan housing environments.³⁶

This appeared the nub of the conflict. Out of the welter of professional principles and communitarian ideals rose the malformed hulks of public housing which pockmarked the cityscapes of Philadelphia, New York, and large as well as small cities. While planned for the venerated American working class, the New Deal dedication to the professional houser's scripture on slum clearance compromised almost every verse of the communitarian creed. Sterile project environments, structured to meet only the bare physical needs of clean air and sunshine, ignored the many other elements in the panoply of housing satisfaction and failed as seedbeds for the restoration of culture.

Finally, despite its aim of uplifting the ill-housed worker, in effect public housing branded residents as defectives. This harmful labeling of the project tenants was aggravated by the super-block itself, which, moored in the slum, spatially and visually isolated both the project and its residents from the larger urban neighborhood. Projects locked in the inner city and advertised as receptacles for the "lowest-income" families were easily stigmatized as alien territory. In sharp contradistinction to the vision of the communitarians, Philadelphia's Tasker, Allen, and Johnson homes fostered the very alienation they were originally designed to overcome.³⁷

*California State College,
California, Pa.*

JOHN F. BAUMAN

³⁶ "The Architect's Place in Current Housing," *Housing Yearbook*, 234-235; testimony of Carrie Younker in "Excerpts from Southwark Public Hearing [on desirability of a housing project in areal]," Apr. 15, 1940, HAP.

³⁷ Wallace F. Smith, "Housing: The Social and Economic Elements," in Daniel R. Mandelker and Roger Montgomery, eds., *Housing in America: Problems and Perspectives* (Indianapolis, 1973), 11-19; on "privatism," see Sam Bass Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth* (Philadelphia, 1968).