

Myth, Modernity, and Mass Housing: The Development of Public Housing in Depression-Era Cleveland

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During the Great Depression planners and architects in Cleveland, Ohio, initiated sweeping housing reforms, and by 1943 seven public housing estates had been constructed across the city. The initial success of these residences solidified Cleveland as an important vanguard in the history of public housing in the United States. At the center of the myths and realities of housing reform was the notion that modern dwellings could alleviate the social and urban conditions of impoverishment. The symbolic burden of this vision was placed on the residents of public housing, whose corporality became the pivotal space of modernization and reform.

In July of 1933 Cleveland hosted the first National Conference on Slum Clearance, at which housing advocate Ernest Bohn declared that Cleveland would become the nation's "housing laboratory."¹ Driven by Cleveland's acute need for jobs during the first years of the Great Depression and a firm belief in the social and financial benefits of slum clearance, Bohn and his colleagues were at the time planning extensive housing reforms in Cleveland's poorest neighborhoods. To facilitate this effort, in 1933 Ohio became the first state in the nation to pass legislation enabling the creation of housing authorities.² Shortly thereafter, under the directorship of Bohn, Cleveland established the nation's first housing authority, the Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA), now the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority. Cleveland subsequently received financing for three Public Works Administration (PWA) Housing Division projects, a large number for a city of its size. And by 1937 Cedar Central Apartments, Outhwaite Homes, and Lakeview Terrace were completed.

The early efforts of Bohn and the CMHA propelled Cleveland to the forefront of the national housing reform movement. Lakeview Terrace, in particular, was held out as an

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exceptional model. And by 1940 the CMHA not only managed the city's original three estates but had embarked on an ambitious program to build four more: Valleyview Homes (1940), Woodhill Homes (1940), an extension to Outhwaite Homes (1942), and Carver Park Apartments (1943). Yet, while Cleveland's public housing policies did successfully generate desperately needed jobs for the unemployed during the Great Depression and provide certain families with well-equipped housing that was publicly praised by both city leaders and new residents, housing reform in Cleveland also allowed local elites to dismantle low-income neighborhoods, restructure urban communities to isolate the poor, and embed racial segregation in public policy.

NATIONAL MYTHS AND REALITIES

In 1940 the housing activist Catherine Bauer published *A Citizen's Guide to Public Housing* to introduce federally funded housing to middle-class Americans. Bauer began her guide by juxtaposing a photograph of an outhouse surrounded by a cluster of old clapboard cabins and a much more appealing photograph of new townhomes on a tidy tree-lined street. The reader was asked to choose "This . . . or This?"³ The conclusion one might be expected to reach was clear: public housing was a cleaner, safer, and more attractive option for the poor than unplanned private slums.

Using examples of American housing estates constructed during the late 1930s, Bauer then illustrated that the distinction between "houses" and "housing" was essentially that the former were an individual concern while the latter was a "public responsibility."⁴ Under the headline, "Will families from slums appreciate decent modern homes?" Bauer explained that even the poorest Americans can be "modernized" through access to better housing.⁵ She thus established public housing as a unique architectural project with requirements distinct from those of a typical American home: homes were an expression of individualism, while public housing would develop its residents from slum dwellers into proper citizens.

Bauer's optimism about the potential of modern housing to solve social problems and her subversive assumptions about the modernization of the poor shaped the policies, reception and criticism of public housing into the late twentieth century. However, in 1991 Katharine Bristol challenged many of these assumptions in her article "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth." Bristol targeted the architecture critic Charles Jencks's well-known pronouncement that the implosion of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex in St. Louis marked the "death" of modern architecture as epitomized by mass public housing schemes. Instead, she argued that the established critics of modernism had failed to historically contextualize public housing within the economic policies and racial discrimination that had contributed to its decline.⁶ Jencks's

focus on the shortcomings of architectural design and modernist theory thus obscured the more systemic institutional and structural problems of public housing programs in the United States.⁷ According to Bristol, the Pruitt-Igoe myth "naturalizes the presence of crime among low-income populations rather than seeing it as a product of institutionalized economic and racial oppression."⁸

At the heart of Bristol's criticism lay a series of arguments traceable in the housing literature to the urban planner Peter Marcuse's article "Housing Policy and the Myth of the Benevolent State." Despite persistent popular belief that the primary concern of government housing programs was to promote the welfare of all citizens and ameliorate social ills, Marcuse pointed out that these very programs often led to the decline of targeted neighborhoods, the isolation of poor urban areas, and racial segregation.⁹ Public housing residents were not merely housed; they were economically and often racially hemmed in by an institutionalized apparatus with many ultimately negative consequences.

The myths and the realities of public housing in Cleveland centered on the assumption that modern housing could and would solve social, economic and political problems. Toward this end, public housing of the 1930s and 1940s was intended for the so-called "deserving poor," or the lower-middle class.¹⁰ Following these guidelines, many Cleveland estates were initially successful communities. However, the detrimental cost of racial segregation, uninhibited slum clearance, loss of industry, and competing subsidies for suburban investment would cripple many of these neighborhoods by the latter half of the twentieth century.

As the corporal subject of the vision of modernity promoted by housing activists, public housing residents increasingly shouldered the symbolic burden of social reform. Looking specifically at three estates — Lakeview Terrace (1937), Outhwaite Homes (1937), and Woodhill Homes (1940) — this article examines the architecture, public art, and urban policy of Depression-era Cleveland by considering the ways in which the historicized, segregated and modernized body of the resident became the pivotal space of architectural reform.

HISTORY OF HOUSING IN CLEVELAND

Cleveland grew from a frontier canal town into a center for commerce and production during the Civil War. The nascent industries needed to support the war thrived there because of the city's favorable location on the eastern shores of Lake Erie, its proximity by rail and canal to other growing urban centers, and its access to large quantities of raw materials. By the late nineteenth century, iron and steel mills, meatpacking plants, foundries, machine shops, shipyards, and factories all flourished in Cleveland.¹¹ During this Gilded Age the wealthy built grand mansions along Euclid Boulevard, named "Millionaire's Row," just east of downtown, while laborers

lived in modest wooden rowhouses scattered throughout the city.¹² Though two houses were typically built for working families on a single lot, the wide dispersal of industry in Cleveland during the nineteenth century stalled the emergence of the overcrowded tenements that plagued many other industrial cities of the time. Indeed, in 1890 the average number of persons per dwelling in Cleveland was well below that in many other American cities.

The rapid increase in population needed to support Cleveland's transformation into an industrial powerhouse, however, inevitably created social pressures. European immigration doubled Cleveland's population between 1900 and 1910.¹³ Industrialization also took a heavy toll on the environment, as many neighborhoods were severely polluted and waterways were clogged with industrial waste and sewage. As the population swelled, housing conditions among low-income families also inevitably worsened. Single-family homes were subdivided into apartments for multiple households, and the wealthy abandoned Euclid Avenue for streetcar suburbs like Shaker Heights, Cleveland Heights, and Garfield Heights.¹⁴ In 1904 these changes led the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce to issue a report titled *Housing Conditions in Cleveland*, which claimed that the city had a "serious housing problem," and concluded that poor housing was the source of a litany of social evils and immoral behaviors.¹⁵

In 1903, as Cleveland was emerging as one of the world's preeminent manufacturing centers, its leaders also unveiled a major beautification project intending to bring order, elegance and distinction to its growing business district. Designed by Daniel Burnham, John Carrere, and Arnold W. Brunner, the Group Plan envisioned prominent government buildings extending along an axial green mall from downtown to the lakefront.¹⁶ According to W.D. Jenkins, the project signaled Cleveland's transition from "the personal, piecemeal, and privately funded planning of a nineteenth-century city to the public, comprehensive, and government-funded planning of a mid-twentieth-century city."¹⁷ The transformation also led city leaders to become more actively involved in housing and slum clearance. In 1903, to make way for the future green mall, officials ordered the destruction of the working-class neighborhood that included Cleveland's vice district.¹⁸ However aesthetically ambitious and grand, the Group Plan thus also inaugurated the practice of slum clearance in Cleveland, and it provided local elites the pretext to remove brothels, gambling casinos, and working-class housing, inhabited by African Americans and recent immigrants, from the downtown.¹⁹

The 1920s were a period of buoyant prosperity and municipal progress for Cleveland. Public and private largesse expanded popular access to the arts, medicine and education, as city leaders erected many prominent buildings, created public parks, and expanded the city's infrastructure. However, labor unrest and racial discrimination also intensified. Historically, Cleveland had cultivated a reputation for toler-

ance and racial equality, and during the nineteenth century Cleveland's small African-American population had been part of a relatively integrated community.²⁰ World War I, however, slowed European immigration while stimulating an industrial boom, prompting thousands of African Americans to migrate to the city to fill its open labor positions. As the African-American population swelled, racial discrimination became increasingly aggressive, and economic and educational opportunities for African Americans dwindled.²¹ By 1930, 90 percent of the African-American population of Cleveland lived in the overcrowded Cedar-Central neighborhood, bounded by Euclid and Woodland Avenues and East 14th and East 105th Streets.²² Meanwhile, the wealthy continued to move to the suburbs, and the mansions on Euclid Avenue were sold off or abandoned. In the neighborhood that had once boasted Millionaire's Row, African-American tenants paid higher rents than their white neighbors for the same underserviced apartments. A typical housing unit here (frequently labeled substandard) was the "kitchenette," a tiny apartment with shared kitchen and bathing facilities created by subdividing a single-family home.

On the eve of the Great Depression, Cleveland was a booming industrial center. The 1920s had been a period of unprecedented growth, and by 1930 it was the sixth largest city in the United States.²³ However, by 1931 100,000 persons had lost work, and by 1935 Cleveland's unemployment rate reached 23 percent.²⁴ African-American laborers were hit the hardest, with some neighborhoods suffering 91.5 percent unemployment.²⁵ By 1933 many workers had also lost their homes, and shantytowns lined the lake and riverfront.²⁶ The Great Depression was devastating for Cleveland; indeed, it could be argued that the city never fully recovered from it. However, due to its activist leadership, Cleveland also became an ideal site for many important New Deal building projects.

The initial steps by the federal government to promote national economic recovery were taken during the Hoover administration. In 1932 the U.S. Congress established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), an independent agency authorized, among other things, to issue limited-dividend loans for the purposes of constructing low-income housing.²⁷ The 1932 housing program was, however, limited in scope, and only one estate was built under its authority.²⁸ In 1933, however, the newly elected Roosevelt administration intervened much more substantially in the housing sector as part of its New Deal. The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 placed the RFC housing loan program within the new Public Works Administration (PWA) Housing Division. This division was then given the authority to buy, condemn, sell or lease property for the development of housing, and provide loans to private limited-dividend corporations and public organizations for the purposes of slum clearance.²⁹

Ohio's landmark housing legislation of 1933 rendered its new public housing authorities eligible for RFC loans.³⁰ The CMHA was formed in 1933 under this law as an advisory

and coordinating entity in Cleveland to eliminate slums and improve housing conditions for low-income families.³¹ Ernest Bohn's early directorship of the CMHA was influenced in this effort by the sociologist Robert Navin's 1934 dissertation "Analysis of a Slum Area," which examined health, crime and poverty statistics for the low-income neighborhood between East 22nd and East 55th Streets. Navin found that the decrease in tax revenue relative to city services in that neighborhood resulted in an annual subsidy of \$78.78 by the city of Cleveland for each of its residents.³² He also concluded that many of the problems related to health and crime there were due to inadequate housing, and, focusing on tuberculosis statistics and police and fire services, he emphasized how substandard housing was an economic liability for the city.³³

The primary goals of the PWA projects were to provide relief to the unemployed and stabilize the economy. Navin, however, cast housing as a moral issue, and concluded that better housing could also solve the city's social and economic problems.³⁴ Navin's findings appealed to Bohn, a devout Christian and a lifelong Republican trained during the Progressive period, who believed that public housing was "not socialism, but necessary for capitalism."³⁵ The study galvanized Bohn, local architects, and city officials to dedicate themselves to improving or eliminating undesirable housing conditions in Cleveland.

During the 1930s a two-tiered housing program emerged in the United States. On the one hand, the National Housing Act of 1934 created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which allowed the government to underwrite and insure mortgages so that more families would be able to purchase their own homes.³⁶ On the other, the Wagner Steagall Act (United States Housing Act) of 1937 established the United States Housing Authority and gave it the power to loan or grant funds to local housing authorities. By this second measure the federal government took permanent responsibility for the construction of decent low-cost housing.³⁷ These policies contributed to the symbolic and semantic separation of "housing" from "houses" by simultaneously producing public housing for low-income families to rent and offering subsidized mortgages to middle-income families to buy private homes.

Adding to this distinction between public- and private-sector roles was the fact that public housing tended to be concentrated in cities, while most FHA-insured homes were built in the suburbs. In *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, Kenneth Jackson scrutinized the reasons behind the problematic spatial distribution of housing created by these policies. First and foremost, he noted, the application for federally subsidized housing was voluntary, and therefore a municipality that did not want public housing could simply refuse to create a housing authority.³⁸ Furthermore, because cities were able to choose where public housing was built and who would live in it, public housing estates had the effect of reinforcing racial segregation. Finally,

according to Jackson, the prominent citizens and officials charged with making decisions about government programs often had as much financial interest in clearing undesirable neighborhoods and protecting real estate values as they did in providing decent housing.

In Cleveland, after the passage of the Wagner Steagall Act in 1937, the CMHA ceased simply being an advisory body. Under the direction of Bohn, it took over the operation of the PWA Housing Division estates of Cedar Central Apartments, Outhwaite Homes, and Lakeview Terrace, and began developing, constructing and managing its own low-rent housing estates.³⁹ Slum clearance factored centrally into the location of these new projects. Beginning in 1938, the CMHA and the city of Cleveland cooperated in the "equivalent elimination of substandard dwellings." Thereafter, they agreed, one "substandard" residence would be either demolished or brought up to code by the city for every unit of public housing constructed by the CMHA.⁴⁰ Because the demands of the business elite directed those on work relief, this meant that those employed in the municipal programs were now charged with tearing down the shantytowns and clearing the low-income neighborhoods of less fortunate working-class Clevelanders.⁴¹

Racial segregation was also informally enforced through the CMHA's tenant policy. No official race policy was in place. Instead, the CMHA practiced "racial tokenism": a few African Americans were placed in otherwise white estates, and a few whites were placed in otherwise African-American estates.⁴² But of the seven residence estates built by 1943, Cedar Central Apartments, Lakeview Terrace, Valleyview Homes, and Woodhill Homes were clearly intended for white occupancy, while Outhwaite Homes, Outhwaite Extension, and Carver Park Apartments were dedicated for African-American tenancy.⁴³ The architectural standard for all the estates was essentially the same; however, white occupancy homes were scattered across the city, while all the African-American-occupancy homes were built within a few blocks of one another and isolated in one neighborhood.

Across the country, the spatial redistribution of the urban population due to suburbanization and slum clearance provided the larger framework for the geographic isolation of public housing. Residents of public housing were marooned within increasingly abandoned cities and branded with the stigma of poverty and government dependency. Meanwhile, the suburbanization funded by FHA loans created homes that symbolized individualism and financial autonomy. Within this national schemata, the policies of Cleveland, like those of many other cities, reinforced and racialized the seclusion of the urban poor in certain neighborhoods. Among the effects of these policies was to transfer the symbolic burden of Cleveland's urban reform effort onto its residents.

THE NATION'S HOUSING LABORATORY

An important distinction divided the work of the curators of the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition on avant-garde architectural design in the spring of 1932.⁴⁴ Rather than showcasing housing design as an integral aspect of the Modern Movement in architecture, housing was presented in a separate exhibition with a separate catalogue. The exhibition on "Modern Architecture" was arranged by Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, while that on "Housing" was organized by Clarence Stein, Henry Wright, and Catherine Bauer. As Richard Pommer has shown, the alienation of housing from general architectural design in the U.S. segregated social doctrines from the aesthetic principles of high art in a way that would have been incomprehensible for European modernists, for whom housing was the epitome of the new architecture. As a result, in the American context, the sociological problems of mass housing were not intimately related with the principles of high design espoused by Hitchcock and Johnson. Americans, according to Pommer, "could not see that the social and large-scale aesthetic bases of European modernism were two sides of the same coin."⁴⁵

In the years that followed, housing design in the United States became more and more removed from the art of modern architecture, as American modernism turned inward and evolved to produce increasingly formalistic "*objets d'art*."⁴⁶ Public housing designers developed unique functionalist vocabularies, an "Americanized" International Style that was neither integrated into the vernacular context of the neighborhoods that surrounded them, nor totally accepted, as their European counterparts had been, into the legitimate high-design agenda of the International Style.

The first public housing estates in Cleveland were large-scale, low-density representations of the Americanized International Style, sited on ample blocks of green space in dense urban areas. Begun in 1935, Lakeview Terrace was built on a steep, irregular site on the shore of Lake Erie. Like Cedar Central Apartments and Outhwaite Homes, the construction of Lakeview Terrace was sponsored by Cleveland Homes, Inc., a limited-dividend corporation founded by the architect Walter McCormick in 1932 to obtain RFC loans.⁴⁷ The design of Lakeview Terrace was executed by a group of Cleveland architects — Joseph Weinberg, William H. Conrad, and Wallace G. Teare, with Stein and Wright serving as design consultants. A total of 184 homes were demolished to clear the site, and 620 units were constructed in 44 new residential buildings to replace the lost housing stock.⁴⁸ Lakeview Terrace was infused with the lessons of hilly Chatham Village, a successful planned neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and by European modernist housing complexes that had also had to contend with difficult sites, such as Neubühl Siedlung in Zürich.⁴⁹

Of all the housing estates in Cleveland, Lakeview Terrace came closest to an expression of the European fusion of high design and social solutions. Hitchcock and Johnson had defined the architecture of the International Style as embodying several key principles: an expression of volume rather than mass, an attention to surface materiality, an emphasis on regularity and balance rather than axial symmetry, and a lack of applied ornament.⁵⁰ Responding to this design agenda, the volumetric forms of Lakeview Terrace commanded open space with cantilevered balconies, concrete canopies, and stark ornament-free facades (FIG. 1). And to adapt to the contours of the site, the low residential buildings were asymmet-



FIGURE 1. Lakeview Terrace, 1937. Source: Herman Gibans Fodor, Inc. — Architects.



FIGURE 2. *Lakeview Terrace, 1937.* Source: Herman Gibans Fodor, Inc. — Architects.

rically arranged in a fanlike pattern on a curving loop road or at a 45-degree angle to a diagonal axis (FIG. 2). Different building types were utilized for different terrains: taller apartment buildings framed the top of the site; two-story townhomes followed the loop road; and at the very bottom of the site, smaller apartment blocks acted as embankments.⁵¹ And all of the housing units were carefully oriented to take in as many views of the lake as possible. Typical of all early Cleveland estates, however, the architects ignored the European predilection for pure white forms, as *Lakeview Terrace* was constructed of concrete and brick. When it was completed in 1937, the estate was praised and exhibited as a model of superior public housing design.⁵²

Lakeview Terrace was also socially innovative in that it was the first public housing estate in the nation to incorporate a community center.⁵³ Intended to cultivate a coherent, close-knit community, this provided workshops for women, offered a playground for children, and served as a medical center.⁵⁴ *Lakeview Terrace* was located just west of downtown, in a predominately Irish and German neighborhood a few blocks from the West Side Market, the largest public market in Cleveland. Indeed, *Lakeview Terrace*'s loop road was meant to open into this commercial district. However, the community extension of *Lakeview Terrace* would be limited shortly after the estate opened due to competing infrastructure developments.⁵⁵ The construction of the Main Avenue Bridge in 1939 and roadway expansions in 1940 cut *Lakeview Terrace* off from the West Side Market community and sequestered it between the lake and a major highway.

Like *Lakeview Terrace*, *Outhwaite Homes* was begun in 1935 and completed in 1937 using RFC funding. The design of *Outhwaite Homes*, by Maier & Walsh Architects, also sited low-density residences on large garden blocks; however,

the site differed significantly from that of *Lakeview Terrace*. *Outhwaite Homes* was built in the densely populated and underserved Cedar-Central neighborhood that had been the subject of Navin's analysis, and its construction provided city leaders the opportunity to simultaneously accomplish an extensive slum-clearance project. A large commercial and residential swath of the Cedar-Central neighborhood, including 524 homes, was demolished to clear the site for 579 new housing units at *Outhwaite Homes*.⁵⁶ The estate, which stretched from East 40th Street to East 55th Street, consisted of block after block of serpentine, flat-roofed residential buildings. Unlike the bold volumetric forms and asymmetry of *Lakeview Terrace*, the repetitive, low brick buildings of *Outhwaite Homes* were symmetrically organized around alternating courtyards (FIG. 3). Community activity was dispersed into the courtyards where residents could interact with their neighbors and children could play (FIG. 4). The homogeneity of this site design was, however, broken by graceful colored brick patterns, which provided texture for the facades and subtle detail around windows, doors and balconies.

Outhwaite Homes was constructed for African-American occupancy only. By the 1930s a steady migration of African Americans from the South had stretched the housing resources of the Cedar-Central neighborhood.⁵⁷ African Americans had few housing options beyond the overcrowded community, and those who qualified for public housing in 1937 could only live at *Outhwaite Homes*. Furthermore, the construction of *Lakeview Terrace* and *Cedar-Central Apartments*, both white-occupancy estates, had destroyed existing African-American housing.⁵⁸ As a result, *Outhwaite Homes* was quickly occupied, prompting the CMHA to build an adjacent extension to it in 1942, adding 449 more units.⁵⁹ Yet, despite the CMHA's construction efforts, the housing



FIGURE 3. *Outhwaite Homes, 1937. Source: The Cleveland Press Collection, Special Collections, Michael Schwartz Library, Cleveland State University.*

demand in the dense Cedar-Central neighborhood did not abate, as Outhwaite Homes, Outhwaite Extension, and the African-American community at large became increasingly isolated from the rest of the city.

After the passage of the Wagner Steagall Act in 1937, the CMHA embarked on a further prolific building campaign that produced (in addition to the Outhwaite Extension) Woodhill Homes, Valleyview Homes, and Carver Park Apartments.

Begun in 1938 and completed in 1940, Woodhill Homes was designed by Abram Garfield, a well-established Cleveland architect and the son of President James A. Garfield. Woodhill Homes was constructed in the midst of a predominately Hungarian community on the former site of Luna Park, a popular amusement park that had closed in 1931. The estate occupied a single, massive garden block and encompassed 63 unembellished brick buildings in which there were 560

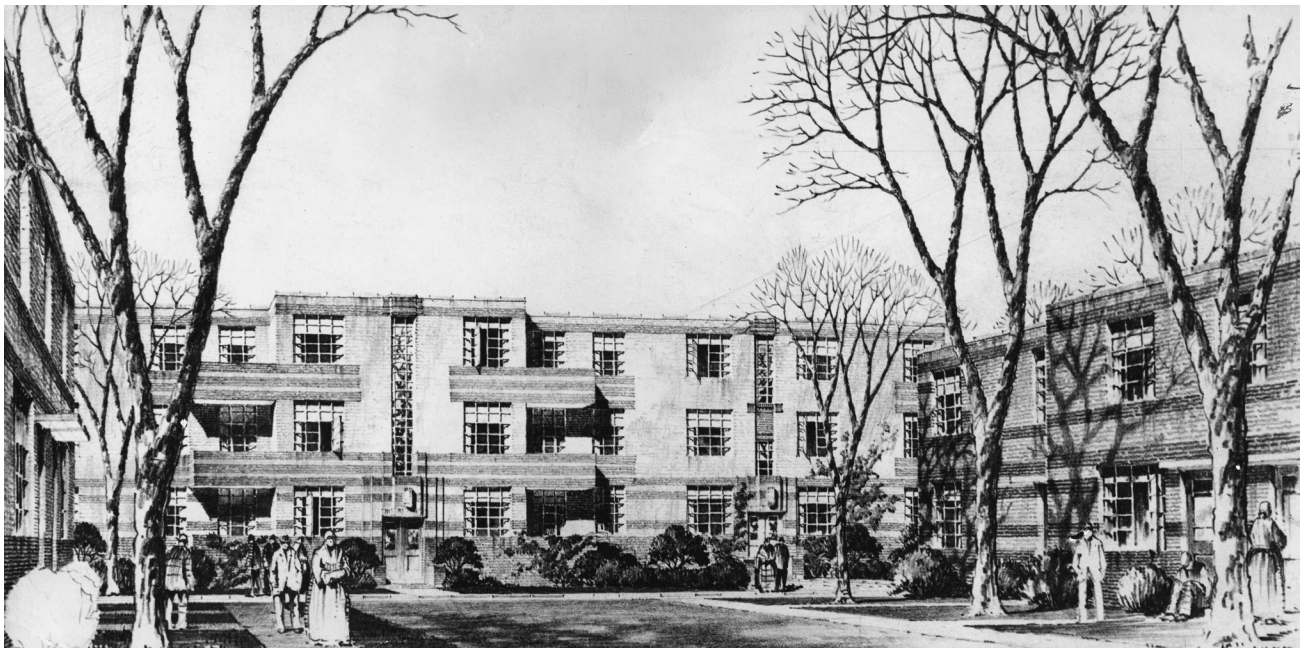


FIGURE 4. *Outhwaite Homes, 1937. Source: The Cleveland Press Collection, Special Collections, Michael Schwartz Library, Cleveland State University.*



FIGURE 5. Woodhill Community Center, 1940. Source: *The Cleveland Press Collection, Special Collections, Michael Schwartz Library, Cleveland State University.*

new dwelling units.⁶⁰ Woodhill Homes was distinctly less indebted to the International Style than Lakeview Terrace, despite its similarly steep terrain. The estate was organized on a Beaux-Arts axis that converged on Woodhill Community Center, which was prominently situated as the focal point of the entire site (FIG. 5). The residential buildings radiated symmetrically from the central axis, pivoting toward the community center, or faced each other — rather than engaging with the surrounding streets. The community center referenced Hitchcock’s and Johnson’s vision of the International Style in its bold forms, terraces, and stark lack of ornament. However, Woodhill Community Center was deeply embedded in the earth and, like Outhwaite Homes, lacked the volumetric clarity of Lakeview Terrace. The surrounding housing units systematically alternated between vernacular gabled roofs and modernist flat roofs, in mixed reference both to the International Style and to the homes of adjacent neighborhoods.

The architecture of Lakeview Terrace, Outhwaite Homes, and Woodhill Homes was visually identifiable and distinct from the vocabularies of traditional houses in the surrounding communities. Embracing neither the design principles of international modernism nor the vernacular traditions of Cleveland residential design, the aesthetic homogeneity of the three estates minimized the particularity of place and references to the past. The residences were also physically sited so that they turned away from the surrounding community and could not be casually engaged from city streets. In many respects, this tendency reflected the desire of city leaders to instill order on low-income neighborhoods, and thus modernize the poor through their housing. Sweeping aerial photographs of Lakeview Terrace and Outhwaite Homes reveal how each attempted to impose a clear geometric rationality on the city’s dense fabric in an attempt to unify, rationalize and control the disorder and heterogeneity of its urban communities. The aerial photographs likewise paralleled Bauer’s “This . . . or This” choice in

A Citizen’s Guide to Public Housing. They clarified for a broad public the clean modernity of the public housing resident as opposed to the unruly resistance of the slum dweller.

THE PEOPLE, THE PAST, AND PUBLIC ART

Through the effort of Ernest Bohn and William Milliken, the director of the Cleveland Art Museum, the CMHA received fifteen federally funded art commissions between 1937 and 1941. These projects not only enhanced Cleveland’s housing estates, but they also visually represented the residents as the historical and corporal subjects of the vision that modernity housing activists hoped to implement. The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), established in 1935 by a grant from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), funded the first four projects installed at Lakeview Terrace.⁶¹ However, shortly after the inception of the TRAP, the WPA decided to commence its own art program, called the Federal Art Project (FAP), and the subsequent eleven works installed at Woodhill Homes, Outhwaite Homes, and Valleyview Homes were created under the WPA/FAP.

Like many New Deal projects, both the TRAP and the WPA/FAP were intended to create jobs, in this case for unemployed artists and craftsmen. As a condition of public support, however, artists were encouraged to work within the umbrella of the American Scene genre, which typically celebrated the common man, American community life, and socially useful labor. In Cleveland, Milliken suggested that artists create a “Cleveland Scene” and focus on the infrastructure and industries that brought Cleveland to life, such as Cleveland’s bridges, avenues, factories, mills and waterfront.

Of the fifteen commissions received by CMHA from the TRAP and the WPA/FAP, fourteen were distributed between white-occupancy estates. Outhwaite Homes was the only African-American estate to receive a commission. Generally, the subject of each project was the result of a discussion that involved the artist, the architects, administrators such as Milliken, and often residents.⁶² Aside from the projects intended for children’s playrooms and playgrounds, the artwork at Lakeview Terrace and Woodhill Homes fell into one of two themes: the historicization of Cleveland based on heroic myths and pastoral pasts, and the celebration of the body as a space of reform. At Outhwaite Homes, on the other hand, the subject of its one mural was the history of impoverishment shared by the public housing residents.

At Lakeview Terrace and Woodhill Homes, murals and sculptures temporally redefined the history of Cleveland by representing the residents of public housing as the descendants of mythological histories and agrarian utopias. William McVey executed two large projects, both depicting the origins of Cleveland, on the exterior walls of Lakeview Terrace Community Center in 1937. On its east wall a carved brick mural, *The Founding of Cleveland*, illustrated the har-



FIGURE 6. Paul Bunyan Digging the Great Lakes, William McVey, limestone, 1937. Source: Herman Gibans Fodor, Inc. — Architects

monious meeting of a group of Native Americans and a band of American settlers in a simplified, stylistic manner. On the north wall, McVey installed *Paul Bunyan Digging the Great Lakes*, a limestone relief recalling the myth of the giant lumberjack who formed the Great Lakes as a watering hole for Babe the Blue Ox (FIG. 6). McVey's work emphasized a distant romanticized past and the mythical origins of Cleveland. Similarly, at Woodhill Homes in 1939, Edris Eckert designed terra-cotta plaques for numerous buildings on the site. The plaques portrayed idealized men, women and children surrounded by agricultural abundance, animals, and the fruits of agrarian labor (FIG. 7). Within the gymnasium of Woodhill Community Center in 1940, Leroy Flint painted a large mural representing the people of Woodhill migrating from a pastoral paradise embraced by a god-like figure of agriculture to a glorified industrial landscape (including Woodhill Homes in the corner) protected by a god-like figure of industry. In the center of this hyper-idealized scene, a worker relaxes with his wife and child (FIG. 8).

In all these works the industrial realities of the neighborhood were replaced with Arcadian fantasies. By focusing on myth and bucolic reverie, the murals and sculptures framed Lakeview Terrace and Woodhill Homes as sites of displaced memory historically isolated from the actual past. No references to the former neighborhoods were retained: the material legacy of the past was simply erased along with



FIGURE 7. Plaques at Woodhill Homes, Edris Eckert, terra-cotta, 1939. Photographs by author.

any symbolic memory of impoverished, overcrowded urban conditions, vibrant, colorful immigrant communities, or even Luna Park at Woodhill Homes. Instead, the undesirable realities and cherished landmarks of the actual past were replaced by romanticized myths and idyllic illusions.

Depictions of the body of the resident in murals and sculptures at Woodhill Homes emphasized traditional gender roles, the nuclear family, and proper forms of work and leisure. In 1940 Flint painted a series of six panels that accompanied his larger celebratory mural in the gymnasium of Woodhill Community Center (FIG. 9). These panels portrayed normative behaviors for residents: women caring for children while working as typists; men playing baseball and musical instruments after laboring as machinists. On the terrace of the Woodhill Community Center in 1941, Alexan-

FIGURE 8. *Woodhill Community Center Mural, LeRoy Flint, mural on masonite panes, 1940. Source: The Bohn Collection, Special Collections, Kelvin Smith Library, Case Western Reserve University. Reproduced with permission from the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority.*

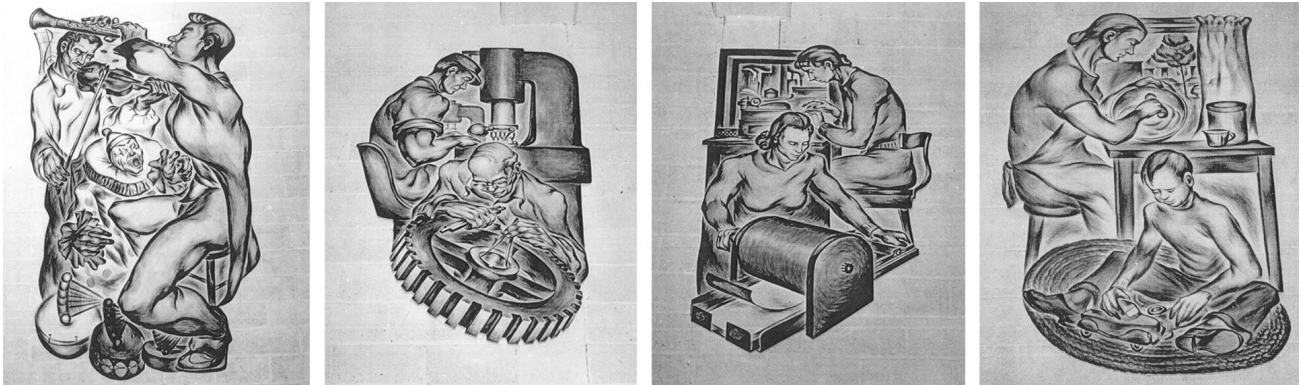
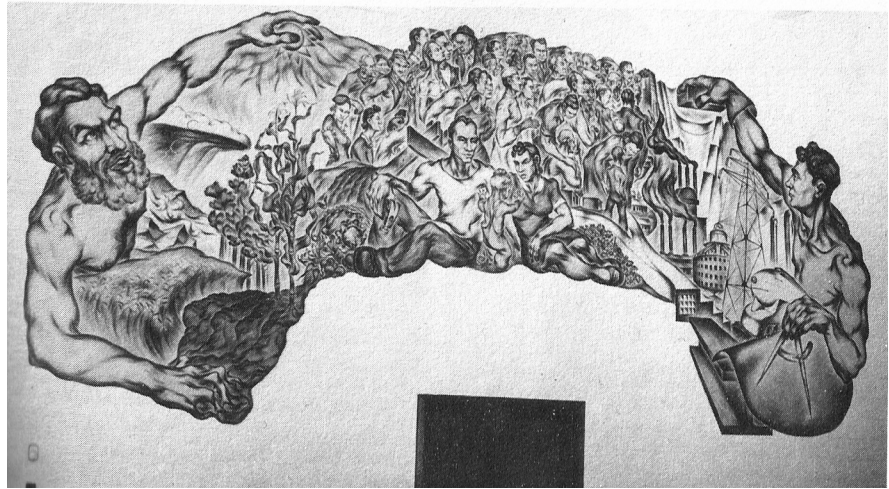


FIGURE 9. *Woodhill Community Center Murals, LeRoy Flint, murals on masonite panels, 1940. Source: Ernest J. Bohn Papers, Photographs, Woodhill Homes, WPA art, Murals, ca. 1937. Special Collections, Kelvin Smith Library, Case Western Reserve University. Reproduced with permission from the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority.*

der Blazys installed the sculptures *Working Man* and *Working Women*, two stylized nude figures celebrating the salubrious vigor of the body dedicated to useful labor (FIG. 10). This proclivity to consider the healthy body as the preeminent symbol of community well-being extended beyond the purview of the artists and administrators, and it was embraced by the residents as well. Thus, Lakeview Terrace residents rejected Charles Campbell's 1937 mural *Children at Play*, and demanded its removal soon after its installation because the children in the painting appeared to be too gaunt and sickly.⁶³ The emphasis on the health and productivity of the body at Lakeview Terrace and Woodhill Homes reinforced the public's faith in the modernization, and thus the middle-class assimilation, of public housing residents.

At Outhwaite Homes, meanwhile, the historicization and modernization of the resident was depicted quite differently. In his 1940 mural *Outhwaite*, Charles Sallée, like Flint at Woodhill Homes, illustrated the movement of people into public housing. Yet, where Flint's interpretation represented

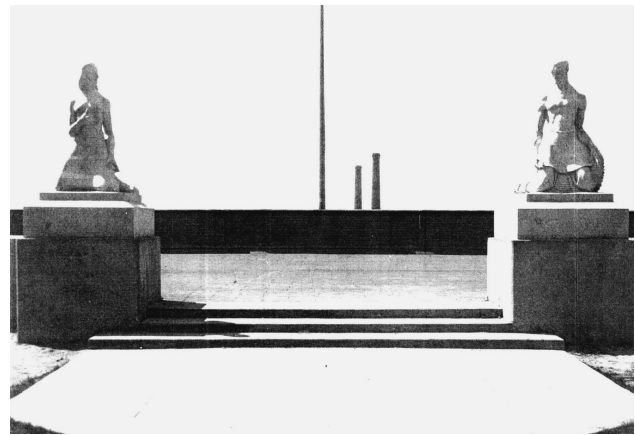


FIGURE 10. *Working Man and Working Woman, Alexander Blazys, cast stone, 1941. Source: Ernest J. Bohn Papers, Photographs, Woodhill Homes, WPA art, Sculpture, ca. 1937. Special Collections, Kelvin Smith Library, Case Western Reserve University. Reproduced with permission from the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority.*

FIGURE 11. Outhwaite, Charles Sallée, mural, 1940. Source: *The Cleveland Press Collection, Special Collections, Michael Schwartz Library, Cleveland State University.*



the residents as heroic and triumphant, Sallée portrayed Helen Smith, the wife of the first director of Outhwaite, as leading African-American children out of squalor and into the harmonious environment of public housing (FIG. 11). This distinction of having to be led out of poverty, rather than moving from one idealized landscape to another, represented a further conceptual isolation of African-American public housing residents. In effect, it historically legitimized racial segregation.

Though Sallée did attempt to demonstrate the physical conditions of the actual past, where the artists at Lakeview Terrace and Woodhill Homes did not, his interpretation of it, in which children needed to be rescued from poverty, infantilized the abilities of the residents of Outhwaite Homes. Whereas the residents of Woodhill Homes and Lakeview Terrace were the proud successors of a glorified agrarian past, the African-American residents of Outhwaite Homes were the symbolic inheritors of a history of impoverishment and dependency. The competing messages of the murals and sculptures of Lakeview Terrace, Woodhill Homes, and Outhwaite Homes exposed the fundamental contradiction of housing reform: the simultaneous social inclusion, racial isolation, and historical displacement of the public housing resident.

WHO WERE THE DESERVING POOR?

Cleveland's first housing estates were opened with fanfare and celebration, and many residents offered tours of their new homes. The housewives who opened their doors to journalists from a local newspaper, *The Cleveland Press*, in Au-

gust 1937 enthusiastically praised the new residences. They proudly lauded the modern white-enamel range, the iceless refrigerator, the bright, airy rooms, the cleanliness of the new estates, and the community that had been created for their children.⁶⁴ Each woman emphasized the convenience and ease with which housework could be completed in the modern homes. As Mrs. Sam Sahigian explained, "It's no task at all to do the washing" with a basement washing machine. And Mrs. Joseph Jackson of Outhwaite Homes expressed profound appreciation for her new surroundings: "We moved here from a single room with an old fashioned ice box, a coal stove, and no means of disposing of our trash . . . there is absolutely no comparison."⁶⁵

However, several months earlier *The Cleveland Press* had interviewed residents who had been displaced from the properties cleared for the construction of the new housing estates. And the journalists had found no one who had been living in the old neighborhoods who had been able to afford the rent of the new residences.⁶⁶ At Outhwaite Homes, units rented for the monthly rate of between \$18.10 for two rooms and \$30.44 for six rooms, while rents at Lakeview Terrace ranged from \$25.00 for three rooms to \$33.75 for five-and-a-half rooms.⁶⁷ The typical displaced resident, however, could not afford to pay more than \$4 per room a month, and these estates replaced homes that had rented for between \$10 and \$15 a month.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the CMHA enforced rigorous residency conditions, and to ensure payment, it stipulated that tenants demonstrate that they earned at least four times the monthly rent.⁶⁹ Tenants were further not allowed to take in boarders; no more than two persons were permitted to oc-

FIGURE 12. WPA Posters from Cleveland. Artists: far left, Eric Schuler; middle left, artist unknown; middle right, Stanley T. Clough; far right, artist unknown. Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



copy the same bedroom; and unmarried men could not rent an apartment.⁷⁰ Therefore, the displaced families found lodging nearby, in similar or worse conditions to those that had been dismantled for the construction of public housing.

The CMHA's advertisements for the housing estates promoted the same salubrious benefits praised by Mrs. Sahigian and Mrs. Jackson. Lakeview Terrace, Cedar Central Apartments, Valleyview Homes, and Woodhill Homes were the subjects of WPA posters that featured bold cartoons of smiling children and happy workers in front of abstract illustrations of the estates. The images were accompanied by inviting slogans like "Your Children Like These Low Rent Homes" and "Live Here at Low Rent" (FIG. 12). The bright and cheery Cleveland posters emphasized the positive outcome and the healthy domestic atmosphere that embodied the promise of public housing. Interestingly, the WPA posters for public housing in New York City presented a starkly contrasting image. They concentrated on the behaviors that needed to be reformed to achieve the same charming result promised by the Cleveland posters. The New York City posters, like Sallée's mural for Outhwaite Homes, focused on the social ills that public housing intended to eradicate. They often featured stylized images of squalor and crime, and slogans like, "Rotten Living/Decent Living Through Planned Housing," and "Cure Juvenile Delinquency in the Slums by Planned Housing" (FIG. 13).

The two sets of posters revealed two sides of the same message, much like Sallée's and Flint's murals. Impoverished living in the slums was portrayed as morally bankrupt

and unsanitary, while public housing offered an architectural investment in the improvement of the individual. However, the emphasis on the body of the resident as a space of reform in the artwork and advertisements of public housing demonstrated the philosophy of environmental determinism that was driving housing reform. And this philosophy meant it would be the residents of the public housing estates who would ultimately be held accountable for their success through their ability to live model lives there.

To help ensure this success, the first families selected to live in the new housing estates were chosen because they had the financial ability to live up to the middle-class domestic ideal promoted by housing activists. However, the structural composition of poverty in Cleveland remained unchanged, as the very poor who were being priced out of the "slums" where the new housing was being built were simply displaced and into other nearby neighborhoods.

THE FRUITS OF MISUNDERSTANDING

The symbolic potency of the belief in the ability of better housing to alleviate social ills propagated an idealized, localized vision of modernity in Cleveland. Cleveland's first public housing estates were successful communities that improved the living conditions of many of their initial residents. However, this was because the CMHA's strict tenant policy ensured that the first tenants had the financial means to acquire the accouterments of normative, middle-class home-

FIGURE 13. WPA Posters from New York City. Artists: far left, Benjamin Sheer; middle left, John Wagner; middle right, attributed to Herman Kessler; far right, Walter C. Pettee. Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



making. However, as urban conditions deteriorated due to uninhibited slum clearance, loss of industry, and competing government investment in the development of the suburbs, public housing became a site of stigma, increasingly isolated in the decaying urban core.

At the center of both the promise and failure of the Cleveland housing program was the myth that the body of

the resident was itself a space of reform, and that the modernization of the body equated with redemption from poverty. Ironically, though public “housing” was differentiated from “houses” as a public responsibility, the obligation to realize the ideals and promises of housing reform became the individual burden of the public housing resident.

REFERENCE NOTES

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