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WHEN PUBLIC HOUSING WAS WHITE

William Lescaze and the Americanization of the International Style

To plan housing, to plan federal government buildings, to coordinate all the building enterprises of the government in its praiseworthy efforts to act as a “primer” and thus revive private work, to organize nationwide public-works surveys—all this is necessary. Yet it is not enough. The choice of a definite architectural theory must be made, a clear-cut position must be taken. Who knows if, in investing its and our millions functionally, economically and aesthetically, the government would not be laying down the foundation of an American architecture, of modern architecture for a modern nation?

—William Lescaze,
“New Deal Architecture”

OVER THE LAST TEN YEARS, architectural historians have turned their attention back to the architectural legacy of William Lescaze—the native Swiss designer who emigrated to the United States in the 1920s. By 1932 Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock had canonized Lescaze in their *Modern Architecture: International Exhibit* at the Museum of Modern Art as a popularizer of European modernism in the Northeast. This reputation was built on his collaboration with George Howe on the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society (PSFS) building—a project that is identified as the first International Style skyscraper in the United States ([fig. 4.1](#)).¹ Lescaze was later approached in 1932 to design the site plan and exteriors of the most expensive International Style public housing project then built in New York City—Williamsburg Houses ([fig. 4.2](#)). Despite a persistent record of designing public housing in the States, Lescaze’s reputation had dwindled by the 1960s to that of a minor architect whose career peaked with the PSFS building.² Architectural historians have recently attempted to recuperate his professional contributions to the birth of American public housing. Gaia Caramellino has persuasively argued that a major factor behind Lescaze’s reputation as a housing expert was his status as an émigré

capable of adapting the technical and aesthetic standards of European social housing to American life.³ Williamsburg Houses was a major achievement in this regard: it borrowed the “towers in the park” approach of European planners but employed a regional material palette that made it unique to the city. According to Samuel Zipp and Nicholas Dagen Bloom, administrators of the New York City Housing Authority chose Lescaze because they “imagined Williamsburg as a testing ground for Modernist planning ideas from the start.”⁴ The transatlantic trajectory of this process intimates a further study of the racial politics that affected two parallel groups of immigrants at Williamsburg Houses: those of its architect and those of its residents. As Caramellino notes, Lescaze experienced a prolonged process of Americanization that compelled him to synthesize the aesthetic ideals of his European training with the social and cultural demands of American practice.⁵ This process was likely also a conditioning factor for the Eastern and Southern European immigrants who would later call Williamsburg Houses their home.

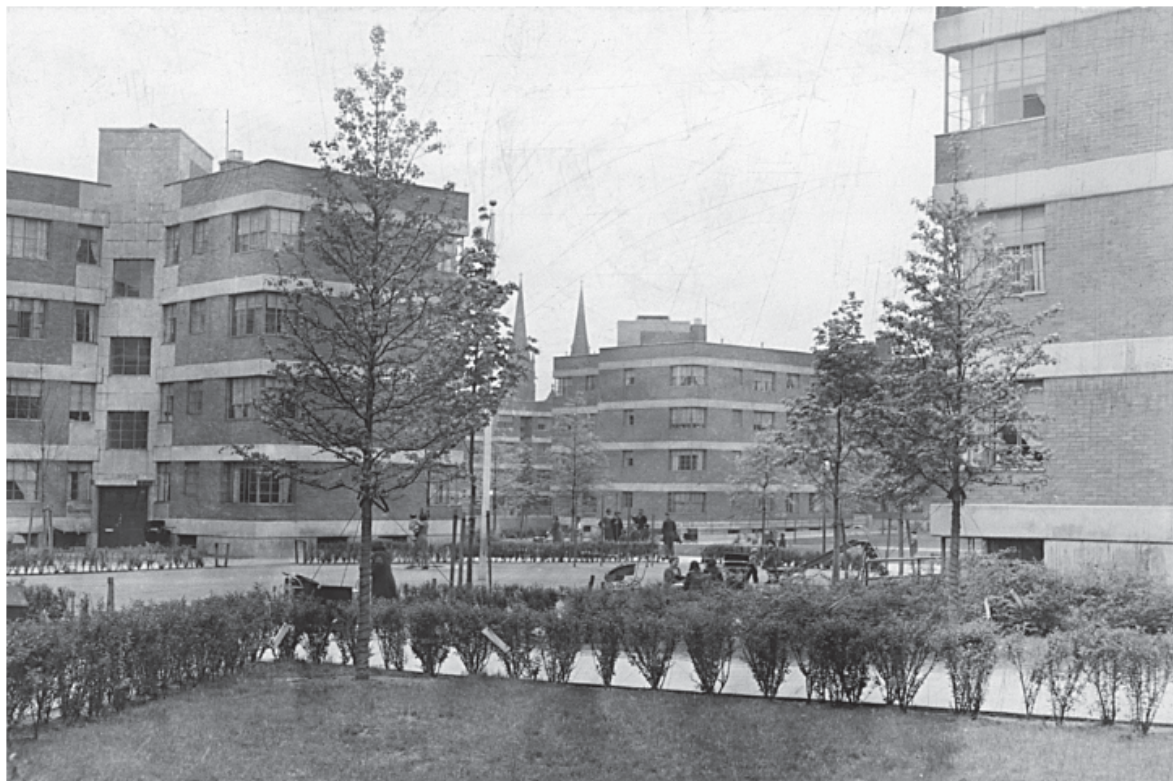


Figure 4.2. Williamsburg Houses, Brooklyn, Courtyard Garden View, ca. 1938. La Guardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, New York.

Historical studies of Americanization note the ways this process imposes a singular definition of national identity upon all immigrants arriving to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. The term *Americanization* first emerged in the 1880s as the label for the

process of assimilation that new immigrants underwent to emulate the cultural values of the so-called American race.⁶ Proponents of this process relied upon a number of institutional programs—including the educational, medical, and commercial programs established at Williamsburg Houses—to ensure that working-class immigrants became familiar with and learned to acculturate the “Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order and popular government” that defined white elite culture in the states.⁷ As many of the first residents for Williamsburg Houses were working-class European immigrants, it seems reasonable to ask how Lescaze’s European aesthetic for the building reflects the various national origins of its residents and their status as immigrants in the United States. This chapter analyzes the critical role of racial segregation policies on the cultural pedigree of International Style public housing during the interwar period. It argues that the racial segregation policies of public housing authorities deterministically channeled the cultural meaning of International Style public housing toward a visual representation of the white diaspora then living in the United States. This narrow cultural focus unwittingly transformed exclusively white projects such as Williamsburg Houses into a material emblem for white working-class character in the United States. While Lescaze’s efforts were concentrated on the outside of the building, a host of housing reformers used the interiors of this material context to precipitate the assimilation of new waves of Eastern and Southern European immigrants. In this way, the interior and exterior spaces of Williamsburg Houses performed complementary functions in the racial codification of public housing, with the architectural style providing a visual sign of the social norms encouraged by the civic dimensions of the architectural program.

In order to examine the critical influence of racial segregation and Americanization theory on the meaning of Williamsburg housing, we must first challenge some of the myths that continue to skew our understanding of public housing today. One such myth is the notion that public housing has always been associated with low-income people of color in the twentieth century. This perspective is the result of negative political campaigns to pathologize the people living in public housing as welfare queens or chronically unemployed. Such efforts continue to shape public attitudes of the historical legacy of public housing in the states. Another source of confusion comes, ironically, from scholarly studies of the antiblack attitudes that led to the underfunding and mismanagement of public housing during the postwar period. This research has revealed the patterns of de facto segregation that were perpetrated by state and federal housing authorities to maintain a high concentration of black Americans in segregated urban enclaves while working-class whites were offered subsidized home loans to move away from

the city and into segregated suburbs.⁸ Of course, these studies are of great benefit to us when we contextualize its findings within a broader history of housing initiatives in the states. However, if they are considered in isolation they can promote the assumption that “race” has only operated in physical settings where people of color reside. But the antiblack attitudes of the postwar period are only part of the story. Another part consists of the white racial privileges that were put in place by housing authorities in the 1930s. American public housing was racialized from its birth through the “separate but equal” laws that shaped urban demographics and the placement of public infrastructure around the nation. These very laws set the tone for the antiblack attitudes of the postwar period by normalizing public housing as an experimental context for shaping white working-class character.

The close relationship between whiteness and public housing has become so seamless that its historical function remains invisible to even those of us who are trained to be architects. And this is no accident. As Martin Berger notes, the aesthetic practices of white elites in the nineteenth century was normalized for both white and nonwhite members of society in order to ensure that this visual economy became the dominant paradigm that structured all viewers experiences of the built environment.⁹ A similar critique should be made of the racial politics of American public housing. A complete narrative of American public housing can be achieved only by considering the assimilationist functions of the interwar years as a précis for the institutional abandonment that prevailed once whites no longer constituted the majority of residents of these spaces. This narrative for public housing would enable us to account for the relative abandonment of public housing by American avant-gardes in the 1950s and 1960s when it was no longer a fashionable topic for research.¹⁰

While federal and state authorities made careful studies of the living conditions that both whites and nonwhites enduring the living conditions of tenement slums, the plight of the white immigrant was held above that of their peers as a result of public debates on Americanization. Scientists, politicians, government administrators, and social reformers all questioned whether the historical patterns of “old” white immigrants “made up mainly of Swedes, Norwegians, English, Irish, Scotch, and Germans” were predictive of the future assimilation patterns of new waves of white immigrants arriving from Eastern and Southern Europe.¹¹ The white immigrant’s path toward assimilation was closely documented and romanticized by social scientists, photojournalists, and even modern architects responsible for constructing a typical model of the needs and requirements of contemporary Americanization.¹² Publications such as Jacob Riis’s

How the Other Half Lives were representative of the types of images that people were trained to associate with the living conditions of the poor ([fig. 4.3](#)). They opened readers' eyes to the class structure that then divided the nation. While these images were popularized as simple documentary photographs they became important ideological tools for motivating federal and state bureaucrats to act. Public campaigns for housing reform used this aesthetic portrait of urban poverty to measure the empirical impact of new programs on white uplift in the post-Depression years.



Figure 4.3. Jacob Riis, "Old Mrs. Benoit in her Hudson St. Attic." From *Children of the Tenements* (1904), 202.

Within this social and political context, modern designs for public housing presented a concrete answer to the dilemma of white ethnic assimilation. The smooth white surfaces of International Styled housing in Western Europe presented a stark contrast to the soiled and derelict tenement structures new immigrants were forced to occupy—a contrast that suggested an immediate change for the better.¹³ And of course, this was entirely the point. As Lescaze

hints in his 1933 essay “New Deal Architecture,” the payoff for spending millions of dollars on national public works programs was to lay a foundation for modernizing “American architecture.”¹⁴ While a broader recognition of Lescaze’s contributions to American public housing is a good start to correcting the myopic assessments of his postwar biographers, we have yet to account for the ways his work was complicit in the racial politics of its day. The concept of Americanization provides a productive lens for analyzing the ways that Williamsburg Houses functioned as a physical instrument for shaping white working-class character during the interwar period. As a result of this civic function, it became a material emblem of the shifting state of whiteness in the American body politic. The racial discourses that conditioned Lescaze’s design for this structure originated from at least two complementary institutional contexts: the first was the European pedigree of the International Style exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), for which Lescaze was a reluctant representative; and the second was the restrictive racial policies that US housing departments used to regulate the demographic composition and physical placement and form of public housing. Since Williamsburg Houses was located in New York City, this location will provide the geographical context of the following analysis.

Nathan Strauss, the first director of the US Housing Authority in Washington, DC, explicitly praised American architects and critics for helping him to summarize the principles of British and Western European models for social housing.¹⁵ One figure slated for special praise was the American critic Lewis Mumford, who curated the housing section of *Modern Architecture: International Exhibit*, which first introduced New Yorkers to European trends.¹⁶ A consistent ideal to emerge from Mumford’s writings was his hope that architects could use the organic rules that regulated historical human settlements to establish new social housing typologies for advanced Western economies.¹⁷ His notion of an organic architecture was predicated on a socially based approach to design that treated the visual aesthetic of social housing as a functional reflection of the social and cultural demands of mass culture then influencing major centers of Western Europe.¹⁸ This ideal was repeated in several other seminal texts, from Carol Aronovici’s *Housing and the Housing Problem* (1920), Edith Elmer Wood’s *Housing Progress in Western Europe* (1923), and Louis Pink’s *The New Day in Housing* (1928) to Catherine Bauer’s *Modern Housing* (1934).

Ironically, it was the homogenous character of European social housing that gave some conservative American politicians pause, precisely for the confusion this might introduce for a new American type: a vocal lobby of bankers, real estate investors, tenement owners, and

Congressional leaders expressed concern that the socialist associations of a European building style might taint the public reception of American public housing as deviating from the capitalist and free market basis of the nation.¹⁹ This situation presented a unique conundrum for American critics: how were they to convince American legislators that a domestic program for public housing could be visually distinguished from European models while still emulating the social and technical standards that made them desirable in the first place?

Mumford, Bauer, and Clarence Stein were among the most prominent figures to assuage these conservative fears by theorizing the possibility of a homegrown system for regulating public housing that organically emerged from the social values and economic basis of American democracy.²⁰ The content of Lescaze's "New Deal Architecture" suggests that he was fully supportive of employing the principles of architectural organicism to produce new vernacular forms. Not only was he familiar with the writings of leading American critics on this subject, he was also exposed to European theories of architectural organicism that were based on the natural metaphors for design, outlined in previous chapters.²¹ Within this politicized context, Lescaze's proposal that Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal should constitute the social basis of a modern American architecture should not be taken as an incidental statement.²² These words represent his first steps toward creating a "definite architectural theory" that he believed would shape the meaning of American public housing.²³

Governmental efforts to reform working-class character were an institutional response to public perceptions of the sociological causes of urban poverty. The general influence of scientific debates on racial character are apparent in some of the advertising the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) used to build support for its public housing programs. One poster from 1936 draws an explicit connection between the dilapidated living conditions of New York's slums and the high rate of criminality measured in poor white demographics (see [plate 9](#)). Turn-of-the-century studies conducted by the Prison Association of New York supported the view that a stable home life was the key to minimizing criminality in working-class communities.²⁴ In response to this model home ideal, the diagonal text of this poster promises that a "cure" for juvenile delinquency will be found in the modernization of working-class housing stock. This image visualizes the class-based fears many harbored of poor whites living in neglected districts of the city, and in terms of its visual economy, contains a simultaneous message of hope and despair: the crime that is born out of need can be entirely eliminated if one's natural environment is functionally considered.²⁵

It is interesting that the ominous male figure of this image is stigmatized only for his poverty, not for his race. This option for redemption was not open to every racial group. Khalil Gibran Muhammad notes in *The Condemnation of Blackness* the role of sociological studies of racial character in normalizing a pathological image of black criminality in the late nineteenth century.²⁶ According to Muhammad, a consensus on the irredeemable state of black racial character was used to legitimize the separate-but-equal policies in the states.²⁷ However, the racial character of poor whites was routinely perceived as redeemable if caught at an early age or pathological in a small aberrant minority. Emulating the structure of these sociological studies, this NYCHA poster offers a road to reform for the white working classes negatively affected by the poor state of their surroundings. This scientific perspective on racial character fed the race-based fears of residential integration programs that motivated an enforcement of separate-but-equal laws in official housing policy.²⁸

Another paradigm of working-class character to influence housing policy originated from architecture in the form of Garden City planning theory. Some of the most famous writers in this field romanticized images of the medieval English cottage for recalling a premodern era when the needs of a population were perfectly harmonized with the means of local construction.²⁹ Modern architects used this reference to vernacular forms to inspire their own version of functional simplicity in working-class environments. Such rhetoric also contributed to the popularity of Garden City principles among housing bureaucrats in the early years of the NYCHA.³⁰

After public housing became an official component of municipal budgets, the moral language surrounding its use grew on several fronts: the “efficient” use of public funds became a moral issue for politicians, as did the selection of the right types of residents to live within these modernized public housing units. Even the aesthetics of public housing was up for debate, as many reformers desired architectural forms capable of communicating the symbolic cleansing that this modernization represented for the nation’s working classes. The contentious battles over the moral rhetoric of these debates was also visualized by the diagrams modern architects used to substantiate the superior “efficiency” of their functionalist housing programs. Lescaze mastered this language for public presentation of his early ideas, which compared the proportion of land use left open by his cruciform plans and those remaining from courtyard-oriented plans ([fig. 4.4](#)).

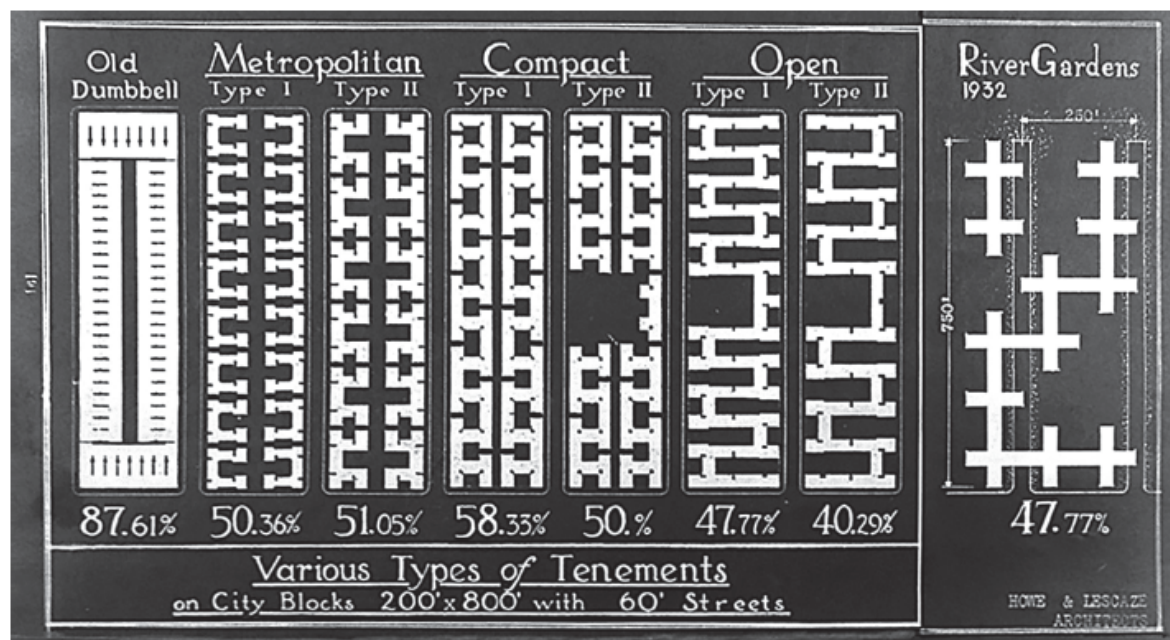


Figure 4.4. A comparative diagram of the efficiency of William Lescaze's solution for River Gardens Housing, an unbuilt project for Manhattan's Lower East Side, and other housing types of the late nineteenth century. WELA, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University.

The historical movement to institutionalize public housing in New York City resulted in an uneven synthesis of middle-class interpretations of public morality, from the lingering Victorian notions of domestic propriety and decency to modernist notions of rationality and efficiency. Resolving these ideological tensions was no simple task. Yet people found a way of collaborating in the new institutional landscape that emerged to manage this public trust. The debates on working-class character became a subject of intense interest for all the parties responsible for managing American public housing during the interwar period.

The Architectural Reform of Working-Class Character

Leading avant-garde architects in France, Germany, Britain, and the United States were engaged in researching the topic of public housing to find ways of creating a new vernacular building typology that established a visual analogue between international norms of working-class character and the functional and technological demands of working-class life. These figures collectively speculated on the best ways to determine what principles guided mass culture in advanced modernized nations and diagnose the most pressing problems of low-income communities in order to be successful. It was in this spirit that the US government began to commission documentary surveys of urban poverty to provide an empirical baseline for assessing the social problems generated by contemporary urban living conditions. Riis's turn-of-

the-century study of poverty in New York's tenements is perhaps the most famous example of this genre of literature that first raised public interest in the urban poor. As a reporter, Riis was dedicated to elevating public discourse, but as a reformer he knew that he must directly address "the half that was on top" of the class ladder if he wanted to initiate the institutional momentum to change the living conditions of "the other half" at the bottom.^{[31](#)}

In retrospect, Riis's survey of working-class poverty is an important visual documentation of the beleaguered state of white racial character as it was experienced by Eastern and Southern European immigrants. While he records the lives of many different racial groups—the table of contents lists the Italians, Jews, Chinese, and African Americans specifically—a good degree of his primary subjects were members of European immigrant groups or the "submerged middle classes" of white citizens still suffering from the economic downturn of the Depression years.^{[32](#)} Riis's survey brought wider visibility to the living conditions of white urban poverty, as did Mumford's narration of documentary films that directly contrasted the poorly designed tenements of New York City with the healthful environments of Radburn, New Jersey—a suburban community designed by his peer Clarence Stein.^{[33](#)} These visual surveys reveal the extent to which the public imaginary of New York's urban poor was figured by a vulnerable but seemingly redeemable class of white foreigners. Riis's documentary attitude toward photography parallels the interests of nineteenth-century ethnographers who previously used pencil and paper to capture the essential traits of the world's racial and national characteristics. The only difference was that the world seemed to come directly to Riis through the gates of Ellis Island. His study rarely detailed the specific functions of the physical objects associated with the expressive or material cultures of recent immigrants. He kept his focus on the conditions of squalor that seemed to arise from one's class status. This narrow framework treats these objects of culture as a mere visual extension of the rubbish and filth that hindered the immigrant's acquisition of greater comfort and stability. Abandoning any trace of the foreign elements of their past life was one of the costs of assimilation.

The critical assumption that race and place were organically integrated in vernacular architectural styles likely elevated the public's interests in modern architectural debates. If the clean white spaces of private modern housing prototypes provided a visual proof of this elite class's fitness for modern society, then perhaps a physical transformation of the urban ghetto into an equally clean and neat space might be enough to transform the moral character of the city's forgotten working classes ([fig. 4.5](#)). Such a line of reasoning was implicit in museum exhibits, journal articles, and magazine essays of the time. At least one *New York Times* article

covering MoMA's 1932 exhibition on modern housing made this suggestion to readers. The unnamed author textually compels future tenants to measure up to the modest sense of decorum and reserve that is required of a truly modern citizens: "Each of these last projects, by the way, is represented by an elaborate model and each is doubly interesting—first, as a piece of ingenious machinery and second, as an index of what the standardized tenant of the future (the fellow who has to pay minimum rent) is expected 'internationally' to be like. In New York, as in Germany, he is expected to be tame and neat. In Germany he has three times as much space to be tame and neat in."³⁴ This article intimates that the "tame and neat" characteristics required of modern tenants was physical proof of a transformation of working-class character; a visual ideal that was meant to saturate both the upper and lower ends of the housing market in the modernized world.



Figure 4.5. A family of six pose in their new living room at Williamsburg Houses, November 4, 1938. Photo #02.006.1161, La Guardia Archives, LaGuardia Community College, New York.

Progressive Era philanthropists first pushed the idea in the United States that social housing was an invaluable tool for reforming the morality and intellectual capacities of working-class residents during the late nineteenth century.³⁵ This social instrumentalization continued into the

twentieth century with government-funded public housing, most of which was rendered in some variation of Williamsburg Houses in New York City in the 1930s and 1940s.³⁶ Yet the social and economic opportunities these residences opened up for working-class Americans was not applied equally among those in need. State and federal policies mandating the segregation of public housing initially constructed the greatest number and the most progressive housing experiments in white working-class neighborhoods.³⁷ When race riots and public protests in black neighborhoods caused New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia to finally relent and construct new spaces for black residents, the participants who were chosen were purposefully gleaned from families with the most financial and material resources to prevent any backslides into poverty so as not to taint the public's perception of the future promise of public housing.³⁸

The first federally funded and state-managed International Style public housing project in New York City was Williamsburg Houses in North Brooklyn. Its planning began in 1932, the same year that Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson cocurated the International Style exhibit at MoMA that introduced this universal mode of building to New York audiences. The modern aesthetic of Williamsburg Houses helped inaugurate a new phase of New Deal housing policy in New York state. Administrators of the recently formed NYCHA decided to abandon their former policy of renovating existing tenement structures or subsidizing limited-dividend projects for the full-scale implementation of a municipally funded and managed housing system. Two prominent modern architects were chosen to spearhead the design for Williamsburg Houses. Richard Shreve of Lamb & Shreve was selected as the chief architect because of his contributions to the construction of the Empire State Building, which became an emblematic monument to New York City's strength to ride out the Depression years. William Lescaze of Howe & Lescaze was chosen as the lead designer, however, for his contributions to *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, including his design of the Chrystie-Forsyth public housing complex that was intended to become a public housing structure for working-class residents on Manhattan's Lower East Side ([fig. 4.6](#)).³⁹ Both Shreve and Lescaze were actively reforming the aesthetics of New York City's architecture in the first half of the 1930s to reflect new modes of design, with Shreve as a representative of art deco and Lescaze of the international style. Each served in their own way as translators of the hopes and dreams embodied in Roosevelt's New Deal policies at the federal level, La Guardia's reform efforts in New York City, and nearly three generations of housing reformers across the country. Lescaze

was so convinced that public housing would become an important building typology that he invented the phrase “New Deal Architecture” to identify the range of new building types that would emerge from Roosevelt’s political activism.⁴⁰



Figure 4.6. Model of Chrystie-Forsyth Housing Development, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), 146.

La Guardia’s inauguration as the ninety-ninth mayor of New York City announced a new era of political reform in the city.⁴¹ Although he had been involved in city politics for many years, even serving as the deputy attorney general of New York and a representative in the US House of Representatives, La Guardia was an outsider to the Irish-led bureaucrats of the Democratic machine that had directed local governance for nearly eight decades.⁴² La Guardia was also a member of the Fusion party, a political group that emerged in order to clean out the nepotism and corruption facilitated by Tammany Hall politics. In addition, he was a Republican in a traditionally Democratic stronghold. His close association with Roosevelt, a prominent Democrat and president of the United States, is generally attributed to their common interests in reform instead of any common party affiliation. In cultural terms, La Guardia represented a departure from the traditional biographical profile of New York City political candidates: a loud, brash son of an Italian father and an Italian Jewish mother, he emerged as an unlikely alternative

to the old-monied WASP and Irish establishment candidates of the 1910s and 1920s. His victory was in no small part enabled by voter dissatisfaction with Tammany Hall's response to the Depression and the rise of white ethnic working-class communities in New York, including the radical Jewish and Italian laborers who formed socialist labor unions. These communities developed strong political alliances with reform movements while maintaining ties back home through local newspapers published in their native languages, such as the *Jewish Daily Forward* and the Italian *Il Progresso*. While each group inherited distinct ethnic and cultural traditions from the Old World, they were forced to work with other groups of nonnatives in the United States to secure fair wages and rent controls.

A prominent example of the white immigrant cooperation mentioned above was the formation of interethnic labor unions that performed communal activities on the behalf of new immigrant populations. During the 1920s and 1930s the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) actively recruited members from a broad base of European immigrants living in New York at the turn of the century. Its founder, Sidney Hillman, had a long history of establishing Jewish cultural and business organizations.⁴³ Hillman served on federal committees such as the National Recovery Administration in Roosevelt's administration, which contributed to organized labor being a major force in Democratic elections. Such connections enabled Hillman to advocate for Jewish immigrants and Jewish American citizens' rights locally and federally. In 1927, under the leadership of then president Abraham E. Kazan, the ACWA extended its purview from organized labor to collective housing with the construction of a cooperative housing complex in the Bronx.⁴⁴ This structure was situated on an entire block of Sedgwick Avenue between Saxon and Dickinson Avenues. The overall site plan maintained the tradition of perimeter block housing with subdivided interior courtyards that was established by philanthropic organizations during the Progressive Era.⁴⁵ The ACWA formed a corporation to manage the construction of this project, which became the first limited-dividend company to operate under the Limited Dividends Housing Companies Act that Governor Alfred E. Smith signed into law in 1926. In order to raise the funds necessary to begin, the ACWA performed outreach to potential residents through their credit union, which enabled members to directly contribute a part of their savings or to take out a loan in order to become a partial owner in this endeavor.⁴⁶ Funds from prospective tenants were advanced to secure one-third of the construction costs, with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company advancing the remaining two-thirds of the \$2 million budget.



Figure 4.7. “Eastside Dwellings, Hillman Housing”—Courtyard with empty fountain.
Photo by Wide World Studio, 289 West 43rd Street, New York City, n.d. Kheel Center,
Cornell University.

In 1930 the architects George W. Springsteen and Albert Goldhammer were commissioned to design a second cooperative housing structure for ACWA—the six-story, 236-apartment Amalgamated Dwellings—on the Lower East Side of Manhattan (figs. [4.7](#), [4.8](#)). It was fitted with several communal functions, including “a monthly bulletin, nursery school, forums, [and] recreational facilities” as well as a collective means of purchasing “milk, electricity and food.”⁴⁷ The creation of a monthly newsletter provides evidence of the importance of the media in establishing neighborhood cohesion: it was common for housing administrators to cooperate with existing resident-run newsletters, or create new ones, to foster a sense of community.



Figure 4.8. "Grand St., Manhattan- Amalgamated Dwellings Inc.—Limited Dividend Co-operative Apartments." Doorways into building. Photo by Albert Rothschild Photographer, 324 W. 42nd Street, New York City, n.d. Kheel Center, Cornell University.



Figure 4.9. "Architects sketch of the Sidney Hillman Development under construction on the New York East Side." Drawing of apartment buildings. Photographer and date unknown. Kheel Center, Cornell University.

Another important aspect of these early ACWA projects is how closely they presaged the diverse aesthetic components of Williamsburg Houses. Both Williamsburg Houses and Amalgamated Dwellings combined the traditional brickwork of Progressive Era housing structures with the carved art deco ornamentation reminiscent of local commercial buildings and the naked concrete detailing of European social housing experiments. Amalgamated Dwellings projected a relatively minimalist building façade toward the street edge, which is in keeping with later developments in International Style public housing in New York City. However, there are some key differences, in both the architectural detailing of these buildings and their site orientations. For example, Amalgamated Dwellings is activated by a greater sense of historical revivalism than its successor, including its use of architectural ornamentation. A key point of comparison is the imposing entry archways that recall romantic medieval imagery in Amalgamated Dwellings, as do the brick quoins that trace the corners of each projecting volume (figs. [4.9](#) and [4.10](#)). The use of art deco surrounds in Amalgamated Dwellings is visually heavier than that found at Williamsburg Houses as well, which in the latter case soars above the doorways as ornamentation for stainless steel marquees instead of being anchored to the ground as stone carvings. Despite these differences, however, Lescaze expressed a desire to preserve Amalgamated Dwellings in his 1930s speculative designs for a River Gardens development on Manhattan's Lower East Side, a project that was never built (see [plate 10](#)). Amalgamated Dwellings and Williamsburg Houses represent two explicit attempts to visualize the collective

character of working-class communities in New York City, which was especially important for the white ethnic immigrant communities gaining new power to physically shape their living environment. They balanced similar historical and aesthetic factors, including the popular associations of brick, art deco ornamentation, and the public reception of European modernism.



Figure 4.10. "Amalgamated Housing Lower east Side, New York City." Arch. Photographer's stamp: Sam Reiss, 2907 Kingsbridge Ter. Bx. 63, N.Y., n.d. Kheel Center, Cornell University.

At least one period guidebook describes Williamsburg as the home of a "polyglot population" of white ethnic immigrants that included native Italians, Germans, and Jews, among others.⁴⁸ The 1903 construction of the Williamsburg Bridge precipitated the infusion of many white working-class families from the Lower East Side into what was previously a wealthy suburban enclave. These demographic migrations resulted in a dramatic physical transformation of the area. While there was always a persistent African American minority living in Williamsburg's Southside neighborhood between 1900 and 1940, this population thinned out over time and the area quickly became associated with white working classes until the influx of Puerto Rican immigrants in the 1960s.⁴⁹ The NYCHA worked both officially and unofficially with neighborhood entities to insulate this demographically shifting area from further black integration by segregating nonwhite communities in Central Harlem and building separate public housing complexes in this area. When asked by black activists as to whether the NYCHA

would racially integrate new public housing projects around New York City, Mary Simkhovitch, a prominent housing activist and the vice-chair of the NYCHA, stated that the socially progressive efforts of the authority would be unduly endangered by an integrationist stance on public housing.⁵⁰ Instead, the authority focused its attention on promoting class uplift for white and black residents by constructing segregated housing projects in distinct enclaves. However, the distribution in early years favored the construction of white residential units. In this way, the NYCHA used the inclusive language of class uplift to mask the divisive racial politics that was situated at the heart of this movement.

If Williamsburg Houses came to represent the most progressive image of International Style public housing in the late 1930s, then the restrictive racial covenants regulating its construction almost guaranteed that the racial character of this structure would remain white, monolingual, and aspirationally middle-class in the eyes of the public. A survey taken by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Civil Liberties Union shows only slight progress on reforming this vision by 1947: of the 1,622 residents living in Williamsburg Houses, only 34 were “Negro,” and the residents of these units were carefully selected by the authority to be the most politically moderate and economically middle class of all the applicants.⁵¹ These late concessions were primarily due to worries of pending judicial decisions that threatened to outlaw segregation in federally funded projects, and even then such prompts only elicited minimal efforts from the NYCHA to ensure that the percentage of black residents to gain access to predominantly white housing projects remained as minimal as possible.

The US housing department’s official policy of racial segregation reflected the abject characteristics that modernist architects associated with black culture in modern architectural debates. European designers such as Le Corbusier simultaneously praised the primitive or instinctive genius of blacks to create the modern idiom of jazz while insisting that black Americans were too limited to engage with the rationalist principles that were required to create a modern architecture.⁵² The combination of these institutional factors resulted in the upward mobility and the social mixing of white ethnic subjects at the expense of nonwhite social uplift. This perspective is confirmed by the path through which African Americans historically secured public housing in New York City; namely, through consistent public protests and the moral critique of the racial exclusivity of public housing policy in newspapers, speeches, and other venues available in the counterpublic sphere.

New York City was racked by two prominent race riots during La Guardia's term as mayor, once in 1935 and again in 1942.⁵³ While each incident was precipitated by interactions between police and private citizens, the issue of public housing stoked the fires of protest before and after these two riots.⁵⁴ La Guardia did not fully capitulate to black demands for new public housing until the race riot in Harlem in 1935, leading to the design and construction of Harlem River Houses in 1936–1937.⁵⁵ In 1942 he approved the construction of Stuyvesant Town on the basis that black residents not be permitted to apply at all. Before the construction of Harlem River Houses, minority reporters for the black newspaper *New York Amsterdam News* feverishly covered the issue of public housing for their readers.⁵⁶ Not only were reporters made aware of the construction of new building projects but the exclusion of African American applicants to Williamsburg Houses was the subject of several articles published in 1937: “Although under construction for nearly two years and more than one-third filled, the New York City Housing Authority continues to bar Negroes as tenants in the Williamsburg Houses. No attempt has even been made to investigate the eligibility of the Negro families that have made applications for apartments, it was learned.”⁵⁷

In some cases, the very words of Langdon Post, NYCHA's first chairman, were used to challenge the NYCHA's assessment that Harlem was not an ideal location for experimentation. In a *New York Times* article published in 1935, Post legitimized the need for social housing with three main criteria: the introduction of fireproof construction in new developments; the reduction of crime (and thus, the improvement of moral character) in low-income neighborhoods; and the elimination of disease. By virtue of low land values, overcrowding living conditions, and annual crime statistics, Harlem seemed to be one of the areas in most urgent need of public housing.⁵⁸ Yet the NYCHA selected a predominantly white neighborhood to construct its most expensive public housing project. The \$12.5 million price tag of the building construction (as well as the land acquisition costs and the economic stimulus it prompted in Williamsburg) was also proudly reported upon in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, a neighborhood newspaper for the largely white ethnic residents of Williamsburg.⁵⁹

In contrast to the pointed racial character of the news coverage in the *Amsterdam News*, the only exclusion that seemed to worry white Brooklynites was the possible omission of family pets in new public housing units. In an article that spread across three-quarters of the front page, titled “Fido's Locked Out of Uncle Sam's Williamsburg Houses,” the issue of pet ownership was heavily discussed. This article was accompanied by before-and-after images of

the district and a close-up of the modernized interior of a model apartment.⁶⁰ Given the lack of coverage on the racial segregation policies of the NYCHA, it is understandable that black activists and political leaders considered International Style public housing to be the relative privilege of white ethnic groups in these early years.

The tone of protest found in the articles published in the *Amsterdam News* explicitly demonstrates the lengths to which black Americans would go in order to participate in the progressive modernization of New York City. The Brooklyn Urban League offered to screen residents from “Brownsville, Williamsburg, Bedford, Stuyvesant and Navy Yard districts” in order to ensure there were enough qualified candidates to enter Williamsburg Houses.⁶¹ However, Harold Ickes, the commissioner of the federal Public Works Administration (PWA), announced that only whites would be queried for inclusion in this space. The fact that Harlem River Houses was only included as an afterthought to the NYCHA’s construction program lends weight to the notion that a pan-European conception of the International Style provided yet another ideological legitimization for reserving the most modern environments for white ethnic communities in New York City. This makes the eventual turn to the interwar conception of public housing as a permanent black space that much more ironic—it took only twenty years for the consolidation of the white working class to mature enough to accrue the social and economic capital necessary to flee these housing projects. By this time the eventual inclusion of black residents into International Style public housing was one of the major factors to finally unravel the optimism that marks the introduction of Lescaze’s “New Deal Architecture.” The Supreme Court’s elimination of segregated federal housing alongside newly established segregationist policies for federally subsidized veterans’ home loans guaranteed that the struggle to integrate public housing would continue in detached suburban home developments. It seemed that racial integration was destined to continue haunting the modernization of American housing well into the postwar period.

The European Pedigree of *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*

The pan-European intellectual framework for the *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* at MoMA evolved from the discrete interests of its two cocurators: the American architect and critic Philip Johnson and the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock. When Johnson was appointed as the first secretary of the newly established Department of Modern Architecture within MoMA in the early twentieth century, he consciously envisioned that this department would serve as an institutional headquarters for propagandizing the dissemination of European

aesthetic ideas to the American public. Johnson reached out to Hitchcock in 1930 to plan the museum's first exhibit on modern architecture. This process took nearly two years as Johnson traveled across the United States and Western Europe with family and friends to create a list of works to be included in this exhibition.⁶² Hitchcock was an important addition to this exhibition, as he had become one of the most respected scholars of modern architecture at this time. His first book-length study of the subject, *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* (1929), constructs a linear and progressive narrative of the gradual transformation of distinct national architectural styles into a commonly shared international building culture.

Part 1 of this monograph outlines "The Age of Romanticism," which examines the picturesque representation of organic concepts through architectural ornament. According to Hitchcock, the architect's emulation of painting and poetry unduly elevated the aesthetic function of architectural ornament above all other factors of building. This phase of development is interpreted as an interruption of the structural principles of modern architectural style later exemplified in Gothic architectures:

For the phases through which European architecture has passed since the culmination of the High Gothic in the thirteenth century are not to be considered as constituting successive independent styles comparable to those of the earlier past, the Greek or the Egyptian for example, but rather as subsidiary manners of one Modern style. Those architects and builders who have worked within this Modern style have had on the one hand more or less conscious intellectual interests in abstract form and have frequently preferred experiment to the continuance of tradition. But on the other hand, their free tendencies have until the last few years been balanced by a sentimental desire to recall one or several styles of the far past and by an inertia which has caused a considerable retention of the features of style of the near past.⁶³

Hitchcock's rejection of Romanticism, or the "organic" rhetoric of the nineteenth century, is slightly confusing for a contemporary reader because it is primarily used to describe the picturesque representation of naturalistic forms. In contrast to this philosophy, several nineteenth-century architecture theorists used organic concepts in a direct attempt to metaphorically emulate the generative principles of nature, not just its external forms. Such an interpretation was manifest by nineteenth-century theorists such as Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and Gottfried Semper, who equally celebrated the integration of form and function in

medieval forms, especially the ecclesiastical structures of France. Thus, Hitchcock's defense of the synthetic integration of all building elements dovetails with an alternative approach to "organic" design during the height of Romanticism.⁶⁴

Part 2 of Hitchcock's *Modern Architecture* examines the historical emergence of "The New Tradition" that gave birth to a style of architecture that is finally free of all forms of eclecticism, or what he called sentimental revivals of exterior ornamentation. Part 3 isolates "The New Pioneers" of this movement, with France, Holland, and Germany leading the way. According to Hitchcock, International Style architectures began in Western Europe and were disseminated by a few key figures to lands as far away as North America, Russia, and Japan.

The European pedigree of International Style architecture was most firmly established by the coauthored exhibition catalog *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (1932), which Hitchcock published with Johnson. This text continues Hitchcock's formal interpretation of modern architecture, but establishes a starker contrast between the Romantic traditions of the past and present by providing the impression of a more radical shift in contemporary developments. This change results in a more unified interpretation of the International Style, which was outlined by three formal criteria: the visual expression of interior volumes, the visual expression of interior structure, and the rejection of applied ornament.

In the eyes of most architectural historians, the latter criterion undoes the synthetic relationship established between space, structure, and ornament by nineteenth-century theorists of architectural organicism. However, despite the avowed rejection of applied ornament, *International Style* does in fact discuss the manner in which aggregated building materials such as brick and tile can be applied in the modern fashion. Thus, any explicit attempt to emulate the embodied or monolithic character of stucco or concrete is offered as a proper modern aesthetic. These options are discussed openly in the section titled "Surfacing Materials." After outlining the demerits of brick as a traditional building material, Johnson and Hitchcock claim, "Nevertheless, much can be done to emphasize continuity of surface. If the color of the mortar be near that of the brick, and the bricks relatively even in value and texture, the bonding pattern need not be strikingly evident. The actual material of a wall surface of considerable area is then relatively inconspicuous. . . . Since brick is permanent in color and not subject to cracking and streaking, it is in the long run actually superior aesthetically to stucco for large-scale constructions."⁶⁵ Four architectural precedents are offered as evidence of the modern potential of brick as a monolithic material: the Jakob Kolb Soap factory in Zurich (1930), by Theodor Merrill; the Konigsgrube Mine Works in Bochum, Germany (1930), by Kellermüller and

Hofmann; the Lange House in Krefeld, Germany (1928), by Mies van der Rohe; and the city employment office in Dessau, Germany (1928), by Walter Gropius. Tile is discussed immediately thereafter: “In the range of constructions of medium cost and medium size glazed tile laid with continuous vertical as well as horizontal joints provides a material that vies in aesthetic effectiveness with plate sheathing. . . . The shape of the units may be such that all suggestion of the traditional masonry block is lost. The texture is smooth and permanent; the color possibilities are wide. . . . Tiles properly laid give even more surely than bricks a continuous surface pattern like the texture of a fabric. They also quite avoid the suggestion of a supporting masonry wall.”⁶⁶ The façade of J. W. Lerh’s Volksstimme Building in Frankfurt (1929) is offered as a precedent for the modern potential of tiled surfaces.

Lescaze would apply the aesthetic principles of these very passages in his design for Williamsburg Houses, completed just seven years after the International Style exhibition. This can be taken either as a compromise of strict stylistic standards due to budgetary reasons or as an aesthetic attempt to create the illusion of a bounded volume, just as was prescribed by the exhibition catalog. Either way, the synthetic relationship between space, structure, and ornament that bound architectural organicism in the past is clearly relevant in the design of Williamsburg Houses.

Architectural historians have long hinted at Lescaze’s critical role in bridging the aesthetic positions expressed by social housing in Western Europe and the United States, though few have fully accounted for the white racial politics that regulated the transatlantic dissemination of ideas.⁶⁷ The European pedigree of the MoMA exhibit establishes a discursive relationship between the achievements of Western European avant-gardes and the relative social status of white ethnic diasporas living in the United States. Upon closer examination, the political commitments of the International Style were not theoretically universal, as many have claimed, but instead constructed new alignments within the existing patterns of international cultures that influenced the Euro-American modernist avant-garde. The shifting alignments of this cultural legacy affected its reception in the United States by serving as a class-equalizing agent for white ethnic immigrants that could claim a distinct kinship with European cultures. When interpreted through the lens of character, the racial polarization of New York City’s public housing market merely deepened the cultural pedigree already implicit in the 1932 International Style exhibit. The transatlantic character of this formulation was a fundamental aspect of the tensions that emerged between national and international interpretations of modern culture and its expansion around the globe.

By the time African Americans became full beneficiaries of modern public housing in the postwar period, the avant-gardist wave behind this amenity had given way to the new frontier of suburban housing. As public housing became the rear guard of official state and federal housing policies, it more explicitly reflected a racially stigmatized—and class-stigmatized—context. White middle classes, now uplifted by older public housing environments, moved on to the newly modernizing suburbs, while poor blacks remained segregated in ghettos and were forever out of step with mainstream architectural modernism. In this sense, the specter of integration continued to haunt the universalist claims of International Style public housing in New York from its inception in the 1930s to late in the postwar period. The racial associations of postwar US public housing can be traced back to the racial politics of International Style architectures during the 1930s.

A fully fledged organicist interpretation of International Style public housing appears in the third and final section of *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*. The homogenous character of brick and concrete housing projects constructed in Germany and the United States was interpreted as an aesthetic index of the collective modern lifestyle that became possible by means of mass production techniques. Mumford describes what he believed was an inverse relationship between the homogenous character of modern architectural environments and the eventual liberation of an individual's personality: "As the background becomes more standardized, so that it no longer applies to a single caste but a whole community, no longer to a single community but a whole civilization, so will the foreground become more individuated. Here we have in architectural taste that necessity for combining the intimate and the individualized, which we find in the region, with the generic and universalized, which we shall find only in the widening of the processes of culture to our whole planet. The common ground will thus become broader."⁶⁸ The architectural projects used to illustrate this modern aesthetic included Clarence Stein and Henry Wright's Sunnyside housing project in Long Island (1924) along with a second in Radburn, New Jersey (1928); Springsteen and Hammer's Amalgamated Dwellings (1939); Otto Haesler's Rothenberg Housing in Kassel (1930); J. J. P. Oud's Kiefhoek Housing Development (1928); and Ernst May's Römerstadt Housing Development in Frankfurt (1927). The European projects all consisted of white monolithic *Siedlungen*, while the American projects consisted of minimalist two-to-three-story brick volumes.

Though the housing section of this exhibit is generally attributed to the writings and theory of Mumford, he contributed very little to the final catalog and composition of the show. Instead, three of his closest associates—Bauer, Stein, and Wright—contributed works that kept to the

broader principles of his thought.⁶⁹ Sample text was also taken from previous writings of Mumford or exposés on public housing in the national press.⁷⁰ Mumford was principally known as a contemporary critic of city and urban development. Trained by Patrick Geddes, the Scottish biologist and town planner, Mumford interpreted cities as an organic outgrowth or exponent of local cultures and customs. His theory appeared in massive anthologies, newspaper columns, and even documentary films such as *The City*, which appeared in 1939.⁷¹ The organicist language he used to describe city development became a common element of interwar housing debates. Reformers such as Bauer and Louis Pink likewise attributed the formal character of modern social housing experiments found in Germany, France, and Great Britain to an organic connection between the lifestyle of mass-produced culture and the development of a new standard in housing. This socioaesthetic relationship was thought to parallel those obtained in earlier forms of Heimat culture, including the medieval cottage architectures of the English and German countryside.

Pink and Bauer spent a considerable amount of time visiting and documenting built examples of social housing in Great Britain and Western Europe. Their travels across the Atlantic helped them establish the political and aesthetic rhetoric that housing reformers used to direct the movement in the United States as well as popularize European avant-garde designs with nonprofessional audiences. One common criterion they both used to assess the success of modern housing was the organic character of each design, or the visual expression of the social integration that was achieved in each project. In Pink's *New Day in Housing* and Bauer's *Modern Housing*, the social cohesion of working-class residents was represented by an overriding visual aesthetic that overtly expressed the new vernacular standard for modern living. This modern vernacularism was littered with comparative moralistic readings of premodern and modern housing settlements, especially when these environments were designed for the working classes. A neopastoralism was prominent among British designers of Garden City communities, which were directly inspired by medieval housing fabric. Such projects explicitly revived the visual aesthetic of the cottage house situated within its bucolic landscape while introducing a unified urban fabric for composing newly aggregated housing units in satellite new towns on the city's periphery.

Bauer believed that the natural progression from this pastoralism to “a new kind of order in the human environment” would be manifest by the integrated visual aesthetic of modern housing at the level of the superblock.⁷² She translated this search for holism into a general principle of design: “A single building is not a painting hung in a gallery—it is rather an arm or a leg or a

spinal column of a larger organism which, if it is healthy, we may call architecture. If buildings do not express an integrated society (or at least a desire for such society) they merely state the fact that society is discordant—and little more.”⁷³ This sentiment continues and revises the stylistic implications of nineteenth-century architectural organicism. By claiming that architecture is a social art, Bauer emulates nineteenth-century paradigms of architecture as a direct exponent of social order, which required national character and architectural character to mirror one another in human civilization. Yet the organic principles that formerly directed the visual articulation of a building’s tectonic features in architectural ornament were now stretched to regulate the visual integration of an entire urban district.

In this sense, the scale for patterns of a site plan for a Siedlungen apartment block in Germany or the plan geometry of a Garden City district in the United Kingdom replaced the scale of Louis Sullivan’s elevational studies for botanical ornament. These interwar revisions to architectural organicism effectively displaced the strategic importance of visual ornament in modern architecture in service of unifying the visual aesthetic of a building to represent the growing anonymity of mass culture. In order to better express the collective character of an entire district—the scale that Sullivan and other Chicago Style architects had yearned to reach in the nineteenth century—the modern architect turned his gaze away from ornamenting the individual object to regulating the visual cohesion of the city block. This left the architect to express the truth of materials by overtly displaying them to the eye. If concrete could not be used to produce a monolithic aesthetic, then brick and tile could be combined with colored mortar to preserve this effect from the building scale to the block.

Williamsburg Houses and the Physical Embodiment of Whiteness

As a Swiss émigré to the United States, William Lescaze epitomized both the European pedigree that the International Style came to be associated with in New York in the 1930s and the Americanization that political elites desired for new immigrants. Lescaze had trained across the Atlantic with the protomodernist Karl Moser in Switzerland and Henri Sauvage in France before migrating to the United States and naturalizing as a citizen. Yet despite the international roots of his design philosophy, Lescaze strove to refine the American character of his architectural practice. By 1942, in his autobiography *On Being an Architect*, he was convinced that modern man must have both national and international traits to live in contemporary society: “There is nothing more or less ‘international’ about ‘modern’ architecture than there is about ‘modern’ man. They are both international and national. Man, wherever he has appeared, has followed the

same general design. The Prussian general, the Spanish fisherman, the Eskimo, the cowboy, the American tycoon are basically international and national. The nationalism always shows up in the details, in the way of walking, talking, language, the food eaten, the clothes worn—and so it does in buildings. Modern architecture is as international and as national as was Gothic architecture.”⁷⁴ This viewpoint departed from the most polemical claims of international style theorists that praised the homogeneity of the new art. These claims limited the presence of nationalist factors to nonarchitectural elements such as furniture, language, clothing, and other specimens in the practical arts.

While Lescaze rejected the use of applied ornament and recognized the critical function of the practical arts for exhibiting local flourishes, he held on to the possibility that a building still contained the capacity to express formal particularity in its own right. Like Sullivan before him, Lescaze continued to define style as a visual exponent of the cultural condition that produced period forms. The latent romanticism of this position is manifest in the continued relevance of particularity, although it is now restricted to “the details” that were not outlawed by international style debates: the underlying spatial and material constituents of architectural form. Lescaze’s interpretation of functionalism revised the central claims and assumptions of aesthetic nationalism in a new and decidedly expanded political context.

It is not surprising that Lescaze rejected Johnson and Hitchcock’s stylistic interpretation of contemporary design. As Lorraine Welling Lanmon notes in her biography of Lescaze, his journey across the Atlantic helped him to appreciate the ways national boundaries still exerted an indelible force on architectural production.⁷⁵ He struggled tremendously with adjusting his organicist architectural training under Moser to a new professional context, and he abandoned many aesthetic lines of inquiry in painting and graphic design that did not prove immediately relevant to the US national context. Robert Bruce Dean has even suggested that Lescaze went through the trouble of casting himself as a businessman-architect to better reflect the pragmatism of American capitalism—a step that many of his European migrant peers rejected outright in order to maintain their mystique as a foreigner with international roots.⁷⁶ These experiences likely increased his belief that the regional character of a place could not be completely erased by a universal (i.e., functionalist) approach to design. But the problem of materializing national differences remained. What relationship existed between the seemingly universal procedures of functionalism and the visual expression of architectural characters? Lescaze would address this issue by investing in the political commitments of his new homeland, especially in the form of public housing.

In his essay “New Deal Architecture,” Lescaze explicitly equates the progressive and pragmatist aims of Roosevelt’s New Deal policies with the functionalism of European modern architectures. According to Lescaze, the parallels between these two forces suffered from some confusion insofar as the phrase “New Deal” had become a neologism for updating what he considered to be outmoded architectural practices. This historical conception of form, which discussed buildings in terms of their visual appearance only, mistook the results for the cause of new forms in architecture. Such discussions should remind us of Viollet-le-Duc’s distinction between historical styles and “style,” the latter of which was understood to be a process of design and not a visual model. After outlining the range of infrastructural projects that were to be constructed with federal monies, one-third of which would consist of public housing, Lescaze goes on to discuss the appropriate aesthetic expression of this modern construction effort. He characterizes North America’s existing public housing stock as a hodgepodge of historically eclectic works, or what he called “‘picture’ architecture,” which was out of sync with Roosevelt’s vision: “A government with a forward-looking and planning attitude toward agriculture and industry should not be so retrogressive as to weigh down the country with such a baroque collection of bastard buildings.”⁷⁷

By contrast, Lescaze portrays modern architecture as a natural response to man’s contemporary needs, making it a visual diagram of his current mode of existence. In this sense, the scientific organization of man’s interior and exterior environment was an ergonomic extension of himself. Lescaze’s view of a New Deal architecture was reinforced by a civilizational narrative of past styles, which legitimized the notion that the large-scale building effort now facing the nation should reflect the contemporary character of American life:

The first successful attempts made recently in European cities to clear away slums to build decent housing on a large scale were undertaken by modern architects. Modern architects rediscovered that man is the scale, that what counts is man and his activities, that man had been actively engaged in digging oil wells, developing railroads, automobiles, harvesting machines, electric lights, telephones, wireless, and that all these activities had modified his point of view, his requirements, his very life. . . . It is to the acceptance of man as the scale for architecture, instead of a king of Versailles, God as at Mont St. Michel, or a tomb as in the Pyramids, that we owe the present tendency in housing.⁷⁸

In this historical parallel, the physical replacement of the slums of New York was an epochal event that visually expressed the maturation of modern life in the United States. Any remnant of nineteenth-century man, with his tenements, lack of indoor plumbing, poor education, and

insanitary existence would literally be disciplined and transformed into a citizen fit for the industry and purposes of the modern nation-state. In an implicit critique of the NYCHA's previous solutions for public housing, Lescaze condemns their nostalgic use of "walled-in courts," a planning feature that became a staple of early tenement reform and limited-dividend housing projects that predated the establishment of a local authority.

Lescaze ends his article with the direct suggestion that a principled investment in public housing should lead to the development of a unique form of American architecture: "Who knows if, in investing its and our millions functionally, economically and aesthetically, the government would not be laying down the foundation of an American architecture, of modern architecture for a modern nation?"⁷⁹ Yet Lescaze never fully explains how this American variant would be different from the movements inaugurated in Europe. He left such subtleties to his architectural practice. The clearest example of what this might look like was presented in the planning and architectural detailing of Williamsburg Houses ([fig. 4.11](#)). This project was the most expensive design put forward by the NYCHA at the time, with a combined land acquisition and construction cost of nearly \$13 million (in 1930s currency).⁸⁰ Lescaze was put in charge of determining the architectural character of the exterior façades as well as the overall site planning of the complex. His innovations were slight, but very effective in elevating the modern features of this project. First, he replaced the enclosed perimeter block courtyard plans of the limited-dividend projects that he criticized in his article for of a series of smaller outdoor spaces aligned alongside of individual midrise buildings. His tower-in-the-park scheme included a few U-shaped green spaces, which resulted in a more open and asymmetrical plan arrangement. The entire complex sat within a vast superblock collected from several smaller city blocks, with each building plan shifted fifteen degrees from the orthogonal street grid. The exterior of each volume was minimally detailed with concrete spandrels visibly displayed along the exterior, which in turn supported a series of brick infill panels with punched windows above. Period construction photos verify the primacy of the concrete frame in the final design ([fig. 4.12](#)). Lescaze's solution purposefully combined the bare concrete finishes that were reminiscent of Western European social housing with the brick finishes that were characteristic of philanthropic social housing experiments in the United States. This combination of brick and concrete was preceded by his solution for the Chrystie-Forsyth housing project, designed for the Lower East Side.



Figure 4.11. Aerial view of Williamsburg Houses with Gaynor Junior High School in the foreground, ca. 1938. Photo no. 02.016.390, Sheba Ziprin collection, La Guardia Archives, LaGuardia Community College, New York.

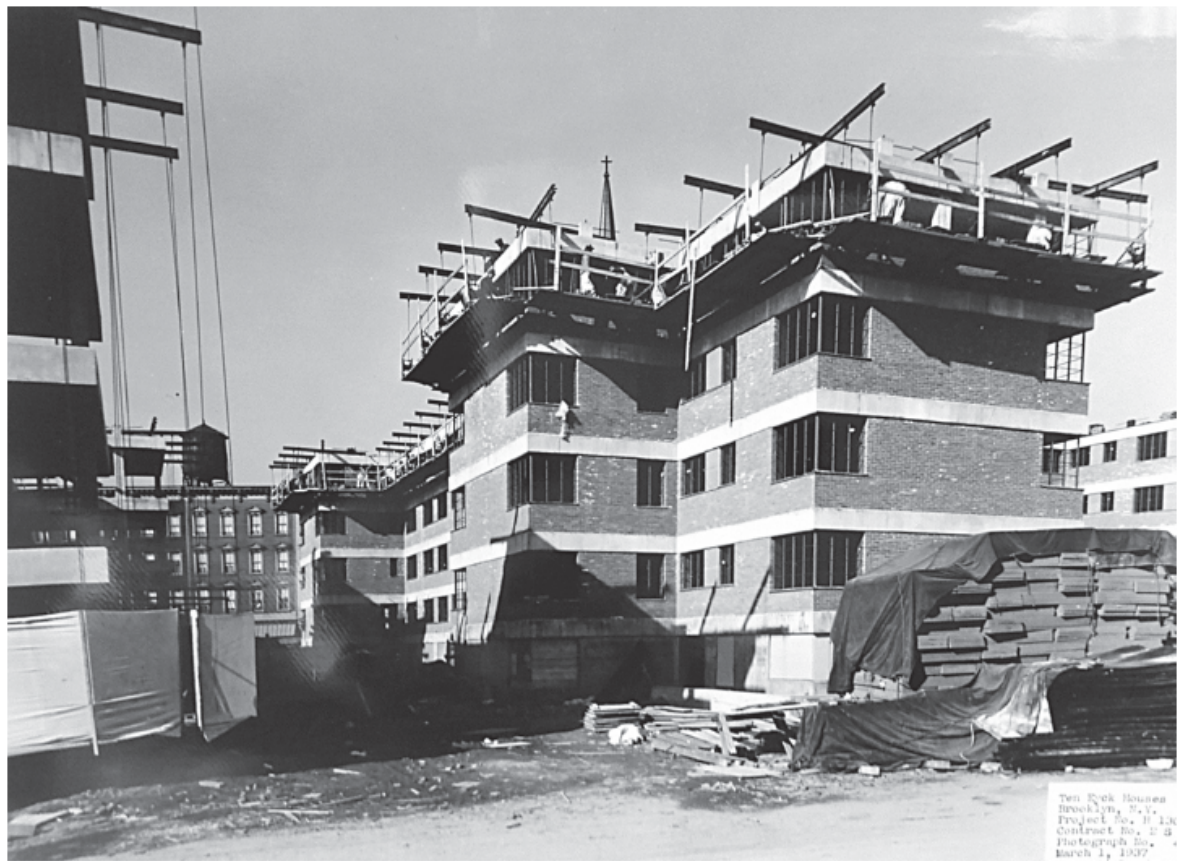


Figure 4.12. Construction photo of Williamsburg Houses, ca. 1937. La Guardia Archives, LaGuardia Community College, New York.



Figure 4.13. Harlem River Houses under construction. Box 14: New York State, folder 13/14, Record Group 135-SAR: Prints: Photographs rejected for use in the Photographic Report to the President: "Survey of the Architecture of Completed Projects of the PWA, 1939," National Archives.

Two of the NYCHA's most visible demonstration projects, First Houses and Harlem River Houses, directly employ the red brick that "was the most frequently used material in housing developments" of the 1920s and 1930s.⁸¹ Yet there are some important distinctions regarding the formal treatment of this material in comparison to International Style ideals. For example, the brick finish of First Houses was not based on any formal idea but was the economic result of speculative housing models of the private market. Administrators at the NYCHA decided to demolish the interior and keep the exterior in place, which merely revitalized the existing treatment of this tenement structure. By contrast, Harlem River Houses was intentionally designed to be a physical emblem of black social uplift, as it was meant to house predominantly African American residents. The lead architect, Archibald Manning Brown, decided to pursue a site plan organization that emulated the exterior courtyard schemes of the limited-dividend schemes of the previous generation. This produced one long and contiguous building mass that was more fixed, and thus seemingly heavier than the tower-in-the-park organization of European housing models ([fig. 4.13](#)). The architects for this building employed brick corbelling along prominent exterior walls leading through the entry to an exterior courtyard. The zig-zag patterns

of this surface emulated the aesthetic treatment of brick surfaces in Amalgamated Dwellings much more than the bold and minimalistic finishes found at Williamsburg Houses. The entry walls of the courtyard were capped on one end with an ashlar-based brick pier that held up statues of black figures and animal specimens to enliven the space.

Heinz Warneke, a German American artist appointed to be the lead sculptor of this project, was made responsible for designing the two most iconic figurative sculptures for the exterior courtyard: a black male laborer titled “Man, the Provider” and a black female matron titled “Woman, the Mother and Housekeeper”⁸² (see [plate 11](#)). Warneke’s work was inspired by the undulating curves of organic forms and his study of primitivism. Each sculpture celebrated the themes of labor and work that were prominent in most of the social realist art commissioned by the WPA. However, several members of a committee representing the residents complained that Warneke’s sculptures created a degrading and exaggerated portrait of black features.⁸³ Instead, the residents preferred a sculpture of a black male “remodeled as a businessman dressed in jacket and tie” that would have brought the image of black masculinity into the twentieth century. There was a black sculptor on Warneke’s team, Richmond Barthé, who developed a concrete frieze containing an alternative portrait of blackness. Barthé’s *Green Pastures: The Walls of Jericho* would have introduced a contrasting portrait of black personhood to Williamsburg Houses if it had been installed as originally intended (fig. 4.14).⁸⁴ The heroic lines of his two-panel decorative frieze, titled “Exodus” and “Dance,” respectively, were inspired by Biblical themes and Egyptian architecture. The art historian Margaret Rose Vendryes interprets some of the gestures of Barthé’s black subjects recalling the poses taken by members of the Black Panther Party.⁸⁵ As a participant of the Harlem Renaissance, Barthé was invested in an artistic culture that challenged stereotypical portraits of African Americans. Such limited conceptions were put forward by leading architects such as Le Corbusier, who viewed black racial character as too primitive or premodern to grasp the rational principles required to create modern architecture.⁸⁶ Mayor La Guardia added an African American architect, John Louis Wilson Jr., to the design team for Harlem River Houses after the project was officially started; however, the apparent racism of his colleagues prevented him from serving as the lead architect of this project.⁸⁷ He was thus unable to channel the project in a material direction that updated disciplinary norms for representing minority character.



Figure 4.15. Richmond Barthé, “Green Pastures: The Walls of Jericho.” This decorative frieze was originally designed for a black housing project but was relocated to a white housing project in 1941.

The institutional history of the limited-dividend projects that served as a model for their design came from a tradition of creating charitable spaces for the poor that celebrated the generosity of its sponsor more than the cultural legacies of its residents. These cultural factors complicate the ultimate meaning of this housing project. Perhaps the combination of social realist and International Style conventions found in Harlem River Houses was the result of its being completed nearly a year before the end of construction on Williamsburg Houses. There may not have been enough time to update the visual aesthetic of this building to reflect current trends. Given the primitive themes of its figurative sculptures, however, it seems much more likely that this design was created to reflect the contemporary perceptions of black racial character as perpetual primitive subjects of the modern world.

Lescaze chose to reference the brick tradition of New York’s limited-dividend social housing, but with a twist: he selected a tan brick instead of the stock red of earlier projects to soften its overall effect on the form. This specification brought the color of the brick closer to the concrete used in the project, which made it even more distinct from other projects completed by the NYCHA. This visual aesthetic did not evoke any of the dread that such solutions have come to represent today. From the perspective of the white ethnics living in 1938 they likely represented a bright liberation from such circumstances. Historical reviews in local newspapers and in papers published by the NYCHA note the gentrification that occurred around the neighborhood in response to this development. Period images of residents moving into the apartments, as well as staged model living room and bedroom arrangements suggest that many

whites believed this setting would be instrumental in promoting their upward social mobility. When one compares the interior living patterns of white ethnics living in tenements torn down to accommodate Williamsburg Houses and the model photographs of these new interiors, it is apparent that some of the material cultures that marked individual white ethnic groups as distinct cultures falls away for a more homogenous image of white personhood.

A visual comparison of the artistic principles regulating the interior murals sent to this public housing project and the artworks hanging in many of the upper middle-class interiors included in the 1932 MoMA show suggests the instrumental function of public art. The architectural program for Williamsburg Houses directly contributed to the modernization of working-class character through the public amenities and leisure activities that were set aside there. One of the most conspicuous examples was the construction of community meeting rooms in the basements of each housing block. The weekly PTA meetings and resident board meetings of Williamsburg Houses were often held in these rooms, and these flex spaces were also the sites where local children learned on how to get along with others, presumably of a different ethnic background than themselves.⁸⁸ The rooms were decorated with murals created by modernist artists (see [plate 12](#)). Though not formally in charge of these interior details, Lescaze requested that abstract modernist paintings, instead of art using the figurative style of social realism produced by most other PWA artists, be included in the basement recreation rooms. The reason he gave was that abstract paintings might help day laborers relax when they came home from toiling jobs, whereas social realist works were likely to remind them of work. However, Lescaze's personal experiences with Americanization made him intimately familiar with the acculturating function of high art. This was likely also a factor in his suggestion, as abstract art introduced an upper middle-class aesthetic to the domestic milieu of Williamsburg Houses. In this way, the communal spaces of Williamsburg Houses were transformed into a physical laboratory for assimilating white ethnics into the American body politic, and the avant-garde artwork literally connected this process of racial amalgamation with the pan-European aesthetic of modernist art and architecture. Lescaze's intuitions on the acculturating function of high art seemed to be on target: the second edition of the resident newsletter, the *Projector*, reported plans to establish a larger art-lending program that would permit residents to place works of art on loan from local museum to decorate their homes for parties, community meetings, and other gatherings that merited a formal air.⁸⁹

In 1938 Talbot Hamlin called Lescaze a champion of “a new vision of democracy” for the ways that Williamsburg Houses materialized the social values of Roosevelt’s New Deal politics. While the minimal aesthetic of the project expressed the new repose expected of the globally aware modern citizen, Lescaze’s formal departure from the white concrete aesthetic of the 1932 MoMA International Style exhibit visualizes an Americanization of the style in the United States. Yet this stylistic hybridization was burdened by two primary issues in the interwar period: the Eurocentric cultural frameworks used to market the MoMa exhibit in New York City and the official segregationist policies of state and federal housing agencies in the 1930s.

There were at least three institutional bodies that strategically worked to define the racial character of public housing in the early twentieth century. The first set of institutions were the governmental agencies intent on materializing the cultural ideals of Roosevelt’s New Deal politics. These included the federal PWA and the state-run NYCHA. Their interests in defining American character were evident in the social gains for working-class residents that they claimed would come with the construction of public housing, as well as the funded social programs they added to housing complexes in order to reform the lifestyles of these residents. These latter programs included daycare centers, public schools, local clinics, and semipublic meeting rooms that served as social condensers to encourage the communal mixing of white immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. These social integrations were not always common among the white ethnics that settled in New York, especially when language and material customs revealed deeply rooted cultural differences. These spaces also provided didactic exposure to middle- and upper middle-class cultural norms, such as the art lending program that was started in Williamsburg Houses and the founding of a community newsletter, the *Projector*, which advocated saving for homeownership and other notions of private property.

A second institution that was invested in defining the American character of public housing was the Museum of Modern Art, which sponsored “*Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*.” This exhibit was divided into three sections, the first concentrating on the work of individual modern architects; the second illustrating the national tendencies and international extents of this style; and the third highlighting the innovations made to public housing in the United States. Despite the inclusion of Russian and Japanese practitioners in the first and second sections of the show, the pan-European geography of most of the exhibit established a Eurocentric cultural framework for interpreting the relevance of International Style architectures in the United States. In New York City, this Euro-American conception of internationalism

served as the perfect ideology for promoting the unification of new waves of European immigrants entering the United States; while new immigrants may not have had the cultural capital to immediately succeed in the American context, they could conceive of themselves as working toward the types of modernity that had already taken root back home.

This cultural imaginary was articulated to an even greater degree in the third set of institutions that helped define the character of public housing in the United States: the local and national press. Local newspapers proliferated in the racial and ethnic enclaves of New York City in order to discuss the social, political, and economic happenings in each district. This phenomenon helped neighbors to feel that they belonged to a particular neighborhood, as well as to an extended diasporic community when local conditions were compared to those in other major cities. Even the physical construction of Williamsburg Houses prompted the creation of a newsletter that was meant to serve this complex alone. Analyzing the racial politics of local newspapers alongside those of housing authorities and the architectural discipline allows us to better understand the impact of internationalist discourses on the character of public housing.

While the polemics of the International Style debates defined this aesthetic as theoretically universal in extent, the legalization of separate-but-equal policies of federal and state housing authorities made a universal application of this style a practical impossibility. On the one hand, the European pedigree of the International Style debates enabled a conceptual relationship to be drawn between “old” and “new” waves of European immigrants to the United States that promoted the Americanization of white working-class communities into the American body politic. The social utility of public housing for this group was empirically demonstrated by their ability to flee these contexts during the postwar period and move to the suburbs with the aid of new federal legislation for subsidized home loans. On the other hand, the white cultural pedigree subtending these debates hindered its applicability for incorporating the cultural legacies of African Americans also desiring to live in public housing projects. In contrast to the pan-European pedigree that helped the white working classes contextualize themselves within the process of Americanization, the cultural pedigree of International Style architectures was never imagined to specifically embrace the cultural legacies of black Americans during the interwar or postwar periods. This was not the case for visual representations of black modernity created by participants in the Harlem Renaissance, a parallel artistic phenomenon in New York City. The racial politics of the period prevented the visual construction of an alternative cultural legacy for International Style public housing in the early years of the NYCHA.

The institutional patterns of racial segregation had an inevitable effect on the public perception of Williamsburg Houses in New York City. Evidence of this racial codification can be found in local newspapers and municipal records: articles in the black press detailed the ways the budget and location of this project—the most expensive project to that date for the NYCHA—exemplified the secondary status of African Americans in this citywide modernization effort; while the white press in Williamsburg celebrated the new levels of social and economic investment that were occurring in their neighborhoods. A social history of Williamsburg Houses also reveals the critical function of these spaces for shaping the character of working-class European immigrants. The architectural programming of this project introduced a string of civic programming that was designed by the state to homogenize the language patterns and even shape the bodily habits of new residents. A public school was the first program ever completed on the site, which guaranteed that white ethnic children of different language groups would learn to speak English from a young age. In addition, the introduction of a PTA enabled the mothers of different language groups to learn to settle disputes in a common forum that encouraged group cohesion. Basement clinics were also included to address the race-based fears of poor white ethnic diseases through a comprehensive program of communal inoculation. Other features of the interior program were designed to elevate the public taste of new residents to enable an acculturation of middle-class aesthetic sensibilities. The community newsletter, the *Projector*, details an art lending program created to enable residents to decorate their homes in ways that emulated the opulence of middle-class families. Basement activity rooms were also decorated with murals of cubist art, an abstract precedent that departed from the social realist idioms of other working-class projects.

The exterior form of Williamsburg Houses was shaped to promote an American interpretation of the International Style. In both aesthetic and political terms, Lescaze's design for Williamsburg Houses placed two competing models for social housing in conversation with one another. The first is represented by the common brick material and courtyard-oriented plans of American limited-dividend projects, a solution that was very popular among philanthropists and union-organized housing at the turn of the century. This model grew from a tradition of public-private partnerships that combined the strengths of the private market with publicly funded projects. As Bloom notes in *Public Housing That Worked*, this combined approach was somewhat unique to New York State.⁹⁰ Its success in times of lean governmental financing explains its continued use there for nearly two decades after public housing had officially begun in the 1930s. By contrast, the second aesthetic tradition employed in Williamsburg Houses is

represented by the monolithic concrete aesthetic of Siedlungen housing units completed in western Europe during the 1910s and 1920s. The most famous examples of this tradition are Ernst May's pioneering designs for municipal housing in Frankfurt, and Weissenhof Siedlungen organized by Mies van der Rohe in Stuttgart. Progressive housing reformers in the United States revered these models of social housing for materializing the radical socialism that many believed was implicit to FDR's New Deal policies, which used the powers of the federal government to expand the social safety net for the nation's working classes.⁹¹ By combining elements from these two national building traditions, Lescaze produced a hybridized design that was politically expedient for mitigating the socialist (and thus "un-American") associations of European social housing but enabling the political instrumentalization of public housing as a material context for assimilating first-generation European immigrants into the body politic.

The social and disciplinary histories of Williamsburg Houses reveal the shifting role of character judgments in twentieth-century architectural organicism. The organicist rhetoric American critics employed to describe European social housing considered this building type to be a transparent reflection of rising international norms for mass culture. American architects hoped these standards would enable them to create a new vernacular aesthetic at home. In contrast to nineteenth-century paradigms of architectural organicism, American critics did not employ explicit references to natural metaphors of design to integrate the principles of race and style theory in modern architectural debates. Instead, they interpreted the historical continuity of organic relationships that regulated vernacular settlements in premodern societies as a material precedent for contemporary designs. Mumford was a leading proponent of such thinking in the United States. Lescaze was exposed to both traditions of architectural organicism: first from his European mentors Moser and Sauvage and later through the writings of leading American theorists. While Lescaze continued to use the formal idioms of International Style architecture to visually represent the essential traits of racial and national character in the twentieth century, the institutional contexts of the interwar period required a contextualist response to national debates.

In the final analysis, Lescaze's most pioneering design for American public housing—Williamsburg Houses—established a contemporary style of organic architecture that shored up the authenticity of a modern American architecture against the homogenizing culture of an international avant-garde. His personal experiences with becoming an American citizen likely made him sympathetic to the plights of working-class European immigrants arriving during the

interwar period. Unfortunately, the racial politics of his day conspired to prevent him from extending this accommodation to most other minority communities desiring to participate in this new American experiment.



Figure C.1. Le Corbusier, model of Plan Obus for Algiers, 1930. Fonds Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal.