

The Harlem River Houses

Roy Strickland and James Sanders



Harlem and the Vision

There are two popular images of Harlem. One consists of the ranks of six-story tenements and once opulent apartment houses whose formal and stylistic distinction is masked by decades of neglect and layers of grime. The other is made up of high-rise public housing projects. These projects, built on superblocks, dominate the community, the most recent among them reaching thirty stories and more (Figure 1). At their best they are sanitary; at their worst they are toms riddled with crime. In both cases they have come to symbolize rather than ameliorate the slum.

For New York these superblock projects are the legacy of Modernism. They are as prominent and as violent a change to the fabric of the city as that brought by the corporate rebuilding of Park Avenue (Figure 2). But Harlem has no sleek glass curtain wall – Park Avenue's saving grace. Instead, the housing projects are dully opaque with cheap brick, punctured by aluminum sash windows, and flecked by institutional tile.

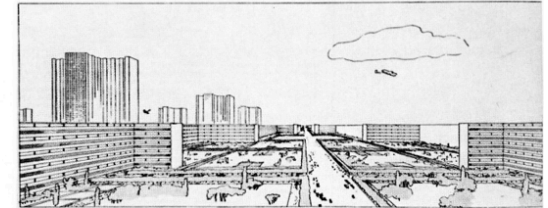
At the edge of the projects, Harlem seems especially ragged and raw. The "rivers of trees," to which planners and architects of the 1950s had likened their superblock open spaces, have turned to flood, and belts of project peripheral roads have swept away neighborhood institutions, shops, and references.

The legacy comes far short of the promise of Modernism and the promise of the superblock, which in the radical planning literature of the 1920s and 1930s seemed to go hand in hand. The promise was perhaps best illustrated by visionaries like Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Lescaze, whose superblock urban housing schemes, penned and modelled in shadowless abstract delicacy, appeared to cleanse the slums with towers-in-the-park (Figure 3). Here was assured the aeration of the city where, argued Le Corbusier, ". . . sun, vegetation, and space are the three raw materials of urbanism"¹ – materials as distinct from New York's (or, for that matter, Paris' or Berlin's) as possibly could be.

¹ Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter* (New York: Grossman, 1973), p. 55

The Harvard Architecture Review, Volume 2, Spring 1981, 0194-3650/81/010048-12 \$3.00/0, © 1981 by The Harvard Architecture Review, Inc. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology

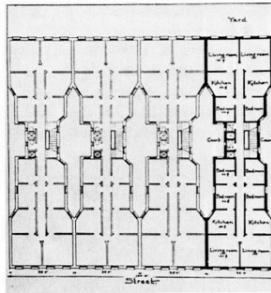
- 1 Polo Grounds Towers, Manhattan: Ballard Todd Associates, architects, 1968. The housing project: Post-War symbol of Harlem
- 2 Park Avenue, 1960s
- 3 City of Three Million, Le Corbusier, 1922. The shadowless, ideal city of towers-in-the-park



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4 Tenement Houses Plan, New York City, 1887. Built from the 1879 “old law” (“dumbbell”) tenement prototype, these buildings were dark and narrow and covered 90% of their 25' × 100' lots. Such tenements were the basis of New York’s slums and a challenge to reformers to provide a decent housing alternative.

In Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, the promise was momentarily fulfilled. With the post-World War II public housing boom, the slender concrete skeletons of high-rise housing projects rose among leveled slums. They were elegant and aerated. But despite their ample provision of light and air, once they were filled with brick and occupied by tenants, their social failures proliferated.

The Promise of the Superblock

For New York housing reformers and architects the early promise of the superblock had been especially impressive. It was the planner-architects’ response to both the congestion of the slum and the advent of the automobile, whose speed and efficiency seemed to mandate a new urban traffic network that strictly separated cars from pedestrians in the interest of unimpeded movement and safety. And the superblock housing project, with its implications of reworking whole sections of the city at once, was a welcome departure from the lot and block-bound tenement projects of the nineteenth and early twentieth century when reformers had been limited in the scope of their work by the political and economic conditions of their time.

Because the superblock combined several city blocks into one uninterrupted site, it appeared the final emancipation of housing from single parcel speculative development. The parcels were based on New York City’s pervasive property division—the 25 by 100 foot lot. This lot, the outgrowth of the city’s single-family row house tradition, was, the nineteenth century architect-reformer Ernest Flagg said, “the greatest evil which ever befell New York City, for from this division has arisen the New York system of tenement houses, the worst curse which has ever afflicted any great community”² (Figure 4).

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, New York reformers built model tenements and developed tenement laws which by the 1920s shaped philanthropic housing projects covering whole city blocks. In series of simple brick volumes, these projects were vessels of light and air (Figure 5). Through the decades the reformers were anxious to unlock the tenement from the small site and in the process to gain greater design flexibility, more open space, and stronger control over the health and social behavior of their tenants.

It was not until government moved from its primarily regulatory role over private property (e.g. the municipal old and new tenement laws) to an activist, initiatory one of building for the collective (viz. the Housing Division of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works) that low-income housing could grow in Manhattan from the single block to the superblock. The Federal government, unlike the reformers, could close streets and combine blocks. (Even Stein and Wright had been prevented from doing so at Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, and their Hillside Homes in the Bronx was an uneasy compromise of *cul de sacs*.) When the Federal government decided in 1934 to build housing, it also decided to use the superblock, a form appropriate to projects of the envisioned scale of 1000 units and more. Entire slum communities were to be torn down and rebuilt as part of the New Deal.

The Harlem River Houses

The first Federal public housing project was the Harlem River Houses, located at the intersection of Seventh Avenue and 151st Street and completed in 1936. The project was designed to house black families in apartments in four and five story buildings (Figure 6). According to Talbot Hamlin, *the project was only a little, only a beginning, only a drop in the bucket, to be sure; but at least there the buildings stand . . . To those of us who have watched and coddled and fed the housing movement, who have talked housing and listened to each other talk housing almost continually since the war, that seems an almost unbelievable fact. We have begun to build; the words are being incarnated in brick and steel and concrete and glass.*³

The project, now unobtrusive above Harlem River Drive, is at once the progenitor of the Harlem superblock housing project and the culmination of the New York reform housing movement’s nineteenth and early twentieth century design principles. Here the promise of the superblock and large-scale modern planning principles is fulfilled, although the project’s many particularized design decisions establish its continuity with the city’s residential traditions of tenement and apartment house architecture and social life. This special mixture has enabled the Harlem River Houses to enjoy a continued social success that has lasted nearly half a century—a remarkable record for public housing.

Harlem River Houses is not *public housing* as it is familiar to us now, nor was it *reform housing* as it was familiar to its contemporary proponents. In today’s terms, the project is a decidedly modest and traditional series of low-rise buildings of subtle details which add up to an imagery whose richness is quite distinct from that of its period’s didactic—and largely paper—Modernist housing schemes (Figure 7). As the first Federal public housing project in the nation, Harlem River Houses is a demonstration project whose level of resolution at once superseded that of earlier model tenement projects and set a standard unapproachable by later projects where expedient mass-housing formulas were applied. Harlem River Houses had to be good for it had to prove that public housing could work. At the same time it opened a Pandora’s box by firmly establishing the superblock as precedent for public housing.

Although the Harlem River Houses’ greatest importance rests in its representation of an ideal—that of the Federal government’s first subsidized housing for an urban working class—its particular interest and richness are the consequence of the expressed tension between the political, social, and architectural ideals of its era, and its architects’ sensibilities and skill in translating and executing those ideals. The Harlem River Houses is evocative of a Depression era American approach to urban problems which combined progressive, even radical, design theory with pragmatism and tradition. The project is transitional—breaking as many rules as it establishes yet retaining many of its city’s architectural and residential traditions.

And no wonder. Architects for the project included Archibald Manning Brown, Frank Forster, Horace Ginsbern, and John Louis Wilson. Brown, classmate of Franklin Roosevelt at Choate and Harvard, was a member of the prestigious architectural firm of Peabody, Wilson, and Brown and the designer of suburban estates and country clubs. Ginsbern, a New York architect, produced numbers of the city’s large, middle-class garden apartment complexes. Wilson, a Louisiana, was the first black architect to graduate from Columbia. Their combination of elitism and architectural conservatism (Brown and

² Ernest Flagg, “The New York Tenement-House Evil and Its Cure,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, xvi (July 1894), 108

³ Talbot Hamlin, “New York Housing,” *Pencil Points* (May 1938), 281

Andrew Jackson Thomas, architect, 1925. One of the finest 1920s reform projects, these buildings were sponsored by John D. Rockefeller to provide improved housing for black families in Harlem.

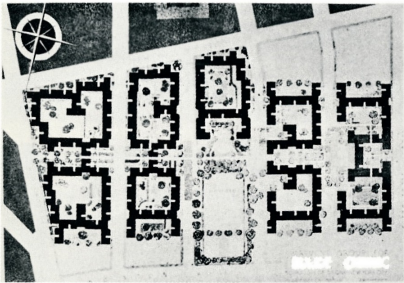
6 Harlem River Houses, in construction, 1935. A new order rises on Seventh Avenue.

7 Harlem River Houses, view of pedestrian mall. Less than a year old, the project has a vigorous, youthful look.





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8 House of William Ladd, Cedarhurst, Long Island; Peabody, Wilson, and Brown, architects, 1921. Brown was one of the architects of the Harlem River Houses and in the brick walls and casement windows of this estate are implications of Harlem River Houses' design.

9 Noonan Plaza, the Bronx; Horace Ginsborn, architect, 1931. A Moderne fantasy for the middle class, its courtyard planning principles were extended in the Harlem River Houses.

10 Plan, Hillside Homes, the Bronx; Clarence Stein, architect, 1932. Stein's planning compromise. The site plan nevertheless exhibits housing ambitions of the Harlem River Houses' decade.

11 Plan, Harlem River Houses. An almost classical arrangement of axes and courts, achieved economically through the repetition of "T," "L," and "Z" building units – each served by its own entrance and staircase. The openness of the plan, compared to the restricted courts of the Hillside Homes, is a benefit of the superblock.

12 Harlem River Houses. Grassy amphitheater overlooking the Harlem River. The classical semi-circle (turned into an embankment) resolved the project's orthogonal site plan with the diagonal of the river and was used, in the project's early days, for children's games and small theatricals.

13 Harlem River Houses, from Seventh Avenue, 1930s, with shops and "Flash Inn," a street corner bar in true New York tradition

14 Harlem River Houses, from periphery. Entrances to the buildings were generally on the interior courts, begudging the street's traditional role.

Forster), familiarity with high density urban housing (Ginsbern), and advocacy of the user-needs of the poor (Wilson), epitomized the combination of interests, social perspectives, and social classes that pervaded New Deal projects and social programming. The architects shared in classical, Beaux Arts academic training. Brown and Forster, in their country estates, were well practiced in the synthesis of architecture and arcadian landscape (Figure 8). Ginsbern, whose stylish Art Deco apartments in the Bronx were promoted as offering homes "destined to remain ever free from mediocrity"⁴ (Figure 9), was skilled in the design of efficient, well-lit and well-planned apartments surrounding open courts. Wilson, whom racism had locked out of professional practice in New York for the years following his graduation, was to design all of Harlem River's community facilities in a manner contradictory of the period's adage: "If you are poor, you are poor because you are meant to be poor."⁵

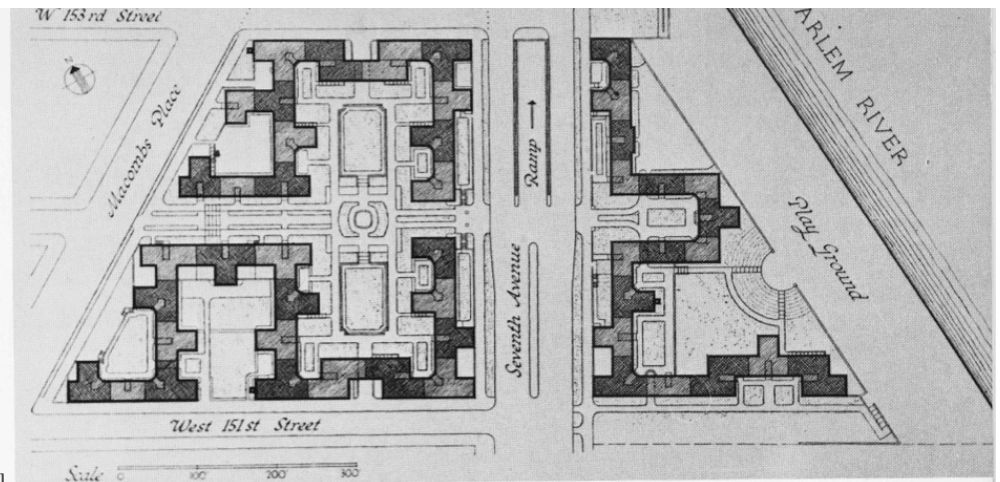
Well-known planning theorists and community designers like Andrew Stein and Henry Wright, or popular model tenement designers like Andrew Jackson Thomas, were conspicuously missing from the project's design staff. Whatever progressive planning influences touched the plan of the Harlem River Houses – and there were several, including the superblock principles of Stein and Wright (Figure 10), the low-rise *à redent* blocks of Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*, and the dwelling unit performance criteria developed by the PWA's Housing Division – they were filtered through a classically trained architectural sensibility that, in the case of the project's practicing architects, had reached indigenous urban and suburban expression. Harlem River, from the day of its inception, was not to be an abstraction, but rather a community bred of its New York milieu.

The Project's Design: Open Space and Building Form

The Harlem River Houses combines four Harlem city blocks into two pedestrian-oriented superblocks (Figure 11). Covering eleven acres, it consists of

⁴ Donald Sullivan, Brian Danforth, *Bronx Art Deco Architecture* (New York: Hunter College Graduate Program in Urban Planning, 1976), p. 5

⁵ Interview with John Louis Wilson, New York, NY, July 1978



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four and five story walk-up buildings with entrances turned away from the street. The buildings define a pedestrian mall, courts, gardens of various sizes, and a large, mid-block plaza. The buildings are divided into well-scaled units housing from eight to sixteen families each, and they offer floor-through apartments which helped establish standards for subsequent Federal public housing projects across the country. At the river's edge, below terraced lawns, is the site of a large athletic field and an amphitheater, both destroyed in 1957 by the building of the Harlem River Drive (Figure 12). Shops, health care facilities, a library, and a day care center are located along the project's surrounding streets (Figure 13).

Given the flexibility of the large site, Harlem River's architects vacillated between concern for street definition and an anxiousness to exploit the potential of open space. Although the project does not give the impression of being a series of free-standing buildings set in open space, it nevertheless anticipates that characteristic of later projects by bringing open space to the street side of the project in the form of U-shaped courts. As did their forerunners, the tenements, Harlem River's buildings define street space, but the housing reformers' traditional ambivalence toward the street is here memorialized by the inclusion of what amounts to a center-block circulation system of pedestrian paths. The buildings are rectangular and similar in height to their older neighbors, and the building wall is maintained along much of the project's peripheral streets; nonetheless the relocation of building entrances to inside corners of the project and the concentration of social activity on the interior courts make Harlem River, in a profound way, turn its back on the street (Figure 14).

Inside the block, the courtyard is brought to one of New York's fullest and most mature conceptions (Figure 15). Most of the courts seem city bred with formal arrangements of London plane trees, shrubs, and cobbled walks. Tightly framed by the buildings,



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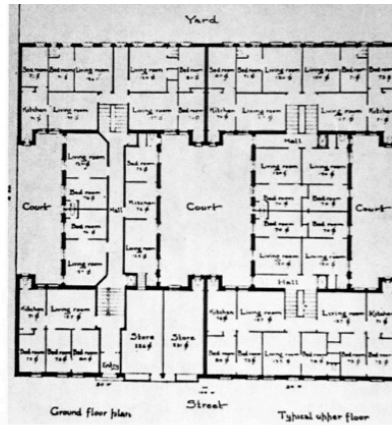
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the courts provide access to apartments, recreation, and community facilities whose proximity to one another produces a particularly urbane interchange of activities (which makes for lively, interesting views for the apartments above). As a result, buildings, courts, and open spaces enjoy a taut relationship despite the fact that the project's ground coverage is 31%, or less than half that of the surrounding neighborhood's tenements.

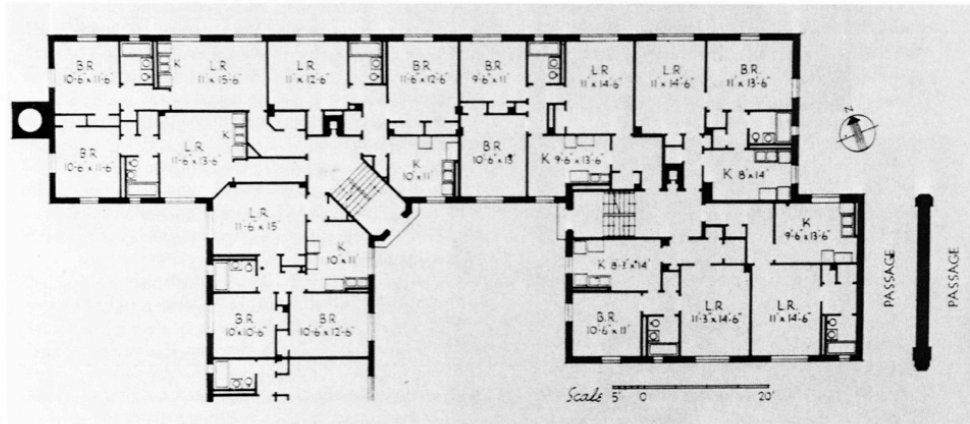
A block-through pedestrian mall is the catalyst of the courts' ultimate success (Figure 7). This promenade ties together the project and bisects Harlem River's major court, where larger-than-life-size sculpture by Heinz Warnecke of a black man, woman, and child aggrandize the portals to what is essentially the project's piazza (Figure 16). It also locks the project's amenities into the neighborhood because it is aligned with a community sidewalk; from 152nd Street, where the project opens up with wide building wings and shops, the view into the project gives a sense of its spatial progression. The mall brings the neighborhood to the river through a gentle change from cobbled pedestrian paths to well-planted lawns stepping down to the waterfront. (The architects' original intention of dividing the project's landscape into "urban" and "natural" halves is still apparent despite the intrusion of the Harlem River Drive.) Harlem River Houses' arrangement of buildings allows the densely built neighborhood west of Seventh Avenue to contain the project like a frame. From the center of the major court it is possible to look west and see a phalanx of tenements which breaks at the project's edge, but whose general form is carried across MaCombs Place, simplified, and suddenly allowed to breathe.

The project's connected T-shaped buildings are the Harlem River plan's most apparent holdover from new law (1901) tenement form, although their stairs have been shifted from the traditional place at the center of the tenement to the front of the building (Figures 17a,b). The staircases lead directly from the building entrances, and are vertically glazed. From the courts, these staircases break Harlem River's frontages into the double-lot, 50-foot property rhythms of the New York, new law tenement street.

In the balance among vertical stairwell glazing, the field of apartment windows, and the upward thrust of tiny bathroom windows, the project takes on a



17a



17b

comfortable, and for New Yorkers, a familiar, domestic scale and look. The public procession of the open space and the encompassing gradations of public to private space are among the most crisply delineated of any public housing project. It is their clarity and close association that give the project a unique and thoroughly combined communal and domestic sense as well as a facility for surveillance and communication among court, entry way, and apartment.

Corbelled brickwork around the piazza breezeways and at half-basement level along certain stretches of the building wall can be associated with the first floor rustication of the New York row house, tenement, and apartment house, but is as stylistically vernacular as the project ever becomes. The sobriety with which the architects translated New York residential form to fit government-mandated efficiencies gives the low-rise buildings a simplicity in which landscape becomes the crucial element in providing a full architectural imagery. Because the uniformly brick-wrapped buildings do not have differentiated fronts and backs (in clear rejection of New York architectural tradition), the

- 15 Harlem River Houses, courtyard view, with sculpture by Heinz Warnecke. Glazed stairhall is above entry (center) and overlooks public space.
- 16 Harlem River Houses, main courtyard, with sculptural groups in left foreground. Compared to Figure 5, this view clearly evidences the superblock's potential for more generous open space than that offered by projects limited to a single block.
- 17 Comparative plan. New Law tenement, ca. 1901 (17a), and Harlem River unit plan, 1936 (17b) — a clear improvement in low-income housing

meticulous development of courtyard landscape and paving elements serves as the orientation device that is the surrogate of building ornament, the embodiment of Modernism's first principles. But Harlem River, unlike its progeny, never makes the step toward becoming an abstract solution; its sobriety, proportions, and thickly turned building elements add up to an imagery which Talbot Hamlin, writing in 1938, found "warm and inviting; the whole [having] some of that human charm one finds in the brick built portions of New England towns of the [18]30s and '40s."⁶

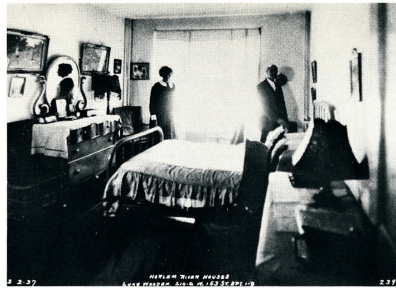
The Apartments

Underlying the project's design is a Beaux Arts formalism, whose influence was still felt in American Modernism of the 1930s. A design tension exists between the project's public procession and the apartments, which are shaped to fit the building form. Occasionally twisting foyers and diagonal walls in living rooms and kitchens (familiar and acceptable to New York housing both speculative and reform), imply that the plans for the living units are less refined than those of the public open spaces,

⁶ Hamlin, "Housing," 284



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and that Federal public housing requirements had yet to evolve a streamlined apartment prototype.

The apartments are series of tiny rooms (Figure 17b). In the larger apartments, the living room can be circumvented by going through an eat-in kitchen, where family life might very well be centered, leaving the largest room for special occasions and the display of better furniture. This room, as attested by the Housing Authority brochures at the time of the project's opening, was correctly proportioned for a sofa, armchair or two, coffee table, and cabinet radio, but for little more (Figure 18). Harlem River's floors were hard oak, and apartment detailing was minimal and clean — perfect for being decorated in chaste Modern style, but more likely to be crowded with the first tenant's holdovers from tenement days: The broad and overstuffed furniture would rub closely in the box-like rooms, enjoying the sunlight served up each day by an oversized casement window (Figure 19).

The generous windows were the project's most prized element. In each photograph of a model apartment interior, they appear broad and high, suffusing their rooms with light and dispelling the imagery of airless Harlem tenement flats. In these photographs a Modernist didacticism appears, and the lives of the project's residents appear to be cleansed and homogenized. But the architects' concern for light and ventilation did not deteriorate their traditional concepts of rooms. Apartment plans proceeded not from the "open space" planning principles of Modernism but maintained distinct volumes of space; even the living room could be closed off from the apartment's main stream of circulation in order to become a bedroom or sick room. The unit's dual circulation paths were considered by the architects to be a major improvement upon New York apartment design. Middle-class apartments, in which each member of the family might have his own bedroom, lacked secondary circulation routes bypassing the living room by way of the kitchen. Harlem River had them because of its low-income tenants' circumstances which might require that the living room be used for sleeping. For the poor, a baby's birth did not mean an automatic move to a larger apartment. Only later did a bureaucratic expediency prevail that applied "open space"

planning principles to public housing projects — to save money on room partitions.⁷

For the reformers, the minima of Harlem River's apartment dimensions were less important than the success of the overall plan, which appeared to achieve through design what had heretofore in New York been the ephemeral product of real estate speculators, prestige, and social class: a sense of community, supported by the physical accoutrements of an ideal neighborhood. Harlem River Houses, built in the Hudson Valley brick familiar to indigenous housing from row house to luxury apartment house, seemed the ultimate refinement of the city's housing tradition. And because the apartment as a housing form had filtered up through every social class in New York by the 1930s, Harlem River's lessons were thought applicable even to the housing of the rich.

"Here in short," wrote Lewis Mumford, *is the equipment for decent living that every modern neighborhood needs: sunlight, air, safety, play space, meeting space, and living space. The families in the Harlem Houses have higher standards of housing, measured in tangible benefits, than most of those on Park Avenue. By contrast, every other section of the city is makeshift, congested, disorderly, dismally inadequate.*⁸

For the reformers, "neighborhood" had at last been given appropriate physical form.

Mumford's comment illustrates a very important aspect of Harlem River's design. Together with Talbot Hamlin's observation of the project's continuity with a New England brick town, it reveals that Harlem River Houses was not far beyond contemporary reformers' expectations for neighborhoods and associations with them despite its size, superb block planning, and — most radical of all — its government sponsorship. Mumford, who was critical of the Modernist didacticism of European visionaries and who advocated an American modern architecture which reflected regional materials and social life,⁹ could look upon the Harlem River Houses as an expression of that architecture. In the tradition of Stein and Wright's Sunnyside Gardens, the project struck a chord with larger American

- 18 Harlem River Houses, model apartment, 1937. The Housing Authority's Moderne vision of ideal apartment interior
- 19 Harlem River Houses, apartment interior. The reality
- 20 Even before the project was completed, thousands of Depression era New Yorkers lined up, anxious for housing.
- 21 Harlem River Houses, 1960s. View of central court, looking towards pedestrian mall. Thirty years later the trees have thickened to maturity and combine in a rich landscape of brick, foliage, and water. (Compare to Figure 7.)

domestic traditions which included architectural simplicity without severity, communality and friendly association among buildings, and the democratic sharing of open spaces.

The Project Today

Today, the Harlem River Houses' landscape has matured and its red brick has deepened to a patrician brown. The original casement windows have been replaced by sliding aluminum sash, and the wooden park benches have been exchanged for brightly colored plastic ones. Several shops and restaurants, which once rooted the project to the surrounding neighborhood's commerce, have been edged out by community service agencies.

The project is now over forty years old, the same age the surrounding tenements were when Harlem River first opened. Slum tenements are still next door. Adjacent streets suffer building abandonment. And the Harlem River Drive has permanently cut the community from its waterfront. In some aspects, the quality of Harlem life has declined below the level of the 1930s, when 11,500 families lined up to apply for Harlem River Houses' 576 apartments (Figure 20).

Despite Harlem's reputation as a tough and volatile place, the project's life has a decidedly relaxed air. Harlem River's open spaces are used by a wide variety of age groups from both within and outside the project. Building lobby doors are left unlocked, often swung wide open. Public halls and vestibules are virtually dirt- and graffiti-free.

New York's legendary street life, in which parents interrupt children's stickball games with calls to supper from tenement building windows, is preserved, even elaborated here. The courts, more so than the project's surrounding streets, are outdoor rooms, whose walls are formed by building facades and windows. The Beaux-Arts sequence of outdoor spaces and the synthesis of building form and landscape have translated in the project's courts the hierarchical relationships among the parts of the New York tenement street. The traditional street of facing buildings, facing stoops, and parallel edges of sidewalk bordering the asphalt road finds its



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⁷ ———, "A Lesson in Cost Reduction," *Architectural Forum* (November 1938), 405

⁸ Lewis Mumford, "The Skyline: The New Order," *The New Yorker* (February 26, 1938) Volume 14, 42–44

⁹ ———, *Architecture as a Home for Man* (New York: Architectural Record Books, 1975) p. 21

- 22 Williamsburg Houses, Brooklyn; R. H. Shreve and William Lescaze, architects, 1937. New York City's other Public Works Administration housing project
- 23 Harlem River Houses, seen from the waterfront of the Harlem River. In this pre-highway view, the project rises from a landscaped, serpentine embankment giving onto the piers of the Harlem Ship Canal.
- 24 Harlem River Houses, courtyard view, 1960s. A summary of what American public housing was to have been – but only seldom became



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equivalent in Harlem River's buildings and landscape elements.

Benches adjacent to building entries serve as congregation points and residents' lookout perches – substitutes for the tenement stoops. Differentiated paving materials – concrete aggregate for circulation paths and Belgian block for sitting areas – form the tributaries of movement and pockets of rest that are familiar to the tenement street with its half-basement inlets and low fences and walls. And dropped a step or two below the paths or "sidewalks" of the project's courts are play areas and fountains, reminiscent of the child-confiscated, fire-hydrant-sprayed street, which is here given over permanently to recreation and reshaped as small, concrete-bottomed squares (Figure 21).

Nowhere in New York has the social activity of the street been so successfully transferred to and reshaped for the special conditions of the center-block court. Here the overlapping hegemonies of interest and age groups are openly and symbiotically expressed. And because Harlem River's courts are hard surfaced and enclosed, they reflect the sounds of their users who walk, converse, and play to bring the sounds of the street to the heart of the superblock. In marked distinction from later projects, where wide open space and soft landscape either scatter or absorb sound, the courts reflect the murmur of city life to reinforce the impression of the project's quality as an urban community.

"This is a beautiful place," comments Harlem River's manager. "All these buildings close together make what's called defensible space. They should make all housing this way."¹⁰

Only along the project's edges at 151st and 152nd Streets, where the architects' wariness of the street makes the project's relationship to the surrounding neighborhood its most tentative, does graffiti proliferate. The decision to turn the project buildings' entrances to the court rather than have them face both the court and the street has left long stretches of Harlem River's periphery outside the project's domain. The condition of the peripheral walls makes the courts seem all the more handsome

preserves or, as architect John Louis Wilson calls them, "a clearing" in the ghetto that comes right to the project's edge.

The Road Not Taken

In 1937, the Harlem River Houses appeared the most advanced expression of an 80-year lineage of New York reform housing projects. Drawing on the traditions of that lineage, it represented an enormous step towards the fulfillment of such long-held housing reform ideals as open space, light, air, and lowered ground coverage and density. Under sponsorship of the Federal government, the project achieved these goals through an extrapolation of the forms of the existing city and at a scale that seemed commensurate to the task of rebuilding New York's slum communities.

Yet in the quality of its balance between architecture and social sensitivity, it led nowhere.

Rising in Brooklyn and completed in 1938 was Brooklyn's Williamsburg Houses (Figure 22), which presented a vision virtually antithetical to Harlem River. The new project, a series of free-standing buildings set in open space and with structurally expressive and arguably more "functional" and more modern architecture, appeared to match the radical implementation of the superblock with a radical architecture. The Beaux Arts *marche* of Harlem River was replaced by amorphous spaces; the orthogonal arrangement of Harlem River's contiguous buildings was reduced to detached pavilions set fifteen degrees to the city grid; courtyard and Belgian block gave way to lawn and tarmac path. Low-income housing was stamped from a communal, mass-produced mold.

Thus on the eve of World War II these "demonstration" projects, each distinct in form and implication, but sharing a high quality of resolution and articulation, provided New York with two alternatives for future public housing. The Harlem River Houses, standing at the juncture where the traditions of New York tenement life met a bureaucracy's verbal dicta and where large-scale public housing met the particularized designs of architects and sculptors, was for the Modernist too



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conservative and for the bureaucrat too costly for the poor.¹¹ Economic considerations led instead to the adoption of the European model of towers-in-the-park suggested by the detached buildings of Williamsburg Houses. In such projects, high-rise elevator buildings reduced the number of expensive building foundations to be laid while achieving housing densities equal to or higher than low-rise projects. Within the buildings, architects adopted "open plan" apartment layouts to save money on room partitions. To economize further, apartment plumbing was left exposed and such amenities as closet doors were discarded. Gone, too, were the wood floors that made an apartment something more than a shell.

Then began the public association of "low-cost" subsidized housing with poor, or substandard, housing.

Within two decades a second city emerged in Harlem and other New York communities. This city was made up of disconnected clusters of towering housing projects. At its root was the Harlem River Houses, ignored over time but standing on the banks of the Harlem River as a poignant expression of early ideals (Figure 23).

In retrospect, it appears that of all the lessons Harlem River Houses offers, it is the project's generous open space which was the most important to the builders of later projects. Superblock open space became a desirable commodity in and of itself, and it soon superseded the urban tradition of housing that Harlem River's architecture recalled. As Harlem River's progeny grew, architects assumed that still lower ground coverage and greater open space became a desirable commodity in and of itself, and it soon superseded the urban tradition of superblocks.¹² Harlem River, in its establishment of the quantifiable bureaucratic standard of lowered ground coverage forcefully indicated the new scale of conception urban housing would take.

Today, the Harlem River bespeaks a depth and sincerity of vision that provides an eloquent criticism of public housing policy as it has developed. Its lessons in courtyard life, its shaping of superblock open space with frank appreciation of

concentrated urban life, its hierarchical balance between public open space and low-rise private space, and its concern for the small details of urban domestic life make it a model for housing that seeks to extend and enhance patterns of urban community. Because Harlem River is transitional – based in the urban housing tradition yet incorporating the ideals of early housing reforms and those of the New Deal – it is of a richness and maturity unmatched by later projects that were designed from expedient, replicable formulas.



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¹⁰ Interview with Arthur Heller, manager of the Harlem River Houses, July, 1978

¹¹ "Lesson . . .," *Architectural Forum*, 406

¹² "Lesson . . .," *Architectural Forum*, 405