

# Writing Projects: New Deal Guidebooks, Community, and Housing Reform in New York City

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The reader of the 1939 *WPA Guide to New York City* encounters an oddity: situated with the *WPA Guide's* tours of more familiar Gotham landmarks--the Brooklyn Bridge, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the new Empire State and Rockefeller Center buildings--a description of the Harlem River Houses, a public housing project, seems rather misplaced.<sup>1</sup> An East Harlem housing project, after all, was not a destination most tourists would put on the must-see list, particularly during the middle of the Depression. Stranger yet is the accompanying description. Quoting a review of the housing in the prominent architectural journal *Pencil Points*, the writers claim:

In every really important general matter of land usage--in air, in light, in a sense of green and growing things as a concomitant of living; in the creation of an atmosphere of humanity and decency, a place where children would be glad to grow up; in the development of a community that brings with it a new vision of democracy and of progress [...] [this development has] qualities that no money can buy. (*WPA Guide* 459; first brackets added)

The passage's optimism, linking public housing to the making of a national community, may seem incredible, or at least ironic, to contemporary readers whose imaginations picture destitution, crime, and squalor.

The reasoning behind the odd inclusion of the housing project tour is illuminated by a passage in the manuscript "A Brief Narrative History of New York's WPA for the Year ending July 31, 1936 by the Federal Writers' Reporting Project": "Perhaps no other program of the entire New Deal offers so concrete an expression of its social objectives as does the effort to make available decent housing for people of low incomes" (Housing section 4). The passage highlights the importance of a Progressive communitarian vision that shaped both New Deal housing and writing projects. With public housing, New Dealers sought to incorporate urban social groups into a newly forged modern national community. The projects

would be both testaments to their intent and instruments of community. Just as Hooverville shacks had been one of the most visible expressions of governmental failure, public housing would be the concrete expression of the New Deal's promise in the urban environment, one that would build modern communities where fractured slums had been.

Focusing on the description of the Harlem River Houses in the FWP New York City guidebooks, this essay examines how the understanding of community functioned in New Deal public housing programs, how the guidebooks justified the housing projects on the basis of this vision, and the limits of that account. The New York City guidebooks gave the federal government an opportunity to imagine publicly how more equitable and harmonious social relations might be created by reforming urban space. Consequently, they were an important part of the New Deal's struggles over both physical spaces and the understandings governing their use. Drawing on Progressive understandings of the relationship between the environment and citizenship, the guidebooks suggest that public housing would facilitate the development of slum-added urbanites into citizens for the national community. This vision harmoniously echoed the aims of the guidebooks themselves, which linked tourism to creating a participatory citizenry. Downplaying social and political conflicts, FWP editors rewrote the city in order to make the diverse and contested metropolis intelligible as part of the national community. However, as this article will demonstrate, their vision was compromised by racial and political conflicts they neglected to consider.

### **The Communitarian Vision of the FWP Guidebooks**

Writing about the physical environment was, *and was understood to be*, an important component of the New Deal's attempt to rework the social fabric of the nation. The books in the American Guide series--forty-eight state guidebooks, three highway guides, a gargantuan guide to Washington, DC, and two guidebooks to New York City--were divided into essays about the economic, social, and political elements of the particular geographic location, descriptions of various locales, and extended narrative "tours" of points of interest. Christine Bold's study of the guidebooks, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America*, illuminates the crucial role that they played in the representation of New Deal aims.<sup>2</sup> Under the direction of Henry Alsberg, the American Guide series aimed at representing a cohesive, "harmoniously diverse" national community, allowing readers to imagine themselves as part of wealth of the national heritage as it was coming into prominence on the international stage, and instructing these readers in the arts of being citizens in such a community (Bold 18). Community was a key term for the editors. Denoting a group of individuals responsible to one another in political or civil society, conceptions of com-

munity both determine the distribution range of social goods and ground ideas of social justice.<sup>3</sup> Community is almost always a spatial concept, suggesting both how and where people should live. FWP editors imagined a national community based on substantive shared values: political participation, cultural diversity, individual self-determination buttressed by national support, and faith in industrial and technological progress.<sup>4</sup> Most of the FWP administrators shared a commitment to cultural pluralism, yet they also shared a faith that New Deal programs would lead citizens to recognize their common stake in a national community, a faith that was reflected in the guidebooks.

The communitarian vision of the guidebooks is particularly important because it addresses gaps in our understandings of 1930s culture. In literary studies, the New Deal often disappears. Literary critical understandings of the 1930s have instead largely been shaped around the marginality of radical literature.<sup>5</sup> These recovery efforts have expanded history of the debates that shaped modern literary aesthetics and led to reprintings of lost works from the 1930s. Yet popular culture and consumerism, the desire for mobility, a large second-generation citizenry, large-scale industrial organizing, and the expansion of federal programs all arguably affected the lives of ordinary citizens to a much greater extent than the left turn in literature did.<sup>6</sup> It is somewhat ironic that literary critics have not granted the New Deal guidebooks more serious consideration since one of the more important contributions of recovery work has been to show how 1930s authors blurred the lines between fictional and non-fictional narrative.<sup>7</sup> To be certain, the guides pose significant challenges, not the least of which are the absence of an identifiable single author and lack of a narrative trajectory. Yet the guides tackle many of the key social issues that literary critics have explored in other works, and the challenges they present require nuanced attention to form as well as historical analysis. Following earlier studies that focused on the production and administration of the guidebooks, more recent accounts of their cultural work by Bold and Jerrold Hirsch have linked the guidebooks to a Progressive intellectual tradition and explored how they reimagined the nation. These studies have not, however, connected the guidebooks to other major New Deal initiatives like social security and housing policy.<sup>8</sup> If we are to suggest that the guidebooks' vision was a substantive one, then we need to examine their political context and their role in managing perceptions of specific New Deal activities.

### **New Deal Communitarianism: Progressive Vision and Spatial Reform**

In contrast with the literary critics, most historians have long seen the New Deal as the dominant U.S. political event of the 1930s. Attempts

to define the New Deal often minimize crucial elements of the coalition. Historians have been concerned to mark qualities that distinguish the New Deal from earlier reform movements.<sup>9</sup> In *The End of Reform* Alan Brinkley laid out a coherent understanding of the liberal ideas that shaped the New Deal, positing a sharp break between an earlier planning-oriented phase and a later phase of Keynesian spending policies oriented toward increasing aggregate consumption. In Brinkley's account, the New Deal emerges in the break from earlier Progressive planning traditions, and its legacy was the foundation of liberal social policy during the Cold War. While convincing in its framing of the major shifts, this rubric can obscure the continuing influence of progressive ideals animating many New Deal initiatives.

Progressivism's influence is particularly evident in the complex area of New Deal urban policy. New Deal urban policy grew out of the long struggle to balance ideas about the nation with ideas and realities of the city. As Paul Boyer argues, in the half-century before the New Deal, reformers sought to shape some semblance of community in the socially fractured metropolis, often linking the constitution of community with the reformation of the urban environment. Reformers were particularly concerned about the moral standards of working class and immigrant populations. Before the 1880s, successive reform movements--Sunday schools, bible tract societies, temperance advocates, and charities--focused on the personal responsibility and character of individuals as a means to reform the city. Boyer demonstrates that as theories of environmental determination and epidemiology permeated reform movements, Progressive reformers reversed this logic, increasingly concentrating on physical elements of the environment, particularly housing, which they viewed as the primary front in the battle on social, moral, and physical ills. Following the turn-of-the-century City Beautiful movement, reformers focused on creating an orderly, symbolic city, which would inspire public responsibility. For some reformers, the order itself was a pedagogical antidote to urban squalor. Other critics, such as John Dewey, focused on aesthetics and the development of discriminatory capabilities, which were critical to democratic decision making.<sup>10</sup>

Both the FWP guides and New Deal urban policy were heavily indebted to Progressive-era debates about national community and the metropolis. Among the influential thinkers who contributed to these debates were philosopher John Dewey, cultural critics Lewis Mumford, Randolph Bourne, and Horace Kallen, sociologist Robert Park, and members of the considerable women's network that had been forged in the settlement house and social work movements. Dewey, Mumford, Park, and housing activists (or "housers") Catherine Bauer and Edith Elmer Wood all argued that a just social order depended on re-outfitting the physical and social

environment in such a way that individuals understood their responsibilities toward one another.<sup>11</sup> Kallen, Bourne, and anthropologist Franz Boas sought to establish the importance of cultural pluralism, which enabled a more inclusive theory of national community.<sup>12</sup> Through activist networks and the newly professionalized fields of urban planning, social work, and sociology, their arguments gained credibility in national politics, and, as Hirsch has demonstrated, these ideas influenced many of the cultural intellectuals in the FWP federal office.

The work of two Progressives in particular, Herbert Croly and Louis Brandeis, shaped national political debates over the form that community should take and the role of government in it. As advisors during the 1912 presidential election to Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, respectively, Croly and Brandeis sought to ameliorate negative effects of monopoly capitalism on individual citizens. While Brandeis argued for restoration of small-scale competition, Croly maintained that corporate organization was useful, and, if extended to government and social organization, would balance the power of corporations. Brandeis's ideas, through Felix Frankfurter and his students, contributed to an emphasis on building smaller, knowable communities. Many Progressives saw the metropolis as part of the industrial excess Brandeis attacked, but others viewed it as an object that could be reformed through judicious planning. Croly's ideas about government coordination--drawn from his experience as an architectural critic, and reflected in the thought of Brains Trusters Raymond Moley, Rexford Guy Tugwell, Adolph Berle, and Gardiner Means--were used to suggest that efficient, large-scale communities could be planned.<sup>13</sup>

Driven by these ideas, community building through spatial reform became a federal strategy during Roosevelt's early years in office. Administrators who had experience in the fields of planning and model housing like Raymond Moley, Charles A. Merriam, Frederic Delano, and Charles W. Eliot II, were the primary vector of New Deal spatial reform.<sup>14</sup> Historian Paul Conkin notes that over 100 communities were planned, but that these projects' communitarian aims varied widely according to the competing ideas that inspired them, whether Brandeis's individual self-sufficiency or Croly's corporate efficiency (Conkin 6-7). New Deal programs including the Tennessee Valley Authority, Division of Subsistence Homesteads, the Resettlement Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Public Works Administration (PWA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were enlisted to reform the physical landscape in the interest of competing visions of community.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conflicting Visions: The Struggle for Public Housing**

Public housing was one of the more controversial programs of the New Deal.<sup>16</sup> Despite a long history of urban housing reform initiatives,

particularly in New York, the federal government remained reluctant to build or to encourage building public housing in cities. In part this was due to mediation of the federal-city relationship by state governments, but housing reformers generally focused on the elimination of slums rather than housing construction as well. Moreover, housing provision had long been seen as the responsibility of the private sector. In New York City, innovative laws regulating tenements and the personal projects of wealthy benefactors and workers' cooperatives generated the majority of improvements in working-class housing.<sup>17</sup>

During World War I, however, the government first became involved in extensive construction of housing for military personnel.<sup>18</sup> The Emergency Fleet Corporation and the United States Housing Corporation built a total of almost 30,000 units of housing in the garden city style, advocated by British planner Ebenezer Howard, who stressed large open spaces and separation of residential and commercial functions (Armstrong 526). The precedent inspired housing activists like Wood and Bauer, who argued that the government could expand its activities to build modern housing for lower-income citizens, particularly since developers were reluctant to construct working-class housing. Congress, however, repudiated the experiment during the 1919 Red Scare.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1920s, the primary government intervention was in suburban real estate and building, expanding the private sector social initiatives of that decade. As Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover advocated national building standards and a Department of Labor-sponsored "Own Your Own Home" program to guarantee mortgages for returning veterans. Hoover also served as president of the influential Better Homes in America organization started in 1922.<sup>20</sup> The organization promoted home ownership and modern suburban housing. Private developers remained reluctant to build lower income housing in cities without government assistance during the 1920s, preferring to concentrate instead on suburban development and ideas to turn unprofitable neighborhoods around.

When Franklin Roosevelt came into office, his policies reflected the suburban outlook of his predecessor, while concentrating more heavily on community building. Roosevelt focused first on programs that bolstered the increasingly anachronistic agrarian ideal. Encouraged by his wife Eleanor, Roosevelt initiated a Homesteading program to create sustainable communities in the countryside. The program was eventually phased out for the Resettlement Administration, a program headed by Brains Truster Tugwell that was directed at achieving many of the same ends in a suburban environment. Roosevelt, however, soon had to face the unemployment and housing crises in cities. Mayors of the largest cities, tired of being neglected by state legislatures, had formed the United States Conference of Mayors in 1932. This pressure group appealed directly to the federal

government for aid, beginning a slow alteration in the federal relationship to cities (Gelfand 27). Along with appeals for financial aid and public works programs, mayors sought federal assistance with the decaying material and economic conditions in the slums. Their calls were backed by a network of housing activists and urban planners.

Unable to ignore the cities' call for help and the relatively minor effects of the resettlement and homestead programs, Roosevelt began to commit resources in earnest.<sup>21</sup> Several studies of urban conditions were conducted by the Federal Emergency Relief Act and Works Progress Administration research divisions, the Federal Housing Administration, the Resettlement Administration, the Conservation Works Administration, and the National Resources Board Committee on Urbanism, which investigated "the role of the urban community in the national economy" (quoted in Gelfand 86). While sometimes ignored, these attempts to represent urban problems were central to plans to solve them.

Utilizing these studies, several groups--housers, planners, and realtors--fought to have their own interests realized in New Deal housing policies on the national level. The priority of most housers was destruction of slum housing followed by provision of adequate modern housing for citizens. Their key organizations were the National Public Housing Conference, the National Association of Housing Officials, and the Labor Housing Conference (Vale 156). Realtors sought to direct the federal government into subsidizing efforts to redevelop areas of blight, portions of the city that returned little in private investment or taxes, while limiting its attempts to build public housing. Their primary organization, the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) was highly influential in Washington and was backed by the National Association of Home Builders. Urban planners aimed to increase their ability to shape projects initiated by the federal government, whether in housing or urban redevelopment. The influential Regional Plan Association of America included Bauer, Wood, and Mumford and had been active in shaping the model communities of Sunnyside Gardens in Queens and Radburn, New Jersey during the 1920s. At the municipal level, these competing groups were joined by other organizations representing tenants, ethnic communities and local businesses.

The earliest urban New Deal public housing programs were begun under the 1932 Emergency Relief and Construction Act, which enabled the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to make loans for building to limited dividend housing corporations. The financing duties were moved to the Public Works Administration Housing Division under Harold Ickes shortly thereafter. Since few states permitted limited dividend housing and PWA review was fairly strict, this loan program had little effect. In October 1933, PWA began more intensive efforts at construction, either

directly or through funding for local housing agencies. The aim of PWA housing was to “identify large tracts of land as sites for proposed projects and then to rebuild whole neighborhoods into better planned communities that would cost local governments less for street maintenance, fire and police protection, and similar services” (Armstrong 528). While many PWA-planned projects remained unbuilt during the 1930s in New York, several were finished under later programs. Over NAREB objections, New York’s Senator Robert Wagner and the housing advocacy organizations pushed for a federal housing office. The resulting 1937 Wagner-Steagall Act established the United States Housing Authority as the federal body in charge of funding public housing, shifted the focus of public housing to the poor by creating maximum means testing, and limited public housing to sites where land could be purchased cheaply. The tenement reform movement’s legacy of slum clearance as a means of alleviating urban social injustice persisted, but now it was attached to standardized, subsidized construction of new housing.<sup>22</sup>

The fight over public housing continued after 1937. NAREB managed to hold up additional appropriations, protesting what they saw as a socialistic infringement on the rights of private developers. Housing advocates, however, with the ear of the president, blocked NAREB attempts to get slum clearance and urban redevelopment bills through without public housing provisions. The work of the USHA and ongoing projects under other programs continued in this stalemate, which lasted until the end of World War II. In this context, the New York City guidebooks’ foregrounding of PWA housing in 1939 was not merely depiction or promotion of New Deal achievements, but must be seen instead as an argument for certain values and ideals. New Deal housing programs were presented as a coherent urban reform rooted simultaneously in a vision of participatory community and a modernist spatial aesthetic.

### **Imagined Community: New York and Harlem in the FWP Guidebooks**

The New York guidebooks created an imaginative vision of the city in an experimental narrative form, while employing and sustaining many of the most promising writers of the 1930s. In consequence, they might well be the decade’s most significant urban literature, and they were certainly the most contentious. Readers today may still encounter the immense and widely available reprint editions of the *1939 WPA Guide to New York City*, but the FWP actually released two volumes. Published in 1938 by Random House, the first volume *New York Panorama* was composed of essays on various aspects of urban life, such as architecture, history, transportation, and ethnic diversity. The second volume combined the narrative descriptions of different sections of the city with historical information.<sup>23</sup> Work



on the New York City guidebooks began in 1934 under the direction of Walter K. Van Olinda and, later, Orrick Johns, who had been an editor at the *New Masses*.<sup>24</sup> Because of the disproportionate number of writers residing in the city, a separate production unit assembled the guidebooks. The New York City unit employed many recognized writers of the time--including Anzia Yezierska, Maxwell Bodenheim, Charlotte Wilder, Kenneth Fearing, and William Rollins, Jr.--as well as the then lesser-known talents Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, John Cheever, and Philip Rahv. The New York unit was infamous for labor disputes and infighting between various leftist political factions, gaining publicity which eventually accelerated the demise of the Federal Arts programs.<sup>25</sup>

Like other writers of the metropolis, the central organizational problem FWP editors faced was dealing with the city's social and physical complexity, a problem multiplied by the guidebooks' mandate to capture as fully as possible the local scene. FWP reporters amassed a wealth of information on the city, but editors were uncertain how to present it. Management of this problem is visible in the guidebooks' form. Significantly, the introductory section on "Manhattan" in the second volume nods stylistically to the contemporary chronicler of American life, John Dos Passos.<sup>26</sup> Like his 1927 novel *Manhattan Transfer* and the 1930s U.S.A. trilogy, the NYC guides deployed a range of complex representational devices in order to achieve their effect of unity and holistic vision. These devices include essays, statistics, illustrations, and "tours," which show the diversity of city life, ranging from its spectacular wealth to its crushing poverty. In 1938, when Alsberg decided that the New York unit's raw material was disjointed, federal and city editors worked out a regional organization that drew on existing ethnic and racial histories and spatial divides, while eliding many of their attendant conflicts.<sup>27</sup> A vision of the city gradually emerges in which many of the city's problems would be eased by federal programs facilitating the growth of a community of politically active citizens.

With their unique mission, the FWP guidebooks had to include material and locations not typically found in other guidebooks. This odd inclusiveness illuminates both the imagined audience of the guidebooks as well as the cultural aims of FWP editors.<sup>28</sup> In her study of tourist texts and institutions, Marguerite Shaffer has illuminated a long tradition associating tourism and American self-imagining, which helped establish a canon of sights, usually natural landscapes, that would supposedly allow the tourist to understand their heritage and elicit patriotic sentiment. Progressives drew on this heritage, pressing for "See America First" campaigns at the turn of the century. In this context, the FWP guidebooks and the activities and sites they recommended were seen as training for participation in the national community. Positing tourist-citizens as an imaginary audience, the guidebooks became both expanded histories and visions of what the

nation could be.

Since many Progressives also sought to position ethnic groups as participants in building the nation, FWP administrators drawing on these ideas aimed to encompass a wide range of ethnic histories in the guidebooks. In particular, they were concerned to include histories of African-Americans since they envisioned African-American culture as central to an indigenous American culture.<sup>29</sup> The discussion of Harlem was crucial to these administrators, as Harlem provided a physical and symbolic home to many African Americans as well as an important cultural incubator. They let black writers Richard Wright, Claude McKay, and Roi Ottley handle much of the writing duties, and in consequence the portrayal of Harlem in the guides showcases Harlem's social diversity and cultural riches. The "Portrait of Harlem" essay in *New York Panorama* reinforces the envisioned link between the nation and Harlem:

The question of what will ultimately happen to the Negro in New York is bound up with the question of what will happen to the Negro in America. It has been said that the Negro embodies the "romance of American life"; if that is true, the romance is one whose glamor is overlaid with shadows of tragic premonition. (151)

The "shadows of tragic premonition" in the passage above suggest caution about national unity and the uncertain future of black citizens. In response, the FWP figures Harlem as a test case for a more robust liberalism, one that could simultaneously provide for material needs of black citizens and draw them into the national community.

*The WPA Guide to New York City* essay on Harlem recognizes a number of problematic developments. Beginning with an account of the physical borders of Harlem--the East River, Central Park, and Morning-side Heights--the essay stresses boundaries and overcrowding. Like "Portrait of Harlem," the *WPA Guide* essay discusses real estate practices that maintained the neighborhood's physical boundaries as racial ones. The FWP's tenuous position is evident in the fact that, while the essays assail these racist practices, a correction to the manuscripts by Alsberg carefully defined the boundaries of Harlem on the West Side and cautioned that "unless the areas are given accurately, there will be complaints from the real estate people" (FWP, Criticism). The essay suggests that the neighborhood's natural and enforced boundaries inflated housing costs and diminished services and notes that the Depression eliminated many of the already scarce jobs, services, and business opportunities.

Suggesting the outcome of these conditions, "Portrait of Harlem" expresses concerns about "Harlem's peculiar susceptibility to social and political propaganda" and cites the popular appeal of Marcus Garvey's black nationalism as a threat to federal authority (*Panorama* 141). It also

notes that many African-Americans had defected the major parties for Communist and Socialist parties, and had rioted in 1935 in an “orgy of window-smashing and store-looting”(142). The 1935 riot targeted businesses that would not hire blacks, but concerns about living conditions in Harlem were just as prevalent. Joel Schwartz reports, “In Harlem, Communists vied with black nationalist Garveyites as street corner agitators against high rents. Their tenant organizations picketed landlords, staged rent strikes, and engaged in rent bargaining” (46). Underscoring the link between economic security and political participation, “Portrait of Harlem” suggests that civil order is at risk if Harlem’s needs are not met. Citing health clinics and teachers, as well as new schools in music, art, and theater, the corresponding *WPA Guide* essay highlights the WPA’s “significant contribution to the cultural life and social welfare of Harlem” (257). This essay ends with a brief discussion of new housing, both private and public, rhetorically positioned as an answer to Harlem’s problems.

### **Planned Community: The Harlem River Houses**

The most significant of these housing developments was the new Harlem River Houses. The building of Harlem River was a complex undertaking, involving federal intervention in local politics. The municipal body in charge of public housing was the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), which had been formed in 1934 with Langdon Post as chair, and Mary Simkhovitch, Louis Pink, B. Charney Vladeck, and Monsignor E. Roberts Moore as appointed members (Schwartz 39). When NYCHA learned of additional federal monies that would become available in 1935, it identified several sites on which to build projects, privileging the outer boroughs, while leaving Manhattan’s lower and upper east sides for slum clearance and redevelopment (Schwartz 41). Simkhovitch, Vladeck and Moore, however, questioned the logic of leaving Manhattan out of the housing scheme and argued for the priority of East River sites in Harlem and Corlears Hook (Schwartz 42).<sup>30</sup> These choices segregated housing, reserving the new Queens and Brooklyn projects for whites, while allocating the Bronx and East Harlem projects for black residents. In the meantime, PWA decided that it would administer construction of the expansive Williamsburg, Brooklyn housing project, and, in response to concerns stemming from the Harlem riots of 1935, also assumed control of a site near the Harlem River slated for black citizens. It offered the two sites as show-pieces of the new public housing, highlighting the federal government’s willingness to provide for both black and white citizens, if separately.

The Harlem River Houses, completed in 1937 by the PWA, was the first of the government’s large-scale housing projects. Harlem River was built from the ground up on four blocks centered on Seventh Avenue and West 152nd Street in an area with a number of aging tenements. The land

had been owned by the Rockefellers, who began to unload their real estate interests in upper Manhattan outside Morningside Heights during the 1930s (Schwartz 65). The houses were a group of several interlocked buildings in a garden apartment configuration with a central pedestrian mall and several smaller courtyards. The buildings, at four and five stories, were scaled to fit other buildings in the surrounding area. In total, the PWA built 574 new apartments of between two and five rooms in size at Harlem River.

The *WPA Guide* begins its discussion of the Harlem River Houses by extolling their virtues as a far-reaching contribution to social welfare, reassuring readers of their necessity:

In New York City's most overcrowded community, Harlem--where Negroes pay as much as 50 per cent [sic] of their incomes for rent, where the rent party is an institution, and where the "hot bed" serves three shifts of sleepers a day--are the Harlem River Houses, a group of apartment buildings that provide more sunlight, fresh air, and certain other advantages of good housing than the residences of fashionable Park Avenue. (392)

As well as a solution to housing deemed "unfit for human habitation," the *WPA Guide* sees the houses as an example for "raising the standards of high-income groups," citing a new private development in the Bronx as proof (392). Clearly, these descriptions are exercises in hyperbole, but the apartments were indeed impressive. Even Mumford, who was often critical of New Deal programs, granted the comparisons with upper-class dwellings in a statement in the guidebook.

The guide also reassures readers about the deserving nature of the new inhabitants by citing strict eligibility standards. Requirements to get in the Harlem River project were stringent and elicited local resistance. To qualify, applicants had to pass a means test and show proof of continuous employment. Candidates' character as well as their material prospects were considered in a point system during the review process. The careful selection was seen as necessary for both moral and political reasons and continued a long tradition of deciding who was deserving of public welfare. The PWA sought to insure that the candidates selected for the housing would contribute to its success. However, the selection process caused a good deal of controversy. Schwartz notes that "Harlemites were furious when the committee's paternalist guidelines became public knowledge. The committee saved face by demanding that the Housing Authority put blacks in charge of Harlem River Houses and appoint a black to the authority board" (55). The *WPA Guide* notes that the unfortunate effect of such high selectivity was that "relatively few Harlem families are eligible" (394). However, despite the strictness of the process, there were 15,000 applicants for the limited number of apartments (Schwartz 46).

Interestingly, the *WPA Guide* spends comparatively little time discussing the actual apartments. The brevity of the discussion is surprising, since discussions of housing improvement since the turn-of-the century had focused as much on interior as exterior arrangements. *New York Panorama's* essay on housing conditions included an exercise in x-ray vision for the reader who "cannot see beyond the walls and beneath the roofs into the fetid and roach-infested interiors" of the slums (425). Moreover, most New Deal programs focused on families as the point of articulation for social policy.<sup>31</sup> The guide provides a breakdown of the varied living arrangements and lists the apartments' modern amenities: "electric refrigeration and lighting; steam heat, ample closet space, steel casement windows, and a tiled bath" (FWP, *WPA Guide* 394). The guide also notes the cross ventilation and the relative separation of apartments, which "insures privacy and quiet" (FWP, *WPA Guide* 394). The effect of the guidebook's brevity here is a more resolute focus on public spaces and civic interaction, yet the private family remains central.

The discussion of the Harlem River project focuses primarily on the exterior and grounds, which were, after all, the only things an intrepid tourist or even most Harlem residents would see. The *Guide's* description of these features reflects Progressive emphases on the link between aesthetic coherence and social order. New Deal critiques of architecture often married a valorized architectural modernism to a communitarian social vision. A sense of the guidebooks' overall understanding of architecture aids in contextualizing its discussion of Harlem River. The particular aesthetic sensibility of New Deal modernism, to re-valorize Michael Szalay's phrase, is perhaps most evident in another odd moment: the guidebooks' celebration of the Rockefeller Center over the Chrysler or Empire State buildings as New York's preeminent architectural achievement.<sup>32</sup> The Rockefeller Center, as a corporate skyscraper complex, was a significantly different venture from the housing projects, yet the guides' description of Rockefeller Center presents an architectural vision that is almost interchangeable with the descriptions of Harlem River Houses or the Williamsburg Houses. Perhaps this is not so surprising; New Deal liberals regularly cited corporate organization--in its ability to reflect a collective purpose yet still allow for efficient, decisive action--as a model for social reorganization. Celebrating the way that a more beautiful and humane urban order is carved out of the old one, the *Guide* focuses praise on the overall planning and coordination of the Rockefeller site. Unlike its taller midtown neighbors, Rockefeller Center embodied a form of modernism that sought beauty in the coordination of elements throughout a large multifunctional site rather than in any singular triumphal moment. The *Guide's* authors sometimes proceed to discuss Rockefeller Center in terms associated with tenement reform; they note, for example, that the site is arranged well so

that all buildings are “easily penetrated by sunlight and fresh air” (*WPA Guide* 335). The architectural vision that animated both the critique of the Rockefeller Center and the housing projects paired a modernist aesthetic and a Progressive belief in individuals realizing themselves through social and environmental interaction in a coherent and orderly environment.

The guidebook editors subject the Harlem River buildings to similar aesthetic criteria in the interest of evaluating the contribution to social order. They note details like the “pleasant red brick” and the complementary accents between the fenestration and the glass airshafts. “The impression of the whole,” they suggest, “is one of charming simplicity” (*WPA Guide* 393). The tour includes a review by Talbot Hamlin, a prominent architectural critic, who sees the site as just missing the mark “Harlem River Homes,” he wrote, “is so generally beautiful that one longs for it to be perfect. What might have been great architecture is merely--very good” (*WPA Guide* 394). What is most remarkable here is not that the guides find some fault with the project’s architecture, but that it is with the “carelessness” of the final details (*WPA Guide* 394). This statement affirms the overall success of the project, but more significantly it expresses a desire for greater attention to be paid to these aesthetic matters.<sup>33</sup>

While architecture was important, FWP editors were most concerned with how the Harlem River architects planned an orderly environment. Site planning had long been a central problem in housing design in New York, where small lots encouraged overbuilding. In consequence, planners argued that more humane housing would necessitate planning over several blocks, or combined superblocks. The Harlem River site was relatively small, with irregular blocks, limiting the design. The architects drew from garden apartment precedents. The garden apartment configuration, which had been successfully utilized in Jackson Heights, Queens and other outer borough neighborhoods offered a way to integrate multi-unit housing with ample recreational areas.<sup>34</sup> The *WPA Guide* praises the coordination of buildings and other elements of the Harlem River site as “a testimonial to the designers’ ingenuity in mastering a difficult site,” calling the result “a pleasing, harmonious arrangement that retains a maximum of useful open area” (FWP, *WPA Guide* 395). These statements evoke the essence of progressive design: a well-planned, open, and orderly environment.

Promising that the houses will become a catalyst for community, the *WPA Guide* claims, “transcending the physical elements of the project are the social” (394). These social elements included both spaces designed to elevate community interaction and art meant to reinforce this interaction. The guide cites the existence of several spaces designed to promote a participatory community:

A share in community life is made possible for each tenant by

such facilities as four social halls for adult use, a nursery school for children of working mothers, a health clinic operated by the New York City Department of Health, community laundries, and rooms for indoor play. (FWP, *WPA Guide* 394)

Multiple playgrounds, located in the central plazas amid grass lawns and cobblestone walks, were just as significant. Contributing to the social well being of children, playgrounds reflected the New Deal belief in family as the base unit of community. The guide also notes the existence of a tenant group that “promotes group social and cultural activities” (FWP, *WPA Guide* 394). Together, these elements are meant to encourage an enhanced degree of social interaction.

One of the most notable features of the guidebook’s description is the attention paid to public art. Sculptural elements of the project were intended to serve instructional aims and reflect New Deal communitarian ideals. Playful basalt sculptures of bears and penguins decorated the playgrounds, providing models of social harmony. A few others had more specific pedagogical intent. The *WPA Guide* relates, “At the southern end of the plaza is a statue of a Negro laborer, while at the opposite end is a group depicting domesticity: mother and child with a dog” (393).<sup>35</sup> The sculpture pointedly idealizes a specific set of gender roles and family norms: the nuclear family with a sole male breadwinner and a female caretaker.<sup>36</sup> The sculptures at Harlem River suggest both the desirability of social interaction, while at the same time emphasizing the nuclear family with normative gender roles.

The guide’s tour of Harlem River Houses provides readers with a coherent account of the WPA’s activities in housing, addressing concerns about Harlem’s social unrest by explaining both the architectural and humanitarian significance of the projects. Answering both white and black citizens’ concerns about the degradation of Harlem’s physical environment, the guide confirms that the federal government will provide modern housing for citizens and simultaneously help create community bonds. At the end of the first year, the editors report, “not a single case of delinquency or crime was reported [...] A compact, progressive community had emerged” (FWP, *WPA Guide* 394). By their architectural and communitarian standards, the project was deemed a success.

### **The Limits of Community: Blindness in the FWP Guidebooks**

The guide’s reminder of communitarian aims highlights later social failures in public housing programs all the more sharply, which in turn call attention to the guidebooks’ blind spots. Central to the guidebook’s misrepresentation was the unwavering belief that the present success of the projects guaranteed their future. Karal Ann Marling has identified a form of “New Deal Futurology,” in which the present is almost entirely absent

from New Deal murals and the overwhelming focus on historical motifs is paradoxically meant to reassure the anxious viewer of continuity with the future. Broadening Marling's approach, Bold cites the "futuristic predictions [in the guidebooks], masquerading as documented facts, which distance the city from current conditions and function as an instrument of WPA survival" (107). A further useful corollary would encompass the blinkered presentism with which the guidebooks presented ongoing and conflicted programs as accomplished reforms. By doing so, the guidebook editors blinded themselves in three major areas: the guidebooks often ignored the racial implications of housing policy; they failed to account for the ways in which conflicting New Deal spatial policies undermined the urban environment; and they never understood the effects of legislative conflict and bureaucratic institutionalization.

With an understanding of this focus on community, readers should recognize that many familiar criticisms of public housing bear on interpretations of the environment which were largely foreign to New Dealers. Jane Jacobs and Oskar Newman famously argued that informal street-level surveillance from residential and commercial windows, sorely lacking in high-rise housing, is necessary to maintaining civil neighborhoods.<sup>37</sup> Surveillance was not a primary issue for New Deal housers and guidebook editors, not merely because architects were mistaking art for habitability as Jacobs charged, but because Progressives assumed that the properly built environment would facilitate the sort of community in which citizens find fulfillment in participation. Despite such assumptions about civic participation, housers gave inadequate consideration to bolstering the commercial fabric of the service and job-starved neighborhoods in which these projects were located.

Other problems also should have been evident during the 1930s. The near universal commitment of New Deal public housing policies to maintenance of racial segregation was clear, though the racism was modulated through several justifications. Housing projects were designated for white or black occupants in the planning stages, and with few exceptions, these boundaries were maintained during application reviews. Buttressing this system, the NYCHA established separate application headquarters for black and white applicants. Black applicants were sent to the Harlem River site, while white ones were sent downtown (Schwartz 56). The somewhat cynical reasoning behind segregation held that property values would decline if blacks were allowed to move into white neighborhoods and that certain groups could not live together harmoniously.<sup>38</sup> However, the policy was supported by a belief in cultural pluralism as well. Historian Robert Fairbanks argues:

civic activists pursued a community strategy which sought coherence for a culturally pluralistic metropolis. Toward this end



they endorsed the segregation of different races or different classes into “communities,” all of them conceived as community development projects, but only some of them executed as public housing community development projects. (2)

Under Robert Moses, the NYCHA continued a policy of segregation in public housing until political pressure and housing scarcity brought on by urban renewal opened sites in Brooklyn and additional sites in the Bronx to black citizens.

The most evident problem, however, lies in the guidebooks’ erasure of conflict over public housing programs. The guidebooks presented Harlem River and Williamsburg, built as model housing with serious overruns, without considering their exceptionality. Both projects, along with First Houses, remain showpieces of the NYCHA. These projects, and the successors, however, ran into a gamut of conflicts and compromises. Historian David Rothman has demonstrated how institutionalization of prison reform subjected reformers’ plans to both power struggles and personal agendas within bureaucratic structures. Similarly, as federal housing appropriations were choked by NAREB and NAHB opposition, conservative antipathy, and wartime needs, local programs were adjusted to reflect financial and political realities. Housers backed off on their low density demands, instead focusing on limited site coverage, which encouraged crowded high-rise buildings in under-serviced neighborhoods. Planners standardized housing designs, which gave the projects an institutional appearance. Moreover, after the 1937 Housing Act established maximum income limits as the primary category for housing eligibility, it became more difficult to pre-select a community. Vale argues that once means testing became the only legitimate requirement for application, it became much easier to demonize housing programs as support for freeloaders (216).

Another harmful development, urban renewal, which gained momentum under the 1949 Housing Act and the 1954 Urban Renewal Act, was present in the 1930s debates about public housing. Under renewal, areas designated as centers of blight could be bulldozed to make way for public improvements. Later critics noted that the programs often swept away viable, if poor, neighborhoods. By destroying existing housing at a rate exceeding new construction, renewal also exacerbated the urban housing crisis and taxed the resources of areas adjacent to those razed. Gelfand notes that “Urban redevelopment represented a triple threat to the Negro: it could be used to displace him from desirable neighborhoods; it could force the break-up of integrated neighborhoods; and it could reduce the supply of living space open to black occupancy” (212). While the guidebook editors could not have predicted the long-term effects of renewal, the refusal to acknowledge controversy over the housing program was a failing in its case for community-oriented urban planning.<sup>39</sup>

In New York, as both Robert Caro and Schwartz have illustrated, Robert Moses utilized public housing's appeal to increase his own power, reshaping the housing programs in New York and setting examples for other administrators.<sup>40</sup> Recognizing the value of housing as an issue that attracted popular support, Moses entrenched himself as the arbiter of public housing construction in New York by neutralizing opponents in both the NYCHA and the City Planning Commission. His triumph over Tugwell in the CPC in 1939 signaled the decline of Tugwell's community-centered influence on housing. According to Schwartz, Moses developed an approach utilizing "secret negotiations that matched a private developer with a choice site; generous leeway regarding the pace of clearance, removal of supervision by pestering city agencies (particularly the City Planning Commission), and Moses' indispensable role as a coordinator" (106). Most significantly, Moses institutionalized relocation to public housing as a means of coping with renewal-displaced slum residents. Moses created a self-sustaining machine for building public housing, one which eliminated many neighborhoods and replaced them with clustered towers. Reformers did not like his methods, but they often applauded the results.

Influenced by the same racial ideas that motivated racial segregation in public housing, New Deal programs aimed at suburban development created further problems for the city. While the guides are keenly aware of the different spatial treatment of racial groups, as the chapters on Harlem demonstrate, they never consider the disparity between federal housing policies aimed at African-Americans and those aimed at other groups. The idealization of single-family homeownership and attempts to maximize property values generated programs that emptied the cities of a middle-class tax base, exacerbating racial segregation while denying black urbanites crucial funds for urban residential and commercial opportunities.<sup>41</sup> Suburban single-family housing construction was stimulated by federal guarantees for mortgages under the Federal Housing Authority and, later, the GI Bill. At the same time, the Home Owner's Loan Corporation developed a widely used mapping system that determined lending risks. The map labeled virtually all inner city areas as risks, particularly areas occupied by African Americans. In consequence, it became nearly impossible to build and maintain homes or to open businesses. Blacks found themselves excluded from access to loans under both the Federal Housing Authority and the G.I. Bill. Industry followed housing, as postwar plants often located outside cities where land was inexpensive and close to newly-built highways. The postwar culture of consumption bolstered the single-family suburban home ideal.<sup>42</sup> Since the subsidies provided by federal programs were extensive, but hidden, homeownership appeared to be the normal result of individual achievement and self-realization through choices made in the marketplace. Public housing, in contrast, appeared to

be a surrender of the individual will to government control in the domestic arena, which opened the direct beneficiaries of public housing to further stigmatization.

The FWP guidebooks to New York City provide an important example of the way that liberal aims were written into the metropolis. They offer insights into both spatial politics and communitarian ideals, under-emphasized aspects of New Deal thought and policy that had enduring social effects. Showing how New Dealers attempted to rewrite the city both literally and metaphorically, the guidebooks served as an effective vehicle for New Dealers to communicate a vision of the city transformed by New Deal initiatives like public housing. In answer to problems identified by both white and black reformers, the representation of these projects in the FWP guidebooks expressed a compelling vision of community and expansive government-secured rights. Steeped in Progressive thought, the guidebook editors likely believed their declaration of success at Harlem River. Still, they missed the ongoing conflicts over the urban and social issues they wrote about in their myopic focus on what the city should be. Significantly, they missed large New Deal initiatives, often motivated by understandings of race, which would undermine the communitarian vision advanced in their guidebooks.

### Notes

1. An archived production chart notes that this tour was assigned to Richard Wright, but essays in the guidebooks were published anonymously and they were often heavily rewritten by both local and federal editors
2. State FWP units provided both access to local knowledge and a flexible means for the Roosevelt administration to press its vision without riling local political organizations. For other writings about the Federal Writers' Project guidebooks, see Jerrold Hirsch, Mangione, Penkower, Schindler-Carter, Shaffer 169-220, and Sporn.
3. See Walzer 31-32 for a good summary of the relationship between ideas of community and social justice.
4. See Rodgers 113-32 for a discussion of debates over Progressivism, which he notes has been a contested term since Peter Filene "attacked the whole notion of a coherent progressive movement as a semantic and conceptual muddle" in the 1970s (113). Historians regularly employ the term Progressivism to suggest a range of positions, if not any ideological consistency. Moreover, it is still possible to identify a range of influential individuals, groups, and ideas. This essay draws on conflicts and movements commonly identified as Progressive in order to suggest how these arguments carried on, influencing New Deal cultural and urban programs. See also Ellis Hawley's introduction to

the 1995 edition of *The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: A Study in Economic Ambivalence* for discussion of several ways that Progressive ideals were incorporated into the New Deal and how similar historical debates to those that Rodgers identifies have shaped interpretations of the New Deal.

5. See Aaron, Gilbert, and Rideout for the 1950s beginnings of radical recovery. In the 1980s and early 1990s, their work was extended by the work of several critics, notably Alan Wald, Paula Rabinowitz, Barbara Foley, Cary Nelson, Harvey Teres, and James Murphy.
6. See Denning, Dickstein, and Szalay for literary criticism that stresses the limits of radicalism's influence in the 1930s.
7. See Foley and Stott for discussions of 1930s documentary aesthetics.
8. See Szalay for a rare consideration of the influence that New Deal programs had on debates about literary production and value.
9. See Dubofsky and Hawley for discussion of these shifting interpretations.
10. See Dewey, *Democracy and Education* 76-100 for his discussion of the link between an education designed to increase the capacity to work through complexity and democratic citizenship.
11. See Bauer, Dewey, *Democracy and Education and Individualism Old and New*, Mumford, Park, and Wood for Progressive arguments about environmental reform.
12. See Jerrold Hirsch 17-40, 107-139 for discussion of these figures and their influence on FWP administrators' cultural aims.
13. See Brinkley, Hawley, and Lash, who discuss the disparity between these groups at length. See also Schwartz 12, who discusses Croly's involvement in advocating downtown extension of avenues in New York.
14. See Gelfand 81-87 for discussion of these individuals' roles. He notes that New Deal public works programs often drew administration from the field of urban planning as it provided experience in coordinating large projects.
15. In addition to spatial reform, most of these programs had other, sometimes shifting, justifications, including work relief and government spending to stimulate the economy.
16. The literature on public housing is extensive. See Armstrong, Conkin, Gelfand, and Wright for strong overviews of the history. For studies of public housing in specific sites see also the following: Vale on Boston; Fairbanks on Cincinnati; Wye on Cleveland; Plunz and Schwartz on New York City; Arnold Hirsch on Chicago.
17. See Plunz 21-49 for discussion of the New York tenement reform laws.
18. See Plunz 125 for discussion of the wartime housing in New York
19. Armstrong notes that when the war housing programs were killed in

- 1919, the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds committee charged that “College professors and alleged experts in various lines were called in and placed on the payroll at large salaries and designated as ‘town planners,’ ‘town managers,’ etc., ad nauseam and ad absurdum” (526).
20. See Hayden 123-25, Wright 196-97, and Vale 120-27 for discussion of Hoover’s role in encouraging suburban development.
  21. See Gelfand 26 and Cook 130-52 for further discussion of the development and failure of the homesteading programs.
  22. See Page 102 and Jackson 226 for discussion of how the laws authorizing federal money for housing projects required that these projects bulldoze many of the existing substandard lower-class tenements and homes.
  23. Despite the two volumes’ already immense size, records in the National Archives reveal that the guidebook was originally conceived as a three-volume project. The original second volume was to be a guidebook to Manhattan, and the third volume would cover the other boroughs. As a result of the perceived lack of interest in the outer boroughs by publishers, tourists, and the guidebooks’ Manhattan-oriented authors, this third volume was eventually scrapped. The outer borough descriptions, along with an introduction to the 1939 World’s Fair, were added to the *WPA Guide to New York City*.
  24. The New York City Unit had several directors during the years that it was producing the New York guidebooks. They were Olinda, Johns, Travis Hoke, Harry Shaw, and Harold Strauss.
  25. See Mangione 155-90 for an account of the internal tension on the New York City unit.
  26. Archival records indicate that this section was drafted by William Rollins, Jr. and edited by John Cheever. Brief mention of a man walking backwards in this section likely references Albert Halper’s 1933 novel *Union Square* as well as the more famous Dos Passos works.
  27. See FWP, “Sectional Plan for Combining Locality Stories in Book II;” Memo, from Mary Barrett and Stella B. Hanau, 18 July 1938 for discussion of the reorganization plan.
  28. The absurd quantity of information in the guides, boiled down from even more minutiae, defy the tourist imagination and limit the guidebooks’ portability, a fact commented on by many critics. Mangione notes that the original guidebook to the District of Columbia was so unwieldy that Franklin Roosevelt asked about the “steamer trunk” to go with it (11), and WPA director Harry Hopkins quipped that it would make a nice doorstep (220).
  29. See Jerrold Hirsch for discussion of the FWP administrators’ conceptions of culture. The work of African-American poet Sterling Brown

and musicologist John Lomax, who both served as FWP administrators, were of particular importance. See also Bold 123-86 for discussion of the controversy the federal focus on black history and culture caused in the Southern FWP units.

30. The inaugural NYCHA project was First Houses, which fronts Avenue A and Third Street and was completed in 1936.
31. See Gordon 53-72 for an account of how welfare programs focused on bolstering a male breadwinner “family wage” system. Gordon also discusses debates within the feminist community during the 1920s over this idea and arguments about whether aid should be targeted at mothers or children.
32. Bold 100-103 has identified the Rockefeller Center as the central symbol of *New York Panorama*, but it serves a guiding role in *The WPA Guide to New York City* as well.
33. The innovative design of the Williamsburg Houses project, in contrast, earned unqualified praise from the guidebooks. See Plunz 214-27 for architectural comparison between the Harlem River and Williamsburg projects.
34. See Plunz 122-163 for discussion of the garden apartment form.
35. The statues of bears and people are extant at the site, but, sadly, the penguins have been removed from their pedestals.
36. It is much less clear whether white anxieties about the form of the black family drove their inclusion. African Americans, particularly women, were often ignored in welfare discussions and policies targeted at other urban groups. Meanwhile black women’s groups fought to secure aid measures that were not tied to the family wage system. See Gordon and Mink for extensive accounts of this exclusion.
37. Vale 218 notes that architect Joseph Hudnut was an early proponent of a vital street culture as well.
38. See Jackson 197-98, 208-09 for discussion of property value and harmony arguments for segregation in New Deal housing policies.
39. Mumford 129 stressed the dominance of real estate and banking interests in his criticisms of federal housing programs.
40. See Schwartz and Caro for thorough, and often contrasting, commentary on New York’s postwar spatial politics under Robert Moses.
41. See Jackson 190-230, Wright 217-51, and Hayden 131-32 for discussion of conflicts between public housing and other housing programs. See also Vale, who contrasts the ideological support for investment in private housing versus that for public housing.
42. See Cohen 195-289 for a good account of the relationship between postwar suburban housing and consumer culture.

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