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To End the Slum: The Origins of American Public Housing

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Social Studies

of Bard College

by

Aimee Gallagher

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

Dedication

I dedicate this project to my parents, Susan and Frank Gallagher, who are also some of my best friends.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Greg Moynahan for the challenging and inspiring work you have done as the advisor of this project. I have learned so much from you that I will take with me, not only in the academic sphere, but also regarding the physiological benefits of being cold in the morning.

Thank you to Jeannette Estruth for being my role model ever since I took my first class with you as a sophomore. Your support, intelligence, care, and good cheer have made my time at Bard so enjoyable.

Thank you to all of the professors of history here at Bard who have made me fall in love with the discipline. I hope to pay homage to you in my career as a teacher. Thanks especially to Wendy Urban-Mead, Cecile Kuznitz, Richard Aldous and Robert Culp for your direct or indirect assistance on this project.

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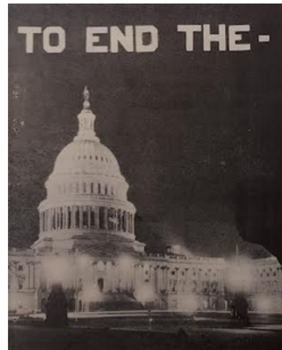
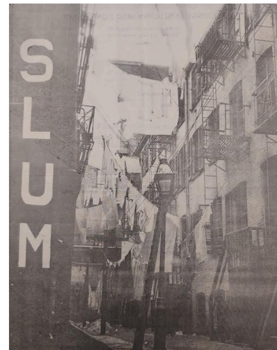
Introduction

"In the first instance, discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space."

-Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish





To begin my research for this project I visited the archives at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. I had only a very vague sense of what my project was going to be, and had selected the materials I wanted to look at using only the keywords "public housing" and "housing authority." One of the first folders I looked through contained correspondence between Roosevelt and the National Public Housing Conference, which led me to the pictures above. Immediately I was gripped by the drama of the two images. The glittering whiteness of the United States Capitol cutting through the dark night sky, and on the next page the dreary, disheveled, and unoccupied SLUM. The two structures that appear in these images are rich with symbolism, and intimated to me what my project would be about: how the New Deal's Wagner-Steagall Act tried to use federal law to eliminate the slum, both physically and in the American consciousness.

The Great Depression left the United States facing an unprecedented housing crisis, and though the market crash of 1929 played a large role, the housing market and housing policies of previous decades were already in a position that was vulnerable to such a crisis. Out of work

homeowners were unable to afford their monthly mortgage payments, and the nation faced mass foreclosures. In 1933, over half of the mortgages in the country were in default[1]. Aside from problems of affordability in the face of the economic crash, the physical housing stock was inadequate. Even a decade after the crash, as late as 1940, "45% of all households lived in homes without complete plumbing, especially in rural and southern areas."[2] Problems that had been crusaded against by 19th-century urban housing reformers such as overcrowding, poor sanitation, and lack of sunlight and fresh air, continued on into the 20th. Clearly, there was a significant need for a new housing policy.

The central piece of New Deal housing legislation was the Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937. The bill created the entity known as USHA, or the United States Housing Authority (now the Department of Housing and Urban Development). Despite being a piece of federal legislation that utilized federal funds, the Wagner-Steagall Act was designed to be operated by local housing agencies. As a result of this decentralization, these local housing agencies had a great deal of control over the housing projects they envisioned, which led to an uneven application of the Wagner-Steagall Act across the United States. This unevenness means that it is difficult to describe an overarching picture of public housing in the United States, as different cities had different priorities, geographies, and demographics. However, the origins of the Wagner-Steagall Act have, I believe, a specific and defined thrust to them which I seek to explain in this paper.

One ubiquitous element of the campaign for public housing that appeared in cities all over the United States was slum clearance. The crash of 1929 had left American cities so visibly depressed that Hoovervilles, shantytowns, and slums became prominent symbolic representations of the period. Housing advocates as well as members of the press promoted slum

[1] Alex F. Schwartz, *Housing Policy in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 52.
[2] Schwartz, 22.

clearance campaigns, which in some cases led to better safety and health regulations, and in other cases led to the displacement and eradication of entire communities. The Wagner-Steagall Act is one reason why slum clearance and public housing are so deeply interconnected, as it required that for each unit of public housing built, one unit designated to be a slum had to be destroyed. This framing, of slum clearance and public housing as one process, made the Wagner-Steagall Act more attractive to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration. The administration had to be very careful to avoid allegations of socialist intent or policy, as it faced a great deal of criticism on the pieces of New Deal legislation which expanded the power of the centralized state. Another bonus to the bill in Roosevelt's eyes was the fact that it stimulated labor and speculation, particularly in the field of construction, which had been in a period of stagnation since the Depression hit. In other words, it was not a straight up relief program, which he did his best to avoid enacting.[3] The 1936 *Workers' Handbook*, published by the federal government for use by employees of the Works Progress Administration, reminded workers of the alleged indignities of relief programs. "What happens to us when we are on the dole? We lose our self-respect. We lose our skill. We have family rows. We loaf on street corners. Finally, we lose hope."[4]

The goal of my project is to uncover some of the origins of this ideology of slum clearance. I started this introduction with a quote from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* not because I am adopting a purely Foucaultian approach, but instead because I want to highlight the idea of designing urban space as a means of discipline and social control. I looked back to the 19th century and found that as cities rapidly expanded due to periods of intensive immigration

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[3] Catherine Bauer Wurster and Barbara Penner, *Modern Housing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 1; Schwartz, *Housing Policy in the United States*. 125.
[4] Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers In Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 271, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb00088.0001.001.

and industrialization, concern about the growing tenements grew heavy on the minds of middle class urbanites. My first chapter addresses these fears and how they shaped housing reforms, ideologically and physically, from the social upheaval of the 1834 New York race riots to the Tenement House Acts passed by the New York State legislature from 1867 to 1919. In this chapter I used the writings and photographs of two prominent New York reformers, Lawrence Veiller and Jacob Riis. These hugely influential reformers brought attention to the exploitative and unhealthy living situation in the tenements, but alas their perspectives were greatly influenced by the racism, xenophobia, and classism of the period.

Jacob Riis and his well known exposé *How the Other Half Lives* proved immensely helpful as I tried to understand how the urban middle class related to and perceived the low-income communities they lived near. I used his writings and photographs to highlight the racial and ethnic hierarchy and moral condescension many Americans had for the slums and the slum dwellers. In this section I also talk about how the pastoralism and maternalism apparent in Riis' rhetoric as well as that of the settlement movement worked in concert with the westward settlement that was happening contemporaneously. The settlement movement is particularly associated with maternalist politics, as a result of the high number of women who were centrally involved with the movement and their emphasis on traditional women's work.

Chapter Two contains more on the settlement movement, and focuses on the maternalism and cultural clearance thereof using one figure in particular. Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch was the founder of a New York settlement house and later became a titan of public housing reform, co-writing the Wagner-Steagall Act and then becoming the Vice President of the New York City Housing Authority. I focus mainly on her writing in *The Settlement Primer*, a handbook for

settlement workers, in order to better understand how she saw her role in the movement, and the movement's role in the realm of housing reform.

In the third and final chapter, I introduce one more leading figure of the public housing debate of the 1930s. Catherine Bauer was an academic and activist whose book *Modern Housing* was an inspiration for many housing advocates. She also contributed to the drafting of the Wagner-Steagall Act, even though her thoughts on the work of settlement reformers such as Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch were contemptuous at best and scathing at worst. In this chapter I compared the very different ideologies of Bauer, Simkhovitch, and the early reformers, and the ways in which their work shaped this integral part of the American welfare state.

Chapter One: Sickness in the Slums

Housing advocates of the New Deal period were acutely aware of the housing problems of previous decades, and some of them had even been active reformers for decades by the time the crash hit. In the latter half of the 19th-century, American cities experienced huge waves of immigration and internal labor migration as a result of unmitigated industrial and economic expansion[5]. To absorb this high volume of migrants, urban landlords began to subdivide the available housing, fitting more people into less space[6]. This practice had negative repercussions for the quality of physical housing stock, the primary motivator for housing reformers at the time, but also for housing affordability, the central issue in today's housing market. The tenements that became ubiquitous in the immigrant neighborhoods of industrial cities in the late 1800s lacked in space and the necessities of life that come with it: namely light, fresh air, and sanitary facilities. Neighborhoods dominated by housing that did not have adequate access to these features succumbed to disproportionate rates of health and safety hazards. Thus, the first movement for housing reform grew mainly out of the movement for better health and safety regulations in poor neighborhoods. In fighting for disease control, these health and safety reformers fought for laws to regulate housing around space, ventilation, and fire safety.

A groundbreaking example of this type of regulation was the New York City Tenement House Acts, a series of laws that spanned from 1867 to 1919.[7] The original Tenement House Act of 1867 is most known for requiring fire escapes and windows in every room, however these adjustments had in truth minimal impact on the overall quality of life for those living in tenements.

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[5] Mina Carson, *Settlement Folk: Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement, 1885-1930*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) 11.
[6] Annie Pollard and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840-1920*, (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 113.
[7] Carson, 70.

Ethnicity, Class, and Environment: Housing Reform in the 19th-Century

In New York in the 19th-century, the neighborhoods that suffered the highest rates of tenementization were immigrant neighborhoods located in lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. This fact led to a popular understanding that there was an innate connection between immigrants and racial minorities and subpar housing in the collective consciousness of the entire nation. It must be noted that race as we currently conceptualize it varies quite a bit from how New Yorkers in the 19th century did. It is helpful to think in terms of certain ethnic and religious groups being "culturally marked as different or Other" instead of thinking in terms of race as we have constructed race today.[8] In other words, whiteness is considered normative and ideal, and anything that falls outside of whiteness is othered and treated as less than. The black/white binary that dominates the current American racial discourse can be seen as the two extremes of race at the turn of the century, but in certain areas of the country groups such as Chinese, Irish, Italian, and Jewish (as well as many others) inhabited the metaphorical gray area between the two poles.[9] This is not to say that blackness and whiteness did not still define the extremes, as the focal period being discussed fell during and shortly after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery.

A 1904 article from the Atlantic described how this connection between the groups that I will refer to as culturally marked and poor housing developed. "The congested sections of our large cities are populated mainly from the immigrant ships. In New York the connection has always been so close that popular movements for tenement reform have almost invariably followed periods of the largest immigration."[10] The housing reformers I will be discussing were

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[8] James Moreno, "Brown in Black and White: Jose Limon Dances" in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199928187.013.60.
[9] Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 41.
[10] Burton J. Hendrick, "The Tenement House Problem," *The Atlantic*, March 1904, 414.

from wealthy, well-educated backgrounds, and did not have much in common with the culturally marked tenement dwellers they aimed to assist. In fact, they sometimes saw issues of the tenement houses, particularly those related to hygiene and morality, as intrinsic properties of the immigrants and minorities who lived there resulting from their race and class. However, as they became more closely acquainted with the tenements and their inhabitants, some began to notice that environmental issues like overcrowding were to blame for the poor housing conditions in the city, and that the culprit was not some sort of innate racialized feature of immigrant populations. Some reformers realized that by changing the physical space of the tenements they might be able to influence the moral and social issues they observed within them.

This evolution in perspective among 19th-century housing reformers, from an ethnicity and race-based analysis of poor housing to a belief in its environmental causation, is clearly shown in Lawrence Veiller's 1900 report to the Tenement House Commission, the investigative department responsible for the Tenement House Acts. Lawrence Veiller was born in New Jersey in 1872, and after his graduation from City College in New York he immediately began his housing advocacy. He worked with the New York Charity Organization Society and the University Settlement and lobbied the New York State government until he became the head of a new tenement commission in 1900.[11] It was in this role that he wrote his report, entitled *Tenement House Reform in New York*.[12] In it, Veiller detailed the history of New York housing reform from 1834 to 1900, a period of large-scale immigration that placed a great deal of pressure on the housing market. His report not only included his own writing about city and state policy, but also his analysis of scholarly monographs and reports written by others. The problems

[11] Carson, 71.
[12] Lawrence Veiller, "Tenement House Reform in New York, 1834-1900. Prepared for the Tenement House Commission of 1900," HathiTrust, accessed April 29, 2024, 11. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015073780812?urlappend=%3Bseq=7.

of the tenement he focused on were disease and sanitation, but there is a strong and persistent connection between those and other social ills in his writing, namely what he perceived to be immoral behavior. Essentially, he and his contemporaries in the Tenement House Commission believed that better housing would improve physical and moral well-being, which would alleviate crime and disease and their spread beyond "the class in which they originate…into the localities occupied by the wealthy."[13] In this work, Veiller wrote about every law, amendment, and legislative commission created by the city of New York from 1856 to 1895. His report featured examples of model tenements throughout, and culminated with the Model Tenement Competition and the Tenement House Exhibition of 1900, pointing to his belief in the spatial improvement of tenements as the solution to the social ills present in low-income neighborhoods. Model tenements were designed mainly with the desire to improve sanitation and ventilation for those who could only afford to live in tenements. Their designers sought to use the tenement as it stood in its most efficient capacity as well as to build new tenements on a similar amount of land. They were generally the product of limited dividend companies, as opposed to being funded by the state. This structure was similar to how housing initially operated under the New Deal's Public Works Administration. Model tenement companies utilized private investment, but set a limit on returns, which allowed them to keep prices below market rate, and therefore theoretically accessible to those who were living in tenements. Despite the similarities between the model tenement structure and what today exists under the name public housing, Veiller was a strong advocate against public housing, believing it to be socialist and threatening to private investment.[14] He preferred that housing projects be undertaken by privately owned limited-dividend companies, whose profits would be kept in check in order to accommodate

[13] Veiller, 11.
[14] Peter Marcuse, "The Myth of the Benevolent State: Towards a Theory of Housing" in *Papers in Planning* no. 8, 1978, 5.

low-income residents. These fears, espoused by Veiller and many others, influenced the writing of the Wagner-Steagall Act in 1937, which as a result uses a combination of both public and private investment.

The first significant study of housing Veiller included in his report took place in 1842 and was written by Dr. John H. Griscom of the New York City Board of Health. Dr. Griscom, as a health inspector, was chiefly concerned with the sanitary aspects of housing, however, he too concerned himself with the "grave moral evils" of the tenement dwellers[15]. Both his and Veiller's characterization of the inhabitants of the slums betrays their condescending perception of the immigrant populations they aimed to assist. Veiller wrote of Griscom's report "he calls attention to the great increase of population…by a horde of ignorant immigrants who arrived here generally penniless, and who brought with them disease and misery."[16] Here we can see that the onus, in the minds of these two powerful housing reformers, is on the "ignorant immigrants,"[17] not the fact that they were ushered directly into unsuitable living conditions upon their arrival. Despite his often condescending views about the immigrants he had studied, Dr. Griscom's recommendations to the City of New York highlight the influence of the living environment on behavior and health, as opposed to supposed innate racial attributes. The recommendations he made in his report included a cap on how many people could live in a given amount of space, but did not provide any solutions as to how and where the high numbers of immigrants might live instead of in tenements.[18] While his recommendations were not taken up by the New York Legislature immediately, the failure of Griscom and reformers like him to see beyond regulating against results of poverty led to a punitive system of reform that targeted both landlords and

[15] Veiller, 6.
[16] Veiller, 5.
[17] Veiller, 5.
[18] Veiller, 6.

residents who would be fined or forced to vacate their housing by the Sanitary Inspectors created by the Tenement Housing Acts. Despite this major flaw, Griscom's report marked the beginning of a shift toward an ethos of housing reform defined by attempts to curb disease and overcrowding through regulation and maintenance of existing buildings and neighborhoods. This period also began to popularize an environmentalist view of poverty, morality, and social discord, meaning a belief that these social issues were caused by inadequate housing, poor ventilation, and poor sanitation.[19]

This view, that behavior was shaped by the environmental atmosphere, differed greatly from contemporary beliefs about behavior and socialization, such as racial and gender-based pseudo-science. Scientific racism and classism were prominent during the 19th-century, and had great influence over mainstream middle class perceptions of urban areas.[20] While many health professionals feared the spread of disease in such overcrowded spaces, housing reformers also feared the spread of immoral behavior via the same miasmal gasses they believed were transporting illness. This belief appears in Veiller's report. Of those tenement dwellers he did not deem immoral and/or unclean he wrote, "It is to be feared the miasmal air will creep into their existence undermining the sturdy constitutions and prostrating its victims on a bed of sickness; health failing them, want will follow, and then must come crowding rapidly upon them neglect of home, neglect of children, uncleanliness, drunkenness, and crime."[21] This statement shows how closely ill health and poor morals were conflated during this period, and how housing was one point of intersection for the two.

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[19] Veiller, 6.
[20] Noel A. Manzano Gómez, "The Cleanliness of Otherness: Epidemics, Informal Urbanization and Urban Degeneration in Early Twentieth-Century Madrid," *Planning Perspectives* 37, no. 1 (February 2022): 127–47, doi:10.1080/02665433.2021.2017683.
[21] Veiller, 10.

Other prompts for housing reform in the 19th-century were the fear of sex outside of marriage and the fear of interracial sex. Veiller listed this phenomenon among other qualms he had with tenement living in his report:

> Here are to be found drunken and diseased men and women lying in the midst of their impurity and filth; idiotic and crippled children suffering from neglect and ill treatment, girls just springing into womanhood living indiscriminately in the same apartment with men of all ages and of all colors; babes left so destitute of care and nourishment to be fitted only for a jail or hospital in after years if they escape the blessing of an early grave.[22]

In this quote Veiller paints a melodramatic picture of how the son of a factory owner from New Jersey like himself would have viewed the poor, newly arrived immigrants in urban New York. The people he describes seem not to do anything but lie about drinking, having sex. He most certainly does not record them cleaning themselves, working, or tending to their families. His major concern is with the moral lives of tenement residents. His characterization of the real problems of poor sanitation and overcrowding is condescending and colored by moral judgment. Once again, poor morals and ill health are conflated in his prediction that the children of these houses will end up in either "jail or hospital."[23] He particularly notes the danger facing young women in tenements where they would live with, and presumably have sex with, men of various races/ethnicities. Veiller also wrote (about Griscom's 1842 report) that "The grave moral evils resulting from the indiscriminate mingling of the sexes in the same room are dwelt upon…"[24] While this quote frames the lack of adequate space as an issue of licentiousness and immorality, it is unequivocally true that this issue had negative repercussions for the quality of life within the tenements. By no means do I intend to negate the fact that the tenements were overcrowded, or that this placed an obstacle for inhabitants' access to good sanitation and privacy. However, I do

[22] Veiller, 9.
[23] Veiller, 9.
[24] Veiller, 6.

argue that Veiller and reformers like him were primarily motivated by the desire to control the behavior of the tenement dwellers.

Controlling Amalgamation

Fears of racial amalgamation had come to the forefront of the New York City consciousness in the 1830s as the abolitionist movement, in which black and white people worked and socialized together, grew in power and popularity, but also as lower-class neighborhoods such as the Five Points came to be home to both free black people and Irish immigrants. Amalgamation, or what we today might call fear of interracial sex and mixing, became a hot button issue among anti-abolitionists and the press, and negative reactions to it became the primary cause of race riots in 1834.[25] I use the term amalgamation, instead of for example miscegenation or race mixing, because after the riots of 1834 amalgamation was the phrase consistently used by New York papers to describe and denigrate any sort of social interaction between black and white working class people, but especially sex and cohabitation.[26]

[25] Leslie M. Harris, In the Shadow of Slavery: African-Americans in New York City, 1626-1863, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 197.
[26] Harris, 248.

One of Jacob Riis' photographs, depicting a bar that catered to a mixed race audience on Thompson Street in New York.[27]

Here we can see another instance of the malleability of race during this (as well as any other) period. Earlier, I wrote that race at this time might be best understood as groups of people who were culturally marked compared with groups of people who were culturally unmarked. But in this case, the black/white binary seems to reappear. The amalgamation that middle class New Yorkers feared so much was framed as being an issue between black and white people.[28] Still, the Irish, who seemed to be the group of white people who had the majority of interactions with black people in this neighborhood, were without question considered culturally marked. In fact, there were even instances where Irish and black people were completely equated, despite the fact that their social interactions were so strongly advocated against. For instance, it was common for both black and Irish people to be referred to with epithets that had originated to be used towards

[27] Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York,* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), figure 28. Black-and-Tan Dive in Thompson Street.
[28] Harris, "“Rulers of the Five Points”: Blacks, Irish Immigrants, and Amalgamation," 247-262.

their opposite.[29] For example, black citizens were sometimes referred to as "smoked Irish."[30] However, in the 21st century landscape, Irish-Americans are always considered white and African-Americans black. As I mentioned earlier, while fears of amalgamation and crime were growing regarding Irish immigrant and black populations in the Five Points, slavery was still legal and active in the southern United States. As a result, black people lay at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy, while Irish people were relatively free from centuries of negative perceptions in their new homeland.[31] Despite being culturally marked, they were free from the negative stereotypes associated with being marked as black specifically.

Middle class white anxieties about social and sexual racial mixture continued on into the 1840s and 1850s, and played a part in sparking the 1863 draft riots.[32] Unlike the newspaper coverage that led up to the riots of 1834, which attacked middle class abolitionists, the press treated racial amalgamation as specific to lower-class neighborhoods during the '40s and '50s. Some of this press attention was based in fact; as the Irish immigrant population surged and moved into the Five Points neighborhood there were certainly instances of interracial marriage, sex, cohabitation, business, and socialization. This phenomenon was treated as the most damning evidence of increasing immorality in Lower Manhattan, which explains the repeated allusions to "The grave moral evils resulting from the indiscriminate mingling of the sexes…" in Dr. Griscom's 1842 housing report.[33] The class-based nature of the attacks of this era created backlash against amalgamation from multiple sides. Working class white people sought to elevate themselves above their black counterparts and middle class black people sought to

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[29] Harris, 251.
[30] Ignatiev, 41.
[31] It must be noted here that Anglo-Americans, whose presence in the Eastern United States was considerable, continued to hold the racist and anti-Irish beliefs that were so prevalent in England and British-occupied Ireland.
[32] Harris, 247.
[33] Veiller, 6.

separate themselves from associations with crime, particularly prostitution, by countering the rhetoric about racial mixture coming from contemporary newspapers. The crime that was indeed present in the Five Points was often portrayed as a result of amalgamation, and one solution to this alleged problem was to house black and Irish people in separate neighborhoods. It was believed that Irish people made black people worse and vice versa.[34] Thus, fears of amalgamation played directly into the establishment of the New York State legislature's 1856-7 "Select Committee on Tenement Houses in New York and Brooklyn."[35]

This Select Committee consisted of five members of the New York House of Assembly, John M. Reed, A.J.H. Duganne, Eli Curtis, Wm. J. Shea, and Samuel Brevoort. It was conducted by the same men, who were escorted in their investigations by police officers and "health wardens."[36] The fact that every home visit was conducted by the State's elite politicians who had police protection at all times demonstrates how inherently flawed this study of tenement life was. First, it shows that the committee viewed the tenement dwellers not as victims of poor housing, but as dangerous criminals. The report states that the committee "made tours of those districts which had been reported as presenting the salient features of general evils connected to the tenant-house system."[37] Once again, we see that the housing reformers of this era were mainly concerned with the tenements as a symbol of the "general evils" of industrialization and urban life, instead of being concerned with the health, safety, or security of tenement dwellers.[38] The

[34] Harris, 260.
[35] Harris, 260.
[36] "Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Examine into the Condition of Tenant Houses in New-York and Brooklyn: Transmitted to the Legislature March 9, 1857 - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine," accessed April 29, 2024, 2. https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101208328-bk.
[37] "Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Examine into the Condition of Tenant Houses in New-York and Brooklyn: Transmitted to the Legislature March 9, 1857 - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine.", 3.
[38] "Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Examine into the Condition of Tenant Houses in New-York and Brooklyn: Transmitted to the Legislature March 9, 1857 - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine.", 3.

committee entered these neighborhoods and houses, far from their own, with a carceral mindset and were ready to condemn the alleged vice and criminality already reported to them. Additionally, there is the fact that the tenement dwellers were no doubt influenced by the appearance of the armed agents of the State in their homes. One can assume the police presence prevented them from giving an honest report of the problems they experienced in order to protect themselves and their communities from the State which was often openly antagonistic to people of their class and ethnic backgrounds. In this instance, we can see how housing reform was clearly a reactionary attempt to control the culture of the rapidly changing urban landscape. The committee concluded with a set of proposals "to be secured by ultimate legislative action, to be based upon further investigation."[39] Some of their initial proposals were made into law a decade later as the first of the aforementioned Tenement House Acts, such as the requirement for buildings to have fire escapes, but that was the sole lasting and enforceable contribution of the committee. The problems of overcrowding, poor hygiene and sanitation, and high rent were not alleviated, or really attacked, by this committee.

However, the problems of racial mixture and state surveillance were dealt with by the committee. According to Lawrence Veiller, one of the most brilliant proposals of the committee was the

> registered lists of the different tenant houses in each ward, designating the age, sex, color, and occupation or employment of each person; also the number of children between the ages of six and fourteen not in attendance on any school, and of the occupation of such children, and the Commissioners were empowered to examine witnesses upon oath in reference to this matter.[40]

[39] "Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Examine into the Condition of Tenant Houses in New-York and Brooklyn: Transmitted to the Legislature March 9, 1857 - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine.", 3.
[40] Veiller, 13.

With this proposal the state could have a sense of where exactly cohabitation among different races was taking place, where people were employed, whether children were in school, and generally how people were spending their time. In other words, what appears here to be housing legislation would in essence be used to police the behavior of those in low-income neighborhoods. This proposal shows how central fears of racial mixture and vice were in the public eye at the time, and how middle class fears of the tenement, the immigrant, the racialized, and the lower class manifested themselves in the expansion of the state power through housing, specifically carceral power.

Jacob Riis and the Image of the Slum

A noted contemporary and friend of Lawrence Veiller was the photographer and housing reform advocate Jacob Riis. Riis, a Danish immigrant, is now known primarily for his exposé entitled *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, which presented photographs of the living conditions in tenements.[41] The book was incendiary at the time of its publication in 1890 and introduced many middle and upper class New Yorkers to the unsafe conditions in the slums that they had previously been unaware of. The book provides, in addition to photographs of tenement life, a history of tenement housing, and first-hand anecdotes from Riis' interactions with tenement dwellers. It also proves a good example of how culturally marked tenement dwellers were categorized and understood by those who were considered unmarked, like Riis for example, who was defined as white rather than as his status as an immigrant or by his foreign national origins. He wrote about some of the most populous immigrant groups in New York in his chapters "The Italian in New York", "Chinatown", and

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[41] Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970).

"Jewtown", and about them as a whole in "The Mixed Crowd." *How the Other Half Lives* contains a clearly delineated racial hierarchy that places these groups in relation to one another for the readers who were probably not familiar with them, but also places them in the same overall category. Evident from these titles is the simultaneous distinctions between ethnic groups, but also the blending and conflation of the different groups as people who are all ultimately considered culturally marked. However, Riis gives a good example of how blackness was nonetheless considered the polar opposite of whiteness. "Where he [the landlord] permits them to live, they go; where he shuts the door, stay out."[42] Riis noted how black people, in cities that were largely separated by ethnicity, were specifically segregated and barred from all but the worst housing.[43]

One way the book is helpful is in understanding how being culturally marked worked in this period, and particularly how housing served as a marker. The terms "slum dweller" or "tenement dweller" evoked to many middle class New Yorkers the image of a racialized person, an image that is continually perpetuated in much of this book, as well as Riis' other writings. Instead of bemoaning the unsafe and unsanitary conditions present that would be a danger to any person, he repeatedly took note of the ethnicity of those whose homes he profiled, perhaps as some sort of subconscious signal to the reader's xenophobia, helping them to imagine the state of degradation in the tenement. He writes "Of the Irish woman who buried her baby in the Potter's Field"[44] and of how "we have no more business to squelch that hope here on earth in the darkroom tenement than we have to shut the gate of our heaven to the Italian or the Jew."[45] Riis

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[42] Riis, 98.
[43] Riis, 99.
[44] Jacob Riis, Speech notes for Mr. White's campaign against dark tenements at the Academy of Music, 13 February, 1911, MssCol 2579, box 6, folder 7, Jacob Riis Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York, NY (hereafter cited as Speech notes for Mr. White's campaign against dark tenements).
[45] Speech notes for Mr. White's campaign against dark tenements.

took a particularly harsh stance when it came to immigrant or immigrant-descended landlords. In his view, the problems of tenement life were the fault of the greedy and immoral landlords. Of "the once unwelcome Irishman" who had now become a tenement landlord he wrote

> the Irishman's revenge is complete. Victorious in defeat over his recent as over his more ancient foe, the one who opposed his coming no less than the one who drove him out, he dictates to both their politics…while collecting the rents of the Italian whose house he has bought with the profits of his saloon.[46]

Riis' constant relation of the races of his subjects serves to solidify connections between these groups, their class position, and ultimately the neighborhoods and housing they inhabit.

After explaining the racial makeup and relations in New York's tenement areas, Riis goes into the social problems found there. These include alcohol and drug consumption ("A Raid on the Stale Beer Dives", "The Reign of Rum"), labor exploitation ("The Sweaters of Jewtown", "The Bohemians--Tenement House Cigarmaking"), and crime, prostitution, and violence. It was his reporting on these problems that heightened the fear of the tenement among New York's middle class. Riis hoped to, and did successfully, start a social awakening among the middle classes against these elements of danger found in the urban slums. He believed that this book would showcase how the inhumane conditions of New York's tenements themselves were responsible for the social ills they contained, not the people who inhabited them. This belief is shown in what Riis is best known for; his photographs. However, the book also provided its audience with images and stories that highlight a connection between the culturally marked slum dwellers and antisocial behavior.

The fact that a good deal of the book focuses on crime and other antisocial behaviors can be explained by the fact that Riis got his start in photography as a police reporter. This job was also what first exposed him to the lives of those who lived in tenements. The tenement and the

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[46] Riis, 19.

city itself were main players in his photographs, and the human subjects that appeared often had covered or blurry faces. This shows us that what Riis really hoped to expose through his photography was the harshness inherent in the environment. The people he documented could stand in for anyone, and he probably hoped the readers would in fact identify themselves with the bodies that appeared in the book.[47] However, the constant reiteration and marking of the racialized populations within the tenements partially undid his attempts to universalize the subjects of his photographs.

Another Riis photograph, this one of an apartment in Hell's Kitchen New York.[48]

[47] Sam Bass Warner Jr., "Editor's Introduction" in *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), vii.
[48] Riis, figure 33. Hell's Kitchen Flat.

The role the city played in *How the Other Half Lives*, that of a corruptor of morals and health, probably developed in contrast to Riis' relatively idyllic small-town childhood in Denmark, where he was able to roam and play in nature, unlike the children of the New York tenements.[49] Denmark's social housing program also began development in the mid-19th century, but developed at a faster rate than the United States' did. Riis probably looked to his homeland for inspiration, as the state developed a system of private-public investment in social housing. Like the U.S. and many European countries, Denmark's public housing policy was motivated by fears of the illness and unemployment that arose as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Before the Industrial Revolution, workers in Denmark depended on their employers to feed and house them, but as factories and cities boomed, this new class of industrial laborers found themselves untethered to occupation or land. After an 1853 cholera outbreak, charitable groups and workers unions in Denmark began to organize social housing, which later became a government program available to all citizens regardless of income, but aimed primarily at the new class of urban industrial workers.[50] Denmark's social housing, like Riis and many American housing reformers of his time, sought to return to the social norms of a pre-industrial society.

Colonies in the Slum: Riis and the Settlement Movement

As a result of his interactions with poverty in tenements as a documentarian, Riis became interested in the work of the settlement movement, one of the first movements to face the social problems, including housing, of American cities. The settlement movement, which originated in England and arrived in the U.S. during the 1880s, was greatly influenced by Anglican ideas

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[49] Bass Warner Jr., ix.
[50] Hedvig Vestergaard, "A Short History of Housing and Housing Policy in Denmark since 1945," in *Housing in Denmark*, (Kobenhavn: Center for Housing and Welfare, 2007), 32 https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/13695523/Housing_130907.pdf.

about morality and social responsibility. While its actions often resembled those of traditional charity organizations, many of its early members were greatly influenced by Christian socialism.[51] A key settlement belief was the Christian ideal that all of humanity was connected as a family and that their role in fighting vice and poverty was to break through artificial divisions in society brought on by class and a growing sense of individualism. Settlement workers also felt that exposure to mainstream middle class mores and character development of both the rich and poor side by side would be more beneficial than material aid alone. Thus, settlement workers, instead of simply offering material help to those less fortunate than themselves, lived in the same neighborhoods and sometimes the same housing as those they aimed to assist. The settlements themselves served as a stepping stone to moral betterment, as well as improved housing and healthcare. Settlement houses operated by purchasing or renting an apartment building which would be primarily inhabited by their employees, and sometimes also by people from the surrounding neighborhoods. They would entice locals to spend time in the settlements by offering services such as medical clinics and leisure activities like arts and crafts or music lessons.

As a Methodist and as someone who had physically spent time in tenements and among people of a different social class than his own, it is no surprise that Riis was attracted to the settlement movement. In notes for a speech, he gave his own answer to the question of

> What is a settlement?...No, it is not a church. And yet to my mind it comes as close to the ideal we connect with the term as many that bear the name and closer than some. For the settlement is there to get us to go out of the maze of nervousness, of bigotry, of ignorance of one another that is our worst stumbling block. It prefers no sect or religious method, but in motive it is deeply religious, for you can not be a settlementer [sic] and not find out that we are all God's children together, however we call Him by name.[52]

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[51] Carson, 11.
[52] Lecture notes, 1909, MssCol 2579, box 6, folder 6, Jacob Riis Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York, NY (hereafter cited as Lecture notes 1909).

While he correctly notes that settlement houses are not religious institutions, it is clear from this writing that he, like many other workers in the settlement movement, was deeply influenced by his religious background and a non-denominational, yet distinctly Judeo-Christian service ethic. This ethic appears throughout the settlement movement and is visible in the focus on moral improvement of those in tenements and low-income neighborhoods, as well as the emphasis on the universal brotherhood of man that transcends class and social divisions. Riis highlights this paradigm, which is unique to the settlement movement when compared to other contemporary charity and reform movements. The importance of crossing class lines to connect the middle and upper class settlement workers with their poorer and more marginalized counterparts was the central draw for reformers interested in moral and social betterment or education, as opposed to material assistance. With his book *How the Other Half Lives* Riis initiated this trans-class movement symbolically, by visually showing his wealthy and educated readers the realities of poverty within their city, but the settlement movement he supported aimed to go beyond that, by physically inserting the wealthy and educated in poor neighborhoods, or as Riis put it "They get next to the Neighbor."[53]

Increasing industrialization, in addition to overcrowding, was a great fear of the settlement workers and reformers of that era. As Riis put it, a central goal of the settlement was "searching out the neighbor we have lost in our city crowds…"[54] One response to this phenomenon of high-speed urbanization was a cultural pastoralism that began to appear in the settlements. A fascination with and promotion of an idealized form of country living grew in settlements, especially when it came to the immigrant children, many of whom had only known busy, crowded city life. Riis wrote that the settlements "give…the play which street and gutter

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[53] Lecture notes 1909.
[54] Lecture notes 1909.

monopolyed [sic] before."[55] In addition to being a reaction to growing industrialization and urbanization, this pastoralism was in some ways an emblematic image of America itself.[56] By bringing aspects of the agrarian countryside to the urban dwelling immigrant children, the settlement workers were able to introduce them to an American dream which may have seemed foreign and unknowable to them. One element of this American dream was the intersection of "savagery and civilization" that occurred on the Western frontier, resulting in the ultimate erasure of "savagery" by the pioneering colonist.[57] Thus, the emphasis on pastoral activities to occupy immigrant children who visited the settlements can be read as an act of Americanization and civilization on the part of the settlement workers. The city, in all its untamed and wild potential, acts as a parallel to the frontier, and its immigrant masses act as a parallel to the indigenous inhabitants of the continent, both of whom needed to be Americanized by the settler. This illuminates one meaning of the phrases 'settlement house' and 'settlement worker' and insinuates that some of their work constitutes a sort of internal colonialism of the urban landscape and its racialized inhabitants.

There was also a gendered aspect of the work that settlement workers did. For one, the movement was full of women, as housing and social work were considered acceptably feminine areas of the public sphere. When writing about the settlement house, Riis noted that "the father…does not come in as often as he should."[58] This was a common qualm of settlement houses all over the country, who hoped to help reform absent and/or alcoholic fathers as well as the mothers and children who were far more likely to attend settlement events and accept the assistance offered there. Children and their adaptable minds were a particular target of settlement

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[55] Lecture notes 1909.
[56] Henry Nash Smith, "The Frontier Hypothesis and the Myth of the West," *American Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1950): 3–11. https://doi.org/10.2307/2710571.
[57] Smith, 4.
[58] Lecture notes 1909.

house programs, which included kindergartens and art lessons, and the settlements took on a maternal role within the neighborhood. The practice of focusing efforts at women and children among women-led reform organizations of this period was part of a maternalist political movement present in the U.S., Western Europe, and Australia.[59] To return to the analogy of the settlement worker as an instrument of internal colonialism, female settlement workers played the role of the white women maternalists who inserted themselves into the homes and communities of indigenous people in order to Christianize and Americanize at this very same time.[60] In both cases, the settlers pathologized and condescended to the populations they served, believing them to lack the moral and intellectual capabilities to care for themselves and their children. This condescension appears throughout Riis' writing about the tenement dwellers. He wrote of how he and his compatriots "did rescue…the children", similarly to how missionaries in the American west believed they were saving the souls and lives of the native people they evangelized and institutionalized.[61] The condescension held by settlement workers and other reformers towards the way of life within immigrant and low-income areas and homes was akin to the maternalist attempts at "uplift" by colonial missions and schools, specifically on the American and Australian frontiers.[62] In many ways, the maternalist politics of this period defined not only the settlement movement, but also the shape of housing reform and many other aspects of what later became the American welfare state. While women were able to insert themselves into the public

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[59] Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 88.
[60] Jacobs, 93.
[61] "Organized Charity," speech delivered at the Fort Pitt Hotel, Pittsburgh, 8 December 1911, MssCol 2579, box 6, folder 7, Jacob Riis Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York, NY (hereafter cited as "Organized Charity).
[62] Jacobs, 23.

sphere at a greater rate than before, they did this by further solidifying and glorifying their roles as mothers and by imagining poor and non-white women as their dependents.[63]

[63] Jacobs, 89.

Chapter Two: Mothering the Slum

The settlements were then places where poor and immigrant families could be exposed to the cultural and behavioral norms of middle class Americans in order to counteract what were commonly considered at the time to be the moral problems of poverty.[64] They were also a place where women could emphasize their supposedly innate maternal skills in order to work in the public sphere and gain a foothold in political advocacy. Despite the fact that the communion of neighbors in the settlements was portrayed to be mutually beneficial by the settlement workers, the actions of the settlement workers towards their neighbors were still tinged with the condescending maternalism introduced in the last chapter. As a result of this maternalism, many of their most successful initiatives involved organizing regular activities to occupy neighborhood children.[65] Where I argued that the settlement workers played the role of the colonial settler, some members of the settlement movement saw their work as a continuation of the Franciscan monastic order, which worked outside of the monastery in an effort to bring "the influences of Christianity and civilization" out into the world. This placed these settlement workers in a legacy that harkens back to a much older model of institutional education to support cultural, and in that case religious, hegemony.[66]

The settlement movement was not only developed under the guidance of Christian social movements, but had secular influences as well, chiefly the institution of the social sciences at American colleges and universities. In the last two decades of the 19th-century, enrollment in institutions of higher education boomed, leading to a renewed vision of the traditional liberal arts education, as well as an increased presence of women on campuses. The creation of the social science disciplines allowed university administrators and concerned misogynists comfort with

[64] Carson, 1.
[65] Carson, 52.
[66] Carson, 57.

the idea of women in schools, because the social aspect of this discipline was easily applied to things that were traditionally part of the feminine sphere such as domestic and community work. In the social sciences, the scientific rationalism of the era was combined with what was believed to be the innate work of women. At colleges and universities women received the tools that allowed them to engage in community organizing, social work, and philanthropy as professionals.[67] Thus, early settlement workers (both male and female) were educated in a tradition that emphasized and elevated their maternal skills, which they then brought to the poor districts of American cities, birthing the aforementioned maternalist school of reform.

There, settlement workers came to know a host of social ills, many of which were the direct results of increasing industrialization and urbanization with little regulation. Due to the high numbers of primarily European immigrants and the increasing availability of work in urban factories, American cities were flooded with new inhabitants and grew up and out at an incredibly rapid rate.[68] The settlement workers witnessed many of the same problems Riis and Veiller described in Chapter One. These included problems with the physical housing stock like poor sanitation and overcrowding, but the settlement workers also advocated against vices like gambling, drinking, and sex outside of marriage.[69] Public health was a particular issue that settlement workers attacked, and because of its interconnection with subpar housing, some settlement workers later came to focus their reform efforts in housing specifically. Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch was one member of the settlement movement who had a particular impact on the shaping of American public housing as we know it.

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[67] Carson, 24.

[68] The reason the majority of immigrants to the United States in this period were from Europe has to do with the various immigration quotas upon people from other areas of the world, notably the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924.

[69] Carson, 53.

Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch was born in 1867 in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts to a prominent and wealthy Boston family. She became extremely well-educated and attended Boston University for her undergraduate degree and then Radcliffe College, the University of Berlin, and Columbia University for her graduate studies. Before her work with the National Public Housing Conference, she founded and worked as the director of Greenwich House in 1901. Greenwich House was a settlement house aimed at aiding newly arrived, mostly Italian, immigrants in the Greenwich Village. Her advocacy expanded into the realm of politics, specifically regarding slum clearance and public housing, in 1907. She served on many committees for social welfare and low-income housing at both the state and local levels, such as on the Congestion and Recreation Committees in New York. She then took her experience in housing reform to the national level in 1911 when she co-founded the National Federation of Settlements, and then later as the director of the National Public Housing Conference.[70]

The beginning of Simkhovitch's work in housing was as the headworker of the College Settlement House in 1897 on New York's Lower East Side. Despite her high level of education, as a woman she, like many other women reformers, was expected to engage in activism based in traditional women's work. Housing was one of the permissible spheres for women to work in, so the settlement movement, and later the movement for public housing, included women more prominently than other areas of social work and government advocacy.[71] The settlement movement, which originated in Victorian England but was present in most major American cities by the 1880s, continued to contain the religious influences of its founders in the U.S., particularly regarding what reformers perceived as the individual, moral inadequacy of those who were subject to poverty. This meant that settlement work was primarily concerned with the

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[70] "The History of Greenwich House," *Greenwich House*, accessed April 29, 2024, https://greenwichhouse.org/history/.
[71] Erica B. Simmons, *Hadassah and the Zionist Project*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) 119.

improvement of the individual in order to escape poverty and immorality. The goal of the movement was not conceived to house the poor but to allow them, as well as their more affluent counterparts who worked in the settlement movement, the opportunity for spiritual and moral betterment. Instead of just providing material benefits like housing, money, or other services to the poor, people in the settlement movement believed that contact with those of a higher, more educated class and with the settlement itself as an institution would counteract the personal and moral problems of poverty. Thus, these "settlement folk" as Mina Carson called them would often live in the very settlements they had founded, to serve as a role model of respectability.[72] Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch was a follower of this model, and she and her husband resided in Greenwich House until their deaths, although it must be noted that they had a farm in New Jersey that they escaped to on weekends.[73]

Because Greenwich House was aimed specifically at an immigrant population, its goal was to introduce them to American ways of life and citizenship. Cultural education was central to Greenwich House's work, and it continues to be known for its music, theater, and pottery programs. Settlements like these, that focused on educating and assimilating poor and immigrant families, served their purpose by fostering contact across classes and ethnic backgrounds. Despite the goal of such settlements to have rich and poor, American and immigrant live in the same building, settlements were often inhabited exclusively by settlement workers. The residents of their surrounding neighborhoods, particularly children and their mothers, would stop in to take advantage of the programs and benefits offered by the settlements.[74] Jane Addams, the founder of one of the United States' most famous settlement houses, described the atmosphere of the

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[72] Carson, 1.
[73] "Collection: Papers of Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, 1852-1960 | HOLLIS For," accessed November 10, 2023, https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/8/resources/5687.
[74] Carson, 52.

settlement thusly: "a community of University men who live there, have their recreation clubs and society all among the poor people yet in the same style in which they would live in their own circle."[75] She was describing Toynbee Hall, the first settlement house in the world, which evidently sought to enlighten their poor neighbors as to how respectable and educated British society functioned, and became the model for all ensuing settlement houses. Similarly, American settlement houses like Greenwich aimed to educate lower class denizens in middle class mores as well as tame the perceived wildness of the city/frontier.

Organizing the Neighborhood

The settlement movement did not disappear from the realm of public advocacy after the adoption of safety and health legislation by cities and states. Its workers and beliefs reached their tendrils onward well into the twentieth century and the Great Depression. Mina Carson, in her book *Settlement Folk*, defines the period of settlement work in the United States as being from 1855 to 1930, but some settlement houses, organizations, and policies created by settlement workers still exist today. One of the foremost organizations concerned with slum clearance and public housing advocacy during the New Deal era was the National Public Housing Conference, or NPHC. The NPHC was founded in 1931 by Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, who remained a settlement worker for her whole life, even as she began a career in political advocacy.[76]

During her residence at Greenwich House, Simkhovitch wrote a guide for other settlement workers and organizers entitled *The Settlement Primer*, which was published by the National Federation of Settlements (NFS) in 1926. The NFS, which Simkhovitch became president of in 1917, was the first nationwide organization geared toward promoting and

[75] Louise W. Knight, *Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 169.
[76] "Collection: Papers of Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, 1852-1960 | HOLLIS For."

improving settlements in the United States. Its particular concerns included arts education and child welfare.[77] In *The Settlement Primer* Simkhovitch elaborated on the purpose of the settlement house and how it should function to assist its neighbors. Her goal was not to write a complete and unalterable guide to every activity offered by every settlement, but instead to explain the principles behind the movement to those intimately involved in running settlement houses. The chief aim of settlement houses, in Simkhovitch's eyes, was to foster community self-organization. In the primer she addresses many aspects of the settlement, including its employees, organizational structure, surrounding neighborhoods, and cultural activities. Cultural activities and their application take up a great deal of the focus of *The Settlement Primer*, as do vocational, cultural, and civic education. Simkhovitch's focus on what she believed were appropriate activities, jobs, and community behavior shows us how the settlement movement was far more interested in introducing proper American cultural and behavioral education than improving the material housing in low-income communities. It also reminds us of Simkhovitch's specific background as the headworker of a settlement house in the middle of a neighborhood full of newly arrived immigrants.

The first section in *The Settlement Primer* poses the question "What is a Settlement House?" Simkhovitch's answer is short and rather vague, leaving room for settlement workers in different areas and different contexts to create their own interpretations. She wrote "...the house should organize the interests of the neighborhood, social, cultural, artistic and intellectual, in order that they may be strengthened through group development."[78] However, this quote shows that the goal of any settlement house in any neighborhood ought to create a sort of structured and

[77] John E. Hansen, "National Federation of Settlements" in *National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers*, VCU Libraries Social Welfare History Project, Accessed March 12, 2024, https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/settlement-houses/national-federation-of-settlements-and-neighborhood-centers/

[78] Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, "The Settlement Primer" HathiTrust, accessed April 29, 2024, 9, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015005273860?urlappend=%3Bseq=7.

organized shared culture. This organization was to come from within the settlement house, not be brought to it by the residents of the neighborhood. In her view, the settlement house was the obvious and necessary center of any neighborhood that contained one. She saw herself and her fellow settlement workers as benevolent guides who would insert themselves into every aspect of neighborhood life in order to foster its united inhabitants towards harmony using their superior cultural and moral knowledge and knack for organization. The ways in which the settlement workers might organize the neighborhood were manifold, but her focus was on the organization of cultural activities that would occupy her neighbors' time. Unlike the tenement housing reformers like Veiller and Riis who sought to reorganize neighborhoods and the people within them spatially, the settlement houses sought to structure their time and behavior, by offering classes, lectures, organized sports, cultural activities, and by modeling self-government, perhaps the foremost value Simkhovitch writes about in the guide. Where the tenement reformers pushed sanitation and cleanliness above all, Simkhovitch and the settlers aimed to create an environment that was warm and welcoming first, but also, like Veiller and Riis, intended to sanitize and organize aspects of lower class culture. I will call this process cultural clearance, to situate it in relation to the slum clearance that was present in U.S. housing policy, including in the Wagner-Steagall Act.

This is not to say that Simkhovitch and the settlements did not also seek to improve the sanitation of the neighborhoods in which they resided. They, like Veiller and Riis, were also greatly influenced by Victorian beliefs conflating health and morality, and part of their mission to 'better' their neighbors included introducing them to safer health and sanitation practices. Where the tenement reformers looked for ways to physically alter the insanitary design and overcrowding that occurred within the tenements, settlement workers attacked this problem

through education at the level of the individual. Simkhovitch described the elements she believed were necessary in the health education of settlement workers in *The Settlement Primer*. "As integral parts of the health educational program of the Neighborhood House, there should be work in the fields of nutrition, of posture, and of habit formation."[79] However, she believed that this work on the part of the settlements should not interfere with or take precedence over whatever local doctors and clinics were available in the neighborhood. Instead, the settlement workers were to serve as a sort of unofficial health advisor for their neighbors, and intervene not as professionals, but "be able to detect obvious lapses from a proper standard."[80] Where this "proper standard" was to come from is not made precisely clear, but based on the knowledge of the settlement workers tasked with applying said standards, one can assume that it is the standard practiced by people of their ethnic (often Anglo-Saxon), class (middle or upper class), and educational (college educated) background. Here, once again, the settlements show themselves to be organizers and discipliners of the individual, chiefly interested in habit formation and educational outreach to serve the goal of moral betterment, rather than architects of neighborhoods and physical space as in the case of Veiller and the tenement reformers, and later Catherine Bauer. Essentially, the goal of the settlements was to familiarize and train their low-income, racialized, often immigrant neighbors in the mores of American middle class citizenry.

One of the ways Simkhovitch advocated for these middle class mores to be promoted within tenement areas was through structured leisure activity. She, like many other reformers before her, was concerned with the goings on in local dance halls and theaters, and hoped to increase participation in well-organized self-governed groups as a healthy and stimulating

[79] Simkhovitch, 17.
[80] Simkhovitch, 17.

alternative. The recreational activities she recommended to the readers of *The Settlement Primer* were "The chief awakeners of these deeper strata of potential interest…the occupations connected with country life, and the arts, especially music, drama and the crafts."[81] Once again, we see the tendency toward the rural and pastoral in order to stimulate moral betterment. The benefits she anticipated her neighbors receiving from practicing these arts were not occupational, but disciplinary. She believed that these forms of leisure assisted in her mission of civic education and encouraged self-organization and self-government by the participants. She saw drama as an especially good way to introduce discipline and organization to her neighbors. Of theater she wrote,

> The awakening of intellectual interest, beauty of scene and costume, purity of diction, grace of body, the discipline of ensemble, the group development that comes from working together for a common end, combine to make the drama one of the best mediums for social development…with the object not of professional performance but of cultural growth and a deeper understanding of how life can be beautifully lived.[82]

This quote shows clearly how the main focus of the cultural education supplied by the settlements was "social development," which in this case means familiarity with middle and upper class artistic values, group discipline, and organization.[83] Simkhovitch mostly aimed her Greenwich House drama program at children, and wrote that "there are two paths to take. One is the telling of stories which the children freely act and the occasional presentation of children's own stories. Here there is an opportunity of digging out the old world stories told children at home…It is also appropriate for children to undertake beautiful classic productions."[84] It is not clear what productions Simkhovitch or the readers of *The Settlement Primer* would have considered classic, but it is clear that she thought that these classics could be occasionally

[81] Simkhovitch, 18.
[82] Simkhovitch, 19.
[83] Simkhovitch, 19.
[84] Simkhovitch, 19.

supplemented by the "old world stories" from the background of these immigrant children.[85] She frames this not as an opportunity for the children to engage with their cultural heritage, but instead as an opportunity for the settlement workers to investigate from a distance what went on within the homes of the children.

Music and theater were of course some of the most prevalent amusements among communities living in tenements, but Simkhovitch had a definitively class-based standard against which she measured such arts. She found the popular songs of the neighborhood to be "vacuous or sordid," but was able to imagine a compromise where residents would still be able to enjoy aspects of popular culture.[86] For instance, she wrote, "If jazz is necessary it should be the best. If the latest popular song must be sung, the vacuous or sordid can be eliminated, and the best ones sung well. Raising the standards of dance music, furthering neighborhood choruses, making thoughtful and constructive use of the victrola, are all important."[87] Here, the locals might still enjoy the dance hall and the victrola, just under the watchful and improving eye of their neighbors in the settlement.

Simkhovitch described the ideal settlement workers, saying "They must have a clear knowledge of the neighborhood's physical and social structure. They must know the part played by different racial, religious, industrial, commercial, educational and political groups."[88] Clearly, the settlement workers served a different purpose and had different characteristics than the sanitary inspectors who visited tenement housing after the development of the Tenement Housing Acts. Where the Sanitary Police were to simply search apartments for sanitation and population violations, there was a vast set of expectations for settlement workers. Not only

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[85] Simkhovitch, 19.
[86] Simkhovitch, 18.
[87] Simkhovitch, 18.
[88] Simkhovitch, 11.

should they be intimately educated on the myriad demographic differences contained in each neighborhood, they were expected to "have unusually good health and be free from "nerves"; they must possess initiative, humility, fearlessness, love of adventure and a spirit of co-operation [sic]."[89] The emphasis on these relatively intangible personality traits in the settlement movement belies the centrality of the personal and moral uplift the leaders of the movement believed they could impart upon their poor neighbors.

However, like the sanitary police, settlement workers were also tasked with surveilling and investigating their neighbors. Using the newfangled technique of "case work" from the recently developed discipline of social work, the settlement workers were expected to conduct and thoroughly record social research into the neighborhoods in which they lived.[90] Simkhovitch defined case work as "a deeper understanding of individuals than can be gained from casual contact," and it was meant to be used in concert with their background knowledge of the social, political, and physical shape of the neighborhood.[91] All of the seemingly neighborly social interactions between the settlement workers and their neighbors were considered by Simkhovitch to be a form of data collection. For example, think of the theater program being used as a way of "digging out" information about the cultural background and home life of the children.[92] Simkhovitch also specified the need for a psychiatric social worker in every settlement house to assist in this individualized case study procedure. Here we can see the recurring motif of health, in this case mental, being connected with the search for social order.

Simkhovitch did not have nearly as strong a focus on extramarital or interracial sex as Veiller, for instance, did, but she too was concerned with how tenement life affected the

[89] Simkhovitch, 9.
[90] Simkhovitch, 13.
[91] Simkhovitch, 12.
[92] Simkhovitch, 19.

traditional family structure, which is unsurprising considering the maternalist aspect of the settlement movement. She felt that as women began to work increasingly outside of the home, paternal authority was undermined, leading to a competition between school and home for authority over the life of the child. She also felt that the overcrowding of the tenement and the "distractions of motion picture and dance hall and the automobile" were not conducive to "the old-fashioned life."[93] Her solution to this issue was quite vague, but I believe she may have seen public housing, with its emphasis on the single-family unit, as one way to attack the dissolution of traditional family life.

The maternalism present in the settlement house movement went on to shape housing reform and the American welfare state through multiple avenues, one of which was Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch herself. The cultural clearance we see exhibited in this chapter remained a part of housing policy in the following decades, and was part and parcel to the slum clearance that has been a feature throughout the history of American housing reform. Housing reformers continued to harbor maternalist concerns about the civic education and moral betterment of slum dwellers and later those who lived in public housing. Simkhovitch's worries about the changing nature of family life were a particular feature of the housing policy she supported in the 1930s, and the Wagner-Steagall Act aimed to preserve the traditional roles of the homemaking mother and the breadwinning father. The influence of women and maternalism on public housing via the settlement movement cannot be ignored.

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[93] Simkhovitch, 16.

Chapter Three: The Making of the Wagner-Steagall Act

Just as fears of industrialization and urbanization colored the 19th century ideas about housing reform, housing in the 20th century, particularly during the depression, was construed as a response to social upheaval as well as to economic factors. The urge to eradicate the slum or render it invisible was just as prevalent, if not more so, as the United States reeled in the aftermath of the 1929 crash. The settlement movement, which did not seek to provide affordable housing at a large scale, was nonetheless a key part of the development of American public housing policy. Settlement reformers like Simkhovitch began to advocate for slum clearance in addition to continuing to create cultural education programs. Slum clearance and what I have called cultural clearance remained central for housing advocates of the early 20th century, and some began to advocate for public housing units to be built entirely from the ground up that would replace the blighted neighborhoods in which tenements were located. The growing support for public housing marked a shift from the desire to physically and morally improve already existing tenements, to a desire to raze entire buildings and neighborhoods and re-house their residents. The processes of slum clearance and re-housing were held in equal regard by many of the advocates of what we now call public housing, and in some cases the two were even seen as one dual value. The advocacy of these 20th century re-housers culminated with the Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937, a piece of New Deal legislation that federally subsidized the construction of low-income housing units, and continues to serve as the basis of federal public housing policy today.

In addition to slum and cultural clearance, aspects of the maternalism of the settlement movement also appeared in the creation of the Wagner-Steagall Act. This was in part because of the fact that the Roosevelt administration marked a turning point when it came to the appearance

of women in positions of political power. Frances Perkins, Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, was famously the first woman to be appointed to a cabinet position. Eleanor Roosevelt, who had been politically active for her entire adult life, changed the role of the First Lady with her focus on social issues such as racial equality and human rights. While women and feminism suffered many setbacks in terms of employment and independence during the Great Depression, well-educated women, who were in most cases wealthy and white, were able to find occupations in government and as activists.[94] Thus, New Deal policies and the creation of the welfare state bore the input and influence of women as no other American legislation had before. This chapter will center the contributions of two women, of different generations and different ideological backgrounds, who worked in the Roosevelt administration and had enormous impact on the creation of the American public housing system. One, whom the reader is already familiar with, was Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch. Simkhovitch was a part of the older generation of women working in the public sphere who had been born in the latter half of the 19th-century. The other, Catherine Bauer, was born in the 20th century, and was part of a cohort of young, bohemian, and explicitly left-leaning New Dealers who only entered the national and political milieu in the 1930s.[95] The difference in their opinions on housing can be summed up by how they described their projects. Simkhovitch often referred to her work as the work of slum clearance and Bauer saw herself as striving towards a complete system of modern housing.

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[94] Bernard Sternsher and Judith Sealander, *Women of Valor: The Struggle Against the Great Depression As Told in Their Own Life Stories*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee), 1990, 7; Landon R.Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 7.
[95] Storrs, 7-8.

Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch and the National Public Housing Conference

As one of the foremost voices in New York housing reform at the beginning of the 20th century, Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch became a close contact and adviser to the Roosevelt administration regarding the creation of a public housing bill. Simkhovitch was a longtime friend of Eleanor Roosevelt's, as Simkhovitch had been her mentor when they both worked at Rivington Street Settlement House on the Lower East Side.[96] Simkhovitch and one of the organizations she founded, the National Public Housing Conference, often corresponded with Franklin Roosevelt on the topic of public housing implementation from as early as his inauguration in 1933 to well into the 1940s, after the Wagner-Steagall Act had been passed. Roosevelt even made public appearances at several of the annual conferences organized by the NPHC.

The National Public Housing Conference is important to this project for two reasons: its public facing campaign to promote slum clearance and public housing and the influence of its members (particularly Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch and the eponymous Senator Robert Wagner) on the Wagner-Steagall Act. This section will deal with its public campaign, primarily as seen in its newspaper *Public Housing Progress*. The stated aim of *Public Housing Progress,* per the first issue of the publication from 1934, is "to make the policies and planning involved in public housing clear to increasing numbers of the people, to keep public housing protagonists in touch with each other, and to submit reliable information and critical opinion to political representatives, housing officials, citizens, and a wide variety of groups in the community."[97] By doing this the NPHC hoped to garner widespread support for public housing, which they defined

[96] Sternsher and Sealander, 19.
[97] National Public Housing Conference, "Facing Forward", *Public Housing Progress*, November 15, 1934, President's Personal File, 2138, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, NY.

as "the rehousing of wage earners in homes of modern standards at low rents, by public authorities, on publicly owned land, and with the aid of public funds."[98] In saying that they hoped to rehouse wage earners specifically, the NPHC emphasized the idea that public housing, in its Depression era iteration, was aimed not at the chronically poor and unemployed, but instead at those many unfortunate people who had been temporarily impoverished by the recent crisis of capitalism. Public housing was intended to help wage earning workers move into the middle class.

Immediately, in this first paragraph of *Public Housing Progress*, we can see a limit imposed on who is eligible for public housing. While the term "wage earners" may seem vague and expansive, it holds a great deal of meaning.[99] Firstly, it excludes anyone who cannot prove their employment to the government. This creates a barrier for those who work outside of the law, such as sex workers for example. It also continues in line with the desires of 19th century reformers interested in slum clearance, who sought to use housing to control crime and relied on the public's fears of the crime occurring in low-income and racially diverse neighborhoods to accomplish this.

Secondly, the term "wage earner" plays an important political role in the NPHC's rhetoric. The Great Depression was a time of heightened interest in left-wing movements, and as a result, it was also a time of heightened anti-communism. Public housing advocates and the FDR administration had to carefully avoid any accusations of socialism, which in many cases meant eschewing any and all references to class-based inequalities. To use a phrase as politically fraught as say, working class would have been unthinkable to liberal reformers like those in the NPHC. Instead, "wage earner" or "worker" served as an acceptable, classless shorthand to

[98] National Public Housing Conference, 1.
[99] National Public Housing Conference, 1.

describe those eligible to live in public housing projects. Inspired by Robyn Muncy's "The Strange Career of the Working Class,"[100] I compared the use of the terms "working class" and "wage earner" in the *New York Times* in the 1930s. From 1930-1940 the term wage earner was used 141 times in articles about labor economy generally in the United States. In the same decade, the term working class appeared thirty-four times, and was almost exclusively used to describe socialist movements in other countries. This gives a sense of how much more comfortable people were with using the term wage earner as opposed to working class, as well as the connotation the latter had regarding foreign socialist subversion.

Another important part of the phrase "rehousing of wage earners" is the idea of rehousing, as opposed to simply housing.[101] That people are being rehoused tells us that they were already living in housing of some sort. They had not been unhoused but had lived in homes or communities that did not meet the standards of the NPHC. One of the key differences between the Wagner-Steagall Act and the housing policy that preceded it was the fact that the Wagner-Steagall Act required an equal number of housing units to be demolished as built. This language allows for entire housing complexes, communities, or neighborhoods to be demolished and rebuilt, and for their inhabitants to be forcibly rehoused either into government housing, or in many cases not at all. This was a significant departure from the housing policies of most urban localities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which generally sought to alter existing buildings rather than physically destroy entire communities.

[100] Robyn Muncy, "The Strange Career of "the Working Class" in US Political Culture Since the 1950s," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 15, no. 4 (2018): 37-58, muse.jhu.edu/article/712726.
[101] National Public Housing Conference, 1.

Catherine Bauer and *Modern Housing*

One of the prominent voices in housing, both in academia and in policy-making, was that of Catherine Bauer. Bauer was part of a cohort of young female New Dealers who had distinctly left-wing views in comparison to their female counterparts in the Roosevelt administration who had been born in the second half of the 19th-century, such as Simkhovitch. Simkhovitch I associate more closely with liberal reform and maternalism, as opposed to Bauer, whose radicalism caused her to be investigated under the federal employee loyalty program of the 1940s.[102] Born in New Jersey in 1905, Catherine Bauer was a Vassar graduate who lived in Paris and in New York's Greenwich Village, two communities that at the time were full of radical leftist and liberatory sentiment. In those two cities, surrounded by fellow radical thinkers, she began to write about housing and urban planning. In 1934, she wrote *Modern Housing*, a treatise on American and European housing models. This book, and Bauer herself, became central to the political struggle for efficient, affordable housing in the United States.[103] She believed that the shortage of affordable housing during the Depression stemmed from the speculative nature of the housing market. She pointed to the "dizzy years of speculative building activity" that preceded the Great Depression as the reason for the consistently poor housing, not the crash of the Depression itself.[104] To correct this, she advocated for housing to become a public good and for a system that utilized planned and holistic housing units that would form an entire community. This vision of the complete planned neighborhood built from the ground up was the biggest intervention into American housing reform Bauer was responsible for. The neighborhoods she imagined were to contain not only housing units but communally held play spaces, schools,

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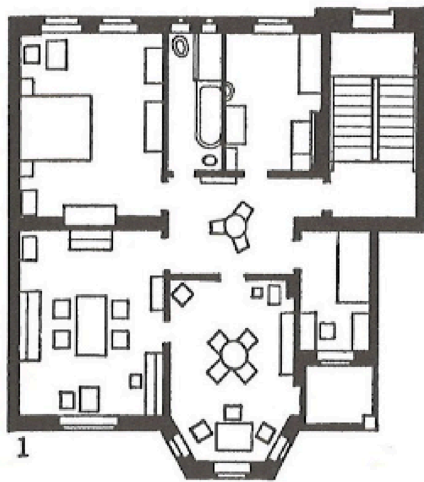
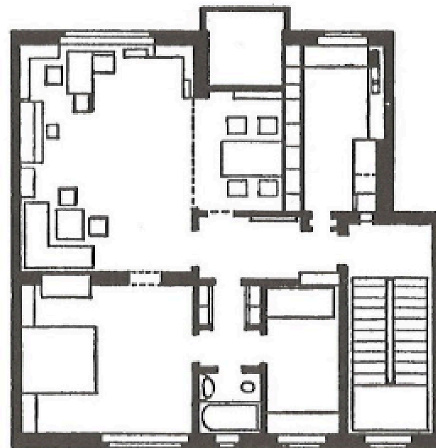
[102] Storrs, 1.
[103] Storrs, 7.
[104] Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing*, (Minneappolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1934), I.

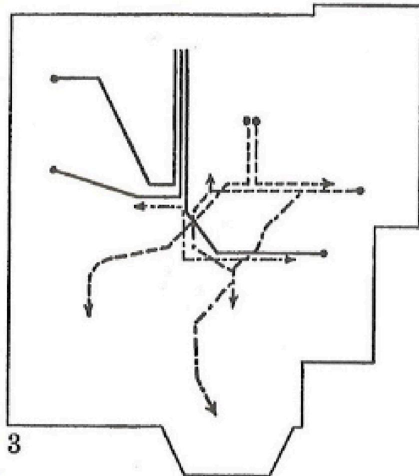
gardens, laundry facilities and even cafes and shops. While she saw many of the same issues in housing her 19th-century counterparts did, she wanted to attack these problems not by administering material or moral assistance to low-income communities, but by completely revamping how housing was approached in the U.S. and turning it into a public utility.[105] Additionally, she was quite critical of what she called the "extravagant and sentimental essays in 'slum-clearance.,'" which may have been a criticism of some of the work done by Riis and Simkhovitch in the 19th-century.[106] To Bauer, these essays seemed to ignore the economic system that encouraged the mass speculation in land and housing which led to inefficient, unaffordable, and short-lived housing units. As a critique of American capitalism and unregulated speculation, Bauer's book and beliefs are distinctly different from her predecessors in housing reform such as Riis and Simkhovitch, whose work ultimately targeted the individual level to affect change. Where Riis saw greedy landlords as a central part of the cause of poor housing, Bauer saw an economic system that rewarded unsustainable yet profitable purchase of land. Where Simkhovitch sought to get rid of slums and the lower class culture residing within them, Bauer was far more interested in designing the physical space of houses than imagining the culture that would exist within them. Bauer was quite vocally contemptuous of the work done by the American reformers before her calling them "conscience-saving philanthropists" and "earnest ladies bent on 'improving' the lower classes" who "invented new, and always more expensive, kinds of slums to supersede the old ones."[107] The difference in opinion regarding the origins of poverty and slums is quickly legible in the writings of Riis, Simkhovitch, and Bauer. *Modern Housing* is full of charts, floorplans, and statistics, showing not only Bauer's background in architecture and economics but also her understanding of the systemic, as opposed to the

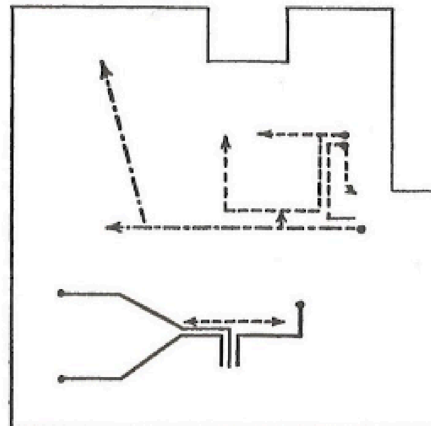
[105] Bauer, xlix.
[106] Bauer, li.
[107] Bauer, 19.

personal, nature of poverty and housing inequality. Unlike in the writings of Simkhovitch and Riis, there are no stories of individual families and their interactions with their environment in *Modern Housing*.









An example of the design work Bauer prioritized in *Modern Housing*. This example is from a study by Alexander Klein, a German architect.[108]

[108] Bauer, 203.

By calling her book *Modern Housing*, Bauer immediately positioned her work as a distinct break from the previous history of housing policy in the United States. The introduction to the book begins by saying "'Modern Housing…has certain qualities and embodies certain methods and purposes, which distinguish it sharply from the typical residential environment of the past century."[109] While she did look to European housing as a source of inspiration and innovation (much of the book focuses solely on European urban history as well as contemporary European housing models), she did not consider the public housing programs of the countries she evaluated to be permanent or perfect solutions to instability in the housing market. By calling for a modern system of public housing she called for a new era of American public policy and housing design, and for the disposal of those housing solutions put out by reformers who preceded her. Despite the modernity she ascribed to her own ideas, her vision did not belong wholly to the 20th century. She includes the work of 19th century utopian socialists like Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, placing herself firmly in alignment with a legacy of cooperative housing and innovative social thought.

In *Modern Housing*, Catherine Bauer described her vision of a holistic neighborhood and holistic federal policy that "does not…constitute a mere mechanical extension of streets and agglomeration of individual competitive dwellings. It has a beginning and an end, and some sort of visible, organic form. One part is related to another part, and each part serves a particular, predestined use."[110] While Veiller advocated for the construction of privately funded model tenements, these were to remain within the crowded confines of urban areas already deemed slums, and were not part of a comprehensive governmental policy. The model tenement was to stand on its own in the midst of whatever buildings, homes, and businesses already stood in the

[109] Bauer, xlix.
[110] Bauer, xlix.

slum neighborhoods. Bauer, on the other hand, believed that the neighborhood consisted of the social unit, economic unit, and integral unit, which in order to be efficient and sustainable had to be united and indivisible.[111] While allusions to the neighborhood featured prominently in the rhetoric of the settlement movement, it was not such a unified concept with proscribed elements like Bauer's imagined neighborhood was. The idea of the neighborhood in the settlement movement was a community surrounding and orbiting around the settlement house, but one that contained many social divisions. Simkhovitch, Riis, and Veiller all acknowledged, though to different degrees and for different purposes, the ethnic, religious, and political divisions within the populations they aimed to assist.

On the other hand, Bauer envisioned the beneficiaries of her modern public housing as a monolithic and deracinated working class. While her socialist analysis of the responsibility of the economic system in creating poor housing that entraps the working class in poverty is insightful, it ignores the ways that the same system of housing also creates and perpetuates notions of race, and how these hierarchies of race and class interact with one another. It is not clear if this was simply an oversight on her part or an intentional move to obscure the associations of racialized minorities with poor housing. She seems to see the racial inequality in housing as a thing of the past, saying "In America it was largely the Negroes and 'foreigners' who had found lodging in the alleys and early tenements," placing this phenomenon firmly in the past tense.[112] However, the racial segregation she attributed to the 19th-century was not only present when she wrote *Modern Housing*, but remains a part of the American landscape today. Perhaps her erasure of the racial segregation and inequalities still found in housing at the time of her writing was not only an effort to imagine a racially united working class, but also an attempt to capitalize on the

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[111] Bauer, xlix.
[112] Bauer, 15.

extended and relatively universal nature of poverty and homelessness during the Great Depression. By portraying public housing as something completely removed from race that would not benefit particular groups of people over others, she may have been attempting to whitewash housing problems and make public housing more palatable to Congress.

Other than the idea that housing projects should be entirely new buildings and neighborhoods that functioned as a planned unit, Bauer had two central theses that appeared throughout her work. The first was that capitalism and speculative investment were at fault for rewarding the extreme subdivision of urban space. She wrote that housing practices of the 19th century "had two major elements: the land speculator and the small builder, both almost entirely uncontrolled in accordance with the economic credo of the time. And, however the [Manchester] Liberal principle may have worked out in other departments of production, its effect on housing and city-building was little short of disastrous."[113] The second was that housing should be a public good completely protected from the hands of private investors, standing even more starkly against the Manchester Liberalism that was so popular in the century before. Her clear and lucid critique of economic policy differs quite sharply from the other works that appear in this paper, which, if they are at all critical of government policy, are only concerned with the regulation and maintenance of housing stock by local governments. She argued that "the price of urban land is almost never the result of anything even faintly resembling the orthodox conception of a free market deal" as it is based instead on "the most intensive future use to which a speculator estimates that the plot can be put."[114] In other words, the price of urban land is based on the maximum amount of profit an investor imagines they can wring out of each piece of land. In terms of housing, an easy way to increase the profit to be derived from a given parcel of land is

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[113] Bauer, 17.
[114] Bauer, 18.

to create smaller and smaller living units, leading to the proliferation of tenements. As living spaces decreased in size, the price of land got higher, as investors realized how much more potential profit existed in these urban spaces. The increase in the price of land led in turn to the increase of the cost of rent, which created an affordability crisis as well as a quality crisis. This led to, in Bauer's words, "Overcrowding in every department of the housing operation. Congestion of people in rooms; 'extra' families in dwellings; contraction of room areas and of the number of rooms per dwelling…"[115] This description of cramped living quarters and greedy landlords sounds familiar to what Riis wrote about the tenements, but Riis and Bauer placed the blame on entirely different factors. Where Bauer attacked the entire system of speculative capitalism that worked to reward the increasing subdivision of space, Riis blamed the greed and moral corruption of individual (and very often racialized) landlords, as in the example of "the once unwelcome Irishman" from Chapter One.[116]

The Wagner-Steagall Act

Following her argument about the inherently exploitative system of speculative capitalism, Bauer argued that housing should thus become a public good and be kept out of the realm of private speculative investment. She hoped that with the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt she would have an opportunity to influence a comprehensive national plan for public housing. In 1935 she co-authored a bill that would have allowed for federally funded loans and grants to provide for housing projects made by non-governmental organizations such as trade unions and worker cooperatives.[117] This bill did not pass, so Bauer worked on a revised version of it that would be passed in 1937 and form the basis of American public housing as we know it.

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[115] Bauer, 12.
[116] Riis, 19.
[117] Penner, xxiv.

This version, the Wagner-Steagall Act, focused much more on slum-clearance, which was explicitly contrary to the Bauer's vision as recorded in *Modern Housing*. Of slum clearance she wrote "The professional city-planners of the nineteenth century were for the most part far too easily satisfied…No new provision was made for the residents of the cleared areas, and they could not, unfortunately, be swept away as easily as were their rookeries."[118] Job creation, also not one of her priorities, was prioritized by the bill as well, in order to appease American legislators, prevent the Wagner-Steagall Act from being seen as a relief bill, and drum up popular support for public housing.[119] The thing that allowed the Wagner-Steagall Act to be used in the interest of slum clearance was that it required an equal number of housing units be demolished as built. Instead of simply building new and improved housing, the Wagner-Steagall Act required the demolition of significant numbers of homes. This meant that entire areas had to be razed to make way for new public housing developments. It also meant that these areas would be available not only for the creation of new housing units, but also for investment by private capital.

The emphasis on self-government and active citizenship in the writing of Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch was echoed by Bauer's call for a decentralized system of public housing that was operated by a cooperative of people living within the development. The Wagner-Steagall Act reflected these ideas, which were attractive to Roosevelt, who feared the ways in which some pieces of his New Deal expanded federal power. The Wagner-Steagall Act created the entity known as USHA, or the United States Housing Authority. USHA was a federal agency, and had the power to subsidize up to 90% of building costs for projects envisioned by local housing agencies, which allowed for both the decentralization called for by the NPHC and

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[118] Bauer, 48.
[119] Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 101, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/detail.action?docID=557579.

Bauer, and the use of federal money. Local housing authorities worked with private entrepreneurs and housing reformers to decide what areas should be redeveloped and what criteria would be used to select the new tenants. They then were tasked with convincing both the general public and USHA of the necessity of the slum clearance and public housing project. In many cases, these decisions and campaigns were racist. In some cases, local authorities were influenced by racist business interests to denigrate areas populated mainly by people of color as slums and have them razed to make way for new public housing developments occupied by mainly white residents. In the case of Atlanta, as told in Karen Ferguson's *Black Politics in New Deals Atlanta*, white business interests used USHA to designate four black neighborhoods as slums and remove their inhabitants, segregating them in the western part of the city.[120]

The greatest difference though, between the Wagner-Steagall Act and Bauer's conception of modern housing, was the concessions the bill made to the real estate industry. In fact, one of Bauer's arguments for the superiority of European housing solutions after World War I was based on the premise that they were engaged in "quite the opposite of 'saving' the real estate business. It was a problem of finding *a new way to house everybody.*"[121] While Bauer's view of cooperative public housing was conceived to "be available at a price which citizens of average income or less can afford," it allowed, like much of European public housing, people of any income level to reside within public housing projects.[122] Bauer believed that residence by people of all classes in housing projects would prevent stigma against public housing as well as the people who lived there.[123] However, real estate lobbyists demanded that this new public housing scheme not compete with the private housing market.[124] This meant that the Wagner-Steagall Act

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[120] Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 166, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/detail.action?docID=413274.
[121] Bauer, 122.
[122] Bauer, xlix.
[123] Penner, xxviii.
[124] Schwartz, 128.

allowed only those who could not afford housing at market rates to live in public housing developments. Not only did this lead to a mutually reinforcing cycle of social stigma and class division, it allowed tenants to be closely monitored as well as evicted when they started earning anything above the maximum income.

By concentrating groups of low-income families within developments, U.S. housing authorities were able to continue the project of social control, surveillance, and maternalist monitoring started by settlement workers. Representatives of the housing authorities made home visits to make sure that families conducted themselves in an appropriate enough manner to be allowed to live in public housing.[125] This meant that residents were expected to measure up to a set of middle class behavioral standards, similar to those that settlement workers attempted to impose upon their neighbors. Tenants were selected based not only on their incomes, but also "outward markers of good citizenship, including steady employment and marriage."[126] Occupation and marriage, two priorities of tenement reformers of the 19th-century, continued to be reflected in housing policy of the New Deal and beyond. Using the example of Yesler Terrace in Seattle, where tenants were required to be legally married U.S. citizens, many of the areas' former residents were displaced by the slum clearance that took place and excluded from being rehoused in the new public housing project.[127] Some of the groups who were displaced by the creation of Yesler Terrace included sex workers, single male laborers, female-headed households, and a significant number of Japanese families prevented from being naturalized as citizens by the Naturalization Act of 1870 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. Thus, in addition to stimulating

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[125] Schwartz, 129.
[126] Megan Asaka, "'40-Acre Smudge': Race and Erasure in Prewar Seattle," *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 2 (May 1, 2018): 231–63, https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2018.87.2.231.
[127] Asaka, 234.

slum clearance with its physical developments, public housing continued the legacy of cultural clearance of the 19th-century reformers.

This was one area where the 19th-century reformers and Bauer came to an agreement. They both saw good housing as a remedy for social disorder. Bauer, like those who she sought to distinguish herself from, was concerned with the “wild disorder” and lack of governmental regulation and inspection of 19th century tenements.[128] Her modern housing was also a mark of civilization, just as the superior housing of slum clearance and the cultural clearance of the settlement movement were. However, unlike them, she very clearly held capitalism responsible for the wildness and chaos of turn of the century housing, and was better able to separate this disorder from the people living in low-income neighborhoods. Instead of moralizing about the effects of slum living on inhabitants, she was instead interested in the material effects of slums on cities. The combination of these two understandings of housing reform led to the adoption of a mostly incongruous private-public housing system that persists in attempting to erase and/or control sites of social nonconformity.

[128] Bauer, 13.

Conclusion

The Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937, like many other pieces of New Deal legislation, sought to unite the public and private as a bid to preserve American capitalism in the face of rising radicalism.[129] As a recovery bill first and foremost, it aimed to assist those "beyond the range of public enterprise" who could not afford housing at market prices.[130] During the Depression, this applied to a much higher number of people than usual, so the first priority of the government was to serve those citizens they perceived as most deserving of housing assistance, those who were part of two-parent working families and who had temporarily fallen out of the middle or working classes. The bill's focus on slum clearance and urban redevelopment has allowed for the creation and propagation of many of the contemporary issues of housing such as segregation and the continuing lack of affordability. The decentralized nature of the bill has allowed local politicians and businesses to reshape cities to their own benefit, which in many cases has left residents of former slum areas unhoused or displaced. Regardless of the desire of the Wagner-Steagall Act's writers to ameliorate poverty and inequality, the centrality of the ideology of slum clearance to the legislation and to the history of American housing reform has created a housing system that prioritizes un-housing before housing.

As I have argued in this paper, the slum clearance that is such an integral part of the Wagner-Steagall Act had its roots amongst urban housing reformers who were reacting to the excesses of capitalism and the industrial revolution. The fears of things like disease, crime, immorality, race mixing, and the "general evils" present in the slum drove middle class reformers like Lawrence Veiller to come up with housing solutions intended to monitor and control the

[129] Brent Cebul, *Illusions of Progress: Business, Poverty, and Liberalism in the American Century*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023), 3.
[130] Franklin Roosevelt to Mary Simkhovitch, 18 January 1935, President's Personal File, 2138, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, NY.

behavior of low-income communities.[131] The conflation that came about during this period between poor housing, racialized groups, the lower class, crime, and ill health colored, and continues to color housing reform in the United States. At the same time, settlement houses created programs of cultural education in order to assimilate these lower class and racialized groups into middle class American society, using methods and imagery that echoed the colonization of the American West. While these ideas, of slum clearance and cultural clearance, were not present in the work of the more progressive Catherine Bauer, she failed to temper them in the writing of the Wagner-Steagall Act and they were used to help win support for the fledgling housing bill in Congress. Ultimately, it is my contention that American public housing is a project of slum clearance, of cultural and behavioral control, of race and class based segregation, of civilization, and of American assimilation.

[131] "Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Examine into the Condition of Tenant Houses in New-York and Brooklyn: Transmitted to the Legislature March 9, 1857 - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine.", 3.

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