

FIRST HOUSES 29, 31, 33-35, 37, 39 and 41 Avenue A; 112-114, 118-120, 124-126, 130-132 and 136-138 East 3rd Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1935-36 by the New York City Housing Authority; architect Frederick L. Ackerman.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 430 ,Lot 10.

On October 8, 1974, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the First Houses and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including Joseph J. Christian, Chairman of the New York City Housing Authority. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Historical Significance

"First Houses," the municipal housing project located on Avenue A, between Second and Third Streets, and along Third Street, was begun early in 1935 and completed in mid-1936. Approval for the project was granted by Mayor LaGuardia on November 21, 1934. Consisting of eight four- and five-story brick buildings laid out in an L-shaped plan around an inner landscaped courtyard, its relatively small size and unpretentious appearance belie its historical and architectural importance. This was the first housing project undertaken by the recently established New York City Housing Authority, and the first public, low-income housing project in the nation. It began as a rehabilitation program, an experiment by the City in partial demolition of existing tenements on the site, in cooperation with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in a "work-relief" program.

First Houses was also significant as the first municipally sponsored and operated project which endeavored to deal with the acute and long-standing problems of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the area of the greatest concentration of slums in the City. It was originally planned for 122 families, with an average monthly rental of \$6.05 per room, which included all basic amenities. Eligibility was determined in part by a family income of no more than five times the rent. The only other existing project on the Lower East Side was Knickerbocker Village, a twelve-story, two building model housing project for middle-income tenants erected by the Fred F. French Company and financed by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). The average rent of \$12.50 per room was far too high, in the middle of the Depression, for low-income residents of the neighborhood.

First Houses was a bold innovation in planning which began as an experiment in partial demolition of existing tenements on the site. It was originally planned to raze every third house, in order to open up the block to air and light, and then to remodel the remaining houses. This practice had been successful in England and had been recommended in 1920 by Clarence Stein, Chairman of Governor Smith's Reconstruction Committee, as a practical and economical way to deal with urban renewal on the Lower East Side. Furthermore, in order to comply with the terms of Federal financing, First Houses had to be a slum renovation project. Demolition of the existing tenements on the site began on March 1, 1935, in accordance with plans submitted to the City's Department of Buildings on February 11. As work proceeded, it became apparent that the mid-19th century buildings left standing, structurally deficient from the outset, were dangerously weakened by the removal of the adjoining tenements. As a result, five of the present buildings were entirely rebuilt from the ground up, and the remaining three were almost entirely new throughout, reinforced by structural steel for center support of all spans and for main staircases. New twenty-year roofs were installed, walls were made soundproof, and doors were fireproofed. The reuse of bricks from demolished buildings on this and other sites provided a saving in construction costs and was a source of income for the Authority for several years.

History of the Project

The New York City Housing Authority was established on February 20, 1934, following the enactment of Chapter 4 of the Laws of 1934 of the State of New York. Among its provisions, this law made it possible for the new agency to apply for Federal aid. This enabling legislation, the Mandelbaum bill -- which authorized the creation of local housing authorities throughout New York State, with power to issue their own bonds--passed both houses of the State Legislature late in January 1934, after having suffered two defeats the previous year. It was immediately signed into law on January 31 by Governor Lehman. Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia appointed Langdon W. Post, the former Tenement House Commissioner, to the post of chairman of the new agency. The first members of the Housing Authority were Louis I. Pink, B. Charney Vladeck, the Rev. E. Roberts Moore and Mrs. Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, all long-time advocates of housing reform and slum clearance.

Most of the old tenements on the site of First Houses were acquired from Vincent Astor and, indeed, the undertaking was known until shortly before its dedication as "the Astor project" or as the Housing Authority's "Experiment No. 1." In March 1934, immediately after the establishment of the Authority, Mr. Astor offered Commissioner Post thirty-eight parcels on the Lower East Side, which were earning less than 3% on investment, at substantially less than their assessed valuation. Vincent Astor, who had inherited the properties from his grandfather, John Jacob Astor, expressed his "... desire to do anything within reason to help clear these slums..." Underscoring the fact that private capital was unable to cope with such a vast problem, he urged other property owners to cooperate with Federal and municipal authorities in their new slum clearance program. On December 20, 1934 the New York City Housing Authority, having the approval of the Board of Estimate, acquired the property from Mr. Astor for \$189,281.31, a figure which represented less than half the assessed valuation. The purchase was made possible by the issuance of a tax-free, sixty-six year purchase money mortgage, to be paid up by the year 2000, at 1-3/4% interest for the first six months and 3-1/2% per annum thereafter. This Housing Authority bond established the credit of the New York City Housing Authority.

Labor and materials for the demolition of the old tenements, and for subsequent reconstruction, were furnished under the "work-relief" program of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) through the State Temporary Emergency Relief Administration. The use of the labor forces of the WPA (Works Progress Administration) was an experiment by the Authority. It raised serious friction between union labor and the relief workers and was the prime cause of a turbulent demonstration of 1500 people at the "Astor project" on September 13, 1935.

Two tenements at 130 and 132 East Third Street, separating the Astor properties, belonged to Andrew Muller who not only refused to sell at the price offered, but sought an injunction restraining the Authority from proceeding with demolition of the adjoining properties and challenged the constitutionality of condemnation proceedings initiated by the Authority in March 1935. A year later, on March 17, 1936, the New York State Court of Appeals handed down a major decision in the case of NYCHA vs. Muller which confirmed the right of condemnation. It was adjudged that the use of the power of eminent domain by the City was for the public benefit, namely the remedy of slum conditions which were beyond the scope of private enterprise. This building, on the site of the two Muller tenements, was financed by a Housing Authority Bond accepted by financier Bernard S. Baruch. The building was ready for the last initial group of tenants in mid-June 1936, six months after the first tenants had moved into First Houses.

The dedication of First Houses, originally set for October 1, 1935 but delayed by the changes in plans, legal problems and labor troubles, took place on a cold winter day --- December 3, 1935. It was a momentous occasion, not only for the thousands of New Yorkers who thronged the streets, but for the entire nation. The proceedings were broadcast on a national radio hookup. First came the reading of the congratulatory telegram from President Franklin D. Roosevelt,

under whose leadership the Public Works Emergency Housing Corporation had been established in October 1933 and the National Housing Act passed in mid-1934. This was followed by the dedication of First Houses by Mrs. Roosevelt. Among other speakers were Governor Lehman, Mayor LaGuardia, Housing Commissioner Post, Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, Corrington Gill, Assistant WPA Administrator, and Victor Ridder, Administrator of the WPA in the City.

The dedication was a source of immense gratification for all who had worked so hard and so long to make municipal housing a reality. Governor Lehman, who had repeatedly urged the creation of local housing authorities throughout the State to enable the cities to take advantage of Federal aid, had delivered an eloquent address on January 2, 1934, urging a new era in housing. Just a few weeks later, the Mandelbaum bill passed. In his speech, Governor Lehman first stressed the fact that the passage of this bill was necessary to provide decent housing for all, a function which, because of a shift in attitudes accelerated by the economic depression, was now recognized by the public as a prime responsibility of government. He then went on to argue that economic salvation might lie in the reactivation of the building industry --- which had operated at 15% of normal in 1932-33 --- through the erection of low-income housing and the re-employment of construction workers, of whom at least 75% were jobless. Mayor LaGuardia had been elected on a platform which included plans for slum clearance. Commissioner Post, the former Tenement House Commissioner, had long lobbied for tenement house reform and slum clearance, both in the State Assembly and in Washington, where he had served as Assistant to Harry Hopkins, the Federal Emergency Relief Administrator.

Following the dedication of First Houses, an "Abolish the Slums" luncheon was held, sponsored by the National Public Housing Conference. The role of the NPHC cannot be overemphasized. Since its first meeting in March 1932, under the leadership of Mary K. Simkhovitch, the well-known social worker and former director of Greenwich House, the group had urged a full program for public housing, including the creation of a municipal housing agency with enabling legislation and powers similar to the Port Authority. Among the speakers at the luncheon, presided over by Herbert Bayard Swope, were Mrs. Roosevelt, Senator Robert F. Wagner and A. R. Clas, Director of the Housing Division of the WPA, in addition to others previously mentioned.

On July 2, 1936, First Houses was formally turned over to the City. Victor Ridder, the local WPA Administrator, presented the key to the project to Housing Commissioner Post. Harry Hopkins, who had come from Washington for the occasion, spoke in defense of the project, as did Mayor LaGuardia. The Mayor unveiled a tablet describing First Houses, which is still affixed to the building at 112-114 East Third Street. It proudly proclaims: "These Houses Were Erected by the New York City Housing Authority as an Initial Step in the Program for Slum Clearance and Low-Cost Housing."

Architectural Description and Significance

The First Houses project originally comprised a total area of 1.37 acres (now 1.23): land coverage was deliberately limited to 41.6% (now 43.4%). This allowed for air and sunshine for each apartment and for an outdoor seating area for the residents.

The plan was generally consistent with the guidelines set by Federal agencies of the time, notably the Federal Emergency Housing Administration, with regard to the following: residential zoning; neighborhood location, which emphasized a site on a quiet street, provision of a landscaped play area, access to schools, churches, stores, entertainment and transportation to places of employment; and orientation to the sun and wind--all cited in a special issue on "Housing" in the March 1935 issue of the Architectural Record. These standards applied to new construction, but the degree to which they were applied to an alteration of existing tenements on the site showed ingenuity and imagination on the part of the architect in charge of the planning and development of First Houses, Frederick L. Ackerman. Plans and specifications, signed by both the architect and Commissioner Langdon W. Post, were filed at the Buildings Department in two stages: on February 11, 1935, with reference to Nos. 106-128 East Third Street, a portion of which is now part of Village View Houses; and on July 30, 1935, which applied to the buildings on Third Street toward Avenue A and to Nos. 29-41 Avenue A.

Frederick L. Ackerman (1878-1950) was a well-known architect and city planner, a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and a member of the American Institute of Planners. His 1917 study of housing and planning in England and his service as Chief of the Division of Housing and Town Planning for the U. S. Shipping Board made him especially valuable to the housing and planning movement in this country during the 1920s and still more in the thirties. Among the best known community planning and low-income housing projects on which he worked, in close association with Clarence Stein, were Radburn, N. J., and Sunnyside Gardens in Queens. Ackerman also drew up the specifications for the competition sponsored by the City Housing Authority in June 1934 for which 277 designs were submitted. In his memorial tribute to Ackerman, published in the A.I.A. Journal in December 1950, Lewis Mumford, the distinguished social critic, identified him as a follower of Thorsten Veblen, "...ready to practice economy and avoid the frivolities of conspicuous waste... He dreamed of a society free from privilege and of rights conferred by property... of a civilization where people would work cooperatively with honesty and integrity..." Ackerman's work at First Houses, and his other projects for various housing authorities during the 1930s, notably in Washington, D. C., New York State and New York City, enabled him to put his theories into practice.

Th three buildings facing Avenue A, separated by one-story stores, are four stories high, while the five units on Third Street are five-story buildings separated by open access courts. The low height and "homely" look of these walk-up apartments, in contrast to high-rise "model" housing of the period, drew appreciative comments from The New York Times on January 19, 1935, following publication of a perspective drawing of the project. In addition, the fact that the houses are entered from access courts, and not directly from the street, encourages a feeling of neighborliness.

The houses are solidly constructed of red brick and the windows have six-over-six sash. The chief ornament on the street fronts of the seven wide double units consists of three raised brick courses above the two top corner windows of each building, halfway between the top of the windows and the coping of the roof parapet. In addition, four small, square recessed panels appear above the top four center windows. At 29 Avenue A, the same decoration is adapted to the narrower building. This ornament is a simplification of the angular, stylized motifs of the Art Deco period.

In the paved courtyard, the scene is enlivened by free-standing and applied animal sculpture, designed by artists associated with the Federal Artists Program, which has delighted several generations of children. A large dolphin dominates the rectangular area behind No. 130-132 East Third Street. Smaller scaled horses here reappear at two corners of the pool area, behind No. 136-138, in addition to a bear and a dog, all rather worn from use. The one-story high parapet wall, which separates the yard from the Second Street side of the block, is charmingly decorated with round concrete molds set into the brick, depicting eight varieties of animals and birds which are repeated: a seagull, gazelle, turkey, rabbit, pigeon, goat, fox and cat--all contributing, with the wall itself, to the feeling of apartness from the life of the city.

The garden apartment concept has become commonplace in city planning, but in 1935, when plans were filed for the project, this peaceful courtyard running the length of the houses must have seemed like an oasis to these residents of the Lower East Side. To them, the yard usually meant a tiny dank space, often with a water pump and a community toilet. The garden apartment idea, with interior courtyard, had been popularized in the City during the 1920s by architect Andrew J. Thomas. The largest development he planned in Manhattan, the Dunbar Apartments of 1926-28, a designated New York City Landmark, had been financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. At First Houses, the garden apartment concept was first applied on a small scale to a municipally sponsored housing project.

First Houses was a small project, originally planned for 120 to 122 families. All apartments had steam heat and hot water and were equipped with the modern amenities usual in middle class housing. As soon as the Housing Authority opened a renting office for the project in mid-January 1935, it was deluged with applications. Between 3,000 and 4,000 applications were received by early March, and then applications were closed. Prospective tenants were carefully selected by a team of social workers, with preference given to the inhabitants of the worst slums and to relatively small families. All but one of the families chosen were residents of the Lower East Side, including six which had formerly lived in the Astor tenements on the site. Of the heads of families finally selected as eligible for the project, 45 were engaged in skilled labor, 42 in unskilled labor, 29 in clerical occupations, and 5 in professions; a majority were foreign born.

Standard apartments still consist today of three rooms, i.e., living room, bedroom and kitchen, plus a bathroom. There are three two-room apartments and seven of four rooms, and one five-room apartment. Today, because of the conversion of the former nursery and of the synagogue, there are 126 apartments. Room sizes are quite adequate, with living rooms averaging 12 ft. X 15 ft. (some are 12 ft. X 18 ft.) and bedrooms 11 ft. X 12 ft. Kitchens are generally large enough to serve as dinettes, and each was originally equipped with such items as an electric refrigerator, high-oven four-burner stove and overhead laundry dryer. Bathrooms, though relatively small, must have seemed luxurious to tenants who were used to hall facilities at best and to bathing in the kitchen tub. There were no windowless rooms: bathrooms and kitchens have one window, other rooms have two and some corner apartments even have three, providing cross-ventilation. A community laundry room, with electric washing machine, was provided for each of the eight units, as were incinerators, now replaced by compactors. There were a nursery and a synagogue originally, a community meeting room and a unit of the City's Public Health Service on the premises.

Recent History

The First Houses Project is a source of great pride both to the Housing Authority, which maintains it in prime condition through the management of the Jacob Riis Houses nearby, and to the tenants. About half participate in the Tenants' Council, organized six years ago. Among their activities are arts and crafts twice weekly, bingo once a week and a meeting on housing once a month. A majority of the present tenants, including a single original resident, are senior citizens, but there are some younger couples with children.

The project is ethnically and demographically mixed, with a white majority and a large minority of Puerto Rican and Black families. Jews and Catholics, Americans of Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Slav, Italian and Puerto Rican descent all live here in harmony. Rentals are scaled according to income.

In 1966, chess tables and flower tubs were installed in the courtyard behind Nos. 29, 31 and 33 Avenue A by the City's Mobilization for Youth. At present there are still eight stores at street level which provide a variety of services for the project and the neighborhood. The coffee shop at 37 Avenue A was always a restaurant, but the other stores have replaced the original businesses.

Conclusion

First Houses was repeatedly attacked as "a boondoggle" and "a million dollar extravaganza." While the cost of necessary new construction had roughly tripled the original estimate of \$350,000 which had been figured on the basis of demolition and renovation only, the achievement of the project was summarized by James Ford in his authoritative study, Slums and Housing (1936), in these words: "...though definitely not a solution of the problems of public housing, First Houses may be recorded as one of the more significant experiments worthy of the effort and cost involved." First Houses should be understood as an integral part of the period of the Depression and the New Deal, and of the mood of a people determined to alleviate the suffering of that one-third of a nation which Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his Second Inaugural Address, described as "ill-housed, ill-clad, [and] ill-nourished."

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this project, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the First Houses has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the First Houses is both historically and architecturally significant, that it was the first public, low-income housing project in the nation, that it was the first project undertaken by the newly established New York City Authority, that it was the first municipally sponsored and operated project which endeavored to deal with housing problems of the Lower East Side, that it was unusual in that it began as an experimental program in partial demolition and rehabilitation of existing tenements on the site, that it was financed in part by the issuance of Housing Authority bonds, that labor and materials were furnished under the "work-relief" program of a Federal agency, that a lawsuit resulting from condemnation by the Authority of two tenements (continued on next page)

on the site established the power of eminent domain of a city housing agency, that the dedication of First Houses on December 3, 1935 was a momentous occasion not only for the City but for the entire nation, that the low height of the buildings lend a human scale to the project and encourage a feeling of neighborliness, that the landscaped courtyard, a modification of the garden apartment concept, provides an oasis for residents of the project, that First Houses continues to serve the needs of its present tenants, and that it is a significant example of the experimental approach of the period of the New Deal.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the First Houses, 29,31,33-35,37, 39 and 41 Avenue A; 112-114, 118-120, 124-126,130-132, and 136-138 East 3rd Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 430, Lot 10, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.