

Public Housing in the United States, 1933-1949

For many people, the term “public housing” conjures up negative images of crime, urban decay and failed government services, but it wasn’t always so. During the 1930s and 1940s, planners, progressive housing reformers, and government officials alike saw government sponsored public housing as a viable solution to the squalor and disease of America’s growing urban slums and as a much needed source of employment. The result was a series of programs that for the first time placed the federal government directly in the business of building safe, clean, modern housing to meet the needs of the country’s most disadvantaged citizens.

Nearly 700 large-scale public housing projects, built either as “low-rent” housing during the Great Depression or as “defense housing” during World War II continue to operate today within the federal public housing program. These projects, the majority housed in low-rise modern-styled complexes, contain approximately 125,000 dwelling units that are in the inventories of nearly 250 local public housing authorities in 39 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. As the living legacy of the federal government’s earliest public housing programs, these projects remain an important physical component of communities across the nation. Many of these resources, all now 50 years or older, are also being lost at an alarming rate, a casualty of evolving patterns of public policy and a lack of understanding of their significant role in American history.

In the late 1990s, the National Park Service in association with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers (NCSHPO) began developing a historic context study to place public housing constructed in the United States between 1930 and 1950 within a nationwide framework. A goal of this HUD-funded study was to establish criteria for evaluating the National Register

eligibility of public housing projects constructed during this period, designed to aid local public housing authorities, HUD, federal, state, and tribal preservation officers, and others in meeting their federal preservation responsibilities.

The forthcoming results of this cooperative project will include a National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form entitled *Public Housing in the United States, 1933-1949*, and a bound study report incorporating a user’s guide to assist local officials and other interested groups in understanding the National Register identification and evaluation process.

PWA Public Housing, 1933-1937

The origins of the federal public housing program can be traced to a series of government initiatives begun in the 1930s to combat the converging problems of unemployment, expanding slums, and insufficient housing during the Great Depression. In response to President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s request for direct government intervention to spur national recovery from the Great Depression, Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in June 1933. Title II of this act appropriated \$3.3 billion for the creation of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, commonly known as the Public Works Administration (PWA), a federal agency that could support the construction of public building projects, including housing, by making loans to limited-dividend corporations, by awarding grants to state or local agencies, or by building projects on its own.

The PWA’s Housing Division undertook its first housing projects by providing low-interest loans to limited-dividend corporations, and between 1933 and 1935, seven limited-dividend public housing projects were constructed using this funding mechanism. Influenced by both the Garden City and European Modernist movements, architects for the PWA projects were encouraged to create innovative designs and plans incorporating the most modern materials.

Although the PWA limited-dividend housing projects were of high quality, rents were well beyond the means of most low-income families, and only one project complied with the PWA's objectives of creating new housing while at the same time clearing slum areas. The limited-dividend program was subsequently suspended and the PWA began the direct financing and construction of public housing projects.

When the PWA ended its housing responsibilities in the fall of 1937, it had accomplished the replacement of some of the country's worst urban slums with safe, modern housing, and set the stage for the development of even more extensive housing programs during the later 1930s and 1940s.

USHA Public Housing, 1937-1940

The passage of the United States Housing Act in 1937 renewed the federal commitment to providing decent, affordable housing for America's urban poor, and also created the federally-funded, locally-operated public housing program that still functions today. Under this decentralized program, local public housing authorities were given primary responsibility for initiating, designing, building, and operating their own housing projects, while the newly created United States Housing Authority (USHA) provided program direction, financial support, and technical and design assistance. With these new federal funding mechanisms and policies in place, the USHA spurred local public housing authorities to construct more than 370 projects, which housed nearly 120,000 families at a cost of approximately \$540 million.

World War II-era Housing, 1940-1949

In 1939, with the nation's economy seemingly stronger and the construction industry appearing to have recovered from the Depression, Congress refused to consider a bill to extend the USHA programs beyond the three-year term originally mandated. As the country's attention turned increasingly toward war, the priority of housing advocates shifted from public housing to defense housing. All low-rent public housing projects were re-assessed for their possible contribution to national defense programs. Projects under construction in defense industry centers were converted for use solely by war workers and their families, and local housing authorities in strategic

defense areas quickly converted unfinished projects from public housing to defense housing.

By early 1942, more than 65,000 low-rent public housing units that had been under construction or ready for occupancy in late 1940 were converted to defense housing. Many of the defense housing projects built during the war were converted to low-rent housing as soon as they were no longer essential to wartime needs and absorbed into the expanding public housing program.

The government's emphasis on speed of construction and economy of materials was extended in October 1940 with the passage of the Lanham Act, which appropriated \$150 million to the Federal Works Agency to provide massive amounts of housing in congested defense industry centers. Between 1940 and 1944, the federal government built approximately 625,000 housing units under the Lanham Act and its amendments. More than 580,000 of these units were of temporary construction, such as demountable plywood dormitories and trailers that were destroyed after the war. Although the wartime operations reflected a marked change in direction from earlier public housing programs, they nevertheless represented a significant aspect of government activity on the home front.

With the enactment of the Housing Act of 1949, America's public housing program entered a new phase, one more directly linked to substantial urban renewal efforts, and with it the character of public housing witnessed a marked transformation in architecture, architectural theory, and public policy from the distinct early years of the federal housing program.

The "public housing" built during the period 1930-1949 infused communities both large and small throughout the country with thousands of modern and affordable dwelling units, which represented highly successful cooperative efforts by local and government agencies to provide housing and employment during times of desperate need.

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