

PRESERVATION AND THE PROJECTS:
AN ANYALYSIS OF THE REVITALIZATION OF PUBLIC HOUSING IN
MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

by

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(Under the Direction of Wayde Brown)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to suggest specific strategies for rehabilitation of historic public housing that will meet the goals of housing authorities and the needs of residents while maintaining enough integrity to convey the historic significance of the projects. Chapter Two explores the history of public housing with an emphasis on identifying which design aspects are most historically important. Chapter Three describes the history of public housing in Milwaukee, WI, and Chapter Four analyzes the revitalization of four public housing projects in Milwaukee. The final chapter uses lessons learned from Milwaukee to provide suggestions for approaching the revitalization of similar historic public housing projects across the United States.

INDEX WORDS: Public housing, Historic preservation, Parklawn, Hillside Terrace, Milwaukee

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 Introduction	1
2 Federally-Assisted Low-Income Family Housing in the United States.....	5
Public Works Administration	5
United States Housing Authority	13
Public Housing Administration	15
Department of Housing and Urban Development.....	19
3 Government-Assisted Low-Income Family Housing in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.....	22
Early Experiments in Government-Assisted Housing	24
Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee Projects	38
4 Analysis of Major Revitalization Efforts in Milwaukee	54
Hillside Terrace and Hillside Terrace Addition	55
Parklawn.....	62
Lapham Park.....	80
Highland Park.....	81
Conclusion.....	82

5 Suggestions for Future Public Housing Revitalization Projects83

 Specific Design Suggestions84

 Possible Educational Efforts.....87

WORKS CITED89

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the United States the relationship between historic preservation and public housing has traditionally been an adversarial one. Between the 1930s and 1960s the federal government funded slum clearance and replacement programs that resulted in the razing of hundreds of thousands of historic structures and the construction of thousands of public housing units in their place. Given that Urban Renewal helped generate widespread interest in preservation and was an impetus for the passage of the *National Historic Preservation Act of 1966*, it is ironic that the very structures that the act was written to protect neighborhoods against are now old enough to be eligible for protection under the same act.

Understandably, people have been slow to rally around the cause of preserving public housing. From its inception, public housing has always had its critics. Conservatives and those involved in the private housing market have opposed public housing as government intervention in the private sector, and after the media brought the social problems rampant in public housing projects

to national attention in the 1960s, even liberals began to regard public housing as an expensive and failed social program. The modern, minimalist designs of the majority of public housing projects are generally considered aesthetically unpleasing. Many public housing projects currently stand surrounded by historic neighborhoods, and the projects are a constant reminder of a well-intentioned but ultimately destructive government program.

Even people who do recognize the historic significance of public housing projects are unable to make the usual arguments in support of their preservation. Unlike historic downtowns and neighborhoods that exemplify good urban design, many of the defining design features of public housing have actually exacerbated social problems. Adaptive reuse, a common preservation solution, is not a feasible option. It is hard to imagine what alternative use these buildings could house, and although scattered site public housing is becoming more popular, most housing authorities are not in the position to sell their existing large-scale projects. The reality is that in the foreseeable future the vast majority of public housing complexes will continue to operate in their historic capacity as public housing.

While preservationists have virtually looked away, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funded the demolition of 55,782 units of public housing between 1996 and 2003.¹ Thousands of these units were parts of

¹ Department of Housing and Urban Development, "HOPE VI Demolition Grants: FY 1996-2003," (Washington, D.C., June, 2004), 12. Available from

historic projects, some of which were already listed on the National Register of Historic Places or were determined eligible.² The first public housing project built by the Public Works Administration (PWA), Techwood Homes in Atlanta, was demolished in 1995 despite being listed on the National Register since 1976. Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, although not a National Register property, held the distinction of being the largest public housing project in the world when it opened in 1962. Its demolition will be completed by 2005.³

In response, The National Park Service has commissioned *Public Housing in the United States, 1933-1949; A Historic Context*. The purpose of this document is to aid HUD and local housing authorities in complying with Section 106 of the *National Historic Preservation Act of 1966*. This review is required whenever a federal or federally-assisted undertaking may result in changes in the character of a property that either is listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. During the review process the federal agency meets with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in an effort to find design solutions that lessen the adverse effects on the historic property. Currently these review processes are the only preservation tool available to prevent the demolition or insensitive alteration of historic public housing.

http://www.hud.gov/utilities/intercept.cfm?/offices/pih/programs/ph/hope6/grants/demolition/2003master_dem.pdf; Internet; accessed 6 May 2004.

² Judith Robinson, Laura Bobeczko, Paul Lusignan, and Jeffrey Shrimpton for The National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service, and the National Register of Historic Places, *Public Housing in the United States, 1933-1949; A Historic Context*, 12 October, 1999, appendix I-IV.

³ Chicago Housing Authority, "Robert Taylor Homes, 2003. Available from http://www.thecha.org/housingdev/robert_taylor.html; Internet; accessed 1 July 2004.

The purpose of this thesis is to suggest specific strategies for rehabilitation of historic public housing that will meet the goals of housing authorities and satisfy the needs of residents while maintaining enough integrity to convey the historic significance of the projects. Chapter Two will explore the history of public housing with an emphasis on identifying which design aspects are most historically important. Chapter Three will describe the history of public housing in Milwaukee, WI, and Chapter Four will analyze the revitalization of four public housing projects in Milwaukee. The final chapter will use lessons learned from Milwaukee to provide suggestions for approaching the revitalization of similar historic public housing projects across the United States.

CHAPTER TWO

FEDERALLY-ASSISTED LOW-INCOME FAMILY HOUSING IN THE UNITED STATES

Public Works Administration

In 1929 the Great Depression sent the country into economic ruin and mortgage foreclosures reached an average of 1,000 per day.⁴ In an effort to address mostly the problem of unemployment but also the low-income housing shortage, Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act which included the creation of the Public Works Administration (PWA).⁵

The Housing Division within the PWA was charged with five objectives: to “deal with the unemployment situation by getting the building and trade industry up and going, furnish decent and sanitary dwellings to those with low incomes, eradicate slum areas, demonstrate to private builders and planners the practicability of large scale community planning, encourage enactment of

⁴ Carol A. Flores, “U.S. Public Housing in the 1930s: the First Projects in Atlanta, Georgia,” *Planning Perspectives* 9 (1994): 407.

⁵ Harry C. Bredmeier, *The Federal Public Housing Movement: A Case Study in Social Change* (New York: Arno Press 1980), 81.

state enabling legislation so as to make possible early decentralization of construction and operation of public housing projects.”⁶

In an attempt to meet these goals, the PWA offered low-interest loans to limited-dividend housing corporations for low-income housing construction. The PWA received over 500 funding requests, of which only seven met the requirements of the program. The architects of these projects were encouraged by the PWA to be creative; and the resulting housing developments, constructed between 1933 and 1935, exemplify innovative design and use of materials. These developments shared the common characteristics of superblock site design, low site coverage by buildings, community centers, and public art, all of which carried over into the next phase of public housing projects initiated by the PWA. ⁷

Accepting that few organizations had the skills and knowledge necessary to plan large-scale public housing projects, in 1934 the PWA took a more direct approach and began directly handling most aspects of the land acquisition and building process as well as operating the projects after completion.⁸ In order to plan the new housing developments the PWA gathered a group of leading architects, housing reformers and social workers who developed public housing design guidelines that reflected the latest thinking in their areas of

⁶ Robert Moore Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing: Economic Aspects of the Federal Program*, (New York: Harper Brothers 1959), 83.

⁷ Robinson, Bobeczko, Lusignan and Shrimpton, 13,14.

⁸ibid, 18.

expertise.⁹ In 1935 the PWA released a publication that provided guidance for local housing authorities in the areas of unit design, site selection, and site planning. They specified five types of appropriate dwellings: the Apartment House Type, Flat House Type, Row House Plan, Gallery Type Plan, and Combination Flat and Row House.¹⁰ All of the plans called for fireproof construction, access to sunlight and air and a reasonable level of comfort and privacy for the tenants.¹¹ The PWA favored the use of high quality materials and good craftsmanship, believing that a greater initial investment would pay off in the long run.¹²

The PWA also placed great importance on site design, and its 1935 guidelines stated that “[t]here must be a logical and agreeable blending between the arrangement and the design in relation to that of open areas. A housing development with excellently designed buildings and poorly planned and inadequate open spaces will be unsuccessful.”¹³ Most projects adopted a superblock site plan in order to have adequate space to meet the guidelines, which called for two- to three-story buildings positioned to create a semi-

⁹ Larry Keating and Carol A. Flores, “Sixty and Out: Techwood Homes Transformed by Enemies and Friends,” *Journal of Urban History* (March 2000): 281.

¹⁰ National Housing Agency Federal Housing Authority, *Public Housing Design: A Review of Experience in Low-Rent Housing* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, June 1946), 204.

¹¹ Keating and Flores, 281.

¹² Michael W. Strauss and Talbot Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 71.

¹³ United States Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, Housing Division. *U.S. Public Works Administration Unit Plans* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935).

enclosed courtyard.¹⁴ The buildings were typically aligned with existing streets, however front entrances were often located in the interior of the courtyards in an effort to separate public housing from the surrounding neighborhoods and to increase residents' sense of community.¹⁵

Although the PWA required that its housing projects adhere to most aspects of the aforementioned building and site design guidelines, local architects were allowed some freedom in selecting a style for the buildings, provided the designs were simple and inexpensive.¹⁶ While most architects chose brick as the primary façade material, some buildings were clad in terra cotta or built with concrete blocks. Some architects even eschewed the modernist, flat roofs popular at the time and designed buildings with parapets and gabled roofs.¹⁷

Architectural detailing such as copper roofs, decorative brick work, door canopies, heavy quoins, lavish use of colors, and sculpted decorative friezes of workers gave some of the projects a bit of individuality.¹⁸ Some early housing projects even incorporated regional architectural traditions. Saudia Mesa

¹⁴ Terence K. Cooper, "Public Housing Architecture: Concept, Compromise, & Challenge," *Journal of Housing* (July/ August 1988): 182.

¹⁵ Karen Franck and Michael Mostoller, "From Courts to Open Space to Street: Changes in the Site Design of U.S. Public Housing," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* (Autumn 1995): 190.

¹⁶ Strauss and Wegg, 68.

¹⁷ Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 227.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 227.



Figure 2. "The Progress of the Negro Race," - terra cotta frieze at Langston Terrace in Washington, D.C. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Theodor Horydczak Collection, LC-H814-T01-2189-027 DLC)

Houses in Albuquerque, New Mexico, have stucco facades which resemble the adobe houses common to the region. Another example is New Orleans' St. Thomas Houses, which were designed with cast iron balconies and tall windows reminiscent of 19th Century Louisiana homes.¹⁹

While the exteriors of early public housing were somewhat varied and architecturally interesting, the interior designs were rather uniform and plain. Walls were white plaster and floors were cement, sometimes painted and sometimes covered with asphalt tiles, respectively. In the PWA era the rooms

¹⁹ Ibid, 229.



Figure 3. Kitchen in Parklawn housing project in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. (Courtesy of HACM)

themselves were relatively spacious, with an average kitchen measuring nine by ten feet, a ten by thirteen foot dining room, a thirteen by sixteen foot living room, and bedrooms ranging from nine by thirteen feet to thirteen by fourteen feet.²⁰

Atlanta's Techwood Homes was the first PWA direct-built housing project. To make room for the project the PWA cleared eight city blocks in the Techwood Flats neighborhood, a slum consisting of cheap shacks and two-story shanties built in the 1880s. The final plan consisted of seven two-story rowhouses

²⁰ United States Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, Housing Division.

and thirteen three-story apartment buildings constructed of high quality materials with decorative features such as stone trim and canopied doorways.²¹



Figure 4. Entrance and window details at Techwood Homes shortly before demolition. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Historic American Buildings Survey or Historic American Engineering Record, HABS, GA,61-ATLA,60E-10)

The buildings were placed around extensively landscaped courtyards designed to provide places for residents to meet and socialize. Structures occupied less than twenty-five percent of the site, and the remaining open space was devoted to clay tennis courts, fenced playgrounds, a wading pool, and large parks. A central complex contained eight retail stores, a doctor's

²¹ Keating and Flores, 281.



Figure 5. Techwood Homes courtyard shortly before demolition. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Historic American Buildings Survey or Historic American Engineering Record, HABS, GA,61-ATLA,60E-15)

office, an auditorium, meeting rooms, and a library. The units were outfitted with amenities such as closets, electric appliances, hot and cold water, steam heat, and built-in bathtubs, making them the most modern apartments in Atlanta.

Between 1935 and 1937 the PWA constructed fifty-one similar projects in thirty-six cities, which became home to 26,000 low-income, working families. Since a large component of the program was to provide jobs to architects and construction workers, the PWA often chose quality materials and creative design over cheaper options, resulting in the construction of well-built and aesthetically interesting projects. Unfortunately, projects constructed after the demise of the PWA lack many of the positive attributes of early public housing.²²

²² Robinson, Bobeczko, Lusignan and Shrimpton, 18, 34, 35.

United States Housing Authority

In 1937 Congress established a permanent United States Housing Authority (USHA) with the passage of the Wagner-Steagall Act. Cities jumped at the chance to receive federal assistance, and by 1939 291 had created housing authorities and were eligible to apply for federal funding.²³ Although the Wagner-Steagall Act allowed for greater local control over the construction of public housing, the federal government would not supply aid unless the proposed projects met certain specifications. For every new housing unit local housing authorities wished to build, they were required to demolish one slum unit. In addition, the cost per unit of new construction could not exceed \$4,000 in cities with less than 500,000 people and could not exceed \$5,000 in larger cities.²⁴

Conservatives who worried that public housing would be too luxurious convinced the federal government to prohibit the use of "elaborate and expensive design or materials" in public housing.²⁵ As a result, most USHA projects were International Style, with the flat roofs, uniform fenestration, and lack of detailing characteristic of modern architecture. USHA projects also lacked the community amenities present in PWA era projects, and interior

²²Ibid, 18.

²³ Gertrude Slipperly Fish, ed., *The Story of Public Housing: Economic Aspects of the Federal Program*, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1959), 210.

²⁴ Ibid. 21.

²⁵ Alexander von Hoffman, "The Curse of Durability: Why Housing for the Poor was Built to Last." *Journal of Housing and Community Development*, (September/October 1998).

spaces became even smaller and sparser.²⁶ In order to figure out exactly where costs could be cut the USHA conducted experiments to determine minimum dimensions required to accommodate household systems such as plumbing and heating and even minimum amounts of space necessary for the average residents' furniture. "Luxuries" such as closet doors and bedrooms larger than ten feet by twelve feet were eliminated.²⁷

Most USHA-funded projects were two- or three-story rowhouses, which the agency favored over the apartments common in PWA projects.²⁸ The USHA criticized PWA era courtyard plans for causing "inconvenience of circulation, inefficiency of service drives, [and] difficult use of land at the exterior corners."²⁹ New guidelines discouraged obstructions such as fences and through streets, and specified that housing authorities construct the buildings in straight or curving lines to create "uniform orientation" and a "quality of good order." USHA administrator Nathan Straus compared the design of new public housing to early American communities, writing that "[old] and young alike find that the center of life is the open play area of the housing project as it once was in the village green."³⁰

²⁶ Kristin M. Szylvian, "Bauhaus on Trial: Aluminum City Terrace and Federal Defense Housing Policy during World War II," *Planning Perspectives* 9 (1994): 232,234.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Devereux Jr Bowly, *The Poorhouse: Subsidized Housing in Chicago, 1895-1976*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press), 1978, 201.

²⁹ National Housing Agency Federal Housing Authority, 30.

³⁰ Nathan Straus, *The Seven Myths of Housing*, (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1944), 163.



Figure 6. Bradley Court in Newark, New Jersey. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Gottscho-Schleisner Collection, LC-G612-T01-46061 DLC)

During its three year existence the USHA funded the construction of 370 housing projects containing roughly 120,000 units.³¹ Although the USHA made a significant increase in the number of low-income housing units, cost and design restrictions resulted in projects of an overall lesser quality than those built during the PWA era. Nonetheless, these projects represent a significant body of International Style architecture in the United States.³²

Public Housing Administration

In 1949 Congress passed the Housing Act of 1949, which reinstated federal funding for public housing under the authority of the newly created Public

³¹ Robinson, Bobeczko, Lusignan and Shrimpton, 40.

³² *Ibid*, 45.

Housing Administration. Projects constructed after 1949 were of a very different character than PWA and USHA projects, partially due to changes in architectural theory, but also because the circumstances under which the housing was built had also changed. While the goal of the PWA projects was to provide construction jobs and house families who were temporarily unable to find housing due to the depression, the goal of the post-war public housing program was to house large numbers of families who lived far below the poverty level.³³

Inspiration for the design of post-1949 public housing is often attributed to influential European architects such as LeCorbusier and Mies van der Rohe. The dominant form of public housing constructed during this period was a cross plan, Y-plan, or slab high-rise of a stripped down, modern design. Rather than grouping the buildings around landscaped recreational areas, these towers were placed in large open spaces and often covered less than ten percent of the total site area. Due to budgetary constraints and contemporary architectural and social theory, the remaining ninety percent of the land tended to contain few of the amenities that characterized early public housing projects.³⁴

The interiors of these buildings were equally bleak. In order to cut costs, buildings were constructed with "skip-stop" elevators, rooms were very small,

³³ Ibid, 58.

³⁴ Wright, 233-237.

and “luxuries” such as showerheads, ground floor restrooms and paint for the cinder block walls were eliminated.³⁵

One of the best-known public housing projects of the post-war era is the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago. When it was finished in 1962 it contained 4,415 units housing 27,000 people, 20,000 of whom were children.³⁶ The project was situated on a ninety-five acre site, two miles long and only one quarter of a mile wide. Each of the twenty-eight identical buildings was sixteen stories tall and was surfaced with red or yellow brick and no additional ornamentation. Most were situated in U-shaped groups of three buildings. The interiors were small and sparse and offered nothing beyond the absolute necessities.³⁷



Figure 7. Building in Robert Taylor Homes complex in Chicago shortly before demolition. (Chicago Housing Authority, http://thecha.org/housingdev/robert_taylor.html)

³⁵ LKeating and Flores, p. 281.

³⁶ John F Bauman. et al. ed., *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth Century America*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press), 2000, 149.

³⁷Devereux Bowly Jr., 201.

Even when they were new, Robert Taylor homes were highly criticized. In 1965 one tenant told the Chicago Daily News “We live stacked on top of one another with no elbow room. Danger is all around. There’s little privacy or peace and no quiet. And the world looks on all of us as project rats, living on a reservation like untouchables.”³⁸

Tenants were not the only people who were dissatisfied with Robert Taylor Homes. Architecture critic W. Joseph Black referred to the project as “one of the worst tragedies that architects have created, and surely among the world’s ugliest buildings.” Newspaper reporter M.W. Newman wrote that the Robert Taylor Homes were a “seventy million dollar ghetto.”³⁹

The aforementioned criticisms were not unique to Robert Taylor Homes. By the late 1950s serious problems had already surfaced in high-rise public housing. The award winning Pruitt-Igoe Homes in East St. Louis, finished in 1956, were already experiencing major social problems by 1958. By 1967 the acting director of the East St. Louis Housing Authority asked the federal government for permission to demolish Pruitt-Igoe just eleven years after it was completed. Pruitt-Igoe was a wake-up call. Prior to its highly publicized failure the federal government continued to fund high-rise public housing developments.⁴⁰

The construction of high-rise public housing effectively came to an end in 1973 when President Nixon declared a moratorium on housing and community

³⁸ Bauman et al. ed, 149.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid,149, 201.

development assistance. While much of the failure of public housing of this era can be blamed on design, the changing economic status of residents is a large part of the story. Unlike PWA and USHA projects which housed the working poor, by the late 1950s the residents of the projects were more likely to be the very poor who had little chance of ever improving their economic position enough to move to privately-owned housing.⁴¹

Department of Housing and Urban Development

Very little public housing was constructed in the 1970s and 1980s, but the 1990s brought a flurry of building. In 1992 the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing reported that 86,000, or six percent, of public housing units, were considered severely distressed due to problems including physical deterioration, increasing poverty, inadequate resident services, and physical isolation from surrounding neighborhoods. To address these problems Congress created the HOPE VI program, administered by HUD, to fund the revitalization of these projects. According to HUD, "Sixty years of experience with public housing has taught policy makers what *does not* work for public housing and what *might* work. HOPE VI provides an opportunity to test ideas that have promise. These ideas must not only avoid the mistakes of the past, but they must also repair the

⁴¹ Wright, 233-237.

damage that has already been done. Some of the challenges faced include welfare dependency, the decline of many center cities, poor public housing management, decreasing operating subsidies, crime, the dramatic increase in single parent households, poor design of buildings, inappropriate unit size, and racial and economic isolation." HOPE VI grants are awarded to housing authorities who create plans that include a combination of the following components: "deconcentration and dispersion, development of mixed-income communities, demolition and/or renovation of current developments, emphasis on family self-sufficiency, and resident management of the properties."⁴²

The revitalizations resulting from the HOPE VI program and local housing authority initiatives consist of partial or total demolition of older public housing complexes and replacement with more "traditional" housing types and forms. Buildings are often rowhouses arranged in courts, similar to those common in PWA era housing projects. However, in an effort to make public housing more like private homes, communal open space has been replaced by fenced, private yards and residents enter their units through private entrances facing the street rather than from an interior courtyard as was common in PWA housing.⁴³ Superblocks have been replaced with through streets, and there is an emphasis on integrating public housing with the surrounding community.⁴⁴ While

⁴² U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *An Historical and Baseline Assessment of HOPE VI, Volume 1 Cross-site Report* (Washington D.C., July 1996). Available from <http://www.huduser.org/publications/pubasst/hopevi.html>; Internet; accessed on 7 May 2004.

⁴³ Varady, et. al. ed., 88.

⁴⁴ Franck and Mostoller, 190.

according to current planning theories the design of public housing is moving in the right direction, it is still too early to know whether the physical and programming changes implemented in the 1990s and 2000s will succeed in solving the myriad of social problems that plague public housing in the United States.

The following two chapters will focus on Milwaukee, Wisconsin's successes and failures to create housing for low-income families. The origins of government-assisted housing in Milwaukee are unique, but as national public housing programs were created, the City of Milwaukee began to march, for the most part, in line with the rest of the country.

CHAPTER THREE

GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED LOW-INCOME FAMILY HOUSING IN MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

The origins of Milwaukee's public housing date to the 1910 election of Emil Seidel, the first Socialist mayor in the United States, and twenty-one Socialist aldermen. The party platform included the construction of municipally-funded, low-cost worker housing—a badly needed commodity in industrial cities like Milwaukee.⁴⁵ Although Seidel failed to make any headway on the project before his defeat two years later, his idea of city-built worker housing was picked up by the next Socialist candidate for mayor, Daniel Hoan.

When Hoan took office in 1916, Milwaukee's housing shortage had grown to an estimated 7,000 units.⁴⁶ His administration attempted to alleviate the problem by applying for the aid available from the Federal government for the construction of housing for war workers. Milwaukee's application was turned down, both because the city's housing shortage pre-dated the war and

⁴⁵ H. Russell Austin, *The Milwaukee Story*, (Milwaukee: The Milwaukee Journal, 1946), 170; and *A Decent Home. The Report of the President's Committee on Urban Housing* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1969), 54.

⁴⁶ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 20 April, 1919. quoted in *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, "Garden Homes," February, 1997.

because the city could not prove that a lack of housing was hindering war material production.⁴⁷



Figure 8. Daniel Hoan, Milwaukee's second Socialist mayor. (Courtesy of HACM)

At the end of the war Mayor Hoan and the housing commission took a different approach to solving the housing crisis, this time asking the Wisconsin legislature to allow the creation of public housing corporations whose stock would be owned by the local government and residents. The legislature passed enabling legislation in 1919 and the Garden Homes Company formally incorporated in 1921.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ President's Committee on Urban Housing, 54.

⁴⁸ *Garden Homes Co. Prospectus* (City of Milwaukee Legislative Reference Bureau Library collection)

Early Experiments in Government-Assisted Housing

Garden Homes

As would be the case in future public housing projects, many business leaders, the real estate board, and local politicians vocally opposed the government entering the housing industry,⁴⁹ and some even claimed that the project “hinted strongly of Sovietism.”⁵⁰ Undaunted by criticism, Mayor Hoan’s administration pushed ahead, and in 1921 Garden Homes became the first municipally-built public housing project in the United States.⁵¹

The inspiration for the design and ownership structure of Garden Homes came from the English Garden City movement. Milwaukee architect and Garden Homes designer William Schuchardt visited England in 1911 and Garden Homes appears to be based on the “garden city” of Letchworth, England which was built in 1903 as an experiment in carefully designed, cooperatively-owned, working class housing.⁵²

Milwaukee’s Garden Homes development consisted of eighty-two single family homes and eleven duplexes, each built on roughly forty foot by 120 foot lots on a twenty-nine acre site outside of the northern city limits. Garden Homes

⁴⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, 20 February, 1938. quoted in *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, “Garden Homes.”

⁵⁰ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 9 September, 1920. quoted in *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, “Garden Homes.”

⁵¹ *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, “Garden Homes.”

⁵² *Ibid.*

Park—a boulevard-like greenspace—provided a central recreation area for residents.



Figure 9. Garden Homes during construction. (Milwaukee County Historical Society)

Schuchardt designed the homes in a simplified version of Colonial Revival, a style popular for more expensive homes built at that time. They came in nine basic designs, which were varied further by occasionally adding a front gable to a side-gabled plan. All nine models had asphalt shingle roofs, stucco exteriors, gable returns trimmed with crown molding, covered entry porches, six-panel entry doors, six-over-six double-hung windows, decorative shutters, and raised basements.⁵³

⁵³ Ibid.



Figure 10. Garden Homes cottage in 2004 (photo by author)

Garden Homes received about 700 applicants, including many city employees and union leaders. Mayor Hoan declared that tenants must be working people who could not afford to buy a market rate home, but the exact criteria used for tenant selection are unknown.⁵⁴

The project was completed in 1923, and by 1925 there was already serious unrest among the residents. Many people became unhappy when the City of Milwaukee assessed Garden Homes residents for street and stormwater improvements. Many also became frustrated that any improvements they made to their homes could be lost because of the cooperative ownership

⁵⁴ *Milwaukee Leader*, 10 September, 1921. quoted in *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, "Garden Homes."

structure.⁵⁵ As a result, the Garden Homes Co. Board of Directors voted to disband the cooperative and gave residents the opportunity to purchase their homes for a price considerably below market rate.⁵⁶

Given the disappointing results of the Garden Homes experiment, Milwaukee chose not to attempt any similar projects and Garden Homes remains the first and last development of its kind in the city.

Greendale

Even after the disbanding of the Garden Homes Cooperative, Mayor Hoan's administration was far from giving up on government-sponsored housing projects. When the Resettlement Administration (RA) announced in 1935 that it was looking for sites to locate experimental greenbelt towns, Milwaukee immediately applied. The city was chosen for various reasons, including a documented housing shortage, rising population, and stable industry.⁵⁷ Having an elected socialist government was likely a positive factor because it helped assure the RA that Milwaukee residents would accept the project.⁵⁸ The original

⁵⁵ "Garden Homes Losing Charm, Many Residents Leaving 'Utopia' to Evade Assessment." *Milwaukee Journal*, 11 March, 1925.

⁵⁶ *Milwaukee Leader*, 17 July, 1925. quoted in *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, "Garden Homes."

⁵⁷ Jeanne Anderson Posada, "Public Housing in Milwaukee: A Case Study in Administration." (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1947), 53, 55.

⁵⁸ Arnold R. Alanen, Joseph A. Eden, *Main Street Ready-Made: The New Deal Community of Greendale, Wisconsin* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1987), 12.

plan for Greendale called for a self-sufficient suburban community, designed and built by the federal government for the purpose of providing jobs and quality housing to low-income working families.

In contrast to the other greenbelt projects, the designers of Greendale were not interested in designing the town based on high-styled contemporary architecture or town planning. Instead, site designer Elbert Peets used Midwestern county seats, European Renaissance market-places, and the reconstruction of Williamsburg for inspiration. Architect Walter G. Thomas designed public structures influenced by Williamsburg and the Beaux-Arts style.⁵⁹ Architect Harry H. Bentley purposely designed homes that more closely resembled English cottages than International style housing.⁶⁰ According to Bentley, "The town will not be modernistic in the accepted sense. We want the people who live there to be happy and don't want to force upon them anything they don't want." The designers assumed that Midwesterners would want detached dwellings, and since the contours of the land would have made construction of block housing difficult, single-family homes became the obvious choice.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Elbert Peets, "Report of the Town Planning Section," 148-150. as quoted in Alanen and Eden, 40.

⁶⁰ Churchill, *Greenbelt Towns*, Ch. 3, "Organization," p.3.; Albert Mayer, "Greenbelt Towns: What and Why," *American City*, 51, May, 1936, 59-61. as quoted in Alanen and Eden, 10.

⁶¹ Elbert Peets, "Report of the Town Planning Section," 148-150. as quoted in Alanen and Eden, 38.



Figure 11. Homes in Greendale. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF33-T01-001441-M3 DLC)

The RA rented individual homes and rowhouses to families. Commercial buildings were leased to the Greendale Cooperative Association, which ran a food store, service station, and a barbershop while individuals leased space for a pharmacy and a movie theater.⁶²

Despite all of the good intentions and planning, Greendale was continually plagued by trouble. Although 2,000 families were screened for residency, seven months after the May 1938 opening date Greendale remained sixty-eight percent empty. When the town did fill, it was primarily inhabited by young families headed by blue-collar employees, many of whom claimed to have moved to Greendale not because of the town but specifically for the purpose of saving money for a down payment on a house in Milwaukee. Instead of participating in organized community activities, residents watched television

⁶² "Greendale Up to Now: A Summary of Events," *Greendale Review*, 4 May, 1939. as quoted in Alanen and Eden, 61.

at home.⁶³ The planned collective farmsteads, recreation center, industrial area, and parkway estates were eliminated from the plan for funding reasons. The stripped-down and repetitive architecture mandated by financial constraints lead some people to refer to Greendale as a “boxlike modernistic project.” Every attempt at a bus line to Milwaukee failed and residents were isolated in Greendale.⁶⁴

While planners, architects, and other interested parties from across the United States, Europe, and South America came to visit and praise Greendale, residents grumbled about the aforementioned problems and complained about village regulations, rent increases, and the intrusion of the federal government.⁶⁵ As early as 1940 residents had already begun working on plans to purchase Greendale, and by 1944 the federal government was ready to sell.⁶⁶ A series of failed negotiations continued until 1952 when the homes in Greendale were finally sold to residents at a loss of over six million dollars for the federal government.⁶⁷

⁶³ Douglas G. Marshall, “Greendale: A Study of a Resettlement Community,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1943), 51-65.; Carl Yost, “Hello Neighbor,” *Greendale Review*, 28 April, 1950. .as quoted in Alanen and Eden, 75.

⁶⁴ “Improve Bus Schedule; Restore Pass,” *Greendale Review*, 29 November, 1939. as quoted in Alanen and Eden, 59.

⁶⁵ Alanen and Eden, 49,70, 68.

⁶⁶ Greendale Citizens’ Association Housing Committee to U.S. Senator Robert M. LaFollette, 29 September, 1940, Record Group 96, National Archives. as quoted in Alanen and Eden, 69.

⁶⁷ *Greendale: Final Report of Project Costs Including Actual Construction Costs from Inception of Project to June 30, 1938*, sec. 3, exhibit A, 11 April, 1939, Record Group 96, National Archives. as quoted in Alanen and Eden, 87.

Like Garden Homes, the Greendale experiment was not successful in living up to its intentions. However, another project in Milwaukee, planned and constructed around the same time, produced different results.

Parklawn

In addition to successfully convincing the RA to choose Milwaukee as the site for a greenbelt town, Mayor Hoan's administration also convinced the PWA to locate one of their first direct-built public housing complexes in the city. Work on the project began in 1934 when the Emergency Advisory Housing Commission selected a blighted, predominately black neighborhood in the Sixth Ward and the Land Commission began acquiring land. When half of the land had been acquired a property owner sued, claiming he was forced to sell without due process, and was granted an injunction that stopped the Land Commission from purchasing the remaining properties.⁶⁸ Similar suits across the country forced the PWA to more loosely interpret their policy which required that public housing be built on slum clearance sites.⁶⁹ Just five months after the initial approval of the project in Milwaukee, the PWA approved an undeveloped site on the outskirts of town, and Parklawn became the first PWA housing project

⁶⁸ Posada, 29.

⁶⁹ Public Works Administration, *America Builds: the Record of the PWA*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 212.

built on vacant land.⁷⁰ Construction began in 1936 and the first families moved in in 1937.

Because the PWA required that their specifications for site plans, building types, and floor plans be followed, in these respects Parklawn is similar to other PWA-era housing projects.⁷¹ The buildings themselves covered roughly twenty-two percent of the site and were laid out in quadrangles. According to Raymond A. Voigt, the Housing Manager, the “the arrangement of all buildings...offers little obscurity to lurking offenders” and he therefore expected that “a minimum of police protection will be required to maintain law and order.”⁷² All city streets except for one encircling the central park area ended in courtyards with parking lots, leaving a pedestrian-only interior. The central recreation area contained a community center and many amenities including facilities for tennis, volleyball, basketball, handball, shuffleboard, horseshoe, and softball as well as a wooded area, playground equipment, and a wading pool.⁷³

⁷⁰ “Social Uplift Part of Plan in Parklawn,” *Milwaukee Journal*, 17 November, 1935.; and “Parklawn Gave Jobs, Now Gives Homes to Low Income Group,” *Milwaukee Journal*, 6 June, 1937.

⁷¹ National Housing Agency Federal Housing Authority, *Public Housing Design: A Review of Experience in Low-Rent Housing*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, June 1946), 204.

⁷² Raymond A. Voigt, “Parklawn,” 27 January, 1938, 4.

⁷³ Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, “Parklawn: Milwaukee’s Legacy of Affordable Housing,” 1.



Figure 12. Parklawn housing project. (Courtesy of HACM)

Parklawn consisted of sixty-two structures containing 518 dwelling units (at a density of twenty units per acre), eighty-three garage stalls, and a heating plant. A community building located at the center of the development provided the approximately 1,675 residents with an auditorium, a social room, a community kitchen, a health clinic, and a large assembly area. Eight two-story apartment buildings contained 112 one-bedroom apartments known as "widows' housing" because most of the residents were women who were unable to support themselves after their husbands died.⁷⁴ Fifty-four two-story rowhouses housed low-income families in two- and three-bedroom units and

⁷⁴ Rocky Marcoux-Manager of Housing Modernization and Development for HACM, interview by author, Milwaukee, WI., 16 June 2004.

one-story wings on some rowhouses contained twenty-four one-bedroom apartments.⁷⁵

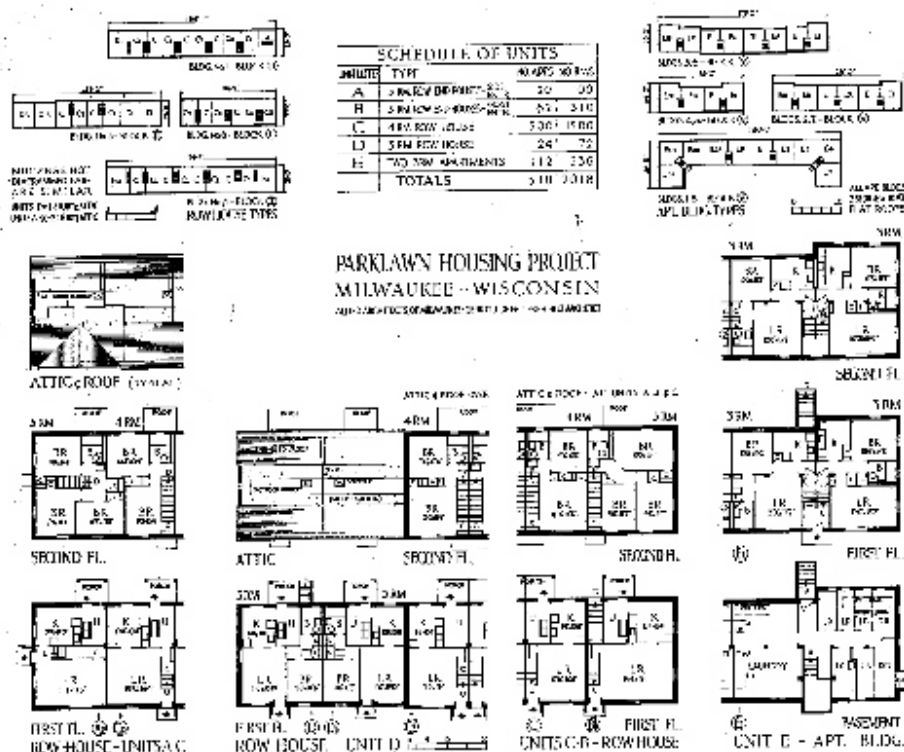


Figure 13. Floorplans for units in Parklawn. (Courtesy of HACM)

The city commissioned a well-known architecture firm, Associated Architects of Milwaukee, to design the project.⁷⁶ Architectural style was the one area where local governments had control, and the style of Parklawn does differ from many other PWA projects.⁷⁷ According to one newspaper article, “the

⁷⁵ Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Public Housing in Milwaukee*, 4th ed, 1966, 23.

⁷⁶ Invitation for the Dedication Ceremony of the Parklawn Housing Project, 14 August, 1937.

⁷⁷ Posada, 32. ; and Strauss and Wegg, 68.

buildings themselves will not be much different from the type common to the city. The architects did not go in for the flat, squarish modern style that has marked some housing developments."⁷⁸ All of the buildings were common brick on hollow tile construction. The apartment buildings did have the flat roofs and small, flat entrance canopies common in other public housing. Other details were more traditional, like the varied fenestration pattern consisting of windows of differing sizes, the wooden doors with sidelights, and a water table with small windows.



Figure 14. Widows' housing at Parklawn. (Courtesy of HACM)

The rowhouses had traditional side gabled roofs with smaller front gables on each end. Other features included red concrete roof tiles and six-over-six double-hung sash windows with sidelights. Entrances from the interior courtyards

⁷⁸ "New Housing a Social Ideal," *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 July 1935.

had small shed roofs and concrete stoops. More modern details on the rowhouses were the flat front entrance canopies with metal trellises.



Figure 15. Low-income family housing at Parklawn. (Courtesy of HACM)

Unlike most PWA projects, the front entrances to the Parklawn units were not from the courtyards but either from the streets (in cases where a building was adjacent to a perimeter street) or from the mews between buildings. This reduced the isolation of Parklawn residents from the adjacent neighborhood rather than forcing residents to break with their surroundings as was a goal of public housing constructed during this era.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Franck and Mostoller, 39.

Other interesting features of Parklawn were four sculptures created by local sculptor Karl Kahlich as part of the Wisconsin Federal Art Project (WFAP). The sculptures, including “fishing” and “music,” were typical of New Deal era art projects which were based on themes from everyday life.⁸⁰



Figure 16. WFAP sculptures at Parklawn. (Courtesy of HACM)

Parklawn received a good deal of media attention and drew interested visitors from all over the city when it opened. In sharp contrast to Greendale, 3,100 families applied to live in the project and all 518 units filled immediately.⁸¹ Despite opposition from the private housing sector and accusations that the residents of Parklawn, mostly working-class white families, were not truly needy, Parklawn was an overall success and its general acceptance by Milwaukee residents paved the way for future public housing projects in the city.⁸²

⁸⁰ *Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee*, “Parklawn: Milwaukee’s Legacy of Affordable Housing,” 3.

⁸¹ “Homes Open at Parklawn,” *Milwaukee Journal*, 16 April, 1937.

⁸² “Rental Rates for Parklawn Raise Fury,” *Milwaukee Journal*, 7 March, 1937.

Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee Projects

Given the severe nature of Milwaukee's housing shortage, the completion of Parklawn and Greendale hardly made a dent in the problem. However, the passing of the Wagner-Steagall Act in 1937 made federal funds available to cities with Housing Authorities for the construction of public housing. The Milwaukee Housing Council argued for the creation of a Housing Authority and participation in the federal housing program, saying that in the past few years "[a]lmost all of the residential building in Milwaukee County has been for families of above-average income. No low-cost housing has been provided, except the cutting up of existing buildings into smaller units." The Council argued this was proof of the private housing industry's failure to meet the needs of low- and middle-income families and claimed it was time for the government to step in. The common council agreed and created the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee (HACM) in 1938. All future public housing projects in the city were administered by HACM.⁸³

⁸³ Clarence Senior, *Facing the Housing Problem*, Milwaukee Housing Council, (February, 1938), 13.

Hillside Terrace

Hillside Terrace became HACM's first public housing project. HACM selected a site on a hillside near the central business district in the area that was originally chosen as the location for Parklawn. The city still considered the area severely blighted, and designated it as the Hillside Neighborhood Urban Renewal Area, a site for slum clearance and public housing construction.

Constructed between 1948 and 1950, Hillside Terrace is in many ways more reminiscent of early PWA housing than much of the public housing constructed at the same time in other cities. Despite federal guidelines specifying that buildings be built in lines, typically at fifteen-degree angles to adjacent streets, the buildings of Hillside Terrace are organized around



Figure 17. Hillside Terrace and part of Hillside Terrace Addition. (Courtesy of HACM)

courtyards and maintain the same orientation as existing streets.⁸⁴ In addition, although the national trend was to construct rowhouses rather than apartments, the Hillside Terrace development had more apartments than rowhouses—even more than in Parklawn, which was constructed during an era when apartments were more popular nationally.⁸⁵

In keeping with national trends, Hillside Terrace employed a superblock design with roads only around the perimeter and pedestrian walkways connecting the buildings on the interior. Buildings covered roughly twenty-six percent of the site and the density—at thirty-nine units per acre—was almost twice that of Parklawn.⁸⁶

The buildings themselves were constructed of solid masonry faced with common brick. They were all very similar, each with a side-gabled roof, a lighter colored material between the windows, small entrance porches with flat roof canopies and trellis-like supports, and a water table. Twelve apartment buildings and eight combination three-story apartments and rowhouses contained forty-three one-bedroom units, ninety-six two-bedroom units, and forty-eight three-bedroom units. Five rowhouses and eight combination apartments and rowhouses contained three one-bedroom units, thirty-four two-bedroom units,

⁸⁴ National Housing Agency Federal Housing Authority, 30.

⁸⁵ Bowly, 201.

⁸⁶ Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Public Housing in Milwaukee*, 4th ed, 1966, 27.

and eight four-bedroom units. The total population of Hillside Terrace came to almost 800 people, and the density was around ninety-two people per acre.⁸⁷



Figure 18. Hillside Terrace apartments. (Milwaukee Public Library Photo Archives)

The predominantly black residents of Hillside Terrace enjoyed fewer amenities than Parklawn tenants. A central park of just over half an acre provided the only official recreation area, although city-owned Carver Park was nearby. Daycare was provided on-site, but Hillside Terrace lacked a community center like Parklawn. This absence of community facilities reflects the national trend in public housing during this era.

The construction of Hillside Terrace marked the beginning of a building spree for HACM. Its design is a bridge between Parklawn and the three subsequent veterans' permanent housing projects—Northlawn, Southlawn, and

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Berryland—and one low-income family development, Westlawn, all completed between 1950 and 1952.

Westlawn

Westlawn, constructed between 1950-1952, stands out in many ways from Milwaukee's other low-income family projects. HACM constructed Westlawn on an eighty-one acre site—a site twice as large as Parklawn and ten times the size of Hillside Terrace. At fourteen units per acre the density was also substantially lower than that of any past or future low-income projects, and site coverage was also the lowest at just sixteen percent. The population density, at approximately thirty-three people per acre, was also significantly less than Milwaukee's other low-income public housing. Housing roughly 2,600 residents, the population at Westlawn dwarfed HACM's other low-income family projects by around 1,000 people.⁸⁸

The site plan for Westlawn deviated from the superblock design that dominated public housing in both Milwaukee and the United States as a whole. While the street layout did deviate from the street grid of the surrounding neighborhoods, the streets ran in the same direction as neighborhood streets and the blocks in the development were roughly the same size as the

⁸⁸ Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Public Housing in Milwaukee*, 4th ed, 31, 23, 27, 31, 64.

surrounding city blocks. The project consisted of 149 wood-frame, brick-veneer, two-story rowhouses. Other than flat metal entrance canopies, the buildings



Figure 19. Westlawn housing project. (Courtesy of HACM)

displayed little ornamentation. Westlawn contained 181 one-bedroom units, 326 two-bedroom units, 181 three-bedroom units, and thirty-eight four-bedroom units, each with its own basement, heating system, washer and dryer, and private front and back yards. With the exception of the largest units, the bedrooms and bathroom were on the second floor. The units themselves were sized particularly generously for an HACM low-income project, and only Westlawn tenants enjoyed private basements, laundry, and heating systems.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Public Housing in Milwaukee*, 4th ed, 23, 27, 31.



Figure 20. Apartments in Westlawn. (Courtesy of HACM)

Westlawn's amenities, site plan, and appearance were much more similar to HACM's three veteran's permanent housing complexes than to the other low-income family housing projects in Milwaukee. The veterans' projects, like Westlawn, were located outside of the central city. The close proximity of the construction dates and their location on cheaper land may explain why Westlawn has more in common with Northlawn, Southlawn, and Berryland than the low-income family housing complexes built before and after it in Milwaukee.

Hillside Terrace Addition

HACM constructed Hillside Terrace Addition between 1954 and 1956. Similar to the original Hillside Terrace, which it was located adjacent to, buildings covered roughly twenty-one percent of the site. The density of the addition was twenty-six housing units per acre, down from thirty-nine units per acre at the original Hillside Terrace. However, with approximately 1,600 tenants the

population density of Hillside Terrace Addition was around 103 people per acre, higher than in the older part of the project.⁹⁰

It was laid out with a superblock design typical of public housing built during this period. Only one street ran through the development, a street that needed to be maintained in order to provide access to the privately owned St. John's Lutheran Church located within the project.

Like Hillside Terrace, the site plan for Hillside Terrace Addition was not in keeping with federal guidelines. The buildings were in line with existing streets and oriented around central courtyards. The exception was a group of buildings on the west side that were constructed at an angle in keeping with the existing street grid on that side.

Although the original plans for Hillside Terrace Addition called for four to six high-rises, a lack of space in the urban renewal zone forced HACM to reduce the plan to one.⁹¹ The eight-story high-rise of reinforced concrete and masonry construction housed sixty-four low-income married couples without children in one-bedroom apartments. Seventy-six two-story walk-up apartment buildings and ten two-story rowhouses housed low-income families with children. They contained 180 two-bedroom units, 124 three-bedroom units, twenty-eight four-bedroom units, and eight five-bedroom units.⁹²

⁹⁰ Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Public Housing in Milwaukee*, 4th ed, 27, 36, 64.

⁹¹ Marcoux.

⁹² Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Public Housing in Milwaukee*, 4th ed, 36.



Figure 21. Hillside Terrace Addition. (Courtesy of HACM)

The buildings were of wood frame construction and had side-gabled roofs. The façade of the first floor was brick veneer and the second floor was clad in asbestos siding. Front and back entrances had small, flat roof canopies with metal supports. Other than sidelights around the doors, there was virtually no other detailing.



Figure 22. Hillside Terrace Addition. (Courtesy of HACM)

While Hillside Terrace Addition enjoyed the distinction of remaining the largest and most populous development in the Hillside Neighborhood Urban Renewal Project, it was not the last.

Lapham Park

Built in 1963 and 1964, Lapham Park was the last public housing project constructed in the Hillside Neighborhood Urban Renewal Area, where it replaced 267 housing units classified as substandard.⁹³ Lapham Park's plan violated both existing height limitations and setback requirements, and it was approved as one of Milwaukee's first planned developments.⁹⁴ Its typical superblock site plan created a pedestrian only interior with the exception of driveways on the north and south sides that lead to two large interior parking lots

⁹³ Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Milwaukee Public Housing Report*, 1960, 6, 7.

⁹⁴ Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Application for A Fiscal Year 1995 HOPE VI Implementation Grant for Lapham Park Housing Development*, 13 April, 1995, 45, 46.

that served the entire project. Buildings were arranged in a modified courtyard plan and were in line with the existing street grid, except for the southwest quadrant where the buildings were oriented toward the diagonal street that marked the south-west border of the project.



Figure 23. Lapham Park. (Courtesy of HACM)

Buildings covered nineteen percent of the twelve-acre site. A density of thirty-one housing units per acre made Lapham Park the second densest low-income family project in the city in terms of units per acre. The actual population density of Lapham Park was roughly 120 people per acre, the highest of all of the low-income family projects in Milwaukee.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Public Housing in Milwaukee*, 4th ed, 43, 64.

An eight-story Y-plan apartment building, typical of high-rises of the era, dominated the east end of the site. This unornamented, reinforced concrete and masonry construction building contained 172 one-bedroom units and twenty-eight two-bedroom units. Two wings housed elderly people and one wing housed small families. Seventeen combination two- and three-story buildings and six two-story buildings contained 102 three-bedroom apartments, forty-eight four-bedroom apartments, and twenty five-bedroom apartments. The three-story sections were of masonry construction and the two-story sections and two-story buildings were of wood-frame, brick-veneer construction. Each building had small, flat, metal entrance canopies supported by plain metal posts, ribbon windows, and alternating bands of light and dark brick.⁹⁶



Figure 24. Low-income family apartments at Lapham Park. (Courtesy of HACM)

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Lapham Park was the last large-scale low-income family housing development constructed in Milwaukee. However, HACM recognized that there was still a great need for more apartments that, like Lapham Park, could accommodate families with many children.⁹⁷

Highland Park

Highland Park, located in the Kilbourntown No. 3 Urban Renewal Area, was HACM's last low-income family project. Although the majority of the units in the development were one-bedroom apartments for the elderly located in two twelve-story high-rises, fourteen two-story rowhouses which looked almost identical to those at Lapham Park housed fifty-six families in forty four-bedroom units and sixteen five-bedroom units. The ten-acre superblock had a comparatively low site coverage of just twelve percent. The development had no through streets but entrances on three sides of the project provided access to four interior parking lots. For the first time, HACM followed national guidelines and oriented the buildings somewhat diagonal to the existing street grid, although they were still organized around courtyards like previous public housing in Milwaukee.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ibid, 65.

⁹⁸ Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Community Housing in Milwaukee*, 6th ed, 1985, 16, 17.

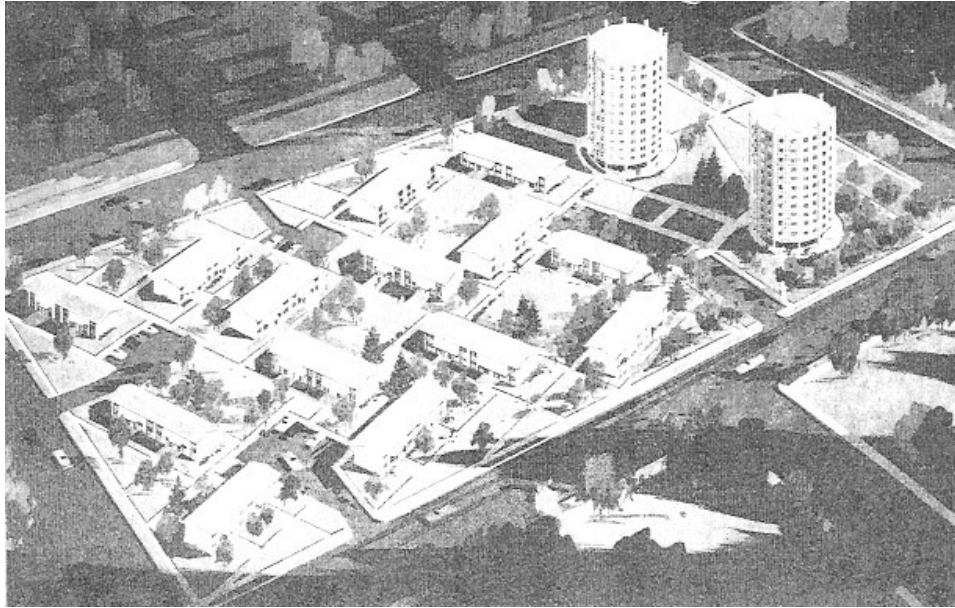


Figure 25. Model of Highland Park. (Courtesy of HACM)

Elderly and Scattered Site Housing

After Highland Park HACM concentrated on constructing elderly housing, and between 1961 and 1971 they built thirteen high-rise developments for elderly tenants. The need for elderly housing stemmed both from a projected increase in the low-income elderly population and from the large number of elderly people who lived in central city areas slated for slum clearance and highway construction.⁹⁹

To serve low-income families, HACM started a scattered-site housing program. By 1985 they managed 361 units consisting of both existing housing

⁹⁹ Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Public Housing in Milwaukee*, 4th ed, 52.

purchased by HACM and newly constructed homes. HACM also acquired eight houses and two duplexes from St. Luke's Hospital, which had purchased the homes to make room for expansion. HACM moved the homes in 1975 and created a small planned unit development called Southland Park.¹⁰⁰

No major changes were made to any of HACM's low-income family housing projects during the 1970s and 1980s other than the construction of additional community space and the conversion of some residential units to community uses. The buildings received minor alterations through maintenance, replacement of worn parts, and small revitalization programs. Like much of the public housing across the country, the projects in Milwaukee experienced increasing physical and social problems during these decades. Then the 1990s began a new chapter in Milwaukee's public housing program.

¹⁰⁰ Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Community Housing in Milwaukee*, 6th ed, 21, 22.

Overview of HACM Low-Income Family Projects

Project	# of Units	# of People	# of Acres	Units per Acre	People per Acre	Site Coverage
Parklawn	518	1,668	40	20	42	23%
Hillside Terrace	232	778	9	39	92	26%
Westlawn	726	2,670	81	14	33	16%
Hillside Terrace Addition	404	1,604	16	26	103	21%
Lapham Park	370	1,438	12	31	120	19%

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF MAJOR REVITALIZATION EFFORTS IN MILWAUKEE

By the 1990s much of the public housing in Milwaukee and other cities across the country was considered severely distressed by the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing. The distress came in the form of both physical decay and social problems, many of which were exacerbated by the original site plans. When Congress established the HOPE VI grant program in 1992, HACM maintained Milwaukee's tradition of interest in public housing by filing one of the first applications. To date, HACM has received HOPE VI grants for Hillside Terrace and Hillside Terrace Addition, Parklawn, Lapham Park, and Highland Park. HUD has awarded HACM more HOPE VI grants than any other housing authority, and Hillside Terrace enjoys the distinction of being the first HOPE VI project in the country to reach completion.

The following analysis of HACM's HOPE VI revitalization efforts reflects an attitude of compromise. HACM made changes that they believed would improve the lives of residents and that fit the requirements of the HOPE VI grant program. This analysis is written from the viewpoint that some changes are

necessary to keep public housing projects viable, but asserts that preservation issues should be carefully considered when making design changes.

Hillside Terrace and Hillside Terrace Addition

In 1993 HUD awarded HACM its first HOPE VI grant for rehabilitation of Hillside Terrace and Hillside Terrace Addition. At that time, these projects had the highest vacancy rates of all of HACM's developments. HACM used the grant to upgrade systems and fix many minor problems resulting from deferred maintenance. In addition, HACM made a number of major design changes



Figure 26. Hillside Terrace and Hillside Terrace Addition before revitalization.
(Courtesy of HACM)

with the goal of attracting “a broader economic mix of residents to create more diversity among public housing residents, enhance the appearance of public housing, and develop units that are more consistent with the neighborhood.”¹⁰¹

Many of the design changes also addressed specific problems. Originally, just one street ran through the southern portion of Hillside Terrace Addition. Because of this superblock design, “residents had limited access to buildings and emergency responders, such as firefighters and police, were delayed. Curbside garbage collection was nearly impossible; and isolated areas sheltered drug activity.”¹⁰² These are typical problems in distressed public housing and the HOPE VI application requires housing authorities to address them. HACM devised a plan that called for the demolition of six buildings to make way for three new through streets.

The addition of through streets eliminated a major character-defining feature of public housing—the superblock. Although the only viable solution to the aforementioned problems was to break up the superblock, HACM could have chosen to lay the streets in a way that created the least disruption of the historic character of the site. HACM chose a route that required minimal demolition of buildings and essentially re-created the original street grid. It is fortunate that the maximum number of buildings were maintained, yet

¹⁰¹ Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, “Urban Revitalization Demonstration Implementation Grant Application for Hillside Terrace,” 24 May, 1993, 4.

¹⁰² Planning Council for Health and Human Services, “HOPE VI Evaluation of Hillside Terrace,” 7 March, 2000, 11.

reestablishment of the street grid substantially changed the feel of the site. While HACM successfully reached its goals of facilitating traffic circulation and reducing the isolation of the development, the historic integrity of the site was eroded.

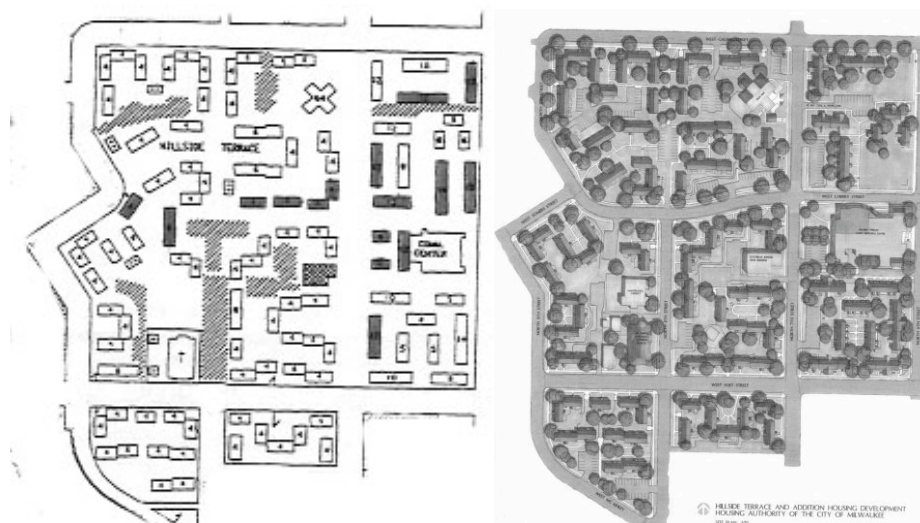


Figure 27. Hillside Terrace and Hillside Terrace Addition before and after HOPE VI revitalization- dark buildings were demolished. (Courtesy of HACM)

Another goal of the Hillside Terrace HOPE VI revitalization was to “reduce density, [and] increase open land for recreational use...by deprogramming and razing 15 buildings.”¹⁰³ HACM chose to demolish ten of the twenty-five historic original Hillside Terrace buildings and six of the eighty-six Hillside Terrace Addition buildings. While demolition is obviously incompatible with preservation, because HOPE VI requires density reduction, HACM cannot be completely condemned for demolishing buildings. However, HACM could have combined some units to

¹⁰³ Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, “Urban Revitalization Demonstration Implementation Grant Application for Hillside Terrace,” 24 May, 1993, 4.

make larger units that would attract higher-income residents. Because of the smaller number of buildings in Hillside Terrace, demolition of these buildings had a greater impact on the historic integrity of the site. HACM could have chosen to protect the integrity of Hillside Terrace by reducing density in the larger Hillside Terrace Addition, where the impact of demolition would have been less than in the smaller project. Perhaps if HACM had gone through the Section 106 review process it might have created a plan that achieved the same goals but was less detrimental to the historic nature of Hillside Terrace.

HACM made major changes to the appearance of both Hillside Terrace and Hillside Terrace Addition by removing the original small, flat-roofed porches and replacing them with larger, gable-roofed porches. They also added large fire escapes to Hillside Terrace in order to comply with current building codes. HACM could have built smaller, less noticeable fire escapes, but it instead opted for large fire escapes with usable porches. Although these additions substantially changed the appearance of the buildings and further eroded the project's integrity, residents use these porches and it would have been difficult to come up with an equally effective but less detrimental solution.



Figure 28. Fire escape and porches added as part of HOPE VI revitalization. (Courtesy of HACM)

Hillside Terrace Addition was built with small, flat-roofed front porches and small back balconies. The original flat roofs created drainage problems and caused the concrete slabs to crack. HACM chose to replace them with detailed, colorful, gabled roofs in order to solve the drainage problems and “improve the appearance of the buildings.”¹⁰⁴ The new back balconies are similar to the originals but are larger and more colorful and they successfully provide adequate space for recreation while preserving the historic character of the buildings. The new front porches have greatly altered the appearance, however they are clearly a recent addition and will not cause confusion about whether or not they are original. A possible solution that the Section 106 review process might have produced would have been to add drainage systems to the front porches and otherwise preserve them while sensitively improving the back balconies for residents’ use. Because of the buildings’ arrangement

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 11.

around courtyards, many of the buildings do not front streets and encouraging residents to use back balconies would be equally effective at facilitating social interaction.



Figure 29. Front and back porches at Hillside Terrace Addition before and after HOPE VI revitalization. (Courtesy of HACM)

HACM also constructed a new community building in Hillside Terrace that houses many service organizations for residents. One original apartment building

was adaptively reused and two small buildings were demolished. The design of the new building is relatively good because it is obviously new and does not create a false sense of history. However, its curved lines are not consistent with the geometry of historic public housing buildings and site design.



Figure 30. Community building added during HOPE VI revitalization. (Courtesy of HACM)

As a result of the HOPE VI revitalization Hillside Terrace and, to a lesser extent, Hillside Terrace Addition, are barely recognizable as public housing. While this is a victory for HACM, a historic resource was virtually lost and neither project is currently eligible for the National Register because of lack of integrity. The Section 106 review process might have helped save some of the Hillside Terrace's buildings and might possibly have prevented the replacement of Hillside Terrace Addition's front porches, but many of the design changes were necessary to solve design flaws and their inclusion in the revitalization plan was inevitable.

Parklawn

As a PWA-era public housing complex, Parklawn was arguably HACM's most historically significant and architecturally interesting project. Like most PWA projects, it was well-designed and constructed. However, years of deferred maintenance and intensive use left the project in a state of decay and crime had become a major issue.



Figure 31. Parklawn shortly before HOPE VI revitalization. (Courtesy of HACM)

HACM identified the project's major problems as "its deteriorated utility systems, its physical and social isolation from its surroundings, and its residents' concerns about personal safety." Despite Parklawn's problems, HACM wrote that "[u]nlike some public housing developments that cannot be effectively revitalized without 100% demolition, Parklawn, HACM strongly believes, can be successfully and much less expensively transformed with a strategic mixture of partial demolition and new construction, selective renovation, site redesign, and an aggressive self-sufficiency program." HUD awarded HACM a \$34 million HOPE VI grant for Parklawn's revitalization in 1998.

HACM clearly recognized the importance of Parklawn's history, and many of the elements of the revitalization plan reflect this understanding. However, although Parklawn was almost certainly eligible for the National Register, HACM did not go through the Section 106 process, and many of the changes made using the HOPE VI grant damaged the historic character of the project unnecessarily.

HACM felt that the superblock site plan "cuts the development off from its surroundings, makes access within the site difficult, and contributes to residents' feeling unsafe." They proposed the addition of through streets as a way to mitigate all of these problems, specifically by allowing parking closer to units, reducing indefensible space, encouraging activity, and allowing access for emergency vehicles. The addition of interior streets also allows non-Parklawn

residents easy access to the new YMCA and Central City Cyber School located in the interior of the project.¹⁰⁵



Figure 32. HOPE VI site plan for Parklawn with through streets. (Courtesy of HACM)

While superblock site design is a key character-defining element of historic public housing and is therefore an important aspect of integrity, it was a problematic feature for Parklawn. Since the creation of through streets was necessary to remedy many problems and to receive a HOPE VI grant, it was an inevitable change. In this case the street reconnection does not substantially alter the feel of the sight, and although both residents and outsiders can now travel by car or bike through the middle of the project, the odd street pattern

¹⁰⁵ Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, "Urban Revitalization Demonstration Implementation Grant Application for Parklawn," 1997, 16.

prevents through site lines and preserves the atmosphere of being in the middle of a large housing complex.

Unfortunately, to create the north-south street HACM demolished the central heating plant and all eight flat-roofed apartment buildings, formerly known as widows' housing. This demolition is particularly problematic because every single building of that type is now gone. It would have been possible to solve the circulation, safety, and isolation problems either without demolishing any buildings or, depending on the required right-of-way size, by demolishing just two buildings. The following figure shows a possible route for a street that goes through the widows' housing parking lot and courtyard and around the heating plant.

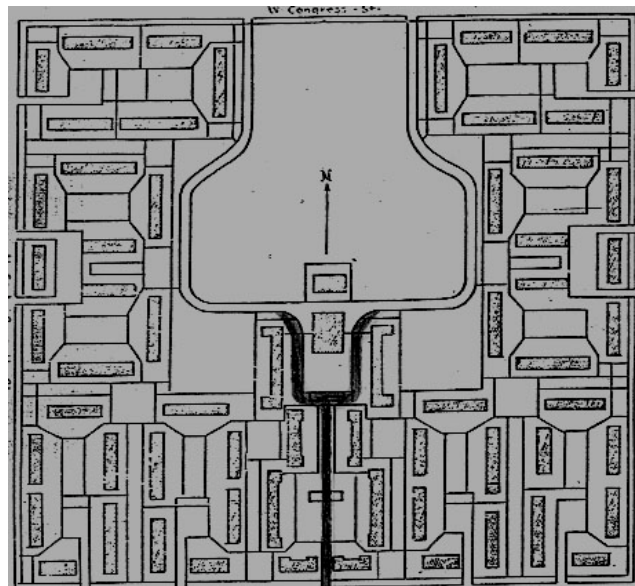


Figure 33. Author's suggestion for alternative street route for Parklawn shown with dark line.

However, creation of a through street was not the only reason HACM chose to demolish the widows' housing. HACM called the buildings the "densest and least attractive housing on the site" as well as "obsolete" and filled with "disruptive tenants." While the widows' housing was the densest, 138 units in eight two-story apartment buildings did not represent a high density by public housing standards. HACM's claims of obsolescence stemmed from problems they had in finding responsible tenants for the small units, which resulted in many "young individuals, a number of whom are involved in illegal activity" occupying the apartments.¹⁰⁶

These problems could have been creatively solved without demolishing the buildings. The apartments could have been reconfigured into larger units, which would have increased their marketability and eliminated the necessity of renting to problem tenants. In terms of appearance, although the widows' housing lacked the peaked roofs favored by HACM, their varied window pattern and water table helped them blend in with the smaller surrounding buildings. With the restoration of windows similar to the originals and landscaping, the widows' housing could have looked even less institutional.

However, a goal of both HOPE VI and HACM is to create homeownership opportunities and mixed-income communities. HACM used the space created by demolition of the widows' housing to construct 20 single-family homes that were sold to Milwaukee families. This helped bring a bigger mix of incomes to

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Parklawn and increased homeownership in the neighborhood. While these are excellent achievements, both were attainable without demolition. HACM could have combined the apartment units to create larger condominiums, and high-quality fixtures and flooring could have increased their marketability. At a cost most likely much less than demolition and construction of new homes, the widows' housing could have provided even more opportunities for homeownership than the detached housing that replaced it, while at the same time retaining historic resources. This is the kind of solution that might have come out of the Section 106 review process, and, perhaps in part because the review was not completed, historic resources were unnecessarily lost.



Figure 34. New homes constructed in Parklawn. (Courtesy of HACM)

Another site design change HACM made at Parklawn was the reconfiguration of the identical, rectangular parking lots located in each courtyard. The lot shape was left “as is” in the original HOPE VI application but different, organic designs for each courtyard were constructed.¹⁰⁷



Figure 35. Parking lots at Parklawn before and after HOPE VI revitalization. (Courtesy of HACM)

An advantage of the new lot shapes is to allow vehicles closer access to the apartments which front the mews. However, many residents now have smaller backyards than they had previously. Since the original parking lots did not create or contribute to any social problems, the lots did not need to be

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

changed to a shape inconsistent with the original geometric site design of Parklawn. This is the kind of subtle preservation issue that a housing authority, no matter how good their intentions, would likely overlook. Because Parklawn residents received only minor advantages and many are also at a disadvantage due to the lot redesign, this is a place where the Section 106 review process may have convinced HACM to preserve the original design.

The final site design change HACM made as part of the HOPE VI revitalization was the shape and position of the front sidewalks for the units facing the mews. The original design contained two parallel sidewalks, each one fairly close to the front doors. These sidewalks were removed and replaced by a single, meandering sidewalk in each mew.



Figure 36. Sidewalks at Parklawn before and after HOPE VI revitalization. (Courtesy of HACM)

While the original design did not cause crime or any other major problems, it was somewhat problematic. The dual sidewalk design made it

necessary to walk through the grass to visit neighbors across the mew, which caused wear on the grass and made circulation difficult in the winter when the ground was covered in snow. Having a single sidewalk not only improved circulation but also created space for larger front porches and gave residents more private space. The drawback of the new meandering sidewalk design is that it is not in keeping with the order and straight lines that were a character-defining feature of historic public housing. A compromise sidewalk solution could have been to construct a single straight sidewalk, which would have solved circulation and yard space problems while preserving the historic character. Like changing the shape of the parking lots, this is the kind of design change that HACM likely did not realize eroded the historic integrity of Parklawn. If the Section 106 process had been completed, a compromise that both respected the character of the site while solving the problems the original design could likely have been reached.

When built, Parklawn had a large central park that consisted primarily of greenspace for recreation and was also the location of the community building. In 1996 the park became the site of a new YMCA, and in 2000 the Central City Cyber School and a new maintenance building were also added. While adding new buildings clearly changes the historic site design, HACM placed these buildings in a place where they were minimally detrimental to the historic character of Parklawn. The park and community building have always been the

central gathering places in Parklawn, and the new buildings simply reinforce this location as the focal point of community life.



Figure 37. Park at Parklawn before and after HOPE VI revitalization. (Courtesy of HACM)

For the most part, the design of the buildings themselves is fairly good from a preservation perspective. The YMCA and Cyber School are clearly new and do not create a false sense of history, although two drawbacks of their design are the asymmetry and curved lines, both of which are design elements that deviate from the symmetry and straight lines characteristic of historic public

housing. The design of the new maintenance building is a bit problematic because its similarity to the original community building could easily confuse people into thinking it was part of the original project. HACM left the original community building, and although many of its fine details were lost over the years, HACM has expressed interest in restoring it to its original appearance.¹⁰⁸



Figure 38. Parklawn community building before and after alterations. (Courtesy of HACM)

Overall, the new buildings provide great services for both Parklawn residents and the neighborhood. Because their detriment to the historic integrity of Parklawn is minimal, they are an appropriate addition to the project.

¹⁰⁸ Marcoux.

As part of the HOPE VI rehabilitation HACM created Monument Park, located on part of the original WPA park and recreation area. Monument Park is home to two restored WFAP statues by local sculptor Karl Kahlich, originally located in a courtyard at Parklawn. The park also contains a bridge constructed



Figure 39. WFAP statue in Monument Park at Parklawn. (Courtesy of HACM)

with limestone salvaged from a nearby WPA-built retaining wall. A 1937 time capsule found during demolition of the heating plant and a 2000 time capsule are each buried under dated markers. There is also a gazebo, playground, and benches; and storyboards and plaques explain the history of public housing in the United States from its origins to the HOPE VI program. The unique combination of recreational amenities, historic artifacts and educational markers make Monument Park an excellent space for Cyber School students, Parklawn residents, and neighborhood kids.



Figure 40. Monument Park at Parklawn. (Courtesy of HACM)

Small, flat-roofed porches are a common feature of public housing, and although the architecture of Parklawn is more traditional than typical public housing projects, it still had the same characteristic front porches. HACM chose to demolish these original small front porches and to replace them with larger porches with gabled and hipped roofs.



Figure 41. Parklawn in 1948 with original flat porch roofs. (Courtesy of HACM)



Figure 42. Parklawn with gabled porch roofs after HOPE VI rehabilitation. (Photo by author) (Courtesy of HACM)

One of HACM's goals was to design new porches that would "complete and complement both the historic and newly constructed structures."¹⁰⁹ However, attempting to "complete" a historic building is like rewriting history from a later viewpoint. Parklawn was designed with porches typical of public housing of its era, and whether the architects wanted the project to have these porches or they were mandated by the PWA, the porches were undeniably a significant part of Parklawn's design. Even if the architects' intentions for Parklawn to have gabled porches were documented, constructing them at a later date creates a false sense of history. HACM did understand Parklawn's historical significance, but unfortunately they did not understand how to preserve it.

Another goal HACM hoped to achieve with a new porch design was to "visually unify the development with the neighborhood" by "using a vocabulary of porch forms found in the area."¹¹⁰ Because the majority of the homes in the neighborhood that grew up around Parklawn in the 1940s have either no porch or a small porch, the original metal canopies with trellises were not terribly unlike the porches on surrounding homes. Parklawn's new gabled porches actually make it look more "traditional" than the rest of the neighborhood.

HACM was also hoping to "soften" Parklawn's borders. An inexpensive, effective, and historically sensitive way to accomplish this goal would have

¹⁰⁹ Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, application for "Congress of New Urbanism Charter Awards," 2004, 3.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

been to restore the original landscaping. A 1948 photo shows ivy on the buildings, attractive shrubs, ornamental trees, and shade trees. Restoring these elements would have been far less expensive than constructing new porches and would have enhanced Parklawn's historic character while achieving the same goal.

HACM also hoped to encourage interaction between Parklawn residents and passersby by building "generous front porches."¹¹¹ However, because of the way the buildings are oriented in relation to the surrounding neighborhood, for the most part Parklawn's front porches do not face other residences, so chances for neighborly interaction are reduced. Along Parklawn's south border are the sides of houses and alleys entrances. The border of the north side is a park, and a multi-lane boulevard runs along the east. Only the buildings on the west side face the fronts of houses from across a residential street. Perhaps this explains why the majority of front porches in Parklawn appear unused.

A different solution, with both historic preservation and social benefits, would have been to enlarge the back porches to encourage more use. The shed roofs could have easily been enlarged to a usable size without changing the historic character of the development. Because the back porches face courtyards, every unit would have neighbors in close proximity. The front porches could have been restored to their original design, thus preserving an important

¹¹¹ Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, "Urban Revitalization Demonstration Implementation Grant Application for Parklawn," 1997, 17.

part of Parklawn's historic character while still encouraging social interaction and providing residents with private space for recreation.

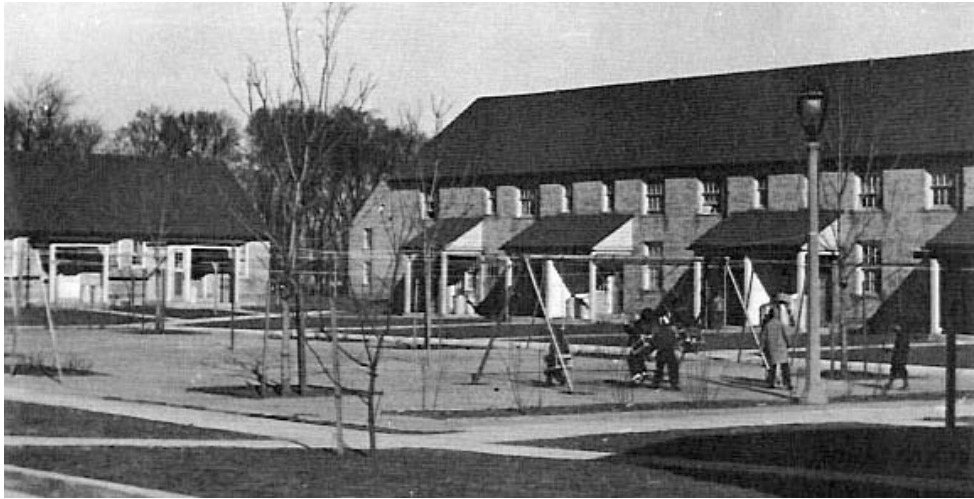


Figure 43. Back porches at Parklawn before and after HOPE VI rehabilitation. (Milwaukee Public Library Photo Archives) (Photo by Author)

One of Parklawn's more interesting building details was the red concrete roof tile which gave the appearance of clay. Unfortunately, HACM felt that the roofs were beyond repair and replaced them with asphalt shingles. While it is a shame that these unique roofs could not practically be maintained or replaced

with reproductions, red asphalt shingles are a practical, period-accurate choice.

Other details lost at Parklawn were the original six-over-six double-hung sash windows with sidelights, which were replaced prior to the major HOPE VI overhaul and were not replaced again as part of HOPE VI rehabilitation.¹¹² When the current windows become deteriorated they should be replaced with historically accurate modern reproductions. The original windows were of a much more traditional and decorative style than the current windows, and replacing them would not only help restore Parklawn to its historic appearance but would also do a great deal to lessen the institutional feel of the project and help it blend in with the neighborhood.

While the rehabilitation of Parklawn provided many improvements for residents, a number of the changes did unnecessary damage to the historic integrity of the project. Had the Section 106 review process been completed HACM could have accomplished many of the goals of revitalization in ways that not only maintained the historic fabric but would have also been significantly less expensive.

¹¹² Ibid, 10.

Lapham Park

HACM first applied for a HOPE VI grant for the revitalization of Lapham Park in 1995. The original application called for the demolition of three buildings containing twenty-eight units, the addition of a through street, replacement of existing flat porch roofs with larger gabled roofs, and other minor improvements.



Figure 44. Lapham Park before demolition and its HOPE VI replacement, Townhomes at Carver Park. (Courtesy of HACM)

The application was denied, but in 2000 HACM reapplied. This time HUD awarded HACM an \$11.3 million HOPE VI grant for demolition of all twenty-three two- and three-story apartment buildings and construction of fifty-one new units in townhouses, which are called Townhomes at Carver Park. The eight-story high-rise for the elderly was rehabilitated using other funding sources.¹¹³

Lapham Park, built in 1963-1964, was just thirty-seven years old when it was demolished. Because of its age alone it would not have been eligible for the National Register and the Section 106 process. Even if it had been historic its demolition would not have been a terrible loss. The demolished buildings in Lapham Park were similar to those of Westlawn and the veteran's developments of Northlawn, Southlawn, and Berryland, all of which HACM plans to maintain.¹¹⁴

Highland Park

In 2002 HACM received another HOPE VI grant of \$19 million for the demolition of all fourteen rowhouses for low-income families in Highland Park. Plans are to replace them with sixteen townhouses and thirty homes that will sell at market rate. HACM obtained additional funding for the demolition of both high-rise towers for the elderly and disabled and will replace them with a mid-rise apartment building. Its rowhouses looked similar to those at Lapham Park

¹¹³ Planning Council for Health and Human Services, "HOPE VI Evaluation of Townhomes at Carver Park," 20 June, 2001.

¹¹⁴ Marcoux.

and its high-rises resembled those at four other HACM properties. The high-rises did have one interesting architectural feature, a brick pattern resembling a series of stick-figures which will be preserved in some form on the site.¹¹⁵ Like Lapham Park, Highland Park was not eligible for the National Register, and its demolition does not represent a historic resource loss.

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that HACM created plans for revitalization of Hillside Terrace and Parklawn without the expertise of the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). Even the best-intentioned rehabilitator can easily make misguided attempts at historically sensitive rehabilitation, as was the case with Parklawn. HACM failed to recognize Hillside Terrace as a historic resource, although its importance never approached that of Parklawn. In both cases, preservation experts from the SHPO who have a greater understanding of which characteristics of historic public housing are most important could have helped HACM craft plans that would have solved design flaws in a manner that caused minimal damage to the historic integrity of the sites.

¹¹⁵ Department of City Development for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, *Community Housing in Milwaukee*, 6th ed, 16.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE PUBLIC HOUSING REVITALIZATION PROJECTS

Preservationists must understand that, as administrators of public housing complexes, HUD and local housing authorities exist to provide safe and sanitary housing to low-income persons. Given its limited financial resources, HUD set up the HOPE VI program to encourage local housing authorities to make changes that HUD believes are most likely to help alleviate the social problems of public housing, and local housing authorities also use other funding sources to achieve the same goals as the HOPE VI program.

Unfortunately, many key design elements of historic public housing such as superblock site plans, lack of usable porches and absence of private outdoor spaces negatively impact the quality of life of public housing residents. If no design changes are made, there is little hope that the social problems that plague public housing can be remedied. Because of these factors, the best preservation strategy is to understand what kind of changes HUD and local housing authorities want to make and why, and to suggest changes that preserve as much of the historic integrity of the projects as possible, while still

addressing the problems exacerbated by the original design. Preservationists must concede to enough substantial changes to allow public housing projects to successfully serve their residents, or eventually the projects will be completely demolished.

Specific Design Suggestions

Different types of public housing present different preservation challenges. The following suggestions for dealing with changes commonly proposed for public housing projects are primarily for rowhouses and walk-ups, although some of them apply to mid- and high-rises as well.

While superblock site design is undeniably a defining characteristic of public housing, it is also problematic. The problems associated with it-facilitating criminal activity, isolating residents from the surrounding neighborhoods, hindering access for emergency vehicles- are all serious quality-of-life issues that are remedied with the addition of through streets.

In order to retain the maximum amount of integrity, the streets should be added in ways that preserve as much of the historic fabric and feel of the site as possible. This means that demolition should be minimized, and when it is required, buildings that are of lesser architectural and historical importance should be selected.

It is also important to preserve as much of the feeling associated with the superblock site design as possible. This means avoiding the creation of sight lines through the project and could include imitating the design of existing footpaths. Parklawn provides a good example of a project where the addition of through streets did not substantially alter the feel of the site. In contrast, the streets added to Hillside Terrace and Hillside Terrace Addition are nearly in line with the original street grid, and, as a result, the projects no longer retain the superblock feel.

The lack of parking near many units is an issue related to the superblock site design. While this is viewed as an inconvenience and causes some safety concerns, the provision of parking near units is not so crucial as to justify demolishing historic buildings or making other substantial changes to any historically important site elements. However, in some cases parking can be added in places where it does not substantially affect the integrity of the site. Another possible solution is to create more on-street parking opportunities when through streets are added.

The high densities of many public housing projects are cited as problematic, and demolition of existing units is the solution typically proposed. Demolition can cause significant damage to the integrity of a project and should be avoided whenever possible. Some demolition is likely to occur when through streets are added, and this will reduce density. Rather than demolishing additional units, some units could be decommissioned and used to house social

service organizations added as part of the HOPE VI program. This would save housing authorities the cost of constructing new buildings for these organizations while helping maintain the integrity of the housing complex. Signage and the addition of a unique roof or trim color would help identify these buildings as service buildings. Another solution to the density issue goes hand-in-hand with the goal of increasing the income mix in public housing projects. Smaller units could be combined to create larger units, and by adding more amenities the units would attract more affluent renters. Some of these units could even be sold as condominiums.

In an effort to increase activity and provide additional amenities to residents, housing authorities are removing the characteristic small, flat porch roofs and replacing them with larger, gabled roofs. Residents do need more private space for recreation, and this provides a redesign challenge. In some cases, such as Parklawn and Hillside Terrace Addition, easy and sensitive alterations could make back porches just as useful as new front porches. In cases where this is not possible, small front porch canopies could be replaced with larger ones that were still flat. This would preserve the original design intent while adapting the spaces to better meet the needs of residents.

Housing authorities also propose to change porches in an effort to reduce the somewhat institutional feel of many public housing complexes and visually integrate them with surrounding neighborhoods. Although adding large, gabled porch roofs does make the buildings more compatible with current architectural

tastes and provides residents useful space for recreation, this seriously erodes the integrity of the buildings. As the historic photo of Parklawn illustrated, plantings can easily make up for the starkness of the design while still keeping true to the original architecture of the project. Other possible changes to buildings which would be highly effective in reducing the monotony often associated with public housing but would not do permanent damage to the integrity include the addition of different colored roofs, doors, porches, and trim. This strategy effectively minimized the monotony of mill villages and could work for public housing projects as well.

Possible Educational Efforts

While preservationists involved in the Section 106 review process would likely make suggestions similar to the ones in this chapter, most housing authorities will make changes without going through a Section 106 review and will therefore never hear them. Housing authorities often skip the process altogether by revitalizing projects just before they become eligible for the National Register or by making changes using non-federal funding sources.

If preservationists are truly serious about protecting historic public housing, they must make a grassroots educational effort. This could take the form of a booklet sent to housing authorities that contains suggestions, examples of “best

practices," and contact information for SHPOs or other agencies which could give professional guidance. While it would likely be received with apathy, some housing authorities, like HACM, clearly do understand the historical importance of public housing and may utilize the suggestions. Without direct preservation efforts public housing units will continue to be demolished or insensitively altered, and although "public housing has become a deeply embedded artifact of American culture,¹¹⁶ an important part of the urban landscape in most American cities will be permanently lost.

¹¹⁶ Lawrence J. Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2000), p. 1

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