

HARLEM RIVER HOUSES, 151st to 153rd Streets, Macombs Place to Harlem River Drive, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1936-37 for the United States Government and the New York City Housing Authority; Chief Architect Archibald Manning Brown in association with Charles F. Fuller, Horace Ginsbern, Frank J. Foster, Will Rice Amon, Richard W. Buckley, John Louis Wilson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2037, Lot 11, and Tax Map Block 2020, Lot 1.

On July 22, 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Harlem River Houses and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses, (including a representative from New York City Housing Authority), spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Historical Significance

Harlem River Houses, the first federally-funded, federally-built, and federally-owned housing project in New York City, was begun early in 1936 and completed in 1937. It was an example of the early collaboration between the New York City Housing Authority and the Federal Government. Consisting of three separate groups of four- and five-story buildings, the project was "a recognition in brick and mortar of the special and urgent needs of Harlem."

The need for government-sponsored housing in urban areas, especially to aid lower-income groups, had been long recognized by concerned architects and social critics in the United States. Successful experiments in government housing had been carried out since the turn of the century in Great Britain, Holland, Germany, Austria, and Scandinavia; many projects had been designed by distinguished architects. Many people wondered why the United States government could not do the same.

A shortage of urban housing, especially at affordable prices, was intensified by the Depression of the 1930s. Under the Hoover administration, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) had been established in 1932 with the purpose of advancing funds to limited-dividend corporations to enable them to construct housing. Knickerbocker Village, a middle-income project on the Lower East Side, was financed in this way. Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the powers of the RFC were transferred in 1933 to the Housing Division of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works (FEAP), making possible the extension of loans to limited-dividend corporations for financing new construction, for the rehabilitation of low-cost housing, and for slum-clearance; the agency could make grants and loans to duly-established public bodies, such as city and state housing authorities, for the same purpose; and it could buy, condemn, sell, or lease property to develop new projects itself. Thus, the Roosevelt Administration recognized that low-income housing was a responsibility of government--despite bitter complaints by the building and real-estate interests that the government was encroaching on their domain. Government officials, such as FEAP Administrator Harold L. Ickes, effectively argued that private industry could not afford to build housing at affordable rents for the low-income sector.

New York City, through the jurisdiction of the New York City Housing Authority, had already begun its own experiment in low-cost housing in 1935 with the construction of First Houses--a designated New York City Landmark--on the Lower East Side, one of the city's most congested slum areas. Although financed through Housing Authority bonds, it used relief labor paid for through the Federal Government's "work-relief" program.

History of the Project

Harlem presented special problems. Although not as densely built up as the Lower East Side--only 60 percent of the total land area was used for residential purposes, and most residences were Old Law Tenements and one-and-two-family structures converted into rooming houses--the population density per acre was the highest in the city. At that time, Harlem's population, which was predominantly black, was confined by racial barriers only to renting in that area. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., had tried to provide the private-industry housing solution when he funded the "Dunbar Apartments," another designated New York City Landmark, completed in 1928. But at average prices of \$14.50 per room such cooperative apartments were far beyond the means of many Harlem residents.

Riots in Harlem in March 1935 and the subsequent hearings on conditions in Harlem by a committee appointed by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia to determine the causes of the riots, helped focus attention on Harlem's urgent housing needs.

In May of that year, Langdon W. Post, Commissioner of the New York City Housing Authority, asked the Federal Government for \$1,500,000 for low-cost housing and slum-clearance as part of a newly-enacted work-relief program. Mayor LaGuardia announced that the next model housing project built in New York City with Federal aid would be in West Harlem. In July, PWA Administrator Ickes announced that the PWA would pay for a \$4.7 million housing project in Harlem, but only if the city could acquire a site in thirty days by condemnation and convey it to the Federal Government for purchase on the same terms as those used for the Williamsburg Houses, another PWA project which was just getting under way.

Because of artificially inflated land values on built-up residential sites in Harlem the site chosen for the new housing project was a largely vacant area, located between 151st and 153rd Streets and Macombs Place and the Harlem River and bisected by Seventh Avenue. Most of the site was owned by the Empire Mortgage Company, one of the financial interests of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Both the PWA and the city tried to buy the site directly. Rockefeller refused to sell unless the city also acquired the Dunbar Apartments, which he then owned, and which were just one block south of the proposed housing project site. Rockefeller feared that he would lose tenants from the Dunbar Apartments to the new project. The city filed condemnation proceedings, and the owners were eventually awarded \$1,095,000.

Rockefeller was not the only one who had doubts about building on the proposed site. A number of objections were voiced because the new housing was not a slum-clearance project and threatened to bring more people to the area. However, the PWA and the Housing Authority felt that building new housing on vacant land would help alleviate some of the overcrowding in existing buildings and might possibly permit some of the worst buildings in the area to be demolished later. Other real-estate owners besides Rockefeller feared that the new housing would draw tenants away from their buildings, and the Real Estate Board asked that the Harlem project be open exclusively to persons of low income.

While condemnation proceedings were under way in 1935, the Housing Authority appointed a team of eight architects, headed by Archibald Manning Brown, to begin work on plans for the Harlem project. In an early instance of Federal and city cooperation, the Housing Authority provided complete plans and specifications for the PWA which then undertook construction.

Commissioner Post appointed a group of prominent Harlem citizens to serve on the Harlem Housing Committee which was to encourage local participation by offering recommendations to the Housing Authority on the new housing project. The committee members were: Walter N. White, author and secretary of the NAACP; Alan Dingle, president of the Harlem Lawyers Association; Mrs. Harriet Shedd Butcher of the Russell Sage Foundation; James Hubert, executive secretary of the New York Urban League; Mrs. Daisy Reed of Utopia House; Donelan J. Phillips, president of the Consolidated Tenants League; Mrs. Minnie Green, vice president of the Consolidated Tenants League; Dr. Edward T. Best; Dr. C.B. Powell; Francis E. Rivers; and Earl Brown.

Title to the property was transferred from the city to the Federal Government at the end of November 1935. The deed stipulated that the city must maintain a park and playground area bordering on the Harlem River for ten years. It also provided for the closing of portions of 151st, 152nd, and 153rd Streets.

After the architects completed the plans and specifications, bids for the construction of the foundations were announced in Nov. 1935. The contract was awarded to the Carlton Company of New York, and actual construction began early in 1936. Similarly, contracts for the erection of the Harlem River Houses superstructure were awarded to the Cauldwell-Wingate Company in May 1936. It should be noted in this connection that the Housing Division of the PWA chose those private contractors who employed workmen paid at the union scale in full, in keeping with the PWA goal of building housing projects in order to create employment and stimulate the building industry.

A ceremony to lay the first bricks of the Harlem River Houses and to mark the completion of the foundations was scheduled for Saturday, June 20, 1936. Mayor LaGuardia, Housing Authority Commissioner Post, and PWA Administrator Ickes laid the first three bricks and were the featured speakers. A number of prominent Harlem residents including Walter N. White of the Harlem Housing Association also spoke. In his remarks, Ickes predicted that the Harlem River Houses would set a new standard for housing in this country and would be a symbol of the Federal Government's renewed commitment to a program which would provide decent housing for low-income groups--the sort of housing that private enterprise could not afford to provide. A similar ceremony was held to commemorate the laying of the last brick on February 12, 1937.

From the beginning, it was planned that the Harlem River Houses would be operated by the New York City Housing Authority although ownership would be retained by the PWA. But in November 1936 the Housing Authority announced that it would not operate the project unless the maximum rents did not exceed \$7.50 per room. Arguing against projected rents of \$8.75 per room, Commissioner Post noted such rents would discriminate precisely against the lowest-income families who were supposed to benefit from the construction of such housing. The problem was resolved when the PWA set the rentals at \$7.10 per room, including heat and water. Rentals were determined according to a formula which would enable 55 percent of the cost of the project to be paid back to the Federal Government over a 60-year period and would also allow the project to pay its own maintenance and operating costs.

A one-year experimental lease--later renewed--transferring the Harlem River Houses from the PWA to the New York City Housing Authority was approved in May 1937. The lease was signed by Commissioner Post, with appropriate ceremonies on June 16, 1937, in the main courtyard of the Harlem River Houses. Special tribute was paid to President Roosevelt for having initiated government aid to housing low-income families.

The apartments were not actually ready for occupancy until September 1937. Of 11,500 applicants, only 574 families--about 1800 people--were chosen to live in the Harlem River Houses. The Housing Authority was deluged with applications shortly after construction of the project began, although formal application proceedings did not begin until early in 1937. The Harlem Housing Committee recommended that tenants be chosen on a point system based on their financial status, employment, size and relationship of family members, tenancy habits, accommodations at the time of application, and social desirability. Under the conditions of the George-Healy Act, set up to administer PWA projects, family income could not exceed five times the gross rental of the apartment, but guarantees of sufficient income were required. Family size was also restricted to no more than seven persons per apartment, and all apartment occupants had to be related.

All applicants were carefully interviewed and investigated by social workers under the direction of Mrs. H. Lumsden, director of Tenant Relations for the Housing Authority. Of the 574 families chosen, all were headed by American citizens. Most of them were unskilled and semi-skilled workers, with an average family income of \$1340, and over two-thirds of the occupants were adults. To prevent proliferation of slum conditions, the furniture of all tenants were fumigated before it was moved into the buildings. All the residents, as well as the entire staff of Harlem River Houses, were black.

Architectural Description and Significance

The Harlem River Houses project comprises an area of nine acres with land coverage of 30.16 percent. This was an unusually low figure compared to the 50 percent land coverage of the Dunbar Apartments or the 60 percent coverage that prevailed in most of Harlem in 1935. The population density of the project was 225 persons per acre. In addition to creating light, airy apartments--each room was on the outside--the low land coverage also allowed for generous landscaping of the site.

A team of architects--Archibald Manning Brown, Charles F. Fuller, Horace Ginsbern, Frank J. Forster, Will Rice Amon, Richard W. Buckley, and black architect John Louis Wilson--skillfully designed Harlem River Houses. Chief architect Brown (1881-1956) later originated plans for the Chelsea Houses and the Elliot Houses, both for the New York City Housing Authority. The recipient of a classical architectural education at Harvard and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Brown had a long-time interest in civic affairs as evidenced by a three-term membership on the board of the Municipal Art Commission. None of the architects were actually employees of the Housing Authority; all were members of private architectural firms who were assembled by the Housing Authority to design the project.

The arrangement of the buildings on the relatively spacious, but difficult trapezoidal site, bisected by Seventh Avenue (now Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Blvd), is extremely effective and drew high praise from architectural and urban design critics Talbot Hamlin and Lewis Mumford. Also complications were added by the terrain which slopes downward toward the southeast.

There were three separate groups of buildings--each group composed of Z-, T-, and L-shaped sections--two west of Seventh Avenue and one east. In the western section the two groups of buildings are arranged axially around a large plaza area, basically formal in plan and intersected by the area created by closing West 152nd Street, whereas a zig-zag is effected along Macombs Place where the sections are stepped back to follow the diagonal line of the street. The eastern section, which was designed in relation to the Harlem River, is a more rambling arrangement reflecting the east end of what would have been 152nd Street by a deep courtyard.

The red brick buildings, of four or five stories, which vary in height according to the slope of the site, are of a simple, straightforward design. Decorative details are added in the form of raised brick bandcourses at the bases of the buildings. Broad, steel-framed casement windows with horizontal hopper lights punctuate the wall surface. Stairshafts lit by narrow vertical windows rise above the entrances which are sheltered by flat-roofed porticoes.

Of the original 574 apartments, 60 had two rooms with kitchenette, 259 had three rooms, 232 had four rooms, and 23 had five rooms. Each apartment had electric refrigeration and lighting, steam heat, ample closet space, a tile bathroom and cross-ventilation. The apartment layouts emphasized privacy by permitting circulation from a foyer only through the kitchen or living room to the bedroom area. Further privacy and quiet were insured by the structural division of the buildings with no more than four apartments opening on any hallway.

In their overall plan for Harlem River Houses the architects were anxious to promote a sense of community, as well as to provide facilities that would specifically meet the needs of Harlem residents. This resulted in such features as a nursery school for the children of working mothers (a necessity since many heads of households were women), a health clinic, four social rooms for adults, four rooms for occupational use and children's inside play, and community laundries. The design of the buildings also resulted in ground floor space which could be used for stores on Seventh Avenue--another community service.

Landscaping, supervised by Michael Papuano, enhances the site. All courtyards are liberally planted with London plane trees and paved with Belgian blocks. Sculpture, executed by Heinz Warnecke with the assistance of T. Barbarossa, R. Barthe, and F. Steinberger, also adds to the attractiveness of the courtyards. In the eastern section is a statue of two bear cubs. Sculptured penguins are placed around a fountain basin in the center of the large plaza in the western section. At the southern end of the plaza is a statue of a black laborer, while a statue of a mother and child with a dog graces the northern end. Also skillfully incorporated into the plan is a natural amphitheater in the eastern section, and below that a playground, as the site slopes down toward the river.

Today the Harlem River Houses project remains one of the finest developments run by the New York City Housing Authority. Rents have, of course, risen over the years to an average of \$20.07 per room. There is still a strong sense of community, aided in part by the excellent overall physical planning.

When completed, Harlem River Houses was more than just a step toward solving the problem of housing that one-third of a nation which Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his Second Inaugural Address, described as "ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished." The hope was not only that Harlem River Houses would set a precedent for public housing across the country but would also provide an example which would help raise the housing standards of all classes. As Lewis Mumford writing in the New Yorker in 1938 so eloquently stated:

Here, in short, is the equipment for decent living that every modern neighborhood needs: sunlight, air, safety, play space, meeting space, and living space. The families in the Harlem Houses have higher standards of housing, measured in tangible benefits, than most of those on Park Avenue. By contrast every other section of the city is a makeshift, congested, disorderly, dismally inadequate.

This low-cost housing, so much needed in 1935, was a prime instance of cooperation between the city and the Federal Government. It opened the door to the continuation of such policy and the rotational reconstruction of Harlem, which, over the years, has resulted in the razing of many blocks of slums and their replacement by clean livable quarters for the residents.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Harlem River Houses is both historically and architecturally significant, that it was the first federally-funded, federally-built, and federally-owned housing project in New York City, that is an example of the early collaboration between the New York City Housing Authority and the Federal Government, that it was one of the first efforts undertaken by the Roosevelt Administration in recognition of the government's responsibility to provide low-income housing, that it was "a recognition in brick and mortar of the special and urgent needs of Harlem," that the Housing Authority actively involved Harlem citizens in the planning of the project including criteria for tenant selection, that the arrangement of the buildings on the difficult trapezoidal site was extremely effective drawing high praise from contemporary critics, that the courtyards and plaza are enhanced by handsome landscaping and sculpture, that the project has special facilities specifically designed to meet the needs of its residents, and that Harlem River Houses not only set a precedent for public housing across the country, but also offered features that could potentially raise the housing standards of all classes.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Harlem River Houses, 151st to 153rd Streets, Macombs Place to Harlem River Drive. Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 2037, Lot 11, and Tax Map Block 2020, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.