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Defying the Grid: A Retroactive Manifesto for the Culture of Decongestion

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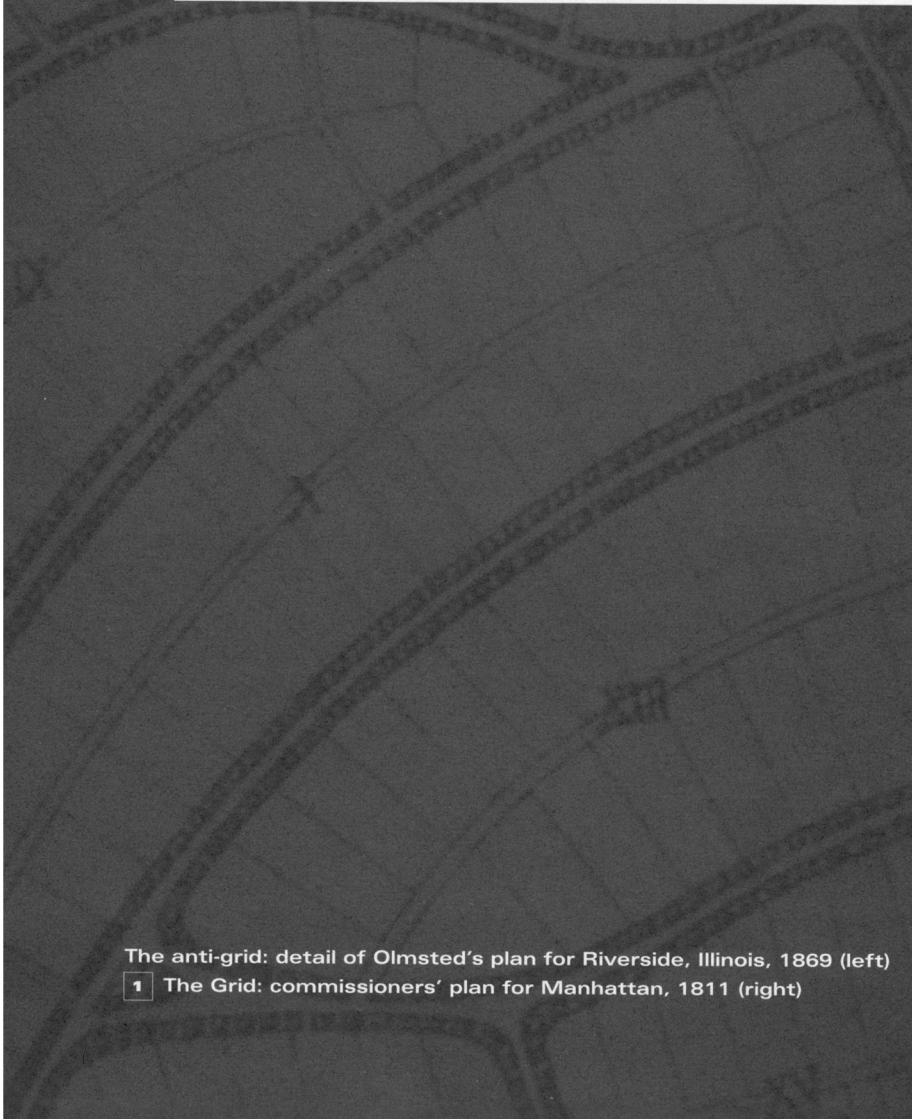
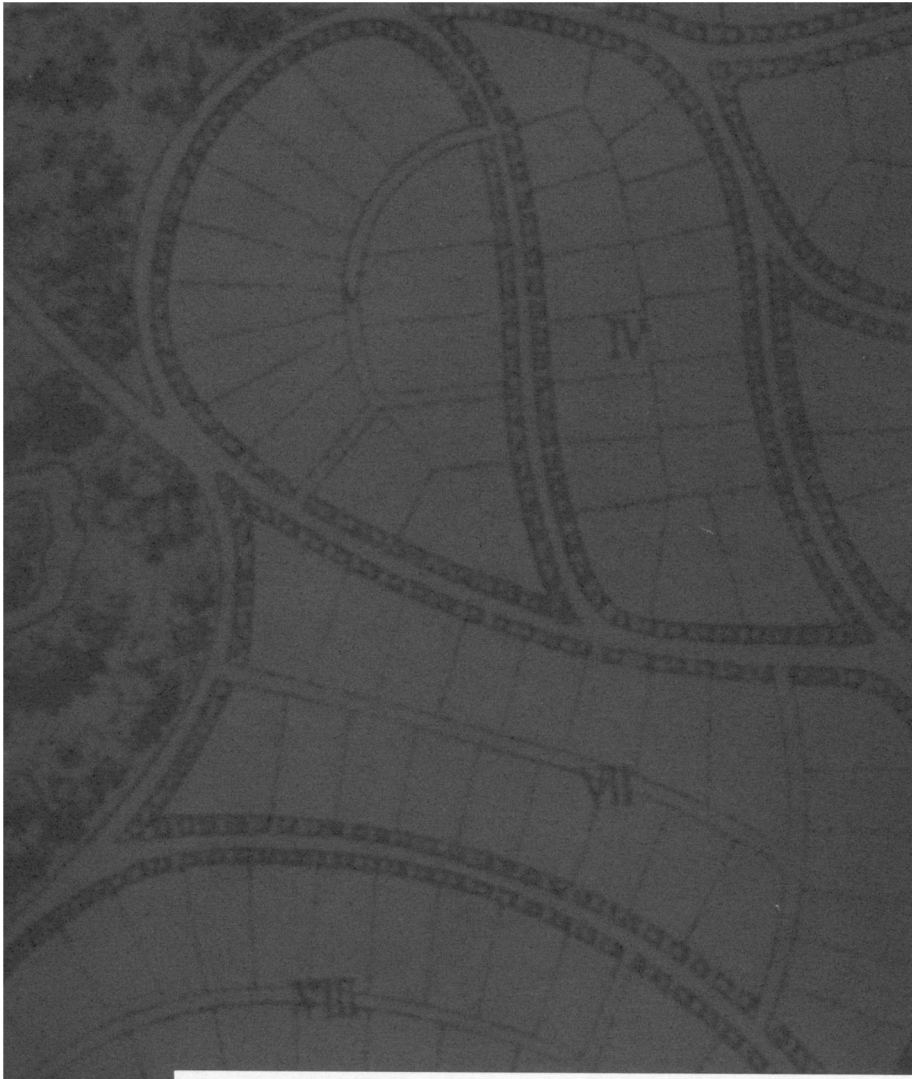
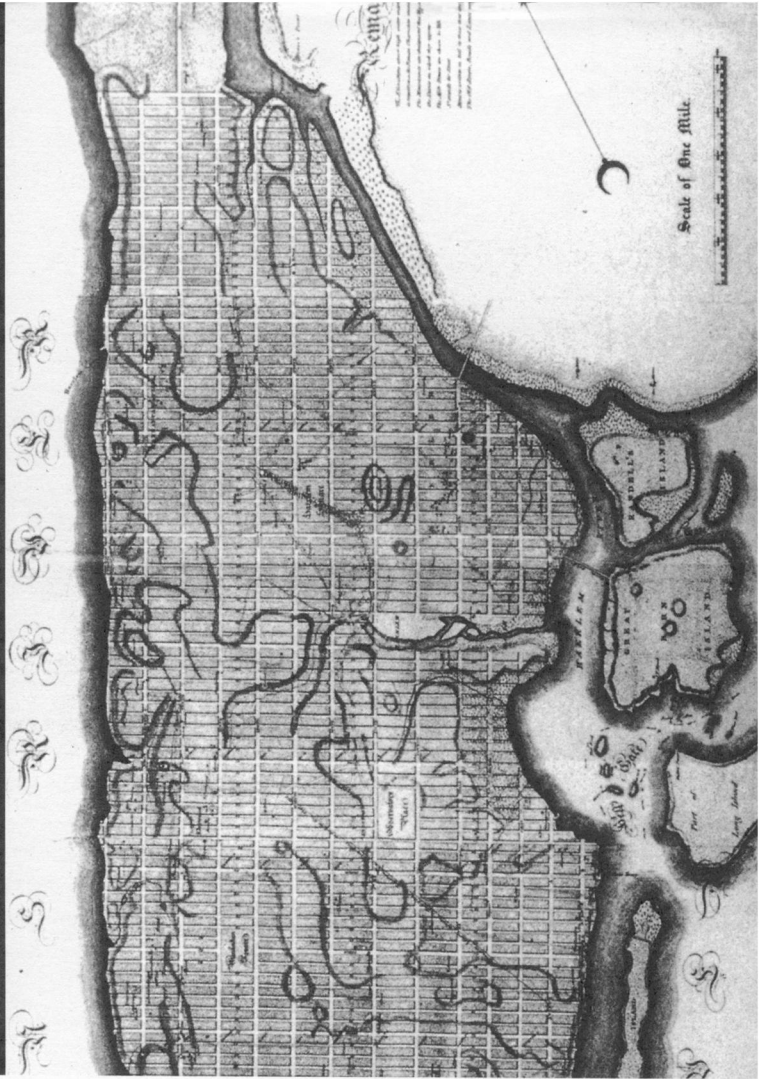
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**defying the grid**

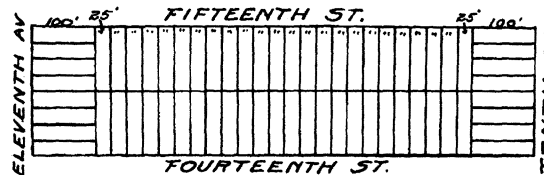
**a retroactive manifesto for**

The anti-grid: detail of Olmsted's plan for Riverside, Illinois, 1869 (left)

**1** The Grid: commissioners' plan for Manhattan, 1811 (right)



In *Delirious New York* Rem Koolhaas hypothesizes that Manhattan's Grid has, since 1811, been the overriding theoretical and practical influence on the development of the city of New York. <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> The Grid "[made] the history



<sup>2</sup> The Grid: typical New York City block, 1811

of architecture and all previous lessons of urbanism irrelevant," forcing not only the creation of new values and strategies of designing and building, but also the recognition of a new architectural control—the single block as the “maximum unit of urbanistic Ego.” Thus, Koolhaas argues, every individual architectural intention must be “realized fully within the limitations of the block.” Consequently, the city evolved as a “mosaic of episodes,” each representing a distinctive “form of human occupancy,” each “with its own particular life span,” and each confronting the other “through the medium of the Grid.”<sup>1</sup> By establishing the primacy of the Grid, Koolhaas situates it as the singular generative force which gave birth to the “culture of congestion” known as Manhattanism—that urban condition of hyper-density which asserted itself most expressively, though not exclusively, in New York City’s commercial skyscrapers, a group of structures which accounted for half of the nation’s tall buildings by 1929.<sup>2</sup> Contemporaneously, however, even as the towers of midtown and

## the culture of decongestion gabrielle esperdy

lower Manhattan, and of smaller urban cores across the country, were engaged in an intricate ballet of mass, bulk, and setback, an alternate drama was unfolding within the confines of the Grid. In this drama the protagonists were not high-rise offices, but low-rise dwellings, and the climax was not hyper-density, but its opposite. If *Delirious New York* serves as a “retroactive manifesto” for the culture of congestion, what follows here is a counter-manifesto, one which seeks to expose retroactively another equally significant enterprise born of the Grid, namely, the culture of decongestion.

Like its antipode, decongestion had an ambitious program. While “decongestion” may not have been explicitly named, it was coherently articulated in theory and practice. There exists an accumulation of evidence—of words, buildings, and site plans—as yet unconnected and an hypothesis as yet untested, both of which require the recuperation of the Grid not as a laboratory of congestion, as Koolhaas would have it, but as a laboratory of decongestion instead.

**the grid** Before the grid spawned its dueling urban American offspring of congestion and decongestion in the first half of the twentieth century, it had, of course, already existed as a dominant spatial construct for several millennia, from the ancient Egyptian worker village at El Kahun to the Hippodamos of Miletus to the foursquare towns of the Roman Empire to orthogonal urban design of the Renaissance. While the grid in the classical world undoubtedly expressed the rational social aspirations of democratic Athens, republican Rome or humanist Italy, it was in the New World that, as J.B. Jackson has noted, this particular settlement pattern acquired a decided ideological dimension and an obvious cultural significance.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, though the grid was imported from Europe early on, as the plans of Philadelphia (1683) and Washington, D.C. (1792) make clear, it was in the nineteenth century that the grid was nationalized and Americanized, becoming a normative tool for imprinting the doctrine of Manifest Destiny upon the expanding national landscape. This was especially true after the massive land acquisitions of the Northwest Territory and the Louisiana Purchase, requiring subdivision and settlement of so much raw, unincorporated acreage. The grid was thus platted both east and west of the Mississippi not only to exert rigid order and disciplinary con-

<sup>1</sup> Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (1978; rpt. New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), pp. 20-21. Koolhaas’ celebratory polemics color his arguments concerning the grid. For a more evenhanded approach which summarizes a number of critical positions on Manhattan’s grid, see Edward K. Spann, “The Greatest Grid: The New York Plan of 1811” in *Two Centuries of American Planning*, ed. Daniel Schaffer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 11-39.

<sup>2</sup> According to M. Christine Boyer, New York City possessed 188 of the 377 skyscrapers standing in the U.S. in 1929. See Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> J.B. Jackson, *Landscapes* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), pp. 1-9.

- 4 Christine Boyer identifies the "quest for disciplinary control" as a constant in the history of American city planning. See Boyer, pp. 9-32.
- 5 Lewis Mumford leveled all these charges against the grid in 1924, in "City Planning and the American Precedent," *New Republic* 39 (11 June 1924), pp. 79-80. Mumford concluded that however much the grid originally embodied the American pioneer spirit, it ultimately served only the haste and avarice of real estate speculators.
- 6 Federal Housing Administration, *Planning Neighborhoods for Small Houses* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1936), p. 10. For further description and analysis of these districts see Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), especially chapter 1. See also James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), especially chapter 3.

trol over the chaos of nature, but to claim territory for the newly formed nation.<sup>4</sup> **3** The platted grid emerged as a politically practical and commercially efficient means for taming the wilderness, regardless, as its critics would later complain, of topography, aesthetics, or humanity.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, from within the matrix of this national grid American cities emerged. In some places, as in Manhattan, the grid was imposed upon existing seventeenth and eighteenth century settlements; in other places, as in Columbus, Ohio, (1815) and Chicago (1830), it determined settlement location and growth.<sup>4</sup> In either case, by the end of the nineteenth century, especially following the urban-industrial expansion of the post-Civil War period, gridiron towns and cities from the Atlantic to the Pacific had been platted, parceled, and sold and were being rapidly built-up. **5** **6** In the process, the grid's congestive pathologies were becoming all too apparent. What had been conceived as an initiatory gesture of order had, by 1900, fostered the decided disorder of rampant, anarchic, real estate speculation. Block after relentless grid block was built to capacity with tenements in New York, triple-deckers in Boston, two-flats in Chicago, and, with lower density but equal shabbiness, identical free-standing houses in cities like St. Louis, Detroit, and Cleveland. **7** This was the situation not only in the downtown cores, but in contiguous residential districts as well, those urban and ultimately ex-urban neighborhoods which accompanied the advance of streetcar and subway lines. Regardless of their building types, these sprawling peripheral districts were characterized by numbing regularity, overwhelming density, and lack of open space. "The monotonous gridiron plan has but little character or appeal," declared a government planning bulletin which utilized the grid as the problematic starting point of its before and after site plans.<sup>6</sup> **8** **9** The advent of the skyscraper and automobile in the 1910s and 1920s exacerbated the situation, with more buildings, vehicles, and people jammed into the unregulated checkerboard of congested urban blocks, from New York to Los Angeles. Even Emporia, Kansas, far removed from the vertical and horizontal extremes of the

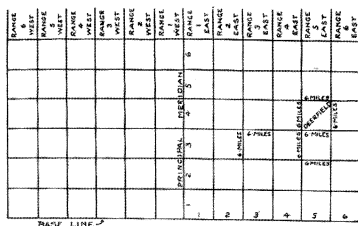
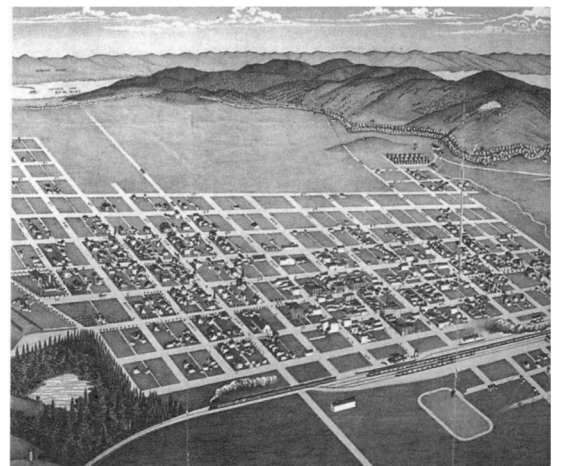


FIGURE I

		MILE 1/4 MILE					
		6	5	4	3	2	1
TOWNSHIP	7	8	9	10	11	12	
	18	17	16	15	14	13	
RANGE	15	20	21	22	23	24	
	30	23	28	27	26	22	
	31	32	33	34	35	36	

		1/4 MILE (3200 FT)			
		1/2 SEC. (160 ACRES)	40 ACRES	10 ACRES	10 ACRES
1/4 MILE	40	40	10	20	10
	40	40	10	20	10
	40	40	10	20	10
	40	40	10	20	10

FIGURE III



**3** The national Grid: checkerboard plans for land surveys following congressional land ordinance, 1785 **4** Platting the midwest: Columbus,

- 7 The results of the 1935 Emporia Real Property Survey (WPA Project Number 530) are cited in Federal Housing Administration, *The Structure and Growth of Residential Neighborhoods in American Cities* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1939), pp. 9, 13. The purpose of the Real Property Surveys, undertaken in 64 American cities beginning in 1934, was to provide the building and real estate industries with comprehensive statistical data on the existing building stock.

coastal cities, was cited in a 1935 government survey as "typical" of American urban patterns and land use: gridded ground plan, "solidly occupied center blocks," "hollow squares" of outer blocks, partially developed subdivision blocks, eventually giving way to countryside and farm land.<sup>7</sup> **10**

Such was the American built environment—a generic version of Koolhaas's Manhattanism—from which a reactive culture of decongestion arose in the 1920s and 1930s. Certain decongestive tendencies had been present on the American scene since at least the mid-nineteenth century, manifest especially in the work of Frederick Law Olmsted. By his own description Olmsted's urban parks, such as those in New York, Boston, and Buffalo, were intended to open up "the interior parts of large and closely built towns" acting as "lungs" both physically and figuratively. Olmsted believed that Central Park (c. 1865) and the Back Bay Fens (1878) would provide actual "clean and purified air" as well as psychological breathing space to oppressed city dwellers. His suburban residential communities were also planned to correct the "misfortune" of speculative subdivisions which,



according to Olmsted, were “staked off with rule and pencil in a broker’s office” as ill-conceived extensions of existing towns. Riverside, Illinois (1868), for example, was designed to be “exactly the opposite” of such “constantly repeated right angles [and] straight lines.” Olmsted planned its curvilinear and varied streets, open spaces, and lavish landscaping as a decongestive remedy to the “unhappy” grid of nearby Chicago.<sup>8</sup> **11**

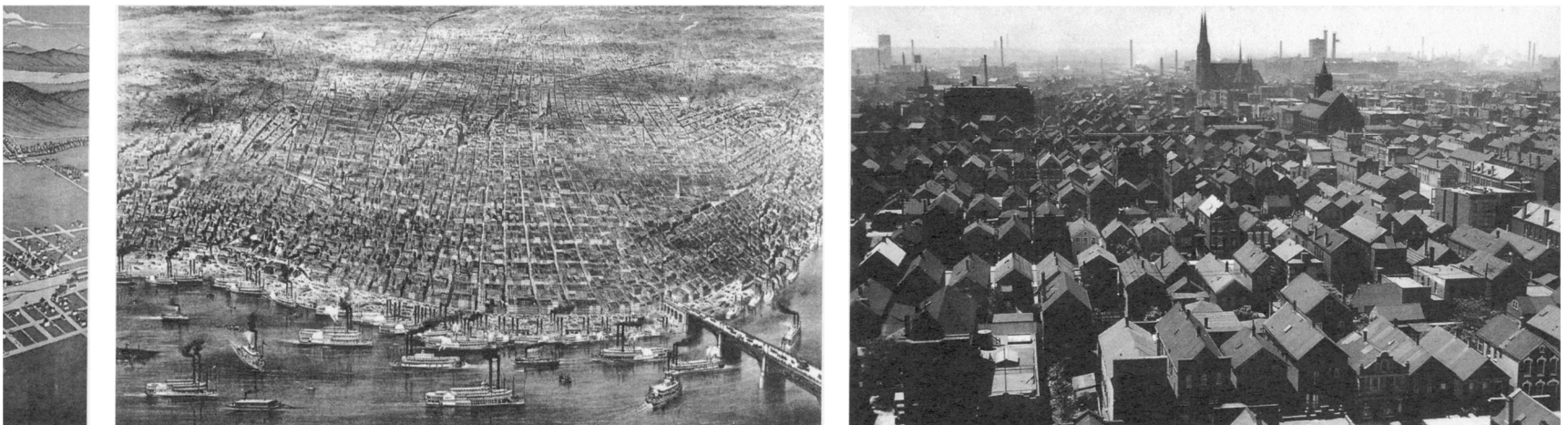
In its simultaneous advocacy of opening up the urban core and developing the urban periphery, Olmsted’s work is prophetic of the decongestive planning efforts of the interwar decades, which took a similarly dichotomous approach to solving the problems of urban density supposedly engendered by the grid. Some efforts embraced the inner city and sought to rebuild the gridded core; other efforts rejected the inner city and sought to build afresh on the *tabula rasa* of the periphery or in remote outlying areas. All efforts shared a grid-defying consciousness characteristic of the reformist culture of decongestion. For a generation of American planners the grid existed, to paraphrase Colin Rowe, as a fact and a symbol—an unavoidable physical feature of the urban landscape and a virtual Pandora’s box of urban ills.<sup>9</sup> To defy the grid was to condemn it in theory and reject it in practice.<sup>10</sup> At times this took on aspects of a heavyweight boxing match: “Superblock vs. Gridiron” announced the headline to a 1940 article appearing in both *Architectural Forum* and *American City* which claimed that aesthetically, economically, and socially “the superblock has it all over the conventional grid pattern of U.S. cities.”<sup>11</sup> **12****13** The superblock, a large-scale curvilinear or rectilinear planning unit based on Raymond Unwin’s garden city or the German modernist *Zeilenbau*, had by that time become the ultimate grid-defying weapon, though not the only one. From Henry Atterbury Smith’s sawtooth geometries to Stein and Wright’s perimeter blocks to Howe and Lescaze’s slab blocks, American planners and architects invented, developed, and borrowed a variety of anti-grid paradigms. Many of these were the product of intensive housing research labs which

**8** Frederick Law Olmsted, “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns (Cambridge, 1870)” and “Plan for Riverside, Illinois (New York, 1868)” in *America Builds*, ed. Leland M. Roth (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 184-5, 197, 201.

**9** See Colin Rowe, “The Chicago Frame” in *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976).

**10** Manifestations of this early rejection of the grid anticipate the late twentieth century survivalists and militia members who choose to live “off the grid.” While it is the power grid from which they are removing themselves, one could argue that they are also rejecting a menacing urbanism perceived in and signified by the street grid.

**11** “Superblock vs. Gridiron,” *Architectural Forum* 73 (July 1940), 66. See also, “Superblock vs. Gridiron,” *American City*, August 1940, pp. 72-3.



Ohio, 1817 **5** Kalispell, Montana, 1897 **6** St. Louis, Missouri, 1874 **7** Congestive pathologies of the grid: Chicago tenement blocks, 1935

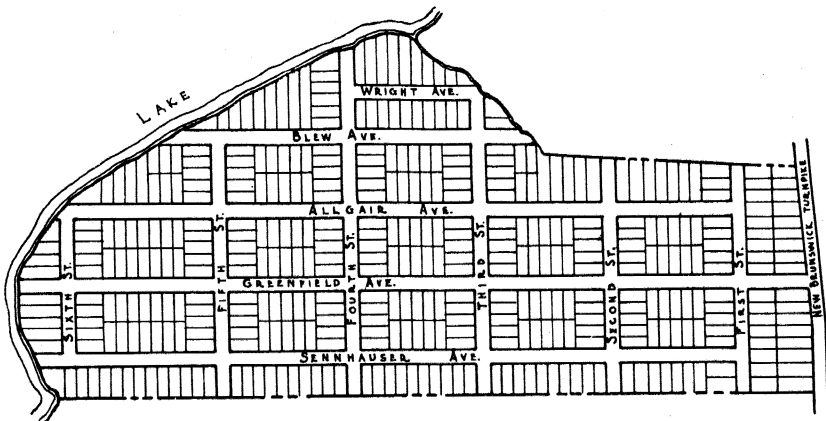
subjected the grid, as a theoretical and practical model, to a battery of tests, to extended analysis, and to eventual dissection.<sup>12</sup> Though somewhat decentralist himself, Lewis Mumford offered a more charitable view of urban congestion, if not of the grid, which in his view was characterized chiefly by its “blank imbecility”: “the congested metropolis is not primarily bad or miserable: it is merely wasteful, inefficient, technologically obsolete.”<sup>13</sup>

**decongestion** If intense scrutiny of the grid produced a certain multivalence, this was because, as Koolhaas suggests, the grid itself tended toward an episodic urbanism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the conflicting plans, proposals, and projects which, utilizing diverse anti-grid patterns, formed a “mosaic” of community rebuilding initiatives in the 1930s. In that decade, while the Depression temporarily disabled the economic engine of Manhattanism, it permanently empowered a bureaucracy of decongestion.<sup>14</sup> By 1937, when the Urbanism Committee of the National Resources Committee (NRC) of the Public Works Administration (PWA) presented *Our*

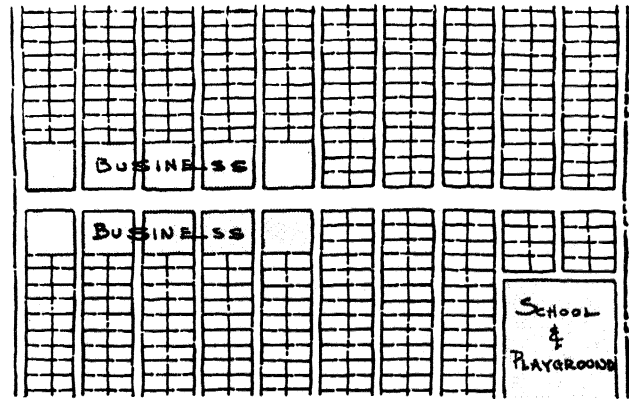
**12** See Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), especially chapter 6.

**13** Mumford, “City Planning and the American Precedent,” p. 79 and “The Intolerable City: Must It Keep Growing?” *Harper’s Monthly*, February 1926, p. 290.

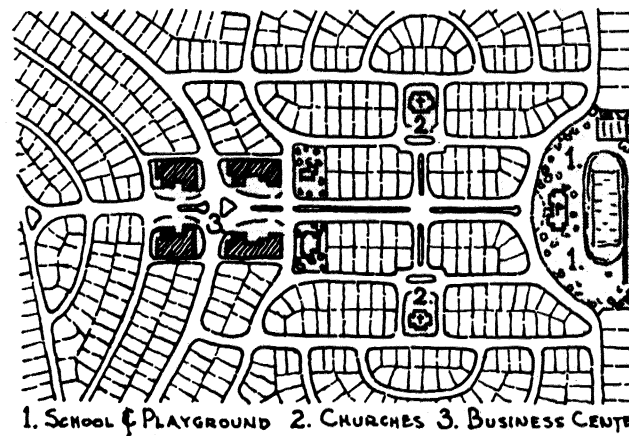
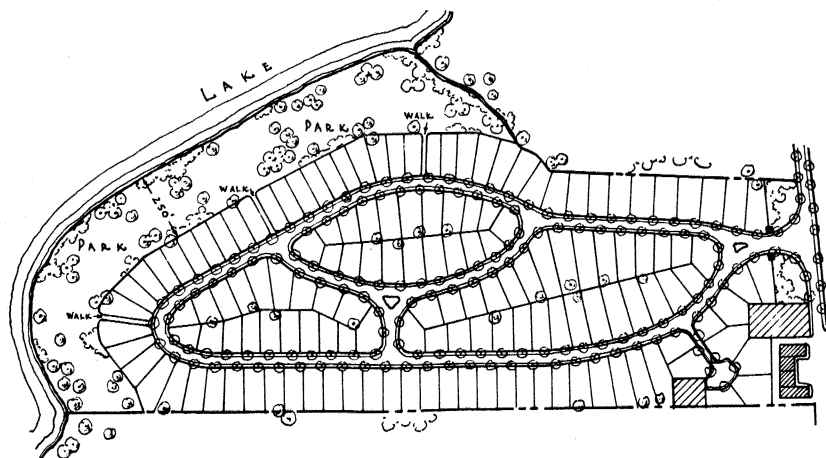
**14** Earlier “bureaucratic” attempts at decongestion lacked national coordination. The situation changed with the New Deal, although no single agency was responsible for decongestion.



8 Grid/defying: original subdivision plan (above) and revised plan (below), as per the U.S. government, 1938



9 Bad plan (above) and good plan (below), 1938



1. SCHOOL & PLAYGROUND 2. CHURCHES 3. BUSINESS CENTER

while the Depression temporarily disabled the economic engine of Manhattanism, it permanently

15 Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes established the National Resources Committee (originally the National Planning Board) in 1933. For the next ten years it served as an *ex officio* organization promoting and coordinating planning efforts at the federal, regional, state, and local levels.

16 Alex Krieger identifies the skyscraper as "the primary antagonist of the city" in the twentieth century. See Krieger, "The American City: Ideal and Mythic Aspects of a Reinvented Urbanism," *Assemblage* 3 (July 1987), p. 43.

17 National Resources Committee, *Our Cities: Their Role in the National Economy* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1937), pp. 6, 58, 73.

18 For economic aspects of bigness, see Thomas K. McCraw, "The New Deal and the Mixed Economy" in *Fifty Years Later: The New Deal Evaluated*, ed. Harvard Sitkoff (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), p. 62.

19 See "The Problems of Urban America," *Our Cities*, pp. 55-70.

*Cities: Their Role in the National Economy* to President Roosevelt, it was clear that decongestion and its attendant grid-evacuation had been codified, if not into coherent public policy, than at least into a critical position. 15 This report, generally regarded as the first major contextual study of American cities and prepared by a group of prominent planners, economists, and sociologists, including Frederick A. Delano, Charles Eliot, and Milton Friedman, was fully engaged in a discourse of decongestion.

This discourse is most obvious in the report's treatment of the skyscraper which, by the time *Our Cities* was published, had already become the principal object and signifier of congestion. 16 Thus, it is not surprising to find that in the report, unlike in *Delirious New York*, the skyscraper is cast as villain, the simultaneous cause and effect of congestion. At various points in *Our Cities* the skyscraper is vilified for its "grotesque" profile rising up from the "mechanical monotony" of the grid; decried as the "visible symbol of congestion"; and problematized for the "philosophy and aspiration of bigness" it represented. 17 In the context of the New Deal this "bigness" referred specifically to a lopsided economy of centralized wealth and control embodied by Wall Street and located in its skyscraper "citadels of high finance and big business" – institutions regarded by antitrusters as the root cause of the Depression. 18 Regardless of economic philosophy, however, in terms of sheer physicality, the bigger the skyscraper, the more acute the condition of congestion supposedly facing the city. According to the NRC, that condition of congestion extended well beyond the central business district occupied by skyscrapers. It reached the furthest physical limits of the city and affected, negatively by the NRC's account, nearly every aspect of urban life, including population density, family stability, public health, crime and delinquency, insanity and suicide, noise and air pollution. 19 In its condemnation of the skyscraper the NRC echoed concerns about congestion and density that urban activists, especially proponents of zoning regulations, had been voicing for several decades. While passage of the 1908 land use law in Los Angeles and the 1916 setback law in New York had put some congestion-checking controls in place, the building boom of the 1920s had pushed development densities to levels considered socially dangerous.

The dark villainous aspect of skyscrapers was recognized even by their own defenders, such as contractor William A. Starrett, whose firm erected the Empire State Building and who observed in 1932 that beneath the “upper band of our great beautiful skyscrapers” lay the “genuine social menace” of urban blight.<sup>20</sup> The opposition between skyscraper and street, expressed metaphorically as the opposition between tower and dungeon, was not uncommon in the decongestive rhetoric of the period, which at times became virulently anti-urbanistic.<sup>14</sup>

In *The Disappearing City* of 1932, Frank Lloyd Wright unambiguously condemns “the overgrown city” which he likens to a “malignant tumor” grown “far out of human scale.” He is equally censorious of the skyscraper and the grid, which together formed a “man-trap of gigantic dimensions,” creating a constant “roar of congestion, confusion...[and] spasmodic movement.”<sup>21</sup> In Wright’s schema there is no escape from the distorting forces of the grid, for the only place of retreat is itself a victim of congestion, of exploitative landlordism—the “soulless” tenement, row upon row of “cubicles [as] remote from nature as any coffin.”<sup>22</sup> In her 1935 book *The Next Step*, the California architect, planner, and feminist Alice Constance Austin similarly contrasts the skyscraper penthouse, “the acme of achievement” for the successful urbanite with “the slum-dweller in a sort of medieval dungeon cellar below all this grandeur.” She further decries the grid as a tool for laying out cities, likening the grid-makers to wrench-wielding monkeys whose inept fumbblings have led to the utter victimization of the American urban environment.<sup>23</sup> Social commentator and decentralist Ralph Woods was even more explicit in his condemnation of the “underlying evil” of congestion which he equated with “urbanization gone wild,” concluding not only that it took “an enormous toll physiologically, psychologically, and economically,” but that it actually “threaten[ed] civilization.”<sup>24</sup>

### **empowered a bureaucracy of decongestion**

Like these critics of the city, the NRC viewed with alarm the degraded environment of many congested urban areas. Also, because the committee recognized the increased prominence of cities on the national scene—as cultural, economic and industrial centers possessing two-thirds of the country’s population and wealth—it recognized urban congestion as a problem of national significance. The “elimination of congestion” was therefore crucial to the future well-being of not just American cities, but the country as a whole. While decongestion would “involve enormous costs,” the NRC, perhaps following Mumford, believed that it must be attempted because “the aggregate cost of permitting this congestion in our cities to continue represents an imposing waste”—of national resources, material and human.<sup>25</sup> Likening congestion and its resulting economic and social ills to “infections which an otherwise healthy organism can check,” the NRC recommended expectorant action to “loosen up” the urban phlegm. This action would take the form of decongestive city planning that would by-pass the densely-built, skyscraper-studded, traffic-clogged business core, leaving Manhattanism, and its schizophrenic capitalism, to run amok.<sup>26</sup> Instead, employing a selective strategy of social and economic intervention, this city planning would seek to “abolish those urban areas of congestion commonly called slums.”<sup>27</sup>

**new york city laboratory** Throughout the NRC report one urban center, with the country’s most teeming slums and its biggest skyscrapers, functions as a veritable poster child of infectious congestion. Not surprisingly, that urban center is Koolhaas’ own epicenter of hyper-density, New York City. Because New York’s congestion was so extreme, its relevance was believed to transcend the particularities of local conditions, becoming instructive for the nation as a whole. Earlier, the editors of *American City* had noted in the preface to a 1934 article by Frederick Ackerman that New York’s “amazing” congestion had “all too general application to cities, towns, and villages throughout the United States.”<sup>28</sup> In the article, as Ackerman relates New York’s efforts to zone against congestion he never refers to the city by name. Instead, he identifies New York only as “Megalopolis,” thereby universalizing, and rendering relevant, the otherwise potentially unique experience of this one city.<sup>29</sup> In the present context, we also begin with *Delirious New York* itself to

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in John M. Gries and James Ford, *Slums, Large-Scale Housing, and Decentralization* (Washington, DC: President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, 1932), p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Disappearing City* (New York: William Farquhar Payson, 1932), pp. 21-22.

<sup>22</sup> Wright, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> Alice Constance Austin, *The Next Step... Decentralization* (Los Angeles: E. Norman Johnson, 1935), pp. 5-7. Austin’s work as a planner and architect is discussed in Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 242-8.

<sup>24</sup> Ralph Woods, *America Reborn: A Plan for Decentralization of Industry* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1939), pp. 86, 93 & 106.

<sup>25</sup> *Our Cities*, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> Though “scatter the skyscraper” was rallying cry of many urban and regional planners in the 1920s and 1930s (Boyer, p. 184), it remained largely untried as a policy, with planners instead concentrating on the creation of vast networks of highways, parkways, bridges, and tunnels in the mistaken belief that these arteries would alleviate congestion in the downtown cores by enabling the free flow of traffic from urban to suburban areas. See John Nolen and Henry V. Hubbard, *Parkways and Land Values* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937). See also David A. Johnson, “Regional Planning for the Great American Metropolis,” in *Two Centuries of American Planning* and Mark S. Foster, *From Streetcar to Superhighway: American City Planners and Urban Transportation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981).

<sup>27</sup> *Our Cities*, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick L. Ackerman, “Population Expectations, Zoning, Appraisals and Debt,” *American City*, October 1934, p. 49.

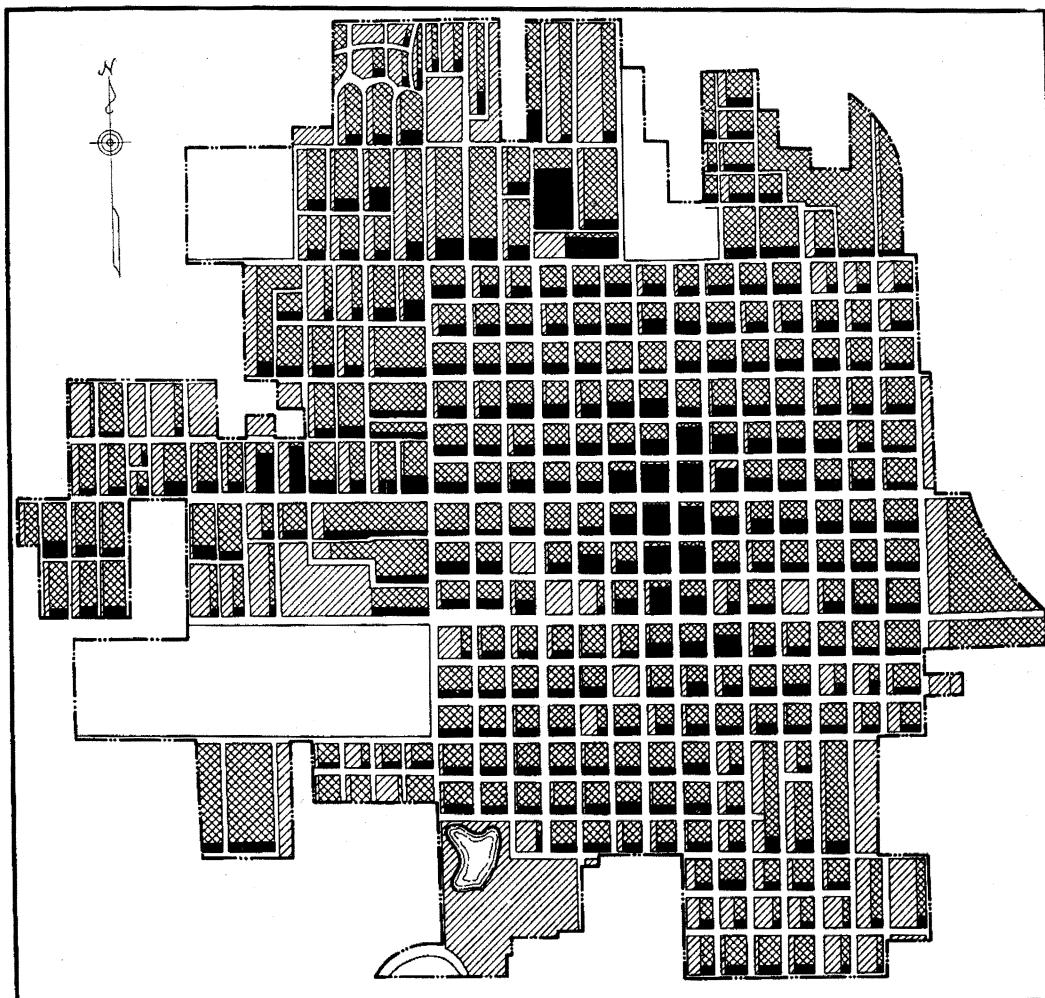
<sup>29</sup> More recently, Richard Plunz has argued that New York City, while unique, represents a “microcosm” of all urban housing developments in the United States. See Plunz, p. xxxv.

see how the city's own efforts to clear slums and rebuild blighted areas in the 1930s anticipated, influenced, and reflected decongestive efforts elsewhere. In other words, we begin in the laboratory of decongestion before venturing into the field.

While the whole of New York City represented a fertile area of investigation, one locale in particular was viewed as a laboratory *extraordinaire*, not only because its slums were so congested but because this congestion was so famous. This was Manhattan's Lower East Side, which, as a superlative of congestion in the United States, functioned for decongestive theorists and practitioners as a worst case scenario and as a test case for decongestive action. Here a variety of prototype solutions were applied to a singular urban landscape which possessed two critical congestive constituents: people and buildings. In the early twentieth century the Lower East Side was one of the most densely populated areas in the world, as Jacob Riis had revealed in the confrontational photographs of his 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives*. While the average density of New York City was roughly 143 persons per acre, for that district south of 14th Street and east of Broadway the ratio could reach an astounding 800 persons per acre—a density surpassing even the most crowded districts of Bombay. Despite repeated reform efforts, the Lower East Side was also one of the most densely built, its standard city lots of 25 by 100 feet so packed with tenements, row houses, and back buildings that frequently only a few inches of space remained between structures. The worst blocks boasted land coverage as high as 90 percent. One typical block with 70 percent land coverage was East 3rd Street, bounded by First Avenue and Avenue A. **15** It was here in the mid-1930s that a decisive episode in the drama of decongestion took place.

In 1930, on this particular block of East Third Street, with numerous forms of human occupancy (to use Koolhaas' terms) confronting each other through the medium of the grid, Manhattan's newest

***an initial gesture of order had, by 1900, fostered the decided disorder of rampant, anarchic***



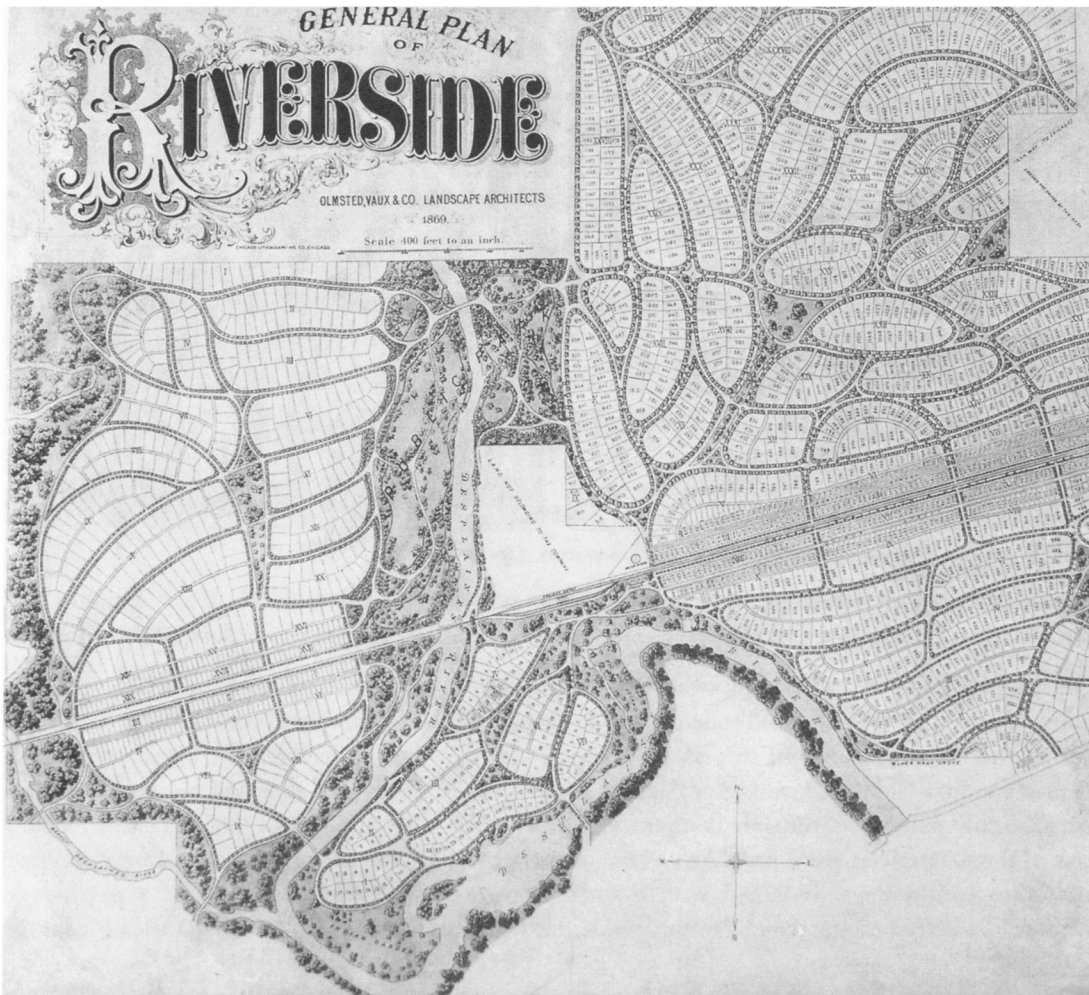
**10** "Manhattanism" in America: land coverage map of Emporia, Kansas, 1935



form of congestion faced off against its oldest. A recently-completed high-rise apartment building on the north side of the block, known as Ageloff Towers, confronted over three dozen grimy old-law tenements and back buildings on the south side of the block.<sup>30</sup> The tenements were mostly five-story dumbbells dating from the 1880s and described by their landlord and owner Vincent Astor as “older than the hills.”<sup>31</sup> **16** These tenements were generally regarded as overcrowded, obsolete slums, housing some 400 mostly poor immigrant families, not including an additional permanent population of, as identified by Lewis Mumford, “rats, bedbugs, and roaches.”<sup>32</sup> Before either of these congestive forms could dominate East Third Street, the invisible hand of the market intervened. The stock market crashed; the Depression set in; and housing conditions on the Lower East Side worsened. According to local apocrypha, the financially ruined developer of the Ageloff threw himself off the top of his eponymous towers. Vincent Astor, with significantly less bravura but far more media coverage, offered to sell the south side of the block to the city for an experimental housing project. His price was a mere \$189,281.31—a figure well below the property’s assessed value of \$600,000.<sup>33</sup>

**decongestive practices** In March 1934 when Astor offered his East Third Street property to the city at a budget price, housing advocates across the country were engaged in heated debates concerning just this issue—the availability of cheap land at the urban core. Actually, it was the supposed lack of such land in American cities that prompted designers, theorists, and critics like Clarence Stein, Catherine Bauer, and Lewis Mumford to promote the development of new housing on the urban periphery where, they argued, land was cheaper and economies of scale in development were possible. Indeed, in Bauer’s influential *Modern Housing* of 1934, she singled out the cost of land due to inflated values as the “great stumbling block” and the “most significant single factor” in constructing new housing where it was needed most, in New York and other large

### real estate speculation



**11** Frederick Law Olmsted, plan for Riverside, Illinois, 1869

**30** The Ageloff was an obvious example of a Manhattanistic movement toward the conquest of the grid block by a single structure; it was physically and visually imposing in the midst of run-down low-rise tenements. Built by developer Samuel Ageloff, the towers were among several “luxury” high-rise apartment houses planned or erected in the area during the 1920s, including Frank Lloyd Wright’s unbuilt designs for the St. Mark’s-in-the-Bouwerie Towers. See “Ageloff Towers,” *American Architect* 135 (5 May 1929), p. 621; “Odd Type Buildings to Overlook Church,” *New York Times*, 19 October 1929, p. 24 (1); Terence Riley, ed., *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994), pp. 222-23; Norbert Brown, “The First Experiment in Municipal Housing,” *Real Estate Record*, 21 December 1935, p. 17.

**31** “Landlord’s Offer,” *Architectural Forum*, 60 (April 1934), p. 318.

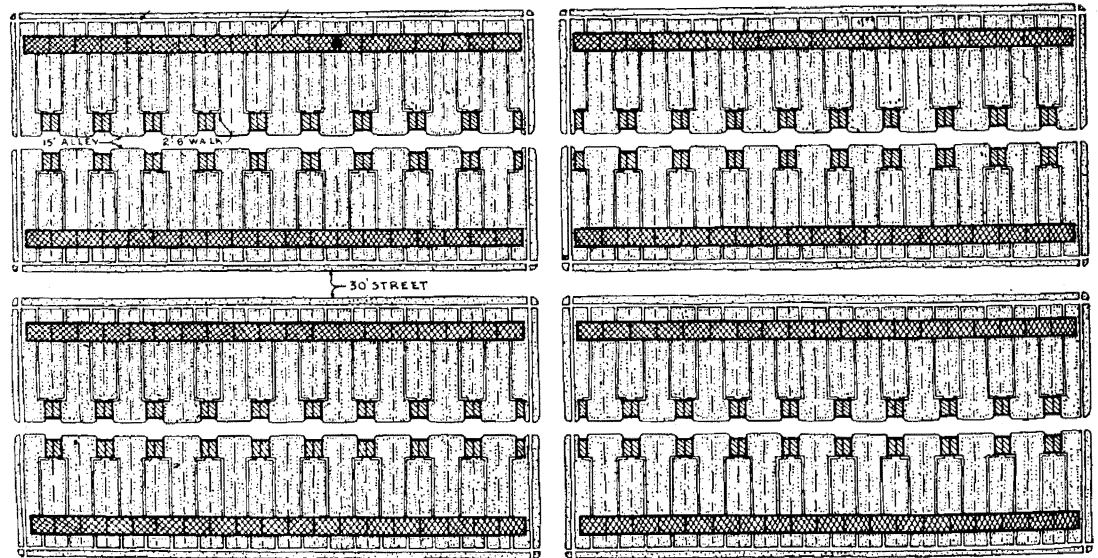
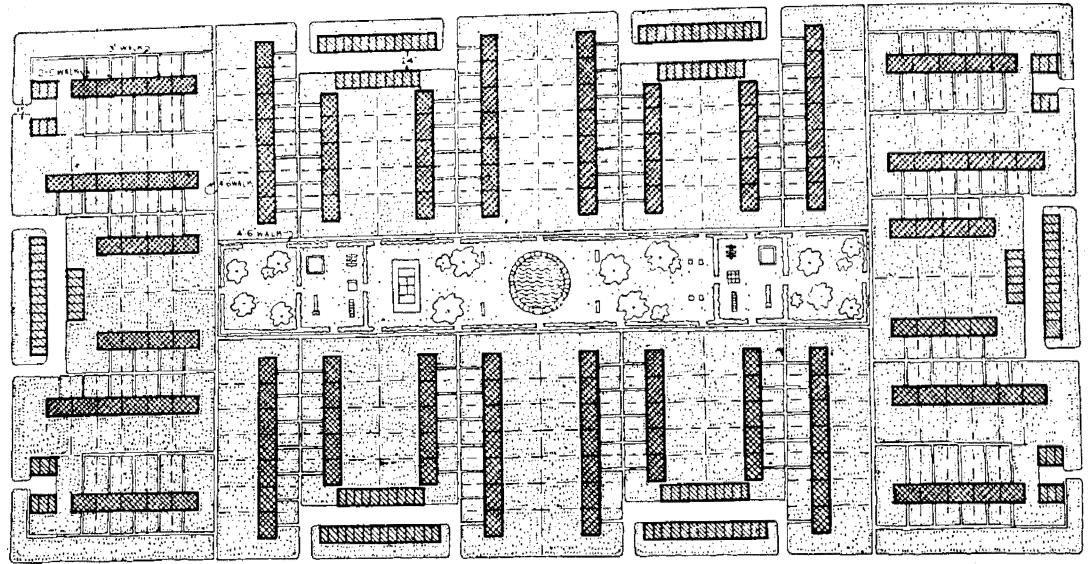
**32** Lewis Mumford, “The Skyline: The New Housing,” *New Yorker*, 7 December 1935, p. 105.

**33** Astor’s beneficence was richly garbed in *noblesse oblige*. “My desire is to do anything I can do within reason to clear these slums,” Astor solemnly stated, adding that the offer was meant as a contribution to the recently established federal housing program (PWA Housing Division), which he believed to be “tremendously worthwhile.” His generosity was equally motivated by self-interest. Throughout the 1920s, while divesting himself of a significant portion of his real estate holdings, Astor held on to a number of East Side slum properties. In 1926 he redeveloped the uptown slums into an exclusive high-rise residential district known as Gracie Square, but had no such plans for his downtown properties. Apparently Astor could tolerate slums as long as they were turning a profit, but that changed with the onset of the Depression. Once the properties “stopped paying their way” as landlord Astor put it, he was “glad to get rid of them,” even at a loss. See “Vincent Astor—Landlord,” *Architectural Forum* 61 (July 1934), pp. 73-75 and “Landlord’s Offer,” p. 318.

**34** Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), p. 244. For an analysis of Bauer's role in the development of new housing forms in the United States see Radford, especially chapter 3. For a discussion of urban tenements across the country see Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), especially chapter 7.

**35** Bauer, p. 247.

cities.<sup>34</sup> Yet, according to Bauer, slum clearance was an obsolete planning model which should be logically replaced by new town or garden city developments in outlying areas, as at Sunnyside, Queens, (begun 1924) and Radburn, N.J. (begun 1927). These projects, designed by Clarence Stein and built by the limited-dividend City Housing Corporation affiliated with the Regional Plan Association of America, were anti-speculative, pro-decongestive model suburbs intended to demonstrate that low cost and low density were possible in new housing. But because the row houses and garden apartments of Sunnyside and the detached houses of Radburn were always intended for a



**12** Superblock versus gridiron: comparative plans, 1940

middle-class population these projects didn't really represent an alternative to slum clearance targeted at the most blighted areas, like the Lower East Side, where the poorest urban dwellers resided.

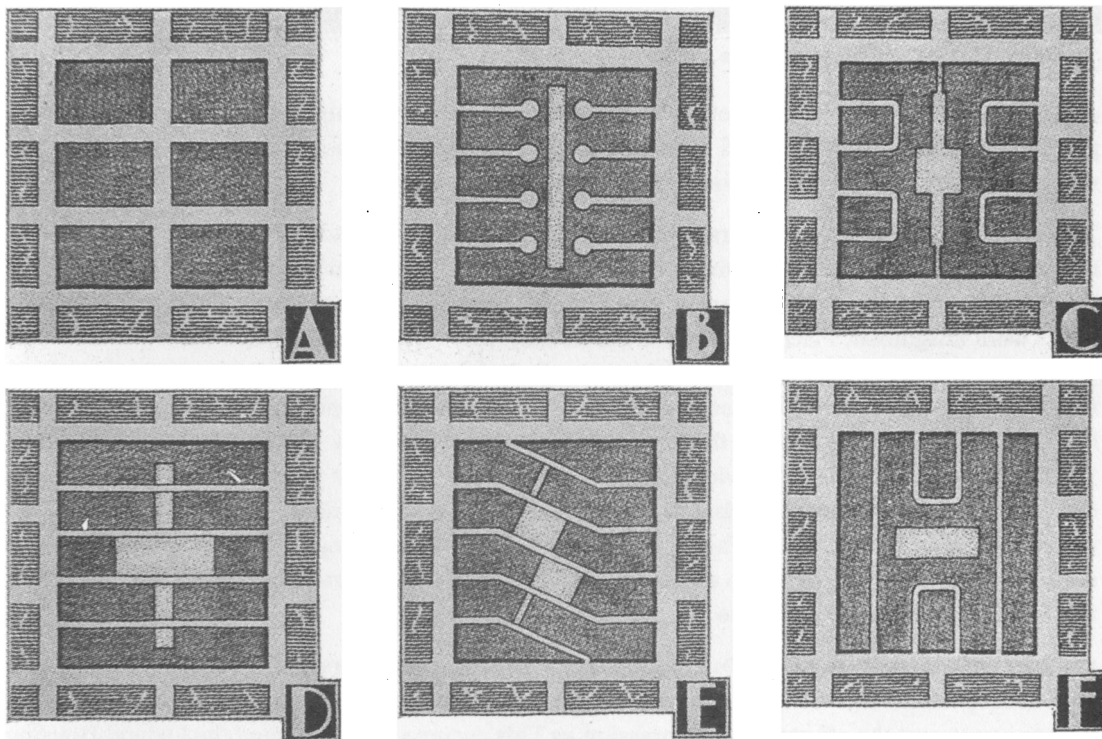
Vincent Astor's land deal would seem to have offered New York City a singular window of opportunity, but one which would soon disappear in the wake of inflated land values, potentially rendering the redevelopment of this small blighted area an isolated experiment. Bauer cautioned against random "model" housing projects in a "patchwork" approach that had more in common with the "old pattern" of nineteenth-century philanthropic reform than with the large-scale exigencies of the "American slum problem" of the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> However, many slum clearance advocates would have disagreed with Bauer's assessment, believing instead that a patchwork approach, whether undertaken by municipalities, corporations, or public-private partnerships, rep-

resented a necessary first step toward solving the large and extremely complex problem of urban housing. For example, housing experts John Gries and James Ford, reporting to President Hoover's 1932 *Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership*, argued that it was both possible, and even desirable, to remove slums selectively block by block, "cut out by the surgeon's knife," concluding that even if "a single block in a city like New York can be successfully [cleared and] developed, it will be possible ultimately to rebuild the greater part of our cities."<sup>36</sup> <sup>17</sup> Though they believed that large-scale redevelopment of units ten blocks in size or larger was preferable to single block projects, they recognized that this would not be possible because of the existence of certain legal and constitutional obstacles to slum clearance, including the lack of eminent domain laws empowering municipalities to clear blighted areas and the fact that housing was not regarded as a public use. Until these obstacles were removed (which would occur in the coming years with the arrival of the New Deal) "piecemeal" slum clearance and redevelopment "would remain viable."<sup>37</sup>

The same year *Modern Housing* was published other advocates of slum clearance attacked the position of Bauer and Stein on the grounds that it failed to represent accurately the state of land values in blighted urban areas. Such was the case in a comprehensive, but hypothetical, replanning study for Astoria, Queens, prepared by an impressive group of associated planners and architects—Carol Aronovici, Henry Churchill, Albert Mayer, William Lescaze, and Stein's one-time associate Henry Wright. Their study, which received national media attention, proposed the transformation of 488 acres in Astoria into exemplary modernist and grid-busting *Zeilenbauen*. In their proposed design schemes the associates purposely varied building densities and heights to avoid the visual monotony of speculative subdivisions, projecting an average of 158 rooms per acre in three-story buildings. In the text accompanying their super-block plans, the associates make clear that their study, while using New York as a "focal point," was meant as a schematic model which would be "appli-

<sup>36</sup> Gries and Ford, p. 54. This use of medical metaphor was not uncommon in decongestion rhetoric. In 1929 housing reformer Lawrence Veiller had used the exact same terms. Slums and blight were "a civic cancer which must be cut out by the surgeon's knife." Congestion was the pathogen or carcinogen; the slum caused by congestion was the disease; slum clearance was the invasive surgical procedure necessary to cure it. Pushing the metaphor further, housing researchers and planners assume the role of urban epidemiologists while architects and designers become the all-powerful surgeons. See Veiller, "Slum Clearance," *Proceedings of the Tenth National Conference on Housing*, January 1929, p. 75. A few years earlier, Le Corbusier had also used a surgical metaphor when describing the Haussmannization of Paris and when calling for his own replanning of the city. See Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow and its Planning* (1925; rpt. trans. New York: Payson & Clarke, LTD, 1929), pp. 155, 253-73.

<sup>37</sup> Gries and Ford, p. 55. If housing was not defined as a public use, taxpayers could not be made to bear the burden of development costs.



<sup>13</sup> The superblock from the grid: the existing block pattern (A) replanned in five schemes (B-F)

cable anywhere," since similar blighted areas "exist[ed] in virtually every large city in the country." While in agreement with Bauer that the limited "Model Housing" approach to slum clearance should be rejected in favor of "large-scale attack," the associates argued that "it is not necessary to go to outlying land" because "new communities can be created within the city" on cheap, tax-delinquent land lying between the "inner core of unnecessary congestion and the outer belt of cheap

**38** Associates Aronovici, Churchill, Lescaze, Mayer, Wright, "Realistic Replanning," *Architectural Forum* 61 (July 1934), p. 50. This study was one of the major projects of the Housing Study Guild founded by Mumford, Wright, and Mayer in the early 1930s. See Richard Pommer, "The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 37 (December 1978), pp. 253, 256.

**39** See "Thousands of Tenants Seek Homes in Model East Side Tenements," *New York Times*, 11 November 1928, p. 1 (13), for the published findings of the Home Survey Board's first report.

**40** Joseph Platzker, "Replanning Old Areas for New Housing," *Architectural Record* 75 (February 1934), p. 103.

**41** Platzker, p. 104.

**42** This analysis of slum/blighted district modernization is part of the author's larger study (forthcoming) on the modernization of commercial and residential buildings during the Depression.

By 1932 the American Institute of Architects was counseling its members to seek out modernization work to avoid unemployment. See Arthur B. Holmes, "A Plan to Create New Business for the Architect," *American Architect* 141 (June 1932), p. 14.

**43** This insurance was made possible by Title I of the 1934 National Housing Act which initiated the Modernization Credit Plan and related programs and activities designed to promote building modernization.

**44** In 1932 the Home Building Conference recommended the "reconditioning of buildings" and the "modernization of homes" with the hope that such individual efforts would stimulate the resuscitation of entire blighted districts. Modernization would enable a district, and its individual properties, to achieve financial viability and thus increase contributions to the tax base. The Conference concluded that slum modernizations would also "greatly aid in the housing of the lower income groups, improving their health, morals, and the morale of the population." Gries and Ford, pp. 11, 157.



**14** *Glow of the City*, Martin Lewis, 1929

speculation." This land was not only "immediately available" but also "completely serviced" by public transit, schools, shops, and other "amenities" which were crucial to the creation of a cohesive community, but were too expensive to build all at once.<sup>38</sup>

This point in particular was underscored by another slum clearance advocate, Joseph Platzker, secretary of New York's powerful business consortium the East Side Chamber of Commerce.<sup>39</sup> Arguing in *Architectural Record* that planners who favored developing new housing on outlying "cheap land" were misguided, Platzker disputed claims that land values in blighted areas were even that inflated given that so many older areas possessed crucial "municipal services" which made land fundamentally more valuable than that located on the less developed urban periphery.<sup>40</sup> This, Platzker argued, was the case on the Lower East Side where the City had spent \$55 million since 1929 to improve community services. Thus, Platzker contended that ultimately it would be most cost effective to locate new housing in such blighted areas, "modernizing a good old section" by replanning it as "large neighborhood units."<sup>41</sup> Platzker's terminology here is significant, for it evokes two parallel movements in architecture and planning which intersected the theory and practice of decongestion in the effort to clear urban slums.

**modernization** In the 1930s modernization was even more pervasive in architecture culture than decongestion, especially after the federal government began promoting it as an economic stimulus to counteract the effects of the Depression.<sup>42</sup> This occurred in 1934 when the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) started to insure low-interest loans made by private lenders for the physical improvement of existing commercial and residential buildings.<sup>43</sup> New Deal modernization and decongestion came together in rehabilitation projects for individual buildings—usually tenements, houses, and stores—multiple buildings, or multi-block sites.<sup>44</sup> As a method for neighborhood improvement, modernization seemed to offer a practical alternative to a demolition model of slum clearance and the FHA issued several booklets, including *Community Planning* and *How to*



*Finance Tenement Modernization*, which promoted modernization as a step-by-step slum revitalization program in which municipalities, neighborhood groups, and individual property owners could all participate.<sup>45</sup> The FHA promoted modernization-cum-slum clearance as offering immediate, often highly visible results: a new facade on a run-down tenement would be perceived by slum dwellers as a sure sign that conditions on a blighted block were improving. In practice the modernization of tenements functioned decongestively to open up floor plans, to reduce the number of apartments per floor and the number of windowless rooms per apartment, and to open up overbuilt alleys and back courts, converting them into recreation spaces.<sup>46</sup> With easy federal loan and credit terms, slum clearance or, more accurately, slum effacement, could be undertaken without delay, on an *ad hoc* basis, building by building, avoiding protracted land acquisition, condemnation proceedings or costly multi-block demolitions. Tenement modernization was thus viewed, by its supporters and its critics, as a stop-gap measure, a temporary expedient, to be replaced eventually by a long-range public housing construction program. This was the view held by Joseph Platzker who further recognized the short-term necessity of modernization because of the “single-parcel” pattern of individual building ownership that existed in most American cities. Platzker cautioned, however, that such one-shot modernizations would prove “in the long-run an unsuccessful investment” unless they were part of a coordinated program to wholly transform slum areas into coherent neighborhood units based on the typology developed by Clarence Perry in the late 1920s.<sup>47</sup>

Perry’s ideal neighborhood unit was a 160-acre subdivision located in an outlying urban area and planned according to “principles which would give added character, convenience and safety” to the district. These principles included a size limit of 5,000-6,000 people, inclusion of shops and community institutions within neighborhood boundaries, provision for open recreational spaces, and an internal street system which avoided the grid in favor of “short, curving and intimate highways.”<sup>48</sup> According to Perry, the grid should be abandoned not only for aesthetic and psychological reasons, but for an economic one as well: he posited that the prototypical curvilinear street plan would accrue a savings of \$400,000. Perry’s grid-resisting ideas were put into practice in so many cities and towns that Gwendolyn Wright has identified the neighborhood unit as “the most important model for [pre-war American] residential design.”<sup>49</sup> Notable neighborhood unit residential developments include Stein and Wright’s Radburn and Stein’s Hillside Homes.<sup>50</sup> The latter, under construction in the Bronx beginning in 1933, was assailed by Joseph Platzker, who argued that while the project was built on inexpensive land (70 cents per square foot), it contained monumental hidden and future costs in the municipal services which would be required to meet the needs of the new development’s residents. Both Perry and Stein would have agreed with Platzker’s assertion that “new housing alone does not make a community,” since they believed that community centers, schools, playgrounds, and shops were an integral, indeed crucial, component of any neighborhood unit—components which would have to be built from scratch when developing new housing projects in any outlying urban area.<sup>51</sup> In Platzker’s view—and here he departed from Perry’s ideal—replanning an area with extant infrastructure and services, like the Lower East Side, was a far more viable option for new housing.

Housing officials, advocates, and lobbyists in many other cities saw the logic of such a view and urged the utilization of Perry’s model in the replanning and rebuilding of the urban core. Indeed, the Planning Committee of the 1932 Home Building Conference resolved that “the ‘neighborhood unit’ should be adopted as the basis of reconstruction” of blighted areas.<sup>52</sup> By the late 1930s municipalities across the country were drawing up neighborhood improvement districts. In 1937 the city of St. Louis, whose trends regarding land use and population densities were considered typical of the nation, was attempting to counteract “suburban sprawl” (already named as such in this pre-World War II period), urban blight, and decreased city land values through the “development of neighborhood units embracing all residential areas of the city.” The City Plan Commission divided St. Louis’s 62.5 square miles into 81 units to “furnish the most logical basis for all forms of housing control and construction.” These forms included “several modern large-scale low-cost housing projects” to be erected in the most severely blighted districts.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>45</sup> The FHA encouraged tenement landlords to undertake modernization to meet the requirements of municipal building codes and as a way of increasing rents and property values. This interest in urban housing was an aberration in general FHA policy, which tended to favor new construction in suburbs to reconstruction in the city.

<sup>46</sup> Other typical tenement modernizations included the installation of electricity, hot water, and bathing facilities in apartments.

<sup>47</sup> Platzker, p. 104.

<sup>48</sup> Clarence Perry, “Planning a Neighborhood Unit,” *American City*, September 1929, pp. 124, 126. This article is a reprint of Perry, “The Neighborhood Unit” in *Neighborhood and Community Planning, Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*, Vol. VII (New York: Regional Plan Association, Inc., 1929) and Perry, *The Rebuilding of Blighted Areas: A Study of the Neighborhood Unit in Replanning and Plot Assemblage* (New York: Regional Plan Association, Inc., 1933).

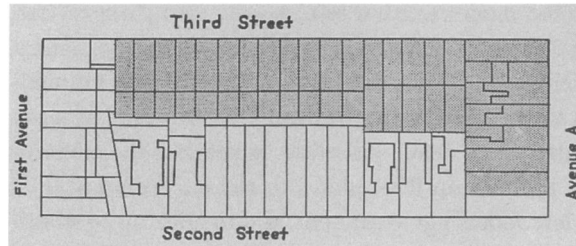
<sup>49</sup> Wright, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of these projects see Clarence Stein, *Towards New Towns for America* (1957; rpt. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978) and John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1959* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>51</sup> Platzker, pp. 103-4.

<sup>52</sup> Gries and Ford, p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> “From Sprawling Suburbs Back to Urban Neighborhoods: The St. Louis Land Policy,” *Architectural Record* 81 (June 1937), p. 59.



**15** First Houses site plan

neighborhood seemed to underscore the feasibility of Astor's East Third Street property for housing redevelopment. The land had many of the municipal services cited by Perry, including transportation, an elementary school, and a house of worship—all within a one-block radius.<sup>54</sup> The City was aware of these infrastructure advantages. Moreover, Astor's asking price brought the square foot cost down from \$10 to around \$3.50. In the spring of 1934 Langdon W. Post, chairman of the newly created New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), was keen to accept Astor's offer and use the site as a "bricks and mortar" testament to the City's seriousness about "clear[ing] slums and build[ing] houses." With no municipal funds available for either land acquisition or construction Post was forced into exasperating inactivity and, perhaps worse, into recognizing the possibility that his agency, the first of its kind in the nation, would prove to be nothing more than "a debating society or a propaganda bureau."<sup>55</sup> Thus, Post went straight to Washington and presented his case to Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) head Harry Hopkins who agreed to provide \$300,000 for building materials, with the WPA providing a grant of \$50,000 for the necessary relief labor. Subsequently, Post convinced Vincent Astor to accept brand new NYCHA bonds, bearing

Housing officials in New York City were only too aware of the devastating physical, social, and economic effects of urban blight. They realized early on that the slums of the Lower East Side needed radical treatment if the contagion was to be checked and the still viable components of the existing "neighborhood unit" were to be resuscitated. That the Lower East Side was already a vital

***housing experts... argued that it was both possible, and desirable, to remove slums selectively***

<sup>54</sup> These services were, respectively, the Second Avenue El, Public School 63, and the Church of the Holy Redeemer. A housing study of two adjacent blocks also undertaken in 1934 indicated that this immediate area was ideally situated in terms of a wide range of "geographical and environmental advantages" such as business, transportation, and schools. See "Regional Resurrection without Demolition," *Architectural Forum* 61 (September 1934), p. 191.

<sup>55</sup> Langdon W. Post, *The Challenge of Housing* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1938), pp. 180-81.



**16** Astor's tenement properties, site of the First Houses, 1935

only 3.5 percent interest, and tax-exempt, in lieu of a cash payment for the land. This deal was followed by a protracted condemnation process with a recalcitrant landlord who refused to sell to the city two tenements bisecting Astor's property. The landlord went to court to challenge the constitutionality of the NYCHA's exercise of eminent domain. His lawyers argued that the creation of housing was not a valid public purpose, but the state appellate court disagreed. The landmark decision *NYCHA vs. Muller* upheld eminent domain and the legitimacy of housing as a public use. Thus, the decision was a boon to all urban housing programs then in their infancy, not just the one in New York City.

**urban evacuation** In Washington FERA's Harry Hopkins had proved sympathetic to the proposed New York project not only because he was well-acquainted with conditions on the Lower East Side, having spent his early career as a social worker in that neighborhood, but because he knew that slum clearance was part of President Roosevelt's personal vision of urban decentralization—a vision then being codified into New Deal policy. The initial legislative underpinning of Roosevelt's decentralization policy was an amendment to Title II of the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) which earmarked \$25 million of the \$3.3 billion Public Works and Construction Projects appropriation to “provide for aiding in the redistribution of the overbalance of populations in industrial [mostly urban] centers.”<sup>56</sup> According to government statistics, by 1930 nearly 75 percent of workers in American manufacturing industries were crowded onto less than 5 percent of the country's land and of that 75 percent, some 60 percent were supposedly living in areas affected by varying degrees of blight.<sup>57</sup>

Decentralists hoped to reverse this situation through a radical population shift, relocating industries, factories, and workers from congested urban areas to entirely new communities to be built

***block by block, “cut out by the surgeon's knife”***



**17** Selective incisions: First Houses, 1935

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Russell Lord and Paul H. Johnstone, *A Place on Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1942), p. 24.

<sup>57</sup> Division of Subsistence Homesteads, *A Homestead and Hope* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1935), p. 5 and Gries and Ford, p. 90.

**58** For a thorough assessment of the design of these communities see Diane Ghirardo, *Building New Communities: New Deal American and Fascist Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). A more policy-oriented study is Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959).

**59** As Lewis Mumford wrote in 1926, "manifestly, the suburb is a public acknowledgement of the fact that congestion and bad housing... are not humanly endurable." Mumford, "The Intolerable City," p. 287.

**60** "Subsistence Homestead Projects," *American City*, February 1934, p. 75.

**61** Frank Lloyd Wright, "Broadacre City: A New Community Plan," *Architectural Record* 77 (April 1935), 243. This article coincided with the first public exhibition of the Broadacre model.

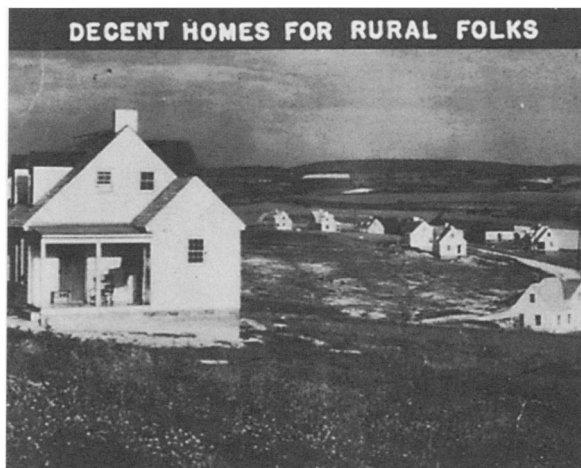
first on undeveloped peripheral land and eventually in wholly rural locales. A number of model decentralized communities were built in the 1930s as a result of New Deal policy including rural industrial communities, subsistence homesteads, and the greenbelt towns erected by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads and its successor agencies, the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration. **58** **18** **19**

In many respects decentralization was allied with general decongestive trends toward suburbanization and edge settlement which began in the 1920s. **59** It differed from these trends by virtue of its conscious physical and economic planning, as opposed to the haphazard growth and speculation of urban rim development typified by the streetcar suburbs and commercial strips of the 1920s. Nonetheless, as *American City* noted, both decentralization and suburbanization were stimulated by "the automobile, the hard-surface highway, and the electric power line." **60** These three stimuli were also crucial to the development of perhaps the best known theoretical model of decentralization—Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City (1935), a project contemporary with federal decentralization initiatives. **20** In Broadacre City Wright combined the liberating effects of new technologies, which he identified as electrification, mechanical mobilization, and organic architecture, with the (supposed) liberating effects of a return to the land. Wright's Broadacre City was a utopian vision of a totally decentralized America in which people and industry were dispersed into low-density individual communities along a great network of superhighways with shopping, business, recreational, and cultural centers located at highway crossings—a large-scale version of Perry's neighborhood unit. Broadacre's inhabitants lived on multi-acre homesteads with large subsistence gardens and, occasionally, working farms. Decentralized factories and offices were nestled among the homesteads and open fields with no clear differentiation between commercial and residential zones. As Wright described his visionary city—careful to distinguish it from the typical large-scale

### ***an essential opposition exists in American culture between urbanism and pastoralism, between***

**62** Peter Rowe (building on Leo Marx) identifies this urge to create a mediated territory between urban and rural as modern pastoralism, which accepts the technological advances of modernity while embracing the rustic, nostalgic virtues of pastoralism. Rowe, *Making a Middle Landscape* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 232-237.

**63** Frank Fritts and Ralph W. Gwinn, *From Fifth Avenue to Farm: A Biological Approach to the Problem of the Survival of Our Civilization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1938). Back-to-the-landers rejected the capitalist modernity which cities represented. See Ira Katznelson, "Reflections on Space and the City" in *Power, Culture and Place*, ed. John Mollenkopf (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988).



**18** The Resettlement Administration's goals for Americans, 1936

metropolis—each Broadacre consisted of "coordinating groups of small farms, small factories, small homes, small schools, and small laboratories." **61** Unemployment and substandard living conditions were nonexistent; workers were prosperous industrialists and thriving farmers, dwelling in a flourishing technological and arcadian landscape somewhere between town and country. **62**

The decentralized community, in both theory (Broadacre City) and practice (federal new towns), was ostensibly motivated by economic efficacy, though this was frequently, if not purposely, occluded by a larger social agenda. This agenda related closely to the contemporary, often unabashedly romantic back-to-the-land movement which called for a retreat from urban modernity and a nostalgic return to rural life, as evident in the 1938 manifesto *From Fifth Avenue to Farm*. **63** Many back-to-the-land notions were incorporated into Wright's and the government's decentralization ideology, including an embrace of Jeffersonian agrarianism, a belief in the psychological benefits of



contact with the land, and an espousal of pioneer virtues and traditional family values. Such ideology was predicated on what Leo Marx identified, in his classic work *The Machine in the Garden*, as an essential and continuous opposition in American culture between urbanism and pastoralism, between the moral turpitude of the city and the moral rectitude of the country.<sup>64</sup> In the 1930s this cultural tension was understood in spatial terms as a dichotomy between the congested city and the decongested countryside, or, as PWA planner Albert Mayer put it, in simple human terms between the “urban worker and farmer.”<sup>65</sup>

For many decentralists, the most critical feature of life for the worker in the congested city was the overcrowded conditions of apartment dwelling, especially among the poor and working class. This provided an even more potent ideological opposition – that between the multi-family walk-up tenement and the single-family detached house. Indeed, the house itself was signifier of the “modern decent” way of life that a decentralized existence would presumably engender – a way of life that was both geographically and psychologically distant from the supposedly sordid and morally-lax conditions of the crowded tenements from which the newly decentralized workers would come.<sup>66</sup> Decentralist literature published by the government and private organizations often included visual propaganda to underscore this opposition. One typical image juxtaposed city-dwelling children with those in the countryside; not surprisingly the city children were depicted in tattered clothing picking through garbage cans in a filthy back alley while their country counterparts happily interacted with friendly barnyard animals. Such imagery was particularly effective in older East Coast cities, including Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington. The Fresh Air Fund and like organizations had, since the 1890s, been shipping children out of crowded slums to the healthier atmosphere of the suburbs or the country.<sup>67</sup> Given the extreme living conditions in New York especially, and on the Lower East Side in particular, it is perhaps not surprising that an early group of

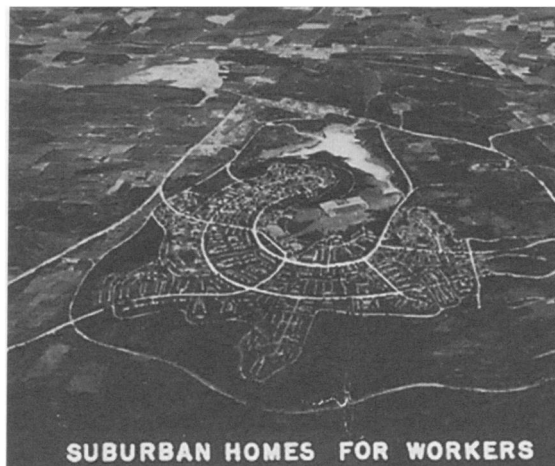
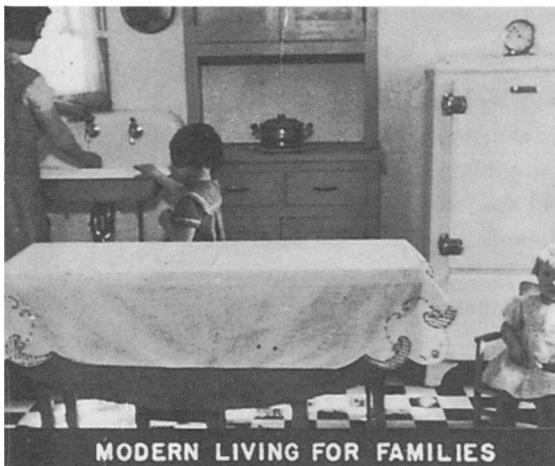
<sup>64</sup> Leo Marx. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>65</sup> Albert Mayer, “The Greenbelt Towns: What and Why,” *American City*, May 1936, p. 59.

<sup>66</sup> Division of Subsistence Homesteads, *Homestead Houses* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1935), p. 1. See also Resettlement Administration, *First Annual Report* (Washington, DC: GPO., 1936), p. 63.

<sup>67</sup> See *A Homestead and Hope*, p. 10.

***the moral turpitude of the city and the moral rectitude of the country***



government-sponsored self-decentralists sprang from this community in 1934. Some 200 Jewish garment workers, most of them members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) headquartered on the Lower East Side, organized themselves to escape the city’s needle trades by forming an experimental community in rural Mercer County, New Jersey, to be known as the Jersey Homesteads.

Following their European counterparts, American labor unions, especially in the garment trades, had been active developers of housing since the 1920s, in New York City and other manufacturing centers. As developers, the unions’ goal was to provide members with decent, affordable housing, since much of the stock then available to workers was congested, expensive, and substandard. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union was especially active, forming its own limited-dividend housing corporation and developing projects in the Bronx and on the Lower East Side, mostly

**68** For a detailed analysis of the development of the Mackley Houses see Gail Radford, chapter 5, "Hosiery Workers' Model Development," pp. 111-44.

**69** As Gail Radford has shown, the "single-family" nature of row-house life was, by the 1930s, somewhat specious, since many houses had been divided into accommodations for up to three families. See Radford, pp. 119-20.

**70** In the years following the completion of the Mackley Houses, the surrounding blocks would become increasingly congested with this type of row house development.

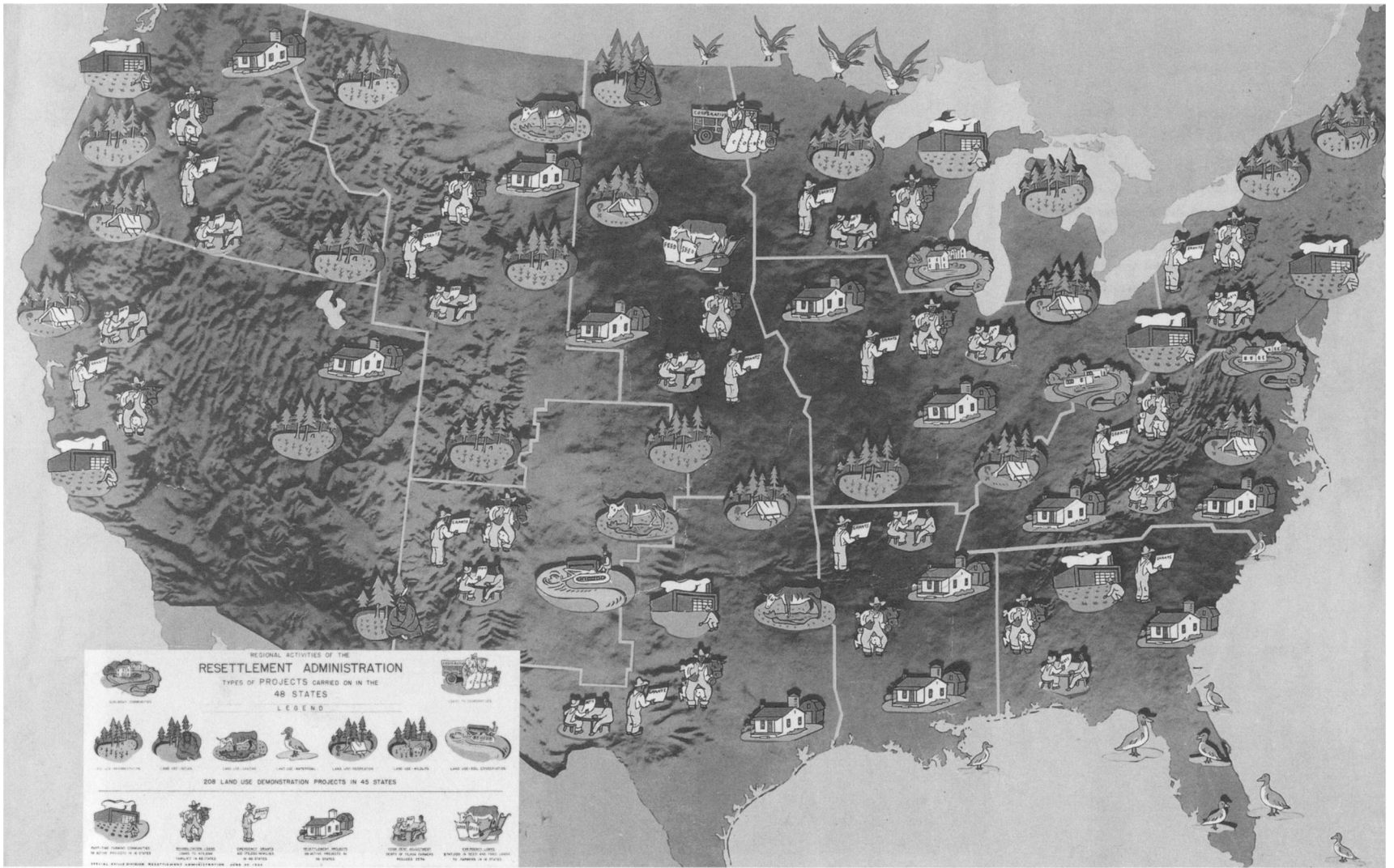
**71** For a full account of the history of Jersey Homesteads (renamed Roosevelt) see Edwin Roskam, *Roosevelt, NJ: Big Dreams in a Small Town and What Time Did to Them* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972).

perimeter block garden apartments. Other smaller unions, along with Jewish community groups, formed housing cooperatives which constructed and managed buildings for their members in addition to running a variety of co-op based cultural programs. In Philadelphia the Hosiery Workers' Union utilized PWA funds—the first loan made by the PWA Housing Division—to build the Carl Mackley Houses, planning for which began in 1932 with designs by Oscar Stonorov and subsequently, Alfred Kastner. The latter would soon turn his attentions to the decentralized community of the Jersey Homesteads, designed for another group of needle workers. Kastner's work at the Mackley Houses and the Jersey Homesteads represents two distinct forms of decongestive design strategy as well as the earliest modern housing schemes built in the United States.

The Mackley Houses were located in the Northeast section of Philadelphia, an area that in the 1920s was neither the over-built urban core or the under-built urban periphery, but was instead a highly industrialized, yet residentially undeveloped district, ideally situated for worker housing.<sup>68</sup> The Mackley site consisted of two undeveloped city blocks which were combined into a superblock by demapping interior streets. For this site Stonorov and Kastner, recent European immigrants, designed four modified *Zeilenbau*en of four stories each, with a total of 300 apartments, as well as a community hall, kindergarten, laundry facilities, a swimming pool, and even an underground parking garage. These multi-family apartment buildings and their communal services represented a decided departure from the traditional single-family attached row house for which Philadelphia was known (80 percent of its residents living in such dwellings.)<sup>69</sup> The developers and designers of the Mackley Houses rejected this tradition for several reasons. Not only did they want to explore the social and economic potential of cooperative housing and collective living, which the isolated single-family house disallowed, but they also wanted to combat the built congestion endemic to the row house and the gridded street pattern. In a typical Philadelphia rowhouse development land coverage was around 66 percent. While the remaining 34 percent of land was open, it was usually not contiguous and presented no opportunity for the development of recreational space.<sup>70</sup> By reversing these land coverage ratios, the Mackley Houses could accommodate three large interior spaces with pedestrian walkways, landscaping, and play areas.

The hosiery workers who developed the Mackley Houses built their project in the midst of the urban industrial landscape which provided their livelihood, reterritorializing that existing landscape into a zone of production in which not only stockings could be manufactured, but community as well. By contrast, the garment workers who developed the Jersey Homesteads built their decentralized project in the midst of a rural landscape. Though the landscape itself required development to produce a community, even more crucial was the transformation required of the needle workers who, far removed from the urban congestion of Manhattan's Lower East Side, had to reinvent themselves as farmers.

The Jersey Homesteads, like the Mackley Houses, were built with federal NIRA funds, here channeled through the PWA's Division of Subsistence Homesteads. The community was originally to include a cooperative garment factory, a consumer co-op, and a cooperative farm, in addition to individual garden/farm plots for each single-family house.<sup>71</sup> The plan, designed by Resettlement Administration engineer Frank Schmitt and based closely on Stein and Wright's Radburn idea, was a model of decongestion.<sup>21</sup> As in Hale Walker's contemporaneous plan for Greenbelt, Maryland, the grid was banished here in favor of a hierarchical curvilinear scheme. One major distributor road connected the Jersey Homesteads to nearby Hightstown and served as the primary thoroughfare for the disposition of public facilities, including the town hall, post office, and combined community center/elementary school. Secondary loop roads and cul-de-sacs provided access to the compact individual houses on one- and two-acre plots with space for garden plots and chicken coops. With single-family detached houses as the primary building type, Jersey Homesteads stood in marked contrast to the house clusters and apartment blocks of Greenbelt. It also differed from Greenbelt in its lack of a comprehensive system of walkways to insure separation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic. However, as at Greenbelt, a modernist aesthetic was predominant. The houses Alfred Kastner designed in collaboration with Louis I. Kahn, who also collaborated on the school, were spare,



**19** Resettlement Administration map showing type and location of projects nationwide, 1936

flat-roofed, concrete block, one-story units with five-or six- room plans: three or four bedrooms, kitchen, living room with dining alcove, and in addition, a full bath and storage/utility room. The houses were also equipped, as befit a Radburn era/motor age community, with carports or garages. Kastner and Kahn used these standard room elements in varied combinations to produce twelve different house types. These types were notable for their irregular perimeters, the variety of which was heightened by their staggered placement in the site plan and by the occasional, seemingly random, joining of two types into a double house, both maneuvers serving to remove the Jersey Homesteads from the mechanical monotony of the grid.<sup>72</sup>

Some housing reformers and critics initially applauded government-sponsored decentralization projects like the Jersey Homesteads, at least in theory, because they seemed like a viable tool for slum clearance and improved living conditions for industrial workers. Catherine Bauer, for example, acknowledged that it would indeed be better for slum dwellers to have “instead of canned rations in a tenement, or soup in a flop-house, fresh vegetables and healthy outdoor work amid pleasant surroundings” as they supposedly would at the Jersey Homesteads.<sup>73</sup> Lewis Mumford praised Kastner and Kahn’s designs for the individual houses at Hightstown, in particular their use of a Wrightian projecting roof, as well as the “abandonment of the old-fashioned block” evident in Schmitt’s site-plan.<sup>74</sup> Both Bauer and Mumford realized however that such “urban evacuations,” as one ardent decentralist described them, might ultimately result in the further exploitation and degradation of the city. Unless careful attention was paid to the replanning of evacuated slum districts, no decongestion would take place. Left to its own devices the free market would surely guarantee another cycle of vacancies, sub-standard housing conditions, and an eventual return to overbuilding and over-crowding.

Occasionally, despite antithetical (anti-city/pro-city) urbanistic agendas, decentralization and slum clearance were planned as companion projects. In Cleveland, for example, a limited dividend housing corporation working with the Mayor’s Business Recovery Commission secured a PWA loan in

<sup>72</sup> David Brownlee and David DeLong have observed that the irregular perimeters of the houses “were more like the picturesque tradition of the American suburban home than modern European-style worker housing.” Brownlee and DeLong, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 26. Alternately, one could argue that the irregularity of the Jersey Homesteads houses recalls the picturesque tradition of worker cottage designs by A.J. Davis and A.J. Downing (1840s), while simultaneously evoking the pinwheeling European modernism of Mies van der Rohe’s brick country house project (1923), which itself borrows from Wright, as do the Jersey Homestead houses.

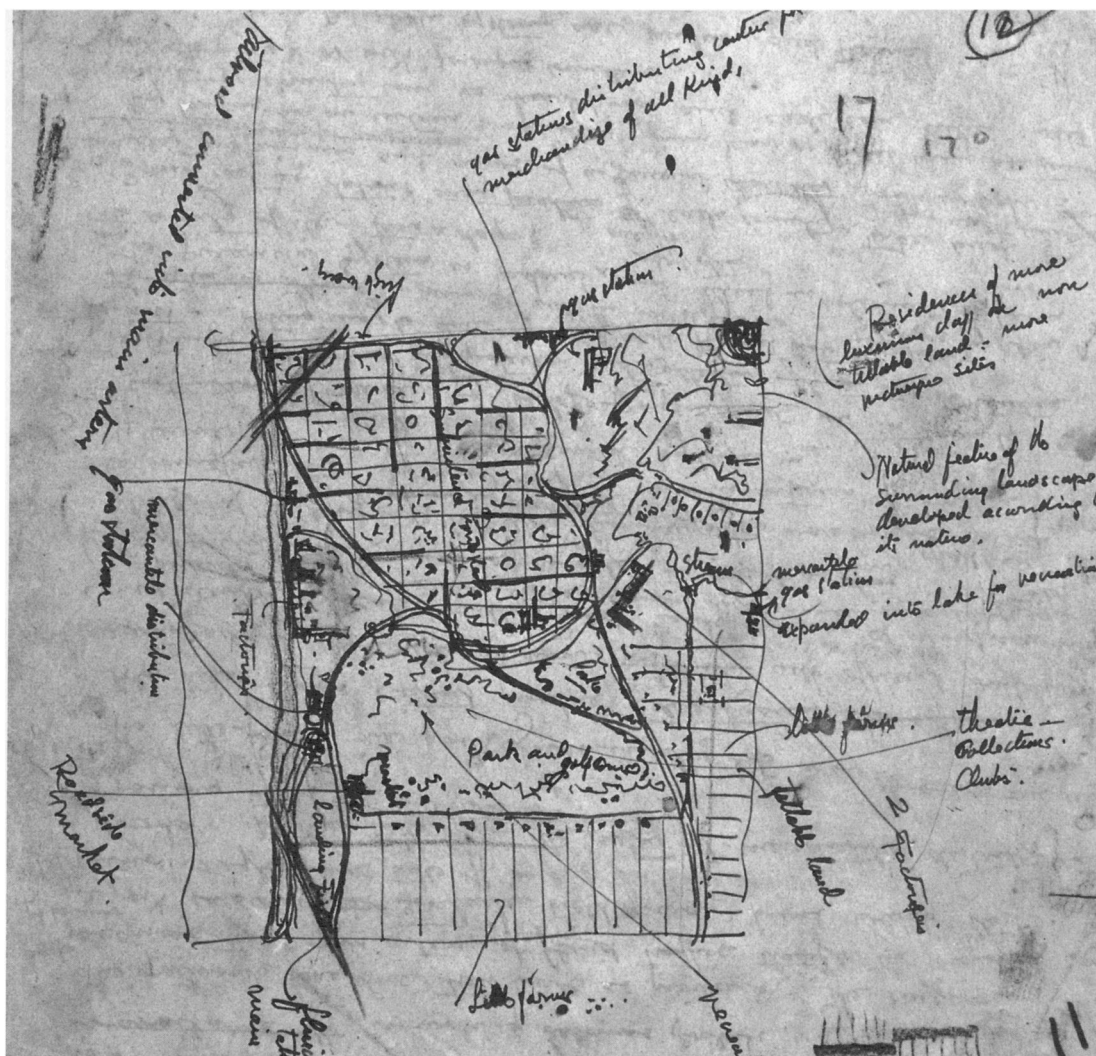
<sup>73</sup> Bauer, p. 248.

<sup>74</sup> Lewis Mumford, “The Skyline: Houses and Fairs,” *The New Yorker*, 20 June 1936, p. 34.

75 "Cleveland Housing: Low-Cost Apartments," *Architectural Record* 75 (February 1934), p. 114.

76 Or at least in certain areas of the overcrowded city. The downtown/skyscraper business core would remain as congested as ever even if all the slums were rebuilt.

77 Quoted in Brown, "The First Experiment in Municipal Housing," p. 19.



20 Sketches for Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City plan, 1934-5

1934 to develop a series of low-cost housing projects inside and outside the urban core. Cleveland Homes Project No. 1 consisted of 900 apartments in three-story walk-ups, disposed in long perpendicular rows on a multi-block slum cleared site in the city center; land coverage was 32 percent. Cleveland Homes Project No. 4, also known as Lakeview Terrace, consisted of 675 row houses and apartments of two and three stories, disposed *Zeilenbau*-style on 22 acres at the (decentral) urban periphery; coverage was 26 percent with the remaining land left as a central open space and recreation area. The purpose of Project No. 4 was to "take care of those who [were] eliminated from the downtown area. In other words, houses for people who should live in the country." Families were provided with gardens and chicken coops in which they were expected to produce enough food to be "self-supporting or pretty close to it" with only occasional supplemental work.<sup>75</sup>

Back east, though planning for the Jersey Homesteads and the East Third Street/Astor site was concurrent, and in spite of their shared Lower East Side connection, the projects were not intentionally related. Still, the two projects had the same ultimate goal, namely to de-densify the concentration of buildings and people in the overcrowded city.<sup>76</sup> That this goal might be achieved through such opposing means as evacuation to Jersey Homesteads or rebuilding on East Third Street merely accentuates the diversity of possible responses to a single condition—urban congestion engendered by the grid. Here was Bauer's pejorative patchwork approach (Koolhaas' mosaic of episodes) writ large: a variety of isolated potential solutions to the problem of decongesting the slums; a series of disparate, sometimes contradictory models or prototypes linked only, it would seem, by grid-defying tendencies. Of course, the respective ideological or formal positions these projects occupied in the cultural spectrum of decongestion were of little interest to the average worker-in-the-street looking for a decent place to live, and late in 1934, while one group of Lower East Side garment workers was planning its escape to the New Jersey countryside, another group was lining up on East Third Street, "standing in the rain and sleet for hours" to fill out residency applications for the newly-announced low-rent apartments which were finally to be built or, more accurately, rebuilt, on the site of Vincent Astor's tenements.<sup>77</sup> Work would shortly begin on the modest low-rise apartment

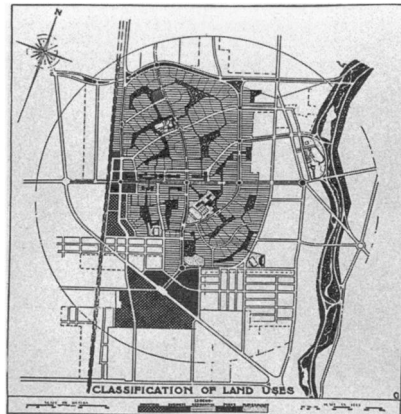


complex that was to be the first urban public housing project in the United States.<sup>78</sup> The First Houses, as they came to be known, were wholly sponsored, funded, owned and managed by the government, providing 122 low-rent apartments for low-income families drawn from the slums bordering the project.

**the first houses** The three- and four-room apartments of the First Houses into which these families moved in December 1935 were spacious and well-appointed. They were disposed four per floor in eight gut-rehabilitated buildings which had been carved out of the 38 existing structures on the site; the remainder were demolished. In the final configuration there were five five-story walk-ups along East Third Street and three four-storys on Avenue A. Each unit consisted of a double-lot 50-foot frontage with a 25-foot break on either side; on Avenue A the breaks were occupied at street level by one-story commercial space. Together the units formed an L-shaped, partial perimeter block surrounding a landscaped interior court that functioned as a garden and play area for the tenants. This court also provided access to the individual buildings as entrances were removed from the street to the rear. This layout relied on the precedent of the garden court which had become a standard typology for middle-class housing in New York in the 1920s, epitomized by such projects as Clarence Stein's Phipps Garden Apartments at Sunnyside (1929) and Andrew Thomas' Dunbar Apartments in Harlem (1928). That this precedent should have been used for the city's first public housing complex is not surprising since the project's chief designer was Frederick L. Ackerman, who had worked with Stein and Wright at Sunnyside and was now the head of the Technical Division of the NYCHA. Ackerman was a devoted housing advocate who favored perimeter planning throughout his career. As planning was underway for the First Houses, Ackerman organized a comparative study of 23 low rent housing projects to serve as potential models for upcoming municipal projects; nearly all were perimeter-block garden-court types.<sup>79</sup>

The perimeter block, as used at Phipps and Dunbar, represented an intermediary step in decongestive efforts to defy the grid. While the grid's street lines were maintained, and from the exterior the perimeter-planned building appeared to represent the congestive take-over of an entire block by a single edifice, in fact the opposite was happening. For the perimeter block was just that—a perimeter—with an open court at its center. This open space, depending on the articulation of the court-side walls which could, as at Dunbar, sometimes result in a double perimeter, virtually guaranteed a low building density. At Phipps the land coverage was 43 percent; at Dunbar it was 49 percent—a figure which was remarkable in the context of congested Harlem, where building and population densities rivaled those of the Lower East Side. Indeed, land coverage of the block just south of the Dunbar site was well over 70 percent with its packed rows of old- and new-law tenements. At the Harlem River Houses (1937), located just north of the Dunbar apartments and in the development stage as the First Houses were coming to completion, land coverage was reduced to 32 percent, although with 574 units, compared to 511 at the Dunbar, the complex had a higher resident population.

In addition to lowering land coverage, the open court represented a conscious spatial and social internalization intended, when located in a slum district, to separate the project as much as possible from its external environment and foster a sense of community among the inhabitants. This is exactly what happened at the Dunbar apartments where residents, including Countee Cullen, Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Dubois, and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, formed a vibrant, middle-class, African-American community that made the Dunbar a cultural landmark of the Harlem Renaissance. Downtown, because the First Houses occupied only a partial block, the rear elevations of the tenements on East Second Street remained visible from the project's interior court. Thus, the insulating advantages of the perimeter plan could not be fully exploited. Eventually, trees and shrubs planted in the



21 1929 plan of Radburn, New Jersey

<sup>78</sup> There had been earlier attempts at wholly public housing, most notably in New York the Chrystie-Forsyth corridor, a narrow strip of Lower East Side land running seven blocks from Canal to Houston Streets. The city acquired the land in 1929, demolished all existing tenements by 1931, and by 1933 had collected numerous proposals for model housing, including a boldly modernist slab scheme by Howe and Lescaze. By 1934 the redevelopment effort languished under the weight of fiscal and political indecision, which made it fair game for newly-empowered Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, who managed to appropriate the site and transform it into a park and playground. For an analysis of the Howe and Lescaze design see Pommer, pp. 251-52. For Moses's involvement see Robert A. Caro, *The Powerbroker* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 375.

<sup>79</sup> See Frederick Ackerman and William Ballard, *Survey of Low Rental Housing Projects in New York City* (New York: Technical Division, NYCHA, September 1934). Richard Plunz analyzes Ackerman's ideas and his NYCHA work in *A History of Housing in New York City*, especially chapter 7.

**80** Plunz, p. 209.

**81** All decorative embellishment was removed, including window hoods and sills and the stamped metal bracketed cornice. Modernization experts considered such ornaments obsolete. See Kenneth Stowell, *Modernizing Buildings For Profit* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1935), pp. 11-15.

**82** The initial expenditures of \$350,000 eventually more than tripled to over \$1 million. See Walter Kruesi, "Cost Analysis: The First Municipal Housing Experiment," *Real Estate Record*, 19 September 1936, pp. 7-11.

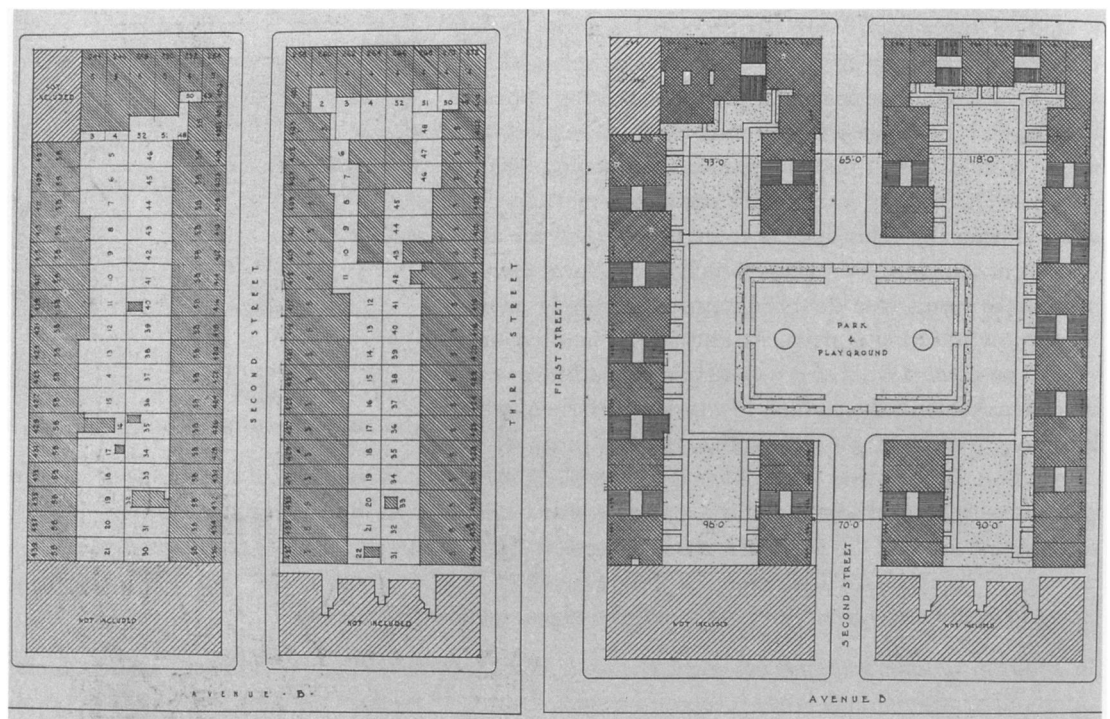
**83** "\$6.05 Per Room in Manhattan," *Architectural Forum* 64 (January 1936), 67. These criticisms discount the satisfaction of the tenants of the First Houses with their new apartments, renting at around \$18 per month. For tenant views of the project see Catherine Mackenzie, "120 'First Families' Get New Homes," *New York Times* 1 December 1935, p. 10(4) and Rachel L. Swarns, "60 Years Later and Still a Success," *New York Times* 18 December 1995, pp. B1 & B4.

**84** John F. St. George, "An Analysis of the City's 'Astor' Housing Project," *Real Estate Record*, 4 May 1935, pp. 4-5 and "Architects Oppose Remodeling Plans," *New York Times*, 21 April 1935, p. 22 (1). The latter article quotes the Guild's open letter to Mayor Fiorello La Guardia.

interior grew tall enough and thick enough to give the illusion of a full garden court. Because of the First Houses's similarities to projects of the 1920s Richard Plunz characterizes the design of the complex as "an anachronism and atypical of what was to come in the following three decades of public housing."<sup>80</sup> While the First Houses were indeed atypical of the low-rise superblock and the tower-in-the-park morphologies associated with the public housing of the New Deal era and the post-World War II period respectively, they are not exactly anachronistic. Rather, the design of the First Houses was of the *Zeitgeist*, the product of not only the culture of decongestion but also the contemporaneous modernization movement which proposed tenement rehabilitation as an alternative to wholesale demolition.

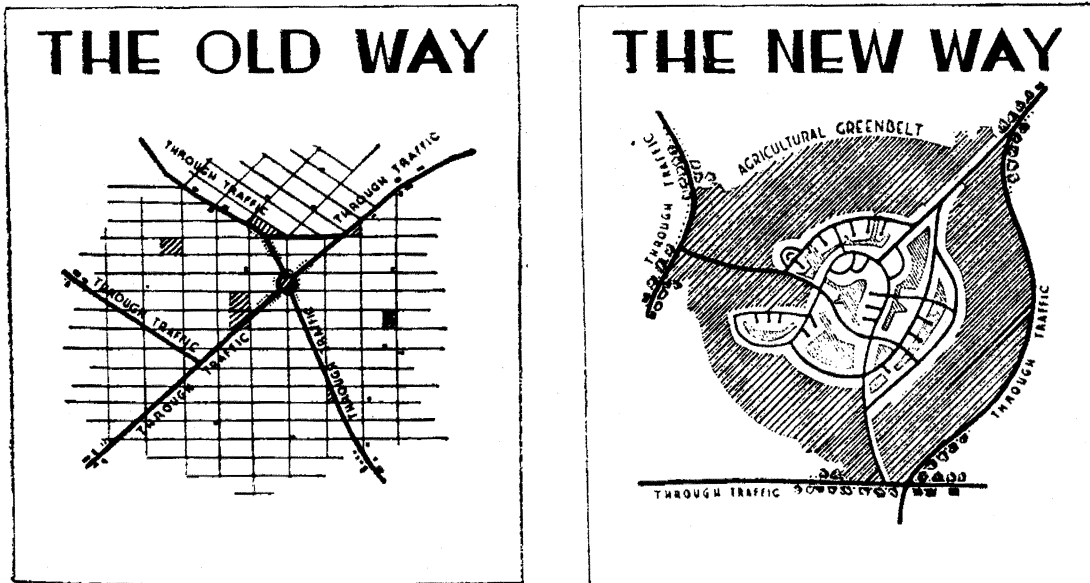
The modernization effort which metamorphosed the old law tenements on East Third Street into the First Houses was exceedingly thorough.<sup>22</sup> While the old foundations were used, steel centerings were added to all spans, and new roofs were installed. Along Avenue A, keeping with standard modernization practice, new storefronts incorporated asymmetrically composed facades with large plate glass windows and off-center entrance doors. The exterior walls of all eight buildings were rebuilt with the original brick into the simplified, unornamented, stripped-down facades typical of those that were perceived as modern and up-to-date.<sup>81</sup>

The complete top-to-bottom makeover of the First Houses was carefully and critically scrutinized, assumedly because of its role as the curtain-raiser on Government-financed low cost housing. *Architectural Forum* sharply disparaged the actual modernization effort taking place on East Third Street and deemed the First Houses excessively expensive and therefore of benefit to no one but Vincent Astor.<sup>82</sup> Though the *Forum* stopped short of calling the project a total boondoggle, the implications of stating that the NYCHA "had decided to bake cake, not bread, with its dough" were obvious enough.<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile, the Architectural Guild of America undertook an independent



**22** From grid block to perimeter block: East Third Street modernization, New York City, 1934

analysis of the project and concluded that its plan was impractical, its finances unsound, and its structure unsafe. The Guild publicly opposed the modernization and called instead for the site to be totally cleared and rebuilt from scratch.<sup>84</sup> This opinion was shared by Lewis Mumford who reviewed the First Houses in his Skyline column in *The New Yorker* the very week the project opened in December 1935. He too complained that the cost of renovation was so great that "one



23 The grid and the greenbelt: old way versus new way according to Albert Mayer, 1936

might as well tear down these lousy quarters and make a fresh start," preferably somewhere else.<sup>85</sup> But Mumford's most opprobrious criticism was directed at the NYCHA's most decongestive act, namely the demolition of every third building on the site to provide the remaining structures with light, air, and open space—"the minimum housing requirements of every American no matter how small his income," according to Langdon Post.<sup>86</sup> According to Mumford, this selective demolition was a clear demonstration of "precisely how not to rebuild the blighted areas of New York" and he mocked those who promoted it as either "innocent or deluded."<sup>87</sup>

Maybe they were both in these early years of public housing, but the bureaucrats of decongestion were just getting started. On East Third Street they had succeeded in reducing the congestion from 70 percent to 40 percent by punching out every third building. But even as Eleanor Roosevelt was cutting a red, white, and blue ribbon to open the First Houses, drastic work was underway in Brooklyn to decongest 12 of the borough's densest blocks. The four-story Williamsburg Houses (also known as Ten Eyck Houses), completed in 1937 with full PWA financing, reduced land coverage from 90 percent to 33 percent with twenty buildings disposed in four superblocks across a "pseudo-Zeilenbau" site plan. William Lescaze's arrangement of the individual buildings on the superblocks was intended as a gesture of grid-defying bravura. By shifting the buildings 15 degrees to the northwest, Lescaze effectively rent the Williamsburg Houses from the surrounding gridded urban fabric. Unfortunately, as Richard Pommer's analysis shows, this "attention-getting aesthetic effect" resulted in vicious wind channels and poor sun exposure in many apartments.<sup>88</sup>

**the triumph of congestion** While William Lescaze was responsible for the individual design elements of the Williamsburg Houses, the man in charge of overseeing this massive decongestion project was Richmond Shreve, designer of the Empire State Building. The Empire State was of course a preeminent symbol of the culture of congestion: well in advance of Rem Koolhaas, the editor of an anti-urban tract called *Cities are Abnormal* made this clear, denouncing it as "a monument to congestion."<sup>89</sup> Shreve's role in the oppositional Williamsburg and Empire State projects, icons of decongestion and congestion respectively, might seem a product of what Koolhaas identified as the inherent schizophrenia of Manhattanism. However, this interpretation is perhaps too cynical when considering the housing projects of the 1930s, when architects, planners, and policymakers—members of what Catherine Bauer would recall as a genuine "social front"—were earnestly working to achieve urban decongestion.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, at the time, William Starrett, contractor for the Empire State Building, saw no contradiction in a single mind producing both the hyper-dense skyscraper and the hypo-dense housing project. For Starrett, skyscrapers were a supreme American achievement. In his view it was only natural that the men who created them should turn their tal-

<sup>85</sup> Mumford, "The Skyline: The New Housing," pp. 105-6. Mumford advocated abandoning the "bleak, filthy, ugly" Lower East Side in favor of the "open spaces and green" of the far northern Bronx, where Stein's Hillside Homes had just been completed.

<sup>86</sup> "City Built Homes will Open Dec. 3," *New York Times*, 21 November 1935, p. 3 (1).

<sup>87</sup> Mumford, p. 106.

<sup>88</sup> Pommer, p. 255. Richard Plunz calls the project's alignment "an abrupt schism." See Plunz, pp. 216-18.

<sup>89</sup> Elmer T. Peterson, ed., *Cities are Abnormal* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1946), p. 7. See also Koolhaas, pp. 132-51.

<sup>90</sup> Bauer, "The Social Front of Modern Architecture in the 1930s," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 24 (March 1965), pp. 48-52.



**24** Robert Taylor Homes, Chicago, 1964. Hube Henry, Hedrich-Blessing

**91** Quoted in Gries and Ford, p. 92. Gries and Ford describe Starrett as “a builder of bigger and bigger buildings.”

ents and energies to solving a supreme American problem—the urban slum: “It is the hope of people who are discussing this [slum] problem that those same brains that put together the great skyscrapers... will turn toward this.” Starrett predicted that the “same great, magnificent structure of building ability, our great architectural skill, can develop out of this social order something just as fine in the end as the skyscraper...it will not be so conspicuous...but it will be none the less real.”**91**

It is debatable whether public housing ever reached the heights of achievement Starrett optimistically predicted. Certainly, the potential for slum eradication, community enhancement, and decent, affordable apartments was present in those first federal projects of the 1930s—in First Houses, Mackley Houses, Lakeview Terrace, Harlem River Houses, and Williamsburg Houses—which, as Richard Pommer claimed, “set the pattern for the architecture of housing projects in

many cities of the nation for the rest of the decade.”<sup>92</sup> Certainly too, the potential for decongestion was present in these projects; indeed, decongestion was more than merely present, it was a cultural determinant and a collective *raison d'être*. These slum-clearing/decongesting potentials, largely realized in the projects of the 1930s, were still present during the war years in defense housing projects, such as Gropius and Breuer's Aluminum City Terrace (1942). Though based on the decongestive paradigms of the recent past, like Radburn and Greenbelt, these war-time projects gave decongestion a present-day, military spin. <sup>23</sup> “Scatter for safety” and “low density decreases slaughter” became the new urban planning battle cries as the grid was condemned not because it was a slum-producing congestant, but because it was an easy target for air-raid attack. Decongestion seemed destined to win this particular battle, defeating even the towers of Manhattanism which, like the grid, possessed a “strong geometr[y]” and “prominent artificial[ity]” which made them “impossible to camouflage” from enemy war planes.<sup>93</sup>

Aside from the issue of national defense, Catherine Bauer was confident in 1941 that housing ideals had shifted away from the skyscraper—that “romantic idolum for most Cities of the Future in the roaring twenties.” The housing projects of the 1930s had made this a reality, pointing “definitely toward two and even one-story structures; the top limit for walk-ups [descending] from five to four to three stories.” Likewise, Bauer was certain that the mechanistic grid would finally give way to the superblock, which was not only cheaper to build but was “more human.”<sup>94</sup> But in the shift to large-scale public housing, which Bauer predicted for the postwar period, there was something to be learned from the skyscraper after all, something the war-time projects had already understood.

After World War II, despite predictions to the contrary, the skyscraper became more than just an organizational paradigm. Planners and architects had learned the lessons of the tower too well, and it became a model for public housing as an actual building typology. In some ways the postwar tower-in-the-park represents the ultimate expression of the 1930s culture of decongestion, with its buildings widely spaced on superblocks with astoundingly low ground coverage. However, in the shift from low-rise to high-rise, the tower-in-the-park also represents a perversion of that earlier, hopeful culture. In the postwar decades when high-rise became synonymous with high-density—not of buildings, but of people—an important tenet of decongestion was forgotten. American planners and architects were still defying the grid in their slum clearance efforts, but that defiance now held the implicit danger of over-crowding, of re-congestion. As Lewis Mumford tren-

### ***the postwar tower-in-the-park is the ultimate expression of the 1930s culture of decongestion***

chantly observed in 1950, the superblock might just generate the super-slum.<sup>95</sup> The new high-rise towers of the postwar era, “the projects,” were nothing more than “super-tenements.” The seeds for these towers had been planted, Bauer argued, by the “strange... skyscrapomania” of federal postwar housing policy and now, in the 1950s, “a nation-wide crop of behemoths” was being harvested: congestion-producing towers which bore “about as much resemblance to the ordinary American idea of home as lower Manhattan does to Concord.”<sup>96</sup> Any visitor to an American city can easily identify the “projects,” while an early twentieth-century city could camouflage the destitute within the regularity of the street grid.

Beginning with the dramatic implosion of Pruitt-Igoe in 1972, a steady stream of public housing towers have been demolished, culminating recently with the notorious Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago. The congestion/decongestion debate has effectively come full circle. <sup>24</sup> As the postwar projects, themselves decongestive artifacts, now come tumbling down, the ideology of decongestion born in the early decades of this century continues to shape the American urban landscape in profound, if ironic, ways.

<sup>92</sup> Pommer, p. 235.

<sup>93</sup> Douglas Haskell, “What Does Military Design Offer the Planning of Peace?” *Architectural Record* 85 (March 1939), pp. 68-75.

<sup>94</sup> Catherine Bauer, “Planned Large-Scale Housing: A Balance Sheet of Progress,” *Architectural Record* 89 (May 1941), pp. 89, 97, and 99.

<sup>95</sup> Lewis Mumford, “The Skyline: The Gentle Art of Overcrowding,” *New Yorker*, 20 May 1950, p. 83.

<sup>96</sup> Catherine Bauer, “Clients for Housing,” *Progressive Architecture* 33 (May 1952), pp. 61-2.