

NEW YORK HOUSING

HARLEM RIVER HOMES AND WILLIAMSBURG HOUSES

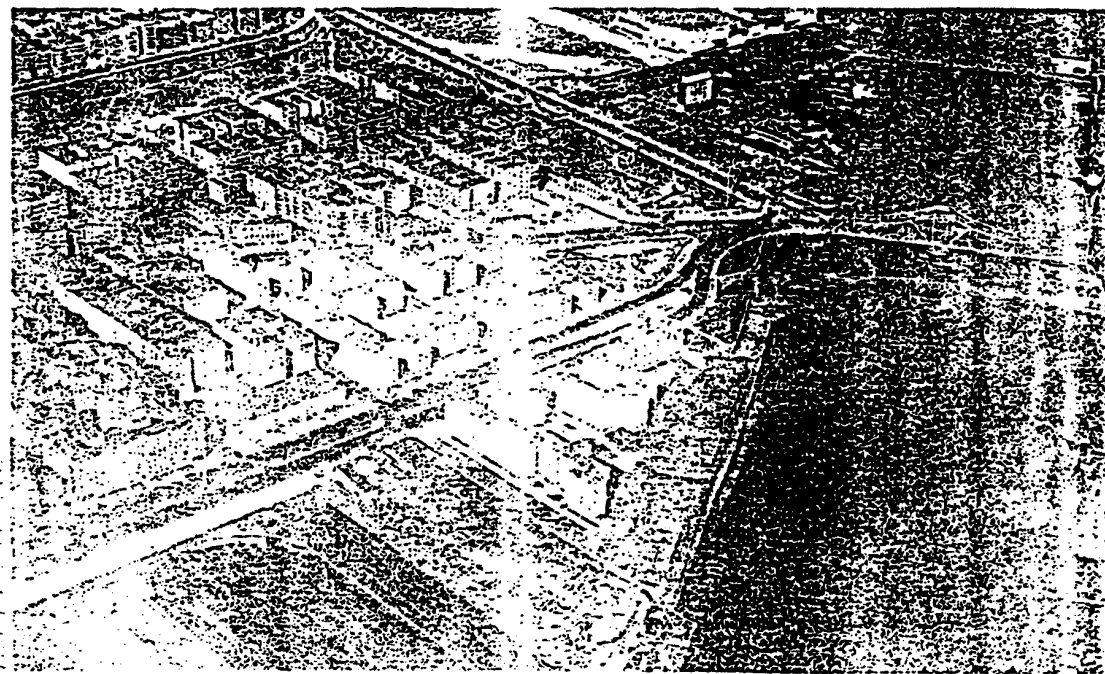
BY TALBOT FAULKNER HAMLIN

At last, in our midst, "housing" exists. Only a little, only a beginning, only a drop in the bucket, to be sure; but at least there the buildings stand, and people run in and out of them, and eat and sleep in them. In New York some 2,300 families of former slum dwellers—nearly 10,000 people—have for the first time places to live in that are worthy to become, and to be called, homes. To us who have watched and coddled and fed the housing movement, who have talked housing and listened to each other talk housing almost continually since the war, that seems an almost unbelievable fact. We have begun to build; the words are being incarnated in brick and steel and concrete and glass.

As the first fruits in New York of the new Federal housing movement, Harlem River

Homes and the huge Williamsburg Development have a great importance. In them is being tested not only the whole validity of the housing movement in New York, but also the achievements of our design skill and the utility of our building materials and techniques. These two groups are beginnings only; but we should learn from these beginnings as much as possible, so that what is to follow may be as good as we can make it.

One may approach Harlem River Homes from the west. On the heights above, the Victorian houses and the thirty-year-old apartments of Convent and Edgecomb Avenues are rapidly filling with the more prosperous negroes; the magnificent view from the terrace at Edgecomb Avenue and Colonial Park is already entirely theirs, and they can look



Harlem River Houses, looking in a direction a little to

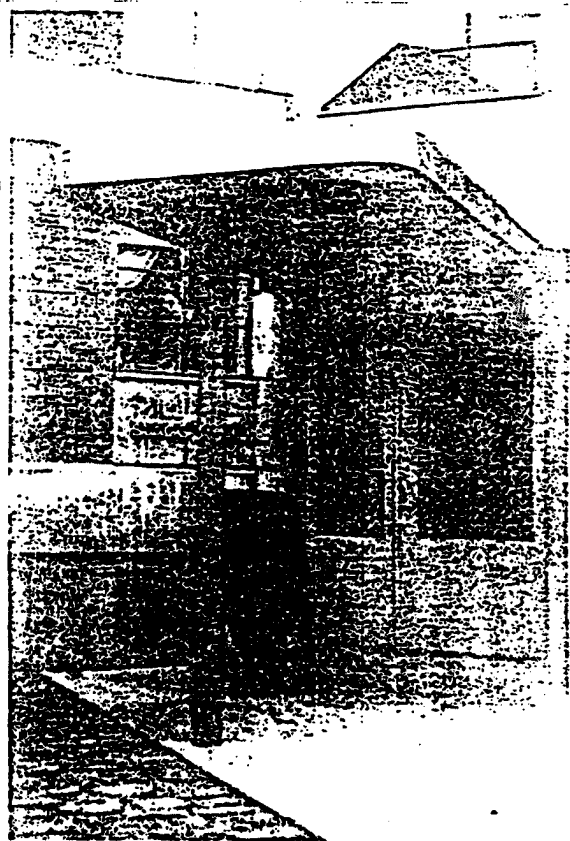
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as a cause for a lack of participation in the effect of the completed design seems therefore scarcely important or relevant.

And no law governed the color choices for the materials. The stair halls are faced with terrazzo slabs. They are a cold gray. The concrete exposed varies from quite yellowish to gray and green and black where it has stained; even where its surface is uncontaminated the color goes but ill with the stair-tower slabs. The brick is a grayish warm pink, without definiteness, and is rapidly dirtying to a mottled gray. Each of these colors has a rather melancholy tone, and each seems to be having its rather undistinguished and mournful say in a totally different and discordant key. One welcomes the sharp yellow and bright blue of the entrance doors, if only because of their clarity, though they add to the confusion.

Yet the largeness of the whole, the wide views in the chief courts, the general sense of airiness remain as dominant impressions. There is a quality in these buildings, criticize them as one will, which is fresh and inventive and alive. Walking through them one comes with all the more shock upon the school in the center—a school, as far as date goes, as modern as they are, yet in everything else outmoded. Of white brick, it shouts its discordant note insistently; its inept proportions and its extraordinary, crude, "modernistic" detail are alike a disgrace. If that is a standard design for New York City schools—well, it is just too bad for New York's art consciousness. Why the rigid standardization of the New York Board of Education should have unnecessarily foisted such a monstrosity upon Williamsburg despite the architects' protest is a question, I suppose, political rather than aesthetic. Whatever the cause, there it stands, a prize example of "ye olde moderne." Snyder's Tudor schools of thirty years ago, and even the thin colonial-esque schools of ten years back, were really more straightforward and expressive than this stiff whiteness . . .

It is pleasant to return from this school to Williamsburg Houses, and especially to that element in them which to me is most interesting—the imaginative and creative character of most of the details. In them there is continual pleasure to be found in the choice and use of materials, in the freshness and originality of the forms. The front of the nursery school in one of the project buildings, for instance, with its pleasant alternations of glass brick and windows and its play terrace, is delightful, despite the lack of relation between the play terrace and the surrounding spaces. The shops, with their dark, clear blue para-



An entrance at the new Williamsburg Houses

pets above them, and their suave curved ends, bring into the whole a much needed variety. The way the treatment of the corner stair-tower fronts is carried around the corner is interesting, though the levels of the stair windows and those next them seem to lack coordination unnecessarily.

Especially interesting are the entrances themselves. The porch and hood roofs are curved at the corners and swept back gracefully into the wall, and the edges are covered with stainless metal that is gleaming and attractive, detailed with grace and finesse. The addresses of each entry are clearly marked upon it in interesting yet legible lettering, placed just at the eye level where they cannot be missed. And at the doors themselves the curving of the jambs and the bright clear colors of the door finish give the right touch of invitation. This is all just that kind of imaginative and carefully studied detailing which is so unfortunately absent in the other project; alongside of these bright and imaginative entrances the stained and characterless concrete slabs at Harlem would seem drab indeed.

Of the landscaping at Williamsburg, it is difficult to say more than the rather dubious "adequate." All the imagination found in the building details is absent; the layout of paths,

play spaces, and the more conventional, more restricted paths, and the almost total lack of trees here and there except along the borders of the open spaces. The imagination which is so much more limited than that of the Harlem River Homes, and made of much more delight, there is in Williamsburg in the trees. There are trees, and grass, and paving, and one can get around the project; that is about all. It is infinitely less good than the planting at the Hillside Project in the Bronx done three years ago by Mrs. Cantley.

The apartments themselves in both these New York projects are almost identical, for both are based on the Unit Plans prepared by the Housing Division of the Department of the Interior. They are clever, efficient, and economical. The use of the kitchen to give additional entrance to the bedroom area works well. Yet as living places, they are not inspiring; there is in them a definite feeling of cramped minima. Even the large bedroom, when furnished with a double bed, a chest of drawers, and a chair and table, gives the impression of being crammed full, with no space to walk. To put two children into the small bedroom calls for a shoe horn. It is possible that similar areas in slightly narrower and longer proportions, though allowing less flexibility in arrangement, would have given a more open and airy feeling; any nearly square bedroom is difficult unless its minor dimension is at least twelve feet.

In rooms as tight as these, the careful correlation of mechanical equipment and of structure with the room becomes of prime importance. Here the type of construction chosen has been a major handicap in Williamsburg. The thickness of the concrete spandrel beams has forced all the heating risers well out from the wall; in some places they are at least 10" away from the wall, and, unprotected, they form a definite hazard to the inhabitants and prevent adequate use of the wall surfaces for furnishing. In most cases, too, the horizontal runs from risers to radiators are long and run above the floor, so that an additional furnishing difficulty is produced. Moreover, the structural columns form breaks in the walls of almost all the bedrooms, in the most inconvenient places. These are drawbacks which might well be controlling factors in the choice of structural and mechanical systems in all future housing work. In Harlem River Homes, where the structure is more conventional and less spectacular, these problems do not arise.

Both of these projects bring up one important question: Why are not living balconies more used in American housing? Our long summers and autumns make them desirable; the pleasant outlooks possible in large-scale development would make them definite necessities. In the Cedar Central Project in Cleveland they are present, and add immensely not only to the desirability of the apartments but also to the interest of the exterior. They are universal in the Swedish housing, and common in Italy; surely the possibility of developing them here, and so giving one more impulse towards health-giving outdoor living, might well be studied in America.

But the major problem which these new housing projects bring up to any unbiased observer is not one of layout, planning, or aesthetic design—it is the problem of bad, or ill-considered, construction. The appearance of both of these jobs reveals a shameful condition. Staining and efflorescence destroy color and form, and evidence walls full of water. The leaks between the concrete and the brick in Williamsburg became almost a disaster. The concrete basement walls in both projects are marred and patched and discolored and ugly. The brickwork, particularly in Williamsburg, is blotched and discolored by leaks and dripping; the general appearance is shocking. And this condition is not limited to these New York projects.

This is a question of prime importance in American architecture. It would almost seem as though the more science we had, the more new building materials and building methods, the worse we built. Here are groups costing millions, designed by good architects, and well designed, built by some of the country's best known and most reputable contractors, engineered by the best engineers, with everything checked and re-checked — and in less than a year these buildings, many of them, look a disgrace. Where is the error? What is the matter?

Surely, if we cannot build well in the newest and most loudly advertised ways, let us build well in the older, proven ways. If modern materials don't work, let us use materials that do. Let us do our experimenting on private houses and private buildings generally—or, better still, let the building material people do the experimenting—and not inflict experiments on thousands of people and on the government. For one of two things is true: either these are experiments, or else our sense of building standards is shockingly low.

One definite lesson seems to be obvious.

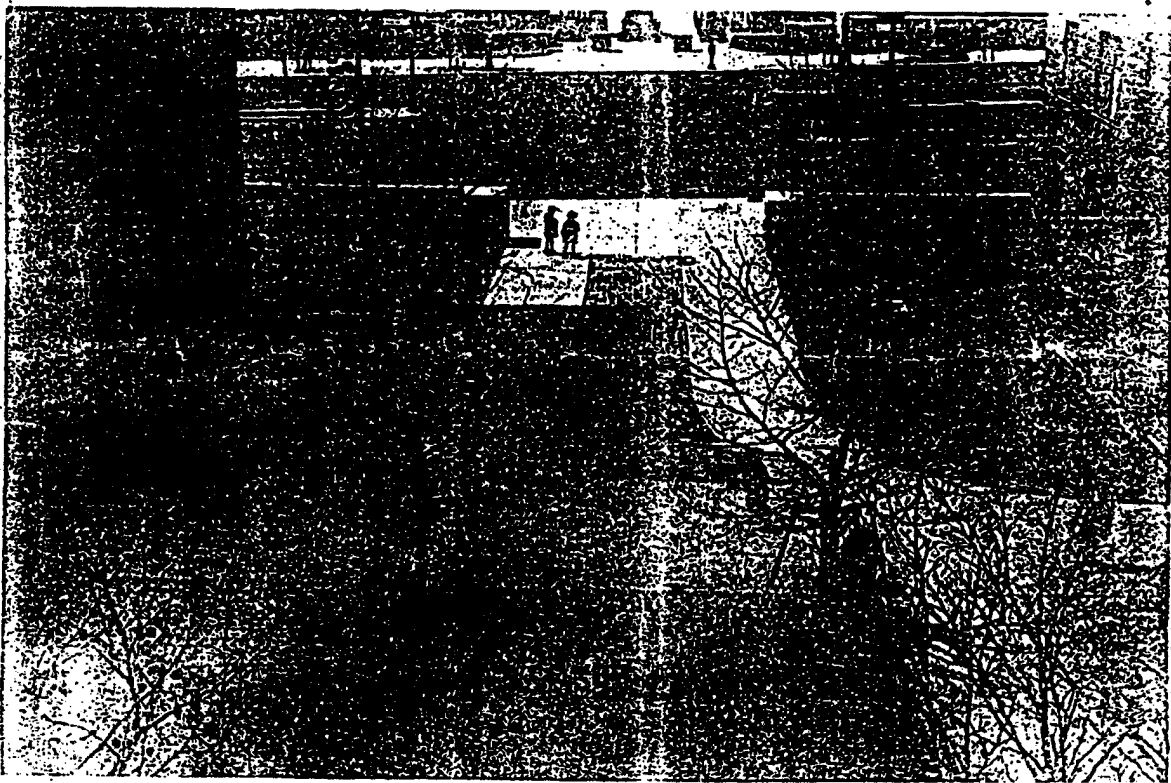
concrete, as an experimental thing, is good in this climate, under these conditions, and is used in these projects, and from its use, we learn. There are many things that can be used, but they involve considerable expense in surfacing and finishing. There are, for climates like that of Southern California, where concrete used as it is in these projects might be satisfactory. But in a cold city in the New York latitude it just does not work. And there is one other thing: cannot the inventors and building material people give us, at reasonable cost, a mortar as good as the best that was used a century ago? Or is the trouble in the use of it, in skimping its strength and quantity?

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Yet, despite all these criticisms, the general effect of a visit to the two projects is exhilarating and enheartening. They point the way; but they are also, themselves, extraordinary achievements. In every really important general matter of land-usage—in air, in light, in a sense of green and growing things as a concomitant of living; in the creation of an atmosphere of humanity and decency, a place where children would be glad to grow up; in the development of a community that brings with it a new vision of democracy and of progress—these two developments have quali-

ties that no money can buy. In every single one of these matters they are better than the most expensive apartments of Park Avenue.

And the cost? Lewis told that the basic economic rent at Williamsburg was \$11.55 per room per month. With the subsidy, this brings the base rent to \$7.12. But if housing with all these advantages can be built to rent for less than \$12.00 a room a month, how long will our middle classes and even the wealthy put up with the congestion for which they pay \$20.00 and more? That is a significant question. If large-scale planning on large sites can give the amenities we find here, will not daring investors see the significance of this large scale development? Already the Metropolitan Insurance Company has made a beginning, by its proposed development in the Bronx. Others will follow. By so raising the housing standards of the poorer classes, we may be raising the standards of housing of all classes; in the end, though we may never, under present land systems, reach those of the very lowest income, we shall have worked a drastic revolution in the entire concept of land usage and of the relation of land to housing—a revolution which will profoundly affect the city planning and the living habits of the future. And that, alone, would make these projects worth their cost, however great.



Looking down into one of the entrance courts at Harlem River Homes

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