

Integrating Co-op City

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Co-op City, located in northeast Bronx, consists of 15,389 units with over 50,000 residents. Today, it is still the largest cooperatively owned and operated residential community ever built in the United States. As the largest, and one of the last, cooperative housing complexes to be union-sponsored, Co-op City represents the culmination of almost fifty years of effort by union leaders in New York to organize around not only wages and hours but also around affordable housing, arguably one of New York's greatest needs. At the same time, from vision to completion, the realization of Co-op City took almost a decade and occurred during a time of extreme political and social unrest in the 1960s and 1970s. In many ways, Co-op City's completion marked the end of one era and the beginning of another.

As one of the last cooperative housing complexes to be sponsored by the United Housing Foundation (UHF), Co-op City's completion in 1973 represented the pinnacle of almost fifty years of union-sponsored cooperative housing. Beginning in 1927 with the completion of Amalgamated Houses, located in the Bronx and the first project to benefit from the New York State Limited Dividend Housing Corporations Law of 1926, Abraham Kazan and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) initiated a series of planned residential communities. However, it wasn't until the ACWA partnered with 61 other labor unions, civic groups, and housing cooperatives in 1951 to establish UHF (Farrell, 1968), a development agency committed to the creation of cooperative housing, that Kazan and his partners began to realize their vision. Prior to the formation of UHF, just over 1,600 units of union-sponsored housing were built in New York City during a twenty-five year period. After the formation of UHF, more than 30,000 units of union-sponsored housing were built in New York City in less

than twenty-five years. And, of those more than 30,000 units, Co-op City's represented over fifty percent. But, while some thought Co-op City represented just one more in a series of ever-larger union-sponsored cooperative housing projects, its early troubles in fact crippled the UHF and forced it into bankruptcy. This bankruptcy, coupled with the ever increasing difference between wages and the cost of construction, marked the end of an era in New York's housing.

To best assess the successes and failures of Co-op City and the project's continued potential, it is necessary to first understand a little of the context in which the vision for Co-op City came about. In 1966, as the vision for Co-op City continued to evolve, New York City suffered from an unemployment rate of 4 percent (Alden, 1966) that Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller declared "dangerous" and in response to which he sought to stimulate construction in New York City (Kihss, 1966). Co-op City certainly satisfied the Governor's desire. The project was granted almost a half billion dollars in government support (McQuade, 1968), including a \$263-million mortgage loan under the state's Mitchell-Lama Law (Bennett, 1965), and was estimated to employ an on-site labor force of 2,000 at a cost of \$115-million over the five-year period from 1967 to 1972 (Ennis, 1965b). At the same time that Rockefeller was seeking to bolster the city's economy with an infusion of state and federal support for mega-projects like Co-op City, the City Planning Commission was concerned that projects of Co-op City's scale would siphon off a large number of families from fragile areas such as the Grand Concourse in the central Bronx (Knowles, 1966) (Roberts 1967) (Roberts, 1968) (Robbins, 1969) and argued that the city should concentrate all major capital improvements in "ghettoes and other areas of greatest need" (Bennet, 1966) rather than in projects like Co-op City located on the outskirts of the city where services were not yet provided.

But, while some in the city argued their efforts should be focused on the areas with the greatest need, more powerful interests were at play. Like the UHF, Robert Moses—perhaps the most powerful man in New York City—was committed to slum clearance and the creation of middle-income housing. In fact it was Moses who first suggested the 300-acre former Freedomland amusement park site be turned into a housing development, citing exasperation with “silly” schemes to cut holes in tenement roofs in order to lower in shiny new kitchens, living rooms, and bathrooms. As Moses saw it, every time a project of even one-third the scale of Co-op City was completed the area vacated by the relocating tenants should be rebuilt. He claimed that if this were to be done across the city then “in 10 years there would be no more slums” (Farrell, 1968). Assisting Moses and the UHF to clear slums across New York City was the state’s Mitchell-Lama Law, passed in 1955, designed to help the construction of middle-income housing by providing low-interest mortgages and local tax exemption (Asbury, 1966a). Unfortunately for Moses’ argument, vacant tracts of land the size of the former Freedomland were rare, if not non-existent, and for good reason.

Prior to Moses’ suggestion for a housing project, the 300-acre site, bounded by the Hutchinson River Parkway, the New England Thruway and the Hutchinson River, was home to the failed Freedomland amusement park. Envisioned by realty man William Zenckendorf Sr., Freedomland was meant to be the East Coast’s answer to Disneyland in California. Designed to allow visitors to explore American history, the park was the shape of the continental United States and, when completed in 1960, cost \$65-million or almost four times what Disney spent on his park in 1955 (Naish, 2001). An incredible investment by Zenckendorf, Freedomland initially opened its doors to wide acclaim and unmanageable crowds. Unfortunately for the

park's investors its success was short-lived and the park declared bankruptcy in 1964 and was quickly regarded as "a spectacular venture that spectacularly failed" (Fried, 1968). When the park closed its doors it left little but its remains and what was still largely undeveloped swampland. That such a large parcel of land in New York City was still vacant in the 1960s speaks to the difficulty of building on it. But build there they did.

In order to build the 35 apartment towers, 238 garden town houses, 8 parking garages, 7 schools, 3 shopping centers, 3 community centers, power plant, firehouse, police station, and library (Ennis, 1965b) that would eventually form Co-op City, the Riverbay Corporation had to first transform the existing site that was mostly below grade and an extension of Eastchester Bay during high tide. To do this they had to drive more than 50,000 pilings or nearly 2 million linear feet of piling (Cheslow, 1994) and transport 4 million cubic yards of hydraulic fill, at a cost of \$25,000 an acre, from the sandy bottom of Gravesend Bay off Coney Island to raise the site a total of 12 feet ("Gravesend Sand Fills Bronx Site," 1966). In addition to providing support on the sandy site and raising its level, the Riverbay Corporation also had to install bulk-heading along a quarter mile stretch of the site fronting on the Hutchinson River (Ennis, 1965a). This process, to prepare the site for Co-op City's buildings, lasted more than 18 months and, when completed in December of 1967, provided the design team with a dry and level site on which to build the world's largest if not greatest union-sponsored cooperative housing complex.

As the scale of the project and the effort required just to prepare the site demonstrate, Co-op City was a project at a scale fitting the social change the Governor and Robert Moses wanted to foster. Truly, it was one of the great mega-projects of its time. But perhaps surprisingly, unlike most mega-projects today, Co-op City's architect was no celebrity despite

being considered an urban housing expert by architects and government agencies around the world. Born in the Ukraine in 1894, Herman J. Jessor, Co-op City's architect, immigrated to America with his grandparents in 1906. Settling in New York City, Jessor went to Stuyvesant High School and later the Cooper Union at night for civil engineering while working in the architectural office of Springsteen and Goldhammer during the day. It was while working for Springsteen and Goldhammer as their chief draftsman that Jessor was first exposed to the social ideals of the unions while working on the 1927 Amalgamated Cooperative Apartments. His affection for the unions and their ideals regarding housing would shape the rest of Jessor's career and ultimately be the end of it as well.¹

Unlike Jessor, those assisting him with the design for Co-op City were not nearly as enthralled with the social ideals of the unions. In particular, the landscape architects Robert Zion and Harold Breen were recommendations of the City Planning Commission as Co-op City marked the first time Jessor's housing design schemes would be applied on such a large site with so little of the site given to buildings. While Zion and Breen helped Jessor deal with the 80 percent of the 300-acre site not taken up by building footprints, the structural engineering firm of Farkas, Barron and Partners developed solutions for the many complications involved with constructing so many large towers on such sandy soil. Unfortunately, while the engineer's solutions ensured the buildings a sturdy footing, they did not prevent the ground around them from sinking soon after completion. Such site subsistence coupled with the high cost of

¹ For a thorough study of Herman J. Jessor and his work for Kazan and the UHF see "Labor and Housing in New York City: Architect Herman Jessor and the Cooperative Housing Movement" by Tony Schuman, professor at the College of Architecture and Design at New Jersey Institute of Technology. <<http://urbanomnibus.net/main/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/LABOR-AND-HOUSING-IN-NEW-YORK-CITY.pdf>>

correcting shoddy construction created a number of problems for Co-op City early on but also resulted in circumstances that highlighted its successes in spite of intense criticism.

But before these failures and successes could come to light Co-op City had to be designed, built, and occupied. The original design for Co-op City had 39 towers (Ennis, 1965b) with units for 60,000 residents. As the design scheme went through the city's review process it was revised and ultimately ended up having 35 towers designed by Jessor, 238 town houses designed by Gerhard Graupe, Jessor's chief draftsman, and the support facilities mentioned earlier. In addition to the buildings listed, the design for Co-op City included tot lots, basketball and tennis courts, baseball diamonds, sports fields, a jogging and bike path and scores of benches (Cheslow, 1994). While Jessor was responsible for the design of the 35 towers, the basic design prototype for the units in each tower as well as two of the three tower types were developed much earlier by Jessor's mentor Springsteen in response to parameters set by Kazan. Graupe then adapted these basic prototypes that formed the basis for all UHF housing. Jessor's real strengths lay in the legal and technical aspects of construction, vital to the success of UHF housing projects as they served as their own General Contractor (Schuman). Such technical expertise is one reason that Co-op City is the first project by UHF to not minimize corridor length. With the introduction of mechanical ventilation it was no longer considered essential for the building form to facilitate cross ventilation.

Accordingly, Jessor placed three "new" tower types in a regimented scatter pattern across the Co-op City site. Of the 35 towers-in-the-park, there are: 15 with a cross-shaped plan that are 33 stories tall and simply called the "Tower;" 10 slightly-curved slab buildings with long double-loaded corridors that are 24 stories tall dubbed the "Chevron;" and 10 with a triple-core

that are 26 stories tall and known as the “Tri-Core.” Together, these towers contain over 97 percent of the units available at Co-op City. The remaining units are in the 238 town houses arranged in seven clusters sprinkled among the towering apartment buildings. Unlike many apartment buildings, Co-op City’s towers offered a wide range of unit options from 3-room apartments with 900 square feet to 6-room apartments with 1,500 square feet (Ennis, 1965a). With each unit starting with a purchase price of \$450 a room and a monthly carrying charge of \$25 a room, Co-op City was regarded as an affordable and “rare opportunity for comfortable family living” (“Display Ad 1549,” 1966) by many middle-class New Yorkers.

Perhaps more importantly, the units available at Co-op City offered a number of amenities considered quite new at the time. When prospective buyers walked through the display unit almost all commented favorably on the wooden floors, the central air-conditioning, the ample closet space, the eat-in kitchens, and the entrance foyers (Farrell 1968). In addition to these amenities, which are still quite rare in New York City today, many of the apartments had balconies and views toward Pelham Bay Park or back toward Manhattan’s skyline. One display advertisement from an October edition of the New York Times sold Co-op City as “a park city on river front without interior traffic roads. Safe for you and your family.” The same advertisement invited New Yorkers to “enjoy the better life” in a development with “a blend of urban and suburban living” in town houses and widely spaced apartment towers that featured “spacious” centrally air-conditioned apartments with “light, cheerful kitchens fully equipped with large refrigerator, range, [and] wood-grained formica cabinets” (“Display Ad 1549,” 1966). Certainly such luxuries were appreciated, and still are appreciated, by many New Yorkers as measured by the more than 14,000 applications submitted by March of 1965, well before site

construction had even begun (“14,700 Applications Made,” 1965) and the low vacancy rates that the complex has had since opening (Garvin, 2002). And yet, despite such easily measurable successes, Co-op City suffered harsh criticism before the Riverbay Corporation broke ground.

While transportation between Co-op City and Manhattan was, and still is, far from excellent, the majority of early and sustained criticism levied against Co-op City was mostly aesthetic criticism that attacked the formal composition of the site and its buildings. Where Jessor saw the creation of “the greatest amount of open and unencumbered space” (Ennis, 1965a) in his decision to place the apartments in 35 towers, his detractors saw “the negation of the ideals of the Great Society” (Farrell, 1965), “cookie-cutter” design and the stereotypical “mediocre mold” of UHF housing design (“New York Program,” 1965). While criticism came from both those who felt design could cure social ills and those who felt that it could not, some of the harshest and most persistent criticism of the design for Co-op City came from architects.

Of these architectural critics, the most organized were the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and a group of leading teachers of architecture and their students at Yale, Columbia, Cooper Union and Pratt Institute led by Percival Goodman. While the AIA selected one spokesperson, Maurice W. Kley, to present their critical opinion in front of the City Planning Commission, Goodman’s group crafted a letter to Governor Rockefeller and Mayor Wagner. Interestingly, while the AIA’s critique was primarily positive criticism seeking to improve the mix of land uses at Co-op City, the group of teachers and students was decidedly negative in their criticism that focused on the scale and materials of the buildings. Specifically, the forward-thinking AIA urged that shopping, recreational and community centers be “better integrated” into the residential portions, to avoid a “ghetto of bedroom usage” drained of

activity during the day by off-site jobs and shopping (“Planning Board Backs,” 1965), a problem never fully resolved (Garvin, 2002). In sharp contrast to the AIA, those in Goodman’s group did not seek to improve the work proposed by Jessor. Instead they advocated for a complete redesign of the project through either an open design competition or board of review led by architects and planners. In particular, this committee expressed dissatisfaction with the “extreme” height of the buildings that created “gross towers that would create a feeling of alienation in anyone who lived in them” and called them a disgrace saying that the Great Society does not asks how much but how good (Farrell, 1965). The criticism did not go ignored.

In quick response to the letter to the Governor and Mayor, UHF president Kazan called the committee’s criticism “worthless talk” that dealt with “abstractions” and did nothing to produce “housing that working people could afford.” And, not satisfied to just rebuff the criticism, Kazan went on to say that he would be the first to support any group with a “practical plan for producing housing at \$21 or \$23 a room” and would love to know of just one member of the committee who had built a moderate-cost development (“Co-op City Housing,” 1965).

Later, George Schechter, the vice president of UHF, responded to criticism of the towers saying:

“We don’t believe height creates alienation. This depends on whether you have a community, which depends on whether there are facilities to draw people into common participation.” (Fried, 1968b)

And as time has shown, and plenty of later critics grudgingly acknowledged, Kazan, Ostroff, Schechter and the other leaders of UHF had numbers on their side.

In terms of number of apartments built, UHF was only rivaled by Robert Moses, another strong advocate of slum clearance. And while UHF projects were continuously criticized for banal, cookie-cutter design; overpowering, almost inhuman scale; and insular planning that

carefully segregated project residents from the surrounding community, they were also equally praised. Perhaps speaking for many residents too busy to care what those like Goodman had to say, Roger Starr, a New York Planning Official, author and editorial writer outspokenly defended UHF and their projects. In particular, at the New York City Planning Commission's public hearing on Co-op City, Starr said that:

“far from being inhuman, far from crushing the spirit, far from presenting people with an inhuman environment, inhumanly scaled, UHF built developments which have been subscribed and oversubscribed, in which people have now been living for many, many years, and as nearly as can be made out—living successfully and happily at a price considerably lower than comparable new, conventionally financed housing.” (__, __)

What Starr, and other advocates for Co-op City such as Governor Rockefeller, was clearly responding to was the fact that there were “plenty of \$100-a-room apartments” in New York City but few that provided “good living under \$25-a-room” (Asbury, 1966b). As the Times noted in May of 1966, Co-op City was “not only the most ambitious but also the most progressive of the mass housing centers in recognizing that people need beauty as well as shelter for the good life” (“Co-op City,” 1966). While the Times editors did not consider the gardenlike setting to have the “venturesomeness” of such “new towns” as Reston in Virginia, they argued that its planners had succeeded at shedding the “barrackslike monotony” and “red-brick badge of cheap housing” associated with most giant urban housing projects while not driving costs so high that middle-income families were priced out of the development (“Co-op City,” 1966). While the Times did not use the word utopian, they did find that the UHF's realization of Co-op City was “providing a new lesson in creative unionism for social progress” and this it certainly did as the UHF sought to capitalize on almost 50 years of lessons to start a new era of housing. In this new era, the overriding objective was not only to keep costs low but by so doing to use

moderate-cost cooperative housing developments as a means for developing integrated and diversified communities.

Such aspirations were certainly realized with the completion of Co-op City, but unfortunately it took the Co-op City community's response to some serious problems to demonstrate just how successful the social engineering had been and in so doing destroy the very organization, UHF, that had made such community cohesiveness possible. From the very beginning Co-op City was plagued with problems. Located so far off the beaten path, it required over 30 city agencies cooperate and coordinate their efforts with those of the Riverbay Corporation. Sadly this didn't happen for some time (Ennis, 1967) ("Planning is Essential," 1968) (Farrell, 1968) (Fried, 1968b). And, even after legislation was passed to assign one individual responsibility to coordinate the 30 city agencies it was not enough to get the city's act together in time to benefit the first residents of Co-op City. When the first of Co-op City's residents moved in they were plagued with shortages of schools, streets, utilities, and public transportation. Suddenly critics turned from attacking the physical design of Co-op City to attack the lack of coordinated planning ("Co-op City Lesson," 1968). Such basic failures were amplified by more serious broken promises as the plans for a \$2.9-billion second avenue subway that would reach Co-op City were shelved (Witkin, 1968a) (Witkin, 1968b) but then the UHF should not have been so optimistic in light of how often that particular route has died. But then, the city was not entirely to blame. While Co-op City was estimated to bring the city \$7-million a year in taxes (Farrell, 1968) significantly more than the former Freedomland, the project's tax exemptions made this much less than it would have been otherwise.

In addition to the problems Co-op City experienced with the delay in the extension of city services to support its residents, the project suffered from a lack of physical integration with the surrounding neighborhood. It was veritably one massive gated community with fences made from highways and rivers. Twenty years after its completion a resident of Co-op City wrote to the editors of the New York Times to list the many drawbacks to living in Co-op City. Among the drawbacks he listed was the mass migration of residents, from the Grand Concourse in the Bronx to Co-op City, who sought safety and security only to find it in a barren wilderness (Vasti, 1994). Such lack of integration with the rest of fabric of the Bronx was just as obvious to Alexander Garvin when he wrote that its insularity made Co-op City a housing project and not a planned community (Garvin, 2002). Little has changed since and Co-op City is still an island. And, in addition to its poor access to essential city services and the area around it, Co-op City suffered from early and sustained structural failures.

While the Riverbay Corporation charge that most of the project's structural deficiencies were the fault of the state housing agencies that oversaw its construction, it did not begin to find legal relief until the early part of this century and defects are still visible. In 1983, leaks abounded and resulted in numerous vacancies (Daniels, 1983). Little changed in the subsequent decade and in 1994 almost 150 of the 605 vacancies were the result of construction defects that made the apartments uninhabitable (Cheslow, 1994). Still, such defects are incredibly minor compared with the fact that the ground around the buildings has been sinking since Co-op City was completed. Such subsistence problems resulting from shoddy construction have affected many of the buildings causing entrance stairs to crumble and making more than 10 percent of the 11,000 spaces in garages unsafe because of crumbling concrete (Cheslow, 1994).

Perhaps surprisingly, despite the plentiful criticism Co-op City suffered before, during and after construction, the project is successful by many measures if not necessarily those of the design community. These successes may have little to do with the architecture of Co-op City, though this warrants study, and more to do with the community that UHF and the Riverbay Corporation helped to create even before the first of Co-op City's 55,000 residents moved in on December 10, 1968. The first example of this community that Schechter, Ostroff, Kazan and other UHF leaders worked to foster manifested itself in 1975 when the cooperators at Co-op City collectively protested proposed increases in maintenance charges and held out so long that the UHF entered bankruptcy (Tomasson, 1975). Such community was the direct result of the broad range of activities and facilities that Co-op City offered residents of all ages ("Co-op City Reactivates," 1974) and of the efforts by UHF to create a racially and economically integrated community of middle-income New Yorkers. While in 1968 just under 15 percent of applicants were non-white UHF stated publicly that they intended for 20 percent of the 55,000 residents to be black (Farrell, 1968) and when Co-op City opened this was the case. UHF achieved this in part through policies such as their 1969 commitment to Operation Open City to hold more than 1,000 of the 15,500 remaining apartments for Black and Puerto Rican families. To fulfill this promise, UHF went so far as to use their Co-op City credit union to finance the initial \$500 deposit required to secure an apartment ("Co-op City Holding Apartments," 1969). Such precise population manipulation was not confined to the founding of Co-op City.

To this day the 15-member board of Co-op City continues to sustain policies that foster the continued existence of an integrated middle-income population. In 1991, after a failed attempt by the state to relocate Soviet Jewish émigrés at Starret City, the Co-op City board

approved a plan to settle 250 émigré families in partnership with the state (Tomasson, 1991). Such sustained policies are one reason Ostroff said that moderate-cost cooperatives were essential not only to keep families in the city who would otherwise join the suburban exodus but to also create diversified neighborhoods (Ostroff, 1967). While most of the original residents were Jewish, Italian, or Irish, the population has changed over time and has transitioned from 80 percent white in 1972 to 55 percent black, 25 percent Hispanic, and 20 percent white as of 2008 (Brenner, 2008). Despite these marked racial demographic changes, with a vacancy rate below 1 percent, Co-op City continues to be a fully integrated middle-income community that is home to many of New York's policemen, correction workers, civil servants of all types and blue-collar workers.

Today there is surprisingly little written about Co-op City. What is written continues to focus on its built environment while overlooking its incredibly successful social environment. Adapting in a controlled manner to changing times, Co-op City's community continues to ensure that its members will come from all walks of life, represent all races, creeds and colors, use the same schools, the same stores, and the same churches. However, with one of the highest concentrations of elderly in the city there is certainly room for further exploration of different social and environmental possibilities. Whether such a controlled environment would survive an effort to better integrate its built environment and community with those around it is a question worth further exploration. Perhaps the relative utopia that Co-op City's cooperators enjoy can only survive as long as the highways, rivers, and lack of plentiful public transportation isolate their sizeable population.

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