

Project Notes: Grand Ensemble

Chelsea Elliot Houses, New York City

My research for *Grand Ensemble* is an investigation of prewar European ideas on mass housing and how those ideas migrated to the United States from the 1930s to the 1950s. I am examining the original ideas and intentions of modern architects and planners, and then following those ideas as they are passed from designer to designer, from generation to generation. I like to trace how certain ideas have been modified due to changing economics or misapprehensions, and how they have become manifest in US housing projects today.

An example: Why are US housing projects clad in red brick? First of all, red brick cladding is cheaper. But Clarence Stein in *Toward New Towns for America* describes aesthetic and symbolic reasons behind the use of red brick: this material was the cladding of choice in Ebenezer Howard's English Garden Cities projects, which were closely studied by American urbanists and housing advocates. According to Stein, red brick cladding made the leap from Arts and Crafts-style complexes in Britain to the dense urban American "projects" in an attempt—by association—to render them cozier.

Another influential idea in US public housing is the concept of the *Ville Radieuse* developed by Le Corbusier and put into practice with his *Unité d'Habitations* in Marseilles, Firminy and Berlin. Housing reform was important to the architect, taking a leading place in his book-length manifesto on the New Architecture, *The Chart of Athens*. Le Corbusier advocated the "high-rise in a garden" concept: groups of buildings placed in a super-block—a single parcel of land equivalent to several

city blocks—surrounded by lawns, shrubs and trees. This is the idea behind the breaks with the street grid and the setbacks of most US housing projects.

New European models in public housing were carefully researched by American housing advocates of the 1930s, foremost among them, Catherine Bauer. Bauer devoted her life to US housing reform and was instrumental in the drafting of the 1937 Housing Act. She established early contact with architects all over Europe and Scandinavia, even touring sites in Soviet Russia after the outbreak of World War II. Bauer is an ideological link in a housing revolution on both sides of the Atlantic. *Grand Ensemble* focuses on an existing housing project in New York City, William Lescaze's 1946 Chelsea Elliott Houses. Lescaze was a French-Swiss-borne architect who nourished his practice in the United States with frequent trips to Europe throughout the 1920s, bringing back the ideas of fellow CIAM members.

A study of public housing in the US would be incomplete without an analysis of its failures. A close look at European models shows how those ideas were modified and adapted to an American economic and demographic context. For example, how did US (public/private) funding models alter the land-use ratios recommended by architects like Le Corbusier? We saw a lot of increase in density (to increase rentability) and reduction of open space and there have no doubt been social repercussions to these modifications.