

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: **MAKING MODERN HOMES: A HISTORY OF
LANGSTON TERRACE DWELLINGS, A NEW
DEAL HOUSING PROGRAM IN WASHINGTON,
D.C.**

Kelly Anne Quinn, Ph.D., 2007

Dissertation directed by: **Associate Professor Mary Corbin Sies
Department of American Studies**

Langston Terrace Dwellings is a complex of 274 units of apartments and row houses in Washington D.C. that opened in 1938 under the auspices of the New Deal's Public Works Administration. Designed by Hilyard Robinson, this modern housing program was built principally by African American professionals for African American families. This study recasts our understanding of modern housing locating it in the broader historical context of modern architecture, urban planning and African American life. Design professionals and residents contributed to the program's early success as an aesthetically pleasing, socially significant community.

This work chronicles how African American residents forged a life for themselves and their children in architect-designed modernist apartments and row houses. I begin with an analysis of the application process in which hopeful residents petitioned the federal government; I conclude with a consideration of the pioneering residents' place-making efforts. In Chapters One and Two, I introduce key figures: first, I highlight the

ordinary Washingtonians who applied to move into Langston, and then I profile the architect principally responsible for the formal design program. The hopeful residents relied on individual strategies and extensive social networks to secure a spot in government housing; the architect Robinson also developed and honed individual strategies and extensive social networks to advance his architectural practice and to obtain a government contract. I explore the European interwar housing estates he visited in Chapter Three and offer a formal analysis of Langston in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, I return to the ways in which the first cohort of residents worked to make homes and form community.

I marshaled evidence from 2,263 letters applications; city directories; census manuscripts; government project files; private correspondence between architects, reformers and government officials; architectural plans; Sanborn maps; popular and architectural periodicals; and photographs. Additionally, I traced the project's precedents by conducting fieldwork in Europe and the United States. My assessment of the legacy of this project emerged from partnerships with current residents and neighbors. As such, this research relied on a number of interdisciplinary research strategies including graphic documentation, archival research, and community-based collaboration and investigation.

MAKING MODERN HOMES:
A HISTORY OF LANGSTON TERRACE DWELLINGS,
A NEW DEAL HOUSING PROGRAM IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

by

Kelly Anne Quinn

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Mary Corbin Sies, Chairperson
Professor Elsa Barkley Brown
Professor John L. Caughey
Professor Melinda Chateauvert
Professor Francille Rusan Wilson

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In various locales, I have shared aspects of this work at annual and biannual conferences including: American Association for State and Local History, American Studies Association, College Art Association, Collegium for African American Research, International Planning History Society, Modern Language Association, National New Deal Preservation Association, Organization of American Historians/National Council on Public History, and Society for American City and Regional Planning History. Additionally, I presented materials at a number of special meetings and symposia including: “African American Identity Travels” held at University of Maryland; “Another Look at the 1930s” hosted by Centre Interdisciplinaire d'Etudes Américaines;

Buell Center Dissertation Colloquium assembled at Columbia University; “Crossovers: African Americans and Germany,” convened at Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster; and “Mid-Century Modernism in Washington, D.C.” sponsored by the Latrobe Chapter of Society of Architectural Historians. Additionally, I was invited to present my work at the Delaware Seminar at University of Delaware, during Black History Month at the Henson Valley Montessori School, for the public lecture series of the Greenbelt Museum, and at the Smithsonian American Art Museum/Archives of American Art lunchtime lecture series.

As a graduate student in College Park, I tested early theses and ideas about modern housing with colleagues in the History Graduate Student Association colloquium; at the “Tools for Social Justice” symposia organized by The Consortium on Race, Gender, and Ethnicity; and in the Faculty, Student, and Staff Development Programs in the Department of African American Studies. I also benefited immensely from assistantships in the Departments of African American Studies and American Studies, as well as from the Modern Movement in Maryland documentation project. Periodically, I worked as a research assistant for Elsa Barkley Brown; those positions offered way more than a stipend and benefits. I learned how to think, look, and listen while working with her. I finished this dissertation project while on a teaching fellowship in the Urban and Regional Planning Program and at the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan. In Ann Arbor, a number of colleagues—both faculty and students—responded to portions of this work in the classroom and around the seminar table. I refined my thinking and analysis because of presentations at the Urban and Regional Research Collaborative, at the Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies, at the

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Finally, my parents, Harry and Kathy Quinn, created a loving home for my brother and me, and for our extended family. Their compassion and generosity instilled in me a commitment to social justice and an enthusiasm for a life of the mind. They have participated in many aspects of this project by attending public talks and conferences, by accompanying me to conduct research in the archives and in planned communities, and, in my father's case, by dressing as Santa Claus at a holiday party for the children at

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Making Modern Homes documents the formative years of a federally-funded housing program designed chiefly by a black architect for black families in Washington, D.C. Sponsored by the New Deal's Public Works Administration (PWA), Langston Terrace Dwellings first opened in spring 1938. This dissertation chronicles a number of overlapping stories associated with the development of a 13-acre parcel of land in Northeast Washington, D.C. At its core, these are accounts of dreams and designs of modern housing enacted by an ensemble cast of actors. Between August 1935 and its opening in 1938, thousands of African Americans responded to the government's notice for units in a brand new housing project. As African American Washingtonians completed applications and composed letters, they imagined new lives for themselves and their families in affordable, decent, sanitary housing. These individuals, the hopeful residents who petitioned for new housing, emerge as important characters in this study. And yet, they are not the only figures who dreamt Langston's possibilities. The architects, planners, and other government employees who orbited the project also envisioned great possibilities. For these experts, this project offered a government contract and a chance to experiment with housing solutions during an economic depression; they also imagined the built forms for new ways of living. For better or worse, their professional ambitions were tied to reordering the domestic lives of working-class families. This study introduces men who designed the formal built environment.

According to this version, the main protagonist was the lead architect, Hilyard Robinson; his supporting players included other architectural professionals, government bureaucrats, and project administrators. Once government agents winnowed “hopeful residents” from the pool of roughly 2,200 to the few 274 families who would become the pioneering tenants, working-class African Americans transformed the row houses, apartments and flats from a spare complex into a vibrant community. As they designed and developed institutions and personal practices, they transformed modern housing into modern homes. For me, Langston Terrace’s successful early years depended on both ordinary and extraordinary men, women, and children’s dreams and designs.

This dissertation examines the dynamic relationship between people and place. As an interdisciplinary project, produced in an American Studies department, this research draws from and engages several bodies of literature. This is a social history, an urban history, an architectural history, and a planning history. I aim to demonstrate the utility of formal and spatial analysis of the built environment to social historians and as I also suggest the utility of consulting census manuscripts, correspondence and city directories to architectural historians. Informed by current debates in architecture and planning about Everyday Urbanism, it is a study about community formation that assumes that working-class and professional people shape the character of places; and that these places help to shape the people’s experiences.¹ Chiefly, I hope to contribute to the body of scholarship that probes the meanings of African-American urbanism. While Raymond Mohl and Kenneth Goings suggest that this field is a “*New African American*

¹ John Chase ed. with John Kaliski, Margaret Crawford *Everyday Urbanism* Monacelli, 1999 and Rahul Mehrotra, ed. *Everyday Urbanism: Margaret Crawford vs. Michael Speaks* Michigan Debates on Urbanism, Ann Arbor Michigan, 2004.

Urban History”, I see this as a part of a longer series of studies in which African Americanists explore the meanings of the city for working-class and elite black people.²

This study relies on previous research on federal housing reform in the early part of the 20th century. Several scholars have examined the legacy of New Deal housing efforts.³ A smaller number of architectural historians have identified the contributions of African-American architects, planners, and builders.⁴ My dissertation research engages this scholarship and suggests the need for a reassessment of how design professionals operated. I maintain that their professional practices did not depend exclusively on innate genius, studio culture, and formal training; their practices also depended on robust personal lives and social networks of friends and fellows, not just a cadre of elite design professionals. I also owe great intellectual debts to the fields of African American studies and visual culture studies in which generations of scholars have explored the professional lives of black men and women.⁵

While the housing complex’s lot lines locate the property at 38°53’55.32” N (longitude) and 76°58’26.64” W (latitude), Langston may be bounded by a larger, elusive

² Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, eds. *The New African American Urban History*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications Inc., 1996

³ See especially Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Joseph Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Programs, 1935-1965*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971; Richard Pommer, “The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s,” *Journal of Society of Architectural Historians* vol. 37 December 1978: 235-264; John F. Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987; John F. Bauman, Roger Biles, and Kristin M., Szylvian, *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America* University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000 Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

⁴Dreck Wilson’s recent biographical dictionary, despite its numerous mistakes, will advance this scholarship for years to come. Dreck Spurlock Wilson, *African American Architects* New York: Routledge, 2004.

⁵ The exhibition, *The Challenge of the Modern* at the Studio Museum of Harlem, was among the first to incorporate African American architects into a discussion of African American modernism. *Challenge of the Modern: African American Artists 1925-1945* Exhibition Catalogue, Studio Museum New York 2003.

set of borders that extend to formal, planning and architectural precedents dating from interwar housing estates of Central Europe; these boundaries might include the places from which ‘hopeful residents’ hailed-- “sending communities” in the southern and mid-Atlantic United States and apartments, flats and row houses scattered throughout the District of Columbia; they might also include the venues where models, plans, and descriptions depicted the program such as Manhattan’s Museum of Modern Art and across the United States to large cities and small towns where readers of architectural magazines and African American weekly newspapers learned of the program in the pages of their periodicals. This study wends through these various locales to gather supporting details for the larger account.

I maintain that Langston’s “hopeful residents” as well as design professionals invested in Langston’s success before the cornerstone was laid. In the subsequent two chapters I investigate the figures who were responsible for shaping the program’s formative years. In Chapter Two, I begin by examining the claims made by over 2,200 applicants as they filed for one of 274 housing units. To this end, I analyzed their personal statements and located them spatially and socially in the city of Washington by gleaning information from city directories, the manuscript census of 1930, and period maps and photographs.⁶ In Chapter Three, I turn our attention to Hilyard Robinson, the architect who principally determined the project’s formal character. His biography suggests that his early life in Washington, D.C., his formal schooling, professional

⁶ I created a database and logged the name, application date, and address of every piece of correspondence in Langston’s project files. I then checked each name and address in an effort to corroborate the data in the city directories for Washington D.C. between 1935-1939. Using residential addresses derived from these sets of sources, I mapped the applicants spatially in the city. Additionally, I plumbed the federal manuscript census (1930) for further details like household composition, ownership of radio sets, place of birth, and veteran status.

training and travel shaped his vision of urbanism generally and modern housing specifically in the mid-1930s. I consulted many of the same city directories, decennial censuses, photos and maps for D.C. as well as manuscript materials related to his education, and professional development as an architect.⁷ In Chapter Four, I focus on the European modern interwar housing projects that most directly influenced Robinson; I also present the public conversations about housing that he engaged upon his return to Washington, D.C. in 1932 and on.⁸ Thereafter, this assessment required fieldwork in the modern housing projects Robinson studied during his tour of Europe in the interwar period and fieldwork on-site at Langston Terrace. In Chapter Five, I offer a formal analysis of Langston's program.⁹ In Chapter Six, drawing from government project files, newspaper coverage, a published memoir, reports of D.C. Public Library, and a documentary film from the 1980s, I recount the various ways that early, pioneering residents enlivened Langston's landscapes by using indoor and outdoor public spaces.¹⁰

⁷ I consulted his papers at Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, Robinson's correspondence in Albert Kastner and Oscar Stonorov's papers at American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming, his fellowship application to the Harmon Foundation at Library of Congress, his FBI file, materials at his alma mater, Columbia University, and the archives of D.C. Public Schools at Charles Sumner School.

⁸ I combed through articles in local and national newspapers, in the architectural press, and through the proceedings of architectural and planning conferences. For the period between 1930 and 1943, I read microfilmed copies of newspapers that have not been indexed or digitized including the *Afro-American*, *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Howard Hilltop*. I searched electronic editions of major daily and weekly newspapers including *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Chicago Defender*. I checked indices to the architectural periodicals using bound and electronic editions of *Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals*. I delineated this period to encompass news accounts and publications just before Robinson's travel to Europe through five years after Langston's opening. Finally, I consulted the vertical files and clippings collections at Howard University and in the Washingtoniana Division of DC Public Library.

⁹ This analysis depends on the extensive fieldwork I conducted in European interwar housing estates; the itinerary is in the appendix.

¹⁰ Barr Weisman and Glen Leiner, *Home: Langston Terrace Dwellings*, 1988; Eloise Little Greenfield and Lessie Jones Little, *Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir* New York: HarperCollins, 1979; DC Public Library Archives, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library; NARA II, RG 196 Project Files, H-1706; and newspapers included: *Afro-American*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Washington Post*.

This project examines a particular manifestation of urbanism in the early 20th century: modern housing. *Modern housing* suggests the formal characteristics of a sheltering program: in this meaning, the constituent elements relate to design including site and unit planning, aesthetics, materials, and construction methods. *Modern housing* also implies an ideological component that prizes sanitation, safety, order, and efficiency. *Modern housing* attempts to reform domestic life by establishing a sheltering program that provides for two distinct zones: within the sheltering unit and within the larger compound. Through the design of the built environment, circulation and services, the physical program separates nuclear families into private, small or modest sized units; the physical programs also encouraged larger civic life in public places within the residential complex. These public places support leisure, recreation, and activities for individuals, families, and communities. (In roughly one dozen sites, these public places included a didactic decorative program: sculptural friezes, figures and murals enlivened blank walls and courtyards in Harlem, New York; Camden, New Jersey; Chicago, Illinois; Boston, Massachusetts; Atlantic City, New Jersey; Atlanta Georgia; Brooklyn, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; and Washington, D.C.).¹¹ Part of the significance of this project is the focus on modern housing built by and for African Americans in Washington, D.C. This particular housing program operated within the context of government housing that both constructed and operated within segregated spaces in the city.

The creative impulse for and advocacy of modern housing related to the larger intellectual and aesthetic movement—the Modern Movement in architecture—that emerged first in Europe and then later in the United States in the early decades of the 20th century. Adherents eschewed traditional designs and historical references and adopted

¹¹ Olin Dows, “Art for Housing Tenants” *Magazine of Art* v. 31 (November 1938) p. 616-23.

several basic tenets in their building projects: architects manipulated forms to celebrate volume and mass; they emphasized horizontal lines through repetition and regularity; and they avoided applied ornamentation. New building technologies and materials like concrete, steel and glass, and methods of mass production enabled them to simplify forms. Initially, in the early part of the 20th century, European modernists focused on design solutions for social problems caused by industrialization, urbanization, and the devastation after World War I. Reform-minded planners, architects, and designers convened international congresses and associations to debate effective strategies and responses. Whether in institutions like Germany's Bauhaus, at occasional meetings of (CIAM) or through the publication of treatises like Karel Teige's *Existenzminimum*, design professionals and other experts gathered and contemplated appropriate physical forms for shelter in the 20th century.

Observers like Britain's Elizabeth Denby and the United States' Catherine Bauer documented modern housing programs in monographs, in part, to promote solutions in their native countries.¹² Between the late 1900s and late 1930s, contemporaries recognized architecture and planning's commitment to mass housing especially to publicly-financed modern housing. As early as World War II, in the United States, architectural critics and tastemakers derided modern housing as inferior expressions of modernism. For example, when *Architectural Forum* published Wolff, Phillips, De Young and Moscovitz's innovative plans for Vanport City outside Portland, Oregon, a caption that accompanied images of the multi-family apartment blocks, described them as

¹² Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934 and Elizabeth Denby, *Europe Re-Housed*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1938.

“Bastard Modern.”¹³ Further, the architectural historian Richard Pommer echoed and advanced this sentiment when he published an article on state-sponsored modern housing in the *Journal of Society of Architectural Historians*; for him, PWA housing was a product of “miscegenation.”¹⁴ (This article remains the major point of departure for scholars of the period and it is the most widely cited piece). This dissertation rejects these characterizations of state-sponsored modern housing as illegitimate manifestations of the Modern Movement. Further, I aim to situate this account of modern housing within the larger context of Modernism to introduce another set of characters involved in modern movement in the U.S. milieu: African Americans.

To this end, I chronicle the accomplishments of an elite architect, an individual designer who practiced and taught architecture at Howard University and whose work was routinely published in the periodicals of Black newspapers. More, while tracing an individual designer’s contributions, I also aim to identify a larger cast of actors and activities. Importantly, ordinary African Americans were among some of the first people who experienced and shaped modern housing in the U.S. In urban centers around the U.S., working-class African Americans moved into government sponsored modern housing and made it their own. The places where they worked and walked, lived and played, shaped a modernist expression of urbanism in the early part of the 20th century in the United States.

I consulted manuscript collections and institutional records at a number of public and private institutions in the United States. In suburban Maryland, I worked with public housing project files and photographic collections at the National Archives II (NARA II)

¹³ “Kaiserville,” *Architectural Forum*, vol. 9, pp. 53-62, Aug 1943.

¹⁴ Richard Pommer, “The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States in the Early 1930s” *Journal of Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 235-264, Dec 1978.

in College Park, Maryland; I also consulted records of another early New Deal housing program at the Greenbelt Museum, Greenbelt, Maryland. In Washington, D.C., I worked with Hilyard Robinson's personal papers and periodicals from the early-20th century at Howard University. I spent hours upon hours at several public libraries trolling their vertical files, city directories, manuscripts, map collections, and photographic archives at Martin Luther King, Jr. Library's Washingtoniana Collection and at the Library of Congress. I also worked with the materials from early D.C. public schools at Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives. The special collections at Smithsonian Archives of American Art, and Archives Center National Museum of American History also enriched this project because of their resources on individual artists and the collective social history of the District of Columbia. In New York, I visited Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, (Hyde Park); Columbiana Collection and Columbia University Archives at Columbia University, New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library; and Museum of Modern Art to scour the papers of individuals, programs, and exhibitions. Finally, excursions to the Chicago Historical Society and the American Heritage Center in Laramie, Wyoming provided further sets of materials about members of the African-American press during the 1930s and 1940s and the contemporary expatriate designers.

These sources yielded rich materials to investigate and corroborate. I interrogated verbal and non-verbal sources, two-dimensional documents and three-dimensional artifacts. This range of primary sources required me to hone skills in textual, visual and spatial analysis. Additionally, I also conducted fieldwork on-site at Langston Terrace and at other federally-funded housing programs in the U.S. dating from the

period, including Harlem River Houses, New York, New York; Brand Whitlock Homes, Toledo, Ohio; Carl Mackley Homes, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Greenbelt, Greenbelt, Maryland; Aberdeen Gardens in Hampton Roads, Virginia; and Roosevelt, New Jersey. I visited other planning landmarks in the United States including Radburn, New Jersey and Sunnyside Gardens, New York as well as landmark sites in Europe and England including Vienna, Austria; Frankfurt and Berlin, Germany; Rotterdam, The Netherlands; and Letchworth, England. At these locations, my fieldwork consisted of graphic and audio documentation using photography, drawing, and sound recording.

My understanding of Langston Terrace's architectural and social legacy also derives from my engagement with current and former residents and advocates and from my teaching with and about Langston. In 1999, I began taking students from the University of Maryland to visit Langston Terrace Dwellings (and occasionally Greenbelt) as an instructional strategy to help undergraduates examine firsthand the history of housing and federally-funded planned communities in the United States. Challenged by college students in those early classes, I began to think of Langston especially not only as a destination point for an afternoon fieldtrip, but as place that required more sustained attention. These first forays off-campus adopted a service model of civic engagement in which my students worked to write brief accounts about the neighborhood for residents, published in information booklets and on web pages. Gradually, as I became more familiar and comfortable on-site and more confident in my own teaching, I partnered with members of the Residents' Council to develop an arts education and Black studies program for young residents, and their friends and families. During these sessions, over tables of glue, glitter, and construction paper, I learned about the logic and legacy of

Langston from current residents. This dissertation results from long periods parked in front of microfilm readers at libraries and from long periods perched on the swing-set at the playground at Langston. Both sets of activities revealed information about the power and meanings of this place for its residents and for larger communities. This project emerged from the heady mix of classroom pedagogy, civic engagement and traditional historical research methods.¹⁵

New Deal sheltering programs in the Public Works Administration and in the Resettlement Administration followed a longer planning tradition of Garden City principles that sought to reconfigure the American built environment to balance nature, people, and built forms.¹⁶ In the United States, the introduction of federally-funded housing construction during peace time emerged after the Great Depression as a series of initiatives by New Deal agencies including the Housing Division of the PWA and the Subsistence Homestead Division of the Resettlement Administration (RA) that aimed to improve housing conditions while also creating employment, stimulating the economy,

¹⁵ Planning scholars Jacqueline Leavitt and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris exhorted those interested in the lives of public housing residents to listen closely to them, to go “hang out” in community centers to understand the internal logic and needs of people on their own terms. Leavitt and Loukaitou-Sideris, “Safe and Secure: Public Housing Residents in Los Angeles Define the Issues” from *Future Visions of Urban Public Housing* November 1994 pp. 287 – 303. Dolores Hayden’s work with graduate student and community collaborators in Los Angeles through the Power of Place inspired some of this work as well. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. MIT Press: Cambridge Massachusetts, 1997. Urban historian Thomas Bender urged scholars in the humanities to renew their commitment to society through efforts at public culture and civic engagement. He observed that these efforts would transform academic knowledge to democratic knowledge. Thomas Bender, “Locality and Worldliness” in *The Transformation of Humanistic Studies in the Twenty-first Century: Opportunities and Perils* American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper No. 40, 1997. From its inception in 1999, *Imagining America*, a national consortium of colleges and universities, took as its mission the project to strengthen the public role and democratic purposes of the humanities, arts, and design. They support publicly-engaged academic work in the cultural disciplines and promote the structural changes in higher education that such work requires because, they maintain, engagement produces *new* knowledge.

¹⁶ Eugénie Ladner Birch, “Five Generations of the Garden City: Tracing Howard’s Legacy in Twentieth-Century Residential Planning” in *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard* edited by Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, pp. 171 – 201.

and removing slums.¹⁷ The PWA directly built or financed 58 projects, offering approximately 25,000 dwelling units around the country.¹⁸ Private interests and organizations including the National Association of Real Estate Boards, National Association of Home Builders, the Chamber of Commerce of the United States, Mortgage Bankers Association, American Bankers Association, and the U.S. Savings and Loan League attacked the notion of public housing, and criticized the proposition that the federal government should interfere with the private housing market.

Why should the government intervene in the private housing market? Housers marshaled a variety of rationales to justify their actions. They relied on the government's police powers to preserve public welfare, morality, health and security. They conceived of housing reform addressing one or a combination of the following problems: social, physical/formal, economic and public health. In Washington D.C. reform-minded philanthropists, government officials, professionals and other civic leaders focused their attention on housing since the late 19th century. Medical doctors, public health officials and other experts chronicled the housing conditions of Washington's poor residents in journalistic pieces in periodicals, in scholarly journals, and monographs.¹⁹ This attention on housing emerged precisely as the town transformed itself from a small town to a major

¹⁷ Gilbert A. Cam, "United States Government Activity in Low-Cost Housing, 1932-1938," *Journal of Political Economy* vol. 47, no. 3 June 1939, pp. 357-378; Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981; Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: Gender, Housing and Family Life*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002; John F. Bauman, Roger Biles and Kristin M. Szylvian, *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002.

¹⁸ Radford, *Modern Housing*, p. 91.

¹⁹ George M. Sternberg, "Housing Conditions in the Nation's Capital." *Charities* 12 July 23, 1904: 762.

city.²⁰ At various moments throughout the 20th century visitors and journalists marshaled images of Washington D.C.'s housing conditions – especially in the city's poorest neighborhoods -- as a synecdoche for the health and well-being of the country. These verbal and visual accounts of blight and disorder metaphorically took the pulse of democracy for local, national and international audiences.²¹ While Washington-based housing reformers were concerned about local residents and particular problems in the District of Columbia, they were also mindful of the city's role as the federal city where their efforts may have been scrutinized more carefully than their counterparts in other locales.

One of the earliest efforts at re-housing Washington's residents began in 1897 when Washington Sanitary Improvement Company (WSIC) formally organized and bought a parcel of land on Bates Street, NW between North Capitol and First Streets, NW. While planning professionals and politicians debated the merits and later sought to implement the McMillan Plan to redesign D.C.'s monumental core, WSIC members turned their consideration to the public health and physical/formal problems in the District's poor neighborhoods especially concentrating on the alleys; their attention resulted in another philanthropic, limited dividend corporation that worked on housing reform, Washington Sanitary Housing Company (WSHC). Between, 1908 and 1939 incrementally, WSIC and WSHC built rows of houses and apartment blocks in

²⁰*President's Homes Commissions' Report, Report of the Committee on Building Model Homes*, compiled by George M. Sternberg. Charles Weller, *Neglected Neighbors: Stories of Life in the Alleys, Tenements, and Shanties of the National Capital* Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1909. George M. Kober, *The History and Development of the Housing Movement in Washington, D.C.* Washington: Washington Sanitary Housing Companies, 1927; William H. Jones published *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Study in Human Ecology*.

²¹ It remains unclear whether these images also stood as an indictment of capitalism and racism in the United States. That is, typically the images of disrepair and disease signaled a problem with the residents or the local elected officials and not larger issues of economic or social inequality.

neighborhoods in Southwest, Northwest, and Northeast.²² Other early philanthropic forays into slum clearance and new building included the construction of the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes in Southeast.

Washington reformers expressed their desire to develop formally a more comprehensive slum clearance strategy during the interwar period. Their lobbying culminated in the passage of the District of Columbia Dwelling Act of 1934, a law that created a federal agency, the Alley Dwelling Authority (ADA). As a federal agency with a mandate to operate locally, the ADA, under the leadership of John Ihlder, sought to remake the physical character of the city by abolishing “hidden communities” in alley dwellings through a combination of sociological and economic strategies including the purchase, condemnation, demolition, and rehabilitation of existing dilapidated, unsanitary housing stock with (new) construction of housing for low-income Washingtonians. This program targeted the built environment and simultaneously implicated the residents who dwelled in substandard housing units in the interior passages and narrow streets of the city’s blocks. The ADA targeted the neighborhoods of very poor residents in Washington D.C. Yet, Ihlder and his contemporaries recognized the paucity of decent, affordable housing for low-income working poor people as well.

Organized under the auspices of the Washington Committee on Housing, a band of men and women housers combined rationales as they sought and obtained funding from the PWA to implement a modern housing program that would specifically cater to this segment of the population. This marked a shift in responsibility for housing from benevolent and philanthropic organizations to the government during the very moment of

²² Elizabeth Hannold, "Comfort and Respectability": Washington's Philanthropic Movement", *Washington History* 1992-1993 4(2): 20-39.

the creation of the welfare state. After some initial setbacks in the acquisition of property, Washington Committee on Housing received funding for a PWA-sponsored project to be built in Northeast Washington for African-American families. This housing program, like others sponsored by PWA, sought to reorder the domestic lives of low-income working-class citizens by offering nuclear families small units of modern housing at an affordable price. Mindful of their critics, PWA housing administrators (at the national level) and Washington Committee on Housing (at the local level) developed a model program with innovative if not avant-garde model design for model residents. In the federal city, under the leadership of the Washington Committee on Housing, even the project's name should be associated with exemplary leadership, citizenship and democratic practices. From the outset when the Committee rejected the project's working name, "Kingman Terrace," in favor of "Langston" for "the late John M. Langston who was a prominent [N]egro in the educational field nationally and locally" they imbued the place with associations that resonated in the District of Columbia and beyond, especially for African Americans who remembered the leader.²³

This dissertation traces the development of this project from its incipient stages through to the earliest period after it was occupied by the first cohort of residents. Who were the earliest applicants who yearned for a unit of modern housing on Benning Road, NE? How did they make their claims for housing? I begin with their applications. They registered their interest with the Housing Division by listing their names and addresses. In so doing, they also registered their dreams. These applications offer insight into

²³ As the secretary for the Washington Committee on Housing Florence Stewart explained the relevance of their selection: "[Langston] served as acting dean of the Law School at Howard University and was acting president of the University for two years. Mr. Langston also served as United States Minister to Haiti for seven years as well as Congressman from the State of Virginia." Florence D. Stewart to A.R. Clas, RG 196 H-1706 box 129. NARA II August 20, 1935.

African-American working class people's visions of domesticity; I explore this in Chapter Two.

CHAPTER TWO: 'Please give our case serious consideration': Petitioning for Housing at Langston Terrace Dwellings

"I like to get one than houses out there at 22nd Benning road I like to have 4 rooms
kichen and 1 bath
4 in family
worker government printing office
live 1026-3rd st n.w."

-Wise Brown to Federal Emergency Administration Public Works, March 1936¹

"We do want very badly to rent a nice three-room apartment or flat in a desirable neighborhood, but this is impossible on account of the high rent in such neighborhoods. We are expecting our first baby in a few months so this will make it more necessary for us to give up rooming and find a place of our own. We are very anxious to get settled in a nice home in a decent neighborhood where we can bring up our child successfully and make desirable friends. Langston Terrace seems to be our only hope because it aims to offer these advantages for a comparatively low price, one that we can afford to pay. Kindly, send us a formal application blank and please, give our case serious consideration."

-Mrs. Joseph H. Middleton to Director of Housing, December 1937

In 1935, as Washingtonians learned of new housing to be erected by the federal government for African-American families in Northeast D.C., African Americans, perhaps in consultation with friends, cousins, in-laws, siblings, co-workers, and neighbors, shared details of the program and encouraged each other to apply for units at Langston Terrace Dwellings. Others read about the project in the local newspapers or in newsletters at their places of employment; some found promotional flyers in their mailboxes. Residents registered their names on a roster maintained by the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration (PWA). Additionally, scores of people posted letters of application to the federal government in the hopes of obtaining a row house or apartment. This chapter examines the application process as a way to explore

¹ I have retained the original spelling, punctuation and grammar of the authors when quoting or transcribing them.

the material realities and ambitions of working-class African-American Washingtonians in the 1930s; these letters suggest that hopeful residents shared and shaped a vision of domesticity that drew from and extended the government's prescriptions. That is, government housing was not simply an exercise in social control; applicants asserted their own needs as well. I will review the application process and move to an examination of the applicants' strategies, and then explain the screening and selection procedures established by the PWA. In this chapter, I will privilege the voices of the applicants in order to uncover and reclaim their aspirations to limn the ways in which they ordered their own lives. Whether handwritten on a sheaf of torn, lined notebook paper or typed on a piece of parchment, these letters of application provide an extraordinary body of evidence about the sheltering arrangements and aspirations of working-class African Americans in Washington, D.C. in the mid-1930s. These frank statements made manifest their domestic dreams; these passages also suggest that applicants imbued Langston with meaning before the bricks and mortar cured at 21st Street and Benning Road.

Between August 1935 and May 1938, Langston Terrace's hopeful residents filed at least 2,366 pieces of mail with the PWA Housing Division. This extant correspondence constitutes an archive of sentiments that document quotidian aspects of urban life in Washington, D.C. after the Great Depression and before World War II. The materials include several types: letters of application, registration blanks, and postcards from individual African Americans who wished to be selected for a unit of new housing; recommendations on behalf of some of these hopeful residents; and applications from a handful of white Washingtonians who also petitioned (their requests for lodging at

Langston were denied or redirected to other re-housing initiatives sponsored by the federal government that were specifically for white Americans). Additionally, this archive of project files also includes a series of petitions by white residents who, in a failed attempt to block Langston's creation, objected to the construction of federally-funded housing for African Americans north of Benning Road in Northeast Washington, D.C.

Using data culled from these letters, cross-referenced with entries in City Directories between 1935-1939, I have correlated the authors of these letters and forms to roughly 1,700 discrete addresses around Washington, D.C.² [See Figure 2.1] This extraordinary body of evidence allows us to approximate the applicants' understandings of family and domestic life before they moved into the property, unpacked their belongings, hung curtains, or hosted a meeting. These materials also suggest how African Americans developed strategies and tactics to negotiate institutionalized, segregated spaces; the letters of Langston's opponents remind how white Americans also sought to enforce racial segregation in the nation's capital city. Much of the scholarly literature on New Deal housing programs explores the intentions of professionals including planners, architects, reformers, government officials, and other housing advocates; these letters insist that we also explore the intentions of the clerks, messengers, porters, laundry workers, maids and laborers who filed penny postcards, composed letters or completed registration blanks in the hopes of sheltering themselves and their families.

² Project Files for Project 1706, RG 196 National Archives Records Administration II College Park Maryland. I read every letter and attempted to corroborate applicants' names in city directories between 1935-1939 to verify the address and to obtain employment information; I also used the criss-cross directory to locate further information. In roughly three dozen cases, I pursued individuals in the Manuscript Census from 1930 and in local periodicals, e.g. *Washington Post*.

In autumn 1935, the Housing Division began collecting the names of people interested in housing at Langston. Acutely aware of the competitive nature of the process, applicants sought to supplement the perfunctory contact information (names and addresses) with further details about their living conditions. How did these authors position themselves as ideal candidates for new housing? Hopeful residents enacted a wide variety of rhetorical strategies in order to gain one of the coveted 274 units: the archive of correspondence reveals appeals based on logos, ethos, and pathos. This chapter analyzes the letters of application, both verbal texts and pieces of material culture in order to probe authors' rhetorical choices further.³ As textual documents, the correspondence offers crucial data like names, addresses, family sizes, and employment status. Many authors seized upon the application process, cultivating personal narratives that would also advance their personal agendas and promote their eligibility; they wove anecdotes throughout their applications in order to bolster their claims. The information listed on registration forms, letters and postcards indicate how authors based their appeals in logos (i.e. to signal interest and to record vital statistics). These details, coupled with an assessment of the visual and other non-verbal strategies, demonstrate how authors also based their appeals in ethos (i.e. the character of the applicant) and in pathos (i.e. the emotional quality of the applicants' circumstances). Hundreds of applicants beckon us to pursue the particular, intimate circumstances of their lives. For many, a registration blank limited their ability to assert their case fully. As artifacts, the correspondence enables us to approximate the ways in which individuals invested the application process

³ Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method" *Winterthur Portfolio* 1982 17(1): 1-19.

with meaning. These details encourage us to pursue applicants' biographies and invite us to probe their values and beliefs.

Authors detailed poignant personal and familial circumstances that have been muted and otherwise lost when aggregated into demographic profiles and statistics. In this correspondence, elevator operators, laborers and domestic workers recounted personal budgets with figures including income and household expenses, family size, composition, and arrangement; some characterized their current housing situations while others described desired dwellings. Authors specified their preferences for row houses or apartments, upper or lower floors, and number of rooms, for example. Further, they talked about the qualities that they prized in new homes and potential communities: they treasured privacy, quiet, and space.

They made their claims, sharing a vocabulary and rhetoric with housing reformers: they enumerated their issues in terms of physical/formal design, economics, sociology and public health. More, these letters illumine a great deal about the private lives of their authors. In his introductory essay to an edited volume of letters written by youth to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt during the Great Depression, historian Robert Cohen observed that young authors routinely offered detailed personal narratives as they carefully requested material assistance. Through this structure, according to Cohen, these scribes composed a "condensed autobiography" through which subsequent generations might glimpse quotidian aspects of poor and working-class people's lives.⁴ Many of the authors trusted the government's application process enough to describe intimate details of their family life. Petitioners repeatedly mentioned onerous rents and cramped quarters.

⁴ Robert Cohen, ed. *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, p. 17.

They also repeatedly imagined private apartments and row houses equipped with modern appliances at affordable rates. As hundreds of authors reiterated their concerns, they signaled the dimensions of widely-held notions about domesticity during the period.

While many authors spoke movingly and at great length about their circumstances, not all were as eloquent as Mrs. Middleton whose plea for “serious consideration” serves as the title for this chapter. Others, like Alvin Johnson, were taciturn. In a handwritten note, Johnson, of 744 19th Street NE, expressed his request to move three blocks across Benning Road with a simple phrase, “Three rooms kitchenette and bath in Langston Terrace.”⁵ Both Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Middleton wished to obtain a place at Langston. Their petitions—long or laconic—catalog their consideration and curiosity of if not enthusiasm for government-sponsored, modern housing. Some authors expressed the compulsory data; others were more expansive, and perhaps even creative. Still, each of these petitioners formulated their interests deliberately.

Beginning in late August 1935, the very first Washingtonians formally registered their interest in housing at Langston with the Public Works Administration’s (PWA) Housing Division at the Department of Interior. In other cities where PWA housing programs were slum clearance sites, the first applicants were invited to enter their interests before any public announcements were made.⁶ Likely, these early invited applicants were residents of the site to be cleared. It appears that the first to register their interest for Langston were not formally invited; in Washington, D.C. unlike cities like Atlanta, for example, early applicants learned of the project through their jobs or from friends and family members. Before any official notice of the project appeared in

⁵ Alvin Johnson [to PWA Housing Division] March 19 1936/6? Box 132 RG 196 NARA II.

⁶ “Manual of Tenant Selection Procedure.” Management Branch Housing Division Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, Washington, D.C. no date, Box 1 RG 196 NARA II.

Washington newspapers in early October 1935, nineteen people wrote letters to the government. Fourteen of the nineteen authors worked in federal agencies including the PWA and Government Printing Office (GPO); two shared a last name (Wright); two lived in the same apartment building (734 Park Road); and two other groups of families lived within a one to two block proximity of each other. This suggests that a few well-placed government employees learned about the housing program at its inception, before the general public, and that they shared this news with families with whom they were intimately connected, families whom they hoped would also be selected for a unit at Langston. The strategies of these earliest applicants reflected a pattern that emerged over the 32 month period in which the government accepted letters of inquiry first and then formal applications to establish the original cohort of residents for Langston.

Writing on stationery embossed with a stylized 'W,' the first applicant for new housing was Frederick J. Wright, a bindery operator at the Government Printing Office. On August 24, 1935, Wright expressed interest in a five room house in the "new subdivision known as 'Kingman Terrace.'" In addressing his letter directly to A.R. Clas, the administrator of PWA's Housing Division, and by invoking Kingman Terrace, the tentative name for the project, Wright's letter demonstrated that he possessed specific yet little known details of the program. Perhaps he was privy to information before the news broke publicly and generally through a personal or familial relationship with James S. Wright, a messenger at the PWA who resided four blocks away from him. James S. Wright filed a handwritten note the day after Frederick J. Wright, on August 25, 1935. Others among the first set of authors related their concerns and posed questions about the government's plans for the program. Harold Jackson, Alberta Summerville and the other

hopeful residents may have been uncertain about the procedure for filing applications, but they eagerly resolved to be among the first to register for new housing. In a typewritten letter, Jackson listed a series of questions directly to the Secretary of the Interior. He pressed for information regarding whether the buildings were to be “apartments or private homes;” rental fees or sale prices; and where and with whom to file an application.⁷ Mrs. P.S. Summerville (Alberta) noted, “I clearly understand that the work has not started yet, but I thought it wise to apply for one now. If this is not the proper way to go about it, I will appreciate it if you will advise me what to do.”⁸ In their letters, they specified the number of rooms their family required, they posed questions about the rental and purchase of units, and they included little known details like the project’s name, and its location in Northeast near the Anacostia River.

By the first week in October, government officials revealed the details of “Langston Low-Rent Housing Project” to readers of the *Afro-American*.⁹ Before the notice appeared in the *Afro*, fifteen men and four women logged their interest with handwritten and typed notes. Their correspondence revealed that the program’s particulars circulated among social networks within working-class communities. One confided that he learned of the project from a friend, employed at the White House, another explained that he was prompted to inquire “having heard of the housing project.”¹⁰ Wiley Davis of 734 Park Road, N.W. petitioned “to rent five room house in the new project” after he “just read of your intentions;” the piece he read must have piqued his interest because he also asked to switch his pending application from a

⁷ Harold Jackson to Secretary of the Interior, August 26, 1935, Box 129, RG 196, NARA II.

⁸ Mrs. P.S. (Alberta) Summerville to A.R. Clas, 9/29/1935, Box 131, RG 196 NARA II.

⁹ “Architects Open Offices to Start Housing Project” *Afro-American* October 5, 1935, p. 13.

¹⁰ William M. Steen to Mr. A.R. Clas, October 7, 1935 and John R. Robinson, October 9, 1935, Folder, “Through Feb 1936,” Box 131, RG 196, NARA II.

proposed project in Southwest D.C. for Langston. Evidently, he may have shared his enthusiasm for the proposed project with his neighbor Robert T. Greenfield also of 734 Park Road, N.W. who filed his interest the next day.¹¹ As the public discovered information about the housing program, gradually more African American Washingtonians inquired about the availability and process. By the end of November, according to a brief piece that ran in the *Afro*, 50 families registered with the Housing Administration.¹² The 54 families who filed by December 1 lived in apartments and row houses in three of the city's four quadrants: Northeast, Northwest, and Southeast.¹³ These first registrants were men and women, married couples and widows. In roughly 60% of the families, men worked for a federal agency; in the other 40%, the City Directory listed the occupations of the heads of household as maids, porters, a baker, and as laborers in hospitals and restaurants. Only two of these first 50 families moved into Langston: Zebedee and Alice Hawkins moved from 424 Oakdale Place, NW to 2105 H Street, NE and Raymond P. and Lois M. Kelly moved from 8 Evarts Street NE to 2113 G Street, NE.

The majority of these early applicants worked for government agencies. James H. Wright's letter of application reveals the housing concerns of government workers and it suggests the various strategies that they employed to secure better, affordable housing. His case suggests that government employees possessed access to detailed information about the housing program and the application process. Wright, an employee in the office of the Comptroller of the Currency at the Treasury Department and a resident of 744

¹¹ Wiley Davis to A.R. Clas, October 3, 1935 and Robert T. Greenfield to A.R. Clas, October 4, 1935, Box 131, RG 196, NARA II.

¹² "Fifty Apply for Low-Cost Apartments" *Afro-American* November 23, 1935, p. 23.

¹³ Box 131 RG 196 NARA II.

Harvard Street, NW, attached a clipping from the Department of Agriculture's Welfare Association's newsletter, *Agricultural Exchange*, with his correspondence.¹⁴ Someone, perhaps a friend or family member who worked at Agriculture, passed along the information to him. He, in turn, may have shared it with John W. Robinson, an employee in the Division of Loans and Currency at Treasury, who also lived at 744 Harvard Street, NW, as Mr. Robinson wrote three days later to express his interest in the proposed project, explaining that he had read about "the colored housing."¹⁵

The newsletter article, entitled "Colored Homes Project," alerted Agriculture employees to the particulars of the PWA housing project and provided them with information about the application procedure.¹⁶

The Rent and Housing Committee of the Department wishes to call attention of colored employees to the PWA Housing project at Benning Road, between Twenty-first and Twenty-fourth Streets, N.E. The project calls for 22 groups of buildings in the form of two brick row houses and flats. Contracts for the 301 apartments were let on December 12 and work is to start immediately. The project will be a planned community, free from interior streets, with ample room for children to play in an area set aside for them. The rentals are not yet fixed, but it is hoped they will not average over \$6 or \$7 per room. The Rent and Housing Committee has been glad to do its part to encourage the establishment of low cost housing developments and has furnished data indicating the need for them as reflected in the 11,000 questionnaire study that was carried on in the Department early last spring. Applications for living quarters may be made by writing to the Management Division, Public Works Administration, Interior Building, Washington, D.C.

This article followed an effort by members of the Agriculture Branch of the National Federation of Federal Employees to provide employees with better,

¹⁴ James Wright to Management Division of Public Works Administration, January 6, 1936, Box 131, RG 196, NARA II.

¹⁵ John W. Robinson to PWA Housing Division January 9, 1936, Box 131, RG 196, NARA II.

¹⁶ "Colored Homes Project" *Agricultural Exchange* December 23, 1935 vol. II no. 12 from James Wright to Management Division of Public Works Administration, January 6, 1936, Box 131, RG 196, NARA II.

lower-cost living quarters. Earlier in the year, in May 1935, Morgan Baker reported in “The Federal Diary” column in the *Washington Post* that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) conducted a housing survey of employees who reported dissatisfaction with their present living circumstances, including the rent, size of the units, and the proximity to work.¹⁷ The findings of this survey and the large number of government workers who applied for units at Langston indicate that federal employment--positions that were considered by many to be highly desirable--did not ensure security in the difficult housing market in Washington. It also suggests that the government used public policy for subsidized housing to correct public policy for government wages for African Americans who were employed in skilled and unskilled occupations. Rather than raising employees’ salaries to rates that would enable them to support themselves and their families, the government developed an elaborate building program and housing policy to intervene.¹⁸

In the mid-1930s, Washington offered African-American working-class families limited options with respect to affordable, decent shelter in rental units. Many paid dear prices for rooms in overcrowded, dilapidated housing stock; they also paid excessive rates for the cost of heat, light, and refrigeration.¹⁹ When Robert Mitchell, Assistant Chief of Branch I, studied the rental conditions of housing accommodations among African Americans in Washington, D.C., he found in areas with 83% or more African

¹⁷ Morgan Baker, “The Federal Diary” *Washington Post* May 9, 1935, p. 30.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Professor Leslie Rowland who pointed this out to me during our conversations about this body of evidence.

¹⁹ Daniel Swinney, “Alley Dwellings and Housing Reform in the District of Columbia” Unpublished Thesis, University of Chicago, June 1938; Hilyard Robinson, “Slum Survey,” Washington D.C., 1933. The sociologist Robert C. Weaver referred to Robinson’s survey for his article, “The Negro in a Program of Public Housing,” *Opportunity* July 1938, p. 199.

American families, 3800 or approximately 50% of African American tenants paid between \$20 to \$40 rent per unit per month; 1600 of these paid between \$30 to \$40 per month.²⁰ Many families shared households with extended relatives; others doubled up and took in boarders. Some made homes in alley dwellings and in neighborhoods deemed to be slum areas by the Alley Dwelling Authority (ADA).²¹ In 1934, ADA established a plan to eradicate alley dwellings within ten years. They vowed to relocate displaced African American and white residents to newly-built or reconditioned modest row housing in small projects on slum-clearance sites.²² The PWA sponsored program also aimed to provide sanitary dwellings, but the Housing Division intended this as a larger program of experimental housing for a different cohort of African Americans; they specifically targeted African Americans with slightly higher annual salaries who lived in substandard housing not located in alleys.

The people intimately associated with Langston—including the professional designers and draftsmen, construction workers, as well as the hopeful residents—enacted a variety of strategies to house themselves. Many lived in multi-generational, consanguinal households in black neighborhoods throughout the city. (The phenomenon

²⁰ Robert Mitchell to the Director of Housing, November 5, 1936, RG 196 Box 135, NARA II.

²¹ In the early half of the 20th century, the paucity of decent, affordable housing for poor and working-class families in Washington, D.C. confounded residents and troubled reformers. I discuss the conditions of housing stock in greater detail in Chapter 3. William H. Jones, *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Study in Human Ecology* Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1929; Hilyard R. Robinson, *Slum Survey*, 1933, “Alley Dwelling Association” Vertical Files, Washingtoniana, Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library, and James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982. I consulted the work of Jones, Robinson and Borchert to develop a directory of inhabited alleys in Washington in the early 1930s. I then cross-referenced the addresses of applicants with this directory to determine how many of Langston’s applicants lived in alleys. I considered whether applicants who lived in alleys might use alternate street addresses in their applications. Yet, I verified 75% of the addresses supplied by applicants with City Directories of the period; the balance of the applicants provided addresses that cannot be correlated directly with listings in the City Directories.

²² Established simultaneously as Langston, early ADA-sponsored projects included Hopkins Place, W Street Apartments, St. Mary’s Court, K Street Dwellings and Bland’s Court. These complexes contained between 12 and 31 housing units compared to the 274 units that Langston accommodated. *Housing Letter* 13 October 1937, page 2.

of housing arrangements that included extended kin was not a practice exclusive to African Americans or working-class families.) Yet, very few applicants lived in areas typically designated by planners and reformers as having very poor populations. For example, three residents of the 1800 block of Thirteenth Street, Northwest applied to move into Langston.²³ This “slum area” was the first to be cleared by the Alley Dwelling Authority.²⁴ And only two applicants resided in inhabited alleys: Mollie Scott lived in Clark Court, SW and Amos Lanning lived in St. Matthew’s Court, NW.²⁵ Despite this handful of families, given the estimated 7,000 – 9,000 people who lived in the city’s 170 inhabited alleys, disproportionately few alley dwellers applied for places at Langston.²⁶ Langston’s hopeful residents were a self-selecting group who lived in conditions that may have been expensive, undesirable, untenable, or ill-suited for their family’s needs, but as a whole, they did not live in the “slum” and “blighted” neighborhoods targeted by reformers and planners in Washington, D.C.

Official notices that appeared in the local newspapers did not announce a distinction between the categories of applicants for ADA or PWA housing, but there seems to have been a tacit understanding among petitioners in Langston’s applicant pool about the PWA’s desired tenants. In their queries and petitions to the federal government’s Housing Division, many applicants wondered whether Langston was intended exclusively for government workers. For example, Thomas H. Austin of 267

²³ Charles W. Hughes to PWA Housing Division, March 7, 1936; S.I. Cephas to PWA Housing Division May 24, 1936; Evelyn Glascoe to PWA Housing Division April 14, 1937 and Ophelia Jones to PWA Housing Division, March 9, 1938; Boxes 131, 132, 133 RG 196, NARA II.

²⁴ “First Slum to Be Cleared for Low-Cost Housing,” *Afro-American* October 26, 1935, p. 10

²⁵ Mollie Scott to PWA Housing Division December 14, 1935; and Amos Lanning to PWA Housing Division February 23, 1938 Boxes 131 and 135, RG 196 NARA II.

²⁶ Based on his investigation and that of the City Building Inspector in 1927, William H. Jones estimated the population of alley inhabitants in Washington as 9,000; by 1939, when the authors of the WPA Guide to Washington, D.C. produced the chapter, “The Negro in Washington” they placed the number at 7,000. Perhaps relief workers channeled applicants to different programs based on race, income, and need.

Sheridan Road, SE wrote “to find out about Project H-1706A.” The specificity of his use of the project’s assigned alpha-numeric code rather than referring to it by name or street coordinates indicates that he must have learned about the housing program from someone who worked at PWA or from someone who had received a registration form. (The project code was not used in the press.) He explained that he wanted “to get full information.” Further, Austin stated, “I understand that they are for government employees.”²⁷ Austin, himself employed by the government as a Chipper at the Navy Yard, was not alone in linking Langston and government employees; others repeatedly characterized the program as one dedicated to this population. Perhaps this misconception, commonly held among some petitioners, explained why Langston attracted applications from so many workers in government employment.

Langston attracted applications from Washingtonians with modest incomes who had steady work. Some even lived in decent, sanitary housing that may have been expensive or otherwise not suited their needs, but was not dilapidated. Indeed, several applicants²⁸ lived at Howard Manor, a privately developed, brick apartment block adjacent to Howard University that opened in 1930. It served as home for clerks, skilled laborers, hair dressers, teachers, and Howard University instructors, including Hilyard Robinson, the principal architect of Langston who lived at Howard Manor from 1930-1934.²⁹ Other hopeful residents lived in sanitary housing that had been built 20-30 years

²⁷ Thomas H. Austin to FHA, February 29, 1936, Box 131, RG 196 NARA II.

²⁸ Lomack, Patton, Lee, Cohron and Soders all lived at Howard Manor in separate apartments. Bertha Lomack to PWA Housing Division January 6, 1936; C.S. Patton to PWA Housing Division March 3, 1936; Mrs. Edith G. Lee to PWA Housing Division April 24, 1936; Geo E. Cohron to PWA Housing Division May 14, 1936; and Nettie B. Soders to PWA Housing Division August 23, 1937, Boxes 131, 132, and 134 RG 196 NARA II.

²⁹ Census Data from 1930 Census. ED 293 Sheets 13A-B and 14A-B microfilm held at Martin Luther King, Jr. Library.

earlier by philanthropic groups in Southwest and Northwest Washington.³⁰ For example, dozens of applicants inhabited flats built by Washington Sanitary Housing Company (WSHC). The WSHC flats were innovative when they opened at the turn of the century. While the amenities may have been outdated by the mid-1930s, the units were most likely serviceable. Further, the apartments at Howard Manor were only five years old. Physically neither housing complex was deteriorated or blighted.

These hopeful residents may have been drawn to Langston because of the promise of affordability or the desirability of the location, on a major artery with a bus line, next to a campus of public schools for African American children. Some applicants, who filed simultaneously or in tandem with friends and family, may have wished to make a new start with familiar neighbors. Additionally, some may have been intrigued with the proposed urban design especially the accounts of a planned community composed of individual units with modern amenities and outdoor recreation spaces. This design was not, however, universally appealing. For example, Joe Norris recalled that 15 years later, after World War II, when he and his wife applied for public housing and were shown two different sites, Langston and James Creek, he preferred James Creek, in part, he explained because of “the way the trees [were] hanging over. [It was a n]ice, cool place down there.”³¹

³⁰ Washington Sanitary Housing Company built units on Franklin Street, Northwest and in Southwest on Half Street, Carrollsburg Place and M Street. Matthew Brown and his wife, Julia lived at 433 Franklin Street, NW. Residents of Carrollsburg Place, Southwest included William Triplett: [1407 A]; H[elena].C. Clark [1409 A]; Leon R. DeVille [1421] Harold J. Carter; [1407]; Richard W. Tillman [1240]; Milton A. Bland [1423]; Mrs. Blanche Young [1258]. Half Street, SW residents included: Alfred D. Wallace [1416-A]; Fred Jackson, 1410 A; Mrs. E. Lewis 1406; Joseph H. Brooks 1420; Mrs. Agnes R. Brown 1414; Leslie Gentry 1424; Mr. Clyde N. Coates 1238; Mrs. Lasenia Dodson 705; Mr. William J. Burrison 1420-A; Neighbors from South Capitol Street SW included: Raymond Minor 1426; R. Aramento 1217; Mrs. Minnie Gordon, 1235A; Mr. Charles Cross 1243 and Bunyon Coleman 1425 A.

³¹ Interview with Joe Norris, “... You’ll never see those days anymore’: *Oral Histories from the Capital View Plaza and James Creek Public Housing Sites*, ed. Joseph F. Jordan, Washington, D.C: D.C.

Hopeful residents incorporated detailed descriptions of their needs into their correspondence with the Housing Division. Some expressive authors drew from the government's promotional rhetoric as they claimed their vision of life at Langston. How did they learn details of the program? Occasionally, authors queried government officials directly about news they heard circulating in the community. For example, as mentioned earlier, when Harold Jackson heard of the program in late August 1935 before the project officially launched, he wrote directly to the Secretary of Interior; his letter was redirected to the Housing Division and A.R. Clas replied. In his response, Clas explained,

The buildings will consist of two-story row houses and flats and three-story apartments. These buildings will be planned so that the ground coverage is only about 20 per cent; this will leave ample open space between buildings which can be used for play areas and gardens. All buildings will be of fire-proof construction.³²

In his correspondence with this individual, Clas delineated a particular impression of Langston that dominated early newspaper coverage of the program. The first piece that ran in the *Afro-American* described the project's low density. A bold subheading declared: "80 Per Cent of the Area Open." The article continued, "About 20 per cent of the total site will be used for buildings, and the remainder will be devoted to lawns, open areas, recreation space."³³ The *Washington Post* hailed the program, "Buildings will occupy only a portion of the 13-acre site, the remainder of which will be used as a park and playground."³⁴ The *Washington Herald* depicted the spaciousness of the property: "Only 20 per cent of the site for the housing development will be used for buildings,

Community Humanities Council and Institute for the Preservation and Study of African-American Writing, 1990, page, 62.

³² A.R. Clas to Harold Jackson August 30, 1935 Box 129, RG 196 NARA II

³³ "Architects Open Offices to Start Housing Project" *Afro-American* October 3, 1935, p. 13

³⁴ "Bids Invited by PWA for Langston Terrace" *Washington Post* October 20, 1935.

officials said. The remainder will be landscaped to provide tenants with park and recreational facilities and to allow space for gardens.”³⁵ And two months later, Wright’s newsletter clipping again promoted Langston’s open space: “The project will be a planned community; free from interior streets, with ample room for children to play in an area set aside for them.”³⁶ Local newspapers repeatedly emphasized the commodious nature of the site in their coverage of the project’s construction phase.

Aware of these physical/formal details, some applicants asserted their own needs by borrowing the government’s depiction of the site strategy, recasting the message in their terms. These authors queried the Housing Division about the program’s particulars and sought units suitable for their own particular needs. Walter L. King articulated an interest for his family’s new house to have access to “plenty back yard and too also rent space.” He flatly stated that he had no use for an apartment “as I want to have a garden if not that house chicken.”³⁷ For applicants who recently migrated from rural North Carolina and Virginia, apartment living in dense neighborhoods on narrow streets without yards may have proved to be jarring. For them, the promise of landscaping and garden plots at Langston may have been especially inviting. Also, these open spaces may have been attractive to families who desired protected places dedicated for children’s recreation and adult leisure activities. Routinely, parents invoked the needs of their young children as they petitioned for consideration. For example, Mrs. Dorothy Long emphasized the social benefits of better housing at Langston so that her “baby could play

³⁵ “Housing Job of \$1,606,000 Due Dec. 15” *Washington Herald* October 21, 1935 from Vertical File, Martin Luther King, Jr. Library.

³⁶ “Colored Homes Project,” *Agriculture Exchange*, December 23, 1935, vol. II no. 12

³⁷ Walter L. to King to PWA Housing Division November 27, 1935 Box 131, RG 196 NARA II.

out of doors.”³⁸ For some, Langston’s lower density and new construction signaled an opportunity for fresh air and healthier living not just for children, but for adults as well. Mrs. Bessie King, a teacher, explained that Langston potentially held ameliorative or recuperative powers, “I have the asthma and I want to try and get somewhere, where I can try to get well.”³⁹

Scores of hopeful residents signified on the unit planning as they specified the number of rooms that their family required. They also declared their preferences for flats, apartments, and row houses. Other applicants stated specific needs regarding unit placement and location. For example, Lee A. Browne desired “three rooms, kitchen, and bath apartment, if possible a corner location in your new Langston Terrace to be located at 24th and Benning Road, NE.”⁴⁰ Perhaps Browne determined that the placement of corner units meant less traffic, more privacy, less noise, or better light and circulation, in his current apartment building at 2711 Georgia Avenue, NW and hoped for similar results at Langston. Indeed, a number of petitioners, like Bertha Lomack, who was familiar with apartment living at Howard Manor, and Francis N. Davis, also expressed concerns about obtaining end or corner units in their letters.⁴¹ Other preferences included mentions about size or type of dwelling. Elias Berry ranked his preferences as he made his “application for one of the four room houses.” But, he noted that he “prefers six room houses. And in the event that this can not be done I will be glad to have one of the apartments which are being constructed on the same site.”⁴² Mr. John Moten requested

³⁸ Mrs. Dorothy Long to PWA Housing Division Box 132 ,RG 196 NARA II

³⁹ Mrs. Bessie King to PWA Housing Division September 10, 1937 Box 134, RG 196 NARA II.

⁴⁰ Lee A. Browne to PWA Housing Division, January 27, 1936, Box 131 RG 196 NARA II.

⁴¹ Bertha Lomack to PWA Housing Division January 6, 1936 and Francis N. Davis to PWA Housing Division December 5, 1935, Box 131 RG 196 NARA II.

⁴² Elias Berry to PWA Housing Division, April 29, 1936, Box 131 RG 196 NARA II.

information regarding “the homes for colored that are being put up in Northeast and when they will be completed an how I am going to go about getting one. I learned that there were to be both apartments an houses I would like a house. Kindly send me information.”⁴³ These authors’ queries indicate that they possessed clear ideas about their individual and familial preferences. And, they were not reluctant to assert these needs to the Housing Division’s agents. Hopeful residents like John Moten and Elias Berry desired housing forms that would complement and support their lives. These claims illumine their understandings of urbanism in Washington, D.C.

For many, their vision of a desirable urbanism did not rely on physical features or elements. Applicants expressed their intentions for housing that possessed special, intangible social qualities. Mrs. Joseph H. Middleton poignantly pressed her case in a second letter to the government. She wrote to revise data she provided earlier about her husband’s position and salary because he secured a permanent position. She also used this occasion to plead her case and to stress their desire for “a nice apartment or flat in a decent neighborhood.” She explained,

We are expecting our first baby in a few months so this well make it more necessary for us to give up rooming and find a place of our own. We are very anxious to get settled in a nice home in a decent neighborhood where we can bring up our child successfully and make desirable friends.

In this passage, Myrtle Middleton employs adjectives like “nice”, “decent” and “desirable”; these words are reiterated by many, many authors to characterize their vision of the unit, the community and the other residents at Langston.

If hopeful residents lived in shabby conditions at the time of their application letter, they did not discuss forthrightly the physical aspects of current housing in their

⁴³ Mr. John Moten to PWA Housing Division March 28, 1936 Box 131 RG 196 NARA II.

letters likely because they did not want to risk their standing by implying a personal inability to maintain a decent, clean home. Chiefly, applicants complained about unfair economics as they stressed the cost of their present lodging. They also inveighed against the lack of privacy that came with rooming or boarding. Many like Mrs. Fanny H. Alston wrote, “I have never been able to afford a really desirable home and would like so much to be included in this project which will permit people in circumstances similar to me one decent and adequate housing at a reasonable cost.”⁴⁴ Or, as Leon Clifford observed, “[It is [h]ard to make ends meet paying the rent that I am at present.”⁴⁵ While some like (Mrs.) John Mapp noted, “The rent at our present residence is really very steep and we would like to find a cheaper place,” others like Blanche Lynch elaborated, “[I am] constantly employed as a chambermaid and laundress, but find it extremely hard to support myself and my family principally due to the comparatively high rent I am forced to pay.”⁴⁶ Still others like Mrs. Hoffman explained, “At the present we have a house with roomer and they can’t pay sometime and it take every penny we can to get to pay our rent here can’t meet other bills.”⁴⁷

Authors like Mrs. Hoffman commented about the crowded conditions of their lodging – as they were forced to double or divide up, or to room or board with others. For instance, Rudolph Brown, who lived in a rowhouse across the street from the parcel of land that would become Langston Terrace, explained that in his situation he was “Rooming now, paying \$25 a month rent.”⁴⁸ Others detailed their positions.

⁴⁴ Fanny Alston to PWA Housing Division, October 24, 1935 Box 131 RG 196, NARA II.

⁴⁵ Leon Clifford to PWA Housing Division, March 12, 1936 Box 132, RG 196, NARA II.

⁴⁶ Mrs. John Mapp to PWA Housing Division May 26, 1936 and Blanche Lynch, May 4, 1936. Box 13X RG 196, NARA II.

⁴⁷ Hoffman to PWA Housing Division, April 21, 1936 Box 132, RG 196 NARA II.

⁴⁸ Rudolph Brown to PWA Housing Division, September 25, 1935 Box 131 RG 196, NARA II.

Acknowledging that his was a complicated case, Mr. Wallace Jackson introduced himself and stated,

[I]iving in my household are 10 persons. My son his wife and two children help to make up these ten. His name is James Jackson, and he is also interested [in information and registration for Langston Terrace]. But for these there would only be six persons of my household. My rent is \$18.00 a month for six rooms. I have no conveniences except a zink in the kitchen.⁴⁹

Housing extended families in one unit was a common practice as Mrs. Ann Davidson's letter averred, "[We] have my mother with me in my house."⁵⁰ Augustus G. Bruce, Sr., a porter for the Pullman Company, also expressed interest in moving from the row house that he and his wife Nancy shared with their son, Augustus Jr., a porter with WPA, and his wife, Alice, a teacher in the public schools.⁵¹ George Green emphasized his claustrophobia when he wrote a second letter to the Housing Division "as a reminder" that he was still in the same place, in "very crowded conditions", with six people "in two rooms with no modern conveniences."⁵²

Mrs. Elizabeth Leak described a strategy of dividing up family members to get by as she noted, "We have been in the city since last year. We are rooming and the children are with my mother."⁵³ James R. White lived as a roomer at 1911 Second Street, NW while his pregnant wife resided in Savannah, Georgia. He applied for housing at Langston in the hopes of securing a home and reuniting their young family.⁵⁴ On June 22, 1936, Iser Herman complained about the "high cost of living conditions" in the

⁴⁹ Wallace Jackson to PWA Housing Division, June 17, 1936 Box 132 RG 196 NARA II.

⁵⁰ Ann Davidson to PWA Housing Division March 27, 1936 Box 132, RG 196 NARA II.

⁵¹ Augustus G. Bruce to PWA Housing Division, August 30, 1937, Box 134 RG 196 NARA II.

⁵² George Green to PWA Housing Division, April 30, 1937 Box 133, RG 1196 NARA II.

⁵³ Elizabeth Leak to PWA Housing Division, March 26, 1936, Box 131, RG 196, NARA II.

⁵⁴ James R. White to PWA Housing Division, November 20, 1936, Box 132, RG 196, NARA II.

“couple of furnished rooms” that he and his wife had taken.⁵⁵ And others remarked about the lack of amenities in their homes. Ernest L. Carter lamented that he could not fulfill responsibilities to his family as he noted, “[I am] [u]nable to provide as comfortable home for them as I desire.”⁵⁶ On Christmas Eve, 1935, James H. Bennett, Jr. stated, “At the present time, the conveniences at my residence are not modern.”⁵⁷ By sharing intimate details of their family composition and arrangement in their condensed autobiographies, these authors registered concern about the conditions in which their families lived; they also registered their wish for improved circumstances. They turned to the Housing Division and invested themselves in the process as one of the strategies they pursued to ameliorate their conditions.

Hopeful residents further invested in the application process by investigating the property and monitoring Langston’s progress with visits to the construction site. For example, Willie Morton decided to apply for a unit after making a trip to Northeast in spring 1936.⁵⁸ These excursions occurred with enough frequency that they impressed youngsters in the families of applicants. A child when her parents petitioned to move to Langston, Eloise Little Greenfield, one of the original residents of Langston, later in life in her memoir, remembered the vigil that her mother and her mother’s best friend, her father’s cousin, Lillie, kept at Langston’s construction site. “During the months that it was being built, Lillie and Mama would sometimes walk 15 blocks just to stand and watch the workmen digging holes and laying bricks. They’d just stand there watching and wishing.” Others, like Margaret Dickinson, explained in her letter of application

⁵⁵ Iser Herman to PWA Housing Division, June 22, 1936, Box 132, RG 196 II.

⁵⁶ Ernest L. Carter to PWA Housing Division, December 13 1935, Box 131, RG 196, NARA II.

⁵⁷ James H. Bennett, Jr. to PWA Housing Division, December 24, 1935, Box 131, RG 196, NARA II.

⁵⁸ Willie Morton to Mr. A.R. Clas, April 10, 1936, Box 132, RG 196, NARA II.

that she surveyed the apartments going up from her home at 2034 Claggett Street, NE.⁵⁹ Undoubtedly, the dozens of applicants who lived directly across from the Langston property also surveyed the efforts of the masons, carpenters, and other laborers from their homes in the 400-500 blocks of 23rd Place, 24th Street, 25th Place, and E Streets NE. Watching the progress from the ceremonial groundbreaking through the installation of windows may have enticed some of the African-American neighbors to become hopeful residents and apply to move across the street into modern apartments and row houses.⁶⁰ Perhaps more than other applicants, those who frequented the construction site routinely dwelled on the possibilities of their new domestic lives if approved to move into Langston.

Scholars have observed the ways in which working-class African-American Washingtonians used dress, in particular, to claim respectability and forge an urban identity.⁶¹ I follow their lead and contend that the authors of these letters endeavored to assert their respectability through use of letter-writing conventions and the correspondence's material culture. As they petitioned the government for a unit of housing in a brand new neighborhood, they were declaring their vision of urbanism. Whether typed or handwritten, most hopeful residents who crafted missives adopted the formal tone and format of a standard business letter. Some like Fanny H. Alston, worked as typists or in clerical positions in offices where daily they generated business

⁵⁹ Margaret Dickinson to PWA Housing Division, July 25, 1937, Box 133, RG 196 NARA II.

⁶⁰ This construction also likely antagonized the 92 white residents who lived immediately adjacent to Langston to the west on 19th Street, Bennett Place, Benning Road and H Street Northeast. Residents along these streets circulated and signed petitions opposing the project. They maintained that Benning Road was intended to be a buffer between the races with White families living North of Benning, and Black families living South. Officials at the Housing Division received the complaints and proceeded with the project apace: they dismissed the concerns of the White residents.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1994 and Marya Annette McQuirter, *Claiming the City: African Americans, Urbanization, and Leisure in Washington, D.C., 1902-1957.*, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2000.

correspondence. Others, like the many messengers who applied, handled business correspondence routinely. Yet, those petitioners who worked in offices or for the government were not the only ones familiar with business letters. Indeed, generally, the authors demonstrated their proficiency in letter-writing. They observed standard practices as they ordered their letters: they marked the return address, the date, business address, salutation, message, complimentary close and concluded with a signature (and occasionally a signature block with a signature and a typed or carefully lettered name). The frequency and repetition of these conventions in letters authored by domestic workers, elevator operators, and messengers suggests the existence of an epistolary tradition among working-class African-American Washingtonians. While the personal papers of laundry workers, butlers, drivers, laborers, and attendants may not survive in some other archives, these letters of application--preserved among government documents--indicate a fluency in correspondence.⁶²

Certainly, the authors of these letters self-consciously depicted their character as they crafted their petitions for housing. Repeatedly, authors enumerated their industry by stating their employers' names, job titles, and years of service. This was especially true in the case of government workers who routinely mentioned their positions; many proffered references from their agencies as well. As the application process quickened and the selection period drew closer, many hopeful residents solicited letters of reference from prominent Washingtonians, including church leaders and landlords, but more often congressmen, senators and New Deal officials. Some petitioners knew these figures from

⁶² Phyllis Palmer mined government files of the Women's Bureau and various New Deal agencies at National Archives "to recount [domestic workers'] feelings about the work content and social arrangements of domestic work" for her monograph, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, pp. 71-87.

the workplace—from the cloakrooms, hallways, and elevators of the Capitol, for example, while others (or their wives) worked in close proximity in personal service or as attendants or elevator operators in their residential apartment buildings.

Authors also asserted their identity by referencing their relationship to the State. For example, veterans of World War I, forthrightly emphasized their military service. Still others avowed their relationship to representative government, by mentioning their status as a voter. In each case, hopeful residents cast themselves in special relation to the State. They emphasized that they were not merely a supplicant requiring assistance; they claimed their rights as citizens. Widows mentioned their status and the responsibilities they assumed since the loss of their husbands. By offering their condensed autobiographies and emphasizing their character, these authors invested in this process through their letter-writing.

They also claimed their rights as individuals by their closings. The final element of business correspondence requires a signature. These hopeful residents asserted their identities powerfully and simply with their complimentary closing and through the use of the signature and signature block. Repeatedly, authors concluded their appeals with customarily polite greetings, especially phrases that underscored respect and appreciation while also stressing the relationship between reader and writer. Authors emphasized and affirmed their respect for the reader's official position and for the process by explicitly invoking the word and coupling it with phrases like: "Respectfully yours" "Very Respectfully," "Yours respectful," "I am most respectfully," "I beg to remain most respectfully," and "I am closing with all respects." Others expressed their appreciation and gratitude with lines such as: "Thanking you in advance", "Thanking you", "Very

gratefully”, “Thank you kindly”, and simply, “Thank you.” Others highlighted an implicit transactional relationship between writer and reader with explicit closing statements that included: “Kindly oblige”, “Sincerely yours”, “I am yours to command”, “Trusting that you will be able to help me”, “Hoping to hear from you soon”, as well as other, subtler phrases such as “Very truly yours” “I am truly yours” “Yours truly” and “Obligingly”. The repetition of these phrases throughout the correspondence suggests more than perfunctory linguistic obeisance. Taken together, the frequency of these phrases suggests that the authors believed in the power of their own words and in the power of the federal government to help them.⁶³ These applicants believed that Housing Division’s employees took seriously their concerns; they held fast to the notion that the PWA was positioned to assist individuals and families to realize and ameliorate their housing needs. Through these letters, the authors imagined and cultivated a relationship with the federal government.

Further, these authors insisted upon their individuality and identity by employing their given names; they also declared their dignity. In a period in which African Americans struggled to have their full personal names and titles recognized by white Americans it is especially important to note that authors habitually marked their signatures with titles, suffixes, and middle initials. These working-class African Americans insisted on recognition of their proper names as authors closed their letters with signatures that included titles such as Mr., Mrs. or Miss and as they used and maintained middle initials and suffixes like Junior, Senior, or III. Through carefully

⁶³ Professor Richard Kirkendall, an expert on U.S. 20th century political history and the Scott and Dorothy Bullitt Professor of American History at the University of Washington, impressed upon the importance of this during his comments on a paper I delivered at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in 2002.

chosen language, these correspondents asserted their individuality and claimed their rights as citizens of the city and nation. When turning to a federal agency for assistance with a basic human need—shelter—they insisted on courtesy, recognition of their proper, personal names.

Yet, for some authors, their status as single or widowed women circumscribed their ability to reveal fully their identities. Some female authors concealed their status as female-headed householders perhaps because of a concern about whether the government would provide assistance to single women and single mothers. Several women provided only their first initials when registering their interest: Helena Clark, a bindery operator at GPO, filed her application as H.C. Clark; Dollie Herbert, a printer's assistant also at GPO, registered as D. Herbert; Susie Cephas, a tailor, applied as S.I. Cephas; Anna Belle Holmes, a stenographer, used A.B. Holmes when she wrote on behalf of herself and her friends; and a clerk, Alvesta Lancaster, used A.P., when she petitioned for an apartment.⁶⁴ Mamie Qualls and her daughter, Alberta, applied for a unit of housing, under the name of Mamie's deceased husband, John B. Qualls.⁶⁵ Other single and widowed women worried and queried the authorities at the Housing Division whether they would be deemed to be ineligible for assistance. In a follow-up letter after her initial application, Mrs. Madeline Williams, a widow, pressed A. R. Clas further with questions about her application; she wondered whether to believe the rumor that units "would not

⁶⁴ H.C. Clark to PWA Housing Division, March 23, 1936; D. Herbert to PWA Housing Division, March 26, 1936, S.I. Cephas to PWA Housing Division, May 24, 1936; A.B. Holmes to PWA Housing Division May 14, 1936; and A.P. Lancaster to PWA Housing Division, April 24, 1936, Box 132 and 133, RG 196 NARA II.

⁶⁵ John B. Qualls to PWA Housing Division, March 16, 1936, Box 133, RG 196, NARA II.

be rented to persons without husbands.”⁶⁶ In his reply, Clas attempted to assuage her concerns by explaining that that fact alone did not disqualify her.

As they composed their correspondence, some of the authors also made deliberate decisions about how to represent themselves and their cases through their choices of language, as well as through their stationery and calligraphy and typewritten text. Authors made decisions either to substitute or supplement a completed registration blank with a hand-written or typewritten letter. As pieces of material culture, the letters of applications also make manifest some of the personal qualities of the authors. Whether on penny postcards, lined sheets torn from tablets, personal monogrammed stationery, or purloined embossed notepaper, hopeful residents enlisted creative tactics as they asserted themselves as petitioners for government housing. Many utilized paper from their workplaces: lifting sheets of letterhead from the Supreme Court or stationery from the Hotel Roosevelt. The job responsibilities of those who worked in government agencies, offices, hotels, and private homes required their familiarity with preferred customs that governed correspondence. For example, two men employed at the Hotel Commodore used stationery supplies from their jobs to apply: Robert W. Miller, the captain of the bellmen and Louis I. Castor, a bellman, used hotel paper and postcards.⁶⁷ Further, a number of the women who worked as maids may also have taken advantage of their access to fine stationery and writing materials to use these supplies in their applications.⁶⁸

Some crafted letters in confident penmanship; their letters display a scriptographic quality of practiced authors. These authors may have dispatched their own letters; they

⁶⁶ Madeline Williams to A.R. Clas, June 10, 1936 Box 133, RG 196 NARA II.

⁶⁷ Robert W. Miller to PWA Housing Division March 14, 1936 and Louis I Castor to PWA Housing Division, May 3, 1936 Boxes 131 and 132 RG 196 NARA II.

⁶⁸ Professor Elsa Barkley Brown’s comments on Juanita Harrison’s travels at the close of the conference *African American Identity Travels* helped me to understand this point.

may have copied out the texts so as to avoid strikethroughs or mistakes; others may have enlisted the assistance of others with steadier hands. Several sets of correspondence bear a striking verisimilitude in lettering, choice of paper and ink. The presence of these letters suggests that one author must have written on behalf of friends or family and that the process of securing a new, decent, affordable home was a shared enterprise; the application process was a communal activity.

Indeed, one popular strategy that applicants used was to write letters together. For example on Sunday, February 2, 1936, four people wrote from the same address, 60 Que Street: Mrs. Pearl Blue, Joseph H. Williams, Mrs. Dorothy Rozier, and Mrs. Isabelle Talbert; their letters stated their interest identically with the phrase: “two rooms, with kitchen and bath.”⁶⁹ We might imagine the four of them convening in one of their rooms after church services on their day off from their responsibilities as a maid, helper and shoe repairman. As they shared stationery and pens, perhaps they rehearsed their letters for each other. Similarly, Mrs. Ann Davidson and Mrs. Mamie Ross, women who were co-workers at Government Printing Office and who lived four blocks from each other on S Street NW , completed postcards that described details of their respective work, salaries, and families; the cards were mailed on the same day.⁷⁰ Two messengers at the Bureau of Internal Revenue sent their applications for consideration in December 1935. And when Mr. Ware followed up on his letter to register a new address later in March, he then encouraged a third messenger from Internal Revenue. Mr. Braxton, evidently

⁶⁹ Mrs. Pearl Blue to PWA Housing Division February 2, 1936; Joseph H. Williams to PWA Housing Division; Mrs. Dorothy Rozier to PWA Housing Division; and Mrs. Isabelle Talbert to PWA Housing Division February 2, 1936 Box 131 RG 196 NARA II.

⁷⁰ Ann Davidson to PWA Housing Division and Mamie Ross to PWA Housing Division March 25, 1936, Box 133, RG 196 NARA II.

having learned of the procedure from his colleagues, asked for the registration blanks by name.⁷¹

Coworkers, like those employed by the federal government, obtained information about housing opportunities and shared the details with colleagues. And, the Government Printing Office and Internal Revenue were not the only federal agencies whose employees sought housing at Langston. Applicants held positions in a number of government offices and programs including: AAA, Agriculture, AGO, Architect of the Capitol, Board of Public Welfare, Bureau Air Com, Bureau of Budget, Customs Bureau, Bureau of Engraving and Printing, Bureau of Fisheries, Bureau of Standards, Civil Service Commission, Commerce, District Water, Department of Justice, Farm Credit Administration, FDIC, Federal C Commission, Federal Reserve, Federal Trade Commission, General Accounting Office, General Land Office, Health Services, Interior, Interstate Commerce Commission, Justice Department, Labor, at Labor in the Women's Bureau, Library of Congress, Maritime Commission, National Archives, National Gallery of Art, National Museum, National Park Service, Navy Department Navy Yard, Patent Office, Post Office, Public Works Administration, Reconstruction Finance Corporation, Social Security Board, Works Progress Administration, and in the House and Senate Office Buildings. Others worked for the District government or in the public schools. Still others worked for private firms as laborers and messengers; at private apartment buildings as elevator operators, bellmen, janitors, assistant engineers, maids, and waiters; at hotels as bellmen, housemen, busboys, maids, porters and laundry workers; at hospitals as attendant, laborers, maids, orderlies, and laundry workers; at restaurants or private

⁷¹ Carter to PWA Housing Division, December 13, 1935 and Omega Ware to December 13, 1935 Box 131, RG 196 NARA II; Omega Ware to PWA Housing Division March 12, 1936 and Braxton to PWA Housing Division, March 25, 1936, Box 133, RG 196 NARA II

clubs as cooks and waiters; at retail outlets as porters, clerks, delivery men, labelers, and laborers; and in personal services as maids, cooks, drivers, chauffeurs, and laundry workers. Applicants also worked at a handful of identifiably black-owned businesses including North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance, a movie theater, barber shops and beauty salons.

Another notable strategy included letter writing by one author on behalf of others. James H. Wilson wrote on behalf of himself and three friends, Charles A. Formen, E.H. Booker and Benjamin Simons⁷²; Robert Spriggs also wrote on behalf of himself and five friends, Mr. and Mrs. John Warren, Mr. Elijah Tindel, and Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bowie⁷³; Miss Agnes M. Procter, a self-identified white woman, wrote on her own behalf and on behalf of “a friend”, “a very deserving colored woman”⁷⁴; Mrs. Anna Holmes wrote on behalf of herself and three friends, George E. Cohron, J.L. Evans, and W.B. Wilson⁷⁵; and Henry J. Ford wrote on behalf of three members of the Alliance of Professional Workers, Miss Pauline Nicholas, Mrs. Ruth W. Poe, and Mrs. Mattie L. Hill.⁷⁶ Finally, people who lived in very close proximity to each other frequently wrote similar letters within weeks of each other. Residents of Park Road and Wylie Street, Northwest; residents of Half Street, South Capitol Street and Carrollsburg Place in Southwest; and residents of 23th Place, 24th Street, E Street, and 25th Place Northeast; for example, hoped to continue to live in close proximity to each other once they moved across town or across the street to 21st Street and Benning Road.

⁷² James H. Wilson to Washington Committee on Housing, January 3, 1936 Box 132, RG 196, NARA II.

⁷³ Robert Spriggs to Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, March 23, 1936, Box 133, RG 196 NARA II.

⁷⁴ Agnes Procter to Federal Works Administration, Housing Division, May 8, 1936, Box 133 RG 196 NARA II.

⁷⁵ Mrs. Anna B. Holmes to Mr. Ritter, May 14, 1936, Box 133, RG 196 NARA II.

⁷⁶ Henry J. Ford to Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, June 5, 1936, Box 133, RG 196 NARA II.

These examples of applicants--writing together and those writing on behalf of others--demonstrate the power of social networks among working-class African Americans in Washington, D.C. in the 1930s. Authors would file applications and then write to update as their situation changed. Perhaps their salary changed; perhaps their address changed; or, as in the case of Philip Arnett who first wrote in December 1935 and then again in March 1938, some wrote when their marital status changed.⁷⁷

Many authors persistently inquired with the Housing Division about the status of their application. Mrs. Karl F. Phillips, Jr. of 1521 S Street NW wrote in late April 1936 and then again in June to see whether she could arrange an interview. Finally, she wrote in July 1937 to inquire again about the status of her application.⁷⁸ As hopeful residents wrote again and again to the government, they demonstrated their persistence and their need. They looked to the government for assistance and counted on the project as their way out of the private housing market. They were eager to begin fresh in the new units at Langston. For example, Charles Cross eagerly wrote in late March 1937 that he would like to know the government's anticipated timeline for the project so that he could start buying furniture. His enthusiasm mingled with exasperation as he explained in his subsequent letter in early 1938, that he had been "waiting since 1934" and insisted "if I don't get one of these apts. I will be in a pretty bad spot."⁷⁹ Cross' letters suggest that the hopeful residents imagined and prepared new lives in new homes in vivid detail. As they awaited word from the Housing Division, hopeful residents made plans for themselves

⁷⁷ Philip Arnett to A.R. Clas, December 4, 1935, December 12, 1935; and March 7, 1938, Boxes 131 and Box 135, RG 196, NARA II.

⁷⁸ Mrs. Karl F. Phillips, Jr. to PWA Housing Division April 28, 1936; June 7, 1936; and July 9, 1937. Box 131 and Box 134.

⁷⁹ Charles Cross, March 29, 1937 Box 134 and January 30, 1938 Boxes 134 and 135 RG 196 NARA II.

and their families. They also monitored their application's status, working hard to maintain their standing and chances at new housing.

Some of the authors deliberately positioned themselves as superior candidates for housing and openly denigrated other applicants. For example, after Margaret Hall received a letter inviting her to come along to the Housing Division's office to file a formal application, she was distressed to learn that she had to stand in line. She dispatched a note to the agency immediately in which she excoriated other hopeful residents. She vociferously defamed the character of other applicants; the tone of her letters stands as a striking departure from the tone employed by almost all the other applicants. [Her letter is transcribed in the appendix of this chapter].

Given the high volume of applications, how did PWA officials choose which residents were most deserving of modern housing? Employees of the Management Branch of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works developed a set of procedures for tenant selection; these guidelines governed the application process by creating a set of standard registration forms and by producing a classification scheme to determine whether applicants were eligible for residency. Given the skepticism on the part of some critics of New Deal programs, government officials attempted to select tenants that would contribute to the success of the program. One of the Housing Division's chief goals during the application process was to identify prospective tenants who could not adequately shelter themselves and their families with the housing stock offered by the private market. They also sought those applicants who promised to exhibit exemplary behavior if admitted for occupancy. Selecting prospective tenants from the

eligible applicants required an investigation of the material conditions and the moral character of hopeful residents.

The guidelines of the process required that the Housing Division investigate prospective applicants. In the case of Langston, the division maintained files of correspondence from people who registered their interest in the project with PWA. Once the project advanced, hopeful residents were encouraged to submit a formal application with the agency. Officials winnowed this field further through a series of investigations. Fieldworkers visited prospective tenants' homes to assess their circumstances and need for housing: investigators were especially concerned with relocating deserving families from unsanitary and overcrowded units in neglected or blighted neighborhoods. The government's inspection criteria revealed the ways in which they prized privacy and modern, planned units in decent neighborhoods.

Part of this investigation required an inspection and ranking of the physical conditions of the family's housing.⁸⁰ For example, government investigators assessed whether hazardous conditions existed with respect to the structural integrity of the roof, walls, ceilings, floors and stairs of the unit and whether there existed a hazard to health and comfort "due to dampness, insanitation, severe exposure to the elements." They also inspected the dwelling's equipment for toilets, running water, two pipe plumbing systems, bathing facilities, and electrical outlets. Agents also determined whether families shared their houses or whether they enjoyed private accommodations by inspecting the planning and circulation patterns in people's homes. Finally, during the on-site investigation, government inspectors evaluated the neighborhood's potential

⁸⁰ Management Branch of Housing Division, "Manual of Tenant Selection Procedure," Washington D.C. Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, RG 196 Box 1 NARA II

influence on the family – especially the children – by reviewing the dwelling’s proximity to healthy and safe outdoor recreational space and its proximity to vice and crime. If “cheap dance halls or pool halls, penny racket stores”, for example, populated the family’s immediate environment, their cases were considered more pressing.⁸¹

In their evaluation process, the government also attempted to judge the moral character of prospective tenants in a number of ways. First, the inspector interviewed the family and considered the cleanliness of the interior of the unit to determine whether they maintained an orderly, neat home. The applicants were also judged on their care and regard for the landlord’s property. The investigator queried neighbors and adjacent tenants about whether the family displayed appropriate levels of consideration and respect to others.

The applications of Harry Waters, James Mingo, and Luther Wilkerson reveal some of the machinations of the review process. Harry Waters, a messenger at the White House, wrote to the Housing Division in January 1936. In his correspondence, Waters used the White House as his address, perhaps to underscore his position and to signify on his relationship to President Roosevelt and the First Lady. His co-workers, James Mingo and Luther Wilkerson, also applied for housing at Langston Terrace. James Mingo moved to Washington, D.C. with the Roosevelts from Hyde Park New York, where he had worked for the family since 1926. Mingo used his personal connections with Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt for assistance with employment and housing. As a butler at the White House, he appealed directly to Mrs. Roosevelt to obtain a federal job in the

⁸¹ Management Branch of Housing Division, “Dwelling Units – Investigation of Applicants” Washington D.C.: Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, RG 196 Box1 NARA II and “Handbook for Tenant Selection and Initial Renting, Part II – Forms” Washington D.C.: Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, RG 196 Box1 NARA II.

Post Office or War Department and for a unit of housing at Langston. Similarly, Luther Wilkerson requested assistance from Mrs. Roosevelt. She wrote letters of endorsement and inquiry for each. In late December 1937, Nathan Straus, the PWA Administrator, wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt about Mingo's application. He explained that her letter of December 16 was attached to Mingo's registration form. Straus explained, "References such you have given for Mr. Mingo are of great assistance to us in the selection of tenants."⁸² While she was successful in securing new employment for Mingo, her recommendations for housing did not supercede the criteria the Department of Interior established for eligibility. Harry Lucas, a Pullman car porter in the President's car since 1933, expressed his desire to someone in the White House because in early February 1936, M.H. McIntyre, Assistant Secretary to the President, queried about the application process.⁸³ None of the applicants was selected to move into Langston Terrace Dwellings.

The men must have expressed their disappointment and frustration to Mrs. Roosevelt and her staff because Nathan Straus, the Administrator of the U.S. Housing Authority, was obligated to explain the decision to Mrs. Malvina T. Schreider, Secretary to Mrs. Roosevelt. Straus explained,

The Langston tenant selection office has advised me that upon investigation of Mr. Wilkerson' home it was found that in no way were his present housing conditions substandard, nor was his family overcrowded. It was determined that his only definite need for housing was the fact that he was paying a large proportion of his income for rent and utilities. No family has been accepted on a basis of this need alone.⁸⁴

Even the endorsement of influential figures like the First Lady did not guarantee access to one of the highly prized units at Langston Terrace. Harry and Hilda E. Waters remained

⁸² Nathan Straus to Mrs. Roosevelt, December 29, 1937, Box 132 RG 196 NARA II.

⁸³ M.H. McIntyre to Public Works Administration, February 4, 1936, Box 132? RG196 NARA II.

⁸⁴ Letter, Nathan Straus to Malvina T. Scheider, May 20, 1938, Eleanor Roosevelt Correspondence File. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

at 1512 A 10th Street NW; Luther Wilkerson and wife Gertrude remained at 801 Euclid Avenue, SW⁸⁵; and James A. and Dora W. Mingo remained in their apartment at 2406 (#4) Shannon Place SE.⁸⁶

So, if letters of recommendation from the First Lady, arguably the most impeccable reference for a unit of government-sponsored housing during the New Deal, did not ensure placement, who were the people who were admitted? The earliest, pioneering residents demonstrated their dire need for housing and their fitness for residency through the application and investigation process. While the program catered to the needs of nuclear families, several households were composed of widowed women with children. That is, despite assumptions during the period marital status was not, in and of itself, a condition of acceptance. While single and never-married women may have applied, when it came to female-headed households, there was, however, a decided preference for accommodating the needs of widows with children. Several PWA employees, including at least one single woman, who worked on-site, resided at Langston as well.

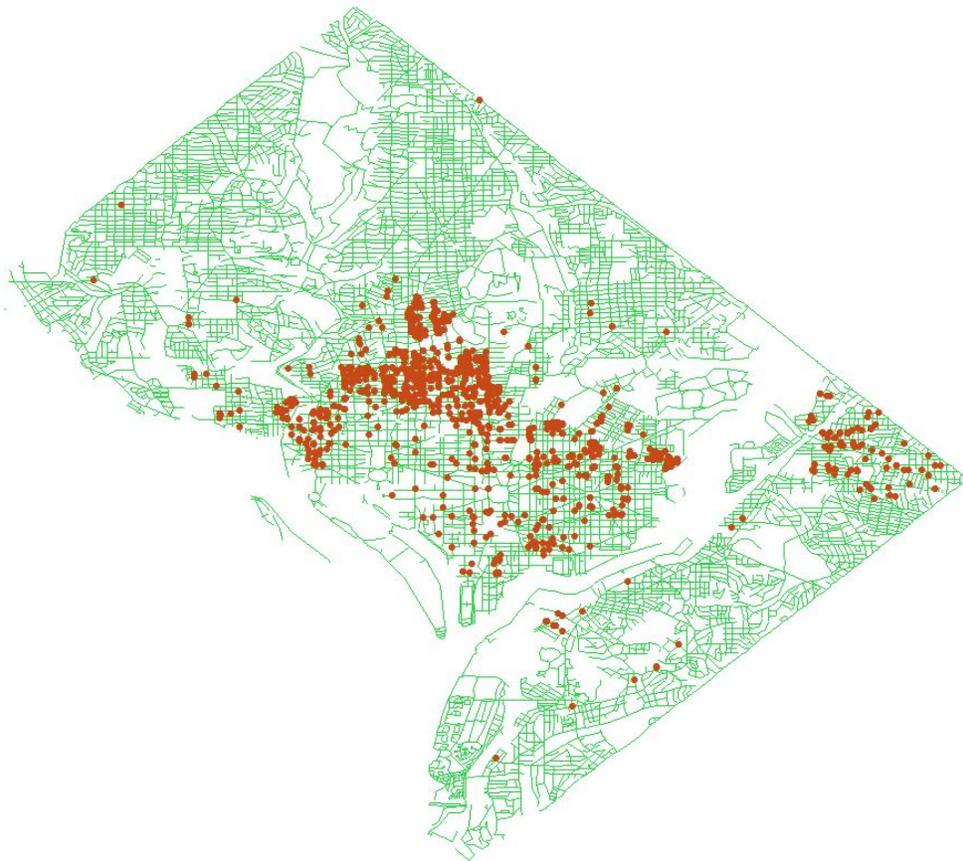
Regardless of their current marital status, every head of household whom the government selected to become a pioneering resident was gainfully employed. This housing intended to support the needs of workers who struggled to make their monthly rent bills; the private housing market had failed to shelter these members of the working-classes in decent, affordable housing units. The government agents selected families who led active lives off-site: nearly every household sent occupants to places of employment in other neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. While school-aged children would remain

⁸⁵ Luther J. Wilkerson, *City Directory* 1939. p. 1369 and 1940, p. 1413. James A. Mingo, *City Directory*, 1939, p. 889; *City Directory* 1940, p. 916

⁸⁶ James A. Mingo, *City Directory*, 1939, p. 889; *City Directory* 1940, p. 916.

in Northeast around the clock in their homes and at the adjacent complex of schools, their parents hopped on the streetcars or walked to work downtown or at other points around the city. The PWA emphasized the importance of these as affordable, decent homes for productive employed citizens, preferably ones with young children around whom the community might be able to organize. Once admitted these applicants activated the built environment designed by the African American architect, Hilyard Robinson. Chapter Three explores his formative years in Washington D.C. when he, like many of these applicants, took to the city's streets as a pedestrian, commuting between residences, schools, and work.

Figure 2.1: Discrete Addresses of Applicants for Langston Terrace Dwellings, 1935-1938



Chapter Three: “The Committed Architect’: Hilyard R. Robinson”

“Do not be deceived into believing that Architecture is a luxury and an indulgence for the moneyed people alone. Nothing could be more erroneous. Good Architecture is not measured in terms of dollars and cents; its merits lie in the brain and experience of the architect, who—and I implore your confidence in this statement—is a most inexpensive servant, and besides, who—if he is of the proper temperament and efficiency—loves his work.”

Hilyard Robinson to readers of *Howard University Record*, 1925

“You are a selected group, set apart, as it were, to prepare yourselves for divine purposes of leadership of a minority group, aspiring and hopeful, but nevertheless still largely disadvantaged and underprivileged. . . . You are Alpha Phi Alpha Men. Unto you have been opened the gates of educational opportunity—you must not seek ease-loving careers, nor yet selfishly the advantages of the powerful, privileged few. Your education is a trusteeship. Your debt to society is one you cannot repudiate.”

Emmet J. Scott to Eastern Regional Conference Alpha Phi Alpha, 1932

“The committed architect never stops studying and learning.”

Hilyard R. Robinson, *In Retrospect*, Professional Philosophy, ca 1968

The man who would be principally responsible for the design of Langston Terrace Dwellings was architect Hilyard R. Robinson. A Washingtonian by birth, Robinson passionately loved the profession of architecture and firmly believed in the power of design to transform lives. He devoted his career to reforming the built environment of African Americans, largely in the city of Washington, but also throughout the Mid-Atlantic and the U.S. His first major commission, Langston Terrace, afforded him the chance to experiment with modern architecture and mass housing; this project garnered international attention and praise, including representation in an exhibition at the

Museum of Modern Art and favorable reviews in popular periodicals including the *New Yorker*, *Afro-American*, and *Pittsburgh Courier*.

Robinson's program for Langston and subsequent projects resulted not only from his formal training at prestigious architectural institutions in the United States and Europe, but more from his experiences of African American community life in Washington, D.C. and beyond. For Robinson, Black community life in fraternal organizations and in educational institutions like his alma mater, M Street High School, and his employer, Howard University, greatly influenced his understanding of the relationships between intellectuals and urbanism. Many biographical accounts of professional architects concentrate on the prophetic genius of gifted individuals; these narrow emphases on unique, artistic accomplishments belie the impact of communities on these individuals. Indeed, Robinson himself insisted that the merit of "Good Architecture" resided in "the brain of the architect." Just as communities use architecture, communities also shape the creation of the built environment. Hilyard Robinson's program for Langston Terrace demonstrates that architectural plans owe intellectual, political and social debts not just to the designer, but also to the communities who produced and supported the designer. His understanding of urbanism was steeped in his experiences of the city as a child and young adult, as well as his schooling and employment.

Hilyard Robinson cultivated his craft, honing his technical skills and enlarging his artistic imagination through a series of formal and informal educational opportunities. While Robinson trained at a number of prestigious institutions including M Street High School; Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Arts; University of Pennsylvania,

where Paul Cret was his critic; at Columbia University, where he was a favorite of Dean William Boring; Der Auslander Institute at University of Berlin; and briefly at the Bauhaus, this formal design training only partially shaped his sense of urbanism. His academic training grounded him technically and also imbued him with a commitment to design excellence. Through his schooling, Robinson also developed a keen appreciation for an architect's duties and obligations. His participation in African American community life expanded his sense of architecture's opportunities and challenges. Throughout his life, networks of social and political relationships sustained Robinson; these friendships and connections gave him entrée to professional opportunities and offered personal support. Through military service in World War I and membership in fraternal, social, and professional organizations, Robinson contemplated the duties and obligations of African American architects. As a result, Robinson nurtured a professionalism devoted to individual achievement and social responsibility.¹ As a "committed architect," Robinson developed a vision of architecture in service to humanity, particularly to African America. Robinson routinely stressed the potential contributions of competent architects and good architecture.

"In housing, not to mention several other fruitful sources of architectural practice, an attractive, remunerative, and useful career is offered the competent Negro architect. Also in his capacity as planner, the Negro

¹ Stephanie Shaw's study provides an instructive model for scholars concerned with the history of Black professionals at the turn of last century. See especially her discussions of "socially responsible individualism" in Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Francille Rusan Wilson's collective biographies of social scientists explores the intellectual commitments of scholars in Francille Rusan Wilson, "The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Development of Black Labor Studies, 1895-1950), University of Pennsylvania, Ph.D. Dissertation. Genna Rae McNeil's biography of the Civil Rights lawyer, Charles Hamilton Houston, also suggests how African American men approached professional responsibilities. Genna Rae McNeil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

architect may become a determining force and indispensable factor in the struggle for more abundant living.”²

This chapter traces Hilyard Robinson’s development as an architect who offered Langston Terrace Dwellings as one solution for working-class African Americans who engaged in the “struggle for more abundant living” in Washington, D.C. in the 1930s. Three sets of experiences nurtured his grasp of the potentials for both urbanism and professionalism: his formative years in Washington, where he spent much of his life inside multi-generational households and outside as a pedestrian, walking the city’s streets and alleys; his friendships with other Black men in secondary and post-secondary schools and in the military service; and his early teaching position as a faculty member of Howard University. These practices and experiences fostered his understanding of professional planning and architecture.

In 1925, in the *Howard University Record* Robinson, then an instructor in the Department of Architecture, lectured university students and faculty about the cultural significance of their contemporary moment, deeming it “a veritable golden age of material and artistic attainment;” he likened American creative and economic productivity to that of the Italian Renaissance. In this piece, Robinson worried about the paucity of African American architectural contributions to the American built environment, querying, “Where [a]re our race architects?” Indeed, at the very moment he composed this piece, John Lankford was the only African American architect licensed to

² Hilyard Robinson, “Opportunities for the Negro Architect” *The Negro History Bulletin* April 1940 p. 102. 109.

practice in Washington, D.C.³ And, Howard awarded the university's first diplomas in architecture in 1923 when Arthur Wilfred Ferguson and Julius Gardner took the first two degrees in the subject from the University.⁴ Urging action, he continued,

Can we afford to slouch along and let progress trample over us; drag ourselves out of the dust; sit along the roadside and let our eyes alone follow the wake? We need a stimulus. I believe that the stimulation of our taste for excellent and beautiful buildings, after all that has been written, lies principally with our architects. 'They' are what is missing. To encourage good taste in some one else one must possess it to a marked degree himself. And what is equally as important, to build it into a structure an architect must have the proper temperament for his work and secondly, a thorough professional training. Shall we train more of our likely youths to become efficient architects? The question hardly needs begging. We must not, however, wait too long. We need them right now."⁵

Ostensibly written as a clarion call to train more African American students at Howard, Robinson's remarks also suggest an intense investment in his own authority and professionalization. Robinson promoted architectural training as a means for both individual professional accomplishment and for collective social and cultural progress. As such, we may interpret his plans for Langston Terrace, his first project to be built, as his effort to contribute to a culturally vibrant moment in American architecture as well as an effort to demonstrate the accomplishments of African American professionals and communities. Who was Hilyard R. Robinson? This chapter introduces him and chronicles his acquisition of skills and sketches several formative experiences through the early 1930s.

On December 3, 1899, when Michael and Elizabeth Robinson welcomed their new baby son, Hilyard, into the world, they lived with Michael's parents, Michael Sr. and

³ Dreck Spurlock Wilson, *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary, 1865-1945*, New York: Routledge, 2004.

⁴ Harry G. Robinson, Howard University, Department of Architecture, in Dreck Wilson, *African American Architects*, p. 214.

⁵ Hil[y]ard Robinson, "Something is Missing." *Howard University Record* vol. 19, 1925, p. 407.

Anna; a cousin, Suzie Johnson; and Nathaniel Tisdale, a roomer, in a modest rowhouse blocks from the capitol.⁶ Like scores of other families in the city, Robinson's household included blood relations as well as boarders; rooming was a common experience for African Americans through the early part of the 20th century in Washington, D.C..⁷ While the census enumerator did not list occupations for their wives, Michael Sr. reported his occupation as "Barbershop of Owner;" Michael Jr. listed his as "Priv. Sold. U.S. Army." Suzie Johnson, Michael and Anna's 33 year old niece from Virginia, listed her profession as House Servant. Nathaniel U. Tisdale, a 50 year old widower who roomed with the Robinson family, worked as a government laborer; he hailed from Alabama. In a series of oral interviews with the late Harrison Etheridge, an architectural historian trained at Catholic University, Hilyard Robinson recounted memories from his youth, working as a bootblack, shining shoes at the barbershop where his paternal grandfather worked at 320 Pennsylvania Avenue, Southeast, just six blocks from their home.⁸

Robinson began his schooling at a segregated school in his Capitol Hill neighborhood, Lincoln Elementary at Third and C Street, SE at age 6.⁹ According to Robinson's recollections later in life, after his father's death, his mother left her in-laws' home and relocated because she desired to be financially independent. She moved to Chevy Chase, Maryland to work as a seamstress and she placed her son with her mother

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. *12th Census Population 1900*. Washington DC: 1900. (District of Columbia, vol. 11, ED 153A, sheet 1, line 11).

⁷ Steven Mintz, "A Historical Ethnography of Black Washington, D.C." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society of Washington, D.C.* vol. 52, 1989, pp.235-253.

⁸ Harrison Mosley Etheridge, "The Black Architects of Washington, D.C., 1900-Present," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1979), pp. 43-44. For address of Michael A. Robinson's barbershop, see "Business Directory" within *1900 City Directory*, p. 56.

⁹ Rogers Statistical Map is reproduced with an essay by Charlene Drew Jarvis and Iris Miller, "Segregation as a Factor of City Schools" in Iris Miller, *Washington in Maps, 1606-2000*. New York: Rizzoli, 2002, pp. 104-105.

across town in Foggy Bottom. Robinson recalled fondly shooting marbles in the alleys with his neighbors in Foggy Bottom: the Burrells, Dick, John, Lenora, and Selena; as well as Charles and Robert Drew.¹⁰ From his maternal grandmother's home on 18th Street, NW (and later from her home on 20th Street, NW) young Robinson walked to and graduated from Thaddeus Stevens School in Northwest.¹¹ Robinson's early childhood experiences of intergenerational households with boarders and moving between family members' homes resembles those discussed by "hopeful residents" who petitioned for units of government housing (highlighted in Chapter Two).

Robinson approached the concept of state-sponsored modern housing in general and the design of Langston, in particular, with a personal intimate understanding of the material realities of African-American working-class family life. Further, the visual and material culture of Washington's streets inspired Robinson's earliest impressions of urbanism. In unpublished reflections, Robinson offered vignettes of his multiple, active use of the city's streets and alleys as sites of recreation and education.¹² His recollections of traversing the city as a child and teen may have augmented his appreciation of how African American families improvised and ordered everyday objects and the built

¹⁰ After a childhood spent, in part, playing in Washington's alleys with his brother and their friends, Charles Drew later studied medicine and invented the blood bank. Spencie Love, "'Noted Physician Fatally Injured': Charles Drew and the Legend that Will Not Die" *Washington History* 1992-1993 4(2): 4-19.

¹¹ "Nomination Blank, William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes, 1930," Records of the Harmon Foundation, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress and "Hilyard Robinson – "Personal Correspondence and Miscellaneous" Box 5 Unprocessed Papers of Hilyard Robinson, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

¹² Hilyard R. Robinson, "In Retrospect – Professional Philosophy" unpublished CV, Hilyard R. Robinson Papers, Box 6, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; "Introduction to a Biography of Hilyard R. Robinson", Box 5, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

environment of Washington’s alleys, apartments, and row houses to meet their needs. He understood the city, I contend, because he walked the city.¹³

After graduating from Thaddeus Stevens, Robinson enrolled at M Street School; he walked across town from Foggy Bottom to First and M Street, NW daily. As Robinson recounted and his biographers have observed, he greatly enjoyed his high school years. At M Street, “the all Black faculty—mostly trained in superior Northern colleges and universities—insisted on a quality academic education to prepare the students for the rigors of university study.”¹⁴ The curriculum in D.C. Public Schools readied the city’s African American youth for academic success and for life beyond the classroom. Between September 1891 and September 1916, Washington D.C.’s M Street High School served as one of the country’s most prestigious public high schools for African Americans. Steeped in a tradition of academic excellence, its administration, faculty, and alumni contributed to local, national and international communities.

Faculty, alumni, and supporters who have written about M Street’s history boast about the accomplishments of those associated with this venerable institution: Rayford Logan, the eminent historian and alumnus of M Street, proclaimed his alma mater “[...]one of the best high schools in the nation, colored or white, public or private.”¹⁵ Their nostalgic memories and accolades belie the material realities of overcrowded, under-funded schools that were occasionally beset with considerable problems. In his final annual report to the Superintendent of Schools, E.C. Williams looked forward to

¹³ Rebecca Solnit’s observations in an essay entitled, “The Mind at Three Miles an Hour” suggested the import of Robinson’s relationship between walking and making. Erika Block and Hilary Ramsden’s *The Walking Project* introduced me to these ideas. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin, 2001.

¹⁴ Etheridge, p. 43.

¹⁵ Logan, “Growing up in Washington,” p. 503.

imminent closure of M Street and the impending move to a new home at Dunbar in 1916 as he hinted at the material problems he encountered in the administration of M Street.¹⁶ Nonetheless, M Street graduates matriculated at some of the country's leading colleges and universities, sometimes garnering scholarships and Phi Beta Kappa keys. As graduates, many of the men and women of M Street achieved prominence in a variety of professions including law, medicine, business, dentistry, education, the military, politics, and music. Many alumni assumed leadership positions in civil rights organizations and worked tenaciously on social justice issues. Faculty members at M Street, many of whom held Ph.D.s and had traveled extensively, challenged students with an exacting curriculum that trained students in the liberal arts and the sciences.¹⁷

For a young Hilyard Robinson, the rigors of M Street prepared him for tasks that he may not have imagined when he sat in classrooms in the red brick building at New York and New Jersey Avenues. Some alumni and scholars have argued that the superior education in Washington's segregated public schools prepared students for race leadership. Robinson's own recollections affirm this assertion with at least three specific examples.

While the general excellence of his secondary schooling prepared him for professional life, Robinson adroitly mobilized several specific skills shortly after

¹⁶ See for example, the discussion of the physical plant in Report of Principal of M Street High School, *Annual Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia Year Ended June 30, 1916*, Volume IV Report of the Board of Education, 64th Congress, House of Representatives, Document No. 1503, Washington, D.C.: 1916, p. 274

¹⁷ Mary Church Terrell, "History of the High School for Negroes in Washington," *Journal of Negro History* vol. 2, no. 3 July 1917, pp. 252-266; Henry S. Robinson, "The M Street High School, 1891-1916," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* vol. 51 1984, pp.119- 143; Rayford Logan, "Growing Up in Washington: A Lucky Generation," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* vol. 50 1980, pp. 500-507; and Chapter Five: "Primary and Secondary Education" in Jacqueline M. Moore's *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999.

graduation, very early in his career. Indeed, his knowledge of geometry, training in foreign language, and participation in the cadet corps put him in good stead for military service in World War One. He eagerly enlisted: when Robinson learned that “Campbell Johnson, then an officer in the U.S. Reserve Corps, was seeking qualified young Black men to take an examination to qualify to enroll in the “colored” Field Artillery officers’ training school in Kentucky, he persuaded the Enlisting Officer that he knew quite a lot about trajectories ... a key element in artillery warfare.”¹⁸ Further, Robinson relied on his French lessons in Carter G. Woodson’s classroom when he arrived in France with the American troops. And he was not the only M Street Francophone; in a speech for the Columbia Historical Society, Rayford Logan recalled his French lessons with Jessie Fauset. After Logan pointed out that she was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Cornell University Class of 1905, he explained how Miss Fauset insisted that her students:

“stand, repeat the nasal sounds *an, ain, en, on, un*. To learn how to pronounce the letter *u*, she would tell us to round our lips and say, *u, u, u*.” He concluded, “We knew the verbs conjugated with *avoir* and *être* better than did the little boy Daudet’s *La Dernière Classe*.”¹⁹

More, I am interested in how Robinson’s extra-curricular experiences shaped him; indeed perhaps the obvious preparation for military service was Robinson’s experiences in the Cadet Corps. Later in life, in conjunction with Rayford Logan, Hilyard Robinson reflected on his experiences in the corps.²⁰ According to Robinson,

¹⁸ Untitled recollections of Hilyard Robinson prepared in 1984, page 4. Unpublished manuscript in Box 5, Robinson’s unpublished papers at Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

¹⁹ Logan, “Growing Up in Washington,” p. 503.

²⁰ In October 1978, working with Rayford Logan and other M Street alumni under the auspices of the Dunbar High School Alumni Association and Scholarship Fund, Hilyard Robinson compiled a statement for a hearing before the Joint Committee on Landmarks of the National Capital. Robinson argued for the preservation of the school and its landmark status on the basis of three points: Military ... Interpretations/Contributions; Architectural ... Identities; and Public Service ... Potentials. Hilyard Robinson, “To the Committee on Landmarks of the National Capital” October 1978 in “Preservation of M Street High School” Charles Sumner School and Museum (D.C. Public School Archives)

“Too narrowly stressed ... often omitted ... is recognition of the positive useful influence of the philosophy embraced in the military discipline connected with program and administration of the Cadet Corps and competitive drill at Old M Street. [...] The system produced skilled Cadets...officered by students of high scholarship. [...] [Appropriately enough, out of this background many Old M Street “grads” served with distinction in the U.S. Armed Forces.”²¹

He praised the marriage of competitive drilling and scholarship and emphasized the discipline that resulted from the strict attention to posture, rhythm, and precision while marching in squads, companies, and platoons.

M Street High School’s competitive drills were embedded in a tradition that dated back to 1889 when the High School Cadet Corps of the African American schools was organized at the Old Miner Building then located at 17th and P Streets, Northwest.²²

Young, armed, uniformed African American men like Robinson and Logan, as well as Omega J.C. Ware, a hopeful and pioneering resident of Langston, paraded in major public spaces for presidential inaugurations and for crowds at local stadia. In their formations--whether in training drills, as escorts for dignitaries in the street, or when they took the field in competition, military training developed “the boys mentally, morally and physically and to more thoroughly acquaint them with the American principles of patriotism and democracy.”²³

Yet, before the troops donned their best uniforms for processions or on the pitch at Griffith, they practiced. And for cadets who were matriculated at the prestigious but overcrowded M Street School where space was a luxury, the young men ran drills outside

²¹ *ibid*, p. 2-3.

²² *Thirtieth Annual High School Cadet Competitive Drill*. Washington D.C. June 12, 1922; *The Cadet Department of Military Science and Tactics*: Washington, D.C., I: 1, 1926, unpaginated. From Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives, D.C. Public School Archives.

²³ Arthur C. Newman, Captain, Infantry, D.C.N.G., Professor of Military Science and Tactics in *Thirtieth Annual High School Cadet Competitive Drill*. Washington D.C. June 12, 1922; *The Cadet Department of Military Science and Tactics*: Washington, D.C., I: 1, 1926, unpaginated.

on the streets and boulevards of Northwest D.C. On New Jersey Avenue, Pierce, M and Third Streets, adjacent to their school, the troops advanced past the apartments and rowhouse residences of laborers, laundresses, domestic workers, bakers, clerks, undertakers, passing Lane Brothers Contractors; 16 Miles Memorial AME Church, Twining, Douglass and Simmons Public Schools, Howard H J M Manufacturing Company, and St. Matthews Baptist Church.²⁴ According to Robinson and his peers, this relationship with American patriotism and democracy readied them for military service in the army; it also made them question the promise and reality of these same values when they enlisted for World War One. It is important to acknowledge that the high school rituals enacted in the streets of District of Columbia nurtured these notions.

After graduating from M Street High School, at the suggestion of his high school art teacher, Robinson enrolled at Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Arts in Philadelphia to study Commercial Art in 1916; during his brief tenure there, according to his reckoning, he was the only African American student.²⁵ Founded in the same year that Philadelphia hosted the Centennial Exposition of 1876, the mission of the school included a catholic approach to the arts. The curriculum for the history of art included studies of architecture, archeology, painting, sculpture. Design courses integrated such subjects as costume, modeling, woodcarving, ornament, interior decoration, stained glass, furniture, decorative illustration, poster and advertising, lettering, illumination, etching,

²⁴ 1915 City Directory for Washington, D.C. entries for M Pierce, Third Streets NW and New Jersey Avenue, NW.

²⁵ Hilyard Robinson "Introduction to a (Auto)Biography of Hilyard Robinson," p. 3, MSRC Howard University. He was not, however, the first African American student: Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller studied at the institution from 1894-1899 before she left for France. Mary Logan Lenihan, *Themes in African-American Sculpture: Creating the New Black Image* University of Southern California, 1996, p. 64.

wood block, printing, illustrations, pottery, metal work, and drawing.²⁶ While its history may have been eclipsed by larger art movements in New York, Philadelphia, at the turn of last century, supported vibrant communities of artists. A number of arts clubs and organizations contributed to the vitality of the scene including: the Sketch Club, the Plastic Club, the T-Square Club, the Pyramid Club, the Pennsylvania Society of Miniature Painters, the Philadelphia Watercolor Club, Artists Equity and Art Club.²⁷ Robinson studied in Philadelphia for one year, obtained a certificate in 1917, and volunteered for service in World War One.²⁸

Like scores of other men, with the start of World War One, Hilyard Robinson answered the call for military service; Robinson interrupted his studies at design school and volunteered. During his period at the Negro Officers' Training School at Camp Taylor, Captain Taute prepared Hilyard Robinson for service in the 92nd Division in the 167th Field Artillery Brigade.²⁹ This 13 month tour of duty marked his first trip to Europe, a period Robinson later characterized as critically important for his development as an architect. Napoleon Rivers, a member of his brigade who also hailed from Washington, D.C., and Robinson embarked on an AWOL excursion to Paris; the sight of "hordes of French zigzagging arm in arm across Champs Elysées and chanting "C'est

²⁶ *The Library of the Pennsylvania Museum's School of Industrial Art Catalogue*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art, 1931, pp. 8-9.

²⁷ Darrel Sewell, "Foreword," *Philadelphia: Three Centuries of American Art*. Bicentennial Exhibition: April 11-October 10, 1976, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976, p. xx.

²⁸ Hilyard Robinson, *American Institute of Architects, Application for Membership*, No. 4420. July 15, 1946, p. 2 Archives of American Institute of Architects, Washington, D.C.

²⁹ D. Holman to Kelly Quinn, March 9, 2004 request # 1-98471728 RE: Veteran's Name: Robinson, Hilyard SSN/SN: 1768091; "Negro Architects of Today in Action" *Negro History Bulletin* April 1940, vol. III, no. 7, p. 104; J. L. Langhorne, "Obituaries: Hilyard R. Robinson, 87, Noted District Architect" *Washington Afro-American* July 12, 1986 (obituary from AIA clippings file).

tout pour la France” exhilarated and dazzled the young officers.³⁰ According to Etheridge, “Travel in Bretagne and Provence, contact with the Beaux Arts, and observation of the deep respect Europeans displayed for architecture and architects convinced Robinson to become an architect.”³¹ Indeed, a decade later, the journal *Architecture* noted that “the well-known mud of St. Nazaire” provided part of Robinson’s architectural training.³² Robinson and his biographers characterized this period as a moment of artistic influence in which an impressionable young man found his vocation. While the exposure to the Beaux Arts and Hausmannian urban planning may have influenced Robinson, his military service also drew him more closely into the orbit of a number of young men who would later emerge as professionals and race leaders.

The conditions of their military service galvanized many African American men, impelling them to work for racial justice. In an uncharacteristically frank memory of racism, Robinson—one who routinely dismissed accounts of discrimination in his life and practice—described his military service as an exercise in the “survival of some of the rawest, gut-knotting racial indignities imposed by American white military personnel.”³³ Virulent racism pervaded every aspect of his experience of war; for succor, Robinson relied on the other African American officers in the 167th and 350th Brigades. His comrades included a number of Washington D.C. men whom Robinson may have known only by reputation previously: Syracuse Scott, Henry Collins, Harvey Patterson, John Jackson, Charles Hamilton Houston, William Maurice Goddette, Lester Granger, Julius

³⁰ Untitled document on Robinson’s biography, probably notes from interviews with Glen Leiner in the 1980s, page 5. Hilyard R. Robinson’s unprocessed papers MSRC, HU.

³¹ Etheridge, p. 64.

³² “*Architecture*’s Medal Awards,” *Architecture* April 1928, p. 229.

³³ In a file marked Leiner, box 20 from unprocessed papers of Hilyard Robert Robinson, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

Bryant, Napoleon Rivers, Albert Cassell, and Sylvanus Hart. According to Charles Hamilton Houston's biographer, Genna Rae McNeil, "[B]lack men in the American Expeditionary Forces personally suffered daily arbitrary indignities and exposure to mortal danger. Talent, ability, and character were of little significance; race set men apart from one another. As they marched in a circle from camp to camp in France, Charles and other Black artillery officers [...] quickly learned that racism often meant nearly insurmountable difficulties. [...] "Unwilling to let the racism of the army keep their spirits down, the Black officers entertained themselves in camp. Shortly after Christmas at Camp Meucon they organized daily seminars, 'each man talking for an hour and a half on the subject he [was] most interested in'."³⁴

At the outset of World War II, Charles Hamilton Houston authored a weekly column, "Saving the World for Democracy," in the *Pittsburgh Courier* with twin goals in mind: he wrote in an effort to convince "white fellow citizens that they must treat Negroes as equals, and that this generation of Negro boys may have their eyes opened to what is ahead of them."³⁵ His weekly reflections on his personal military experience detailed the indignities of Black servicemen in the United States Army in France during World War I. His recollections suggest that Black officers not only waged war against German troops; rather, African American servicemen also waged war against the racism of the white American military. Both battles exacted high costs. For Black officers like Robinson and Houston, camaraderie sustained their tenure in the service; they also offered each other intellectual stimulation. In France, they swore promises to themselves and to each other that they would continue to fight American racism at home after the

³⁴ Genna Rae Mc Neil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983, p. 43.

³⁵ Charles Hamilton Houston, "Saving the World for 'Democracy'," *Pittsburgh Courier* July 20, 1940.

war. Weekly study sessions and lectures in which each man prepared remarks in his field of expertise renewed their sense of purpose and galvanized them for social change. As young men at war, they affirmed their personal interests and commitments. The seminars conducted by various officers including the Washington D.C. based architect (who would later hire and promote Robinson), Albert Cassell, introduced Robinson to the possibility of a design career committed to ameliorating racial injustice. In France, Robinson's friendships with other African American soldiers stimulated a belief that professionals could use their training in service to the race. Robinson did not forget these lessons when he accepted the position to coordinate, design, and plan housing programs with the Department of Interior later during the New Deal.

A fraternal organization proved to be another critical factor in Robinson's career development; his membership in Alpha Phi Alpha (ΑΦΑ) offered further entrée into professional circles. Seven African American men founded ΑΦΑ, the first African American intercollegiate fraternity, at Cornell University in 1906. Initially, these men coalesced around the twin goals of establishing a social and literary group and a fraternal organization to support themselves while pursuing their collegiate studies.³⁶ In its earliest decades, the fraternity's chief goal was to support the social lives of undergraduate members at their chapters on college campuses. As the fraternity expanded and the membership matured, ΑΦΑ proved to be an important business and professional network.³⁷ Hilyard Robinson was initiated into ΑΦΑ in 1921 at Columbia

³⁶ Charles H. Wesley, *The History of Alpha Phi Alpha: A Development in College Life* Baltimore: The Foundation Publishers, 2000, 18th printing, p. 16.

³⁷ Kenneth Robert Janken, *Rayford W. Logan and the Dilemma of the African-American Intellectual* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, pp. 99-113.

University where he was assisted by Alpha brother Paul Robeson.³⁸ (In so doing, he joined the fraternal organization of his military comrades, including Charles Hamilton Houston and Rayford Logan.) Shortly after his initiation, Robinson began to benefit from the Alpha network as he was hired by Vertner Tandy, one of the founding members, to work as a draftsman in his architectural practice in New York City. Tandy also employed Alpha Brother John Louis Wilson, Jr. and Alonzo Brown as architectural draftsmen in his office during the 1920s.³⁹ Robinson described Tandy as “a most convivial friend and benefactor of more. He gave me a chance to briefly intern, see, and listen to much about the practice of architecture by a Black in New York City.”⁴⁰

AΦA also proved to be an important network for race leaders to rehearse and realize their strategies and tactics for work in the Civil Rights movement. By the late 1920s, members of AΦA began to debate the role of fraternities in Black civic life.⁴¹ In the early 1930s, leaders of AΦA engaged their brothers in a public dialogue about racial responsibilities. When the editors of the organization’s journal, *The Sphinx*, reprinted an address delivered by Emmett J. Scott at the Eastern Regional Conference on December 29, 1932, they emphasized the fraternity’s potential contributions in racial progress. Scott argued,

“You are a selected group, set apart, as it were, to prepare yourselves for divine purposes of leadership of a minority group, aspiring and hopeful, but nevertheless still largely disadvantaged and underprivileged. A lighted

³⁸ J. L. Langhorne, “Obituaries: Hilyard R. Robinson, 87, Noted District Architect,” *Washington Afro-American* July 12, 1986

³⁹ “Information Achievements of Negro Artists” in “Wilson, John Louis/American Negro Artists” in Records of the Harmon Foundation, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.” No date but after 1931. For Alonzo Brown, see File “Hilyard Robinson – Personal Correspondence” in Box 20 of Robinson’s Unprocessed Papers at Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

⁴⁰ Hilyard Robinson to Carson A. Anderson, 6 May 1980, in File “Hilyard Robinson – Personal and Miscellaneous” Box 20, Unprocessed Papers, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

⁴¹ “What Good are College Fraternities? A Debate between James W. Ivy and Raymond W. Cannon,” *The Sphinx* vol 13: 3 June 1927, p. 10.

torch has been confided to your care and keeping. You must not fail the hungry multitudes who are looking to you for guidance and direction during these days of technocracy, whatever it may eventually come to mean in the lives of the great masses of men and women; these days of travail and disillusionment, you must not, you cannot fail them. You are Alpha Phi Alpha Men. Unto you have been opened the gates of educational opportunity—you must not seek ease-loving careers, nor yet selfishly the advantages of the powerful, privileged few. Your education is a trusteeship. Your debt to society is one you cannot repudiate. The golden torch you bear must be carried ever, ever forward.”⁴²

Robinson held a similar sentiment as he negotiated the imperative of carrying a torch for the race and enkindling his own candle. During these years, he also began to manage the twin professional duties of artistic excellence and social responsibility.

Several years earlier, Robinson articulated a comparable vision for race architects in his aforementioned piece, “Something is Missing Here” published in the *Howard University Record*. Like Emmett Scott, Robinson maintained the talented elite could play an instrumental role in the lives of “the masses.” For Robinson, “efficiently planned and beautifully designed buildings” resulted from “the brain and experience of the architect.”⁴³ He invested considerable energy in honing his “brain and experience” to refine his “technocratic” skills. Eventually, with the development of projects like Howard City and Langston Terrace, as we will see in Chapters Three and Four, Robinson addressed the needs of the “hungry masses,” but first, he assiduously built his own professional credentials.

Upon his return to the United States after his military service, Robinson returned to Philadelphia for architectural training at the University of Pennsylvania where Paul Cret served as his design critic. As when he attended Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Design, Robinson was the only African American enrolled in the program.

⁴² Emmett J. Scott, “A Call to Arms” *The Sphinx*, vol. 19: 1, February 1933, p. 31.

⁴³ Robinson, “Something is Missing”, p. 407.

Despite the isolation he may have endured in the classrooms and studio at Penn, Robinson sought the company of Black men through the campus chapter of AΦA, perhaps at the suggestion or because of the example of the Alpha brothers with whom he served in France. (Rayford Logan, Charles Hamilton Houston, Napoleon Rivers, and Lester Granger, for example, were all Alpha men). While employed at Vertner Tandy's architectural practice in New York in the summer, Robinson met Paul B. LaVelle, a Swiss-born architect, who encouraged Robinson to transfer to Columbia University with the promise of year-round part time employment at his architectural firm. Robinson pursued this offer, matriculated at Columbia, and worked in LaVelle's office as a draftsman on a number of projects including his entry to the Chicago Tribune Tower Competition of 1922.

When Robinson enrolled in Columbia University's architectural program in 1922, the program remained committed to pedagogical practices that pervaded American schools at the turn of the last century; the curriculum and studio culture adhered to the Beaux Arts principles of education and it was formally affiliated with the Beaux Arts Institute of Design, "receiving programs from the Institute and sending the students' completed design problems to the Institute for judgment in competition with those from other architectural schools and private ateliers."⁴⁴ The stated aim of the school was "to provide fundamental instruction and discipline in the art, science, theory, and history of architecture, which, when supplemented by a sufficient amount of practice in architects' offices, shall qualify the graduate for the independent practice of his profession."⁴⁵ A

⁴⁴ Theodor Karl Rohdenburg, *A History of the School of Architecture, Columbia University*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1954, p. 19; 29.

⁴⁵ *Columbia University Bulletin of Information School of Architecture Announcement, 1922-23*, New York: Columbia University, p. 10 University Archives and Columbian Library, Columbia University.

precocious young man, Robinson questioned the merits of the training at Columbia. Initially, he resented the university's requirements in fields he did not see as being directly related to design.

“When I chose Architecture as a career, to qualify as a student in the school of my choice, I was advised first to pursue for a period of two years, exclusively, a preparatory study discipline known as the course in “Contemporary Civilization” ... meaningfully identified with the World of Natural Sciences and their Relevances ... all as taught in the College of Liberal Arts, Columbia University.
 “Damned snooty perhaps to be tolerated ... but an unmitigated waste of time: summed up my appraisal THEN.⁴⁶

In retrospect, with the benefit of age, Robinson realized the salutary effect of being intellectually grounded in history, economics, government and philosophy. These courses in Contemporary Civilization complemented the expansive vision of architecture that Robinson developed during his formative years. Like the lessons in “democracy” that he learned in the military, this curriculum helped him to formulate an understanding of sociology that Robinson would bring to bear later in his designs for public housing.

Upon his graduation with a Bachelor's from Columbia in 1924, Robinson accepted a full-time position with LaVelle's firm on Fifth Avenue until Robinson persuaded LaVelle to permit him to spend two days a week at Howard University as a part-time Design Critic and Lecturer.⁴⁷ At this point, Robinson adopted a hectic pace and a demanding set of professional commitments that required a commute between Washington and New York. This tempo quickened further when the Walter M. Ballard Company hired Robinson as a designer and consultant for their interior design firm in

⁴⁶ “In Retrospect/Professional Philosophy” (undated) from Hilyard R. Robinson Papers, MSRC at Howard University.

⁴⁷ Walter Dyson, *Howard University: The Capstone of Negro Education* Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1941, p. 141; untitled document on Robinson's biography probably notes from interviews with Glen Leiner in the 1980s, page 5. Hilyard R. Robinson's Unprocessed Papers MSRC, HU

Washington D.C. As their consultant, Robinson worked on number of commercial projects, garnering a first-place award for his work on interiors of the Hendrick Hudson Hotel in Troy, New York.⁴⁸ At the urging of Albert Cassell, his comrade from the 167th, Robinson assumed the position of full-time Instructor and later Chairman of the architecture program at Howard in 1926. Cassell subsequently hired Robinson for his private practice in which Robinson served as Associate Architect on a dormitory for Virginia Union University.⁴⁹

Robinson may have maintained this busy schedule for a pragmatic reason: he stitched together a number of jobs in an effort to support himself (and possibly his mother and family as well.) And, he may have viewed these responsibilities as opportunities to further his training. Simultaneously, he was building a set of credentials and amassing materials for his portfolio. This period of tremendous professional activity also enabled Robinson, ever respectful and occasionally obsequious, to cultivate a network of influential people who were positioned to promote him for commissions, positions, honors, and awards.

Indeed, when the director of Columbia's School of Architecture, William A. Boring, first proposed Robinson for consideration for a Harmon Foundation award for Distinguished Achievement in Fine Arts, Robinson assembled an extensive array of supporting documents. In addition to completing the requisite paperwork, Robinson submitted a copy of his publication, "Something is Missing," reproductions of drawings for an organ scheme and Howard University Medical School; and nine photographs including ones entitled "Municipal Building, Competition – Montevideo, Uruguay",

⁴⁸ Extracts from Career of Hilyard R. Robinson, page 3. Hilyard R. Robinson's Papers MSRC, HU

⁴⁹ Box 5, Hilyard R. Robinson's Unprocessed Papers MSRC, HU

“War Memorial”; “Memorial Doorway”; “Monumental Double Staircase in an Embassy”; “Venetian Palace”; “Design for a Christmas Card”; “Typical Hotel Bedroom”; and two photos of “Small Economical Office Building”. Among his supporting materials, Robinson also shipped his thesis on Commemorative Architecture with illustrations; competition sketches for Tea Room and Grill Room for Hendrick Hudson Hotel in Troy, New York; Stained Glass Skylight; 60 blueprints, designs for curtains, sketches of interior decoration schemes; and drawings of Half Moon Cabin; Perpetual Building Association; Dining Room of Hotel Pennsylvania, Miami, Florida; Gymnasium and Athletic Fields for Howard University; and Odd Fellows’ Auditorium, Baltimore, Maryland.⁵⁰ In the same year, the only other architect nominated for an award, John Wilson, Robinson’s peer, Alpha Brother, and Columbia classmate, submitted a slimmer set of materials. Wilson sent along a drawing of a Romanesque Church, the plans and elevation of a Chapter House, and the sketch of church organ from a design problem worked out during his college days.⁵¹ It is instructive to draw a comparison between Robinson and Wilson to suggest how Robinson self-consciously positioned himself as a prolific author of a wide array of design solutions; from monuments to curtains, and from university buildings to greeting cards, Robinson practiced his craft, exercising his talent and carefully cultivating technical skills.

The letters of recommendation that accompanied his nomination for the Harmon Foundation award indicate that he impressed his teachers and employers as well. Paul LaVelle endorsed Robinson, “Because I know him to be both an artist and a

⁵⁰ Box 49 Correspondence with Hilyard R. Robinson, Harmon Foundation Files, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

⁵¹ Box 81 Wilson, John L. American Negro Artists Harmon Foundation Files, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

gentleman.”⁵² Samuel Revness of Walter Ballard Co. praised Robinson, “Over several years experience, we find Mr. Robinson’s work in our field vastly more intelligent, artistic and practical than any we have from any other, or those offered in competition.”⁵³ William A. Boring commended Robinson as “one of [Columbia’s] best men,” and continued that Robinson was “a man of fine instincts and excellent manners.”⁵⁴

While slow and spare, institutional recognition and support for Black visual artists developed in the 1920s and 1930s as a few curators assembled work from a variety of artists from around the country for exhibitions. In public libraries, YMCAs, university art galleries, and at the Art Institute of Chicago, the public began to witness the artistic vitality of African American sculptors, painters, and muralists in shows mounted in New York, Washington, and Chicago.⁵⁵ Robinson’s maturation as an architect coincided with this era; he certainly benefited from his association with skilled and creative visual artists. Architectural drawings were not always included in shows, yet, Robinson and others managed to have theirs featured in early important shows like the first exhibit of American Negro Art sponsored by the Harmon Foundation. Robinson’s participation in shows by the Harmon Foundation, Howard University, and the Museum of Modern Art linked him with a number of important art and architectural movements in the early part of the 20th century.

⁵² Paul B. La Velle to Harmon Foundation, August 24, 1927 ⁵² Box 79 (double check this box #) Correspondence with Hilyard R. Robinson, Harmon Foundation Files, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

⁵³ Samuel Revness to Harmon Foundation, August 27, 1927, Box 79 “Robinson, Hilyard R.” Harmon Foundation Files, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

⁵⁴ William A. Boring to George E. Haynes, September 2, 1927, Box 79 “Robinson, Hilyard R.” Harmon Foundation Files, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

⁵⁵ Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1993, pp. 116-117.

One of the first exhibitions that featured Robinson's work included a number of artists who would rise to prominence in the early 20th century. In January 1928, at the International House, a cultural center and residence at 123rd/124th Street and Riverside Drive in New York, the Harmon Foundation in cooperation with the Commission on the Church and Race Relations of the Federal Council of Churches, hosted an exhibit of fine arts produced by "American Negro Artists." Organizers listed three goals in the catalogue; their purposes included: 'Creating a wider interest in the work of the Negro artist as a contribution to American culture; stimulating him to aim for the highest standards of achievement; and encouraging the general public in the purchase of his work, with the eventual purpose in view of helping the American Negro to a sounder and more satisfactory economic position in art.'⁵⁶

The show included three pieces by Robinson: *Study for a War Memorial*, *Study for a Memorial Gateway to Howard University*, and *Study of a Venetian Palace*. His work accompanied the work of two other architects: Louis A. S. Bellinger's *Proposed Plan for Church and Apartments* and John Louis Wilson Jr.'s, a Columbia University classmate and AΦA brother, *Romanesque Church*. Their inclusion suggests that the Harmon Foundation and the curators estimated the architects' contributions to the visual culture produced by Black designers and craftspeople during the period.⁵⁷ While there

⁵⁶ Exhibit of Fine Arts, exhibition catalogue, 1928, p. 2; "Negro Artists," *New York Times* December 25, 1927, p. X13; and "National Show Reveals Worth of Negro Art" *Christian Science Monitor* January 11, 1928, p. 5.

⁵⁷ A total 41 artists displayed 87 pieces in the show; they included: Aaron Douglas, painter, illustrator, print maker, and educator (7); M. Gray Johnson painter and commercial artist (4); A.R. Freelon painter, printmaker, and educator (3); Clifton T. Hill painter and commercial artist (2); D. Norman Tillman commercial artist(1); Suzanna Wilson, (1); C(harles) A(rel) Robinson, commercial artist (1); Mary Lee Tate, painter (1); Albert Alexander Smith, painter and graphic artist (2); Helen Smith, (2); Richard Lindsey, painter and graphic artist (1); Winifred Jonathan Russell, painter and illustrator (2); Sargent Johnson sculptor, ceramicist, and printmaker (6) and recipient of the Otto H. Kahn prize at the show for *Sammy*; Elenor McLaren graphic artist, craftsperson, and educator (1); W(illiam) M(cKnight) Farrow, painter,

are no extant images of these entries, given the aesthetic commitments of Robinson and Wilson, for example, during this period, we might imagine their entries to be technically impressive if conservative. Additionally, in both cases, the foundation exhibited works that they submitted in support of their nomination for the awards in fine arts in the previous year.

With this show in 1928, subsequent traveling exhibitions, and several major award competitions, the Harmon Foundation earned the reputation of being the Black visual artist's first professional sponsor.⁵⁸ According to artist and art historian, James Porter, the Harmon exhibitions "were among the greatest stimuli to the artists of the New Negro Movement."⁵⁹ While the exhibit included older figures like Edward A. Harleston, Laura Wheeler Waring, and Palmer Hayden, the curators also assembled work by a cohort of younger artists, the generation of artists and educators who began to remake Black visual culture in the early to mid-20th century.

printmaker, author, craftsman, and educator (3); J(ames) Porter, painter, educator, and art historian (1), Samuel E. MacAlpine, painter (3); Samuel Ellis Blount, cartoonist (2); Edgar Wiggin(s), draftsman (1); O. Richard Reid, portrait painter (1); Laura Wheeling Waring, painter, illustrator, educator, and recipient, First Award in Fine Arts – Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes, 1927 (7); William E. Braxton, painter and illustrator (2); Gladys L. Johnson, textile artist (1); William L. Smith, painter (1); Winfred Jonathan Russell, painter and illustrator (1); R(ichard) Lindsey, painter and graphic artist (1); Donzleigh Jefferson, painter and sculptor (1); John Phillipis, glass painter (1); J. W. Hardrick painter and recipient of Second Award in Fine Arts – Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes – 1927 (5); William Edouard Scott, painter, illustrator, and muralist (4); Hilyard Robert Robinson architect, designer, and educator (3); Louis A. S. Bellinger architect and educator (1); John Louis Wilson, Jr., architect and draftsman (1); Evelyn Tompkins (1); C.G. McKenzie textile designer (1); Geraldine Charles, commercial artist (1); Augusta Savage, sculptor, educator, and art center director (2); H. Fontaine (1); Effie C.F. Mason, sculptor (1); Palmer C. Hayden, painter and recipient of First Award in Fine Arts – Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes, 1926 (3); and Hale W. Woodruff, painter and recipient of Second Award in Fine Arts – Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes, 1926 (2).

⁵⁸ David C. Driskell, "Mary Beattie Brady and the Administration of the Harmon Foundation," in Gary A. Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright, *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* Newark, New Jersey: The Newark Museum, 1989, p.107.

⁵⁹ James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992, pp. 99-101.

Contemporary critics of the show decried the artists' inability to enunciate a bold vision of Blackness.⁶⁰ In sum, they leveled a critique that indicted the artists for not taking enough chances. In *The Southern Workman*, Gwendolyn Bennett, who would become a leader of the Harlem Artist Guild, wondered whether "this showing of pictures by Negro artists will receive more than a passing word of comment from the tongues of even racial historians." She contended, [the work] "lacked the essence of artistic permanency."⁶¹ And, she condemned the uneven quality of the work, charging that several of the works lack formal rigor and sound academic technique. Bennett held forth the work of Laura Wheeler Waring, Palmer Hayden, Sargeant Johnson, Aaron Douglas and Hilyard Robinson as "adequate standards of proficiency" while cautioning, "[S]heer technical facility alone does not make for racial contributions to a culture in the making."⁶² In the same publication, Rose Henderson shared some of Bennett's misgivings and hoped that the artists "may eventually make as vigorous and sincere a contribution in painting and sculpture as they have made in music and poetry."⁶³ James Porter worried that the show displayed "too liberal taste in subject matter and too little concern for execution."⁶⁴

By 1928, Robinson's personal efforts to earn a professional reputation began to be realized as his work circulated in the Harmon show and received national recognition from an important design periodical, *Architecture*. He submitted five entries in the

⁶⁰ Gwendolyn B. Bennett, "The American Negro Paints," *The Southern Workman*, March 1928, vol. LVII: 3, pp. 111-112; Rose Henderson, "First Nation-Wide Exhibit of Negro Artists," *Southern Workman*, March 1928, vol. LVII: 3, pp. 121-126; James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992, pp. 99-101; Gary A. Reynolds, "American Critics and the Harmon Foundation Exhibitions," *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* Newark, New Jersey: Newark Museum, 1989, pp. 106-119;

⁶¹ Bennett, p. 112.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Henderson, 124.

⁶⁴ Reynolds, "American Critics and the Harmon Foundation Exhibitions" in *Against the Odds*, pp. 109.

magazine's series of monthly competitions for minor problems of design, winning first, second, and fourth prizes, and a Bronze Medal. The jury for the Medal Awards included H. Van Buren Magonigle, President of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects; Edmund S. Campbell, Dean of the Beaux Arts Institute of Design; J. Monroe Hewlett; Alexander B. Trowbridge, Director of the American Federation of Arts; and the editor of *Architecture*. Robinson's entries included "A leaded-glass window in the library of an American gentleman" and "Owner's Bathroom in a Country House."⁶⁵ Inclusion in the exhibit and critical praise offered Robinson a measure of status that he desired personally and that architects required professionally. It also drew the attention of African American presses including the *St. Louis Argus* and *Chicago Defender* who ran small accounts of Robinson's prizes.⁶⁶

During this period, Robinson developed his individual portfolio, but importantly, he was not working in isolation. He circulated among a creative crowd because of his teaching position at Howard University in northwest Washington, D.C. Howard proved to be an important base of operations for Robinson and others. First, it provided a steady source of income as he developed his business. And, at the university, Robinson worked closely with an elite cadre of Black intellectuals who used their teaching positions to combat social injustice while also training the next generation of African American professionals. As teachers, scholar-activists like Robinson's erstwhile military mate and fraternal brother Charles Hamilton Houston, E. Franklin Frazier, also an Alpha, and others used the classroom to imagine and inculcate strategies and tactics of social change among their students. More, the larger campus served as a major milieu in which

⁶⁵ *Architecture* April 1928, vol. LVII: 4, pp. 225; 227-229.

⁶⁶ "Medal Awarded H.U. Instructor," *St. Louis Argus* April 6, 1928, from Robinson's file with Harmon Foundation papers. "Wins Prizes" *Chicago Defender* May 5, 1924, page A1.

scholars and students tested their ideas for confronting the colorline as they hosted conferences, mounted exhibitions, collaborated on projects, and published research on social, political, legal, cultural, economic, religious, and medical conditions among African Americans in the United States. The weekly student newspaper, *The Hilltop*, covered campus activities; their articles suggest the vibrant exchange of ideas that must have nurtured Robinson and his peers.⁶⁷ Robinson and his cohorts debated design with each other in community. Faculty colleagues, as well as undergraduate and graduate students, in engineering, design, the social sciences, and architecture nurtured an engaged, artistic community. For example, at Howard, Robinson met and worked with the artist Lois Mailou Jones when she arrived on campus; later they collaborated on several projects in their careers.⁶⁸ In his hometown, the federal city, Robinson joined with other race intellectuals to inveigh against racial inequality. Together, they drafted, crafted and implemented solutions that eventually reformed the built environment of African America in Washington D.C. and beyond.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ “H.U. Engineering Society Reports Interesting Meeting “, *The Hilltop*, Wednesday, October 24, 1928 p. 1; “Richmond Barthe visited campus, a guest of Alain Locke” *The Hilltop*, February 7, 1929 p. 2; “Howard Architects at Hampton Conference” *The Hilltop*, February 26, 1929, p. 1; “Exhibition in College of Applied Science” *The Hilltop*, May 22, 1929 pp.1-2. “Engineering News” *The Hilltop*, May 22, 1929, p. 2; “National Builders’ Asso. Holds Session at Howard University: Many Prominent in Profession Present; Stress Need for Better Home” *The Hilltop* October 17, 1929 p. 1; “Howard University of Seat of National Technical Association” Prof E. R. Welch is Secretary-Treasurer” Thursday October 24, 1929, p. 1; “Noted Negro Architect Visits Howard University: Appointed by President Hoover to National Negro Memorial Commission,” *The Hilltop*, November 7, 1929, p.1; Hilyard Robert Robinson, “Women Becoming Active in the Field of Architecture” *The Hilltop*, May 16, 1930, p. 1; “Meet Dean Downing” *The Hilltop*, November 13, 1930 p. 3; “Student Exhibits to Open in Galleries March Fourth” *The Hilltop*, February 27, 1931, p.1; “National Technical Association Meets at Howard University; Charles B. Duke, President of the Organization to Deliver Opening Address; To Visit White House; University Engineering Society to Participate” *The Hilltop* October 22, 1931, p. 1; “Work of Cret Included in AIA Exhibit Architects’ Dept. Sponsors” *The Hilltop* December 17, 1931 p. 1; “HU Holds Architects Exhibition Works of Outstanding Men” *The Hilltop* January 28, 1932, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Jones arrived at Howard in 1930. “School of Applied Science Undergoes Changes: Faculty Greatly Increased” *The Hilltop* October 16, 1930, p. 1. Later in the 1930s and early 1940, she illustrated entries Robinson placed in architectural competitions and articles of his in periodicals.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 191-1941*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Although this environment stimulated his productivity, Robinson desired an advanced degree. Robinson secured a leave of absence from his responsibilities as the head of Architecture at Howard in 1930, to continue his studies at Columbia as he thought it necessary “to further prepare for the effective, no-nonsense, competent, knowledgeable practice of architecture.”⁷⁰ Maintaining an efficiency unit in a brand new apartment building near Howard and a dormitory room at Columbia’s Livingston Hall, Robinson shuttled between Washington and New York again while he pursued his master’s degree, and opened his own private practice in the U Street corridor of D.C. Robinson’s activities of 1930 and 1931 suggest that the subject of housing began to interest him. During this period, the experiments in residential planning at Radburn, New Jersey captivated him; he conducted a graphic analysis of New York City’s multiple dwelling law; and he lectured on Modern Developments in the Design of Small Houses. After securing a travel grant from Columbia, Robinson took his Master’s degree and turned his attention to Europe.

Robinson suspected that he had not explored fully “the often fascinating, sometimes depressing, always changing and challenging World of the Human Being, his amazing Institutions and the Natural Environment in which he operates.” Fearing complacency, Robinson requested another, extended leave of absence from his responsibilities at Howard. Armed with cameras, a tripod and curiosity, Robinson set out for Europe with his new wife, Helena. The Robinsons’ Grand Tour of Europe follows a long-standing practice in the education of artists and architects that dates from at least the 18th century when English gentlemen toured the Continent to visit classical ruins,

⁷⁰ untitled document on Robinson’s biography probably notes from interviews with Glen Leiner in the 1980s, page 6 Hilyard R. Robinson’s unprocessed papers MSRC, HU

museums, and galleries. The goal of foreign travel was not just to soak up the historical ambience and to examine architecture and artifacts closely; a study tour encouraged the sensual embrace of a place. Foreign travel heightened the senses; it stimulated the imagination; it invited wonder. For architects, a trip abroad offered a number of specific experiences: to behold buildings at firsthand; to hone drawing skills and build a portfolio; to refine aesthetic sensibilities; to deepen an appreciation for an array of styles and forms; to cultivate taste; and to witness current practices and fashion. For American architects, travel was imperative especially since architectural periodicals did not feature glossy photographic reproductions of major new buildings in the 1910s and 1920s. Indeed, by 1936 when the American Institute of Architects standardized its application materials, the forms included queries about the candidate's foreign travel under the heading of Education. Robinson was keenly aware of the importance of sound architectural training; he may have viewed his study abroad as an essential credential for his development as an artist and as a professional. As we shall examine in Chapter Three, Robinson's trip to Europe coincided with the rise of modernism, a moment in which avant-garde architects reconsidered the role that architecture could play in reordering human experiences, especially with regard to working class life. Robinson's understanding of professional obligations and duties primed him for an acceptance of the theories of modernism.

While Robinson diligently endeavored to present himself as an artist and a professional, his white colleagues did not readily accept his claim to professional status. Robinson's membership in the American Institute of Architects (AIA) illumines both the limits and possibilities for Black architects who wished to participate fully in the

professional cultures of architectural practice in a segregated city like Washington D.C. Founded in 1857, the American Institute of Architects remains the major professional organization for architects in the United States. From its inception, the mission of the AIA was “to promote the artistic, scientific and practical profession of its members; to facilitate their intercourse and good fellowship; to elevate the standing of the profession; and to combine the efforts of those engaged in the practice of Architecture for the general advancement of the Art.”⁷¹ The customary route to membership in AIA was through an application process. This procedure was codified in 1936 when applicants completed standardized forms that included personal vital statistics like place and date of birth, jurisdictions of licensing and practice, and details from a curriculum vita. The paperwork required a recitation of formal training--high schools, private schools, colleges and universities; scholarships; and foreign travel.

According to Harrison Etheridge, “Membership in the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, an important aspect of professionalization, was impossible [for African Americans] in the 1930s.” In 1940, as Robinson earned critical acclaim for his program at Langston, he remained one of 20 “nonwhite” male architects in the U.S.; the Census enumerated 19,640 “white” male architects.⁷² Etheridge points out that “Howard Mackey for seven years had been a junior member of the Philadelphia chapter when the national headquarters wrote him, at his previous Philadelphia address, asking him to apply for a corporate membership. After replying by using Howard

⁷¹ http://www.aia.org/about_history

⁷² U.S. Census Bureau, “Population: The Labor Force: Occupational Characteristics,” Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1940, p. 11 and p. 17.

University writing paper, Mackey's membership was denied."⁷³ Despite his sterling résumé, Robinson's first application for membership was denied.

Leon Brown, a white architect who trained at Georgia Tech and Penn and who practiced in Philadelphia before coming to Washington in 1943, remembered conversation about nominating Robinson for membership at a D.C. chapter meeting of AIA at the Octagon House, the organization's national headquarters, a Federal-era building in Foggy Bottom, a site that was physically only blocks from Robinson's grandmother's home, but metaphorically, a world away because of racial segregation. Brown explained,

“One night there was an officer in the Navy-I do not remember his name who got up on the floor and said, ‘I propose that we invite Mr. Hilyard Robinson as a member of the American Institute of Architects.’ You don't invite people to be a member, they apply for membership. [...] This man proposed from the floor and the chapter voted unanimously [...].⁷⁴

In 1946, Robinson's membership application, endorsed by prominent white architects, Branch Elam and Louis Justement, was accepted and approved. In vouching for Robinson, Elam affirmed that they had been acquainted for nine years; Justement and Robinson knew each other for twelve.⁷⁵ Brown discussed where the architects held their meetings – in segregated hotels. So, according to him, members moved their meetings to the Georgetown Boat Club so as “to enjoy the company of Black and white colleagues.” Robinson's considerable professional success in the mid-late 1930s earned him a

⁷³ Etheridge, page 61.

⁷⁴ William Bushong, Judith Helm Robinson, and Julie Mueller, *A Centennial History of the Washington Chapter: The American Institute of Architects, 1887-1987*. Washington, D.C.: Washington Architectural Foundation Press, 1987, p. 78.

⁷⁵ Application for Membership, Number 4420, Archive of American Institute of Architects, Washington, D.C.

reputation among D.C.'s professional architects. Thus, in the 1940s, the white architectural establishment more readily accepted Robinson as a colleague.

While Black design professionals may have been shunned by or deliberately eschewed AIA membership, some formed alternate professional organizations. Formed in Chicago in 1926, the National Technical Association served as an organization for African American practitioners of architecture, engineering, heavy building construction and science; the association took a keen interest in the professional lives of its members and the training of subsequent generations of architects, engineers, and scientists.⁷⁶ Between 1926 and 1928, men established chapters in Dayton, Ohio and Washington, D.C. In 1929, the National Technical Association hosted its first annual meeting at the Appomattox Club in Chicago, an important location for meetings of African American fraternal orders. In subsequent years, the organization hosted meetings in various cities including Washington, Dayton, Detroit, St. Louis, and New York.⁷⁷ When meeting in D.C., participants met throughout the city, as in 1931 when the 70 professional men registered at Howard's College of Applied Science, toured the White House, and assembled in the auditorium of the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church as guests of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association.⁷⁸ At Metropolitan A.M.E., Howard University President Mordecai Johnson and Charles S. Duke addressed the gathering with speeches about "the unusual possibilities of economic and social advancement for the Negro in America in the field of engineering, architecture, and

⁷⁶ Ethridge, *The Black Architects of Washington*, p. 47

⁷⁷ Jennie J. Elliot, *The National Technical Association: An Account of Its Activities, 1927-1957*. Howard University, Master's Thesis, Department of Education, 1958, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

⁷⁸ "Howard U. to Entertain Technical Group Today," *Washington Post* October 23, 1921, pg. 11.

chemistry.”⁷⁹ In September 1937, when over 100 delegates came to Washington, D.C. to participate in the 9th annual convention of the National Technical Association, Robinson and Paul R. Williams addressed the membership.⁸⁰ The National Technical Association proved to be an important forum for professional African American men to gather, to enjoy each other’s company, to cultivate professional contacts, and to work together to solve problems confronting the race. Through their publications and conventions, leaders of the NTA promoted rigorous standards for technical expertise and professional accountability to the membership. These professionals in the building trades emphasized the importance of individual achievement and social responsibility.

Robinson, like his Howard University colleague, Alain Locke, the eminent professor of literature and philosophy, looked to art as a means of social advancement. Where Locke urged wordsmiths and visual artists to answer the call of the New Negro, Robinson urged architects to build on behalf of the masses.⁸¹ Robinson shared Locke’s belief that talent, leadership, and service were the central challenges for young race architects. In a special edition of Carter G. Woodson’s *Negro History Bulletin*, Robinson asserted that Negro architects could play a significant role in the progress of the race. He highlighted the work of architects in interwar Europe, in part, because they grappled with how to shelter “the masses of people who needed decent housing the most and were least able to pay for them.” Robinson, who himself had garnered attention and prizes for renderings of villas and country houses only a dozen years earlier, valorized the European architects who eschewed those commissions in favor of modern housing programs that

⁷⁹ “Parley Stresses Future for Negro,” *Washington Post* October 24, 1931, pg. 2.

⁸⁰ “100 Attend Parley of Technical Unit,” *Washington Post* September 4, 1937, p. 5.

⁸¹ Alain Locke, “Youth Speaks” *Survey Graphic* 53, no. 11 (March 1, 1925): 659-660; Hilyard R. Robinson, “Something is Missing” *Howard University Record*, and Lowery Stokes Sims, *The Challenge of the Modern: African-American Artists, 1925-1945*, New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2003.

stood as models of “technical and human planning.” After chronicling contemporary, modern housing programs in Holland, Austria, and England, Robinson drew parallels to the American housing crisis, and urged his readers to train as architects to serve the race. According to Robinson, the profession was not only a viable prospect, but “[T]he Negro architect may become a determining force and indispensable factor in the struggle for more abundant living.”⁸² Instead of promoting earlier architectural epochs like the Renaissance, Robinson valorized contemporary Modernism.

For Robinson, a young man whose life experiences, travels, and training convinced him of the possibilities of architecture and planning in service of humanity, modern architecture held a special promise. When Robinson won the commission for Langston Terrace from the Public Works Administration, he drew upon his reservoir of early memories as a pedestrian rushing to school, as a cadet marching in line, as a child shooting marbles in the alley. His visual vocabulary was steeped in Washington’s traditions of two and three story brick row houses.

How might this affinity for low rise, low density row houses mesh with the modernist forms emerging in Continental Europe? Chapter Four examines the concept of modern housing with an introductory assessment of what Hilyard Robinson studied in the interwar European projects he visited. It goes on to delineate further Robinson’s social, cultural, and intellectual milieu in the mid to late 1930s, arguing that the ideas and people he circulated among enabled the realization of his successful plans for Langston Terrace Dwellings.

⁸² Hilyard Robinson, “Opportunities for the Negro Architect” *The Negro History Bulletin*, April 1940 pp. 102; 109.

CHAPTER Four: Modern Housing for Washington: Robinson's Aesthetic and Intellectual Influences for Reforming D.C.'s Housing Stock

In the 1920s, Hilyard Robinson expended a great deal of energy developing his credentials and his professional network. His trip to Europe marked a period in which he sought to extend and deepen his formal training by embarking on an endeavor that solidified his claims for academic and aesthetic excellence. With his trip to Europe, Robinson followed generations of artists and architects who explored the Continent of Europe in search of cultural authority. This excursion, with his wife Helena, emboldened Robinson's imagination and enabled him to cast himself as an arbiter of taste and knowledge; after this trip, Robinson rejected traditional, historical styles in favor of new architectural fashions.¹ It encouraged him to embrace modernism's style and ideology for urban reform. This understanding of the promise of architecture crystallized during the tour and coincided with a moment in which modern architects insisted on the utility of architecture. The principles of modernism—and in particular, modern housing--resonated with Robinson because of his understanding of a social contract between architects and communities, a philosophy he developed because of the networks in which he circulated as a child, teenager and young man, largely in the city of Washington.

When Hilyard Robinson returned from Europe in 1932, he sought to realize the lessons

¹ In extant materials in his papers at Howard University, Helena Robinson appeared in photographs from their trip together on ship decks, in gardens, behind a camera perched on a tripod, but there is scant evidence about her contributions to or experiences of this trip. The images suggest that the Robinsons made the photographic record together and that they were close traveling companions engaged in the project, but I have been unable to determine how they mapped their itinerary for example, and whether and how they exchanged ideas and collaborated.

he absorbed about modern architecture and modern planning while abroad. This chapter considers a variety of the modern housing that Robinson studied in Berlin and during his tour of the Continent to probe the range of choices that were available to him in the early 1930s. In addition to the formal aspects of the housing estates he visited, the notion of state-sponsored housing impressed Robinson and the cohorts of housing reformers in the United States who looked to Europe for solutions for the failure of market-rate housing programs.²

Robinson based his claims for cultural authority and knowledge on the heroic promises of the Modern Movement. This chapter discusses the salient influences that shaped Hilyard Robinson's understanding of urbanism and modern housing and the ideological commitments of the movement for modern housing that Robinson encountered while abroad in the early 1930s. Using his postgraduate study at Der Auslander Institut and Berlin as a base of operations, the Robinsons traveled throughout Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, France, and the Soviet Union. [See Figure 4.1]

² Scholars single out Catherine Bauer as the major proponent of housing reform during this period because of the publication of her monograph, *Modern Housing*. She contributed a great deal to the debates on housing policy in the 1930s, and is largely responsible for the housing initiatives of the Public Works Administration's Housing Division, but she was not the only U.S. reformer who found inspiration in the interwar housing programs in Europe. For scholarship on Bauer, see for example, Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; Peter Oberlander and Eva Newbrun, *Houser*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1999. Daniel Rodgers traces generations of reformers who studied the European urban reform and the built environment, and documents their intellectual, social and political debts in his monograph *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.



Figure 4.1 Hilyard and Helena Robinson's Tour of the Continent

The campaigns for state-sponsored mass housing in Frankfurt, Vienna, and Rotterdam particularly impressed Robinson. Subsequent to his return, his designs for housing projects in Washington, D.C. drew heavily from the modern housing he studied, visited, and documented across Europe. These projects shaped the ideology that Robinson would adopt as well as the forms that Robinson would manipulate and proffer in his entry for a civic campaign called Renovize Washington, for his plans for Howard City, and ultimately for his program for Langston Terrace Dwellings upon his return. They influenced his larger architectural and planning agenda by providing an intellectual

framework for his ideas. Since his student days at Columbia, Robinson had expressed an inclination toward housing reform initiatives.³

The tour of Europe further provided the impetus for reform and expanded Robinson's visual vocabulary from architectural revivals to contemporary expressions of modernism.⁴ His trip also introduced him to the professional experts who reshaped European cities during the interwar period and who would become leading figures in the Modern Movement. These design professionals realized their objectives through the sponsorship and support of municipal governments. They also convened special congresses and organizations where leading design professionals from a number of European nations met to debate the planning futures of the Continent's capitals. He learned about their holistic approach to design which meshed with his own catholic experiences at architectural and interior design firms where he produced a variety of products from textile patterns to programs for commercial and residential projects.

In Europe, Robinson also witnessed the ways in which urban planners and architects, under the auspices of the municipal government, produced places based on carefully calculated, theorized human experiences. By incorporating sociological research into their programs, these European designers prescribed environments that promised to reorder everyday life for working class citizens. They meticulously documented human behavior in an effort to fashion dwellings and recreation centers that

³ Harrison Mosley Etheridge, "The Black Architects of Washington, D.C., 1900-Present," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Catholic University of America), 1979; Untitled document on Robinson's biography, probably notes from interviews with Glen Leiner in the 1980s, page 5. Hilyard R. Robinson's unprocessed papers MSRC, HU and Glen Leiner, "Hilyard Robert Robinson, 1899-1986", in Dreck Spurlock Wilson, ed. *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary, 1865-1945*, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 351.

⁴ Before this trip to Europe, Robinson's prize-winning entries for *Architecture's* competition looked backward, borrowing details leaded windows from earlier periods. And, in his writings, he valorized periods like the Italian Renaissance. After this trip to Europe, he rejected the gestures of revival and promoted contemporary architectural and planning solutions.

would support and sustain a typical, average family. Although he loathed it as an undergraduate student, Robinson's training in Contemporary Civilization at Columbia University primed him for a broader conceptualization of architecture and its relationship to human experiences. By his return to the States in 1932, Robinson took as custom the strategy of investigating the personal conditions and circumstances of the people associated with the architectural project. His acceptance of this practice coincided with a vibrant period among Black social scientists.⁵

Moving to the Weimar Republic

Hilyard and Helena Robinson arrived in Berlin during the twilight of the Weimar Republic; their arrival coincided with a period in which Berlin shined as a major cosmopolitan city, a city that shimmered with a broad urban visual dynamism.⁶ Cultural historian Peter Gay described Berlin during the era of the Weimar Republic as irresistible: "To go to Berlin," he observed, "was the aspiration of the composer, the journalist, the actor; with its superb orchestras, its hundred and twenty newspapers, its forty theaters, Berlin was the place for the ambitious, the energetic, the talented."⁷ Berlin beckoned artists and intellectuals from Western and Central Europe and North America as well.⁸ The young couple's residence at Kurfürstendamm 29 located them squarely amid a major thoroughfare and site of bohemian activity.⁹

⁵ Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 191-1941*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

⁶ In his visual survey of the Weimar years, John Willett cautioned against privileging Berlin as the seat of cultural vibrancy during the period 1919-1933 in Germany. He argued that the modern movement in the arts depended on an effervescent urbanism that bubbled in Hanover, Cologne, Dresden, Breslau, Frankfurt-Am-Main, Stuttgart, and Munich. John Willett, *The Weimar Years: A Culture Cut Short* New York: Abbeville, 1984, pp. 110-143.

⁷ Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001, 1968, p. 128.

⁸ In his dissertation, Jürgen Heinrichs asked a series of important questions about the cultural encounters between African Americans and Germans in Germany during the Weimar Republic. Jürgen Wilhelm

During the period that Robinson traveled the Continent, European architects engaged a series of public debates that would shift the focus of their practices; these debates, often held at major international congresses, influenced the discourse on urbanism in Europe and in the United States from the 1930s and beyond. While it remains unclear whether Hilyard Robinson participated directly as a delegate to any of the major conferences, his embrace of modern architecture and its concomitant ideologies suggests that he was keenly aware of the discussions. Perhaps he followed the contours of the arguments in the voluminous publications authored by the committees of architects, planners, and reformers. During his visits to the Bauhaus and during his meetings with leading architects including Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Erich Mendelsohn, Robinson encountered the reforming architects' spirited commitment to revitalizing the practice of architecture and reorienting it toward the social, political, and economic phenomena of modernity. For them, mass housing became an organizing and galvanizing principle around which architects and planners rallied. Their demand that architecture incorporate economic and social concerns rested in part on concerns about developing decent, efficient, and affordable dwellings for workers. Organizations like CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne), the International Housing Association, and the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning convened

Walter Heinrichs, *'Blackness in Weimar': 1920s German Art Practice and American Jazz & Dance*, unpublished dissertation, Yale University, 1998.

⁹ For a description of the mercurial Kurfürstendamm in the later 1920s, early 1930s, see Joseph Roth's *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin, 1920-1933* translated into English with an introduction by Michael Hofmann, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003; originally published in German as *Joseph Roth in Berlin: Ein Lesebuch für Spaziergänger*. I believe this to be the Robinsons' address based on the paperwork Hilyard Robinson completed when he submitted his film for processing. There are extant envelopes in Box 6 of his photographic collections housed at Howard University.

meetings, hosted exhibitions, signed charters, issued statements, and produced monographs to promote modern housing and urban planning.¹⁰

Facing cities in crisis after World War I, European reformers began to theorize housing programs that would provide decent, sanitary dwellings, offering a minimum existence for working classes. Articulated in the strategy of *Existenzminimum*, architects, planners, and politicians and bureaucrats in municipal governments applied the term to the type of minimum dwellings developed in Frankfurt in the 1920s. They advocated these ideas through major building campaigns and promoted the results in glossy periodicals and major international exhibitions.¹¹ In 1929, CIAM2 devoted its conference in Frankfurt am Main to *Existenzminimum*. In his monograph on the subject, Karel Teige, the Czech artist and theorist, proclaimed, “The minimum dwelling has become the central problem of modern architecture and the battle cry of today’s architectural avant-garde.”¹² In the dogmatic prose that followed, Teige documented and advocated the efforts of his contemporaries, advancing an architecture that addressed basic human needs rather than the monumental. Later, other critics and reformers published monographs in English that promoted the advances in modern housing and minimal dwellings in western and central Europe.¹³ International organizations circulated literature on housing. For example, the International Housing Association

¹⁰ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1992, 3d. ed., pp. 269-279; Reyner Banham, “CIAM”, in Gerd Hatje, ed. *Encyclopedia of Modern Architecture* London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., p. 70-73; and Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000.

¹¹ These publications included *das neue Frankfurt, die neue Stadt* as two examples. For a contemporary account of the succession of international housing exhibitions, see Karel Teige’s chapter 8 on “Model Settlements and Housing Exhibitions.”

¹² Karel Teige, *The Minimal Dwelling*. Translated and introduced by Erich Dluhosch. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002; originally published as *Nejmenší* by Václav Petr, Prague, 1932, p. 1.

¹³ In the United States, Catherine Bauer published *Modern Housing* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934; and in England, Elizabeth Denby published *Europe Re-housed* London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1938.

produced a series of volumes that reviewed trends in housing, construction, and slum clearance by highlighting specific case studies and examples; some were drawn from specially commissioned reports, others based on conference proceedings.¹⁴

While Robinson did not adopt the radical critique of capitalism that some of the leading proponents of modern housing advanced, the aesthetics of their programs impressed Robinson and greatly influenced his aesthetic choices for Langston. Although he enrolled at Der Ausländer Institut at the University of Berlin, Robinson and his wife, Helena, moved beyond Berlin; they toured Europe extensively. Equipped with their cameras and tripod, the Robinsons made thousands of photographs of their travels. Their forays into Russia and to Paris, for example, doubtlessly affected his understanding of architecture, and shaped his visual vocabulary, but the building campaigns of three cities loomed large in his artistic and intellectual imagination. Modern housing estates in Frankfurt-am-Main, Vienna, and Rotterdam relate directly to his program for modern housing when he returned to the United States and assumed responsibility for government housing programs sponsored by the New Deal administration. From the German projects, Robinson borrowed ideas for façade composition, fenestration, materials and circulation. From the projects of Red Vienna, Robinson absorbed the importance of the

¹⁴ See for example: International Housing Association, ed. *Beseitigung von Elendsvierteln und Verfallswohnungen/Slum Clearance and Reconditioning of Insanitary Dwellings/Suppression de quartiers miséreux et de logements insalubres*. Stuttgart: Verlag Julius Hoffmann, 1935, 2 volumes; International Housing Association, ed. *Technische Ausstattung und Einrichtung der Kleinwohnung/Equipment and Fittings for Small Dwellings/Installation technique et disposition du petit logement*. Stuttgart: Verlag Julius Hoffmann, 1935, 2 volumes; International Housing Association, ed. *Umsiedlung/Subsistence Homesteads/Colonisation intérieure* Stuttgart: Verlag Julius Hoffmann, 1935; International Housing Association, *Das Wohnungswesen der Stadt Wien/Housing in Vienna/L'habitation à Vienne*. Stuttgart: Verlag Julius Hoffmann, 1933; Paula Schäfer, ed. *Finanzierung des Wohnungsbaues der minderbemittelten Klassen. Financing House-Building of the Lower Classes. Financement de la construction d'habitations des classes peu aisées*. International Housing Association with International Federation for Housing and Planning (15th Congress: 1937: Paris); Paula Schäfer, ed. *Miete für die minderbemittelten Klassen/Rents for the Working Classes/Loyers pour les classes peu fortunées*. Frankfurt am Main: Internationaler Verband für Wohnungswesen from the International Federation for Housing and Planning, 15th congress, Paris, 1937.

U-shaped courtyard, the perimeter block plan, the emphasis on community services on-site, and small flourishes like the value of didactic decorative programs. In Rotterdam, Robinson learned the lesson of integrating modern forms into extant urban contexts.

Modern Housing in Europe

At the turn of last century, with many major European cities suffering from acute housing crises, architects and urban planners searched for satisfying design solutions that could support and sustain community life for all citizens. The most stimulating and promising projects emerged as modernism materialized. Modern housing attempted to reform the built environment of urban centers and to reorder the lives of the inhabitants through a series of strategies that included new physical forms, new materials, and new construction methods.

In an article in *Negro History Bulletin*, Robinson later explained:

“In Europe during and shortly after the first World War far-reaching problems of housing on a large scale arose. They were not mere questions of building some good villas and country houses. They were problems of providing suitable shelter for the masses of people who needed decent houses most and were least able to pay for them. The governments of Holland, Austria, and England, among others, determined that provision of decent homes that low wage earning citizens could pay for was a direct obligation of the government. This decision resulted in the orderly ra[z]ing of slums and in replanning and building large housing communities. These communities were models both in technical and human planning.”¹⁵

Aware of these developments, Robinson established an itinerary that orbited many of “the models of planning” he would later valorize.

¹⁵ Hilyard R. Robinson, “Opportunities for the Negro Architect” *The Negro History Bulletin*, p. 102,109.

Frankfurt

By the 1930s, Germany served as the center of the new movement in architecture—to produce functional, efficient buildings for citizens.¹⁶ Within Germany, Frankfurt-am-Main was the epicenter. Frankfurt held special appeal for Robinson (and other architects) because of the energetic and comprehensive planning efforts of Ernst May. Drawing from the English traditions of garden city planning and the work of Raymond Unwin, Ernst May realized the scientific principles of city-development through his position as Stadbaurat (municipal architect) and Dezernent für Bauwesen (overseer of city planning). Between 1925-1930, May and his colleagues tackled the housing crisis that beset Europe immediately after World War I; they initiated semiautonomous satellite cities that ringed the central core. Nicholas Bullock lucidly detailed Ernst May's ambitious, comprehensive and successful schemes for Frankfurt during the interwar period and their significance for planning historians. His research also suggests why generations of architects, planners, critics and historians have been drawn to May's plans for satellite cities. According to Bullock, Ernst May's propagandistic campaigns were not simply arrogant self-promotion; May sought to provide, "complete with illustrations drawn from the work of Frankfurt, a working demonstration of the benefits made possible by the new Wohnkultur, [new dwelling culture]." ¹⁷

The German word for settlements, Siedlungen, connotes the basis for the planning scheme implemented by May and his team of reformers in Frankfurt in which residential

¹⁶ John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933*. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 124.

¹⁷ Nicholas Bullock, "Housing in Frankfurt and the New Wohnkultur, 1925-1931" *Architectural Review*, 1978. pp. 333-343.

programs emphasized the needs of the community unit rather than individual families.¹⁸ Architects and planners translated sociological theories into a set of idealized minimal standards that could efficiently be replicated to serve the greatest number of residents for the lowest cost. The German Siedlungen bear hallmarks of standardization: uniform site strategies, regular unit plans, simple facades, and construction methods that favor mass production. As Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson observed in their introduction to international style architecture, “The Siedlung implies preparation not for a given family but for a typical family.”¹⁹ May and his colleagues in planning and architecture promoted the Siedlungen as a force for social stabilization.²⁰

In Frankfurt, most prominently at Römerstadt, May promoted Trabantenprinzip, a principle of town planning in which new residential construction proceeds through carefully planned satellites rather than growth through “inorganic accretion.”²¹ The municipal government purchased the entire valley of the Nidda River, which partially encircled the city on two sides two to five miles from the center. As Catherine Bauer observed during her tour for *Modern Housing*, the city reclaimed the site for Römerstadt from marshland and provided both a large part of the green belt and ideal areas on the other side for large-scale housing developments. The combination of the river, its banks, and the undulating meadows contributed to a bucolic setting of great beauty. Some of the open space continues to be utilized for playing fields, bathing establishments, and allotment gardens; the rest was left as open pasture. In the initial schemes, direct

¹⁸ Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* p. 154 ff.

¹⁹ Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style* New York: WW. Norton and Company, 1932 republished 1995, p. 103.

²⁰ Peter Rowe, *Modernity and Housing* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993, pp. 128-144.

²¹ Siedlung Römerstadt in the Nidda Valley located on the site of the historical Roman city, Nida, the complex was built 1927-28 by architects: E. May, H. Boehm, W. Bangert (Planung), E. May, C.H. Rudloff, K. Blattner, G. Schaupp, F. Schuster.

transportation facilities linked to the city-center (not more than 20 minutes) from each community, but the neighboring industrial zone made it unnecessary for a large part of the tenants to go into the city in order to get work.²² The path of the sun orders the site strategy; this strategy known as Zeilenbau governs the arrangement of houses around curvilinear streets and interior pedestrian pathways. [See Figure 4.2 and 4.3] The 1,200 living units at Römerstadt are arranged in rows of two story private rowhouses and three to four story apartments.²³ [See Figure 4.4 and 4.5] The façades of the rowhouses consist of a very simple, horizontal composition in which rectangular windows and doors punctuate the concrete panels. Only the paired entrances and small porches with curved metal railings and T-shaped concrete canopies help to distinguish one home from another.



Figure 4.2 Aerial View of Römerstadt, Frankfurt am Main, ca. 1928

²² Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934, pp.172-174

²³ Bernd Kalusche and Wolf-Christian Setzepfandt, *Architekturführer Frankfurt am Main* Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag Publishers, 1997, p. 156.



Figure 4.3 Interior Pedestrian Pathways, Römerstadt, Frankfurt



Figure 4.4 Rowhouses at Römerstadt, Frankfurt



Figure 4.5 Apartment Block at Römerstadt, Frankfurt

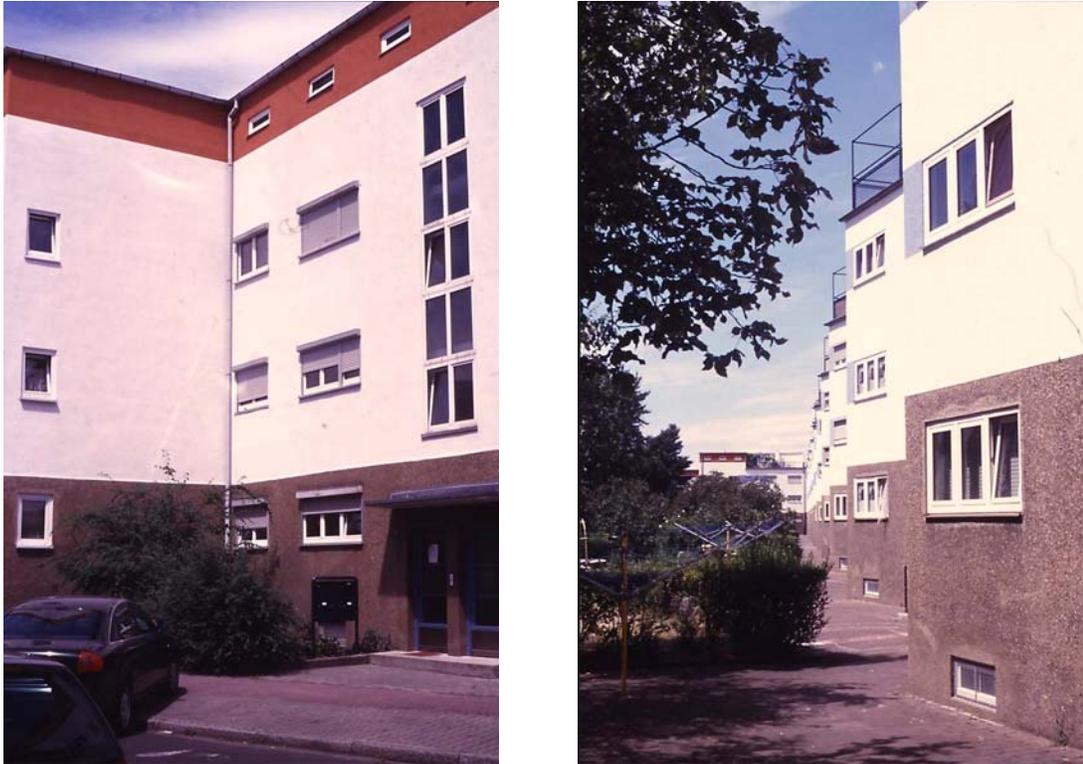
The Siedlung Bruchfeldstraße (1926-27) at Breubergstraße contains many one-family row houses, but predominantly offers three-floor apartment buildings. Here, May adopted a perimeter block site strategy with a distinctive urbanism. Instead of each of the apartment buildings running parallel to the street, they stand at angles, zig-zagging along the perimeter. This staggered strategy coupled with a tripartite façade composition--concrete at base, stucco painted two different bands of color--ameliorates the potentially monotonous façades. Additionally, the zig-zag street front was chosen to optimize the natural light exposure. A multi-floor central building dominates the eastern short side of the rectangular plan and, at the same time, closes it off. The tower blocks built of brick

usually have six apartments.²⁴ These buildings encompass a common courtyard that provides lots for gardens, clotheslines, and recreational space.



Figure 4.6. , At the exterior of the compound, the profile of the apartment blocks explains the nickname “Zig Zag Houses.” Siedlung Bruchfeldstraße, Frankfurt

²⁴ Siedlung Bruchfeldstraße at Breubergstraße 1926-27 Architects: E. May, H. Boehm, C. H. Rudloff Built on behalf of AG für Kleine Wohnungen (Corporation for Small Apartments) Nicknamed Zickzackhausen/Zig Zag House. Bernd Kalusche and Wolf-Christian Setzepfandt, *Architekturführer Frankfurt am Main* Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag Publishers, 1997, p. 196.



Figures 4.7 and 4.8, On the left, note the tripartite treatment of the façade. On the right, the apartment blocks on the interior of the courtyard. Siedlung Bruchfeldstraße, Frankfurt

The rows of flats at Siedlung Westhausen offered still another site strategy; here a severe grid dominates the complex. Vehicular circulation is controlled by roads that run East to West; pedestrian circulation is enabled by a grid of walkways. In contrast to May's other complexes that featured double row houses, the row houses are accessible only from one side. The model for this layout was designed by Kaufmann and Boehm (Frankfurt), competition winners for the housing complex Berlin-Haselhorst and relates to this earlier plan. Originally planned as one-family houses, May converted them to flats that use the same footprint as two-family houses; to accommodate vertical circulation, he tucked the entrance to the staircase beneath the T-shaped concrete canopies. Robinson would enlist this strategy later at Langston where he, too, concealed flats in rows of houses. At Westhausen, like elsewhere in May's programs, the buildings were built, in

part, with pre-fabricated components.²⁵ “Later project and one of the last in which May was directly involved. By this time, the German economy had deteriorated, requiring very small units and a sparse physical layout of dwellings. In all 1,116 units were completed.”²⁶



Figure 4.9 Siedlungen Westhausen, Frankfurt

Vienna

While the modern housing of Frankfurt may have directly influenced the design of Robinson’s federally-sponsored projects, the major rehousing campaigns of Red Vienna enthralled.²⁷ As Catherine Bauer observed, “The Karl Marx Hof in Vienna, with its kindergartens and libraries and clinics, its laundries and baths, its playgrounds and wading pools and post-office and shops and restaurants, is not an exception, but merely the fullest realization to date of the working idea behind all Viennese housing.”²⁸

Robinson marveled at the comprehensive nature of the planning by Karl Ehn and his

²⁵ Siedlung Westhausen at Egestraße, Westring, Kollwitzstraße, Ludwig-Landmann- Straße built between 1929-31 by architects: E. May, H Boehm, W. Bangert (plan); E May; E Kaufmann, F. Kramer, E. Blanck, O. Fuckert, F. Schuster. Bernd Kalusche and Wolf-Christian Setzepfandt, *Architekturführer Frankfurt am Main* Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag Publishers, 1997, p. 128.

²⁶ Peter Rowe, p. 134.

²⁷ The very best source on interwar modern housing in Vienna is Eve Blau, *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-1934*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999.

²⁸ Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* p. 149.

contemporaries. Yet, Robinson divorced the massive housing solutions from the political ideology of the socialists. For him, their forms offered inspiration.



Figure 4.10 The Central Courtyard at Karl Marx Hof, circa 1931

The complexes of small living units in blocks arranged around central courtyards proved to be a model that Robinson would rely on once he returned to the States. In Vienna, Robinson also carefully noted small flourishes that helped to transform spare buildings into livelier façades. For example, hardware, materials, and details like occasional portholes, outdoor light fixtures and furniture, casement windows, and decorative sculpture impressed Robinson.

Although in interviews throughout his life, Robinson routinely cited the Karl Marx Hof as one of the great architectural masterpieces, other Viennese housing estates, though smaller scale, enjoy a more direct relationship to the housing programs Robinson would build throughout his career. One such program was the estate Frölichhof at 1-5 Malfattigasse Vienna 12 by Mang.

Here, five stories of 149 apartments arranged around a central courtyard, with 11 stairwells serve as a precedent for Robinson's project at Langston.



Figure 4.11, Frölichof, and Figure 4.12 Interior Stairwell of Frölichof, Vienna

The site plan, courtyard, and two-toned painted stucco and brick results in a scale and density that enables an open feeling. The landscaping and use of concrete figures around a fountain mitigated an institutional character. Additionally, the glazed staircases permit light inside.

Rotterdam

According to Robinson's recollections, Walter Gropius urged the young architect to visit Holland to study their innovations in the field of public housing. Rotterdam and the accomplishments of J.J.P. Oud dazzled him; of the housing estates he studied in

Europe, Oud's solutions in Holland, especially at Kiefhoek, expressed the most ambitious and aesthetically accomplished modernism.²⁹



Figure 4.13, An Early Image of Kiefhoek

As the critic Peter Rowe observed, “[Kiefhoek’s] [a]rchitecture [is] highly refined and more sophisticated in its modernity.” Like other European cities after World War I, Rotterdam faced housing pressures from the city’s expansions and the severe housing. As a result of the housing crisis and because of his own political and aesthetic commitments, J.J.P. Oud, the city architect of Rotterdam, committed himself to low-cost and working-class housing. From the outset, the Kiefhoek estate was oriented toward large poor families; the 300 two-story duplex dwelling units were expressly designed for families with five or more persons.³⁰ At Kiefhoek, Robinson apprehended the possibility of how to knit rows of modern housing in an urban fabric. Formally, Kiefhoek was more daring, more avant-garde than the forms Robinson would later offer, but here, he saw how to incorporate modernist principles into the larger city grid and local context. Like

²⁹ Kiefhoek, 1925-1930; 1928-1929. Kiefhoekstraat/Lindtstraat

³⁰ Peter Rowe, *Modernity and Housing*. p. 144-157.

the projects he admired in Vienna, the Dutch housing examples offered him a solution for how to fit modern housing into the urban context. While he may have been captivated by the façade composition, for example, this is not a gesture he would ever copy.

Returning to Washington, D.C.

After his time abroad, Robinson returned to Washington with his wife. With new eyes and new ideas, he eagerly engaged housing issues in his hometown. Robinson intimately knew the landscape of Washington, D.C. having traversed the city as a child whether in his grandfather's surrey, on foot, or by street car. He returned to a city of privately developed row houses, apartment blocks and alley dwellings; he returned to the sites of his childhood and teenaged homes in a rowhouse on Capitol Hill, his maternal grandmother's place in Foggy Bottom on 18th and 20th Street N.W., and his first private dwelling where as a young man, he rented an efficiency apartment in Howard Manor, an apartment building at Girard Street and Georgia Avenue, Northwest.³¹ In the 1920s, with his teaching position at Howard and his professional commissions with private design and decorating firms, Robinson also traversed the social and professional terrain of Washington, D.C. With this homecoming, Robinson crisscrossed the city once more.

Housing Competition

One of the first projects for modern housing that Robinson participated in upon his return to the United States was the "Renovize Washington" campaign organized by local civic leaders and business professionals in early 1933. Borrowing a phrase that was

³¹ U.S. Census Bureau. *12th Census Population 1900*. Washington DC: 1900. (District of Columbia, vol. 11, ED 153A, sheet 1, line 11); Untitled biographical notes (likely prepared for oral interviews with Glen B. Leiner, Hilary R. Robinson Manuscript Collection, Box 6, Moorland Spingarn Research Collection, Howard University; Classified Advertisement, "Howard Manor" *Washington Post* January 6, 1929, p. R5. U.S. Census Bureau. *15th Census Population 1930*. Washington DC: 1930. (District of Columbia, vol. 11, ED 293, sheet 14A, line 35). Washington D.C. City Directory, 1931, p. 1372, 1931.

first coined in Cleveland and used in Philadelphia during similar civic betterment drives, “renovize” derived from the words renovate and modernize.³² Business and civic leaders from the Washington Board of Trade, the Advertising Club of Washington, the District of Columbia Bankers Association and the Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Architects sponsored a series of activities in the spring and summer to improve housing, sanitation, beautification, and employment. Announced in February, “Renovize Washington” promoted private home repairs and construction projects by launching a publicity campaign that included discussions about affordable renovation programs in a variety of media including radio shows, speeches, news stories, and newspaper advertisements. The public library complemented the efforts by preparing bibliographies of home improvement titles from their collection.

The campaign culminated in two major events that incorporated home rehabilitation into public exhibitions: one featured a design competition among architects for the renovation of a dilapidated one-story house that had been relocated to an empty lot downtown across from the Department of Commerce at 14th and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW; the model house accompanied the other event, an exposition of renovation materials hosted at the Shannon and Luchs and Wardmann Buildings at 1435 and 1437 K Street NW. As an incentive for public participation, the Bankers Association offered a special loan program for individual homeowners. As part of the initiative, banks authorized loans for home improvement projects of up to \$500 at 6% interest for homeowners. In order to be eligible for the loans, these homeowners must have possessed equity on their property and have paid the taxes and mortgage interest; they

³² “Philadelphia Found Greatly Benefited by ‘Renovize’ Drive” *Washington Post* February 28, 1933, p. 18.

also either had to be depositors at a local bank or the applicant must have secured the endorsement of a depositor.

This program afforded Robinson an opportunity to join public conversations on housing and modernization issues so that he could address the developments he studied in Europe in a local context. Robinson submitted an entry to the architectural competition; the design problem centered on how to rehabilitate cheaply a one story dilapidated house. As part of the competition, the organizers selected a prototype “shanty” and relocated it to a plot across from the Department of Commerce building so that the public could witness its transformation. Robinson’s was one of 32 entries for the competition; judges included the architects T.J.D. Fuller, Irwin S. Porter, and T.B. Evermann, with assistance from C. Wohlgemuth, Jr. on costs involved in carrying out the design and Rose Greely, on landscape setting.³³

³³ “Home Repair Drive to Start Thursday” *Washington Post* February 21, 1933, p. 16; “Renovation Drive Opens Tomorrow” *Washington Post* February 22, 1933, p. 5; “Renovize Campaign Chiefs Meet Today” *Washington Post* February 23, 1933, p. 16; “Renovize Campaign Publicity Planned” *Washington Post* February 24, 1933, p. 16; “Indorsement Given Drive by Manufacturers Board” *Washington Post* February 25, 1933, p. 12; “Renovize Campaign Backed by Ad Club” *Washington Post* February 25, 1933, p. 12; “Renovize Campaign Leaders Plan Trip” *Washington Post* February 26, 1933, p. 12; “Philadelphia Found Greatly Benefited by ‘Renovize’ Drive” *Washington Post* February 28, 1933, p. 18; “Ad Club Launches War on Depression” *Washington Post* March 1, 1933, p. 4; “Board to Resume Renovize Program” *Washington Post* March 14, 1933, p. 16; “Renovize Campaign Opens Today with Removal of House” *Washington Post* April 26, 1933, p. 18; “Bank Loans Ready in Renovize Drive” *Washington Post* May 3, 1933, p. 18; “Renovize Contest Judging is Today” *Washington Post* May 11, 1933, p. 18; “Supply Men Join in Renovize Drive” *Washington Post* May 16, 1933, p. 18; “House Task Given to Miss Hendricks” *Washington Post* May 17, 1933, p. 4; “Books Ready to Aid in Renovizing Drive” *Washington Post* May 21, 1933, p. 4; “Justement Wins Renovizing Design” *Washington Post* May 12, 1933, p. 20; “Exposition Slated in Renovize Drive” *Washington Post* June 4, 1933, p. 8; “Renovize Exhibit Spaces Still Open” *Washington Post* June 8, 1933, p. 18; “Renovize Exhibition Space is Going Fast” *Washington Post* June 11, 1933, p. 3; “House is Promised fro Renovize Show” *Washington Post* June 14, 1933, p. 3; “Big Renovize Jobs Help Employment” *Washington Post* June 18, 1933, p. 9; “4 Model Kitchens in Renovize Show” *Washington Post* June 25, 1933, p. 30; “Stout to Aid Drive to Renovize City” *Washington Post* June 28, 1933, p. 22; “Loans Ready Here for Home Owners” *Washington Post* June 30, 1933, p. 18; “Renovize House will be Displayed” *Washington Post* July 4, 1933, p. 3; “Trade Groups to Attend Renovize Exposition” *Washington Post* July 8, 1933, p. 20; “Loans Available in Renovize Pool” *Washington Post* July 9, 1933, p. 22; Advertisement ... “Some day” you have said, “we’ll repair that wobbly step...put on a new rood...add a second bathroom.” *Washington Post* July 9, 1933, p. 21; “Renovize Home Opens Tonight for Inspection” *Washington Post* July 10, 1933, p. 11; “Many Visitors View Opening of Exposition” *Washington Post* July 11, 1933, p. 3; “Repair Work on Homes Seen Stretching Values” *Washington Post*

This project was a professional reintroduction for Robinson to Washington's architectural and design professions. Importantly, he seized upon this chance to modify the state-sponsored solutions he studied in Europe, to experiment with housing reform within the context of the private market in the capitalist context. Wrapped in the mantle of European modernism, Robinson positioned himself as one especially suited to tackle the problems of housing and urbanism in Washington. It is difficult to ascertain the character of his submission for the design competition because only one extant image of his entry survived; it accompanied a featured piece in the *Washington Afro-American* about the Honorable Mention that he garnered in the design competition. The elevation, Interior Treatment of the Living/Dining Room, was a symmetrical composition of two windows flanking a central hearth; he included two chairs and a pair of lamps, one floor lamp and one lamp on a table. For the boldly patterned draperies, Robinson enlisted the help of his Howard Manor neighbor and Howard University colleague, Lois Mailou Jones.³⁴

His participation and prize-winning entry in this competition provided him a platform from which he could proselytize about the merits of professional architecture and the virtues of modern housing. First in interviews and then later in (signed and unsigned) articles for the *Afro-American*, Robinson promoted his profession and shared

July 12, 1933, p. 7; "Home Comfort Gains greatly by Remodeling" *Washington Post* July 16, 1933, p. 15; "Renovize Exposition Extension in Sought" *Washington Post* July 16, 1933, p. 22; "Renovize Drive to Keep House Open Full Time" *Washington Post* July 23, 1933, p.5; "Mme. Reno, the Renovized Cat, Populates Renovize Exposition Room" *Washington Post* July 26, 1933, p. 20; "\$500,000 Renovize Business is Reported" *Washington Post* July 28, 1933, p. 2; "Renovize Work Here 17 Pct. Of 37 States" *Washington Post* July 30, 1933, p. R5; "Gas Company Plans Modernizing Plants" *Washington Post* August 2, 1933, p. 22; "Renovize Model House Will Open This Week" *Washington Post* August 6, 1933, p. 22; "Shabby Shack Becomes Colonial Bungalow, All Equipped" *Washington Post* August 14, 1933, p. 2; "Want House?" *Washington Post* August 21, 1933, p. 18; "'Renovizing' Work 40 Per Cent Here" *Washington Post* August 27, 1933, p. M 22; "Dinner Honors Arthur Heaton" *Washington Post* September 8, 1933, p. 22.

³⁴ Scrapbook One, Lois Mailou Jones Scrapbooks, 1922-1992, Archives of American Art. "Hilyard R. Robinson's Design in Renovizing Contest" *Washington Afro-American* June 3, 1933 p. 7.

the findings of his recent European tour for readers. In a piece that profiled Robinson and the winners of the competition, Robinson estimated a three-fold significance of the campaign:

“to demonstrate the value to the owner and occupant of every property improvement at the very low costs now prevailing: to stimulate re-employment; and to direct public attention to the fact that skillful architectural services are a valuable asset to the individual client and the Community alike.” “It is too little known,” he continued “that on the economic side alone the cost of the services of a well trained architect often amounts to but a portion of the real savings he is able to realize for his client.”

He continued:

“Although only lightly suggested at present, there seems to be a deeper significance to this Renovizing Campaign in Washington. It appears a small advanced detachment of a more sweeping modernization of housing and building to come later—sometime not very long perhaps after the “Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago” has spread its message of modern means of living to match the demands of modern life. [...] City planners and architects have already projected plans that reveal houses and communities so efficient in scheme and equipment that their simplicity may seem almost a shock to our otherwise accustomed eyes.

“Economists and sociologists conclude that something must be done about these same facts. And convinced, the manufacturers of building materials and equipment have started the development of patterns and products to outfit the needs of the modern efficiently planned individual houses and communities.”

“In a few words, it may be said, that health requirements, economic pressure, enlightened concepts of living, and more dependable and useful citizenship are demanding better and cheaper housing. [...]”

In a subsequent article, Robinson excoriated contemporary housing conditions for African Americans and insisted on a conversion to modernity. He also directed readers’ attention to the progress in housing in Europe:

“Almost the entire problem of providing shelter has been cable-bound and nearly strangled with a super-sentimental attachment to what constitutes the proper kind of shelter for intelligent human beings living in a modern industrial age and in a modern industrial country.”

“[...]And so, today, a fundamental change in the solution of our housing problems is being made. This change is called modern. Today the same quality of careful analysis and scientific skill is being applied to providing modern shelter—that is, the house, church, school, hospital, business building, etc.—as has been applied to solving our modern food, transportation, and communication problems. Better results for less money is the demand of today.

Europe Leads the Way

“For some years now, Europe—until recently having been distressed more than we by economic, social and political forces—has led the way with many successful experiments in modern housing requirements. [...]

“As the result a new concept of housing is growing. Its effects have reached our own country. If our minority community is to survive and thrive we must also study, understand and apply new principles as they relate profitably to us. [...] It does mean that there is no better time than in this period of general economic dislocation to seriously study trends that are forming a new housing economy in our country—these trends are family incomes, modern requirements of houses for maintaining health and sanitation at a minimum cost, environment, population trends and land values.”

In later columns in the *Afro*, Robinson urged his readers to go along to the Renovize Washington demonstration home and to study its materials and to absorb its lessons on comfort, heating, insulation, ventilation, and lighting.

Slum Survey

In the summer of 1933, as Robinson promoted the benefits of modern housing, he also collected data about contemporary housing conditions in Washington’s alleys and slums. As such, he emulated his architectural and planning peers in England and Europe who theorized human behavior and explored sociology in their quest for universal design solutions for town planning and mass housing schemes.³⁵ Robinson borrowed from their

³⁵ See especially Chapter 1, Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2000. Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, English edition, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002, and

methods and joined an intellectual tradition that had flourished in the United States since the turn of the century. Since 1899, with W.E.B. Du Bois's publication of *The Philadelphia Negro*, urban sociologists studied the living conditions of African Americans in major cities in the United States, in part to document and diagnose social problems, and in part to prescribe solutions.³⁶ In the first few decades of the twentieth-century, Washington, D.C. did not escape the scrutiny of investigators, scholars, and reformers. Their various reports include detailed accounts of housing conditions throughout the city with a special emphasis on the slums and alley dwellings. Primary sources from the period depict grim and difficult life in segregated housing in Washington, D.C.: scholarly studies include Charles F. Weller's study for Associated Charities of Washington, *Neglected Neighbors*; Howard University sociologist, William Henry Jones', *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Study in Human Ecology*; and Daniel D. Swinney's graduate thesis at University of Chicago. In the 1930s especially, scholars at Howard University embarked on a series of community-based studies in Washington, D.C. Reports and correspondence of the Alley Dwelling Authority attest to the miserable, unsanitary conditions white and Black families endured in the city. National magazines and local newspapers routinely covered dilapidated housing in the nation's capital city, as well. Reformers like Edith Elmer Wood and Catherine Bauer, for example, joined journalists to report on conditions in periodicals like *The Survey*, *The Nation*, *Architectural Record* and local papers, such as the *Washington Post*, and *Washington Star*. Under the New Deal, documentary photographers hired by

Stephen V. Ward, *Planning the Twentieth-Century City: The Advanced Capitalist World*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002.

³⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, reprint edition, 1996.

Roy Stryker at the Farm Security Administration recorded compelling depictions of Washington's housing. In 1935-38, Russell Lee, Carl Mydans, Arthur Rothstein, and John Vachon photographed images of life in alleys and homes of Washington, D.C; Gordon Parks followed later in 1942.

Hilyard Robinson, too, explored the alleys of Washington: he visited African American neighborhoods, he distributed and tallied a survey about the economics of "slum housing"; and he photographed some of the worst conditions.

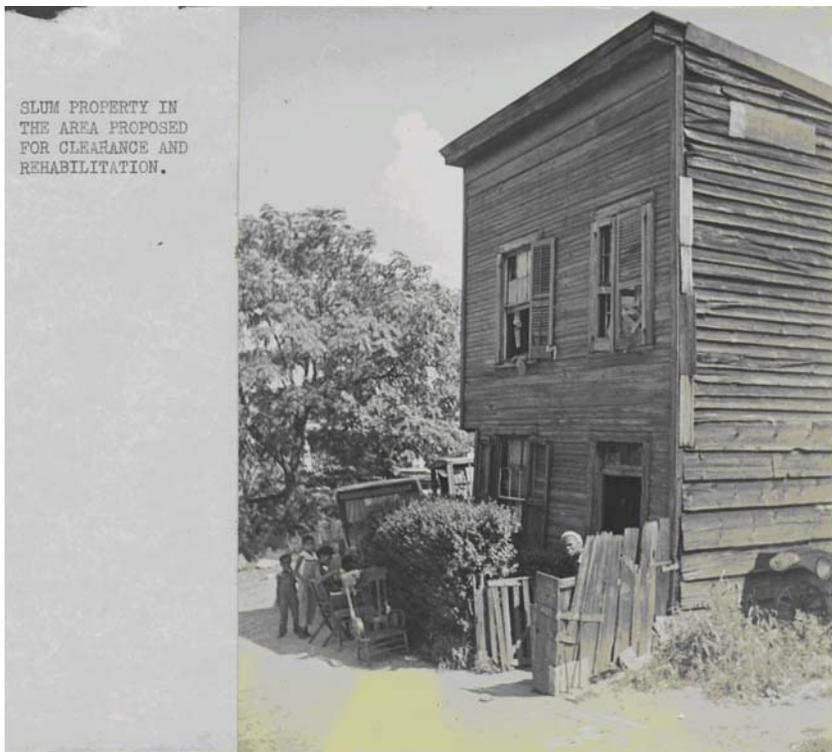


Figure 4.14 Slum Property as Recorded by Robinson

He compiled his findings to chronicle and quantify the scope of housing problems in Washington specifically for African Americans. According to his reporting, his survey encompassed four areas. In the southwest quadrant of the city, Robinson canvassed an area bounded to the North by Canal and E Streets, SW; to the South by H Street, SW; to the East by South Capitol Street; and to the West by Fourth Street, SW. In the

northeastern quadrant, he canvassed a parcel bounded by the North at Myrtle Street, NE; by the South at Jackson Place; by the East by the Pennsylvania Railroad tracks; and by the West at North Capitol Street. He also studied two sections in the northwestern quadrant. In the first, North Capitol Street bounded the parcel at the eastern edge; New Jersey Avenue at the western; Massachusetts Avenue at the northern edge and F Street at the southern. In the second section, Georgia Avenue bounded the eastern edge of the parcel; Vermont the western; Barry Place the northern and Florida Avenue at the southern end.

He concluded that the private market did not provide adequate shelter for these residents. In his *Introduction*, Robinson identified four questions that guided his data collection: 1) to what extent are their houses inadequate?; 2) what pertinent economic problems have they faced in the last few years?; 3) do they bear a housing cost out of proportion to their needs?; and finally, 4) what is their attitude toward solving their housing problems? He contended that the answers to these questions should guide an architect in developing “a sound experimental low-cost housing plan.”³⁷ Robinson surveyed 225 families in 219 units in areas he designated as slums; 211 were renters, while 14 were owners and/or buyers. He investigated residents’ rent and household expenses, and classification and equipment of their houses. Robinson compiled the data from these sites to bolster his claims for the urgent need for rehousing and slum clearance. He argued, “Something should be done to provide better houses for slum dwellers.”³⁸ Robinson’s findings were not path-breaking; his research methods were not innovative for social scientists or investigative journalists. It was however, unusual

³⁷ Hilyard R. Robinson, “A Sample Housing Survey of Slum Areas in Washington, D.C.” 1933, p.v. H-1706, RG 196, NARA II.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.1.

during the period in the U.S. for an architect, especially one who was educated at elite institutions, to walk the city's poor and working-class neighborhoods, glimpsing domestic life on small household budgets.

Robinson circulated this survey among colleagues at Howard, and sought opportunities to realize his findings further with a building program to re-house low-income families. Beginning in December 1932 and through the winter of 1933, he experimented with several solutions in "blighted" locations around Washington, including a parcel directly south of Howard's campus, a project he tentatively called Howard City. This scheme received renewed attention after a fortuitous meeting between Robinson and a pair of Philadelphia-based European expatriates. The two, Oskar Stonorov and Alfred Kastner, procured a letter of introduction to Howard University's president, Mordecai Johnson, from the author and activist James Weldon Johnson. They were eager to develop "Model housing for colored people" and they sought assistance in identifying an African American architect with whom they could partner.³⁹ President Johnson arranged a meeting between Stonorov, Kastner and Hilyard Robinson in late June. By early July, the three developed a proposal to the federal government to finance a mixed-use, mixed-income housing program south of Howard's campus, using Robinson's formal solutions and local contacts and relying on Stonorov and Kastner's recent experiences on a similarly federally-financed housing program for hosiery workers

³⁹ O.G. Stonorov to Dr. Mordecai Johnson, June 15, 1933, Box 35 Oskar Stonorov American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

in Philadelphia. They forwarded materials to Robert Kohn who had just been appointed Director of Housing for the Public Works Administration in late September 1933.⁴⁰

Invoking the language of public health and economic improvement, Robinson offered his solution for a slum clearance project near Howard University in an effort to stabilize the local economy and to eradicate the “social plague” near the University, near Freedmen’s Hospital and McMillan Reservoir. Robinson developed a modern superblock plan with modern architectural features composed of modern materials. In plan, the program possessed a strong axial orientation with a symmetrical site strategy that enabled major public spaces with separate vehicular and pedestrian circulation. He envisioned a project with 600 units of housing (for 1828 people in room dwellings) with a combination of two and three story rowhouses and apartment blocks of eight stories. He intended 32% ground coverage in this low density project with 10 stores at 1200 square feet each, community houses, and 90 garages. In plan and program, Robinson’s proposal for Howard City resonated with the state-sponsored housing estates he visited in Vienna and Frankfurt.

⁴⁰ Materials regarding the Howard City project may be found in Robinson’s Collection at MSRC at Howard University, in Oskar Stonorov’s papers at AHC at University of Wyoming, and in the project files of Langston Terrace in RG 196 at NARA II.

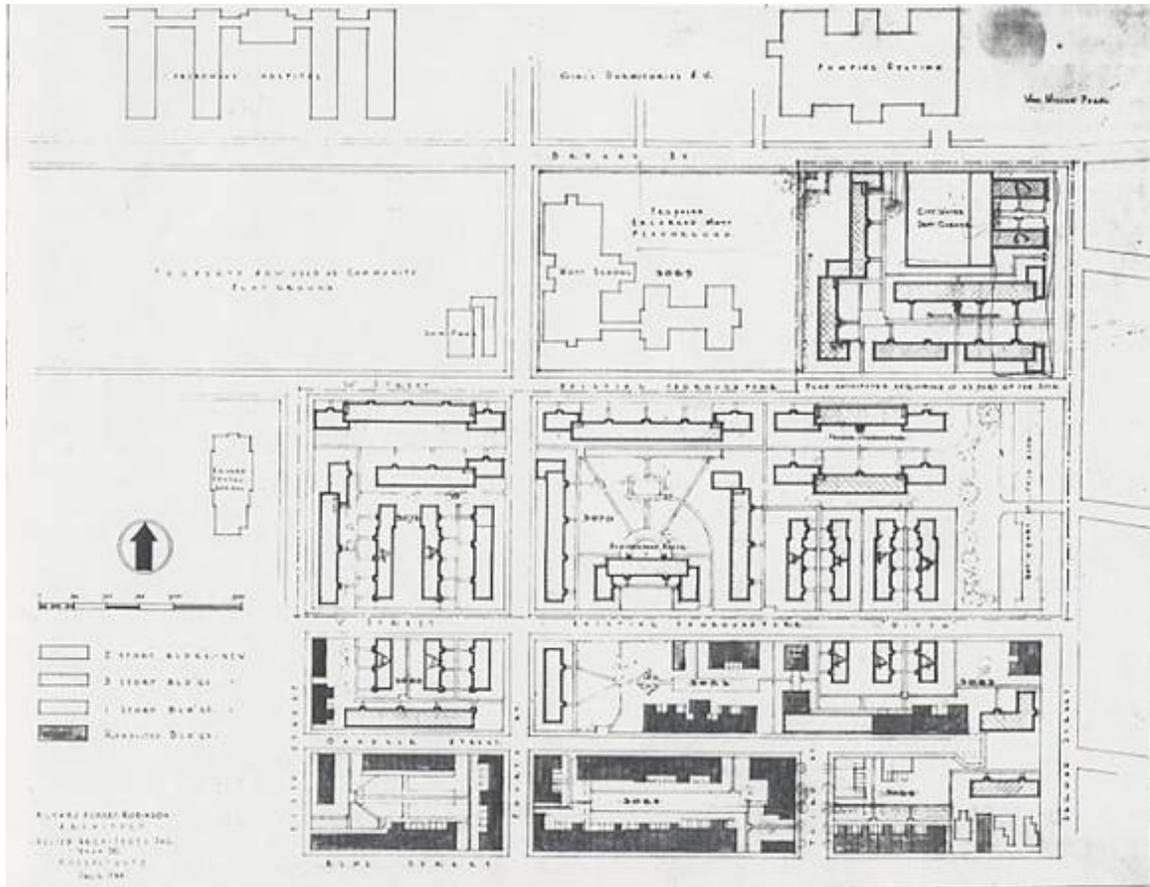


Figure 4.15 Site Plan for Howard City

The proposal for Howard City failed because a local banker absconded with the funds for the parcels of land. Yet, it was important for Robinson for a number of reasons: through the process he came to the attention of Robert Kohn who offered him a government appointment with the newly formed District of Columbia Advisory Committee on Sites for Public Housing Projects under the PWA and through the process he came to the attention of two influential architects. Disappointed though he may have been with the collapse of Howard City, Robinson got his chance to experiment with modern housing with his plans across town, on a vacant parcel that the government acquired. Robinson's formal solution for Langston Terrace Dwellings is the subject of Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE: Modern Housing in Washington: A Formal Analysis of Langston Terrace Dwellings

Langston Terrace represents a number of salient impulses in housing reform and design circles in the United States and Europe during the mid-1930s: it articulates principles and details associated both with the Modern Movement and modern housing reform. As chief architect, Hilyard Robinson decided against historical revival styles in favor of a modified, situated Modernism.¹ Following from Chapter Four's discussion of the interwar housing estates that Robinson studied in Germany, France, Holland, and Austria in the early 1930s, this chapter offers an analysis of his attempt at *Wohnkultur* and *Siedlungen* for African Americans in Washington D.C. In form and site strategy, Robinson's plan for Langston responded to the natural topography and physical context of the 13 acre parcel in Northeast, and the residential scale throughout the larger city of Washington. Robinson employed a low-density, low-rise site plan as prescribed by the Public Works Administration's (P.W.A.) guidelines. The decorative program offered celebratory, commemorative and functional pieces of sculpture. He adopted materials promoted and valorized by Modernist contemporaries. And, the modest and small units contained modern appliances and amenities.

This project, like others of these earliest public housing programs offered by the P.W.A., promoted progress, valorized nuclear family life, and introduced Modernism to working-class families. Very much in the spirit of the interwar projects he admired, the

¹ Sarah Goldhagen, *Louis Kahn, Situated Modernism: Monumentality, Community, and the Evolution of Architectural Form*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

Viennese *Wohnkultur* and the German *Siedlungen*, Robinson hoped that his project would improve the quality of life for the residents, the 274 African American working-class families who moved to the site. For him, modern architecture provided the chance to transform the lives of families who lived in substandard, unsanitary dwellings. Throughout his life, he remained optimistic that this experiment on Benning Road enabled residents to develop as healthy, productive citizens.² This chapter explores the design solutions Robinson offered on the exterior and interior of the complex.

After the plans for the Howard City complex collapsed, Hilyard Robinson selected and the Public Works Administration acquired vacant parcels from Hugh A. Thrift and Jacob Gruver for \$78,000 in September 1935.³ The property offered a number of advantages: convenient access to street car lines, close proximity to a campus of public schools designated for African American children, and gentle, natural terracing that offered vistas of Kingman Lake, the Anacostia River and beyond to the shores of Virginia on the horizon. [See Figure 5.1]

² Robert B. Fairbanks, *Making Better Citizens: Housing Reform and the Community Development Strategy in Cincinnati, 1890–1960* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988 and Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

³ “Land Sold to PWA” *Washington Post* September 1, 1935, p. R2 Correspondence about the government’s failure to obtain the adjacent parcels of land south of Howard University are housed at Howard University, National Archives II and American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming.



Figure 5.1: An early aerial image of Langston and its immediate environs, ca. May 1938

With the program for Langston, Robinson contemplated the meaning of modern housing for African Americans: what shape should it take? What would be the appropriate form for this city's working-class African-American families? Robinson sensitively respected the physical context of the District's housing stock while simultaneously offering modern forms that both complemented and departed from the traditional architectural idiom of Washington's dominant house type: the rowhouse.

In D.C., rowhouse construction flourished in the last three decades of the 19th century. Built as small scale, speculative projects by developer-builders, D.C.'s rowhouse architecture of this period was conservative and modest in scale, especially when compared with other East Coast industrial and manufacturing cities like Boston, New York, and Baltimore. Builders offered garden variety interpretations of higher styles, themselves late to arrive in D.C. A combination of housing legislation and market

forces shaped the formula upon which these developer-builders relied heavily. Local builders used brick materials for rowhouses with square bays and side hall plans. Stylistically, these units made references to popular styles of the late 19th century: Queen Anne with textured façades in brick, stained glass, and complex roof lines; Italianate with “bracketed” cornices; Richardsonian Romanesque with rough-faced stone and rounded arches.

Born in his paternal grandparents’ rowhouse on Capitol Hill and reared across town in his maternal grandmother’s rowhouse in Foggy Bottom, Robinson knew the rowhouse form intimately.⁴ He drew from the reservoir of these memories as he also tapped the visual vocabulary he cultivated in architecture schools and on his trips abroad. For the plans and forms of Langston, Robinson relied on innovative--if not avant-garde--modern housing estates he visited in Europe in the early 1930s. As discussed in Chapter Four, Robinson reworked the solutions of Frankfurt, Vienna, and Rotterdam, in particular.⁵ He possessed a clear vision for a solution for the housing complex; he derived his program from the interwar modern housing programs he studied in Europe, his entry for “Renovize Washington”, and his collaboration with Stonorov and Kastner on Howard City. He observed the work of his contemporary architects and planners through his position in the Department of Interior’s Subsistence Homesteads Division, a post that enabled him to tour new and inchoate federal housing programs in other regions of the United States. His professional relationships with other housing experts kept him

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. *12th Census Population 1900*. Washington DC: 1900. (District of Columbia, vol. 11, ED 153A, sheet 1, line 11). Harrison Mosley Etheridge, *The Black Architects of Washington, D.C.: 1900 to Present*.” pp. 43-44.

⁵ Again, I base this assertion on my six weeks of fieldwork in European housing estates in 2002.

in touch with trends and developments in the field. As a faculty member at Howard, he investigated alley life with the help of colleagues in architecture and sociology.

Robinson embraced modern housing reform and the Modern Movement. For him, modern housing offered a desirable alternative to the cramped, unsanitary alley dwellings he examined in his *Slum Survey*. Robinson fervently believed that Modernism could improve the quality of life for African Americans. His design solutions reflected his formal training steeped in Beaux-Arts Classicism and his hope that the built environment could reform and redeem working-class life, especially for “the Race.”⁶ With his PWA commission, Robinson approached the problem as a newly-converted, Beaux-Arts-trained Modernist would: a carefully conceived design held the answer. Robinson also maintained that an architect, especially a committed race architect, would develop the best formal solution. He intended to engineer working class life. Through a totally designed environment, modern architecture seemed especially suited for public housing: both promised social change for working-class families. He did not anticipate the stigma that would later attach to flat-roofed slabs of rowhouses and apartment blocks in particular and to public housing in general.

The government established neighborhood standards for the PWA-sponsored projects.⁷ Robinson adhered to their guidelines by respecting the provisions that each housing project must have:

⁶ Hil[y]ard Robinson, “Something is Missing.” *Howard University Record* vol. 19, 1925, p. 407 and Hilyard R. Robinson, *Slum Survey* Washington D.C.: Howard University, 1933, RG 196 Box 13X H-1706.702 NARA II.

⁷ Catherine Bauer, a leading housing reformer and architectural critic, greatly influenced the legislation that shaped and formed the federal government’s first foray into public housing during peace time. See Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934; Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; and H. Peter Oberlander, Eva Newbrun, Martin Meyerson, *Houser: The Life and Work of Catherine Bauer* University of British Columbia Press, 2000. Eugenie Ladner Birch, “Woman-made America: The

- generously open landscaped areas
- no closed courts
- three or four stories maximum height for walkup apartments
- one or two story one-family houses where land costs permit
- direct sunlight in every room
- safe streets: this means no through traffic
- recreation centers; play areas
- pleasing design, simple architecture⁸

Government housers valorized the salubrious effects of open space because, in their estimation, residents of densely populated neighborhoods languished in unhealthy conditions in close proximity to unsavory characters. Robinson and his reform-minded peers could not separate physical conditions and social character. As determinists, they clung to the belief that they must ameliorate “slum and blighted” neighborhoods or suffer the inevitable, pernicious consequences. Reformers’ guidelines insisted upon open space and order as the formal expression of the democratic landscapes they envisioned. They enlisted concerns about children and their vulnerability as part of the rationale. It is telling, then, that so much of Langston’s design is devoted to open space, particularly open space for children’s play.

Robinson prized the site along Benning Road because of its “impressive naturalistic” features, including the vista overlooking the river and “the green hills of Virginia.” He also relished the proximity to the campus of public schools, envisioning the possibility of Langston’s children traveling “just a few steps from his home safely to kindergarten [and grammar school].”⁹ Robinson developed a site strategy that related to the natural sloping topography of the land. He devised a super block scheme by

Case of Early Public Housing Policy," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 43:2 (April, 1978): 130-144.

⁸ As transcribed from an image in Hilyard Robinson Collection Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

⁹ Hilyard R. Robinson, “The Langston Housing Project,” page 3. MSRC Howard University.

dispensing with 22nd and 23rd Streets and Bennett Place while retaining the grid of 21st, G, 24th, and H Streets. He arranged rows of flats, houses and apartment blocks atop the horizontal grade and subtly nestled the others into the natural terracing. Around the central courtyard, a large horizontal plane stands as the central common space. This environmental context proved to be highly desirable for the pioneering residents at Langston since many had recently migrated from rural, southern communities in North Carolina, Virginia and parts of Maryland; these large open spaces helped to ease the transition to urbanism with the promise of plots for productive gardens.

The compound strikes a paradoxical posture in that there is a decided inward orientation, but also an inviting openness. Langston turns its back from the automobile traffic and street cars of the multi-lane divided thoroughfare of Benning Road, toward the central courtyard at the heart of the neighborhood. Set atop and tucked into natural terraces just north of this major thoroughfare, pedestrians may ascend the steep hill from Benning Road to G Street by climbing a semicircular concrete staircase. [See Figures 5.2 and 3] Robinson encouraged pedestrians to pause at a small concrete patio which offers a place of quiet contemplation, an impressive vista, and a transitional space between the major street and the rows of houses.



Figures 5.2 and 5.3: Concrete Staircases at Langston Terrace Dwellings

Vehicular traffic is controlled by a series of one-way, single lane streets that bound the property and that begin at the corner of G and 21st Street and move from west to east to 24th and continue north to H Street; from this corner, vehicular movement flows west to 21st Street, which is one way, southbound. An existing gas station stands at the corner of 21st and Benning Roads; the portion of 21st that stands immediately in front of the pumping station is the only two-way street within the complex.

Robinson's site strategy directs pedestrians to circumnavigate the superblock's grid although, obviously, on foot, the horizontal flow of movement is not restricted to one direction. Internal pathways form a network of narrow, outdoor, semi-public corridors for pedestrian traffic. Robinson created a hierarchy of spaces by carefully arranging the sidewalks, the placement of concrete stairs, the paved playground, and other common spaces. Additionally, the collaboration between Robinson and David O. Wiliston, the

landscape architect, provided a series of green spaces achieved by tree boxes in the causeways, lawns setback from the streets, plantings, and other foliage on the landings and the courtyard. [See Figure 5.4]

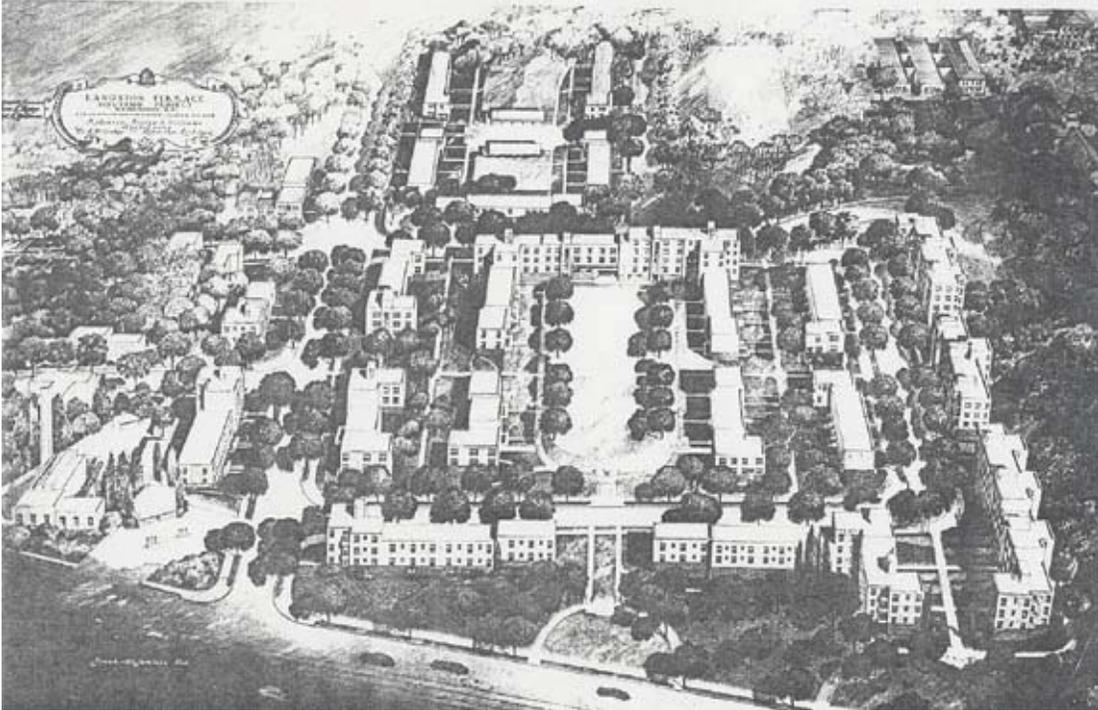


Figure 5.4: Rendering of Langston that highlights the ambitious scheme for landscape and plantings.

As a result, residents and visitors may circulate throughout the complex, easily finding their way through public and semi-public pedestrian outdoor corridors without verbal orientations and clues. These subtle way-finding gestures introduced the unfamiliar programs; they made it comprehensible and navigable, offering dignity and autonomy to residents and visitors.

The use of the superblock relates indirectly to Ernst May's Siedlungen projects in Frankfurt, and directly to Robinson's longstanding admiration of the planning of Clarence Stein, Henry Wright and Marjorie Sewell Cautley's Radburn, New Jersey, and

the longer tradition of Ebenezer Howard's English Garden City.¹⁰ For example, visitors and residents are led to the chief public space on site in the courtyard, through the carefully orchestrated sequences of semicircular stairs from the south, or through the corridors formed by the openings between rowhouses. The movement culminates in the central horizontal plane--the courtyard--the location that the designers imbued with the most import through its placement further and the allegorical decorative frieze mounted along the arcade. The courtyard with its changing grade, open plan, and broad vistas offered a democratic space within the compound where neighbors and visitors could meet. In this respect, Robinson's site plan for Langston, with the hierarchy of spaces, the symbolic civic center, and the central axis and cross axis betrays his traditional training. These characteristics are hallmarks of Beaux Arts planning that likely resulted from Robinson's training at Penn and Columbia. The building's massing betrays his enthusiastic embrace of Modernism.

Thin rows of two-story units enclose the square formed by G, 24th, H, and 21st Streets, Northeast. [See Figure 5.5]

¹⁰ Eugénie Ladner Birch, "Five Generations of the Garden City: Tracing Howard's Legacy in Twentieth-Century Residential Planning" from *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard* edited by Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, pp. 171 – 201; Norbert Schoenauer *6,000 Years of Housing* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003 and Stephen V. Ward, *Planning the Twentieth Century City: The Advanced Capitalist World* London: Wiley, 2002.

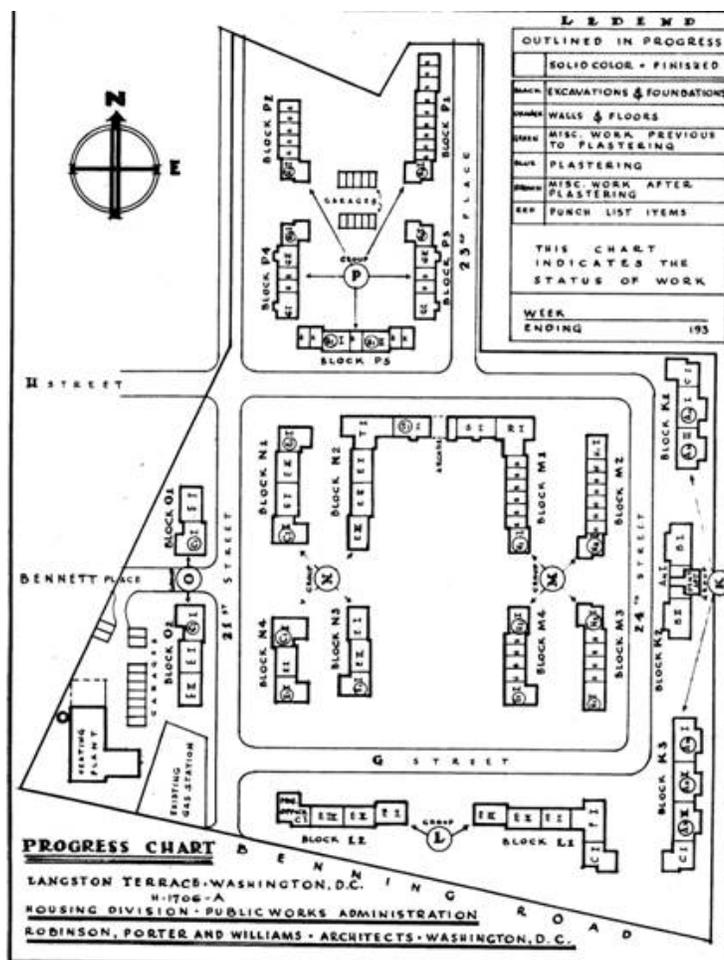


Figure 5.5: Progress Chart for Langston Terrace, circa 1935-1936 from the project file at NARA II.

In one row, a pair of units runs parallel to G Street on the southern side of the street. At the southeastern corner of the property, where the grade shifts most dramatically on the site, Robinson tucked a pair of four-story apartment blocks that stand perpendicular to G Street. A pair of two-story rowhouses and flats runs parallel to 24th Street to the west, while three blocks of apartment units run parallel on the east. At the northernmost edge of the complex, blocks of apartments sit on the southern side of H Street. On the northern parcel of H Street between 21st Street and what would have been 23rd Place, Robinson intended U-shaped rows of apartment blocks, rowhouses and flats.

Additionally, he intended to tuck two garages for ten automobiles in the middle, but this portion of his plan was never realized.¹¹ Along 21st Street, rowhouses, flats and apartment blocks line both the eastern and western sides of the street. To the south of Bennett Place, behind rowhouses that front 21st Street and the existing gas station, Robinson inserted the power plant with its towering smokestack.

From G Street, the courtyard is perched atop of a pair of semicircular concrete staircases that lead from the sidewalks at the southern end. With the change in grade and the expansive plane, the outdoor vertical and horizontal circulation choreographed movement to foster social interaction. At the center of the landing, Robinson included a decorative flourish with the colorful concrete fountain. [See Figure 5.6]

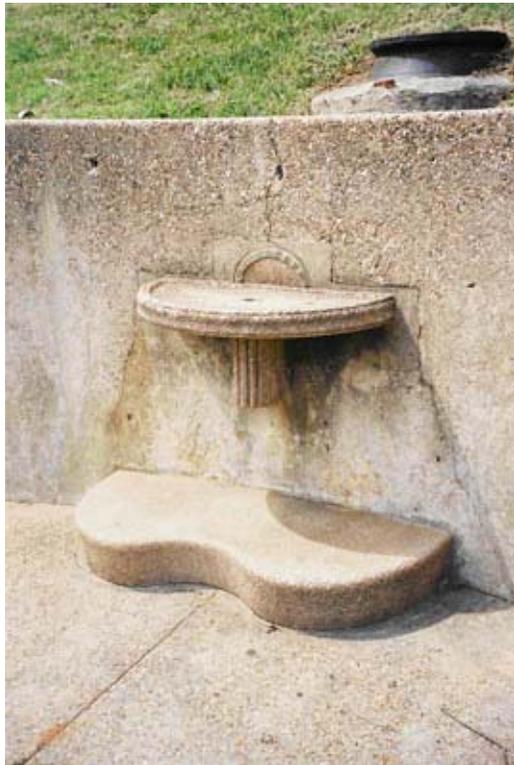


Figure 5.6: Concrete Fountain at the Southern Staircase.

¹¹ In 1965, Harry Robinson (no relation to Hilyard Robinson) built 34 additional units of rowhouses on this parcel for the Housing Authority. While these rowhouses occupy a similar footprint and relate to the scale of Hilyard Robinson's original schemes, they bear little resemblance in façade composition and fenestration.

At the center of the courtyard, running east to west, a paved pedestrian pathway bisects the common space; this sidewalk stands on axis with Bennett Place Northeast. Robinson manipulated the volumes of the apartment blocks at the northern end to form an asymmetrical arcade. Here, the courtyard terminates and the only opening stands at the arcade, an underpass, around which marches the sculptural frieze, *The Progress of the Negro Race* by Daniel Olney. [See Figure 5.7]



Figure 5.7: *Progress of the Negro Race*, Frieze by Daniel Olney

The courtyard is protected from vehicular traffic and landscaped with small plots of grass and trees including deciduous American Elms and oaks as well as coniferous Longneedle Pines. From the courtyard, the vista at the southern end as envisioned by Robinson and experienced by early tenants included developer-built rowhouses across the street, verdant fields, rivers, and lakes as well as canopies of trees.

Langston's program reflects a number of planning principles including Beaux-Arts Classicism, Modernism, and housing reform; it also simultaneously respects the natural topography of the site as well as local traditions of the built environment. Robinson harnessed formal qualities from each tradition in service to the community. He rejected the severely linear site plans offered in the European projects he studied in Germany, preferring instead plans like the Viennese programs with courtyards. He also privileged his design parti with its strong north-south axis over others that would have directly addressed solar and thermal considerations. While Robinson acknowledged the importance of solar orientation and worked to incorporate natural light into every room in the units, he did not duplicate the Zeilenbau strategy offered by Ernst May at Siedlungen Römerstadt or at Siedlungen Westhausen. Taken from the German word Zeilenbau that literally translates to "lines building", in a Zeilenbau plan, the path of the sun dictates building placement; typically, planners arrange two to four story buildings in parallel rows east to west so as to maximize solar exposure and minimize thermal loss.¹²

In North America, planners who wish to maximize environmental considerations situate their buildings to accommodate the prevailing northwest winds and orient them with an east to west orientation rotated $\pm 17^\circ$. Instead, Robinson organized his north to south axial site plan, privileging a formal central, common public space. Rather than planning dogma, the natural topography of the site, the contours of the parcel, and the street grid influenced the site strategy. He leveraged these assets to orchestrate a

¹² As the path of the sun moves from east to west, throughout the course of the day, light floods buildings—especially those with large windows—oriented east to west. This permits maximum light inside and can, if executed properly, defray the cost of heating the structure. If a building is oriented north to south, for example, the solar exposure of interior rooms varies throughout the course of the day depending on the movement of the sun, its angle and the season. Modern housing reformers in Germany championed the construction of housing projects that had narrow slabs with large windows. Ernst May and other European housing reformers promoted these ideas in glossy periodicals such as *Das Neue Frankfurt*.

communal, public space. It suggests that avowed Modernist architects situated their buildings into the physical, environmental context. His concept works on paper as a two dimensional exercise, but it also succeeds in three dimensions as built, unlike the Williamsburg Houses primarily designed by the Swiss-born architect, William Lescaze (and supervised by Richmond H. Shreve, chief architect) in Brooklyn. Here, Lescaze rotated the buildings 15° from the street grid to privilege the sun and to sweep fresh air into the neighborhood; instead outdoor public spaces turned into fierce wind tunnels.¹³

Robinson offered a formal axial plan with grand, hierarchic order. His plan reflects a modernist site concept. He created a superblock by dispensing with extensions for Bennett Place and 23rd Street. Here, at the heart of the program, Robinson rendered a site plan that was largely symmetrical, with small asymmetrical flourishes at the ends of rowhouse blocks on the courtyard itself. This major public space offered residents and visitors a dignified central commons for civic exchange and recreation. The decorative program for the courtyard underscored its import. In addition to the courtyard, the rowhouses and flats step back from the street with lawns on the front and yards and garden plots in the rear. Robinson created places that offered an expansive space for public rituals and niches for other, more intimate interactions. Here, he relied on his own memories of everyday urbanism to create spaces that related to the forms of Washington's streets and alleys, but offered protection and safety from traffic and congestion.¹⁴ The network of open spaces and outdoor corridors resonated with the

¹³ Associated architects included James F. Bly, Matthew W. Del Gaudio, Arthur C. Holden, William Lescaze, Samuel Gardstein, Paul Trapani, G. Harmon Gurney, Harry Leslie Walker, John W. Ingle, Jr. *Architectural Forum* May 1938, p. 356-359. Richard Pommer, "The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s" *Journal of Society of Architectural Historians* vol. 37, no. 4, Dec 1978, pp. 235-264.

¹⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. John Chase, John Kaliski, Margaret Crawford, eds. *Everyday Urbanism* Monacelli, 1999 and *Everyday*

pioneering residents as well, many of whom were recent arrivals to the city of Washington.

This low density strategy in the larger urban context is occasionally derided or dismissed by proponents of urbanism who hold thick, tall, dense cities like Manhattan as the standard. Robinson, like many of his peers and other advocates of modern housing, insisted on the salutary effects of open space within the larger urban context. That is, this low density, low rise site plan is not an anti-urban or even an ambivalent urban strategy: it is another expression of urbanism.

Minimally decorated, stripped of ornamentation, and free of references to historical styles, Langston's brick buildings announce their modern disposition with their rectangular geometry: their flat roofs and horizontal orientation. These solid, brick buildings relate to the Cubist aesthetic prized by European Modernists. Robinson and the PWA rejected more efficient and cheaper construction methods espoused by the European housers because these early 51 projects sponsored by the Housing Division within the Public Works Administration of the Department of Interior were intended to be *employment* projects.¹⁵ Government housers in the United States may have admired, but ultimately eschewed Frankfurt's methods of construction: assembly line processes with prefabricated concrete panels offered fewer jobs than labor-intensive masonry, etc. Robinson chose a distinctive pair of colors for his masonry, rejecting red brick. In Washington, red brick prevailed as the most common building material for residential buildings in Washington; it also clad the institutional buildings on the adjacent campus of

Urbanism: Rahul Mehrotra, *Margaret Crawford vs. Michael Speaks (Michigan Debates on Urbanism)* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005.

¹⁵ This argument had particular salience in African American circles. See for example Robert C. Weaver's development of an early prototype for affirmative action in government hiring.

schools. In what may be interpreted as an expression of the tripartite classic order of base, shaft, and top, Robinson selected for Langston two colors for the buildings' skin: a darker brown course anchors the rows and blocks to the ground while a lighter, variegated buff brick dominates the upper two thirds to three quarters of the façades. Depending on the time of day and season, the mottled buff brick blushes with pinks and oranges while purples, umbers and terra cotta radiate through the dark brown base. Robinson's choices here imbue the quotidian with beauty; his scrupulous attention to detail rendered an aesthetic that has been compromised in subsequent public housing programs. [See Figure 5.8]

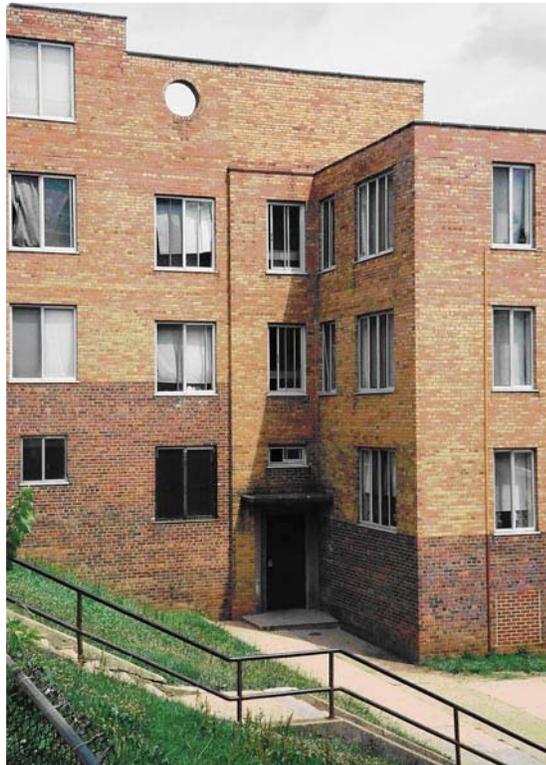


Figure 5.8: Apartment Block with Varied Brick Treatment

With this choice, Robinson repudiated the darker Victorian color palette popular at the end of the 19th century in American cities in favor of a lighter, brighter one. The

brick pattern is a common bond with sixth course headers. These sixth course headers not only help to tie the veneer into the structure better but they also very subtly, almost imperceptibly, emphasize the horizontality of the composition. [See Figure 5.9]



Figure 5.9: Apartment Block with Varied Brick Treatment

The flush mortar joints are tan. Robinson's color palette obviated the stark, institutional quality of traditional red brick buildings. The light color also alleviated the feeling of overpowering mass which very large, dark colored buildings can generate.¹⁶ His selection may have been influenced by the work of his erstwhile collaborators, Stonorov and Kastner. During visits to Philadelphia, Robinson monitored the progress of the Carl Mackley Homes with field trips to the construction site. Upon his return to Washington

¹⁶ Joseph Abel and Fred Severud *Apartment Houses* New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation Progressive Architecture Library, 1947; pp. 76-77.

after one such foray, Robinson inquired with Stonorov about their choice of materials.¹⁷ Such queries suggest the highly collaborative nature of these early housing projects, where architects swapped information and ideas freely.

The quality of the masonry at Langston continues to impress residents and visitors. It has aged well, there is no efflorescence, and aside from some tuck pointing maintenance, the work endures. Current residents cherish the brick and use it as one example of the high quality craftsmanship of the original laborers. Ms. Sarah Alman boasts to visitors that the masons were not simply laying bricks; they carefully tended to their task as though they were stacking pats of butter. She singles out the thin slices of mortar as exemplars of the craftsmanship of the masons. Current residents were indignant and outraged when contractors for the DC Housing Authority stapled plastic tubing to the sides of the buildings, anchoring them in the brick itself (rather than the mortar). In their estimation, current residents interpreted this gesture as an act of carelessness and a malicious disregard for the integrity of the historic fabric of their buildings. Further, the Housing Authority has clumsily bricked over basement windows, stairwells, and other window openings with mismatched bricks and inelegantly appended shafts and chimneys to the corners of units.¹⁸ [See Figure 5.9]

¹⁷ Hilyard R. Robinson to Oscar Stonorov October 31, 1934; File “October to December 1934,” Box 36 American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

¹⁸ Members of the greater Washington community cite Langston’s enduring physical presence and fine craftsmanship as a special accomplishment of the workers; a former student at University of Maryland, College Park, Michael Wright, recalled how his grandmother proudly recounted how his grandfather worked as a PWA laborer on this construction project in the mid-1930s.



Figure 5.9: Recent Maintenance and “Improvements” at Rear of Rowhouses and Flats

Robinson’s careful selection of materials is also evident in his use of concrete. At Langston, bits of primary colors animate the door surrounds and T-shaped awnings; round smooth brown umber stones enliven the sidewalks, retaining walls, and porches. A locally-based, white craftsman, John Joseph Early, pioneered a procedure in which exposed colored aggregate greatly expanded the available shades of concrete¹⁹ [See Figure 5.10]

¹⁹ “Architectural Concrete Slabs” *Architectural Forum* February 1940, pp. 101-106.

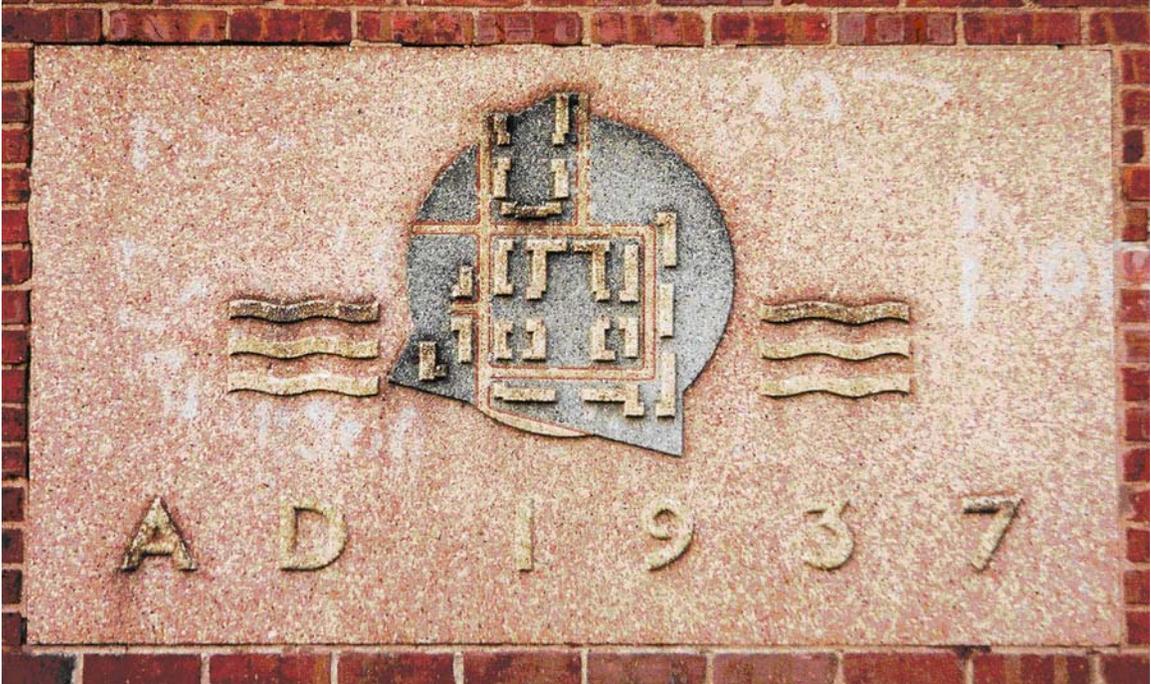


Figure 5.10: A Ceremonial Cornerstone in John Joseph Earley's Concrete Treatment

This process may have reminded Robinson of the modern housing in Frankfurt where variegated concrete served as the skin of the base of the Zig Zag Houses, for example. At Langston, Robinson used this innovative concrete around the entrances to apartment blocks and homes. Again, the paired entrances, T-shaped canopies, and awnings in the rowhouses relate to the concrete entrances of the homes at Römerstadt, also in Frankfurt. Robinson adopted modern materials and introduced concrete flourishes wherever pragmatic.

Details like the doorframes, fountain, and the cornerstone elevate the design, but they do not always serve the needs of the residents. Robinson included stylized house numbers and light fixtures tucked into the canopy. As a result, at dusk and dawn, when the porch lights illumine, these brown door surrounds glow warmly, stippled colors with flecks of blues, reds, and yellow aggregates. Yet, for the aesthetic charm of Robinson's work here, his stylized house numbers are not legible from the sidewalk or street,

rendering them useless. Subsequently, residents have accentuated the numbers with paint or supplemented his handiwork with press-on adhesive ones. [See Figure 5.11]



Figure 5.11: Rowhouses with Amended House Numbers.

Despite Modernists' vehement pronouncements against decoration, Robinson and others fully dedicated their attention to small details, offering pleasing-if sometimes inefficient--designs. As a result, Robinson offered a dignified aesthetic that is not often associated with government-sponsored mass housing schemes. He devoted considerable attention to the entrances of the row houses and flats, installing spare brass doorbell fixtures and fanciful rounded, semicircular metal railings. [See Figures 5.12 and 5.13]



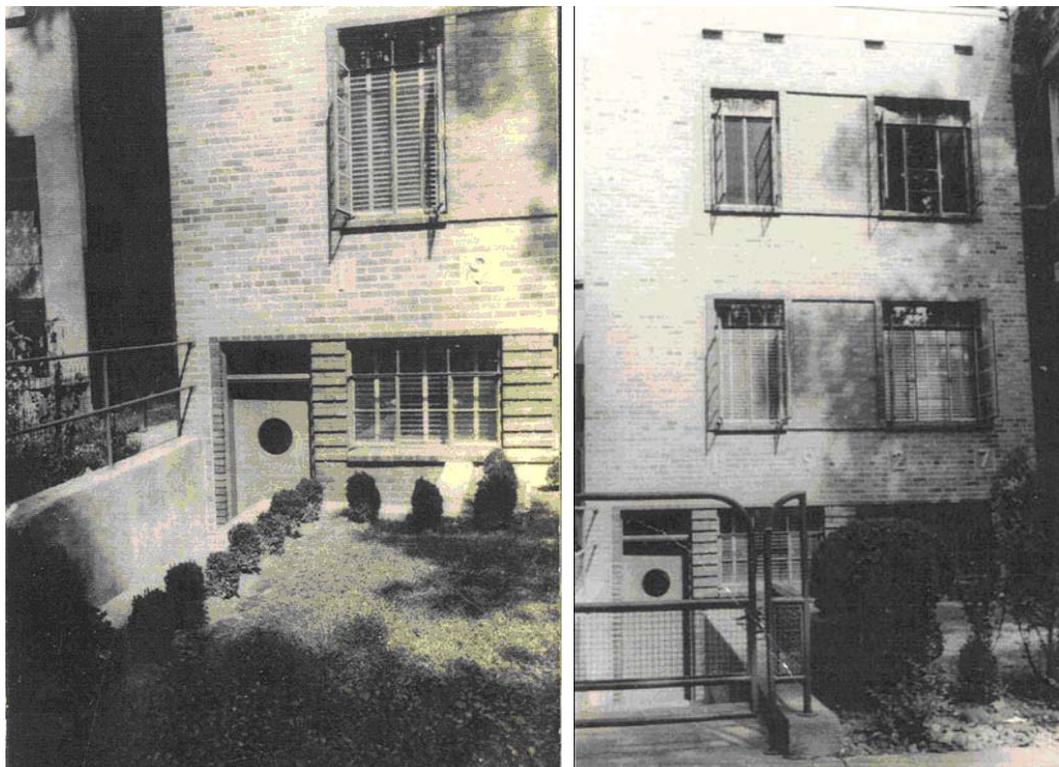
Figures 5.12 and 5.13: Semicircular Railings

These small porches and paired entrances encourage interaction with neighbors in adjacent units, a small gesture to the urbanism valorized later in the century by urban critics Oscar Newman and Jane Jacobs in their now canonical treatises on city design and urban housing.²⁰ These details also betray the regard with which the designers imagined the needs and practices of potential residents. Initially, the architectural teams who designed others of these first PWA projects neglected to install doorbells. This oversight presented considerable problems for tenants—especially in flats and apartment blocks.²¹ Robinson experimented with treatments for Langston’s skin including sampling colors,

²⁰ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* New York: Random House, 1961 and Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space through Urban Design*, New York: Macmillan, 1972.

²¹ Designers of the PWA-sponsored housing program for African American families in Harlem, the Harlem River Houses, failed to install a bell scheme. Crystal Max, Atman Smith and Stephanie Cheval alerted me to this after they found an article in the *New York Age* in preparation for their research paper for an undergraduate course at University of Maryland, College Park during 1999.

textures, and materials on his own residence and office that he built for Officer Campbell at 1927 Eleventh Street NW.²² [See Figures 5.14 and 5.15]



Figures 5.14 and 5.15: Robinson's Photographs of His Residence and Office circa 1938.

Robinson decided against revival and historical styles for Langston. This was a sensible gesture because despite the popularity of Colonial Revival during the 1930s, styles of architecture associated with plantation life held little positive meaning for African Americans. Unlike the design team at Liberty Square in Miami, Florida, who chose a modified Colonial Revival idiom for the African American residents of that PWA-sponsored program, at Langston, Hilyard Robinson looked to the future rather than the past.²³

²² Robinson sent photographs of his home/office to Nathan Straus to show him the genesis of his treatment for Langston. Hilyard R. Robinson to Nathan Straus, May 13, 1938
RG 196 Box 131 H-1706.702 NARA II

²³ Paul S. George and Thomas K. Petersen, "Liberty Square: 1933-1987: The Origins and Evolution of a Public Housing Project" *Tequesta* 1988 48: 53-68.

While the buildings are devoid of gestures to historical styles and flourishes, African American history enjoys a prominent position in the major decorative program. Mounted on the asymmetrical wall that serves as an underpass at the base of an apartment block at the northern edge of the central courtyard, a sculptural program, *The Progress of the Negro Race*, commemorates the past and celebrates the future. Robinson's earliest sketches of the site indicate that he envisioned a decorative frieze there; he worked closely with a local white sculptor, Daniel Gillette Olney, to memorialize several major moments in African American history.²⁴ While only a small fraction of the PWA housing had budgets for decorative programs, the dozen that received funding through the Treasury Relief Art Program (TRAP) emphasized themes that related to the demographics of the residents with a special concern for race, ethnicity, labor and domesticity.²⁵ According to Robinson, the sculpture "broadly symbolized the relation of the largely rural backgrounded low-income earning Negro masses in Washington to greater social security through modern low-rent community housing."²⁶

In five major figurative terra-cotta panels, Olney rendered a version of history that traced African Americans from slavery to freedom, through Reconstruction and the Great Migration. The frieze features themes of labor, family, leadership, and urbanization; the narrative arc of this ensemble suggests that progress is predicated on each of these elements. Olney punctuated the major narrative with three smaller icons that recede in the background. These smaller pieces provide architectural clues to notions of progress

²⁴ The frieze closely resembles the decorative program on the exterior of the Folger Shakespeare Library, the archive and research library that opened in 1930 a few blocks from Robinson's birthplace on Capitol Hill. The building, designed by the architect (and Robinson's former teacher) Paul Cret, features nine bas-relief panels on the north side of the building on East Capitol Street. Robinson followed his teacher's work closely and hosted an exhibition of Cret's work at Howard University in 1929.

²⁵ Olin Dows, "Art for Housing Tenants," *Magazine of Art* v. 31 (November 1938) pp. 616-23.

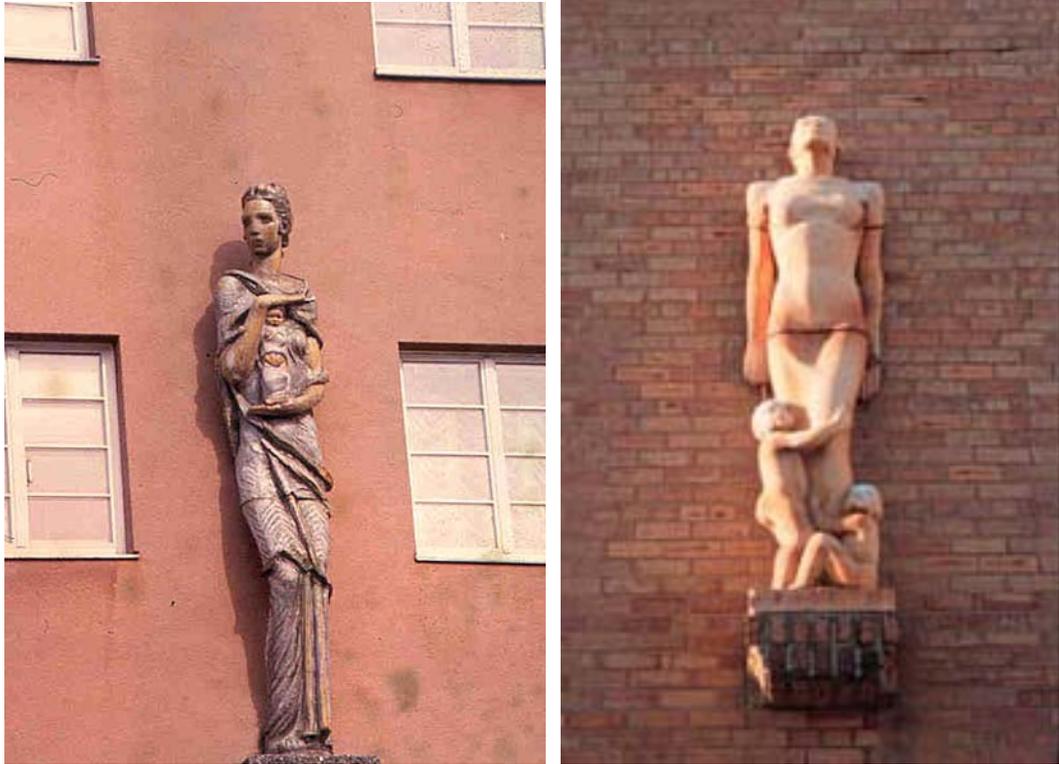
²⁶ Hilyard R. Robinson "'The Langston Housing Project'" n.d. page 4. MSRC Howard University.

and change. A celebration of family life and the centrality of motherhood accompany the historical narrative; domesticity is embodied in the figure of a mother and her two children. This piece directly relates to the sculptural program in the central courtyard at Karl Marx Hof, the Viennese project Robinson so greatly admired.

In the first piece, six stooped figures in profile tend to their work with basic agricultural implements like hoes. The group, representing the labor of enslaved people, includes men and women, a small child and a youth, who stand with their heads cast down. In the second, in the upper left corner, a bearded male figure, perhaps John Mercer Langston, dominates the group with his left arm outstretched, his right at his side. He peers down at the three figures below. In this group, two men look to their left with heads tilted up to follow Langston's direction. The woman stands slightly apart from the others with her left arm covering her chest, her right hand draped across her midriff as though she is protecting herself; she looks to the ground and to the earlier cluster of figures. Floating in the background between the second and third major pieces of sculptural narrative, a small pitched roof cabin with chimney at the right corner appears, suggesting the rural homes of sharecroppers and tenant farmers during the period of Reconstruction. The third major episode includes a man and a woman working in the fields. On the left, the man kneels and peers over his right shoulder looking backwards to the earlier installment and perhaps to the past; the woman, also kneeling, tends to a small leafy crop, she looks ahead to the next episode and to the future. Between the third and fourth acts, another building appears, perhaps suggesting the process of urbanization and mechanization since it appears to be an industrial building with two large chimneys or smokestacks. The roofline of this plant relates to the nearby Potomac Energy and Power

Company (PEPCo) plant on Benning Road and suggests the movement of rural, southern farmers to northern, urban locales like Washington. In the fourth installment, a trio of figures works: at the left, a woman squats and sits next to a kneeling man who works with a jackhammer; a third figure, another man, kneels and stretches his left arm out directing the central figure's work. Between the fourth and fifth figurative pieces, a small cluster of building towers suggests the skyline of the urban North. The narrative culminates in the fifth scene, a family portrait. From left to right, a small child stands, protected by the embrace of the kneeling man, his father, who wraps his right arm around the child while gazing down at him. To the right, a seated woman, the mother (and wife) looks directly at the pair, her son and husband.

While physically separated from this narrative of progress, Robinson positioned and Olney rendered an allegorical representation of domesticity with *Mother and Children*. Its placement, size, and sculptural treatment command attention and relate directly to the positions of the allegorical figures at the Karl Marx Hof. [See Figures 5.16 and 5.17]



Figures 5.16 and 5.17: Figures of Mothers and Children on Karl Marx Hof (left) and Langston (right)

On the otherwise unadorned brick stairwell of an apartment block, a woman stands with her shoulders squared and back, with her left leg slightly forward as if to suggest dynamism, her arms down and thrust back, hands at either side. Her gaze is forward as she looks up with her chin squared. Two small children clutch her legs; one stands at her right leg, reaching his right arm over her knee and grazes her lower thigh; the other, seated on her left, clings to her calves. The three are perched atop a brick ledge, looking over and beyond the central courtyard, looking slightly above the horizon. For Robinson, the adult woman represented “young, vigorous motherhood looking up and outward at better things.” He deemed this piece, the woman and children, to be the “most striking

part” of the sculptural program, worthy of its elevated place of prominence above the other sculpture in the group.²⁷

In his examination of outdoor sculpture in the Federal Triangle of Washington D.C., George Gurney, an art historian, has argued that architectural sculpture “was part of civic expression, allied with a particular attitude towards modern life.”²⁸ Certainly, Robinson and the government officials who administered the arts programs intended the sculpture to edify. This didactic quality of the sculpture should not discount the importance of integrating the arts into the daily lives of working-class people. Here, in the courtyard of a public housing complex, residents enjoyed an historical narrative and art daily. It suggested that publicly-financed art celebrated the contributions of prominent elected officials like John Mercer Langston as well as the lives and labor of anonymous workers and families. In addition to Langston himself, the frieze depicts working-class families as agents of social change and progress. Cast in gendered terms, it emphasizes manual labor, and elected officials valorized as the ones leading the way, but the repetition of work and family underscores their contributions as well. Importantly, the residents in Langston Terrace are portrayed as active participants in African American history. Images of this sculpture accompanied published pieces by journalists in newspapers, in art and architectural periodicals, and in journals of African American history and life.²⁹

²⁷ Hilyard R. Robinson, “The Langston Housing Project” pp. 4-5, MSCR Howard University.

²⁸ George Gurney, *Sculpture and the Federal Triangle* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985, pp. 28-41.

²⁹ Alice Graeme, “Young District Sculptor Given Rare Opportunity; Olney Has Unusual Chance in Commission Decorate Facade in Central Building of Colored Housing Project.” *Washington Post* Washington, D.C.: Feb 28, 1937 p. T9; Olin Dows, *Magazine of Art* v. 31 (November 1938) p. 622; Robert C. Weaver, “The Negro Program in Housing” *Opportunity* July 1938, vol 16: 198-203.

By the mid-1930s when Robinson finalized his plans for Langston, African American men, women and children in the District of Columbia would have been intimately familiar with efforts to create, assert, and interpret the history of African Americans through rituals in large public spaces: Langston's designer and pioneering residents were no exceptions. More, a range of community organizations and institutions endeavored to depict and commemorate African American histories and experiences in public events and entertainments. Olney and Robinson cast in stone historical vignettes that pioneering residents and their visitors would have recognized and experienced.

As demonstrated in Chapter Two, for example, Robinson himself observed how as a teenager, his use of public streets for cadet drills influenced his development. Robinson's high school military exercises related to a longer tradition of African American everyday uses of urbanism in Washington. In April 1866 and every April in subsequent decades, for example, at least 5,000 African Americans took to the streets of the District to celebrate Emancipation while thousands more participated as spectators along the route.³⁰ In the early part of the 20th century, thousands of Washingtonians crowded in Griffith Stadium for three fair clear autumnal evenings in October 1915 for performances of the *Star of Ethiopia*, an historical pageant written by W.E.B. Du Bois, endorsed by the Board of Education, and sponsored by local figures.³¹ This pageant, performed by a cast of 1,000 children, women, and men, traced the experiences of African Americans from the African Continent through the Middle Passage, through

³⁰ Craig A. Schiffert, "Stepping Toward Freedom: An Historical Analysis of the District of Columbia Emancipation Day Parades, 1866-1900" from Elizabeth Clark Lewis, ed., *First Freed Washington, D.C., in the Emancipation Era* Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 2002, pp. 111-134.

³¹ Display Advertisement, "The Star of Ethiopia" *Washington Post* October 10, 1915, pg. SM3. Weather Conditions, *Washington Post* October 10, 1915, pg. 12.

slavery, Reconstruction and beyond in a three hour, six part tableaux with music, dancing, lighting and elaborate scenery; half of the proceeds were directed to the Colored Public Schools playground movement.³²

Later, local churches and organizations celebrated and commemorated African-American history in living tableaux, frequently presented at Griffith Stadium. For example, 300 participants from the Interdenominational Ushers' Union of Washington depicted "Progress of a Race" before 5,000 spectators in September 1937.³³ The narrative chronicled a "sociological study for the period from 1850 to 1937" in three acts: slavery, emancipation, and the present. Actors were drawn from "every denomination found in the city" and included church workers and Boy Scouts.³⁴ The wide variety of Christian denominations drawn from each of the city's quadrants and many neighborhoods indicates the relevance of history to African American civic culture in D.C. in the 1930s. This suggests that the frieze at Langston was not simply a novel tectonic flourish or ceremonial backdrop; African American stories of the past and present were highly relevant to the residents. Robinson recognized the need for an outdoor space that could be flexible enough to accommodate public rituals, pageants, and

³² On Du Bois' involvement and mention of the Washington performances, see David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* New York: Henry Holt, 1993, pp. 459-461.

³³ "5,000 Attend Pageant with 300 on Stage: *Baltimore Afro-American* September 11, 1937, p.13. In 1940, 100 members of choirs from Campbell, St. Paul and Methodist churches participated in a pageant that celebrate 75 years of African American history through song. "2,000 See Colored Pageant Depicting Race's Progress" *Washington Post* September 6, 1940, p.3.

³⁴ In 1937, participants in the pageant represented: Third and Rock Creek Baptist, Park Road Community, Contee AME Zion, Second Zion and Jerusalem Baptist, Silving Vista, Miles Memorial CME, Union Wesley AMEZ, Ebenezer AME, Metropolitan AMEZ, Second Baptist of Southwest, First Baptist, Sixth Zion Baptist, Lilly Memorial, Randall Memorial, Liberty Baptist, Matthew Memorial, Zion Baptist, Emanuel Baptist, Mt. Carmel Baptist, Walker Memorial, Israel Baptist, Mt. Zion M.E., Vermont Avenue Baptist, Metropolitan AME, Jerusalem Tabernacle Baptist, Friendship Baptist, Good Hope M.E., Pilgrim A.M.E., First Baptist of Mt. Pleasant, St. Paul AUMP, Boy Scout Troop No. 512, First Baptist (Deanwood), Mt. Airy Baptist, Mt. Lebanon, John Wesley AMEZ, Mt. Moriah Baptist, Bethesda Baptist, Florida Avenue Baptist, Galbraith AMEZ, Macedonia, St. John Baptist, Turner Memorial, Rehobeth Baptist, Sibrook Memorial, Delaware Avenue Baptist, Mt. Moreb Baptist, Shiloh Baptist, Ebenezer M.E., Lane CME, Mt. Hebo, Brown Memorial, Southern Baptist.

place-making. While the courtyard and frieze were rendered and executed by the architect and sculptor, the space, with its decorative program and possibilities, resonated with the pioneering residents.

Langston's sculptural program also met the functional needs of young residents.

[See Figure 5.19]



Figure 5.18: Children atop Lenore Thomas Straus's *Frog*

The functional, if whimsical, sculptural playground furniture enlivened the courtyard upon their arrival in mid-1940; they relate to the decorative programs in some of the Viennese housing estates Robinson visited during his tour of Europe in the early 1930s and to other PWA sites. As a contemporary journalist observed in the *Washington Post*, “The chief problem for the artists, therefore, was to create designs which would harmonize with the surrounding architecture and at the same time, lend themselves safely

to acrobatic use by children of all ages.”³⁵ Cast on-site in the project’s powerhouse, several local artists designed massive animal sculptures for the playground. Initially, these concrete animals were meant to encircle a shallow wading pool, but the pool was never realized. Lenore Thomas Straus, Hugh Collins, and Carmelo Aruta employed ochre-colored concrete in which they mixed brick fragments for the walrus, frog, and hippopotamus. For his pair of horses, Joseph Goethe also used concrete mixed with darker brown brick so that flecks of red and purple surface. This outdoor playground sculpture offered sturdy, imaginative furniture that delighted young residents, and importantly, was sized to accommodate their young, petite bodies. Eloise Little Greenfield recalled their arrival on-site.

I remember when they first came to live with us. They were friends to climb on or to lean against, or to gather around in the evening. You could sit on the frog’s head and look out over the city at the tall trees and rooftops.³⁶

Greenfield’s childhood recollection points to one paradox of modern housing: the contrived aspects of the landscape. As a girl, Greenfield’s outdoor play occurred in an open space on a paved, impermeable playground surrounded by manicured lawns, perched on a concrete animal with grand vistas of both “nature”, the plantings and foliage, and urbanism, the skyline and the roofs.³⁷

At other PWA sponsored housing like Jane Addams in Chicago and at Harlem River Houses in New York City, artists offered similar pieces of sculpture in which the forms offered both functional as well as decorative presences in common, public spaces.

³⁵ Adele K. Smith, “WPA Artists Completing Langston Sculptures” *Washington Post* September 1, 1940, A7.

³⁶ Eloise Little Greenfield, *Childtimes*, p. 139

³⁷ Frederick R. Davis, an environmental historian, pointed out this tension between nature and urbanism during a presentation at Florida State University. In classroom discussions at University of Michigan, Cari J. Varner also pressed me to think harder about the manipulated qualities of nature at Langston Terrace.

After Robinson used concrete animals as playground furniture at Langston, similar figures were introduced elsewhere in federally-funded projects in the city. For example, Franklin Thorne and Hilyard Robinson served on a jury for sculptural playground pieces in other local housing estates.³⁸ In introducing these pieces of playground sculpture, Robinson and the other government sponsors signaled their regard for childhood and children's play. These designers and reformers emphasized supervised, wholesome recreation for young residents by engineering safe spaces free of vehicular traffic; they also encouraged active play with charming, permanent concrete equipment.

As the children's play demonstrates in a period photograph from the early 1940s, Lenore Thomas Straus thoughtfully fashioned *Frog* to serve the needs of small children and others. Straus skillfully designed the sculpture to function as playground equipment. Her sculpture, and to a lesser degree those of the other sculptors, succeeds in part because of the smooth lines and pleasing forms, but more because they catered to the needs of children. Her rendering of a frog offers at least four carefully sequenced levels: from the base, a climber can mount the sculpture easily by scrambling up the webbed feet, up hind legs, onto the gently sloped back, to the head and its protruding eyes. Additionally, diminutive children can duck into the nook formed by the frog's chin and chest. Young residents relished climbing aboard their concrete playmates and imagined a neighborhood menagerie just steps from their homes.

The playground furniture provides an explicit example of how the landscape of Langston catered to the needs of young residents. In addition to these features of the decorative program, the prominent placement of the playground reminds us of the ways in which the designers conceived of the larger environment as a healthy and protective

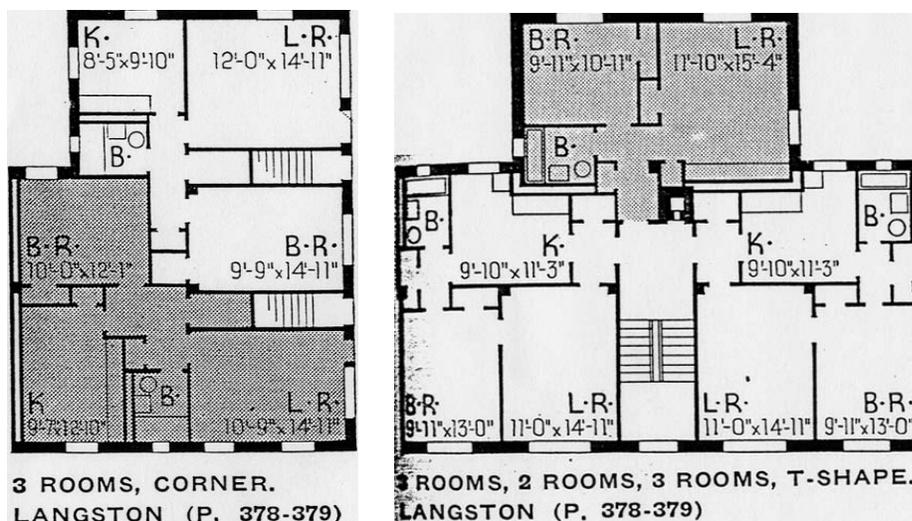
³⁸ JG, "Whimsical Turtle Wins WPA Sculpture Prize" *Washington Post* August 10, 1941. p. L7

place for children and their families. Still, there were limits to the features and amenities that the government would finance for public housing residents. While it remains unclear why the plans for the wading pool were scrapped, fountains or a spray pool, even a shallow one, would have been a refreshing addition to Langston given the sticky, hot summers of Washington, D.C. When juxtaposed against Eloise Little Greenfield's recollections of the accidental swimming deaths of her playmates and other African American children who ventured into the local rivers during sweltering summers because segregation prevented them from taking the waters at public pools like Rosedale Pool located at 17th and Gales Streets just across Benning Road, the omission of the wading pool seems less an oversight and more tragic.³⁹

Yet, the exterior spaces were not the only focal point for Robinson and his reform-minded colleagues: the domestic interiors received careful attention and unit planning. In addition to remaking the neighborhoods of working-class families, the designers and other reformers who envisioned these federally-funded housing programs sought to reshape the private lives of public housing residents by manipulating the inside of their homes as well. Their prescriptions and programs for unit planning emphasized nuclear family life. Government guidelines established standards for the dwelling units based, in part, on houser Catherine Bauer's understanding of the Existenzminimum movement in interwar Europe promoted by Karel Teige and others in Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM).⁴⁰ [See Figures 5.19 and 5.20]

³⁹ Greenfield, *Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir* New York: Harper Trophy, reprint 1992.

⁴⁰ Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002. Eric Dluhosch, translator.



Figures 5.19 and 5.20: Unit Plans as Published in *Architectural Forum*

Accordingly, Robinson derived unit plans from the directives that each dwelling unit must have:

- cross or through ventilation
- hot and cold running water, bath and flush toilet
- complete privacy in individual rooms
- safe means of exit in emergencies
- at least one square foot of window space for every ten square feet of floor space
- natural lighting of stairways
- fire resisting materials throughout⁴¹

At Langston, as in other early PWA housing programs, modern housing significantly improved the material conditions of the pioneering families, many of whom previously lived with other families in expensive, crowded units, some without light, water and heat. Residency in these new apartments, flats, and rowhouses marked a chance for families to cultivate a domestic life with modern amenities and appliances; in many cases, government housing offered a new standard of living. Mindful of this opportunity, Robinson attempted to shape a total, transformative environment. As he

⁴¹ As transcribed from an image in Hilyard Robinson Collection Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

organized space in these homes, Robinson and the federal government attempted to reorder and reorganize the residents' private, domestic lives. Robinson's plans for individual units at Langston emphasized nuclear family life; they also revealed the government's assumptions about privacy, decorum, and domesticity.

The unit plans at Langston represented a transitional moment in housing in the United States: aspects of the plans are traditional while others hinted at progressive notions about space and family life. Following architectural conventions of the period, Robinson assigned functions for each room and separated them by walls and doors. Each unit included a bathroom, a living room, and at least one bedroom. The majority possessed modern kitchens with hot and cold running water and major appliances; 19 of the 274 were kitchenless apartments. Robinson assembled plans for living rooms, distinct from dedicated private spaces like sleeping chambers or bedrooms. The government insisted and Robinson offered plans in which visitors circulated through the unit without requiring entrance to private spaces as in historical models of housing. This detail suggests at least two things: the designers held an expectation that residents would invite and entertain company in their homes, and that they should maintain a social distance from their company by prohibiting entry into private spaces. The paradox of this notion, of course, is that in public housing, tenants must admit into their homes housing officials like the project manager. Landlords circumscribed and trumpeted notions of privacy and decorum for residents in government-sponsored and other rental housing programs.

Two hundred and seventy-four families lived in small units at Langston. Despite Robinson's careful planning and labeling of rooms devoted to sleeping and living, given

the size of families, many spaces served multiple functions. In 1939, the average family consisted of 3.51 people at Langston.⁴² Since roughly 2/3 of the units at Langston had only one bedroom, parents with children either shared bedrooms with their little ones or converted living rooms to sleeping quarters during nighttime hours.⁴³ For example, Eloise Little Greenfield recalled that her family's living room doubled as her bedroom at night.⁴⁴

Number of Rooms (excluding bathroom)	Distribution of Rooms within Unit	Unit Type	Total Number of Units
2 Rooms	1 Bedroom, 1 Living Room	Apartment	19
3 Rooms	1 Bedroom, 1 Living Room, 1 Kitchen	Apartment	78
3 Rooms	1 Bedroom, 1 Living Room, 1 Kitchen	Flat	83
4 Rooms	2 Bedrooms, 1 Living Room, 1 Kitchen	Flat	35
4 Rooms	2 Bedrooms, 1 Living Room, 1 Kitchen	Apartment	27
4 Rooms	2 Bedrooms, 1 Living Room, 1 Kitchen	House	26
5 Rooms	3 Bedrooms, 1 Living Room, 1 Kitchen	House	6

Figure 5.21: Distribution of 3, 4, and 5 Room Units at Langston in 1939

The government's insistence on natural light in every room represented a major contribution to improving housing standards. Through large casement windows, natural light and fresh air entered every home; through mesh screens, flies, mosquitoes, and other

⁴² This figure is derived from a roster of residents in John Ihlder's papers. John Ihlder Collection, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, Hyde Park New York.

⁴³ This table is derived from the aforementioned roster and data published in lengthy spread on government housing in *Architectural Record* May 1938.

⁴⁴ Greenfield, *Childtimes* p. 112.

airborne pests did not. Modernists adored the machinist aesthetic of steel-framed windows and public health reformers prized the screens as a major deterrent to the spread of disease. Yet, these openings not only let light and fresh air in, but they also permitted residents to look out: some enjoyed vistas of the courtyard; others enjoyed views of the expansive green lawns of the adjacent schools; while still others could monitor their neighbors' activities. Reformers hailed the use of large windows to promote health and hygiene through light and ventilation; some residents may have prized (or resented) them for surveillance reasons. Since Robinson's site plan did not maximize solar and thermal efficiency, some residents may have found it harder and more expensive to heat or cool rooms depending on the season and the movement of the sun. For example, in the eastern-facing rooms in the apartment blocks on 24th Street, residents may enjoy pleasant vistas of the campus of schools and the driving range and greens of what became Langston Golf Course, but they contended with strong, direct sunlight in the early mornings and little direct sunlight afternoon. Again, the lack of direct sun encourages thermal loss and drives heating costs up.

Government reformers and project architects devoted considerable attention (and finances) to the kitchen. The kitchen's layout and amenities reveal assumptions and beliefs about domestic life perhaps more clearly than any other room in the unit.⁴⁵ In multi-family dwellings, in particular, designers must decide whether the units will be organized around individual, private kitchens or communal kitchens. At Langston, Robinson installed kitchens in two basement social rooms to assist in food preparation for

⁴⁵ Joy Parr, "Modern Kitchen, Good Home, Strong Nation" *Technology and Culture* October 2002 volume 43: 657-667; Shelley Nickles, "'Preserving Women': Refrigerator Design as Social Process in the 1930s" *Technology and Culture* October 2002 volume 43: 693-727 and Elizabeth Cromley, "Transforming the Food Axis" *Material History Review* vol. 44: 1996

special, social events. These kitchens were not outfitted with larger scaled, industrial-sized appliances; they were never intended to serve as communal kitchens for routine, collective food storage or preparation. The kitchens he configured in 255 units at Langston served a number of functions. They were designated as multipurpose rooms; by design, they served as sites of storage, production and consumption, in part, because the government officials decided that separate dining rooms were too costly an extravagance for federally-funded housing. Robinson segregated these activities and practices—food storage, preparation and consumption—from the other spaces in the unit, perhaps in an attempt to contain strong cooking smells from other rooms in the unit. (The incinerators in the apartment blocks suggest that Robinson and the others aimed to dispose of trash and fetid materials.)

Designers devoted considerable attention to the kitchen. With the electrical appliances and modern amenities, the kitchen was the most expensive room in the unit and it was the room that may have marked, in many cases, the most significant improvement in the family's standard of living.⁴⁶ Through the kitchen and its electrical technology, Langston's families made modern appliances their own. While the labor associated with the maintenance of a private kitchen is not to be underestimated, modern amenities and appliances promised to enhance domestic life especially with regard to sanitation and hygiene. For example, these modern kitchens offered a reliable source for clean, hot and cold running water and electric refrigerators offered new possibilities for food preservation and storage. Aesthetically, the appliances and amenities in Langston's apartments represent a transition: they are configured to increase efficiency and ease, but

⁴⁶ My interpretation of the kitchen and its technology relates most closely to the work of Ronald C. Tobey, *Technology as Freedom: The New Deal and the Electrical Modernization of the American Home* Berkeley: University of California, 1996

the cabinets, sink, and electric technologies are separate pieces, each on its own legs. That is, the appliances and kitchen equipment are not integrated into one console or cabinet. This arrangement suggests that the designers recognized the importance of alignment and ergonomics, but these principles were not fully realized in the design itself.⁴⁷

Government reformers prescribed the configuration of the kitchen; their rhetoric indicates that this room presented the opportunity to maximize the productivity of the home unit. “The kitchen—the domestic workshop—will be so designed as to make possible the preparation of food, with its ancillary labors, with the least possible waste of time and effort, and with a minimum of fatigue.”⁴⁸ Robinson configured the appliances to increase efficiency and productivity for working-class family life. At Langston, appliances included electric technology that had in earlier decades been considered luxury items: a three burner electric range by Edison General Electric Co. and an electric refrigerator by Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company. The sink was produced by Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Company. A pair of metal cabinets, by Excel Metal Cabinet Company, each with three shelves mounted next to each other on the wall above the sink. A smaller, narrow single shelf mounted directly below the shelving unit. In the architectural press and in the housing standards circulated among project architects, the government enumerated a long list of kitchen concerns and directives about ergonomics, light, ventilation and storage. While they fixed most of

⁴⁷ Here, Robinson’s kitchen design does not compare favorably with the units he studied in Frankfurt or Vienna. Grete Schüte Lihotsky conceived of a kitchen that Ernst May incorporated into his housing program, hence the appellation, the Frankfurt Kitchen. See Susan R. Henderson, “A Revolution in the Women’s Sphere: Grete Lihotsky and the Frankfurt Kitchen” from Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze, and Carol Henderson, ed. *Architecture and Feminism*, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.

⁴⁸ “Government Standards” *Architecture Record*, May 1935, p. 174.

their attention to the height, order, and size of surfaces, appliances, and cabinets, government designers also contemplated the relationship between the kitchen and the outdoors. They advocated, wherever possible, for the kitchen windows to offer views to supervise children's play outside.

Langston offered an important opportunity for African American working-class families to make modern lives in modern housing whether inside or out, in the kitchen or the courtyard. How did the residents activate the spaces Robinson manipulated and ordered? The ways in which they invested their labor and leisure into the transformation of the landscape of modern housing is the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter SIX: 'Not perfect but good': Living at Langston Terrace Dwellings

“For us, Langston Terrace wasn’t an in-between place. It was a growing up place, a good growing up place. Neighbors who cared, family and friends, and a lot of fun. Life was good. Not perfect, but good. We knew about problems, heard about them, saw them, lived through some hard ones ourselves, but our community wrapped itself around us, put itself between us and the hard knocks, to cushion the blows.”¹

As Chapter Five demonstrated, Hilyard Robinson’s careful study of architectural and planning solutions resulted in an aesthetically pleasing enclave of modernist forms perched on a naturally terraced hill in Northeast, D.C. Yet, Langston’s achievement as a modern housing program depended on the early residents’ daily experiences of the built environment. The buildings alone could not and did not foster Langston’s everyday urbanism: Langston’s success depended on the residents whose place-making strategies and tactics animated and enlivened the speckled concrete and the buff and brown bricks and mortar. Their labor fostered community formation. As the pioneering residents moved in, working-class African American families activated the vacant spaces in the central courtyard, in the tiled stairwells, in the basement laundry rooms, and in

¹ Eloise Greenfield and Lessie Jones Little, *Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir* New York: Harper Collins, 1979, p. 135.

the modest flats and row houses. By their labor and through their lived experiences, Langston's earliest residents transformed modern housing into modern homes.

This chapter explores this process by asking how the earliest cohort of pioneering residents used the spaces at 21st and Benning Roads in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Before Eloise Greenfield published over 40 children's books or won acclaim, she lived at Langston with her two brothers, Wilbur and Gerald, and her parents, Weston and Lessie Little; they moved into their two bedroom unit on her birthday in May 1938. Later in life, she dipped into this well of memories for her children's books. In a three-part memoir of the women in her family written with her mother, Eloise Little Greenfield recounted life in Langston in its early days. Her memories, taken with newspaper accounts, period photographs, reports, correspondence, and interviews featured in the documentary film, *Home*, reveal that life at Langston was "not perfect, but good."²

Langston proved to be a "good growing up place" for the Littles, their neighbors, and for generations of Washingtonians, in part, because of the

² Materials from this chapter were drawn from: Claude Barnett Collection at Chicago Historical Society; *Washington Evening Star* Photo Archive, Vertical Files and Records of the DC Public Library Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Library; Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Archives Hyde Park, New York; Prints and Photographs Division Library of Congress; Project Files of National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, Maryland, Archives of the Greenbelt Museum, Moorland Spingarn Research Collection at Howard University, and newspapers including *Washington Post*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Pittsburgh Courier*.

thoughtfully conceived built environment, and, in part, because of a wide array of social institutions that the residents and managers created. In the program's earliest and formative years, the physical design encouraged and the social programming supposed that residents would engage and participate in community life: in periodic, dramatic ceremonies, and in daily, ordinary routines. This experience of everyday urbanism, while desirable and nurturing for some was also demanding and, occasionally, trying. This chapter examines the social uses of the modern housing program with an emphasis on the common spaces – both outdoors and indoors. How did this set of buildings work for the people who moved through them? How did their labor shape the space? And what can their experiences reveal about everyday urbanism and everyday modernism in the interwar period in Washington, D.C.?

Given the large applicant pool, the staff of the Housing Division had the advantage of being punctilious and scrupulous during the final stages of the application process. The staff took no chances: they preferred only families deemed to be especially suited for life at Langston. Mindful of the experimental and provisional nature of modern housing and publicly-funded housing both locally in the District of Columbia and nationally in the United States, government housers opted for people they believed to be the most promising and best equipped to rent apartments, flats and row houses. They selected an

accomplished cohort to be among the first to move into Langston in May 1938. Recall from Chapter One, government agents investigated not only the financial histories and material circumstances of the prospective tenants. Agents also scrutinized the family's relationships with and regard for their neighbors; government inspectors also attempted to measure that family's respect for their landlords' property during their site visits. Langston's early residents may have possessed highly developed interpersonal skills before they moved in. Indeed, in crowded, dense neighborhoods, in close quarters with limited, and in some cases, uncertain income, they cultivated skills in community-building. As renters in apartment buildings and boarders in private houses, working-class African Americans honed skills in organizing space, improvising material culture, negotiating privacy, stretching budgets, coping with noise, tending to conflict, dividing labor, arranging child-care, and circulating information whether it be prospects for new jobs and new housing or people's "business."³ As project manager Franklin Thorne observed in his first annual report, 122 of 271 families were "removed from one-room lodgings for families of three or more individuals and all came from surroundings conducive to disease and delinquency."⁴ One

³ James Borchert's interpretative strategy for understanding the skills and creativity of residents who lived in alley dwellings suggested how to explore these concepts. See especially Chapter 3, James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980.

⁴ Langston, U.S. Housing Project, Year Old Tomorrow," *Washington Star*, May 4, 1939. Washingtoniana Collection, MLK Library.

of the pioneering residents, Edwin Washington, recalled his former residence; he sardonically stated, “I wasn’t even living down there; I was just existing.” For Washington, the move to Apartment 35 in 662 24th Street from a dark one-bedroom, rat-infested apartment at 613 19th Street, Northeast, a place known as “The Bottom,” offered a new chance at life.⁵

Perhaps more than the elite architects, planners, and reformers associated with the program, these working-class families, who seized the space, began *making modern homes*. Who were they? In 1939, 878 people lived at Langston. The average family size was 3.2279; with at least 351 children living on-site; 16 of 287 households [or 5.57%] were “female headed households.” At least 28% of the residents – 81 of 287-- were employed at government agencies including the six people (or 2% of the population) who were employed by the project. The average annual reported income was just under \$1,200 (\$1,199.93 average annual reported income for total population; \$1,181.03 average annual reported income for residents not employed by PWA who lived and worked on-site at the project).⁶ These men and women worked in a variety of jobs at government agencies, in private companies, in apartment buildings, and retail stores, as well as in households around the city: they worked as busmen; craft teachers at the Y;

⁵ Quote transcribed from Barr Weisman and Glen Leiner, *Home: Langston Terrace Dwellings*, 1988. Washington’s addresses were derived from work in Washington’s City Directories held at Washingtoniana, MLK Library.

⁶ This material is derived from a list of occupants found among John Ihlder’s papers at FERA Hyde Park, New York.

elevator operators at private apartments such as the Savoy and the Pershing, government agencies such as the Government Printing Office, and in department stores like Woodward & Lothrop; they worked as chauffeurs, truck drivers, and drivers for individuals and for companies including Lerch Inc. and Hoover; they worked as porters at many sites including Call Carl Inc.; they worked as clerks at grocers; they worked as messengers for federal agencies and in private firms; and they worked as barbers; laborers; custodians; cooks; janitors; waiters; and maids.⁷ While some of these positions may have required office or business hours, several jobs obligated men and women to be away from their families for longer periods, during the nights, as well as weekends.

Robinson offered a superblock plan with a central courtyard at the very heart of the complex; David Williston's plantings softened the scheme and introduced "nature." This large, level parcel may have been destined to become the primary outdoor, ceremonial space, but it could have become an urban void, listless and empty; its success as a place depended on the residents' use of the space. The pioneering families who moved to Langston craved the openness that this site offered: the openness of this plan and the topography of the site starkly contrasted with the physical environments where they lived before their moves. (Previously, most pioneering residents lived as roomers in rowhouses or shared

⁷ These job titles are derived from listings in the City Directories; from their application forms or letters; and the Manuscript Census of 1930.

apartments in densely populated neighborhoods in the city; the streets in front of and alleys behind their units constituted the major open spaces for recreational activity, a point that deeply troubled parents (and reformers) of the period.)

Later in life, the earliest residents approvingly recalled their arrival at Langston as remarkable for the unmatched access to light and space.⁸ At Langston, the ample, open courtyard afforded residents a chance to have direct access to safe, decent recreational spaces at their front doors: the possibilities were as wide as the courtyard itself. The courtyard proved to be a prominent feature of Langston's landscape: it was the major public space. Residents activated it with formal and informal, passive and active recreation.

At the northern end of the courtyard, the archway and underpass open onto a patio that steps down into the courtyard. This sequence of the space served as a stage for ceremonies that required a dais or platform. The formality and centrality of this particular public space proved especially useful when residents hosted events that included people who were attached and invested in Langston, but who did not reside on-site. Framed by Daniel Olney's sculptural frieze, *The Progress of the Negro Race*, celebrants used this arcade for rituals, programs, and parties as well as for spontaneous, informal and individual recreation. Daniel Olney's decorative program for the courtyard underscored its

⁸ Barr Weisman and Glenn Leiner, *Home: Langston Terrace Dwellings*, D.C. Humanities Council, 1987.

import. The iconography of progress, labor, and domesticity marched across the walls of the courtyard at Langston with racially specific, gendered messages for residents and visitors. It framed the extraordinary (and the everyday) dramas as a permanent proscenium without the thick velvety curtains found inside theaters.

One of the earliest ceremonial celebrations was on December 21, 1938 at the first tree lighting. Residents and visitors gathered at twilight under the arch, holding candles and other artificial lights around the Christmas tree; a local newspaper account mentioned that a number of government housing officials also attended. As the *Washington Post* noted, “The official party included United State Housing Administrator, Nathan Straus; John Ihlder, the executive officer of the District Alley Authority; Canon Anson Phelps Stokes, president of the Washington Housing Authority; Dr. Robert Weaver, special assistant to Straus; Norwood Williams, president of the [R]esiden[ts] [C]ouncil; and Frankl[i]n Thorne, resident housing manager.”⁹ As the list of guests indicates, some opportunistic federal officials exploited the setting, eager to show off the property; they sought to assemble in the courtyard, staging rituals and to take full advantage of the public relations appeal of the landscape. And the residents themselves exercised a flare for the dramatic. Routinely, they used this setting

⁹ There is a photograph of the tree-lighting in Hilyard Robinson’s personal photographic collection at Howard. “Langston Lights Its First Tree,” *Washington Post* December 22, 1938, pg. 15.

for formal, grand events, but it was also large and flexible enough to serve as the setting for a number of organized recreational matches including children's kite contests as well as kickball and baseball games. For outsiders, reports and images of these programs attested to the affirmative and vibrant life in public, modern housing.

When Mrs. Dorothy Miller, of Apartment 5 at 2103 G Street, conceived of and planned a three-day festival to mark the first anniversary of occupancy at Langston, *Washington Star* and *Chicago Defender* readers learned of their activities.¹⁰ News of anniversary festivities circulated as a wire story for the Associated Negro Press (ANP). The event served as a convivial celebration for members of the immediate community, but it also signaled to the larger local and national publics that the experiment at Langston was working. It was a self-conscious celebration of the housing program and the residents' new lives at Langston.

The prize exhibition at the fête was a photographic record of the 25 babies born in Langston during the first year of residence. To be sure, proud parents enthusiastically shared snapshots and photographs of their little ones with the immediate neighbors, but these images also circulated beyond the property via the local daily newspaper, *Washington Star*. The pictures of round, diapered

¹⁰ Box 359 Folder 8, Claude Barnett Collection, Chicago Historical Society; "Langston, U.S. Housing Project, Year Old Tomorrow," *Washington Star*, May 4, 1939. Washingtoniana Collection, MLK Library; "Housing Project Marks First Year" *Chicago Defender* (National edition) May 13, 1939. p. 13

infants may have also served as a testament to the vibrant health of the community. As the *Washington Star* observed, infant mortality in Washington, D.C. – especially among low-income Black families – was extremely high. For those skeptical of New Deal housing programs, especially for federally-financed projects for African Americans, government officials parried criticism with pitches that promoted the health and well-being of the children, promising reduced infant mortality and juvenile delinquency. The photographic display and exhibition at the anniversary celebration and the publication of the babies' pictures in the local paper presaged subsequent public discussions about the public good of public housing, as indeed, a year later, when USHA Administrator Nathan Straus pointed to Langston as an exemplar of healthy and wholesome living among public housing residents. In 1940, two years after Langston opened, when the agency surveyed the 40,000 children of the 25,000 low-income families residing in public housing projects, they found a virtual absence of juvenile delinquency, injuries from traffic accidents, and misdemeanors among adults. For Straus, the results offered, "Convincing proof that slum clearance pays dividends in human as well as economic values."¹¹ Daily newspapers like the *Star* and weekly Black newspapers ran news items and photos of young children – perhaps as a visual strategy to counter stories of

¹¹ "Absence of Child Delinquency Noted in U.S.H.A. Survey" *Washington Star* January 14, 1940, Washingtoniana Collection, MLK Library

infant mortality and juvenile delinquency that frequented the pages of newspapers and periodicals. Pictures of the infants and toddlers averred the fitness and vigor of life in modern housing.

Importantly, these images depict people and places. As such, they provide clues for the early residents' efforts at community formation: they help us to picture their place-making strategies. And, they also suggest the values and esteem that parents inculcated in the young. Perhaps because it was a prime location and photogenic, the arcade also served as the setting for spring rituals including a Maypole dance: an early image from the project portrayed children weaving fanciful ribbons around a pole, the young boys in shorts with knee-highs and pressed shirts and girls in diaphanous, fluffy long skirts with hair bows, others with knee-length dresses with satin sashes wrapped round the middle. Their fancy dress and clothing hints at the labor involved in outfitting and grooming the children, but, more this springtime dancing ritual is a highly specialized, difficult activity that must be choreographed and practiced. Who taught them to dance? Perhaps a parent, teacher, or a WPA worker offered lessons. Still, an adult coordinated and orchestrated the movement of many young children who braided multi-colored ribbons around a pole, wending over and under while simultaneously dancing in a circle. The complexity of this ceremonial dance required skill and patience, and an enormous investment in

time and labor.¹² These snapshots of young children allow us to glimpse the residents' standards, norms and strategies for dignity and decorum.

Still others joined the children in the outdoor ballroom: Teenagers and adults glided and grooved through the courtyard as well. Proudly and fondly, a former resident detailed adult dancing and revelry in the space,

In the summer, we had movies, concerts. We had [bebop bandleader] Billy Eckstein and his band to come through there, [pianist and big band bandleader] Count Basie's band to come through there. We had the WPA bands ... in the middle of the ... these were our block dances. [...] WPA bands used to come into the court. Right in the court...you know where the sculptures are. And we would sit out there and block dance. And we would dance all night long. And we had some good dancers. You actually could toot and toot all over the court: Sandra Huggins, Jackie Simmons. [...] It was a groove.

At the northern and southern ends, stolid concrete figures lumbered like inattentive chaperones, while the neighbors--these occasional dancers--gamboled and ambled under the arcade and across the terrace. This surface lot swelled with life, animated with activities for younger and older members of the community during daylight, through twilight and beyond.

Franklin Thorne, the first resident manager who lived on-site with his family, and Residents' Council opened activities and services on-site to local neighbors. As a result, Langston enjoyed fairly permeable boundaries; community events drew other African-American residents who lived in close

¹² "Recreation Units To Hold 3 May Festivals Here" *Washington Post* May 15, 1949. p. M22

proximity. They mingled with Langston's residents at social events: their children attended the same schools and scout troops; they competed against each other in kite contests, ping pong matches and baseball games; they hiked, baked, and talked together; they petitioned the government for more buses and better schools; they built and borrowed from a library on-site; and they worshipped together.

"Langston was a close-knit community," reminisced Samuel Washington, an original resident at a reunion in 1986. "There were hundreds of youngsters and we all knew each other. There were two recreation centers. There was a co-op store. They had speaker forums on Sundays. [. . .]It was Utopia.¹³" During the New Deal, utopian principles buttressed government housing programs sponsored by both the Public Works Administration and the Resettlement Administration. Architects, planners, reformers, managers, and hopeful residents imbued these housing programs with an idealized domesticity. While the architectural vision was rendered by a cadre of professional male architects and the management was entrusted to a cadre of trained professionals – largely men, the work of living at Langston was largely realized by mothers and fathers and children who moved into these apartments and row houses. As lived experiences, the utopic goals were realized by the labor of the men and women

¹³ Amy De Paul, "Historians' Project to Honor Architect," *Washington Post*, October 16, 1986, D2.

who hosted parties, led meetings, cooked meals, and planted gardens. These gardens remain a particularly striking feature of Langston's landscape. The plantings, which were introduced during the phase of government planning by the landscape architect David O. Williston were maintained, rearranged, and enhanced by residents like those who lived at 660 24th Street who installed their very own white picket fence in the front of their property or those who introduced a bird bath in the backyard.¹⁴

Through a series of initiatives, Langston's residents and resident management cultivated a community that was fun. Their leisure resulted from their labor. Like a number of the federal housing projects that sought to shelter families, social programs emphasized the requirements of young families. Early images from other housing programs for African Americans capture remarkably similar moments of youngsters engaged by adults, usually African American women, in structured periods of story time, music lessons, or handi-crafts. In these photographs, well-groomed children sit in rapt attention both indoors and outdoors at farflung sites including Brand Whitlock Homes in Toledo, Ohio, Harlem River Houses in Manhattan, and Lafitte Housing in New Orleans.

At Langston, a wide array of recreational activities catered to children's needs. Langston's physical features afforded many possibilities for spontaneous

¹⁴ See for example, period photographs from the Theodor Horyzduk Collection that depict the fencing and the bird bath.

and informal play both inside and out. At the center of the neighborhood, the commodious courtyard welcomed residents for outdoor amusements in every season. In the hot, close summers, the breeze that blew off the river made the courtyard a desirable location to cool off and to catch up. Residents recalled and photographs depict childhood afternoons spent roller skating, playing paddle balls, bicycling; one former tenant recounted the opportunities for passive leisure as well, “Or just sit on the bench and watch and talk, you know. And everybody would just sort of meet up there in the evening.”¹⁵

Imaginative residents took full advantage of the court in the winter as well. “And one time , all the parents --- the fathers stayed up all night and poured water on the court so that it could freeze while the mamas stayed in cooked the, uh, coffee stuff and the next morning we went ice skating. But the only thing was we didn’t have any skates!” Parents may have surreptitiously prepared the court with water by squirting a garden hose or ferrying pitchers of water to the rink: either method required effort, coordination and determination to sufficiently glaze the surface on a dark, chilly, subfreezing night. While the memory of having a makeshift ice rink installed in the playground overnight may have been magical and humorous, the poignancy of this recollection is heightened when we consider that D.C.’s “public” ice rinks—Uline Arena and

¹⁵ Weisman and Leiner, *Home*, 1987.

Riverside Stadium--prohibited African American patronage through the 1950s.¹⁶ Langston's children may have delighted in ice skating films especially when Sonja Henie and Dorothy Dandridge glided across movie screens and through *Sun Valley Serenade* (1939). Yet, the District's segregation prohibited the children's access to rinks in the nation's capital.¹⁷ Their parents' labor and the project's flat, ample courtyard enabled them to pass a frozen morning, sliding and sailing across the ice in Northeast, however fleetingly.

Some outdoor activities tested the neighbors' ability to tend to conflict and community. While former residents' nostalgia perhaps colors their generally positive, harmonious memories of their lives at Langston, some few have hinted at conflicts, especially around the subject of chitlins, perhaps because of a stigma attached to the ingredients: pigs' offal. Chitlins, a customary Southern, African American food, attracted attention, in part because of the strong, pungent smell that may have hung in the air, offending or disturbing neighbors especially when residents lived in close proximity to each other. Chitlin preparation requires special attention; at Langston, a set of rules governed their preparation, on-site, especially outdoors. One way that residents coped with the smell (and perhaps the stigma attached to this practice) was to prohibit the labor intensive

¹⁶ Justine Christianson, "The Uline Arena/Washington Coliseum: The Rise and Fall of a Washington Institution" *Washington History* 2004 16(1): 16-35.

¹⁷ Mabel Fairbanks cited Sonja Henie films as the inspiration for her own ice skating and coaching career. Accounts of the Harlem-born circulated in major Black nationals like the *Chicago Defender* during the 1940s and Langston's young readers may have emulated her poise and strength.

preparation in front yards. Despite personal, familial, and regional preferences for methods, ingredients and seasonings, the pig casings must be soaked and rinsed thoroughly and repeatedly in cool water. Those preparing the ingredients avoid food-borne bacteria by continually, manually cleaning and removing extra fat and fecal matter. After, they are cleaned, boiled and simmered. Residents recall cleaning 100 pounds of chitlins at a time, an enormous undertaking tended by a number of women outside as a fundraiser in which they prepared dinners and sold them to neighbors.¹⁸ Did the public nature of these preparations include debates over the procedures and preferences with regional differences between methods learned in their birthplaces in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland or the District? If so, were these debates playful or contentious? How did those preparing the foods negotiate their differences? Were they smoothed over in service of the common goal of fundraising for the recreation center?

Given Langston's location in Washington, D.C., residents frequently encountered visits by philanthropists, reformers, housing experts and other government officials who ventured out to Northeast to celebrate and investigate the housing experiment at Langston. In correspondence about Langston's opening, Canon Anson Phelps Stokes suggested a party to which John Ihlder insisted, "Let them have their privacy." Nonetheless, given Langston's presence

¹⁸ Crispin Y. Campbell, "Former Public Housing Tenants Retrace Their Steps to Better Life" *The Washington Post* May 19, 1982. p. DC3, and Barr Weisman and Glen Leiner, *Home*, 1987.

in the federal city, it became a site for frequent visits by local and national housing officials and government employees. The Department of Interior organized field trips, Robert Weaver delivered speeches, and senators visited. Newspaper articles urged readers to head to Northeast to see the housing experiment. There was no direct evidence that Langston residents felt as though they were on display as keenly as residents did at another New Deal federal housing program in suburban Maryland where pioneering residents of Greenbelt recall visitors arriving to their community, peering in their windows “just like you were in a fishbowl.” As Bernice Brautigam recollected, “We were on exhibition all the time.” Pioneering residents at the governments’ housing programs shouldered a large responsibility and endured what to some must have been an intrusion to have outsiders prying into their domestic lives. While some may have resented the spectacle of display, for others, it was a responsibility, but it was one that some enjoyed and imbued them with a sense of civic pride. Still, New Deal housing residents may have wished that more officials like Ihlder “let them have their privacy.”

Franklin Thorne, Irene Hooker, Avon Collins, Lawrence Hartgrove and others employed by PWA who worked at Langston lived on-site. Newspaper accounts and editorials maintained that the management and maintenance of the program lacked paternalism that was, according to the newspapers, a general

misconception of such projects. “There are no officious bureaucrats running around to “guide” the people into a way of life. “The community life is governed and directed by a residents’ council of which Norwood Williams is chairman. It also serves as a medium of criticism by tenants and gives an opportunity for the management to discuss general community problems.”

Clusters of houses and flats and blocks of apartments served as the organizing principle for representation on the Residents’ Council. We are left to wonder whether there were additional social sanctions not codified or documented in the newspaper accounts or in the recollections of former, long-term residents who enjoyed happy childhoods at Langston.

Residents invested themselves in the labor of community-building indoors as well. In 1939, a journalist for the *Washington Star* observed,

The Mothers’ Club has helped equip the kitchen and the community recreation hall where community entertainments are given regularly. Three WPA workers conduct pre-school nursery classes where there is an average attendance of about 40 children. A slogan contest has helped stimulate interest keeping the surroundings tidy. There is a rapidly growing aquarium started by a guppy “fan” and camera fans have arranged a dark room where they develop their own films. Men are learning some of the useful arts in self-help groups.¹⁹

As former residents reminisced about the recreational and leisure activities of their youth, one woman identified how hard mothers especially worked to

¹⁹ “Langston, U.S. Housing Project, Year Old Tomorrow,” *Washington Star*, May 4, 1939. Washingtoniana Collection, MLK Library

realize the programs and to make them special. She enumerated, "And the mothers got together and they used to cook dinners and everything so that they could [buy] equipment for the recreation center. And that is how our recreation center got a lot of equipment from our parents – our mothers really -- slaving and getting dinners together to sell." An older woman (most likely one of the mothers who slaved away) explained, "We bought the draperies, the slipcovers; we had different projects to make things livable. You know, and not look like ... a project."²⁰ Early residents at Langston developed an ethos that all members of the community would invest in the project of making things livable. This expectation manifested in public conversations.

The library was one of the major indoor places where residents convened. A former resident explained, "And in Langston, they are saying that we had the recreation centers. We all put together to have a library. We all went out. We all cleaned up. We pulled in the books. We all had ... we had hand-crafts classes there; we had dancing classes; dances. Hey, it was terrific." In 1943, in the basement of one of the apartment buildings, 701, the Public Library of the District of Columbia established a lending library. Under the auspices of the municipal library system, in what had been a laundry room, the residents, readers, and other patrons transformed a spare room into a lively place that

²⁰ As quoted in Weisman and Leiner's *Home*, 1987.

became a hub of activity for Langston's children and adults and for the children and adults of the adjacent neighborhoods.²¹ Professional librarians, Althea Howard, a graduate of Fisk University and University of Illinois, and Maggie Rivera, a Howard University graduate, worked with three part-time pages hired from the neighborhood to develop a wide array of programs. Their professional expertise complemented the enthusiasm of local residents who were avid readers and inveterate participants in community activities.

The one room library measured 23 x 42 feet with an additional five foot square alcove. On the east and west sides of the room, the concrete masonry walls were punctuated with casement windows. The east side of the room, where the children's books were kept, had five low windows that offered pleasant, unobstructed views of Kingman Lake and the Anacostia River; the west side of the room also welcomed sunlight through four casement windows. In plan, Langston's library resembled those of other libraries with a centrally located built-in charging desk in the southeast corner of the room. Books stood at attention on shelving which lined the walls; these shelves were supplemented with a pair of double-faced floor cases and a floor rack for magazines. Four sets of tables and chairs accommodated patrons who engaged in quiet reading and other programs. The room opened onto a grassy, terraced patio where outdoor

²¹ Theodore Noyes's "Free Public Library" in *Report of the Government of the District of Columbia Commissioners for the Year End June 30*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945, page. 38.

programs were held in temperate months. Activities held on-site included reference work, storytelling, and holiday programs. Early residents warmly remembered the weekly reading clubs and the handicraft lessons at the library. Eloise Greenfield, who as a teenager worked at the library as a page, recalled the proximity of the library when she noted that she could leave her “back door and be there in two minutes.”

As the *Kingman Park News* noted, although the library was located on the property of Langston, it offered “services to all who find it the nearest branch of the Public Library.”²² Librarians estimated that Langston’s library served the roughly 1,000 residents who lived on the property as well as the 38,000 residents within a one mile radius of the branch. Within the first three months of opening, 200 adults and 1,000 children registered as patrons of the library; they borrowed 1,300 and 9,000 books respectively. By June 1944, when the library tabulated statistics for their annual report to the District of Columbia Commissioners, Langston branch library patrons checked out 23,554 items.²³

Library officials noted, “Both adult and children users of Langston branch library have borrowed twice as much non-fiction as fiction.”²⁴ Special interest has been evidenced by adults in practical philosophy and religion, maternal and

²² “Langston Subbranch of the Free Public Library of District of Columbia,” *Kingman Park News*, December 1943 from Public Library - Langston Vertical File, Washingtoniana Division, MLK Library.

²³ Aubry Lee Graham, “The New Langston Branch, Washington,” *Library Journal* May 1946.

²⁴ Press Release dated September 18, 1944 in Public Library - Langston Vertical File, Washingtoniana Division, MLK Library.

child care, and books by and about the Negro.”²⁵ Contemporary newspaper and newsletter pieces alerted patrons of the availability of a number of best-selling titles that were offered through reserves. The library began with a collection of 6,000 titles for adults and a number of magazines, as well. When the Langston library relocated from 701 to a site on the property of Spingarn High School, part of the school complex along Benning Road, a reporter summarized the institutional history of the one-room library. She observed, “In a way, the library is an informal institution here, a way of life for children who come each afternoon to get help with homework, use books they do not have at home or find a quiet place to study. Over the years, hundreds of children and teen-agers have written term papers, finished homework, learned to read, played chess, gossiped with friends and even flirted with the opposite sex in the library.”²⁶

Langston’s branch library relates to recent scholarship on African American community formation particularly those on Black reading publics.²⁷

While the public library system in Washington did not maintain an official policy

²⁵ These titles included: *The Robe* by Lloyd Douglas; *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway; *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* by Captain Ted Lawson; *Under Cover: My Four Years in the Nazi Underworld of America* by John Carlson; *Survival* by Phyllis Botome; *Another Claudia* by Rose Franken; *None but the Lonely Heart* by Richard Llewellyn; *Thunderhead* by Mary O’Hara; *Big Rock Candy Mountain* by Wallace Stegner; and *Weeping Wood* by Vicki Baum.

²⁶ Leah Y. Latimer, “Langston Library is Closing.” *Washington Post* October 13, 1982, p. DC 3.

²⁷ Marya Annette McQuirter, “Claiming the City: African Americans, Urbanization, and Leisure in Washington, D.C., 1902-1957” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2000) and Elizabeth McHenry, *Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002. For readings in community formation in which African Americans actively design and shape community in their own terms, see for example: Kenneth Goings and Raymond A. Mohl’s, ed. *The New African American Urban History*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996; and Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996;

of segregation, the racial composition of specific neighborhoods and locations influenced the placement of branch libraries. The opening of Langston's library marked the first time in the city's history that a public library would be located in a Black neighborhood; in the first decades of the 20th century, Washington's library administrators carefully contemplated where to target their services so as to foster racially homogenous branch libraries. In the mid-1920s, as the trustees of the library system considered a major initiative for the expansion of branches, a number of factors influenced their decision-making. While they sought to realize the library's mandate "to supplement the educational system of the District," library leaders carefully eyed the demographics of the city's neighborhoods.²⁸ By 1929, as they sought to open a branch "to serve the section north of East Capitol Street and east of Union Station," the library trustees and employees debated the availability and cost of parcels of land and the potential site's proximity to other branch libraries, public and parochial schools, bus and car lines, and housing developments. Additionally, and significantly, the changing racial composition of burgeoning neighborhoods figured into the calculus as well despite the official policy. Despite the system's official position

²⁸ Five Year Building and Extension Program of The Free Public Library of District of Columbia, "Statements of Librarian, Library Trustees, and Citizens, December 13, 1926, Extracts from Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia, House of Representatives, 69th Congress, 2nd Session. District of Columbia: Government Printing Office, 1927.

of an open, free library for all patrons regardless of race, the library system contemplated and imagined *branches* as racially homogenous sites.²⁹

At the Central Library downtown at Mount Vernon Square, the library system nominally offered services to all, but in the residential neighborhoods, administrators carefully assessed the implications of their expansion and development with regard to the demographics of specific neighborhoods.³⁰

In reading rooms around the city, librarians in branches and sub-branches accommodated the needs of those in the neighborhood immediately adjacent to the site. The physical presence of neighborhood libraries in close proximity to one's home encouraged reading habits and an intimate relationship with books in a convenient location; local libraries throughout the city contributed to the urban experience. As such, reading cultures became part of the lived experiences of residents throughout the city. Neighborhood libraries doubled as social centers for a smaller number of people, fostering a tightly-knit community. As a consequence, patrons at branch and sub-branch libraries were less heterogeneous than the Central Library. These local libraries also offered less anonymity and privacy for readers who may have preferred to query the reference librarians and

²⁹ From District of Columbia Public Library, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. George F. Bowerman, "Northeastern Branch Library Site" 18 June 1929, pp. 4-5. District of Columbia Public Library, Minutes of Trustees January 1922 to December 1932.

³⁰ from District of Columbia Public Library, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. George F. Bowerman, "Northeastern Branch Library Site" 18 June 1929, p.3 from District of Columbia Public Library, Minutes of Trustees January 1922 to December 1932.

borrow materials without the supervision or attention of their neighbors.³¹ The library system acknowledged that to better serve the reading publics of D.C., they needed to build a physical presence in under-served neighborhoods. In 1941, the Board of Trustees, on the motion of Mr. Coleman, voted unanimously to see whether “they could liquidate the capital from the Miner Fund to implement a demonstration of library service in the negro housing development at Langston Terrace.”³² A library at Langston was not possible until the system closed another sub-branch in Northeast; the closure of a sub-branch library in Eastern High School, a white school at 1700 East Capitol Street, NE, enabled the creation of the library at Langston.³³ “The [Langston] branch was made possible by the transfer of staff, books, and equipment from the branch formerly operated in the Eastern High School but closed to release space for school purposes.”³⁴

³¹ Geographically, four quadrants divide the city of Washington. In the 1944, just after Langston’s sub-branch opened, the library maintained the Central Library (at Eighth and K Streets NW); seven branches around the city in Georgetown (R Street and Wisconsin Avenue NW), Mt. Pleasant (Sixteenth and Lamont Streets NW), Northeastern (Seventh Street and Maryland Avenue NE), Petworth (Georgia Avenue and Upshur Street NW), Southeastern (Seventh and D Streets SE), Southwestern (Seventh and H Streets SW), and Takoma Park (Fifth and Cedar Streets NW); as well as six sub-branches located in Anacostia (Sixteenth Street and Good Hope Road SE), Chevy Chase (3815 Livingston Street NW), MacArthur (4954 MacArthur Boulevard NW), Langston (701 Twenty Fourth Street NE), Tenley (4539 Wisconsin Avenue NW) and Woodridge (2206 Rhode Island Avenue NE).

³² from District of Columbia Public Library, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. District of Columbia Public Library, Minutes of The Trustees 13 February 1941, vol. January 1941- June 1947, pp. 2-3.

³³ In 1942, librarians reported that “60% of the use of the Eastern High School Sub-branch was by students and teachers of that school, 30% by students of other nearby schools, and only 10% by persons having no connection with the schools. The peak hours of demand were from 12 to 1 and 3 to 4:30. The librarian recommended that the hours of service at the subbranch be shortened from 12 noon to 5:30 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, and from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays.” from District of Columbia Public Library, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. District of Columbia Public Library, Minutes of The Trustees, 11 June 1942; vol. January 1941- June 1947, p. 1.

³⁴ Theodore Noyes’s “Free Public Library” in Report of the Government of the District of Columbia Commissioners for the Year End June 30. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945, page. 38. Noyes’s statement suggests that the school need the library space for educational purposes. Yet, the

At board meetings, according to the minutes, library trustees routinely questioned each other whether their system promoted segregation, and generally assured themselves that their official policy offering “service to all” was sufficient. Yet, they also recognized the need to develop and expand services in Black communities. When the National Capital Housing Authority offered the library system use of space at Langston, Clara Herbert rationalized the opening of Langston with the following statement:

“The library has always offered library service without discrimination as to color, but the library has no branch in an all-Negro neighborhood. The availability of quarters, rent free, in the Langston Terrace housing development for Negroes offers an admirable opportunity to establish a branch staffed with competent Negro librarians and serving not only the 2,000 residents of the Langston Terrace development but also the Browne Junior High School and nearly 8,000 residents of the neighborhood and the Deanwood community across the Anacostia River.³⁵

Langston proved to be an ideal location for this foray into services catering to African Americans since it was an experimental housing program where the tenants had engaged and developed a host of educational, recreational, and social activities in their first five years of residency. Tenants at Langston

Office of Price Administration and the War Rationing Board occupied the space abandoned by the library system in Eastern High School. Traceries, *D.C. Public School Library Survey* for DC Preservation Leagues and the DC Historic Preservation Division, 1997, p. 253, in District of Columbia Public Library, Washingtoniana Division.

³⁵ from District of Columbia Public Library, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. District of Columbia Public Library, Minutes of The Trustees Free Public Library Estimates, 1944; vol. January 1941- June 1947, p. 4. prepared 8 June 1942.

enthusiastically embraced the library and endowed the enterprise with their considerable energies.

Opening day at the library provided another occasion for celebration and fanfare. On September 24, 1943, distinguished visitors and guests convened at 701, as the apartment building which housed the library was affectionately known. From 3 p.m. to 8 p.m., librarians greeted curious visitors; at 8 p.m. they hosted the opening exercises. An assortment of government, civic, and educational leaders assembled to dedicate the reading room and to inaugurate the services. Reverend James O. West, Jr. of Calvary Episcopal Church offered the invocation; his blessing was followed with greetings from Honorable Guy Mason, D.C. Commissioner; Ernest F. Harper, President of Kingman Park Civic Association; John Ihlder, Executive Officer of National Capital Housing Authority; and Dr. Garnet C. Wilkerson, First Assistant Superintendent of Schools. Miss Clara W. Herbert, the Chief Librarian, and Miss Althea V. Howard, Langston's branch librarian, joined the others in welcoming visitors and soon-to-be-patrons to the library. They introduced themselves, their programs and policies, and announced the schedule for free services. In addition to residents and William Anderson, the manager of Langston, other guests included Dr. Walther Daniel, librarian at Howard University. Reverend Leon S.

Wormley of Zion Baptist Church offered the Benediction. Patrons were encouraged to return at 9 the next morning for services.³⁶

Althea Howard, a native Washingtonian and Dunbar High graduate, lived with her father on Nichols Avenue in Southeast D.C.; she had extensive training and experience when she was charged with responsibilities at Langston. When she accepted the position, Howard became the first African American librarian employed by the Free Public Library of the District of Columbia. A graduate of Fisk University in 1932, Howard earned a Master's Degree in Library Science in 1934. She worked as a librarian in schools and junior colleges in Kentucky, Texas, and Indiana before returning to D.C. in 1943 to assume the position at Langston.

Pioneering residents warmly remembered the afternoons of their childhoods spent in weekly reading clubs and at handicraft lessons at the library. The library, housed in the basement of an apartment building, enabled residents--particularly children--to develop catholic reading habits. Storytelling cultures in print and spoken word could be part of their daily habits situated in a specific place devoted to books. That is, while they may have been readers (tellers or listeners) before, this place affirmed that practice. In her appearance before the House of Representative's subcommittee hearing on the appropriations bill for

³⁶ "Speeches Mark Langston Library Dedication Here," Washington Post September 25, 1943, p. B1 and ephemeral materials including invitations and program from the Public Library - Langston Vertical File, Washingtoniana Division, MLK Library.

the District of Columbia, Miss Clara Herbert testified about the operations of the Langston sub-branch of the D.C. Public Library system that opened in September 1943.

“I feel it is doing a good piece of work very largely with children. That is the history in all branches. They begin with being popular with children and little by little become 50-50 with adults. Then later on adults use it more heavily than children. But there are three schools right in that neighborhood so we have had a large use by the children there, and we are circulating about 2,000 volumes a month. That is on a part-time service. We are only open about 40 hours a week I think.”³⁷

In a community where adults explicitly and movingly talked of their desire for a healthy and wholesome place to raise their children, a library that catered to young families suited their needs. In addition to an ample playground, a recreation center, and a campus of public schools adjacent to the property, the library’s collection and events enabled the young residents of Langston to make their own modern homes and to design their own meanings of citizenship.

The library may have also provided a crucial role for young families with working parents who moved away from crowded apartments and houses they shared with extended family members. The librarians Howard and Rivera may have provided adult supervision for youngsters whose aunts, uncles, and grandparents lived across town and could not conveniently mind children

³⁷ Statements of Miss Clara W. Herbert, Librarian; Ralph L. Thompson, Assistant Librarian; and Alvan C. Chaney, Superintendent of Buildings. Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations House of Representatives. 78th Congress. 2nd Session on the District of Columbia Appropriation Bill for 1945. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994, p. 374.

especially while their parents worked. (Perhaps the library and its staff provided infrastructure and facilitated nuclear rather than extended family life.) Further, Howard and Rivera and may have also fulfilled the library's mandate to supplement the public schools when the overcrowded schools at the adjacent campus strained to teach all pupils. When local children were sent to school in shifts to Charles Young, Browne, and Platoon, the library may have doubled as a makeshift classroom, day care center, and recreation center.

Langston Terrace's sub-branch library enabled the children of laborers, porters, janitors, clerks, messengers, charwomen, and domestic workers to incorporate visits to a reading room into their daily lives. When Langston's library opened, 6,000 volumes of books and scores of magazines were available to 274 working class African American families and their neighbors across the street and across the river in Kingman Park and Deanwood. For parents who prized raising their children in a healthy environment, the library--with its storytelling and programs—offered an important site to realize their desires. The sub-branch library was a site that catered to young readers in their very own neighborhood without having to pedal their bicycles or walk over one and a half miles to the Northeastern Branch Library at 330 Maryland Avenue, NE or almost three miles to the Central Library at 801 K Street, NW. Generations of readers at Langston developed their reading habits in a basement room of a public housing

complex. Having “a reading room two minutes” from her backdoor may have helped inspire Eloise Little Greenfield to publish over 40 books for children and young adult readers during her lifetime, garnering several coveted national awards and induction into the National Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent. Having a library very close to their houses, other young patrons also took advantage of the opportunity to claim words as their own. In so doing, these children asserted their own claims for citizenship.

At the tenth anniversary, several newspapers ran articles that applauded Langston’s impressive first decade. In his opening remarks to an assembled crowd of several hundred, John Ihlder, the executive officer of National Capital Housing Authority (NCHA) observed, “Today, Langston is a milestone of progress in American history.” He continued, “At Langston we have proved that Americans, handicapped by racial discrimination and lack of economic opportunity, can and will when the opportunity is opened become self-dependent American citizens.” The *Pittsburgh Courier* concluded its piece with the declaration that “Langston Terrace is virtually a city within a city, with every aspect of community life manifested in miniature. Its environment is wholesome and attractive; its residents progressive and responsible.”

The newspaper accounts that covered the accomplishments of residents highlighted the various social organizations and local self-governance that Langston’s residents developed. They also listed other dignitaries whose presence suggests that the

“city” of Langston linked themselves to others beyond their borders as well. In attendance on the speaker’s rostrum were representatives from other housing programs in the District of Columbia including members of the management and residents’ councils of Barry Farms, Frederick Douglass Homes, and James Creek Homes. The president of the local civic association, Kingman Park Civic Association, was also in attendance. His presence is especially significant since the Langston Resident Council had affiliated with their organization. The city’s library system and the recreation department sent delegates; a local church sent their Allen AME Choir to provide the music. A letter from Mrs. Roosevelt was read to the assembly. Administrative and maintenance staff and previous managers of Langston were also seated as part of the platform party.

The pioneering residents of Langston Terrace Dwellings utilized their private homes and public spaces to forge a community that developed and nurtured friends and families. Nestled at the corners of 21st and Benning Roads Northeast, this residential enclave in Washington, D.C. drew from and contributed to the surrounding neighborhoods that housed hundreds of other Black families. Situated at Langston, Black women and men sometimes drank too much, danced too hard, and talked too loud: they squabbled and bickered. And situated at Langston, Black women and men sometimes confided secrets, buoyed each other and shared dreams: they lived and lived. They fell in love, reared children, read books, sang carols, flew kites, cooked chitlins. They chatted

and cursed and giggled and cried together. In so doing, they transformed flat-roofed concrete and brick boxes into cherished homes.

Chapter SEVEN: Conclusion

This dissertation is a product of years in archives, college classrooms, and public housing programs at Langston Terrace Dwellings and other locales in the U.S. and Europe. Marshaling evidence from a disparate array of sources and sites, *Making Modern Homes* identified the range of actors responsible for the early success of a modern housing program developed for African Americans principally by an African American architect. This study examined the variety of strategies working-class Black men and women sought to secure lodging for themselves and their children in the late 1930s. Since it first opened in 1938, Langston Terrace Dwellings has sheltered several generations of Washingtonians; it continues to provide housing for families in Northeast Washington D.C.

One significant finding of this study is that renters in public housing created places and worked hard on community formation. With their lived experiences and labor, African American men, women and children transformed modern housing into cozy homes that sustained and supported families and community. Current residents continue this tradition.

This study also examined the social, educational, and professional milieu of a pioneering African American architect. His professional success depended on his aesthetic acumen and his vast social networks. While other scholars have documented the important role of institutions like fraternal orders for African American professionals, architectural historians who study the lives of designers have underestimated the significance of social networks. Robinson's biography required an investigation of the

multiple social worlds in which he moved. His experiences of community informed his work as an architect and planner. Langston launched Robinson's career: he continued to be committed to housing throughout his professional life, designing dormitories, other multi-family dwellings, and private homes; he also engaged in campus planning at African American institutions; additionally he designed hospitals, churches, military bases, and public parks. His career offered an example of architecture in service to his race, and to larger communities. He passionately believed in the power of architecture and planning to enhance and improve the quality of life for ordinary and elite citizens. While his early commissions and contracts catered principally to African American clients, he left an important legacy for larger design communities and residents. His vision of decent housing for all Americans is one worth revisiting and reconsidering. Robinson's elegant modern housing solutions should nudge contemporary designers to contemplate the merit of architecture and planning by and for African Americans.

Finally, the design solution at Langston Terrace Dwellings indicates the important contribution that federally-funded public works projects can have in the daily lives of people in the United States. The common spaces proved to be very important to the success of the program at Langston Terrace. Flexible indoor and outdoor rooms enabled community formation. Carefully designed spaces do not need to be over-determined or over-programmed; indeed, part of what worked at Langston was the lack of formal planning in the central courtyard and the basement library. The users and the residents of a particular site have the ability to make a place their own through their uses.

This project explored the dynamic relationship between people and place in the early part of the 20th century in Washington, D.C. in an effort to clarify the histories of

modern design and to emphasize the power of ordinary people to create and reconfigure architecture to suit their needs. By emphasizing the relationships between the built environment and everyday lived experiences, I advance our consideration of everyday urbanism. By tracing these neglected international links between European modernism and African America, I revise our understanding of modern architecture.

In 1965, Leroy J.H. Brown designed 34 additional rowhouse units on the parcel of land originally obtained in 1935. The Additions, as they were called, share a similar site strategy and massing, but the detailing is different: they are slightly less elegant. His rowhouses address the original complex contextually, but they offer different façade composition, fenestration, and detailing. Despite their banal aesthetic features, they shelter families whom the private housing market otherwise does not serve.

When it first opened and at regular intervals, especially on significant anniversaries, Langston has garnered publicity. Wolf Von Eckardt renewed outside attention when he advocated landmark status for Langston in his “Cityscape” column in 1981 in the *Washington Post*.¹ In the following year, late in 1982, thirty-nine years after it opened, the public library closed in the basement quarter at 701 24th Street NE.² Nearly fifty years after it first opened, in 1987, under the leadership of members of the Residents’ Council including Johnny Glenn and with the research assistance of preservationist and local historian Glen Leiner, the National Park Service recognized Langston Terrace's architectural and social significance by placing it on the National

¹ Wolf Von Eckardt, “House Keeping: Langston Dwellings’ Case for Landmark Status,” *Washington Post*, May 9, 1981, B1.

² Leah Latimer, “Langston Library Is Closing; Community Protest Fails to Change District's Plan,” *Washington Post* October 13, 1982, DC3.

Register of Historic Places.³ Leiner's research also supported the efforts of Barr Weisman's documentary film that premiered in 1988.⁴ Public television viewers and eventually others (including college students enrolled in courses in architecture, planning and African American Studies) across the country learned of Langston's auspicious early years after screening this film, *Home*.

In 1999, after showing the film in my own classes, I began taking university students to Langston to tour the site, at first on fieldtrips. Gradually, I began to work more closely with current residents, and eventually developed more sustained relationships with some who have made homes at Langston. At birthday parties and holiday celebrations, while enjoying accordion concerts and puppet shows, I came to appreciate more fully the legacy of Hilyard Robinson's design and the work of those first pioneering residents. With current residents, I began to understand the logic of the site itself. My engagement with the African American men, women, and children who live and work on-site presently helped me to appreciate the African American men, women, and children who first lived and worked at Langston.

In 2001, D.C. Preservation League placed Langston on its list of *Most Endangered Places*.⁵ Those historic preservationists recognized the toll that deferred maintenance and lack of conservation has had on the historic fabric of the built environment. They emphasized the imperiled physical structures. Yet, it is poignant to

³ According to the "Statement of Significance," Langston was entered on the National Register because "the property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history," and "the property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction." National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, November 1987.

⁴ Benjamin Forgey, "The Enduring Ideals of Langston Terrace," *Washington Post* June 4, 1988, C1.

⁵ John DeVault, "Mendelson Charges Neglect of 'Defaced' Historic Housing" *The Common Denominator* March 26, 2001.

note that the concept of public housing itself is endangered not only in Washington, D.C., but indeed, around the country.

To be sure, Langston is a different place today than it was when it first opened in 1938. In the U.S., notions of domesticity and family life may have changed; notions about unit size, design, and amenities have changed. Langston's demographics, as well as the larger city's demographics, have changed. Still, the complex itself endures and it offers an important opportunity for residents to make decent, affordable homes in a centrally located site on a major east-west artery.

The concept of what constitutes decent, sanitary modern housing has changed over time as well. The utopian vision promoted and advocated by housers like Hilyard Robinson has diminished. State-sponsored housing is suspect in the United States. And contemporary economic, social and political forces in Washington D.C. threaten to jeopardize the domestic lives of residents who currently make Langston home. Public and private partnerships like the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative, the rapid gentrification of H Street Northeast and the New Communities program introduced under the former Mayor Anthony Williams' administration all share a common stated purpose of improving the physical and social conditions along the Benning Road corridor. Langston's current residents would also like to witness improved physical and social conditions in their neighborhood. Yet, the waves of renewal programs in U.S. cities suggest that public housing residents are often the least likely to benefit from such improvement.

Langston's early history reveals a successful government housing program that provided for families who could not fare well in the private housing market. Langston's

fragile future depends on the government's ability to deepen and renew the social contract with poor families in Washington, D.C.

Appendix A

Type-written Letter from (Mrs.) Fanny H. Alston to Mr. A.R. Clas, October 24, 1935

2022 2nd Street, N.W. Apt. 102
Washington, D.C.
October 24, 1935

Mr. A.R. Clas.
Director, Federal Housing Authority.
Interior Department,
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

I hereby make application for a five room unit the Langston Terrace housing project.

I am a widow and for quite a number of years I have supported my family, consisting of four daughters. Consequently, I have never been able to afford a really desirable home and would like so much to be included in this project which will permit people in circumstances similar to mine decent and adequate housing at a reasonable cost.

I have been an employee of the Veterans' Administration for more than sixteen years and my salary is \$1580.00 per annum. At present I am renting from the B.F. Saul Company, 925 Fifteenth Street, Northwest. I worked with Major C.C. Johnson, Secretary, 12th Street Branch, Y.M.C.A., for a number of years and I furnish his name as a reference.

Yours very truly,

[signed] (Mrs.) Fanny H. Alston

Mrs. Fanny H. Alston
2022 2nd Street, N.W., Apt. 102
Washington, D.C.

H1706, 81-A

2022 2nd Street, N. W., Apt. 102
Washington, D. C.
October 24, 1935.

17

To B5
Ans'd
No Ans. Required
Date 10-28-35
File VPHB

Mr. A. R. Glas,
Director, Federal Housing Authority,
Interior Department,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

I hereby make application for a five room unit in the
Langston Terrace housing project.

I am a widow and for quite a number of years I have
supported my family, consisting of four daughters. Consequently,
I have never been able to afford a really desirable home and would
like so much to be included in this project which will permit
people in circumstances similar to mine decent and adequate housing
at a reasonable cost.

I have been an employee of the Veterans' Administration
for more than sixteen years and my salary is \$1680.00 per annum.
At present I am renting from the B. F. Saul Company, 925 Fifteenth
Street, Northwest. I worked with Major C. C. Johnson, Secretary,
12th Street Branch, Y. M. C. A., for a number of years and I furnish
his name as a reference.

Yours very truly,

(Mrs.) Fanny H. Alston

Mrs. Fanny H. Alston
2022 2nd Street, N. W., Apt. 102
Washington, D. C.

REC-101-82-11-30-36

9
75303 OCT 26 1935

Mrs. Fanny Alston was not selected to move into Langston Terrace.

Handwritten Letter by Hattie Crumpton, January 16, 1936.

353-McLean Ave S.W.

Jan. 16, 1936.

Dear Sir:-

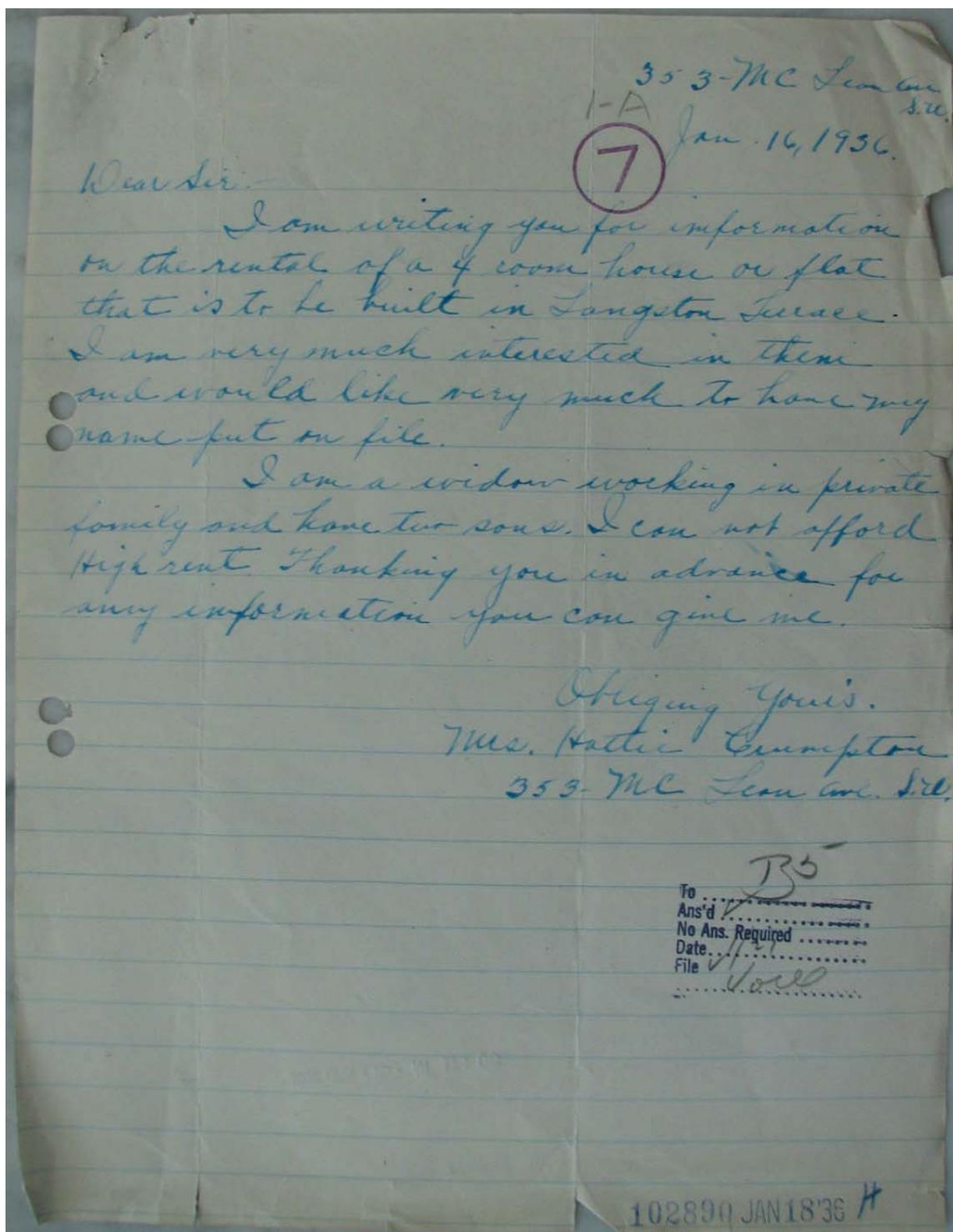
I am writing you for information on the rental of a 4 room house or flat that is to be built in Langston Terrace. I am very much interested in them and would like very much to have my name put on file.

I am a widow working in private and have two sons. I can not afford high rent. Thanking you in advance for any information you can give me.

Obliging yours.

Mrs. Hattie Crumpton

353 Mc Lean Ave. S.W.



Hattie Crumpton was not selected as a tenant for Langston. She remained at 353 McLean Avenue, SW.

Handwritten Letter from Walter King to Mr. Howard A. Gray, April 10, 1937

Washington DC 4-10-37

Mr. Howard A. Gray,

Dear sir-I am asking you a favor I am quite sure would benefit a hard working man as myself the balance of my life. That is to do whats in your power to put my name on the permanent list as an applicant for living quarters out to Langston Court Bennings I am a poor man with three in family & I am not choice about what I could get out there so as I had enough space.

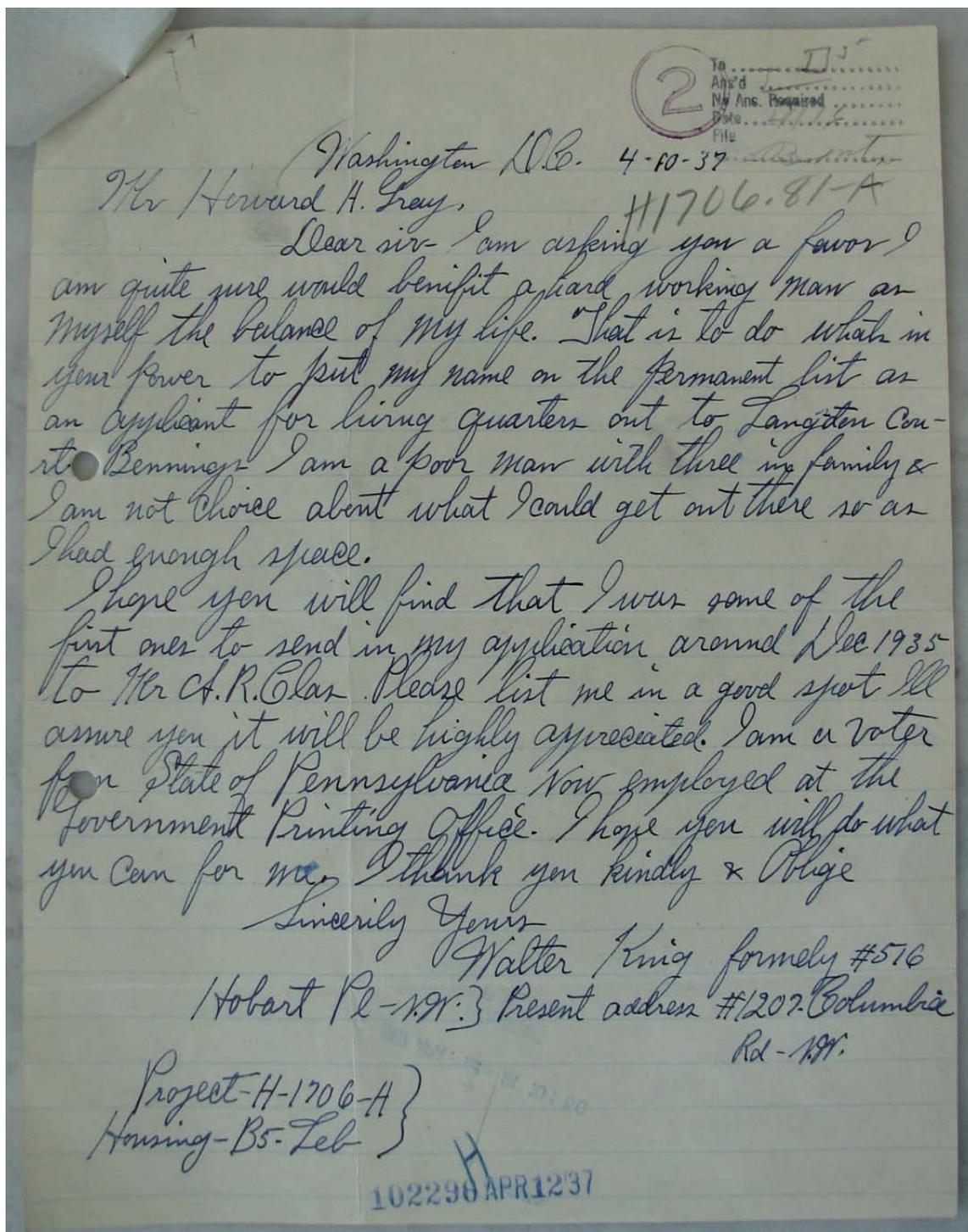
I hope you will find that I was some of the first ones to send my application around Dec 1935 to Mr. A.R. Clas. Please list me in a good spot Ill assure you it will be highly appreciated. I am a voter from State of Pennsylvania now employed at the Government Printing Office. I hope you will do what you can for me. I thank you kindly + Oblige.

Sincerily Yours

Walter King formerly #516

Hobart Pl-N.W:} Present address # 1207 Columbia
Rd.-N.W.

Project -H-1706-A
Housing B5-Feb



Walter King was not selected to move into Langston Terrace.

Handwritten postcard from Mrs. Joseph H. Middleton to Mr. Clas, June 23, 1936

June 23, 1936

My dear Mr. Clas;
Regarding Dwelling Registration for the Langston Housing Project in Wash., D.C. Please, send me an application blank + any necessary particulars concerning the renting of one of these dwellings.

Mrs. Joseph H. Middleton
609 – C – St., S.E.
Washington, D.C.

my dear Mr. Clas; June 23, 1936

Regarding dwelling registration for the Langston Housing Project in Wash., D.C. Please, send me an application blank & any necessary particulars concerning the renting of one of these dwellings.

Mrs. Joseph H. Middleton
619-C-St., S.E.
Washington, D.C.

Handwritten Letter by Mrs. Joseph H. Middleton to Director of Housing, December 17, 1937

Mrs. Joseph H. Middleton
609-C Street, S.E.
Washington, D.C.
Dec. 17, 1937

Federal Emergency Administration
of Public Works
Project H-1706-A
Housing-B 5- BHR
Director of Housing
Dear Sir:

I am writing with reference to the Langston housing project, now being constructed for colored tenancy.

Over a year ago I sent to your office a registration blank to be placed on file. Since this blank was sent in my husband has been appointed to a permanent position as laborer in the Interior Department at a salary of \$1080 per year. Although this sum is more than he was making at the time the blank was filed it still is not sufficient to enable us to move into a nice apartment or flat in a decent neighborhood. We do want very badly to rent a nice

[Page 2]

three-room apartment or flat in a desirable neighborhood, but this is impossible on account of the high rent in such neighborhoods.

We are expecting our first baby in a few months so this will make it more necessary for us to give up rooming and find a place of our own. We are very anxious to get settled in a nice home in a decent neighborhood where we can bring up our child successfully and make desirable friends. Langston Terrace seems to be our only hope because it aims to offer these advantages for a comparatively low price, one that we can afford to pay.

Kindly, send us a formal application blank and please, give our case serious consideration.

Sincerely yours,
(Mrs.) Joseph H. Middleton

4/30/36

Mrs. Joseph H. Middleton
609-C-St., S.E.
Washington, D.C.
Dec. 17, 1937

Federal Emergency Administration
of Public Works
Project H-1706-A
Housing - B5-BHR
Director of Housing
Dear Sir:

H-1706-A

To
Ans'd
No Ans. Required
Bk.
File
.....

7

I am writing with reference to the Langston housing project, now being constructed for Colored tenancy.

Over a year ago I sent in to your office a registration blank to be placed on file. Since this blank was sent in my husband has been appointed to a permanent position as laborer in the Interior Department at a salary of \$1080 per year. Although this sum is more than he was making at the time the blank was filed it still is not sufficient to enable us to move into a nice apartment or flat in a decent neighborhood. We do want very badly to rent a nice

678558 DEC 18 1937

three-room apartment or flat in a desirable neighborhood, but this is impossible on account of the high rent in such neighborhoods.

We are expecting our first baby in a few months so this will make it more necessary for us to give up rooming and find a place of our own. We are very anxious to get settled in a nice home in a decent neighborhood where we can bring up our child successfully and make desirable friends. Langston Terrace seems to be our only hope because it aims to offer these advantages for a comparatively low price, one that we can afford to pay.

Kindly, send us a formal application blank and please, give our case serious consideration.

Sincerely yours,
(Mrs) Joseph H. Middleton

B-5 - MANAGEMENT 905
Received 12/20
Forwarded

The Middleton Family was selected to move into Langston. They moved into Apartment 61 at 665 24th Street, NE.

Appendix B

European Housing Projects Visited, Summer 2002

VIENNA

Karl Marx Hof, 1927

Heiligentstädter Strasse, Vienna 19

Architect: Karl Ehn

Sandleiten, 1934

Sandleiten Gasse, Vienna 16

Architects: Hoppe, Schönthal, Matuschek, Theiss, Jaksch, Krauss, Tölk

Bebelhof, 1925

Steinbauergasse 36, Vienna 12

Architect: Karl Ehn

Liebknechthof, 1926

Längenfeldgasse 19, Vienna 12

Architect: Krist

Lorenzhof, 1927

Längenfeldgasse 14-18, Vienna 12

Architect: Prutscher

Fröhlichhof, 1928

Malfattigasse 1-5, Vienna 12

Architect: Mang

Fuchsenfeldhof, 1922

Längenfeldgasse 68, Vienna 12

Architects: Schmid and Aichinger

Am Fuchsenfeld, 1924

Am Fuchsenfeld 1-3, Vienna 12

Architects: Schmid and Aichinger

Metzleinstaler Hof, 1919

Margaretengürtel 90-98, Vienna 5

Architects: Kalesa and Gessner

Reumannhof, 1924

Margaretengürtel 100-110, Vienna 5

Architect: Gessner

Julius Popp Hof, 1925

Margaretengürtel 76-80, Vienna 5

Architects: Schmid and Aichinger

Herwegghof, 1926

Margaretengürtel 82-88, Vienna 5

Architects: Schmid and Aichinger

Matteottihof, 1926

Siebenbrunnerfeldgasse 26-30, Vienna 5

Architects: Schmid and Aichinger

Rabenhof, 1925

Baumgasse 29-41, Vienna 3

Architects: Schmid and Aichinger

Beerhof, 1925

Wehlistrasse 72-86, Vienna 20

Architect: Schmalhofer

Janecek Hof, 1925

Wehilstrasse 88-98, Vienna 20

Architect: Peterle

Otto Haas-Hof, 1924

Passetistrasse 47-61, Vienna 20

Architects: Dirnhuber, Schuster, Loos, Lihotsky

Winarskyhof, 1924

Stromstrasse 36-38, Vienna 20

Architects: Behrens, Frank, Hoffman, Strnad, Wlach

Gerlhof, 1930

Stromstrasse 39-45, Vienna 20

Architect: Reid

Engelsplatz, 1930

Friedrich-Engels-Platz, Vienna 20

Architect: Perco

Paul Speiser Hof, 1929

Vienna 21

Architects: Scheffel, Glaser, Lichtblau, Bauer

Karl Seitz Hof, 1926

Jedlleser Strasse 66-94, Vienna 21

Architect: Gessner

FRANKFURT

Heimatsiedlung (Siedlung Riedhof Ost und West)

1927-30, 1930-31

Stressmannallee, Heimatring, Mörfelder Landstraße

Architects: Ernst May, H Boehm, F. Berke (Gesamtplanung), F. Roeckle

Siedlung Praunheim

Ludwig-Landmann-Straße

1926-29

Architects: Ernst May, H. Boehm, (plan); E. May, E. Kaufmann, A. Brenner

(Architektur), L. Migge (Garten)

Siedlung Römerstadt

1927-28

Architects: E. May, H. Boehm, W. Bangert

Planning: E. May, C.H. Rudloff, K. Blattner, G. Schaupp, F. Schuster

Siedlung Bornheimer Hang, Siedlungsblock

Ketterallee 25-43, 51-75

1926-28

Architects: E. May, C. H. Rudloff

Kath. Heilig-Kreuz-Kirche

Ecke Ketteler – und Wittelsbacherallee

1928-29

Architect: Max Weber

Hallgartenschule

Am Bornheimer Hang 10

1929-30

Architects: E. May, A. Loecher (Mitarbeiter)

Siedlung Bruchfeldstraße

Breubergstraße

1926-27

Architects: E. May, H. Boehm, C. H. Rudloff

Built on behalf of AG für Kleine Wohnungen (Corporation for Small Apartments)

Nicknamed Zickzackhausen/Zig Zag House

Siedlung Westhausen

Egestraße, Westring, Kollwitzstraße, Ludwig-Landmann- Straße

1929-31

Architects: E. May, H Boehm, W. Bangert (plan); E May; E Kaufmann, F.

Kramer, E. Blanck, O. Fuckert, F. Schuster

BERLIN

Reichsforschungssiedlung Haslehorst

Gartenfelder Straße

1931-32

Architects: Fred Forbat, Paul Emmerich, Paul Mebes

Versuchssiedlung Schorlemerallee

Schorlemerallee 7-23

1925-28

Architects: Wassili und Hans Luckhardt, Alfons Anker

ROTTERDAM

Bergpolderflat

Abraham Kuzperlaan/Borgesuisstraat

1932-34

Architects: W. Van Tijen, Brinkman & Van der Vlugt

Op ten Noort Blijdenstein (restoration)

Betonwoningen/Concrete Dwellings

Stulemeijer

Dormandstraat/Heer Danielstraat/ Walravenstraat

1921-24

Architects: J. M. Van Hardeveld

Betonwoningen/Concrete Dwellings

De Kossel

Bloemhofplein/Hortensiastraat-Hzacinstraat

1921-29

Architect: J. Hulsbosch

Woningbouw/Housing Kiefhoek; Kerk/Church

Kiefhoekstraat/Lindstraat; Eemstein 23

Museumwoning-dwelling: Hendrik Idoplein 2 (010-485359)

1925-30; 1928-9

Architect: J.J. P. Oud

W. Patijn restoration 1989-95; Van Duivenbode & De Jong (restoration 1992-94)

Research trip funded, in part, through David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora

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Columbia University, New York, New York
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University Archives

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York
Eleanor Roosevelt, Correspondence Files
Franklin D. Roosevelt, President's Personal File
John Ihlder Papers and Correspondence
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Nathan Straus, Jr. Papers
Rexford Guy Tugwell Papers
Caroline F. Ware Papers

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