

Rockefeller Family Involvement in New York Housing during the 1930s: European Models and the American Legacy

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Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Ken Rose and Erwin Levold. Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

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While the history of New York federal public housing projects during the New Deal years has been intensely explored by scholars in different fields, little consideration has been given to the local discourse on low-cost housing promoted by private institutions, associations, families and foundations during the same years. In fact, as the role of philanthropy in the city development has been in some measure addressed by scholars in a number of essays (“Philanthropy and the City: A Historical Overview”, Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Rockefeller Archive Center, September 2000, sponsored by Russell Sage Foundation and David Rockefeller), little of the American literature on public housing history pays particular attention to the significant role that philanthropy had in the development of housing for low-income families in New York urban fabric. Scholars working on the history of

New York public housing (Plunz, 1990) and on the influence of foreign models in the development of a US housing debate during the Thirties (Pommer 1993), as well as the most recent studies in the field (Bloom 2008), usually focus on American bureaucracy and governmental agencies and rarely attempt to highlight the significant role that European architects and ideas had in the development of new social housing programs for New York.

In my Ph.D. dissertation I analyzed the housing discourse in New York from its origins during the 1920s up to the 1930s, focusing on the role that European *émigrés* architects and American social reformers had in the definition of new federal programs and governmental projects, when the question of slum clearance and low-cost housing was declared one of the most important problems in New York. My research did explore a number of projects developed during these first years, from the first theoretical experiments in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, to the definition of new laws and programs and the completion of the first projects in New York, financed by the government and the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) in 1935.

I undertook research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in Sleepy Hollow last summer, between July and August 2008. RAC sources about the history of low-cost housing in New York during the Thirties have been explored by scholars from different perspectives, whereas the Rockefeller Family Collection, as well as the Rockefeller Office records and documents from a number of New York-based institutions, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial and the Spelman Fund of New York, offer a great opportunity to researchers working on housing issues. My interest in the topic comes from a different perspective, an interest in housing as a discipline and a body of knowledge that has been developed and shaped during the Thirties in New York. In fact, the

research engages the history of philanthropy in housing programs and urban life in the area of New York between the 1920s and the late 1930s, trying to go beyond the projects, in order to highlight the active role that John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and especially his wife Abby, played in the New York social housing discourse and reforms. As other scholars have already highlighted (D. K. Rose, 2008) John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s participation in social housing discourse led to a number of interesting large-scale apartment developments built in New York during the decade.

By 1930 John D. Rockefeller, Jr. had invested 10 to 12 million dollars in housing projects and Charles Heydt was in charge of housing enterprises in his offices. Mr. Rockefeller, in the person of C. Heydt, proposed an alternative solution to governmental housing, a form of "cooperation" which would allow capital a modest profit while providing the working and middle classes with modern, affordable housing, which they would eventually own. He believed that decent, affordable housing for people of modest means could be built at a profit of 6% and he strongly hoped that other developers and investors would follow his example. On many projects the architect was Andrew J. Thomas, whose work popularized the garden apartments design in New York to replace slums, in contrast with the high-rise slab-blocks and cross-towers proposed at the beginning of the 1930s by European architects. In Manhattan they built the Lavoisier Apartments at 67th and 68th streets east of Park Avenue and the apartment buildings on York Avenue between 65th and 66th streets, radically influenced by the local tradition of perimeter garden apartment plans.

As Kenneth Rose argued, the Great Depression severely hampered Rockefeller reformist goals for these projects, because of high unemployment and diminished income of those with jobs, few low-income families could become apartment owners as he envisioned. With the aid of Charles Heydt and Andrew Thomas as the architect, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. also built the

Thomas Garden Apartments in the Bronx, the Paul Lawrence Dunbar Apartments in Harlem, the Van Tassel Apartments in North Tarrytown and the Bayonne Apartments, an Industrial Housing Corporation in New Jersey. At Dunbar Apartments in Harlem, for example, Mr. Rockefeller abandoned the plan to sell apartments and changed to a rental program. The 511 apartments within the four blocks in 7th and 8th Avenue between 149th and 150th streets in the “Negro quarter” of New York City, were given by Rockefeller to the City Housing Committee for social housing projects and opened in 1928 for the working class.

On June, 12, 1928, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. wrote a letter to Andrew Thomas, stating that, “As you know we have no interest whatever in purely philanthropic schemes for housing and we believe it to be a mistake to subsidize such housing by any form of tax exemption or state or municipal aid at low interest rates. We feel that the only solution to the housing problem can come from the people themselves, who, by their own efforts, should own and operate such enterprises on a cooperative basis. The only philanthropy, as it may be called, which enters into our housing enterprises is that we waive commissions, fees and charges of one kind or another over and above actual costs, and we keep our interest charges down to a reasonable basis, that is, around 6% net. In other words, we do not make any gift, but we allow the use of our money for a flat 6% net charge and also give our own services free of charge. To the extent that these things are more than anyone else will do, our project is philanthropic”.

(RFA , 2J, HI, box 13, folder 117)

My study of the history of social housing has its origins in a different perspective than the ones which have motivated works by scholars working on Rockefeller philanthropy in housing. The research did address the history of Rockefeller family interests in the field of housing during the decade, a topic not analyzed in any depth. In looking at the Rockefeller Family Collection

(most of the material is held under the heading RFA, 2 J, series “Housing Interests”) my research focused on the number of interesting documents, pamphlets, publications, notes, letters, reports and surveys given to the Rockefeller offices, in order to document the presence of the Rockefeller Family in the field of housing and the relationships with a number of local and national housing associations, as well as with two of the earliest philanthropic foundations in the United States, the Russell Sage Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.

The research did engage the history of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.’s “housing efforts”, well documented in the memorandum “The Housing Problem”, written on November 20th, 1930, as well as his own approach in giving capital aid to New York-based housing associations, agencies and federal institutions involved in social housing such as National Public Housing Conference. Since 1931 the Rockefeller Family supported the NPHC with the primary objective to organize local communities in support of slum clearance and real low-cost home construction by public authorities. In fact, they financed also the publication of a large number of reports, surveys, statutes, practical manuals and printed materials on housing, and supported the activity of consultants and of members of the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration and the Federal Housing Authority.

On January 27th, 1925 Mr. Heydt wrote to David Hinshaw, responsible for the Citizens Housing Corporation, “the matter of housing has been given careful study by our office, and the question of Mr. Rockefeller’s policy with reference to the matter is now under discussion. The purpose is to build better homes and communities for people of moderate incomes, and by careful experiment to improve house, block and community planning”. Since the early twenties John D. Rockefeller, Jr. had made several efforts to create a general central housing agency in New York charged with studying a variety of housing problems because he recognized the

importance of research as a useful safeguard against the adoption of ill-considered program of governmental participation in housing.

Between 1923 and 1927 the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial made a number of grants to the organization "Better Homes in America" to aid in conducting an educational campaign in the interest of better housing in the United States; at the same time, between 1928 and 1929 the Rockefeller Foundation engaged in negotiations with the Rosenwald Fund for the establishment, as a joint project, of a National Institute of Housing Research, but this had not been brought to fruition at the time when the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial was dissolved in 1929.

Between 1928 and 1949 the newly developed Spelman Fund of New York was responsible for the National Association of Housing Officials (NAHO) administrative budget. The Association aimed to provide expert consultative services to local and federal groups concerned with low-cost housing projects, to bring foreign housing experts to the United States and to organize a training course for housing managers engaged upon federal projects.

The NAHO, properly established and financed with a number of special grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, benefitted from financial help for consultant services to local communities and for the visits to the country by European housing experts such as Raymond Unwin from England and Ernst Kahn from Frankfurt am Main. Between 1933 and 1934 the European visitors were accompanied by the New York architect and social reformer Henry Wright and by the president of the NAHO Ernst Bohn in their housing tour thorough Washington, New York, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis, New Orleans, Atlanta, Knoxville, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

Held in Chicago on November 25th, 1933, the first NAHO meeting was called by the Public Administration Clearing House and attended by federal, state and local officials, who came to their posts with limited experience in housing and could assist in framing the broad policies that would be necessary if housing programs were to be developed (NAHO Report, 1934).

In spite of the confusion in the field, another report of the NAHO, published on April 10th, 1935, proposed a new housings program supported by Mr. Rockefeller, in order to develop a program focused on housing and training for personnel research, whereas the most tangible result of their contribution was a booklet titled “A Housing Program for the United States” distributed in 20,000 copies in the United States. (The Spelman Fund, 1932/1935: series 4, box 21, folders 392/393, Social Studies and Social Welfare Plan).

In 1931 the Rockefeller Foundation , which in 1929 had appropriated funds to the Harvard School of City Planning in support of its program of teaching and research over a seven- year period, supported making a survey of existing housing research in New York and abroad and of personnel competent to work in the field. The report was finished in 1932 by Ernest Fisher, Director of Research of the Federal Housing Administration. A few years later Columbia did seem to be the most suitable university to affiliate with because has been cooperative with City Housing Corporation and the fact that was located in New York was another advantage as New York was the center of whom interested in the particular problem of low-cost housing.

In the early Thirties John D. Rockefeller, Jr. gave financial support of two grants to the New York- based Citizens Committee on Slum Clearance and Low Cost Housing and National Public Housing Conference; from 1928 to 1931 he financed the Housing Association of the City

of New York and in 1932, when the Congress first passed laws that recognized the Federal government's concern in low-cost housing, he was asked to develop a program focused on housing and training of personnel for research. In spite of the confusion in the field, the program was conceived to know what had already been done, to have the cooperation of the outstanding men in the fields of architecture and engineering and to have adequate capital for exhaustive research and experimentation. ("Report upon New Program", April 10th, 1935, RFA, 2J, Housing Interests, box 9, folder 87).

During the same year, \$5,000 was given by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to promote the first Slum Clearance and Low-Cost Housing Plan for New York of 1933 and the Rockefeller Trustee Committee was held, a housing committee composed of Walter W. Stewart, Raymond B. Fosdick and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., that would undertake to lay the foundation for the establishment and future operation of a local housing authority.

Between 1926 and 1947 Mr. Rockefeller supported also the "State Board of Housing" and the new housing program inaugurated by Governor Smith with the funds of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, whereas from 1925 to 1939 he strongly recommended the association Better Homes in America, which had been financed by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial since 1926. BHA was initiated in 1921 by Mrs William Brown Meloney, reviewer of the American journal *The Delineator* and was supported by President Hoover since 1923 to overcome the shortage of homes, to encourage the erection of single family houses and to show methods of elimination. In 1923, \$225,000 was given to the association to enable it to organize an educational campaign through the country in the interests of better housing and the first *Better Homes Demonstration Week*, called "Home Sweet Home", was held in Times Square, where

lectures were given in open demonstration houses (LSRM, RG3 series 3.7, box 81, folder 846, “Memorandum 1929”, Report, Correspondence, 1927-1929).

During the same years the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial supported a number of other developments and coordinated the efforts of different housing associations, since Memorial policy was to work with the members of various professional groups and to strengthen their hands to bring about the necessary changes in plan and practice, such as the case of James Ford, Architect of the Small House Service Bureau, a limited-dividend organization established by the American Institute of Architects in December 1926, with its official organ *The Small Home*. Despite the particular attention given by the New York State Housing Legislation to housing conditions in Manhattan and especially in the Lower East Side from 1925 to 1930, little concern has been paid to other project developments in the suburban area. In fact, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was deeply committed with the City Housing Corporation from 1925 to 1955 and was involved in the Forest Hills Housing Development, the housing project for low-income families financed by the Russell Sage Foundation. In 1924, the RSF gave another \$100,000 to the experiment with concrete building units at Sunnyside Gardens, the well-known low-cost housing project by Henry Wright and Clarence Stein in Long Island City, Queens, famous for the rigidity of the street plan (which compelled adoption of an inflexible street system with streets 60, 80 and 100 feet in width) and for the rigid requirements of the building codes.

The history of philanthropy in housing through most of the twentieth century is traditionally studied as the collaboration among male patrons and male architects to suit their interests. Due to the general disinterest in the topic, the documentation is often partial or altogether absent, and precisely because they were less valued than men, it will be equally difficult to document the work of women. In the most general terms, this approach ignores the

possible participation of women, as it happened in the interesting case of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s wife, Abby Rockefeller. Among my objectives is valorizing the various female identities as they have been expressed, and the way in which spaces and identities nourish and transform one another over time with the influx of new inhabitants and new ways of using spaces. Even if I did concentrate the main part of my research during the first period, focusing on John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s activities in social housing, I tried to make an effort to document as well as understand how women radically influenced the discussion on low-cost housing over time, as in the intriguing case of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

I cannot anticipate precisely what will emerge from this research in terms of new understanding about women's role in low cost-housing, but some of my studies suggest that Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. could be recognized as one of the protagonists of New York discussion on housing by and for women during the 1920s and the 1930s. In particular, I believe that the wealth of sites and settings associated with her in New York and in other places will come to be seen as an important resource for a new consideration of philanthropy in housing. A first exploration into the Family Records (Housing Interests series) has encouraged me to go on with my attempt to reconstruct the role played by Abby Rockefeller in structuring urban programs, and social practices. I spent some time working on her records in Sleepy Hollow in order to collect material, correspondence, articles and notes in the field (material that architectural and urban historians have consistently ignored). The major accomplishment of this part of the research is to bring to light the often hidden and at best partially understood spaces and spatial practices conceived for women by the "new women" during the New Deal years (Nancy Cott 1987), not addressed in any depth by Mrs. Rockefeller's biographers (Chase, 1950; Kert 1993).

The matter of housing was of peculiar interest to her since a house and what went on within its walls was always an idea and an ideal even more than it was an exciting actuality. Since 1918 Abby Rockefeller was the Chairman of the Housing Committee of the War Work Council of the Young Women Christian Association, an institution founded during the war period to help governmental agencies to provide better living conditions for women engaged in various forms of industry. (“Suggestion for Housing Women War Workers”, A. Rockefeller, Report to the Secretary of War, RFA 2, OMR, series AAR, box 26, folder 240).

In 1918 Mrs. Rockefeller inaugurated the YWCA Charleston House in South Carolina, a home for girls working in the naval uniform factory there. As she explained in an interview given to Magery Rex of the Progressive Labor World, Charleston was the place where the first demonstration structure was built to host 100 women employed in making uniforms for the navy, many of them from isolated mountain villages. She described the program and the project to the *Seattle Press*, as conceived for “sisters to the Munitions Worker and Side Partner of the Woman who goes to the camp to work”. During the same years she served on the Committee on the Protection of Girls for the War Department's Commission on Training Camp Activities (problem of runaway teenagers hanging around military camps). She thought that the time had come to instruct young women in “social morality”, a euphemism for sex education. But beyond that, she was most concerned about providing decent housing for the women who were entering the work force in great numbers. She was also the chair of the Emergency Housing Committee, and she formulated the idea of a pioneering the model for a worker's house in 1919. Miss Budd (the architect of the hostess houses) made the project close to the Bayonne plant in Elizabeth, New Jersey. In 1919 John D. Rockefeller, Jr. gave his wife \$11,000 to buy the site, to design the building and the landscape for the new house and for the entire community that was inaugurated

in 1920, giving particular attention to women in war work and enlisted women of the Department of Labor.

Abby's concern about housing for women is highlighted in the letter she wrote to Amalia Pinchot, the finance chairman of the new National League of Women: "I have an ardent desire that women should accept their new responsibilities of citizenship in the most intelligent way. But even in spite of this, I feel it is not wise for me to be connected actively or even nominally with any organizations that are political in any sense of the word and I insist on special consideration for the health and convenience of the employees". In 1918 Abby travelled to Washington on several occasions to talk with the Secretary of War Newton Baker about the new plans for improving housing conditions among women employed in government and munitions factories. As reported by the newspapers she argued: "I see by this morning's paper that the housing question had been put back in the Labor Department, to be settled and remain there, I hope should you be kind enough, the minute you find out who is head of this newly created department, to let me know? I want very much to lay before him the woman side of the question as soon as possible". (*New York Times* 31, January 1918)

On May 8th, 1921 Abby Rockefeller inaugurated for the Young Women Christian Association, the World Grace Dodge Hotel for women in Washington (named for the Director of the YWCA National Board and founder of the Columbia University Teachers College), with the purpose to improve living conditions in the neighborhood, the district sanitation, housing, schools, physical safety and welfare of children. Originally planned to ensure decent and pleasant living quarters for women war workers in an overcrowded city, it continued to serve as a home for business and professional women and for transients in Washington. Mrs. Rockefeller was the chair of the Grace Dodge Hotel Committee for fifteen years, supported by the YWCA

National Board, and she lavished more attention on her hotel than any private real estate developer on other investments. The architect Duncan Candler designed 350 rooms at a cost of \$1,200,000: sunny lounges, specially equipped rooms for mothers travelling, vaulting rooms with iron, are only few of the innovations introduced into the project. During these years Mrs. Rockefeller gave interviews and distributed brochures when she travelled to Washington and her efforts in the promotion of the Grace Dodge Hotel were well documented in the *Tribune*, with the support of the managing editor and good friend Mary Lindsley and by the *New York Times*. Even if the *NYT* journalist opinion was that Good Housekeeping could not be considered as housing philanthropy, Abby demonstrated that an economic hotel for women could also become a financial success for Rockefeller enterprises even if she was opposed to tipping because women in all lines of work should be paid an adequate wage. It had been her aim to create comfortable hotels for women, not a charity house. She also spent a lot of time at the Hotel and the media were forever bemused that the rich Mrs. Rockefeller stayed at the unpretentious YWCA hotel, riding to and from conferences in taxi cabs.

When the project was inaugurated Abby Rockefeller stated, "I should like very much to make a contribution to the Women's Trade Union League Club House and the Student Forum." (See also Mark M. Jones Papers, box 6, folder 41). In fact, between 1922 and 1935 she supported a number of housing projects and much of the social legislation of the New Deal.

She played a key role in the architectural project for the International House for young students opened in New York at 500 Riverside Drive, in 1924; she acted as chairman of the Furnishing Committee and the House became a reference also for foreign institutions such as the *Alliance Française des Unions Chretiennes des Jeunes Filles*, supported a few years later by Mrs. Rockefeller during the 1940s. (Letter by Mrs. John Rockefeller, Jr., Paris, May 28, 1940).

In 1927, Paula Laddey, a young New Jersey lawyer, asked Abby Rockefeller for support to build a new house for women workers on the Boston model at Bayway, Elizabeth, New Jersey, close to the Standard Oil Company Refinery. Since 1920 she had worked on housing for workers and the Rockefeller Family had already built 50 cottages (houses for workers) for the Bayway community Centre Standard Oil Company; a model workman's cottage, a five-room house called the "Bayway Community Cottage" was built in 1920 and opened to the public in 1921. Mrs. Rockefeller planned to secure a domestic science teacher, a trained nurse and a social worker who will use her cottage as a center of demonstration to show how an attractive American workman's home can be economically built and managed. To her cottage flocked so many people that its original aesthetic purpose was forgotten in the practical activities to which the immediate necessities of human beings at once dedicated it, such as healthy and progressive neighbourhood and a baby clinic. In 1926, when her model cottage was bursting at its seams, she and the Company together built a Community House adjoining it and the cottage was used as an office for social workers up to 1939.

While she was involved in art and historic preservation and philanthropy, Mrs. Rockefeller provided financial support to a number of associations during the 1930s and 1940s, such as the Home Playards, Inc. (105 East 22nd Street), the National Women's Trade Union League of America journal, the *Life and Labour Bulletin* as an instrument to support women in industry, the War Work Council of the YWCA National Board, being the chairman of the housing committee, where she proposed that her people be permitted to erect demonstration housing for women on government land. At the end of ten years the government would take over the building at a reasonable price and turn it to any purpose it wished.

During these years she also supported the American Women's Aid for British Service Women and a number of architecture and urban competitions for New York State, such as the “Small Wayside Refreshment Stand Competition” in December 1927, which she promoted along with the *Ladies Home Journal* through the medium of the Art Center of New York and a committee of experts composed of architects such as the president of the Arts Council, Harvey Willey Corbett; the president of American Civic Association, William Adam Delano; Whitney Warren of the Society of Beaux Arts Architects; and Brinckerhoff of the American Society of Landscape Architects. (RFA 2, OMR, box 26, folder 239).

Last but not least, the “Roadside Improvement Program” of the American Planning and Civic Association was made possible by a number of grants from Abby Rockefeller to the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, Billboard Committee, which led to the organization of the National Council for Roadside improvement for Billboard control on country highways between 1904 and 1935. (RFA, 2, OMR, box 25, folder 238). As the techniques of highway planning and zoning developed, the Association began to relate billboard control to the over-all problem of roadside development.

It was exactly at this moment, early in 1935, that Mrs. Rockefeller offered to make a grant to the Association for two successive years for salary and expenses of someone trained in the law, zoning and planning to experiment with a program of, roadside betterment, zoning and planning.

The RAC documents offer the possibility not only to reconstruct the historical *milieu* and the housing discourse during the inter-war period, but they also offer an exploration of the work of their protagonists: the projects and their interactions with Rockefeller offices are a regular feature in diaries, memos and correspondence with New York based housing associations. By

considering the broad range of subjects that have received support from the Rockefeller Family, my intention will be to spend one more year conducting research on this topic.

One of the many virtues of this project is that it recognizes women as actors who played a role in defining and transforming the spaces they occupy. (Other relevant records are collected at the Radcliffe College Women's Archive, such as those of Mary Simkhovitch, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary Dewson and Frances Perkins. Additional institutions with pertinent records include Avery Library and Columbia University – i.e. those of Edith Elmer Wood).

I spent my last week in Sleepy Hollow exploring a new topic and working on a survey of the RAC records on housing, settlement, economic and public welfare, in order to start a new research project for my two years post-doc fellowship, about the role that a number of women played in New York during the New Deal, focusing on the social housing discourse. Among my objectives were valorizing the female identity as it has been expressed, and the way in which spaces and identities nourish and transform one another over time with the influx of new inhabitants and new ways of using spaces.

It would be extremely helpful to develop new research at the Archive. In fact, during the research I came across a significant number of distinguished women involved in New York social housing discourse and very highly respected as leaders in the settlement house field and responsible for local Housing Associations. Edith Elmer Wood, Helen Alfred and Mary Simkhovitch (director and founder of the Greenwich House, financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and founded for the social settlement society of the city of New York at 27th Barrow Street in 1902; RFA, Series P, Public Welfare, box 46, folder 0502) are only a few of the better-known cases.