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William Lescaze and the social housing in New York

Gaia Caramellino

By tracing the development of the first New Deal public housing programs in New York during the 1930s the article explores, through the work of the Swiss émigré architect William Lescaze (1896-1969), two significant moments of the social housing discourse within the context of the political and cultural development of the city, from the initial theoretical stage (1930-1934) to the direct intervention of the federal government with the approval of the Municipal Housing Authority Act in 1934 and the subsequent foundation of the New York City Housing Authority, that led to a new phase of federal projects built in New York until the end of the decade.

Lescaze attempts to introduce references inherent in his European architectural education in the first public housing projects inaugurated in New York by the NYCHA with the Public Works Administration funds during these years, lead to interesting considerations on the role of an European-trained architect within the New York housing debate and on his social responsibility during the New Deal years. He actively participated in the definition of a corpus of standards officially adopted by the Authority and by the new federal housing programs, that became part of a trend revived after the Second world war that visually characterized the low-cost housing interventions in New York until the 1960s. The analysis, crossing the architect's biography with the study of the low-cost housing policies inaugurated by the Roosevelt's New Deal programs for New York, follows the thread of the

social and economic trend. A first moment focuses on the pioneering role Lescaze played by introducing 1920s' 'Modern movement' paradigms into the New York housing projects during the first experimental phase of the programs, breaking with the legacy of the local housing debate developed during the Twenties, as well as with the tradition of philanthropic housing and of beaux-arts design.

The origins of his social housing commitment could be searched in Lescaze's Swiss education, considering the vivid cultural context of his formative years in architecture at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule of Zurich between 1915 and 1919, indelibly marked by the progressive figure of Karl Moser and by the under-considered role of Hans Bernoulli (1876-1959), then professor of town planning, focusing also on Lescaze's first professional experiences in Europe between 1919 and 1920, set in the post-war depression context when social reforms and low-cost housing were an absolute priority for young architects. During the initial experimental moment of the New Deal housing programs, architects, housing reformers, and institutions debated high-rise buildings, slum clearance and the acceptance of European models for low-cost housing, in search for innovative solutions and new standards, with the purpose of using in the best way the 25.000.000 dollars granted by the PWA for the first projects funded in New York, although few buildings were actually constructed. By the end of the 1920s Le Corbusier's lesson of the high-rise 'Tower in the Park' had been assimilated by New York architects and housing reformers, who started to ponder the issue of vertical distribution, adopting Le Corbusier's

vision of the cross-shaped towers for low-cost housing and supporting these concepts with New York federal agencies, still defiant of European architects and the solutions they introduced.

Contrasting intellectual and institutional positions emerged during these years, such as the 'cultural' approach promoted by the Museum of Modern Art of New York, on one hand, and the PWA programs, still rooted in the local housing discourse developed during the 1920s by the Regional Planning Association of America and the Russell Sage Foundation, on the other.

Since the 1932 International Style Exhibition of the MoMA, housing and architecture have been considered as two different fields by American historiography. It is precisely in the exhibition that we can find the origins of this misunderstanding that led to the vision, still shared by American critics, that separates housing from architecture, a position accepted with difficulty by a European architect for whom housing represented the first expression of architectural culture. In the early Thirties, Lescaze advocated slum clearance in both his writings and the un-built projects for Lower Manhattan, highlighting the potential of high-rise buildings and of European models such as Le Corbusier and German Zeilenbau schemes, as well as the provocative character of his never completed 'theoretical' proposals developed for the residential districts of Chrystie-Forsyth streets and River Gardens between 1930 and 1934. A first initial moment of these theoretical housing experiments included also a 'realistic re-planning' study for the Astoria District, Queens, promoted by the Housing Study Guild between the late 1933 and

the early 1934. Lescaze having become a member of its Guide Council in 1934, when with Carol Aronovici, Henry Churchill, Albert Mayer and Henry Wright, he proposed an 'ideal' housing program to draw the authorities' attention to the fact that the funds allocated by the Federal Government for low-cost housing in New York could have been spent to greater advantage in some areas outside Manhattan rather than in the already extensively explored Lower East Side, where the cost of land was higher. Compared with the contemporary isolated proposals of 'model housing' for Lower Manhattan, the innovative program for Astoria for a large-scale low-cost housing project was clearly inspired by the community planning models and by the Neighborhood Unit concept. Although the considered projects were not implemented for financial reasons and because of the innovative solutions Lescaze introduced, too radical for the New York urban context, these experiences laid the bases for the introduction of European models in the subsequent development of federal public housing programs for New York and marked a turning point also in Lescaze's career, shifting from his initial provocative position to his subsequent commitment in the institutions.

The establishment of the NYCHA in 1934 inaugurated a second, more institutional stage of the New Deal housing discourse in New York, concerning the years 1935-1939, when the debate of the previous years were eventually followed by the direct intervention of federal government, with the drafting of public housing projects for New York promoted by the early work of the NYCHA and funded by the Housing division of the PWA in the second half of

the 1930s. It was in those years that Lescaze started to be considered as an international 'housing expert', a role acknowledged with his appointment as a member of the Architectural Board of the New York City housing authority in 1934, as chief designer of the Williamsburg Houses (1934-38) project and consultant to the United States housing authority in 1938, a position he held until 1969, the year of his death. The article explores Lescaze progressive involvement with the New Deal federal agencies for low-cost housing and among the Nycha Architectural Board, as well as his gradual acceptance as an European architect in the decision-making processes, with particular attention given to the competition project and the final proposals the Swiss architect developed for the Williamsburg Houses in collaboration with the Authority. Lescaze was partly compelled to yield to the Nycha technical restrictions dictated by the economic situation. After the statement of the Wagner Housing Act in 1937, the less significant economic outcomes are the direct consequence of the difficult conditions imposed by excessively strict rules, standards defined in great detail limiting architect freedom and imagination, bitterness in front of the working conditions of the architect who collaborated with the federal organizations in those years, limitation of the designer's work, inevitably led to solutions that were formally uninteresting, ordinary and very similar. Considering a long-term process with its central period between 1932 and 1934, the article focuses on different aspects of Lescaze biography converging in three significant housing proposals that mark the development of the New

Deal public housing programs for New York during the 1930s. Through an initial theoretical and experimental moment of the discussion about federal programs in the early thirties, William Lescaze designed the first low-cost housing projects for New York in the firm's name Howe and Lescaze in a radical 'modernist' idiom with the clear intention of 'stimulating the planners' fantasy' and to awaken federal institutions to the importance of slum clearance interventions in Manhattan and the introduction of European housing models developed during the 1920s. His 'model housing' proposals and his never completed experimental projects for the residential districts on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, such as the Chrystie-Forsyth Streets Housing Development (1931-33) and the River Gardens Houses (1932-34), constitute an eloquent demonstration of his interest in adopting solutions which were clearly derivative from Le Corbusier's redent block and cross-shaped high-rise tower models. Lescaze's Chrystie-Forsyth Streets Housing Development was one of the few United States housing projects represented in the Exhibition at the Museum of modern art of New York in 1932, described by Henry-Russel Hitchcock as the first significant attempt to solve American low-cost housing problems in 'modern social, economic and aesthetic terms', radically in contrast to the range of the others proposals for the site, all in the tradition of the garden apartment perimeter. The project was intended for the redevelopment of a narrow 'corridor' of Manhattan's Lower East Side between Chrystie and Forsyth streets on one side and Canal street on the other, approximately 306,500 sq.ft. of land the

City had acquired in 1929 with the hope of constructing a major early precedent for public housing, and included a large-scale residential complex that covered seven blocks consisting in 24 nine stories L-shaped slabs, raised off the ground by columns and pilotis, thus leaving the first floor practically free and creating a continuous park. Although the 'tower in a park' plan of European origin, incorporated in the New York context, is undoubtedly the most obvious reference in Lescaze approach, calling for European slab-blocks as a way to introduce higher densities, another source of his proposal was the isolated slab-block in a Zeilenbau scheme developed in Germany during the 1920s. Although it alludes also to the European attempts of the early century, it was definitely Le Corbusier layout in the 1929 Ville Radieuse, first exhibited at the Brussels Ciam in 1930 and the à redent model illustrated in the proposal, that inspired Lescaze when he designed the Chrystie Forsyth project, especially the feature of the open corridor-balconies running all along the façade on each floor. His proposal for the River Gardens Houses constitutes another significant effort to promote European models in the same years. Although not adequately considered by the specialized press, the Rutgers Town housing development, called River gardens by Howe and Lescaze in the project documents, represented an interesting joint effort by Lescaze as architect, Carol Aronovici, as planning consultant and Albert Frey as associate. The project covered 18 badly deteriorated blocks built before 1900 and formed part of a broader 'super-plan' for the whole Corleau Hook renewal area

on the Lower East Side, approximately 50 acres of slums along the East River between Manhattan Bridge and Williamsburg Bridge. The housing scheme proposed by Lescaze for River Gardens included 103 storey blocks, 20 cross-shaped storey towers and 27 storey towers, once again raised above the ground on pilotis, surrounded by open spaces designed as public gardens and connected to each other by low blocks, with garages and shops running around the perimeter and facing the street. Cruciform tower replaced in this case the independent low-building concept proposed for the first project and strongly influenced the composition layout when at the same moment economic advantage of high-rise cross-plan tower was officially accepted by the Housing Study Guild as early as 1934 and variations on this model became the customary layout for American low-cost housing and the most common solutions adopted by the Nycha in subsequent years. What is significant about the two Lescaze projects is the way he redeveloped the original models in his proposal, such as altering the towers height, a direct consequence of his idea 'to relate the towers to the human scale and avoid a stereotyped monotony', altering the hierarchy and rational order that characterized Le Corbusier urban proposals and resulted in an excessive rupture with the scale of the existing city and with the surrounding street grid in Manhattan's Lower East Side. The New York economical political and cultural context was of crucial importance for the development of Lescaze projects and prompted both by financial needs and federal design standards, but also expressed the legacy of the 1920s housing reform movement.

Lescaze subsequent involvement as chief designer of the Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn (1934-38), the first government built housing project in New York, regarded by the Pwa as "the most valuable contribution to social progress that New York Deal has made", provides interesting cues for an analysis of the policies adopted by the Pwa and the Nycha in the architectural decisions for the new social housing, highlighting a new contradictory behavior of the institutions, influenced by the new European modernism. A fundamental moment for the understanding of this shift within the Nycha is the public competition in 1934, and the assignment of the project to Lescaze and the Williamsburg Architects, whose proposal was in complete disagreement with the Pwa programs and guidelines and with the preliminary schemes for the Williamsburg site plan proposed by the Nycha technical staff, still influenced by the legacy of the 1920s New York City garden apartment tradition. The project covered 10 standard blocks in Brooklyn and in Lescaze final site plan, which represented a radical shift, cross streets were closed to form three large 'superblocks' where he proposed 1.622 apartments in 20 H and T shaped building, placed 15 degrees out of alignment with the gridiron streets, producing an abrupt schism, 'in the manner of Le Corbusier' between the project and its surrounding environment and a significant break from the Nycha accomplishment.