

# Building Without Value: Architecture and Political Economy in Herman Jessor's Limited-Equity Cooperatives

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Zara Pfeifer, Penn South, 2024.

The architect Herman J. Jessor's career, spanning the late 1910s to the late 1980s, aligns neatly to the period of "social democratic polity" in New York, the arc of the modernist architectural movement there, and the rise and collapse of organized labor power in America.<sup>1</sup> This period marks a dramatic urban transformation in the city distinguished by the construction of thousands of new residential buildings, mostly aimed at housing the lower and middle classes.<sup>2</sup> The architectural vocabulary of red brick "towers in the park" shared by many of these developments belies a diverse spectrum of organizations and management models behind their creation. A litany of city, state, and federal incentives empowered non-traditional actors—such as community groups, labor organizations, religious associations, nonprofits, and municipal housing authorities—to join traditional private developers in the construction of new housing, while their architects worked within existing building economies to resolve abstract spatial relationships prescribed by zoning and lenders within tight budgetary constraints.<sup>3</sup> Successive government incentives during this period came about in large part as a response to pressure applied by various labor and urban reform interests in addition to these groups' ability to demonstrate viable new models of producing and managing housing projects.

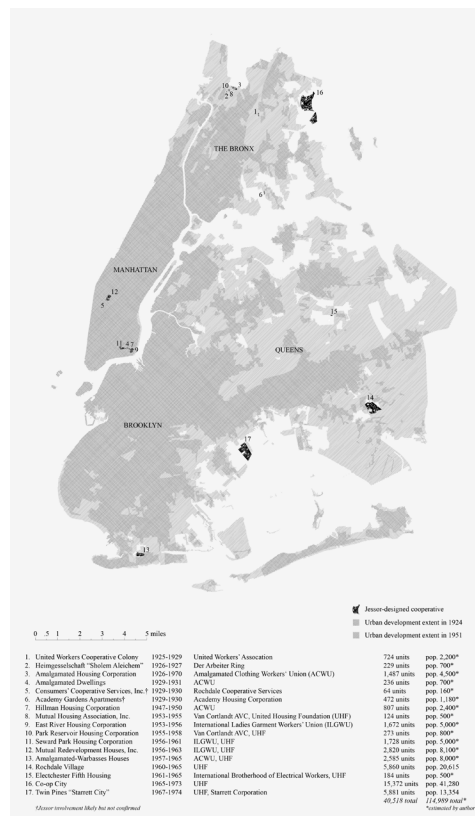
Within this space, the works of syndicalist developer Abraham Kazan loom large. He was responsible for constructing some 47,000 apartments with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union (ACWU) and International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), as well as what would become the United Housing Foundation (UHF), accounting for 13 percent of New York City's total contemporary stock of 357,905 cooperative housing units.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Freeman, *Working-Class New York (New York: The New Press, 2000)*, 55.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 273.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander von Hoffman, "History Lessons for Today's Housing Policy," *Housing Policy Debate* 22, 3 (2012), 326.

<sup>4</sup> Estimation by the author combining 25,556 units tallied in "Co-op Contact" published by the United Housing Foundation in 1964 plus 21,437 units that would be completed after 1964 at Electchester Fifth, Co-op City, and Twin Pines/Starrett City; for the total stock of NYC cooperative housing units, see NYC Department of Finance. *Annual Report of the New York City Real Property Tax: FY 2023* (2024), 6.



Map of New York City showing Herman Jessor-designed cooperative housing projects and growth of the city's urbanized area from 1923 to 1951. Drawn by the author.

Kazan's innovation was the refinement of the *limited-equity cooperative* (LEC), a legal structure that allowed collectively-owned housing units to be built and sold at cost.<sup>5</sup> Kazan fostered a half-century long professional relationship with Jessor, who designed almost every LEC project initiated by Kazan; Jessor likewise worked almost exclusively for Kazan over his entire career. With a repeat client bringing a consistent flow of projects with similar programs and financing, Jessor treated each new commission as an opportunity to test, adjust, and refine an ideal architectural type according to the immediate needs of its spatial and economic context indifferent to style. The fruitful and monogamous collaboration between Jessor and Kazan underscores the centrality of the pragmatic architectural approach of the former to the social project of the latter.

This paper, developed as part of an ongoing research project with Daniel Jonas Roche and Zara Pfeifer, will attempt to parse the architectural priorities of Jessor's practice as they relate to their unions' social goals and the diffuse building culture of midcentury New York.

## TYPES OF COOPERATION

A co-op is a legal entity designed to share ownership of an apartment building or complex amongst multiple parties or individuals. Whereas in a condominium, in which owners hold a title to a specific unit of "piece" of the building much like a single-family house, a cooperative is a corporation that issues stock entitling its holder the right to occupy a given unit or apartment of the cooperative's property.<sup>6</sup> In current-day New York, the

5 Tony Schuman, "Labor and Housing in New York City," 86<sup>th</sup> ASCA Annual Meeting and Technology Conference: Constructing Identity (1998), 623.

6 Leonard G. Sahling and Rona B. Stein, "Co-op Fever in New York City," *Quarterly Review of the Federal Reserve of New York*, Vol. 5 (1980), 16.

word “cooperative” is commonly used as a synonym for “condominium.” Unlike the rest of America, in which condominiums are the prevalent legal form of owner-occupied multi-family buildings, most owner-occupied buildings in New York are structured as cooperatives.<sup>7</sup>

The contemporary legal structure of the cooperative apartment in New York is largely derivative of models first developed by craftsmen and specialized workers in response to the mechanization and deskilling of labor during the Industrial Revolution in Europe. In England, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers wrote the 1844 Rochdale Principles, a list of values and working terms for their movement that predated by four years Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*. The first modern co-ops were designed to democratically share profits from and protect a specific trade or craft. Collectively agreed-upon limits on profits meant cooperatives could exert greater controls over the cost of goods and maintain affordability for their shareholders. The first cooperatives were something like collectivized factories or shops without powerful industrial owners, although the model of cooperative ownership was later adapted to create a wide range of institutions, such as grocery stores, banks, credit unions, hospitals, and insurance companies. Early housing cooperatives began appearing in Germany and Scandinavia in small numbers in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

The prevalence of co-ops in New York traces, in large part, how its population growth in the nineteenth century outpaced new architectural and legal inventions to manage it. By the mid-nineteenth century, land scarcity in Manhattan presented a crisis for the upper classes who, priced out of properties to build prestigious single-family townhouses, were also reticent to embrace apartment living because of stigmas that associated multi-family buildings with poverty. In 1900, nearly two million people lived in Manhattan where only a century prior the population was 60,000.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the lower classes rented apartments, tenements, and “rookeries” built on standard 25’ wide by 100’ deep lots intended for townhouses where they endured abject living conditions made famous in Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*. At the turn of the century, new housing construction mostly catered to either the extremely wealthy or the extremely poor, a dynamic which continued through the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> The era around the invention of the skyscraper marks “the greatest inequity between the housing of the rich and the poor that [the city] has ever known.”<sup>11</sup>

Twin legal inventions designed to spatially address issues of property at opposing ends of the class spectrum arose in the late nineteenth century that would later converge at the dawn of the LEC movement some fifty years later. First, the 1879 and 1901 New York State Tenement House Acts (also known as the “Old Law” and “New Law,” respectively) introduced standards requiring adequate ventilation and exterior exposures for all interior rooms of new apartment buildings. These laws were recommended by architects as a compromise between public health activists and commercial interests. By situating the building plan as a curative to the poor conditions of tenement life, speculative tenement house plans produced by architects like Ernest Flagg were used as a tool to preserve class hierarchy by redirecting the political conversations around urban poverty away from a critique of exploitative social relations towards a critique of building form. Though by the mid-1890s many industrialized European cities had begun social housing programs, policymakers in New York “expressed faith in the private sector to house the poor, within the constraints of government standards.”<sup>12</sup>

7 Ibid.

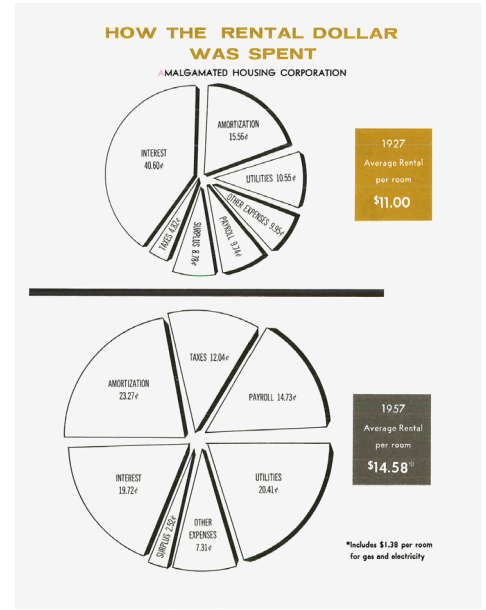
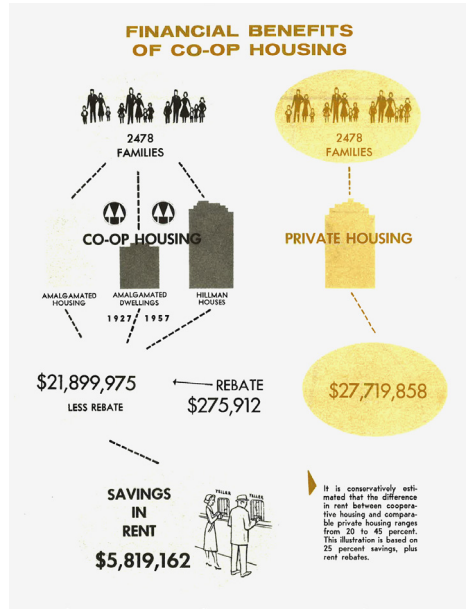
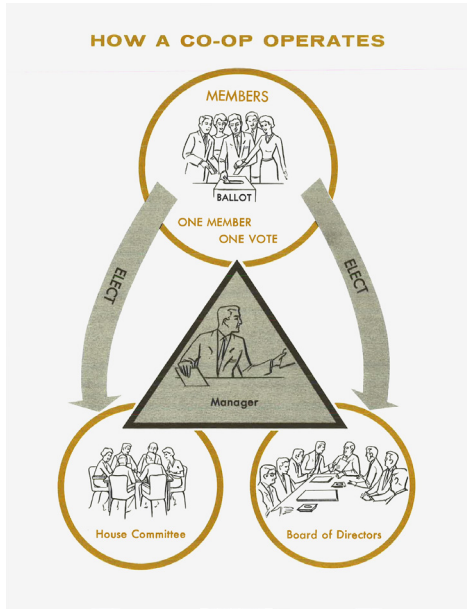
8 Gerald Szama, “A Brief History of Affordable Housing Cooperatives in the United States,” *Economics Working Papers* (University of Connecticut, 1996), 1.

9 U.S. Census Bureau, *1900–1930: Fifteenth Census of the United States, Volume 6* (1930); Demographia, *New York Urbanized Area: Population & Density from 1800 (Provisional)*, <http://demographia.com/db-nyuza1800.htm>.

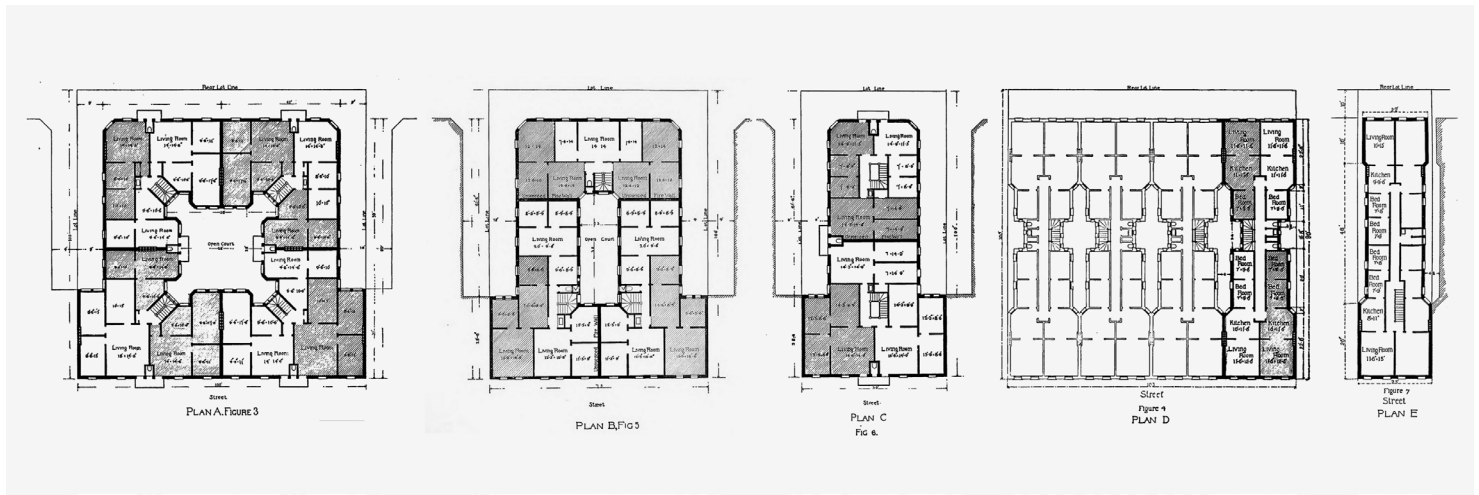
10 Nicholas Dagen Bloom and Matthew Gordon Lasner, *Affordable Housing in New York* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 37.

11 Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, 91.

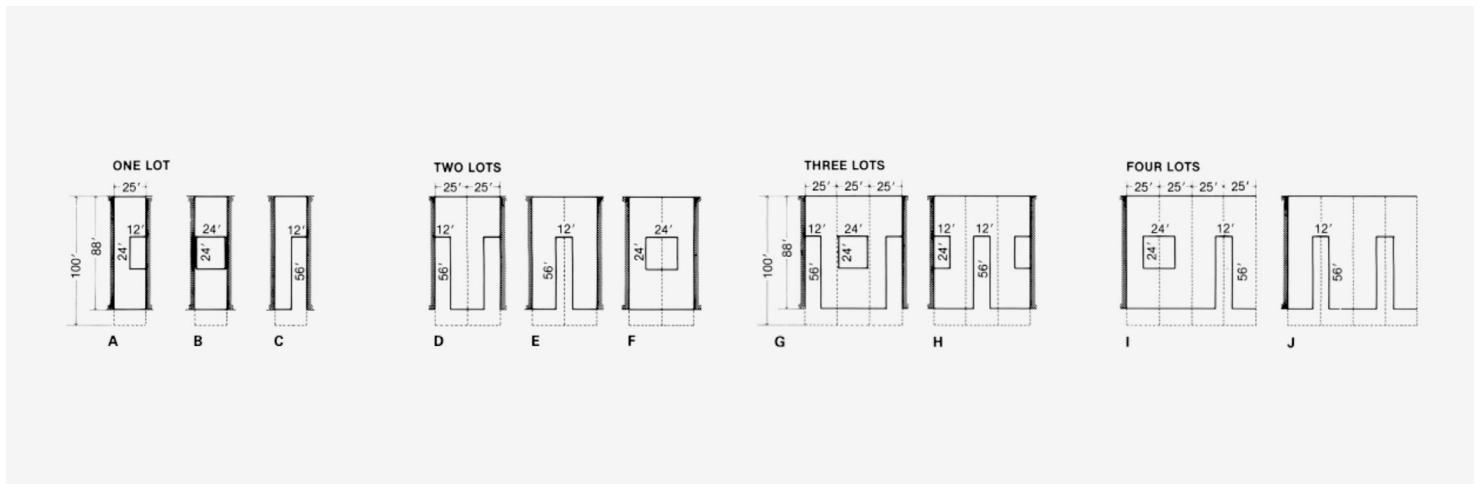
12 Ibid., 82.



Diagrams published by the Amalgamated Housing Corporation explaining cooperative ownership structure and expenditures. From Amalgamated Housing Corporation., *30 Years of Cooperative Housing: 1927-1957* (1958).



Prototype tenement plans prior to the 1901 "New Law" reforms. Drawings arranged by the author. From Ernest Flagg, "The New York Tenement House Evil and its Cure," *Scribner's Magazine* (Vol. XVI) (July 1894), 108, 112, 113, 114.



Typical tenement configurations permitted under the 1901 "New Law." From Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 89.

The second invention was the adaptation of the European cooperative model to luxury high-rise apartment buildings like The Chelsea, completed in 1883, “the earliest truly high-rise apartment building in New York City,” according to Richard Plunz.<sup>13</sup> The Chelsea paired oversized, high-ceilinged duplex apartments with elevators and other extravagant amenities that simulated upper-class mansion living. Apartments did not have kitchens; rather, on-site staff housed in a building in the rear yard could be summoned to prepare meals delivered to the apartments or served in a shared dining room on the ground floor. Importantly, the developers used a cooperative ownership model which offered wealthy tenants a degree of pride and agency in owning an *apartment*, rather than a townhouse, illustrating the fungibility of the cooperative model across class lines.<sup>14</sup> For the upper classes, cooperative ownership reproduced “as closely as possible the atmosphere of a private house...[offering] freedom from servants and maintenance workers, the ability to go away and return to apartments ready for occupation, to redecorate at will, move more easily, and save money in household expenses.”<sup>15</sup> Over the remainder of the nineteenth century, the cooperative would be adopted as the preferred model for apartment ownership in New York, with its definition codified in the 1909 Consolidated Laws of the State of New York. Legislation that enabled the ownership of condominiums was not introduced until 1964, and a 1980 report by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York asked, “What accounts for the current popularity of co-ops in New York City? In large part, it appears to be a legacy of past eras...it may be that the predominance of co-ops in the city results from their long-standing familiarity to the public, lawyers, and lending institutions.”<sup>16</sup>

The radical collectivist valence of the cooperative project would be recovered in the 1920s, paired with a new architectural expression resulting in the courtyard apartment block. While the housing crisis worsened even further following World War I, labor organizations benefitting from rising wages became developers of collective housing experiments on cheap, undeveloped outer-borough land made newly accessible to the city center by extensions of the subway.<sup>17</sup> Private developers and philanthropists also took the opportunity to experiment, as reform-minded capitalists looked to the cooperative model for a means to soothe worker angst, increase labor productivity, and prove that government did not need to intervene in housing matters.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of financing, most of these projects agreed on the courtyard block as the ideal form, including: Andrew Thomas’s Thomas Gardens Apartments and Dunbar Apartments, developed by John Rockefeller, and Linden Court, developed by the Queensboro corporation; Clarence Stein’s Phipps Garden Apartments, developed by a philanthropic offshoot of the Carnegie Steel Company; and Springsteen & Goldhammer’s rental Pickwick Arms, Alhambra Apartments, and Concourse Gardens, all of which Jessor worked on as draftsman.

Kazan’s first successful cooperative can be viewed as an appropriation of locally-developed legal models in service of political goals. Kazan, a syndicalist accountant for various textile unions in the 1910s and 1920s, approached the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union (ACWU) in 1925 to build a cooperative housing development following successful experiments in consumer cooperative groceries and services. The resulting project, the Amalgamated Housing Corporation in the Bronx, was the first successful example of a “limited-equity” cooperative in which cooperators collectively agree to abolish profit from resale of their shares, enabling housing to be purchased effectively at-cost. Kazan dedicated the

13 Ibid., 109.

14 The Rembrandt, another high-end apartment building built in 1881 on 57<sup>th</sup> Street adjacent to Carnegie Hall, was the first cooperative in the city.

15 National Cooperative Law Center, *A History of Housing Cooperatives*, <https://www.nationalcooperativelawcenter.com/coop-locator/the-history-of-housing-cooperatives>.

16 Sahling and Stein, “Co-op Fever in New York City,” 16.

17 George Springsteen, “The Cooperative Plan – One Answer to the Low Cost Housing Plan,” *The Architectural Forum*, February 1931, 243.

18 Dagen Bloom and Lasner, *Affordable Housing in New York*, 41.

project to the spirit of the Rochdale cooperators who “forced by hunger and poverty, sought to help themselves in their desperate situation... Co-operative housing...is an extension [of the] idea of mutual aid.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Kazan’s LEC marks the return of Rochdale cooperative principles to the working class, having first been locally prototyped in the production of luxury housing. Kazan and his sponsors with the ACWU and the International Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) belonged to a milieu of left-leaning working class textile and factory workers. With a strong contingent of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe, these unions often emerged from the dense social fabric and religious institutions of Manhattan’s Lower East Side and were strongly ideologically committed to building new, experimental, multi-racial communities free from the shackles of capital and squalor. Beginning with the 1916 *Alku* and *Alku Toinen* cooperatives, built by a Finnish workers group in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, trade unionists began building utopian cooperatives, each with their own unique belief systems that attracted members accordingly. Calvin Trillian would later write that “in the late-twenties, a Jewish garment worker who wanted to move his family from the squalor of the Lower East Side to the relatively sylvan North Bronx could select an apartment on the basis of ideology.”<sup>20</sup>



Zara Pfeifer, Amalgamated Dwellings, 2024.

While for some organizations the cooperative model was connected to an explicitly communist or socialist ideology, for many it was seen as a pragmatic solution to contemporary labor issues developed from first principles. Though Jessor was an outspoken supporter of the Communist Party of the United States of America, Kazan and his patron Sydney Hillman of the ACWU were decidedly less ideologically specific.<sup>21</sup> Where Kazan might be described as an anarcho-syndicalist, Hillman was a devoted anti-communist who used union-investment in cooperative enterprises to satiate leftist and conservative factions of his organization, telling an agitated convention in Chicago following the Bolshevik revolution that “the Co-operative Movement will bring a large measure of democracy and human

19 Abraham Kazan, “Letter to Jacob S Potofsky,” *30 Years of Amalgamated Cooperative Housing, 1927–1957* (1957).

20 Calvin Trillian, “The Coops,” *The New Yorker*, July 25, 1977.

21 Letter from Earl Browder to Herman Jessor dated November 4, 1930, reviewed by the author.

happiness into industry.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Kazan relied on unionized cooperators to act as vanguards anchoring large new cooperative developments that could attract the unpoliticized working and middle-classes away from suburbia. Both Kazan and Hillman, and affiliates like publisher Charnley Vladeck, could be considered as Bundist “half intellectuals...distinguished...in practical work as expert organizers, administrators, and most of all mediators between the movement’s intellectual elite and enlightened constituency.”<sup>23</sup> Officially, the ACWU and UHF avoided using loaded political language in published materials, deferring to the promotion of “better society by...an economy of abundance,” “fair return for...labor,” “equality,” “democracy in economic institutions,” and, in alignment with the deeper history of American entrepreneurship, “the necessity of safeguarding the members’ equity.”<sup>24</sup>



Left: Zara Pfeifer, Amalgamated Housing Corporation Building 6, 2024.  
Right: Zara Pfeifer, Co-op City townhouses, 2023

As organized labor borrowed the legal structure of the cooperative as distilled by luxury developers in the century prior, Springsteen & Goldhammer performed a similar act of appropriation architecturally by welding the cooperative model to a new hybrid building type merging the working-class tenement and upper-class apartment-house. Amalgamated’s affinity for tenement apartments was most obvious in its appearance, which revealed a decorated load-bearing brick construction similar to contemporary low- and mid-income apartment buildings. In plan, however, the consolidation of several narrow lots into a wide, block-long parcel allowed the lightwells demanded by the 1901 “New Law” to be combined into a

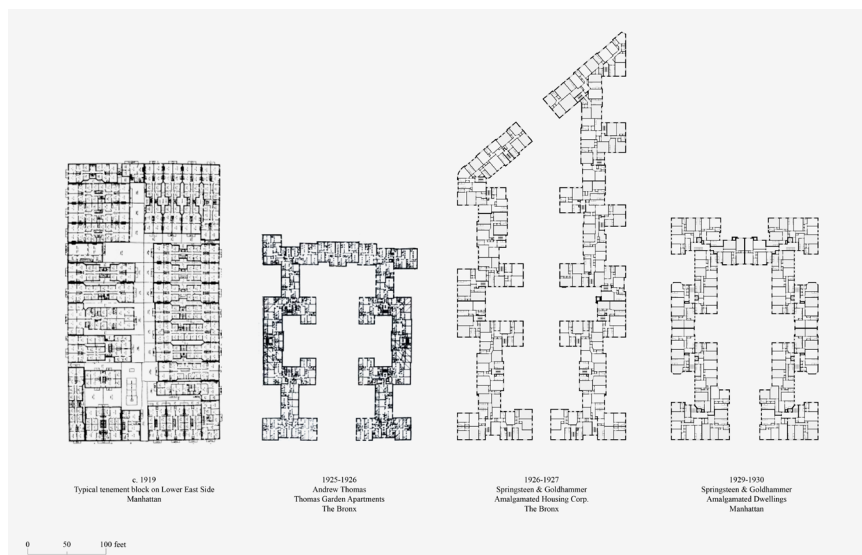
22 Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 153.

23 *Ibid.*, 16.

24 United Housing Foundation, *Co-op Contact Vol. VII, No. 4* (October-November 1964), 2, 9.

larger, inhabitable, continuous “court.” Springsteen & Goldhammer had previously developed courtyard cooperatives for radical clients the United Workers’ Association (1925–1927, 1927–1929) and the Workmen’s Circle (1926–1927).

Both projects, named the United Workers Cooperative Colony and the Heimgesellschaft Sholem Aleichem, respectively, expanded upon the perimeter-block prototypes developed by others like Ernest Flagg, Andrew Thomas, and Clarence Stein.<sup>25</sup> Keeping the bulk of the building divided into separate structures, with their own “towers” accessed from the court with stairs and sometimes elevators, eliminated the need for common corridors and allowed apartments to have double- and triple-exposures facing the inside and outside of the building, a schema Jessor would continue to experiment with through his entire career. Similar to high-end apartment-hotels like the Chelsea and Ansonia, Amalgamated featured common amenities in its ground and basement levels, albeit collectively managed, such as a library, tea-house, grocery, cafeteria, and ballroom interspersed with “townhouse” units that opened directly onto the courtyard. These common spaces were not architecturally distinguished from the rest of the building and were carved out of leftover space within a building footprint designed to optimize the interior layouts of apartments above.



Comparison of early courtyard cooperative plans and typical tenement block construction.

Drawn by the author; Tenement block plan from “Notes on an Architectural Competition for Remodeling of a Tenement Block,” *The American Architect* (Vol. CXVIII) (September 8, 1920), 306. Thomas Garden Apartments plan from Stern, Robert, *The New York Apartment House* (The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, 1980), 97.

The advantages of the courtyard layout to the cooperatives’ identity was neatly summarized in a 1925 advertisement for the Allerton Coops which said, “We want to build a fortress for the working class against its enemies.”<sup>26</sup> The pastiche of “pleasingly suburban” neo-Tudor and Romanesque decorations at Amalgamated, the Allerton Coops, and Sholem Aleichem presented an allegory of the early co-ops as fortified castles of urban social life at the wild, undeveloped frontier of the city.<sup>27</sup>

25 United Workers Cooperative Colony was also referred to as the “Allerton Coops” and more colloquially as the “Commie Coops” in recognition of the complex’s centrality to communist organizing in the late 1920s. The “Coops” were the first racially-integrated apartment building in the United States, and Jessor followed the UWA’s anti-segregationist ethos by maintaining one of the country’s first racially-integrated architectural practices.

26 Avi Garelick and Andrew Schustek, “The Rise and Fall of the Coops,” *Jewish Currents*, December 7, 2020.

27 Ana Garcia Sanchez, Ana Torres Barchino, Jorge Llopis Verdu, and Nicholas Dagen Bloom, “The ‘Tower in the Park’ in New York City (1930–1965): A Comparative Analysis between Cooperative and Public Housing,” *Journal of Planning History* 1, 38 (2025): 5.

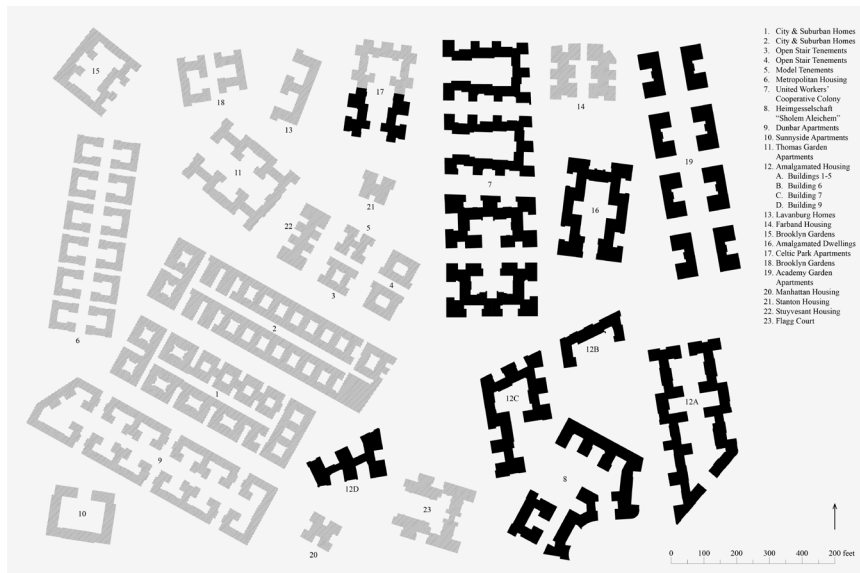


Diagram prepared by the first technical division of the New York City Housing Authority under Frederick Ackerman studying "housing efforts under private, institutional, trade-union, or cooperative auspices made during the thirty years preceding" NYCHA's incorporation in 1934, redrawn by the author. Projects designed by Herman Jessor and his anteceding office Springsteen & Goldhammer are highlighted in black.

Sholem Aleichem and Amalgamated's irregular footprints trace the street layout proposed by Frederick Law Olmsted in his 1877 report encouraging the city to annex the west Bronx, "as beautiful as Central Park,"<sup>28</sup> which, as Donna Haraway noted, offered to "heal the...decadent city dweller with a prophylactic dose of nature."<sup>29</sup> A romantic connection to the mountain pastoral was not merely visual, as all three projects were within walking distance of train stations that connected cooperators to Jewish day camps in the Hudson Highlands and Catskill mountains.<sup>30</sup>

## ENGINEERING VALUE

Where low-income housing can deliver profit by maximizing rents on the cheapest construction possible and where high-income housing can deliver profit from maximizing markups and service fees on luxury amenities, middle-income housing construction operates on tighter, riskier margins balancing consumer demand for higher quality and finishes against consumer frugality. Thus, the market is historically not an effective vehicle for the production of "missing middle" housing.

The success of the UHF in executing large-scale, long-term building projects relied on calm markets and price stabilities afforded by Roosevelt and Truman-era fiscal controls. Although aided by government subsidies, the UHF still operated on slim margins and needed to be able to reasonably predict the future prices of materials at the outset of projects and execute them as quickly as possible. Usually this timeline lasted between three-to-five years, and delays threatened financial viability.<sup>31</sup> While Title 1 of the 1949 Housing Act enabled the UHF to develop projects on cost-

28 Anthony W. Robins and Thompson & Columbus, Inc, *Fort Independence Cultural Resource Survey* (December 2011), 12; New York Parks Department, *Van Cortlandt Park Master Plan: The Need for the Master Plan*, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/park-facilities/van-cortlandt-park/master-plan>. The later Park Reservoir projects are built on top of a schist outcropping similar to those celebrated by Olmsted in his Central Park design, making for an interesting visual juxtaposition of romantic and modernist architecture from the project's backside along Orloff avenue.

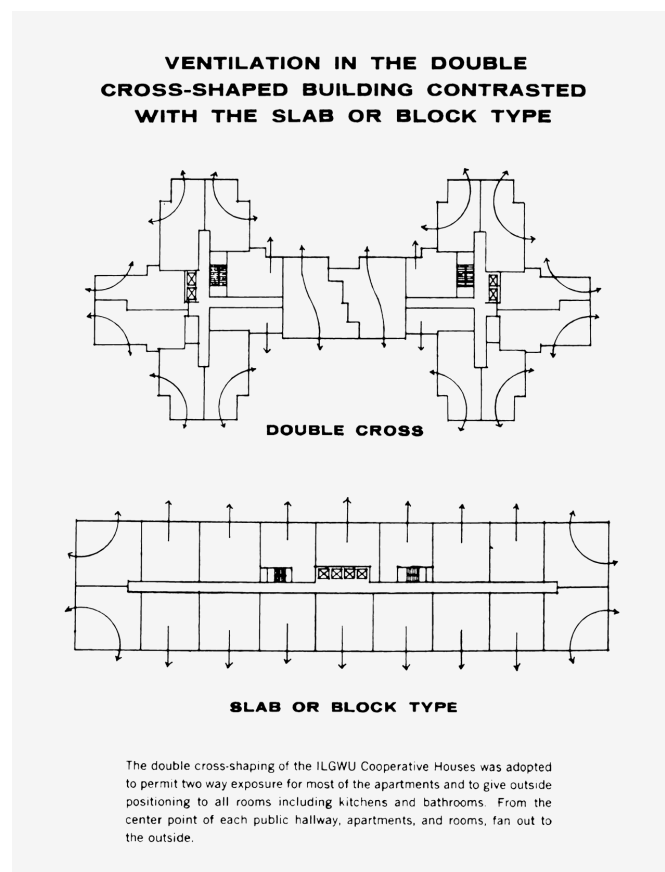
29 Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," *Social Text*, no.11 (1985): 20.

30 Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, 172, 175.

31 United Housing Foundation, *Co-op Contact Vol. VII*, No. 4, 2.

ly Manhattan real estate, pushback from displaced tenants delayed UHF slum clearance efforts at Penn South and Cooper Square, leading Kazan to abort the latter project entirely. Kazan and the UHF subsequently opted to only pursue new projects on undeveloped properties in the interest of financial expediency, often on fallow land at the city's periphery. Materially, this led Jessor and the UHF to prioritize working within existing building economies, using common supply and labor chains as evinced by extensive use of Hudson River brick cladding over concrete skeleton structures.

Jessor's architecture furthers Kazan's collectivist political goal by designing for efficiencies that allowed the projects to scale. Because the LEC model discards profit, cost savings delivered by construction efficiencies allowed some flexibility in designing for architectural improvements and reinvestments in social programming. In a 1957 shareholder report, the Amalgamated cooperative estimated "the difference in rent between cooperative housing and comparable private housing ranges from 20 to 45 percent."<sup>32</sup> Adjusted for inflation, this means a family could save between about \$25,000 to \$45,000 in 2026 dollars over a thirty-year period renting a comparable apartment.<sup>33</sup> With 2,478 families across all of their developments in 1957, the Amalgamated Corporation estimated the cooperatives cumulatively saved \$5,819,162 over thirty years, about \$70 million in 2026,<sup>34</sup> roughly twice the gross cost to develop the entire 1927 Amalgamated project.<sup>35</sup>



From United Housing Foundation. *The Story of the ILGWU Cooperative Houses* (1962), 12.

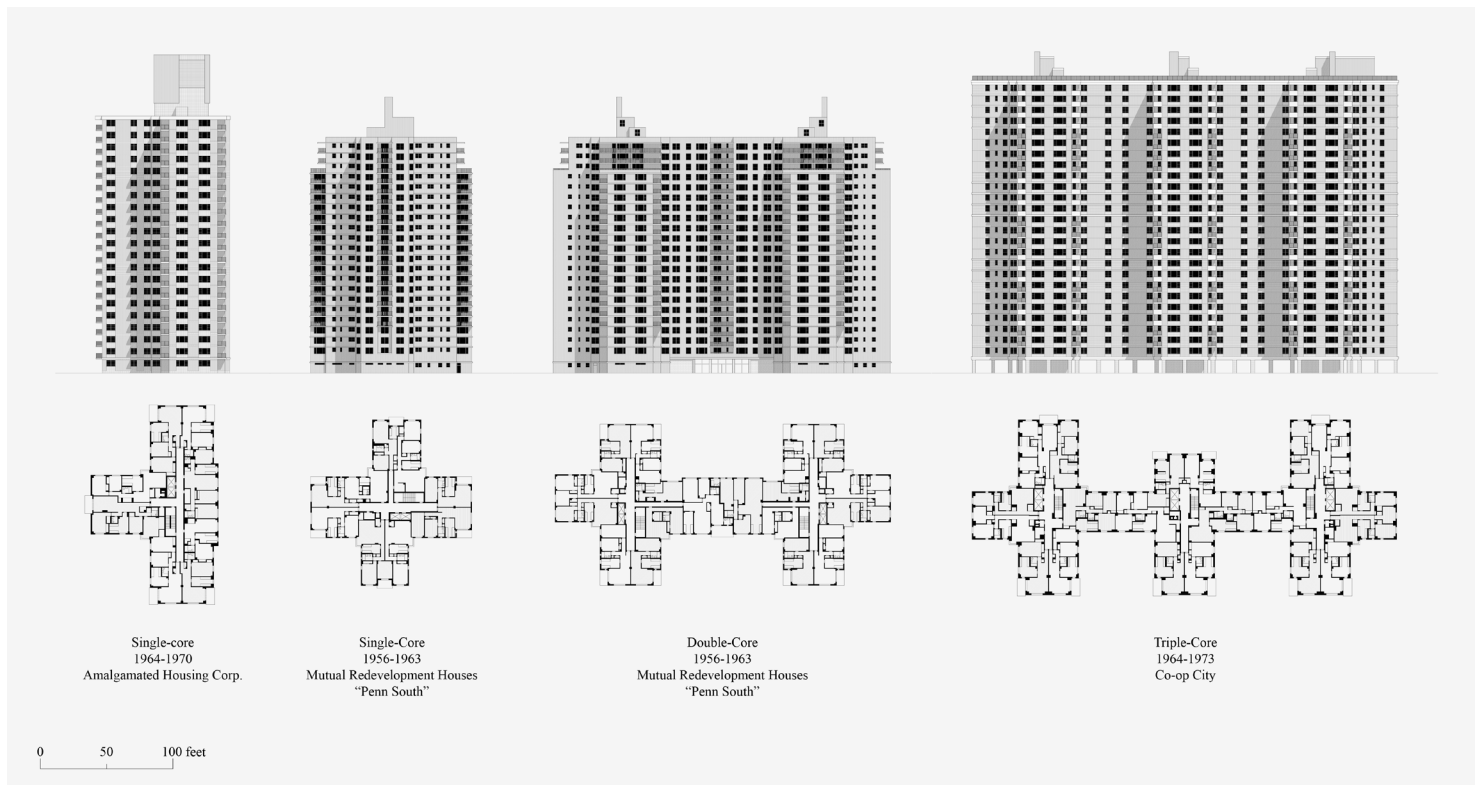
32 "Financial Benefits of Cooperative Housing," *30 Years of Amalgamated Cooperative Housing, 1927–1957* (1957).

33 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *CPI Inflation Calculator*, [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm).

34 Ibid.

35 Howard Charles Kaplan, *Amalgamated Cooperative Housing: An Empirical Study of Middle-Income Cooperative Housing in the State of New York* (1959), Appendix A; \$1,950,000 in 1927 adjusted to inflation is equivalent to approximately \$36.6 million per the USBoL CPI Inflation Calculator.

Thus, Jessor had some flexibility to spend on his designs, as shown in a circa 1962 diagram comparing ventilation of “double-cross” towers at Jessor’s Penn South versus a typical “slab or block type” tower with the same number of units.<sup>36</sup> While the “slab type” offered just four of its eighteen units cross-ventilating double-exposures, Jessor’s “double-cross” does so for fourteen of its eighteen units, enabled by investment in additional exterior surface area.<sup>37</sup> Jessor’s units are also noticeably larger than those in the uncredited “slab block.”



Plan and elevations comparing “cross” type towers by Jessor. Drawn by the author.

The cooperatives’ abilities to reinvest savings into modest architectural luxuries models the transference of real estate exchange-value into amenity use-value; allowing the definition of efficiency as a metric in the design process to encompass non-material qualities like sunlight exposure, ventilation, and comfort in addition to cost. Jessor finds such efficiencies through a process of typological design, adapting the brick courtyard tenement plans refined by his mentors, Springsteen & Goldhammer, to a reinforced-concrete structural system. The “triple-core” plan was Jessor’s preferred apartment building type, as evinced by his having used it in almost every UHF development, and was clearly derived from his tenement-derived courtyard experiments at United Workers’ and Amalgamated.

The triple-core plan could be deconstructed into double- or single-core towers to create smaller footprints (as at Penn South), and it could be vertically expanded or reduced to vary the unit count as demanded (as at Amalgamated-Warbase and Rochdale Village). At Rochdale Village, Jessor laid out a plan of five pinwheels of four identical triple-core blocks

<sup>36</sup> United Housing Foundation, *The Story of the ILGWU Cooperative Houses* (1962).

<sup>37</sup> The higher ratio of exterior surface to interior volume, desirable at mid-century to enable greater passive ventilation and light, is in 2026 a liability for the co-ops because of their increased thermal inefficiency, requiring greater energy consumption to offset through active heating and cooling, as outlined by Will Sheridan and Brandon Pietras in their May 2026 lecture, *Co-ops Today: The Case of Penn South*.

spun with entries at the pinwheels' fulcra. The orthogonal placement of the towers frames a sequence of squared-off open spaces between the towers, somewhat recalling the atmosphere of the secluded interior courts of the early projects, at a much larger scale.

Rochdale Village is Jessor's most reduced and coherent urban plan, using a rigid grid to organize a single, generic building type across a large site in which automobile and pedestrian traffic are entirely separated and in which libraries, shopping centers, schools, and other community facilities are given special articulation. It also marks the height of coordination between the UHF and city and state agencies, as the layout of the development, the outline of its property, and the scale and location of civic infrastructure was designed in close communication between civic officials and Jessor's office.<sup>38</sup> The lawns between the buildings are crossed by offset paths and allées of trees which continue the grid, reinforcing the feeling of passing through an open network of exterior "rooms" which today act as the de-facto commons for the surrounding suburban neighborhoods.



Left: Zara Pfeifer, Hillman Houses apartment kitchen, 2025.

Right: Zara Pfeifer, Penn South residential lobby, 2023.

Ideology courses differently through Jessor's plans than those of the contemporary heroic modernist housing designers. Where Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe abstracted architecture into compositionally-resolved plan-diagrams to be superimposed over whatever community they were intended for, Jessor's plans appear comparatively messy, tracing a meticulous articulation of fussed-over apartment layouts to pressing financial constraints. Within Jessor's office, lead draftsman Gerhard Graupe was noted for working closely with future tenants to develop apartment layouts that neatly accommodated everyday uses and desired amenities,<sup>39</sup> and in some cases Graupe even prepared furniture and merchandise plans for individual residential and commercial tenants.<sup>40</sup> The densely packed floorplans of Jessor buildings reflect a scalar design operation to resolve interior domestic space and exterior urban social space, fitting highly internally resolved apartment units within a relatively economical envelope optimized for light, air, and views.

If the planning ideas of the European avant-garde had an influence on Jessor, they likely came secondhand through his contemporaries in the New York architectural media. Managing editor of *Architectural Record*

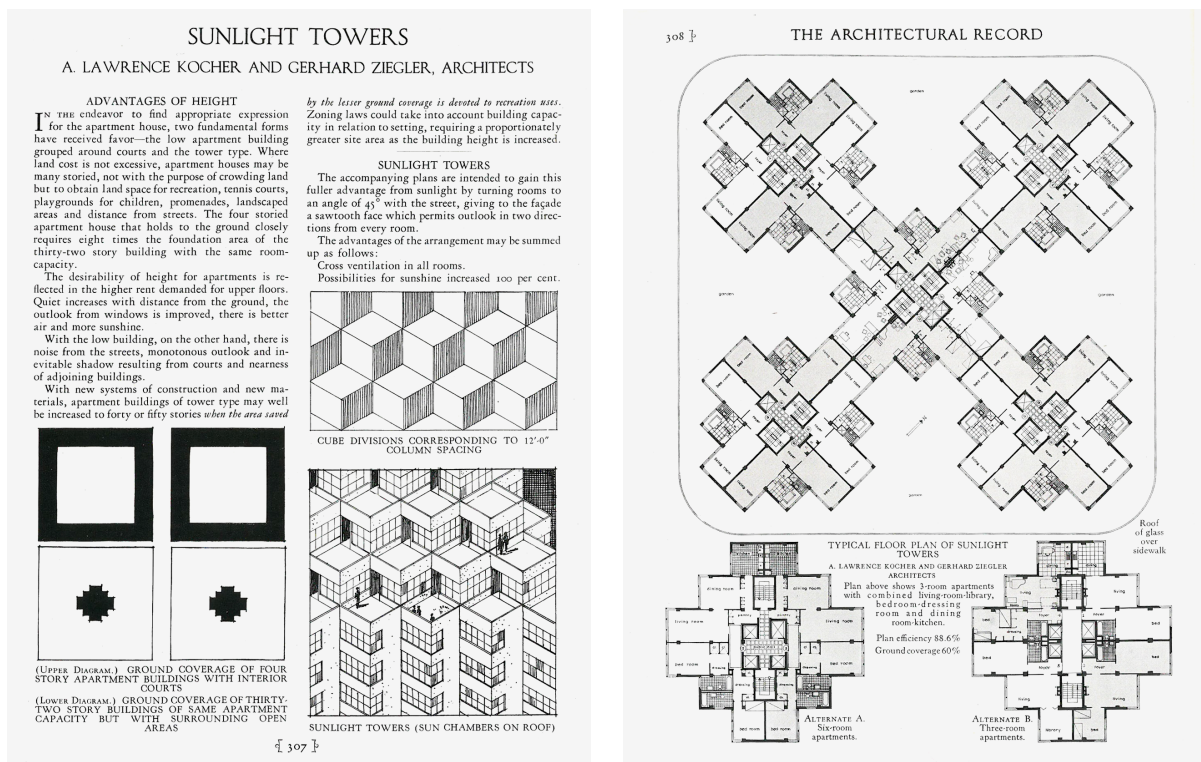
38 Preliminary site plans reviewed by the author.

39 Schuman, "Labor and Housing in New York City," 624.

40 Study drawings prepared by Graupe reviewed by the author.

Lawrence Kocher and Gerhard Ziegler’s Sunlight Towers proposal anticipated a multi-core tower with bay windows at interior corners similar in form to Jessor’s designs, but with clumsier interior layouts organized by a rigid square grid. William Lescaze and Albert Frey’s unbuilt River Gardens scheme, to raze and replace the Lower East Side of Manhattan with double- and triple-cross skyscrapers that interlock to form a network of courtyards, is not entirely dissimilar from what Jessor would later build on this site, especially at Hillman Houses.<sup>41</sup>

The evolution of Jessor’s plans was tied to the pace of change within building culture at large. The UHF maintained a measured attitude to integrating new technologies; while generally reticent to be pioneers of new buildings systems, Jessor’s team were “masters at basic systems which enabled Jessor to bring in his projects at lower cost than most.”<sup>42</sup> Jessor tended to incorporate new features like mechanical ventilation, electrical heating, and the “corduroy” concrete block only after such inventions had been widely adopted. “Design innovation is not permitted to drive up costs,” the UHF said in 1968.<sup>43</sup> In the private sector, the architect Philip Birnbaum provides an interesting analogue to Jessor, having designed a similar number of privately-developed apartment and cooperative buildings for a wider range of client types over the same period of time.<sup>44</sup> Birnbaum’s architecture, similarly praised for its construction efficiency, shares many plan elements, an indifference to aesthetic style, and an approach to “design a building from the inside out,” but often placing bigger buildings on tighter lots with smaller apartments and less amenities.<sup>45</sup>

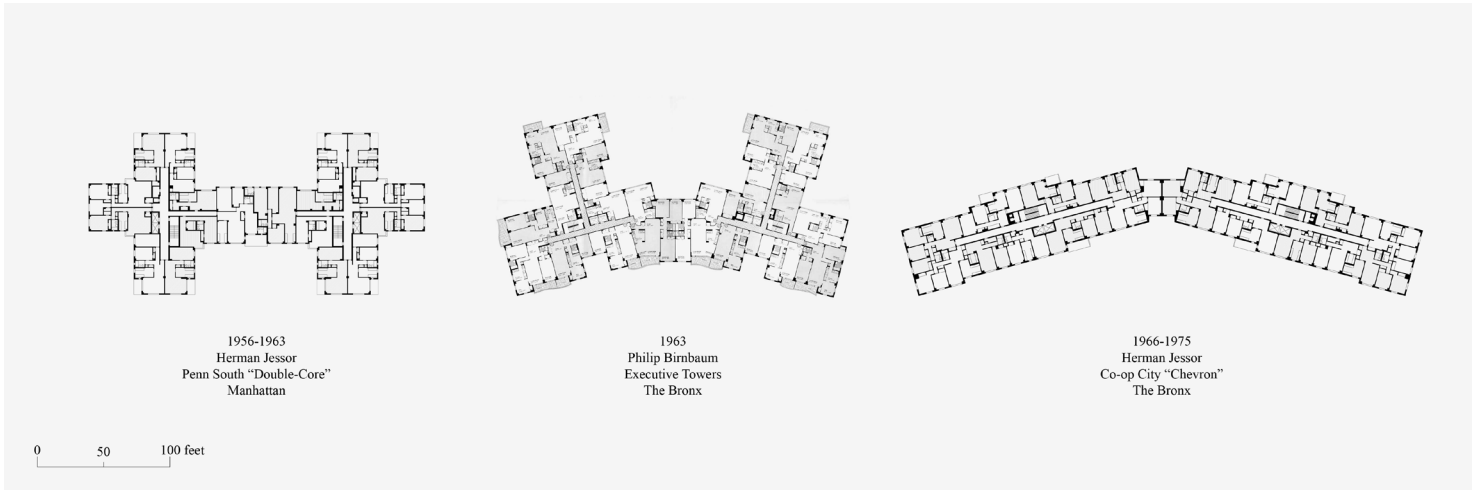


From Lawrence Kocher and Gerhard Ziegler, “Sunlight Towers,” *The Architectural Record* Vol. 65 Number 3 (March 1929), 307–308.

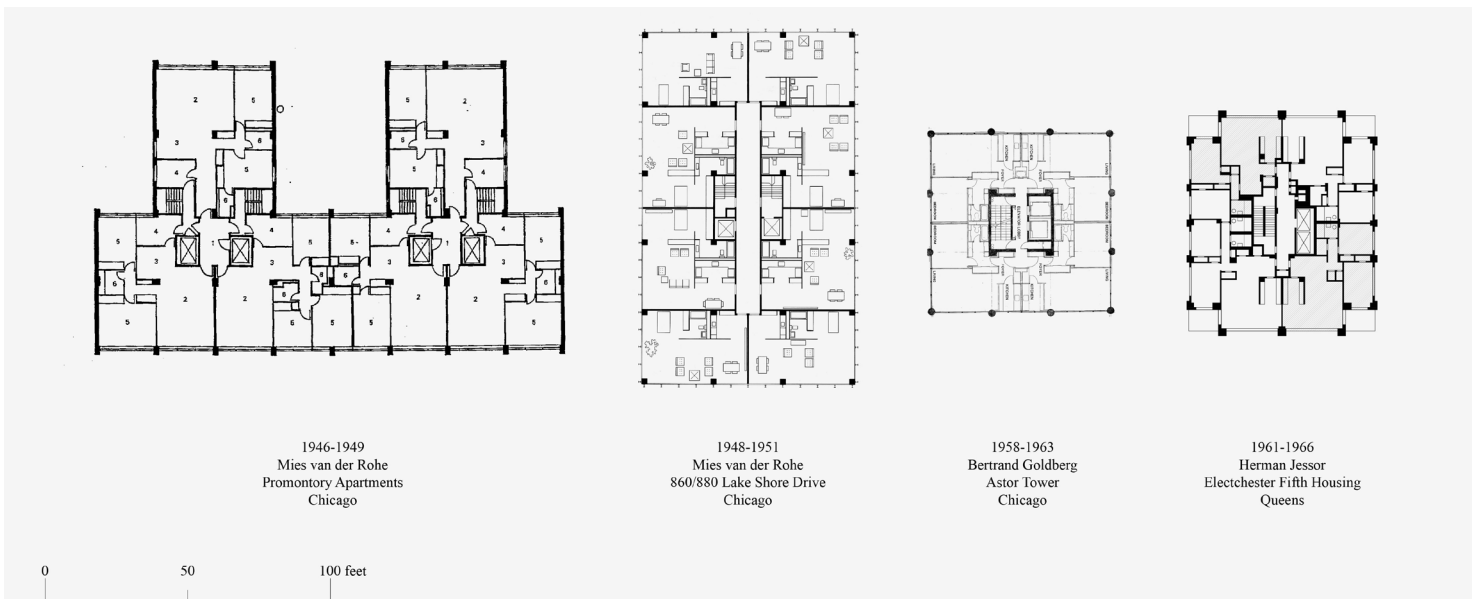
41 Sunlight Towers also seems to share an urban plan approach with NYCHA’s Red Hook Houses, which Jessor worked on as a draftsman during a lull in cooperative work due to the Great Depression.  
 42 Schuman, “Labor and Housing in New York City,” 624.  
 43 Ada Louis Huxtable, “A Singularly New York Product, Co-op Monumental in Size, Minimal in Social Planning,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 1968.  
 44 David W. Dunlap, “Philip Birnbaum, 89, Builder Celebrated for His Efficiency,” obituary, *The New York Times*, November 28, 1996.  
 45 Donald Trump, quoted by Dunlap. Upon Birnbaum’s death, Donald Trump said, “Most people don’t know Philip Birnbaum, yet he probably designed more buildings in New York than anyone else. Not all were great but they all made money. And some were, in fact, very good.”



William Lescaze and Albert Frey, River Gardens c. 1931–33.  
 Courtesy Lescaze Archives, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University.



Plans comparing common “double-core” apartment typologies, c. 1960. Drawn by the author. Executive Towers plan, courtesy of the New York Real Estate Brochure Collection, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.



Plans comparing luxury apartment typologies in Chicago with Jessor’s Electchester Fifth Housing. Drawn by the author. Promontory Apartments plan adapted from the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency’s submission to the National Register of Historic Places, October 4, 1996. 860/880 Lake Shore Drive plan, courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art. Astor Tower plan, courtesy of G. Goldberg + Associates.

The Electchester Fifth development, a pair of towers designed in 1965, are a unique example of a more experimental design by Jessor in dialogue with avant-garde trends. The client, the Joint Industry Board, an electricians union who had helped finance previous Amalgamated projects,<sup>46</sup> came with a desire to make a technological showpiece, the first all-electric project in the region, and had more resources than other UHF clients to make it happen.<sup>47</sup> The resulting project, twinned towers on a small footprint with ribbon windows and a concrete skeleton expressed on the building's façade, has an affinity with Mies van der Rohe's 1949 Promontory Apartments in Chicago, itself a critique of the tenement-courtyard building typology. Moreover, the slender, vertiginous proportions of the Electchester Fifth towers are a bold statement against the suburban single-family houses that they abut.<sup>48</sup> Jessor's residential towers at Electchester were supplemented by the Electric Industry Center, a community center for the larger existing development that Jessor's towers expanded upon. Featuring an auditorium, lecture halls, public library, credit union, club rooms, "hi-fi" rooms, cooperative offices, medical and dental facilities, rooftop terrace, and 48-lane bowling alley, the Electric Industry Center may be the closest realization of a Soviet *social condenser* in the United States.<sup>49</sup> The building's scale and programmatic ambition is inversely proportionate to the presence of other social institutions in this sprawling, suburban area of the city far from mass transit.<sup>50</sup>



Plans comparing typical 2-bedroom "balcony" apartment of Seward Park to contemporary typical 2-bedroom "Cape Cod" style single-family house at Levittown, New York. Drawn by the author.

Jessor's technically pragmatic design approach was integral to Kazan's political project, which prioritized "constant expansion."<sup>51</sup> Growing to include more individuals, families, and unions beyond the movements' core constituencies was viewed as the means to both realize a collectivist utopia

46 Kaplan, *Amalgamated Cooperative Housing: An Empirical Study of Middle-Income Cooperative Housing in the State of New York*, Appendix A.  
 47 United Housing Foundation, "Report on 23 Housing Cooperatives Affiliated with the United Housing Foundation," *Co-op Contact Vol. VII*, No.4 (October–November 1964).

48 The decision to make two tall towers may have been prompted by the decision to build the Electric Industry Center on the blank lot at Parsons and Jewel avenues. Preliminary site plans reviewed by the author show Jessor's office initially experimented with double- and triple-cross towers on this site.

49 Presentation plans reviewed by the author.

50 Jessor travelled to Moscow and the Soviet Union and had family in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan. He may have been influenced by workers' clubs he saw there.

51 United Housing Foundation, *Twentieth Annual Report* (1971), 6.

free from need and how the movement itself could survive in a capitalist ecosystem. As both developer and contractor, the UHF's size afforded it leverage through "mass buying power" to negotiate policy with state actors and building costs within the construction industry.<sup>52</sup> By designing buildings that delivered tangible quality-of-life improvements at decent costs at scale, Kazan and the United Housing Foundation could attract more cooperators and compete with suburban real estate speculators in Long Island and Westchester for the attention of the growing middle-class.<sup>53</sup>



Left: Zara Pfeifer, Penn South ceramic studio, 2023.  
Right: Zara Pfeifer, Penn South apartment bedroom, 2023.

Key to Kazan's strategy of expansion was demonstrating the viability of new development models to encourage adoption by other organizations and to leverage city, state, and federal governments for additional subsidies which would, in turn, allow Kazan to pursue larger co-ops in different areas of the city. The 1927 Amalgamated project in the Bronx, the first project to receive tax benefits from the 1926 New York State Limited Dividend Companies Act, were shown by lieutenant governor Herbert Lehman to governor Franklin Roosevelt, who was interested in reforming lower Manhattan's tenement neighborhoods. Roosevelt provided state resources and limited financing for Amalgamated to build a downtown satellite that would become the nation's first slum-clearance project,<sup>54</sup> the Amalgamated Dwellings on Grand Street.<sup>55</sup> The Grand Street Apartments in turn were used as a prototype for the 1934 and 1936 Public Housing Laws which created the New York City Housing Authority, where Amalgamated sponsors Charnley Vladeck and Louis Pink sat on the board.<sup>56</sup> The landmark 1955 "Mitchell-Lama" law, a modification of the 1926 law, opened direct state financing to developers of new limited-profit cooperatives and rental developments, was intended to spur construction, and was modelled after the Morningside Gardens co-op which was itself derivative of Kazan's Amalgamated LEC.<sup>57</sup> Mitchell-Lama "subsidized

52 Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, "Co-op City: Learning to Like It," *Progressive Architecture*, February 1970, 69.

53 Dagen Bloom and Lasner, *Affordable Housing in New York*, 163.

54 Springsteen, "The Cooperative Plan – One Answer to the Low Cost Housing Plan," 243.

55 Architect Roland Wank of Springsteen & Goldhammer was the design lead for Amalgamated Dwellings, with Jessor working in a supporting capacity. Wank had earlier lived in Vienna and was familiar with the socialist housing developments there and later, in 1933, became the first chief architect of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

56 A 1934 report compiled by the first technical director of the New York City Housing Authority, Frederick Ackerman, showcases ten Springsteen & Goldhammer projects in a survey of exemplary cooperative and union-led housing development efforts. The drawing was in turn published in German planner Werner Hegemann's influential 1937 book *City Planning: Housing*. Ackerman and Hegemann were both friendly with Le Corbusier, who in 1935 joined Ackerman for the opening of the NYCHA First Houses.

57 Dagen Bloom and Lasner, *Affordable Housing in New York*, 75.

the construction of 269 developments with over 105,000 apartments for middle-income households,”<sup>58</sup> and Jessor designed the first project to take advantage of the program, the three-building, 273-unit Park Reservoir, built for a veterans’ association near the Bronx Amalgamated campus.

While Jessor developed his projects according to the metrics of density, footprint, and cost that were familiar to his contemporaries, Jessor went further in viewing his architecture as a means to reshape property relations writ large, namely by offering an escape route from landlord-tenant exploitation.<sup>59</sup> While many critics blamed Co-op City, the UHF’s largest endeavor with 15,000 residential units, for drawing away Jewish, Black, and Puerto Rican residents of the South Bronx, contributing to that neighborhood’s decline through the 1970s, Jessor was unapologetic:

The building of Co-op City presented a unique opportunity for large scale rehabilitation. Many of the residents came from specific areas in the Borough of the Bronx—rundown slum areas... When the inhabitants move out to Co-op City, the landlords will apply a fresh coat of paint, install a new refrigerator and gas range, hike the rents, and the slums will continue to grow. And Jane Jacobs will be happy—the ‘grass roots’ will not have been destroyed.<sup>60</sup>

Like the luxury cooperatives of the nineteenth century, Jessor’s co-ops symbolized class aspirations for property ownership and similarly trafficked in bourgeois desires and paranoias. In some cases, this placed the UHF in opposition to the poorest New Yorkers who could not afford the mortgage payments required to become a cooperator. George Schecter, Vice President of the UHF, opposed the inclusion of New York City Housing Authority-managed subsidized rental housing in their developments: “We are opposed to rent supplements in a cooperative because we believe each individual must make his own commitment. We will not have people who are tenants of the Housing Authority.”<sup>61</sup>

### SUBURBANIZED MANHATTAN, MANHATTANIZED SUBURBS

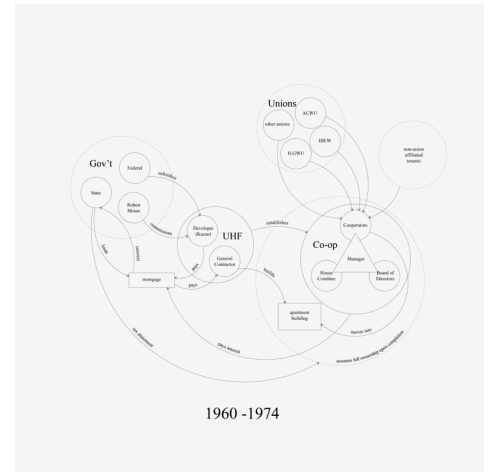
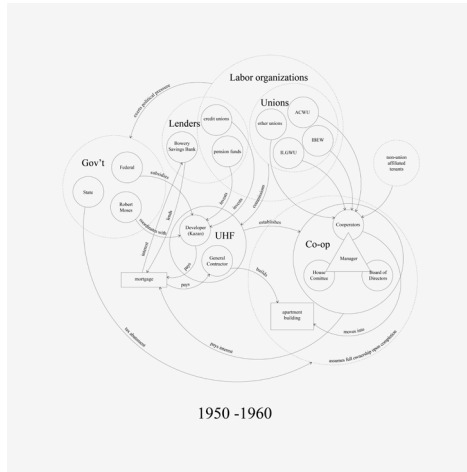
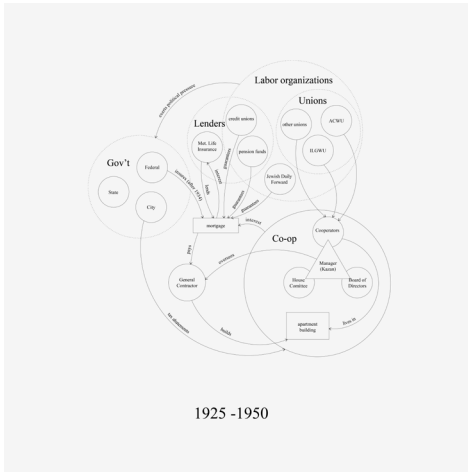
The iterative, project-by-project refinement of Jessor’s building plans unfolded across a dialectic between city center and periphery, following the building sites that expanding cycles of development, government coordination, and access to capital allowed Kazan to pursue. Jessor’s projects bring together diametrically opposed qualities from opposing urban and suburban spaces in service of a kind of universal urbanity remade by the collective. Where the first Bronx Amalgamated project transposes the urban tenement typology onto the city’s edge, morphing it in the process, the second Grand Street Apartments represents the return of the tenement apartment to the city’s center, reformed as a courtyard block. Designing projects alternating around the expanding North Bronx and Lower East Side Amalgamated campuses, Jessor and Kazan used both neighborhoods as architectural laboratories to test an urban community model to later be re-exported to the periphery at large scale.

58 NYU Furman Center, *Directory of NYC Housing Programs*, <https://www.furmancenter.org/data-tools-resources/directory-nyc-housing-programs/>.

59 Jessor’s antagonism towards landlords was undoubtedly shaped by his childhood time living in tenements, and his early life as a Jewish émigré to the American slums at the turn of the century somewhat mirrors that of his contemporary Louis Kahn. Kahn and Jessor both worked for the Works Progress Administration during the great depression, separately designing public housing projects in Philadelphia and New York, respectively. Kahn too designed cooperatives for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in the 1936 Jersey Homesteads, but found fame as an architect of luxurious single-family houses.

60 Herman Jessor, “Herman J. Jessor, Co-op City Architect, Responds to the Authors’ Text,” *Progressive Architecture*, February 1970, 72.

61 Schuman, “Labor and Housing in New York City,” 624.



Organizational diagrams outlining the evolution of Kazan's cooperative development model from 1925 to 1974. Drawn by the author.



Left: Aerial view circa late 1950s of (from upper left, clockwise) Amalgamated Dwellings, Hillman Houses, East River Houses, East River Drive, East River Park, Vladeck Houses, Corlears' Hook Park. Courtesy of New York Municipal Archives.  
 Right: Aerial view of Rochdale Village circa early 1960s. Scanned by the author, original image unattributed.

The arc of Kazan and Jessor's entwined careers roughly follows three phases of development with distinct organizational and architectural expressions.

The first early phase, from roughly 1925 to 1936, covers the period of time in which government intervention into housing was minimal and cooperative development entailed great financial risk. This in turn required a degree of ambition and vision from sponsors, often labor unions, cultural associations with prior experience running consumer cooperatives, or industrial philanthropists. Contemporary with Kazan's Amalgamated were Sholem Aleichem, the United Workers' Colony, Farband Houses, Thomas Garden Apartments, and others. All of these projects were relatively large courtyard buildings, usually an entire city block, reflecting a desire on the part of designers and organizers for a utopian architectural expression of the cooperative system, but only the Amalgamated Dwellings on Grand Street was built on previously developed land. Most of these early cooperatives, save Amalgamated, were insolvent by the time of the Great Depression.

In the middle phase, lasting from roughly 1936 to 1955, Kazan incrementally developed campuses of new cooperatives orbiting Amalgamated's uptown and downtown strongholds, seeking to further expand into areas where the ACWU and ILGWU had organizational presence. With reduced capital abilities from the Great Depression and later material shortages during World War II, these projects, built sporadically on lots purchased

within the unions' means, featured smaller footprints that break from the prior idealized courtyard model.<sup>62</sup> This type-shift quickly developed into the tower as economic conditions improved, a form that was also more ideologically suited to the unions' changing identities as they sought to incorporate workers from other economic sectors.<sup>63</sup> If the courtyard block created an inward-facing, enclosed space to protect a fragile utopian social experiment, the eversion of Jessor's buildings into outward-facing towers confidently projected the union's growing social vision into the city beyond.<sup>64</sup>

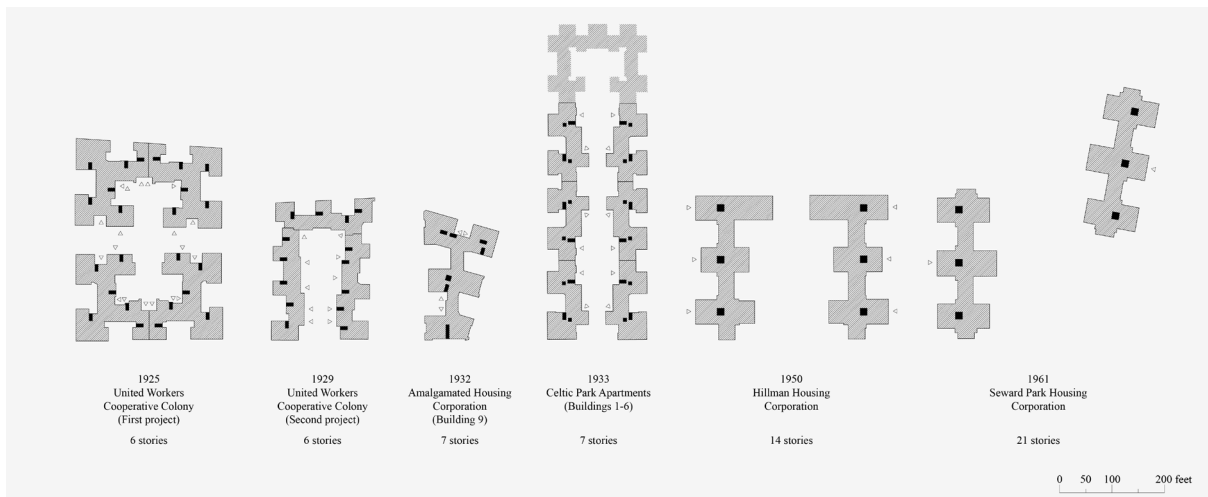


Diagram showing evolution of Jessor's cooperatives from courtyard block to "tower in the park." Drawn by the author.



Left and center: Excerpts from United Housing Foundation, *We've Come of Age: Twentieth Anniversary Journal* (1947).  
 Right: Excerpt from United Housing Foundation, *Golden Jubilee Journal and Kazan Memorial: 50 Years of Amalgamated Housing Corp.* (1977).

62 Beginning in the 1920s, socialists in the United States and abroad understood the skyscraper, the archetypal building of capitalism, as a revolutionary architectural form ripe for appropriation to revolutionary political programs. See Jean Louis Cohen, *Building a New World: Amerikanism in Russia* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2021). An early example of the dialectic between capitalist and socialist treatments of skyscraper architecture unfolded in New York in 1912 when the Jarmulowsky Bank competed with Charnley Vladeck's bundist Jewish Daily Forward newspaper to build the tallest building on the Lower East Side. Legend alleges the Jarmulowsky Bank added a tempietto to the roof to be taller than the Forward Building, but the bank's symbolic victory over socialism was shortlived as it was bankrupt by 1914. As of 2026, both towers are luxury residences.

63 During the period of transition away from the courtyard model towards the "tower in the park," workers in Jessor's office began visiting Soviet cities and studying their planning and construction methods. See Isadore Rosenfeld, Alan Mather, and Morris Zeitlin, "Housing and Town Planning in the Soviet Union," *Research Bulletin on the Soviet Union* (New York: The American Russian Institute for Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union, 1937); and Morris Zeitlin, "About Soviet Cities," *World Magazine* (Chicago, November 30, 1974).

64 Kaplan, *Amalgamated Cooperative Housing: An Empirical Study of Middle-Income Cooperative Housing in the State of New York*, 33.



The late phase began with the passage of Mitchell-Lama in 1955 which gave the UHF access to massive resources, allowing Kazan to pursue development of new cooperatives independent from union sponsorship. These projects were entirely new neighborhoods that reproduced the architecture and social milieu of the Lower East Side and North Bronx, translated into new urban plans designed from scratch, with substantial public buildings, schools, theaters, libraries, healthcare facilities, art studios, commercial centers, and dedicated power plants. Rochdale Village, Co-op City, and Twin Pines culminate Kazan and Jessor's mutual vision to create a socially vibrant alternative to suburban development pattern offering attractive, large-scale housing for demographics far outside the cooperative movement's core constituency of Jewish garment workers. This phase ended in 1975 with the "rent" strike at Co-op City.

### POSTSCRIPT: ARCHITECTURAL INERTIA

The mass cooperative movement, and social housing in general in America, ended as the New Deal economic system was dismantled. Shifting economic circumstances dealt dual blows to the UHF's ability to execute projects. First, material and labor shortages due to the war in Vietnam increased the costs to construct housing.<sup>65</sup> Second, the end of the Bretton Woods currency controls initiated a structural pivot away from the postwar export economy, weakening organized labor by accelerating the offshoring of factory jobs at their movements' bases.<sup>66</sup> Both events marked the end of relative market stability that enabled the UHF and other unions and nonprofit organizations to act as commercial developers.

At Co-op City, partially inhabited while still in construction in the early 1970s, the UHF faced substantial, unexpected cost increases that were not accommodated for when early project planning began in the 1960s.<sup>67</sup> At the time, the UHF was acting as developer, contractor, and manager for the occupied buildings, as their standard practice was to build the cooperative political infrastructure in tandem with the actual buildings and hand over management to the cooperatives upon the end of construction. The UHF passed the construction overruns through to cooperators in the form of increases in maintenance fees. The Co-op City cooperators, who did not have a say, felt that the UHF had, ironically, become a landlord and was treating maintenance fees as rents to extract from their tenants.<sup>68</sup> The cooperators organized a "rent strike," the largest in United States history, which effectively crippled the UHF and forced the handover of Co-op City to the cooperative and the sale of the in-construction Twin Pines development to a consortium of private developers who completed it as a rental Mitchell-Lama complex renamed Starrett City.<sup>69</sup>

Architectural and social criticism caught up to Jessor's urbanism around the same time that the federal government suspended financing for new social housing construction.<sup>70</sup> Though strong critiques of the "tower in the park" had been made amongst architects and planners since the outset of the 1940s,<sup>71</sup> it is possible that they did not become mainstream until later exactly because the economic advantages of their plans allowed for widespread implementation that delivered tangible improvements to standards of living for many New Yorkers through the 1950s and early

65 Schuman, "Labor and Housing in New York City," 626.

66 Michael Bordo, "The Operation and Demise of the Bretton Woods System: 1958–1971," *The Center for Economic Policy Research*, April 23, 2017.

67 Schuman, "Labor and Housing in New York City," 626.

68 Ian Frazier, "Utopia, The Bronx," *The New Yorker*, June 19, 2006.

69 Schuman, "Labor and Housing in New York City," 626.

70 Huxtable; Ana Garcia Lopez, Ana Torres Barchino, Jorge Llopis Verdu, and Nicolas Dagen Bloom, "The 'Tower in the Park' in New York City (1930–1965): A Comparative Analysis Between Cooperative and Public Housing," *Journal of Planning History* 25, no. 2 (2025): 1.

71 Plunz, 240.

1960s.<sup>72</sup> Jane Jacobs objected not only to Jessor’s style of urban planning on the basis that “people do not use city open space” except for “muggings,”<sup>73</sup> but also to the idea of subsidies for cooperatives, saying that the UHF’s East River Houses “would fail economically if it had competition.”<sup>74</sup> Jacobs’s editorial critiques were given institutional credibility by Oscar Newman’s landmark 1972 research paper *Defensible Space*, funded by Columbia University and the United States Department of Justice, which “argued that there was a direct relationship between physical environments and human behavior”<sup>75</sup> and became an important reference point for policymakers looking to defund public housing. As Katherine Bristol points out in *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, “*Defensible Space* is a subtle form of blaming the victim...it naturalizes the presence of crime among low-income populations rather than seeing it as a product of institutionalized economic and racial oppression.”<sup>76</sup>



Left: Zara Pfeifer, Co-op City, 2024.  
Right: Zara Pfeifer, Starrett City, 2025.

Such critiques percolated into the professions of architecture and planning, where many extrapolated from Newman’s analysis of high-rise public housing a condemnation of “modernist” housing in general. In a 1980 essay written by Robert A.M. Stern on the “failures of modernist housing,” Stern vaguely cites the work of “sociologists such as Jane Jacobs, Herbert Gans, and Oscar Newman”<sup>77</sup> in making the case that “if architects would simply combine new solutions—defensible space, a mix of low-rise and high-rise buildings, and the like—with modernist typologies, the profession will finally get it right.”<sup>78</sup> Such framing allows Stern to compare the floor plans of luxury apartments and social housing developments stripped of any context as to their cost, political origins, forms of ownership, or the fact that many of the buildings Stern celebrates in the essay were segregated.<sup>79</sup> Given his prolific career as a practitioner, public

72 Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York*, 275.

73 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Random House, New York, 1961), 90.

74 Jacobs, 71.

75 Katherine Bristol, “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth,” *Journal for Architectural Education* 44/3 (May 1991): 167.

76 Ibid.

77 Robert A.M. Stern, *With Rhetoric: The New York Apartment House* (The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, 1980), 78.

78 Ibid., 78.

79 Stern writes: “...I believe to be Thomas’ best work of the late 1920s – Thomas Gardens in the Bronx at 158<sup>th</sup> street and the Grand Concourse, completed in 1927...The large court is delightful, with Japanese-style lanterns and a footbridge at the center.” This is, coincidentally, the failed project initiated by Thomas and Kazan in 1925 which John Rockefeller completed as a segregated, whites-only co-op. Rockefeller was happy enough with the outcome that he hired Thomas again to design a Black-only counterpart across the Harlem River, the Dunbar Apartments.

figure, and as the longest-serving dean of the Yale School of Architecture,<sup>80</sup> Stern's emphasis on the singular importance of architectural form in the treatment of urban social issues is illustrative of how Jacobs's and Newman's theses have been broadly and uncritically integrated into professional practices writ large.

The dire social predictions of midcentury critics have not panned out; despite economic hardships and demographic turnover through the 1980s and 1990s, most of the former UHF and similar Mitchell-Lama LECs have elected to retain their ownership structures and limits on profitability. 28,460 apartments built by Kazan remain limited-equity,<sup>81</sup> about 32 percent of the 90,000 limited-equity cooperative units in New York City today.<sup>82</sup> Tenants in Jessor developments are proud to live in them and continue to be politically mobilized, owing in part to the relative comfort and affordability of their apartments and high population densities that facilitate long-term community organization and a constructive social atmosphere. At Penn South, where waiting lists for an apartment are 20–30 years long, 90 percent of cooperators recently voted to extend the community's limited-equity status despite the potential for windfall profits from selling off their desirable midtown real estate.<sup>83</sup> Rochdale Village has become the world's largest majority-Black-owned cooperative in the world,<sup>84</sup> while at Co-op City, "for the most part... commitments to racial integration served a positive function, enabling residents to feel a sense of continuity and community," bucking simplistic late-twentieth century narratives around suburbanization, gentrification, and white flight.<sup>85</sup> At the rental Starrett City, a robust tenants association organizes community programming and negotiates the terms of the development's Mitchell-La-ma benefits between management and government officials.<sup>86</sup> In a reversal of Oscar Newman's defensible space theory, organizers at Starrett City believe the high concentration of residents in an isolated area of the city actually facilitates neighborly interaction and collaboration on community issues.<sup>87</sup>



Left: Zara Pfeifer, Amalgamated Housing Corporation, 2024.

Right: Zara Pfeifer, Rochdale Village, 2024.

80 Mark Alden Branch, "Big Man on Campus," *Yale Alumni Magazine* (March/April 2026).

81 Glyn Robbins, "The Hidden History of New York City Housing Co-ops," *London School of Economics* (March 27, 2026), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2026/03/27/the-hidden-history-of-new-york-city-housing-co-ops/>.

82 Urban Omnibus, "Housing Brass Tacks: Limited-Equity Co-ops," *Urban Omnibus*, January 10, 2018, <https://urbanomnibus.net/2018/01/limited-equity-co-ops/>.

83 Interview with Ambur Nicosia, 18 May 2026.

84 Robbins, "The Hidden History of New York City Housing Co-ops."

85 Annemarie Sammartino, "Rethinking Co-op City, White Flight, and Race," *PLATFORM*, December 19, 2022.

86 Stephen Witt, "Starrett City Tenants Claim Victory Over Rent Hikes," *The Brooklyn Paper*.

87 Interview with Nanda Prabhakar, 14 May 2026.

Jessor's projects stand today as an unlikely archipelago of de-commodified, multicultural utopias sprinkled across the capital of global finance, ironically reproducing a social vision imagined by bundist textile workers a century ago. The continuing success of these projects owes much to Jessor's sensible architecture of economy so interwoven with Kazan's cooperative program that one likely couldn't exist without the other. We might consider this oeuvre as a counterexample to the generations of architects from Ernest Flagg to Oscar Newman who used their technical expertise to appropriate discourses of poverty, class, and race and polarize them through the lens of architectural form to entrench the status quo. If the crises of today require serious confrontation with inequity at a global scale, for better and for worse architects will be important actors as the managers of the building industry, its labor, and materials. Maybe, like Jessor and Kazan, we can begin by borrowing liberally from existing financial and architectural models in service of a radical goal: the abolition of value. Who's afraid of cooperating?

*Note from the Author*

Portions of this text were adapted from "What is a Co-op and Herman Jessor: A Primer", co-written by the author with collaborator Daniel Jonas Roche comprising original research undertaken for the exhibition *JESSOR: The Architecture of the Limited Equity Cooperative Movement in New York (1925–1974)* hosted at Citygroup, in Manhattan, in spring 2026.

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