I) Introduction

When Catherine Bauer, a renowned American public housing advocate, described her plans for federally-provided housing in America in 1934, she stated “it is not a ‘reform’ within the old pattern.”¹ Bauer suggested instead a profound transformation of what housing meant to Americans, stating that a new and radical path for public housing was possible. A focus in the collective rather than the individual was at the center of her proposals. In fact, she believed that public housing facilities should be ran by cooperatives formed by the tenants and that community should be represented in several spaces such as nurseries, common kitchens and dining-rooms, schools and playgrounds, all ran by the community. In advocating for collective housing, she challenged deeply held beliefs about the meaning of housing, family and the role of policy in shaping American life.

American housing policy has long had two-tiers, one committed to providing housing for the poorest Americans, and the other to subsidizing loans for middle-income families. The separation of these two policies is described sometimes as being a product of American culture, as the idea of a single-family home is often considered a staple of the American dream and a symbol of democracy and progress.² By providing homes only to the poorest and lending money to the middle-class nuclear families, the government has reinforced the ideal that each family should have its own private home, and that homeownership is essential to the success of individuals. The depiction of homeownership as a timeless and intrinsic value of American society has undermined

¹ Catherine Bauer Wurster, Modern Housing (Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 247
attempts to seek out alternatives to this two-tier housing policy. The hegemonic discourse in politics, during most of the 20th century, portrayed co-operatives, alternative communities, and non-nuclear family households as transgressive and sometimes even dangerous. Studying the history of American housing policy allows us to move beyond an understanding of the single-family home as a “natural” outgrowth of eternal American values, and instead to recognize the emergence of this ideal as stemming from the politics and gender relations of the time.

By carefully analyzing the debates, politics, and theories behind housing policies in the 1930s, one can question the existence of a deterministic path in the “American way” of providing houses. A study of housing of this sort is all the more important when addressing issues related to gender and sexuality, as hegemonic groups have constantly manipulated the discursive and material home to oppress minorities and marginalized groups. In American society, dominant elites, especially white males from the upper-classes, have established a clear link between the home and the private sphere. This association has had different impacts on men than it has had on women, confining the latter to the home, and thus excluding them from the public sphere. This confinement of women to the home describes primarily the situation among white upper-middle classes. It also refers to an ‘ideal’ that did not always reflect reality but did impact policy. Moreover, the association between the home and a nuclear-family has participated in the exclusion from society and public policy of non-conforming households such as homosexual couples with or without children, single-parent, or even extended families. The design of housing policies and their definition of what makes a home can lead to or reverse the exclusion and oppression of various social groups.
Several historians identify the New Deal as the era when an American “general” housing policy started. Before this period, the government and local authorities built some housing projects, mostly designed for World War I veterans. By studying American housing policies in the 1930s, and especially their evolution, it is possible to overcome the idea of a timeless conception of the American home. Although housing policy debates in the early 1930s were marked by theories that challenged traditional family structures and gender roles, the evolution of public policies on housing in this decade reinforced the place of the nuclear family as the core of society and supposed the confinement of women to the domestic sphere. By lobbying against collectivist projects and transformative conceptions about housing, the real estate lobby had a major role defining American public housing. In fact, the most radical visions for housing were carried out when the real estate lobby was weakened.

This paper explores the question of how public housing policies in the 1930s were responsible for the implementation of a patriarchal nuclear family home by. It starts by addressing the issue of public housing debates and policies before 1934. By focusing on the organization and proposals of female reformers, it shows that before 1934 there were women fighting and working for radical changes in public housing, aiming principally towards more collective and inclusive designs. It then analyzes the temporary policy carried out by the Public Works Administration (PWA) during the New Deal, which built dwellings that embraced, to some extent, a sense of community but that still perpetuated traditional gender ideals. The paper then examines how the passage of the Wagner-Steagall Act in 1937, reflecting the economic interests of the real estate


4 See Radford, *Modern Housing for America.*
lobby, implemented the ideal of the patriarchal nuclear family home and ignored the previous contributions of female reformers. The paper concludes with an examination of the current and future relevance of U.S. housing policy.

II) Female reformers and The Housing Movement before 1934

Before 1934 and the implementation of a general public housing policy by the federal government, public housing was a site of debate. Unions, female reformers and black advocates were crucial actors in those debates as they represented groups that were highly concerned by the shortage of housing. Female reformers, such as Edith Elmer Wood and Catherine Bauer, played a central role in the mobilization and design of public housing. Their approach to public policies concerning housing was marked by the proposal of cooperative dwellings, and their feminist concerns.

Though creation of housing policy is often thought of as a top-down process, the actions of politicians in Congress or in the White House do not adequately explain the beginning of the construction of public housing facilities in 1934. Political activism and academic theories played a central role in launching American public housing policy. The start of the Great Depression in 1929 accentuated a problem that had been lingering for decades: the housing shortage. With industrialization and immigration, a large number of people now lived in cities, and already existing structures in urban centers were insufficient to absorb incoming inhabitants. The economic crisis aggravated this situation, as more people were unemployed or underemployed, making them less able to afford a place to live. The housing shortage affected specific groups of the American population more than others. Members of the working classes and unemployed people were
certainly more impacted by the shortage. Nonetheless, among these groups, women and African-Americans fared even worse. Salaries for women and black people were lower than the ones of the white male population. Therefore, it was even more difficult for them to afford a place to live. At the core of the groups that mobilized themselves for public housing after 1929 were unions, the unemployed, female reformers and black people.\(^5\) If the four groups asked for publicly funded houses, women and black populations added to the discussion a different perspective from the white-male point of view. Female reformers, for instance, asked for designs that would alleviate the domestic charge for housewives and working-women, and black groups demanded projects with racial integration.\(^6\) Female reformers played an important role in the mobilization for public housing. The American Association of University Women, for example, was one of the first organizations in the United States to articulate and promote programs for housing policy. The National Public Housing Conference, led by mainly upper-class white women, was considered to be one of the most important lobbies for decent public housing.\(^7\) The importance of female reformers in the development of public housing policy is embodied by Edith Elmer Wood and Catherine Bauer. Several scholars consider them the main engineers of early American housing policy.\(^8\) Eugenie Birch, for instance, affirms that the two women “stand out as leaders having the most significant impact on the formulation of the new policy.”\(^9\) Therefore, women reformers not

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\(^6\) See Parson. Due to limitations of space, this paper discusses mainly the role of female reformers and, to some extent unions, which played a specific and especially important role in public housing debates and policies. The contributions of black communities concerning racial integration were also substantially significant but are beyond the scope of this study. For studies of black housing reform in mid-20th century see Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (2003) and Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (1983).


\(^8\) See Birch and von Hoffman, “High Ambitions.”

\(^9\) Birch, “Woman-Made America The Case of Early Public Housing Policy,” 130.
only were involved from the start in the definition of a federal public housing policy, they were also the very designers of early housing policies in the United States.

Both Wood and Bauer suggested an innovative public housing policy, one that challenged American society and the nuclear-family structure. In 1940, Edith Elmer Wood wrote *Introduction to Housing: Facts and Principles*, where she recapitulated her ideas developed in past decades. It is important to highlight the significance she gave to cooperative housing. She described the cooperative system in Scandinavian countries and in Holland, and argued that “something on the Netherlands model could be fitted into our existing system at any time.”

After cooperative housing was not included in the Housing Act of 1937 she continued to promote the possibility of implementing it. To understand why she gave that importance to collective housing even after the bill of 1937, it is essential to understand that Wood, and mainly Bauer, had extolled these innovative forms of housing since the 1920s. Catherine Bauer is considered to be the principal figure to have promoted “modern housing” in America. Imported from Europe, this type of housing with industrialized aesthetics, promoted a collective way of living and of property-owning. Carrying on a long tradition of feminist thought, and particularly the work of the feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Bauer wanted a federally financed project for the masses that would create neighborhoods with common and shared spaces, collectively owned and managed. These women proposed public housing facilities that would provide nurseries, playgrounds, pools, ballrooms and common laundries. The most innovative and transgressive of them asked for facilities with shared kitchens and dining rooms, as was proposed before by utopian socialists in Europe and Americans like

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11 See Radford, *Modern Housing for America*. 

CREATING THE PATRIARCHAL NUCLEAR FAMILY HOME:  
THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC HOUSING DURING THE 1930s
Charlotte Perkins Gilman.\textsuperscript{12} Although some unions gave importance to collective housing, female reformers went further by demanding shared spaces that would question the care of the children or cooking as private and feminine tasks.

\textbf{III) The Public Works Administration Buildings: Gendered Communities}

The creation of the PWA in 1933 launched, for the first time in American history, a general public housing policy. This federal entity created residences that promoted a sense of community between the tenants, through the building of nurseries, playgrounds and shared spaces in the residences. These residences were not, however, cooperative spaces like those proposed by Catherine Bauer. In fact, apartment design and the publicity materials surrounding these projects contributed to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles.

Created in 1933, the Public Works Administration (PWA) was in charge of leading the construction of public works to boost employment rates and therefore increase expected aggregated demand. The institution was thus conceived as a Keynesian mechanism to fight the depression. The Roosevelt administration considered public housing a field that at the same time would provide work for builders and fight the shortage of affordable housing. In the first round of the PWA constructions, between July 1933 and February 1934, the committee of Housing gave loans to local organizations to build housing facilities. In the second round, between February 1934 and September 1937, the PWA administered directly the design and construction of these spaces. As the real estate lobby was still in crisis in 1934, it had no sufficient power to oppose these measures.

which were conceived by the government as temporary. This early PWA housing included some of the features suggested by female reformers and unions, such as shared spaces and some extent of collective management. Concerning women, an important component of these building was the construction of nurseries. The PWA described a nursery in the Harlem River Houses, a public housing complex opened in New York City in 1937:

“In many housing communities the most popular feature is the nursery school. In Harlem River Houses it is anticipated that mothers will organize such a play school for young children. Not only will the children be safe from dangers of street life, but their play can be supervised and their health watched.”

Nurseries were common in the constructions of the PWA and they were often administered by professional women and housewives from the housing facilities. They were constructed with working-women in mind, but were also designed to relieve some of the tasks of many housewives. Female reformers were essential in the implementation of these places. For instance, in the Carl Mackley Houses, a project opened in 1935 and subsidized by the PWA but directed by the Hosiery Workers union and its director of research, John Edelman, it was a female reformer that conceived of and fought for the implementation of nurseries. In fact, “when the idea had been first suggested by Edelman’s wife, they resisted it because of the expense and administrative difficulties it would entail.” It was the constant fight from Kate Edelman that resulted in an innovative and high-quality nursery. The implementation of a co-operative was not realized by any of the buildings, but

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13 See Radford, *Modern Housing for America*.
the nurseries, playgrounds, and common facilities brought a sense of community and eliminated some of the burden of child rearing for women.

Despite these victories, the projects built by the PWA did not completely challenge the idea of a nuclear family or traditional gender roles. First and foremost, these projects were thought to increase the availability of jobs for men. In the short term, the creation of these buildings mainly provided construction jobs, a professional sector associated with masculine working aptitudes. Furthermore, the houses created were said to provide homes for working men. Alfred Kastner, the architect of the Carl Mackley Houses built in Philadelphia between 1933 and 1934, responded to the New York Times that the project “will provide every possible facility for the convenience and amusement of the working man and his family.”\footnote{Quoted in Radford, 123.} Therefore, the Carl Mackley Houses were initially thought to provide housing to male workers at the hosiery industries and women were conceived as an extension of their husbands. Nonetheless, as Sharon McConnell-Sidorick argues, women composed the large part of the hosiery workers in Philadelphia and most of them were politically organized.\footnote{See Sharon McConnell-Sidorick, \textit{Silk Stockings and Socialism: Philadelphia’s Radical Hosiery Workers from the Jazz Age to the New Deal} (University of North Carolina Press, 2017).} While amongst lower class families most women worked, they were nonetheless constantly referred to as housewives in the design literature of these projects. Moreover, the apartments were largely designed as places for women. Kitchens were not collectivized in the facilities, but instead each house had its own kitchen, separated from the living room. As we can see in the planning for a four-room apartment of the Harlem River Houses (Figure 1a), the dining table is included inside the kitchen.\footnote{United States Housing Authority., \textit{Harlem River Houses}.} One could think that this type of kitchen was more inclusive because all the family shared the space. Nonetheless, according to Judy Wajcman,
“the domestic division of labour was not transformed by these architectural changes! However, they did obscure the extent to which women continued to bear responsibility for servicing the family.”19 In Figure 1b, it is possible to confirm that the pamphlet for Harlem River Houses presented the kitchen as a space where women could serve their families. The fact that the whole family occupied the kitchen plays into the expectation that housewives had to do the domestic work while they served their husband and observed their children. In a society where the domestic work was attributed to women, an open kitchen increased the burden for women instead of alleviating it. Even if the PWA buildings provided common facilities that facilitated women’s ability to work outside the home, as intended by the creators, the design of the houses, and the publicity of the facilities described women as housewives even if among the tenants of these projects the larger

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part were families where the mother worked. For instance, in the Harlem River Houses, in one quarter of the units, only the mother worked.20

IV) The Wagner-Steagall Act: Implementation of the Patriarchal Nuclear Home

With the passage of the Wagner-Steagall Act in 1937, public housing policy became a permanent feature of American government. This led to increased resistance from the real estate lobby, which saw its economic interests in danger. Private industry’s resistance to public housing helped shape federal policy, which focused increasingly on slum-clearance and providing loans for home purchase to middle-income families. New policies also promoted the ideal of single-family units as they were more profitable to realtors. In doing so, the Wagner-Steagall Act was essential to the further perpetuation of traditional gender roles and the ideal of a nuclear family home.

Like the PWA, the Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937 implemented a federally-financed public housing program. Unlike the PWA, however, this bill created a permanent housing policy. Because of this permanent status and the economic recovery after the Great Depression, the real estate industry lobbied against the federal provision of housing as it represented a threat to their economic interests. For instance, Herbert U. Nelson, a lobbyist from the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB), defended a position against publicly subsidized dwellings in 1934, even before the passage of a permanent law. He claimed that multi-family dwellings were a part of communist policy, and therefore anti-American. For him, “the individual single-family dwelling, rather than the multi-family structure, is the prototype of good housing and good social planning.”21

20 See Radford, Modern Housing for America.
estate lobby used these anticommmunist claims to fight a reform that could affect their profits. Indeed, realtors preferred the ideal of single-family to collective buildings as they a much larger market in which they could participate. Moreover, if the government was in charge of providing dwellings, this would further restrain the potential number of clients for real estate. Therefore, realtors lobbied for a public housing policy that embraced the ideal of nuclear family homes and that did not intervene with the private market. This kind of resistance from real estate lobbyists led to many amendments to the original bill. As unions were more organized and had more political power than female reformers and black populations, the American government left behind the propositions of these two last groups.22 The Housing projects built after 1937 received less funding and were designed to house only the poorest Americans. On one hand, the United States Housing Authority (USHA), created by the Wagner-Steagall Act, constructed and subsidized housing for the poor. On the other hand, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), created in 1934 by the National Housing Act, subsidized loans for middle-income families that wanted to own a single-family house. In 1937, with the passage of the Wagner-Steagall Act, the main issue for public housing became “slum-clearance,” which was encouraged by the NAREB, as realty groups expected that the government could clear the slums, and that the private market could construct in the new spaces. According to the Wagner-Steagall Act,

“The term “slum” means any area where dwellings predominate which, by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement or design, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to safety, health or morals.”23 [emphasis added]

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22 See Parson, “Organized Labor and the Housing Question.”
23 United States Housing Authority Federal Works Agency, United States Housing Act of 1937, as Amended, 1939, 2.
Slums were, therefore, not only defined in terms of structural conditions or health issues, but in terms of moral standards. “Slum clearance” was presented by the USHA as a method to fight “juvenile delinquency” and to help maintain a “better community.” In many of these “slums” the idea of a nuclear family was contested by the existence of extended family, multi-family or single-parent houses. The new dwellings provided were intended for single-family units. Any application to the dwelling from a household that did not fit the definition of a nuclear family was denied. By clearing the “slums” and providing single-unit houses, the ideal of a nuclear family was reinforced.

Furthermore, as public housing policies encountered much more resistance from the real estate lobby and politicians, the government constructed the new projects on a smaller budget than the ones built by the PWA. Consequently, the new buildings were smaller, made with worse materials, and the common facilities became dispensable in the eyes of the government. The construction of nurseries and playgrounds in public housing facilities largely decreased and the spaces in the home were exclusively designed for the housewife. This is clear in the review made by the Federal Public Housing Authority and the National Housing Agency in 1946 about the previous decade of public housing construction. This review, titled *Public Housing Design. A review of experience in low-rent housing*, described the kitchen as the center of the activities of the family, where women served their families. Men were supposed to work only in public spaces. This is reflected by numerous pictures of women and girls doing domestic jobs in the interior of

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25 See Megan Reid, “Public Housing and Gender: Contextualizing the ‘We Call These Projects Home’ Report,” *Cities* 35 (December 1, 2013): 335–41.
their homes (Figure 2), while men and boys were depicted as working or playing in the yard (Figure 3). The report on these projects illustrated traditional gender roles for both women and men and, moreover, gave advices on the construction of the houses based on the ideals of nuclear families and housewifery. For instance, it was recommended to have large windows in the kitchen because “mothers like to watch their young children at play.”

27 United States. Federal public housing authority., 95.
promoted single-family houses instead of apartments arguing that the “great majority of people prefer one or two-story houses. Very few want apartments in three- or multi-story buildings.” In a similar way that in the PWA projects, most buildings had the dining room in the kitchen, and the kitchen was usually connected to a yard space, to allow the housewife to look at their children. (See Figure 4.) Clearly, public housing policy after 1937 reinforced the traditional nuclear-family by numerous ways, such as “slum clearance”, priority to single family-units, marriage requisites to application, clearly gendered spaces in the buildings, and the elimination of nurseries and common

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28 United States. Federal public housing authority., 100.
areas. One major reason for this reinforcement of traditional gender roles was the resistance from the real estate lobby, and the predominance of the unions to negotiate over women and black groups.

V) Conclusions

The idea of a cooperative or communal system for public housing was, and still is, transgressive in the sense that it challenged the idea of individual property, but also because it defied the norm of a “patriarchal nuclear family home.”

Figure 4: Design of the first floor of a row-dwelling (left) and of twin houses (right). In both we can see that the kitchen is also the dining room. In the row-dwellings, the kitchen is next to the entrance where the is the yard. In the twin houses the kitchen is in the back, next to another yard. These designs were retrieved from: United States. Federal public housing authority. Pages 99 and 101.

Throughout the 20th century, female reformers and feminist activists for public housing demanded cooperative and communal facilities, ones that might detach female residents from the private spaces of their homes. Stressing the importance of collective facilities was the main approach to public housing design used by female reformers before and during the New Deal. Some of this feminist vision was implemented in the temporary

29 Reid, “Public Housing and Gender,” 339.
work of the Public Works Administration between 1934 and 1937. The realization of these projects was, to some extent, possible because of the limited power of the real estate lobby at this time. Nonetheless, the number of projects built during this era was few, and even if the majority of them had nurseries, they were far from being what housing advocates like Bauer or Wood demanded in earlier decades. With the Housing Act of 1937, a new permanent housing policy established low quality buildings with single-family units, practically no common-areas, and traditionally gendered designs. This kind of policy was in part the result of the growing power of the real estate lobby, which demanded nuclear-family houses and extoled “slum clearance” as a route to a more profitable type of housing than collective facilities.

The history of American housing policy in the 1930s serves to illustrate that the current American housing policy, which since 1937 has had two-tiers, is not timeless and determined by intrinsic American values.30 There was for some time an alternative, proposed mainly by women, workers, and black populations. This vision was gradually rejected, and the hegemonic vision of the patriarchal nuclear-family was imposed on the poor and middle-classes through housing policy. Awareness of the past existence of an alternative and of debates about policies on housing, can serve feminists, LGBTQ+ activists and all types of non-nuclear-families. They might find in these past theories and projects a way of challenging the white hetero-patriarchy and its impact in public housing, and bring about a future rethinking of housing policy.

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30 See Radford, Modern Housing for America.
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