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Multi-Family Housing Throughout the 20th Century

The concept of the apartment complex has undergone significant change throughout the last century. Designed as a space-efficient housing structure, it is synonymous in cities, urban landscapes, and especially in neighborhoods with a lower average income than that of single family suburbs. Its origins in the tenement building and contentions existing amongst single family homes during the period of urban renewal are tumultuous. Today, the multi-family is accepted as commonplace, but certain developments are once again causing upsets in communities where housing is at a premium and rental costs steadily rise. By analyzing earlier forms of multi-family housing – the tenement and model tenement, the apartment complex, and public housing projects – and understanding where those fell short, we can explain the current social issues surrounding the "5-over-1," the modern multi-family installation.

As the population in large cities grew, housing capacity failed to meet demand. An overwhelming majority of the group seeking housing were members of the working class, who could not individually afford to construct their own homes, as was common practice much earlier on. The next best course of action, and one that was taken up in many cities, was to subdivide existing buildings, providing housing for many more families than was reasonable in the space. These haphazard quarters were what became to be known as the tenements. These dense living communities were, by many standards, inadequate to sustain the average person[1]. Regardless, the largely immigrant working class continued life in these conditions, to the dismay of wealthier individuals, appalled at the state of the tenements and convinced that it was up to an altruistic

[1] Riis, Jacob, *Jersey Street Tenements*. 1888-98.

benefactor to bring order to these disorganized communities. The documenting of these early slums by photographers like Jacob Riis only amplified the message that the tenements were a scourge on the city, and that something must be done[2].

The movement to reform the tenements came about shortly thereafter, and sought to design dedicated multi-family quarters, with certain shared amenities like cooking space and bathroom units. This design was realized as the 'model tenement,' which supposedly rid the communities who would move in of bad practices by providing them with a layout of quarters more in line with the average American home. Though not popular with everyone in the cities at the time, the model tenement, and later the decorated tenement, stood as evidence that multi-family living was not only possible, but it could be desirable in a landscape such as the city that demands space efficiency and a responsiveness to tenant needs and wants.

The success of the tenement in the city as a method of living, as well as the infeasibility of and building homes within the city center led to the realization of the luxury apartment[3]. There were many stark differences in the layout and aesthetic presentation of the luxury apartment compared to the tenement. Perhaps the most significant is the retention of the private and public divisions essential to a home at the time: a front parlor area for entertaining guests, kept separate from the private bedchambers which were kept to the back. Of course, these units were much more spacious than the working class quarters. There were no communal utilities; each apartment had its own entrance, bathroom and sewage connection, kitchen, and even a designated service entrance for the staff working in the kitchen.[4] These apartments had little in

[2] Violette, Zachary, *The Decorated Tenement.* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019). 1-34
[3] Alpern, Andrew. *Luxury Apartment Houses of Manhattan: An Illustrated History*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992.
[4] Hardenbergh, Henry Janeway. "Original Floor Plan of the Dakota." Unknown source.

common with the contemporary tenement, other than the fact that they were both looked down on as inferior to living in a standalone home.

After the second world war, the era of urban renewal, which sought to cleanse the city of the crime and immorality that could only proliferate in dense working class neighborhoods, inspired many municipal governments to pick single out these areas within their cities and level them completely, usually opting to use the newly cleared land for something other than residential housing. The most common housing alternative for these now-displaced people were the superblock-scale public housing projects that were also being funded by the federal government. Inspired by housing reformists,[5] these complexes were a step up in quality from the 'slum neighborhoods' in the same way that the model tenement structure was a step up from the shantytown-like neighborhoods which preceded them. These public housing projects had mixed levels of success. For example, the Harlem River Houses and the Williamsburg houses, both located in New York City, stood the test of time, and are still present today as housing plots that allow more light and air in than the typical apartment. In other cities, though, communal housing was once again seen as a place where crime proliferated. Most notably of these was Pruitt-Igoe[6] in St. Louis, a public housing project that fell into disrepair after neglect and a lack of tenant income, confirming the belief that dense housing projects bred crime.

The urban renewal endeavor led to the rapid construction of federally funded projects within the city center. As mentioned, these developments could come at the cost of the existing communities occupying prime real estate in the city's core. With the construction of residential space being increasingly difficult to justify within the dense city center, developers looked outward to the suburbs in the greater metropolitan region. Many of these suburbs were primarily

[5] Bauer, Catherine. *Modern Housing*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1934.
[6] Evans, E. S. "73 Pct. Rise in Pruitt-Igoe Crime Reported." *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, September 25, 1968.

occupied by single-family homes. Regardless, some multi-family residences found their way in the distant suburbs, among settled families. Realizing large communal structures in communities that prided themselves on being permanent residents led to displeasure among those families, who harbored distrust[7] of the tenants of these new apartment buildings.

With the exception of niche residential groups, multi-family residency has always maintained a largely negative perception within American discourse. Historically, the American populace has been diametrically opposed to the concept of living in communal spaces. Even those people involved in the efforts to reform the tenements did so out of perceived biases.[8] The underlying issue in building relations with tenants in a communal living setup can consistently be explained by some form of xenophobia, informed at least in part by prejudice and condescending attitudes towards those who would live in such housing. The tenements, for example, were primarily communities established by recently immigrated people, likely bringing and continuing their own customs which were sure to deviate from the typical American lifestyle. The 'evils' inherent to these communities may, at some level, be attributable to those customs and practices. The tenement reformist's mission of 'cleansing' these communities is not unlike the attitude of 'manifest destiny' that frontier settlers maintained towards indigenous peoples needing to be saved by way of learning good religious values during westward expansion in the prior century. Similarly, the apprehension of apartment tenants felt by the single family communities they were encroaching upon is due to the perceived othering of tenants by community members. Renting a room in a complex allowed flexibility and, if needed, the ability to pick up and leave relatively easily compared to the longstanding resident, who has staked claim in a community and is likely

[7] COLMAN, ALLAN HARRIS. 1969. *RESIDENTIAL RENEWAL IN A SUBURBAN COMMUNITY*
[8] Violette, Zachary, *The Decorated Tenement.*

to start a family. This notion of transience becomes very relevant to the modern interpretation of the tenement, the 5-over-1 multi-family complex.

The 5-over-1 is a relatively recent trend in new residential construction. While the American dream of owning a single-family home has not left the public, it is largely unattainable for the average person for a multitude of reasons, and the older, less-maintained multi-family dwellings from decades past can be unappealing to a younger generation seeking housing. In this environment, the 5-over-1 thrives. Compared to other residential layouts, it is relatively inexpensive to build.[9] Because of its simple design, the internal layout is very configurable, allowing for responsive allocation of studio, single, or two bedroom suites. Most notably, the ground level is often designated for commercial use, providing a space for local commerce. This building design seems to retain many positive influences from its forebears, such as responsive housing, accessibility and integration to the community, and shared amenities that respect the culturally expected levels of residential privacy. Despite these positives, buildings like this one are still seen in a negative light amongst community members, since it has the potential to perpetuate long standing issues such as the displacement of established people and businesses as well as negating opportunities for introducing new capital.

The main issue with the 5-over-1 building is the disparity between where it is often located and who its main clientele is. Most often, these buildings can be found neighboring, if not directly adjacent to, a train station or other form of transportation infrastructure. Within my own hometown, the new development, named ‘Linc32,’ is located across the plaza from a major metro line that runs directly to Pennsylvania Station in New York city, and their website is not at all shy about boasting “Orange to New York in 30 minutes!”[10] These units are designed with the

[9] Demsas, Jerusalem. “In Defense of the ‘Gentrification Building.’” Vox. Vox, September 10, 2021.
[10] “Linc32 At Orange Station.” RPM Management II, LLC.

city professional in mind. This is not inherently a criticism as many people in the suburbs work in neighboring metropolitan areas, but these units are being taken by those who are fleeing the city.[11] This pattern has the potential to siphon away existing housing units for community members who would otherwise invest in the community they live with and have adverse effects on the community at large, but especially towards those places that end up being relocated to accommodate these developments. As seen in the early social issues of the tenements, apartment complexes, and public housing, a distrust of non-community members and a prejudice towards transient residents who do not integrate locally creates tensions between new developments and existing ones. The only difference is that now these lines are commonly drawn purely between socio-economic barriers, which were perpetuated by which groups of people had the ability to purchase a home in the decades before.

To summarize, multi-family residences have been the source for contention between different groups of people across the last century. Who has access to certain types of housing is both a symptom and a source of inequity, as the opportunities that come with owning property for long periods of time are intangible but significant. Today, housing development practices are, if not intentionally, learning from the mistakes of prior multi-family residences to improve the accessibility and quality of housing to a wider range of people. If not managed with care, however, the new patterns emerging in who is taking advantage of these new spaces will once again leave out the historically disenfranchised groups. Treating the situation with sensibility and a renewed understanding of the systems that have led to inequity can help in the goal of equitably housing everyone.

[11] Bonislawski, Adam. “Residents Lured to Suburbs by Cheaper NYC-Style Apartments.” New York Post.

Gallery

Image 1: The Dakota Luxury Apartments. Being the first of its kind, the Dakota set the precedent for apartment-style living amongst the wealthy at a time when multi-family residences had the negative connotations of the tenement. Image sourced from Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Dakota_1890b.jpg

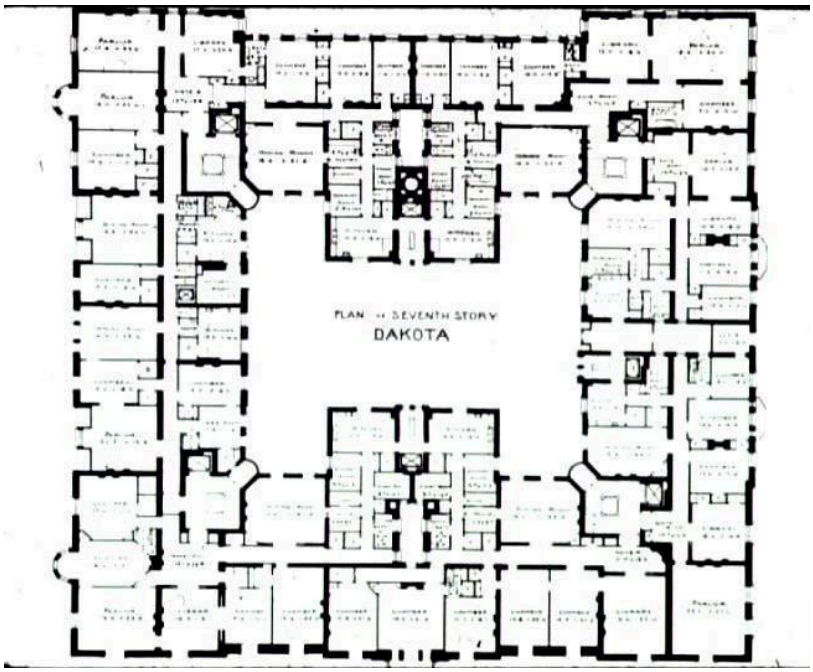

Image 2: A scan of the original floor plan of the Dakota building. Visible on this plan is the layout of the apartments, which replicated most of the fixtures in the single family. Note the individual entrances per apartment, and even service entrances for servants. Original source indeterminate. This photo obtained from http://nyc-architecture.com/UWS/UWS017.htm

Image 3: Linc32 Orange Station Apartments in Orange, New Jersey. Immediately adjacent to the building is the station platform. Image sourced from linc32.com

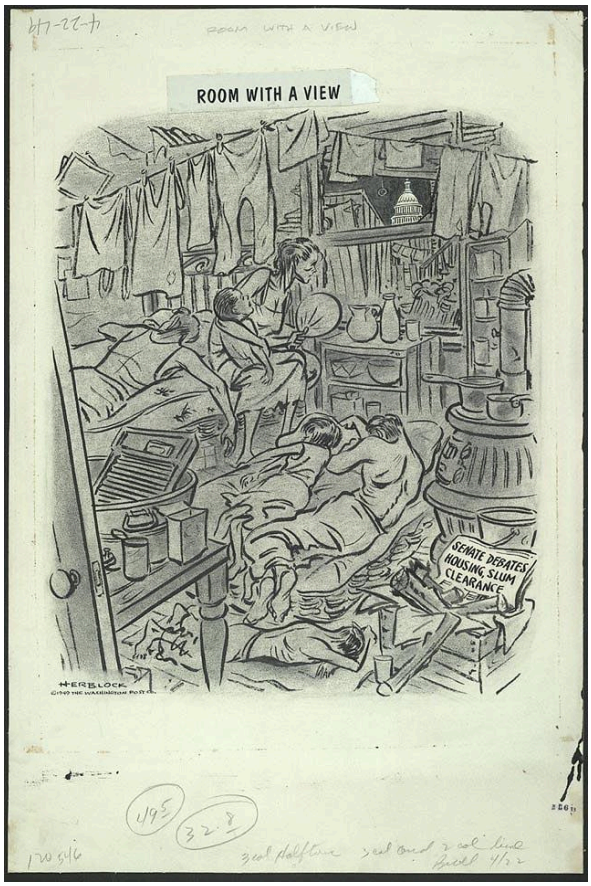

Image 4: “Room with a View” by Herbert Block. Portrays the plight of people living in ‘slums’ at the mercy of the government, soon to raze their neighborhoods in the period of urban renewal. Image sourced from www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00652195/

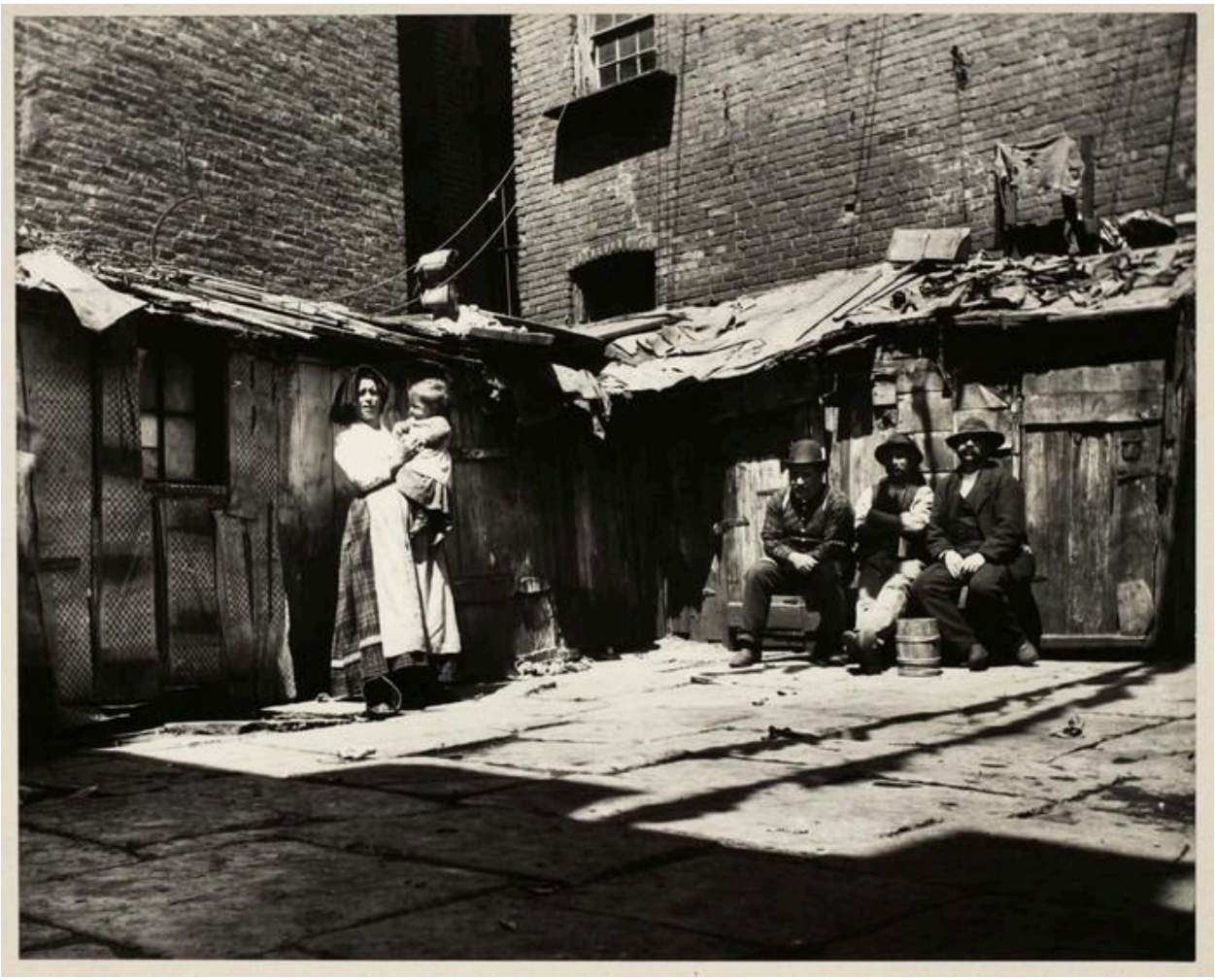

Image 5: Jacob Riis' *Jersey Street Tenements*. Riis became known for documenting the conditions at the early tenements, and though his photographs worked to paint a biased image of the people and conditions there, it served to motivate the Anti-Tenement Reform movement.

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Room with a view, April 22, 1949. Ink, graphite, and opaque white over graphite underdrawing on layered paper. Published in the Washington Post (23) LC-USZ62-127329 //www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00652195/

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