# Amalgamated Housing to First Houses:
# Re-Defining Home in America

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**Senior Thesis Spring 2009**
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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines an innovative, if small scale, effort to explore new permutations of American home life in New York's Bronx in the early twentieth century. The Amalgamated housing projects were the project of Abraham Kazan and others of the community around the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union. These men and women envisioned cooperative housing as a way to fuse a community's idealistic vision of collective effort with a practical answer to the overwhelming demand for affordable, quality housing. Responding to the desires of a community witnessing the emerging ideal of suburban homeownership, the Amalgamated both drew on a more traditional model of American domestic life while achieving a communal lifestyle in line with the political ideals of a Jewish community deeply engaged with collective politics. In a time of crisis and change to our vision of how Americans can and should live, the early history of their efforts speaks to the variety of possible alternatives that can be articulated in the American landscape.

## Introduction

Abraham Kazan did not originally intend to build housing. Working in the labor unions dominating Lower Manhattan at the beginning of twentieth century, Kazan's first political cause was cooperation. For Kazan and other political progressives, the cooperative movement held a utopian possibility with special promise among the many utopian visions that flourished between the Progressive Era and the New Deal. Kazan himself organized a string of cooperative projects, ranging from a chain of cooperative groceries to cooperative coal and ice purchasing to a cooperative hat shop.[1] However, housing, one of the most pressing concerns for a generation of working-class men and women intent on leaving the urban slums for better surroundings, would present new possibilities for Kazan's vision of cooperative life. Kazan found cooperative housing a natural outlet for the instincts of a progressive community. The first of Kazan's housing projects built with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union (ACWU), Amalgamated Housing, went up in the Bronx in 1927. In 1930, the Amalgamated Dwellings project was erected on the Lower East Side. More than forty years later, Kazan would be known as the father of cooperative housing and his United Housing Federation (UHF) would be putting the final touches on the gargantuan Co-op City, his final and ultimately most controversial project.[2]

However, Kazan himself looked to his early initiatives as the closest realization of his collective ideals. The construction of the first Amalgamated cooperatives occurred at

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[1] Jacqueline Leavitt, "The Interrelated History of Cooperatives and Public Housing from the Thirties to the Fifties," in *The Hidden History of Housing Cooperatives*, ed. Allan Heskin and Jacqueline Leavitt (Davis: Center for Cooperatives, University of California, 1995), 83.

[2] Abraham E. Kazan, interview by Lloyd Kaplan, New York, various locations, 1967, Oral history collection of Columbia University, Butler Library, New York, NY.
Ralph Lippman, "The Coordinating Council of Cooperatives," in *Story of a Co-op Community: The First 75 Years* (*New* York: Herman Liebman Memorial Fund, 2002), 41-43, 41.

a time of consolidation and integration in New York City, the country's immigration hub. Between the world wars, restrictive immigration legislation would stem the largest flow of immigration in its history. The Amalgamated Housing project and the Amalgamated Dwellings development were part of a larger American, urban effort to realize better living conditions in the face of still-drastic housing shortages. The Amalgamated projects, like many other contemporaneous developments, tapped into a growing desire for an exit from the city's slum housing simultaneous with a wider movement in search of realization of an American ideal of home life.

The Amalgamated Housing and Amalgamated Dwellings projects represented a particular vision based in the political investments of a unique American community. In the 1920s, under the leadership of Abraham Kazan, a community of New York Jews founded a series of communities based on a vision of cooperation and communal ownership. Few writers and scholars write about the early labor movement-affiliated co-ops today. The developments no longer appear in public discourse on housing. It has become easy to dismiss the idealism and solidarity of early twentieth-century left-wing Jews as dated and utopian. However, despite its certain shortcomings, something fundamentally valuable existed in this idyllic model of cooperative housing. The Amalgamated developments prompted new permutations of emerging American ideals about home life. The Amalgamated cooperators explored new ideas about investment and ownership and the means of navigating such loaded American terrain in new ways. Their explorations uncovered tensions between new ideals and old models and frameworks for development. Ultimately though, this unique cooperative in the Amalgamated offered an attainable model of home life that answered a community's unique needs and provided an

alternative path to ownership for an urban, working-class community. In light of today's subprime mortgage crisis, the practicality and vision united in this project testify to the possibilities left to be explored for American households.

Kazan's projects, particularly in light of his later work with Robert Moses, are sometimes subsumed in narratives of urban renewal: large-scale attempts to remake the urban fabric. Where urban historians have included Kazan's projects, his later efforts generally appear at the periphery of a more well-known horror story—that of the later large-scale cooperatives and public housing that would emerge and would be critiqued by New York urban theorists for destroying the fabric of many New York neighborhoods. These stark, high-rise structures have symbolized the modern face of public housing. This narrative of ideologically-driven, top-down reform, typified by the depiction of Robert Moses in Rob Caro's *The Power Broker* has induced a well-advised skepticism about the promulgation of large scale utopian building projects in New York City.[3]

Where other historians investigated the Amalgamated Projects specifically, the projects have frequently been one chapter in a story about architectural determinism.[4] Many more technically-minded, architectural or planning historians, such as architecture and urban planning academician Richard Plunz and architectural preservationist Andrew Dolkart have looked to these early projects for lessons about the design and construction of low-income housing. The early days of not-for-profit housing saw some of the most

[3] Rob Caro, *The Power Broker* (New York: Vintage, 1975).
[4]Andrew Dolkart, "Non-Profit Cooperatives in New York City: 1916-1929," *Sites* 21-22 (1989): 30-42, 36-37.
Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
This tendency also appears in: Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 1997),
This tendency also appears to some extent in:

striking structures ever built expressly to improve living conditions for the working classes in New York City. The Amalgamated's structures were large in scale and constructed with great attention to the effects and aesthetic possibilities of the built environment. The Bronx Amalgamated Housing struck one journalist for the union publication, *The Railway Clerk*, as monumental. He reported coming upon an "enormous mass of structures facing the park," noting the "affluence, almost magnificence, of the buildings."[5] Though perhaps exceptionally enthusiastic, this journalist's perspective reflects a common focus in literature about the Amalgamated projects and other utopian housing experiments since their inception on the structures themselves.

While Abraham Kazan's cooperative vision would encourage his later cooperation with city officials bent on more questionable slum clearance projects, these early developments deserve to be examined on their own terms and in historical context. Additionally, the architecture of the buildings, which other scholars have highlighted, while significant, was not the driving force behind these developments. Kazan's early housing projects constituted a massive experiment, exploring a range of potential means to inspire psychological as well as monetary investment in people's communities focused around the concept of cooperation.

**Abraham Kazan and the Cooperative Movement**

For Abraham Kazan, the housing projects he began at the Amalgamated centered on cooperation. Kazan stumbled upon the cooperative movement during his early years in the thriving labor movement in Lower Manhattan. Born in a small village in Kiev, then in Russia, Kazan had immigrated to the United States around the turn of the century at age 15. His entire family eventually settled in the relatively new, Jewish farming community

[5] H.C. Carrasco, "Amalgamated Most Interesting Labor Union," *The Railway Clerk*, 598.

of Carmel, New Jersey. There, Kazan became involved in local labor organizing. When his father objected, he left for New York, where a progressive and union-oriented politics thrived at the center of Jewish communal life on New York's Lower East Side. Kazan began working in New York as a bookkeeper in a branch factory of a clothing shop and later took a job in a branch office of International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), one of the most important unions in the labor movement of the 1920s.[6] The labor movement situated Kazan in a world pervaded by ideas of collective action.

During Kazan's early years in the city, he began attending free lectures, most delivered by speakers from across the political left. In 1909, at a speech by a cooperator named Tom Bell, he met a number of people interested in cooperativism and subsequently began attending meetings of the Cooperative League of the USA.[7] For a young Kazan and others in the cooperative movement cooperation came to represent an alternative vision of society, based on the eradication of corporate profit through collective endeavors. Kazan had socialist politics, but these departed sharply from the standard model in the labor movement. Evincing a radical vision coupled with a distinct pragmatism, Kazan found the socialist leaders of his own era unrealistic. He felt the most prominent socialists of the day lacked practical tools to effect change and saw cooperation as a means to realize the ideal of collective life. Kazan became convinced, he later recalled, that "there was no sense in trying to build a socialist society for improving conditions in the country, when we are not prepared we haven't got the men to manage [it]." "You have to be practical," Kazan argued, "to take over business; if you haven't got

[6] Kazan, interview, 1-27.
[7] Kazan, interview, 26.
Julie Cooper, "Next Year in the Bronx," *Pakn-Treger*, Winter 1998, 15-21, 17.

the men to take over, how are you going to do it? You have to fall back on the same people that are mismanaging it now, to help you manage it."[8]

Kazan started his first cooperative venture during World War I. He purchased 50,000 pounds of Army surplus sugar packed in 2 pound bags with a personal loan of $500. While still working in the office of Union Local 35, Kazan took over a vacant floor of the same building: "I would have one line of members paying dues and another line of members buying two pounds of sugar every time they come to the office," he recalled.[9] After the war ended, Kazan bought 100,000 pounds of Passover matzos to distribute.

When Kazan took a job as an office employee with the ACWU, the arena for his projects expanded. The ACWU, like the ILGWU, took a pioneering approach to labor organizing known as "new unionism," which extended beyond the shoproom floor. The union organized immigrants and offered services beyond labor organizing for the benefit of its members, including unemployment insurance and educational programs.[10] Soon after joining the ACWU staff, Kazan organized a cooperative credit union. In the 1920s, meetings of the credit union's members became regular progressive gatherings. Even when business ended quickly, members stayed to talk. Conversation inevitably turned to housing, for many years one of the most critical needs of workers in the fastest growing city in the country.[11]

**New York's Housing Crisis**

The Amalgamated Cooperatives emerged in response to a well-documented need: an overwhelming demand by New York's working-class population—and in particular

[8] Kazan, interview, 26.
[9] Kazan, interview, 33.
[10] Cooper, "Next Year in the Bronx," 16.
[11] Leavitt, "Interrelated History," 83.

among an immigrant Jewish subpopulation—for a housing alternative. The chronic housing shortage for poor and working class New Yorkers had a long history. The Lower East Side, the center of New York's Jewish life, proved a perennial setting for this drama. From the turn of the century, New York had the world's highest urban population densities.[12] The Lower East Side became the most densely populated neighborhood in New York, its population swelling with arriving immigrants by the 1880s.[13] 32,321 Jews came through New York in 1890; at the peak of anti-Jewish violence in Eastern Europe, 62,000 arrived between September of 1890 and of 1891.[14] Overwhelmingly, the arriving Jewry made their first American homes in Manhattan's "Jewish east side."[15] Even as infrastructure projects like the Williamsburg Bridge demolished entire blocks of housing, the East Side's population continued to grow, increasing by 14% in the first five years of the twentieth century.[16]

Conditions in the neighborhood were notoriously poor. Historian Irving Howe describes the "dominant impression of the Jewish quarter," as one "of fierce congestion...the bodily pressures of other people, their motions and smells and noises, seemed always to be assaulting one. Of space for privacy and solitude there was none."[17] Amidst such crowding, housing conditions were grim. A survey of tenants later removed from East Side slum housing in later years revealed that: "Of the 120 families finally chosen....81 were living in tenement houses which had toilet accommodations in the

[12] Plunz, *History of Housing*, 37.
[13] Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 69.
[14] Lee K. Frankel, "Jewish Charities." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 21 (1903): 50.
[15] Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 38.
[16] Jenna Weissman Joselit, "The Landlord as Czar: Pre-World War I Tenant Activity," in *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984*, ed. Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 41.
[17] Howe, *World*, 70.

hall." What's more, the study found, "Twenty of the families selected had windowless rooms, and one applicant explained to the committee in a listless voice that her young son had died, two years ago, vainly fighting a severe attack of pneumonia in an airless room."[18]

Predictably, in this climate, housing became an area of serious tensions. Writing in 1936, James Ford recalled that building housing for arriving immigrants was not deemed economically viable at the turn of the century.[19] Therefore, increased demand for housing did not meet with increased construction, but it did produce rising prices and deteriorating conditions as families doubled up to afford higher rents. Pressures on housing stock caused it to decline rapidly. Seemingly paradoxically, even as the population pressures on the Lower East Side began to ebb, housing conditions did not improve. Immigration fell off in the twenties, and an estimated two-thirds of Lower East Side's Jews would leave the area between 1905 and 1915 to escape slum conditions.[20] However, Ford reports that old-law tenements still made better investments than new construction. He writes that "When population declined and vacancies began to cut into profits, the tenements still held on because there was no alternative...A kind of paralysis developed," with little demand for quality housing in generally deteriorated areas and for that reason little reason or funding available to make needed changes.[21] Instead of improving the housing situation on the Lower East Side, decreased demand meant inadequate resources and demand to ensure regular maintenance and repairs.

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[18] *First Houses* (New York, NY: New York City Housing Authority, 1935), 30.
[19] James Ford, *Slums and Housing: With Special Reference to New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 449.
[20] Deborah D. Moore, *At Home in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 8.
[21] Ford, *Slums and Housing*, 512.

In the critical housing situation in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century, housing had already assumed a political cast, setting the stage for collective and politically conscious efforts. The lives of the urban poor became a major concern of Progressive era reformers, who were bent on rationalizing the urban landscape. For journalists and reformers like Jacob Riis, publicizing slum conditions stood at the top of their agenda. Riis and his compatriots thrust tenements into the public spotlight and demanded solutions, citing an urgent moral imperative. Riis argued that "in the tenements, all the influences make for evil," from epidemics to criminality.[22] He and other activists implicated slum housing conditions as the cause of a slew of other emerging urban worries and fears about the Americanization of new immigrants.[23] Their work would finally prompt powerful urban politicians and others to act.

Likewise, tenants were equally politicized by New York's housing conditions. The first rent strikes occurred on the Lower East Side in 1907.[24] During the First World War, the demands of the conflict diverted the country's resources from housing construction. In the resulting stand still in new housing provision, speculation became rampant and tenant bitterness worsened.[25] The landlord quickly became a notorious culprit, implicated for many on the left-leaning Lower East Side in a predatory socioeconomic system. Housing became profoundly political for the city's downtown Jews during this time, particularly those leaning already towards radical politics. During

[22] Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), 3.
[23] Robert B. Fairbanks, "'From Better Dwellings to Better Neighborhoods: The Rise and Fall of the First National Housing Movement," in *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes*, ed. John F. Bauman, Robert Biles and Kristin M. Szylvian (Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 25.
[24] Joselit, "Landlord as Czar," 44.
[25] Joseph A. Spencer, "New York City Tenant Organizations and The Post-World War I Housing Crisis," in *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984*, ed. Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 51.

the rent strikes at the turn of the century noted East Side figure Abraham Cahan would say:

> The spirit which impels one to struggle for his rights, to combat robbery, has imbedded itself in the hearts of our workingmen...This is the case with the present rent strikes. They are the outcome of the same spirit, the offspring of that same struggle against Capital, which has grown up in our quarter owing to the work of Socialists and trade unionists.[26]

Housing, at least for some, seemed a natural ally with the political idealism of trade-unionism and worker's empowerment and the movements' low-income constituents badly needed a solution to their living situation.

However, alternatives would materialize slowly. This environment was clearly ripe ground for utopian alternatives to "landlordism" proposed by Kazan and others. Theorists proposed a wide range of answers to the urban housing crisis. By the mid-nineteenth century, philanthropists had already begun ambitious attempts to create better housing for poor and working-class New Yorkers. Architects proposed building designs with greater attention to light and ventilation and with better access to amenities. Yet, Irving Howe writes, tenants could do nothing. Directly confronting slum conditions defied the efforts of individuals working alone. "Even when life eased a little, even when husbands worked regularly and there was enough food on the table, the physical conditions of the slums were appalling. This was the one major element of their lives about which the immigrants could do little or nothing, at least until they had enough money to leave the East Side."[27]

In response, some philanthropists attempted to construct new housing within the city's slums. In 1845, the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) built the Workingmen's Home, which Plunz terms the first "truly 'philanthropic'

[26] Joselit, "Landlord as Czar," 41.
[27] Howe, *World*, 148.

housing." The first well-documented project, called Gotham Court, went up on the East Side's Cherry Street in 1850.[28] Model tenements proliferated during the 1870s and 80s, aiming to provide low-income New Yorkers with improved housing on a limited-profit basis.[29] However, philanthropic or semi-philanthropic efforts had little impact in the face of tremendous demand for quality housing. Under the accumulated pressures on New York's housing stock, many of the model tenements themselves deteriorated. Gotham Court became a notorious slum, demolished at the behest of Jacob Riis in 1895.[30] The AICP's model tenement came to be called the 'Big Flat.' The poorly designed and overcrowded structure soon became unlivable and suffered condemnation as "unfit for human habitation" in 1880.[31] The city's Tenement House Committee reported in 1894 that more than half of New Yorkers still lived in tenements.

Frustrated reformers began to push for legislation to improve conditions in existing tenement housing. As early as 1867, the Tenement House Act sought to impose standards for tenements, including the provision of one water closet per twenty tenants and the construction of fire escapes. However, as Richard Plunz notes, city officials, hampered both by an unwieldy and overlapping city bureaucracy and resistance from property-owners, found it difficult to enforce the legislation.[32] Irving Howe calls the bill "riddled with loopholes, matter[ing] mainly as a promise of things to come."[33] The 1867 Act's lackluster success led to the passage of the Tenement Act of 1879, which enacted additional requirements for existing tenements—not altogether successfully. This

[28] Plunz, *History of Housing,* 4-6.
[29] John F. Bauman, Robert Biles and Kristin M. Szylvian, eds., *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 9.
[30] Plunz, *History of Housing,* 6.
[31] Bauman, *Tenements,* 8. Howe, *World,* 145.
[32] Plunz *History of Housing,* 22-31.
[33] Howe, *World,* 151.

legislation codified the adoption of the dumbbell tenement design, designed by James Ware for a competition run in the publication *Plumber and Sanitary Engineer*. Narrow shafts between dumbbell tenements provided inadequate ventilation and light to small and still-crowded rooms. Plunz calls the design 'conservative,' in recognition of the serious compromise of living conditions the design still represented to achieve maximum rentable area.[34] Andrew Dolkart noted the model made few improvements in lighting, ventilation or sanitation. He quotes *Home and Garden*, which called the dumbbell tenement: "perhaps the worst type of tenement ever allowed in a modern, enlightened community."[35]

The Tenement Law of 1901 set new standards for tenement housing for years to come but it also proved the frustrating endurance of the tenement problem. The 1901 legislation outlawed future construction of the dumbbell tenement and enacted more exacting rules on existing buildings. The law also created the Tenement House Department to enforce its provisions.[36] However, the Tenement Department suffered from underfunding for many years and, without measures to increase housing supply, the legislation could not address the main pressures on the city's stock of low-income housing. Overall, investing in housing for poor and working-class New Yorkers remained less lucrative and building better-than-average quality housing still less profitable.[37]

Later on, the first government-initiated interventions in the housing market also failed. In the 1920s, then-Governor Alfred E. Smith called a meeting of two hundred

[34] Plunz, *History of Housing*, 22-31.
[35] Andrew Dolkart, "The Architecture and Development of New York City: Dumbbell Tenements," Columbia University Digital Knowledge Ventures.
[36] Fairbanks, "From Better Dwellings," 26-28.
[37] Scott Henderson, *Housing and the democratic ideal: the life and thought of Charles Abrams* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 47-48.

property owners and investors to discuss solutions to the housing shortage. Governor Smith asked if any would accept lowered profits to construct low-income housing. Jacob Potofsky, an Amalgamated Union official also present in the room reported, "there was only one person who got up and he said that if somebody will match his investment of $100,000, he will be very glad to put in $100,000 on a limited dividend basis."[38] "It was at that time," Potofsky recalled, that Smith determined "since private capital is not willing to limit themselves to limited dividend companies" government needed to provide incentives for construction of low and middle-income housing.[39] As Smith wrote in the forward to a notable text on the housing situation published in 1928, *A New Day in Housing*, "Ordinary commercial trends in the construction industry hold out little hope."[40]

Smith's conclusion led to the passage of the New York State Housing Act (also known as the Limited Dividend Housing Companies Law), which Smith signed into law in 1926. The State Housing Act granted tax abatements and other subsidies to housing corporations willing to invest in housing construction on a limited-dividend basis expressly for lower-income tenants. The legislation also set up the State Housing Board to oversee application of its provisions.[41] Private funds and will had proved insufficient to tackle the scope of the housing problem in New York. "It is to meet this situation that the scheme of cooperative housing has been worked out," concluded the magazine *Cooperator*.[42]

**The Amalgamated Housing Corporation Emerges**

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[38] Jacob Potofsky, interview by Neil N. Gold, New York City, 1963 and 1964, Oral History Collection, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, NY, 176.
[39] Potofsky, interview, 176.
[40] Louis Pink, *The New Day in Housing*, (New York: John Day Company, 1928).
[41] "*HOUSING BILL PASSES: Senate Sends Republican Measure to Assembly for Concurrence,*" *New York Times*, April 22, 1926, 2.
[42] Quoted in Dolkart, "Non-Profit Cooperatives," 30.

The ACW Corporation took shape in 1927.[43] Catherine Bauer suggested in the 1930s that the early, philanthropic housing societies made the evolution of housing societies from the consumer cooperative movement a natural progression.[44] In any case, the move to form the ACW was clearly an opportunistic one on the part of Amalgamated members who had been planning a foray into housing during years of discussion at credit union meetings. Cooperative housing entered ACWU discussions as early as its 1922 biennial convention.[45] In 1923, a separate group of members of Kazan's credit union formally organized to look into a housing project. Kazan and the others wanted to harness the collective resources of the group to provide badly needed housing at a low cost. The cooperative hopefuls envisioned a housing project funded with the collective investment of its tenants, and which eschewed the profits of privately owned housing in favor of lower rents and communal ownership. At the time of its founding, the ACW Corporation had no formal connection with the union, but hoped to profit from the illusion of a "big brother" behind the project.[46]

The ACW was driven by both an idealistic commitment to cooperation and a will to solve the practical dilemma of providing quality low-cost housing for its members. Initially, the group of organizers considered constructing single-family homes on a cooperative basis, but found this plan prohibitively expensive. Two-family homes would require a landlord-tenant relationship, something Kazan and others also could not tolerate, and so the group decided to build apartments.[47] By the time the housing law

[43] Plunz, *History of Housing*, 151.
[44] Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), 87.
[45] "Amalgamated Housing Corporation," January, 1928. Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union Papers. Amalgamated Housing Corporation files. ILR School Martin P. Catherwood Library, Ithaca, NY.
[46] Kazan, interview, 77.
[47] Leavitt, "Interrelated History," 83.

passed in 1926, the committee had found a site in the North Bronx. With the law in place, Sidney Hillman, the Amalgamated's president, finally called in the members of the housing body and proclaimed, "Now you can go ahead."[48] The ACW Corporation reorganized as a limited dividend corporation in 1927. At this time, the organization's name changed to Amalgamated Housing Corporation (AHC).

Kazan approached the newly formed, five-member State Board of Housing with Hillman and Columbia professor of economics, Leo Wolman. The delegation requested incorporation under the Housing Law of 1926.[49] The Housing Board granted their request and the AHC proceeded with its first venture under the leadership of its officers: Kazan, Jacob Potofsky, and Baruch Charney Vladeck of the leading Yiddish daily, the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Aaron Rabinovitz, a member of the State Board of Housing sat on board of the AHC in accordance with the statute of the state housing legislation as did Sidney Hillman, President of the Amalgamated Union.

Though Kazan and the AHC hoped to demonstrate a new model of collective financing and construction, they subsequently needed to resort to more traditional models with traditional limitations. The ACW Corporation acquired its site in the Bronx in 1926. The land consisted of forty-two 25' by 100' lots on Mosholu Parkway, facing Van Cortlandt Park, purchased with financing from the Amalgamated Bank.[50] By this time, only a tiny fraction of the necessary funding to proceed with construction had materialized from potential tenant-cooperators. Tenants were expected to invest $500 per room to purchase their initial share in the project. The shares which represented tenants'

[48] Potofsky, interview, 176.
[49] Kazan, interview, 77-78.
[50] "Amalgamated Housing Corporation (article draft)," ACWU Papers, Box 201.
Jacob Potofsky, "How it All Was Done," *The Advance*, December 30, 1927, 6, 14.

investments corresponded to apartments in the development. They could not be owned by non-resident owners. Moreover, the cooperative agreed early on to buy back the share of any tenant cooperator leaving their apartment for its stated value but the shares did not accumulate additional value.[51] Later on, once the projects were built, tenants would pay monthly carrying fees to support continuing maintenance and services of the development—roughly equivalent to though slightly lower than average rents for similar housing in the city (on average, families would pay $6.68 less per month in carrying charges in 1930 than they had paid in rent prior to coming to the Amalgamated).[52] Louis Winnick estimates the cost of an apartment at the time equaled about 24 months of a worker's pay, a major investment.[53] In the Amalgamated Housing in 1930, the incomes of nearly 27 percent were under $2,000 and 51 percent received an income of less than $2,500. The average for the development hovered just above $2500.[54] Furthermore, cooperators' contributions were not enough to begin construction. Though the central idea of the cooperative development was that tenants would provide the driving impetus, the AHC had to appeal to other entities to fund the building of their homes.

The financing to complete construction in the Bronx came in the form of loans from the Amalgamated Bank and the *Jewish Daily Forward*, as well as advances from other Amalgamated Union subsidiaries. Much of the *Forward*'s $150,000 contribution served as collateral for loans to individual tenants to finance their purchase of shares in the project. Kazan secured the first mortgage on the property from the Metropolitan Life

[51] Potofsky, "How it All Was Done."
Evelyn Seeley, "The House: A Success Story" *Survey Graphic*, February 1948, 70-74.
[52] Asher Achinstein, "Report of the State Board of Housing on the Standard of Living of 400 Families in Model Housing Project The Amalgamated Housing Corporation," (State Board of Housing, 1931), 22.
[53] Louis Winnick, "When an Apartment Fulfilled an Ideal," *New York Times*, July 22, 2000, A15.
[54] Achinstein, "Report," 22.

Insurance Company on December 1, 1927, allowing him to repay some of the short-term debt and put the project on a more solid financial footing.[55]

The tension between new dreams and old models plagued the Amalgamated Housing project throughout its early years. However, both administrators and tenants evinced great enthusiasm for the Amalgamated Housing project at the outset. Groundbreaking for the first buildings took place on Thanksgiving Day, 1926. The occasion was festive. Kazan told the crowd it was the happiest day of his life.[56]

**Expectations of a New Vision of Suburban Life**

Construction in the Bronx began shortly after the groundbreaking ceremony. Kazan's proactive and hands-on role as manager appears from this early starting point. Though he had turned over construction to a contractor, Kazan could not keep away from the construction site. He visited almost daily, roaming the grounds. He mixed the five colors of the brick by hand to prevent patches appearing in the walls until the construction union told him to stop or get a union card.[57] The opening of the first two buildings took place on November 1 of the following year. Kazan recalls it rained all day and the electric company had not finished wiring the buildings. Con Edison had to rig up temporary lighting for the opening ceremonies. "However," he notes. "[W]ithout my knowledge one family sneaked into Building No. 4, on Saxon Avenue, and spent the night."[58] One of the children of the Kaplowitz family, now Bea *Simpson*, still lives in the cooperative and tells the story of her family's early arrival to this day.[59] The formal

[55] "Amalgamated Cooperative Apartments," *Co-operation*, February, 1928, 22. (22-25)
[56] "Ground Broken for Amalgamated Co-operative Apartment Building," *The Advance*, December 5, 1926, Section 2.
[57] Kazan, interview, 114-115.
[58] Kazan, interview, 118.
[59] Ed Yaker, interview by author, New York, NY, January 5, 2009.

dedication of the first five buildings took place on December 25, 1927. Kazan himself would own an apartment in the development through the 1960s.[60]

Why was the first Amalgamated Housing not built on the Lower East Side? The Amalgamated organizers were not interested, "of course," recalls Jacob Potofsky.[61] While built by a group of political outliers, the Amalgamated project evoked new ideas of a residential ideal emerging throughout the country. The Lower East Side had become a symbol of the urban slum, publicized by journalists and reformers like Riis. The failure of earlier philanthropic efforts had only further discouraged prospects for further construction in old neighborhoods. From the start, even for the era's most progressive thinkers, interest in creating new housing for the poor was intimately linked with ambitions to destroy the old. Even as Jews left the Lower East Side, which they did in large numbers after the turn of the century, they frequently found themselves in other neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx experiencing similar pressures.[62] However, the regions beyond offered an alternative blank slate.

New ideas of the periphery had also taken root that inspired the cooperators. In the mid-nineteenth century, at the same time as the erection of the first model tenements on the Lower East Side, the very first suburban community was carved out just outside of the city in Llewellyn Park, NJ. The beginnings of the move from the central city to the periphery began in the antebellum years in America's largest cities. Across the Eastern seaboard and throughout the Midwest, the trend was towards an increasing dislocation of affluent urban residents towards the edges of the city. New York pushed outwards.[63] As

[60] Yaker, interview.
[61] Potofsky, interview, 175.
[62] Moore, *At Home in America*, 8.
[63] Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 20-25.

historian Richard Plunz notes, wide-scale commuting to the city from the boroughs did not start in the 1850s, but the construction of Llewellyn Park represented a major step in the production and coalescence of an American version of suburban ideal.[64]

Though already old in practice, the suburbs took on a new theoretical imperative by the turn of the twentieth century. "[M]ore and more architects clamored for some reorganization of urban space and dreamt of limitless room as the only true solution to urban problems," writes J. B. Jackson.[65] This idea spread amongst urban dwellers and took on a tremendous symbolic appeal as well. Kenneth Jackson argues that new "expectations about residential space...had become firmly implanted in middle-class culture."[66] In reaction to increasingly congested public spaces in American industrial cities, families sought to carve out a protected private space and attain the "suburban ideal" of a detached house in open surroundings.[67] The lawn became a symbol itself of romanticized countryside living.[68] "The single-family dwelling became the paragon of middle-class housing," Kenneth Jackson writes, "the most visible symbol of having arrived at a fixed place in society, the goal to which every decent family aspired". He invokes one of the best-known voices of the era, New York poet and journalist, Walt Whitman, to express the ethos of the times: "A man is not a whole and complete man," Whitman wrote, "unless he owns a house and the ground it stands on."[69] The government took an active stance to abet and encourage the spread of individual home ownership. The United States Department of Labor launched an "Own Your Own Home" campaign

[64] Plunz, *History of Housing*, 9-10.
[65] J.B. Jackson, "American Space," in *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America*, ed. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
[66] Jackson, *Crabgrass*, 46.
[67] Jackson, *Crabgrass*, 46-47.
[68] Jackson, *Crabgrass*, 57.
[69] Jackson, *Crabgrass*, 51.

as early as 1918. Critical efforts on the part of the federal government to promote home-ownership that began in the first quarter of the twentieth century, which have continued to the present day, had substantial effect on individuals' ambitions for their own living situation.[70]

Irving Howe, the preeminent Jewish historian, suggests immigrant Jews living in New York's most deteriorated districts were primed to subscribe to the American housing ideal. Making an ambitious link to a long trajectory of Jewish intellectual history, Howe argues that, at the turn of the century, after centuries of upheaval, the desire to achieve a "normal life" was a powerful recurring theme in Jewish thought. He calls this impulse a "secularized messianism," contributing to a psychological imperative to leave the urban neighborhoods behind, in line with what Joanna Joselit calls the exercise of the "exit option."[71] As the editor of the Amalgamated Housing newsletter wrote in 1930, the "wandering tribes" wished to know if they too could have a "home."[72] The 1920s and 1930s saw a tremendous outpouring from the Lower East Side to neighborhoods in Upper Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx. A change of residence came to represent the exchange of tradition for modernity.[73]

Cooperation actually had a substantial tradition in the housing reform movement, originating in Europe. Ideas of collective life had taken an earlier and easier hold in Europe than in the United States. Socialism emerged as a powerful theoretical movement,

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[70] Henderson, *Housing*, 109.
Richard Ronald, *The Ideology of Home Ownership* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 151.
[71] Howe, *World*, 148, 639-40.
Joselit, "Landlord as Czar," 40.
[72] "Rooms or Homes—Which?" *Amalgamated Co-operator*, February 14, 1930, 2.
[73] Deborah Dash Moore, "On the Fringes of the City: Jewish Neighborhoods in the Three Boroughs," in *The Landscape of Modernity*, Ed. David Ward and Olivier Zunz (Russell Sage Foundation: New York, 1992). 253.

coupled with a whole host of practical collective enterprises.[74] In the Progressive Era, German economists in particular sought alternatives to British laissez faire thought, while also drawing on British history of cooperative consumer enterprises, on the model of the efforts of the Rochdale Pioneers, whose cooperative store, opened in 1844, became a symbol of the movement.[75] In the years before WWI, many American investigations of European social policy were launched, and ideas rethought and re-presented for American audiences. Though Kazan denied having had any knowledge of these projects at the time he first began work on his cooperative buildings, cooperative consumer societies and cooperative housing already had a substantial presence in Great Britain. The Rochdale Pioneers invested in housing for "the working man" in 1861. Cooperative housing experiments took off in the early twentieth century—the earliest were building clubs that dissolved once all members' homes had been constructed[76] American housing reformers would look to nations like Sweden, Belgium and Wiemar Germany for models of housing for low-income, working-class residents.[77]

Leading American thinkers on housing would publish exhaustive studies of the facilities and operation of cooperatives across the European continent.[78] A group of Finnish émigrés had built New York's first cooperative development in 1918.[79] With the onset of the Great Depression, renewed interest in social policy and cost savings would

[74] Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1998), *18,* 43.
[75] Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings,* 99-106.
[76] Bauer, *Modern Housing,* 93.
J. Birchall, "The Hidden History of Co-operative Housing in Britain" in *The Hidden History of Housing Cooperatives,* ed. Allan Heskin and Jacqueline Leavitt (Davis: Center for Cooperatives, University of California, 1995), 52-3.
[77] Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings,* 68-70.
[78] See Louis Pink, *A New Day in Housing* (1928), Catherine Bauer's *Modern Housing* (1934) and others. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1998), 458-467.
[79] Kenneth G. Wray, "Abraham E. Kazan: The Story of the Amalgamated Houses and the United Housing Foundation," completed for MA Thesis, Columbia University, 1991, 22-23.

launch a new host of European fact-finding expeditions, and interest in cooperatives in the United States would attain new heights. Closely intertwined with progressive movements and parties, the number of cooperative stores and credit unions in the United States grew exponentially. Other Jewish groups would found their own cooperatives in New York around the time the Amalgamated did, testifying to the appeal of the ideal to the progressive American, and particularly Jewish, communities heavily invested in the labor movement.[80]

In any case, the Amalgamated Housing paved its own way, departing from the European tradition and acting largely independently from the other Jewish cooperatives, even ones emerging nearby, which had different political affiliations within the Jewish left. At the turn of the twentieth century, dominant American ideas about the home diverged sharply from the urban apartment house. The shape the Amalgamated cooperatives took responded to the appeal of this new vision for its tenants. For Kazan, common investment made a crucial contribution to the production of a less impersonal and functionally cooperative community, in sharp contrast to what he saw in the average city apartment house. "Each cooperator feels that he is one of the owners of the development and responsible to the others for the condition of the community."[81] As one resident would tell a newspaper reporter, "[The Amalgamated Housing] is ours, and we, the workingmen, are the landlords."[82] However, while collective ownership of the buildings might take a politically radical step by removing the landlord, the individual

[80] Plunz, *History of Housing*, 151.
[81] Abraham E. Kazan. "Coöperative Housing in the United States," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 191, Consumers' Coöperation (May, 1937), 142.
[82] Alfred Segal, "Mr. Miller's Palace," *Cincinnati Post,* May 17, 1923.

ownership of shares corresponding to apartments carried other associations not lost on some tenants as part of the project's appeal.

"Ownership" typically meant ownership of single family dwellings in New York. Here, ownership morphed into a collective type of property possession which was also individual. One had an ownership stake in the form of one's share which was tied, as noted above, to one's apartment unit. Moreover, as the editor of the Amalgamated Housing's own community paper would note, owning one's own home promised more than simply political satisfaction. The editor of the Amalgamated paper would write that homes promised a stability and comfort which "rooms" could not. Investing in a home in the Amalgamated, the article argued, demonstrates a sacrifice and investment of one's life-savings in an act of faith and courage. The article's language suggests a much more expansive investment in the idea of a "home" bearing great emotional weight and import.

> Here we take root to grow and bloom in body and in spirit. These homes are ours and from us will pass to our children. And he who can not take root; he who can not sacrifice for his abode; he who is ready to fly at the slightest puff of wind; he who can not get into his blood the deep and blinding love for his home, is indeed an outcast of the world, a wanderer, a vagabond who'll never know peace, nor happiness nor lasting love.[83]

Ultimately, the Amalgamated cooperators wanted ownership, with all its domestic associations.

In the end, several tenants would refuse to sign their first leases written up in standard legalese with resident-cooperators referred to as "tenants." "A good many of them protested," observed Kazan, "saying they were not tenants, they had invested their life's savings here, and they were not going to be subject to the will of the landlord or the corporation." Several never signed their leases. These holdouts lived on in the building without a contract, paying their carrying charges month to month but never agreeing to

[83]"Rooms or Homes, Which?" *Amalgamated Co-operator*, February 14, 1930, 4.

the language of the legal paperwork which denied them the formal language of ownership of their apartments.[84] Harold Ostroff, whose parents moved into the Amalgamated Housing in 1929, recalled receiving a letter from his father years later, when overseas in the army. His father had written to tell him that, after sixteen years, he had finally paid off the last of the loan he had taken out to invest in the family's apartment. His home was finally fully his own. "It was a milestone for him, I guess," Ostroff speculated, "and indicative of the importance of how much he put on getting us into a good community and a good neighborhood."[85]

As Kazan surmised in the case of the lease contracts, tenants' feelings of investment in their own apartments had a lot to do with the economic and political implications of freedom from the tenant system. However, the written record also speaks to a yearning for a much more pervasive American ideal of suburban homeownership attached to what residents *owned* in the cooperatives. Kazan's collective utopian vision of cooperativism is uniquely informed in his earliest project by the prosaic American ideals of home life emerging in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The initial six buildings, designed by the architectural firm of Springsteen and Goldhammer, provide telling indicators of the cooperators' vision. The Amalgamated structures were not single-family detached homes—the ACW had concluded single family homes would be unaffordable for its prospective tenants and two-family homes which would establish landlord-tenant relations were out of the question.[86] Yet, despite the progressive values of the project, the architects designed the structures in a very

[84] Kazan, interview, 125-126.
[85] Harold Ostroff, interview by Mildred Finger, June 21, 1984, William E. Wiener Oral History Library of the American Jewish Committee, New York Public Library, New York, NY, 11-12.
[86] Kazan, interview, 72.

traditional neo-Tudor style. At the time, "Conservative English Tudor...was a staple of New York's middle-class housing," Richard Plunz writes. Tudor style signaled a comfortable, exurban domesticity.[87] The Amalgamated structures stayed low, only five stories, because the law did not permit walk-ups higher than five stories, and the project's neighbor, the Radio Corporation of America, feared the elevators might interfere with its delicate experiments.[88] In many ways, the Amalgamated Housing that these Jewish leftists built coincided with a very traditional conception of the American dream, complete with standard American symbols of prosperity and respectability. Apartments had high ceilings and hardwood floors. In explicit contrast to the crowded Lower East Side, the design of the projects would strive to achieve privacy for families. At great additional expense, the buildings apartments opened onto many separate entrances, so that no more than two families would share any landing.[89] These choices entailed significant extra costs, Kazan recalled, but Kazan's team still chose to include them, signaling the importance of such details in the minds of those who planned this community.[90]

The ideals of this housing project seemingly clash with the leftist leanings of its utopian architects. Residents' pride of ownership in the typical structures of the Amalgamated, much like the Kazan's speeches made about self-help, ultimately conflict with conventional understandings of the political left to which Kazan and the majority of his cooperators belonged. While a natural appeal to a population struggling to leave the harsh conditions of the urban slums, Kazan's project overlapped in startling ways with a

[87] Plunz, *History of Housing*, 165.
Dolkart, "Non-Profit Cooperatives," 38.
[88] Kazan, interview, 118.
[89] Dolkart, "Non-profit Cooperatives," 39.
[90] Kazan, interview, 103.

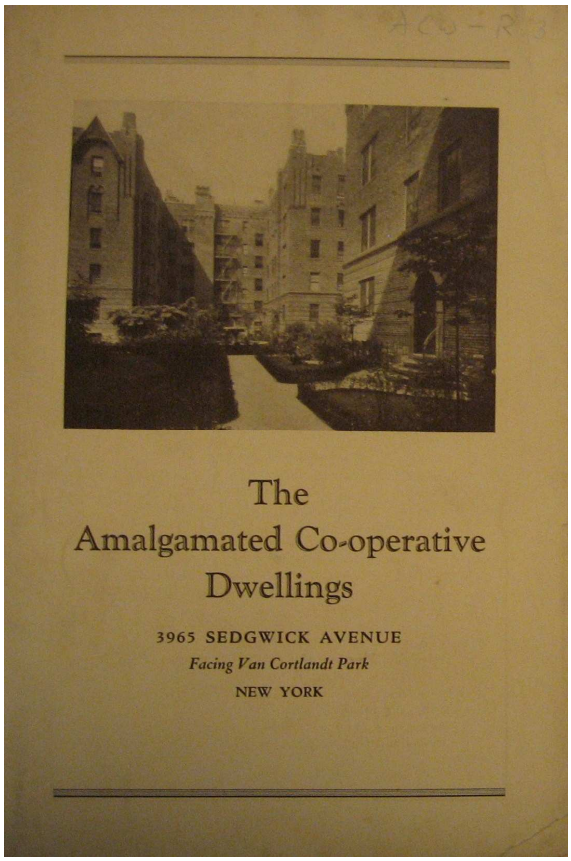
suburban home-ownership model that has become a bastion of contemporary conservative rhetoric. As Kenneth Jackson notes, the suburban ideal has long has deeply conservative associations. In the early twentieth century, Jackson notes, "Marxists and feminists saw [suburban ideas as a] threat because they did not share the vision of tranquil, sexually stratified domesticity in isolated households."[91] In the context of the Cold War and domestic fears of the political left, privately owned dwellings also came to be viewed by leftists as a conservative force inuring individuals against their progressive politics.

However, the record suggests this was also a part of what the tenant-cooperators themselves wanted in their apartments. The Amalgamated Housing acknowledges its organizers and tenants' ideas of desirable housing in the materials it would create to promote the development—presumably written with attention to what was expected to appeal to potential residents. The literature of the AHC goes to great lengths to distinguish the Bronx apartments from regular urban dwellings, invoking symbols of domestic comfort identified with non-urban life. The Bronx was "the country" at the time, with wide open and green spaces, a contrast with the conditions in the crowded, central city that became an explicit part of the project's marketing campaign.[92] A pamphlet intended for potential cooperators bore a section titled "Lawns and Trees," which grandly invokes the expansive natural vistas surrounding the project. The publication dwells on the buildings' park views and its manicured inner courts "laid out in lawns, flower beds, trees and fountains." The project's boosters expressed delight with

[91] Jackson, *Crabgrass*, 51.
[92] Moore, "On the Fringe," 260.
Kazan, interview, 72.
Promotional materials, ACWU Papers, Box 201.
Kazan, interview, 72.

the project's semi-rural location. They boasted that every apartment faced out over the green space prompting their choice of a site in the still relatively rural Bronx; windows looked out onto either Van Cortland Park, or the project's planted interior courtyard. The attention to the buildings' light and ventilation ensured an atmosphere not to be found downtown. Buildings covered just under fifty percent of the lot.[93]

These efforts certainly met some residents' desires. A May 1928 article in the *Cincinnati Post* entitled "Mr. Miller's Palace" paid exhaustive attention to the natural details of the setting, led by Mr. Miller himself. The Amalgamated resident pointed out the birds singing outside his window, telling the paper's reporter that "we of the union built this apartment house to set ourselves free from the tenement houses and from darkness and from ugliness." In contrast to "New York," where, Miller recalls, "there was never a blade of grass...and nothing grew but the rent" he explained that the Bronx offered a positively bucolic paradise.[94]




Promotional Pamphlet for Amalgamated Housing, ACWU Papers, Martin P. Catherwood Library.

**The Amalgamated Housing's Departure**

Ultimately though, the Amalgamated Housing also departed from the model of the detached owner-occupied suburban home. The buildings also reflected an attention to

[93] Amalgamated Housing Corporation Promotional Pamphlet. ACWU Papers.
[94] Segal, "Mr. Miller's."

a cooperative community and lifestyle central to their purpose and altogether counter to suburban life.[95] Ownership within the framework of a collective took on a subtle twist from the traditional American homeownership model. Kazan knew and appreciated the emerging ideal of the small town or the suburb, but he and his compatriots sought something very distinct from that. In Kazan's endeavor, communal life provided the impetus and spirit of his housing developments to be built on a larger scale.

Communal activities became a distinguishing and visible feature of the collectively owned housing inseparable from the construction of homes. Ownership in the community became expressly linked to active participation and cooperative ventures became symbols of the entire development. Tenant Chas. M. Bernstein noted in 1932: "After residing in this community for a period of two and one-half years, thoughts of retrospection on the time spent here crowd my mind. Did I gain any moral or spiritual benefits through contact with this group of people? Was my dwelling here an asset or a liability to my family and myself?" Why, he asked himself, have these thoughts even entered his mind about his dwelling-place? Because he is part-owner of his apartment or because the rental is lower? Bernstein considered the possible factors of the lawns and modern buildings but finally concluded, "But to the reason just mentioned I must add another one, perhaps even better than the last one: *The spiritual and cultural side of our activities.* Yes! The Library, the lectures, the concerts, the camp, the kindergarten, our actors, our singers, etc. etc." [Emphasis from original text].[96]

[95] Jane W. Adriance, "The Influence of Cooperative Housing on the Formation of Friendships; a Study of Women Living in the Amalgamated Cooperative Apartments in New York City," MA Thesis, Columbia University, 1937, 6.
[96] Chas. M. Bernstein, "A Tribute to Our Homes," *Amalgamated Co-operator*, July 1932, 6.

The Amalgamated's communal endeavors, meant to encourage and inculcate cooperative thinking and commitment, while providing entertainment, thrived in its early years. The relative emptiness of the area of the Bronx in which the Amalgamated Housing was constructed meant the substantial investment and patronage of cooperative enterprises was both a choice and a necessity.[97] A nursery followed soon after the cooperative grocery. The Amalgamated Housing's first bulletin appeared on January 5, 1928, a hand-typed broadsheet with the aim to "promote better understanding of our needs, resulting in closer cooperation." The bulletin announced the cooperative's news in verse:

> Listen folks - - - - -
> We've news today
> "A library is coming
> with us to stay."[98]

Great attention to communal spaces testifies to their importance for the community. The corner basement room fitted with library tables and chairs held several thousand volumes from the outset, along with periodical and newspaper racks. Close attention had gone into the décor. Pictures hung on the walls, which painted by artistic members of the community, and busts of notable figures stood at attention. [99]

The bulletin and the library were soon joined by a host of other communal activities—the extent of which give an indication of the scale of community engagement. Cooperators voted to fund activities centrally through a "general Education Fund," which engaged an educational director to oversee and organize community activities and

[97] Yaker, interview.
[98] "Bulletin of the Amalgamated Cooperative Apartments," Number 1, January 5, 1928, ACWU Papers, Box 201, Folder 10.
[99] Excerpt from Publisher's Weekly, September 29, 1928, ACWU Papers.

towards publishing a more regular community paper.[100] The buildings' various bodies, including Educational and House committees took charge or organizing the spaces and activities within the community. The years 1928 to 1929 saw the introduction of the cooperative's first summer day camp, several Yiddish and English dramatic groups, a youth string ensemble and community chorus, and classes for children in music, woodcarving and model airplane-making. The Annual Report of the Educational Committee for 1930 reported conducting 25 forums for the cooperative's 500 families, with an average attendance of 200 persons, 15 lectures to an average audience of 125 persons, as well as 5 concerts, 4 socials and dances, and 5 dramatic presentations. Speakers at these forums ranged from Kazan himself, speaking on the administration of cooperative housing to notable figures from the labor movement.[101] In the early years, "[t]he Literary Circle on Thursday evenings grew from a handful of people meeting in the Library, to a number large enough to warrant [its] moving into the Auditorium."[102] The women's social club hosted their own talks on subjects such as the care of children's teeth, the morality of birth control, and the decoration of a small apartment.[103] Activities were organized for all ages and groups in the community to draw them into communal practice.

By the numbers, communal life seemed to thrive during the Amalgamated's early years, but the nature of the organism itself raises more difficult questions. Herman Liebman took over the position of Educational Director at the beginning of January,

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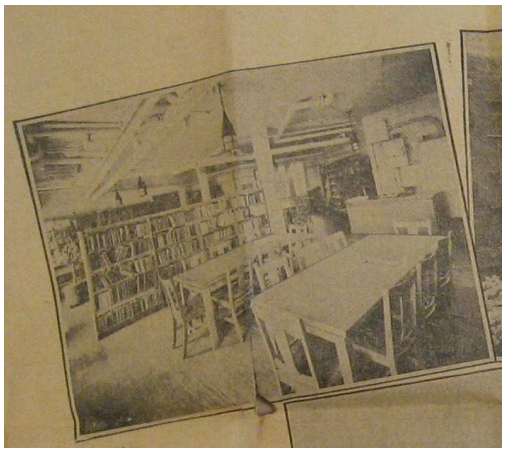
[100] Herman Liebman, "Twenty Years of Community Activities," in *Joint Anniversary Journal,* ACWU Papers.
[101] "Annual Report of our Educational Department for the year 1930," *Amalgamated Co-operator*, November 1930, 2.
[102] Bessie Blumberg, "Educational and Recreational Activities in a Co-operative House," *Amalgamated Co-operator*, April 18, 1930, 5.
[103] Mildred B. Weinik, "Woman's Club Active," *Amalgamated Cooperator*, July 1931.

1930, following the resignation of his predecessor, David Friedman.[104] Liebman, the cooperative's fourth educational director, would make his presence felt over the coming years. He assumed full responsibility for publishing the alternately weekly and monthly community newsletter, by that time printed in Yiddish and English and called the *Amalgamated Co-operator*. As Liebman himself would observe years later, "Turning the pages of our 'Community News' since 1929 one can read the fever chart of our struggles and achievements registered in its columns like on a sensitive barometer."[105] From the accounts of communal life Liebman published in the early 30s, we can trace the complexity of communal life in the Amalgamated Housing.

As reflected in the contents of the *Co-operator,* cooperative activities clearly became central to the community's identity, emotionally and theoretically. In the October-November, 1933 issue, Mrs. Schkolnick, a member of the women's group wrote upon leaving the housing project that her sense of sadness stemmed directly from the loss of the "community life," in the context of her letter, hardly mistakable for simply the communal ownership of the property. "This invisible thing," she writes, "which we can neither measure nor weigh, this intimacy that has developed among us, this interest in each others' lives is the outgrowth of our Community life. This, my dear friends and



Detail of the Library from the *Milwaukee Leader*, May 10, 1930, ACWU Papers.

[104] "Herman Liebman—Our New Educational Director," *Amalgamated Co-operator*, January 3, 1930, 5.
[105] Herman Liebman, "Twenty Years of Community Activities," in *Joint Anniversary Journal,* ACWU Papers.

cooperators, is *the very seed* of cooperation" [emphasis in original].[106] Communal *activities* had somehow become central to the self-definition of the Amalgamated Housing community. When the *Co-Operator* faced threats during lean fiscal times in 1933, Liebman wrote: "If our enterprise is another apartment house, there is no need for a Bulletin. In fact, there is no need for any cultural activity. If, on the other hand, ours is a link in the chain of universal cooperative endeavor, a Bulletin, and a better Bulletin, is indispensible."[107]

If cooperative activities indeed represented the essence of the project and of cooperation, the condemnations of lackluster participation featured regularly in Liebman's bulletin point to a serious problem. These editorials and entreaties appeared every few issues of the *Cooperator* throughout Liebman's tenure as editor. Most frequently, he called for participation in the public discourse represented by his own publication.[108] He and others railed against the weakness of subscriptions to the cooperative library. In November of 1930, the paper lamented that only a fifth of the community had answered the library's membership drive.[109] Especially after 1931, Liebman used the pages of the broadsheet and his position as Educational Director to launch pointed critiques of the Amalgamated community and management. He made lackluster cooperators an especial target, for everything from purchasing their milk at locations other than the project's own cooperative dairy to their failure to keeping the halls clean.[110]

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[106] "Words of Parting," *Amalgamated Co-operator*, Oct-Nov 1933.
[107] "This Bulletin of Ours," *Amalgamated Co-operator*, June-July 1933, 2.
[108] "The Purpose of Our Bulletin" *Amalgamated Co-operator*, January 17, 1930, 2.
[109] "Library Drive Still On," *Amalgamated Co-operator*, Nov 1930, 5.
[110] "Loyalty to your own efforts should not be begged for. If you are not interested in your own work—give it up. But to parade as Cooperators, conduct cooperative services, and then scatter your "sympathies" and your cast to the four and forty winds—is a contradiction we should eliminate at once."

While some of Liebman's appeals to tenants' cooperative spirit to honor proper codes of behavior in the elevators or observe proper laundry etiquette may seem comical or banal, his honesty does manage to raise serious doubts about the success of the Amalgamated Housing as a cooperative. Liebman raises a larger point: that the lack of participation may have reflected a lack of investment in the community among some unknown portion of the house. The Amalgamated consistently enjoyed high demand for its apartments. The AHC would construct an additional building in 1929 and a fourth unit in a more traditional apartment-house style in 1931.[111] Kazan addressed the residents of the development's newest building in 1929 saying, "We want to welcome our new co-operators...not only as tenants, but as co-operators. We hope every one will become active in our work and participate in our activities."[112] However, the attraction of the low-cost apartments clearly varied for residents. In a reported conversation between two cooperators, "Young Mrs. Shuldenfrei" asked her friend why she did not belong to the cooperative library. "Oh, Heaven," replied the lady rather indignantly, "I haven't come here to belong to this, and that or the other thing. I just came to live here. . . ."[113]

Any lack of participation may have signaled a more serious lack of commitment to the vision of the project itself, and a threat to the democratic vision of the body of the house. Though the Amalgamated Housing successfully attracted tenants, low rents and quality rooms may have proved the real draw for some new members of the community,

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"Editorials," *Amalgamated Co-operator,* Oct-Nov., 1933.
For other examples, see:
"Cooperative Month – October" *Amalgamated Co-Operator,* Sept 1932, 2.
"What is wrong with Co-operative Housing?" *Amalgamated Co-operator,* April-May, 1933, 2.
"Commissary News and Comment," *Amalgamated Co-operator,* Aug-Sept., 1933, 2.
"Spruce Up, House!" *Amalgamated Cooperator,* August-September 1933, 1.
[111] Adriance, "Influence of Cooperative Housing," 4-5.
[112] "Auditorium Re-opened With Concert and Dance," *Amalgamated Co-operator,* Nov 22, 1929, 4.
[113] "I Came to Live Here..." *Amalgamated Co-operator*, September 26, 1930.

who may not have converted as readily as Kazan hoped to the cooperative ethos. The success of Kazan's vision rested upon this being not-just-another-apartment house. There were plenty of those being built for and by Jews in the Bronx and in Brooklyn.[114] Kazan's plans hinged on the idea that the project would change the way people lived, their feelings towards one another, and their values. True cooperation depended on the actual engagement of individuals, not just their shared affinity for inexpensive lodgings. Ed Yaker, whose family arrived shortly after the period that forms the focus of this study, in the early 1940s, remembers an atmosphere of trust and respect towards the management to handle the cooperatives' business but, he suggests, not all the residents regarded the project with the same feelings as its management.[115]

**Cooperation in Practice**

Assessing the Amalgamated Housing's management becomes essential to assessing the success of the project. Particularly when one man proved such a driving force within an ostensibly democratic development, understanding the extent to which his activities reflected the perceived needs and preferences of the Amalgamated's cooperators becomes crucial to assessing the viability of the entire enterprise. The first issue of the *Amalgamated Co-operator* printed in 1929, contained an article entitled "Management in Cooperative Enterprises," written by Leo Wolman. Wolman, who also served as Research Director of the ACWU wrote:

> The completion of the newest group of Amalgamated Cooperative Apartments again raises the interesting question of the problem of management in popular cooperative undertakings. For when all is said and done, cooperation in this country has failed or succeeded in proportion as its management was bad or good.

[114] Moore, "On the Fringes."
[115] Yaker, interview.

Wolman observed that cooperation in the United States coexisted with private enterprise and commercial profit. "This condition imposes upon American cooperation obligations of management and policy-making which it cannot avoid," wrote Wolman. In the face of the skill and experience of private managers, cooperative experiments needed especially sound operation and management. "The management brought into cooperative enterprise must possess all the technical skill and experience common to private business managers." However, Wolman laid out the central struggle of Amalgamated Housing: "The cooperative undertaking itself must be so organized, its relation with its management to be such, as to protect its essentially cooperative features." In any cooperative undertaking, Wolman raised the challenging balance to be achieved between management and adequately dedicated novice cooperators. He raised questions about the devotion of tenant-cooperators themselves. Wolman saw no short-cut or quick fix. Cooperators must be "converted to cooperative conduct." Management, he recommended, must be chosen carefully and principles and plans carefully adhered to by all to make a cooperative enterprise work.[116] In short, a balance needed to be achieved.

Early, the cooperators' democratic ambitions had not been easily put into practice and management's activities had proved essential to realizing residents' desires. During Kazan's 1960s interviews with oral historian Lloyd Kaplan, Kaplan asked Kazan to address the structure of the organizing committee that began the project. Kazan's response speaks to the lasting tension inherent in all aspects of the Amalgamated's housing endeavor:

> Kazan: Generally it was like a discussion in the family, and all of them were concerned with the development and decisions were just put through by a show of hands.
> Q: We all know that even in a family there is a father or a mother who has the primary voice.....

[116] Leo Wolman, "Management in Cooperative Enterprises" *Amalgamated Co-operator*, Nov 8, 1929, 3.

> Kazan: Well, sometimes we'd talk until doomsday! discussing what we thought was right or wrong.....
> Q: There was no chief rabbi?
> Kazan: (laughs softly)
> Q: Didn't you conduct the meetings? That's what I am asking.[117]

From the very beginning, the Amalgamated project had to navigate ownership, and theoretically governance, by its soon-to-be resident collaborators. At the same time, the Amalgamated's management held real and specialized knowledge that placed them in a leadership role. Kazan ultimately responded that he did often direct meetings "by virtue of the fact that I was the elected head of the committee...I had more time than the others, working in the Credit Union and also for the Amalgamated and I had more time to give to the study of everything—I met with the architects, got their opinion about a number of matters, and I in turn communicated the information to the rest."[118]

In a compromise with the demands of the financial world, a reputable and recognizable five-member board of directors sat atop the AHC, with the responsibility for the project's finances. The President of the board, a role Kazan would fill for many years, communicated the body's decisions and recommendations to stockholders. The AHC's articles of incorporation stipulated the election of directors, but granted management a significant degree of autonomy. Notably, the original board would consist of a number of figures with considerable name recognition and credibility for the project's creditors—including, as noted, Amalgamated Housing President, Sydney Hillman and Baruch Charney Vladeck of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Besides Kazan, these men generally did not live in the Amalgamated Housing. Kazan himself also served as manager and Michael Shallin, by his own account, a "promising young Business Agent in the

[117] Kazan, interview, 104.
[118] Kazan, interview, 104.

Amalgamated Union," migrated to join him as assistant manager of the cooperative.[119] Below the management, committees of the tenant-cooperators assumed to be better acquainted with the development's daily needs, were formed to oversee the everyday operation of the house. Members of the House Committee, the Committee on Cooperative Attitudes, and the Educational Committee were all elected by the shareholders: the population of tenant-cooperators.[120]

However, could the Amalgamated's management have enjoyed too much success, leading to an overreliance on just a few individuals? Did the Amalgamated remain true to the vision at the heart of what made the project unique? The Co-Operator would note the risk of an overconfidence and overdependence on the Amalgamated Housing's management in a 1933 editorial produced by Liebman:

> The membership continues to delegate more and more executive authority and financial responsibility to their officers instead of themselves and their own Committees participating more actively in the affairs of the Society and its future development...In short, Democracy, which is the core of Cooperation and its greatest assurance of security is here gradually yielding to the popular appeal for super-efficiency, super-control, blind faith in, and blind obedience to the will of "one," intolerance of dissenting opinion, crucifiction (sic) of critics as "enemies of the state," etc., etc., with all the other familiar claptrap and sickening apologies by both the "one" and the "many," the "leaders," and the "followers" for their downright shirking of responsibility and shameless surrender of the principle of democracy when actually required in practice right here at home! ... And once the process of decay sets in, no efficiency on earth will keep this enterprise from degenerating into just another apartment house, and undoubtedly a 'successful' one![121]

While dramatic in tone, Liebman's observations demand a more careful study of ongoing operations at the Bronx Amalgamated development.

Liebman's own position and responsibilities became a lightning rod for controversy in these years, especially as the Great Depression hit the community hard and management and tenant-cooperators struggled with budgeting priorities. In early 1934,

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[119] Michael Shallin, "On Second Thought..." in *Story of a Co-op Community: The First 75 Years* (*New* York: Herman Liebman Memorial Fund, 2002), 7.
[120] Kazan, interview, 120-124.
"Amalgamated Housing Corporation Bylaws," ACWU Papers, Box 201, Folder 12.
[121] Herman Liebman, "Editorials," *Amalgamated Co-Operator. December, 1933, 2-3.*

Herman Liebman's letter of resignation appeared in the *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, grandly titled "I Resign." The immediate controversy that led to this break stemmed from disagreements about the management and funding of the House's educational and communal activities, a consistent point of controversy during the lean years of the early thirties. The Depression severely affected the Amalgamated Housing and other Jewish cooperative developments in New York, stretching the human and financial resources of these communities, in most cases to their breaking point. Historian Beth Wenger has noted that the financial crisis, which included the failure of major financial institutions serving Jews in New York, sent shockwaves through the city's entire Jewish community. A relatively elevated Jewish presence in white-collar professions shielded the population at large from the worst destitution on average, but significant numbers of Jewish community members still experienced serious personal setbacks.[122] In 1931, among the Amalgamated Cooperators, nearly a third worked in the garment trades. Only 10% belonged to professional trades. The garment industry suffered early on in the Depression, and as a result, so did the cooperatives filled with many of its employees. The creditors of the nearby Allerton Coops foreclosed on the property's mortgage.[123] As the Amalgamated Union's Jacob Potofsky remarked, in hard times "You don't buy a new suit."[124]

Only three New York cooperatives, including the Amalgamated Housing, survived the Depression.[125] The Amalgamated's survival was commonly credited by Kazan himself and by others to the Amalgamated's shrewd financial management

[122] Beth Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 11-17.
[123] *At Home in Utopia*, directed by Michal Goldman, Filmmakers Collaborative, 2008.
[124] Potofsky, interview, 208.
[125] Wray, "Abraham E. Kazan," 13.

throughout the period.[126] Kazan was a practical and frugal idealist. His commitment to the financial viability ultimately stemmed from his commitment to the cooperative ideal—he felt that any financial failure would do the movement a disservice.[127] To that end, his 1971 *New York Times* obituary would recall his frequent feuds over electricity rates with Consolidated Edison. Mayor Robert Wagner described Kazan as a "hard man where a dollar, or even a penny is concerned."[128] According to Donald Martin, who would work for Kazan later in his career, the man was tight-fisted as an administrator, insistent on signing every check that left the office himself and bent on cutting costs in his housing projects.[129] During the Depression, Kazan bent all his energies towards pulling the Amalgamated Housing community through. The *Co-Operator* announced that "our community is tightening its belt a bit and is staring the depression squarely and resolutely in the face."[130] Economic necessity during this difficult period had even led the community to accept a limited number of residents from higher income brackets who would not have been admitted before, in some cases as tenants instead of cooperator-owners.[131] Kazan knew at all times that not everyone interested in attracted to the Amalgamated was interested in cooperation, but his desire to keep the projects themselves viable led him to take advantage of all available opportunities to forward his cooperative vision. An integral part of that, for Kazan, meant restoring confidence in the

[126] Wray, "Abraham E. Kazan," 13.
Leavitt, "Interrelated History," 85.
Cooper, "Next Year in the Bronx," 18.
[127] Kazan, interview, 456.
[128] "Abraham E. Kazan Dies at 82; Master Co-op Housing Builder," *New York Times*, December 22, 1971.
[129] Wray, "Abraham E. Kazan," 48.
[130] "Discipline," *Amalgamated Cooperator*, March 1933, 2.
[131] Adriance, "Influence of Cooperative Housing," 6-7.

financial viability of cooperatives.[132] Here again, Kazan's choices seem to have made the most sense for his tenants. The Amalgamated Housing was a monument to the strength of Kazan and his fellow-organizers' idealism, but as importantly, to their practical commitment to providing a workable housing alternative.

However, even with economizing measures and Kazan's attention to financial stability, sacrifices had to be made in the lifestyle of the Amalgamated residents during the Depression. Communal activities had to be down-scaled, in some cases replaced with Works Progress Administration-funded alternatives.[133] In the process of these contentious changes to the Amalgamated Housing's programming, Kazan had several serious disagreements with residents at stockholders' meetings.[134] However, in the long run, his posture of fiscal austerity seems to ultimately have served his tenants to their satisfaction.

Kazan's lectures and his penny-pinching appear not to have been overly resented amongst the Amalgamated cooperators. The Amalgamated manager's idealism and practicality were visible and appreciated by others. Today, Ed Yaker lives in the Amalgamated buildings in the Bronx, more than sixty years after his parents—both union members—moved to the project. He himself served previously as President of the Coop Board. Yaker remembers Kazan's presence in the house during his own childhood, "He wasn't someone you schmoozed with," says Yaker, however he notes Kazan and the rest of the cooperative's management were respected and trusted by his parents and their friends who credited him with the development's success.[135] The written record supports

[132] Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 134.
[133] Adriance, "Influence of Cooperative Housing," 10.
*Amalgamated Co-operator*, "Second Educational Meeting Held" August 1932, 1.
[134] Kazan, interview, 254.
[135] Yaker, interview.

Yaker's recollections and offers testimony dating back further in time. In 1933, the Amalgamated co-operators would adopt a resolution to

> re-affirm our full and unqualified approval and confidence in the ability ,through integrity and the sincerest devotion to our common interests of our manager, cooperator, and president of the Amalgamated Housing Corporation, Mr. Abraham Kazan, and we do hereby express to him our esteem heartfelt wish and desire that we may in the future, as in the past, work all together with him for the continued success of our AMALGAMATED COOPERATIVE enterprises, and to that end we and purpose we all pledge to him our full and undivided support.[136] (sic)

Tenant C. B. Fishbein would note of the same meeting that "The criticism and healthy advice which was very reluctantly given us by Mr. Kazan was, without doubt, the soundest of all."[137]

In addition, another meeting offers further evidence both of support for the Amalgamated's management and of the significant extent of tenant engagement. The newsletter offers a passing reference to a threat made by Kazan and former Educational Director Bessie Blumberg to refuse future support to the Educational Fund during a heated meeting. The *Co-Operator* reported that some rallied around them—namely 60 chose to boycott the monthly educational fee that month; the strength of this group of spontaneously organized tenants alone speaks to the volume of engagement among the Amalgamated cooperators. But, the bulletin also noted the economizers met heated dissent and debate. The coverage describes the resolution of the meeting at which discussions of possible economization within communal activities took place:

> [Cost-saving cuts in educational activities], the committee felt, should be taken by the stockholders direct. It was therefore voted to discuss every item of expense in the Department and pass upon it.
>
> No sooner, however, was the first item introduced than endless discussion and opposing viewpoints again jammed the proceedings. It was clearly evident that our good people would like to have the cake and eat it. It was also evident that 500 people can not be expected to pass upon details of so complicated a program as carried on by our Educational Department.
>
> A compromise was finally reached when a motion to elect an advisory committee of five, with full powers, together with the Educational Committee to set the Budget for next season.[138]

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[136] "Resolution Adopted at the Cooperators' Meeting, April 28th, 1933," *Amalgamated Co-operator*, April-May, 1933, 2.
[137] C. B. Fishbein, "Our Educational Problems: Random Notes," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, April-May, 1933.

Ultimately the outcome of this budgetary controversy, while not directly representative, seems at least relatively democratic, indicating that at least some elements of the cooperators' original ambitions were realized in practice. Moreover, this passage describes a very substantial public engagement on issues central to the cooperative's identity. Kazan and management participated, but clearly did not speak alone or unopposed.

In the mid-1930s, Columbia student Jane Adriance conducted a study of the effects of cooperative living at the Amalgamated Housing for the completion of her master's degree in Political Science. Her thesis, completed in 1937, examined the lives and perceptions of the women living in the Amalgamated project. Adriance observed a correlation between residents' experience of the Amalgamated Housing and the ideas they had brought to the endeavor. "In general," Adriance noted, "the study shows that the Amalgamated Apartments offer a somewhat more favorable atmosphere than is common in New York City for the spontaneous development of acquaintanceships between neighbors."[139] Ultimately though, Adriance found that "in a cooperative housing project, as in any other situation, the basic factor in the development of close friendships is the attitude of the persons involved."[140]

Remarking on the astonishing variety of the experience of the female cooperators she interviewed, Adriance reported that female cooperators knew anywhere from six to five hundred of their fellow tenant-cooperators by name. She attributed these differences in part to the women's personalities, but most importantly to their individual hopes for

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[138] *Amalgamated Co-operator*, "Second Educational Meeting Held," August 1932, 1.
[139] Adriance, "Influence of Cooperative Housing," 47.
[140] Adriance, "Influence of Cooperative Housing," 83.

the development. “The majority of those who started the project and moved into the first unit were enthusiasts and idealists, eager to try to achieve a common solution, not only to the economic problems which they faced as a group, but also the social and recreational needs which they felt.”[141] Others had arrived with different motives, and experienced their apartments very differently. Newer female cooperators did not belong to the women’s club in the same numbers, and its overall membership had declined. Female cooperators’ attitudes and ideas towards the community influenced their experience in the Amalgamated Housing.

Women’s attitudes do not seem to have reflected a fixed reality of cooperative life. As Benedict Anderson has written, nations or communities may be defined by an imagined sense of a horizontal community which may belie the complex reality of any collectivity.[142] In this case, the cooperative community was as much a product of the ideas of the tenant cooperators—initially driven and engaged, later perhaps more reticent—as of the physical environment of the cooperative that Adriance herself studied with great attention.[143] When the Depression hit, many of the early cooperators had been forced to leave or to focus more attention on their own situation, but those who had been in the development the longest continued to have the most positive opinion of its effect on their own lives.[144] In the coming years, events would test the boundaries of

[141] Adriance, “Influence of Cooperative Housing,” 78.
[142] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso; repr., 2006) 6-7.
[143] Adriance suggests the fourth unit, build in 1931with greater economy after the start of the Depression, lacked the spirit of the previous units. She says: “The fourth unit has a distinctly more conventional apartment-house appearance than the preceding units. It lacks a unifying central court. It has a larger number of families on each entrance. It has no central offices, no stores, and no social rooms. The investigator noted that it was only on rare occasions that groups of women stood talking together around the entrance of this unit, whereas such groups were typical of the other units on all except very inclement afternoons, and on many mornings.”
Adriance, “Influence of Cooperative Housing,” 6.
[144] Adriance, “Influence of Cooperative Housing,” 78-80.

cooperation's appeal.

**The Legacy of the Amalgamated**

Kazan authored a letter of resignation as manager of Amalgamated Housing to Amalgamated Union President, Sidney Hillman, in 1937. Kazan wrote the letter in large part over disagreements over the Amalgamated Housing's expansion. A plot of land already in the AHC's possession sat ripe for construction, but Hillman apparently hesitated. The Amalgamated Project had never been the foremost priority of the labor leader and perhaps he feared an overexpansion and eventual failure of the development that had earned the union such positive publicity. In any case, Kazan voiced his own disagreement forcefully. "It is one thing to work for an organization that lives and expects to grow," Kazan wrote. "[I]t is quite a different thing to become the janitor and chief of a limited group, or for the Amalgamated Union."[145] For Kazan, expansion was an essential part of the Amalgamated Housing project. From the start, his commitment to the project had hinged upon its role as the harbinger of a larger movement, one that might reclaim the urban landscape and spread cooperative values and lifestyles to greater numbers of city-dwellers.

From the beginning of the construction of Amalgamated Housing, in keeping with its intended role as a progressive model, the buildings had been thrown open to visitors, including many influential figures. Famed settlement house worker Lillian Wald, Congressman and soon-to-be-mayor Fiorello La Guardia, Jewish reformer Julian Mack and a number of other dignitaries of that day, including Henrietta Moscowitz (adviser to Governor Alfred E. Smith who was extensively profiled in Caro's *Power Broker* as an influential power behind Smith's throne), had all attended the opening ceremonies of

[145] Abraham Kazan to Sidney Hillman, September 9, 1937. ACWU Papers, Box 201.

Amalgamated Housing. Kazan continued to give tours to visiting journalists and statesmen for years to come. In 1932, he attended a national housing conference at the invitation of President Hoover.[146] These tours and Kazan's public engagements had a purpose soon revealed. As Kazan noted in the first issue of the Amalgamated Co-Operator in November of 1929, "cooperative movement in the entire country, the labor movement, and progressives in general are watching this enterprise of ours with a critical eye."[147]

Housing stood at the perceived heart of a tangle of urban problems. As an early model, the Amalgamated interested both theoreticians and policymakers. The State Board of Housing made a study in 1931 of the first housing company to incorporate as a limited dividend company under the State Housing Act. The Amalgamated presented a rare experiment realized in the flesh. Researchers hoped to gain valuable clues from what worked and what did not. The author of the study, the assistant secretary of the State Board of Housing, observed that "once a housing program has been translated from paper to reality and hundreds of families enjoy the benefits of model apartments, then a budget study may take on a much broader scope,"[148] State involvement in housing was itself about to take on a much broader scale. Ideas about investment and community remained central to the questions surrounding publicly financed and facilitated housing—the

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[146] The December 29, 1930 edition of the Amalgamated Cooperator reports a tour give to US Senator Smith W. Brookhart of Iowa in the same month.
Influential housing reformer and original member of the State Housing Board, Louis Pink, would include an account of his tour of Amalgamated Housing from Kazan in his 1928 book *A New Day in Housing*. Accounts of tours from Kazan and his tenants would appear in papers ranging from the *New York Times* to the union paper *The Railway Clerk* to the *London Post.*
Kazan, interview, 225.
[147] Abraham Kazan, "Our Latest Step Forward" *Amalgamated Co-operator*, November 8, 1929, 2.
[148] Achinstein, "Report," 11.

movement that would directly succeed the early small-scale efforts of reformers like Kazan.

**Downtown Developments**

The acceptance and approval voiced for the Amalgamated project heralded a wider moment in the sun in the 1930s for progressive ideas about community life. Cooperation was in vogue, writes historian Daniel Rodgers, pointing to the publication of Marquis Child's *Sweden: The Middle Way* in 1936 in the United States as the catalyst in America for a popular embrace of the cooperative ideal much-studied by academics and theoreticians. In his analysis, cooperation promised a theoretical compromise between the shortcomings of "uncontrolled capital and the totalizing state" for New Deal reformers.[149] It offered a new socioeconomic model to pursue within their own large-scale projects. Cooperation became a part of many progressive endeavors. Rodgers has called the first New Deal housing projects "hives of organizational activity."[150] Cooperative farms and communities appeared across the country during this period, and won admirers on many fronts.

In a meeting in Albany in the late 1920s, State Housing Board and AH Board-member Rabinovitz reported on the Amalgamated Housing to then-governor of New York Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In the words of Kazan: "Rabinovitz being a very talkative sort of man painted a very rosy picture of Amalgamated Housing. Roosevelt then, according to the statement I got from Rabinovitz, said to [Lieutenant-Governor] Lehman, 'Why don't you do another similar job in Manhattan, where we have so many sections that haven't seen a new building in a long time?' Out of that discussion came the

[149] Rodgers, *Atlantic*, 457-459.
[150] Rodgers, *Atlantic*, 448.

idea of doing a similar project on the Lower East Side of Manhattan."[151] Rabinovitz had long been very taken with the Amalgamated's housing efforts, beyond his purely professional responsibilities. In March of 1939, the *New York Times* reported, he had invited several hundred influential people to a tea and tour of the Bronx apartments. "I have asked this group of influential citizens to view the first large unit of the apartments to see for themselves what was distinctly a venture at the start has been a remarkable success from the standpoint of sociology, health, aesthetics as well as financially," Rabinovitz said at the time.[152]

At the meeting with the governor, Rabinovitz alerted the room to the availability of a lot on the Lower East Side. Then-Lieutenant Governor Herbert Lehman, also present, spoke up. Addressing himself to Rabinovitz, Lehman said that if Rabinovitz would put up half the financing to develop the site, he himself would provide the other half.[153] Together, Rabinovitz and Lehman purchased two East Side blocks. At the time, Kazan observed, the two knew virtually nothing about cooperation.[154] The AHC had not thought to move downtown but the urging of these political figures convinced the organizers to get involved.[155] Lehman and Rabinovitz met with the Amalgamated union, which agreed to donate Kazan's services so that he could oversee the construction and administration of the project. This decision would have massive implications.

A new corporation, called Amalgamated Dwellings, Inc. was formed.[156] Lehman and Rabinovitz contributed to a credit fund for residents to finance cooperators' share

[151] Kazan, interview, 141.
[152] "FLATS FOR WORKERS; Success of Bronx Cooperative House Leads To Plans for Lower East Side," *New York Times*, Mar 24, 1929, 183
[153] Louis Rittenberg, "An East Side Oasis," *The American Hebrew*, October 17, 1930.
[154] Kazan, interview, 147.
[155] Kazan, interview, 142.
[156] Untitled document, ACWU papers, Box 201.

purchases. An architect from the Springsteen and Goldhammer officers produced the plans for the structures. The modern design was again on a large scale—the buildings took up full city blocks—but not overpowering. The entire project held 236 units and won a warm reception; the design won the 1931 Apartment House Medal of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects.[157] The construction had an immediate impact on the visibility of cooperatives.[158] "I think," Rabinovitz would write, "that Col. Herbert H. Lehman and I have demonstrated in a substantial manner our faith in the success of the Amalgamated management by joining in the financing of the new project on Grand Street."[159] With powerful backers, the Amalgamated Dwellings project would introduce cooperatives, both physically and theoretically, as a tool for remaking the central city.

When Rabinovitz gave his tour of the Bronx Amalgamated Housing, he presented it in direct contrast to the apartment houses of the slums of the Lower East Side. He exhibited pictures of individual cooperators' old homes on the Lower East Side right alongside pictures of their new rooms in the Bronx. According to the *Times*, Rabinovitz asked himself: "Why will not the same plan work in the east side, perhaps a more convenient location for many of the workers?"[160] The slums had long been intimately linked to development of housing projects like the Amalgamated ones. It was the conviction of many progressive reformers at the time, such as Louis Pink of the State Housing Board and NYCHA, that the old-law tenements could not be revamped. "[T]he fact is," Pink wrote, "that run down and antiquated 'double-deckers' and 'dumb-bell'

[157] "Architects Win Building Prizes." *New York Sun*. February 20, 1931, ACWU Papers, Box 201, Folder 12.
[158] Kazan, interview, 165-167.
[159] Letter from Aaron Rabinovitz, *Amalgamated Co-operator*. November, 1930, 6.
[160] "FLATS FOR WORKERS."

tenements can not be made habitable. Health and happiness, justice to women and children, can only be achieved when the worst of them are destroyed."[161] These interests prevailed in the location of the Amalgamated Dwellings site on the location of deteriorated older tenements.

Kazan would recall initial misgivings about building in a neighborhood renowned for both poor conditions and political corruption. The additional costs and complications involved in construction on the Lower East Side, surrounded by long-established slums worried him. Ultimately, Kazan feared that a failure on the Lower East Side might seriously discredit the cooperative ideal he held so dear.[162] The same conviction of the potential of cooperation which had led him to involve himself in the Amalgamated Dwellings project meant that he was deeply invested in a successful outcome. However, despite his doubts, in keeping with his beliefs in the attendant evils of landlordism, plans for the replacement of landlord-owed slum housing with cooperative housing appealed to his political instincts.[163] By 1930, Kazan would write in the Amalgamated Cooperator that cooperation promised hope for the Lower East Side:

> Progressive and philanthropic people have for years kept the deplorable housing conditions of the east side in the public eye. However, no one came forth to risk his investment and to attempt anything along practical lines. It is now up to the very people who live there to make an attempt...By extending these people a long term credit to finance their homes, they would develop a fine sense of responsibility and ownership among the people and would at the same time assure that the slum conditions prevalent now on the east side would become a thing of the past.[164]

Kazan's dream would never fully materialize as envisioned. The richness of community life in the still-isolated Bronx failed to take root on the bustling Lower East Side, which had a wealth of its own extant social and commercial endeavors competing for

[161] Pink, *New Day in Housing*, 94.
[162] Kazan, interview, 142, 151.
[163] A.E Kazan, "How Co-operation Can Abolish Slums," *Amalgamated Co-operator* January 3, 1930, 2-3.
[164] A. E. Kazan, "Can the East Side Be Rebuilt By the People who Live There?" *Amalgamated Co-operator,* June 20, 1930, 3-4.

attention.[165] Nevertheless, with the expansion of the Amalgamated's Housing Efforts to lower Manhattan, their campaign became part of a wider process of housing reform unfolding in the New York City.

In line with his sentiments about ownership and self-help, Kazan had never really approved of publically constructed housing, but in the days of the Depression and the Works Progress Administration, the first New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Project went up nearby in 1934 at Avenue A and First Street. A number of the figures impressed by the Amalgamated Projects, including Pink and Vladeck, sat on the Authority's Board.[166] An ambitious but initially unfunded body, NYCHA funded its early operations from the sale of salvaged brick from tenements demolished under its direction. The authority cobbled together the money for the construction of First Houses on a lot purchased cheaply by Vincent Astor, eager to dispose of slum properties he owned which had begun earning him poor publicity. NYCHA's new buildings went up on the foundations of the largely demolished old-law tenements on the site around newly cleared central courts. Housing reformers advocating for government construction had won a significant victory and First Houses testifies to their early idealism. Two rooms were reserved for cooperative activities. Architecturally ambitious, the project bore more than a passing debt to visions from burgeoning housing and urban reform movements.[167] Le Corbusier, the well-known utopian planner, attended the project's opening.[168]

[165] Cooper, 19.
[166] Charles Yale Harrison, *First Houses*, (New York: New York City Housing Authority, 1935), available at Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, 15.
[167] Harrison, *First Houses*, 25-26.
[168] Mardges Bacon, *Le Corbusier in America: Travels in the Land of the Timid* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 161.

These projects were built with a great deal of idealism and enthusiasm, but they did not signal the end of the city's slums, nor the complete assumption of low-income housing construction by the government. Kazan's public-private partnership in fact ushered in the most controversial decades of redevelopment in New York City in which he continued to take part. With greater influence and scope for his work of constructing cooperative housing also came greater potential to inflict damage on neighborhoods. Though Kazan's projects would never materialize quite as envisioned, he would continue to spearhead cooperative projects across the city through the 1960s, coming to work hand-in-hand with the controversial New York figure Robert Moses. Moses, New York City's most infamous city planning administrator oversaw much of the city's mid-century renewal and infrastructural programs. Described as both politically calculating and ruthlessly driven, Moses was accused of destroying the fabric of many New York City neighborhoods.[169]

Moses chose to put his weight behind a number of Kazan's projects, using cooperatives to fill in the gaps left by clearance projects. Projects in which Kazan's United Housing Foundation (UHF) participated in later decades while popular in some communities would find greater fears among others. Often Black and Hispanic populations threatened with displacement voiced greater objections than European immigrant populations in the city's poor districts had voiced during the Depression years—when mobility and vacancy rates were already high, and these immigrants were frequently already quite anxious to leave their neighborhoods.[170] Additionally, as Gerald

[169] Pogrebin, Robin, "Rehabilitating Robert Moses," *New York Times*, January 23, 2007.
Caro, *The Power Broker*.
[170] Schwartz, *New York Approach*, 134-7; 176-179.

Sazama observes, "cooperatives go beyond the developments of just buildings—they involve organizing new human institutions that emphasize the residents. This requires patience and follow-up, which unfortunately is compromised in efforts to just produce more units."[171] The later UHF cooperatives could never replicate the early successes or intimacy of the first years in the Bronx, a source of enduring debate in the literature about the projects.

Some have pointed to the cultural homogeneity of the Amalgamated cooperators to question whether anyone could ever replicate the communities created by the early Jewish cooperatives outside of this unique population. The first Amalgamated housing project never advertised for its apartments. Tenants found out about it through friends or acquaintances who had already been attracted to the project and become involved, often encouraged by their own political affiliations.[172] A state report would find that "These families are a distinctly foreign-born Jewish population"—only ten per cent of the generation that first invested in the Amalgamated Housing had been born in the United States. Nearly all the rest came originally from Eastern Europe.[173] Fern Kupfer, who grew up in the Amalgamated, recalled years later: "Of course we were Jewish. The butcher, the baker, every neighbor and friend in that Bronx neighborhood was Jewish...Where I grew up, everyone was Jewish. The schools were closed for Jewish holidays, and Christmas only meant that downtown department stores were decorated with trees and tinsel."[174]

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Peter Marcuse, "The Beginnings of Public Housing in New York in the Early Years of Public Housing," *Journal of urban history*, 4(1986), 381.

[171] Gerald W. Sazama, "Lessons from the History of Affordable Housing Cooperatives in the United States: A Case Study in American Affordable Housing Policy," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Oct., 2000), 588.

[172] Kazan, interview, 92.

[173] Achinstein, "Report," 29.

[174] Interestingly, Jane Adriance reports: "Some mentioned with pride that there were all kinds of people there; Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, Communists, and anarchists. Others said with scorn that there

Vivian Gornick, among others who grew up in largely Jewish areas of the Bronx, has testified to the sense of solidarity and comfort born of this shared ethnic background, one that may have made cooperative organization much easier than in a more heterogeneous environment.[175] Moreover, ethnic commonality also came with a shared and visible political landscape during this period.[176] According to the State Board of Housing, "[m]ost of the strongly organized unions were represented by the wage-earners living in the Amalgamated apartments".[177] The unions and the political parties very active amongst a section of New York's Jewish community at the time all promised a better life achieved by collective effort. These environmental factors had uniquely primed the populations that moved into the Amalgamated Housing to commit to a collective housing effort.

Many at the time even doubted the Amalgamated model's relevance elsewhere. Many argued it could not be replicated, including the organizers of other planned communities, including those of Queens' Sunnyside Gardens. Their argument would not disappear. Gerald Sazama concluded in a 2000 study that the ethnically and politically homogenous group in the Amalgamated projects had a unique predisposition to cooperate and that the Amalgamated model could not survive elsewhere.[178] However, at the time, Kazan disagreed, at least publically. Though admitting with discomfort to a de facto filtering of tenants uncommitted to the idea of collective life during the initial recruitment

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were so many "isms" there that they had to be even more careful than before in selecting their friends." However, Adriance also offers one estimate of the development's population as 98% Jewish.
Adriance, "Influence of Cooperative Housing," 59.
Fern Kupfer, "Another Traditional Arab-Jewish Iowa Potluck" in *The Secret Lives of Lawfully Wedded Wives*, Ed. Autumn Stephens (Novato, Calif: New World Library, 2006), 57.
[175] Vivian Gornick, *Fierce Attachments* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; repr. 2005).
[176] Wenger, *New York Jews*, 106.
[177] Achinstein, "Report," 32.
[178] Sazama, "Lessons," 85.

of Amalgamated residents, Kazan emphasized early on his conviction that a cooperative development could *inculcate* common feeling among its resident tenants. [179] Kazan wrote: "By virtue of their common interest in the enterprise, cooperative housing creates a close bond among the occupants, even if the society is not a homogenous group at the start."[180] Cooperation took education, in Kazan's view. It took the active revelation of common interests based in common values.

Once done with construction in the Bronx, Kazan, now living in the project, continued to deliver lectures and otherwise encourage the appreciation of cooperation. He believed tenants could learn cooperation. In fact, this conviction contributed to his excitement about larger projects. Later studies would support Kazan's conception of the contingency of tenant's identification with their homes. Gail Radford conducted a study of another union cooperative development, this one built in Philadelphia, called the Carl Mackley Homes. She found a similar utopian sentiment to that of their colleagues in the Amalgamated motivated the union activists who built the Mackley Homes. However, as early as the 1950s, tenants in the Mackley development had no knowledge of the origins or significance of their apartments.[181] This fact itself, Radford noted, signified the need for an active and ongoing attention to the ideals behind cooperation to maintain the *meaning* of this project over the longer term.

However, these hopes and observations may miss the point of the Amalgamated endeavor. The vision of collective life offered by cooperation certainly had great potential amongst a community committed to a politics of collective social effort.

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[179] Kazan, interview, 91-92.
[180] Coöperative Housing in the United States, Abraham E. Kazan. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 191, Consumers' Coöperation (May, 1937), 141.
[181] Radford, *Modern Housing*, 143.

Kazan's own effort was critical but responded to more widely held desires. As New York planning official Roger Starr noted, "If it was true that New York's cooperative housing would have been impossible without Kazan's leadership, it must be equally true that leadership would have been useless without the spirit of the times in which he labored."[182] Kazan harnessed the sensibilities of a community already in search of a housing alternative. The left's idealistic fervor would lose some of its power in later decades as individuals' financial vulnerability seemed to decrease and in the pressures of the Cold War—but at this time, leftist ideologies had tremendous power in this community in which the leftist political affiliations predominated.[183] Collective life and the habitual attention of tenants to their everyday activities can never be easily inculcated in a large community, but the success of the Amalgamated's collectivism made sense to at least some of its tenants. For years, those tenants who could remain in the cooperatives did live the life they wanted, but one deeply rooted in their social backgrounds. Others might learn to appreciate cooperation, but it would have to happen on their own terms.

**Conclusion**

The Amalgamated Housing survives to the present day as a cooperative, though two large towers have replaced the first buildings that went up on the edge of Van Cortlandt Park. The community still has a newsletter. It maintains a nursery school, a day camp, discussion and photography groups.[184] Kazan would go on to build more projects around the city after the Amalgamated Houses and Dwellings, eventually founding the United Housing Foundation (UHF) umbrella organization in 1951. The UHF would back

[182] Roger Starr, "Cooperative Housing Today," in Amalgamated *Story of a Co-op Community: The First 75 Years* (New York: Herman Liebman Memorial Fund, 2002), 18.
[183] Julie Cooper, "Next Year in the Bronx," 16.
[184] Ed Yaker, "The Cooperative Continues: The Amalgamated, 1977 – 2002," in *75 Year Anniversary Journal*, 1 – 9, ACWU Papers.

a total of eight major developments, culminating with the 15,000 unit Co-op City in the South Bronx, the largest cooperative development in the country, in the mid-1960s.[185] Kazan began to withdraw from the organization during the construction of Co-op City but controversies about the structures and their management and would wrack the project for decades.[186] New York's Mitchell-Lama program, created in 1955, funded construction of affordable rental *and* cooperative housing. Subsidized mortgages and reduced real estate taxes have made the cooperative more affordable than regular market apartments so that many of these cooperatives have retained cooperative ownership beyond the period mandated by legislation.[187] Many wealthier New York residents and landowners desiring the exclusivity of a cooperative arrangement and its economic benefits have also adopted a variant on the co-op model for their own apartments based on economic factors. Today, this makes the official number of cooperatives in the city actually quite high.[188]

However, a lack of political will and interest mean that cooperative housing would never dominate the housing market as Kazan had hoped. Post-war prosperity and government support in the form of the GI bill helped many move out of the city to suburban homes. The emotional imperative attached to a single-family home of one's own continued to gain strength in the American consciousness. Cooperatives survived in the city, particularly in New York, but their survival was both limited and conditional. Suburban home-ownership, reinforced by government policies, would continue to

[185] Harold Ostroff, "United Housing Foundation" in "Story of a Co-Op Community: The First 75 Years. 8-10.
[186] Matthew Purdy, "Discord Rattles Co-op City Towers; Feuds and Finances Threaten Stability of Middle-Class Refuge," *New York Times*, July 31, 1995.
Ian Frazier, "Utopia, the Bronx," *The New Yorker*, June 26, 2006.
[187] Lynne Goodman, "The Mitchell-Lama Debate," *The Cooperator*, November, 2001.
[188] Lynne Goodman, "The Cooperative Century," *The Cooperator*, June 2000.

dominate as an American ideal for decades. Government provisions in the Post-WWII era provided a major boost to working and middle class homeownership. With the addition of policies subsidizing home purchases targeted towards ethnic and racial minorities, home-ownership would reach 69.2 percent in 2004.[189]

In December of 2008, the *New York Times* published an article on the housing policies of President George W. Bush that contributed to the sub-prime mortgage crisis unfolding earlier that year. In the accompanying photo, President Bush stands before a backdrop that reads "A Home of Your Own." The accompanying icon is a silhouette of a small house with a chimney. In some ways, the article remarks, the President's goals were admirable. He pushed to expand what he saw as a ticket to economic security and independence—homeownership, especially among minorities who have traditionally been underserved by the markets. Moreover, homeownership provides access to the extensive rewards for home ownership in American personal tax policy which subsidize the payments of owners but not renters. But the article suggests the White House's single-minded pursuit of this vision blinded officials, among other things, to the fact that ownership was not always the best option or decision for individuals in the existing market.[190]

Why so driven? Housing has had deeply political connotations for years, and home ownership likewise, gaining strength since the beginning of the anti-left backlash which would upend the popularity cooperative communities enjoyed during the New Deal.[191] There is also a reluctance to shift from a structure of tax and legal policy built to

[189] Ronald, *Ideology*, 149-150.
[190] Jo Becker, Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Stephen Labaton, "White House Philosophy Stoked Mortgage Bonfire," *New York Times*, December 21, 2008, A1, New York edition.
[191] Rodgers, *Atlantic*, 469.

favor homeownership.[192] However, as some have noted, with added urgency in the wake of the subprime crisis, home ownership may not be the best option for all parties.[193] Peter Marcuse has pointed out that homeownership, which comes with high risk and low flexibility, may not be an advisable choice for lower-income occupants, particularly those who may have inadequate information about buying a home. As Marcuse has noted, the ideological structures around homeownership may have helped to obscure some of the economic realities around the choices involved in buying a home for low-income households. "By challenging some of the fallacies contained in the conventional wisdom on homeownership," Marcuse notes, "economic analysis may help clear the way for a more fruitful discussion of the other issues involved."[194]

Abraham Kazan's vision may have owed a great deal to conventional wisdom on homeownership; however it also represented the beginnings of a departure. Kazan's housing developments did not always result as planned, but they offered a model which showed promise in its early years. Such a model raised other possibilities for American home life that groups might carve out in accordance with their own values. Kazan and his colleagues began to explore important alternate visions of housing and of home-ownership. During the early years, Kazan and his fellow-organizers successfully encouraged a portion of tenant-cooperators to invest in their ideal. Parts of this project failed, but as an effort to realize community in a different way, to create green space in

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[192] Ronald, *Ideology,* 151.
[193] Marcuse, "Home-ownership."
Ronald, *Ideology,* 152.
For an example of the public discourse on this issue, see video footage of Congressman Barney Frank's remarks on subprime mortgages at:
Art Jahnke, "What Caused Subprime Crisis?" BU Today Blog, entry posted February 13, 2008, http://www.bu.edu/today/2008/02/12/what-caused-subprime-crisis.
[194] Peter Marcuse, "Homeownership for Low Income Families: Financial Implications," *Land Economics* 48, no. 2 (1972): 143.

the city, a form of ownership shared with others, his earliest forays offered something important. Considering the increasing backlash against our dominant American ideal of housing over the last few decades, Kazan's projects represent one historic effort to find a flexibility and fluidity within American visions of community.

Ed Yaker, the former Amalgamated Housing board president remarks, "It's an interesting question I've wrestled with: what would the Kazans say if they saw [the Amalgamated] today?" The early organizers, he says, thought cooperatives would be the dominant model for the entire country by now. He concludes, in light of the big dreams of the Amalgamated's founders, "I think they'd be less disappointed with us than with the rest of the country."[195] In some ways, it is the failure of Kazan's vision to find a greater purchase which may offer the ultimate lesson of the project. In Kazan's developments, one group found the tools to articulate a community that spoke to its needs.

J.B. Jackson has observed that, "we have lost in the last generation is this assurance, and with it the capacity—or the temerity—to contrive utopias," but, "It is of no use trying to resurrect the vanished forms, beautiful though they may have been their philosophical justification has gone."[196] Jackson may be right, but it may also be that our ideals have simply changed and the fate of older utopian communities had been decided by those changes. The Amalgamated Housing instituted the tools that have allowed the current-day cooperative the chance to respond to the new needs of its changing residents. Today, the development has the status of a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community and as the Jewish dominance of the project has waned, the activities and language of the

[195] Yaker, interview.
[196] J.B. Jackson, "Jefferson, Thoreau, and After," in *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America,* ed. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 182.

development have also changed to reflect new and more diverse resident populations.[197] The original Amalgamated cooperators explored different possibilities for community and community investment. They offer the hope that while today, one American ideal may be faltering; other possibilities—not just suburban homeownership or cooperatives—remain to be explored that better fit the circumstances of individuals in American communities. Kazan's early projects beg for responsiveness to the reality of modern daily life at the same time that they inspire a renewed idealism and a practical model plurality of possibilities that can be realized in the American sense of "home."

[197] Jordan Moss, interview by author, New York, NY, January 5, 2009.

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