



ATLANTA'S TECHWOOD HOMES A NEW DEAL FOR PUBLIC HOUSING

By Francis Desiderio
Emory University



President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated Techwood Homes and University Homes, its black counterpart, on November 29, 1935. The \$3 million Public Works Administration complex was the federal government's first inner-city low-income housing project.

Atlanta Mayor James Key declared September 1, 1936, to be "Techwood Homes Day," signaling the dedication of the nation's first federally subsidized housing project. Families had started moving in during the previous month, realizing local real estate developer Charles F. Palmer's plan to revitalize the Techwood Flats neighborhood through public housing.

The *Atlanta Journal* called the housing a "farsighted investment" as the government will be repaid and "the community and national character will be immeasurably strengthened." The *Journal*, along with the other local papers, was an early supporter of Techwood Homes and printed a number of articles and *Sunday Magazine* stories reporting to Atlantans the progress of the development.

One 1936 *Sunday Magazine* story provided a tour of the \$2,875,000, 25-acre-city complex, showcasing all the modern conveniences and public amenities available to residents, including refrigerators, laundry rooms, community rooms, and playgrounds. "There isn't a millionaire's home in Atlanta that has as many modern improvements or handy appliances," the *Journal* boasted.

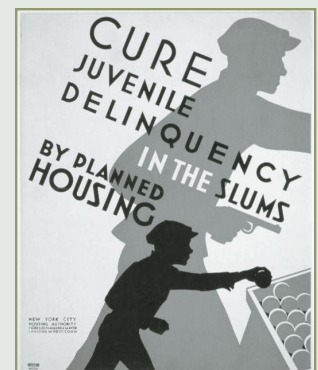
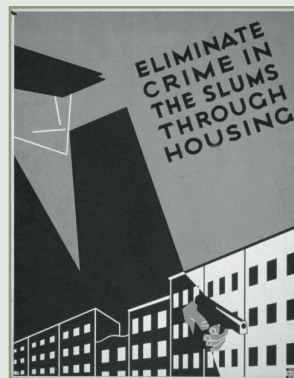
W.C. Steele of Edgewood Avenue, S.E., signed the first lease in June 1936, and

moved his family to Techwood later that summer. The Steeles were part of an initial group of 17 families who made the move into the new housing on August 16. Mrs. Ashton B. Womack told reporters that she was excited about the park across the street—in full view from her apartment's windows so she could keep an eye on her children at play—and that her old apartment "was nice, but nothing compared to this place." The day after "moving day," the *Journal* ran pictures of Mr. and Mrs. C. T. Hooks, and baby Janice, leaving their old house and moving into the new complex.

Rents ranged from \$23.47/month to \$46.45/month. PWA guidelines stipulated that rent should be no more than 20 percent of a resident's salary, and renters whose salaries were more than five times the rental rates were excluded. Many applicants for the housing were refused because the board determined they could afford standard
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"THOSE HOPELESS OLD HOUSES ARE GONE"

New Dealers saw federal public housing as the solution to poverty, infant mortality, and juvenile crime. "Here, at the request of the citizens of Atlanta, we have cleaned out nine square blocks of antiquated squalid dwellings," said President Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the 1935 dedication of the Techwood housing project. "Today those hopeless old houses are gone and in their place we see the bright cheerful buildings. Within a very short time, people who never before could get a decent roof over their heads will live here in reasonable comfort amid healthful, worthwhile surroundings; others will find similar homes in Atlanta's second slum clearance project, the University Project; and still others will find similar opportunity in nearly all of the older, overcrowded cities of the United States." □



New Deal Housing Posters, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

SKYSCRAPERS IN CYBERSPACE

Zoom into a neighborhood, select one of 120 buildings, study its architecture, compare it to neighboring structures, and see its past depicted in old photographs and postcards.

A digital archive from New York's Skyscraper Museum has pioneered an interactive visual index with links to more than

5,000 images and documents. The archives relies on a clickable digital map that generates 3-D images. Powered by a program called VIVA (for Visual Index to the Virtual Archive), the project began as a way to keep research collections open while the museum moved to Battery Park City in Lower Manhattan, its permanent home. VIVA, the website explains, "recognizes the importance of graphic representation in both the medium of the website and in the way that visitors, virtual or actual, come to understand and comprehend a city through its geography and landmarks." See www.skyscraper.org. □



Lower Broadway runs from Bowling Green north to Wall Street. The "Broadway Canyon" formed by the street's wall-to-wall skyscrapers includes buildings from the late nineteenth century through the second half of the twentieth century. The Skyscraper Museum.

SELLING TRANSPORTATION GM SPARKS CONTROVERSY AT THE SMITHSONIAN



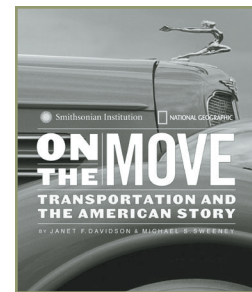
This 2-cylinder water-cooled Duryea motor wagon won the nation's first automobile race on Thanksgiving Day 1895. Racing from Chicago to Evanston, Illinois, and back, the wagon averaged only 7.5 mph.

On Nov. 22, 2003, when Smithsonian's Museum of American History opened the door to its largest-ever history exhibit, the marble echoed with cheers from General Motors and jeers from academe. At issue was GM's name on the 26,000 square-feet of ground-floor exhibit space, the General Motors Hall of Transportation. For GM the \$10 million gift to the \$22 million exhibit was good citizenship and rooted in company pride in products so fundamental to American progress. For critics, the gift was a quid-pro-quo for the commercialization of public space.

No one disputed that the tribute to transportation with multimedia nooks and theatrical presentations broke new ground for the history museum. Called "America on the Move," the exhibit proceeds more or less chronologically through 19 sections. Treasures include a 92-foot Southern Railway locomotive, a 22,000-pound Chicago Transit Authority "L" car, a 40-foot slab of Route 66, a

hot rod owned by Elvis Presley, and an apple-red 1903 Winton Touring Car that H. Nelson Jackson and Sewall K. Crocker drove from San Francisco to New York on the first cross-country automobile trip. "Mobility means freedom," said museum director Brent D. Glass, commenting on the importance of transportation. "Mobility is the defining experience in American life."

Mobility at the Smithsonian also meant gifts from General Motors and other corporate sponsors. In 2001 a memoranda from Smithsonian's Congress of Scholars denounced big-donor privatization. Scholars feared that the Smithsonian would become "much like a shopping mall, with virtually every inch devoted to the promotion of a corporation or its products." Museum director Spencer Crew disagreed. "One has to work with the corporate world of donors," said Crew to a *New York Times* reporter. "We're all pretty familiar with this. It is happening everywhere."



The official companion book, *On the Move: Transportation and the American Story* (ISBN 0-7922-5140-

7, \$35), is available from National Geographic Books. Written by curator Janet Davidson and journalism professor Michael Sweeney, the 320-page book brims with informative sidebars, maps, artwork, and historical photographs. □

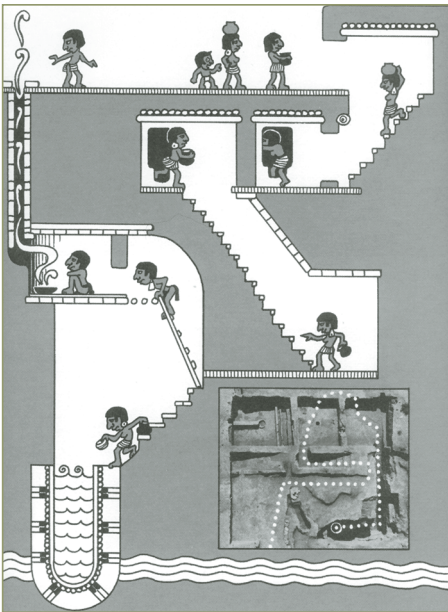
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housing. Still, the demand for public housing in Atlanta far exceeded the supply. Within a year, a second public housing project, University Homes—the result of collaboration between Palmer and Atlanta University President John Hope—would open and provide black Atlantans with affordable housing.

A year after Techwood Homes opened, *Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine* reporter Medora Field Perkerson visited with some of the women of the housing complex who had proclaimed, "We are weary of raised eyebrows." Mrs. H. C. Moore said, "Lots of people seem to consider us slum dwellers. It is true that Techwood was a government slum clearance project, but certainly it is not

a slum section now, nor did the people who live here come from the slums." Perkerson reported how the women, and their families, were living "normal" working-class lives of P.T.A. meetings, church attendance, recreational activities, and community service. Mrs. J. C. Quarles said, "Some people seem to find it impossible to separate low-cost housing from being on relief." □

NEWS AND NOTES

- Amsterdam's Cupola Hall will be the spectacular site of the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT) annual meeting on October 7–10. Hosted by the Dutch Foundation for the History of Technology, the conference will sponsor historical tours of one of the world's oldest canal systems. The SHOT web page provides details at <http://www.histech.nl/Shot2004/index.htm>.
- The International Conference on Heritage of Technology will meet in Gdansk, Poland, May 4–7, 2005. September 30 is the deadline for paper abstracts. For a tentative program see <http://hotgo4.mech.pg.gda.pl/>.
- Anthropologist Vernon L. Scarborough explores the political and economic importance of water in ancient civilizations in *The Flow of Power: Ancient Water Systems and Landscapes* (ISBN 1-930618-32-8), an impressive new book from the School of American Research in Sante Fe, New Mexico. Case studies include engineering marvels in Greece, Sri Lanka, the Indus Valley, Mexico, the Maya lowlands, and the American southwest.



A 10th century walk-in well at Casa Grande, Arizona. (Northland Publishing)

- Public Art Online (<http://www.publicartonline.org.uk/index.html>) publishes case studies of innovative attempts to beautify and interpret sewer treatment plants and other municipal projects. Recent topics include water treatment in San Diego and zoning reform in Birmingham, England.
- The St. Louis Virtual City Project (<http://www.umsl.edu/~virtualstl/phase2/>) returns to the 1850s' gas-lit city where the U.S. Circuit Court famously upheld the Missouri Compromise and Dred Scott heroically fought for his freedom in the era's most volatile trial.



- The National Park Service provides a series of technical guides for managing and restoring historic buildings. Ranging from the practical to the philosophical, topics include federal tax credits for restoration, the problem of moisture in old houses, the use of modern materials in historic reconstruction, and the way visitors perceive the passage of time when visiting a historic site. For a list of titles see the NPS technical services web site at <http://www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/care/goodguides.htm>.

- Understanding how parks work with sewers and roads as municipal engineering is the learning objective of a sophisticated web presentation on the history of Boston's Back Bay Fens. Called *Evolutionary Infrastructure* (<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/backbay/>) the project was developed by Kathy Poole and John Unsworth of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at the University of Virginia.
- The U.S. Department of the Interior has nominated four prehistoric reservoirs in Colorado's Mesa Verde for the American Society of Civil Engineering's History and Heritage

Award. The nomination credits Ken Wright's investigation, published as *Water for the Anasazi* in *Essays in Public Works History*, 22 (2003).

- Jeffrey Stine documents the era of James Watt, Anne Gorsuch, and costly retreat for environmental protection in *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism and its Legacies*, edited by W. Elliot Brownlee and Hugh Davis Graham (University of Kansas, 2003), pp. 233–256.



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ABOUT THE SOCIETY

Watch your mail for the **2004–2005 PWHS Ballot**. As well as the President-elect position, three trustee positions must be filled. Ballots must be returned to the PWHS national office by July 20, 2004. Results will be announced at the Annual PWHS Luncheon on Monday, September 13 in Atlanta, Georgia.

This year's **PWHS Congress program** features the session, "Gridlock Forever: Urban Freeways vs. the Interstate Highway System." Scheduled for September 12 from 2:00 p.m. to 3:50 p.m., Howard Rosen (University of Wisconsin-Madison), will discuss how traffic congestion is an issue for every major metropolitan area. Yet, almost no one advocates that we build more new freeways. As the Urban Freeway Revolts of the 1960s and 1970s pointed out, the resulting quality of life effects on neighborhood continuity, air, storm water and noise pollution are a bigger price than a lot of us want to pay. Don't

miss this opportunity to examine the lessons learned from the freeway revolts and the transportation alternatives realistically available today.

The **chapter historian's meeting** will focus on the efforts of six chapters celebrating their 50th anniversary. Attendees will have opportunity to discuss each chapter's innovative ways of recognizing this milestone. PWHS also will sponsor a booth on the exhibit floor which will act as a showcase of chapter efforts to preserve their history.

Be sure to purchase your ticket for the **PWHS luncheon** on Monday, September 13 and learn why infrastructure is much more than a network of beams, pipes and roadways. Keynote speaker Gregory Dreicer is curator of the traveling exhibit "Me, Myself and Infrastructure: Private Lives and Public Works in America," a critically-acclaimed exhibit that

explores the infrastructure of a thirsty, car-crazy nation. Dreicer will discuss the development of the display and how it explores and challenges the public view of infrastructure. Also present at the luncheon will be the recipient of the 2004 Abel Wolman Award.

The Annual PWHS **Board of Trustees Meeting** is scheduled for Monday, September 13 from 1:30–4:30 p.m. in the Georgia World Convention Center. Check your Congress preview for details.

The latest addition (number 23) to the PWHS essay series is **Cities Take Flight** by Janet R. Daly Bednarek. This book builds on Bednarek's *America's Airports*, a standard reference in scholarship on urban and technological history. *Cities Take Flight* will be mailed to Society members as a benefit of membership in July and will be available for sale through the APWA Bookstore at Congress or on the APWA web site.

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