

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Willert Park Courts **DRAFT**

other names/site number Alfred D. Price Housing; Alfred D.Price Courts

## 2. Location

street & number Willert Park Court [ ] not for publication

city or town Buffalo [ ] vicinity

state New York code NY county Erie code 029 zip code 14204

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [X] nomination [ ] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [X] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [ ] nationally [ ] statewide [X] locally. ([ ] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([ ] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- [ ] entered in the National Register  
[ ] see continuation sheet
- [ ] determined eligible for the National Register  
[ ] see continuation sheet
- [ ] determined not eligible for the National Register

[ ] removed from the National Register

[ ] other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

date of action

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**

(check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>10</u>	<u>          </u>	buildings
<u>1</u>	<u>          </u>	sites
<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	structures
<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	objects
<u>11</u>	<u>          </u>	<b>TOTAL</b>

**Name of related multiple property listing**

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/public housing

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/public housing

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone

walls brick

roof asphalt

other cast concrete relief sculpture

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location
- C** a birthplace or grave
- D** a cemetery
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by historic American Building Survey  
# \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record  
# \_\_\_\_\_

**Areas of Significance:**

(Enter categories from instructions)

- Architecture
- Ethnic Heritage
- Art
- Community Planning & Development

**Period of Significance:**

1938-1939

**Significant Dates:**

1938

**Significant Person:**

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation:**

N/A

**Architect/Builder:**

Fred. C Backus, arch; Wm E. Harries, land, arch.; Fleisher Engineering & Construction; Robert Cronbach and Herbert Ambellan, art

**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreeage of Property** 3.5 acres

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 18                                          
Zone Easting Northing

3 18                                          
Zone Easting Northing

2 18                                        

4 18                                        

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Francis R. Kowsky and Martin Wachadlo [Contact- Daniel McEneny, NYSHPO]

organization \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

street & number 62 Niagara Falls Blvd telephone 716-836-6069

city or town Buffalo state NY zip code 14214

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

- A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location
- A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Fig. 1. Historic aerial view of property. (Courtesy of T. Robinson).

**Additional items**

(Check with SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner** (Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO)

name Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority

street & number 300 Perry St. telephone 716-855-6711

city or town Buffalo state NY zip code 14204

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

**Estimated Burden Statement:** public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20503

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Willert Park Courts

Name of Property

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Narrative Description of Property

**Overview-**

The Willert Park Court housing project is located at the corner of West Peckham and Spring Streets on the East Side of the City of Buffalo, New York, on 3.5 acres of ground. It was built in 1939 for the United States Housing Authority and the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority and was designed by the Buffalo architect Frederick C. Backus. The site planner and landscape architect was William E. Harries. Fleisher Engineering & Construction Company of Buffalo served as the general contractor for the project. The Willert Park Court is an apartment complex of ten, two-and-three-story, free-standing brick buildings and public park. The buildings parallel one another more or less and are oriented toward the property rather than toward the surrounding city streets. The attached plan shows the distribution of the various buildings. When finished in 1939, the complex had 172 units.

**The Exteriors-**

The complex of ten buildings contains two two-story (A & I), one three story (J), and seven two-and-three-story (B, C, D, E, F, G & H) units; all have brick exteriors, concrete foundations and flat roofs. The buildings are oriented roughly north / south on the trapezoidal site which is wider at the north end; this allows for an additional two and three story building (G). The principal court is in the center of the site and is accessible to vehicles; the only entrance is from Spring Street, beneath a concrete canopy that extends between buildings D and E. All seven buildings directly on the central paved court are three stories high; the six on the north and south become two stories as they extend away from the paved court, and are separated from each other and the three two-story buildings by grassed courts. Building J, at the east end of the court, is the only full three-story building; it contains the central heating plant in the basement and offices on the first floor. The buildings are built of fireproof construction except for exposed steel joists in the roofs, with hollow tile exterior walls faced with common brick in several shades of red and brown, ranging from light to almost black. The brick is laid in American bond, with a row of headers every sixth course. There are four bands of brick of noticeably lighter shading, slightly recessed at the window level of the first story of the buildings, with four courses for the lower band and three courses for the others. These extend around most, but not all, of the perimeter of the buildings and serve to accentuate the horizontal and unify the complex. The windows are set directly in the walls with neither sills, lintels or jambs; the original doors and windows have been replaced. Small flat roofs project over the entrances. A large semicircular stepped terrace was built in front of the administration building and extensive metal railings throughout the complex were installed c. 1980.

All the buildings have sculpture as an integrated part of the design, utilized throughout the complex:

The Willert's [sic] Park sculpture consists of four seven-foot figures in high relief, set into walls facing the courtyard, and eighty panels, thirty inches wide, flanking the entrance doors of the individual apartments; also two panels, five by four feet, on the administration building. They are cast in a red-brown concrete.<sup>[1]</sup>

The four seven-foot figures represent flour milling, family, learning and children. Those flanking the entrance doors on the administration building show a black woman and child fleeing slavery and a black man returning as a Union soldier. The small panels flanking the entrance include depictions of

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**Willert Park Courts**  
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**County and State**

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...Education by a reading lamp, a book and a hand with a pencil poised over paper. Music is symbolized by a trumpet and a bass fiddle; Home Life, by a bowl of fruit and a sewing machine; Industry, by a pneumatic drill and a steel girder being hoisted...[\[2\]](#)

**The Interiors-**

The interiors have metal lath and plaster partitions and ceilings, and are very simply treated. Wood moldings are plain and minimal. The duplex units in the two-story sections are U-shaped. On the first floor units the doorway opens directly into the living room; kitchen, bathroom and a bedroom extend across the rear, linked by a hall, with a second bedroom facing the front. The second floor units feature a stairway rising from the entrance door up to the hall; otherwise the layout is same. The apartments in the three-story sections are arranged around hollow tile stair towers, the interiors are similar to those in the duplex units.

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Willert Park Courts

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**Statement of Significance:**

The Willert Park Courts public housing Project (aka the A. D. Price Housing), located between Mortimer, Spring, and West Peckham Streets on the East Side of Buffalo, New York, and constructed in 1939-1940, is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C. The areas of significance that would apply are architecture, art, community planning and development, ethnic heritage, and landscape architecture. Some tenants still live in the buildings, which are owned by the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA). However, the BMHA has announced plans to demolish the structures. They are nominated for state level of significance because in 1940 they were singled out by the Museum of Modern Art in New York as a significant example of modern architecture in the Northeast Region of the United States.

**Architecture.** the design and layout of the ten two-and-three-story brick multiple dwellings at the Willert Park Courts reflect the Modern Movement style of architecture that was most closely identified with the work of Le Corbusier in France and the Bauhaus in Germany. The functional style, flat-roofed blocks laid out in a more or less parallel configuration within a park-like setting were designed by Buffalo architect Frederick C. Backus. The plan generally followed the example of German public housing projects. Social historian Alexander von Hoffman has called this the *Zeilenbau* style of public housing. Buffalo's Willert Park Courts housing project preserves to a remarkable degree the exterior appearance of the original complex of buildings and grounds.

**Art.** The buildings are ornamented with a series of cast relief sculptures on the theme of labor and family life. Sculptors Robert Cronbach and Herbert Ambellan crafted them. Their work, which is in excellent condition, is representative of the modernist-realist style often associated with Works Progress Administration projects of the period. Cronbach was a native of St. Louis who studied sculpture at the St. Louis School of Fine Arts and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. After working as an assistant to well-known modernist sculptor Paul Manship, he was employed by the WPA. Ambellan, a native of Buffalo, went to New York to study sculpture in 1930. He later founded the United Sculptors of America and served as president of the Sculptors Guild of America. He exhibited works at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. In 1956, he moved permanently to France where he continued to work as an artist.

**Community Planning and Development.** Buffalo architect Frederick C. Backus for the Buffalo Housing Authority designed the Willert Park Courts housing project in 1938. The Authority, which was established in 1934, received funding for the project from the United States Housing Authority, a federal agency created by the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937. An important aspect of Roosevelt's New Deal program, the USHA established the practice of clearing urban slums for modern public housing. The USHA built 100,000 units in 140 cities before 1942 when it was merged with another government agency. The Buffalo project, which included slum clearance, was one of the first to be funded by the USHA and one of the first planned for African American residents.

**Ethnic Heritage.** The Willert Park Courts were planned specifically for African American residents. At the time, it was referred to in the press as a "Negro Housing Project." The city was segregated racially and ethnically, and other public housing projects would shelter Polish, Irish, and Italian immigrant populations. The

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Urban League promoted the Willert Park Courts site, formally regarded as a slum, because it was in the part of town where most of the city's African Americans lived.

**Period of Significance.** The period of significance is from the time of construction (1938-1939) to the time when the apartments were ready for occupancy (late 1939). The complex of ten buildings represents the first phase of the construction of low rent public housing at Willert Park Courts. In 1942, 300 additional units were built adjacent to the original site. However, all of these later buildings have been demolished.

**NARRATIVE**

During the late nineteenth century, American cities became vastly over crowded with the native and immigrant poor. Charles Loring Brace, an early advocate for improved housing for the poor, estimated that in the Lower East Side of Manhattan there was more overcrowding than had ever existed in a Western country. He and others called for reform of the wretched conditions of tenement house living that most of the people who resided in the city had to endure. "Tenement Sunday," February 23, 1879, mobilized many religious and civic leaders to fight for better urban housing for the working poor. Later that year, the *Plumber and Sanitary Engineer* magazine sponsored a competition for a "model tenement." This call to the architectural profession can be seen as the serious beginning of tenement house reform in the United States. The journal received entries from architects from all over the country.

Although he had not participated in the model tenement competition, Calvert Vaux, co-designer of Central Park and a prominent New York City architect, was also in the forefront of the model tenement movement. Vaux proposed inexpensive plans for multiple dwellings in which each room would have a window, something that was lacking in most of the plans that architects had submitted to the *Sanitary Engineer*. In 1880, the Improved Dwellings Association erected a large apartment to Vaux's design on First Avenue in New York. It was the first important example of a so-called model tenement in the city. Henceforth, the model tenement movement, which depended entirely on private capital, ebbed and waned until the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Progressive Era of the early twentieth century saw further improvements in laws governing tenement house construction. The tenement law of 1901 raised standards of accommodation in New York and was imitated elsewhere. World War I aggravated the need for worker housing as defense industries geared up to produce weaponry for U.S. and allied troops. Most of the reform efforts during this period were focused on improving building codes and sanitary conditions. Actual construction was still funded by private investment.

Following World War I, the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) championed, the issue of working class housing. Chief among its members were writers Lewis Mumford and Catherine Bauer, and architects Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. These people were keenly aware of developments that had given rise to public housing—housing estates—in England and in Europe, especially in Germany. The RPAA, with Catherine Bauer as its chief spokesperson, would be influential in bringing European ideas to bear on American low-income housing design. Also important among the influences were the writings of British social theorist Ebenezer Howard. Howard was identified with the Garden City movement in England.

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During the late nineteenth century, Howard established spacious new towns that he thought were an antidote to the crowded unsanitary conditions of older city like London, Birmingham, and Manchester. The new garden cities featured low-rise dwelling blocks set in green surroundings. Each unit had its full share of light and air, peace and quiet. Likewise, Vienna in the 1920s was a laboratory of new ideas concerning public housing. By the end of the decade, ten percent of the population of Vienna lived in housing estates. These projects included within their precincts such amenities as libraries, health facilities, libraries, and schools. Low rise multiple dwellings in these communities were arranged in parallel rows with lots of space around them. Moreover, the style of these buildings was sleekly modern, after the fashion of the works of French architect Le Corbusier and the International Style his work had inspired. Le Corbusier's thinking about the modern city as a place of high-rise buildings in park like settings linked by a system of major and minor roadways—the so-called Radiant City—also was a potent influence on the thinking of European reformers. Likewise, the example of the Bauhaus, the famous school of modern art and design in Dessau, Germany, was another cradle of European Modernism. It played a significant role in the evolution of the style and materials used in the new housing. When the director of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, moved to America in 1938, the cause of the so-called International Style would be greatly advanced here in all areas of architecture.

During the 1920s, Catherine Bauer became the major advocate in America for the adoption of European modernist ideas about mass housing. She traveled extensively throughout England, France, Germany, Austria, and elsewhere gathering first hand information about the new public housing estates there. The turning point for the mass housing reform movement in the United States was the housing section of the "Modern Architecture International" exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932. Bauer, together with Stein, Wright, Mumford, helped organize this polemical presentation. It especially highlighted housing estates in Germany and Holland. The exhibition opened the eyes of both designers and social reformers to developments in urban low-income housing that had taken place in Europe since the war. The future was on display there for the American public housing movement. Yet, unlike Europe, other than the new town of Radford, New Jersey, which featured in the exhibition, America had built no significant public housing projects. Local and state governments were unable and unwilling to undertake the serious effort required to construct adequate housing for the vast number of the nation's poor citizens. The federal government had also shied away from taking on the problem. In 1931, Edith Elmer Wood, another forceful proponent for housing reform, pleaded for a "major statesman to make housing on the grand scale the chief plank of his platform" (Wood, *Recent Trends*, 246).

The Great Depression of the 1930s revived the issue of affordable urban housing for working class families in America. The 1930s that saw the greatest development here yet in the area of true public housing, which usually went hand in hand with slum clearance. At this time, the federal government became involved in building and maintaining dwellings for America's citizens. "Federal involvement in housing is primarily a legacy of the New Deal era in American politics," states Eugene Meehan, a prominent historian of the public housing movement. "It ranges," says Meehan, "from such indirect subsidies to private housing as tax relief for homeowners to outright public ownership and management of rental property . . . public housing is 'conventional' if an agency of government purchases and clears the site, contracts for design and construction of the housing, and operates the completed structures. By the end of 1969, more than 700,000 dwelling units of public housing had been produced in this way"(Meehan, 7).

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One of the leading political advocates for public housing was Robert Ferdinand Wagner (1877–1953) a Democratic Senator from New York from 1927 to 1949. In effect, Wagner was the person Edith Wood had hoped would emerge on the American political scene. Born in Germany, Wagner had grown up in the slums of New York. As a politician, he would heed Wood's call and actively promote government involvement in the welfare of its citizens, a principle long established Europe. In 1933, Wagner included housing as part of the public works legislation he proposed. Largely through Wagner's efforts, the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works (PWA) was authorized to fund projects "under public regulation or control of low-cost housing and slum clearance." The PWA's mandate would be accomplished mainly through grants to state or local agencies. To receive these funds, the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority was established on April 3, 1934, pursuant to a resolution of the Common Council of the City of Buffalo. After receiving approval from the state legislature, Buffalo Mayor Zimmerman appointed the authority's first board of commissioners on October 19, 1934. True public housing had been born in the nation in general and in Buffalo in particular.

The PWA, however, met with limited success. Between 1933 and 1935, it funded (as so-called limited-dividend projects) a relatively small number of successful projects. Although the PWA had permitted individual architects to choose the style the project would take (some employed traditional modes), its most important legacy was that of European modern design and planning. Several of its more important undertakings emulated architectural and planning ideals derived from the British Garden City movement and from European Modernist housing estates. In fact, German architects Oskar Stronorov and Alfred Kastner designed the first PWA project to be completed, the MacKley Houses in Philadelphia (1934-1935). Their International Style buildings were erected with contemporary industrial materials, and the low-rise units were grouped in such a way as to enclose the site from the outside urban environment. The complex, which would serve as a model for later undertakings all across the United States, contained 300 apartments together with a swimming pool, auditorium, nursery, laundry facilities, and meeting rooms. Another project (this one built directly by the PWA) of this type was the Harlem River Houses in New York City (1936). These multiple apartment blocks for African American residents also adapted the garden apartment model that was popular in the 1920s European public housing. The structures were low-rise and placed on the edge of the property and focused on landscaped interior space. The plan provided light, ventilation, and views. "The complex worked," says historian Gail Radford, "as an integrated and independent design, yet it also related to the larger neighborhood. In this way, the development combined the advantages of superb block planning. . . with conventional urban building patterns" (Radford, 165). By the fall of 1937, the PWA had terminated its involvement with public housing projects and dissolved its Housing Division, largely because of problems over its slum clearance practices.

The next phase in the struggle for public housing began in 1935 when Senator Wagner introduced another reform-mined bill into Congress. "The object of public housing," he said in a speech at the time, "is not to invade the field of home building for the middle class or the well-to-do. . . . Nor is it even to exclude private enterprise from participation in a low-cost housing program. It is merely to supplement what private industry will do, by subsidies which make up the difference between what the poor will can afford to pay and what is necessary to assure decent quarters" (McDonnell, 139). Wagner encountered strong opposition from the United States Chamber of Commerce, other business groups, and many in the real estate business who complained that "it is contrary to the genius of the American people and the ideals they have established that government become landlord to its citizens." However, when President Roosevelt put his support behind

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Wagner's efforts, the bill passed Congress by a wide margin in November 1937. The Wagner-Steagall Housing Bill (Wagner was joined in sponsoring the legislation by Senator Henry Steagall of Alabama) became the United States Housing Act of 1937. It committed the federal government to providing decent, low-rent dwelling space to America's poor. In the words of architectural historian Elizabeth Milnarik, those who sponsored this "federally funded American dream" hoped that public housing would become "an engine for social improvement" (Milnarik). The new law, which established a partnership between the national government and local communities throughout the country, became the basis for the building of such projects as the Willert Park Courts in Buffalo. The new housing program was under the supervision of the newly created United States Housing Authority. Its first administrator, Nathan Straus, declared: "If the public housing program is put first, low income families that now live in the slums will be immediately benefited, the road will be cleared for the acquisition of slum properties at a fair price, and . . . the chief causes of slum and blight, the lack of decent housing at low rentals, will be remedied" (Straus, 92).

In June 1938, the Buffalo Municipal Housing Committee announced that it had determined the site of a new public housing project designed for African American families. It was adjacent to Willert Park, a small municipal playground established in 1909 (and named for the local council member who championed its creation) on the East Side of Buffalo ("Glad to Get Playgrounds"). Thirty years later, this quarter of town was home to a significant concentration of Buffalo's underserved African American community. Indeed, the site had been strongly favored by the local chapter of the Urban League. The League, the local chapter of which had been founded in 1927 to address racial discrimination and to promote decent living conditions for an ever increasing African American population in the city, memorialized for the location because it believed that a "crowded and ramshackle" slum would be replaced by a "modern, low-cost development in the heart of Buffalo's negro Section" ("Sample of Buffalo Slums").

Nonetheless, at the time many were critical of segregation by race or ethnicity in public housing. As historian Mark Goldman points out, there was "strenuous opposition from both black and Jewish residents of the area—who claimed there were sufficient vacancies in other projects." But the desire of city officials "to cordon off blacks within existing boundaries of the black community and to preserve the racial purity of existing low income housing," says Goldman, led them to support the Urban League position and to promote the project rather than press for integrating public housing. In this respect, public housing policy came to mirror the private real estate market. "By steering blacks into the old East Side," observes Goldman, and directing "whites away from it, the city's real estate industry aided and abetted the ghettoization of Buffalo's blacks." (Goldman, *High Hopes*, 286). Neil Kraus, the scholar of racial politics in Buffalo during this period, affirmed Goldman's assessment. He also points out that at the time of the creation of Willert Park Courts, the surrounding neighborhood was racially mixed. "While the larger neighborhood around the development of Willert Park was where the great majority of the city's African Americans lived in the 1930s," says Kraus, "it was by no means an exclusively black neighborhood. By locating an all black development there and then by adding on to that development a few years later with more housing designated exclusively for African Americans, the city had, in effect, adopted a policy that the east side would be Buffalo's black neighborhood" Echoing Goldman, Kraus acknowledges that "the segregation . . . of the black community became the result not only of private discrimination, but also of public policy." (Kraus, 80).

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The most complete picture of the controversy over racial segregation in public housing at the time comes from William L. Evans, a civil rights activist and the first executive secretary of the Buffalo Urban League.<sup>1</sup> In 1942, Evans, who had moved to Buffalo from his native Kentucky, wrote a long article on the subject. Concerning Willert Park courts in particular, Evans explained:

In June 1937, the BMHA announced its \$5,000,000 slum clearance program. Three projects—one in the Negro East Side area (Willert Park Courts), one in the Italian West Side area (Lake View), one in the Irish-Catholic area (Commodore Perry project) of the South side of the First Ward. The two latter sites were selected and construction started with opposition, headed by a Roman Catholic priest, to the Commodore Perry project. However, construction proceeded without serious interruption.

In the Negro area the situation was different. Three different sites were selected and abandoned for excessive land cost. Negro citizens, with substantial support from civic-minded individuals and groups, urged an equal number of units for their area as provided in the other two, namely Lake View (800 units) and Commodore Perry (900 units). The BMHA then announced that the project for negroes would be 300 units. Protesting this as unfair based upon housing needs, the BMHA's chairman wrote the Urban League—"The housing Authority original had in mind a project of about 100 families. You will appreciate that we must take into consideration the need somewhat along the lines of percentage basis. We did increase the project to 172 units. The Authority recognizes that this does not solve the problem, yet we have gone greatly beyond the number of units that would have been built had we adhered strictly to a percentage rule."

. . .

Further, white families applied for residence in the Jim-Crow project and Negroes applied in the two others. However, the segregation policy was rigidly held to in all instances. When asked why the BMHA had insisted upon its Jim Crow policy, it was stated that two well know Negroes had asked for 'a project of our own.' This stands against thousands of petitioners against segregation, signed d by 55 Negro societies and organizations with a combined membership of not less than 5000 persons. (Evans, 107)

During the early decades of the century, the city had seen a steady increase in its black population. "The black community's growth and development and decline and change," wrote Alfred D. Price, son of the Willert Park Courts revered first manager and member of the planning faculty at the University at Buffalo, "track closely the city's economic pattern. Following the nineteenth century 'Emancipation' and Reconstruction, Buffalo, like other northern cities, came to represent a desirable destination for black migration from the rural south, well into the middle of the twentieth century." (Price, 134) The housing project where the young Price lived would cover 3.5 acres and include a remodeled Willert Park. Two additional acres were purchased at the time, bringing the original parcel to 5.43 acres. This remaining land, which was located to the south of the site being nominated, was cleared and developed in 1942 as an extension of the nominated property. (These

<sup>1</sup> For Evans' biography, see the University of Kentucky's *Notable Kentucky African Americans Database*, [www.uky.edu](http://www.uky.edu)

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buildings, designed by Frederick Backus, Crane & Love, have been demolished. For a discussion of the racial politics surrounding the decision to build additional units at Willert Park rather than in an entirely different neighborhood, see Kraus, 71ff.) The original section was estimated initially to cost \$1,500,000, ninety percent of which would come from the United States Housing Authority. The city would contribute the other ten percent.<sup>2</sup>

In late July 1938, Nathan Straus, the man President Roosevelt had named to head the USHA, came to Buffalo to announce that the Willert Park Courts project had been approved. According to press accounts, Straus took the occasion to deliver an “eloquent appeal” to business, labor, and government officials to mount a “mass attack” on urban slums and substandard housing. “I believe your Buffalo housing program has been wisely conceived and that you are started on a sound basis with an excellent housing authority,” he said. Straus also praised the American Federation of Labor for its pledge not to strike the housing program “over jurisdictional disputes and demands for an increase in the prevailing wage at the time [USHA] projects are started.” Straus also took the occasion to reassure skeptical business people that the federal government’s public housing agenda was, in fact, pro-private sector. Speaking before area Chamber of Commerce, Straus declared that “government housing would never compete with private industry but would serve as a stimulus to a private construction boom.” In support of his claim, he pointed to the experience of European countries, “on which the USHA program is modeled.” In any event, the private building industry, Straus said, “has been given a chance to clean up the slums and provide decent housing for low-income families for 50 years, and the job hasn’t been done.” This, he said, was not the fault of the private sector but “of the economic system whereby the distribution of national income makes it impossible for the industry to house these people and make a profit.” Three-quarters of the people in America, Straus said, could not afford a monthly rent of more than \$30, whereas 90 per cent of the housing built by the private sector was for rentals much higher than that amount. “This is the unanswerable argument for public housing,” Straus told his audience. The rentals at Willert Park would be geared to people with annual incomes between \$600 and \$1200 per year, and the rents would be lower than in projects built by the earlier PWA.

Finally, Straus strongly criticized the “mental attitude” that disposed people to judge public housing “by its mistakes and failures and private building by its successes.” Public housing, he said, was designed to last for sixty years and to have minimal maintenance costs, whereas privately built low income housing had often been “jerry-built” and, therefore, more expensive in the long run (“Buffalo is Assured of Favorable Study”).

Local architect Frederick Backus developed the actual design for the Willert Park homes, a man who was especially known for his designs upper income houses. For the Willert Park Courts project, Backus generally followed well-established ideas derived from European Modernist housing estates. The complex would consist of ten two-and-three-story freestanding, flat roofed brick apartment blocks in the International Style. These were arranged more or less parallel with each other on the wedge-shaped parcel. Buildings would cover only thirty per cent of the 3.5-acre site; there would, therefore, be ample space between each apartment block for air and light to circulate. Local landscape architect William E. Harries developed the site plan and the lay out of the grounds. Following Harries’ design, the project’s open space would be traversed by straight concrete walks, planted in rectangular lawns, and shaded by numerous trees, both inside the complex and along

<sup>2</sup> The cost was eventually reduced to \$913,000 from USHA and \$92,000 from the city. East family unit was projected to cost \$3309.

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the bordering city streets. Generally, the grounds were seen as a shared community asset available to all residents for recreation and play space. More strenuous athletics could take place across West Peckham Street in tree-bordered Willert Park. There would also be laundry yards. All told, Willert Park Courts would hold 172 living units and a total of 596 rooms. Rentals--units ranged from \$18.50 per month for three rooms to \$22.50 for five rooms--would be entirely reserved for African American families who would be chosen through a rigorous interviewing procedure. By September 1941, eleven hundred African American applicants had applied for the project's 172 units (Evans, 107).

Contracts for the construction of Willert Park Courts were let in December 1938. The Fleisher Engineering & Construction Company of Buffalo submitted the winning main bid. The project, which was one of the first five low-rent housing projects built by USHA, was completed by September 1939, when the USHA turned over the keys to Willert Park Courts to the Buffalo Municipal Authority. The buildings were open for occupancy on July 4, 1939. The first building manager was Alfred D. Price (1896-1968), whose name is sometimes attached to the complex. People who, said Price, were proud to call Willert Park Courts home soon occupied all units.<sup>3</sup> Price's and residents' pride of place surely received a boost when the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, visited the site in the spring of 1942.

"A distinctive feature that makes Buffalo's Willert Park housing project one of the most unusual in the United States," reported Buffalo's *Courier-Express* newspaper at the time of the project's completion, "is the art work embellishing the outer walls of the main courtyard, sculpted panels flanking the 40 entrances to apartments and the decorative entrance to the Administration Building." The elaborate program of low relief sculpture depicts scenes of labor, recreation, rest, and contemplation, all of which articulate the overarching theme of healthy, happy family life. "Residents of Willert Park Courts are proud of the sculpture works," said Alfred D. Price, and "they point it out to visitors as a distinctive and exclusive addition to their home." Among those visitors were many out-of-town architects and art lovers ("Art, Sculpture Work Feature of Housing Job").

The newly installed sculpture of Willert Park Courts quickly attracted national attention. In December 1939, as the buildings were nearly ready for occupancy, Ruth Green Harris, art critic for the *New York Times*, wrote a glowing review of the reliefs, which had been created by two young artists, Robert Cronbach of New York and Harold Ambellan, who originally hailed from Buffalo but at the time lived in New York. The reliefs were paid for under the Federal Art Project. Harris, who was familiar with the careers of both young artists—their work had been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art—said that they were well suited to the task because they had done other public sculpture prior to this. "Both men have proved their sensitiveness to architectural problems," she asserted. The fact that the sculptors worked with inexpensive materials and simplified designs—the artists emphasized large curves, sharp angles, and deep shadows in a modernist-realist style that was popular in its day—to keep costs low. But economy of means and materials did not prevent them from creating, said Harris, art that was "satisfyingly beautiful." Cast in concrete that was tinted a reddish-brown color, the reliefs varied in size according to their location within the complex. Four of them are seven feet high facing the main courtyard; two panels flanking the entrance to the administration building are five by

<sup>3</sup> During World War II, additional slum clearance took place on the remaining two acres of ground that extended to William Street and which had also been purchased in 1938. Three hundred new units were constructed here. However, all of these later buildings have been demolished.

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four feet; and the remaining reliefs at apartment entrances are thirty inches wide. These smaller panels, observed Harris, “accent each doorway with a kind of welcome.” Like the men who would eventually reside at Willert Park Courts, the artists were “good workmen,” said Harris, and she described their working method as follows:

The artists consulted with the architect in planning, placement, size, and type of work done. Models were prepared and approved by the architect and the local housing administration. . . . The sculptors worked in full size. Moulds were taken from the wet clay [models] and turned directly over to the cast-stone contractor. Casts were made from these molds and set into the walls in the regular course of construction. This process is not only cheap but also esthetically honest.

In addition to the sculptors, Harris also praised the architect, Frederick Backus. “He had the foresight,” she said, “to build for human tenants and the imagination to meet their human desires. To help achieve that end the architect salted his design with sculpture.” Thus, the reliefs were not an afterthought to the design, a mere embellishment, but an integral part of the architect’s plans. The reliefs were also, Harris thought, integral to the ultimate success of the projects social goal to provide an environment that the residents would cherish as home. “It is often said that the people for whom the new housing projects are designed,” she wrote, “do not take care of their homes. But this may be partly due to the fact that, in the past, ‘appetite appeal’ has not been considered essential to the building scheme.” Buffalo’s Willert Park Courts was an example of how art could humanize such places and give residents a reason to take pride in their place of residence. “In the Buffalo development,” she said, art “has been prudently employed.” Robert Cronbach, who like Ambellan was an idealistic political activist, said that he “felt he was part of an important art movement; that his work would be seen by, first, his peers, and also by a fair section of the public and the art world” (“The Artists of Buffalo's Willert Park Courts Sculptures”). Alfred D. Price confirmed the critic’s and artist’s opinions.

The year after Willert Park Courts opened, John McAndrew, art historian and curator of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, identified it as one of the significant works of modern architecture in the United States. In his book *Guide to Modern Architecture: Northeast States* (1940), McAndrew singled out Willert Park Courts as one of eight significant Modern Movement buildings in Buffalo (McAndrew, 49). The others with which Backus’s buildings kept company were Alfred Aschuler and Raymond Lowey’s Grant’s Department Store (demolished), Frank Lloyd Wright’s Larkin Administration Building (demolished) and his Martin, Davidson, and Heath houses, Louis Sullivan’s Guaranty Building, and Eliel and Eero Saarinen’s Kleinhans Music Hall. McAndrew’s entry for the Willert Park Courts, which was accompanied by an illustration, summarized the strong points of the design as follows:

Fan-shaped layout agreeably solves problem of economical building arrangement on trapezoid-shaped plot. Trim orderliness avoids military regularity through plan, variation of 2- and 3-story buildings, entries, planting. Sculptured reliefs in cast stone colored to harmonize with local brick used for all exteriors.

Overall, observed McAndrew, Modern Movement structures accounted for less than one per cent of all construction in the Northeast, the richest and most populated region in the country at the time. The other

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ninety-nine per cent, he said in his introduction, included “jerry-built developments—many of them unfit for habitation by any human standards,” thousand of middle class homes “built in fear and flight from the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” many “nondescript apartment houses,” and “blocks of undistinguished commercial and industrial buildings.” In his review of McAndrew’s book in *The Art Bulletin*, the leading art historical academic journal, “Jere Abbott thanked McAndrew for advocating for the best new design work being done. He said that *The Guide* “will be greatly welcomed by many people, not only students but laymen, who are genuinely interested in forming a critical idea of what has been done in this section of the country in contemporary architecture. It should further wise building” (Abbott, 186).

### Conclusion

Over the years, children of residents of Willert Park Courts climbed the social ladder to take their place among various professions in and beyond Buffalo. However, historians’ give mixed reviews on the success of these self-contained low-rise, low-income, segregated urban housing projects, in general. Most recently, architectural historian Joseph Heathcott, writing in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, speaks for many when he writes:

Despite benefiting thousands of families, the public housing program contained deep flaws that impacted the reorganization of urban space. However equal the racially segregated projects were in cost and amenities, by mobilizing the resources of the state behind a large-scale segregation program, local authorities achieved total residential separation of whites and blacks. Moreover, by adopting design frameworks that catered to the nuclear family—with a male breadwinner, female homemaker, and a small number of children, housing projects encoded a spatial organization at odds with the gender, class, and cultural realities of most tenant families. The separation and privatization of functions that were once intermixed contributed to the isolation of working-class women, and stripped the projects of flexible, adaptable spaces that could support the economic and social coping strategies devised by poor families. (Heathcott, 101)

Imperfections aside, today the Willert Park Courts complex is an outstanding, well-preserved representative of a heroic architectural and social experiment that took place in cities all across America in the wake of the Great Depression.

**Frederick C. Backus (1889-1969), Architect.** The architect for the Willert Park Courts was Frederick C. Backus of Buffalo. Backus studied architecture at Cornell University after which he worked for several firms in Buffalo, including Townsend & Fleming, Lansing, Bley & Lyman and Edward B. Green & Son. In practice on his own in 1922, Backus became known locally for the design of upscale homes. Among his works in this regard are the Dexter P. Rumsey, Jr., house (c. 1923) on Middlesex Road, the John Ganson Evans house (1928), the Howard W. Cowan house (1926), and the Reginald Williams house (c. 1926), the latter three on Meadow Road. His plans for the Willert Park Courts were praised for the successful way he provided for the comfort of the many residents within an amount of space that one of his wealthy clients might have had for a single family home. “Here he achieved an impression of space and expansive living,” reported a local business journal, “on a site so restricted in area for the number of living units required that it would have been the despair of many architects” (“Architect”). Backus, Crane & Love was formed at the beginning of 1941 with the addition of

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David B. Crane (1901-1954) and Donald Love (1914-1994), longtime draftsmen and designers who had worked on the Willert Park Courts. The new firm fully embraced Modernism in the design of the National Gypsum Co. office building (1941) at 325 Delaware Ave., Tudor Plaza apartments (1947) at 731-751 West Ferry St. and Cathedral Court apartments (1948) at 1030 Delaware Ave. Backus, Crane & Love continued work in public housing with the extension to the Willert Park Courts (1942, demolished), Dante Place Housing Project (1949-1952; present Marine Drive Apartments), and the Ellicott District Redevelopment (1952-1953, altered).

**William E. Harries (1866-1972), Landscape Architect.** William E. Harries was a native of Buffalo who practiced landscape architecture in his native city and in Toronto for over fifty years. He received his training at Cornell University after which he traveled and studied in Europe. Harries was especially in demand as the designer of golf courses and planned several in Western New York. Among them were courses at Westwood Park, Beaver Island, and the Cherry Hill Country Club, where he was a long time member. In the early twentieth century, Harries held several governmental positions, including superintendent of the Niagara Reservation and superintendent of Buffalo's parks department. During the 1930s, in addition to Willert Park Courts, Harries served as site planner and landscape architect on several federal housing projects in Buffalo, notably Kenfield Homes and the Marine Drive Apartments (former Dante Place). He retired from practice in 1969.

**Alfred D. Price (1896-1968), First Manager of Willert Park Courts.** Alfred D. Price Sr became manager of the Willert Park Courts when the project opened for occupancy in late 1939. He continued in this post until his death in 1968. Price was so successful at guarding the interests of Willert Park Court residents that his name became associated in the minds of many with the housing project itself. Born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1896, Price graduated from the Weyland Academy and Virginia Union University and later earned an MBA at Northwestern University. He came to Buffalo in 1924. During his years in Buffalo, Price devoted himself to many religious and civic organizations. He served as board member of the YMCA, YWCA, the Buffalo Chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the Buffalo Chapter of the Red Cross, the International Housing Officials Association, and other non-profit philanthropic organizations.

His son, Alfred D. Price Jr., related this memory of his father's management of the Willert Park Courts:

I can add this anecdotal account which may be of interest. My late father was a "country" boy, having been raised on a farm about 15 miles outside of Richmond VA. Sometime in the 1950's he made a management decision that no one today could get away with—he directed the grounds-keeping staff at Willert Park to cut down all the bushes outside the entrances to tenants homes in the Courts. He had conceived of an idea to increase the sense of tenant responsibility for their environment. He went to a local friend, a Mr. Seivers who owned a florist shop on Genesee St and asked if he would (1) provide the seed stock for floral plantings and (2) organize a review committee to judge a Flower Show at Willert Park. He then went to local William Street businesses like Ben's Pawn Shop, Kulick's Meat Market, Etc., and asked them to provide "prizes" for the show. He then challenged the tenants of Willert Park to take the free seeds, and create the most beautiful gardens that they could on the plots of ground outside their front doors. (This was decades before the publication of Oscar Newman's book *Defensible Space*.) The effort was a resounding success, as neighbors competed for the best garden. BMHA officials, city council members, and many others came to the judging event annually, and my mother and I sponsored

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prizes for this event many years after my father's death....30+ years. I have at least one *Courier-Express* article that documents this. So far as I know, this was the only such event in a public housing project in the US.<sup>4</sup>

**Robert Cronbach (1908-2001) sculptor.** Robert Cronbach was a native of St. Louis, Missouri, where he first studied sculpture at the St. Louis School of Fine Arts. He later attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and worked as an assistant to Paul Manship, one of the leading early modernist sculptors in America. In 1936, Cronbach joined the Works Progress Administration (WPA). He was 31 when he and Harold Ambellan received the WPA commission to create the architectural relief sculptures for the Willert Park Courts in Buffalo. Cronbach's other public commissions included sculptures and fountains at the United Nations General Assembly Building and the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City and the Federal Office Building in St. Louis. From 1947 to 1961, Cronbach taught art at Adelphi College in Garden City, Long Island, and at the summer program of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine where he served as chairman of the school's board of governors from 1975 to 1982.

**Harold Ambellan (1912-2008), Sculptor.** Harold Ambellan was a native of Buffalo but moved to New York City in 1930 where he studied at the Art Student League. He was 27 years old when he joined Robert Cronbach on the historic WPA commission to make concrete relief sculptures for Willert Park Courts. Ambellan achieved a significant reputation as a sculptor and exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. He also worked to promote the interests of sculptors and sculpture in America. Ambellan was a founding member of the United Sculptors of America, and, in 1941, he served as president of the Sculptors Guild of America. In 1956, Ambellan moved to France where he enjoyed a sustained career as an artist working in several media. He exhibited his work in Paris, Rome, and Germany, and, from time to time, sent works for exhibition in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> A.D. Price Jr. to F. Kowsky, April 28, 2011.

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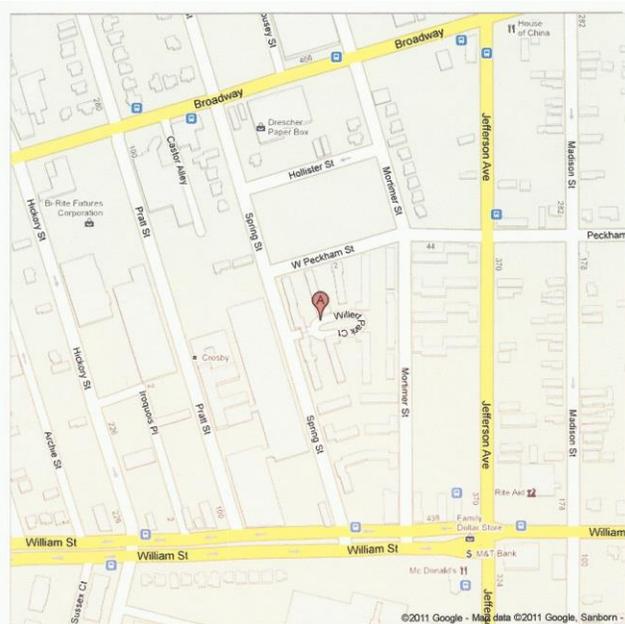
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Verbal Boundary Description

Located on a wedged-shaped parcel of land on the East Side of the City of Buffalo, New York, the Willert Park Courts apartments are bordered on the north by West Peckham Street, on the east by Mortimer Street, on the west by Spring Street and on the south by William Street. The original parcel of land was 5.43 acres. The nomination covers only the original project buildings that were erected on the northern 3.5 acres of the site. Later buildings erected on the remaining acreage have been demolished. Willert Park, a city-owned playground, is also included in the nomination. It occupies the block bounded by Mortimer Street on the east, Holister Street on the north, Spring Street on the west, and West Peckham Street on the south.

Boundary Justification

The Willert Park Courts public housing complex resides on land historically associated with the 1938-1939 period of construction and significance.



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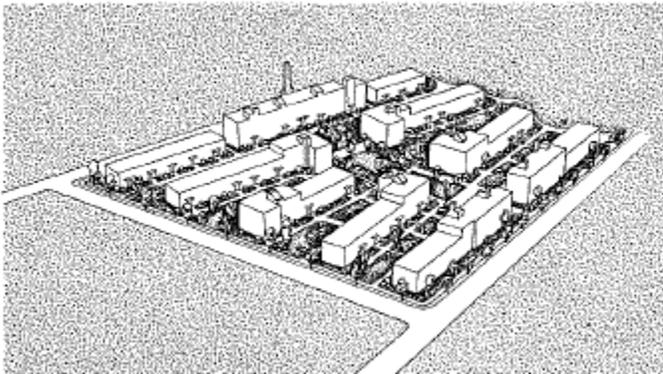
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All color photos taken by Martin Wachadlo, 2011



Willert Park Courts isometric view, from John McAndrew, *Guide to Modern Architecture: Northeast States*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1940, p. 49.

**TYPICAL 3-ROOM APARTMENT**

RENT	UTILITIES	TOTAL RENT
\$12.50	\$6.50	\$19.00



Plan of a typical one bedroom apartment in a Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority project, similar to a duplex unit in Willert Park Courts.