

## Harlem River Houses

Individual Landmark

Macombs Place - West 153rd Street - Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard - West 151st Street

Designation Date: September 23, 1975



*Harlem River Houses*

*Image courtesy of the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission*

Harlem River Houses, the first federally funded, federally-built, and federally-owned housing project in New York City, was begun early in 1936 and completed in 1937. It was an example of the early collaboration between the New York City Housing Authority and the Federal Government. Consisting of three separate groups of four- and five-story buildings, the project was “a recognition in brick and mortar of the special and urgent needs of Harlem.”

The need for government-sponsored housing in urban areas, especially to aid lower-income groups, had been long recognized by concerned architects and social critics in the United States. Successful experiments in government housing had been carried out since the turn of the 20th century in Great Britain, Holland, Germany, Austria, and Scandinavia, with many projects designed by distinguished architects. Many people wondered why the United States government could not do the same.

A shortage of urban housing, especially at affordable prices, was intensified by the Depression of the 1930s. Under the Herbert Hoover administration, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) was established in 1932 with the purpose of advancing funds to

limited-dividend corporations, to enable them to construct housing. Knickerbocker Village, a middle-income project on the Lower East Side, was financed this way.

Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the powers of the RFC were transferred in 1933 to the Housing Division of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works (PWA), making possible the extension of loans to limited-dividend corporations for financing new construction, for the rehabilitation of low-cost housing, and for slum-clearance. The agency could make grants and loans to duly established public bodies, such as city and state housing authorities, for the same purpose, and it could buy, condemn, sell, or lease property to develop new projects itself. Thus, the Roosevelt Administration recognized that low-income housing was a responsibility of the government, despite bitter complaints from the building and real-estate interests that the government was encroaching on their domain. Government officials, such as PWA Administrator Harold L. Ickes, effectively argued that private industry could not afford to build housing at affordable rents for the low-income sector.

New York City, through the jurisdiction of the New York City Housing Authority, had already begun its own experiment in low-cost housing in 1935, with the construction of First Houses, a designated New York City Landmark, on the Lower East Side, one of the city's most congested slum areas. Although financed through Housing Authority bonds, it used relief labor paid for through the Federal Government's "work relief" program.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)