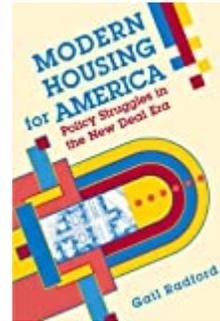


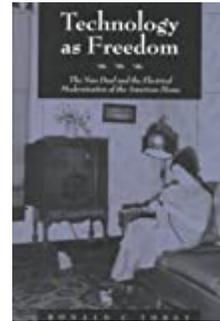
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gail Radford. *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (*Historical Studies of Urban America*). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. x + 273 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-70222-3; \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-70223-0.



Ronald C. Tobey. *Technology as Freedom: The New Deal and the Electrical Modernization of the American Home*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996. xviii + 316 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20421-8.



Reviewed by Karen Dunn-Haley (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Urban (March, 1998)

The New Deal Defines the Modern Home

In a lecture at Milton Academy in 1926, Franklin Delano Roosevelt rhapsodized about the technological changes taking place in the American home. Observing that “the great inventions of yesterday...telephone, electrical light and power, industrial machinery” had just made their way into American homes in the previous quarter of a century, Roosevelt asserted, “(I)t is in the home that the practical effect of change last makes itself felt.”[1] In the same speech, he voiced his contempt for contemporary Rip Van Winkles who tried to “view the world with the eyes of the past.” In almost the same

breath, the future president mourned the potential passing of country life. As early as 1926, Roosevelt’s vision of American housing involved a compromise between the traditionalist past and the technological future. Two recently published books make distinguished attempts to explain that compromise and the legacy of New Deal housing policies.

Ronald C. Tobey, of U.C. Riverside, and Gail Radford, of SUNY, Buffalo, have written separate and very different descriptions of American housing and moderniza-

tion in the 1930s. Read in tandem, both authors provide us with new insights on New Deal economics, politics, and culture. Perhaps the greatest contribution of both books is their explanation of the wide spectrum of political contingencies that led to New Deal housing policy. In a broader sense, both authors help us better understand the evolution of the modern American standard of living, the outline of which was in place by 1940. The affluence that followed World War II connected the dots of that outline in bold relief, but these books remind us of the central importance of the New Deal to the way we live today. As Tobey expresses it by evoking the very structure of the home, "(The New Deal) enframed the prosperity of the postwar era, out of sight like studding...like plumbing, behind drywall" (p. 212).

While Tobey links changing technology, politics, and consumption to the home, Gail Radford explains, in a regretful tone, why a certain type of home prevailed. Housing reformers in the 1930s had an opportunity to put forward European-inspired public housing proposals that challenged the normative single-family dwelling and dismal multi-family tenement. The social and aesthetic vision of housing advocated by reformers, such as Catherine Bauer, contrasted with the single-family 1920's bungalow or the Levittowns that followed World War II. Given the economic difficulties imposed by the Depression, one must wonder why the traditional single-family home prevailed and why the concept of multi-family public housing did not become more widespread. Gail Radford's book conveys the struggle that took place and helps us better understand the reasons for the limited range of public housing in America today.

Over 25 years ago, Joseph Arnold directed historians' attention to a specific New Deal housing program, the greenbelt communities initially under the aegis of Rexford Tugwell and the Resettlement Administration.[2] Since that time, in broader surveys, Kenneth Jackson has explained the importance of New Deal banking and home financing arrangements so central to the expansion of suburbs and single family home ownership, and David Nye has touched upon the social and cultural ramifications of home electrification in the 1930s. A number of scholars have linked the planning efforts of reformers in the 1920s with New Deal housing projects.[3] Still, when a professor in an American survey course enumerates the achievements of the New Deal, housing may not end up on the list; for, with the exception of a confusing array of government projects, housing expansion had to await the postwar 1940s. In fact, New Deal government projects amounted to relatively few actual hous-

ing units—approximately 170,000. Discounting the 79,000 units demolished as part of the slum clearance that preceded the building, these numbers become even less impressive.[4]

Despite the scholarship mentioned above, not enough has been made of the connection between measures to end the Depression and the wide variety of federal policies aimed at the home. These policies went beyond the building projects of the Resettlement Administration, Public Works Administration, and United States Housing Authority, only a few of the agencies involved. One could argue, as Ronald Tobey does, that the most important and far reaching housing programs involved the renovation of existing homes. Home modernization was an incomplete task at the onset of the Depression; only with the modernization of a larger mass of American homes could the appliance industry grow significantly. Tobey provides the statistics: "(I)n the 1920s, nearly two-thirds of the nation's dwellings were not technologically capable of being electrically modernized by the simple installation of better illumination and power appliances. Substandard housing alone, among other factors, prevented a household revolution through electrical modernization. By contrast, at the end of the 1930s, two-thirds of all dwellings were technologically capable of being modernized with appliances" (p. 33).

Put simply, if Americans did not have outlets to plug into, why buy an electric iron? Or the most coveted and expensive appliance—the refrigerator? Remarkably, it was during the most prolonged depression in our history that Americans made the significant headway to which Tobey refers. Tobey makes it clear that Roosevelt saw a social as well as an economic meaning in electric appliances. He quotes the president telling the nation that "the numbers of new refrigerators...mean something besides just plain dollars and cents. It means greater human happiness." This quotation hints at the meaning of Tobey's title, "Technology as Freedom," since it reminds us of one of the four freedoms coined in Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union—freedom from want. Tobey stresses the social changes that arrived with new technologies in the home; he notes, "The dwellings modernized their occupants as households rebuilt their social and labor relations"(p. 209). He quotes Winston Churchill, who neatly puts it, "First we shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us"(p. 93). New Deal housing policies were designed to spur the economy through home modernization, but once implemented, those same policies had social ramifications. "The shift to a true mass market in domestic household appliances" occurred with the aid

of New Deal programs, such as the National Housing Act, which required improvements in wiring and electrical service. In this manner, the federal government “re-framed and restructured the national market, subsidized consumerism and home owning,” and at the same time, “saved capitalism without reforming it” (pp. 177, 98).

For those who perceived underconsumption as a root cause of the depression, the creation of mass consumption through home modernization was key. A direct connection—one could say an electrical connection—existed between government policies aimed at the economic depression and policies aimed at housing problems. Tobey systematically covers the smorgasbord of programs created by New Dealers to modernize the home. He sees the New Deal as effectively nationalizing housing through the development of “a highly structured, uniform market (underwritten by the government)” (p. 98). FHA programs “tied complete electrical modernization to amortized mortgages” (p. 117), and in this way, fostered home rehabilitation. In addition, Tennessee Valley Authority and dam building in the Northwest contributed to the modernization of American homes by leading the way towards publicly regulated or owned electric power, while the Farm Security Administration applied special efforts to modernizing rural homes. Tobey relies on research in Riverside County, California, that is extrapolated to cover the nation as a whole, and he draws upon national publications and statistics as well. In a chapter co-authored by Charles Wetherell, Tobey traces the increase in electrical usage in Riverside homes by neighborhood. With his co-author, he shows how various income groups made “qualitative changes in their lifestyles” by moving from different levels of consumption—“jumping” from lightbulb to radio to refrigerator. Important to note is the fact that racial minorities within Riverside were the least likely to experience these changes; for these least advantaged, the revolution in lifestyles would have to await World War II. His evidence is detailed in numerous charts and graphs, and it is largely convincing.

If one must find a fault in Tobey’s argument, it lies in his tendency to overstate New Deal reforms at the expense of earlier measures. For example, he observes that, “except for a brief episode concerning defense worker housing in World War I, the federal government had no experience in housing” (p. 98). Tobey can be forgiven for not knowing about the Government Hotels for Women, government housing for federal employees in Washington that existed until 1930, but he can not be excused for giving short shrift to the efforts of Herbert Hoover’s

Department of Commerce.[5] New Deal home modernization was an extension of the activities of the Division of Building and Housing within Hoover’s Department of Commerce. Although John Gries, head of the Division of Home Building, retired upon Roosevelt’s election, his subordinate, James S. Taylor, remained to lead the FHA home modernization programs.

Though no housing was built under Hoover, the kind of home modernization propaganda that characterized Roosevelt’s FHA began in Hoover’s Division of Building and Housing. No stranger to that Division, Roosevelt, as President of the American Construction Council, cooperated with Hoover’s Department of Commerce in the early 1920s. Tobey refers somewhat facetiously to Hoover’s great love of conferences, but these meetings allowed labor and business groups, such as lumber manufacturers and concrete producers, to agree on such basics as standard widths and lengths of wood. Such standards, as well as building codes, were essential to furthering a national housing market. More important, Hoover’s “associational” approach—the cooperation of labor, business and government—arguably offered a better means of addressing housing problems than a reliance upon government alone.[6] As Gail Radford illustrates with the example of the Carl Mackley Houses, the combined efforts of the federal government and a labor union to build housing for workers in Philadelphia had impressive results.

In significant ways, Ronald Tobey and Gail Radford deal differently with the term “modern.” For Tobey, the modern home is technologically modern and well illustrated by a photograph of Los Angeles’ Aliso village, a New Deal public housing project for minority families. In the photograph, a mother stands in a kitchen we might all recognize—white-enameled electric or gas range, electric refrigerator, tiled counter, and sink upon a black and white linoleum floor—while children sit at the kitchen table. Gail Radford’s use of the term modern has little to do with the interior of the single-family home and its infrastructure; instead “modern” has a larger meaning. Emphasizing the influence of Catherine Bauer’s book, *Modern Housing*, Radford stresses the modern community and the modern aesthetic.[7] Upon completing her book, Catherine Bauer became Executive Secretary of the Labor Housing Conference, a grassroots lobbying effort for large-scale public housing. Radford’s illustrations, in contrast to Tobey’s pictures of single-family homes and “dream kitchens,” focus on the exteriors of large-scale projects and community plans, as for example the illustrations of the Carl Mackley Houses in Philadelphia, built through a PWA loan and sponsored by the American Fed-

eration of Hosiery Workers.

“Modern housing” in Catherine Bauer’s vision derived from a “large noncommercial housing sector, coordinated and assisted by the federal government,” and it implied cooperative stores and rooftop laundries, community halls, swimming pools, playgrounds, and kindergartens (p. 85). The boiler plant heating the large Mackley complex provides the only hint of technological concerns in the plan. Though the 300 apartments within the Mackley had electric ranges and electric washers and dryers, for the architect, modernity was also found in the design and color. “For awhile, because of costs and local construction codes,” Radford writes, “it looked like the buildings would have to be covered in a very unmodern red brick.” Happily from the point of view of the architects, “at the last moment, Stonorov (the architect) was able to locate a glazed industrial tile in shades of burnt yellow and orange, which gave the buildings a sleek yet not stark appearance” (p. 130).

One wonders whether the Mackley tenants (only in rare cases hosiery workers, since the rents ended up higher than planned) cared about the distinction between red brick and burnt orange industrial tile or what definition they would have given to the term “modern.” Perhaps the distance between tenant and designer is what prevented these projects from surpassing the idealized single-family bungalow in the public imagination. To her credit, Radford ponders this possibility. She notes that Stonorov’s survey of prospective tenants asked no questions relating to design. Nevertheless, she declines to point to the middle-class predilection for the single-family home as the major explanation for public housing decline. In the Mackley and Harlem River projects of the PWA, Gail Radford sees well-built homes of the sort that would attract many Americans of the middle and working classes, and she uses the testimony of actual residents to prove her point.

Radford sets up the possibilities offered by the 1930s by first covering the different types of housing programs that preceded the Depression. She explains the precedents established by the United States Housing Corporation during World War I; for example, Robert Kohn, who directed the PWA Housing Division, led housing production in the Emergency Fleet Corporation in World War I. Radford also gives credit to the efforts made by Herbert Hoover’s Department of Commerce and his Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership. In addition, she offers a good overview of banking and financing changes in the home building industry and an espe-

cially lucid explanation for the movement of capital during World War I and the impact of tax exempt bonds upon real estate.

Radford does not cover all housing policy struggles during the 1930s; it might have added to her analysis had she included a Resettlement Administration project, since in contrast to PWA projects, these homes were expected to be purchased over time by the residents. Instead, following a chapter on 1920’s housing and a semi-biographical chapter on Catherine Bauer, she discusses PWA housing projects that emerged from a critique of home ownership. Her most substantive chapters involve two case studies of PWA-sponsored housing—the Carl Mackley Houses in Philadelphia and the Harlem River Houses in New York City. Following a chapter that discusses the politics surrounding the 1937 Wagner Act and the lobbying efforts of Bauer’s Labor Housing Conference, the book concludes with a critique of the two-tiered structure of American housing policy that emerged out of the Wagner Act. As Radford explains, “by the end of the 1930s, a long-term pattern for federal housing policy emerged. It consisted of two tiers. The top one...consisted of institutional arrangements employing the federal government to organize and subsidize financial markets, thereby providing low-cost capital to producers and consumers of market-produced housing. The core programs of the top policy tier were administered by the FHA...The Wagner Act, which established public housing as we know it today, defined the lower tier” (pp. 197-198).

European housing projects provided the inspiration for Catherine Bauer’s ideas and for the Mackley and Harlem River Houses, but population in European cities at the time tended to be more ethnically and racially homogenous than that of American cities. Admission to American housing projects proved more problematic. Sadly, the most successful New Deal housing experiments involved careful screening of tenants and explicit racial segregation; the residents of the Resettlement Administration project in Greenbelt, Maryland, for example, enjoyed the benefits of community laundries, playgrounds and nursery schools, but they also had to pass stringent qualifications in order to live there. Greenbelt’s population was carefully constructed to hold certain percentages of each major religious group, and its white families (with stay-at-home mothers) had to meet a minimum income requirement. Radford discusses the problems involved in deciding who could live in Mackley and Harlem River, the later project designed only for African-Americans. In placing the blame for government

reluctance to create more of the same type of housing, she points to the Wagner Act, the 1937 legislation that pushed Nathan Straus, head of the U.S. Housing Authority, to build a significantly greater number of housing units at less cost per unit. Radford emphasizes lower costs as the reason for the trend toward “bleak, alienating” public housing, not the perennial problem of integration. Yet, in the end, Catherine Bauer’s vision of “modern” housing required the complicated task of constructing community out of diversity, and for Americans a free-standing, single-family home with appliances offered the most expedient and direct road to modernity.

Historians must examine events as they happened as well as what might have happened. Ronald Tobey and Gail Radford illustrate both what was and what might have been. Through their prose, the reader can come to terms with the full ramifications of the two-tiered federal housing policy that Radford decries. Tobey illustrates that the first tier of housing programs went well beyond government housing projects; policies that regulated the electrical industry and made installment buying possible had just as much impact on the home. Radford makes it clear that the nation had other public housing options available. Just as Tobey rightly celebrates that “by Spring 1940, over 44 percent of the nation’s household’s possessed a refrigerator,” Radford rightly points out that the subsidies enabling such increases in living standards have been hidden from public view in contrast to more visible public housing subsidies. Both books should be commended for bringing the breadth of New Deal housing policy into the light. Both books should be read by anyone interested in the history of housing and urban planning.

Notes

[1]. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *Whither Bound? (A Lecture at Milton Academy on the Alumni War Memorial Foundation, May 18, 1926)* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1926) pp. 10-12.

[2]. Joseph Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Towns Program, 1935-1954* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1971).

[3]. Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); David Nye, *Electrifying America:*

Social Meanings of a New Technology (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990). For a good discussion of New Deal housing, see John Hancock, “The New Deal in American Planning,” in Daniel Schaffer, ed., *Two Centuries of American Planning* (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1988). For discussion of 1920’s planning and reform, one might begin with Daniel Schaffer, *Garden Cities for America: the Radburn Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982) and the classic, Mel Scott, *American Planning Since 1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

[4]. Hancock, p. 212.

[5]. Among other books, Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) covers the activities of Hoover’s Department of Commerce. For a description of the Government Hotels for Women, see Karen Dunn-Haley, “The House that Uncle Sam Built: The Political Culture of Federal Housing Policy, 1919-1932,” Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1995.

[6]. Ellis Hawley, “Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision of an ‘Associative State’, 1921-1928,” *Journal of American History* 61 (1974).

[7]. Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934). Radford’s biographical information is welcome, since there exists surprisingly little published secondary material on this important figure. In the past, the main source of information on Bauer, aside from the many books and articles she authored, has been Mary Susan Cole, “Catherine Bauer and the Public Housing Movement, 1926-1937,” Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1975, and more recently, Eugenie Ladner Birch, “An Urban View: Catherine Bauer’s Five Questions,” in Donald A. Krueckeberg, ed., *The American Planner: Biographies and Recollections*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1994). Catherine Bauer married architect William Wurster, and in some catalogues, she is listed by her husband’s name.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Karen Dunn-Haley. Review of Radford, Gail, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era (Historical Studies of Urban America)* and Tobey, Ronald C., *Technology as Freedom: The New Deal and the Electrical Modernization of the American Home*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1856>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.