

Article

## “You and Your Neighborhood”: Neighborhood, Community, and Democracy as New Paradigms in Wartime American Architecture

Gaia Caramellino

Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, Italy; [gaia.caramellino@polimi.it](mailto:gaia.caramellino@polimi.it)

Submitted: 21 August 2021 | Accepted: 7 March 2022 | Published: 31 March 2022

### Abstract

This article argues that a radical reconceptualization of the notion of neighborhood was introduced by architects in the United States during WWII in response to the new political, cultural, and economic conditions of the war. The efforts of architects and planners like Oskar Stonorov and Louis Kahn contributed to reconfiguring the organizational principle of the “neighborhood unit” model envisioned by Clarence Perry during the 1920s, transferring the discourse from the domain of urban sociology and technical planning to the realm of the American profession. This article revolves around the unexplored and intense period of architectural experimentation during WWII, when the neighborhood emerged as a vibrant platform for the efforts of professional circles to question the values of American democracy and introduce new participative practices in neighborhood and community design, fostering new forms of collaboration between citizens, governmental agencies, and speculative builders under the leadership of architects. Neighborhood design appeared as the testing ground to renegotiate the role and social responsibility of American architects and a foundational value of post-war American society, while its new meanings were to be renegotiated in post-war city planning and built communities.

### Keywords

community; neighborhood; Oskar Stonorov; wartime architecture; WWII

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Terms of Dwelling: Re-Theorizing Housing Through Architecture” edited by Yael Allweil (Technion—Israel Institute of Technology) and Gaia Caramellino (Politecnico di Milano).

© 2022 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

In 1954, Lewis Mumford defined the American neighborhood as a natural phenomenon founded on the relations between inhabitants, highlighting how the neighborhood principle could not by itself solve the problem of its design (L. Mumford, 1954, p. 257).

This article analyses one of the most ambiguous terms in 20th-century urbanism: the neighborhood. An equivocal notion and a timeless phenomenon, constantly shifting between material concept and abstract term, universal value and localized meanings, the neighborhood emerged as a foundational principle of post-war American society (Harris, 2012; Jacobs, 2015; Lasner, 2012; Looker, 2015) and a transnational phenomenon in the aftermath of WWII, exported as a key notion of

mid-20th century planning and a fundamental device of post-war reconstruction policies, massively applied in its several translations to the spatial organization of post-war modern housing estates since WWII (Couperus & Kaal, 2016; Cupers, 2016).

A dominant narrative revolves around the multiple origins and the genealogies of the neighborhood concept, formulated in urban sociology and technical planning between the 1910s and the 1920s, when Clarence Perry (1872–1944) first transferred the sociological formulation of neighborhood proposed by the School of Chicago and the prescriptions of the Community Center Movement into the spatial device of the neighborhood unit (NU; Perry, 1926). The NU model was conceived as a scheme of arrangement for family-life community built on the social conception of the neighborhood as

an aggregation of families based on “primary” relations (Cooley, 1909; Follett, 1918; Perry, 1924).

The expression of the translation from a social indicator to a planning principle over the 1920s, the NU scheme published by Perry in 1929 proposed a settlement unit of 5,000–6,000 inhabitants based on the daily needs of families and organized around the common core of educational equipment, parks, and local commercial activities. Founded on the idea of “proximity,” “walkability,” and “pedestrian safety” of children, the organizational principle was limited by a perimetral transportation system and was adopted both to regenerate existing urban sectors and develop new private suburban estates on the outskirts of American cities (Beach, 1995; Johnson, 2002; Perry, 1929).

Profoundly rooted in the garden city concept of Ebenezer Howard, spread in the United States partly through the contribution of Raymond Unwin, the spatial model proposed by Perry was highly influenced by the discourse of the Regional Planning Association of America during the 1920s. Published in the framework of the *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs* by the Russell Sage Foundation, Perry’s proposal for the NU acquired stability as an organizational structure in its many adaptations, and, if observed in a narrow sense, assumed the meaning of a technique of measurement that became a structural paradigm of physical planning during the years of the New Deal, finding massive levels of application in post-war public housing and city planning in the United States and abroad (Brody, 2013; Dahir, 1947; Schubert, 2000; Silver, 1985).

However, various attempts to reconceptualize the NU concept formulated during the 1920s occurred during WWII when the new implications of neighborhood design arose through the agency of the American profession in response to the new political and economic conditions of the war (Albrecht, 1995; Cohen, 2011; Goodman, 1940; Wynn, 1996). Wartime research on neighborhood and community disclosed a new understanding of the values of “democratic citizenship” expressed in the framework of a growing interest in participative approaches and the design of community facilities for everyday use (Churchill, 1945; “Design for democracy,” 1942). Wartime research on neighborhood design also reveals the attempts to renegotiate the restrictions on the right to ownership and the trends towards residential segregation by racial, economic, and social groups, rooted in the social and income cohesion of the “one-class” model promoted by the NU planning also advocated by federal public agencies during the inter-war years (Bauer, 1945; Churchill & Ittleson, 1944, p. 13).

This article examines the new meanings that the notion of neighborhood—and the changing discourses conveyed through it—assumed when transferred from the domain of urban sociology and city planning to the realities and languages of architectural profession during WWII. The neighborhood moved to be used to designate new practices by American progressive architects

who aimed to calibrate the urban structure to the human scale and the changing patterns of daily living, as a way to return to organic communities.

Institutional, technical and commercial publications, and exhibitions attest to the multiple attempts to reassess the meanings of “neighborhood” in architectural research and renegotiate the boundaries of the profession during WWII, intersecting city planning, housing, and social research and introducing unprecedented forms of professional collaboration, marked by the affirmation of the new figure of the “architect-planner” (Hamlin, 1940). In the framework of the war, architects addressed the neighborhood as the intermediate unit between the building and the city and the dispositive to reorganize an everyday urban environment by translating in spatial forms the new values of “democracy” at an intermediate scale and introducing a new participative agenda and a community life ideology in neighborhood design through the active involvement of inhabitants (Bauer, 1945; Walker, 1941, p. 60).

## 2. Re-Conceptualizing the Neighborhood During WWII

Like a living organism, a city must continuously renew its cells—the neighborhoods—or die. It is agreed that there exists great interest in every community for a “down-to-earth” approach to neighborhood replanning and it is also believed that such ideas as are current in the USA may be of interest to other nations for them to witness how we are tackling a problem common to all city dwellers around the world. Citizens’ participation is the greatest factor in successfully and democratically achieving the replanning of neighborhoods. (Stonorov, 1943a)

With these introductory words, the German-born architect Oskar Stonorov (1905–1970), who had relocated to the United States in 1929, explained the new significance that the notion of neighborhood acquired during WWII as a foundational concept to reframe American society and the professional world. His 1943 documentary, provocatively titled *Can Neighborhood Exist?* was produced during the war to be displayed in the Better Philadelphia Exhibition to be held in Philadelphia in 1947 and prefigured the role that neighborhood design would acquire after the war as the minimum natural and logical unit of post-war social structure based on community life (Stonorov, 1943a; Wynn, 1996).

### 2.1. The “Human Scale” in Neighborhood Design

A first attempt to recontextualize the model formulated by Perry emerged in the background of the transnational discourse on “the human scale” in city planning established during WWII as a form of criticism of modernist planning principles and functionalist approaches. The attention devoted to the “human scale” as a manifestation of American democracy in architecture and city

planning grew in the United States also through the multiple attempts to propose “democratic” design of naturalized and humanized environments in response to the ongoing programs of urban renewal and suburban development (“Design for democracy,” 1942). Neighborhood design as an opportunity to create new human settlements started to germinate during the war and contributed to the introduction of a new system of values through the metaphor of the human scale (Couperus, 2016; Giedion, 1958; Kuchenbuch, 2016).

In the article “The Human Scale in City Planning,” incorporated by Paul Zucker in his 1944 collection of essays entitled *New Architecture and City Planning*, the Catalan émigré architect José Luis Sert translated the metaphorical search for a human scale into an actual scheme, one that portrayed the human scale as a model of American democracy (Figure 1). His scheme proposed to divide the modern city into well-defined units. The neighborhood (an entity of 56,000 to 80,000 inhabitants) was conceived as a component for the design of new “human settlements” based on a cluster of six “townships” of around 300,000 inhabitants, each composed of eight neighborhoods. The township aimed to reconcile the human qualities of medieval cities (e.g., walking access to social services as well as to open country) with the advantages of the modern open plan (Sert, 1944, p. 405). Additionally, it sought to promote the design and distribution of multiple facilities at the scale of the neighborhood, the urban sector and the city, thus

encouraging reflection on the spatial connotation of the human scale (Kuchenbuch, 2016; Sert, 1944).

In his scheme, Sert introduced anthropometrical categories based on the human body, supplemented by a social understanding of the human scale, naturalizing the scale of the neighborhood. He used Leonardo’s geometrical approximation of the Vitruvius man in order to define an abstract scheme organized around community institutions, which intended to replace the centrality of the educational facilities in Clarence Perry’s NU scheme, similar to how cells in an organism represent the individual needs of the social body (Kuchenbuch, 2016). In so doing he introduced new imagery for the organization of communities. Translated to a spatial model, the discourse on the human scale showed the adaptation of space to everyday family life, forming the basis for a new social organism where the size of the township was defined by walking distance (Sert, 1944).

Other positions were issued in Zucker’s book, which constituted the result of a symposium on post-war American architecture and city-planning held in 1942. The book was the outcome of the encounter between the study group of the CIAM New York Chapter for Relief and Postwar Planning and the realities of wartime American profession (E. Mumford, 2000; Zucker, 1944). Numerous essays pointed out the new value of the neighborhood as a tool for architectural criticism during WWII and its changing character, as argued by Gropius, from a quantitative agglomeration to a living organism

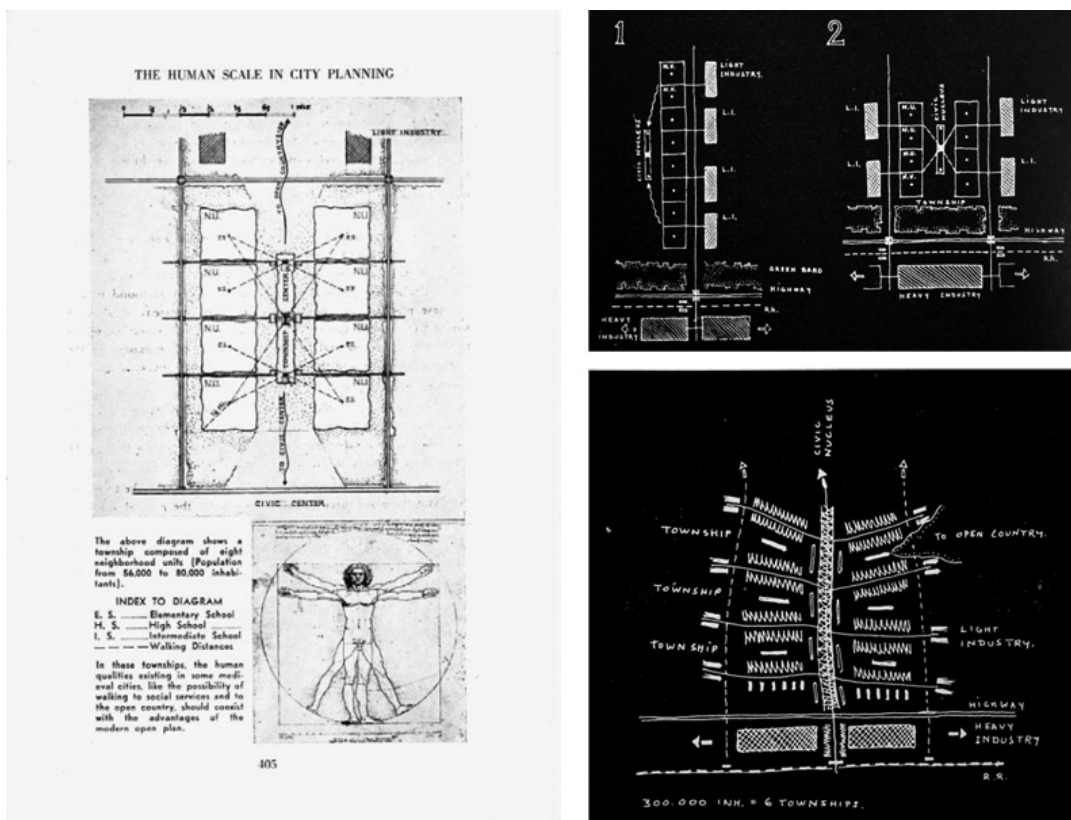


Figure 1. Sert’s “The Human Scale in City Planning,” 1944. Source: Sert (1944, pp. 402–403, 405).

adapted to the life-cycle of the family (Kuchenbuch, 2016, p. 1052). According to Gropius, the human scale “fits the cycle of the 24-hour day and determines the space and time conception of the living environments in the design of the new organic social structure,” locating the points of interest within 10 to 15 minutes walking distance (Gropius, 1945, p. 20).

While in Europe the debate on the human scale paved the way for the discourse on the “Heart of the City” held at CIAM 8 in Hoddesdon, UK, in 1951 and was elaborated through the notions of “core” and “habitat” (E. Mumford, 2000; Zucker, 1944), the research on the human scale contributed to the introduction of new values of democracy in American architecture through experiments that aimed to encourage the mixture of diverse professional and socio-economic conditions through neighborhood design (Bauer, 1945; “Design for democracy,” 1942).

## 2.2. A Neighborhood Is Everybody’s Business During WWII

During WWII, a plethora of platforms (e.g., architectural periodicals, exhibitions and conferences, institutional publications, technical manuals, and promotional materials published by private developers) attested to a growing interest among professionals and the lay public in neighborhood design and community planning, and saw the participation of architects, planners, sociologists, governmental bodies, cultural institutions, and real estate developers.

Private corporations and building companies actively involved in providing defense housing during WWII engaged in debates about neighborhood design by featuring promotional materials aimed at addressing a general public that contributed to creating and circulating

shared imageries on post-war architecture and city planning. Between 1940 and 1945, the company Revere Copper & Brass sponsored the publication of a series of 20 promotional booklets devoted to “post-victory, neighborhood and community planning,” campaigning for better living conditions, promoting a public understanding of the principles and guidelines for the design of community life, and seeking to persuade a general audience about its advantages (Figure 2). The enterprise invited leading American architects involved in war commissions to author the booklets, furnishing in-depth prescriptions and assuming the role of educators of a general audience (including, among others, William Lescaze, Lawrence Kocher, Simon Breines, Buckminster Fuller, Serge Chermayeff, Norman Geddes, Antonyn Raymond, William Wurster, George Keck, Oskar Stonorov, and Luis Kahn).

Oskar Stonorov had a quintessential part in redefining the notion of “neighborhood” during WWII. In the framework of his partnership with Louis Kahn between 1942 and 1947, he attempted on several occasions to reconceptualize the organizational scheme proposed by Clarence Perry for the NU, taking into consideration the lesson provided by the American urban sociology and the early 20th-century settlement work, and introducing a new focus on the popular participation in the processes of neighborhood and community design. The two architects authored two of the 20 booklets sponsored by Revere Copper & Brass, addressing the general public. Titled *Why City Planning Is Your Responsibility* and published in 1942 (Figure 3), the first booklet proposed innovative strategies to convert an existing urban sector into a “modern community” for 935 families. Distributed among six neighborhoods, the new community was grouped around a common central commercial and recreational area that included playgrounds



**Figure 2.** Advertisement of the booklets on “post-victory community design” published by Revere Copper & Brass during WWII. Sources: Lescaze (1942 [center], 1944 [right]).

and leisure facilities for children designed in the former streets (Stonorov & Kahn, 1942, p. 4). The booklet renegotiated the centrality of the educational equipment proposed by Perry in the 1920s and proposed a new model for the rehabilitation of typical existing middle-income neighborhoods, intended as “social units” and situated both in urban contexts and decentralized new areas, through the joint effort of local industry, public action, technical experts, and citizens. They defined a procedure and an organizational structure with guidelines and principles, which regulated the contribution of inhabitants, from the primary group—the family—conceived as the main unit and protagonist, moving through institutions like community organizations, neighborhood planning committees, and city planning commissions (Stonorov & Kahn, 1942, pp. 9–11).

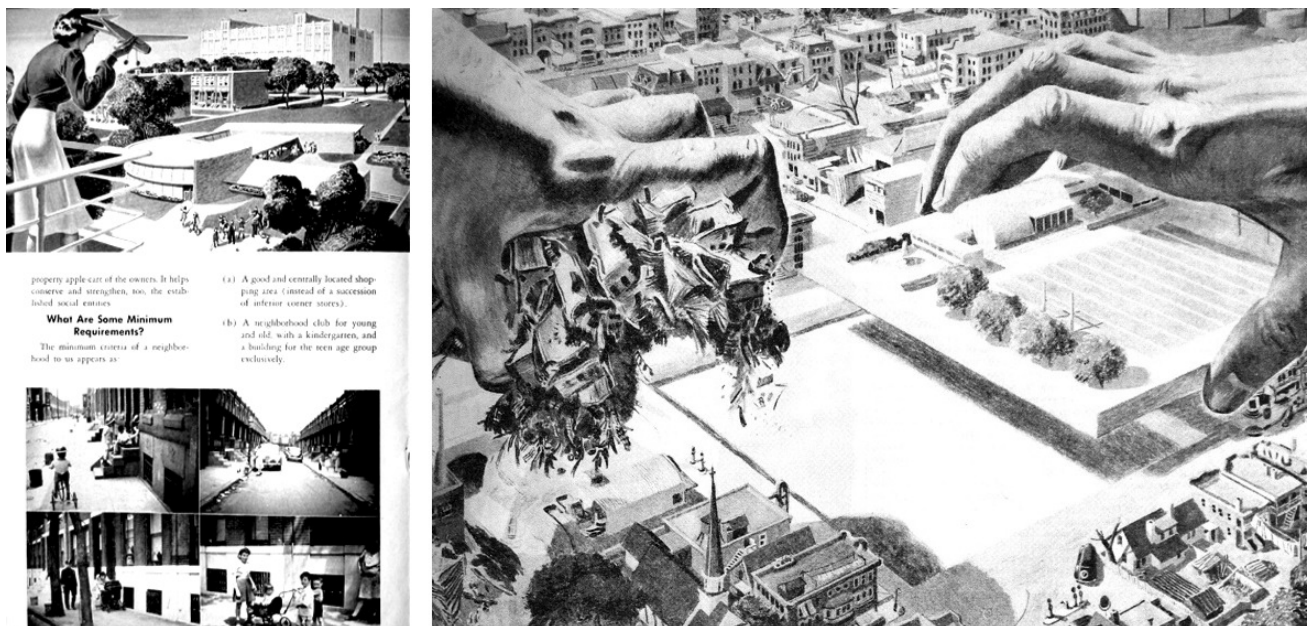
Stonorov’s neighborhood-oriented approach encouraged citizens’ participation in community building and found a legitimacy in Stonorov’s active role in wartime America through research and demonstration projects that reconciled his understanding of modern architecture, social experience, and political activism. His transnational background, his involvement in creating better living conditions for workers, and his awareness of the potentials of participative processes in neighborhood and community design stemmed from a series of collaborations inaugurated during the inter-war period with labor unions, national and federal housing, and planning organizations. He was a consultant for the Public Works Agency from 1933, a member of the Philadelphia Housing Authority and the Citizens City Planning Council, responsible for the definition of the national program for workers’ housing for the Labor Housing Conference, and engaged as consultant

in the Tennessee Valley Authority programs along with Frederick Gutheim (Gutheim, 1972).

On the one hand, Stonorov and Kahn reconceptualized and combined the spontaneous sociability of the “primary group” advocated by the Chicago School sociologists and the prescriptions of the contemporary Community Center Movement (Dahir, 1947; L. Mumford, 1954). On the other hand, their model also tried to grant a spatial connotation to the informal notion of neighborhood introduced in a romantic way by the philanthropic agenda of 19th-century social reforms, defining the physical aspects and design regulations of the concept framed by the American settlement movement in the early 20th century to establish programs of public welfare. Their wartime research tried to translate the notion of “measuring the social needs” and alluded to the first research on neighborhood management established by settlement workers through the Neighborhood Houses, which helped to define codes and principles for regulating the distribution and dimensioning of facilities at local community level (Simkhovitch, 1936, 1938).

Their wartime research was also informed by the political and normative assumption that the neighborhood acquired as an “operative tool” for designing and measuring urban facilities when transferred to the New Deal’s official discourse on public housing and into the set of norms and standards for the efficient design of facilities that inaugurated a new national welfare agenda.

However, it was in 1944, with the publication of their second booklet titled *You and Your Neighborhood: A Primer for Neighborhood Planning* (Figure 3), that Stonorov and Kahn finally elaborated an overarching system to regulate the collaboration between inhabitants



**Figure 3.** “Let YOURS be these helping hands.” Advertisements by Revere Copper & Brass of *Why City Planning Is Your Responsibility* and *You and Your Neighborhood*. Sources: Stonorov and Kahn (1942 [left], 1944 [right]).

(defined as a self-organizing unit of individuals living in proximity), designers, and social and cultural institutions and the relation between citizens, neighborhood, and city planning associations through the publication of a real “primer for neighborhood design,” which introduced new architectural values and instances of democracy into the realities of wartime research on neighborhood (Stonorov & Kahn, 1944; Figure 4).

The languages used in the booklet echoed graphic techniques, pictorial guidelines, visual strategies, modes of display, and tools used by the Federal Media to allegorize New Deal official planning culture (Shanken, 2006). Organizational charts, diagrams, and isotopes were used to reconceptualize outstanding planning experiences, such as the project for the privately built Radburn development in New Jersey, designed by H. Wright, C. Stein, and F. Ackerman in 1923 in the framework of the Regional Planning Association of America, or the analytical charts showing the needs in terms of facilities and recreational spaces of inhabitants of different ages, published by J. L. Sert in his *Can Our Cities Survive?* (Sert, 1942). In line with Sert’s idea of human scale, transferred into the wartime research on architecture and democracy, the primer by Stonorov and Kahn promoted a new understanding of the neighborhood as a social unit to design human settlements, built on the idea of “proximity” and the needs of the daily life of the community. It defined a method to regenerate central urban districts, converting them into neighborhoods, and to plan new decentralized residential zones:

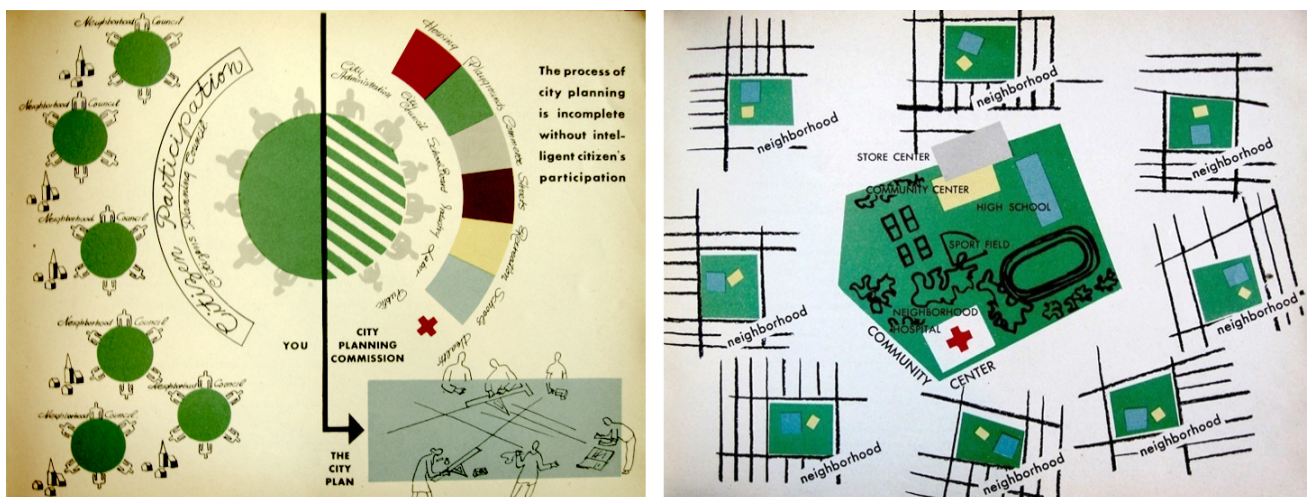
Based on the differentiation of the transportation system and the reuse of former streets for parks and recreational facilities, the centralization of shopping facilities in a central shopping center, the neighborhood house, the modern school situated at a walking distance, the day nursery, rooms for the meetings of the local community, library, parks and playgrounds (calculated in 100 sq ft per child), the swimming pool,

and the replacement of industries with modern public housing. (Stonorov & Kahn, 1944, p. 10)

This second booklet reveals, even more explicitly, Stonorov’s engagement with modern architecture and activism, mediated with an emerging interest for leisure and recreational facilities in community design. It is also a testament to his belief in “political architecture” and to his commitment with New Deal technical experts, agencies, and labor unions, represented by the design with Alfred Kastner of the union-sponsored housing project for the Carl Mackley Houses (Figure 5), built under the Public Works Agency for the Full Fashioned Hosiery Workers Union in Philadelphia (1931–1933). On this occasion, Stonorov and Kastner first experimented a participatory design method with the union workers, which was largely based on the outcomes of a questionnaire addressed by the architects to the workers. The method was in line with the union’s progressive position and was reorganized in the wartime procedure proposed by Stonorov and Kahn in their primer on neighborhood design (Stonorov & Kahn, 1944).

Stonorov’s interest for participative practice had already emerged on the occasion of his involvement as the designer of Federal Pavilions at the San Francisco Golden Gate International Exposition in 1938 and the New York World Fair in 1939. In 1938 he was in charge of the project of the “Your America” pavilion project for the United States Government Science Exhibit, while in 1939 he was the designer of the Federal Housing Administration pavilion “City for Children’s World,” the Model Community Center for leisure facilities for workers, and the “cooperative pavilions” that promoted wartime co-op movement as an instrument to build for post-war America.

In the 1944 booklet, Stonorov and Kahn devote a particular attention to the definition of the methods and procedures for citizen groups to plan their neighborhoods in order for them to fit into the City General Plan and to the



**Figure 4.** Schemes from *You and Your Neighborhood*. Source: Stonorov and Kahn (1944).



**Figure 5.** Carl Mackley Houses, Juniata Park, Philadelphia (1931–1933). Source: “A tale of two cities” (1938).

design of the tools to be used by inhabitants to express their necessities, preferences, and aspirations in the collective design of their neighborhoods, such as 3D models of the neighborhood with removable parts, wooden blocks, collages, puzzles, and 3D maps (Stonorov & Kahn, 1944; Figure 6).

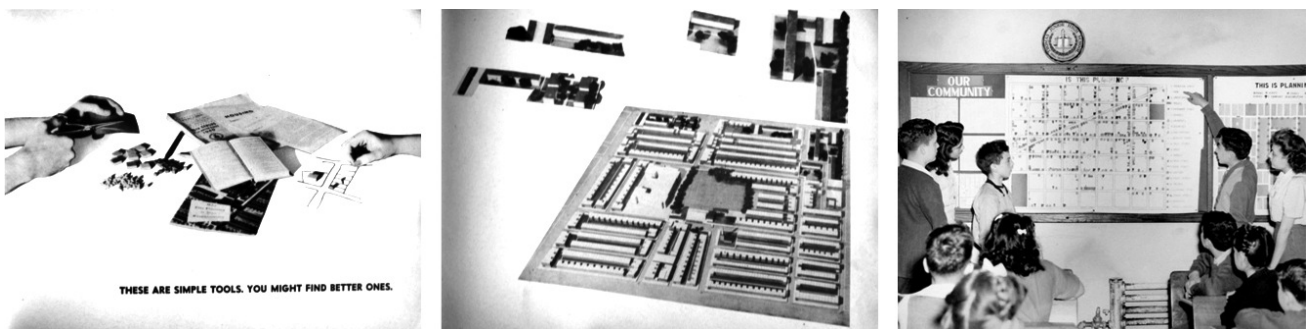
### 2.3. *The Plan of the City Is Like the Plan of a House*

Moving from the assumption that the plan of the city can be associated to the plan of a house (Stonorov & Kahn, 1944), the house became the basic unit of the community and the limits of domestic life extended to the boundaries of the neighborhood (organized at the human scale), while the family was acknowledged as the foundational element of neighborhood-oriented city planning. The continuity between the scale of housing design and city planning explained the difference between an urban sector and a planned neighborhood, equipped with local amenities of everyday use.

The wartime research on neighborhood design incited the idea of a “transcularity” in the approach

that found in the neighborhood its intermediate ground, transferring to the field of design its sociological interpretation as an intermediate group between the family and the State (Cooley, 1909; Follett, 1918). The neighborhood was understood as the intermediate unit between the house and the city and the proper medium for architects to address city planning and confront the urban scale during WWII. This attitude introduced a new system of governance that coordinated local action and city planning and regulated the contribution of citizens and the relationship between inhabitants and designers (Figure 7).

In addition, the booklet presented a language drawing from the notion of “democratic participation” and the involvement of inhabitants, families, and social entities, intended as “primary groups,” with a new centrality in the process of designing modern communities. This grassroots approach based on social relationships and on the hegemony of the family as the main unit and actor in neighborhood design, raised a call for urban citizens’ participation, which, in the framework of WWII, anticipated post-war experiences of advocacy planning.



**Figure 6.** Tools for neighborhood planning from *You and Your Neighborhood*. Source: Stonorov and Kahn (1944).

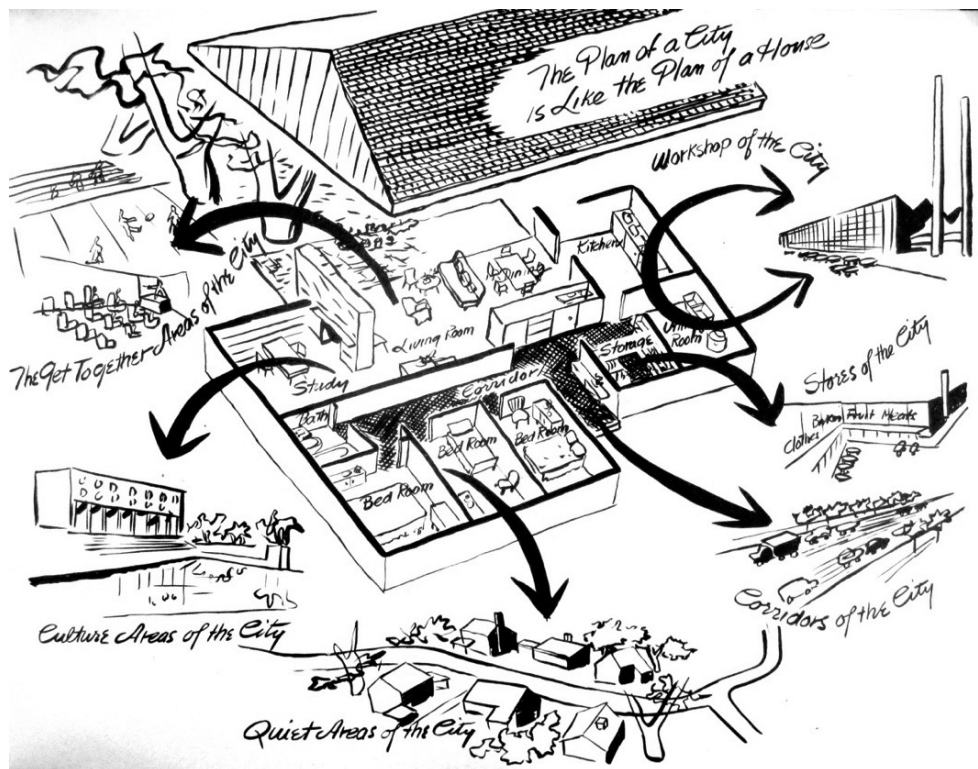


Figure 7. “The plan of the city is like the plan of a house.” Source: Stonorov and Kahn (1944).

These attempts intended to create a balanced residential environment and encouraged the diversity of functions, incomes and social groups in neighborhood design, fostering through modern architecture a racial, economic, and social diversity that was hardly achieved in the pre-war implementations of the NU model and were still rare in wartime large-scale housing interventions promoted by public administrations and the National Committees on Housing. Amongst the arguments against the deployment of one-class neighborhoods, the architects proposed to diversify work opportunities, including suitable productive activities within the domestic environment to incorporate light industries within the confines of the neighborhood, which subserved neighborhood life and originated in self-contained communities with respect to employment (Bauer, 1945; L. Mumford, 1938, p. 473).

With a print run of 15,000 copies, the booklet became a key reference for American civic associations, neighborhood houses, federal authorities, schools, and local committees to regulate the collaboration between inhabitants, architects, private investors, developers, and public enterprises involved in the design of facilities and collective services based on the daily needs of the neighborhood. Through a ground-breaking system the primer encompassed monopolistic public and private initiatives (Churchill, 1945, p. 173), promoting collaboration between welfare-minded public agencies and profit-minded private developers in designing accommodations and facilities for private and public tenants, including sectors of the dwellings for low-income families (Hudnut, 1943).

The two authors proposed to establish a series of neighborhood planning councils that, in collaboration with the delegates from each residential block, collected information and data to study the neighborhood. Each neighborhood was composed of 1,000–1,500 families and, along with other 14 other neighborhoods, formed a community, equipped with various facilities such as an auditorium, a clinic, a library, and sports fields (Stonorov & Kahn, 1944; Figure 8).

The wartime experiments in neighborhood design built on inhabitants’ participation found its first application in the programs of defense housing inaugurated by the federal agencies with the participation of workers, which used the neighborhood as a design unit. In 1941, the same Oskar Stonorov joined the interdisciplinary team of “architect-planners” commissioned by the Federal Works Administration Division for Defense Housing and was involved in the government housing projects developed by the National Housing Agency and the Federal Public Housing Authority, to secure government housing commissions. Like many American professionals, in this capacity Stonorov found in the neighborhood design for defense housing complexes the testing ground to experience new forms of collaboration based on the intersection between landscape design, community planning, and mass-housing architecture (Howe & Associates, 1940).

Stonorov’s interest in neighborhood organization, community ideology, democratic design, and modern architecture is also echoed by his wartime workers’ housing projects, which were promoted by private initiatives



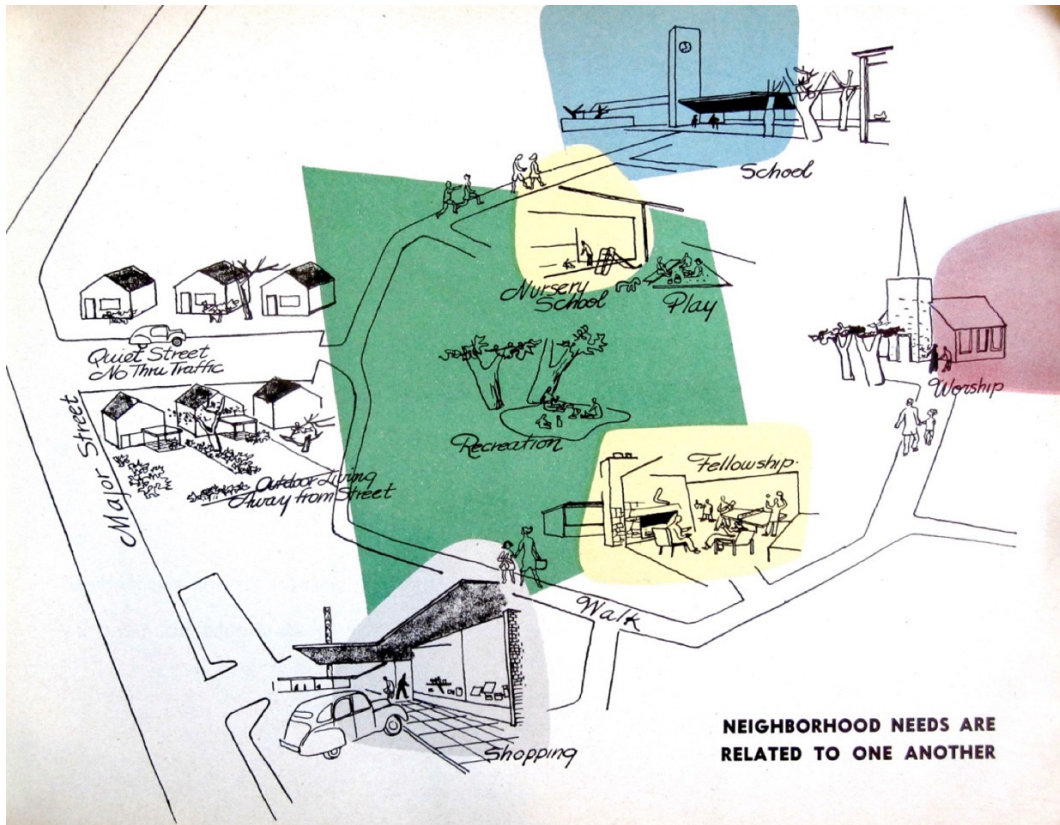


Figure 8. Diagrams representing neighborhood needs from *You and Your Neighborhood*. Source: Stonorov and Kahn (1944).

and epitomized by the experimental community planning project for the “Defense City” (Figure 9), developed under the Federal Housing Administration for the Willow Run Ford plant in Ypsilanti. The new town for

6,000 autoworkers was designed by Stonorov with his partners in 1941 for Walter Reuther and the United Automobile Workers union in Detroit (Herrington, 2015; Jordy, 1943/2005). The project for “500 Planes a Day:

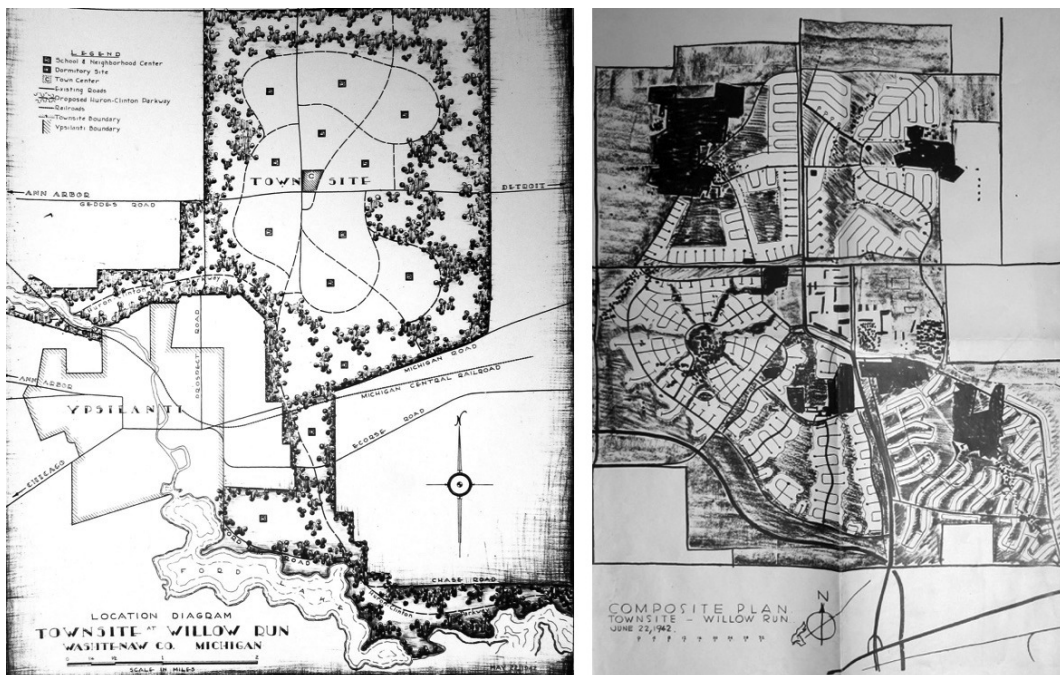


Figure 9. Willow Run, Defense City, Detroit: Location diagram (left) and composite plan (right). Sources: Stonorov (1941 [left], 1943b [right]).

A Program for the Utilization of the Automobile” was a model city based on a mutual ownership plan, conceived with the engagement of workers who expressed their needs and desires by contributing to planning and design processes and who were involved as shareholders. Originally planned as a system of 12 neighborhoods for 10,000 families and organized around a shared recreational core and central green area, the scheme adopted methods and tools envisioned by Stonorov and Kahn in their contemporary research on neighborhood design. Even though it was never implemented according to the original idea, the project became a major force behind the neighborhood design and community planning experiment. Described by the union in 1941 as “the most workable and most human guide to the integrated community produced to date” (Stonorov, 1941), the innovative model plan for 32,000 workers was intended to become another symbol of wartime American architecture and New Deal visions. The novel forms of professional cooperation with the involvement of workers introduced by the project echoed the experiments in the design of the demonstration farms conducted by the Tennessee Valley Authority during WWII (Herrington, 2015; Stonorov, 1941).

In the framework of the Detroit Defense City Project for the Willow Run Ford plant, the 1941 project of the “Bomber City” built on the interest to design human spaces and integrated communities and introduced the innovative idea of the “new house,” featuring a set of experimental units and improved standards in response to diversified modes of living (introducing covered parking spaces, basement work areas, facilities on the second floor, etc.). Under the direction of Oskar Stonorov who selected the site and was responsible for the “planning, land survey, investigations and negotiation with boroughs and technical departments of cities for cooperation agreements with the Federal Government,” G. Howe was appointed as chair of the executive committee and the Saarinens as the urban designers (Stonorov, 1943b). The defense plan included the project of a community center by E. Saarinen and R. Swanson, and 10 individual projects: five housing neighborhoods (including 1,200 dwellings each) designed by the architects in charge of the plan of the Defense City (Stonorov; Howe and Khan; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; among others) and other projects by established professionals involved in defense housing.

Even if the project for Bomber City was canceled in 1942 after the defeat of the Division of Defense Housing, we can argue that the experiments in defense housing used neighborhood design as the opportunity to redefine the social responsibility of American architects involved in housing provision and to re-negotiate the boundaries of the profession through the affirmation of the new figure of the “architect-planner” and “community builder” (Joch, 2016, p. 1036; Stonorov, 1943c, p. 1). Wartime research on neighborhood rehabilitation and participative community design soon became a testing ground to experiment innovative forms of professional

organization and collaboration imposed by the war to secure new commissions, which would flourish in the post-war years (Albrecht, 1995; Cohen, 2011; Goodman, 1940; Hamlin, 1940; Lescaze, 1942).

Similar values were expressed in the sketches produced by Louis Kahn in the same years in the notes he took for his unpublished manuscript “Workable and Human Guide to the Integrated Community,” dedicated to the participatory process in the design of integrated communities for workers. According to Kahn, defense and wartime workers’ housing became an ideal conceptual ground for architects to synthesize, in the principles of neighborhood organization, the redemptive power of modern architecture and the ideology of planned community for workers’ housing (Kahn, [ca. 1944]). His sketches, graphs, and diagrams (Figure 10) reveal Stonorov and Kahn’s drive to “humanly and technically experiment with the integration of static human elements and experimental technique, with middle-class taste and living habits” in the design of modern settlements for a community of families organized in neighborhoods (Kahn as cited in Shanken, 2009).

#### 2.4. Towards a “Democratic” Architecture

The new forms of workers’ participation advocated by Stonorov and Kahn and experienced in defense housing were progressively transferred to the strategies of both American private real-estate developers and Federal Agencies involved in the design and construction of new large-scale housing estates during WWII. These strategies embraced a neighborhood-oriented approach based on citizens’ active participation and envisioned unprecedented forms of interaction between the State, the market, designers, and policy-makers (Hudnut, 1943).

Wartime research on the regenerative forces of the neighborhood also had a lasting impact on the planning of new large-scale housing estates. Architects and housing organizations involved in neighborhood design devoted new attention to the design of community facilities used in everyday life, according a new centrality to the planning, design, and regulation of common recreational and leisure facilities in the organization of the neighborhood. Community centers, neighborhood houses, playgrounds, schools, shopping centers, and sports fields designed at the neighborhood scale for a daily use also started to be considered an additional value in the sales strategies of speculative builders, who turned to large-scale development and explored the advantages of “intelligent street planning.” New planning tools and settlement models were also defined by federal and local authorities for public housing programs initiated during WWII, revealing a new emphasis on the design of collective facilities for the community and the active participation of inhabitants in the process of neighborhood planning (Stonorov, 1939).

This general understanding of the neighborhood as the basic social unit and the foundational concept of

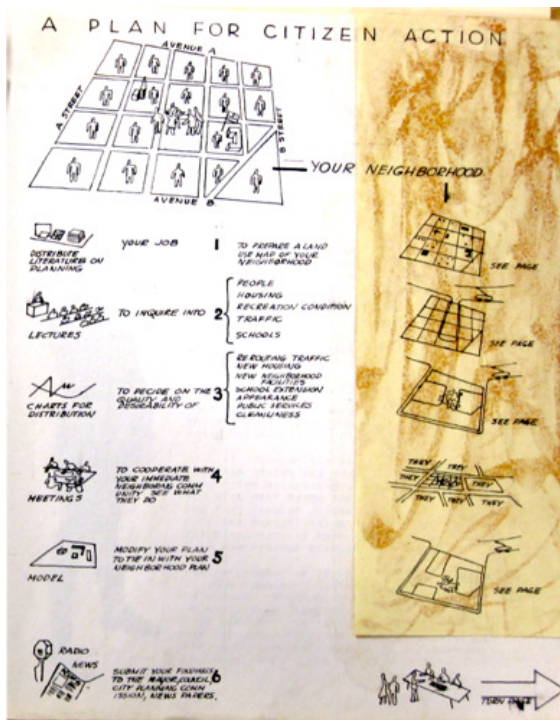


Figure 10. Planning diagrams: “A Plan for Citizen Action.” Source: Kahn [ca. 1944].

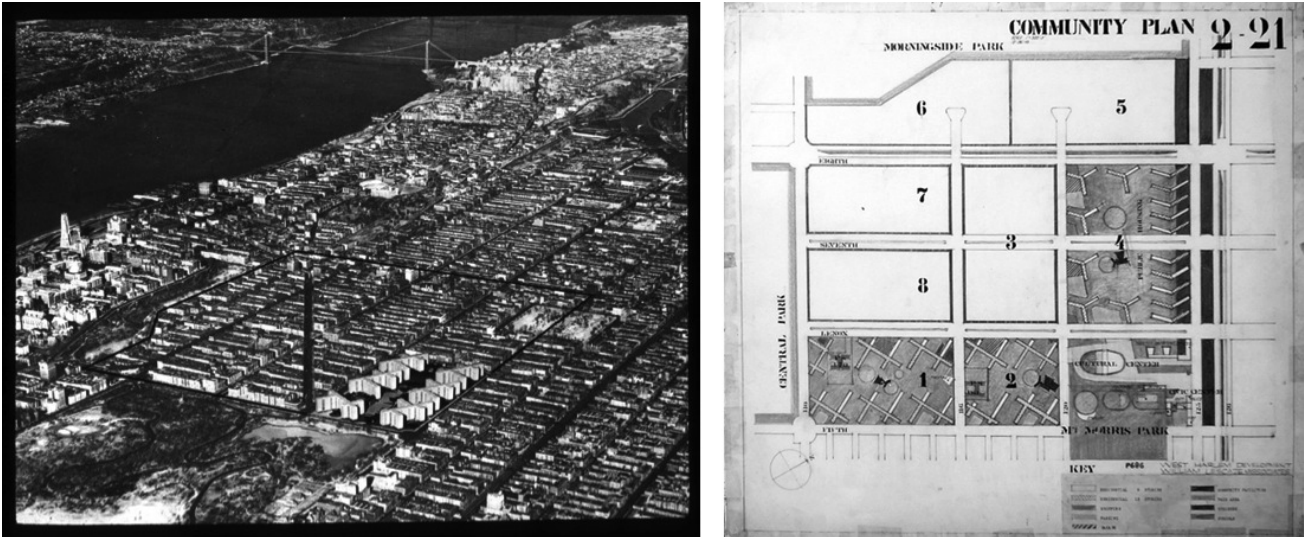
the post-war American city is expressed in the two special issues that *Architectural Forum* published in October 1943 and April 1944 to circulate reflections and projects for “projected postwar neighborhoods” formulated during the war—including strategies, guidelines, prescriptions, and new architectural imageries—that will have significant implications in the foundation of post-war city planning built on neighborhood design (“Planned neighborhoods for 194X,” 1943, 1944).

The two issues appeared in a series of volumes that, between 1942 and 1944, the journal devoted to post-war American architecture and planning addressed at multiple levels and scales, carried out with the collaboration of 23 leading architects and designers. While the first issues reflected on the design of “The New House of 194X” and the “New Buildings for 194X,” the two volumes revolved around neighborhood research in design and emphasized the shifting focus from the single building to the new scale of the “integrated and organic settlements.” The latter benefited from the contribution of inhabitants and neighborhood associations, moving away from a traditional system based on the individual property and towards new large-scale operations of community planning conceived as the outcome of the cooperation among architects, planners, banks, insurance companies, developers, and constructors (“Planned neighborhoods for 194X,” 1943). The issues also outline the shift in contemporary planning culture, from the territorial and regional planning values advocated during the 1920s to the design of units of manageable size conceived as “cells from which the city grows,” understood as tools to regenerate existing urban sectors through a

controlled development at the level of community planning (Stonorov, 1942).

New forms of democratic initiative in neighborhood design were exemplified by the proposals displayed in the issue. An archetypal case is the West Harlem Housing Development (Figure 11), the masterplan submitted by William Lescaze with a New York real estate developer in 1942 for the competition held by the Architectural League and the A.I.A. to identify a viable alternative to the new urban structure proposed by Robert Moses for New York in 1943, when Moses launched his privately funded large-scale slum clearance urban redevelopment housing intervention supported by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

The plan for the redevelopment of 80 blocks in Harlem, accommodated in 12 autonomous superblocks, was entrusted by independent cooperatives, speculative builders, and public administration and generated a new neighborhood for all income levels, built with private funds and affordable government-sponsored housing. The community plan and the “comprehensive neighborhood studio” encouraged democratic forms of initiative and responsibility at the smaller scale of the neighborhood, and introduced prescriptions and diagrams for the redevelopment of other New York slums. The Lescaze project for one of the superblocks, featured by Revere Copper & Brass, became a manifesto of the wartime research on neighborhood and was to be renegotiated in post-WWII large-scale housing estates design and city-planning (Caramellino, 2016; Lescaze, 1945; “Planned neighborhoods for 194X,” 1944).



**Figure 11.** Aerial view of the West Harlem Housing Development by W. Lescaze & Associates (1942–1944; left) and site plan of the Dorie-Miller Housing Project in West Harlem Housing Development by W. Lescaze and J. Felt (1942–1944; right). Sources: “Planned neighborhoods for 194X” (1944, pp. 148, 150).

### 2.5. From WWII Neighborhood Design to Post-War Built Communities

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York had a central role in fostering the wartime research on neighborhood planning, intended as an art and a multidisciplinary field during WWII. Wartime exhibitions devoted to workers’ and defense housing contributed to the reconceptualization of neighborhood design as a positive alternative to the disruptive impact of urban sprawl and urban renewal and became a practical step in post-war city planning (Caramellino, 2020, pp. 233–235). Dealing with various scales, collaborative projects like the “House in the Neighborhood,” proposed by the architects Vernon De Mars and Serge Chermayeff, reflected on the necessity to provide community facilities at cooperative or municipal levels (Mock, 1945, pp. 19–20). As outlined by Oskar Stonorov in his correspondence with Elizabeth Mock in 1943, his wartime research on neighborhood revitalization based on participative design offered support for the organization of the exhibition *Look at Your Neighborhood*, curated by Mock between March and June 1944, in collaboration with the United States Housing Authority and with the support of the United Neighborhood Houses (Caramellino, 2020; MoMA, 1944b).

Designed by Rudolph Mock in collaboration with the planner Clarence Stein, the exhibit made extensive use of blown-up photographs, drawings, charts, models, cartoons, and diagrams to introduce to a non-professional audience the guiding principles for the design of a post-war urban environment based on the needs of individuals and families involved in the process of neighborhood design and community planning. The show analyzed the deplorable living conditions in select New York urban slums and established a range of principles for strengthening the “democratic participative and comprehen-

sive planning of good neighborhoods” (MoMA, 1944a)—equally city neighborhoods or rural communities—built on vacant land or for replacing slum areas in the city. Other experiments of neighborhood regeneration carried with the involvement of organizations of residents at the same time, like the 1940 Mitchell program for the blighted Welwery neighborhood in Baltimore, were displayed to illustrate the use of the neighborhood as the optimal-sized intermediate structure to guide city growth and to regenerate existing residential sectors. The 12 panels became influential educational tools, used by civic and neighborhood associations, schools, planners, and federal authorities, to organize the post-war coordination between the local actions of the neighborhood and city planning through the contribution of community councils, re-contextualizing the early 20th-century attempts to regulate recreational spaces and amenities to regenerate the neighborhood (MoMA, 1944a; Simkhovitch, 1938).

As argued at the exhibit’s opening by Mary Simkhovitch, vice-chair of the New York City Housing Authority and author of the book *Neighborhood* (1938), the notion of neighborhood contributes to fixing the new patterns of American life during WWII and can be planned only in the larger framework of the city, state, and nation, with the involvement of private enterprises and cooperative techniques. She argued that:

What made the strength of pioneer life in this country was the sense of boundary. The family’s self-sustaining economic life, bolstered by school and church created a good but tough life. In town meetings, the life of the community was organized. Everything necessary was contained in that compact unit....We are now in the process of becoming world citizens....There never was a time when the word

neighbor meant as much as it does today. For the neighbor is beginning to realize he is master of his fate if he lives in a purposeful fellowship of neighbors, which is perhaps a pretty good definition of that vast and hazy word “democracy.” (MoMA, 1944b)

In his wartime activity, Oskar Stonorov transferred techniques, visual strategies, languages, and modes of displaying used by New Deal media into the realities of wartime neighborhood design, thus also providing an explicit reference for the Better Philadelphia Exhibition, held in Philadelphia in 1947 to educate the general public on post-war American city planning (Figure 12). Designed by Stonorov and Edmund Bacon in collaboration with the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, the exhibition featured the main outcome of the work conducted by Stonorov with the Commission before and during the war and expressed his idea, developed since 1941 in collaboration with local community leaders, of city planning as the large-scale application of an everyday process based on the cooperation between citizens and professionals in neighborhood and community design (Stonorov & Bacon, 1946).

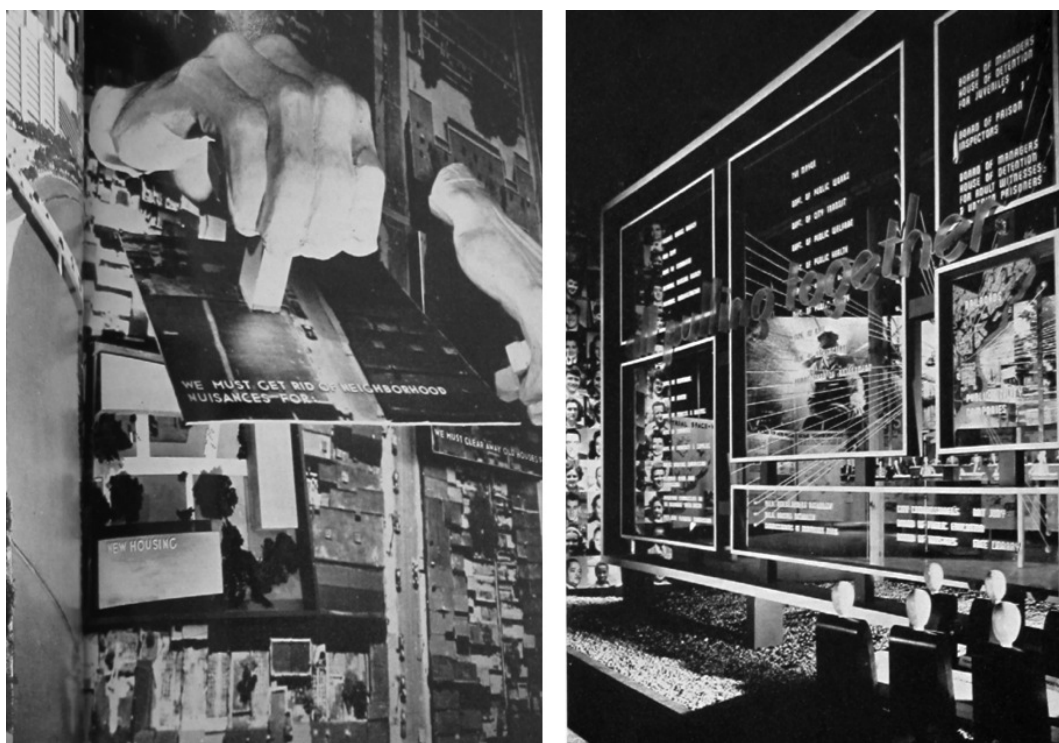
On this occasion, the neighborhood was officially defined as “the cornerstone of the City-Nation” (Philadelphia City Planning Commission, 1947) and the foundational element to cement 20th-century American democracy, used to lay the foundations for a new public works program and a plan for the civic improvement of nine Philadelphia urban sectors. Introduced by the documentary *Can Neighborhoods Exist?* produced by Stonorov in 1943, the installations incorporated con-

tents, languages, techniques, and methods (pictographs, action demonstrations, movies) used in 1944 for the *You and Your Neighborhood* primer and the exhibition held at MoMA, and demonstrated Stonorov’s intent to encourage the participation of architects, dwellers, and institutions in neighborhood design. The exhibit promoted a public understanding of and personal identification with city planning, emphasizing the interest of Stonorov in experimenting with the design of humanely conceived community planning and democratic participative housing, with the involvement of community leaders (Stonorov, 1943a). His ground-breaking approach to neighborhood rehabilitation built on community involvement and modern design was proposed as a convincing alternative to the post-war urban development and suburban growth.

### 3. Conclusions

In the aftermath of WWII, the neighborhood became an epistemological framework, an essential reference, and a recurrent rhetoric in the post-war discourses and practices of American architects, giving rise to a “neighborhood ideology” that mobilized multiple forms of modernity (Harris, 2012; Looker, 2015). Wartime research reconceptualized the neighborhood as a renegotiated paradigm of American society and the expression of a system of values representing American democracy.

The entanglements between the discourse on “neighborhood,” “community,” and “democracy,” which emerged from the wartime attempts to redefine Perry’s NU model in the vocabulary of American architects, had



**Figure 12.** Better Philadelphia Exhibition, 1947. Source: Stonorov and Bacon (1946).

a profound impact on post-war American society, when the notion of neighborhood came to be used increasingly as a design dispositive and re-negotiated in the physical reality of post-war, large-scale estates and suburban white, middle-class built communities (Harris, 2012; Jacobs, 2015; Lasner, 2012).

Similarly, neighborhood design became a powerful vehicle of knowledge transfer and a vibrant platform for architectural debate between American experts—architects, planners, and intellectuals—and European culture. It developed as a transnational concept with unprecedented impact across post-war Europe and acquired a strategic value in terms of global politics (Joch, 2016). It quickly developed as an instrument of post-war European reconstruction plans, one that enhanced the realm of architecture after WWII and became a normative assumption used by design offices and planning departments of well-known international public agencies. Disseminated across the emerging Cold War networks of experts, and reconfigured by the encounter with localized planning and technical cultures and with divergent living and urban models, it underwent processes of reception, adaptation, and appropriation, which in turn generated varied forms of resistance. However, its transatlantic dissemination often resulted in misunderstandings and (mis)translations when transferred into the discourses and practices of European professionals (Couperus & Kaal, 2016; Cupers, 2016). Its usage in technical planning, reconstruction policies, and public housing programs reveals the multiple interpretations and translations of the notion, in its shifting between a material concept and an abstract term. Both built projects and theoretical speculations reveal a limited awareness of the original values and spatial character rooted in wartime American architecture, converting the concept into a technical instrument applied to the composition of housing programs and often reducing its understanding to a device and a graphic tool with a purely visual significance, or to the abstraction of spatial strategies and an organizational scheme for settlement design. The trajectories of circulation of the concept across times, cultures, and languages pose fundamental questions about its multiple translations and bring to light the tension between its universal value and its relative, localized meanings.

### Acknowledgments

I thank the IAS for supporting this research and all the members of the “Re-theorizing the Architecture of Housing” for their incisive comments on different parts of this study. I also thank the colleagues of the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming for their help with my search on the records of Oskar Stonorov. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Paolo Scrivano and Susanne Schindler for the exchange we had on the work of Stonorov. This publication is based upon work from COST Action, European Middle Class Mass Housing

(MCMH-EU) CA 18137 supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). [www.cost.eu](http://www.cost.eu)

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### References

- A tale of two cities. Philadelphia new and old. (1938, March). *Shelter*, 66–67.
- Albrecht, D. (1995). *World War II and the American Dream: How wartime building changed a nation*. MIT Press.
- Bauer, C. (1945). Good neighborhoods. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 242(1), 104–115.
- Beach, A. (1995). The idea of neighborhood 1900–50. *History Today*, 45(9), 8–11.
- Brody, J. (2013). The neighborhood unit concept and the shaping of land planning in the United States 1912–1968. *Journal of Urban Design*, 18(3), 340–362.
- Caramellino, G. (2016). *Europe meets America: William Lescaze, architect of modern housing*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Caramellino, G. (2020). Multiple modernisms. In G. Caramellino & S. Dadour (Eds.), *The housing project* (pp. 210–244). Leuven University Press.
- Churchill, H. S. (1945). *The city is the people*. Reynal & Hitchcock.
- Churchill, H., & Ittleson, R. (1944). *Neighborhood design and control: An analysis of the problems of planned subdivisions*. National Committee on Housing.
- Cohen, J. L. (2011). *Architecture in uniform: Designing and building for the Second World War*. Yale University Press.
- Cooley, C. (1909). *Social organization: A study of a larger mind*. Scribner’s Sons.
- Couperus, S. (2016). Building democracy anew: Neighborhood planning and political reform in post-Blitz Rotterdam. *Journal of Urban History*, 42(6), 992–1008.
- Couperus, S., & Kaal, H. (2016). In search of the social. Neighborhood and community in urban planning in Europe and beyond, 1920–1960. *Journal of Urban History*, 42(6), 987–991.
- Cupers, K. (2016). Mapping and making community in the postwar European city. *Journal of Urban History*, 42(6), 1009–1028.
- Dahir, J. (1947). *The neighborhood unit plan: Its spread and acceptance*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Design for democracy [Special issue]. (1942, August). *Architectural Forum*, 92(1).
- Follett, M. P. (1918). *The new state: Group organization, the solution of popular government*. Longmans.
- Giedion, S. (1958). *Architecture, you, and me*. Harvard University Press.
- Goodman, P. (1940, November). Defense-time planning

- for peace-time use. *Architectural Record*, 96–99.
- Gropius, W. (1945). *Rebuilding our communities*. P. Theobald.
- Gutheim, F. (Ed.). (1972, June). The social architecture of Oskar Stonorov [Special issue]. *L'Architettura*, XVIII(2).
- Hamlin, T. (1940). Architects and the defense. *Pencil Points*, 21, 346–351.
- Harris, D. (2012). *Little white houses. How the postwar home constructed race in America*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Herrington, S. (2015). Fraternally yours: The union architecture of Oskar Stonorov and Walter Reuther. *Social History*, 40(3), 360–384.
- Howe & Associates. (1940, November 20). *Architects and engineers*. [Agreement]. O. Stonorov Papers (Box 43, Folder 11). American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, USA.
- Hudnut, J. (1943, June). Housing and the democratic process. *Architectural Record*, 93(6), 42–46.
- Jacobs, J. (2015). *Detached America: Building houses in post-war suburbia*. University of Virginia Press.
- Joch, A. (2016). Community eludes the architect? German architect planners, American democracy, and the question of community building in transatlantic perspective. *Journal of Urban History*, 42(6), 1029–1043.
- Johnson, D. L. (2002). Origin of the neighbourhood unit. *Planning Perspectives*, 17(3), 227–245.
- Jordy, W. (2005). Fiasco at Willow Run. In W. H. Jordy & M. Bacon (Eds.), *Symbolic essence and other writings on modern architecture and American culture* (pp. 127–132). Yale University Press. (Original work published 1943)
- Kahn, L. [ca. 1944]. *A plan for citizen action* [Unpublished manuscript]. O. Stonorov Papers. American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, USA.
- Kuchenbuch, D. (2016). In search of the human scale. Delimiting the social in German and Swedish urban planning in the 1930s and 1940s. *Journal of Urban History*, 42(6), 1044–1064.
- Lasner, M. (2012). *High life: Condo living in the suburban century*. Yale University Press.
- Lescaze, W. (1942). *A citizens country club or leisure center* [Booklet]. Revere Copper & Brass.
- Lescaze, W. (1944). *Uplifting the downtrodden* [Booklet]. Revere Copper & Brass.
- Lescaze, W. (1945, October 17–December 12). *New design for living. A sound home in a sound neighborhood* [Paper presentation]. Better Homes for Better Living, New York, NY, USA.
- Looker, B. (2015). *A nation of neighborhoods: Imagining cities, communities, and democracy in postwar America*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mock, E. (1945). *Tomorrow's small house: Models and plans*. MoMA.
- MoMA. (1944a, March 21). *Neighborhood Planning Exhibition opens at Museum of Modern Art* [Press release].
- MoMA. (1944b, March 25). *Prominent speakers at preview of Neighborhood Planning Exhibition at MoMA* [Press release].
- Mumford, E. (2000). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism: 1928–1960*. The MIT Press.
- Mumford, L. (1938). *The culture of cities*. Harcourt, Brace & Co.
- Mumford, L. (1954). Neighborhood and the neighborhood unit. *The Town Planning Review*, 24(4), 256–270.
- Perry, A. C. (1924). The relation of neighborhood forces to the larger community: Planning a city neighborhood from the social point of view. In *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work* (pp. 415–421).
- Perry, A. C. (1926). The local community as a unit in the planning of urban residential areas. In American Sociological Society (Ed.), *The urban community* (pp. 238–241). University of Chicago Press.
- Perry, A. C. (1929). The neighborhood unit. A scheme of arrangement for the family-life community. In *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs* (Vol. 7, pp. 22–140). Russell Sage Foundation.
- Philadelphia City Planning Commission. (1947). *The Better Philadelphia Exhibition: What city planning means to you*.
- Planned neighborhoods for 194X [Special issue]. (1943, October). *Architectural Forum*, 65(10).
- Planned neighborhoods for 194X [Special issue]. (1944, April). *Architectural Forum*, 79(4).
- Schubert, D. (2000). The neighborhood paradigm: From garden cities to gated communities. In R. Freestone (Ed.), *Urban planning in a changing world: The twentieth century experience* (pp. 118–136). Routledge.
- Sert, J. L. (1942). *Can our cities survive? An ABC of urban problems, their analysis, their solutions*. Harvard University Press.
- Sert, J. L. (1944). The human scale in city planning. In P. Zucker (Ed.), *New architecture and city planning* (pp. 392–413). Philosophical Library.
- Shanken, A. (2006). The uncharted Kahn: The visuality of planning and promotion in the 1930s and 1940s. *The Art Bulletin*, 88(2), 310–327.
- Shanken, A. (2009). *194X: Architecture, planning and consumer culture on the American home front*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Silver, C. (1985). Neighborhood planning in historical perspective. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 51(2), 161–174.
- Simkhovitch, M. (1936). *The settlement primer: A handbook for neighborhood workers*. National Federation for Settlements Inc.
- Simkhovitch, M. (1938). *Neighborhood: My story of the Greenwich House*. W. W. Norton.
- Stonorov, O. (1939). *Leisure and the community center*. [Lecture transcript]. O. Stonorov Papers (Box 38, Folder 16). American Heritage Center, University of

Wyoming, Laramie, WY, USA.

Stonorov, O. (1941, September 11). *On Detroit Defense City*. [Memorandum]. O. Stonorov Papers (Box 3, Folder 15). American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, USA.

Stonorov, O. (Director). (1943a). *Can neighborhood exist?* [Documentary].

Stonorov, O. (1943b, February 9). *Notes on Bomber City*. O. Stonorov Papers (Box 9, Folder 17). American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, USA.

Stonorov, O. (1943c, May). *Questionnaire to apply for defense housing*. O. Stonorov Papers (Box 9, Folder 17). American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, USA.

Stonorov, O., & Bacon, E. (1946, April 10). *Proposed plan*

*for the Philadelphia City Planning Exhibition 1947*. O. Stonorov Papers (Box 9, Folder 24). American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, USA.

Stonorov, O., & Kahn, L. (1942). *Why city planning is your responsibility* [Booklet]. Revere Copper & Brass.

Stonorov, O., & Kahn, L. (1944). *You and your neighborhood: A primer for neighborhood planning* [Booklet]. Revere Copper & Brass.

Walker, R. (1941). *The planning function in urban government*. University of Chicago Press.

Wynn, A. N. (1996). The 'good war': The Second World War and postwar American society. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31(3), 463–482.

Zucker, P. (1944). *New architecture and city planning*. Philosophical Library.

### About the Author



**Gaia Caramellino** (PhD) is assistant professor in architecture history at the Politecnico di Milano. Her research focuses on the history of housing policies, discourses, and practices and the transfer of knowledge in architecture and urban design. Her work was funded by the Graham Foundation, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Rockefeller Foundation, and Israel Institute for Advanced Studies. She was visiting fellow at the CCA, Montreal, in 2011. Recent book publications include *Europe Meets America: William Lescaze, Architect of Modern Housing* (2016), *The Housing Project* (2020, with S. Dadour), and *Post-War Middle-Class Housing* (2015, with F. Zanfi).