Project Utopia:
Expectations and Conflicts Surrounding Liberty Square, Miami's First Public Housing Project

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ABSTRACT

Liberty Square in Miami, Florida, was one of the first of Roosevelt's New Deal public housing projects for African American residents to open in the United States. Leaders of the black and white communities in Miami initiated the project, and architects working in the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration (PWA) designed it. At the time of its opening, Liberty Square was presented in the national architectural press as a model of government efforts in the design of public housing. In *Housing Comes of Age* (1938), the project was presented as an anonymous, yet most illustrative example of conflict between federal and local officials in. Yet, even before its construction, local black leaders recommended that Liberty Square be officially named *Utopia*. The process of naming Liberty reveals much about the diverse expectations for housing in Miami. This essay outlines the specific tensions and conflicts about race, place, class, and national origin that arise from published and archival sources.

Open to African American tenants on February 6, 1937, Liberty Square, (Fig. 1) was the first public housing project in Florida and the fourth in the United States to be sponsored by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. Its planning and design exemplified modern ideals of a unified layout and a coherent identity sought by architects and planners within the federal Housing Division under the direction of Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes.[1] Contemporary commentators marveled that the project was constructed on the least expensive parcel of land to be purchased by the Division. It cost .004 of a dollar per square foot. That was considerably less than the $4 dollars per square foot spent on the most expensive land purchased, which was that for the Williamsburg Housing in New York City.

Liberty Square was designed to accommodate only twelve families per acre, which was more than the five per acre found in Radburn of 1929 and less than the fifteen per acre in Neubuhl of 1930 in Zurich at 15 families per acre. It had not only the lowest density of any of the fifty-one housing projects completed by the Housing Division, but it exhibited the federal ideal for density in urban housing.[2]

Fig. 1. Aerial view of Liberty Square housing around the time of its opening in February 1937. (Historical Museum of Southern Florida).

Historian Raymond Mohl has written frequently and with authority on Liberty Square. Mohl framed at least part of his discussion of the Miami project within Arnold Hirsch's concept of the "second ghetto," a thesis that addresses the government's role in the location, character, and containment of new black neighborhoods. Mohl thoroughly explored the federal and local politics surrounding Liberty Square's creation, and examined the practice of redlining that efficiently controlled the racial geography of the city.[3] My work owes much to Dr. Mohl, and to local Miami historian, Dr. Paul George, who traced the history of Liberty Square through archival and oral histories. In an

effort to understand the expectations of housing during the New Deal. I will examine its representations. I have selected these from prominent architectural journals and housing publications, from the first published account of federal Housing Division activities, and finally, from archival evidence at the National Archives of exchanges between federal officials and local black and white leaders involved in the naming the project.

In May 1937, shortly after its opening, Liberty Square appeared in both *The Architectural Record* and *The Architectural Forum*, the two most influential design magazines in the United States of time.[4] It was one of only a handful of public housing projects to appear in either journal. The cover of the *Forum*, promised readers articles on theme building and cafeterias, and included Liberty Square in a piece on apartments. The *Record*, on the other hand, featured Liberty Square in a large section on "subdivision design." The only other topic apparently deemed worth mentioning on the cover was the arrival of Walter Gropius to lead the design program at Harvard. The cover highlights in the importance of connections to Europe in the 1930s. Walter Gropius brought with him studies of housing completed in 1929 and new directions in architectural education first explored at the Bauhaus. As seen in the *Record* article on subdivisions, American ideas of public housing were already deeply indebted to European precedents. This was seen in the earlier image taken from a page in the *Architectural Record*.

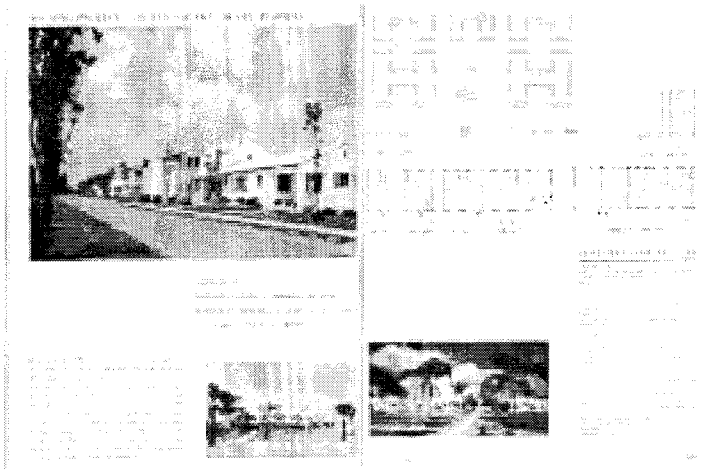

Fig. 2. Liberty Square as it appeared in the May 1937 issue of Architectural Forum.

The author of the article in *The Forum* described Liberty Square through images and plans. (Fig. 2) It prominently featured the names of the local architects involved in the project and included a "construction outline," which listed building materials and their suppliers. The authors commented that the project was for "Negro occupants" and that "in many respects these houses are most attractive, and they present an incomparably better appearance than the average real estate subdivision." The photos attempted to sell the project. They featured clean white single-story bungalows and attached two-story arcaded homes as they are connected to the street. Residents are difficult to pick out of the photographs. Here a child sits on the stoop and an adult stands in a distant doorway. The internal courtyards were shown replete with a variety of palms and a prominently displayed lamppost, which suggested the modern convenience of electricity and a sense public safety after dark. The image, however, of whiteness and of the double height colonnade holds associations with the colonial representation of Florida.

Fig. 3. The Florida Manor House as it appeared in the Great Lakes Official Souvenir Guide. *(The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University).*

These may also be seen in the Florida Manor House from the 1936 Great Lakes Exposition in Cleveland Ohio. (Fig. 3) According to one description of the pavilion: "Visitors will be met at the door by a stooped, gray-haired colored butler. A staff of 45 servants, maids, houseboys, porters and gardeners will be in attendance during the Exposition....Negro entertainers will sing and dance for the visitors."[5] The whiteness of the buildings and double height columns allow at least portions of Liberty Square to appear as Southern manor houses. As such, they may refer to and reinforce the social structure in which the project's initial black tenants worked and lived. A great majority of these were domestic laborers for white Miamians.

The *Architectural Record*, likewise, featured the project site plan, typical individual unit plans, and images of the buildings. (Fig. 4) But writers at the *Record* had either done less homework than their counterparts at the *Forum*, or were determined to dissimulate. For example, after describing Liberty Square's location at the edge of Miami, the *Record* author wrote with the conviction and detail of one who has just visited the project: "Behind the community building is an open, terrazzo-paved dance floor. The swimming and wading pools are flanked on either side by large grass plots." The aerial photograph reveals, however, that the dance floor and pools were never built. In fact, the swimming pool was the central feature of the site plan. Debate over its inclusion brought national attention to the enormity of misinformation and inequities in Miami (and elsewhere) concerning recreational access to water. There were, for example, no public beaches in

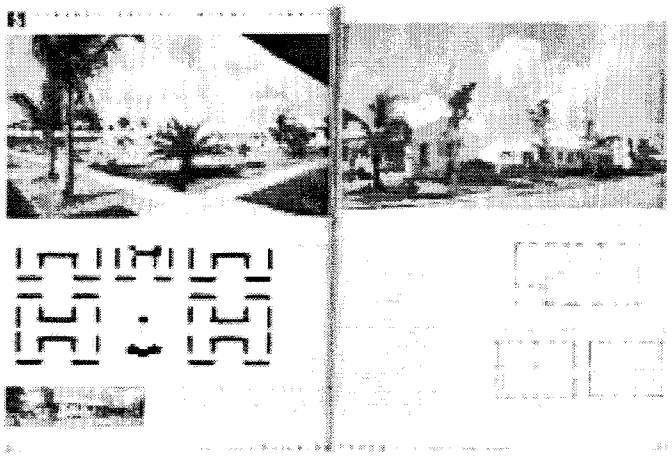

Fig. 4. Liberty Square as it appeared in the May 1937 issue of Architectural Record *in the section entitled "Building Types." The whiteness and double height colonnade (shown in the image on the right) recall the Florida Manor House illustrated in figure 3.*

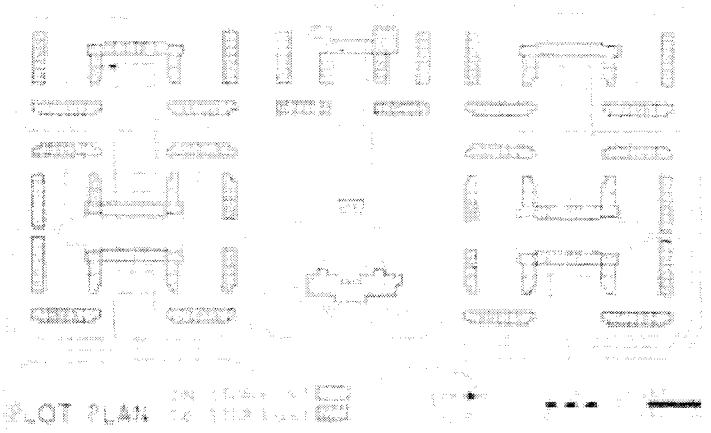

Fig. 5. A model housing site plan as it appeared in the federal Housing Division's publication entitled Unit Plans. *Although published without mention of a site, the plan was clearly based upon the Liberty Square site.*

Miami or Miami Beach that allowed black bathers. Discussion of the pool also spawned a series of interesting issues concerning race and public health. The article in the *Record* also claimed that the project had wooden floors and hot running water, neither of which was true. Also omitted was the fact that the project was constructed for Miami's black population. The ideal qualities of the project, its consistent identity of whiteness and its visual similarity to private middle class developments were perhaps felt to be at odds with the black population for whom it was constructed.

The *Record* and the *Forum* presented very similar site plans. This featured a site partitioned into three segments from north to south, divided by roadways leading to internal parking areas. The middle segment was designed around a courtyard formed by the community building, pools, dance floors, and playgrounds. Paths for pedestrians crossed the open courtyards and ran parallel those of the automobiles. The plan reflected notions of a neighborhood built around community facilities, with pedestrian movement isolated as much as possible from automotive traffic.

Readers of *The Record* and *The Forum* had almost certainly recognized Liberty Square's site and individual apartment plans. They had first been presented anonymously as ideal types in the well-known 1935 publication by the PWA Housing Division entitled, *Unit Plans*. (Fig. 5) This book was intended as an educational guide for the hundreds of architects designing public housing for the first time. Considered a "Bible" of public housing the book offered architects a set of graphic "housing standards." It contained advice on materials, layouts, and various technological and economic issues. These were based upon assumptions about social structures and lifestyles.[6]

With a few minor alterations, most notably the addition of service and storage spaces, and a change in orientation, the project retained its original, anonymous, and "ideal" form. Like many public housing projects across the country, Liberty Square was admittedly designed entirely in Washington and presented to the team of Miami architects for minor alterations and considerations of appearance.

The design of Liberty Square was first presented to the public anonymously because it was an ideal standard to be modified for many specific conditions. When Michael Straus and Talbott Wegg included it as a case study in their "intimate account" of the Housing Division entitled *Housing Comes of Age*, it was again presented anonymously; with "all names...fictitious". The story required anonymity because, in the author's words, of "the multiplicity of controversial detail and the warmth of feeling aroused..."[7] They assured the reader that "no detail of this story is unique to the city or project in question," and note that "All have been encountered in kind, *if not in degree*, in other cities."[8] Liberty Square is the single project most discussed in *Housing Comes of Age*. Archival evidence points to Talbott Wegg's extensive involvement in the Liberty Square project. He made his first of many trips to Miami in September 1934 during which time he discussed the potential of a housing project there with public officials.[9]

As described by Straus and Wegg, the problems began and ended with Liberty Square's location. On this Housing Division map of Miami, the location is scrawled in pencil at the edge of the city limits. The federal government purchased the first of three lots for Liberty Square at the intersection of 12th Avenue and 62nd Street to the northwest of the city of Miami. (Fig. 6) Critical advantages of this site were its location on vacant land with a clear title. A local white businessman, Floyd Davis, who was heavily invested in the existing black subdivision known as Liberty City, held the title. He was interested in expanding his profitable business to the east and saw a federal housing project as a way to achieve this.

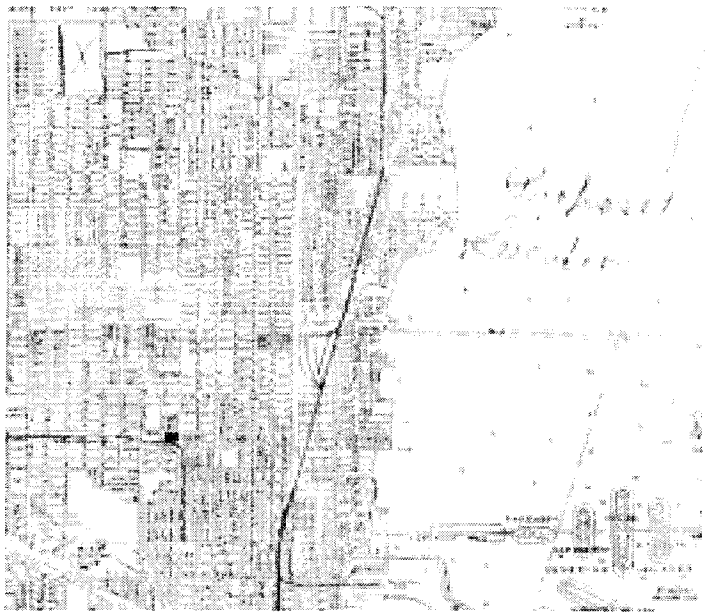

Fig. 6. Federal Government map of Miami showing Liberty Square bordered by NW 12th Avenue to the east and NW 62nd Street to the south. Its position on NW 12th Avenue, which some vocal opponents to the project claimed to be a "white" north-south thoroughfare, was very controversial. The project was eventually moved two blocks to the west. (National Archives and Records Administration).

Straus and Wegg began their story by recounting the history of the poor living conditions for black people in an area that was variously called variously Negrotown, or Colored Town, or is known today as Overtown.

Fig. 7. This 1940 Sanborn Map of Overtown reveals the crowded conditions in the area.

They explain that these extremely crowded conditions, as seen in this Sanborn map of 1940 (Fig. 7), arose from a 1915 covenant signed by leaders of the black and white populations. This required the 800 black people to live on less than 300 acres in what was then the periphery of the downtown area. In a mere twenty years, the black population in Miami had grown to 25,000 and the Overtown area had been engulfed by an expanding downtown. Yet, instead of Overtown expanding to keep up with growth, it had actually been reduced by the construction of warehouses, churches, and schools. As Straus and Wegg noted:

> You could see in Negrotown at least a score of lots 50 by 150 feet on which were squeezed 16 detached houses. Tenants of these houses have stated that, unless they knew their neighbours, they feared to sleep with windows open, lest the neighbours (without going out doors) reach in and steal their belongings. These lots had two privies at one end and one cold water spigot as the sum total of convenience for the tenant, and rents were from $10 to $12 per month.[10]

With the high rents and extreme density, property in Overtown became was an immensely lucrative venture for both white and black landowners. With no action to curb the density or profits, the area became the assumed location of outbreaks of dengue fever in 1934. Miami city officials feared this might become a regular occurrence and severely impede the tourist trade.

At that point, Straus and Wegg describe the situation:

> "Slum clearance in Negrotown was clearly out of the question for two reasons. First, land prices, inflated by the nuisance value of rigid segregation, were out of sight. And second, clearance of any possible area would have thrown hundreds of families on the street until the new project was completed. The plan jointly approved by the sponsoring group and the Housing Division was to purchase land in an outlying subdivision next to a small and long established colony of Negro truck gardeners. This, for the purpose of starting a new coloured section where there would be room to breathe and turn around."[11] This was the beginning of Miami's first "second ghetto."

From the start, the government employed tactics of stealth and force to achieve their goals of public housing. They anticipated a huge amount of local antagonism to the project. Their instinct was to avoid or delay public responses. As Straus and Wegg wrote: "No publicity was given to the plan but the mere presence of the Housing Division initiator gave rise to speculation: 'What was the Government up to?' "[12] While the project was secret, plans went ahead smoothly. The public mood changed, however, the moment Liberty Square's location was announced in March 1935. Straus and Wegg recount that almost immediately:

> A Citizens' Committee formed to protest the project, circulated a petition and succeeded in obtaining 3,000 signatures of person who claimed that completion of the project would not only ruin all property owners in the city, but that it might precipitate race riots. It was perhaps unfortunate that the names of the petitioners were

accompanied by their home addresses, for the Housing Division made a map of the area, spotting these addresses in relation to the project site and found that less than 5 per cent of those who were to suffer ruin lived within one mile of the project and more than that number lived 15 miles distant![13]

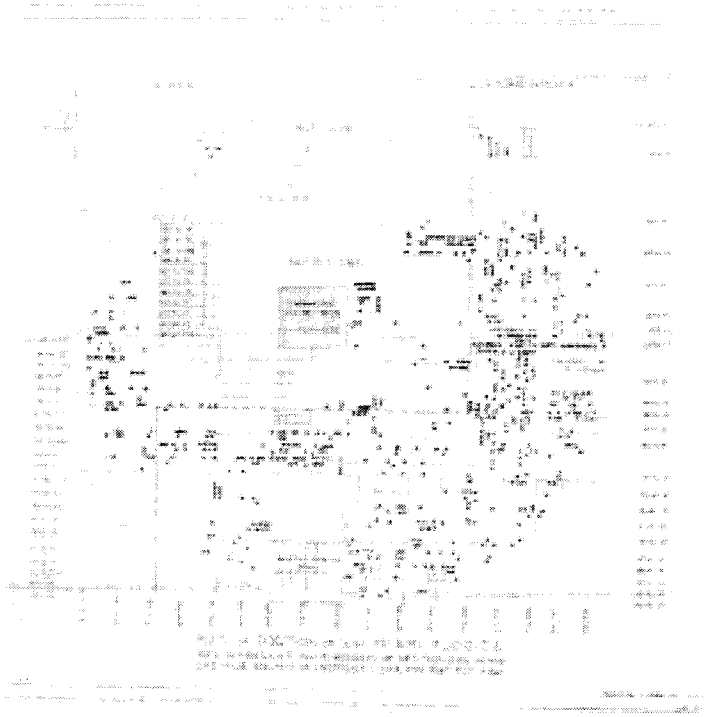

Fig. 8. Map made by government official indicating the location of residences of individuals opposed to Liberty Square. The circles are one half mile, and one-mile radii from the project. (National Archives and Records Administration).

The one-mile map (Fig. 8) forms a target centered on Liberty Square. The dots of petitioner's addresses indicate the number of presumably white people nearby who were against the expansion of the urban black population into this area. It also clearly marks clearly the location of the city line, the location of nearby schools, and other black neighborhoods.

Federal housing officials received photographs of lynchings that not so subtly attempted to scare them off. Hundreds sent letters. A typical response was that black housing in Miami was "the greatest waste of Government funds imaginable." The protests led to waffling on the part of local officials. Votes were taken and retaken, pledges made and broken, and promises given and recanted. The situation appeared desperate. The director of the Housing Division announced his desire to abandon the project. The authors recounted that "members of the staff who had been closely connected with the project" encouraged the director to negotiate an agreement with the city "out of consideration for the 25,000 inarticulate Negroes for whose benefit the project had been planned."[14] This degree of condescension speaks volumes for federal paternalism. From the outset, Miami's professional black population made sizeable contributions to the success of the project. Indeed, one of the initial application's evaluators commented that the project was exemplary because of the expressed "desire of the Negroes themselves to work for the success of the project."[15] Black leaders themselves, however, were not immune to critiques of paternalism. Some eagerly anticipated that Liberty Square would allow them to "*segregate* some of the best families from the classes of *undesirable* elements."[16]

Straus and Wegg described local meetings, including one event in which a prominent local official finished a meeting by "castigating the Negroes as shiftless, criminal, and quite unworthy of any consideration." They describe federal officials physically barring a local leader from a critical meeting because "he had already had his field day," and taking city officials on tours of the site "since none of the officials had ever visited the site or knew where it was!" According to Straus and Wegg, the ends justified the means, and "by the time the project was completed and occupied it had become the showplace of the city." The authors noted with some degree of incredulity that "the mayor, with a conveniently short memory of his past performances, took distinguished visitors to see 'what great things my administration has done for the Negro.'"

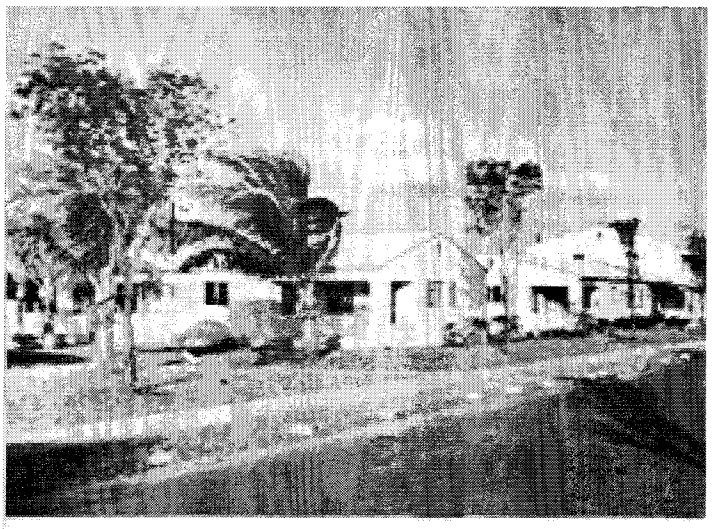

Fig. 9. The only image of Liberty Square in Housing Comes of Age. *The subtitle of the image. "Even Miami has a housing problem" suggests that few people recognized the seriousness of the housing crisis in this city, otherwise known for its fun and sun.*

To most readers, except those in Miami, the story of Liberty Square told in *Housing Comes of Age* would have gone unrecognized. The only depiction of the project is presented near the end of the book with the caption "Even Miami has a Housing Problem." (Fig. 9) Why the words "even Miami"? Was it public perception that there was no trouble in paradise? Or was this aimed at those in Miami who did not recognize the desperate need for housing black residents in their own city?

The Straus and Wegg account is instructive for the insight it offers of federal perceptions of a local community.

Although advertised otherwise, paradise can be a very complex place met with varied expectations. Perhaps the most complete picture of these may be gleaned from discussions about the name, Liberty Square, as exhibited here on a promotional brochure for potential residents. The Director of the Housing Division initiated the process by asking the prominent black Miami lawyer R. E. S. Toomey to form a naming committee. The director advised him that "we would prefer a name that was either distinctive of the location or in memory of some outstanding citizen. We do not favor names which suggest promotional real estate sub-divisions."[17] The committee of five, which was chaired by Mr. Toomey and included the popular young Episcopalian leader Reverend John Culmer, responded with just two names: "Utopia" and "Toomeyville."[18] Dissatisfied with this reply, the housing Director wrote back that "Utopia," while implying a "new and vastly improved community" seemed "too general" for a "specific project in Northwest Miami." As for Toomeyville, the director noted that individuals after whom housing projects were to be named had to be "not only distinguished but deceased." With uncharacteristic comic flair he added: "under the circumstances, I could not wish to see you qualified for this distinction."[19] The director then made his own suggestion of Liberty City Gardens, ironically suggesting a somewhat Arcadian version of the nearby promotional black real estate subdivision, Liberty City. This was precisely what he had told the committee not to do. Toomey and his colleagues acquiesced to the director's suggestion. Utopia and Toomeyville, however, point to two expectations for the role of housing from the perspective of black residents. Utopia, as criticized, implied a placeless hope for new opportunities – suggesting the general possibility of infinite expansion and unattainable expectations. Toomeyville, however, provided hope for prominent black individuals in Miami to receive the recognition they had long lacked in the community. With their names on buildings and projects such as this, the places they live in have the potential to become identified with their own community histories.

The name of the project remained unresolved for nearly a year, at which point the housing project's white Advisory Board was asked to weigh in. They submitted a list that included various combinations of parks, squares, Booker T. Washington, Lincoln, Liberty, and oddly enough-although perhaps with cynical associations to Mussolini's recent activities in Africa- the name "Ethiopian Retreat."[20] From all these options, the white board decided on "Liberty Square," citing their impressions that "Liberty City was a well-known name in Miami" and stated that the project was "within the limits of Liberty City."[21] This effectively established the connection between Liberty City and the new federal project. It insured the smooth development of lands between Liberty City and Liberty Square owned by Floyd Davis. Referring back to the Division director's initial suggestions, the black advisory board expressed their dissatisfaction with the project being named after a subdivision. They preferred "Roosevelt Square," wishing to underscore the fact that the project was a product of New Deal efforts.[22] Federal officials promptly rejected the suggestion of the black community, and settled on the name Liberty Square.

In conclusion, the perceptions of Liberty Square, and by association, New Deal housing, were filled with tension and paradox. For the architectural press, it was an image that did not require accuracy of description. Its image, while distinct from the surroundings, reinforced the social order consistent with the most "attractive" of private real estate ventures. To federal officials, Liberty Square was a study of extremes. Miami's "inarticulate" black population was among the most in need of housing, while some members of its white population were considered just about the least deserving of federal services of any in the country. Federal officials claimed to seek a name for the project associated with a specific person or a sense of the place. Yet they chose one in the end that aligned the project with private development and eased the transition between private and public construction. From Liberty Square, we might infer that New Deal housing addressed the challenges of establishing a public American identity. This was an identity located between ideals and realities of American life on the eve of WWII, and is one that is still being negotiated today.

NOTES

[1] Members of the Housing Division relied heavily on two publications: Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (Boston and New York: Haughton Mifflin Company, 1934) for her coverage of recent examples of housing from the United States and Europe, and Edith Elmer Wood, *Recent Trends in Modern Housing* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1931) for her assessment of the economic viability of federally funded public housing.

[2] Twelve families per acre was considered ideal by several architects who worked with the Housing Division, including, Walter R. McCornack, architect of the Cedar-Central project in Cleveland, Ohio. See Walter R. McCornack, "Elements in Housing Design," In *Housing Officials' Yearbook* 1936 (Chicago: National Association of Housing Officials, 1936): 135. For the price of the land, see Michael W. Straus and Talbot Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938): 96. For the site coverage see, James E. Scott, "Miami's Liberty Square," In *The Crisis: a Record of the Dark Races*, vol. 49 no. 3 (March 1942): 87.

[3] For example, see Raymond Mohl, "Trouble in Paradise: Race and Housing in Miami During the New Deal Era" In *Prologue: Journal of the National Archives* vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring 1987), 7-21. For one of Mohl's more recent discussions of Liberty Square, see "The Second Ghetto Thesis and the Power of History" In *Journal of Urban History* vol. 29, no. 3 (March 2003), 243-256.

[4] *The Architectural Record*, Building Type section (May 1937): 20-21. *The Architectural Forum* (May 1937): 422-423.

[5] Joel Hoffman, "From Augustine to Tangerine: Florida at the U.S. World's Fairs," In *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 23 (1998): 68-69.

[6] Housing Division, Public Works Administration, *Unit Plans: Typical Room Arrangements Site Plans and Details for Low Rent Housing* (Washington DC, 1935). A brief account of the production and purpose of this book is told in Michael W. Straus and Talbot Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 67-68.

[7] Michael W. Straus and Talbot Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, 102

[8] Michael W. Straus and Talbot Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, 102

[9] See letter of 8/25/34 Hackett to Gramling, Public Housing Archives (PHA), Record Group (RG) 196, National Archives and Records Adminstration (NARA).

[10] See Straus and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, 104.

[11] See Straus and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, 104.

[12] See Straus and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, 105.

[13] See Straus and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, 106.

[14] See Straus and Wegg, *Housing Comes of Age*, 107.

[15] Letter 6/27/34 Arthur B. Gallion writes to R. B. Mitchell, PHA, RG 196, NARA.

[16] Letter 1/15/34 R. E. S. Toomey, et al. to Robert D. Kohn, Federal Emergency Administrator of Public Works, Director of Housing, PHA, RG 196, NARA.

[17] Letter 10/25/35 Clas to Toomey, PHA, RG 196, NARA.

[18] Letter 11/1/35 Toomey to Clas, PHA, RG 196, NARA.

[19] Letter 11/14/35 Clas to Toomey, PHA, RG 196, NARA.

[20] 5/14/36 Minutes of the Advisory Committee Meeting, PHA, RG 196, NARA.

[21] 6/4/36 White Advisory Board Meeting Minutes, PHA, RG 196, NARA.

[22] Letter 6/11/36 Coe to Clas, PHA, RG 196, NARA.