

Lessons from the Housing Crisis on the American Home Front during World War II

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Abstract

This paper examines the argument in *Planning the Home Front*--that the federal government of the United States used a "participatory planning" approach to mobilize the American home front for World War II--in the context of the housing crisis that appeared in America's industrial metropolises including Detroit (Peterson 2013). The paper describes the elements of the federal government's participatory planning approach and delves into housing through the historical case study of the Willow Run Bomber Plant. Located 25 miles west of Detroit and at one time planned to employ 100,000 workers, the bomber plant, and the stresses it placed on local communities, posed a significant challenge to achieving federal mobilization goals. The paper closes with reflections on what lessons the American mobilization for World War II and the story of Willow Run hold today for housing and building communities.

Introduction

Millions of Americans moved out of the nation's interior to coastal and Great Lakes states during World War II (1939-1945). They migrated to work in the war industries, and they brought their families. They put tremendous pressure on the existing housing stock at the same time that war production claimed the materials and labor needed for new housing. The mass migration of families, alone, would make the war years significant for urban planning in the United States. Adding to the urban planning challenges, the federal government—led by the military—often chose to expand industrial capacity on the outskirts of industrial metropolises. Using just the example of the Willow Run Bomber Plant, the Army Air Forces and the Ford Motor Company located a major industrial facility, which at one time they thought would employ 100,000 workers, in a county with only 80,000 people in it. Only one paved highway connected the chosen site the 25 miles to Detroit. The federal government's industrial location policy, repeated across the country, accelerated existing patterns of urban growth on the metropolitan fringe and set the stage for the subsequent decades of suburbanization.

Working from the perspective of urban planning, *Planning the Home Front* examines how the federal government mobilized the American home front. With the Willow Run Bomber Plant as its main case study, the study includes the roles played by military officials, civilian bureaucrats, industrialists, labor leaders, local officials, social activists, small business owners, and industrial workers and their families. Instead of looking at each group separately, the analysis focuses on their interactions, as they—as individuals and as members of groups—confronted the challenges of mobilizing the home front for total war.

At a superficial level, *Planning the Home Front* comes to the same conclusion as one of the only other historical studies that (briefly) covers the mobilization of the American home front from the perspective of urban planning: Mel Scott's *American City Planning since 1890*, published in 1969 and commissioned by the American Institute of Planners to celebrate its 50th anniversary. Scott wrote his planning history opus not as a distant historian, but as a planner who had been active

professionally during many of the decades that he chronicled. Scott spent the war years as a planner in the San Francisco Bay area, one of the hot beds of wartime industrial expansion and immigration. Of the American home front, Scott wrote:

Throughout the war most production centers presented a spectacle of innumerable federal agencies, the military, state and local governments, voluntary organizations, and private enterprise struggling against tremendous odds to achieve a reasonable degree of coordination. That ships slid down ways ahead of schedule and plants exceeded their production quotas seemed at times inexplicable. Certainly, no comprehensive planning accounted for America's prodigious wartime accomplishment (Scott 1969, p. 396).

To be sure, *Planning the Home Front* presents one of Scott's spectacles. I also agree with his assessment that comprehensive planning was *not* what led to American production success. From the urban planning perspective, the impulse to be "comprehensive" or to take an "integrated approach" or—as one might say today—to be "holistic" was certainly proposed, discussed, and even attempted in places. But as a way to mobilize the home front, "comprehensive planning" was rejected at the federal level. Nor did the federal government go out of its way to encourage comprehensive planning at the local level; in certain situations, federal officials even discouraged it. But even if one does not approve of what happened (and it is clear that Scott did not approve), it's not very interesting—or helpful--to just throw up one's hands and call it "inexplicable." (For the rest of the small literature that examines the American home front from the perspective of urban planning, see Abbott 1984 and Hanchett 1994).

Instead of comprehensive planning, *Planning the Home Front* argues that the federal government adopted a participatory planning approach to mobilizing the American home front. Total war demanded significant top-down direction, of course, but it is the presence of an equally significant role for the "bottom up" that makes this an interesting and important planning model. As the top-down engaged the bottom-up, national objectives (win the war) joined local objectives for building communities, and interest group politics were harnessed to a national project (total war). For Willow Run, the federal government dictated the goal (produce bombers), but federal policy left many of "the means" to the local level--and often to individuals. Indeed, many of the means implemented at Willow Run would qualify for what Leonie Sandercock calls planning as "community building" or planning as "self-help, community solidarity, and community organizing for social and economic development" (Sandercock 1998, pp. 9-10).

Housing on the American World War II Home Front

The mass migration of families during the war made housing a key planning issue and point of conflict in the United States. (Table 1 provides a summary of the scope and size of the federal involvement in housing during the war years.) Across the political spectrum, leaders believed that industrial production would suffer if industrial workers inhabited inadequate housing. In late 1940, the Defense Housing Coordinator's Office issued statements reinforcing the government's commitment to "decent housing for *all* Americans." Charles Palmer, in charge of this Office, argued that "loyal families of America whose workers are on the industrial firing line, sweating day and night, ... have the right to expect homes, not just shelter." Palmer further insisted that a temporary need "does not justify temporary housing of an inferior standard." Defense workers deserved to be able to live with their families in affordable housing "designed to provide standards of livability and sanitation not lower than those for permanent housing," because "a happy family is the best background for an efficient workman" (National Defense Advisory Commission 1940 and Peterson 2013, p. 88).

On the eve of war, however, U.S. federal housing policy was fairly limited. At the state and local level, uneven development of housing policies meant that housing was not an area where local leadership was especially strong. The federal government did have a surprisingly long list of small-to-tiny programs that dabbled in various forms of public housing. Congress had also enacted a mortgage insurance program that provided incentives for home ownership, but its designers had not figured out—yet—how to support a product affordable to industrial workers.

If policy development remained in its infancy, policy discussion was flowering into a vibrant young adulthood. The United States hosted an active group of sophisticated thinkers, as represented by characters such as Catherine Bauer, Oscar Stonorov, Miles Colean, Coleman Woodbury, Robert Weaver, Charles Abrams and many others from across the political spectrum, who created a rich intellectual environment for policy discussion and innovation. Many of them had studied the various European models that Catherine Bauer had introduced in her 1934 book *Modern Housing*. (Examples of their publications: Bauer 1934; Howe, Stonorov & Kahn 1942; Colean 1941; Woodbury 1940; Weaver 1944; Abrams 1941.) In addition, a host of mid-level bureaucrats reacted with enthusiasm to the opportunity to take to scale the knowledge and experience that they had gleaned from working in the various New Deal housing and public works programs.

	Private	Public	Total
All Types of War Housing	1,165,955	855,714	2,021,669
All Types of Family Housing	1,033,690	602,634	1,636,324
All Types of New Family Housing	836,579	551,972	1,388,551
Permanent Family Housing	836,579	276,073	1,112,652
Public Regular		194,767	
Public Demountable		81,306	
Temporary Family Housing		275,899	
Conversion Construction	197,111	50,662	247,773
Single-Person Accommodations	3,147	171,400	174,547
Permanent	3,147	13,257	
Temporary		158,143	
Stop-gap Housing		81,306	81,306

Source: National Housing Agency, *Fourth Annual Report* (1946), p. 68.

Exactly the relationship between worker productivity and housing of “inferior standard” became a point of significant policy debate and political conflict throughout the war years, but the emphasis on the need to rapidly expand housing—of some type—for families led to the federal encouragement of innovations in construction methods, architectural design, and tenure and finance arrangements. And in the policy and political arenas, they grappled with what are familiar issues today: the need for diversity in the housing stock, whether to focus on housing or look more broadly at community building, and the reality of metropolitan political fragmentation combined with city versus suburban conceptions of regional growth. Housing solutions as ideologically opposed as introducing public housing and expanding single-family home ownership and as varied as building model cities and providing public water supplies to private trailer camps all vied for federal attention and support.

Housing was conceived as a means to ensure and boost industrial production for war, but just as importantly—although less publicly debated—housing was also a means to prevent other federal policies from being enacted. The continuation of housing construction during the war served as a bulwark against calls from the U.S. military and their political allies for increasing controls on labor and travel. Despite strong military pressure, the United States never adopted a labor draft.

The federal government exercised **top-down control** through regulating the use of raw materials for manufacturing and construction. Controls on building materials began in 1941 and strengthened throughout 1942. By summer 1942, a federal permit was required for all new housing construction, and even the federal public housing programs were required to receive approval from the federal bureaus that oversaw construction materials. The federal government sought out housing projects that directly served the war effort and thus only housing types that promised to be affordable to industrial workers were eligible to receive permits.

This bureaucrat dynamic--where the federal agency controlling materials was not also charged with creating construction programs, but instead reviewed and scrutinized the programs proposed by others--led outside groups to adopt what could be called the “and” strategy for war production. For the housing field, this meant that interest groups attached their preferred housing solutions to war production. They advocated for their pet housing policies and projects by claiming that they served war production “and”—for example—promoted single-family home ownership. Or served war production “and” advanced public housing. Or promoted war production: “and” advanced prefabricated construction; “and” allowed housing cooperatives; “and” expanded low-cost, garden apartments in the suburbs; or, “and” achieved whatever other housing policy or specific project they actually wanted.

Although in recent years, historians have begun to rediscover America’s World War II housing (the list of references contain examples of this literature), for decades after the war policy-makers seemed to have walked away from—even forgotten—the war years’ experiments and advancements. One has to look to Britain for a positive assessment. Observing in 1946 that the Americans had re-housed eight million people in four years without resorting to compulsory billeting, the architect Hugh Casson advised that the American model had much to emulate. Not only had Americans preserved private enterprise, putting even many of the public projects out to bid for private construction, they had devised methods that allowed them to learn – to speed construction, to lower costs, and to add community facilities – as they went along. Casson concluded, “Even in that land of industrial miracles, the American emergency housing programme must rank as one the great technical feats of this century.” (Casson 1946, p. 3 and Peterson 2013, p. 278)

The American World War II Experience and Today’s American Housing Challenges

To draw a comparison between now and 70-plus years ago is not always wise. Total war, however, is not the most striking aspect inconsonant with making an analogy to today’s housing concerns. The vast majority of the American home front never experienced a serious threat of active war—of being bombed or occupied. But other aspects of the American World War II context should be kept in mind when making analogies: home front housing policies developed in a time of growing construction material and labor shortages, or the latter’s flip side: approaching and going beyond full employment.

With these caveats in mind, a comparison of one present-day call for American housing reform to the World War II American home front experience shows significant overlap. In their “Getting to Scale: the Need for a New Model in Housing and Community Development,” published as part of

the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco’s *Investing in What Works* policy mobilization effort, Sister Lillian Murphy and Janet Falk, affiliated with Mercy Housing a non-profit developer of 41,000 apartments in the United States, note that communities across the U.S. have a continuing need for both affordable rental housing and workable programs that promote long-term home ownership. For affordable housing, they identify the need for “a sustainable business model to continue to survive and thrive” (Murphy & Falk 2012, p. 239). Table 2 summarizes the Murphy & Falk model and analogous American home front experiences.

Although sophisticated instruments as such as non-profit housing development organizations that leverage tax credits, Murphy and Falk’s central concern, would have been mostly the stuff of talk and policy speculation in the 1940s, both their proposed new housing model and the home front model seek/sought to reach new scales of production and both recognize/included a role for affordable rental housing and home ownership. Although federal housing policy is not usually thought of as a “business model” in the traditional sense, in another sense, total war meant that the federal government acted more like a business than ever before. To be sure, federal officials were running a business with a fractious board of directors that numbered in the hundreds and stockholders that marched in the streets, but like a business, the primary task of war was not governing, but producing, and as this paper shows, for various reasons, the U.S. federal government chose not to take complete and unilateral control of the production process.

Lining it up against the Murphy & Falk new housing model shows that the American home front experience holds the potential to offer direct lessons, the opportunity to mine policy ideas long forgotten, and the sobering challenge of cautionary tales.

Table 2: Can the American World War II Experience Speak to Today?	
Five Elements of the Murphy & Falk (2012) New Housing Model	U.S. World War II Experience
1) Allow for flexibility and diversification of business lines/housing portfolio so some business lines can fund operations and subsidize other business lines.	Metropolitan-wide housing programs that included for-profit housing and various types of government-owned housing, some of which earned an operating profit.
2) Encourage innovation – need some tolerance for failure.	Successful at encouraging experimentation and innovation.
3) Fund at enterprise level, rather than project-by-project.	Attempted to manage at regional/metropolitan program level, but still got drawn into project-by-project reviews and controversies.
4) Encourage collaboration across housing, community, and transportation sectors: need federal institutional infrastructure to facilitate.	Various federal institutional arrangements for coordination attempted; even when successful, eventually rejected by Congress.
5) Develop comprehensive impact measurement of social, economic, and environmental impacts.	Housing seen as means to war production and assessed according to its ability to further industrial production.

Participatory Planning in Action for Housing

In the preceding section, I made the case that 1940s housing policy in the United States may be of interest today for a wide range of reasons. The rest of this paper further analyzes just a part of the larger argument: the **bottom up component** for planning and implementing war housing policies, a key element supporting the conclusion that the federal government used a participatory planning approach to mobilizing the American home front. The following presents only a thumbnail sketch of three housing stories, with the aim of showing multiple examples that make

the point that encouraging **bottom up solutions** formed a pattern of federal behavior. The stories are also chosen to illustrate the variety of ways this bottom up component operated.

Story 1: The Battle for Bomber City

A bomber plant expected to employ 100,000, but located in a rural area 25 miles from Detroit, quite expectedly posed significant challenges for housing and transportation. As the bomber plant was under construction in 1941, two separate proposals emerged from outside the federal government that provided their own solutions.

The United Automobile Workers union, in conjunction with architects enthusiastic about “modern housing” and encouraged by a small group of federal officials, proposed that the federal government build a 10,000-unit model city made up of row houses and garden apartments formed into distinct neighborhoods centered on elementary schools and community facilities. The UAW proclaimed that the model city—a “laboratory for post-war life and housing”—would be “proof that Democracy is capable of preparing its defenses in a way that is exemplary for the kind of peace for which it is asking American workers to build bombers and tanks.” (*United Automobile Worker*, December 1, 1941 in Peterson, p. 103).

The Michigan State Highway Department, working with Ford Motor Company officials, proposed that the federal government fund construction of Michigan’s first express highway to connect the bomber plant to Detroit.

These proposals developed, however, before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. By the time the federal government got around to deciding, it was the summer of 1942. No longer a time of federal largesse, concerns about how construction materials and labor shortages would affect accelerated war production objectives dominated federal attention.

In addition, the local real estate industry and suburban officials were not, to put it mildly, excited about the UAW’s model city, nicknamed Bomber City. (Detroit city leaders expressed little enthusiasm for it either.) They mounted a determined protest against Bomber City and proposed instead that the federal government let the private sector take on the challenge of building affordable single-family houses for sale to war workers. Ford Motor Company officials also strongly opposed the model city, offering support to local efforts in opposition and continuing to lobby for the highway project.

In trying to decide between the proposals, various federal agencies battled it out with each other, and the U.S. Senate held investigative hearings that attracted national attention. Eventually, the federal government came out with a “some for all” compromise based on the rationale that all of the proposals, in proper proportion, served the war effort. The federal government agreed to fund most, but not all, of the highway. The private housing industry got 10,000 units of housing, but the federal government required them to build half of the units for rent. Public housing and model city enthusiasts won 5,000 units of government housing: 2,500 for Bomber City and 2,500 to be built in other suburban communities. But the federal government put all on notice: this would be the last of the permanent public housing; for the duration, the federal government would fund only temporary public housing.

Up to this point, this looks like a classic resource allocation struggle among competing interest groups, with the federal government playing the role of the wise—but perhaps exasperated—father figure. What seals this perspective is what happens next: in the fall of 1942 the UAW petitioned the federal government to convert Bomber City to temporary housing for families.

Although a full explication of led to the UAW's unusual request is not possible here, one of the major reasons behind the UAW's change of heart was that their members criticized the model city plan for not including single-family houses that could be bought. The federal government agreed that instead of a model city, Willow Village, as it would come to be called, would be temporary housing. And in the end, the federal government was right: all three proposals, as modified, did serve the war effort.

Story 2: The Threat to Close the Michigan State Normal School

Although federal officials expressed confidence that the housing program for Willow Run would eventually prove adequate, in the winter of 1943 they had to admit that their timing was a little off. The thousands of units of new housing wouldn't be ready until summer, while the bomber plant was struggling to increase its workforce and many of its workers were roughing it through a Michigan winter in trailers and tents. Ford Motor Company and federal housing officials agreed that the solution was to close the nearby Michigan State Normal School, the state-run college that educated teachers, mostly women, and was the lifeblood of the small city of Ypsilanti. Women workers at the bomber plant would use the college's dormitories, cafeterias, and other facilities. When local leaders learned of the plan? To say they howled in protest is not much of an overstatement.

But local leaders also quickly formulated an alternative solution. They asked the federal government to hold off on closing the Normal School until local leaders arranged for a room and apartment canvas. The editor of the *Ypsilanti Daily Press*, the city newspaper, published an editorial reasoning that "if the community was to be advised of a raid over the city of Ypsilanti with the definite purpose of destroying the Normal College, there would be a ready response to prevent such a catastrophe." He exhorted "it will be considered the patriotic duty of every resident to make available as much room as can possibly be arranged." Ford Motor Company assigned its plant protection men, its security force, to staff the room canvas. When the effort turned up 800 rooms and 174 apartments or houses that could be rented to war workers, the federal government backed off from closing the Normal School (*Ypsilanti Daily Press*, March 11, 1943 in Peterson, pp. 170-172).

Ford Motor Company and federal officials, with local and union support, also began implementing another solution. Using sub-contracting, they began moving production away from the bomber plant, thus relieving housing shortages by reducing the plant's demand for workers. This was an early appearance of the what would turn out to be one of the federal government's more powerful tools to encourage cooperation: the threat to move production elsewhere was real. And indeed, in this case, it was Ford Motor Company officials who were the most reluctant to get on board with the sub-contracting plan. The federal government's "No. 1 Critical Area" rating for the Detroit-Willow Run region meant that all future federal contracts would receive extra scrutiny.

Story 3: Integrating Willow Village

Housing in the federal war programs was assumed to be racially segregated, and African Americans had to fight to get some of the units assigned to them. As the war went on, however, housing shortages for African Americans worsened while housing originally assigned to white war workers stood empty. Pressure mounted to integrate war housing.

In the Detroit-Willow Run region, the start of the Second Great Migration from the rural south into northern and western industrial cities brought thousands of African Americans to the area.

Their only housing options consisted of crowding into the existing African-American neighborhoods in Detroit and a handful of suburbs, places typically containing the most substandard housing.

The June 1943 Detroit Race Riot--taking the lives of 34 (black and white), requiring the U.S. military to restore order, and trapping war workers in their homes for days--added to federal and local racial political sensitivities. The riot and its aftermath earned the region a new federal rating: "Class A Area of Racial Tension."

Three key groups took on the African-American housing crisis in 1944: the Detroit Victory Council, the NAACP, and a band of federal officials responsible for different aspects of the housing programs.

The Detroit Victory Council had formed in response to the federal government's No. 1 Critical Area and Class A Area of Racial Tension designations. Representatives of social agencies, labor unions, the automobile industries and other manufacturers, retail merchants, religious groups, and the heads of local government service providers made up the council, but elected officials were not directly represented. The membership roster included the Detroit Urban League, a moderate African-American activist group, but not the more radical NAACP. The Council decided to throw all its weight behind opening up federal war housing projects to African Americans, petitioning federal officials with specific, concrete proposals that triggered strenuous opposition from local elected officials and other local leaders.

The local chapter of the NAACP had continued campaigning for housing justice throughout the war years. They targeted not just substandard housing, but also racial segregation, especially in the housing built under the federal government's war programs. Until the Detroit Race Riot and the Detroit Victory Council's petitions, however, federal officials sympathetic to the NAACP's objectives found little traction within their own agencies.

With local leaders and federal officials lined up on both sides of the issue, the efforts of the Detroit Victory Council and the NAACP precipitated a metropolitan-wide stand off over integrating war housing. Proponents produced proposal after proposal to integrate war housing in the city of Detroit and in the suburbs. Each proposal was met with angry letters from local officials and ordinary citizens in opposition, and--if the proposal got far enough--stormy housing commission and city council meetings. Federal officials opposed to integration tried to block the proposals by requiring local consensus as a condition for their consent. Working diligently on the ground, proponents finally created the needed consensus around Willow Village's family housing. Ypsilanti leaders, Ford Motor Company officials, and other local industries dependent on war contracts went on record approving of the "experiment," and the federal government kept its end of the bargain. The celebratory headline in the *Michigan Chronicle*, the regional African-American newspaper, read "Smash Willow Run Bias" (*Michigan Chronicle*, July 22, 1944 in Peterson, p. 270). Together, they created a racially integrated community of thousands that existed throughout the 1940s and 1950s, until the temporary housing eventually had to be redeveloped.

The American Home Front Participatory Planning Model

Table 3 summarizes two alternative ways of assessing the American home front participatory planning model. And Mel Scott was right: this was not anything close to comprehensive planning. It was not for nothing that Agnes Meyer, a journalist at the *Washington Post*, titled her 1943 tour of the American home front *Journey through Chaos*.

And I recognize what I've presented here is open to debate: was this participatory planning? Or rather, does it rise to the level of our ideals of democratic participation that it should be called participatory planning? Was this even planning?

Moreover, I am not arguing that the model of urban planning that the federal government adopted was the result of some sort of grand strategy decision. It happened in part for cultural reasons and in part because the federal government lacked other options. By U.S. constitution and tradition, the federal government had (and has) little authority over land use, short of acquiring and developing the land itself, and even then there were (are) restrictions. The federal government could have used total war as an excuse to challenge this tradition, but for the most part did not.

Confounding those, who like Scott, do not want to see planning, however, is the presence of the national goal and a nation successfully rallied around specific objectives. The top-down was goal-driven, but—just as significantly—so, by and large, was the bottom up. The presence of a national goal and implementing objectives also means that the American home front urban planning model is not a good fit for incrementalism, as famously portrayed by Charles Lindblom, although there is definitely a role for “muddling through,” Lindblom’s colorful description of typical policy development (Lindblom 1959).

Table 3: Two views of the American home front participatory planning model	
Process driven by a strong national goal and objective: in this case, win the war through industrial production	
Glass Half Empty Perspective	Glass Half Full Perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Power politics plays a role in decision-making ▪ Federal government dependent on autonomous private sector and local actors for solutions and their implementation ▪ Full of conflict <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Encourages interest-seeking ○ Encourages challenges to federal decisions ○ Suffers from bureaucratic turf battles ▪ Preferences status quo power structures, up to a point ▪ Struggles with coordination ▪ <i>Relies on strong leadership at federal and local levels of government and from private citizens/the private sector</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Harnesses interest-seeking ▪ Tolerates conflict ▪ Makes generating and implementing solutions a shared responsibility ▪ Promotes continuous learning, improvement, and innovation ▪ Takes a limited and incremental approach to centralization ▪ Balances deliberation and action ▪ <i>Relies on strong leadership at federal and local levels of government and from private citizens/the private sector</i> ▪ Fosters democracy
Felt Like Chaos	It Worked (as long as no one expects perfection)

For housing, Americans on the home front achieved an interesting balance between defining housing as a technological means to an end and approaching housing as a social justice issue. Defining housing as a technology led to experimentation, innovation, and locally sensitive solutions; approaching housing as social justice required leadership. The near consensus (outside of the U.S. military) that industrial workers and their families deserved adequate housing, even

during war, made the leadership burden easier, but the lack of consensus over the appropriate technologies led to both innovation and political conflict.

Absent consensus, such as for racial progress, seeing housing as a technology was not enough. Advancing housing as social justice, however, was still possible when the presence of leadership drawn from the ranks of federal officials, the business community, and local officials found ways to combine forces.

In summary, housing got the attention it did for three reasons: 1) proponents successfully argued that housing and housing innovation was a means to an end, that it served the war effort; 2) at least some leadership belonging to all three key divisions—federal government, local government, and in the private sector—saw housing in terms of social justice; 3) housing belonged to the sphere of land use, a sphere which the U.S. federal government let traditional American democracy—with its quirks, inconsistencies, and contradictions—run free even during total war.

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