

Fogelson, Robert (2022) *Working-Class Utopias: A History of Cooperative Housing in New York City*. Princeton.

Review by Joshua B. Freeman

From the mid-1920s through the mid-1970s, some 40,000 units of non-profit cooperative housing were built in New York City, enough to accommodate a small city. The residents were people of modest means, families of factory, construction, clerical, and retail workers; teachers, social workers, and accountants; taxi and bus drivers; lower-level managers; and small business owners. Labor unions, directly or indirectly, developed most of the cooperative projects. They still provide decent affordable housing, in many cases with plenty of amenities: cooperative supermarkets, libraries, schools, community centers, auditoriums, recreation facilities, clubs of every variety, even a cocktail lounge and bowling alley. This extraordinary working-class achievement is almost completely unknown outside of New York. Even in its hometown, it is largely hidden in plain sight.

Robert M. Fogelson's *Working-Class Utopias: A History of Cooperative Housing in New York City* tells the story of these projects. This deeply researched, scholarly study is the first readily available, full-length account of New York's cooperative housing movement. Fogelson sympathetically recounts its many successes, but also is not shy about detailing its problems and failures.

The first working-class housing cooperatives in New York were organized by Finnish immigrants in the early twentieth century. Larger-scale developments came in the 1920s, under the sponsorship of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and several radical Jewish groups. Built on empty land in the Bronx, a subway ride away from Manhattan's garment district, these cooperatives gave residents escaping overcrowded, deteriorating tenements well-designed new apartments, greenery, and collective ownership. The Amalgamated also built a small project on the Lower East Side after clearing away existing slums. In cooperatives, the residents themselves control the buildings, paying a modest fee when they move in, which they get back when they leave.

The Depression and World War II brought cooperative housing construction in New York to a halt. After the war, it resumed, on a much larger scale. Its heyday, from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, is the central focus of Fogelson's account. A remarkably diverse group of unions sponsored projects to house their members (and outsiders as well), including IBEW Local 3 (which represented construction electricians); the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union; New York Typographical Union No. 6; the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butchers; and Local 1199 of the Hospital Workers Union (now part of SEIU). Reflecting a capacious view of unionism, then prevalent not just in the more left-wing CIO unions but in many AFL affiliates, too, cooperative housing provided a way for labor groups to give their members benefits outside the framework of collective bargaining, build mutualistic communities, and attack the ever-present need for more

affordable housing. The projects ranged from small efforts, like the 144-unit Sam Burt Houses in Coney Island, sponsored by the Fur, Leather, and Machine Workers Union, to the 15,300-unit Co-op City in the Bronx, which when built was the largest apartment complex in the world. Like many of the larger projects, Co-op City was sponsored by the United Housing Foundation (UHF), a coalition of unions, existing co-operative complexes, and neighborhood and philanthropic groups.

Though rightly thought of as working-class achievements, the housing cooperatives depended heavily on government support, without which most could not have been built. Starting in the mid-1920s, a host of state, local, and federal programs assisted cooperative development through tax abatements, the use of eminent domain to clear land, and below market-rate loans. The UHF ultimately became almost an extension of the New York State government. Many of its projects were suggested by state and city officials, including Co-op City and Rochdale Village (named after the English town where the cooperative movement began), a 5,860-apartment complex in Queens, completed in 1965, that became the largest African American majority cooperative in the country. Loans from public employee pension funds and a state finance authority, along with union money, made these developments possible. One reason there were so many cooperatives in New York and so few elsewhere was the exceptional backing the state government provided.

The politics of cooperative housing did not fall along the usual lines. The key UHF government ally was Robert Moses, a multi-hatted city and state official who for decades dominated New York land use, construction, and slum clearance decisions, widely hated by liberals for driving highways through residential neighborhoods and his general contempt for working people. Long-time Republican Governor Nelson Rockefeller was another strong co-op backer. For them, and for liberal Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr., union-sponsored apartments provided a vehicle for slum clearance, keeping middle-income families in the city, and taking advantage of federal housing programs, such as Title I of the Housing Act of 1949. This strange-bedfellows alliance was eased by the effective control of the UHF for most of its life by Abraham Kazan, a Clothing Workers staffer who shepherded the first union cooperatives into existence and kept at it for another four decades.

Fogelson devotes the last half of his book to Co-op City and the epic battle that broke out between the UHF and its tenants in 1970, not long after the project opened. The UHF made a habit of underestimating construction costs to ease financing, figuring it could later muddle through. But construction problems, steep, unanticipated inflation, and, according to its critics, mismanagement, made the promised carrying charges (the equivalent of rent) at Co-op City far too low to meet costs. In response, the UHF-appointed project board (control had not yet passed to the residents) kept jacking up the carrying charges until a massive revolt ensued.

For thirteen months, eighty percent of the Co-op City residents refused to pay their monthly bills, instead handing over the money to a strike steering committee, in what was probably the largest concerted housing action in U.S. history. Injunctions, threats to jail the strike leaders, and even foreclosure proceedings by the state, which could have led to evictions and the loss of the payments residents had made for co-op shares that gave them the right to live in their apartments, did not deter the protest. The state and the UHF finally cracked in 1976, after over \$20 million dollars in

payments had been hidden away (over \$100 million in current dollars). The UHF withdrew and the state handed over control of the project to the strike steering committee.

Fogelson provides an extremely detailed account of the legal and political maneuvering at Co-op City, but not much social analysis that might explain the extraordinary organization and tenacity of its residents. He does note that many had left rent-controlled apartments to move into Co-op City, coming with an experience of government intervention to keep housing costs down, not complicity in pushing them up. There were some professionals in the forefront of the strike but also a lot of unionists, including its main leader, Charles Rosen, a left-wing typographer at the *New York Post*. During the strike, a strong sense of community developed at the huge project, the very thing the UHF claimed to want to foster but ended up doing only by becoming a shared object of wrath.

Working-Class Utopias may get into too many weeds for casual readers. But for anyone thinking about how to address the housing crisis today, it is highly instructive. Without large-scale, ongoing government assistance, it is impossible to build and maintain affordable housing; in most of the country, workers just do not make enough money to pay for it on their own. Unions have plenty of financial assets that they conceivably could use for housing, but their political clout and institutional capacity are way down. Meanwhile, land to build on has become hard to find in cities like New York and San Francisco and costs are through the roof. But if the specific approaches workers once took toward housing may not be possible today, the lesson we can take from Fogelson's account is how much can be done when working people have a broad, audacious vision of what they and their institutions should be doing. When society failed to address the obvious need for decent places for working people to live, labor took it upon itself to solve the problem and did so with a remarkable degree of success.

Reviewer Bio

Joshua B. Freeman is emeritus professor of history at Queens College and the author of *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* and, more recently, *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World*.