

THE STORY OF THE SEWARD PARK COOPERATIVE [1961]

Abraham E. Kazan [1]

This is the story of the Seward Park Housing Corporation, a cooperative development, built, owned and operated for the benefit of 1,728 families who decided to use the method of mutual self-help to solve their housing problem. The project was conceived and completed under the guidance of the United Housing Foundation, a federation of cooperative housing societies, non-profit organizations and labor unions interested in promoting better housing through the consumer cooperative method.

In 1957 the Seward Park Houses was the second Title I development undertaken by the United Housing Federation. It owes its existence to the successful completion in 1956 of the East River Housing Corporation, a housing cooperative for 1,672 families which was financed and sponsored by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. The East River Housing cooperative in turn came into being after the completion of the Hillman Houses, located in the immediate vicinity. This cooperative, for 807 families, was completed in 1950. It was built as a redevelopment Company under the sponsorship of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. The same organization is also responsible for the erection of Amalgamated Dwellings, a Limited Dividend housing cooperative for 236 families, completed in 1930 under the supervision of the State Board of Housing of the State of New York.

Together, these four cooperative enterprises, legally and financially operate as separate entities; they occupy the southeast section of the lower part of Manhattan from the East River bend known as Corlears Hook to Essex Street of the west, Delancey Street on the north and East Broadway and Cherry Street on the south. The entire area comprises about 32 acres. The four cooperatives are providing homes for 4,443 families with a population of approximately 20,000. The Seward Park Houses is the latest member to be added to the group.

For decades this part of New York City was the center of the melting pot for newcomers to these shores. It is one of the oldest sections in the City. Grand Street was at one time the Mecca of the department stores and other commercial enterprises. Up to about fifty years ago East Broadway was the neighborhood of the elite of the assimilating immigrants. It provided housing and offices for the intellectuals and professionals. Gradually the second and third generations moved to the other parts of the city leaving behind the old and the weak. The neighborhood gradually deteriorated into a slum area.

It is our hope that the experience of the Seward Park cooperative will benefit others. We trust that they will follow your example and adopt the idea of self-help in solving many problems which otherwise go unsolved. It is also our hope that the method adopted to finance this development will be followed by other organizations who are interested in helping the man who wants to help himself. [...]

Another slum area of the city has been replaced by moderate cost decent homes. But our task is far from finished. For we seek more than good housing, gardens and shopping facilities. Our goal is a better way of life for those who have joined this cooperative venture. Housing is but one step toward a larger objective.

The Seward Park Housing cooperative demonstrates what people can do for themselves when they work together. Without cooperation this development would not have been built, the old tenements would have remained. It has taken a half of a life time to rid the city of only 32 acres of slums in this section and to provide good housing for nearly twenty thousand people. All of these people are consumers; they share many other common needs. It is our hope that from cooperative ventures they will learn to apply the same techniques of self-help not only to housing but to meet their other needs.

Each member of this cooperative has contributed toward its initial success. If it is to remain successful, each member must diligently exercise his responsibilities as a member for years to come. As a democratic institution it requires responsible citizenship on the part of its members. In seeking a better way of life for the members of this organization we are endeavoring to demonstrate that people have the ability to successfully own and operate their own business – to help themselves.

This cooperative is another practical demonstration of not only how people can help themselves, but how the city can encourage public and private groups to engage in the battle against blighted areas. From the example of what has been accomplished by the Seward Park cooperative we hope many other consumers and organizations will draw inspiration to duplicate what has been done here.

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[www.sphc.net/Orig_Story_html_version.htm]

[1] ABRAHAM E. KAZAN

(1889-1971)

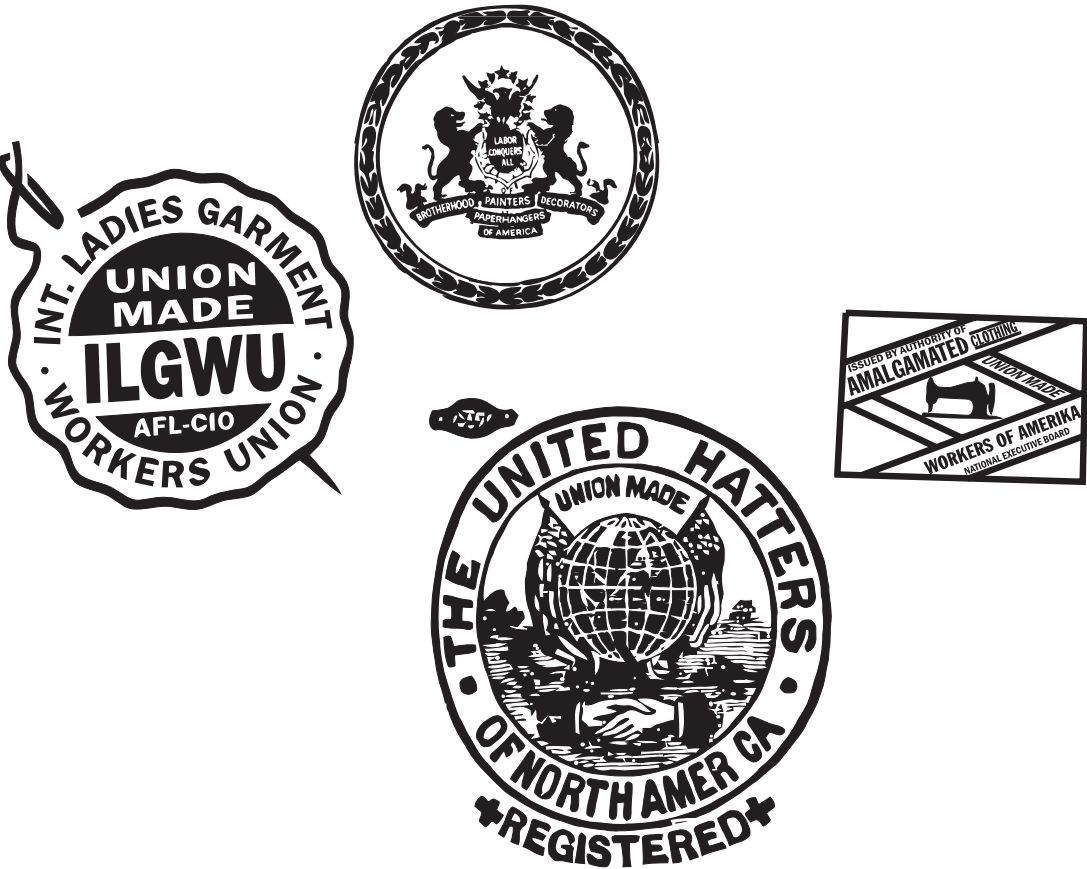
Abraham E. Kazan was among the pioneers of the idea of cooperative housing. Growing up as an eyewitness to appalling tenement conditions, Kazan believed that housing was a vital obstacle for the average person. As the president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACW) Credit Union, Kazan understood that most people, rich and poor, usually considered a home as “purely a product of his own efforts.” Yet, unlike all other routine necessities, owning a home required a sizable initial investment that was usually beyond that of those with moderate means or salaries. He felt that this made newly constructed buildings often out of reach for the poorer earners, causing harsher social and moral conditions with the tenement communities where the poorer people lived in tightly congested clusters. Kazan believed that good housing conditions would not guarantee normal, healthy people and families. Yet, he was convinced that standard housing does directly and adversely affect health, morale, and the social conditions of those who live there within it. He was president of the Seward Park Housing Corporation.

JANE JACOBS

Footnote from: The Death and Life of Great American Cities, New York 1961, p. 334

We trust that they will follow your example and adopt the idea of self-help in solving A word here about rats. This is one of the elementary evils that new housing is supposed to eliminate and the presence of old housing to perpetuate. But rats do not know that. Unless they are exterminated, when old rat-infested buildings are torn down, the rats simply move into the next inhabited area. One of the severe problems in the Lower East Side of New York, as this is written, is the influx of rats and other vermin from the demolished buildings on the site of a huge new cooperative project, Seward Houses. When a large part of the downtown of St. Louis was demolished, this displaced rats invaded building over many square miles. If extermination is not practiced in new buildings, the progeny of the rats come right back there too. Most cities have legal requirements that rats be exterminated in any building demolished; in New York, the going rate in 1960 for lying certificate of extermination, paid by corrupt owners to corrupt exterminators, is \$ 5. How public agencies, like the Housing Authority, evade the law I do not know, but to know that they do evade it one need only go look at fearful rat festivals and exoduses at twilight from their sites in process of demolition. New buildings do not get rid of rats. Only people get rid of rats. This can be done in old buildings about as easily as in new ones. Our building was overrun with rats – big ones – when we got it. It costs \$ 48 a year to keep it thoroughly rid of them and all vermin. A live man does it. The notion that buildings get rid of rats is worse than a delusion because it becomes an excuse for not exterminating rats. [“We are soon going to get rid of these rat-infested buildings.”] We expect too much of new buildings, and too little of ourselves.

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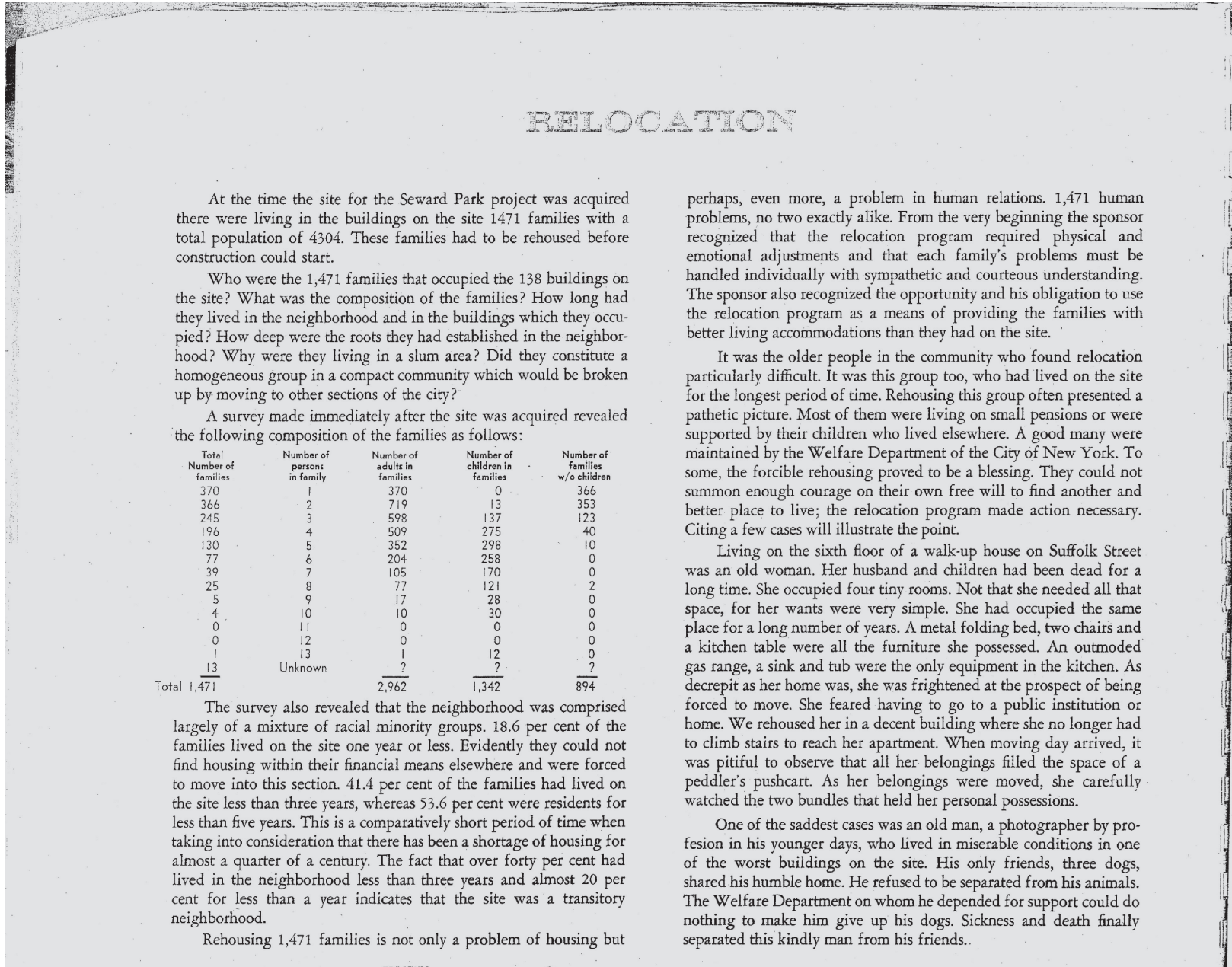
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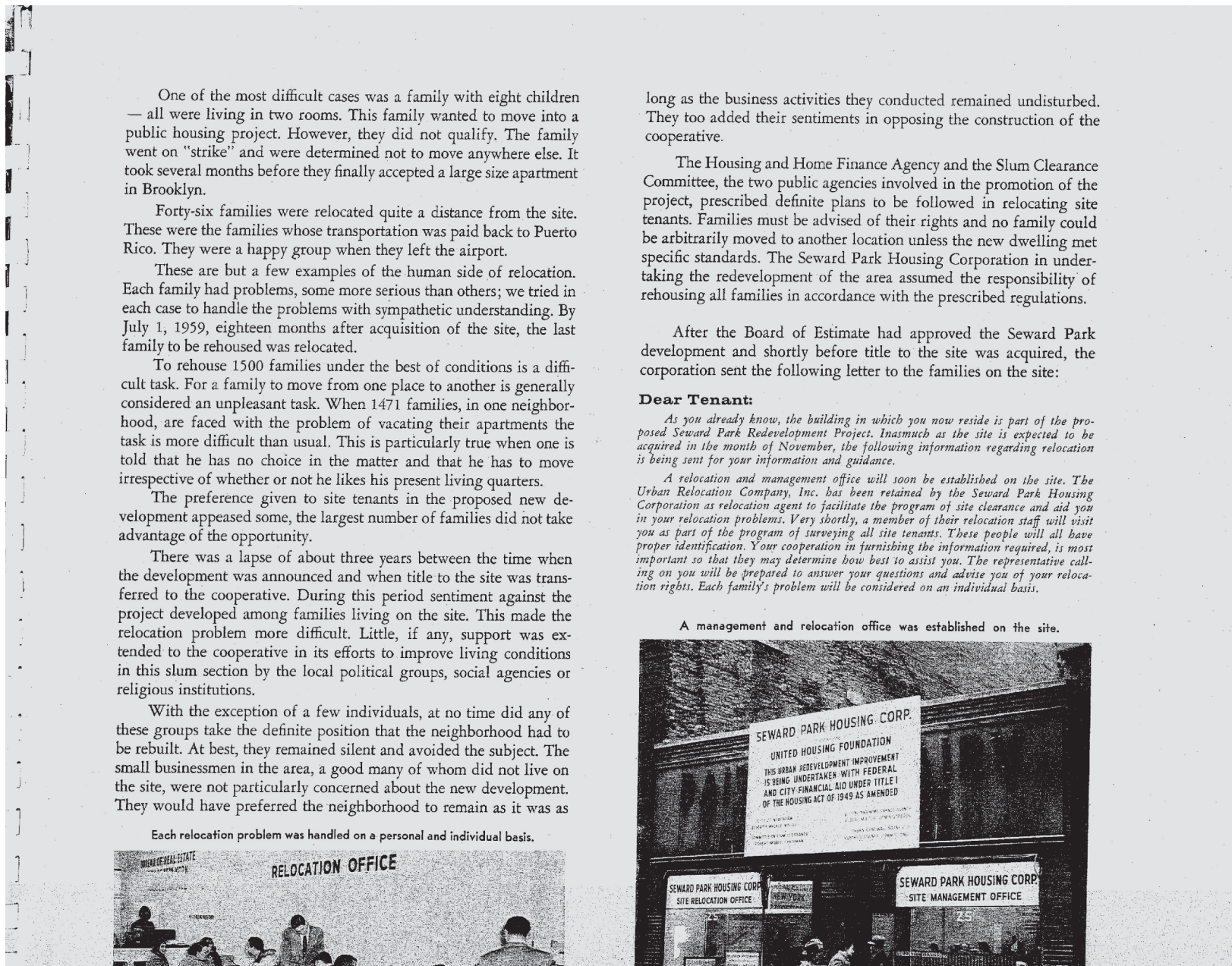


THE STORY OF
THE SEWARD PARK
COOPERATIVE, AB-
RAHAM E. KAZAN,
UNITED HOUSING
FOUNDATION, NEW
YORK, 1961
[Courtesy of Eric Man-
delbaum]

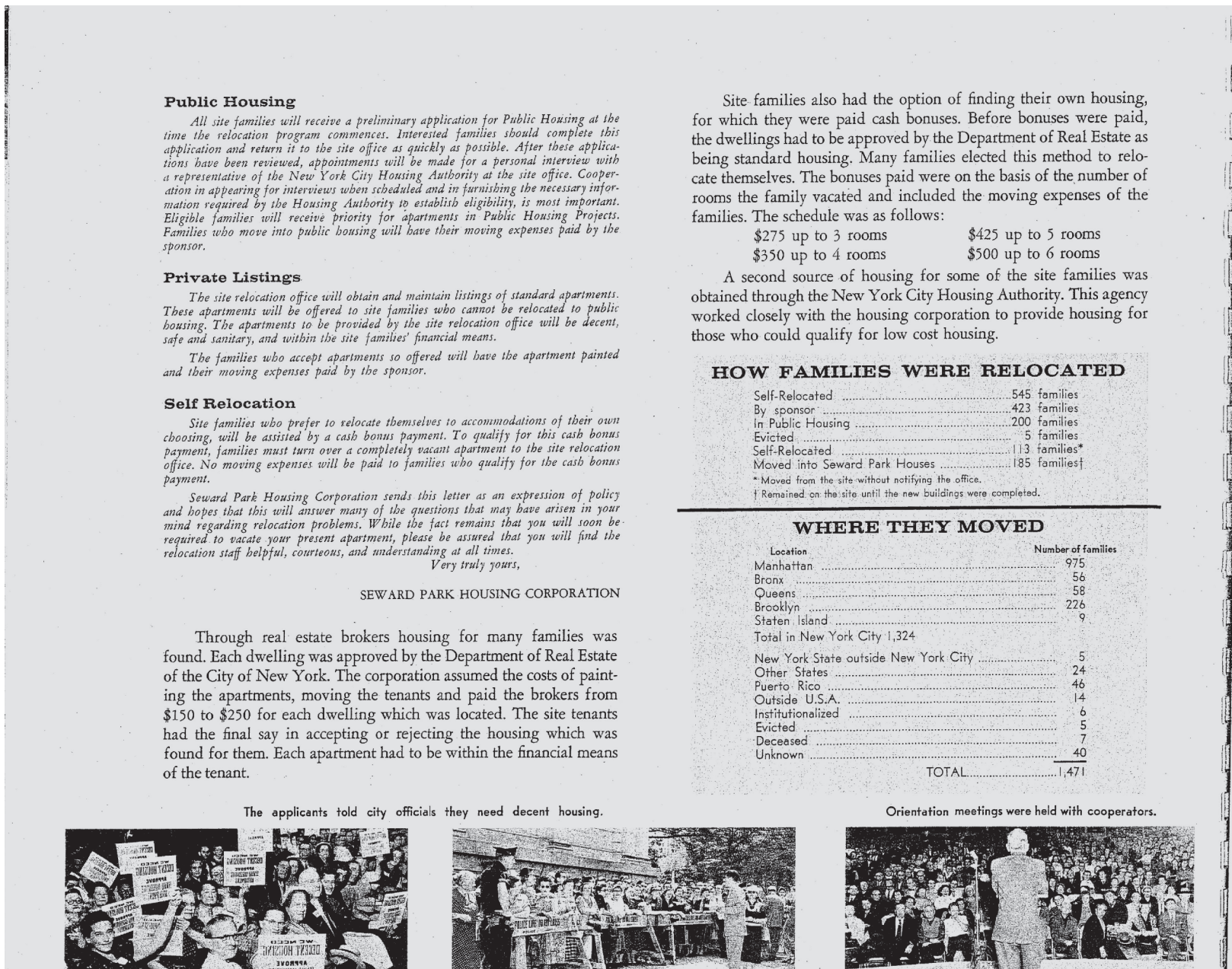
Cover



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