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“The Tenement House Problem”:
Reformers and the Progressive Era Housing Crisis

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On November 26, 1900 Mrs. J. A. Miller gave the testimony of her life in a west side tenement house. Lawrence Veiller, the secretary of New York City's Tenement House Commission asked her "what [was] the chief trouble with the tenement in [her] experience."¹ An exasperated Mrs. Miller replied that "there doesn't seem to be anything 'chief' about it. It seems to be about all trouble." The Tenement House Commission was attempting to convince the state of New York Building, Health and Fire Departments to update housing laws and to outlaw the dangerous tenement housing that Mrs. Miller described in her testimony. She described her rooms as "so dark it is impossible to see except just dimly at the noon hour." On that same day, Mr. Henry Moscowitz echoed Mrs. Miller's complaints but identified air shafts as being the greatest evil within the tenements. The shafts, which were "a breeder of disease because of the refuse thrown down in the air shaft," created a "stench is so vile and air so foul that the occupants do not employ the windows as a means of getting air."² Housing inspector, C.A. Mohr, confirmed the residents' description, condemning tenement living conditions as "filthy," "dangerous," and "general[ly] dilapidat[ed]."³ As horrific as the tenements were, this attention was new. Tenements had been customary housing for the poor of New York City for over 100 years. Only around the turn of the century did the city create a Tenement House Commission.

These testimonies were taken as part of an investigation on the conditions of tenement house living. The investigation was created New York City's Tenement House Commission of 1900 and by progressive housing reformer Lawrence Veiller. Governor of

¹ Robert DeForest and Lawrence Veiller, ed., *The Tenement House Problem*, vol.1, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1903), 404.

² DeForest, vol. 1, 413.

³ DeForest, vol. 1, 424-425.

New York Theodore Roosevelt approved this committee to determine solutions to New York's housing problems.

Dilapidated, overcrowded, and unsafe housing was part of a constellation of problems that accompanied rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration in the last decades of the nineteenth century. During the immigration boom of the 19th and early 20th century every major city in America felt the strain of a rapidly growing population. New York City served as the front door to America and therefore experienced these problems earlier and on a larger scale than any other city. New York City's lower east side, noted housing reformer Laurence Veiller, was "the most densely populated spot in the world."⁴ New York's Housing Committee knew that the city needed a way to house the influx and decided upon communal apartments or tenements. These tenements were based on London's solution to the population boom, where multiple families would share a two or three story house. Large homes were divided up to house multiple families, often two or three in what was once a large room. The toilets and kitchens were commonly used by all of the families on each floor. These makeshift tenements were divided with no rhyme or reason; the First Tenement House Report in 1853 called them "crazy old buildings."⁵ The rate of immigration continued to grow and, before long, the majority of these makeshift apartments filled, creating a demand for more low-income housing. It was clear that another form of housing must be provided to keep the poor off the streets.

The hearings before the Tenement House Commission of 1900 were only one piece of a broad attack on poor housing conditions at the turn of the nineteenth century. A

⁴ *Housing Reform in New York City* (New York, 1914), 1.

⁵ DeForest, vol. 1, 76.

number of middle-class and wealthy reformers examined the tenement house problem and offered various solutions. While these reformers sometimes displayed conflicting opinions about the nature and extent of government involvement, their common understandings of the problem outweighed their tactical differences. Convinced that poor housing created a host of social problems for residents, cities, and the country as a whole, they largely overlooked the low wages and unstable job markets that kept working-class families in poverty. Instead, they were convinced that neater, safer housing would solve the many problems of the urban poor.

The progressive movement is a popular field of study for historians, yet housing reform has been generally overlooked in favor of settlement houses, and electoral and municipal reforms, and consumer protection laws. Historians largely ignore housing reformers, dismissing them as not real progressives, but they fail to explore the roots of housing reformers beliefs. Michael Katz in his book *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse* writes about the progressive failure to solve the housing problem. He blames the poor results on the refusal of reformers to “extend the role of the government beyond restrictive legislation.”⁶ Katz states that Veiller was “fundamentally conservative,”⁷ preferring long term change with minimal government interaction. Katz briefly explains the basic history of tenement house reform, but he mostly ignores the large organization’s beliefs and whether or not those reflect the standard of the day. What Katz avoids and other historians completely overlook is the role of the Charity Organization Society and how it upheld commonly held social judgments. The members of the Charity Organization Society could be defined as Progressives. The majority of Progressives

⁶ Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*. (Basic Books, 1986). 174.

⁷ Ibid.

were within the upper classes. Glenda Gilmore defines Progressives as “average men and women [who] felt that they had the knowledge close at hand to improve life forever.”⁸

While Progressives shared this optimistic sentiment, they were by no means average. A Progressive had the social standing, wealth and education to supply this optimistic attitude that they could create the best possible society. A number of such reformers turned their attention to housing in the late nineteenth century, and their effort reveal some of the limits of Progressive reform.

At the end of the nineteenth century the rapid industrialization had transformed the image of the home into that of a refuge. This proved to be idealistic as working class women rarely had the resources to remain at home. Even so the image of a well-groomed household was the symbol of “Christian womanhood.”⁹ The home described as a “*Divine Institution*,- the most important and central of all our American institutions¹⁰.” The home was to be a moral refuge for the husband, ruled over by the wife and “utterly separated from the turbulence of commerce and industry.”¹¹ The popular literature of the ninetieth century often wrote about the “pasteurization of housework” which was described as “positively regenerating.”¹² The urban upper classes read these descriptions and believed that these were “accurate representations of how...women they observed spent their time.”¹³ This helps explain the shock the upper classes experienced when they attended

⁸ Glenda Gilmore, *Who Were the Progressives?* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 4.

⁹ Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). 110.

¹⁰ Almira Seymour, *Home the Basis of the State* (Boston: A. Willams and Company, 1869), 11.

¹¹ Boydston, 146.

¹² *Ibid.*, 152.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 151.

the Tenement House Exposition and discovered that the working class home had little in common with the ethical refuge.

The wealthy of New York had their own definition of the tenement house problem. The tenements were the cause of moral and social ills spreading into society. Elite urban dwellers were convinced that poor living conditions were causing poor moral behavior. In the summation of my research there was no mention of wages and living conditions. The reasons behind poverty were never discussed; housing was more of a moral issue than an economic one. The horrid condition of tenement living was seen as mistreatment of the poor and more importantly, a threat to American values. Elites argued that the morality of the home should not be restricted to the poor: "it matters not whether the home be a cot or a place, it is equally authenticated as a nursery of God's truth, purity and fidelity."¹⁴ Many upper class Americans were worried that the poor would never develop superior citizenship due to their inability to create a good environment. Whether housing reformers approached tenement reform through private enterprise or judicial law, they all were motivated by the image of the home as the moral center of society.

The housing of New York's poor working classes clearly diverged from the image of a home as the moral foundation of the nation even as New Yorkers sought new designs. In 1878, Henry Meyer, the chief proprietor of the magazine *Sanitary Engineer*, offered 500 dollars to the architect who could design the best tenement house that was "25 feet wide by 100 feet deep."¹⁵ James Ware beat out at least 190 competitors from all over the western world with his design for the double-decker dumbbell tenement. The

¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁵ Ibid., 101.

tenement curved in the center to make room for narrow courtyards. The dumbbell tenements were poorly constructed, the bedrooms had no access to light and fresh air and every fourteen rooms had to share two waterclosets. The Tenement House Committee accused the dumbbell tenement of increasing the "evils of the present tenement house system...tenfold."¹⁶

The housing crisis caught the attention of the nation for multiple reasons. Tuberculosis and other communicable diseases drew reformer's attention to tenement reform. Tuberculosis outbreaks had become common in New York, and in 1864 the city's first Council of Hygiene and Public Health determined that the most "prolific cause of disease was the insalubrious conditions of most of the tenement-houses in the cities of New York and Brooklyn."¹⁷ Tenements were not only unsanitary but exceedingly crowded. This caused the disease to become an epidemic in the areas of New York with a high population density. Doctor Hermann Biggs announced that a single New York City block had a population of 3,688 and 241 reported cases of tuberculosis.¹⁸ The disease was blamed for 250.2 deaths out of 1000 in 1899 and its dangers did not remain confined to poor neighborhoods. The disease was a danger to the entire city. Many of the upper classes blamed the tenements for the epidemic, and many hoped that solving the tenement house problem would rid the city of tuberculosis. Arthur Guerard, M.D., assistant bacteriologist for the New York City Department of Health, believed that by combining "the vast interests of doing good...in sanitation with the full belief and expectation that the day will come when this widespread and fatal source may be completely

¹⁶ Ibid., 102.

¹⁷ *The Housing of the Poor in American Cities*, (New York: American Economic Association, 1893), 10-11.

¹⁸ DeForest, vol. 1, 449.

exterminated.”¹⁹ Many middle class and wealthy New Yorkers became passionate about tenement reform because they saw an opportunity to end citywide diseases that directly affected themselves and their families.

Progressive reformers had their eye on more than disease and crime. They saw the housing crisis as one piece of the larger problems affecting the city as a whole. Crime, violence and disease were blamed on the lower classes and their immoral lifestyles. It was a commonly held belief that creating a better living environment would result in superior morals among the poor. When the Housing Commission for the city of Chicago met in relation to tenement housing in 1884, its members concluded that honest men chose to live outside of the city in order to avoid the “political and moral corruption invited by the wretched condition and surroundings.”²⁰ They argued that corrupt people chose to live within the city and that explains “why they show little if any desire for improvement.”²¹ If inner city housing could be improved, superior citizens would chose to move there and would create a good example for their neighbors to follow.

There were many arguments about the cause of tenement house conditions. Many members of the elite believed that it was the ignorant foreign workers who created poor conditions. The new immigrants rushing into New York were easily discernable from the Anglo Protestant majority. The city became divided into various ethnic neighborhoods. Photographer Jacob Riis titled the chapters of his famous book *How the Other Half Lives* after these neighborhoods: “Jewtown,” “Chinatown,” and “The Italian in New York.” The immigrants spoke unknown languages, practiced Catholicism and Judaism and seem

¹⁹ DeForest, vol. 1, 470.

²⁰ Ibid., 4.

²¹ Ibid.

to upper class New Yorkers as foreign race directly inferior. Veiller, White and DeForest all believed that these new immigrants were ignorant about the correct manner to live. It was this ignorance, not working conditions, that created the diseases and other social ills associated with tenement living. Conservatives and progressives both agreed that the poor “must be taught how to live.”²² Even progressives like Veiller fostered patronizing attitudes toward the poor. “They [the poor] come from places where certain manners and customs work very well,” he intoned. “They apply these methods, once perfectly proper, to conditions in America, and the result is filth and disease.”²³

It seemed to many of the New York elite that the dire conditions of tenement living were a result of the ignorance of the tenants. In order to educate the poor, churches and charity organizations distributed pamphlets and books in attempt to teach women the proper way to furnish and clean a tenement house. On such example was *Housekeeping Notes, How To Furnish and Keep House in a Tenement Flat*. Prepared by The Association of Practical Housekeeping Centers of New York, it included recipes and instructions on cleaning, cooking and general nursing.²⁴ Despite good intentions these books were generally impractical and illustrated a profound ignorance about the financial restraints faced by tenants. Books often included furnishing lists of what is required to make a “suitable” tenement flat. The total cost of all the furnishings listed in *Housekeeping Notes* exceeds one hundred twenty-one dollars, an astronomical price considering it cost one hundred thirty-six dollars for a years rent in a three-room model

²² “Most of Our Cities Pay Scant Attention To Health”, *New York Times*, July 2, 1911.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mabel Hyde Kittredge, *Housekeeping Notes, How to Furnish and Keep House in a Tenement Flat*. (Boston: Whitcomb & Barrows, 1911)

tenement.²⁵ Educating the poor on how to live like proper American citizens without changing living or working conditions was hardly a constructive response to the problem to the urban working classes.

The attitude of blaming the tenants became less prevalent towards the end of the nineteenth century. More common was the belief that poor conditions encourage bad morals in tenants. A quintessential example of public feeling toward tenements was the American Unitarian Association's pamphlet *What Bad Housing Means to the Community* written by Albion Fellows Bacon and with an introduction by Lawrence Veiller. Bacon was instrumental to the passage of Illinois housing reforms. A highly religious woman, she related to her readers on faith, using phrases like "an old house is like a old sinner- so much meaner the older it gets."²⁶ Bacon wrote that appalling living conditions were harmful to the poor physically and mentally. Yet, more important was the risk to the good citizens, "every time a baby dies the nation loses a prospective citizen, but *in every slum child who lives the nation has a probable consumptive and a possible criminal.*"²⁷ Bacon waves horror stories of slum children sitting next to "your children" teaching them their "foul language, vile habits, low standards."²⁸ As the conditions of tenements became widely known and debated around the country arguments like "the slum is the enemy of the home" and "the home is the key to good citizenship,"²⁹ headlined the reasons for reform. The defense of the home argument was effective because it was seen as the solution to social problems within the city.

²⁵ DeForest, vol. 1, 109.

²⁶ Albion Fellows Bacon, *What Bad Housing Means to the Community* (Boston: American Unitarian Association) 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

Jacob Riis also supported the defense of home argument. Although he believed that tenants were partly responsible for terrible living conditions he also worked to paint a sympathetic portrait of the poor. Many other housing reformers and social workers wrote about the squalid living conditions of the poor, but it wasn't until 1890, two years after film replaced the photographic plate, that pictures were used to document the plight of the poor. Riis was a reporter for the *New York Tribune* who specialized in public interest stories and was inspired to write about the poor.³⁰ Riis sought to present the case of the poor in such an emotional, graphic way that no one could ignore. He illustrated his book, *How the Other Half Lives* with compelling photographs of the dirtiest and most dangerous residences in Manhattan. The text begins with a short history of the subdivided houses and their evolution into tenements. Riis then took his readers on a tour of the slums, often writing in a second person narrative style about "The Downtown Back-Alleys," "Stale Beer Dives" and "Chinatown." Riis's empathetic and engrossing writing style was presented in his tour of the Cherry Street tenements. "Come over here," he invites his middle class readers; "step carefully over this baby- it is a baby, spite of its rags and dirt...hear the pump squeak! It is the lullaby of tenement-house babes. In summer, when a thousand thirsty throats pant for a cooling drink in this block, it is worked in vain."³¹ To many middle and upper-class citizens, reading Riis's book or attending one of his presentations created the same emotions as if they toured the tenements themselves. It was reported that during Riis's presentations "his viewers moaned, shuddered, fainted, even talked to the photographs he projected."³² This

³⁰ Domenica M. Barbuto, *American Settlement Houses and Progressive Social Reform* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1999), 94.

³¹ Jacob A. Riis, *How The Other Half Lives* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1997), 38.

³² *Ibid.*, Introduction.

sympathetic view of the tenants affected many elites and caused some to shift the blame from tenants to landlords.

Despite the later developing belief that poor housing conditions corrupted the morals of tenants, many still blamed the residents for the housing crisis. This complex belief in the values of environmentalism shaped reformers beliefs about blame and affected their approaches toward tenement house reform.

One of the solutions planned for tenement house reform was simply to build better housing. After the success of *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis had gained the attention of the nation. Many turned to him asking what should be done to help those living in tenements. Riis answered them with the final chapters in his book, "What Has Been Done" and "How the Case Stands." Riis believed that there were three solutions to the tenement house problem: it could be solved by law, by remodeling and making the best out of the old houses, by building new, model tenements."³³ While Riis believed that the law could remove the worst problems, legal measures were not always practical. Riis chose to place his faith in private enterprise to do "the lions share" of options two and three. In fact, *How the Other Half Lives* includes floor plans of model tenements that he believes are the "beau ideal."³⁴ These tenements are the Riverside Buildings built by wealthy importer and philanthropist Alfred White.

Alfred Tredway White was a conservative housing reformer who entered the reform as a general philanthropist. Born in 1846, White had earned his wealth by joining his father in a successful importing firm. Like many of his contemporaries, White

³³ Riis, 210.

³⁴ Ibid.

believed that fixing living conditions in major cities could solve many of the social ills connected with urban life such as disease and crime. He preached that it was the responsibility of the upper class to take action: “it is time to recognize that if the intelligent and wealthy portion of the community do not provide homes for the working classes, the want will be continually supplied by the less intelligent class and after the old fashion.”³⁵ By calling the tenement landlords the “less intelligent class,” White announced his beliefs that the system would never change if power remained in their hands.

Unlike Andrew Carnegie and other 19th century reformers and philanthropists who focused their efforts after retirement, White began working at a young age and continued throughout his entire life. He developed one of the first model tenements in 1879. Called “Home Buildings,”³⁶ his tenements were similar to town homes. White prohibited boarders and enforced strict upkeep requirements on his tenements. White’s new homes were a vast improvement on the divided house tenements, and he made sure that working-class families could afford these homes with “moderate rates and a financial plan.”³⁷

White’s development plan of “philanthropy and five percent,”³⁸ which ensured profits for tenement developers, reflected his commitment to private enterprise. He insisted that “above all Tenements must be profitable, otherwise they would not inspire imitators.”³⁹ Further he insisted direct charity would result in “weakening [the poor’s]

³⁵ Roy LuBove, *The Progressives and the Slums* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 34.

³⁶ LuBove, 36.

³⁷ Barbuto, 229.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ LuBove, 36.

character and self reliance.”⁴⁰ A majority of housing reformers celebrated White’s model tenements. The American Economic Association listed his Riverside homes as a prime example of the model tenement.⁴¹ Even White’s progressive contemporaries, Lawrence Veiller and Robert DeForest, praised him in their book, *The Tenement House Problem*, “Wide publicity was given to this extraordinary experiment of Mr. White’s,” they insisted, “the result being that a great interest was stimulated in the tenement house problem.”⁴²

White saw his model tenements as more than quality affordable working class housing. He saw these new homes as an opportunity to instill better values in the lower classes. Many progressives rejected the implications of Social Darwinism and scientific racism, which attributed biological inferiority to nonwhites and lower classes. Instead progressives tended to embrace environmentalism; however, few were as confident in the theory as White.

White believed that simply by building homes with multiple rooms he could prevent the ills associated with poverty. He believed the single room home was a curse on the American poor. Often poorly lit and always overcrowded, these rooms were breeding pits for disease. White also blamed a plethora of social disorders on single room living: “the single-room system fosters incest, illegitimacy, juvenile prostitution, drunkenness, dirt, idleness and disease.”⁴³ It was commonly thought that the absence of privacy for men and women, sons and daughters provided temptation to the working classes who lacked the willpower to remain chaste. White refused to build single room homes. The

⁴⁰ LuBove, 37.

⁴¹ *The Housing of the Poor in American Cities*, 85-89.

⁴² DeForest, vol. 1, 97.

⁴³ *The Housing of the Poor in American Cities*, 215.

smallest of White's apartments had four rooms, "living room, parlor, bedroom and scullery,"⁴⁴ while the largest had six. The multiple rooms allowed tenants the luxury of privacy and eliminated temptation. White also strongly believed in the importance of bathing and built baths within all his tenements. He hoped the convenience would encourage more bathing and reduce the embarrassment caused by using public city baths. When the American Economic Society listed the top three objectives for model tenements "domestic privacy, foundation of morality" was listed first followed by "sanitary conditions" and "comfort, convenience, attractiveness."⁴⁵ If the social evils of the rapidly expanding cities could be ended it would be by using model tenements to enforce American values.

One of the few companies influenced by White's model tenements was The Tenement House Building Company. Founded in 1885, the company was based in New York. Before the New York Tenement House Committee of 1894, the Tenement Housing Company wrote its own report on the evils of tenement housing while simultaneously advertising its model tenements. Citing the 1884 Tenement-House Commission, *The Tenement Houses of New York City* listed the five top problems with the physical environment of tenement houses: filthy cellars, excess garbage, lack of light and ventilation, dangerous light-shafts and waterclosets.⁴⁶ The report was written for potential investors in the company and appealed to both charitable and commercial rationales. It claimed that housing reform would save the lives of five hundred current boarders. In case the ethical plea fell on deaf ears, the report also warned of the dangers that tenement houses present for the entire community: "The Tenement-houses of New York is a foul

⁴⁴ Ibid., 220-221.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 238.

⁴⁶ Indoor Privies

blot on the fair name of our city,” and, it announced, “a perpetual source of physical and moral danger.”⁴⁷ The new houses built by the Tenement House Company in 1887 were located on Cherry Street and contained 108 multi-family suites. The new building had a rooftop patio, no air-shafts, public bathtubs and one watercloset for every two apartments.

The Cherry Street tenements also had a free kindergarten, which provided not only education but also the chance to mold poor immigrant children into responsible American citizens. The Tenement House Company described the noble actions and noble endeavors of its Kindergarten as taking children at “their most plastic age,” removing their “habits of carelessness” to be replaced with “habits of order and industry, sense of love and justice, and those other gentle virtues which are essential to right living.”⁴⁸ The aims of the Tenement House Company were similar to those of Alfred White: “to provide safe, comfortable, and even pleasant housing for low income groups”⁴⁹ while continuing to please the investor. The difference was the Tenement House Company advertised that housing reform would change the moral behaviors of the tenants and therefore eliminate the reason for poverty.

By 1884, the city of Chicago had its share of the poor who lived in single-family homes. Chicago had avoided the high-rise tenements but “suffered the blight of the rear house.”⁵⁰ Rear houses were smaller houses built behind the larger homes. Chicago reformers hoped private developers could make a profit while avoiding problems. The Report to the Citizen’s Association of Chicago shares the familiar horrors of tenement

⁴⁷ *The Tenement Houses of New York City* (New York: Press of Albert B. King, 1891), 11.

⁴⁸ *The Tenement Houses of New York City*, 20.

⁴⁹ LuBove, 37.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

living and seeks to prevent a similar situation by building tenements with proper light and amenities before the older style began to be built. Despite seemingly altruistic intentions, the report focuses heavily on profit potential. The tenements were to be placed in sites with the cheapest land, which would give the investors a profit of “6 to 8 percent.”⁵¹

Conservative housing reformers’ focus on profit appears to be universal in this time. This type of reform appealed to the independently wealthy businessman who could afford a project that would make him a slight financial gain to counterbalance riskier investments. These housing projects were marketed exclusively to the upper class. The report stressed the importance of the wealthy helping the poor gain better lodgings because it would make them better citizens. This argument was especially effective; not only did it flatter readers, but it also made the issue of poverty seem completely solvable. Social ills like theft and drunkenness were simply a matter of good influence, which it was the duty of the upper classes to provide.

Moral reform was an effective selling point for model tenements. It combined national or city pride with complimenting the upper crust of society. A classic example of this was found in the Report to the Citizen’s Association of Chicago: “If love of country and of the great city which you have erected is a predominate feeling in your political nature, can you not perceive that by elevating the poorer classes and improving their condition you are refining their political and moral tastes and habits?”⁵² Throughout the country, conservative housing reformers were learning of the moral ills caused by tenement living, and they sought to fix these ills while gaining profit.

⁵¹ *Report of the Committee on Tenement House of the Citizens’ Association of Chicago* (Chicago: Geo. K. Hazlitt & Co, 1884), 13.

⁵² *Report of the Committee on Tenement House of the Citizens’ Association of Chicago*, 17-18.

Conservative housing reformers hoped that remaining in the capitalist profit system while providing pleasant housing for the working class would be the perfect solution to the housing problems. Unfortunately, the majority of companies were disinterested in building model tenements. As Roy Lubove writes, “Why should wealthy businessmen with loose capital accept dividends of only 4 or 5 percent in an age of great material expansion when more profitable investments beckoned elsewhere?”⁵³

The second attempted solution for the housing crisis was publishing the problem and passing government regulations. The innovator behind housing regulations was Lawrence Veiller. Before Lawrence Veiller, the majority of housing reformers could be described as “well-meaning but sporadic”⁵⁴ reformers, who viewed housing reform as a hobby rather than a lifetime calling. Veiller was the first fulltime progressive within housing reform. Veiller turned to social activism after reading the works of Ruskin and Carlyle, who critiqued the social ills of Victorian England.⁵⁵ He began actively working for housing reform during the 1893 depression, when, at the young age of 20, he joined New York’s East Side Relief Committee.⁵⁶ It was here that Veiller saw that tenement housing was one of the principle problems associated with poverty. He convinced the New York branch of the Charity Organization Society to form a tenement house committee, and Veiller was elected secretary. He was dedicated to drawing the support of the upper classes. After the passage of the underwhelming 1889 New York City Metropolitan Building Code, Veiller organized a public exposition to educate the city’s elite about the New York Slums. Funded by the Charity Organization Society, the exhibit

⁵³ LuBove, 38.

⁵⁴ LuBove, 118.

⁵⁵ Barbuto, 218.

⁵⁶ LuBove, 127.

took place in the Sherry Building.⁵⁷ During the two-week run, over 10,000 people attended, learned about population density and disease, and viewed shocking photographs of day-to-day life in the slums.⁵⁸ Jacob Riis's debuted many of the photo that would be part of *How the Other Half Lives*, published the following year. The exhibit launched Veiller's career in government; New York governor Theodore Roosevelt hired him to lead the New York State Tenement House Commission. The commission contained many members of COS Tenement House Committee, including Robert Deforest. The New York State Tenement House Commission lobbied immediately and city building code outlawed the "dumbbell tenements" in 1901. Veiller's life work was housing reform. As his active participation in government suggests, Veiller offered solution that strayed from White's emphasis on private enterprise.

White and Veiller served together on the New York Tenement House Commission under the Charity Organization Society from 1900 to 1917, and both were firm in their belief that the poor deserved quality housing and that the government should enforce building standards upon tenement owners. Both conservative housing reformers and progressives approved city requirements on fire escapes, for example. The 1900 *Special Report on Fire Escapes in New York and Brooklyn* was prepared for Robert Forest, the Chairman for the Tenement House Commission. This report focused on the number of fire escapes, that should be placed on high occupancy buildings, the different types of fire escapes and instances of fires with high mortality. The report ended with an accusation that "the enforcement of the fire escape law in this city is of the most lax and

⁵⁷ Barbuto, 148.

⁵⁸ Barbuto, 149.

inefficient kind.”⁵⁹ As tame as this statement seems, it was a significant change, signifying a shift in thought of the progressive housing reformers from placing the blame upon the upper classes to the city and state governments for not enforcing stricter laws upon tenement builders.

Lawrence Veiller had little patience for conservative housing reformers. He was less of an idealist than many of his contemporaries. Historian Roy Lubove describes Veiller’s belief in a “universe in which power regulated human affairs more decisively than love.”⁶⁰ He valued power as a regulatory force in society that should be used to enforce moral behavior from those in charge.

Veiller was successful in passing the New York Tenement House Act due to years of stress the Tenement House Commission placed on state government. The act was amended in 1901, 1902 and 1903 and sought to place pressure on the landlords to improve building safety and conditions. It defined a tenement and placed strict rules on the erected buildings. The tenements that didn’t comply “shall not be occupied [until it] has been made to conform to the law.”⁶¹ The Act had 165 provisions and covered six separate topics including fire safety, prostitution, sanitation, and ventilation. The punishments for violating the Tenement House Act were harsh, including “imprisonment for ten days for each and every day that such violation shall continue or by a fine of not less than ten dollars nor more than one hundred dollars [to] two hundred and fifty

⁵⁹ *Special Report on Fire Escapes*, (New York: The Evening Post Job Printing House, 1900), 20.

⁶⁰ LuBove, 129.

⁶¹ Robert DeForest and Lawrence Veiller, ed., *The Tenement House Problem*, vol.2, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1903), 168.

dollars.”⁶² The act was a success for Veiller yet his problems only increased after its passing.

The Tenement House Commission was given the difficult job of enforcing the new act. The Commission had to deal with uncooperative landlords and tenants who often didn't speak English. It was difficult to communicate the importance of the new laws, and they were often seen as “relatively trivial.” Local police were often unwilling to collect fines for the same reason. Another difficulty was the number of employees; only 166 men and women were willing to fill the crucial role of inspector,⁶³ even as the number of the poor continued to grow. Below average salaries of \$1,200 a year made the Inspector job so undesirable that between 1905 and 1907, 50 per cent of the department “transferred, resigned or were dismissed.”⁶⁴ The greatest difficulty facing the Tenement House Commission was bureaucracy. The inspectors would report a problem to the enforcement bureau, a process that would take an average of four months. The enforcement bureau was chronically behind “one-half to two years,”⁶⁵ allowing some landlords fines to arrive years after the infraction. Robert DeForest, commissioner for the New York State Tenement House Department made a desperate plea for more resources in the 1903 *Charities* magazine. “Because of inadequate force the Department has been compelled to neglect many other important phases of the work,” he lamented.⁶⁶ DeForest stressed the importance of the Tenement House department calling it “practically the

⁶² DeForest, vol. 2, 194.

⁶³ LuBove, 159.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁶⁶ Robert DeForest, “The Estimate for a Year’s Work of the New York Tenement-House Department.” *Charities* 16 (1903): 357.

Health Department for all tenement-houses.”⁶⁷ Even with their faults, the Tenement House Act and Commission had many achievements. Fourteen years after the Act was passed, the death rate within New York tenements had declined from 19.9 to 13.52 percent.⁶⁸ The Tenement House Act of 1901 created a new standard for tenement homes and was ultimately successful despite its problems in enforcement.

Unlike White, Veiller made no money on the new tenements built after the Act. Most of the tenement reformers were paid very little compared to other state agencies. Veiller’s interest in housing reform was perhaps inspired by his interest in tuberculosis prevention. In reports published by the Tenement House Committee, health is mentioned as the most important reason to reform housing conditions. Veiller is quoted as saying that both housing and public health movements shared goals in “ventilation, sewage disposal, water supply...[preventing] the spread of communicable disease and even public health education.”⁶⁹ Veiller was a realist; he believed that housing reform would simply create healthier living environments. Unlike White and many social conservatives, Veiller was cynical that housing reform would end theft, drunkenness, and other social problems related to poverty. Instead, Veiller had a strong belief in the “inevitability of progress.”⁷⁰ This meant that Veiller believed that with scientific reform the poor were destined for social mobility. He had faith in the effectiveness of government and its ability to create positive change.

Veiller had faith in government progress and inevitable progress. However, he still targeted tenant’s lifestyles. The Tenement House Act primarily focused on policing

⁶⁷ Ibid., 360.

⁶⁸ Lubove, 166.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁷⁰ Barbuto, 218.

the landlords and builders, however, individual tenants could also be held responsible. Veiller described a housing law as being different from a building code “in that it deals with living conditions as well as construction problems.”⁷¹ The punishments for breaking the housing act were seen as too strict by the poor, who often had no knowledge that the laws guiding their living habits had changed. The Tenement Reform Act often used highly complex figures that made the laws difficult to adhere to and enforce. For example overcrowding was defined as “less than four hundred cubic feet of air to each adult, and two hundred feet of air to each child under twelve.”⁷² It was also known that Veiller was prone to exaggerations, which endangered his credentials with the Mayor of Albany.

According to the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Mayor Van Wyck of Albany, New York was outraged about an incorrect statement endorsed by Veiller. He claimed that of the 125 randomly surveyed tenement houses “disreputable women [prostitutes] were found in every one.”⁷³ Van Wyck threatened twice to drive Veiller from the city and had Albany housing inspectors present their claim to contradict Veiller’s. Veiller was no stranger to spectacle and, he was willing to stretch the facts to make his point. A man of his time, Veiller was more concerned with the “contaminating presence of prostitution”⁷⁴ than with the fate of girls and women.

Despite the massive gains Veiller made for the housing reform movement, he had a poor public image. He was seen as a hypercritical cynic by many of his contemporaries. Also, he was passionate about housing reform and its connection to halting the spread of tuberculosis. Disease, while important, could not gather the same level of public interest

⁷¹ *Housing Reform in New York City*, 42.

⁷² DeForest, vol. 2, 192.

⁷³ W. H. Baldwin, “Van Wyck’s Savage Attack Followed an Incorrect Statement on Vice in Tenements,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 13, 1901, 44.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

as social and moral issues. Since Veiller was seen negatively in the public eye, how was it that he captured the interest of Governor Theodore Roosevelt and later wrote many widely read books? Veiller had connections with powerful millionaire Robert DeForest. It was DeForest's financial aid and popular public image that allowed the unlikable Veiller to create political change.

Robert Weeks DeForest was a born into a wealthy family. He reinforced his assets when he married Emily Johnson, whose father was a railroad president. DeForest attended both Yale and Columbia, where he obtained a law degree. He was a highly successful lawyer, yet DeForest attained notoriety from his reputation as “one of the wealthiest men in the United States.”⁷⁵ With his excess wealth, DeForest was active in a large array of philanthropies including the Charity Organization Society, which he helped to organize in 1882. The Charity Organization Society was based heavily on volunteers who would regularly visit poor families and give them moral guidance. The role of the volunteer was to act as both friendly encouraging neighbor and to enforce proper spending. When DeForest became the president of the New York Branch of the Charity Organization Society in 1887, he decided to shift the focus of the organization from “providing a good moral example as friendly visitors” to “professional educated social workers.”⁷⁶

DeForest wasn't financially involved in housing reform like White and, to a lesser degree, Veiller. DeForest was a member of the wealthiest classes and shared with them a felling of “noblesse oblige,”⁷⁷ the feeling of entitlement that the wealthy felt toward helping the poor. It was seen as a sacred duty and a way to enforce democratic values

⁷⁵ Barbuto, 60.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 60.

onto the growing numbers of foreign immigrants, and it was shared by White and Veiller. DeForest was on multiple commissions including child labor, prison reform, public health, the arts, and state parks. The charity DeForest spent the majority of his time on, however, was the New York City Charity Organization Society.

Veiller had been working for the Society since the New York Branch was founded. However, the first time DeForest met Veiller was after he became president and Veiller requested the addition of a Tenement House Committee. DeForest created the committee within the larger organization and made himself chair. LuBove argues that the Tenement House Committee was run by Veiller and served as a “permanent pressure group, a lobbyist for housing reform.”⁷⁸ However, the committee had a more conservative beginning. DeForest recognized the value of Veiller’s work as a “housing plan examiner”⁷⁹ and placed him in the role of secretary, knowing he had the knowledge to articulate the Committee’s ideas in the written word. Veiller, however, did not gain direct authority until 1902 when he was granted the lead position of first deputy commissioner of the New York City Tenement House Commission. The beginning of Veiller’s career was controlled by DeForest who wasn’t willing to rock the status quo. The Tenement House Committee contained well known leaders in housing reform including Jacob Riis, Alfred White, and famous magazine editor Richard Glider. Veiller was a virtual nobody and had little authority over the Committee. LuBove’s argument that the Tenement House Committee was an instant lobby for radical change was undermined by the 1899 New York Charity Organization Society Tenement House Exhibition. After an unsatisfactory ruling by municipal housing committee legislation,

⁷⁸ LuBove, 119-120.

⁷⁹ Barbuto, 219.

the Tenement Housing Committee didn't rush into court to overturn the decision. Instead DeForest presented the Tenement House Exhibition to the upper classes of New York, including his friend, Theodore Roosevelt. Riis's photographs brought in crowds and the tenement reform cause gained support throughout the upper classes. It was only then that DeForest felt confident to attempt to overturn the municipal law.

After DeForest's work to gain support for tenement house reform, he began to realize that Veiller had the ideal knowledge and drive to lead the reform on the ground while DeForest remained the public face of reform. DeForest credited the importance of Veiller's knowledge and "DeForest publicly admitted that he would not have accepted the post unless Veiller consented to serve as his deputy."⁸⁰ Veiller and DeForest cooperated due to their similar belief in the value of scientific charity.

Lawrence Veiller worked under DeForest in the Charity Organization Society before he became the leader of the New York Tenement House Commission. Veiller was thankful to DeForest for providing financial and public support for tenement reform. It is important to explore the public beliefs of the Charity Organization Society because they greatly impacted Veiller and therefore tenement house reforms. Lawrence Veiller's masterwork *The Tenement House Problem* reflects this background. It never mentioned labor laws or unjust wages in its two volumes. The reason the wage question is never asked is because the Charity Organization Society of New York publicized tenement house reform as a community problem.

Tenement house reform emerged as a new system of scientific charity represented by the Charity Organization Society. Famous philanthropist Josephine Shaw

⁸⁰ LuBove, 155.

Lowell founded the New York Charity Organization Society. It was based on the Charity Organization Society of London “which became the mouth piece for publicizing the principles of scientific charity.”⁸¹ The Charity Organization Society of New York helped fuel the public outcry over tenement housing by presenting the Tenement House Exposition of 1899. In an announcement advertising the exhibit in the *New York Evangelist*, the exposition was described as a “vital importance” in order to learn that “a large proportion of poverty and crime in our great city is directly traceable to the bad environment of the unattractive, inconvenient tenement house homes.”⁸² Tenements were clearly blamed for the City’s social disorders. The Charity Organization Society approached tenement house reform differently than many of its other reforms. Instead of appealing to Christian charity to help the poor, the tenements were condemned as a risk to the general public. Previously the Charity Organization Society had focused on a Christian charity perspective, which focused on solving the moral issues associated with poverty. Settlement houses were a classic example of Christian charity; young optimistic men and women would move into these group homes believing that their positive example would eradicate moral failings like prostitution and drunkenness. As tenement reform switched to a scientific perspective, it believed it was improving the community at large instead of focusing on individual moral failings. Governor Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech at the Tenement House Exposition proclaiming “no one movement is so vital to the wellbeing of our people as tenement house reform.”⁸³ The Charity Organization Society encouraged a popular outlook on tenement house reform that took attention away from the individual and onto the overall good of the community. This

⁸¹ Joan Waugh, *Unsentimental Reformer*. (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1997). 102.

⁸² “An Important Exhibition,” *New York Evangelist*, August 17, 1899.

⁸³ “Houses and Homes for People,” *New York Observer and Chronicle*, February 22, 1900

attention shift detracted from personal experience and the reformers ignored impacting factors on tenement homes, such as wage discordance, racism and working conditions. This was known as environmentalism, the belief that a person's environment determined their risk for amoral behavior.

Tenement house reform, despite being organized by the Charity Organization Society, was not described as charity. Charity is focused on the individual and their immediate well-being. Since tenement house reform helped the city as a whole, solving this problem entered the realm of science. During the Tenement House Exhibition, Seth Low, President of Columbia College, gave a speech on opening day where he explained that, "not charity but science...would solve these problems, and...would compel the erection of a better class of buildings."⁸⁴ The Charity Organization Society and New York's upper classes shaped housing reform into a scientific community experiment.

Veiller's professionalism is another reason tenement house reform remained disconnected from the causes of poverty. Veiller was a housing reformer by profession, not a philanthropist. His duties were to design stronger building codes and to improve housing quality. Veiller was a housing specialist and chose to write within his field of expertise. He was not a member of the esteemed "leisure class" who are described by *The Independent* magazine as, men who "make a point to keep up with the important developments of art, of science, of discovery and of political philosophy...who believe that the citizens of the Republic should be not only patriotic, but also informed."⁸⁵

DeForest was defined as a man of leisure and it was he who shaped the public awareness of tenement reform. There were two motivations for tenement reform, that reform was a

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ "Our Need of a Leisure Class," *The Independent*, December 21, 1901.

benefit for the community as a whole and that it was a professional task. Both of these reasons focused on housing reform as an individual scientific issue ignoring the causes of the tenant's poverty.

After the Tenement House Act of 1901, other major American cities began to show interest as they were dealing with similar housing issues. Veiller and Deforest decided to compile the information gained from the New York State Tenement House Commission and include the full text of the three updates of the Tenement House Act. The result was the two-volume masterwork, *The Tenement House Problem* edited by Veiller and Deforest. The book was a success and became known as the guidebook for tenement house reform. *The Tenement House Problem* contained essays written by the experts in every pertinent field including sanitation, public baths, prostitution, tuberculosis, housing conditions, and housing laws in major American and European cities. Veiller wrote the majority of the topics, while Deforest wrote the introduction warning cities to begin tenement regulation as soon as possible to “prevent the repetition of the terrible evils which confront New York, and from which she cannot now altogether escape.”⁸⁶ Nationally, New York was seen as the source of the tenement plague and for this reason the city's opinions on how to solve the problem were valued higher than any other city. Ten years after the Tenement House Act for example, the city of New Haven, Connecticut passed a law similar to New York's. It abolished air shafts and, added fireproofing laws and, it defined a tenement house as New York had, as any rented building “residence of three families of more, living independently of each other...having

⁸⁶ DeForest, vol. 1, Xxxi.

a common right in the halls, stairways, or yards.”⁸⁷ *The Tenement House Problem* was an accessible source for 27 American cities. At the time the book was published, only Philadelphia had the same definition of a tenement house as New York. Yet, if New Haven is any indicator, housing commissioners all over the country began to follow the example set by Veiller and DeForest. The men were considered the foremost in their field. By now, Veiller had become a well-known housing pioneer and DeForest’s philanthropic efforts had continued to contribute to his notoriety. *The Tenement House Problem* was a highly successful influential book; it was sold throughout the nation to law makers, housing reformers and university libraries. (Even remote Oregon Agricultural College attained a copy within 18 years of the first printing.) The book was so influential it remained well read into the 20th century, the most recent reprinting was 1972.

The greatest impact of *The Tenement House Problem* was that it set a new standard for dealing with tenements in major cities. It was this book that permanently shifted the attention from capitalists building better tenements to placing the responsibility on the government. It emerged as the handbook of progressive housing reform, encouraging city and state governments to enforce tenement reform. The capitalistic system of housing reform began to lose direct power, but continued to profit from model tenements.

The majority of housing reform efforts had been largely unsuccessful. The conservative effort to regulate housing conditions through the economic pressures failed due to limited financial interest in building model tenements. The progressive housing

⁸⁷Carol Aronvici, *Housing Conditions in New Haven*, (New Haven, 1913), 37.

reformers were successful in passing the Tenement House Act, however, they had little success enforcing the law. *The Tenement House Problem* widely advertised the tenement house act and it became widely known as a solution to housing ills. Even though the Tenement House Act didn't cause a rapid change in living conditions in New York, the Act became a national housing model. *The Tenement House Problem* legitimized the Tenement House Act in major cities through America. The Tenement House Act was more successful in cities other than New York because other American cities had fewer old style tenements⁸⁸ and no dumbbell tenements. Therefore, the Tenement House Act was easier to enforce. Progressive housing reformers were more successful at creating national housing improvements than in New York. This second attempt at solving the tenement house problem was more successful than model tenements. Despite the moderate successes caused by *The Tenement House Problem*, limited government regulation did not address other issues related to housing, such as the availability of low-income housing.

Progressive era environmentalist views were varied and complex. While some progressives blamed housing, others blamed the tenants. Men like White believed that private enterprise held the solution, while Vellier and DeForest sought government regulations. Tenement House reform was not an overwhelming success. Many members of the poor felt only minimal improvements to their living conditions. However, the poor were never the focus of tenement reform. New York City's death rate had dropped⁸⁹, the dumbbell style was outlawed and there was a feeling among the wealthy that the problem

⁸⁸ Large houses divided up into several rooms.

⁸⁹ Lubove, 166.

had been solved. Published in 1913 *Housing Reform in New York City* claimed that the New York Tenement House Commission is responsible for the “great improvement in the sanitary condition of the city.”⁹⁰ It also stated that New York’s worst tenements are “vastly better than the worst of Europe’s.”⁹¹ While the poor continued to suffer New York’s health and sanitary condition improved, Progressive reformers were pleased with the results of tenement house reform because it appeared to scientifically solve some of the city’s largest issues.

Over time the improvements to housing conditions were proven to be superficial. Public housing was never even considered due to the moral importance of owning a home. This emphasis on home ownership within the capitalist system remains strong today with tax breaks for home owners. Tenement house reform ignored the causes of poverty and although it was centered on the poor, the middle and upper classes reaped the benefits.

⁹⁰ *Housing Reform in New York City*, 5.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

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