


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘A very exclusive experiment in communism’: the radical origins of the Manhattan co-op

Jack T. Masterson\* 

New York City Department of Education, 65 Court St, Brooklyn, NY, 11201, USA

\*Corresponding author. Email: [jmasterson1923@yahoo.com](mailto:jmasterson1923@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

Though it has long been the residence of choice for Manhattan’s rich, the co-operative apartment building has an intellectual lineage that originates in pre-Marxian communitarian socialism. In the early nineteenth century, radical philosophers Charles Fourier and Robert Owen first theorized a multifamily dwelling owned in joint stock by its residents that could deliver economies of scale in the production and delivery of household necessities. Using previously untranslated French sources and archival material (New Harmony Working Men’s Institute), this article demonstrates how early socialist ideas about housing, domestic labour and ownership evolved into the idea for the New York City co-operative apartment building.

## Introduction

The co-operative apartment building is a unique form of co-owned property in which the residents own an equity stake in the entire edifice rather than holding a fee-simple title to their unit. Though the market for real estate determines the individual value of apartments based on individual desirability (size, location within the building, natural light, quality of finishes), the co-operative building evolved institutionally from the joint-stock corporation, and the sale of a co-op unit is in many respects more akin to selling shares of a public company than selling a house. In other words, the asset is one’s securitized share of the entire building (and in most instances the land) and a ‘proprietary’ lease, not a deed to the physical living space itself. While associated in its early decades with luxury housing, the apartment co-operative was inspired by Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, the so-called ‘utopian’ socialists of the early nineteenth century, who first applied the joint-stock principle to the construction of large, shared residences. In the late nineteenth century, decades after the communitarian experiments inspired by their ideas had all folded, a man named Philip Gengembre Hubert, the son of a prominent Fourierist, created the first successful co-operative apartment building in Manhattan.

Despite this striking connection, most historians of the luxury apartment downplay, or entirely ignore, its socialist genealogy. In *Alone Together* (1990), the architectural historian Elizabeth Cromley elucidates how the first apartment

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press.

co-operatives in Manhattan emphasized ‘the ideology of family privacy’ and a ‘culture of convenience’ in order to differentiate themselves from working-class tenements. However, Cromley fails to analyse the ownership model, let alone its possible derivation from socialist theory.<sup>1</sup> Mardges Bacon, in her book on the architect Ernest Flagg, who designed early Manhattan co-ops, argues that the co-operative model was simply the best way to meet the capital requirements of constructing a large luxury building, adding that it appealed to ‘owner-occupants...because it gave them a share in the equity’.<sup>2</sup> While not incorrect, Bacon’s analysis fails to incorporate previous schemes of co-operatively owned multifamily residences, particularly ones proposed by reformers and utopian dreamers. More recently, the historian A.K. Sandoval-Strausz argued that multifamily dwellings in the United States, rented and owned, owe their origins to the hotel, which developed an ‘innovative architecture of hospitality’ in the mid-nineteenth century that prefigured the large apartment buildings erected decades later.<sup>3</sup> While hotels and the first apartment houses certainly shared what I will call an ‘infrastructure of luxury’, Sandoval-Strausz ignores the question of ownership.

A few scholars have analysed the relationship between communitarian socialism and the Manhattan apartment co-operative, but have balked at positing a line of direct influence and continuity between the two. In *Utopian Alternative* (1991), Carl Guarneri catalogues the lasting influence of Fourierism on hotels and experimental housing in the late nineteenth century. Yet as its leading scholar, Guarneri defines Fourierism according to its radical, equalitarian edge, arguing that it had ‘evolved almost to the point of disappearing’ in Hubert’s apartment co-operatives, which abandoned ‘the crucial goals of sharing household work and uniting all social classes’.<sup>4</sup> While Hubert’s deluxe residences and well-heeled tenants were a far cry from an agrarian commune, his enterprise relied on the joint-stock ownership model inherited from his socialist forebears. Further, the collectively employed servant staff and the collectively owned utilities infrastructure were essentially the upper-class analogue to Fourier’s old dream of shared household labour. Like Guarneri, the architect and historian Dolores Hayden acknowledges Fourier’s lasting influence on the radical housing schemes of ‘feminist reformers who hoped to reorganize the domestic economy’.<sup>5</sup> However, she fails to analyse whether the joint-stock ownership model and the shared utilities infrastructure proposed by the business-minded Hubert were at all derived from the communitarian socialist tradition. Because Hubert never expressed politically or socially radical intentions as an architect, he is cast outside of the Fourierist tradition, even while Hayden recognizes Hubert’s influence on the socialist Albert K. Owen and his attempt to create a communitarian apartment hotel in

<sup>1</sup>E.C. Cromley, *Alone Together: A History of New York’s Early Apartments* (Ithaca, 1990), 131, 156–8, 199.

<sup>2</sup>M. Bacon, *Ernest Flagg: Beaux-Arts Architect and Urban Reformer* (Cambridge, 1986), 11–12.

<sup>3</sup>A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, ‘Homes for a world of strangers: hospitality and the origins of multiple dwellings in urban America’, *Journal of Urban History*, 33 (2007), 947–9.

<sup>4</sup>C.J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, 1991), 385–98, esp. 398.

<sup>5</sup>D. Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, 1981), 54.

Topolobampo, Mexico, in the late 1880s.<sup>6</sup> While both authors acknowledge that 'Hubert's ties to Fourierism were direct and familial', neither enlists the Manhattan apartment co-operative as a variation of communitarian socialist housing.<sup>7</sup>

Matthew Gordon Lasner, the leading scholar of multifamily housing in the United States, provides the most thorough analysis of this issue, but argues unambiguously that Hubert's plan was 'a conservative endeavor' and not a utopian one. It is true that Hubert's apartment co-operatives were not an exercise in 'mutual aid or collective housekeeping', and in the scant documentary record that he left behind Hubert did 'explicitly reject the idea that the home club was informed by communitarian sentiment'.<sup>8</sup> Yet it was Colombe Gengembre, father of Hubert and partner of Fourier himself, who taught the craft of architecture to the progenitor of the Manhattan apartment co-operative. Hubert's co-operative might have been 'purely pragmatic', and its tenants may have been bourgeois, but the idea of a multifamily dwelling owned in joint stock with a shared utilities infrastructure to ease the burden of household labour can be traced directly back to communitarian socialism in the early nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Hubert may have eschewed association with radical theories in order to appeal to Manhattan's business elite. But in so doing he echoed a cohort of earlier reformers who strategically attenuated the radical edge of Fourier's socialist theory by promoting communitarianism as a value-added capitalist investment in which domestic privacy would not be violated. Hubert never thought that his apartment projects would ameliorate the condition of man, but the ownership model and the industrial-scale utilities infrastructure of the first co-operative buildings have much in common with both the failed communes of the early nineteenth century and contemporary architectural experiments directly inspired by Fourier. By exploring previously overlooked or inaccessible source materials produced on either side of the Atlantic in multiple languages, this article makes the case that the Manhattan apartment co-operative would not have been an intellectual possibility without the communitarian socialists and their vision.

### Joint-stock socialism and the tyranny of isolation

In February and March of 1825, in the early days of the John Quincy Adams administration, a British industrialist named Robert Owen (1771–1858) was invited to address a joint session of Congress. A Welshman of humble origins, Owen married into a family of wealthy Scottish textile manufacturers and became the manager of their large mill at New Lanark, where he introduced experimental practices aimed at improving conditions for workers and their families.<sup>10</sup> Having achieved international renown as a reformer, Owen arrived in the United States with the intention of creating nothing less than a 'new system of society'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 106–9. Despite political similarities and a common surname, Albert K. Owen and Robert Owen had no relation to one another.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 108; Guarneri, *Utopian Alternative*, 398.

<sup>8</sup>M.G. Lasner, *High Life: Condo Living in the Suburban Century* (New Haven, 2012), 43–4.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 43–4.

<sup>10</sup>O. Siméon, *Robert Owen's Experiment at New Lanark: From Paternalism to Socialism* (Cham, 2017).

<sup>11</sup>'The discourse of Robert Owen, Esq. on a new system of society', *Ohio Monitor* (Columbus), 21 May 1826. These two speeches were printed in installments in the *Ohio Monitor*. The relevant issues are cited below.

In contrast to the 'imperfect systems' of the 'Shakers and Harmonites', the secular Owen proposed a plan 'derived from the knowledge of the facts' that would utilize 'modern mechanical and scientific improvements' to alleviate all want and misery.<sup>12</sup> Owen had long believed that individualism was the 'Evil Genius of the world' that 'severs man from man', and he told the assembled legislators that poverty resulted from 'the old system' of living in 'separate dwelling houses'.<sup>13</sup> In this isolated state, men were 'mere localized beings' bound 'in ignorance [as] perpetual slaves [to] the most inferior and worst circumstances'.<sup>14</sup> Owen's solution to this sorry reality lay in a new 'scientific' framework of 'union and cooperation' that would 'give to each the greatest benefit from society'.<sup>15</sup>

Owen's empirical formula for creating paradise blended experimental architecture with shareholder ownership of communal property. By forming 'joint stock companies', a large 'number of persons could be associated together [for] the greatest advantages with the fewest inconveniences'. Participants in this experiment would enjoy 'the most economical arrangements for procuring from agriculture and manufactures [and] for consuming their productions'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, a joint-stock company would be the vehicle for individuals to combine small amounts of capital in a community that would achieve economies of scale in the realm of domestic labour and household consumption. Although not an end in and of itself, the joint-stock scheme was the critical tool that communitarian socialists deployed to arrange the personnel and materials needed for building their heavens on earth. In this sense, radicals like Owen, Fourier and their followers borrowed a strategy from financial capitalism in an effort to realize their communistic visions.<sup>17</sup>

By the time Owen arrived in America, the early industrial revolution had produced an array of new domestic conveniences for the consumption of the nascent bourgeoisie, leaving the working classes behind in a set of material conditions that had changed little since the eighteenth century. The second part of Owen's vision was a direct response to this stratification. Having deployed the joint-stock principle to collectively purchase a sizable property, subscribers would erect an expansive multifamily dwelling with opulent amenities furnished by a complex communal infrastructure. Owen told the audience gathered at the Capitol of an immense, palatial, parallelogrammatic structure designed 'by men of great science and practical experience', which would contain 'culinary arrangements, dining apartments, stores', and facilities for 'washing, drying, brewing, and every other accommodation'. The resident-members would live in 'apartments', each of which 'will be heated, cooled, ventilated [and] supplied with gas lights, and hot and cold water, at the will of the occupants'. In this 'rational arrangement', a single member could direct the structure's vast 'mechanical and chemical operations', which under the old 'separate individual system' of living would require the labour

<sup>12</sup>*Ohio Monitor*, 28 May 1826; *ibid.*, 4 Jun. 1826.

<sup>13</sup>R. Owen, *A New View of Society* (London, 1813), 44–5; *Ohio Monitor*, 18 Jun. 1825.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>*Ohio Monitor*, 28 May 1825; *ibid.*, 21 May 1825.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>On the history of the joint-stock company, see F. Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce: Civilization and Capitalism*, vol. II, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York, 1982), 439–42.

of 20 men. In the final estimate, Owen argued that ‘the pecuniary effects...produced by union and co-operation’ would render labour doubly as productive as it was in isolation.<sup>18</sup>

Within a year of his congressional address, at the frontier settlement of New Harmony, Indiana, Owen assembled the capital, labour and spirit that he hoped would realize his utopian vision.<sup>19</sup> Despite the highest hopes, the community ended in such disaster that the otherwise boastful Owen neglected to mention the short-lived community in his two-volume autobiography.<sup>20</sup> Far from an aggregation of small capital contributions, most of the ‘masons, bricklayers, wheelwrights [and] carpenters’ who arrived had nothing to invest.<sup>21</sup> For a time, the experiment was kept afloat by sizable contributions from Owen and his friend William Maclure, the wealthy philanthropist and cartographer. But this lifeline proved insufficient, and in less than two years New Harmony ended in unrealized economic output, lawsuits and a mortgage foreclosure, anticipating the fate of many early luxury apartment co-operatives decades later.<sup>22</sup> Though this first attempt at communitarian socialism was anything but successful, the fanfare it garnered demonstrated that reform-minded Americans were interested in utilizing the idea of shared property owned in joint stock.

Owen may have struck his contemporaries as quite the eccentric, but in a century littered with radical dreamers, there was no figure quite like François Marie Charles Fourier (1772–1837). In his earliest surviving document (1803), a young Fourier told a high judge: ‘I am the inventor of the mathematical calculus of destinies, a calculus which Newton had within his grasp without realizing it.’<sup>23</sup> The *ne plus ultra* of nineteenth-century utopians, Fourier laid out plans for a global Elysium where disease would be eradicated, labour governed by Eros, sexual desires requited with statistical precision and oceans made of lemonade.<sup>24</sup> But notwithstanding the pet ostriches and copulating planets, Fourier developed a core model of communitarian socialism that would inspire a spate of experiments in France and the United States.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Ohio Monitor, 28 May 1825; *ibid.*, 18 Jun. 1825.

<sup>19</sup>A. Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian Origins and the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663–1829* (Philadelphia, 1950), 160–201.

<sup>20</sup>R. Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen: Written by Himself*, vol. I (London, 1857). Curiously, Owen does mention going before Congress to make ‘the announcement of that new state of existence upon earth...the highest earthly happiness to which man can attain’ (*ibid.*, 213).

<sup>21</sup>W. Owen to R. Owen, 16 Dec. 1825, in ‘New Harmony Manuscripts, 1812–1871’, New Harmony Working Men’s Institute, Series I, fol. 15; Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 160–201.

<sup>22</sup>W. Maclure to M.D. Fretageot, 21 Aug. 1826, J.M. Elliot (ed.), *Partnership for Posterity: The Correspondence of William Maclure and Marie Dulos Fretageot, 1820–1833* (Indianapolis, 1994), 418; Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 160–201; W. Maclure to M.D. Fretageot, 24 Feb. 1827; Elliot (ed.), *Partnership for Posterity*, 475.

<sup>23</sup>C. Fourier, ‘Letter to the high judge’ (1803), in J. Beecher and R. Bienvenu (trans. and eds.), *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier: Selected Texts on Work, Love, and Passionate Attraction* (Boston, 1971), 84, 86, 92.

<sup>24</sup>C. Fourier, ‘La nouveau monde amoureux’ (1816), in *ibid.*, 336–40. Chris Jennings does a wonderful job highlighting the more excessive aspects of Fourier’s theories in: C. Jennings, *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism* (New York, 2016), 167–72.

<sup>25</sup>C. Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, trans. and ed. G.S. Jones and I. Patterson (Cambridge, 1994), 46; Fourier, *Utopian Vision*, 169.

Like Owen, Fourier believed poverty resulted from the 'social incoherence' of 'isolated households', where 'families have no social relation'.<sup>26</sup> This 'social prison' could only be emancipated by a 'system of combined management', in which even 'the least favoured men and women' would access 'a multitude of savings in labor' and live as sumptuously as 'a Richelieu or a Ninon'.<sup>27</sup> Throughout his writings, Fourier discoursed on the way economies of scale would generate domestic bliss in his ideal community, which he called a 'Phalanx':

In a civilized village there may be a hundred women who waste a whole morning going to town to sell a jug of milk. Instead of these hundred women, a Phalanx will send a carriage bearing a barrel of milk and accompanied by just one man to take care of the horse and carriage...So what now takes one hundred village women and three hundred servants...can be done by one man and one horse.<sup>28</sup>

Fourier even suggested that the 'domestic economies' achieved by his 'progressive household' could provide every member with butler service.<sup>29</sup> Though concerned mostly with higher matters, Fourier made clear that a joint-stock model was most suited to building his paradise.<sup>30</sup>

Even more than Owen, Fourier saw a built community as the golden key to unlocking the economies of scale that would bridge the deficient present to the bountiful millennium. He imagined a state-of-the-art, mixed-use apartment palace, called a 'Phalanstery', that would far surpass Versailles in both splendour and utility.<sup>31</sup> A population of 1,600 would reside in well-ventilated, temperature-controlled apartments, connected by a series of insulated corridors, with hot and cold water delivered through an elaborate system of piping. To 'achieve great harmony' and erase distinctions of wealth and status, the units would be 'distributed in compound and interlocking order'.<sup>32</sup> As with oils and dairy products, the finest wine would be held in 'ten huge tanks, instead of three hundred smaller ones'. Massive cellars, attics and granaries would store 'foodstuff in mass quantities' for industrial kitchens, which would churn out 'exquisite' cuisine and pass it up to common dining rooms by pulleys and trap doors.<sup>33</sup> The architecture of the Phalanstery would furnish its inhabitants with 'the levers of Harmony', rendering labour 20 or 30 times more productive than in the present 'incoherent order'.<sup>34</sup> Fourier believed his Phalanstery would be so desirable that the French royal family

<sup>26</sup> Fourier, *Four Movements*, 123–4; C. Fourier, *Theorie de l'unité universelle*, vol. III (Paris, 1841), 456.

<sup>27</sup> Fourier, *Utopian Vision*, 201; Fourier, *L'unité universelle*, vol. III, 10; Fourier, *Four Movements*, 158–9.

<sup>28</sup> C. Fourier, 'Civilized work is unproductive' (1828), in *Utopian Vision*, 130. Fourier used 'civilized' and 'civilization' as pejorative descriptors for the current state of things.

<sup>29</sup> Fourier, *Four Movements*, 120.

<sup>30</sup> Fourier, 'Establishment of a trial phalanx' (1841), in *Utopian Vision*, 236. There is some dispute over whether it was Owen or Fourier who first discovered the idea of using a joint-stock company to build an experimental community. However, it is unlikely that one plagiarized the idea from the other.

<sup>31</sup> Fourier, *L'unité universelle*, vol. III, 455.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 455, 468–70.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–11; Fourier, *Four Movements*, 159.

<sup>34</sup> Fourier, *L'unité universelle*, vol. III, 468; Fourier, 'Civilized work is unproductive', in *Utopian Vision*, 130.

would abandon the Tuileries 'for a small apartment' in the people's palace.<sup>35</sup> Though he is remembered as a fantastical metaphysician who rhapsodized about the eradication of all suffering, Fourier was also a reformer concerned with devising methods for the betterment of working people – and it is this part of his legacy that ultimately bore fruit in the world.

Fourier's popularizers attempted to sell the public on the master's ideas by downplaying their erotic excesses while spotlighting the economic utility of a multi-family residence owned in joint stock. In so doing, they prefigured the promoters of Manhattan's first apartment co-operatives decades later. Victor Considérant (1808–93), Fourier's pre-eminent French disciple, emphasized how a properly orchestrated 'ensemble of domestic labour' ('l'ensemble des travaux domestiques') would produce 'grand economies' of 'reciprocal enrichment'.<sup>36</sup> Where Fourier made passing suggestions, Considérant adamantly and meticulously expounded the unique benefits of the joint-stock model, which he wagered would better appeal to capitalists.<sup>37</sup> Proclaiming that 'architecture is the author of history', Considérant expanded on Fourier's idea of a Phalanstery, describing in minute detail the central heating and cooling systems, the waterworks and the 'kitchen department'. By emphasizing the 'convenience and economy' of a Phalanstery owned in joint stock, Considérant sought to draw folks of sounder minds and deeper pockets to the banner of Fourier.<sup>38</sup> He even rebranded the system 'Association'.<sup>39</sup>

While travelling in France in 1832, an American named Albert Brisbane (1809–90) discovered the theories of Fourier, which 'produced a great revolution in [his] mind'. But his Yankee pragmatism balked at the 'impenetrability of Fourier'. Specifically, Brisbane was frustrated that the French master 'would not condescend to a familiar exposition of [his ideas] adapted to the intelligence around him'.<sup>40</sup> Brisbane would devote the next two decades to making the gospel of Fourier communicable. Though his massive English translation of Fourier's writings failed to gain wide circulation, Brisbane's 1843 pamphlet titled *Association: Or, A Concise Exposition of the Practical Part of Fourier's Social Science* touched off a frenzy of socialist community building in the United States.<sup>41</sup>

With generous use of the word 'practical', Brisbane laid out the workable elements of Fourier's theories to better appeal to American workers, farmers and capitalists. Like his French lodestar, Brisbane griped about the 'waste and monotony [of] the Isolated Household', where domestic tasks like 'cooking, washing [and] keeping up fire' were performed 'three hundred times daily by three hundred

<sup>35</sup> Fourier, *L'unité universelle*, vol. III, 477.

<sup>36</sup> V. Considérant, *Destinée sociale*, vol. I (Paris, 1838), 365, 371–2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 371. Considérant imagined that 'ten capitalists' could form a joint-stock company and 'extend and insure their productive capability and credit' by this 'concentration of capital' (*ibid.*, 371–2). This grounded economic language was a far cry from Fourier's often outlandish musings.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 457, 492–8, 507. Though he is describing what economists call 'economies of scale', Considérant uses the term 'the most beautiful economies' ('les plus belles economies'), for the modern technical term had not yet been coined (*ibid.*, 492).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>40</sup> R. Brisbane, *Albert Brisbane: A Mental Biography with a Character Study* (Boston, 1893), 184–7.

<sup>41</sup> A. Brisbane, *Social Destiny of Man: Or, Association and Reorganization of Industry* (Philadelphia, 1840); A. Brisbane, *Association: Or, A Concise Exposition of the Practical Part of Fourier's Social Science* (New York, 1843); Guarneri, *Utopian Alternative*, 153–77.



families'.<sup>42</sup> Using a 'scientific system of architecture', an Association would replace 'incoherence' with the 'vast Economies [of] a town under one roof'.<sup>43</sup> By concentrating living quarters and erecting a common system of utilities, Brisbane's 'Edifice' (his Anglophone substitution for 'Phalanstery') would obviate much of the 'complicated labor' (e.g. 'carrying water [and] cleaning and trimming daily hundreds of candlesticks and lamps') required to operate single-family residences.<sup>44</sup> In a subsequent pamphlet, Brisbane succinctly restated this principle: 'Instead of the mass of separate little tenements which compose our towns and villages and cover our farms, and in which the greatest waste, inconvenience and for the most part deformity, vie with each other, an Association would build a large and regular Edifice, combining the greatest elegance and comfort with the greatest economy.'<sup>45</sup> In short, an apartment building with a shared utilities infrastructure would reduce costs by accessing economies of scale in the realm of domestic production.

While Owen, Fourier and even Considérant tended to focus on the social effects of their communitarian plans, Brisbane explicated the 'beautiful practical features' of the 'system of joint-stock or sharehold property' in and of itself. Most importantly, it would transform owners of 'small farms [and] separate workshops' into 'joint proprietors of [an] entire domain'. While preserving the little wealth farmers and mechanics had previously amassed, the joint-stock Association would forge the 'concert of action' required to achieve economies of scale.<sup>46</sup> But Brisbane departed from his French confreres in making naked appeals to the interests and desires of 'capitalists', promising that his new system would deliver secured equity, liquidity, profit and a reprieve from the management of domestic labour. Brisbane assured his readers that the 'vested rights in property' would be 'sacredly respected and strictly preserved'.<sup>47</sup> Not only would shares in an Association act as a 'guaranty of a fixed income' and a tax shelter, the new arrangement would 'render real estate moveable property, saleable and convertible at will...into a cash capital'.<sup>48</sup> Writing in the wake of the Panic of 1837, Brisbane promised 'colossal profits' to 'capitalists' tired of 'the frauds, revulsions, and the numerous accidents' endemic to more traditional enterprises.<sup>49</sup> Further, the multifamily architecture of the Association would relieve the bourgeoisie of the 'great cares and vexations...attendant upon overseeing and managing' single family residences, like 'the trouble and losses arising from the carelessness and faithlessness of servants'.<sup>50</sup> All told, investing and residing in an Association would achieve greater security of wealth and a greater standard of living for the poor and the business class alike.

In a similar vein, Brisbane departed with his forebears in assuring his American readers that the new scheme would not desecrate the autonomy of the family

<sup>42</sup>Brisbane, *Association*, 15–17.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>45</sup>A. Brisbane, *A Concise Exposition of the Doctrine of Association: Or a Plan for Re-Organization of Society* (New York, 1844), 19.

<sup>46</sup>Brisbane, *Association*, 31–3.

<sup>47</sup>Brisbane, *Concise Exposition*, 31; Brisbane, *Association*, 30.

<sup>48</sup>Brisbane, *Social Destiny*, 358; Brisbane, *Concise Exposition*, 30.

<sup>49</sup>Brisbane, *Concise Exposition*, 11; Brisbane, *Association*, 34–5.

<sup>50</sup>Brisbane, *Concise Exposition*, 22–3.



domicile. Brisbane described how the Edifice's 'private apartments' would maintain 'individual liberty' along with 'quiet and order'.<sup>51</sup> Where Fourier's sybaritic Phalanstery was designed for 'amorous liberty', the tempered Brisbane offered to balance 'the charms of domestic privacy and the pleasures of social life'.<sup>52</sup> Though there would be communal ownership of property, life in Association would be in compliance with most Protestant strictures.

In 1842, Brisbane linked up with newspaper magnate Horace Greeley and a coterie of New York investor-philanthropists to charter and capitalize the North American Phalanx, a community in New Jersey. Despite Brisbane's strategic modulation of Fourier's doctrines, the conservative *New York Herald* chided Greeley and company for pursuing a 'Roast-beef and plumb pudding millennium'.<sup>53</sup> In the course of the 1840s, more than 20 communities were founded by Brisbane and other American devotees of Fourier. Some, like the Ohio Phalanx, folded instantly for want of sufficient capital.<sup>54</sup> Others, like the Wisconsin Phalanx, disintegrated over time as participants opted for more traditional homesteads.<sup>55</sup> Kept alive by liquidity injections from Greeley's Manhattan circle, the North American Phalanx eked along until an 1853 fire triggered a period of financial stress that impelled foreclosure in 1855.<sup>56</sup>

Although Fourier's palatial Phalanstery remained the *idée fixe*, none of the communities managed anything grander than a large dormitory with a conjoined dining hall.<sup>57</sup> But Brisbane glimpsed the financial appeal of a huge, multifamily apartment structure, owned as 'sharehold property', where tenants could attain equity in their place of residence and access amenities previously reserved for the elite. It would preserve the sanctity of the family and the value of personal property, but would leverage a collectively owned infrastructure to vanquish a good deal of the drudgery and aggravation required to maintain a household.

Despite some of their more impractical ideas regarding the total abolition of human misery, both Owen and Fourier were deeply concerned with the economic empowerment and material improvement of the toiling classes. In pursuit of these more grounded aims, both chose to make use of the joint-stock model, a time-tested organizational scheme that had transformed private enterprise centuries earlier.<sup>58</sup> Their collective invention – the application of the joint-stock principle to the problem of inadequate and insufficient housing – would go on to serve as a model for other nineteenth-century reformers, and would inspire Philip Hubert to create the first modern co-op in Manhattan nearly three decades after the collapse of the North American Phalanx.

<sup>51</sup>Brisbane, *Association*, 23–4, 30.

<sup>52</sup>Fourier, *Utopian Vision*, 177; Brisbane, *Association*, 23–4.

<sup>53</sup>'Roast-beef and plumb pudding millennium', *New York Herald*, 30 Jan. 1843.

<sup>54</sup>'Ohio Phalanx', *The Phalanx: Organ of the Doctrine of Association* (New York), 3 May 1845.

<sup>55</sup>W.A. Hinds, *American Communities and Co-operative Colonies* (Chicago, 1908), 281–7.

<sup>56</sup>Guarneri, *Utopian Alternative*, 327; C. Sears, *The North American Phalanx: An Historical and Descriptive Sketch* (Prescott, WI, 1886), 16–18.

<sup>57</sup>Jennings, *Paradise Now*, 184–241.

<sup>58</sup>See J.B. Baskin and P.J. Miranti Jr, *A History of Corporate Finance* (Cambridge, 1997), 60–1.

### Co-operative housing: child of communitarian socialism

Though all of the full-scale communitarian socialist experiments resulted in failure, many reformers applied the ideas of Owen and Fourier to more limited ventures by forming 'co-operatives'. In essence, a co-operative is a hybrid of a corporation and a non-profit organization. Members purchase shares and are granted access to goods and services at cost. Unlike a corporation, most or all of the equity in a co-operative is owned by those who consume its products, like housing or food. Typically, the restrictions on buying in and cashing out are stronger than those that apply to trading stock in public companies.<sup>59</sup> The modern co-operative was born in England in 1843, when after an unsuccessful strike a group of 28 flannel weavers organized the Rochdale Equitable Pioneer Society to supply food and other necessities to its members. The majority of the founders were acolytes of Robert Owen.<sup>60</sup> Echoing the New Harmony plan, the Rochdale aggregated the capital of hundreds of working people into a joint-stock arrangement to achieve economies of scale in the supply of domestic necessities. The co-operative allowed its members to purchase groceries and other housewares at market prices, but returned all 'profit' to its members in a yearly dividend – a sum that otherwise would have padded the pockets of merchants and middlemen.<sup>61</sup> Born as a compartmentalized adaptation of communitarian socialism, the Rochdale would become the prevailing model for co-operatives in the United States in the decades following the Civil War.<sup>62</sup>

Like in England, the co-operative movement that emerged in the 1860s and 1870s in the United States had discernible ties to the communitarian socialism of the 1830s and 1840s. This was true of the two most famous examples of post-Civil War co-operatives: the National Grange of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry, a nationwide advocacy group for farmers, and the Order of the Sovereigns of Industry, a similar organization for wage workers. The Sovereigns, which operated co-operative stores on the Rochdale model for its proletarian subscribers, was founded by three former members of the Fourierist commune at Brook Farm, Massachusetts. One of them, a man named John T. Codman, openly championed co-operation as a direct continuation of his previous utopian efforts.<sup>63</sup> And while most Grangers were careful to dissociate their wholesome work from socialism, which had by then become associated with revolutionary Marxism, a number of movement leaders cited Fourier as an inspiration for their co-operative efforts.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup>M. Parker, V. Fournier and P. Reedy (eds.), *The Dictionary of Alternatives: Utopianism and Organization* (London, 2007), 61–3.

<sup>60</sup>G.J. Holyoake, *The History of the Rochdale Pioneers* (London, 1893), 7–12, 82–6.

<sup>61</sup>Parker, Fournier and Reedy (eds.), *Dictionary of Alternatives*, 237. The dividend was based on the yearly purchases of each individual member.

<sup>62</sup>M. Conover, 'The Rochdale principles in American Co-operative Associations', *Western Political Quarterly*, 12 (1959), 111–22.

<sup>63</sup>*Constitution of the Order of Sovereigns of Industry* (Worcester, MA, 1875), 3; J.T. Codman and E.W. Bemis, *Cooperation in New England* (Baltimore, 1888), 18; E.M. Chamberlain, *The Sovereigns of Industry* (Boston, 1875), 52–3.

<sup>64</sup>'Cooperation', *Patrons of Husbandry* (Columbus, MS), 31 May 1879; *Journal of Proceedings of the Eleventh Session of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry* (Louisville, 1878), 7–9; *Journal of the Proceedings of the Eighteenth Session of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry* (Philadelphia, 1884), 18; A. Shaw, *Cooperation in the Northwest* (Baltimore, 1888), 313–16; R.H.

Given the example of the Grangers and Sovereigns, the problem of affordable housing for working people in cities seemed ripe for a co-operative solution. Most of these ventures took the form of building and loan associations, a model first developed in Britain, which granted working-class subscribers access to low-interest loans for building or purchasing single-family houses.<sup>65</sup> In 1871, a group of middle-class New England philanthropists organized the Boston Co-operative Building Company and purchased a tenement house nicknamed the 'Crystal Palace'. They attempted to rent rooms at cost to tenants of limited means, but the principals found the behaviour of the Irish residents 'a disgrace to modern civilization' and opted instead for their original plan of building single-family houses for sale at cost to the worthier poor.<sup>66</sup> While co-operators in America shied away from multifamily dwellings in the 1870s, an industrialist in France named Jean-Baptiste André Godin (1817–88) adapted the ideas of Fourier to build what would become the world's first co-operatively owned apartment building.

Like Albert Brisbane, a young Godin fell under the spell of Fourier's theories, which he called 'the grandest system to ever leave a man's head'.<sup>67</sup> So enthusiastic was Godin that he invested a third of his sizable fortune (a sum of around 100,000 francs) with Victor Considérant, who in 1855 was planning a community near Dallas, Texas, that he promised would be an 'Eden'. Godin lost his entire investment in the 'unhappy business' of the La Reunion community, a calamity even more short-lived than Owen's New Harmony.<sup>68</sup> Determined to salvage the 'socio-economic truth' of Fourier's theory from its lofty 'psychological and moral aspects', Godin spent the remainder of his riches building a large iron stove manufacturing facility in France, where his workers lived in a massive, multifamily structure modelled on Fourier's dreamy Phalanstery.<sup>69</sup> Closer than any other structure on earth to realizing Fourier's architectural vision, Godin's 'Familistère' would become the first successful experiment in co-operative ownership of a multifamily residence.

Following Fourier and Brisbane, Godin believed that a jointly owned apartment structure could deliver economies of scale unavailable to 'scattered and isolated families' while providing labourers with an equity stake in their place of residence.<sup>70</sup> Based on what Godin called 'Social Architecture', the Familistère was designed from the ground up to 'concentrate all the elements of comfort' while abolishing the 'thousand inconveniences' typical of a 'worker's isolated home'.<sup>71</sup> Godin accomplished this by a shared, advanced utilities infrastructure. The Familistère had an industrial-scale laundry, which replaced 'the tenement converted into a laundry room', a 'repulsive' modification that 'forced the working family into a permanent

---

Newton, *Social Studies* (New York, 1887), 85–104; J.D. McCabe, *History of the Grange Movement* (Philadelphia, 1879), 484, 492.

<sup>65</sup>K.T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1985), 130.

<sup>66</sup>*First Annual Report of the Boston Co-operative Building Co.: With Act of Incorporation and By-Laws* (Boston, 1872), 4–5; *Third Annual Report of the Boston Co-operative Building Company* (Boston, 1874), 3–4, 14–16.

<sup>67</sup>J.B.A. Godin, *Solutions sociales* (Paris, 1871), 68–9.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 147–50; J. Pratt, *Sabotaged: Dreams of Utopia in Texas* (Lincoln, NB, 2020), 33–6.

<sup>69</sup>Godin, *Solutions sociales*, 71.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 85, 456–7.

state of discomfort'. In the basement, Godin built a 'special establishment' for laundry, replete with hot-water faucets and cement-anchored basins, restoring 'the apartment as a place of tranquility...free of all things bulky and inconvenient'.<sup>72</sup> A modern system of plumbing relieved housewives of the 'great exhaustion [of] fetch[ing] water from the street well'. Huge gas-fired heaters and a centralized steam pump operated day and night, feeding hot and cold water into every flat.<sup>73</sup> Godin handled illumination with equal prescience, believing that access to light measured 'progress in the order of intellectual, moral and social ideas'. A carefully arranged network of gas lamps assured ample lighting to all 'courtyards, stairs, arcades, and entrances to all apartments in the Familistère'. Finally, Godin was convinced that constantly circulating air was essential to 'hygiene and public health'. Centred around a series of three interior courtyards, the entire layout of the Familistère – down to the placement of doors, windows and archways – was designed to produce 'a gentle ventilation' in all seasons.<sup>74</sup> Apartment buildings had existed in Paris since the 1820s, but Haussmann's renovations depleted the housing stock. By the late 1850s, working Parisians were forced to pay higher rents for increasingly inferior housing.<sup>75</sup> Erected from a single design between 1858 and 1871, Godin's 'Social Palace of the future' promised to provide workers with 'an equitable distribution of comforts' previously 'reserved for the fortunate'.<sup>76</sup>

Though a believer in the harmonizing effects of 'social economy', Godin sang the virtues of property ownership in a higher key than Fourier himself, and denounced the relatively new doctrine of Marxism in unambiguous terms. Believing that 'access to property' was an 'essential condition for [the worker's] improvement', Godin devised a compensation plan that allowed 'the labouring man to feel he has a stake in...the house he lives in'.<sup>77</sup> Originally, the Familistère was conceived as a non-profit rental dwelling where Godin's employees could live and enjoy shared amenities at cost, a model similar to experiments in philanthropic housing already operating in the United Kingdom. In contrast to Fourier's Phalanstery, where tenants were assigned apartments so as to maximize 'social harmony', units in the Familistère were priced according to floor space and desirability of location.<sup>78</sup> Early in the 1870s, Godin commenced his long-contemplated plan for transferring ownership of the Familistère to his employees by issuing 'savings stock' to supplement wages.<sup>79</sup> Though he continued to collect rent, Godin orchestrated an accounting system in which the annual dividends paid on his workers' stock would offset the rental payments for units in the Familistère (or at least come close).<sup>80</sup>

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 493–7.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 490–2.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 480, 502.

<sup>75</sup>S. Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley, 1999), 137–47.

<sup>76</sup>Godin, *Solutions sociales*, 431–4.

<sup>77</sup>J.B.A. Godin, *Mutualité sociale et association du capital et du travail* (Paris, 1880), 33, 67.

<sup>78</sup>Godin, *Solutions sociales*, 532–3. Cf. Fourier, *L'unité universelle*, vol. III, 468. For 'philanthropic housing', see G.M. Towle, 'Saltaire and its founder', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 44 (May 1872), 827–35.

<sup>79</sup>J.B.A. Godin, *The Association of Capital with Labor*, trans. L. Bristol (New York, 1881), 16–20, 36.

<sup>80</sup>E.M. Dallet, A. Fabre and J. Prudhommeaux, *Twenty-Eight Years of Co-partnership at Guise*, trans. A. Williams (London, 1908), 25, 29–30.

In so doing, the Fourier-inspired Godin hammered out the first workable framework for co-operative ownership of a multifamily residence.<sup>81</sup>

Throughout the 1870s, housing reformers in the United States idolized the Familistère and encouraged its emulation. Edward and Marie Howland, two New Englanders with ties to communitarian socialism and the Grange movement, served as the leading popularizers of Godin in America.<sup>82</sup> After spending their honeymoon as guests of Godin, the two Americans came home determined to preach the good news of the Social Palace, 'the only successful embodiment of the ideas of Fourier' in history.<sup>83</sup> In 1872, Edward authored a puff piece for *Harper's Monthly* which lauded the Social Palace for granting to 'the poor... facilities for spending their pittance as judiciously as the rich'.<sup>84</sup> Not to be outdone, Marie published a novel titled *Papa's Own Girl* (1874), which one reviewer lauded for its depiction of the Familistère as 'a heaven capable of realization'.<sup>85</sup> A radical feminist, Howland took to the lecture circuit touting 'social palace homes' as the key to 'woman's emancipation from the kitchen [and] the more onerous parts of housekeeping'.<sup>86</sup> She even promoted a plan to build a Godin-style dormitory for 'the great number of government clerks' in Washington, DC.<sup>87</sup> By the early 1880s, reformers in multiple cities were toying with the idea of building an American Familistère.<sup>88</sup>

While reformers looked to Godin as a luminary of social amelioration, others glimpsed the more capitalist elements of his model. In July of 1880, the *New York Herald* acclaimed the Familistère as 'a paying institution', assuring readers that it was 'neither a nest of Shakers nor a hotbed of crack-brained Robert Owenisms'. Besides providing 'conveniences utterly unattainable in isolated lodgings', the Familistère made 'the capitalist the partner... of his workmen' by affording him an equity stake in the property.<sup>89</sup> Another remarked on the 'financial advantages' bestowed on a tenant who 'hires his room from a company in which he is an interested party'.<sup>90</sup> The *Brooklyn Eagle* touted the soundness of Godin's 'business plan', which with all due orthodoxy preserved the 'privacy of families'.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>81</sup>An early history of co-operative housing in Great Britain reveals that co-operators around the Atlantic world considered Godin the godfather of co-operative housing. See J.E. Yerbury, *A Short History of the Pioneer Society in Cooperative Housing* (London, 1913), 1. Edward Owen Greening, a leading promoter of co-operative housing in England, was directly inspired by Godin, as well as the principles of Robert Owen. See T. Grimes, *Edward Owen Greening: A Maker of Modern Co-operation* (London, 1924), 34–40.

<sup>82</sup>C. Postel, *Equality: An American Dilemma, 1886–1896* (New York, 2019), 16.

<sup>83</sup>'Woman's work', *Hartford Daily Courant*, 17 Oct. 1874.

<sup>84</sup>E. Howland, 'The Social Palace at Guise', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 44 (Apr. 1872), 706.

<sup>85</sup>M. Howland, *Papa's Own Girl* (New York, 1874), 360–3; 'Our book table reviews of recent publications', *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, 30 May 1874.

<sup>86</sup>M. Howland, 'Distractions of married women', *St. Louis Global-Democrat*, 4 Jul. 1875.

<sup>87</sup>'Woman's work', *Hartford Daily Courant*, 17 Oct. 1874; J. Hitz, 'Homes for the people in the city of Washington', *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), 15 Mar. 1882.

<sup>88</sup>'Social palaces', *Cleveland Leader*, 8 Jun. 1874; 'Workingmen's homes', *Golden Rule* (Boston), 19 Apr. 1876; 'The Social Palace', *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 May 1881; 'The Social Palace at Guise', *New York Times*, 5 Jun. 1881; 'The Familistere of Guise: a model community', *Boston Journal*, 3 Jun. 1882.

<sup>89</sup>'The Familistère: social and industrial reform in France', *New York Herald*, 10 Jul. 1880.

<sup>90</sup>'The Familistère de Guise', *New York Herald*, 10 Jul. 1880.

<sup>91</sup>'Godin's Familistère at Guise', *Brooklyn Eagle*, 18 Jul. 1880. This piece echoes the urgency with which early promoters of luxury apartment buildings assured the bourgeoisie that family privacy would not be violated in their experimental housing. See Cromley, *Alone Together*, 9–10, 202.

Charles Barnard remarked in his *Co-operation as a Business* (1881) that although 'co-operation has been often confounded with Socialism [and] Communism', Godin's success proved that co-operation 'simply means business'.<sup>92</sup> So enthralled were elements of New York's business community that a delegation of 'capitalists' was dispatched to France in the summer of 1880 to 'return with plans and projects of a similar kind for the benefit of American working people'.<sup>93</sup> It was a bizarre undertaking: a corps of hard-nosed New York men of commerce traversing an ocean to study the investment potential of a community inspired by the ideas of a long-dead French utopian.

But there was another child of Fourier back in Manhattan who beat them to it. The son and grandson of 'noted French revolutionists', Philip Gengembre (1830–1911) was born near Paris and 'christened on a barricade' during the July Revolution. Legend has it that Gengembre's mother, eight months pregnant with Philip, 'ordered the trees chopped down around her home' to slow the advance of the king's artillery.<sup>94</sup> When Victor Considérant and Charles Fourier needed an architect to design the Phalanstery for a community in Condé-sur-Vesgre, they tapped their mutual friend Colomb Gengembre, the father of two-year-old Philip.<sup>95</sup> As a teenager, Philip worked for his grandfather Philippe, who decades before Godin was experimenting with ways to improve the living conditions of the workers at the state iron works he oversaw at Indret.<sup>96</sup> In 1848, Gengembre emigrated to the United States, along with his father and other revolutionary outcasts, where in Cincinnati he settled and took the more Anglophone surname Hubert, his given middle name.<sup>97</sup> After having some success as a professor and an inventor, Hubert went to New York to pursue a career in architecture, a craft his Fourierist father had taught him.<sup>98</sup> Along with his partner James W. Pirsson, his firm erected a few traditional tenements in the East 40s during the 1870s before deciding to apply the co-operative principle to create housing for New Yorkers of 'moderate means'.<sup>99</sup>

Reflecting the core tenets of the reform tradition he inherited from Owen and Fourier, Hubert conceived of a multifamily apartment structure owned in joint stock that allowed resident-owners to access economies of scale in meeting domestic needs. Hubert created something called a 'Home Club' – a joint-stock company

<sup>92</sup>C. Barnard, *Co-operation as a Business* (New York, 1881), iii–iv, 153.

<sup>93</sup>Godin's Familistère at Guise', *Brooklyn Eagle*, 18 Jul. 1880.

<sup>94</sup>'Death ends career of many successes', *Los Angeles Times*, 17 Nov. 1911; 'New York apartments little changed in 30 years', *New York Times*, 12 Jul. 1914.

<sup>95</sup>J. Favre, *La Fraternité Humaine* (Paris, 1880), 219–20; 'Fondation de la colonie sociétaire', *La réforme industrielle ou La Phalanstère*, 1 (Nov. 1832), 220. The latter source refers to Colomb Gengembre as a 'friend of the principal shareholders' in the venture, those being Considérant and Fourier.

<sup>96</sup>J.M. Guinn, *A History of California*, vol. III (Los Angeles, 1915), 623.

<sup>97</sup>'New York apartments little changed in 30 years', *New York Times*, 12 Jul. 1914.

<sup>98</sup>G.M. Price, 'A pioneer in apartment house architecture: memoir on Philip G. Hubert's work', *Architectural Record*, 36 (Jul. 1914), 76; 'New York apartments little changed in 30 years', *New York Times*, 12 Jul. 1914; 'Pioneer designer of big apartments', *Sun* (New York), 12 Jul. 1914. The fact that Hubert was taught architecture by his father, a long-time follower and companion of Charles Fourier, is a key piece of evidence that scholars who discount the socialist influence on the Manhattan co-op have ignored. See Lasner, *High Life*, 33–45. Cf. Guarneri, *Utopian Alternative*, 398.

<sup>99</sup>'New buildings going up', *New York Times*, 19 Mar. 1882.



chartered to build and maintain a modern apartment building, in which each member would be 'both part owner in the entire property as well as lessee of his own apartment'. A tenant could 'sell or transfer his share' pending the approval of the other members.<sup>100</sup> Essentially, the Home Club was a co-operative construction enterprise in which investors would own an equity share in the entire edifice. This share would directly correspond to the market value of the apartment unit. Unlike Fourier (who assigned apartments without regard to capital invested) and Godin (who paid a cash dividend as a rent remission), Hubert organized the Home Club so that 'rents' would discharge the property's mortgage, eventually granting outright ownership to tenants.<sup>101</sup> Owen and Brisbane may have sold shares in the kingdom of heaven on earth, but Hubert's subscribers would own a slice of real estate on Manhattan Island, the perennial utopia of cosmopolitan sophisticates.

Revealing a reformer's sensibility, Hubert originally desired to lift 'clerks and working people' out from under the boot of Manhattan's rentier gentry.<sup>102</sup> The *New York Times* enthused that the 'Hubert Home Club Association' would leverage 'the economy of all well-considered cooperation' to release 'persons of small means' from 'the large amount a landlord must necessarily charge' in rent.<sup>103</sup> At first, Hubert saw his co-operative plan as a tool for people of limited means to enhance their quality of life and preserve their wealth by combining capital. But like Owen and Brisbane, Hubert quickly found it impossible to attract New Yorkers of 'small means', and the first advertisement for the Home Clubs invited 'people of means and good social standing' to pledge subscriptions.<sup>104</sup> Hubert may have regretted that his experiment would never elevate the toiling masses into upmarket comfortability, but he quickly sacrificed his socialist heritage on the altar of financial viability.

Hubert's adaptation of the Fourierist model did make quite a splash among Gotham's lesser bourgeoisie: those with aristocratic pretensions but not enough capital to staff a free-standing house with a full roster of servants. When Hubert and Pirsson unveiled plans for the Central Park Apartments – a conjoined series of towering buildings on Seventh Avenue and 59th Street – a major selling point was the 'large restaurant...kept by a competent caterer' that would 'furnish meals for those who do not care to burden their households with the responsibilities of cuisine'.<sup>105</sup> Along with delivered meals, tenants could access common kitchens, laundries and refrigerators, receive filtered hot and cold water, read under an ultra-modern system of gas and electric lighting and utilize the services of a butcher shop. In the fashion of the Familistère, this collectively owned infrastructure of luxury was provided 'for the stockholders on a basis nearly at cost'.<sup>106</sup> In near replication of Brisbane's appeal to the moneyed classes of his day, promoters emphasized

<sup>100</sup>'Homes at small expense', *New York Times*, 30 Jan. 1881.

<sup>101</sup>R.H. Newton, 'The progress of co-operation in the United States', *Princeton Review*, 2 (Jul.–Dec. 1882), 201; 'Co-operative house building', *Buffalo Commercial*, 29 Nov. 1881.

<sup>102</sup>C.L. Norton, 'Home clubs', *Christian Union* (New York), 23 Mar. 1881; 'New buildings going up', *New York Times*, 19 Mar. 1882; 'Co-operative apartment houses', *New York Tribune*, 1 Apr. 1883.

<sup>103</sup>*New York Times*, 16 Feb. 1881.

<sup>104</sup>*New York Times*, 17 Feb. 1882.

<sup>105</sup>'New buildings going up', *New York Times*, 19 Mar. 1882.

<sup>106</sup>'A typical modern apartment house', *Carpentry and Building* (New York), 1 Apr. 1885.



how Hubert's scheme accessed economies of scale by hiring 'fewer servants' while allowing 'tenants to present an equally fair appearance in the eyes of the world'. The Central Park Apartments provided 'wealthy tenants' with 'all the conveniences possible' and none of the accounting and managerial headaches of running a fully serviced household.<sup>107</sup> In these 'modern palaces', a 'thousand and one things are taken from your mind' through the achievement of 'great economy'.<sup>108</sup> Though Hubert's experiment failed to make lords out of paupers, it would allow middle-class strivers to present like barons.

Hubert's architectural style mixed the hygienic with the avant-garde. Natural light and air circulation were foremost considerations in the design of the Central Park Apartments. In striking similarity to the Familistère, Hubert's behemoth had 'three internal courts or gardens' connected to the exterior by 'lofty open arches' to 'allow a perfect circulation of air'.<sup>109</sup> Hubert was also the first developer to come up with the duplex, which offered a layout and living experience that more closely approximated a private house.<sup>110</sup> Like Brisbane and Considérant, Hubert made a special effort to attract artists to his 'experiment', building 'studios' on his top floors where Gotham's more moneyed bohemians could live and work in ample natural light.<sup>111</sup> The Rembrandt, Hubert's first project on West 57th Street, was home to many artists, and in its early days opened its doors for a gallery exhibition which invited guests to wander in and out of different apartments.<sup>112</sup> Like other co-operatives constructed later on, Hubert's buildings attracted a curious amount of reformers. Carl Schurz, the former German revolutionary turned anti-corruption renegade, and Mary Mapes Dodge, a muckraker famous for exposing the 'Shoddy Aristocracy' of corrupt Civil War military contractors, both subscribed as original owner-occupants.<sup>113</sup> Though not quite a den of Owenite radicals, Manhattan's early apartment co-operatives attracted a tenantry that skewed eccentric and egalitarian.

Despite his connection to the Fourierist tradition, Hubert eschewed any explicit association between his architecture and communitarian socialism. However, many contemporary observers saw the obvious similarities. R. Heber Newton praised the 'Hubert Home Club' as the latest fruits of a rich tradition originating in 'the inspiration of Robert Owen' and 'Fourierite propaganda'.<sup>114</sup> The *New York Tribune* remarked that Hubert planned his buildings 'on a kind of communistic basis',

<sup>107</sup>J.H. Browne, 'The problem of living in New York', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 65 (Nov. 1882), 919–20; 'Homes in big flat houses', *New York Tribune*, 21 Nov. 1886.

<sup>108</sup>'Homes in big flat houses', *New York Tribune*, 21 Nov. 1886; 'New York literary women', *Buffalo Weekly Express*, 15 Jul. 1886.

<sup>109</sup>'Central Park Apartments', *New York Times*, 20 Nov. 1881. Cf. Godin, *Solutions sociales*, 443–55, 476–80.

<sup>110</sup>'New York apartments little changed in 30 years', *New York Times*, 12 Jul. 1914.

<sup>111</sup>Considérant, *Destinée sociale*, vol. I, 499; Brisbane, *Association*, 25; 'New buildings going up', *New York Times*, 14 Jul. 1880. Hubert himself referred to the Central Park Apartments as an 'experiment' in more than one source. See 'Co-operative apartment-houses', *New York Tribune*, 8 Apr. 1883; 'Homes in big flat houses', *New York Tribune*, 21 Nov. 1886.

<sup>112</sup>'Artists and art topics', *New York Times*, 19 Feb. 1882.

<sup>113</sup>'New-York literary women', *Buffalo Weekly Express*, 15 Jul. 1886; 'Homes in big flat houses', *New York Tribune*, 21 Nov. 1886.

<sup>114</sup>Newton, 'The progress of co-operation in the United States', 201–14.

and at least one paper drew comparisons to Godin's joint-stock model.<sup>115</sup> The Chelsea Apartments, a Hubert building with even more amenities than his previous creations, was hailed as 'the [gold] nugget of the millennium' for its co-operative arrangement.<sup>116</sup> And when Hubert's co-operative apartment idea made it to San Francisco, local papers openly celebrated its 'communistic' attributes.<sup>117</sup> What for Hubert was an awkward legacy became for others a marketing strategy.

Despite the successful construction of multiple apartment palaces, Hubert's vision proved in the end to lack viability. Like the socialist communes that preceded them, Hubert's buildings suffered from undercapitalization and financial mismanagement. Early on, there were warnings that 'well-to-do Americans' would 'have a prejudice' against apartments, given their 'association with common tenements'.<sup>118</sup> The Central Park Apartments had been overleveraged at the outset, and tenants' monthly payments were barely enough to cover the utilities and services, let alone retire the credit lines. By 1888, under mounting debt, Hubert was forced to sell to one of his creditors, who converted the property into a rental building.<sup>119</sup> All told, Hubert's idea had arrived too early. In the 1880s, purchasing a free-standing house on Manhattan remained a possibility for a large portion of the upper class, who were still 'too exclusive to be huddled together [in] tenement houses of a higher grade'.<sup>120</sup> Additionally, the Panic of 1893 triggered a general downturn in residential building in New York as well as the nation.<sup>121</sup> Further experimentation in the way of apartment co-operatives would have to wait until the new century.

Much like Albert Brisbane and even Victor Considérant, Hubert was a pragmatic visionary who sought to adapt the airy ideas of utopian socialism to a more financially grounded venture. Hubert went a step further, abandoning any talk of social amelioration, but his model bears the distinct markers of a tradition which originated in communitarian socialism. Where Brisbane and Godin sought to achieve economies of scale to free the working poor from hard and tedious domestic labour, Hubert dreamed of emancipating Manhattan's lesser gentry from the costs and headaches of managing a fully staffed mansion. By adapting the ideas of long-passed utopian theorists, Hubert created a type of residence that would one day house the titans of Wall Street in style and opulence.

Two decades after the Central Park Apartments folded, Manhattan's real estate market was finally ready for a co-operative boom.<sup>122</sup> After a vanguard of artists and writers on the West Side revived the co-operative idea in 1903, the lack of suitable

<sup>115</sup>'The Navarro flats sold', *New York Tribune*, 10 Nov. 1888; 'A social palace: Paris' famous Familistere founded by M. Godin', *Daily Evening Bulletin* (Haverhill, MA), 28 Feb. 1888.

<sup>116</sup>E. Archard, 'A home club house', *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), 4 Jan. 1885.

<sup>117</sup>'Problems of living', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 Feb. 1894; 'Modern development of the apartment house', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 Mar. 1896.

<sup>118</sup>Browne, 'Living in New York', 920; 'City real estate', *New York Times*, 5 Mar. 1882.

<sup>119</sup>'The Navarro flats sold', *New York Tribune*, 10 Nov. 1888; 'Co-operative apartment houses', *New York Tribune*, 1 Apr. 1883; 'The Navarro flats sold', *New York Tribune*, 10 Nov. 1888.

<sup>120</sup>'From New York', *Middle Town Press* (Middletown, NY), 26 Jul. 1890; 'The West Side', *New York Times*, 20 Mar. 1887; Bacon, *Ernest Flagg*, 12.

<sup>121</sup>C. Hoffmann, *The Depression of the Nineties: An Economic History* (Westport, CT, 1970), xxxiv.

<sup>122</sup>C.J. Rosebault, 'Magic of art in co-operative apartments', *New York Times*, 16 Nov. 1919.

lots in the area of Central Park spurred Gotham's wealthy to think vertically.<sup>123</sup> Around 1909, developers like Walter Russell and Penryhn Stanlaws began constructing colossal apartment palaces on Park, Madison and Fifth Avenues, where the infrastructure of luxury first introduced by Hubert would provide New York's 'well-to-do classes' with a solution to 'the servant problem'.<sup>124</sup> By 1910, socialist literary paragon William Dean Howells, one of the aesthetes who revived the co-operative idea in 1903, expressed deep regret that the 'Philistines' had bought up 'the pleasanter sites' for their private-elevator monstrosities.<sup>125</sup> Unfortunately for Howells and other purists, what had blossomed from the seed of radical thinking was now pruned to fit the fancies of showy plutocrats.

Reflecting in 1916 on the 'amazing rise of the New York apartment house', noted heartland journalist Frederic J. Haskin marvelled at what he called 'communal living for the rich'. Waxing utopian, Haskin wrote:

All over the world, at various times, communal colonies have been founded by socialistic dreamers, and always they have failed because there was no real need for them. Now in New York, the need has grown up because of the great number of people and the complexity of their wants, and the need has brought into being the communal apartment house.<sup>126</sup>

No group of dreamers ever managed to build the Edenic Phalanstery, and today the Social Palace at Guise is a museum. To the extent that they are remembered at all, Robert Owen and Charles Fourier are known merely as curious relics of socialism's fantastical youth. But their protean ideas live on in the apartment palaces of Park Avenue, where fine stonemasonry, marbled lobbies and top-hatted liftmen bear continuing testimony to 'a very exclusive experiment in communism'.<sup>127</sup>

### Coda: the socialist dream revived in Brooklyn and the Bronx

In 1916, a group of socialist bakers incorporated the Finnish Home Building Association to 'club their resources and build their own homes together'.<sup>128</sup> In the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn, the 'Finnish workingmen' created a series of apartment buildings 'planned, financed and built by the tenants' who 'own[ed] them collectively'.<sup>129</sup> In 1924, the *New York Times* marvelled at how 'the idea of

<sup>123</sup>'A striking example', *Carpentry and Building* (New York), 1 Jul. 1907; 'Duplex apartment plan shown to advantage', *New York Times*, 16 Aug. 1908; 'Big co-operatives open new future for Park Avenue corners', *New York Times*, 28 Feb. 1909; 'Park Avenue's transformation as co-operative apartment centre', *New York Times*, 1 May 1910; 'Co-operative apartment houses: their history and advantages', *New York Times*, 6 Nov. 1910.

<sup>124</sup>'Co-operative housekeeping', *Washington Post*, 3 Sep. 1903; 'New Park Av. apartment to be operated on co-operation plan: solves servant problem', *New York Times*, 21 Mar. 1920.

<sup>125</sup>W.D. Howells, 'Ways and means of living in New York', in *Imaginary Interviews* (New York, 1910), 109.

<sup>126</sup>F.J. Haskin, 'A town in one house', *Ottumwa Tri-Weekly Courier* (Iowa), 2 Sep. 1916.

<sup>127</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup>'Co-operative housing proves success in Bay Ridge: twenty plants built or purchased within five years', *The Standard Union*, 21 May 1922; '16 families built big apartment on co-operative plan', *Brooklyn Eagle*, 1 Jul. 1919.

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*

cooperation and mutual assistance in the Finnish colony has assumed a Utopian character'.<sup>130</sup> The buildings even lent space to the Brooklyn headquarters of the Workers Party of America, a Marxist organization whose slogan was 'Workers of the World Unite'.<sup>131</sup> In the early 1920s in the Bronx, a syndicate of garment industry unions teamed up with Morris Hillquit, leader of the Socialist Party of America, to capitalize and build 'a true co-operative apartment' for Jewish workers and their families.<sup>132</sup> Designed 'to bring the women out of their domestic activities into broader co-operative and labor action', the new 'Co-ops' (pronounced like 'Coops') included 'a co-operative restaurant, day nursery, kindergarten, gymnasium, music room, library...and [an] electric laundry'.<sup>133</sup> The architecture and atmosphere reflected the Marxist allegiances of the tenants. Masons chiselled hammer and sickle insignia above the entrances to exterior doorways, and in 1927 the 'Co-operative Youth' organization held a dance in honour of Sacco and Vanzetti, the Italian anarchists convicted of murder in 1921.<sup>134</sup> In their quest to build suitable worker-owned housing, these groups applied their socialist, mutual-aid principles to successfully erect large buildings in the outer boroughs. Reacting to the absenteeism and quick turnover that had come to mar the Manhattan co-op market, these new residences were based on the principle of 'limited-equity', with strict rules that barred rentiers, mitigated speculation and limited the remodelling of units.<sup>135</sup> But by effecting what they believed were innovative undertakings, these socialist bakers and garment workers actually brought the apartment co-operative much closer to its radical origins.

<sup>130</sup> 'Wage-earners succeed in cooperative housing', *New York Times*, 24 Feb. 1924.

<sup>131</sup> 'Workers Party of America', *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, 14 Jun. 1922.

<sup>132</sup> E. Lowell, 'Big co-operative apartment in Gotham will be ready for tenants early in November', *Daily Worker* (New York), 11 Oct. 1926.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> 'Cooperative youth dance Saturday eve', *Daily Worker*, 20 May 1927; 'Finding utopia in the Bronx', *Bronx Bohemian*, 27 Apr. 2009, <https://bronxbohemian.wordpress.com/2009/04/27/finding-utopia-in-the-bronx/>.

<sup>135</sup> Lasner, *High Life*, 93–101.

**Cite this article:** Masterson JT (2023). 'A very exclusive experiment in communism': the radical origins of the Manhattan co-op. *Urban History* 50, 115–133. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926821000699>