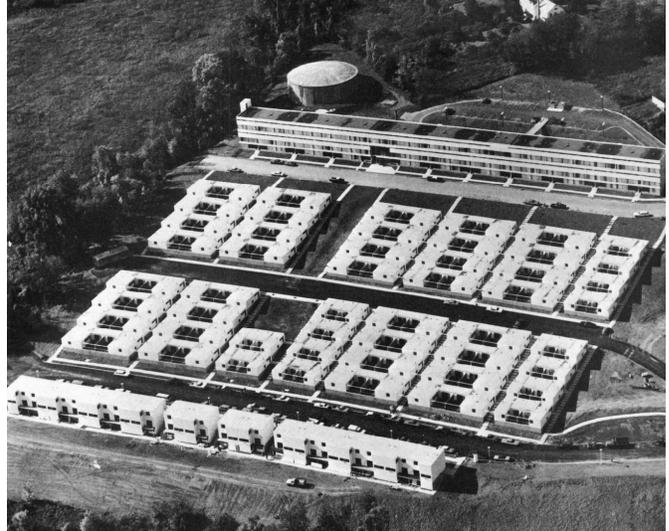
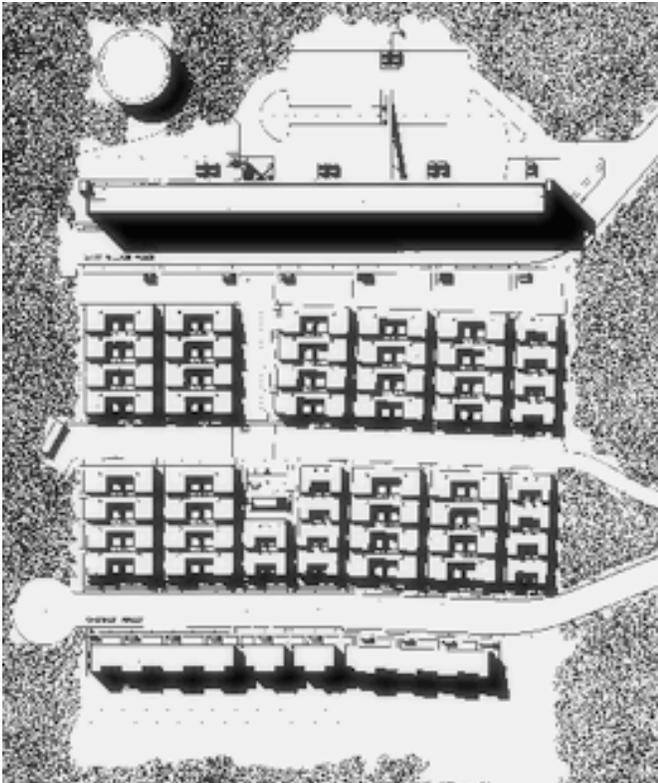


Elm Street Housing

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The Elm Street Housing project, located on West Hill, in Ithaca, New York, in its original condition, was an outstanding example of what was taught 50 years ago - the ideas and principles - in the exceptional design studios of the Cornell University Department of Architecture, within the College of Art, Architecture and Planning. For that reason alone, the project should have been revered and preserved. But sadly, it has not been. Although it is still extant, it is not even close to its original condition. Even though it has been severely compromised, at least it has not been demolished altogether.



Left and top: Site plan and aerial photo of as-built design. Below: Current condition with vinyl cladding over original materials and accent colors removed. Compare to photos on Pages 3 and 6.

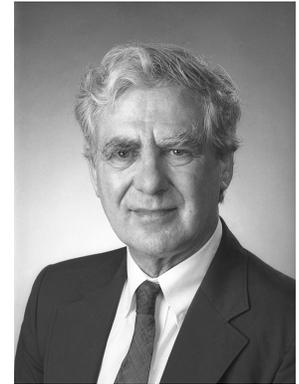
Primary changes over time:

- The overhead beams that modulate the up and down motion of the stairs, have been removed.
- The whole color scheme has been compromised. Now it is green and beige, not white with accent colors.
- The window glass on the east facade, although now insulated, is tinted, instead of clear.



The Elm Street project was designed by Cornell's professor of architecture, Werner Seligmann, who obtained his B. Arch '55 at Cornell, went on to the Technische Hochschule in Braunschweig, Germany, for his Master's degree and returned to teach at Cornell for many years, until he became Dean of the School of Architecture at Syracuse University. He walked the walk, talked the talk, and taught Cornell architecture students, including us, about pre- and post-war, heroic *modern* architecture, now known as the *International Style*, a description coined by architect Philip Johnson and architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, for an exhibit they curated at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1932.

Werner was not only a gifted and influential professor of architecture in the Department of Architecture, but also a highly talented and successful practicing architect in his own right, with his studio located in nearby Cortland, New York. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of western architecture, which he shared with his students and employed in his own design work. When it came to designing the Elm Street Housing project, that extensive knowledge was naturally and automatically applied. Werner literally practiced what he preached.



Werner Seligmann
1930 - 1998

There can be no question that Werner was responsible for the Department of Architecture becoming known as, what now is disparagingly called, the *Le Corbusier Atelier*. He not only espoused and championed the work of the famous Swiss/French architect, urban planner, painter, propagandist, and visionary, Le Corbusier (given name, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret), but exposed his students to *Corbu's* ideas, as well as to other contemporary European architectural creative trends, ideas and principles. The Elm Street project was a manifestation of those ideas and principles.

Well over 500 feet in length, the main building is four stories high on the Elm Street side and contains 100 units and common area amenities. It is of concrete slab construction that, according to the current property manager, is expected to last well over a 100 years. It is a *megabuilding*, now covered in vinyl siding that conceals its original white stucco finish.

The courtyard units, which Werner called *atrium* units, now also clad in vinyl siding that covers their original white striated plywood facades, cascade down the hill in front of the main building. These units are of wood-frame construction in the form of prefabricated boxes, that were trucked to the construction site and assembled there. The use of prefabrication to control cost, to save time and to control consistency of quality, was an idea which was all the rage in architectural circles, then, and is still prevalent in contemporary construction.

The current owner of the project may have invested a great deal of money, but has provided only conventional technical solutions to these extraordinary buildings, in an attempt to address various physical problems that have arisen due to the passage of time, untested and untried technical innovations and poor maintenance. Those conventional solutions (including the vinyl siding) can, and should be, reversed. The current owner, in the process of addressing the project's many physical problems, has perhaps unwittingly, turned *a silk purse into a sow's ear*, but luckily this can still be undone.

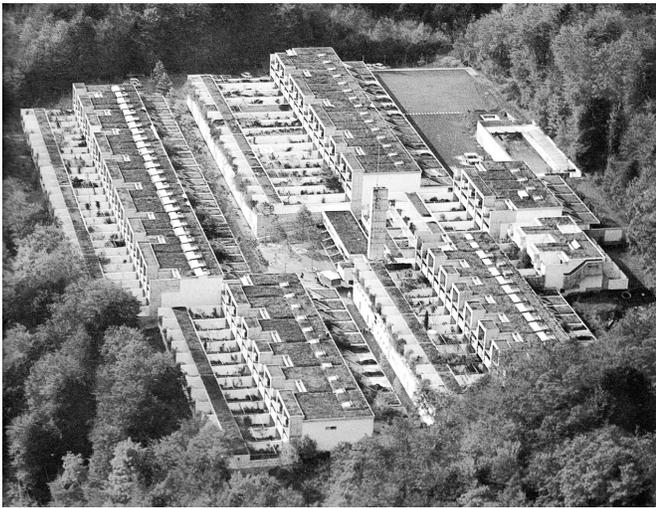
The buildings are now seen and treated as conventional housing stock, merely income generators, rather than the exceptional, and extraordinary examples of *modernism* that they were originally intended to be. Non-conventional buildings, such as those of Elm Street Housing, require special, imaginative and intelligent solutions to address their problems. Although various physical problems at Elm Street have been solved, for the most part those solutions are neither sensitive nor appropriate nor intelligent. They are not even close to the sophistication and elegance of the original design.

The Elm Street Housing project was the cover article of the May 1973 issue of *Progressive Architecture*, accompanied by an in-depth analysis. It was among several housing projects that were financed by the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC), then a division of the State Housing Authority. As a public agency, the UDC advocated and created mixed-income housing and used a *scattered site* approach to build them, buying multiple parcels of land within one location and using the same architect and contractor to develop those sites. Its goal in doing so was to save time and money. In the case of Ithaca there were two scattered sites, the Elm Street location being the larger of the two, set on a hillside and therefore providing sweeping views across the valley. The term *scattered* had absolutely no correlation to the project's design solution, which does not appear even remotely scattered.



Top left: Cover from May 1973 PA. Top right and below: Images looking down and up through the Atrium units.

Siedlung Halen, aerial photo



Seligmann modeled the Elm Street project after *Siedlung Halen* (Halen Housing Estate) an upscale residential project on the outskirts of Bern, Switzerland. *Siedlung Halen*, is also a hillside sited residential project, built mostly of poured-in-place concrete. The idea of the megabuilding, set on a hillside, with smaller units in front is an idea that was inspired by *Siedlung Halen*. The PA article credits that indebtedness. Although, *Siedlung Halen* definitely was not created as affordable housing, Seligmann hoped to capture the same sense of up-scale nobility and sophistication for the low-budget Elm Street project.

Additional architectural ideas that Seligmann used in designing the Elm Street project - ideas and concepts which he taught his students at Cornell - came from the *Marseilles Block*, an *unité* designed by Le Corbusier, in which the cross-section clearly demonstrates how *Corbu*, by alternating the corridors to serve multiple floors, would cause the exterior elevations to appear less tall and less repetitive. *Corbu* also made use of the *Modulor* - a dimensioning and proportioning system which he invented and used extensively - in the design of the individual units in the *Marseilles Block* and the building as a whole. Seligmann also used the *Modulor* for the Elm Street project, both for its units and its overall building dimensions; he employed a number of other design ideas that *Corbu* used in the *Marseilles Block*, including the use of accent colors to differentiate individual units.

[Similar to many of *Corbu's* projects, it was the intent to embed a relief of *Modulor Man* into the sidewalls of Elm Street's main building; but during the late 1960's, when *Modulor Man* with his raised arm came to represent *power to the people* that image suddenly seemed inappropriate, and the idea was abandoned.]

For the elevation studies of the main building, Seligmann found inspiration in yet another Le Corbusier project, *Maison Jaoul*. Observing the manner in which a two-dimensional facade was given the illusion of depth by the juxtaposition of open, translucent and solid forms, Seligmann harmonically organized them on the Elm Street side of the main building and by applying the *Modulor*.

Corbu's *Marseilles Unité* influenced the double floor cross-section of the main building



Corbu's *Maison Jaoul* influenced the facade treatment of the Elm Street side of the main building



Altogether, the design of the project relied heavily upon a historical mixed-bag of not too-distant past *modernist* architectural ideas that were still in vogue in the late 1960's. The Elm Street Housing project was an idea-driven project that went beyond merely being housing for its inhabitants.

Elm Street achieved something greater than its prototypes, Siedlung Halen and the Marseilles Block. It achieved something truly democratic in the spirit of the UDC - every unit in the megabuilding, by being single-loaded, faced the same direction and therefore enjoyed the same magnificent views overlooking Ithaca and the valley. For the low-rise units, every apartment came with a private, enclosed atrium onto which all the rooms opened (the ancient Roman house?), again focused on Ithaca and valley views.

In 1978, I had traveled to Stuttgart, Germany, to visit the *Weissenhof Siedlung* (the Weissenhof Housing Estate), most of which survived the allied bombing of WW2, and which I had come to know about from a history of architecture course at Cornell. Weissenhof was another, earlier example of an iconic *modern* residential architecture project, dating back to 1927. It had a significant influence upon the design of housing prototypes, in general, and specifically upon the Elm Street Housing project.

The Weissenhof Siedlung was touted as an *experimental* housing exhibition showcasing the work of dozens of *modernist* architects, including Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius (who became director of Harvard's Graduate School of Design) and Mies van der Rohe. All three architects, when younger, had worked in the office of German architect, Peter Behrens, in Berlin.



The Weissenhof Siedlung was an iconic housing exhibition built in Stuttgart in 1927. It was an international showcase of what later became known as the International Style of modern architecture.

Left top: design by Le Corbusier
Left bottom: design by Walter Gropius

Right top/bottom: design by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Weissenhof was organized and supervised by Mies, who himself was a modernist. Gropius and Mies were both directors of the famous design school, the Bauhaus, in Dessau, Germany. Gropius resigned and went to England to escape the Nazi threat, before coming to America. Its directorship was taken over by Mies until the school was closed in 1933 by the Nazis. Mies then also fled to America, to become the Dean of the Architecture School at IIT - the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago.

Being totally immersed in the history of modern architecture, Werner frequently referenced the Weissenhof Siedlung, its designers and its esthetic, that of the new International Style. He adopted and employed that style in his own work and in the design of the Elm Street Housing project.

After the 1927 exhibition was over, the Weissenhof Siedlung was made available as housing for the public at large, which occupied it for many years. But, when I visited there, 50 years later, it was being restored by the German government, in recognition of its importance and contribution to the *modern movement*, its designers and the significance of modern architecture in general.

Saving and Restoring Elm Street

Now that it approaches its 50th year, surely architecture as significant as the Elm Street Housing project also deserves to be restored, here in America, in recognition of Cornell and Syracuse Universities' contribution to modern architecture, in this country and worldwide, and in recognition of Werner Seligmann's contribution as a preeminent teacher and practitioner of his era.

What should be done with this exceptional example of *modern* housing in America and associated with central New York? We feel it should be preserved and restored to its original condition in recognition of the impact that its designer, Werner Seligmann, had upon generations of architects. It should be restored with the involvement of the City of Ithaca and its Landmarks Commission, the History Center in Tompkins County, and Cornell and Syracuse Universities. For instance, it could become housing available to all local residents or housing dedicated specifically for faculty and/or graduate students.

The Elm Street Housing project was the result of a rare confluence of three auspicious circumstances: 1) inspired local and state government agencies - the City of Ithaca and the New York State UDC, under the progressive leadership of governor Nelson Rockefeller; 3) an enlightened project owner and developer - David Abbott - who comprehended and admired the design work of Werner Seligmann; and, of course, 3) an inspired and creative architect - Werner Seligmann - who both fostered and shared his creativity through his long-time involvement with Cornell and Syracuse Universities, who admired and applied the *International Style* and the works of Le Corbusier to his own projects, and who, all the while, was able to use his own design explorations as teaching material to inspire his students.



Photo credits

- Page 1 Site plan drawing by Werner Seligmann Architects and Associates staff
Aerial photo by Lyonfoto [taken from pdf of PA article, page 67]
Center photo by Eduard Hueber
Bottom three photos by Nancy Szilagyi
- Page 2 Werner Seligmann official SU portrait, photo by Steve Sartori
- Page 3 Top two photos by Nathaniel Lieberman [taken from pdf of PA article, cover and page 70]
Bottom photo by Bruce Coleman [taken from pdf of PA article, page 71]
- Page 4 Siedlung Halen photo from the pdf of *The Siedlung Halen Rowhouses* at tboake.com
Marseilles Block from Fondation Le Corbusier, photo by Paul Kozlowski
Maison Jaoul from google.co.uk [photographer not identified]
- Page 5 Weissenhof Siedlung photos from *Bauen und Wohnung*
Le Corbusier, page 29
Walter Gropius, page 61
Mies van der Rohe, upper, page 81
- Weissenhof Siedlung photo from *The Weissenhofsiedlung*
Mies van der Rohe, lower, page 54
- Page 6 Mid-rise 'main' building as seen from Elm Street, photo by Nathaniel Lieberman

References

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