

"A community rather than just an apartment house": The collectivist history of Seward Park Co-op

The spirit of civic engagement, organizing, and solidarity is a huge part of our buildings' DNA.



The Seward Park Cooperator
Jun 2, 2026 · 8 min read



This article was written by Rachel Wilkerson, journalist, editor, and Board candidate #11.

Since December, the discussion around the lobby and landscaping renovation has felt connected to a larger conversation about what Seward Park Co-op is and what it stands for in 2026. What do our buildings represent? What do they mean to us as residents, and to the neighborhood? And how do we modernize them in a way that doesn't disregard or erase their unique history?

We don't have to [look very far](#) to see [examples](#) of civic engagement, organizing, and solidarity on the Lower East Side, and this spirit is a huge part of our buildings' DNA. As we try to determine the core values that will direct this renovation, it's worth looking at the people who shaped Seward Park Co-op at its inception, and the principles that guided them.

Labor Unions, Abraham Kazan, and the UHF

Seward Park Co-op would not exist without the work of labor unions and organizers. [According to Anthony Schuman](#), a professor of architecture at New Jersey Institute of Technology, the limited-equity co-op model in New York City really took off in the 1920s in



Abraham Kazan was a prolific housing organizer who immigrated to New York City from Russia in 1904, when he was 13 years old. A few years later, he got involved with the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (and was arrested at an ILGWU strike!). According to the [Gotham Center for New York City History](#), during the 1910s, Kazan "absorbed an eclectic mix of progressive thought, embracing communism and anarchism, but remained determined not to be identified with a particular political ideology. However, probably his seminal encounter was with Thomas Hastie Bell, a Scottish-born anarchist who believed cooperativism was the best way for working class people to escape the brutality of industrial capitalism."

Kazan's views on the importance of collectivism were evident in his earliest organizing efforts. In [Working Class Utopias: A History of Cooperative Living in New York City](#), Robert M. Fogelson writes that a severe sugar shortage during World War I drove up prices for working-class people. Kazan saw "an opportunity to put his principles into practice" and came up with a plan to buy sugar in bulk and sell it at or just slightly above cost to the 7,000 members of the ILGWU. This effort was so successful that he did it again after the war, when the price of food was once again soaring; this time, he was able to sell more than 100,000 pounds of matzoh to union members at or just slightly above cost in advance of Passover.

According to Schuman, Kazan was the "driving force" behind the Amalgamated Union's successful endeavor to fund and build [Amalgamated Co-op](#): "Inspired by the experience of the Rochdale weavers, a profit-sharing consumer cooperative movement founded in England in 1844, Kazan developed the cooperative housing model as an extension of that idea." In 1951, Kazan established the United Housing Foundation, which was supported by several trade unions, and is what eventually brought us Penn South, Rochdale Village, [Co-Op City](#), and Seward Park. Over and over again, Kazan returned to the idea of collective living, and he pushed hard for the buildings to be, in his words, "a community rather than just an apartment house." That's why he advocated for Amalgamated Houses in the Bronx to include amenities like a cooperative grocery store and laundry room, soundproof music rooms, tearooms, a nursery, a kindergarten, and an auditorium.

I do want to note here that Seward Park and other UHF co-ops were not without controversy. The "slum clearance" efforts that made our buildings possible required "relocating" 1,471 families, including many elderly people who didn't want to leave their tenement homes. Many of these families were never able to return. In the ["The Story of the](#)



airport.” (Hundreds of Puerto Rican families were displaced to build East River too.) Schuman, the architect, writes that the UHF “significantly underplayed the difficulties faced by relocating tenants” and adds that the UHF was opposed to subsidizing some units in its co-ops to be able to house poorer people who had an even greater need for housing. And all of this was discussed when the various co-ops were being built: From the beginning, Seward Park had critics who were concerned about the rights of people living in the tenements that were going to be razed, and there was opposition to its development by people who knew that the relocation efforts were likely to be harder on the people who were forced to leave than the UHF was making it sound.

We can be honest about these aspects of the UHF’s developments and Seward Park’s origin story and still draw inspiration from the best qualities that Kazan brought to his work. We have an opportunity to celebrate collectivism and solidarity, and to do everything we can to ensure our neighbors can afford to stay here long-term.

According to [Kazan's New York Times obituary](#), Governor Rockefeller once said that Kazan could have made a fortune going into private business for himself. “I am a co-operator,” Mr. Kazan replied, “interested only in building the cooperative commonwealth.”

Herman Jessor

Herman Jessor immigrated to the United States from Russia when he was 12 years old; he went to Stuyvesant High School and attended Cooper Union School of Engineering at the same time. As a young architect at the firm Springsteen and Goldhammer, he was on the team that designed both [Amalgamated Co-op](#) and [Amalgamated Dwellings](#) in the 1920s. “Sympathetic as well to the union’s social ideals, Jessor thus began an association that was to extend for over half a century,” Schuman writes. Jessor went on to design East River, Hillman, Penn South, Rochdale Village, Co-op City, and our very own Seward Park Co-op.

Jessor’s leftist politics were not a secret. Daniel Jonas Roche, a journalist and historian who co-curated [an exhibit about Jessor’s work at Citygroup](#), told me that Jessor spent many summers with his close friend [Ella Reeve Bloor](#) on a farm in Pennsylvania owned by [The Daily Worker](#), a 20th century newspaper published by the Communist Party USA. Jessor [was described](#) as an “unrepentant commie” by one head of the UHF. The design of Amalgamated Dwellings references [Karl-Marx-Hof public housing in Vienna](#). And Roche told me that the FBI kept a file on Jessor. (A FOIA has been filed but the records haven’t



It's hard to separate Jessor's political views from the designs of our buildings. When architecture critics at the time disparaged his signature style as "sterile," "uninspired," and "a disgrace to humanity" (!!!!!) and tried to block the UHF from building more on aesthetic grounds, Kazan defended the brick towers, saying that if anyone else could produce housing at \$21–\$23 per room, he'd be happy to listen to them. Jessor was able to bring good ventilation, green spaces, light-filled rooms, balconies, and, in some co-ops, central air (in other words, luxury amenities) to thousands of people who otherwise couldn't access these things.

Richard Jessor (Herman's nephew) told Roche in 2024 that the people who criticized his uncle's work "never really got it right": "They always overlooked his radical social mission, that of providing good living spaces for working people, and good living conditions they couldn't get anywhere else in New York." Jessor firmly believed that housing should be a public good, [writing in *Progressive Architecture*](#) in 1970 that his hope for housing "is that it'll be a government function such as streets, highways, sewers, water, subways, post offices, etc. It is too vital to the people to be subject to the profit motive."

Hugo Gellert

I'll admit that I used to take our lobby murals for granted. I was aware of them, but I wasn't fully conscious of what they *meant*—that is, who commissioned them (the UHF!), who the artist was, or why they matter so much. (This is one reason why we need a plaque of some sort in each of our lobbies!)

After [looking at more of Gellert's work](#) and [reading about him](#), I kind of can't believe that a) this art exists in our lobbies, and b) there was [ever a conversation about covering the murals up](#). As Carmelle Safdie, a shareholder, artist, professor, and director of the [Irwin Rubin Archive](#), put it to me, "It's an artwork that's at an architectural scale that most of us could not own personally—but we could collectively own it, cooperatively own it, and care for it."

Of everyone on this list, Gellert is by far the most radical. In "[The Art and Activism of Hugo Gellert: Embracing the Specter of Communism](#)," James Wechsler describes him as "perhaps the most active, outspoken, and unapologetic American Communist artist of the twentieth century. ... He himself strongly disavowed any distinction between his art and his life, declaring 'being an artist and communist are but two cheeks of the same face, and I



in New York City in 1906. He developed his social consciousness during World War I, illustrating the radical journal *The Masses*. (Gellert would later decry his early work for *The Masses* for not being political enough. Meanwhile, a number of people involved with the publication were tried for sedition and treason, and it was ultimately suppressed under the 1917 Espionage Act.)





Hugo Gellert political poster, c. 1932

In 1918, Gellert's brother Ernest (a conscientious objector to the war who was ultimately drafted) died suddenly by what the Gellert family was told was suicide while he was stationed at Fort Hancock in New Jersey. According to Wechsler, "this traumatic event confirmed Gellert's belief that where capitalism dominated, freedom and human rights were mere illusions that vanished when the system was threatened."

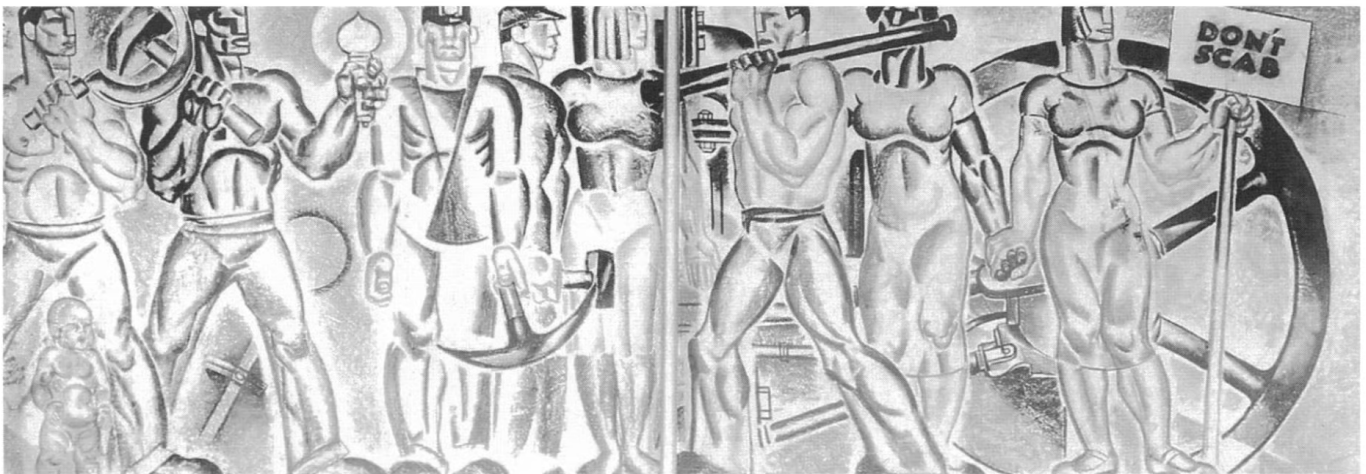
Gellert's lifelong project was creating subversive, openly leftist art and organizing with other artists. According to the [Archives of American Art](#), "Gellert's political commitment and art remained deeply intertwined throughout his life, as he continually sought to integrate his commitment to Communism, his hatred of fascism, and his dedication to civil liberties." In 1932, he was invited to submit a mural for exhibition at MoMA; the work he submitted—"Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together - Al Capone"—depicted J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller Sr., President Hoover, and Henry Ford with their hands on bags of money while Al Capone stands nearby, operating a machine gun. The museum attempted to censor it (along with some other murals), but several artists threatened to boycott the show and the piece was ultimately allowed to stay.





Hugo Gellert's "Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together" mural

Gellert's body of work includes [an illustrated version of Karl Marx's Capital](#) and a massive mural (now destroyed) in the cafeteria of what was once the [Workers' Centre](#), a hub of Communist institutions at Union Square East. The mural depicted laborers and slogans, including "Workers of the world unite!" and "Don't scab!"



Details from Hugo Gellert's mural in the Workers Cafeteria

It probably won't surprise you to hear that Gellert was investigated by the House of Un-American Activities Committee and that [the FBI had a file on him](#), too.

Bonus: William Henry Seward

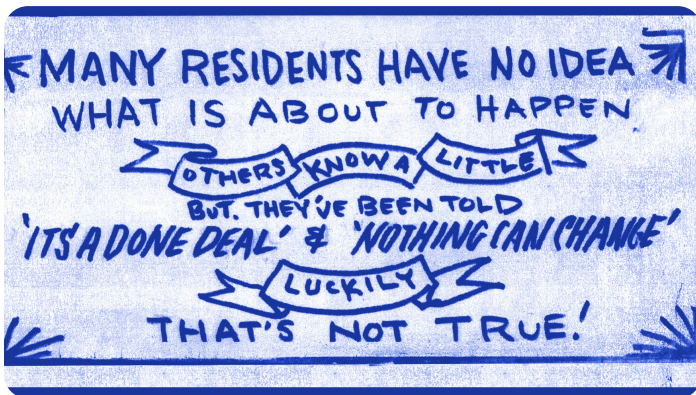
While other UHF co-ops were named for the unions that sponsored them (guess which workers were behind [Electchester in Queens!](#)), Seward Park Co-op was named after the nearby park, which was named for William Henry Seward. Explaining this choice in "The Story of Seward Park," Kazan wrote that "Seward served as Governor of New York from 1839 to 1843. He was one of the earliest political opponents of slavery. Seward was known for his liberal and humanitarian views. He favored prison reform and the use of public



Marshall Ganz, a longtime organizer who cut his teeth volunteering for the Mississippi Summer Project in 1964, writes in his book *People, Power, and Change: Organizing for Democratic Renewal* that “civic relationships are the threads with which robust democracy is woven.” These are the ties you form with people outside of your immediate family—it’s your co-workers, the parents at your kids’ school, and, yes, your neighbors. “They offer respect, commitment to shared purpose, and public trust,” Ganz writes. Importantly, he adds, civic relationships are born from *choice*; they come about not by chance, but when we intentionally decide “to link our fate to that of another.”

The biggest lesson I’ve learned through my own organizing is that relationships are our greatest resource. You don’t need money or influence or buy-in from your elected officials to make lasting change; you need people. Ordinary people—not “activists,” not those who do the work as a full-time job, just...people—who have identified a problem they’d like to see solved, and who are willing to link arms and share resources to make it happen. A lot of good can happen when a bunch of folks get together and say, “Better things are possible.”

Keep Reading



Jan 16, 2026 • 6 min read

It's not too late to make changes to the renovation plans

Plus: Updates on how many people have signed the petition so far and next steps

 The Seward Park Cooperator

The Seward Park Cooperator

Mar 17, 2026 • 14 min read

Local Law 97 and our lobbies

Every dollar spent on this renovation is a dollar we won't be able to use on Local Law 97 compliance, which could lead to higher maintenance fees in the...

