

# SITE ART



**The New York City Housing Authority** developments were the beneficiaries of an important chapter in American art history - the federal Works Progress Administration's (WPA) federal art project, part of the New Deal of the 1930s.

From the mid-1930s through the mid-1940s, the WPA hired artists to produce murals, sculptures and paintings for six newly constructed NYCHA developments during the Great Depression. Painters and sculptors like Ilya Bolotowsky, Philip Guston and Richmond Barthe crafted enduring American art treasures at sites like Harlem River Houses, Queensbridge and Red Hook Houses.



## A LEGACY RECLAIMED



Three pioneering modernists of the age - Balcomb Greene, Albert Swinden and Paul Kelpé - painted five murals installed at Williamsburg Houses, believed to be the first abstract murals ever created in the United States.



Over time, the basement social rooms fell out of use and the art was effectively lost. In the late 1980s, the Authority undertook the task of finding and restoring these murals. Concealed under numerous coats of paint, these hidden treasures were eventually found in 1974. After two years of conservation work, the murals were brought back to life. Today, they are on loan to the Brooklyn Museum.

Of all the art commissioned by the WPA, however, none so tantalized art historians as the fate of the "Williamsburg Murals", a group of abstract murals, which were hung in basement social rooms located throughout Williamsburg Houses.



William Lescaze, architect of Williamsburg Houses, decided to use murals in his innovative design. Understanding that residents were to use public rooms for relaxation, the architect engaged artists to create abstract colorful compositions that would create a harmonious atmosphere in these rooms. At the same time, they would serve to complement the award winning design of the complex.



**The Authority continues to be committed to its legacy of art, restoring a fresco at Red Hook Houses and a group of sculptures at Harlem River Houses. Planning is underway to restore the Philip Guston mural at the Queensbridge Houses Community Center, in addition to the Cesaer Shea bas relief, which adorns the rear exterior wall.**

