

# THE BETTER HOMES BOARD: AN INTERLOCKING DIRECTORATE

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 COMPANION TO "VENEERS OF HISTORY IN GREEN HILLS EAST", *NASHVILLE SCENE*

## FINDING

Lawrence Veiller and John Ihlder sat on the Better Homes in America board and the committee that drafted the model zoning act of 1924 — selling the single-family house and encoding it into law; Veiller's method: a restriction 'must not only be good, it must seem good.'

## SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- *Veiller and Ihlder sat on the Better Homes board and Hoover's zoning committee at the same time*
- *the movement and the model zoning act shared two directors*
- *Veiller in 1916: a restriction must not only be good, it must seem good*

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## ABSTRACT

Two members of the Better Homes in America board — the housing reformers Lawrence Veiller and John Ihlder — sat simultaneously on the Commerce Department committee that drafted the country's model zoning law, the Standard State Zoning Enabling Act of 1924. The Better Homes board, fronted by Herbert Hoover, the federal Children's Bureau, and the national women's clubs, sold the single-family house as the only respectable place to raise a child; the zoning committee turned that child-welfare argument into the legal rationale that made exclusionary zoning constitutional. The same small leadership generated public demand for that vision and wrote the law that encoded it. The interlock had a third figure: the architect Edwin H. Brown, who served on the federal building-code committee and the movement's national advisory council, headed the bureau whose house plans the campaign distributed, and wrote the architects' endorsement of his own designs. Veiller gave the method its frankest statement: a restriction "must not only be good, it must seem good." A peer-reviewed account of his tenement work reads that record harder, as "urban eugenics." The board's Nashville product, the Tennessean Model Home built in Green Hills in 1927, stood on lots bound by a racial covenant.

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## METHODOLOGY

The board roster is read from Karen Benjamin's *Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools* (2025), pp. 217–19, with all quotations verified word-for-word against the source pages. The overlap with the zoning committee is established by setting that roster against the membership of the Commerce Department's Advisory Committee on Zoning, given in [From Model Homes to Federal Law](#). The biographies of Veiller and Ihlder come from standard reference works and archival finding aids, cited in the notes. No director's background is characterized beyond what a source supports.

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## SOURCES

### Scholarship and reference

- Karen Benjamin, *Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools: Selling Segregation Before the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025), pp. 170, 217–19, 239, 311n. The board roster (217–18); James Ford’s *Better Homes Manual* creed (217); the “child-centered zoning” mechanism and Veiller’s “seem good” remark (239); the “race suicide”—eugenics—zoning link (170) and the American Eugenics Society’s residential parks (311n).
- Noah Morris, *Codifying Domesticity: The Story of the Recommended Minimum Requirements for Small Dwelling Construction of 1923, the Housing Policy of the Hoover Secretariat, and the Impact on American Residential Architecture* (master’s thesis, Washington University in St. Louis, 2024). The institutional links among Better Homes, the Commerce Department’s Building Code Committee, the Architects’ Small House Service Bureau, and the AIA, and Edwin H. Brown’s place across all four; the December 22, 1923 incorporation.
- Selma Siew Li Bidlingmaier, “Gentrification through Housing: Urban Eugenics and Lawrence Veiller’s 1900 Tenement House Exhibition,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 64, no. 2 (2019): 265–90, esp. 268 and 287. Veiller’s tenement reform read as “urban eugenics.”
- “Veiller, Lawrence Turnure (1872–1959), housing reformer,” *American National Biography* (Oxford University Press).
- Papers of John Ihlder, 1894–1957, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum (finding aid).
- Neil Flanagan, “John Ihlder: Houser/Gentrifier,” research presentation, Heurich House Museum, Washington, DC, 2025.
- Janet Hutchison, “The Cure for Domestic Neglect: Better Homes in America, 1922–1935,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 2 (1986): 168–78; and “Building for Babbitt: The State and the Suburban Home Ideal,” *Journal of Policy History* 9, no. 2 (1997): 184–210. The dedicated history of the movement.
- Roy Lubove, *The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890–1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962). The standard study of Veiller-era housing reform.
- Howard Gillette Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Bell Clement, “Wagner-Steagall and the D.C. Alley Dwelling Authority,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 78, no. 4 (2012): 434–48. The scholarly literature on Ihlder’s Washington.
- Keith D. Revell, “The Road to *Euclid v. Ambler*,” *Studies in American Political Development* 13, no. 1 (1999): 50–145; and Marc A. Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). On the drafting of the model zoning act and the industry behind it.

## Primary apparatus

- Advisory Committee on Zoning, U.S. Department of Commerce, *A Standard State Zoning Enabling Act* (1924; rev. 1926), committee roster, set out in [From Model Homes to Federal Law](#).

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## A BOARD OF FEDERAL PRESTIGE, INDUSTRY, AND THE WOMEN'S CLUBS

Better Homes in America incorporated in Delaware on December 22, 1923, with Herbert Hoover, the Secretary of Commerce, as president of its board — a post he kept after his election to the White House in 1928, and it took offices at 1653 Pennsylvania Avenue, across the street from the White House.<sup>118</sup> The board drew on four constituencies at once. Federal officialdom came first: John Gries, head of the Commerce Department's Division of Building and Housing; Grace Abbott of the U.S. Children's Bureau; and President Coolidge with most of his cabinet. The building industry sat beside them through the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Architects' Small House Service Bureau, the housing-reform and planning movement through the American Civic Association and the reformers Lawrence Veiller and John Ihlder. The General Federation of Women's Clubs and the American Home Economics Association supplied the maternal authority the campaign traded on.<sup>1</sup>

The campaign had begun a year earlier as a magazine feature. Marie Meloney, editor of *The Delineator*, launched it in 1922; a \$300,000 grant from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial turned it into a national organization with Meloney as vice president, and at its peak it counted 30,000 members across 9,000 cities and towns.<sup>3</sup> Its executive director, the Harvard sociologist James Ford, set out the creed in *The Better Homes Manual* (1931): "every growing child should be able to grow up in a private dwelling, located in a convenient, quiet, attractive and wholesome neighborhood. No tenement or apartment, even in the so-called 'model' class, can meet as well the deeper needs of childhood."<sup>4</sup> The board was selling the detached single-family house, defined against the apartment and justified by the needs of the child. Hoover's Commerce Department worked to make that house the American norm, reaching the public through the movement, the "Own Your Own Home" campaigns, and the national women's organizations.<sup>12</sup>

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## THE SAME TWO MEN SOLD THE HOUSE AND ZONED IT

Two members of the board were, at the same time, drafting the country's model zoning law. The interlock rests on two rosters. Benjamin's account of the Better Homes board seats Lawrence Veiller and John Ihlder among its housing-reform members.<sup>1</sup> The Commerce Department's Advisory Committee on Zoning, which drafted the Standard State Zoning Enabling Act of 1924, had eight members: Edward Bassett, Irving Hiatt, John Ihlder, Morris Knowles, Nelson Lewis, J. Horace McFarland, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., and Lawrence Veiller, with John Gries, the Better Homes board's own Commerce housing chief, as secretary (see [From Model Homes to Federal Law](#)).<sup>2</sup> Two names sit on both. Veiller and Ihlder held the two seats together through the early-to-mid 1920s, the years the committee wrote the model act that thirty-five states copied by 1930. Better Homes and the

zoning committee had separate charters and separate commissions, but a small, shared leadership ran both. Its two most prominent housing reformers worked both to generate demand for the single-family vision and to write it into law. On that committee, Edward Bassett and his colleagues reworked the legal scope of the police power to make comprehensive zoning constitutional, and the real-estate industry pressed the federal government to standardize the zoning and subdivision rules that protected planned, restricted subdivisions.<sup>1617</sup>

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## A THIRD INTERLOCK: THE ARCHITECT WHO WROTE HIS OWN ENDORSEMENT

The design side of the campaign ran through one man as tightly as the legal side ran through two. Edwin H. Brown sat on the Commerce Department's Building Code Committee, which issued the 1923 *Recommended Minimum Requirements for Small Dwelling Construction*, the model standard for economical single-family building; he headed the Architects' Small House Service Bureau, whose *Plan Book of Small Homes Better Homes* distributed from 1924; he served as secretary of the American Institute of Architects; and he sat on the Better Homes National Advisory Council.<sup>19</sup> The AIA endorsement printed on the back of the bureau's plan book — the professional warrant that the designs were sound — Brown wrote himself.<sup>19</sup> The houses the campaign sold were, in many cases, the plans his bureau drew, built to the standard his committee set, under the endorsement his association signed, advertised through the movement whose council he sat on.

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## LAWRENCE VEILLER: THE LAW AND THE METHOD

Veiller (1872–1959) was the dominant figure in American housing reform in the two decades after 1898.<sup>13</sup> As secretary of the New York State Tenement House Commission he drafted the Tenement House Act of 1901, the first modern housing law in the country; in 1911 he founded the National Housing Association to write model housing and zoning codes for other cities to adopt.<sup>7</sup> He campaigned for density caps and against the apartment house, and at the 1916 National Conference on City Planning he gave the method its most candid statement: a restriction “must not only be good, it must seem good.”<sup>6</sup>

His reform record carries a harder reading. A study of his 1900 Tenement House Exhibition treats that reform as eugenics: “under the direction of Lawrence Veiller and Robert de Forest,” the committee’s “planning, lobbying, and management of New York City’s tenement housing were guided by principles characteristic of both forms of eugenics” — the negative, which discouraged the reproduction of the “unfit,” and the positive, which encouraged that of the “fit.”<sup>8</sup> His survey maps, the tenement blocks inked in red, “made tangible and measurable the impending peril of ‘race suicide,’ the slow and progressing degeneracy of the white, Anglo-Saxon pedigree.”<sup>8</sup> Veiller coined the “seem good” rule and built his career on housing as a tool to sort people by fitness.

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## JOHN IHLDER: FROM REFORM TO REMOVAL

Ihlder worked for the National Housing Association and the American Civic Association, then held housing posts in the Commerce Department from 1920 to 1928, the years he sat on the Better Homes board and the zoning committee.<sup>9</sup> From 1934 he ran Washington's Alley Dwelling Authority and its successor agency. Federal planning built a monumental Washington at the expense of its Black residents — a triumph of “beauty over justice” — and the authority's mandate drifted from building housing to clearing it.<sup>14</sup><sup>15</sup> Under Ihlder it cleared dozens of communities and pushed their Black residents across the Anacostia River with no path to ownership, demolishing far more housing than it replaced.<sup>10</sup> He also led a private group that gentrified Georgetown, moving into the mixed-race neighborhood to drive out its nonwhite households.<sup>10</sup> As a federal official he cleared Black Washington; as a private citizen he whitened Georgetown.

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## THE CHILD-WELFARE FACE THAT MADE RESTRICTION “SEEM GOOD”

The board's reform and child-welfare members gave the campaign its benign face. Grace Abbott ran the federal Children's Bureau; the General Federation of Women's Clubs and the American Home Economics Association brought the weight of the nation's clubwomen and home economists.<sup>1</sup> With those names attached, the movement could present the single-family house as a matter of child health.

That framing was the era's most effective argument for single-family zoning. Benjamin shows planners wrapping the zoning map in the language of child-rearing: Robert Whitten's model report for Atlanta warned that a speculative builder might put up “a four-story, sixteen suite apartment house” on the vacant lot beside Mr. Smith's home, cutting off “his light and air” and destroying both his property value and the home's fitness for raising children.<sup>5</sup> Tying zoning to childhood, Benjamin writes, “ultimately became the planners' best weapon,” and Veiller's “seem good” line was spoken in exactly this setting — the conference at which planners worked out how to make single-family zoning palatable.<sup>5</sup> A board fronted by the Children's Bureau and the clubwomen could sell that zoning as child welfare while two of its members wrote the code that turned it into a tool of racial and class sorting.

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## THE EUGENIC MILIEU

The leaders worked in a climate where housing reform, zoning, and eugenics ran together. Benjamin traces the early American interest in zoning to the same anxieties: “Fears of ‘race suicide,’” she writes, “led to support for eugenics and immigration restriction, along with an early interest in zoning.”<sup>11</sup> The link outlived the Progressive Era. During the 1930s the American Eugenics Society promoted suburban residential parks as ideal places to raise a child.<sup>11</sup>

The climate is documented, not the conviction of every name on the board. No eugenic views are attributed to Abbott, Gries, or the clubwomen. Only Veiller's record carries that reading directly, in a peer-reviewed account of his work.<sup>8</sup>

The board's Nashville product was the Tennessean Model Home, built in Green Hills in 1927 on lots bound by a racial covenant (see [Identifying the Model Home](#) and [The Better Homes in America Movement](#)).

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## NOTES

1. Karen Benjamin, [Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools: Selling Segregation Before the New Deal](#) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025), 217–18 (the Better Homes in America board, including Hoover, Gries, Abbott, Coolidge and his cabinet, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Architects' Small House Service Bureau, the American Civic Association, Lawrence Veiller, John Ihlder, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and the American Home Economics Association). ↩ ↩ ↩
2. Advisory Committee on Zoning, U.S. Department of Commerce, [A Standard State Zoning Enabling Act](#) (1924; rev. 1926), committee roster, which included John Ihlder and Lawrence Veiller; set out in [From Model Homes to Federal Law: BHA, Hoover, the Zoning Acts, and Euclid](#). ↩
3. Benjamin, [Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools](#), 217 (Meloney's founding of the movement in 1922, the \$300,000 Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial grant, and the movement's peak of 30,000 members in 9,000 cities and towns). ↩
4. Benjamin, [Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools](#), 217, quoting James Ford, the movement's executive director, in [The Better Homes Manual](#) (1931). ↩
5. Benjamin, [Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools](#), 239 (Robert Whitten's model zoning report for Atlanta and its "Mr. Smith" vignette; planners' tying of single-family zoning to child-rearing as "the planners' best weapon," and the setting of Veiller's "seem good" remark at the 1916 National Conference on City Planning). ↩ ↩
6. Benjamin, [Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools](#), 239, quoting Lawrence Veiller at the 1916 National Conference on City Planning. ↩
7. "Veiller, Lawrence Turnure (1872–1959), housing reformer," [American National Biography](#) (New York: Oxford University Press); on the New York State Tenement House Act of 1901 and the founding of the National Housing Association in 1911. ↩
8. Selma Siew Li Bidlingmaier, "Gentrification through Housing: Urban Eugenics and Lawrence Veiller's 1900 Tenement House Exhibition," [Amerikastudien / American Studies](#) 64, no. 2 (2019): 265–90, quotations at 268 (Veiller and Robert de Forest; the reform committee's work "guided by principles characteristic of both forms of eugenics") and 287 (Veiller's tenement maps and the "impending peril of 'race suicide'"). ↩ ↩ ↩
9. [Papers of John Ihlder, 1894–1957](#), Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum (finding aid); on Ihlder's Commerce Department housing positions (1920–28) and his direction of Washington's Alley Dwelling Authority (from 1934) and the National Capital Housing Authority. ↩
10. Neil Flanagan, "John Ihlder: Houser/Gentrifier," research presentation, Heurich House Museum, Washington, DC, 2025. Flanagan, a public historian and the museum's scholar in residence, documents the Alley Dwelling Authority's clearance and displacement of Black communities under Ihlder, and Ihlder's role in the racial gentrification of Georgetown. ↩ ↩
11. Benjamin, [Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools](#), 170 (the link between "race suicide" anxiety, eugenics, and the early interest in zoning) and 311n (the American Eugenics Society's promotion, during the 1930s, of suburban residential parks as ideal places to raise a child). ↩ ↩
12. Janet Hutchison, "The Cure for Domestic Neglect: Better Homes in America, 1922–1935," [Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture](#) 2 (1986): 168–78; and Hutchison, "Building for Babbitt: The State and the Suburban Home Ideal," [Journal of Policy History](#) 9, no. 2 (1997): 184–210. The dedicated scholarship on the Better Homes movement. ↩
13. Roy Lubove, [The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890–1917](#) (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), a study built in part on Veiller's papers and on interviews with him, treating him as the dominant figure in American housing reform between 1898 and 1920. ↩
14. Howard Gillette Jr., [Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.](#) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). The "beauty over justice" formulation is the book's own. ↩
15. Bell Clement, "Wagner-Steagall and the D.C. Alley Dwelling Authority: A Bid for Housing-Centered Urban Redevelopment, 1934–1946," [Journal of the American Planning Association](#) 78, no. 4 (2012): 434–48. ↩
16. Keith D. Revell, "The Road to Euclid v. Ambler: City Planning, State-Building, and the Changing Scope of the Police Power," [Studies in American Political Development](#) 13, no. 1 (1999): 50–145. ↩
17. Marc A. Weiss, [The Rise of the Community Builders: The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). ↩

18. Noah Morris, *Codifying Domesticity: The Story of the Recommended Minimum Requirements for Small Dwelling Construction of 1923, the Housing Policy of the Hoover Secretariat, and the Impact on American Residential Architecture* (master's thesis, Washington University in St. Louis, 2024), 51 (the December 22, 1923 Delaware incorporation and the organization's offices at 1653 Pennsylvania Avenue). ↩
19. Morris, *Codifying Domesticity*, 56 and 56n151 (Edwin H. Brown's simultaneous service on the Commerce Department's Building Code Committee, as head of the Architects' Small House Service Bureau, as secretary of the American Institute of Architects, and on the Better Homes National Advisory Council; and the American Institute of Architects endorsement on the bureau's *Plan Book of Small Homes*, written by Brown himself). ↩ ↩

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