

An Architecture of Culture and Identity? Sounding the Depths of the Contextual Response in Affordable Infill Housing

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In May, 1992, the city of Delray Beach, Florida and its Community Redevelopment Agency sponsored a competition for the design of affordable infill houses, to be built on scattered vacant lots throughout the turn-of-the-century African American neighborhood of Mount Olive. The brief advocated (but did not demand) a contextual response. Our entry was a hybrid/ transformation of two vernacular housing types: the shotgun house indigenous to Mount Olive and the Charleston sideporch, native to a region with similar climate and history, and original home to many of the neighborhood's first residents. Finding merit in its dignified approach to filling missing teeth in the fabric of a historic neighborhood, judges awarded our small house a first prize.

The cold reception that met their announcement took sponsors and judges completely by surprise. Although prospective African American residents of Mount Olive acknowledge that ours is an ideal tropical house, sensitive to and respectful of their historic neighborhood, they insist that the erection of houses with a clear lineage to a slave past can

only stigmatize and marginalize them further. As a result, they refuse to commission any building with a resemblance to the quarters of their ancestors. Our small house has not been built.

What follows is an attempt to understand the issues and implications of the Delray competition. We explore it as the perfect hypothetical for a broad-ranging discussion of current architectural practice. We are convinced that Delray is not simply another instance in a long history of miscues between architects and clients. Rather, it is the theater in which a fundamental tension in the direction of current practice has inadvertently been revealed.

This competition has prompted us to explore building typology not only as a contextual design tool, but as a response to the limitations imposed on an interpretive community by the socially constructed meaning of a built form. Competition results have caused us to examine the place and implications of historic preservation in affordable housing—specifically in view of academic work that defines the house as an important vehicle for self-expression. They have raised important questions relative to the generation and communication of meaning in architecture. Finally, competition results have led us to scrutinize the Modern insistence in our profession on forging a link, however uneasy, between the form and content of our work.

The Mount Olive Story: Architecture and the Racial Past

While the shotgun house is not unique to Delray Beach, many can be found throughout the South, precisely in African American neighborhoods such as Mount Olive. Most shotgun houses were constructed as slave and agriworker housing during the 1880's, but variations on the type were built in the United States during much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The typology has subsequently been the basis for much contemporary design exploration across a range of regional, cultural and economic contexts.

The shotgun house is uniquely suited to a sub-tropical urban environment. One room wide with a narrow structural bay, extended in length (and sometimes height, as in the camelback or double-stack variation on the type), the shot-



Fig. 1. Front elevation, competition entry.



Fig. 2. Typical shotgun house.

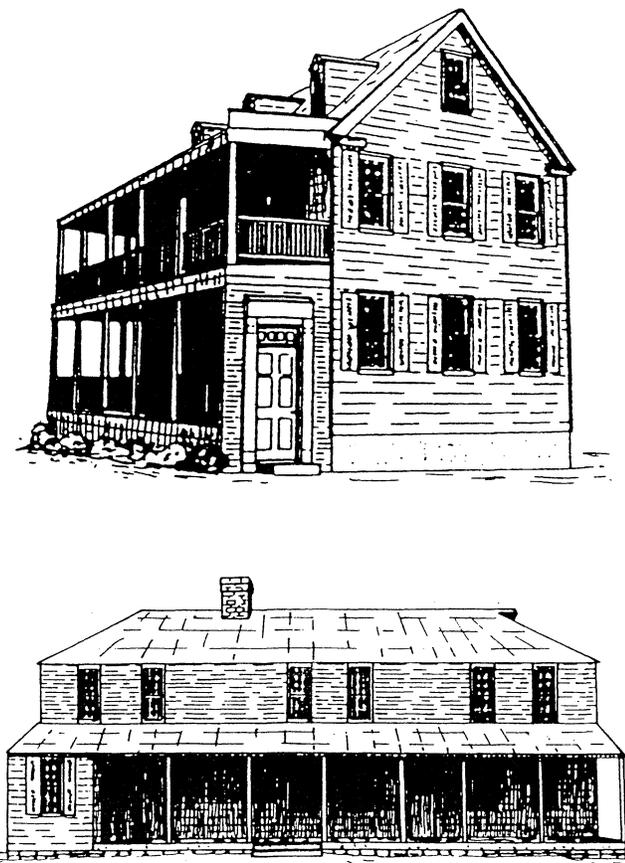


Fig. 3 Typical sideporch house.¹

gun generally has a gabled roof with wide, break-away overhangs, a deep front porch and cross ventilation in every

room. Its simple framing system makes it hardy, inexpensive and easy to build. Like the Charleston single house, the shotgun was traditionally erected without front setbacks on contiguous narrow lots. These generated tight urban environments of pedestrian scale whose focus was life on the street as filtered through the semi-public space of front and side porches.

Despite its role in the slave history of the American South, the shotgun house originated in a West African residential prototype. Historians of vernacular architecture note that it was first brought to the New World in the 1700's by the West Indian slave trade, taking hold in the Caribbean and finding its way to the United States through New Orleans and other cities on the Gulf of Mexico. An expression of African cultural heritage maintained in the face of extraordinary strife, today the house is widely regarded as a significant contribution to the American built landscape.²

Part of a program to provide well-designed, affordable single-family houses for residents with annual incomes ranging from \$17,000 to \$25,000, the Delray competition was intended to assemble a limited portfolio of houses for an area housing "a population of approximately 9,000 residents, nearly 3,000 housing units and some 300 scattered buildable lots of varying dimensions."³ Potential residents, pre-qualified by the CRA and state lending agencies, would be free to choose among the winning designs for a new home in their historic neighborhood.

Originally built amid pineapple and mango groves of the 1890's, Mount Olive centers around (and unofficially takes its name from) the Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church. The original structure, which has since been destroyed, dates from 1896. It was the first home of the oldest African American congregation still active in Palm Beach County. Product of a deeply segregated post-Reconstruction South,



1. Residential District
2. Commercial District
3. Atlantic Avenue
4. Lake Ida Road
5. Swinton Avenue
6. Town Hall
7. Cultural Arts Center
8. Community Center
9. Historical Society
10. Tennis Courts
11. Courthouse
12. Police Department
13. Fire Department

*Aerial
View of
Site*

Fig. 4. Aerial view of site from competition brief.

its namesake neighborhood was established on property purchased from the Model Land Company along the right-of-way of Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway. At the easternmost edge of the Everglades, the railroad—and the new African American community—virtually defined the very frontier of contemporary civilization. Indeed, Mount Olive was one of many Colored Towns whose labor supported the agricultural and tourist economies of the Florida Gold Coast through the middle of the twentieth century. Despite far-reaching changes brought about by the civil rights movement of the 1960's, Mount Olive today—where the descendants of many of the founding families still live—is full heir to a history of post-Emancipation

Proclamation racial injustice.

Currently, housing stock in Mount Olive consists primarily of single-family detached residences—wood-frame Florida Cracker (shotgun) houses, one and two stories high, as well as Mission-style masonry houses. Lots range in width from 50 to 75 feet, but are uniformly 130 feet deep. Utility easements in the rear of lots are undeveloped mid-block alleys. Much of neighborhood social life centers on the street, played out on front porches, yards and driveways. In varying stages of disrepair, the houses of Mount Olive comprise the fabric of an imperiled historic neighborhood—a neighborhood losing its upwardly mobile population to the suburbs.

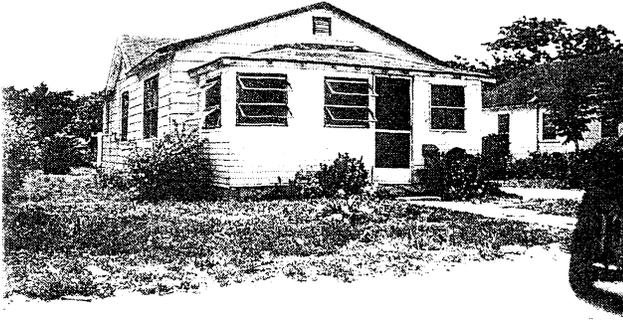


Fig. 5. Vernacular house, Mt. Olive.

Our \$40,000, three-bedroom, two-bath, 1,250-square-foot, single-family wood-frame house was intended neither as a literal reconstruction of neighborhood structures nor as a romanticized, sanitized version of the past. Rather, it represented a desire to reinforce and validate the morphology of an architecturally significant place, adding to it in (relative) kind, while upgrading the new housing stock to include spatial variety and modern conveniences not found in existing examples of the type.

A conviction that urban infill presupposes the neighborhood as a social construct and urban artifact worthy of preservation fueled our interest in the Delray competition. It was and continues to be our belief that designing within a recognizable building tradition allows forms to become the rich repositories of multiple simultaneous meanings. We had no intent to freeze Mount Olive in time either physically or psychologically. Rather, we assumed that both current and

prospective residents shared our respect for the history and physical make-up of their neighborhood. We hoped to encourage simultaneous processes of preservation and transformation by working within the framework of the existing spatial urban structure (*de facto* zoning codes) and the parameters of existing typology (vernacular building strategies).

Nonetheless, prospective home owners who have approached the Delray CRA in search of a future residence have shied away from ours precisely *because* it draws, however indirectly, upon these architectural roots. They explain that despite the authenticity of its African heritage, the image suggested by our house carries with it far more powerful and abhorrent associations to the Jim Crow history of Delray Beach. Instead, would-be residents of Mount Olive appear to prefer what can only be described as white middle class housing circa 1960 to any form associated with their own history and heritage. To date, only single-story, block-and-stucco, developer-designed suburban boxes have been commissioned through the affordable housing initiative.

Self Determination, Preservation and the Ironic Solution of Gentrification

Predictably, this reaction has placed the physical integrity of Mount Olive in real jeopardy, as missing teeth in the neighborhood fabric are filled with impoverished versions of suburbia and, gradually, existing vernacular houses are demolished and replaced with more of the same. Although it is surely possible to argue that variations on the local building types either less faithful or otherwise different from our own might have met with a warmer welcome, the conclusions to be drawn here are nevertheless troublesome.

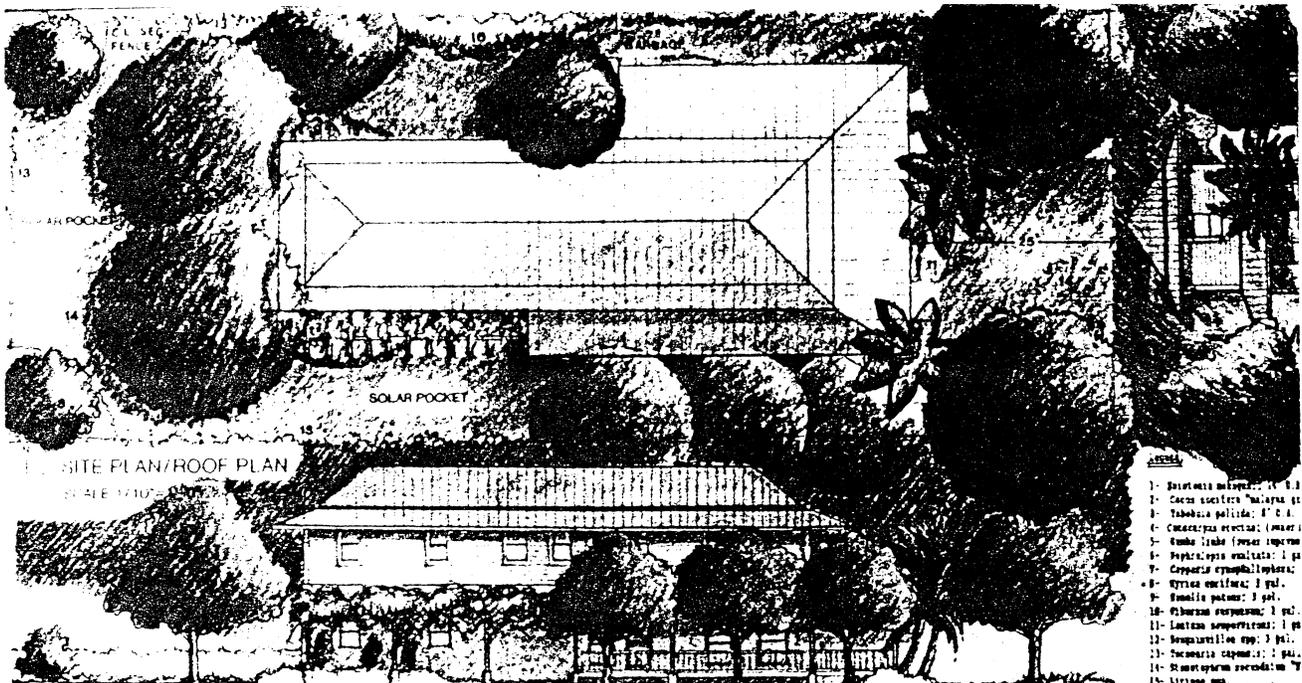


Fig. 6. Site plan, competition entry.

For imprisoned by the limitations of their interpretations and associations, Mount Olive residents have effectively devalued and are destroying what the larger interpretive community has come to hold dear and tried to emulate: a cohesive urban and tectonic construct that can support community. The houses that Mount Olive residents are choosing to build suffer all the hallmark ills of the region-neutral, developer houses that have destroyed the American middle class suburb. In part responsible for a breakdown in local community life, they turn their backs on the streets that are traditionally its focus and center instead on private rear yards and interior spaces. These houses undermine the neighborhood by the non-contributing aesthetic of their setbacks, materials, tectonics and proportions. And in flagrant contradiction to the demands of the a subtropical climate, they have deep building sections, low ceilings, shallow roof overhangs and single-exposure spaces that prohibit cross-ventilation.

Ironically, our site-specific, wood-frame, affordable house may well be built—not in a modest neighborhood of coastal Delray Beach, where it has deep historic significance and represents a direct extension of local building traditions—but rather in one of the many neo-traditional “theme park” towns springing up near Seaside and Disney’s Celebration. Alternative, nostalgic re-revisions of suburbia for the middle and upper classes, these new towns have responded to the house solely as artifact—and so focus on the objective merits of a region-specific architecture rather than on the socio-economic and historic context in which that form was originally built.

We are left confronting the fact that only gentrification will ensure the physical survival of historic Mount Olive. Inhabitation by a middle class disassociated with the neighborhood or its history, responding instead to a reinvented, commodified take on the small-town America of yesteryear, is far more likely to result in the preservation of the place than the reconstruction that would apparently be necessary in order to render Mount Olive palatable to its present residents. The neighborhood, bereft of the descendants of its original inhabitants, would remain physically intact—if restructured and ultimately romanticized. Nonetheless, the most valuable part of the *genius loci* of Mount Olive would be lost—as would the hope of the Delray CRA to provide *in situ*



Fig. 7. New construction, Mt. Olive.

housing for a sector of its population.

Our lament notwithstanding, the scenario sketched above is hardly unique. Historically, the artifacts that are cities become the repositories of sequential and often mutually conflicting meanings largely as a result of economic forces: Since vast amounts of infrastructure capital have been spent to generate the artifact, its permanence is a given. Persons of varying social classes, economic means, political ideologies and aesthetic sensibilities each inhabit the artifact in turn, reinventing its meaning but not its form. This, in fact, is the typical gentrification pattern for most American cities: A run-down but valuable downtown real estate holding inhabited by the city poor is acquired by developers. It is refurbished and subsequently marketed under circumstances that displace its original residents in favor of the upwardly mobile in search of the newly fashionable.

Mount Olive could have represented an unusual variation on that pattern: Originally built inexpensively, its form is only now beginning to be considered significant and its geographic location in Delray Beach has yet to become truly valuable. As a result, although demolition and reconstruction were not economically out of the question here as it often is in traditional inner city conditions, it did become possible to consider retaining the neighborhood in its valuable morphology for its current population. The competition brief written by the Delray CRA underlined and supported that possibility. Its outcome has denied both.

At What Cost Preservation?

The Instructive Case of Affordable Housing

In recent years Delray Beach has gone to considerable lengths to identify its significant historic structures, offering owners economic incentives to conserve and improve them. A majority of Delray residents has enthusiastically supported municipal preservation efforts: They have voted funds to aid in the restoration of their City Hall, art museum and other buildings of civic significance. Despite the fact that the larger community is eager to refurbish old Delray, historic Mount Olive remains a painful reminder of bondage and oppression for many of its current residents. They find it impossible to separate the physical form of their neighborhood from its historic meaning. Given a choice, they unanimously prefer—not incomprehensibly, but perhaps without full assessment of the consequences—to leave those reminders behind.

Delray could choose to designate Mount Olive an historic district and so *insist* on its preservation—while encouraging residents to remain and engage in the effort. In fact, since the original writing of this piece, the first attempt at historic district designation for a portion of this neighborhood is under review. But it is doubtful that such designation will wield much persuasive power with either current or prospective inhabitants. Instead, architectural and zoning codes in support of preservation will probably be seen as coercive efforts to keep a disadvantaged segment of the local population oppressed. Although it would sadly be misinterpreted as

paternalism by current residents, the restrictions accompanying historic designation would not be directed at curtailing the aspirations of any group of persons but rather at maintaining the physical character of a valuable place.

It is far more likely that placing Mount Olive among protected historic districts will only serve to hasten gentrification, taking the neighborhood away from its current residents altogether. Locally, there are few examples of modest, historically protected neighborhoods. It is still an unfortunate reality that a poor neighborhood with an unsavory history is not readily seen as worthy of preservation unless the proposal is accompanied by an economically and socially attractive promise of a move toward gentrification. Indeed, historic district status for places like Mount Olive, while not unheard of, is hardly commonplace in South Florida. In cases where context itself is socially embarrassing or otherwise questionable—and where gentrification is not the ultimate goal—mandated preservation immediately becomes suspect. This holds true in the eyes of the current and prospective residents (who devalue their own holdings and can only envision a positive transformation of the neighborhood by the most radical of means), of community building and zoning boards (who do not necessarily understand that the goals of preservation are not solely economic) and for the general public (whose support both fuels and protects preservationist activities). Such facts speak volumes about the typically exclusive character of our historically protected areas—and suggest a need for a more careful scrutiny of their economic and social dynamics both before and after historic district designation.

At stake is nothing less than the very definition of the city—an organism whose physical form preservationists work to maintain, but whose social, cultural and economic “content” are the *sine qua non* of its multi-dimensionality and authenticity. As a result of our experience in Delray Beach, we have come to understand that the price of preservation for a neighborhood such as Mount Olive may be unreasonably high. Clearly it is necessary to redefine the economic and social structures that attach themselves to a historic district.

Forging a Design Attitude for a Post-Romantic Professional Practice

In what Thomas Fisher has called “a post-Romantic era of professional practice,”⁴ the disjunction of form and content represented by the Mount Olive case study raises important questions. Not only do these probe the ambivalent social role of preservation, but they also direct self-reflexive inquiries about the design stance of the profession: As architects, how independent do we want to make form from content? How independent do our clients want us to make the two? In the context of a competitive process such as this one, in which the jury and the intended inhabitants of its product turn out to have vastly different agendas, is it ever really possible to reconcile form, content and meaning?

Hoping to do our small part to avoid some of the land

mines of an institutionalized separation among design professionals, their clients and the physical context of their work—and in the absence of a flesh and blood client—we naively thought that by serving Mount Olive, we were serving its inhabitants. We harbored the illusion that in building according to the laws of the vernacular we would be doing our part to conserve the neighborhood and to empower the people who lived there. It seems clear to us now that given the history, demographics and cultural climate of this particular place, we were operating in a context that simply did not permit us to find a solution which would save Mount Olive while finding favor in the eyes of its residents.

Amos Rapoport has written eloquently on the definition of the house as a cultural phenomenon, explaining that no single factor determines its form in primitive and vernacular cultures. Indeed, he writes that indigenous cultures often build irrationally—against the dictates of climate, site conditions and even available technology—and in favor of expressing religious beliefs, prestige, status, etc. Rapoport explains that “what finally decides the form of a dwelling is the vision that people have of the ideal life.”⁵

In the final analysis, we (and the prototype clients we conceived) harbored a widely different vision for the ideal future of Mount Olive from that of its present and prospective residents. Nevertheless, their response to the offer of affordable housing had one important parallel to our own as well as one significant difference: Like us, Mount Olive residents assumed a correspondence among the place, its form and its inhabitants. But while we posited a necessary *correlation* among place, form and user, they posited a complete *identification* between themselves and their physical surroundings. Not surprisingly, that distinction led them to diametrically different conclusions regarding the form of their housing. In a contemporary social context that imbues image with tremendous power—especially in the areas of self-identity and self-determination—it is not surprising that in their rejection of the history and associations of the type, the residents of Mount Olive rejected its image, and thus its form.

In her 1974 think piece “The House as Symbol of the Self” Clare Cooper Marcus argues along similar lines that the house is our most intimate and universal means of self-expression, concluding that architects will only serve their clients well when they are able to empathize with and respond to their clients’ concepts of self.⁶ Yet neither Cooper Marcus, thinking at the scale of the individual, nor Rapoport, at the scale of the community, addresses the fundamentally fluid character of self definition in the context of increasing self knowledge. Nor do these writers confront the very real physical consequences and historical costs of disregarding the complexities implied in that fluidity. Invariably, places like Mount Olive are destroyed—either by the external forces of redevelopment and gentrification or by the internal need of residents for redefinition. Unfortunately, such communities seldom consider themselves as meriting the attention that will garner

them funds to ensure their own archival survival in the face of near certain physical extinction.

EPILOGUE: THE RE-INTERPRETIVE AGENDA

Our proposal was a cry for pride in both place and history. We saw these as a source of strength from which to forge a future, rather than as shackles to an oppressive past. Nevertheless, we find ourselves re-evaluating a scenario in which preservation and continuity—even as interpreted through the elastic prism of typology—are perceived as symbols of a coercive rather than natural fit between form and content.

We regretfully acknowledge that unknowingly, we were insensitive in proposing a derivative of the shotgun house for this particular place and this particular group of people. We had hoped that the African roots of the typology might have effectively lifted it above the stigma of its more recent history and refocused the attention of residents on its cultural authenticity and historic significance. The example of the Charleston sideporch house, which, from its inception, existed in both ramshackle and luxury editions, seemed reason enough to assume that the shotgun, too, might be allowed to bridge the gap in cultural, economic and class differences.

Yet the reaction of Mount Olive residents to our shotgun/sideporch house is fully comprehensible, and instances of similar community responses are well documented. The desire to leave a position of social and economic marginality in favor of full assimilation and acceptance into the larger culture virtually defines the ethnic, racial and immigrant experience in America. But the social history of this country during the past two centuries clearly demonstrates that membership in the larger culture is dearly bought. The cost of assimilation and accommodation for racial, national and ethnic groups in America has always included a collective forgetting, a loss of specific identity, history and past.

And it is precisely against that loss that our small house was a physical argument. We chose to rail against a collective amnesia because we considered that it should be difficult to accept an inauthentic, fictionalized history in lieu of a hard-earned past. We hoped that design based on vernacular types in a meaningful context would allow real history a chance to survive the trivialization and commercialization that are the hallmarks of gentrification. We hoped to mark out a way to preserve the history of marginalized groups long enough that the pain of the old memories might be incorporated into a newly positive collective identity.

Our design solution had sought to speak the physical language of Mount Olive and its history in order to strengthen a run-down inner city neighborhood. The reaction to our proposal surprised us, for we were unaware that our small house disregarded the socially constructed meaning of the architectural forms we proposed. Ironically—and precisely as a result of a competitive process that separated user from professional—we have ended up exactly where we did not want to be: deciding that the best interests of a place and its

people are served by something other than what they themselves expressly desire.

We are anything but smugly comfortable in our position. Although we believe strongly that we see far-reaching consequences in blind acquiescence to as narrow a reading of an architectural form as Mount Olive residents wish to impose on themselves, post Pruitt-Igoe we understand the historically devastating results of professional hubris. Nevertheless, it seems worthwhile to point out that in the apparent absence of corroboration on the part of a larger interpretive community relative to whom this limited reading of an architectural form might make sense, Mount Olive residents might reconsider the voluntary self-imprisonment of this particular social construction of meaning.

Despite the perceived unacceptability of its echoes, we cannot help but suspect that our small shotgun house would

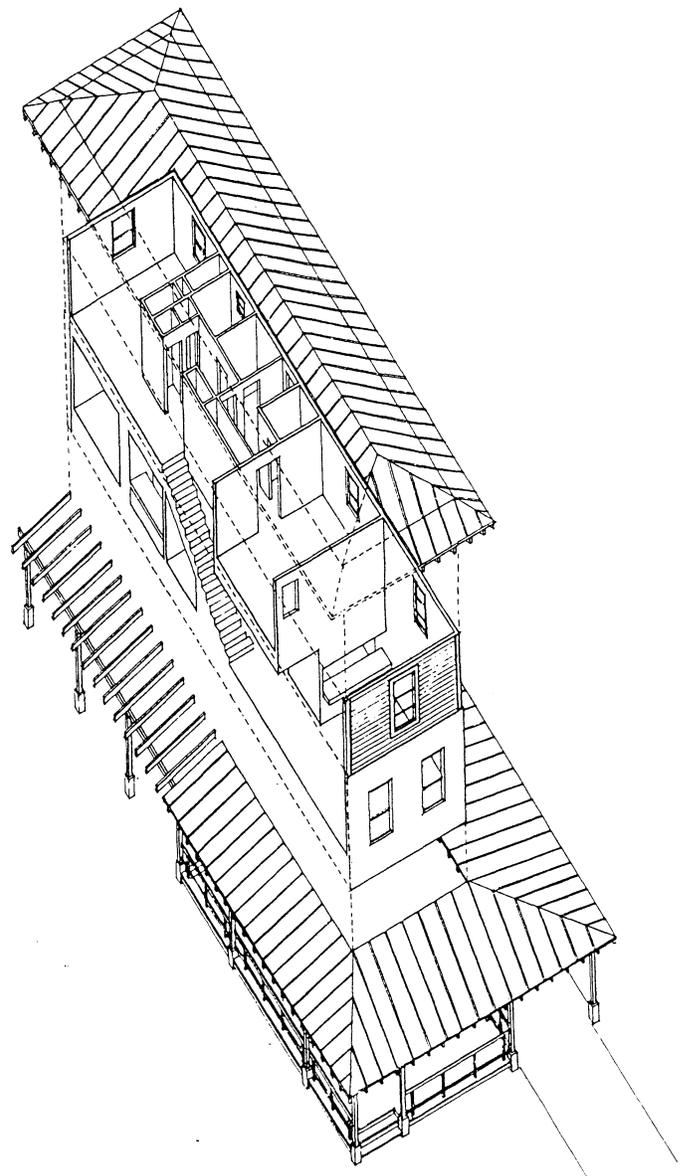


Fig.8. Axonometric, competition entry.

appeal to the very same Mount Olive residents who reject it so soundly today, were they to come upon it in their own, long-since-gentrified former community. By then, however, Mount Olive would have become a different place, transferred to people unfamiliar with, and perhaps uncaring about, its history. By then, it would be far too late for former Mount Olive residents to salvage, reclaim and ultimately transform their own past with authenticity in its historically meaningful location.

After considerable self-reflection, then, after acknowledging frankly that our solution may not be the best or most appropriate one in all cases, we have (gingerly) returned to our original position regarding construction in Mount Olive. Despite the public outcry, we find ourselves unable to ignore the vast chasm that separates a transformation and reinterpretation of the history of enslavement from its abandonment—either through the destruction of its physical remnants or through gentrification. We must conclude that in our own estimation, at least, genuine empowerment for Mount Olive residents lies in embracing and celebrating

their history rather than in succumbing to the urge for its destruction.

NOTES

- ¹ Illustration from Allen George Noble and Margaret Geib, *Wood Brick and Stone: the North American Settlement Landscape*, vol. I. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1984. p. 60-62.
- ² See, for example, John Vlach, "The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy," in *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, University of Georgia Press, 1986, p. 58-78.
- ³ Beth Dunlop, "Home, Sweet Home for \$44,000 Per Year," *The Miami Herald*, Nov. 1, 1992, 1G.
- ⁴ Thomas Fisher, "Escape From Style," in *Progressive Architecture*, Sept., 1994, p. 59- 63, 100.
- ⁵ Amos Rapoport, *House, Form and Culture*, Foundations of Cultural Geography Series. Prentice- Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969, p. 47.
- ⁶ Clare Cooper Marcus, "The House as Symbol of the Self," in Jon Lang, *Designing for Human Behavior: Architecture and the Behavioral Sciences*. Dowden, Hutchinson and Ross, Stroudsburg, Pa., 1974. p. 130-148.