

# Re/Considering Housing: In The Simcoe Street Corridor Project

ROBERT MCKINNEY

University of Southwestern Louisiana

This paper illustrates three issues in developing housing strategies: existing context, analysis and design, and implementation. It seeks to redefine strategies for developing housing from a dogmatic collection of repeated multiple-family units into diversified residential types. In developing the strategies the layers of the community have been re-examined and used to transform common residential typologies to meet the housing conditions in the Simcoe Street Corridor project area of Lafayette Louisiana. The area was first shaped by the railroad in the late 1800s, through the 20s 30s and 40s it was further defined by moderate housing. In the 1960s it was intersected by a multiple line expressway. Each of these developments has led to cycles of migration and a collecting of cultural and architectural characteristics that have been extracted in designing the prototypes. The Community Design Workshop worked collaboratively, with local government, community, and other agencies in attempting the implementation of the strategies. Housing is a crucial area where government, community, and academia can work together to address the issues and problems encountered in the re-establishing of community identity.

## PROLOGUE

Housing of the twentieth-century is primarily a remnant of the modernist dogma, and has seen many of its icons demolished. The Pruitt Igo housing projects of St. Louis for example were demolished due to a failure to create a sense of community and respond to the individual needs of its residents. The demolition of housing projects continues in the current trend across the country to re-examine housing and the idea of the universal grid of high-rises and low rise developments. The issues this trend raises include isolation versus community, and variation versus uniformity. What is replacing these isolated units are a return to the development of the neighborhood, of seeking diversity rather than a single model of addressing housing. It is through considering the complex relationships that form neighborhoods that fostering a sense of community in developing housing strategies can be achieved.

The issue of housing is not limited to the metropolis but is an issue for every community. In Lafayette, Louisiana it is an issue as neighborhoods and districts re-examine their needs and identity and seek ways to develop a stronger community fabric, culturally, socially, economically, and environmentally.

This housing study is a component of a collaborative project between the University of Southwestern Louisiana's Community Design Workshop (CDW) and the Lafayette City/Parish (county) Government to develop the Simcoe Street corridor. The CDW project team directed by Assistant Professor Tom Sammons, compiled the documentation of the study area including recording the existing physical conditions and the objectives and concerns of the community. The CDU identified six (6) distinct areas within the

projects' boundaries, four (4) predominantly residential, two at each end of the street and two (2) primarily commercial or industrial at the midpoint of the street. A survey of existing conditions, through block by block documentation identified strengths and weaknesses of each district while recording infrastructure and architectural characteristics of the area.

This documentation provides the basis for establishing scales of reference framing the information for the creation of approaches to redevelop this fragmented yet distinctive area into a thriving community, socially, culturally and economically. Each scale defines the scope of particular project for the study: urban, street landscape, and architectural that when layered together define the scope of the study proposing ways to reunite the community into a unified whole.' Urban defines patterns of growth and in-fill proposals across the area. A comprehensive model of the pedestrian environment leads to the determination of a strategy at the street landscape scale. The architectural scale investigates the impact of buildings that promote community identity including community centers and housing.'

The focus of this paper is the architectural scale, specifically investigating housing in the project area through the design of housing and recommendations for implementation. The formulation of the housing prototypes' outlined in this report are in coordination with the other scales of the project developed by the CDW. By reconsidering the characteristics of vernacular types this project explores the thesis that it is possible consider how housing responds to current conditions and needs diversifying rather than isolating communities.

## CONTEXT

A housing development is defined in Webster's dictionary as a group of individual dwellings usually of one design controlled by one management. Rather than following the definition of housing as a collection of multiple-family units collected in one area that are the same unit repeated. This project's goals are two-fold, to form individual identities of each residence reflecting the personality and conditions of its family thereby rebuilding the neighborhood through providing community identity.

This follows the trend nationally in housing which is to move from large scale residential developments to small scale insertions that include a mix of residences, commercial and community assistance. In Chicago the Cabrini-Green project is undergoing a transformation from high-rise to mixed-use creating opportunities for diversity.' This strategy allows for the development of neighborhoods rather than just housing blocks. As housing builds neighborhoods so does according to Lewis Mumford neighborhoods build cities.

Within the state of Louisiana housing starts for middle income to upper income single family residences are on the rise while starts for low to moderate residences are declining." In part this is due to

low income families moving into older existing housing that middle class families have left for newer homes in the suburbs. This migration is one problem in the development of housing strategies at a neighborhood scale. Several previous studies of Lafayette have identified the location and kinds of housing problems that occur within the City/Parish.<sup>5</sup> The 1980 US census for metropolitan areas identifies the age, size, ownership, and family make-up of housing in Lafayette. This identifies the issues of affordable housing for the city: individual ownership versus renting, single head of household families, maintenance of housing stock, and affordable housing occurring in the older neighborhoods of the city.

The Simcoe Street corridor is central to the area defined in these studies which require improvement in available housing and development of neighborhoods. It is an area adjacent to downtown Lafayette at its midpoint and extends from the West to neighborhoods developed in the '30s to East to neighborhoods developed in the '60s and passes through the Historic Sterling District developed at the turn of the twentieth century. The income level is a mix of low to upper levels with a cultural mix predominantly of African-American and Creole heritage. Each of the four residential areas in the study has a different mix requiring slightly different solutions to address the needs of the residents.

The area was first shaped by the railroad in the late 1800s, through the '20s '30s and '40s it was further defined by moderate housing. In the 1960s it was craved through by a multiple line expressway. Each of these developments has lead to cycles of migration. As the area attempts to redevelop it faces the upcoming obstacle of having an interstate run though it following the expressway corridor. Each of these events has dramatically impacted the area culturally and architecturally. Depending on location the existing old stock that is vacated contains archetypal examples of recognized regional housing types, the shotgun, the Creole cottage, and the bungalow. Examples of these occur in the older neighborhoods of any Louisiana town and throughout the rural areas of the state.

The block by block surveys of the CDW team confirm the areas with housing problems.' The housing stock ranges from the substandard to the historical with the majority of the residents being in the low income bracket in substandard to minimal housing. Fragmentation of the residential neighborhoods occurs as a result of industry and the aging of the existing residential stock. Much of this area requires up-grade of basic infrastructure, water, sewer, electric, drainage, and streets. Many of the existing services require updating. For the purposes of the CDW project infrastructure include walks, parks, and community support services, such as educational development, health and other social services.'

## ANALYSIS

The data from the survey provides the basis for figure and ground studies that are used to identify density, illustrating vacant properties and the areas that require new development. These studies were then used to generate a three-dimensional model of Simcoe Street and two dimensional map of the districts providing a complete mapping of the project area that defines the existing conditions and suggests basic strategies for development. In terms of housing the studies are essential, illustrating where vacancies occur and the possible locations for in-fill houses. The basic premise is that in order for a neighborhood to be a viable community it must be complete. Each vacant lot is an opportunity for decay. The first component of the housing proposal is to fill the vacant lots with single family and where appropriate small multiple-family housing.

The vacancies are a residue of the development of the area over the past one hundred years and their absence forms voids and overlapping areas of residential, commercial, industrial development. Culturally and architecturally the absence and presence of these layers collage together to define the conditions of the area. The study seeks to offer resistance to the negative impact of voids and collage of uses while at the same time using these extracted characteristics and qualities



Fig. 1. Xlap of Simcoe Street produced by CDW.

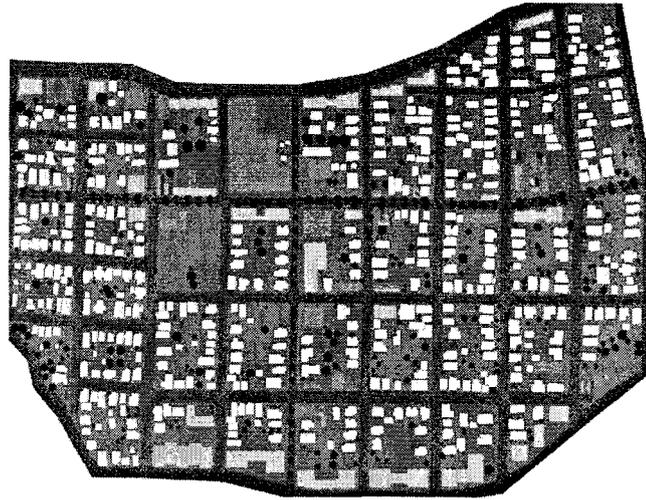


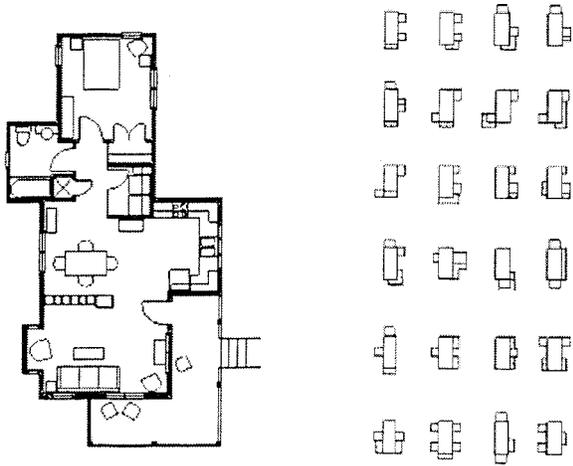
Fig. 2. Plan of typical residential district illustrating proposed in-fill produced by CDW.



Fig. 3. Typical Simcoe Street area bungalow photograph by CDW

which may define the community.

Current trends in residential planning are returning to the scale, design and characteristics of traditional neighborhoods of the turn of the century. Much of the project area has these characteristics of tree covered walks, porches, and an architectural vocabulary that is being rediscovered by the neo-traditional and new urbanism movements in design and planning. The reference to New Urbanism is made cautiously because I believe the trend leans to the nostalgic, especially when new neighborhoods are designed from beginning to end to image the past. This area has grown over the past hundred years and its qualities are authentic not re-creations. A range of architectural styles is present in the project area, including the following: folk vernacular, late Victorian, Victorian folk, bungalow, post W.W.II ranch, and contemporary folk the trailer home.<sup>8</sup> The common characteristics of the earlier types of houses include porches, wood as the primary material, and individual details. Together these



Figs. 4 and 5. Plan of "Cottage" house. (left) and variations of the Shotgun house.

characteristics encourage patterns of living that draw people in and out of the house. It is the later types that isolate families from the life of the neighborhood.

A visual survey of each district reveals common architectural characteristics and personal ad-hoc additions. The basic housing stock of the project area includes the earlier housing types along with regional types. It is the ad-hoc features however that make a residence a personal reflection of its family; a purple house, metal siding, trellises used, a sun room or additions or a sequence of additions that unfold. Within the neighborhoods there is a variety of material additions and alteration that have transformed the original types into a kind of palimpsest recording the migrations of the area. It is this stock and transformation that create opportunities and present possible solutions in developing low income housing strategies. It is the re-writing on top of early texts that is the strength of the area that may serve as a model for current trends of development.

## PROTOTYPES

The shotgun, Creole cottage, and bungalow are archetypal examples of housing types common to the Acadian region and to the project area. The shotgun is known for its cultural and architectural significance as an African typology. The Creole cottage for its French heritage and connection to the Acadian region of the state. The bungalow is significant for its widespread development after WW I.

In going into an existing neighborhood for in-fill the primary aim of the study is to avoid repetition of designs and to respond to the character of the existing neighborhood. To achieve this each of the regional archetypes is dissected into its component pieces. One significant feature of older houses is the additions that respond to the growing needs of the family and also to the changing cultural conditions and definitions of house. A study of the existing houses in the area reveals the original core and then the possible additions. These range from carports to, sun-rooms, bathrooms, utility rooms, and dens. At a smaller scale component include bay windows, and trellis.

It is the idea of a set of cores and component additions that form one of the crucial elements of the study enabling the desired variety without each one needing to be individually designed. These individual studies draw from the existing combinations in the neighborhoods. Through varying the combination of elements unique houses are formed meeting the particular needs of its owners or occupants. The common core serves to re-establish a common fabric and the neighborhood scale. While the additions provide individual identity



Figs. 6 and 7. Plan of Shotgun house (left) and variations of the Bungalow house.

at the street scale. Each of the three types were explored into the possible combination of additions.

In developing a prototypical design form each type Habitat for Humanity guidelines are followed to determine functions square footage limitations. In the design of the three houses the guidelines were followed to maintain the focus on affordable housing and also for the future possibility of constructing one of the houses. One of the exceptions to the Habitat guidelines is the inclusion of generous porches. The porches respond to the climate of South Louisiana and create additional living area.

The prototypes represent different sets of requirements depending on client, size and topological issues yet they share common goals of individual identity through the strategy of a kit of elements. Common to all is the emphasis of the porch as a primary living space and not just a decorative front. This expands the size of the home physically and fosters a sense of neighborhood identity by bringing the residents out of their homes and engaging them with the other residents. The cottage at its core is a two to four room square with a full porch across the front. These basic dwellings consisted of parlor and bedroom with a second bedroom or dining. Additions include the kitchen, utility, and utility porches. One of the needs identified by the city is for one bedroom elderly houses within the neighborhood that is smaller and requires less maintenance than a family sized house. This follows the space requirements of 840 square feet.

The core of the shotgun is its long narrow rectangular form with three to six rooms in a single line, with a porch attached to the front. The shotgun dates to the mid 1800s and originally consisted of a parlor, multiple bedrooms and a dressing area. A fundamental strategy in planning the spatial layout of each residence is to maximize room size by minimizing circulation through hallways. This is a strategy that is evident in the study of the topological houses, especially the shotgun, with its circulation from room to room, porch.

The reconfiguration of the core of the shotgun adapts the pattern to current social patterns of living, dining, bath, and two bedrooms. The component additions that complete and allow for personal variation include kitchen, bedroom, and utility. The prototypical design of shotgun uses a hypothetical client of a single mother with two children. In accordance with the guideline the maximum square footage permitted is 940 square feet of conditioned space.

Dating from the early 1900s the bungalow is the first type to include the kitchen with the core. The bungalow is 2 rooms wide by 3 rooms deep consisting of living, kitchen/dining, bath and bedrooms. The component additions include porches, sun-rooms. The

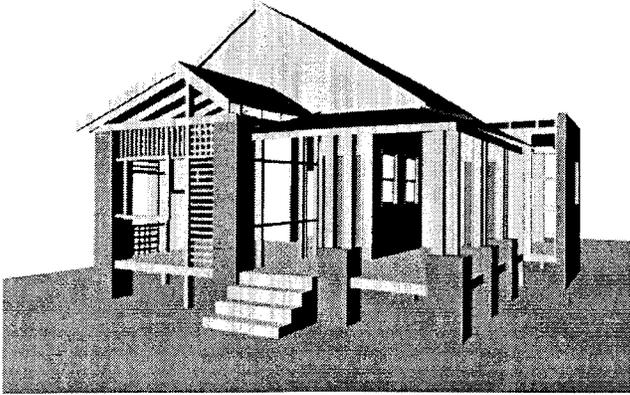


Fig. 8. Bungalow Prototype designed by Brooks Jackson.

bungalow is the base type for a traditional family of four that includes two bedrooms with sun-room that serves as third bedroom, home office, or den. The Habitat guidelines state 1,040 as the maximum square footage.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The Simcoe Street Corridor project has been presented to the citizens of the study area and to the City/Parish council of Lafayette for funding feasibility studies. This is a part of the process that the students of the CDW participate in to learn about the processes of local government and funding sources. The first time the Whole CDW project was presented for funding for further study it was denied. Recently the City/Parish council has approved the street landscape project of for cost estimating and feasibility studies.

The implementation of the housing study or a portion of it through the construction of one of the prototypes was a goal from the beginning of the project. This process has also seen several obstacles and also unexpected opportunities. Initially the prototypes were developed with input from the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity which was about to undertake a seven house development in the area. Ultimately the local director and consultants rejected the designs with concerns to cost and design, in part do the generous porches in the design. Meetings with the City/Parish housing authority lead to a similar fate.

An unusual connection which had not been considered at the beginning of the project is proving to be the best chance to have a true collaboration that leads to the construction of affordable housing. As a result of the study work in the area the School of Architecture was approached by Gregory Pickett of the W.D. Smith Career Center a vocational high in the project area. This past fall the fifth-year studio of the school of Architecture directed by Professor Edward Cazayoux designed a master plan and several affordable housing solutions to be built by the vocational tech students on property that was acquired through funding by the city. It was also a unique challenge for the architecture students to also see their designs as instructional tools for learning construction. It is expected that the first house will begin construction next fall.

The W.D. Smith career center project serves as an example of the ties that must be forged with the different providers of education to meet the needs of affordable housing. The biases that academia does not understand or is not capable of meeting the realities of buildable designs an issue that must be overcome through community involvement and through public and professional education.

This housing study has also led to the establishment of the Housing Institute at the School of Architecture. The mission of the institute is to foster research development in housing through faculty, students and the community collaborating together to address the issues of housing. The CDW will once again have an opportunity

to design housing for the Simcoe Street Corridor as work begins on the I-49 project which passes through much of the Simcoe area. The institute also has a grant pending to study the existing housing conditions along the proposed interstate route as it moves through a three parish region.

The study of housing provides an opportunity for students and faculty to actively work with community organizations. The local community, students and faculty share the benefits of participation in the Housing Institute: faculty and students provide expertise in areas where the community identifies needs for architectural scale projects. Students participate in hands-on learning opportunities gaining experience in design, production, and construction, and the faculty work collaboratively on research projects related to housing. These projects can provide opportunities for School of Architecture faculty to engage faculty from other university disciplines.

## SUMMARY

Housing is an issue that effects every community. and it can no longer be solved by one solution whether it is modern or nostalgic housing requires solution that are not dogmatic but rather are responsive to the existing conditions. These conditions include the cultural and architectural heritage of a region and the migrations that take place at the scale of each neighborhood. An understanding of each of these will contribute to not only meeting the needs of housing but also to establish family and community identity.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Sammons. Simcoe Street Corridor Project. Unpublished paper presented to Lafayette City and Parish Council (1998). Ibid.
- <sup>2</sup> Blain Kamin, "The Latest Chapter in The Cabrini-Green Saga." *Architectural Record* (Feb. 1997): 84-89.
- <sup>3</sup> Real Estate Research Institute. College of Business. Louisiana State University. *Housing Affordability in Louisiana: 1984-1994* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1995), Volume 6, pp. 108-139.
- <sup>4</sup> Lafayette Regional Planning Commission. *Housing Allocation Plan* (Lafayette, LA: Lafayette Council of Governments, 1977), pp. 16-29.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas Sammons.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Virginia McAlester, and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide To American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

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