

## TOP DOWN AND BOTTOM UP

Design and Public Good

### Housing

An Urban Strategy

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Over the past three years, my colleagues and I have taught the housing studio at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a required core element in the second year of our Master of Architecture curriculum. We consistently work within the context of our university's greater neighborhood: to participate in the conversations within this historically important and rapidly changing community. Through interactions with the diverse constituencies in this community, public presentations, and exhibitions, we encourage the students to engage in a larger pedagogical project within the city, offering an opportunity to contribute innovative ideas to the contested discourse surrounding housing in Chicago.

Last year (2000-2001), through the auspices of a partnership developed in our College, we had the rare opportunity to work in conjunction with the Chicago Housing Authority and the Chicago Public Library, including a symposium and an exhibition of the students' work at Chicago's Harold Washington Library Center. This "pedagogical installation" — in a vital public space — allowed us to communicate ideas about the history, current state, and future of housing in our community. In the process we were able to present how architecture students are taught, how architects work, and how architectural ideas can be articulated in public settings. What this studio demonstrated to faculty, students, and others in our city is that the "communication" around projects as intense and complex as the "transformation" of public housing requires a redefinition of the term "client." Beyond the desires of public housing residents and the requirements imposed by housing authorities and their developers lay the concerns of larger constituencies who can only be reached in public fora, through the resources of different public institutions: libraries, media outlets, web sites, and public presentations. In this instance, suggesting possibilities for future collaborations between city agencies, residents, and the academy, a student project and students themselves can become the media in this larger pedagogical project.



Fig.1. Housing: An Urban Strategy.

Our School of Architecture's objectives for the housing studio is straightforward:

- Housing is one of the "best known" but "least understood" of architectural building types.
- We need to constantly rethink the relationship between a house and housing: the relationship of the individual to the family and of families to our cities.
- Housing plays a critical role in the sustainability of the city and the urban environment.
- Housing is a key component in support of the diversity of urban life and lifestyles.

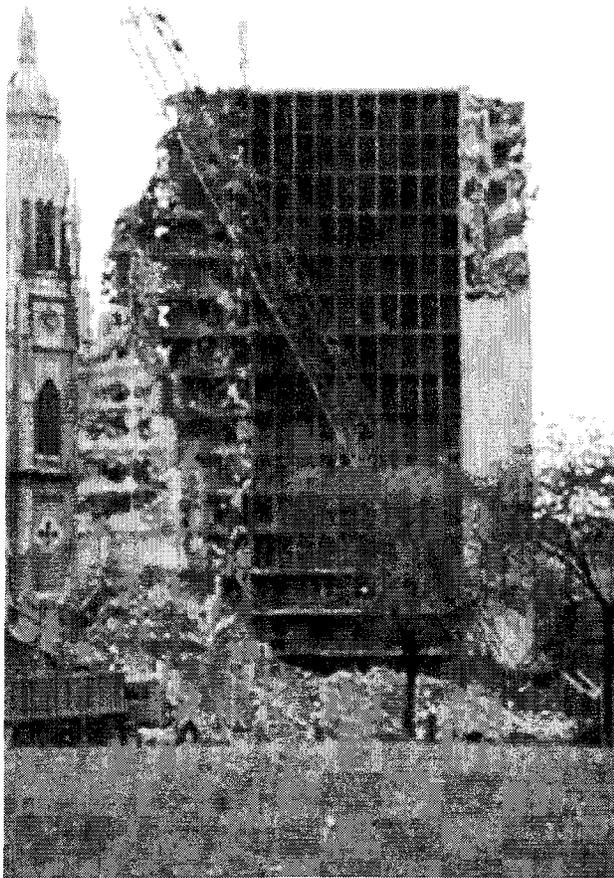


Fig. 2. Brooks Extension, Chicago Housing Authority

- Housing takes great technical skill and design prowess.

Student work is evaluated on the basis of the accomplishment of the objectives above: the extent to which the work demonstrates critical thinking, technical competency, and design strategies in support of innovative housing solutions. The wide variety of responses to the site and the program exemplify the goals of the studio and the faculty in that we do not specify a particular housing typology or urban morphology. Instead, students conduct extensive research into historical and contemporary case studies, designated by the faculty, and can choose to work from this knowledge base, which is shared among the participants of the studio. As a result few of the projects conform in fabric type or style to the block and townhouse approach of much of Chicago's Hope VI development. On the other hand, most of the projects have a more sophisticated response to the existing context, the history of the site, the desires and aspirations of the residents of the neighborhood, and the possibilities for the development of open space and community facilities. As a result of research into the history of both public housing and affordable housing, the students also tend to design for a broader set of inhabitants: indi-

viduals, "traditional" and "contemporary" families, and those with households that change over times. This is reflected in a wide variety of dwelling units and structural and material concepts.

Beyond the innovations in housing design that come out of the studio is the effort to bring the efforts of the studio into a larger public setting. As the higher educational public institution in our urban center,<sup>9</sup> our University is committed to research, teaching and service to advance urban life.<sup>9</sup> As an educational partner with the Chicago Housing Authority and the Chicago Public Library, the graduate housing studio at the School of Architecture spent the Fall of 2000 engaged in the design of housing for the 10+ acre Brooks Extension at ABLA Homes. This teaching studio looked at the way in which housing designers can collaborate and intersect with Chicago communities and citizens, particularly in neighborhoods of which our University is a part. With studio faculty members and college staff, graduate students brought their own experiences of Chicago and cities around the United States and the world to contemporary issues of housing and urban design. The structure of the studio and its public display compelled us to think through the idea of what it could mean to use a studio in an "educational partnership." The studio offered the faculty, students, and members of the University an opportunity to:

- Interact with communities and public institutions that influence the housing built in our city.
- "See" the relationship of education to professional practice.
- Participate with neighbors and a neighborhood of which our University is a part and in which our graduates will live and work.

While the studio's relationship to the other partners is clearly asymmetric — in the end only the students' educational advancement could be measured — the structure did allow us to bring many of the resources of the University to the community. In addition to going out to meet with residents and community leaders these constituents also came to the studio to see how students worked and to participate in final reviews. The School of Architecture was also able to host a symposium that served as a "kick-off" event for a competition run by the Chicago Housing Authority and funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. In this setting, students, residents, the CEO of the CHA, and the competition finalists shared their ideas about the neighborhood and the city. In turn, the Chicago Public Library shared its gallery space and its web site with the students. This important urban institution, both as a physical and a virtual space, has remade itself as a center of vital city knowledge. For the exhibition we designed what we termed a "pedagogical installation," displaying not just the students' work but information and images showing the history of and conflicts around the site, how students work

and how their work is reviewed, models, historical materials, and the partners involved in the project.

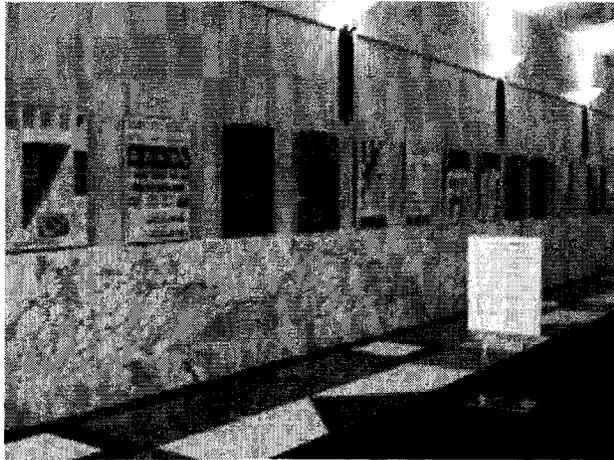


Fig. 3. Installation at the Harold Washington Library Center,

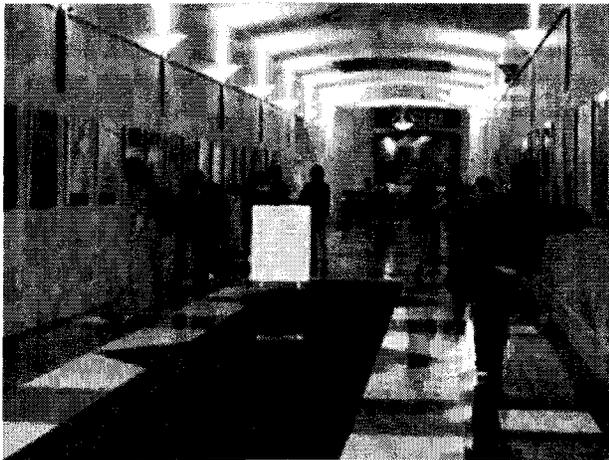


Fig. 4 Installation at the Harold Washington Library Center

This exhibition:

- Brought a set of complex issues to the public in a public venue
- Put student proposals out into the public.
- Presented a more complex understanding of the site, its history, and the issues that surround public housing today.
- Served as a community-teaching tool through gallery talks, walk-throughs with other architecture students, and the dissemination of material.
- Allowed us to show how architects work and how students are taught.
- Enlarge the public discourse on housing and urban development. In the “master development process” — like that being used by

the Chicago Housing Authority — most of the significant decisions are made before neighborhood residents are shown “options.” These decisions include the physical organization of the community, the style and typology of the housing, and the relationship to community services and new commercial activity. Thus, meetings convened to elicit residents’ input, while addressing many community concerns, are relatively narrow in scope and outcome. By contrast, residents who participated in our reviews, symposium, and gallery talks most commonly remarked on the wide variety of responses that the students had to the rethinking of the neighborhood. While conscious that many of the projects might, ultimately be unfeasible, improbable, or even problematic within the context, resident leaders remarked that they were pleased to see more than “option A” and “option B.” The president of the Local Area Council stated at the final review and again at the public symposium that she was impressed by the work and thought that the students had put into designing for her neighborhood. It was clear that a small breach had opened in the wall of mistrust between Chicago’s public housing residents and the greater professional community.

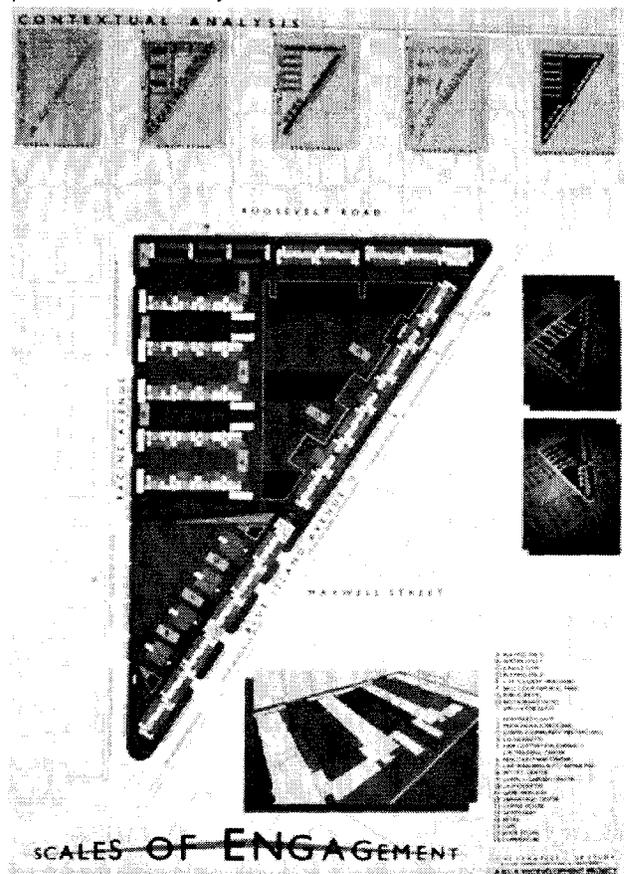


Fig. 5. Student Project: Tiffany Barrett,

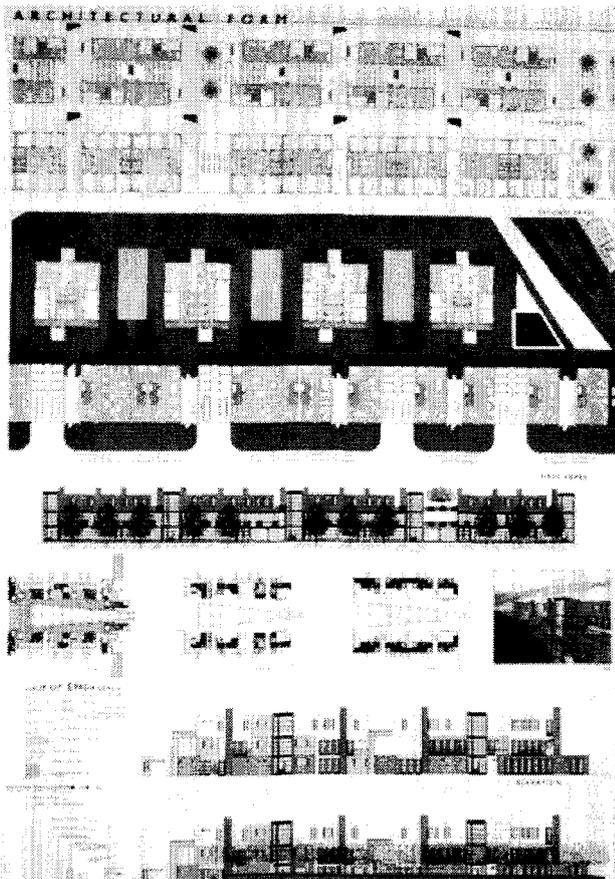


Fig. 6. Student Project: Tiffany Barrett

One significant aspect of the studio was that students were not asked to “dumb down” their projects or their presentations in order to communicate their ideas. Almost all students used advanced computer technology to research, design, and present their work. However, meetings with residents and site managers, visits to residents’ homes, and spontaneous interactions with the neighborhood’s schoolchildren, made it evident to the students that they had a great deal to learn about the lives and desires of the community and its place in the city. This tended to decrease the hermetic nature of presentations, as many students genuinely desired that their ideas be accessible. The client was greater than their faculty, residents, or the housing authority; it included the general public through the symposium, exhibition, gallery talks, and web site.



Fig. 7. Student Project: Andrew Kerr,

Written reactions to the exhibition reflected the nature of the conflict inherent in the “transformation” of public housing. From, “where is the voice of the residents of ABLA in this project?” to “great to see the process and Univ/ABLA/Residents collaborate.” From “racist, classist, part of Negro removal,” to “I hope your efforts and research will help make a difference in my neighborhood.” Sixteen weeks is a small period of time for students to begin to understand or even enter into this complex sphere of emotion and reality. But the students clearly completed the studio with more than technical skills and design knowledge. They walked away with an understanding of the complexities of public processes and public discourse: of how their ideas and work are understood by those outside of their discipline. They also took away sophisticated questions about a typology — housing — and a space — the city — that they all thought they fully understood when they began.

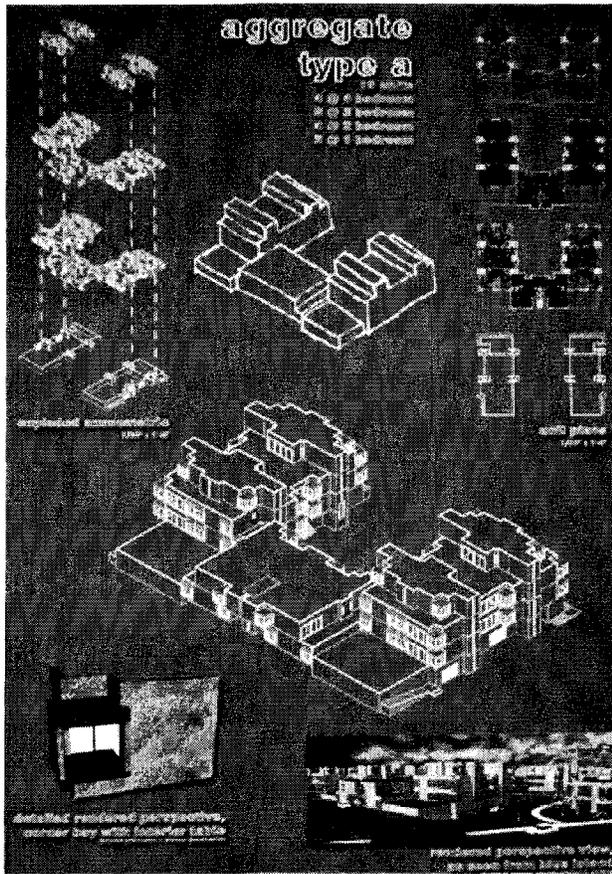


Fig. 8. Student Project: Andrew Kerr