

# HOUSING: TEACHING THE ISSUES

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## INTRODUCTION

Even though the social and economic structure of American society has dramatically changed over the past fifty years, our settlement patterns are typically based on attitudes and practices which date from the 1940's and 1950's. Through a combination of market forces, legal dictates, development practices and entropy, we build in ways that it is obvious are increasingly inappropriate, expensive, wasteful and dysfunctional. America is now a predominantly suburban nation for the first time in its history, and though the American suburban model is not the sole cause of our problems, it both contributes to, and makes them more intractable. Through segregated land use, decentralized sprawl and auto-dependence, suburbs are expensive and require high maintenance, institutionalize racial, gender, age, and economic segregation, and lack the sense of place and regional identity that Americans have traditionally valued. It is clear that we can no longer afford this model socially, politically, economically and ecologically. Though these practices have been challenged by architects and urbanists since at least the early 1980's, they have not produced a broad public response and dialog. The plethora of social problems associated with it are regularly voiced in the mainstream press, though rarely are they linked with the built environment.

It is only through synthesizing the broad range of implications regarding the built environment that a cogent and powerful argument be structured. Housing is one of many issues that need to be re-assessed. As the typical American family has changed, along with work and transportation patterns, the need for alternatives to the suburban, single family house has grown. Instead, developments that utilize a consistent formula of single family houses continue to dominate the housing market. Each strive through their names and motifs to establish a unique character, but nearly all are governed by a ubiquitous set of design parameters. Their litany of names posted on the *de rigour* brick gateways, reads like a thesaurus of idealized, bucolic living: Silver Creek Hollow; Fox Ridge, Chase Farms... Nearly always the names have nothing to do with their location—sometimes they document what they have destroyed. This form of residential development depends on the constant and profligate consumption of the “undeveloped” land of farmlands, open space, and wetlands. Their location and configuration isolates each separate development, and requires sole dependence on the private automobile for all transportation needs.

Though suburbia is not a new phenomena, its proliferation distinguishes the American post World-War II era. During this time nearly 3/4's of the current US housing stock has been built. The single-family house, which comprises 2/3rds of

this total, depends on the myth of what Dolores Hayden describes as the “dream house.” According to Hayden, “The dream house is a uniquely American form, because for the first time in history, a civilization has created a utopiam ideal based on the house rather than the city or the nation.”<sup>1</sup> The notion of the “home as haven,” though dating from Victorian ideals, found powerful resonance in the 1940's when the war veterans returned, and the nation undertook a massive housing program. The formation of the Federal Housing Administration by the Hoover administration in 1934 (followed by the Public Housing Act of 1937,) produced a dramatic shift in housing and development patterns. (The 1956 Interstate Highway system subsequently created the transportation infrastructure for suburbia.) Levittowns and their progeny established a cultural, legal and development dominance that in many ways remain undiminished. Today there are three dominant varieties of suburban housing: standard single-family developments; community associations; and gated “communities.” In a variety of ways, all types of contemporary housing have broad reaching social, political, economic and ecological ramifications.

## SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Humans have an innate need for definable places. This sense of place in essence provides for an archetypal human need—human survival was always dependent on orientation in our environment - on knowing where we are. A sense of place is both comforting, and provides meaning and definition to our lives. Though some current communication technologies may serve to isolate individuals, it is important to recognize that all are evidence of the compelling human need to communicate and socialize. Indeed social skills are the cornerstone of our evolutionary development and continue to be essential to both our continued survival as a species and our mental health. Communication technologies can effectively augment this need, but it is foolish to think that it will replace our need for intimate, social contact. The way we live, work and raise children is virtually unchanged from our more “primitive past,” and the need for social interaction remains undiminished.

Suburban residential developments have always depended on the selling of a better way of life for ourselves, our families and our children. This vision, refined by aggressive marketing techniques that utilize collective national symbols, continues to drive contemporary residential development. A relaxed lifestyle removed from the disruptive and the unpredictable; closeness to nature that offers space and greenery for our children; modern conveniences and appliances that save us work and provide for more leisure; and large interior spaces that reflect

our success and allow for gracious living within the protected enclosure of our private home—all of these images are seductively and effectively sold to the public. It sounds wonderful, and at first glance may even look perfect—but unfortunately it isn't—not for the people that buy into the product—or for following generations that will suffer the consequences of the social isolation and wasteful consumption all require.

Moreover, the lifestyle that is proscribed by isolated “communities” of this type is often diametrically opposed to their promises: the work and family commuting makes for a labor intensive lifestyle that is expensive, leaves little time for family activities, and is far from relaxing; and the sanitized social environment may on one level be quiet and predictable, but its entailing isolation makes for loneliness, anxiety and depression. The legacy of the patriarchal homestead continues to enforce the gender division of labor associated with childcare and homemaking, and results in the “second shift,” that working women are typically subject to. Now that America has become a predominantly suburban nation, we seem to be faced with a staggering array of social and political problems. As a recent *Time* magazine article points out, depression is a growing and common condition, perhaps directly related to the social isolation dictated by suburbia. “Bedroom communities” accurately describes the paucity of activities offered by contemporary suburbs. Nature, the perennial restorer of the human spirit, is also lost through suburban residential sprawl; and so though one may have a larger patch of lawn than one's parents did, it takes hours of driving to arrive at true country. The houses themselves, ever larger and more stocked with equipment, are often cheap and shoddy stage fronts. Construction money is concentrated on providing an array of appliances and amenities, while quality of materials and construction is sacrificed. In the end, the problem-free, easy lifestyle is a chimera that evaporates as the lifestyle promised fails in many areas.

#### POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

The lack of diversity and multi-use of single family residential communities creates places that lack the support net of more dense, diverse planned neighborhoods. The practice of market segmentation effectively segregates society by housing type, age and socio-economic status. A range of neighbors is absent, the young, the old, or anyone for that matter to provide the impromptu social meetings that add interest and meaning to our daily lives. As more needs are seemingly satisfied within the confines of one's “community,” a lack of interest and care about others results. The lack of social and economic diversity also creates borders and separation between different groups of people. This phenomena is particularly apparent at gated communities, which, according to a recent *New York Times* article, are the fastest growing form of housing in America. In these insular, self-governing enclaves homeowners willingly submit to a plethora of ordinances, rules and restrictions that no town government would dare enact. (Community association developments are another major growth area, its numbers have grown from 4,000 to 66,000 between 1970 and 1990.) According to Gerald Frug of the Harvard Law School, “private communities are totally devoid of random encounters. So you develop this instinct that everyone is just like me, and then you become less likely to support schools, parks or roads for everyone else.”<sup>22</sup> A lack of compassion results from the inability for us to know or

at least come in contact with people from different backgrounds, ethnic groups or vocation types. Its social hierarchy makes condemnation and characterization of others dramatically easy. The so called “balkanization” of our society is a term that should be taken at face value—hate always depends on isolation, misunderstanding, and demonization.

In most suburban developments there is a lack of community and direct engagement in affairs outside of one's direct sphere of activity. It is no surprise that a general distrust of government and apathy about political involvement has grown during the time of suburban dominance, and its risks are far reaching. Michael Sorkin argues that dispersed suburban enclaves are antithetical to a free society and that alternatives are essential for the maintenance of democracy.<sup>3</sup> Christopher Lasch in his last book *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* writes about the loss of true public discourse and its implications regarding the practice of democracy. The “sprawling, amorphous conglomeration without clearly identifiable boundaries, public space or identity” that he describes is attributed to the balkanization and polarization of society. According to Lasch as the “privatized classes” retreat from public life behind their gated enclaves, or in their rootless mobility, democracy and its institutions are put at risk.<sup>4</sup>

#### ECONOMIC COSTS

The dominant suburban pattern of housing seems to correspond to not only a reluctance to participate in civic affairs, but a national resistance to taxes and shared resources. The tax rate in America is the lowest in the western world, and yet is increasingly seen as burdensome and unfair. Citizens, for many reasons, have an inability to perceive the benefits of their local and national tax monies, and as regular budget crises appear, their money seems less and less well spent. Subsidies of the single family house through tax deductions for mortgage interest result in an annual tax loss of 30 million dollars, and yet tax funded housing initiatives are perceived as wasteful and unnecessary. What is consistently omitted from the economic picture, however, are the hidden costs of our contemporary lifestyle which drain the resources of families, local, state and national governments.

The cost of maintaining the roads and infrastructure of suburbia comprises a significant part of municipal budgets. Though new developments may be required to assume the costs of installation, maintenance is an expense that will continue to grow. Many reasons are forwarded for the crisis in municipal budgets, but rarely is the cost of maintaining the expensive sprawl of suburbia included, nor its continued practice questioned. Similarly there seems to be a national amnesia concerning the individual costs of maintaining a suburban lifestyle. The lack of shared community and transportation resources means that these costs are assumed by each family. The American economy, structured on the need for continual growth, assiduously promotes this consumer addiction. The post-World War II economy was bloated enough to support this duplication of resources, but after two decades of economic stagnation (for example the per capita income for males is down from 20 years ago,) it no longer works. Marketing techniques insist that larger and larger houses are necessary to satisfy our psychic and space needs, and thus individuals and families are burdened by higher and higher mortgages. Our addiction to progress and acquisition

results in more and expenses to purchase and maintain our coveted lifestyles. Most suburban houses also require two automobiles at a cost of \$5000.00-\$8000.00 a year for their purchase, taxes (in some states), insurance and maintenance. Each mortgaged car reduces the available amount of house mortgage by \$50,000, and as Philip Langdon states, up to 1/4 of a family's budget is devoted to paying for automobiles.<sup>5</sup> One of the nations largest car loan lender is the Ford Motor Company, a relationship analogous to the 1950's precedent of appliance manufacturers also being utility owners. *The Nation* recently cited Ford's track record of fraudulent lending practices that target disadvantaged borrowers—part of the “bottom-feeding” economy that characterizes the late 1990's.<sup>6</sup>

All of these costs mean that the suburban single family house is out of reach for more and more households. (Currently approximately 2/3 own their own homes.) Moreover, the typical American family is radically different from that of 50 years ago with less than 1/2 comprised of two parents and children. Most families depend on two incomes, and the fastest growing household is the single parent family. And yet we continue to build as if the idealized cartoon of the “traditional family” was reality, and certain national leaders stridently extol its virtues. The single family suburban development, in all its forms, does work for some of our population, but is clearly not for all. Alternatives that are more accessible and affordable to a broader range of society are desperately needed. Housing, once deemed essential to the education of architects, is now seen as only one of many choices. This most dominant architectural need, and one where the design profession's influence has continued to wane, is an area where architects and urbanists need to re-assert themselves.

#### ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS

It is ironic that a nation that traditionally has defined itself in terms of its natural resources measures its success in terms of housing starts; a pattern of development that significantly contributes to the destruction of the natural landscape. The ecological costs of suburban housing patterns are legion, and yet are rarely comprehensively addressed. Clearly the space required by single family housing and the phenomena of leap-frog development consumes open land at an alarming rate. The decentralization of suburbia requires a vast system of roads to serve the private automobile, and makes public transportation difficult. The consumption of resources necessary to maintain the duplication of needs and equipment in suburbia has obvious ecological implications. The various industries that support suburbia, shopping centers and malls, which all require significant infrastructure and large parking capacities, are equally wasteful. Green space and wetlands are lost by these and by new road construction, but automobile emissions into the atmosphere may have the greatest ecological impact. According to Bill McKibben, though auto emissions have been reduced over the past 20 years, a figure much touted by environmentalists and industrialists alike, this figure is disingenuous. *Carbon monoxide* emissions have been reduced, but *carbon dioxide* has not, and is a by-product that will never be reduced by technological tinkering with the internal combustion engine. (CO<sup>2</sup> actually indicates an efficient engine.) It is this latter element that is the principal cause of global warming—a phenomena now accepted by the scientific community. Our collective belief that any problem can be eventually cured by technology evaporates in

this case—and other future dreams such as electric cars are equally flawed (though for different reasons.) Moreover, the consumer orientation of the single family house results in a reliance on fossil-fuel generated electricity. According to McKibben, during the past ten years per capita electrical power usage has increased by 22% in America.<sup>7</sup>

In the end, all arguments whether they be social, political, economic or aesthetic, end at ecological concerns, and are proportionally diminished. Indeed it should be a mission of the architectural community to communicate the breadth of concerns that comprise a re-appraisal of our contemporary settlement patterns, and in particular the ecological ramifications. No amount of relative comparisons or clever rationalizations can obviate the fact that the earth cannot support our current lifestyle much longer. (As the WorldWatch Institute regularly documents)<sup>8</sup> In the context of “Gaia” theory and global warming, we have the choice of either changing the way we build and live—or the environment will make its own adjustments, (including the possibility of obsolescent human existence.)<sup>9</sup> The ecological movement has been a success over the past 20 years in many important areas, but in the context of a shift in national agendas and the recognition of more intractable problems, a renewed effort and commitment is apparent. Contemporary housing, and the support structure and lifestyle that it requires, is clearly an area where architects and urbanists can demonstrate leadership, as some are now doing. Nothing less than a radical shift in national values and agendas is necessary in this regard, and positive change can provide an example for the rest of the world. Currently the value of our wasteful consumptive, lifestyle is promulgated globally by means of advertising and television. It is a sobering thought to imagine even a fraction of the rest of the world living in the manner of contemporary America, a catalyst for us to proactively explore alternatives.

#### ALTERNATIVES

Too often contemporary architecture and urbanism conveniently ignores its broader environmental setting and abrogates its social responsibility. Our time demands a rigorous understanding of our contemporary *milieux*, and a proactive development of alternatives. In terms of housing, the need is to create more compact, diverse and sustainable communities. In particular, higher density, mixed-use housing which utilizes a range of unit types and shared components can fill the need for affordable housing and provide a more meaningful sense of community. Important approaches in this area have been developed by the so called “new urbanists.” In particular the global and regional approach of architects such as Calthorpe shows promise of comprehensively addressing the matrix of issues that confront us. Much remains to be done, however, and there are many dangers ahead. A particularly insidious possibility that could derail and subvert long-term success in this area has antecedents in the ecological movement. Ecology has become a fashionable marketing tool for corporate America, with partial information cleverly manipulated to make the product attractive to potential consumers. (Georgia Pacific describes its planting of “new trees by the millions,” against the backdrop of a mountain vista, but fails to mention that these are typically single species forest that support only a fraction of the life that old growth forests do, and depend on chemical spraying to be maintained. Automobile manufacturers describe a program of recycling steel

and aluminum to build their cars, but are utterly silent on the ecological effects of auto use.) Though the proposals of the new urbanists show promise, the imagery of some of their work also has the most danger of being co-opted and degraded, and are prone to corporate rip-offs that will utilize their seductive imagery but jettison their more broadly-based concerns.

There is hardly a common ground within the architectural community as well. Entropy and apathy are the greatest hindrance within the profession, due to its marginal influence, and the brutal exigencies of professional survival. Contemporary theory is fragmented and diffused, and there is no shortage of apologists who see both a promise and an inevitability to our current setting. The roots of this now prevalent attitude can be traced to Robert Venturi and his examination of the "pop landscape," and J.B. Jackson, a consistent apologist for the decentralized patterns of development and transportation. It is an approach that does have value, however, a relative acceptance of the explicit forms of the built landscape cleverly avoids important aspects and conveniently declines any social responsibility. (Arguments such as Jackson's are often useful in transcending the often shrill condemnation of our contemporary scene. Though acceptance is necessary, it does not have to be myopic—we accept in order not to be judgmental and so we can be dispassionately proactive.) Jackson and others typically rely on intellectual, non-specific approaches - and their underlying detachment and cynicism depends on the "bad-boy" persona endemic to architecture. Ultimately, there is nothing new about arguments of this type, as there is both nothing new nor so established about suburbia. (It has been around long enough to be dated, and is short enough to have been an aberration.) Ultimately it is conservative to embrace the landscape of the past 50 years and accept its continuation as inevitable and thus of virtue. Instead we need to recognize the dramatic changes that have occurred in America during this period, and the need for a built environment that responds to these demographic and economic shifts.

We need the kind of protagonists that the environmental movement had, followed by a growing public awareness and an upsurge of proactive proposals. Perhaps this is already happening—people are becoming cognizant that the built environment is unhealthy and dysfunctional, and is adversely affecting the lives of themselves, their children and families. Foundations are being laid for fundamental, broad-reaching and painful decisions with an eye to the future. The environmental movement has been a success in a short period of time, and has produced remarkable results that most Americans value and embrace. In part it benefited from the national decline in heavy industry and, analogously, challenges to development norms will benefit from changes in demographics, economics, and transportation. We need to hold the vision of equally dramatic change.

#### THE CASE STUDY

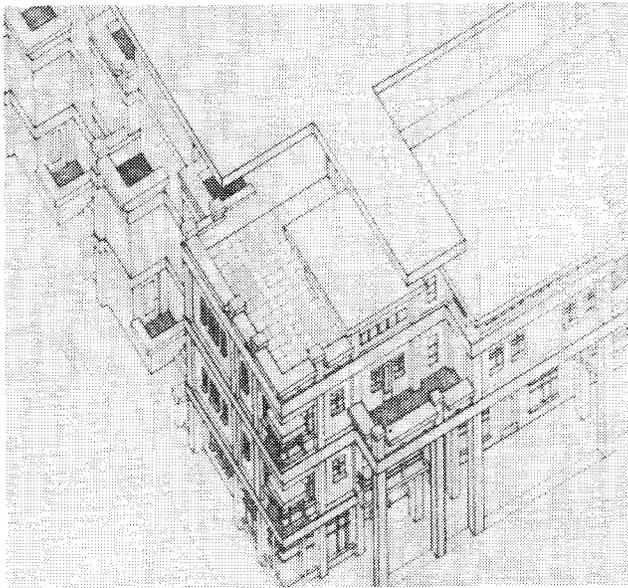
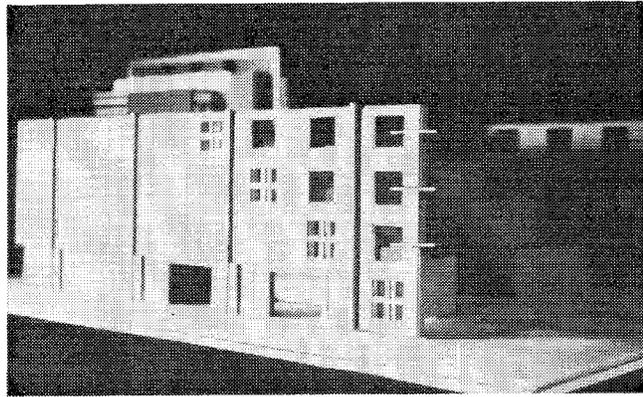
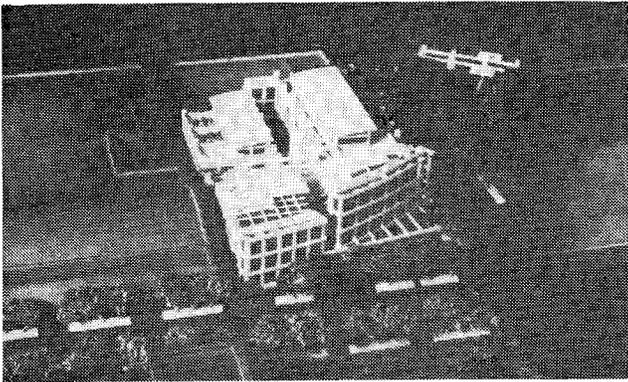
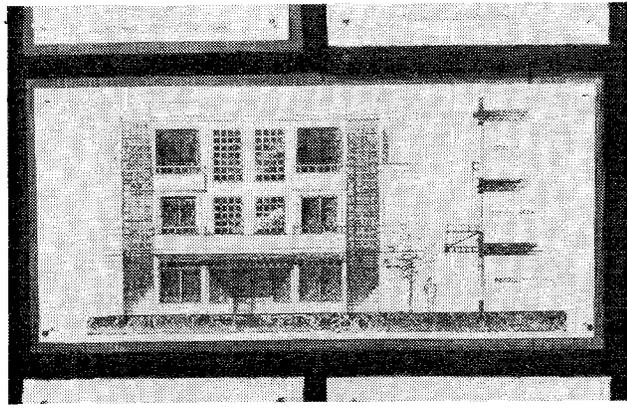
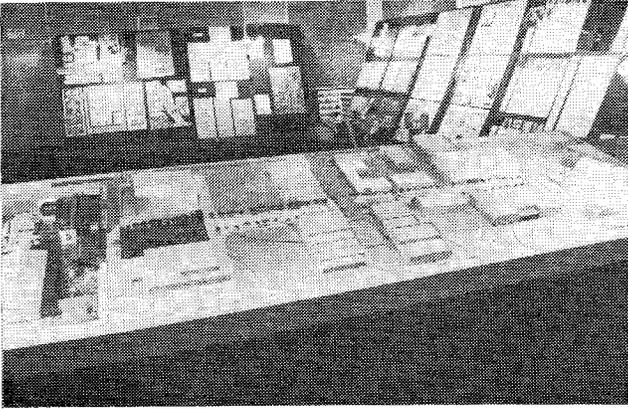
For the past three years my Junior Year design studios have utilized a mid-size city in southeastern Michigan as a case study to address issues shared by small cities and suburbs across America. Royal Oak, laid out in 1838 along a rail line extending from Detroit, has a population of 65,000 and is located three miles from Detroit's city limits. Like Detroit, Royal Oak was decimated by the post-war waves of suburban development, and in the 1970's was merely a shell of its former past. However, for

many reasons including a proactive city government, the creation of a Downtown Development Authority, a committed group of downtown merchants, the arrival of a community college campus, and the completion of a major interstate connection, it has been able to re-build its core to a point of moderate density and discernible pedestrian accessibility. Today it is known for its students, restaurants, eclectic boutiques, night clubs and coffee bars; and as a good place to live and do business. Its real estate values continue to rise and its retail occupancy rate is consistently high. Its success is remarkable, especially when compared to the ubiquitous suburban sprawl that surrounds it. At its best, Royal Oak provides an alternative to the decentralized, marginalized city and the fragmented, sanitized suburb. However, even though its central business district and surrounding neighborhoods work as a pedestrian oriented, diverse, and relatively dense downtown—it still has many "holes in its fabric."

Royal Oak's patterns, codes, housing mix, problems and concerns are ones that are shared by small cities across America. Though it has a definable downtown, much of the city is characterized by sprawl, and auto-dominated development patterns. Exclusive zoning ordinances make mixed-use difficult, and building codes enforce sprawl. Mass transportation is minimal, and significant resources directed toward maintaining the public transportation system of the private automobile. For example, Oakland county of which Royal Oak is a part, budgeted 83 million dollars for major roads in 1996. (Only 6 million was allocated for parks and recreation.) Bus system users are predominantly poor and are stigmatized by infrequent service and shoddy bus shelters. In Royal Oak almost 90% of all workers drive alone to work, 6.5% carpool, and .8% use public transportation. Of the 29,000 total housing units in Royal Oak, more than 20,000 are single-family detached, 70% owner-occupied. Reflecting national trends, the average household in Royal Oak is 2.5 persons, and 25% percent of its population is age 55 and over. In 1989 of over 28,000 households, a little less than one-half earned \$35,000 per annum. This has not changed appreciably over the past seven years, while the average prices of houses has continued to rise from its 1989 level of \$76,000. Clearly there is a need in Royal Oak, as there is across America, of alternatives to the single family house and its decentralized development patterns.

The studios have utilized a range of project types including two housing projects that explored mixed-use development and a range of housing types. The work has included public exhibitions—last spring we mounted an exhibition of work in a vacant retail space in the downtown. This past semester the city funded an urban design study of the CBD and its surrounding residential neighborhoods. The goal was for a more diverse, dense, pedestrian-accessible, downtown that is more closely linked with its surrounding residential neighborhoods—a city that is sustainable over the long period, and offers the sense of community and the types of opportunities and lifestyles that small cities have traditionally provided, and that Americans continue to value. The process included a community design charrette where downtown housing was identified as one of the most important issues. A number of public forums were held including a recent exhibition (fig. 1.) The project will conclude with a publication.

The projects, though they provided specific and detailed proposals, were predominantly educational in nature. Not only were they intended to educate students about the range of



issues confronting us, but included city officials, business owners, professionals and citizens as well. Though the city's business and residential community are committed to the future of the downtown area, they suffer from a lack of urban design literacy and the prejudices and misconceptions typical of the American public. Like ward-to-ward politics, a process like this is intense and time consuming, but only through educating a populace (that has lost confidence in design professionals, and are subject to the same set of misconceptions and fantasies that have driven our settlement patterns,) can broad-based, lasting change be effected.

The content and methodology of the housing projects

included precedent studies of a range of contemporary housing options. Students analyzed projects such as the mixed-use Tent City in Boston (Goody Clancy), the courtyard based LiMa Housing in Berlin (Hertzberger), GoHome shared housing prototypes by Ted Smith, and co-housing examples such as Tynggarden located near Copenhagen. The research background also included reference to traditional small-town and urban housing in America, such as the prototypical shop-house, and mixed use neighborhoods, including examples found in Royal Oak. One studio, team-taught with an urban designer and a landscape architect, analyzed the land-use, circulation, and landscape of the context, and focused on the creation of neighborhood district within the downtown area (fig. 2.) As part of the urban design study, housing and mixed-use prototypes were developed as part of a strategy of overlay codes for the downtown area.

Both of the projects were set on infill sites within the downtown area, and included ground floor retail/commercial spaces (figs. 3-4.) The programs included co-housing and single room occupancy units, a range of traditional unit types, and shared public / semi-public spaces including a common courtyard (fig. 5.) Their intention was to challenge the unreflective acceptance of the single family house and unmask some of its myths, promulgate the value of mixed-use, density and consolidation, and to explore a range of housing types needed to serve a broader spectrum of our society.

#### CONCLUSION

Working with, and even appreciating our present built environment is necessary. However, we should not be apologists for an ingrained and dysfunctional system. What architecture needs to re-capture is its social mission. If the health of the built

environment becomes perceived as essential to our health and well being (as food, exercise, and “lifestyles” have), then the stature and effectiveness of architects and urbanists will be immeasurably raised. For example, the American medical establishment, in the span of less than 100 years, has garnered a powerful status and effective position in society; predominantly due to the public’s value of health and longevity. Unfortunately, at present architects are more often perceived as arcane servants of corporations and the elites, and most of the built environment the purview of contractors, developers and home “handymen.” The results are all too apparent. (Automobiles remain one of the sole totally, professionally, designed environments we have—a facile integration of beauty and use.)

Amidst the plethora of arguments (in fact indicated by their conflicting range,) it is clear that we are seeing the end of an age—a time when the “old” becomes increasingly obsolete, dysfunctional and intolerable, and the “new” is yet to be recognized or established. Unsettled times like this have typically produced both reactionary and visionary thinking—as well as their share of despair, disorientation, entropy and destruction. We are repeating a predictable pattern when we cling to the old ways - or lapse into reveries for a radically changed future. A

more difficult but productive path is to assiduously study the present and recognize what “past” is already irrevocably lost and what “future” has already become established. We need to shift and adjust our professional orientation, re-establish a proactive social agenda, and establish a commitment to positive, substantial and sustainable change.

#### ENDNOTES

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