Beyond Shelter, Situations of Connectivity

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Abstract

Social housing is often viewed as a negative force contributing to the deterioration of the urban environment. This bias toward social housing has complicated the development of new design efforts in this field. As a result, public sector and private real estate policies have evolved to produce two strategies to deal with such projects; reduce and displace. Criticism about social housing claims that it is incapable of accommodating its context. It is often argued that the formal composition and the economy of social housing is at odds with its surroundings. Thus, various social housing projects are relocated, displacing residents from the city’s center. However, when social housing is addressed contextually rather than socially, new and appropriate models that mobilize the social market will evolve, allowing its residents to navigate the city while creating an opportunity for investment and revitalization.

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Introduction

Modernism in architecture, planning, and policy has always focused on universality, uniformity, and durability. Such values still manifest and underline the current design assumptions of public and social housing in the United States. Uniformity between space and place is not only an architectural preference but also a form of hiding public housing and its stigma. New housing programs and designs exhibit an emerging set of values, particularly focused on connection. However, few design distinctions are made between the building’s front and back, the private and public space, and the individual dwelling units. Therefore, once the design of social housing is allowed to transition away from “universality” as a design ambition, and toward *situations of connectivity* the stigma correlated with social housing will be diminished.

I. Historical Genealogy

The 20th Century Utopian visions, such as Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City, Le Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse City, and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City manifested a state of social and spatial urgency while confronting social and programmatic segregation in hopes of reclaiming lost public spaces. As a result, large-scale housing complexes were designed as mega blocks with the hopes of accommodating rising urban populations and improving living conditions of the poor. However, these vertical urban dwellings were constructed “away from the streets, without small internal courtyards and with the windows looking onto large parks”.

Although the intention was to change poor living conditions and promote healthier and cleaner lifestyles, the outcome was different because they were strongly centered on universality.
**Open/Closed**
Stage 1: 1930-40s: walk-up buildings with a semi-enclosed courtyard
Stage 2: 1950-60s: rows of walk-up buildings with open spaces in between
Stage 3: 1970-90s: rows of housing buildings with private yards or fully enclosed courtyards

**Universal/ Particular**
Stage 1: a notion of spatial and social cohesiveness is evident
Stage 2: a sense of universality was created using several layers of open spaces, indoor spaces, elevators, etc.
Stage 3: universality is rejected by limiting accessibility to dwellings

Providing various outdoor and indoor spaces, such as lobbies, elevators, and hallways is a symbolic and physical open call to *All*. Architects envisioned this as an extension beyond the site and reaching to an unrestricted community without barriers. In this pursuit of universalism, visible architectural distinctions between a dwelling and another were concealed, either in terms of the facade or the outdoor space treatment. Thus, in hopes of moving towards particularity, the outdoor space gradually changed into an enclosed space with private and shared spaces. The use of fences was also introduced to existing projects and new projects. Accessibility to spaces was changed to carefully calculated situations of connectivity, and the individual identity of dwellings was more expressed.

**Separated/ Connected**
The street and building relationship changed;
Stage 1: large entrance aligned with the street
Stage 2: closing and placing the building at an angle to the neighborhood streets
Stage 3: reintroducing the street and the building’s front

The change in the relationship between the street and building in stage 2 was an attempt to separate the site from its surroundings. This was a clear move by housing policy makers and planners to break away from neighboring “slums” and past lives. This also rejected slums-found habits like “standing around on street corners.” Separation was also achieved through visual and spatial differences, and the absence of in-between streets.

**Lessons**
1. Housing typologies are perceived as isolated objects in a stark field.
2. Repetition of size and function produced limited interaction and interest from pedestrians.

**Example**
Brownsville, Brooklyn, NY

This project illustrates the problematic and isolated nature of housing development when the towers have little engagement with the public life. When a building does not facilitate public amenities and is surrounded by fenced open spaces and parking lots, it serves little incentive for the public to go to the complex unless they need access to the building.
II. Contemporary Practices in Social Housing

Some contemporary practices are more focused on the physical, social and ideological arrangement of design which constitutes public and social housing in hopes of designing for a difference, connection, and change. Raul Mehrotra’s approach to this addresses the issue of “architecture of indulgence” with ignoring the issues of inequality, pluralism, and conservation. He argues that schools and architects are more focused on “indulgence” rather than learning to make a distinction among “patrons, clients and users” and their different needs. This distinction is crucial in such a case as social housing. There are no absolute solutions to transformation without transitioning first.

{Quinta Monroy Housing}
Iquique, Chile
2003-05

Elemental

The project responds to two conditions;
1. Scale: social housing must be determined based on the scale of the complex and not just the unit.
2. Market Restrictions: accepting restrictions that come with bureaucracy, cost and time frame.

The project surveyed and formulated the right question; instead of asking what constitutes a social housing quality, Elemental aimed to change the negative associating of working in social housing by separating the important from the accessory and create architecture from minimal resources. The project acknowledges the growing world’s population as an urban fact, but benefits from it. This fact is divided into two; the speed of urbanization and how it develops. The high speed of this process results in an inadequate response from governments and markets, which prevent people from coming to the city. As a result, this migration will develop informal urban slums.

The project challenges established universal design solutions by employing them as an entrepreneurial opportunity rather than an expense carried by the state. With houses that are partially built, adaptability is achieved through allowing the inhabitants move right away, and allow time to create a significant change. The Elemental model creates customization through gradual investment and equity. Elemental relies on site specificity while operating highly restrictive economic and political conditions. It manifests adaptive design solution without sacrificing individuality or access.

“The city has been a very efficient human invention to improve the quality of life for the population, particularly for its poorest citizens.”

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{Casa Familiar: Living Rooms at the Border and Senior Housing with Childcare}
San Ysidro, California
2001 - present

Estudio Teddy Cruz

With a collaborative, socio-political approach, the project mediates the bottom-up and top-down intervention between the local government, residents, and others. The project provides to a community of multi-families by proposing a unique plan to their needs and found conditions of the border town. The affordable housing aims to stimulate the neighborhood by infiltrating the homogeneous suburban area and inventing a system that resonates with the dense multi-use and illegal developments. The first step of this project was to identify legal zoning regulation and then respond to the appropriate expected density and income levels. The project accommodates for social, cultural and commercial functions, which institutionalizes the fabric of the immigrant neighborhood and facilitates a collaboration between the project, local government, and residents.

{Skid Row: Star Apartments}
Los Angeles, California
2004

Michael Maltzan

The project addressed the fact that the housing trust was interested in meeting its homeless community rather than confining it to a specific area of the city. In addition, rather than just proposing a building that contains this single community, the project provides an urban connection to the community to help it integrate into the city at large. It integrates the housing into the infrastructure of the city by creating a mono-culture that provides a more complex relationship between space, community, and a rising multi-culture. Similarly, the project provides various community functions and visual connections that not only try to build a community, but also minimize isolation of human beings. Skid Row works as a replacement for the typical permanent supportive housing found in the United States. It understands that the homeless community as a real asset to the city, and housing the homeless community can positively impact the city.

In all three projects, a rejection of universality is evident and replaced by a common dominator and clear examples of situations of connectivity. By focusing on individuality and adaptive design solutions, the Quinta Monroy Housing maintains a sense of accessibility and identity while operating in a highly restrictive economic and political conditions. While Teddy Cruz’s Casa Familiar expresses this connectivity clearly through designing for a border city and its surrounding government, Skid Row’s Star Apartment utilizes this idea by bringing the project to the heart of the city creating a complex relationship between space, community, and the culture.
In our social realm today, housing has evolved into more than a form of protection and safety. Because of homeownership, housing is becoming a highly valued symbol of security, status, wealth and well-being. Today, people transmit their identity onto their dwellings, and this individuality becomes a reinforcement of their self-worth. It is undeniable that society places a substantial weight on people to buy houses, but homeownership is not for everyone. A typically forgotten part of society, the homeless or working poor, has an urgent need for simply a decent shelter rather than homeownership pride. Beyond Shelter; Situations of Connectivity argues against universal solutions and for connective situations because ownership is out of reach for many. Social housing should be treated as an investment in its resident’s future. There might not be a straightforward financial gain, but a solution to urgent-life issues leading to a stable current life and eventually a stable future. This allows the residents to reconnect with each other at a micro-scale and the society at a macro-scale. As a result, this stage will help to build toward their future rather than focus on pride.

Houston ranks 26th among most affordable cities in the United States. In comparison to other major cities, Houston has traditionally benefited from providing lower costs of living, which became its major selling point. As result, new residents and business moved to the city.

However, this housing affordability is no longer a bargain as it has become relative and subjective to the individual and family budget. With 2.3 million people residing in the city, individuals tend to spend 46 percent of their household income on transportation and housing. With an expected increase of 3.5 million people by the year 2035, the Harris County of Houston has raised its assessments on property values, which has resulted in challenges to find affordable and independent housing in Houston.

According the Houston Housing Authority, public housing seems to serve only multi families and seniors in particular with a total number of 15 dwellings. Mixed income housing is found at a number of 10 serving to both. However, today, 30,000 people are seen by the city’s homelessness response system. It is also noted that the city spends more than 100 million dollars each year as part of this homelessness response system, varying from police calls and emergency hospital care to mental health service.

Today, organizations like New Hope Housing have been the core of providing stable lives and affordable permanent options to the working poor community in Houston. New Hope Housing also aims to serve Houston’s most vulnerable community, the homeless. However, with focusing on providing single room occupancy (SRO) units, it seems like there is a lack of social housing serving families, and in particular, single parents and children. On the Houston Housing Authority website, it is noted there is a high number of public housing and mixed income housing providing to singles, multi families and seniors, but not single parents. With a number of units ranging from 40 to 550 units, this raises the question of where single parents fit within the housing market.
IV. The Site

5401 Fannin St.
Houston, TX 77004

50,000 sqft

The site is owned by St. Paul Methodist Church. The site is surrounded by Fannin St. (Metro Rail Stop) & San Jacinto St.

The site is located in proximity to the Museum District of Houston, opposite of St. Paul’s Methodist Church, and in proximity to the Museum of Fine Arts (MFAH). It is currently occupied by the Emergency Aid Coalition Clothing Center (EAC), which works in conjunction to the church to provide to the homeless and working poor during the day through a lunch meal or clothing. EAC does not have specific regulations for serving. It is a “first come, first serve.”
Not only that the location is striking, but the fact that it is at the intersection of the many demographics found in Houston is important. Ironically, the EAC serves as an emergency aid institution to the homeless community, while neighboring one of the emerging housing complexes in the Museum District. Part of the EAC’s services is an after-school program to St. Paul’s church’s attendees. The church is visited by people from up to 80 zip codes in Houston. On a regular Sunday, the EAC parking lot would be fully occupied by visitors to the church and the MFAH. However, this does not necessarily mean an interaction between both sides will take place.

Studying the Racial Dot Map, it is noticed that the EAC parking is where all the different ethnic groups in Houston meet. Meanwhile, Fannin Street operates as a barrier between the White and Black ethnic groups. Looking at the urban identity of Houston, at a macro scale, one can almost forget how segregated the city can be. Yes, Houston might be the most diverse city in the United States, but it is still very segregated and home to a huge homeless community that is usually forgotten.

In the case of EAC parking lot, the generic ‘public’ bubble overcomes the faces of the homeless around that area. The EAC parking lot operates as a regular parking lot during the day, and on Sundays. During the night, it becomes home to a huge number of the homeless visiting the EAC during the day to acquire either food or clothes.

If one to diagram the Racial Dot Map, there are four major ‘public’ bubbles that overlap at the EAC parking lot. The four bubbles would be the White ethnic group representing the fourth ward, the Black ethnic group representing the third ward, the Hispanic ethnic group representing the second ward, and the smaller Asian ethnic group. All four would form the general public opinion read in Houston, Meanwhile, the homeless community will be forgotten, and living in the shadows of all. So, in the case of the EAC parking lot, the neighboring housing complex will eventually become one of the new emerging ‘hipster’ places to live in, while continuing to place its dumpsters within the EAC lot.

(1) Racial Dot Map: https://demographics.virginia.edu/DotMap/
Beyond Shelter: Situations of Connectivity focuses on the single parents’ demographic of the homeless community in Houston. Because of the site’s proximity to the public schools, public transportation, MFAH and the After School program provided by the church, single parents and children are the ideal clients to provide to.

This structure will serve as a transitional stop in these families’ lives while considering the following:

- EAC program continuing to serve to the community
- Children’s safety
- parking replacement

But, who does the Public actually belong to?
VI. Site Strategy & Program

Because the site’s parking lot’s importance, the project does not abandon the existing structure. Instead, it utilizes it to invite its surroundings into the site.

As a result, the program will divide into three categories, the parking garage, the EAC services, the new structure.
VI. Site Strategy & Program

The project tackles three issues; providing a temporary shelter, counseling and giving back to the community.

The program approaches these issues while relying on the diagram to the right. The 5 programs; retails, residential, health, outreach and training, are situated within 4 different quadrants, where an activated space takes place conceptually and physically in the project.

As a result, in the project, there are four situations, A, B, C and D, where the level of public & private accessibility varies.
VII. The Design

Public:
Lobby
EAC (work opportunity for the residents)
Retail: This would attract the church’s or the museum’s visitors and promote visiting the site and contributing to it.
Examples: Bakery, Coffeehouse, Maker Spaces

Housing:
Housing 61 units (Studtio & 1 BED): The shelter will work as a temporary shelter rather than a permanent shelter.

Counseling:
Community Counseling Services: Because of the way our day and age work, Internet and home addresses are essential for someone to navigate the economic network of our society. This center will provide a way for the community it is serving to get back into the society

Childcare
Recreation/ Culture center
Lecture Hall
Meeting rooms
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VIII. Conclusion

Social housing must abandon universality as an ambition and resort to particularity in the form of providing several situations of connectivity. *Why?* Because this is an architecture of difference, creating a new chapter of its residents life, providing the user a sense of belonging, and home. Locating this project in the heart of the city, focusing on single parents and their children who are the future is a form of investment. Addressing social housing contextually reveals a hidden ethic about connectivity that would not be addressed if we to treat the design universally.
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