

HOUSING



& THE GILDED MUZZLE

by Marie Rodriguez

Houston is an alien landscape. A city with streets that slump and crumble due to its tenuous subsurface. The continual creation of potholes makes for a daily commute that is, at best, choppy. It relentlessly hinders the car's wheels and makes for erratic progress. During an idle moment waiting at a traffic signal on Chartres and Commerce, I witnessed a heart-wrenching scene: the reality of homelessness writ large. Police crews were walking through the infamous homeless encampment that has found a home there for the past several years, evicting its residents. Safely behind my car window, the callousness of this city struck me hard. Houston has one of the lowest numbers of homeless residents within a major city and annual counts that show a constant decline in homelessness. Yet Houston is unable to provide shelter for all the homeless people it does have.

The dismantling of the homeless encampment sets off a broad set of questions about housing in Houston. Hiding behind these published averages that cover a vast area are many different housing crises, each difficult to name, in part, because our collective vocabulary, standards, and knowledge of history are not up to the challenge. The fact that affordable housing is addressed as a social problem couches its purpose as a societal burden. The root of the crisis is within the process of how we provide shelter with a disregard to the individual's specific needs. A government agency may often whitewash an extant community in order to satisfy an image of "housing" that is in fact societally predetermined. The problem is that this enhanced image may not and often does not nurture that existing community. This essay, then, is more about how to talk about housing, rather than about offering solutions.

Four microhousing plans, Nagakin, 150 Flat, New Hope Housing, and Lawn Road Flats. Redrawn by Marie Rodriguez.



The dips and bumps in Houston's roads, and our bursts of acceleration between them, has a parallel in Houston's population growth and development patterns. It is a characteristic of a business-driven metropolis, manifesting a "rush-business-wide-openness" appearance noted by John Milsap as early as 1910. It is a city that bursts with vim and vigor. But there is a latent question: how can such a wealthy city not shelter it's less fortunate in a dignified way? The mayor believes that Houston can overcome its status as one of the most inequitable cities in the US and has initiated different strategies to tackle this socio-economic gap with signature efforts focused on five target "Complete Communities"—but the vision remains vague.

In Houston, we need innovation not only to provide shelter for homeless people, but also innovation across every housing type—and especially more variety in types. The neglect of creativity in housing structures has been fueled by building the same models, on repeat. Housing developments in Houston act as a gilded muzzle that restrains design evolution and feigns progress with a thin coat of luxury and ornamentation. Their siting isolates residents from neighbors. Even as Houston becomes more dense in terms of built structures, the new housing projects do not coalesce into a larger whole. Their spatial program, building mass, and landscape fail to communicate a language that can engage the potential social body. We need a revolution not only in housing strategies for the homeless and people of all incomes but a revolution that fosters social relationships and communities.

At present the latest housing idea for the homeless is temporary "low-level shelters" — an important acknowledgment of the difficult truth that not every homeless person will accept conventional types of housing. When first proposed in early 2017, the siting for these staffed shelters was to be under designated highway overpasses. In December 2017, the METRO board approved a plan for a shelter inside a relatively isolated METRO bus facility at McKee Street just north of Buffalo Bayou. While these ideas are rapid responses to a crisis, they disregard the potential to forge more poetic and humane solutions. How can the design community work with city officials and its departments to probe deeper and achieve a truly creative proposition? Where is the "can-do" spirit of Houston that local politicians proclaim? How can we rethink housing so everyone has a home and we don't just shuffle bodies around?

Domestic Examples

Early Small-Scale Housing

Houston has a dual personality of entrepreneurship and chicanery. At the dawn of Houston's development, the idea of shelter was constructed and designed with raw utility. A large swath of domestic houses following the founding of Houston would service the multiple trades that worked along bayous and railroads. These houses served as inns, hotels, lodging, and boarding houses. They provided shelter to a bustling cast of lodgers such as longshoremen, speculators, immigrants, migrants, etc. The spatial program in these boarding houses were elastic, ductile structures that easily converted rooms or salons from one to two and even three rental spaces, propelled by the volatile surge in demand for shelter. This response to the highs and lows of lodging needs had a democratizing effect on the development of housing in Houston. The city's unsustainable speed of growth, along with unexpected disasters, would strip away the need for comfort and community building within domestic house designs for the working class. During World War II, various multi-family residences were constructed to meet wartime demands when blue-collar workers were filling positions at nearby industrial plants, channel docks, railyards and construction sites.

In the few intact sections of Houston's historic wards—especially the Sixth Ward—you can still find examples of modest but dignified housing such as row houses, bungalows, and cottages that were built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The "discrete duplexes" that Margaret Culbertson documented for *Cite 95* and their close cousin, the fourplex, have provided affordable housing that is often seamlessly integrated into the surrounding context, providing the opportunity for a mixture of classes within neighborhoods like Montrose, Eastwood, Houston Heights, and even Southampton. As documented by the Kinder Institute, this important housing type is no longer being built in large numbers and the existing stock is quickly yielding to demolition or conversion to expensive single-family houses. The loss of these nimble housing types is dramatically changing the dynamic pattern of these historic neighborhoods.

Rice Building Workshop (recently renamed Rice Construct) developed successful iterations of row houses in partnership with Project Row Houses. The architect Brett Zamore followed a similar line in his design logic that took a local house form and distilled

it into an affordable product. He carefully reworked vernaculars of our region into an efficient, affordable, and charming house type that he packaged as the ZFab housing unit. These important efforts, even as they are being scaled up, represent a very small fraction of the innovation in new housing types.

Multi-family Housing

Houston has a few publicly-owned housing projects, such as Allen Parkway Village and Irvington Village, but far less than major cities that came of age in the early twentieth century. Houston relies on federal housing vouchers and poorly aging 1970s-era garden apartments, which serve as privately-owned de facto public housing. The Houston Housing Authority (HHA) is collaborating with non-profit groups and doing good work with the best resources available but in the face of natural disasters and federal down funding the limits of housing vouchers and few funding options comes into sharp focus. The destruction brought about by Hurricane Harvey served to intensify a looming crisis where many of the worst hit structures were the very same affordable multi-family apartments. Large numbers of old and outdated structures are in desperate need of repair and upgrades. Such repairs are likely the most cost-efficient way to preserve affordability that will help maintain established communities.

In the past five years, the "Texas Donut" has been repeated across the region so much, that it is easy to lose your sense of place. Am I in Midtown or the Heights or EaDo or the Energy Corridor? These buildings fill entire blocks and wrap around hidden parking garages. Courtyards and pools provide some fresh air to units but on the whole these apartment buildings have little indoor-outdoor relationship. You enter by car, navigate sterile halls, and settle into units with relatively few windows. Sadly, the overall effect of this type of density stifles community development. Once wide open and bucolic, the now well-worn landscape of Houston has layer upon layer of built structures that jostle and huddle at different scales, styles, and material. This pastiche environment of deficient housing demands an inoculation of local ingenuity towards policy, construction, design and planning.

After surviving an epic storm such as Harvey, Houston should develop a fuller repertoire of housing strategies, invest in new buildings and celebrate its communities but more importantly, explore new building types.



View from Tout Suite.
Photo by Tom Flaherty.



The Big Picture

Houston is currently experiencing a housing crisis where market rates for rental units that used to meet standards of affordability have ended. When the combined cost of housing and transportation are considered along with HUD Secretary Ben Carson's rental proposal, the big picture is more troubling. The options for those living below the poverty line are scarce especially with the potential spike of tripling their current rental rates if HUD's proposal is approved. In fact, only 18 out of 100 families that apply are offered subsidized affordable housing. We need a heuristic approach to housing that can recapture an organic *Gemeinschaft* (informal community interactions) among its residents despite its constructed environments. New housing projects should revisit *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) design concepts that encourage a relationship and access to outdoor landscapes, a mix of incomes and housing types to create communal societies. For this concept to succeed there must be an effort to understand the process of how to house an individual. This involves searching for the root cause of their hardship, what can or would provide happiness and basic comfort. The mission for affordable housing agencies should be to uncover the personal context of the prospective resident. Agencies should come to understand the personal context of the individual in need by learning about their inner environment—a complete world which consists of their state of mind, gender, values, beliefs, cultural history—in other words that which comprises their *Gemeinschaft*. But in order to effectively place people in a successful housing environment also requires an awareness of what psychologists call the relational context of a person. This is where their personal context thrives in situ. The relational context emerges from the characteristics, qualities and supportive elements of the individual's sense of place. The model housing environment that agencies should explore is in the dynamic interactions found within the relational context of a family or tenant. Examples of contextual elements would include friendships, a neighborhood park, community center, church, etc. There is a new wave of thinking among some private institutions like Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) and its “Doubling Down” plan. They actively adopt an approach that offers a supportive housing model that facilitates tenant access to health care and social resources. This alignment of public/private initiatives with a commitment to the conservation of a family or individual's relational context can reveal and reverse the root causes of homelessness and poverty. CSH research studies indicate that 80% of chronically homeless tenants are still living in supportive housing after a year.

Can there be a reform in Houston's housing codes and markets that can incentivize developers to rehabilitate existing small-scale housing types of courtyard apartments, garage apartments (also known as ADU), duplex, triplex, and fourplexes with courtyard green spaces that effectively encourage a relational community? How do we change the ground rules so that developers do not continue to invest in a saturated upmarket and instead redirect their efforts to foster social communities in an indelible way? How do we promote more partnerships between corporate entities and federal groups? The efforts of the HHA and Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCV) to assess existing social interactions and reactions

between homeless residents in encampments is a process that attempts to find the best housing solution for each individual. Mark Thiele, vice president of HHA's HCV program affirms that their successful collaboration with local service agencies have worked for the past six years, since 2012, to really drive down homeless numbers in Houston. The best collaboration in Houston at the moment is between SEARCH and New Hope Housing. It's successful program connects an individual or family with the best housing type and supportive services. A sense of place and comfort is provided in the NHH facilities with counseling, accountability, job placement and community support to enable a successful transition for families or individuals into permanent housing. To recapture a critical element of the individual's relational context is key in this transition. The relational context is the psychological space that you inform and will, in turn, inform you as you engage with it and your personal context. This is where differing personal contexts mix, diverse people coalesce and try to find an equilibrium—a sense of place—a relational context. Here is the creation of the *Gesellschaft* (relational society) awareness, a mutual community that has its communal society as a model of conscious support.

Our city needs to look at its distinct characteristics of cultural diversity in order to identify, express, and promulgate its heritage. Houston architects need to create social sculptures and create affordable housing that nurtures without dismantling the extant community. Design solutions that engage the relational art of a neighborhood and builds a social architecture that benefits its residents coterie. There is no need for another building dressed with a culture-appropriated kitsch detail or another cost-effective design that fails to enhance but rather acts as a crafted cage that isolates. How do we appeal to the highest ideals of Houstonians and overcome the NIMBYism that has stopped new affordable developments in so-called high-opportunity areas?

Signs of Hope

There is positive progress that can be found in the city with groups such as GO Neighborhoods, Avenue CDC, and LISC. They mobilize communities by listening to them and encouraging their highest aspirations. Through “Quality of Life Agreements,” communities develop support for cohesive approaches to housing development including financial literacy, preservation/repair of existing housing stock, and recommendations for multi-family housing sites where it makes the most sense. In well-organized communities like these, the City of Houston leveraged disaster recovery money after Hurricane Ike with private investment to build transit-oriented developments with mixes of affordable and market-rate housing. Hurricane Harvey disaster recovery funding after Harvey could extend and magnify those efforts. The Way Home program has met with success as well. A partnership between the city, non-profit foundations, and institutions that serve the homeless has sought to reduce homelessness through coordinated action. Single-Resident Occupancy (SRO) housing built by New Hope Housing have been integral to this reduction, with their high design standards. Former Mayor Parker and Mayor Turner have made credible claims that homelessness among veterans has been nearly eliminated.

The struggle to find a home, safety, and rest is a mutual concern for citizens of all income levels. Yet the success of each individual's search for shelter is hindered or assisted by their relational context, that of a bank, family support, ethnicity, cultural status, addiction, or mental health. It is the relationship between the individual and their context that situates affordable housing as the potential bulwark. This last issue is one of the major causes of homelessness, and the most ignored. Is the person with a mental illness not only sheltered but at home? Can they too have a sense of place infused with art and design? Mental illness is often not diagnosed or treated within impoverished communities. As their mental health escalates, they are criminalized and as jails become their semi-permanent shelter, their situation cascades into long-term homelessness.

One sign of hope is the regular acknowledgement that the Harris County Jail is our largest mental health hospital. The Harris County Sheriff's Office is showing more empathy towards the homeless community after several failed attempts at strict enforcement. A turn in policy has now created an opportunity for a real engagement with the crux of homelessness. The Homeless Outreach team is aware of the prevalence of mental illness within these communities and has included transportation to and from the proper health facilities and resources that can offer them the help they need to improve their living conditions.

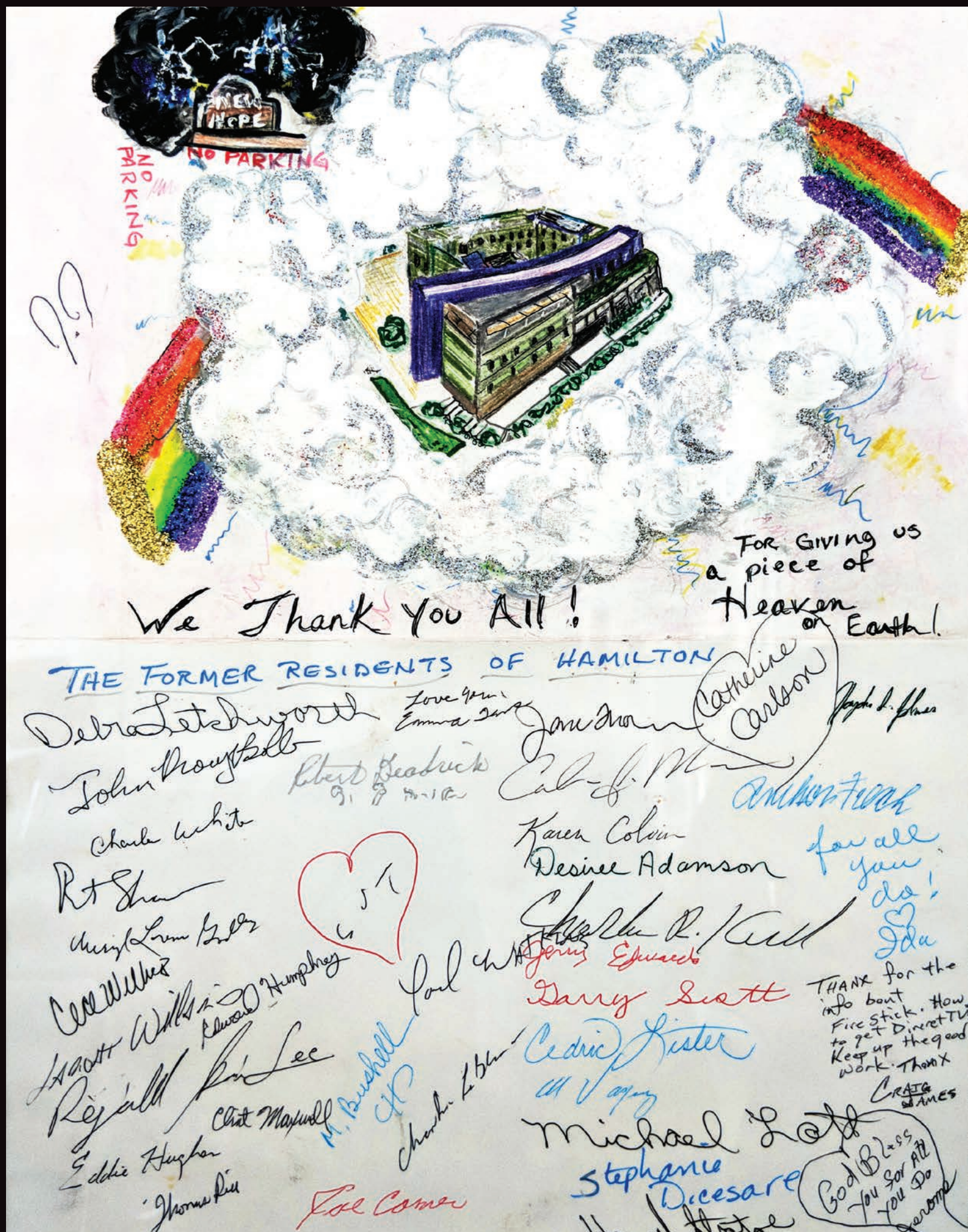
The International Examples

Early Models of Social Housing

Even with these signs of hope, we lack the vocabulary in Houston, and elsewhere in the United States, to articulate what Complete Communities could look like. Early models of social housing that span from 1900-1953 such as Boundary Estates, Betondorp, Waldsiedlung Onkel Toms Hütte, Splanemann-Siedlung, Isokon Building and Unité d'habitation showcase a variety of creative residential designs and innovative space planning prototypes with certain design aspects now regarded as standards in successful and efficient housing developments. The archetypal forms of social housing are those that successfully sustain and enhance the original intent to house low-income citizens. To measure how successful a housing design works, the key factors have to address how effectively it offers comfort, safety, and a community.

Among the first housing example to provide these qualities is the Fuggerei settlement of Germany, known as the earliest continuously-operating example of social housing. It is a housing design that developed from dual interests within disparate philosophies. At the time that this housing settlement was conceived, in 1516, Martin Luther's recent critique of the Catholic church and its sale of indulgences would foment a social change in the relationship between the wealthy and the church. The impoverished citizens of Germany raised an uproar over the concentrated monetary wealth of successful merchants. The affluent were perceived to be too powerful and not fulfilling God's will, whereas the poor were relegated to damnation due to class condition alone. Luther's powerful act sparked a quick and effective re-examination and crafty solution from one of Germany's prosperous merchants.

Jakob Fugger, a wealthy merchant with



Resident's drawing of New Hope Housing Harrisburg. "Heaven on Earth." Courtesy Stephanie Dicesare.

close ties to the Roman Catholic Church, quickly engineered a clever solution that satisfied his personal interests twofold. First, the maintenance and upkeep of his ever-expanding estate required more employees which brought about the need for more housing. Second, he needed another form of absolution from the church, instead of paying off his indulgences directly to the church he provided housing under conditions that the residents say three prayers for the Fugger family. This community of social housing for the citizens of Augsburg rises a modest two stories and is arranged in clean, long rows. The intimate scale of the houses and streets creates an outdoor space that is welcoming and useful for impromptu encounters with other residents. Over time, the Fuggerei settlement has adapted its buildings and built new ones in response to the demands of its community. Mr. Fugger's adept enactment of a social housing settlement initially housed his employees, but it also endured and constructed a satisfying appearance of benevolence for the Fugger family and was successful, despite its veiled intention.

European cities at the dawn of the industrial revolution had a labor movement with a housing shortage. During this time, there was a rigid class structure that directly informed the deplorable housing conditions of the working class. This point of crisis was remedied in small part through the housing design experiments of collective living models. Early forms of *Einküchenhaus* (central kitchen houses) explored in Europe and in Chicago at Hull House would have communal spaces with a shared kitchen, bathrooms, dining, laundry facilities and community spaces. This was the beginnings of a fount of creative housing solutions within dense urban city centers that can still be seen today in various evolutionary forms.

Micro Units, Macro Community

A continuous retooling of space to bring an economy of use is a specialty of nano flat and micro unit designs such as bedsits, geki-sema, Nakagin Capsule Tower, Carmel Place, and The Collective Old Oak. These experiments in economy of space are better suited for cities with extreme density. These Lilliputian units are fitted to address a targeted audience and are often built to respond to the immediate pace and method of construction found in its context.

Houston is just starting to explore the micro or nano concept with its first example to be built East of downtown. The concept borrows from the typical mixed-use apartment tower model and further partitions its inner volume to create units that are at best an afterthought of Taylorism ideology. After the savage floods of Harvey such pursuits of efficiency are necessary to provide affordable housing quickly. Yet, it is at this time of urgent need when we should recall past housing approaches such as the Existenzminimum philosophy that fueled the Neues Bauen designs for Germany's affordable housing. Houston has yet to formulate its own micro housing prototype or philosophy. A rethinking of the housing built form that can jockey attributes of a method or materiality that echoes its context in the same way that the OPods dwelling units by James Law Cybertecture do in Hong Kong. They creatively reuse a construction product that is refashioned as an affordable housing prototype that can be installed within a densely populated environment.

Conclusion

To understand why the city resists a conscious design we must understand the process to find the barriers. In a critical step, the architect audits and collaborates with the community, developer, and city leadership in an attempt to create a stimulating design that uncovers the vitality of the neighborhood. The architect pursues creative solutions that craft, protect, and encourage identity, health, and comfort. This is the ideal, but the ground conditions typically favor whatever is most expedient and profitable in the short-term. We have yet to see if the Complete Communities initiatives will prove effective or become another braided tether to muffle complaints. With relatively little advocacy and innovation coming from the design community itself, and an erosion of the tenuous and Byzantine financing of affordable housing at the federal level, it is hard to keep expectations high.

We will continue to see homeless encampments under highways and along sidewalks throughout the city center. A scene of scattered and aimless bodies persist as they huddle against the base of several downtown Houston skyscrapers. This jarring image further exhibits their resistance to housing assistance. What can Houston do beyond moving our homeless neighbors into a public holding pen that will offer security, basic hygiene facilities and social services? One form of housing Houston should pay attention to can be seen at Dignity Village in Oregon. This tent encampment that conceived its own rules, funding, and model of operation, was influenced by the ideals and needs of its homeless residents. It emerged from a grassroots effort to carve an existence with a democratic system of design and governance. This settlement pattern was met with resistance, at the beginning, by the city and neighboring residents of Portland. In the end, a mutually-agreed public location and lease arrangements were established to become an exemplary alternate dwelling to city shelters. Houston is equipped to host a tent city with its ample vacant lots, a willing mayor who's exploring the idea of "low-level shelters," and a burgeoning tent community. Here is the opportunity, the reckoning of transforming the quality of life, for a group that needs it the most. This is where a potential creative place-solution can develop with innovation and empathy. Academic institutions and the construction industry can form placemaking workshop partnerships that collaborate with the homeless to provide effective quick-build structures. Several facile models worth adapting already exist which include Jean Prouve's early demountable shacks to today's tiny houses. Artistic production allows for acts of self-expression that can address a panoply of social and psychological issues within the homeless population. Space-specific art practice can synthesize identity, find the character and meaning in a place: I am homeless, but I can live here with dignity, with others who are like me, in this place that is our own. When place enters the language of expression, a relational context established, a meaningful connection takes place and the initial step out of homelessness can be achieved. This is what we have to address and what carefully deployed design solutions can make manifest: a sense of belonging, of contextual community, of home. The way forward is for us to remove the gilded muzzle that stops us in our tracks, that prevents innovation. The language of art and culture-

making allows us to begin experimenting and discovering new forms and emergent building types. But if we experiment and fail, we should not give up. We should embrace and learn from our failures, rise up and continue to try - the way Houston has done since its founding.

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