

# Housing as a Social Enterprise: The Ambivalent Role of Design Competitions

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Since founding the firm of Pyatok Associates in 1985, Michael Pyatok has entered seven design competitions, winning first place in five and finishing second in another. Five of these were related to multifamily housing. This article examines these housing competitions in light of an office practice specializing in affordable housing and frames the discussion within the broader context of the national political economy. It evaluates the utility of housing competitions for generating design innovations and offers a critique to make them more relevant both to community needs and to the exigencies of professional practice.

## The Housing Crisis and Design Competitions

GIVEN HOW UNSUCCESSFUL MOST NATIONS ARE in providing housing, a discussion of the value of housing design competitions seems, at first, to diminish the severity of the problem. Quality design, simply stated, does not come cheaply. For technical, economic, and political reasons, Third World countries cannot muster the resources to tackle the task adequately. First World nations have the means but lack the conviction to channel their resources equitably. Under such conditions, rationalized as fiscal restraint in the face of limited resources or immutable market forces, low- and moderate-income housing becomes a minimalist production problem that must always do more with less.

The housing problem cannot be addressed without first recognizing that its causes and proposed solutions are the by-products of deeply rooted inequalities of class, race, and gender. Some nations are willing to address these issues forthrightly while others, like our own, try to discount the importance of these underlying inequities. Design professionals, for the most part, can be hired only by the wealthiest segment of U.S. society. Only through governmental, institutional, or corporate clients do the talents of

architects trickle down to the rest of the population, after passing through the filter of the managerial class that staffs these institutions at important decision-making levels. It is no wonder, then, that our language and conceptual categories tend to reinforce the status quo. In this mindset, affordable housing is a mundane necessity for the lower classes and the domain of unimaginative, functionalist technicians, and Architecture is a privilege, and its design is a sport that belongs to the rich.

The top 20 percent of Americans now own 80 percent of the nation's wealth.<sup>1</sup> They obviously have no housing problem, but they receive 56 percent of the benefits from the nation's largest government-assisted housing program: \$50 billion per year in homeowners' tax deductions for mortgage interest and real estate taxes.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the bottom 60 percent of Americans own less than 8 percent of the nation's wealth, and it is these individuals and families who have a housing problem. Some have none at all, others are poorly housed. Many are paying such high prices for it that they must sacrifice other necessities of life. Yet the bottom 40 percent of Americans must compete for just \$18 billion (or 20 percent) of all federal housing subsidies.<sup>3</sup>

Despite pressure from civic-minded groups, neighborhood-based organizations, muckraking journalists, and social reformers, government response to the housing needs of low-income people remains woefully inadequate. It took the impact of the Great Depression and the temporarily dispossessed white middle class to impel direct federal intervention in housing construction programs. Even before the drastic reduction in federal housing outlays by the Reagan and Bush administrations, urban housing programs were underfunded relative to homeowner tax breaks: homeowner tax deductions for the single year of 1981 were greater than the cumulative federal outlay for all direct housing

subsidies from the adoption of the Public Housing Act of 1937 through 1981!<sup>4</sup>

A small presence among the wide array of housing reform efforts has been design competitions. They seem to rise and decline depending on the openness and severity of class schisms. Floods of immigrants, crowded into exploitative tenements to the extent that the health, safety, and security of the middle and upper classes were threatened, led to model tenement design competitions in the late nineteenth century (with dubious results).<sup>5</sup> For the last fifteen years, we have seen the middle class shrink, with more and more households dropping into the bottom 25 percent of income earners. From 1977 to 1988, average family income declined for 80 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup> As the glow fades from the post-World War II prosperity for the middle class, the insecurity of their housing tenure has brought renewed attention to the issue of affordable housing. Funding organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) have begun to consider housing for the middle and lower classes to be a proper concern for design professionals equal to other artistic endeavors. During this period of stress for the middle class, the terms *architecture* and *housing* are more frequently seen linked in the architectural press.

But is the idea of affordable housing design competitions, however well intentioned, flawed at the outset because such competitions are creatures of a class system? Hierarchical social systems tend to nurture the belief that those from higher classes know best what is needed by lower classes. These systems create educated classes who are somewhat detached from the daily struggles of the disadvantaged; they reside in a world that invents and debates ideas above the fray with little hands-on experience in surviving on modest means. Idealist epistemologies seem like laws of nature to these upper echelons.

Devising interventions on paper, without benefit of direct experience with the conditions to be changed, renders the operation ineffective.

Design competitions are creatures of that hierarchical, idealist world view. They are based on the belief that professionals, when detached from direct involvement with those served by design, will be freed to invent more workable alternatives for the served. The housing problem, then, is defined as a technical or artistic issue. This stands in opposition to those who subscribe to realist epistemologies that assert that ideas for workable change can only be evolved through extensive involvement in the realities to be changed, preferably by the people who are directly affected. In this view, successful housing design must involve the inhabitants themselves from the outset of the design process. The act of dwelling is an integral part of daily existence, involving the continuous management and modification of the initial construction. The day-to-day emotional and physical efforts invested in the home as a life process are trivialized and distorted if they are undertaken solely or primarily to increase the resale market value of the house. The user-based model conceptualizes housing as an untidy social, economic, and political process, rather than a photogenic commodity for sale.

Although designers may be flattered by the implicit elitism of competitions, they are subject to exploitation by that same class system, which uses them for good ideas on the cheap. The "competition" seems to be an institutional phenomenon unique to the design disciplines. It is hard to imagine an attorney donating 1000 hours of work (typical time for a four-board architectural competition) competing with other lawyers to invent new concepts in corporate law with a one-in-hundreds chance that he or she might be paid a token award for only 15 percent of those hours. But this is precisely what happens when architects enter design competitions.

In an earlier time, when the profession was populated by members of a wealthier class, it could engage in such exercises with little economic consequence. Today, however, despite a scarcity of work and a surplus of architects, state-supported schools are graduating more architects from the less economically stable middle and working classes. Most are bred on a version of architectural history as a sequential string of inspirational heroes. It is no wonder that they are lured into working hundreds, if not thousands, of hours for no pay in almost lottery-like conditions in which the outcome is decided by the somewhat whimsical dynamic that results when a handful of select individuals, the jury, is given the power to decide.

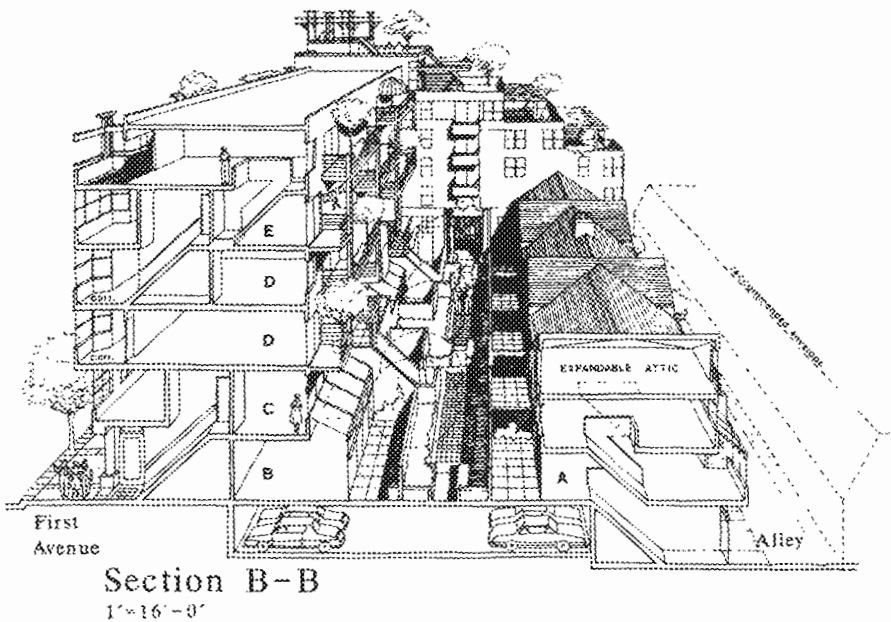
As an architect whose practice attempts to remain connected to the realities of the less advantaged sector of our society, who seeks their direct participation in community planning and housing design, why should I enter housing design competitions, which, by definition, require detachment from those served as well as exploitation of those of us who are trying to serve?

The practical benefits are not evident. While exhibition and publication of competition entries may bring some recognition and exposure among design peers, they rarely lead to commissions. The competitions themselves are often well organized, but the sponsors are generally not prepared to implement the winning solutions. Although my firm has won four housing competitions, only one of the schemes has moved ahead to construction.<sup>7</sup> As a winning firm in the Seattle Four-in-One Competition, we were introduced to local developers through the efforts of an architect on the city staff that organized the competition. This resulted in commissions with two nonprofit developers and a request by a for-profit development corporation to be its architect for an invited competition in Bellevue, Washington. This latter competition, which we also won, is the

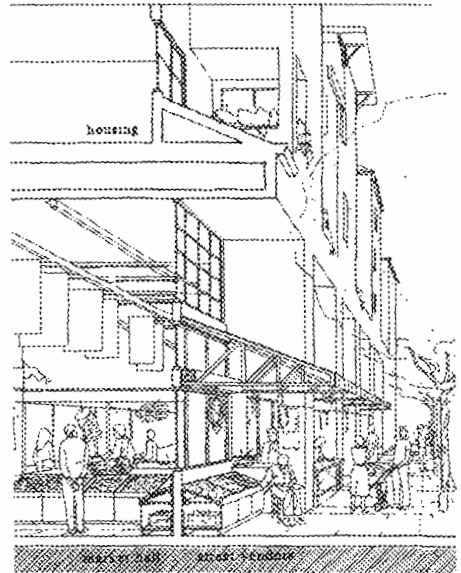
only competition success to move forward into construction. Ultimately, however, these opportunities are infrequent, the rationale for entering a housing competition not self-promotion, but self-education advocacy for the cause of affordable housing. Competitions offer a chance to reflect on experiences with our most idealistic projects about the future of the human community. Housing competitions can play an important role in advocating the cause of those in need and have a right to well-designed, affordable housing. In this respect, a competition is most effective if the project gets built or if the ideas generated get wide distribution. For my office, at least, the investigation is a learning experience that feeds back into our everyday practice.

It is difficult to gauge whether real-world experience in real practice brings more to competitions or if competitions return to real practice. It is easier for us to enter a competition than it is to translate those ideas into real practice. Many of the innovations suggested in housing competitions require significant alterations to existing codes, regulations or to changes in belief systems about people and places held by developers, marketing agents, property managers, government employees, financial institutions, neighbors, and even residents. On the other hand, we bring a wealth of real-world experience to competitions, and our solutions often demonstrate this by our program, site planning, unit design, contextual fit, and understanding of building technology. Solutions have the ring of plausibility.

As practitioners, however, we are fully aware of the point at which we surrender to the realities in competitions. We sometimes find the status quo either difficult to ignore or intimidating because of its apparent intelligence that we accept it as a given. This makes our proposals both more sophisticated yet seemingly more conventional.



1. Seattle Four-in-One Competition: Carriage houses on alley share residential court with street-front apartments. Garages on alley, shops on street front, and second-floor offices are directly linked to dwelling units, offering live/work options.



2. San Antonio Commons, Oakland, California: Residential units above open shared market hall reduce business overhead to individual vendors. Street vendor stalls with even lower overhead costs line the front of the market.

glance, than what younger, less experienced designers may submit.

### Unit Program and Site Planning

Our nonprofit clients come to us these days with inventive life-style adjustments to the severity of the economic crisis. Few now see housing as merely the provision of shelter; most recognize the importance of including social services such as child care and adult education. The housing problem is now understood to be the result of inadequate employment opportunities, exacerbated by the lack of child-care facilities and limited job skills. We bring this real-world awareness to our competition solutions, as in the Seattle competition in which we proposed mixed use live/work opportunities for office or work-shop applications (Figure 1).

We are presently designing a mixed-

use, low-income, interracial development for an Asian nonprofit corporation, in joint venture with another nonprofit organization that serves primarily the African- and Latino-American communities. The ground floor of this 92-unit development on a mixed-use street in East Oakland, California, will be a large, open market hall shared by many small vendors (Figure 2). Both the New York City Infill Housing Competition for Harlem and the Downtown Seattle competitions allowed us to think about these combinations before we implemented them in our practice (Figures 3 to 5).<sup>8</sup> At times, these concepts are a little worrisome to some of our nonprofit clients and their property management companies. They fear the nasty entanglements of squabbling tenants and subtenants as well as the difficulties of monitoring the types of home-based businesses to ensure that they are legal and not dangerous to other residents.

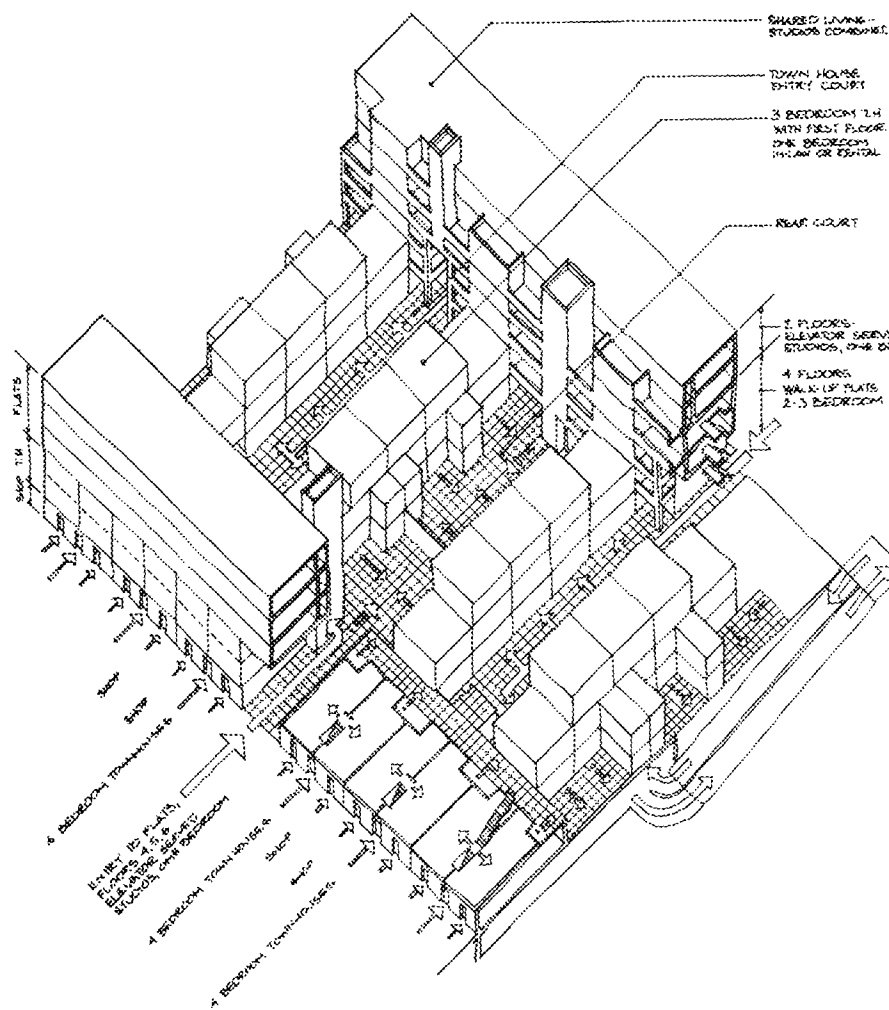
The idea of the accessory or in-law unit to supplement family income came, on the other hand, from our practice. We developed it with a neighborhood group of twenty African-American women in West Oakland for an affordable, infill home-ownership project (Figure 6) immediately before entering the New York City Infill Housing competition. Now we are always looking for opportunities to plan our flats and townhouses with at least one bedroom and its bath somewhat isolated from the rest of the family unit and as close as possible to the front entry and kitchen. Such a room can be sublet to a relative, student, or unrelated adult to draw additional income for the family. We included this thinking in our successful solutions to the Novato, Harlem, and Seattle competitions (Figures 7 and 8).<sup>9</sup>

All of our competition entries have very carefully designed unit plans. We esti-

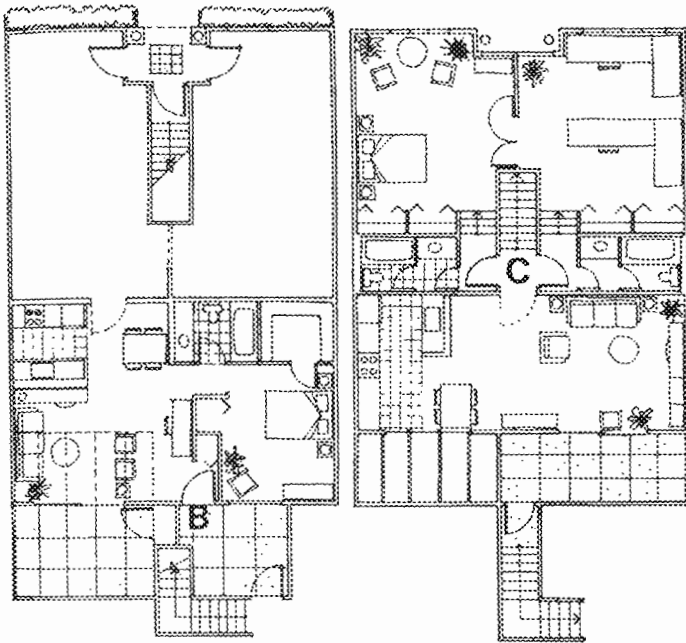
mate that 50 percent of the design time in any of our competitions, as well as in our real projects, is devoted to this scale of the problem. The competition as an exercise gives us additional experience in the unique problems of designing small units. This experiential reservoir accelerates unit planning in our real projects. It can never be stressed enough that the big ideas that shape site plans are useless without integrating into them very carefully planned dwelling units and vice versa.

In the inner city, security is a concern of utmost priority to tenants, nonprofit housing owners, and property managers. All of our real-life site planning in the inner city is driven by this priority and it also affects all of our inner city competition solutions. We do not see it as having a negative prison-like effect on the organization of site plans. On the contrary, it has made us rethink the main source of physical security: social ties and the formation of intimate networks of neighbors. The organization of public outdoor space and the ability of people to territorialize it in small groups is the key to establishing this kind of long-term built-in security.

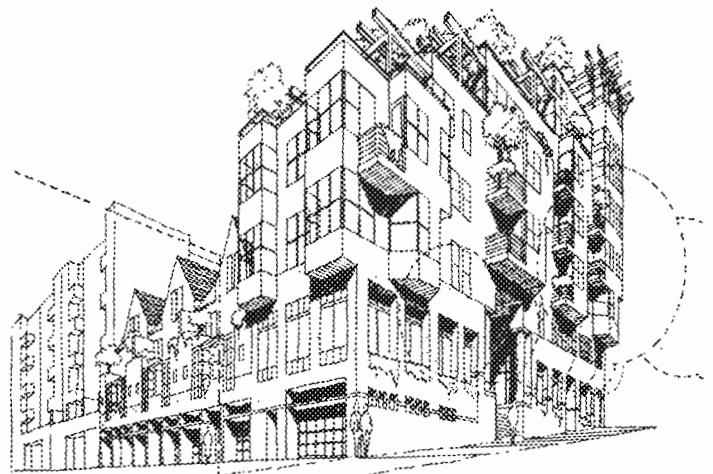
The Harlem courtyard schemes combine no more than thirty to forty families per shared entry and courtyard as did our Seattle proposals (Figure 9). This we learned in practice from our inner-city projects, and we are using it again for the ninety-unit project in East Oakland. This project creates three courts, each serving about thirty families (Figure 10). Contrary to housing site planning of the last three or four decades, we believe that nothing is really gained in a social sense, other than sheer trouble, by connecting rear yard areas for shared use beyond thirty families. If people need to visit friends living in another cluster of thirty families, they can walk out their front door and down the public street to their neighbor's front door and ring the bell. This adds life to the streets and limits less supervised roaming through backyard courts.



3 New York City Infill Competition. Storefront shops below townhomes provide space for neighborhood merchants.

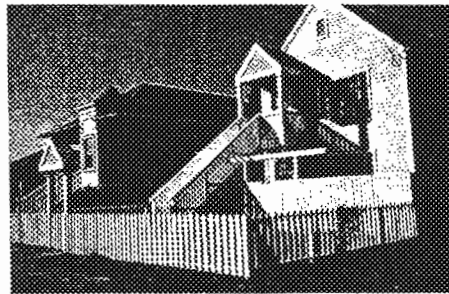


4 Seattle Four-in-One Competition. Ground floor plan (left) shows one-bedroom apartment behind streetfront shops. Two-bedroom unit on second floor has separate entry stairs, allowing conversion to work space with street-front window advertising or to master bedrooms for two independent adults.

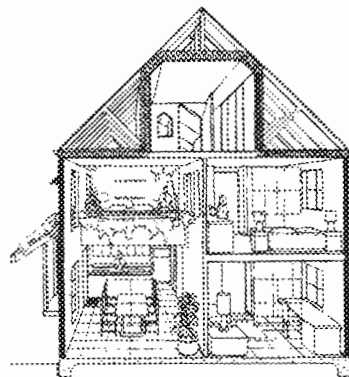
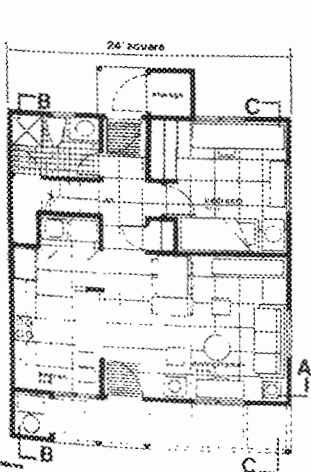


View from Vice

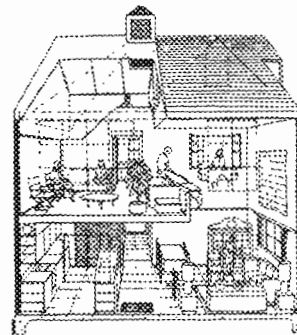
5. Seattle Four-in-One Competition. Corner view shows back alley shops operating out of converted garages and side street entry to midblock residential court.



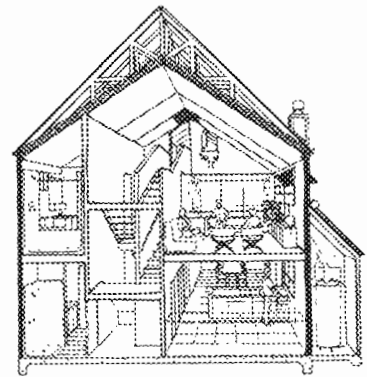
6. Prescott Homes, West Oakland, California. A rental apartment for seniors occupies front half of ground floor with independent entry and patio. Rent helps cover expenses for home-owners, who enter their one-and-a-half story apartment on second floor.



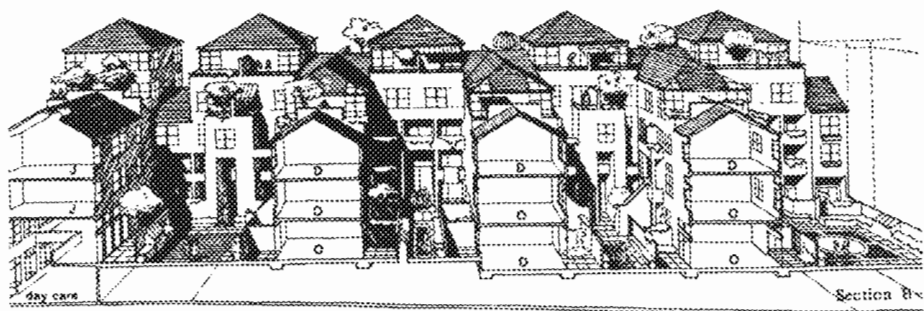
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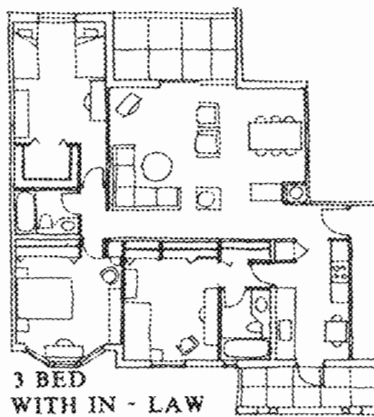
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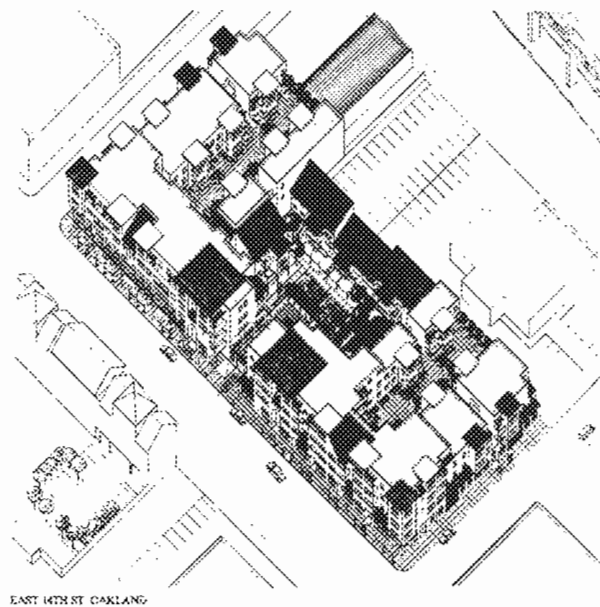
7. Novato, California, Affordable Housing Competition. Second bedroom on ground floor near bath and entry allows older, working child, grandparent, or live-in student to share home with some privacy and provides rental income.



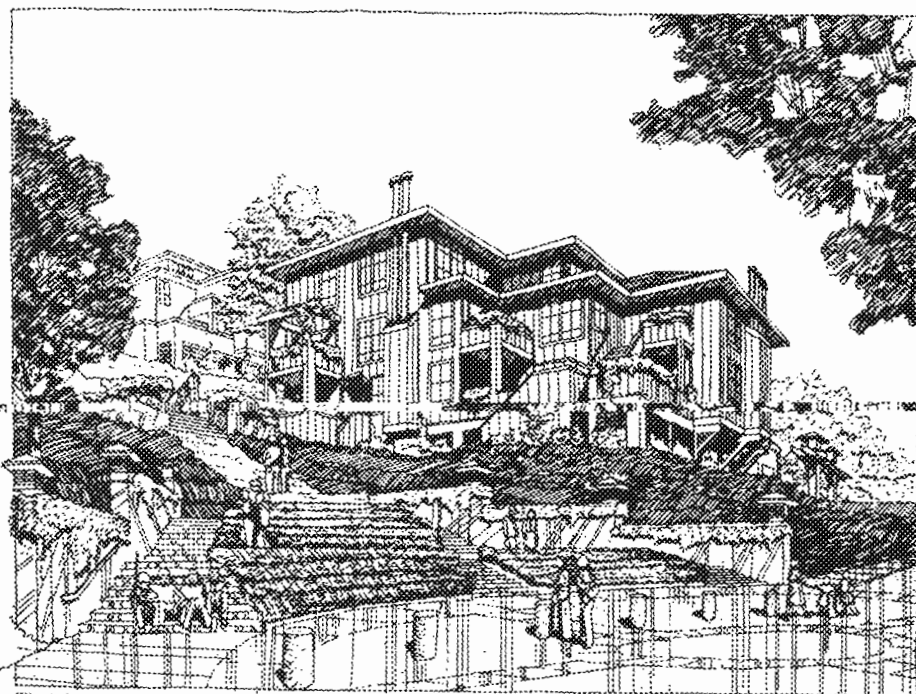
9. Seattle Four-in-One. Competition: Studio units divide midblock area into intimate and secure serrate courts.



8. New York City Infill Competition. Bedroom off kitchen adjacent bath creates independent suite for in-law or :

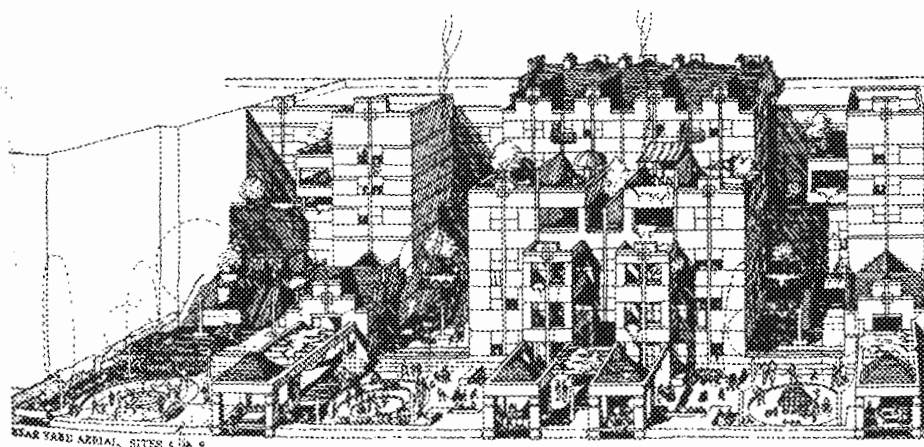


10. San Antonio Commons, Oakland, California. Three separate courtyards break down development into more manageable clusters of thirty households each.



Hilberts Lodge and courtyard to open space corridor

11 Wilburton Hill Competition, Bellevue, Washington Ten-unit building has pairs of stacked one-bedroom flats in front and two-bedroom townhomes above two-bedroom flats in rear. All units have corner locations, exterior entries, and through ventilation.



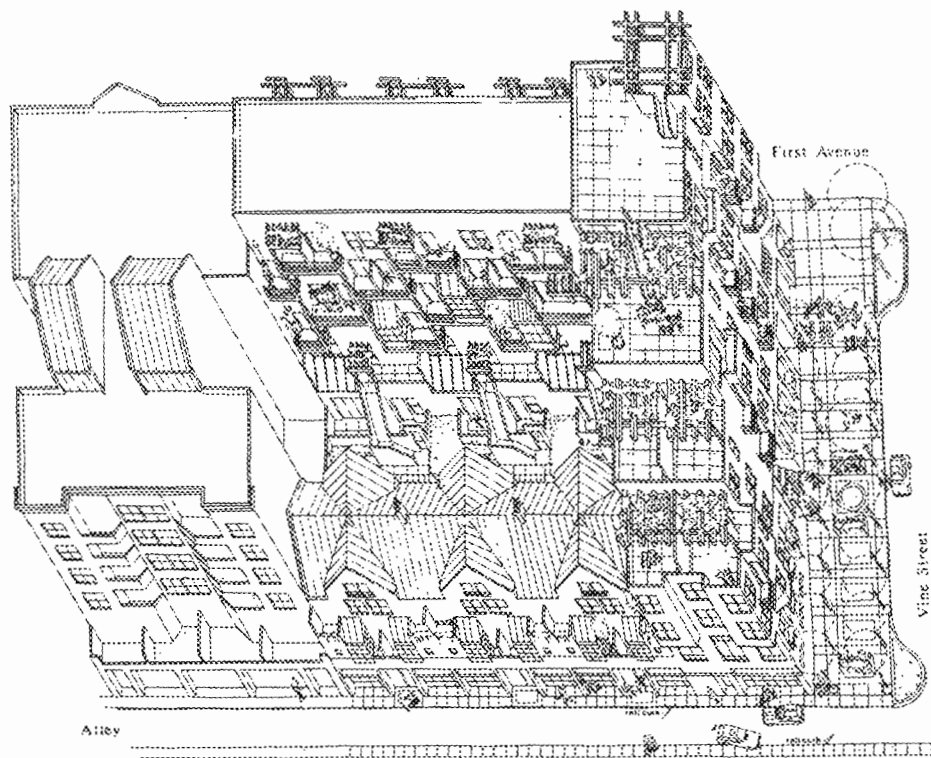
REAR YARD AERIAL, SITES A & B

12 New York City Infill Competition Rear yard view Street-front apartments are one unit deep and receive light and air on opposite sides. Corner location of back-to-back courtyard units provides exposure on adjacent sides.

## Building Organization and Circulation

Only as a last resort do we propose back-to-back units or double-loaded corridors. Not only are these strategies bad for ventilation, they limit daylight and opportunities for views. Also, corridors, elevators, and public stairs have proved historically to be untenable spaces for high concentrations of children and single parents. There is simply not enough supervision to establish territorial control. In the Wilburton Hill competition for 250 units in Bellevue, Washington, we designed a ten-unit, three-story building that had a back-to-back configuration with no corridors (Figure 11).<sup>16</sup> All the units have their own exterior entries and are in corner locations to enhance daylighting and ventilation opportunities. In both the Harlem (Figure 12) and Seattle competitions (Figure 13), in spite of densities of 80 to 120 units per acre, most buildings are one unit deep. When we had to resort to back-to-back units, these apartments were placed in corner locations.

In a recent real project in Oakland, California, the twenty-six-unit Dignity Housing West, we were forced by the density (eighty-five units per acre) and height limitations (four floors) as well as ground floor programmatic needs (twelve-car garage, day-care center, and adult training center) to arrange twenty-one of the units along double-loaded corridors. We managed to put five of the largest family units in townhomes with direct access to grade, and in the double-loaded portion of the building we placed the remaining fifteen apartments for smaller families along short corridors on the second and third floors so that they could still remain close to grade. The six one-bedroom units for childless households are located on the fourth floor. This strategy keeps the children closest to the ground floor so they will tend to use the stairs and not the elevator. We first ex-



13. Seattle Four-in-One Competition. All buildings are one unit deep, maximizing cross-ventilation and daylighting. Stacked townhouse section and skip-stop elevator require only one floor with a corridor in six-story building.



14. Dignity Housing, Oakland, California. Rear courtyard with children's play star

explored these ideas for vertically stratified household types in the Harlem competition. In Dignity Housing West, to entice the children who live on the second and third floors away from the elevator, we designed the fire stairs to lead directly into the courtyard below. The stair is well lit by natural light, and its first flight is designed to be outdoors as a play stoop (Figure 14). The elevator stops in front of the manager's office in the front lobby, in part to discourage vulnerable children.

For seniors, we take a different strategy. Their corridors are designed as courtyards to encourage use and social interaction by drawing people out of their apartments. Courtyards are smaller and more intimate, encourage face-to-face encounters. The small courtyards, integrated into the building's organization like rooms, do have to accommodate the needs of fast-moving children. They are set up to be intensely landscaped and managed by seniors themselves. In our Edes Avenue project in East Oakland, two wings of single-loaded, two-story buildings surround 25-foot-wide courts that function like door living rooms overlooked by circular balconies (Figure 15). The back patio barbecue are open to a lawn surrounded by vegetable planters and fruit trees.

Security in this building plan is achieved because the site is in the center of a city block, surrounded by the rear yards of single-family, detached homes. These form a protective ring against a tough neighborhood notorious for drug dealing and drive-by shootings. The manager's unit and community room are single-story houses that fit the existing street pattern. They flank the main entry gate as sentinels, leading to a car park and the spine of central, four-story housing courts that can only be entered through locked gates.



### COURTYARD SECTION/PERSPECTIVE

15. Armistice Powell Terrace, Senior Housing, East Oakland, California. Walkways, entries, and kitchen windows overlook shared outdoor "living room." Shelves, railings, trellis, and lattice invite plants, vines, bric-a-brac, and other displays.

### Imagery

Designing affordable housing for lower income households means that we must satisfy the cultural conceptions, preferences, and expectations of the surrounding neighborhood to facilitate acceptability and weaken NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) resistance. NIMBY-ism rears its head amidst both low- and middle-income homeowners who fear the invasion of low-income renters and their children. From our experiences in dealing with NIMBY attitudes, the more that new lower-income rental housing reflects a vision of the good life as understood by low- and middle-income homeowners, the better its chances of being accepted into the neighbor-

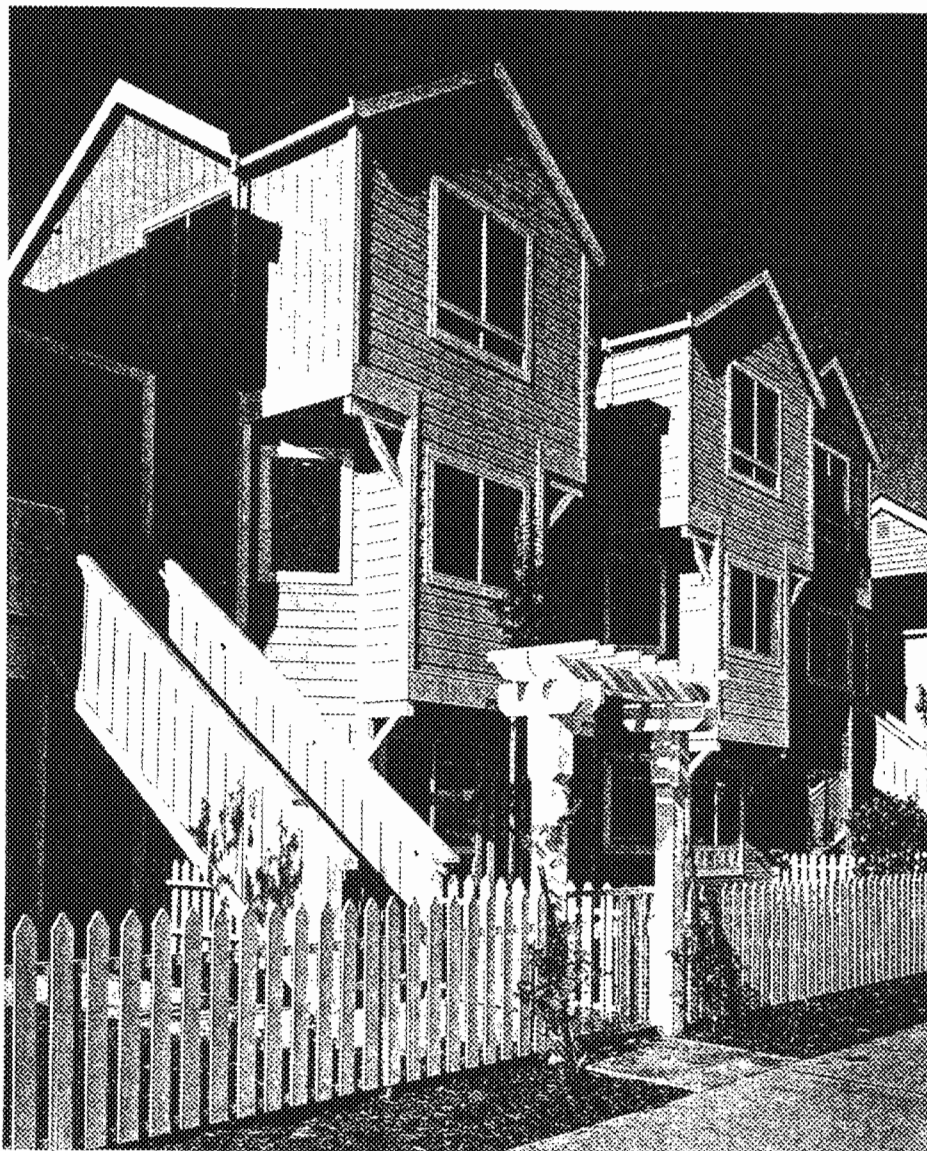
hood. This concern pushes us to more "conservative" imagery in both our daily practice and our competition work.

It is rare for our nonprofit clients to have access to land in wealthy neighborhoods. Therefore, the struggle to get a design accepted by such populations is never an issue. The irony here is that upper-class households are often more open to formal exploration. Whether this stems from a need to prove their sophistication by supporting culturally avant-garde design or to confirm their standing with imagery borrowed from the landed gentry, they are not as concerned with contextual fit. For them, shocking images of the new or aristocratic images drawn from history are a source of desirable ostenta-

tion. Avant-garde designers provide novelty as a camouflage for conventional, materialist value systems; conservative designers provide historicity as a cover for very fragile paper wealth. When applied to the needs of the lower classes, however, avant-garde imagery proves to carry a destructive stigma. As a consequence, the radical designer (as opposed to the avant-garde or conservative designer) recognizes that the concept of social housing is better served with conventional clothing to disguise the more substantive, societal change being introduced into the community: socially supported housing that will not be part of the speculative market, at least for the life of the mortgage (Figure 16).

When such pressures do not exist to place our designs in a neighborhood-dictated jacket, we design the exterior to permit the inhabitants to leave over time their own personalized signatures (Figure 17). To us, the resulting untidy cacophony of self-expression is a better expression of housing as a place to live—a *dwelling*—than something called *housing* that is a salable commodity, a frozen *image* aimed to please neighbors and potential buyers. The latter approach seeks conventions that are believed to enhance the housing's exchange value in the marketplace upon vacating the premises, while the former design approach enhances its ability to provide use value to the inhabitants while they reside there.

The Wilburton Hill competition was distinct from the others in that it was an invited competition among developers, each of whom had their own architects. We knew our competitors and our client as well as the jury. Our client gave us a long leash because he recognized that the jury composition (mostly architects and landscape architects) seemed tilted toward a designers' competition rather than a developers' competition. The latter type requires more provable financial feasibility, and the former demands more inventive site planning and building design



16. Marcus Gravey Commons, West Oakland, California. This contemporary infill project is respectful of a historic neighborhood of "low Victorians" owned by African-Americans.



17. Turning Point Commons, Chico, California. L-shaped farm units create outdoor room for occupants to enhance. Before after photos show cooling effect of grape arbor planted by L in this hot Central Valley town.

We designed twenty-six site plans for the 11-acre parcel before we agreed on what we thought would win, given the jury and the probable construction costs for 250 units. The carefully organized site plan, along with well-conceived unit plans and a somewhat northwestern architectural character that respected local materials and climate, contributed to our success (see Figure 11).

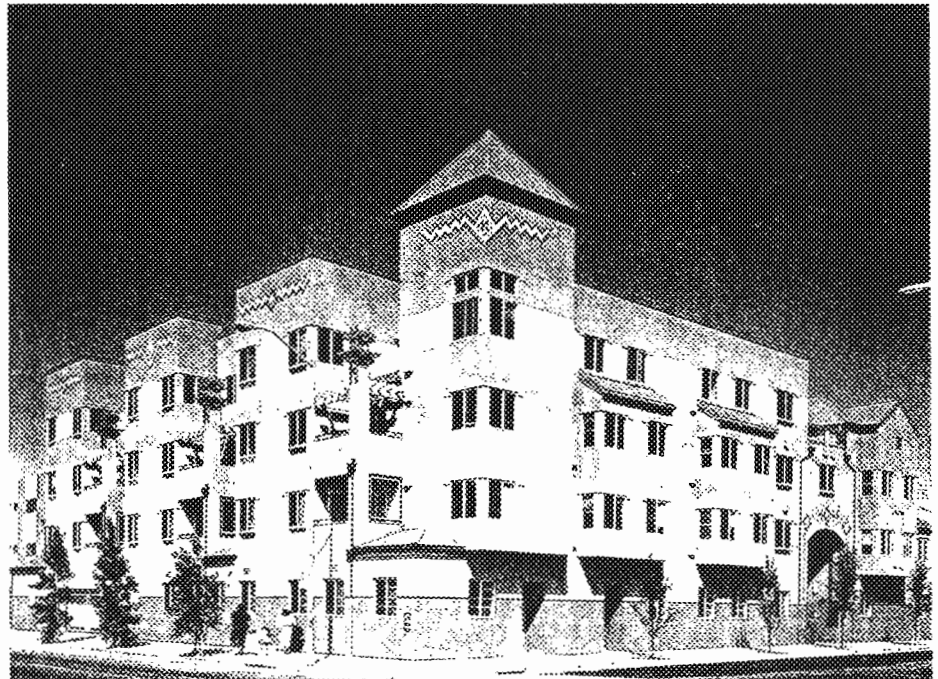
Our YWCA project in Redmond, WA, for single mothers and their children in transition from recent homelessness required an image of stability best served by regional references (Figure 18).<sup>11</sup> For this reason, we made it appear to be a large residential inn, like a comfortable lodge that would seem to have been there for a while and would remain for some time to come. As a YWCA institution, this is a realistic probability. We, the client, and our colleagues shared the belief that the children and their mothers would have a greater sense of security living in their own apartments in a dignified lodge rather than in an odd, contemporary-looking apartment building that screams for attention and stigmatizes the occupants' plight during their difficult transition period.

We are trying more now to integrate the work of artists in our affordable housing projects to give them a spiritual as well as functional dimension. In the New York City Infill Competition for Harlem, we envisioned the new housing operating as a tenant cooperative that would assume a politically and socially active role in the larger neighborhood. For this reason, we designed a recurring tile motif at the top of the buildings that could serve as the coop's logo for publications, products, events, etc. (see Figure 12), helping to establish a strong identity for the coop as a political presence in the community.

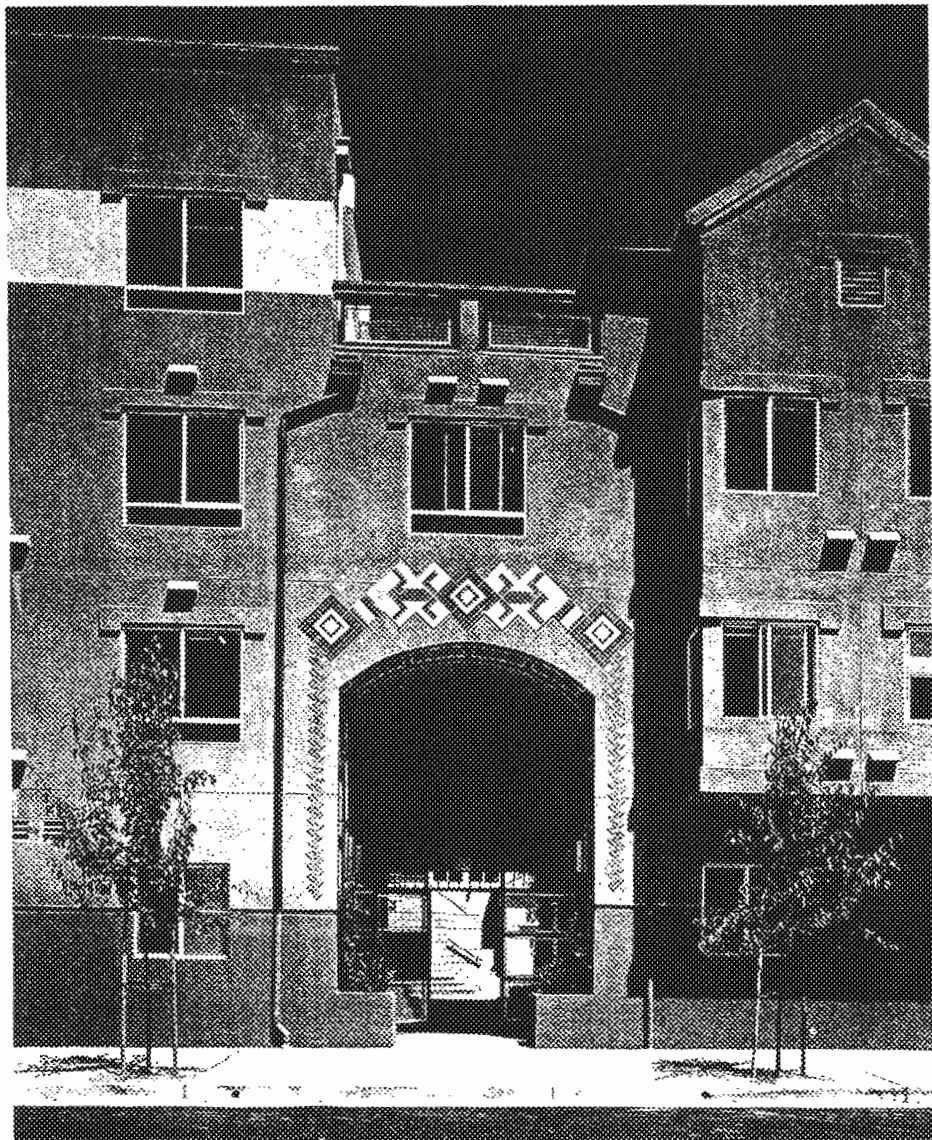
We have carried this idea along in our Dignity Housing project. The organization's board of directors, most of whom are African-American, had mandated that most of



18. YWCA Transitional Housing, Redmond, Washington: The lodge-like character of this residence for homeless women and children is intended to evoke a sense of comfort, charm, and dignity while suggesting traditional Northwest architecture. Rendering by Thomas Prosek



19. Dignity Housing, Oakland, California: The patterns inspired by West African designs cap the facade. Main towers facing adjacent freeway carry mandala patterns symbolizing the idea of community

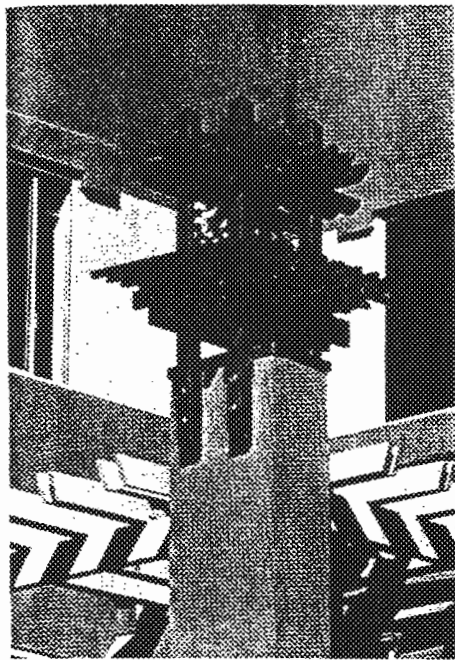


20 Dignity Housing, Oakland, California. Abstract representations of frogs, a West African symbol of prosperity and hope, adorn entry arch. The wall inset above the arch will receive a mural by a Latino artist.

the workers on the job site be women minorities, with 20 percent drawn from ranks of the homeless. Almost 70 percent of Oakland is comprised of minorities, the largest group being African-American (44 percent). We enlisted two artists, an African-American man and a Caucasian woman to enrich the building's appearance. We elected to use West African symbols for community, hope, and prosperity (Figure 20). The board of directors impressed on the artists that most of the homeless who will live in these apartments will be African-American, descendants of slaves who originated in West Africa. The board members also like recent immigrants from Central America, Mexico, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands. African-Americans also want to recover and retain their cultural heritage. The symbols incorporated in tile work at the top floor of the building function like a cornice that uses mandala patterns to represent the idea of community. The entry of the arched passage leading to the inner courtyard, decorative tiles can be images of frogs, a symbol of prosperity and a year of good crops in West African folklore (Figure 20).

The arched passageway will contain a mural by a Latino artist depicting a group of victorious celebrants beckoning the passerby to look through the passage and witness the community being shaped within by forces for homeless people. Atop the three pier support balconies at the third floor, off the freeway, are three miniature (3' x 3') wooden houses modeled after Budweiser "spirit houses" (Figure 21), reflecting the influence of Asian-American immigrants in Oakland. These are dwellings for Earth Spirits who were displaced by the construction of the new building.

Inside the main lobby, two ceiling and ceiling areas will receive murals, trim with friezes containing quotes from famous African American minorities, extolling the virtues



21. Dignity Housing, Oakland, California. Three Buddhist "spirit houses" for the Earth Spirits displaced by the construction sit atop piers that support balconies facing west with a view of San Francisco.

self-improvement. Photo montages at each elevator landing will document the history of the Oakland Union of the Homeless, with portraits of some of Oakland's homeless from recent years. The sponsors of this project engaged in a two-year battle with the city, involving civil disobedience, to acquire the land and funding. To them, this building is a political landmark in Oakland's downtown, a testimony to self-help and grassroots activism.

### Employment and Empowerment

The aggressive utilization of participatory development strategies never seems to be an important judgment criterion in housing design competitions, but it is the *sine qua non* of most nonprofit housing work in practice.

These participatory strategies construe the development sequence—land acquisition and financing, political organizing, choosing contractors and professional consultants, designing and building the project, owning and managing it afterwards—as components in the larger process of community building. Each step along the way provides jobs and learning experiences for lower-income people. Their active involvement improves their ability to survive within the system, expands their awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the institutional framework, increases their skills in working the political system, and generates a sense of pride and accomplishment as they witness the emergence of a cultural enterprise they helped shape with their own hands and ideas. Competitions, unfortunately, are product-oriented in a limited, static sense and never seek proposals for how to use housing development as a dynamic process of building communities.

### Summary Proposals

Pyatok Associates continues to benefit in our everyday work from our experience in competitions, and we inform our competition work with invaluable hands-on experience with our low-income constituents. If competitions are to elicit the very best in this type of work from the most able designers, however, fundamental changes in the conception and execution of affordable housing competitions must occur. These changes can only occur in the context of a broader professional education program that attempts to bridge the gap between the real needs of lower-income clients and the imaginative but often impractical ideas of idealistic designers.

First, the value of such competitions to the larger architectural community must be significantly enhanced through higher purses for the winners and reimbursement of expenses for at least the top several finishers to

draw participation from firms that otherwise may not have the resources to invest in competitions. The imbalance in the way resources are spent in staging competitions is staggering. Few entrants realize that the competition advisor, whose commitment in hours is less than any single competitor, may sometimes earn more than all the winners of the competition put together; that the expense of bringing the jury together and paying them for one day's work can be more than all the prize money; and that the cost of the graphic design and printing of the resulting brochure will be more than all the prize money. Only the architects are expected to work for virtually nothing.

Second, the social or programmatic information provided by competition organizers must be more thoughtful and complete to provide a broader context for designers to approach the problem. It is often impossible to visit the context, and without neighborhood or client input, the designers are left to speculate about local social conditions. Forced to rely on flimsy assumptions, the resultant design may be a house of cards. Perhaps juries should include more people from the community—potential residents or neighbors—along with creative property managers to ensure that the solutions are evaluated from a neighborhood-based perspective.

Third, housing competitions that focus on the single-family house miss the point or at least should be more explicit about whom they think they are helping. Ownership of the single-family home is virtually impossible for households below 80 percent of median income and is difficult in many regions even for those earning from 80 to 120 percent of median. Efficient design, smaller units, and modular or prefabricated construction systems cannot solve the underlying problems of high land costs, low and unstable wages, and poor credit ratings that lead to high rates of foreclosure. A focus on single-family home-ownership in competitions tells

us more about the class bias of the competition organizers who are too often unfamiliar with the real struggles of those with lower incomes. It is also questionable from an environmental and regional planning perspective whether we should promote the sprawl created by detached single-family living. Low-rise, higher density, multifamily housing is the challenging community planning problem of today and the future, not just for lower-income households, but for all income groups whose lower density lifestyles have been a financial burden to all of society.<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, sponsors should think carefully before deciding whether to make a competition open or invited, national or regional, one-phase or two-phase. National housing design competitions make sense for large housing developments because the local area may not have a big enough pool of participants with sufficient expertise to work at that scale. If a national competition is open, sponsors should weigh heavily the fact that several hundred architects may invest 500 to 1000 hours per firm in the effort. Few will be able to visit the site. In contrast, if a few dozen are invited after reviewing qualifications, and offered even a token fee, perhaps there will be less exploitation. With the chances of winning increased, the entrants may be more willing to visit the site. They will also be more likely to give the problem thorough professional attention rather than delegating it to younger interns.

If the scale of the problem is small, is it necessary to sponsor an open national competition? Cannot a local competition do the same job? Nationalizing the effort promotes the misconception that architects from afar can design sensitively for a context they only know through photographs and a brief description of the sociocultural context. For each of the four housing competitions Pyatok Associates won (three of which were large-scale), I went to the locations and studied the neighborhoods and housing types for a few

days before beginning any work. This is an expense that not all entrants are willing or able to afford, especially for small infill sites.

Two-phase competitions are particularly painful because the effort must be done twice for the finalists, leading to the expenditure of thousands of hours of work. This approach should be used only for very large projects in which a sizable fee is provided for each finalist before entering the second stage and in which the sponsors clearly intend and are able to proceed with the winning design into a built project.

Last, if the competition organizers intend the housing to be built, they must include from the start a paid financial or real estate development consultant who can help translate the design into a real project. This person, familiar with the intricacies of public and private funding, will understand how to frame the program to fit potential funding sources and afterward how to procure the land, get access to predevelopment funds, hire consultants, massage the local political scene, etc.—in short, function as developer. Competition sponsors who are not in the real estate business (i.e., public agencies, arts organizations, museums, schools of design, design magazines) do a tremendous disservice to those who need the housing and to those who win the competitions by setting up expectations on which they cannot deliver.

The payoff for these investments will be competition entries that are more imaginative, more realistic, and more likely to be funded and built than many schemes that languish on shelves. Students and professionals will broaden and deepen their interest and participation in affordable housing as a challenging and worthwhile component of the range of possible architectural activities. Improved communication between providers, users, and property managers will promote understanding of the issues. Last, but most important, the quality of multifamily housing will improve as the ideas generated

become tested and accepted realities integrated into the everyday vocabulary of architects and planners.

## Conclusion

Any discussion of the value of design competitions in the effort to produce affordable housing cannot be divorced from an understanding of larger national tendencies. Robert Bellah and his colleagues chronicled in *Habits of the Heart* and recently in *The Good Society*, the U.S. is gripped by a profound moral crisis, the roots of which go back to its founding ideologies.<sup>13</sup> Not the least of these is that of rugged individualism—the desire to be alone in fierce competition, denying both the necessity of larger social institutions and the obligation to participate in them. The inability of the populace to see the systemic interconnectedness of increasing wealth at the hands of a shrinking sector and declining wealth in an ever-broadening sector of the U.S. population allows the institutions that create this imbalance to persist. Under these conditions, design competitions only suggest what things might be like if government were to behave more representatively and redirect the nation's wealth toward a broader public good.

The embarrassingly low rates of voter participation do not reflect apartly much as the lack of a social or institutional imagination that can conceive of humanity as something more than a collection of atomistic individuals maximizing their self-interests. In this sense also, housing design competitions can demonstrate a world resulting from socially responsible engagement.

When competition is linked not to "who gets the most wins" or "who is the unique wins," but with "who gives the wins" and "who satisfies the needs of

wine" then the cause of justice joins with the competitive spirit. While individuals receive the immediate rewards from competitions, society would be the ultimate winner if the ideas created become a useful public possession. If the ideas become another valuable legacy of civilization, building on the collective contributions of generations past, who really cares, or remembers, which individual thought of them first? In this view of history, the individual and society are inextricably woven together, and individual competition—in architecture as in life—is merely the short-term servant of long-term social cooperation.

## Notes

1. This figure was interpolated from data in Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 3–5; and Stephen Rose, *The American Profile Poster* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

2. Cushing Dolbear, *The Widening Gap—Housing Needs of Low Income Families* (Washington,

D.C.: Low Income Housing Information Service [LIHIS], 1992), p. 20.

3. Ibid.

4. Cushing Dolbear, "The Low-Income Housing Crisis," in Chester Hartman, ed., *America's Housing Crisis* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 49.

5. Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). See Chapter 2, "Legislating the Tenement."

6. Phillips, *Politics of Rich and Poor*, 17.

7. Pyatok Associates won first place in the following:

New York City Infill Housing Competition for five sites in Harlem with about 600 units: two phases, approximately 100 entries, 1985–1986; Novato Energy Efficient Affordable Housing, Marin County, California, for 30 units: two phases, approximately 50 entries, 1986; Seattle Four-in-One Downtown Housing, four sites, 220 units: one phase, approximately 450 entries, 1988; Wilburton Hill Housing, Bellevue, Washington, for 250 units: one phase, four invited teams, 1990.

8. These competitions are described in Marta Gutman's article in this issue of *JAE*.

9. The City of Novato, a nonprofit corporation, sponsored a competition to develop a prototype family home that could be used in several locations in

Marin County for first-time homebuyers at densities of 15–20 dwelling units per acre. It was to be energy-efficient, employing passive solar energy strategies to avoid dependency on mechanical equipment. This solution was to be built, but the nonprofit lost control of the original pilot site.

10. The City of Bellevue owned a choice 11-acre parcel adjacent to its botanical gardens and wanted to sell it to a developer who could produce 250 units of rental housing with 30 percent affordable, including a child-care center, community center, and senior housing. The solution was to be a model for other developers in suburban towns, proving that 25 d.u. per acre with two autos per d.u. was possible without feeling too dense and while providing pedestrian-friendly public streets.

11. For this project, Pyatok Associates is the design architect in association with Stickney-Murphy Architects of Seattle, the architect of record. The project includes twenty units of transitional housing for homeless women and children, with a child-care center and adult counseling.

12. For a comprehensive review of the costs of suburban development, see Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

13. Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Robert Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

