

## Housing for a Better World: Can/Should We Design Community?

Edward Robbins

How many studios have I gone to at schools of design around the country, indeed in other countries as well, where presentations of housing often end with more discussion about the design of community rather than a discussion of the formal, programmatic and aesthetic aspects of the design? And, how common is it to read discussions by architects about housing and the design of residential developments that emphasize the extent to which the design either needs to or will create the basis for community? So common, I would argue that it is important to remind architects that there is little real evidence that architecture builds community. Architecture may have important sociological implications but has neither determinative nor even dominating social affect. Even if it did, there are serious questions about the extent to which 'community' forms a basis for a meaningful and civil urbanity.

The design of housing and the residential landscape has been associated throughout the twentieth century, especially in the United States and United Kingdom, with the development of better citizens and a better society as much it has been concerned with the design of commodious and aesthetically pleasing residential developments.<sup>1</sup> As Gwendolyn Wright writes "For centuries Americans have seen domestic architecture as a way of encouraging certain kinds of family and social life."<sup>2</sup> In England too, from at least the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, commentators like Frederick Engels and Samuel Kingsley linked housing with the moral state of its inhabitants. As Kingsley argued as early as 1857, the social state of the city depends on its moral state and that, in turn, depends on the "lodging of its [the city's] inhabitants."<sup>3</sup> The work of the philanthropic societies like the Peabody Trust and that of modernists such as Lord Holford, in England, saw in the architecture of residential developments – especially new towns in Lord

---

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of housing see Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius (1994) *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, New Haven, Yale University Press.; Jim Kemeny (1992) *Housing and Social Theory*, London, Routledge; Paul Oliver, Ian Davis, Ian Bentley. (1981) *Dunroamin: the suburban semi and its enemies*, London, Barrie & Jenkins; Sara Rosenberry and Chester Hartman (1989). *Housing issues of the 1990s*, New York, Praeger; See also Peter Rowe (1993) *Modernity and Housing*, Cambridge, MIT Press; Gwendolyn Wright (1981) *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*, New York, Pantheon.

<sup>2</sup> Wright: xv

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Kingsley (1880) *Sanitary and Social Lectures and Essays* London: 187

Holford's case – "a form of social therapy".<sup>4</sup> In the US, the work of Clarence Perry and Frank Lloyd Wright epitomized the association of the design of housing and residential developments with the making of better people and a better society.

The faith in the design of housing and residential developments as an important part of community design, however, may well be misplaced. As Gwendolyn Wright argues, "the history of American houses shows how Americans have tried to embody social issues in domestic architecture, and how they have tried, at the same time, to use this imagery to escape a social reality that is always more complex and diverse than the symbols constructed to capture it."<sup>5</sup> Because social reality is often more intractable than design solutions might suggest, different alternatives to housing and residential design have been offered as a means to solve social ends. In the United Kingdom "agreements about the most effective 'design for community' never lasted long and underwent the same radical changes as the design of dwellings itself...."<sup>6</sup> What remained constant was state support of approaches to housing that claimed to build community through design even where the means to that end varied.

Most recently in the USA, with support in the UK from such as Prince Charles, the rise of New Urbanism has once again offered the design of housing and residential developments as the answer to the problems of contemporary urbanism, among which are the loss of community and civic engagement. As Leon Krier, advisor to the design of Poundbury in the UK and Seaside in the USA has argued:

If the United States is to solve its social and environmental problems in the future, it must revise the whole national philosophy of settlement, the very notion of civil society. The small-town philosophy of the TND (The New Urbanists/Traditional Neighborhood Developments) is not just an architectural paradigm, but a social synthesis which, if applied nationally, will allow a much larger range of people and talents to become active citizens, in the full meaning of the phrase.<sup>7</sup>

The New Urbanists are bound to their forebears by their faith in their own all encompassing vision for a design of a better world. In the work of Clarence Arthur Perry, in the 1920's, there is an emphasis on the relation of the design of housing and residential environments to the nurturing of community that is similar *mutatis mutandis* to what the New Urbanist's argue

---

<sup>4</sup> Glendinning et al. op. cit.: 110

<sup>5</sup> See Wright op. cit : xix

<sup>6</sup> Glendinning et al. op. cit [get page]

<sup>7</sup> Leon Krier (1991) "Afterword" in Andreas Duany & Elizabeth Plater-Zybek *Towns and Town-Making Principle*, Cambridge, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 119

today. Like the New Urbanists, he saw the design of small, pedestrian based residential communities as the basis for building face-to-face community, which in turn would strengthen civic life.<sup>8</sup> By the 1930's, architects were beginning to "explicitly link " modern design with good community life and argue that a "large block of flats could 'form a community of its own'".<sup>9</sup> English architects, in the 1950's and 1960's, who built places like Cumbernauld New Town wanted to build what one commentator argued was the "best example of community architecture in the world."<sup>10</sup> The architects of the slab architecture of the 1960's were predominately attempting to provide light and air in their buildings. They also saw the design of balcony access ways, however, as a means to foster what they saw as 'the vital spirits' of street life and encounter, which they felt was at the heart of working class community.

The current design rage for the New Urbanism seen by many to provide the basis for powerful designs for building community and overcoming the fears and social divisions that typify much of urban living<sup>11</sup> is looked at with suspicion by others. While some disagree with the New Urbanism's strong emphasis on traditional designs, they do not necessarily oppose the principle of building community through design.<sup>12</sup> Others do not believe that we can design community. It is, rather, created by people over time. For still others, the issue is not whether one can design community but the extent to which "invocations of community... seem irrelevant to the fate of the 'new' American metropolis forming around us".<sup>13</sup>

The debate raises two questions. First, can design foster community or what in his classic definition Roland Warren suggests, if a bit academically, is a "combination of social units and systems, which perform the major social functions having a locality reference".<sup>14</sup> Second, might

---

<sup>8</sup> See Clarence Arthur Perry (1929) "The Neighborhood unity" in *Neighborhood and Community Planning*, New York, New York Regional Planning Association

<sup>9</sup> Glendinning et. al. op. cit.: 113

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Jackson (1970) *The Politics of Architecture: A History of Modern Architecture in Britain*, Toronto University of Toronto Press: 13.1[check]

<sup>11</sup> See for example Andreas Duany & Elizabeth Plater-Zybek (1992) "The Second Coming of the American Small Town" in *The Wilson Quarterly* Winter v16, n1, p19-51; Peter Katz (1994) *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*, New York, McGraw-Hill; James Kunstler (1993) *The Geography of Nowhere: the Rise and Decline of America's Man-made Landscape*, New York, Simon & Schuster

<sup>12</sup> See Marshall [get reference]

<sup>13</sup> See for example David Harvey (1997) "The New Urbanism and the Communitarian Trap" in *Harvard Design Magazine* Winter Spring :68-69

<sup>14</sup> (1963) *The Community in America* [get reference]

not the building of face-to-face territorially based communities, even if successfully realized through design, reinforce social exclusivity and divisions of race, class and ethnicity that are for many folks so much a part of their urban experience even as they bolster meaningful and socially salutary relationships for others?<sup>15</sup>

### *Can Design Foster Community?*

From the 1920's to the 1950's, the designers of garden cities in the USA like Radburn espoused the use of greenbelts. Continuous parks running through areas of dense housing with interior walkway systems and town centers with a mix of uses were viewed as the best way to develop a viable community. At the same time, and in distinct contrast, at developments like Coral Gables, Florida architects proposed a more urban design highlighted by a rectilinear grid interspersed with public gardens, and golf courses with a town center and single-family homes to foster a strong sense of urban community. Debate in England too about how to best develop a strong sense of urban community and civic pride revolved around those who believed in the Garden City and those from the Townscape movement who proposed tightly built-up areas and a more contained and enclosed design of the city. The latter group associated with Gordon Cullen<sup>16</sup> emphasized the street and street furniture to foster encounter and social activity.

By the 1960's, members of Team 10 and others had moved away from the idea of the small dense village supporting spontaneous clusters of social interaction as the basis for community. Alison and Peter Smithson acknowledged the "rightness and inevitability of old cities and villages"<sup>17</sup> but they did not see reinventing such villages as appropriate for the contemporary age. Community in a general sense was important but not as some self-contained local territory. Rather with the increasing importance of mobility in the contemporary age, it was crucial that architects look at community as a form of social aggregation and encounter. It was the architect's responsibility to employ form as a real force through which social practices would

---

<sup>15</sup> There are many definitions of community used by designers and sociologists. In the case of architecture and urban design the notion almost always refers to some form of local, place based face-to-face social interactions and is seen as building a more sound civic and moral order. See Geindinning for a discussion of the uses of community in modern design in the UK for example. As Raymond Williams points out the concept community is the only concept that has no antonym that has an equally positive connotation which makes the critique of community all the more important— see his (1976). *Keywords*, New York, Oxford University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon Cullen (1961) *Townscape*, London, The Architectural Press

<sup>17</sup> Geindinning op. cit.: 121

result from architectural decisions. Thus the necessity and ability of architecture to produce the vitality of the working class street and the chance for meaningful human association and interaction. The Smithsons and other designers like them thus proposed and designed large slab like buildings. They believed that through such design they would create community by clustering uses, creating nodes of interaction linked by networks of movement. So too did the architects for the Greater London Council who were responsible for the design of Thamesmead (a modernist mega-project, located just outside London and the site for the movie about urban dystopia "Clockwork Orange"). For them, "a sense of community... can best be achieved in a compact development like Thamesmead by linking areas which might be otherwise separated neighborhoods by spines of flats".<sup>18</sup>

In the USA, the designers of modernist projects like Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, Missouri (an iconic representation of modernist public housing design that fosters the worst forms of urban alienation and social dissolution) also believed that they were fostering the basis for community based face-to-face interactions through the design of their projects.

As Alex von Hoffman points out, the architects of Pruitt-Igoe imagined that

the design would transfer urban street life to the high-rise building, [and] ... the gallery would create a "vertical neighborhood" for the 20 families who had access to each elevator.<sup>19</sup>

Today, the designers of such large master-planned developments like Valencia in contemporary Los Angeles believe, as the designers of Radburn in the 1920's believed, that they too have been creating community. So do those building low-income apartment dwelling units like Hismen Hin-nu Terrace in Oakland, California. Hismen Hin-nu Terrace is traditional apartment block done in the Mission Revival Style, which has within it courtyards, a ground floor market, niches for street vendors and a community center. From the street the development looks like many other such apartment blocks in the Oakland area. As Reid Ewing<sup>20</sup> illustrates, designs that claim to be building the basis for community for the last seventy years, in the US, have ranged broadly. They may or may not have village centers, or main streets; may be comprised of stand-alone residential buildings or mid- and high-rise buildings; they may have parks or plazas. Paths may meander, sidewalks may or may not be curbed. The question that begs answering is whether there is any evidence that one or another form of design is better able to foster community?

<sup>18</sup>The Greater London Council (1969) *Thamesmead: A Riverside Development*, London:7

<sup>19</sup> Alex Von Hoffman n.d. "Why They Built Pruitt-Igoe".

<sup>20</sup> Reid Ewing (1990) "Evolution of New Community Planning Concepts" *Urban Land* June 90:13-17

Today, the New Urbanists trust that there is answer- the return to the urban village. They and their allies propose to replace the classic suburb because they see they see the suburbs as an alienating agglomeration of houses even though, ironically, the suburbs were designed to foster community. More critically, their attack on the suburbs is based on at best only anecdotal evidence to suggest that suburban living - or modernist mega-blocks for that matter - are any more alienating or socially isolating than other forms of habitation.

My own experiences, in the absence of any systematic evidence one way or another, suggests that there is no obvious relation of design type to social outcome. I have resided in high-rise public housing in New York City where there was a great degree of community cohesiveness. In the Jacob Riis Projects where I lived as a child, I remember my mother and neighbors actively involved in a community-based organization, which fought for and successfully realized the building of a new primary school next to the project and a pedestrian overpass over FDR Drive. Close relations between neighbors provided folks with the support they needed; e.g., free childcare, help with Public Housing Authorities and the City and the like. Well organized, neighborly and socially active, Jacob Riis was, and I am told still is, an exemplar of local face-to-face community.

I have also lived in small towns of 4000 or so people in Labrador, Canada<sup>21</sup> and Alaska<sup>22</sup>, where there was little if any real social cohesion and much social segregation. In both towns, residents lived within easy walking distance from each other. In Wabush, the designers provided a town center with commercial and leisure activities. They also provided a unified sense of place through single family and semidetached houses and small four- to eight-family apartments all interspersed and designed with similar materials, and streetscapes. The other, Valdez Alaska, was designed to allow for large suburban style single family houses as well as apartments, was organized around cul-de-sacs located along a long and parallel set of major avenues going both north-south and east-west, and also had a large trailer park on its outskirts. What stands out in the plan and still stands out today is the absence of any central plaza, square or other central place in the new town.

The difference in design notwithstanding, there was little commitment or significant involvement with community in either town. In Wabush, Labrador, a mining town in Canada,

---

<sup>21</sup> See Edward Robbins (1975) "Ethnicity or Class: Social Relations in a Canadian Mining Town," in Bennett, John (ed.) *The New Ethnicity*, Minneapolis, West Publisher:285-304

<sup>22</sup> See Edward Robbins (1993) "Valdez" in *Social Indicators Study of Alaska Coastal Villages: IV, Post-Spill Key Informant Summary Schedule C: Communities, Part I (Cordova, Tatitlek & Valdez)*, Anchorage, Alaska, U.S. Department of Interior, Minerals Management Service, Alaska Outer Shelf Region:30-126

even though many people owned their own homes, although contractually restricted by Wabush Iron Ore Company, which controlled the town, the presence of company-employed town officials limited any sense of involvement in the community. In this from all outward appearances "model small village", divisions, which emanated from class and other distinctions within Wabush Mines created distinct fissures among the populace that militated against any deeply felt sense of community.

In Valdez, Alaska, home port to the Alaskan pipeline, the town was rife with tensions and conflicts between original residents and those who came with the pipeline, oil company employees and fishers, long-term residents and summertime visitors, and workers among others. To the extent there was "community" in Valdez, it was based on interests and occupational and social loyalties -- old-timers saw themselves as a distinct group for example -- rather than face-to-face contact and propinquity. Of note also was that many residents of the town, to the chagrin of the small businesspeople in town, chose to shop in Anchorage, a six-hour drive away, rather than in Valdez. These folks were driven more by market principles; i.e., what they felt were better prices and selection, than by any loyalty to the economic wellbeing of those with whom they were likely to have face-to-face relations.

At another extreme, the supposed failure of high rise public housing and its association with crime, alienation, and conflict does not provide evidence for the failure of a particular design typology to be associated with face-to-face community. Certainly there have been places like Pruitt-Igoe but it was not always the icon of social collapse and failed model for the design of housing<sup>23</sup> it has become. As Alexander Von Hoffman also writes:

Although for a few years life in the giant projects was uneventful, soon Pruitt-Igoe entered a downward spiral

As the working poor bypassed Pruitt-Igoe's apartments for other accommodations, the housing authority began renting to people supported by Missouri's welfare program--a program with the ninth lowest payment scale in the nation. By the mid-1960s over 60% of the 2000 families living in Pruitt-Igoe were female-headed households; the same proportion were on the welfare rolls. Rental income fell far short of the amount needed to operate the projects, forcing the St. Louis housing authority to divert funds to subsidize the project and cut back on maintenance."<sup>24</sup>

The failure of Pruitt-Igoe was due to its failure to find its market and its management rather than its failings as a design. Jacob Riis was also a high-rise public housing project. And in

<sup>23</sup> See for example Lee Rainwater (1973) "The Lessons of Pruitt-Igoe" in Pynoos, Jon, (ed.) *Housing Urban America*, Chicago, Aldine 548-555.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander von Hoffman n.d. "Why They Built Pruitt-Igoe" :22-23

the same city of St. Louis, Cochran Housing, which too had by the early 1970's become a model of failed apartment block design by the late 1970's a model of tenant community based action. A group of mothers having become tired of what they saw as intolerable conditions organized a tenant management scheme. They not only lowered crime but also cleaned up the project, which brought it to the attention of everyone from HUD to the television networks as an example of good community-based renewal of public housing. At the same time, a low-rise row housing project in California called Easter Hill<sup>25</sup> also became an important example of social dissolution and collapse associated with public housing design

Successful and unsuccessful neighborhoods have been made up of the same housing types; and the many and different housing types that make up our cities have been associated with strong communities and alienating neighborhoods. As the authors of *Good Neighbors: Affordable Family Housing*<sup>26</sup> document there are over a dozen different dwelling types, which have been used to form our urban and suburban environments. In various combinations these make possible an even greater variety of streetscapes and neighborhood designs. All of these urban forms have at one time or another been home to strong and cohesive communities and at other times have housed atomized and alienated residents unwilling or unable to become involved in any kind of community based social life. It is interesting to examine the history of many older urban areas like Lower East Side in Manhattan or East London. What we would encounter in many of these neighborhoods over time would be a shift back and forth between sites inhabited by strong and vibrant communities to places that are most noted for instability, social dissolution and internal conflict. Community or the lack thereof would be a function of the social and economic realities that influenced the area and not its design.

If there is little evidence that one design or another creates more vital neighborhoods and community, there are forms of design, albeit even if often not intentional, that can destroy a sense of neighborhood and community. What I call the "*architecture of disinvestment*" or what is the redesign of a place without the direction of architects or urban designers has been a constant threat to many inner city and even suburban localities. Boarded up houses, abandoned buildings, empty lots, overgrown pathways and decrepit parks or main streets can undercut efforts to build a community's pride and sense of hope. Good design cannot in itself guarantee that a neighborhood or place will remain viable. Good design is something that should be valued in its own right. And, as a sign of public and private investment in a neighborhood, it can help to prevent the serious

---

<sup>25</sup> See Clare Cooper Marcus (1975) *Easter Hill Village: Some Social Implications of Design*, New York, Free Press

<sup>26</sup> Tom Jones, William Pettus and Michael Pyatok (1995) New York, McGraw Hill:64

decay of inner city and suburbs as a sign of what we might call an "architecture of investment." The renewal of older upper income neighborhoods like Islington in London, Beacon Hill in Boston both of which had periods of significant disinvestment before recent gentrification and other areas like them is not built on new design but rather on investment in the streetscape and residential design already in place.

While good housing design whatever we feel such design to be may help to symbolize investment in a place, it will provide neither a sense of community nor guarantee involvement in community activities by residents. Some of our most expensive and desirable housing on streets like Fifth Avenue in New York and in places like Beverly Hills and Mayfair in London, provide what most of us would consider attractive and well designed housing. There is little evidence that those who inhabit that housing have a stronger community identity than residents of less grand housing.

It is for this and a number of other reasons that some architects argue that design is not crucial to community building. Rather, it is the use of the design process to organize residents of a particular place that provides the catalyst for community building. For these designers, formal interventions that are intended to foster and strengthen community and create neighborhood vitality work best when area residents are involved in the process of designing their homes and neighborhood. It is the participation in the activity of design, they believe, that brings forth a sense of belonging, of group solidarity and of empowerment so essential to building strong neighborhoods and community identity. The design represents a desired outcome and symbol of that community participation and investment in the process. What community based designers do not ask is whether it is through the act of design that a groups of people residing in a given place are best organized to meet their needs?

Proponents of community based design respond that the issue is not what design is aiming to create. Rather, it is critical because it is a linchpin around which the organized actions of actors can be made to revolve. It is through the efforts of these actors that the energy essential to any community building grows. If this true then is it necessarily design that is central to such a community building process.

Let's look at Soho in New York City, which for many is an important example of a community-based transformation of a neighborhood, to see just how important design might be in such a process. Although begun informally and not through the conscious intervention of community based designers, it reveals much about what the organized efforts of a small but continually growing number of people committed to the redesign of an urban place can accomplish. It also reveals what happens when that energy is ultimately dissipated or is sapped by

competing forces taking advantage of what the original community based efforts built. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Soho was a site of warehouses for small-scale industrial enterprises. It then was dramatically changed into a site where the warehouses became the home to artists often working together began to create a vital and energetic community of studios, small stores and cafes and restaurants. Through their efforts to redesign the lofts of the buildings in the area and to demand recognition as residents in what was zoned an industrial area, Soho was remade into a residential community. What drove the new resident's energies was a commonly held desire for a particular kind of housing, and residential street life, which was translated into a sense of community and a shared commitment to make the neighborhood work as a residential place. Once again, it is slowly being remade. Market forces are transforming the streetscape from one of commercial establishments serving local needs to stores that now serve the needs of the growing number of tourists from elsewhere in New York City and the world who now populate Soho throughout the year. Moreover, many individuals (artists, for example) have been pushed out of the community they helped build by rising housing prices and gentrification that has begun to reshape the very nature of Soho.<sup>27</sup> Many of its residents still evidence a strong sense of community even though they are being pushed and pulled by forces over which they have little control. Many continue to resist the changes wrought by the real estate market. Ironically, even as these new market forces threaten to overwhelm the community, Soho has been growing as an important civic space for people from throughout the city and beyond.

Design did not make Soho a community, it was one critical symbol for the remaking of Soho. But the effort to keep Soho a particular type of community also revolved around zoning issues and the building of alliances to maintain the cultural activities that had been located there. The creation of lofts to live in and the redesign of ground floor industrial space into galleries and stores were embodiments of larger efforts to build a place for the artistic community in New York. Certainly issues of design have at times been used as a basis to resist the redesign of buildings into hotels and what many in the community see as the malling of Soho's streets. So too have issues of traffic, the loss of local culture been used in this effort. Thus the argument by community-based designers that design is important not only for the housing it provides a community but as the symbolic center to a community's sense of identity and the basis around which it can organize its energies is only partially true.

It is also important to recall that efforts at community based design have also divided neighborhoods as well as unite them. In Boston, the conflicts over housing and its design has

---

<sup>27</sup> See Sharon Zukin, (1982.) *Loft living : culture and capital in urban*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press for a discussion of the changes in Soho.

created significant tensions between different groups within neighborhoods like the South End. Moreover, even if community organizing based on the design of housing does not lead to conflict, it does not necessarily sustain community after that housing is realized. There is anecdotal evidence that reveals that often the energies that coalesce around a community participation for the design of a residential development often dissipates once the housing project is realized. Organizing a community around the design of housing does not necessarily translate into long-term community based commitments or organization.

Designing community or building community through design, may be a core goal or ideological commitment of many designers but after at least a century it still remains at best an elusive even impossible dream

### *Should Community Be Our Goal*

While evidence suggest that it is questionable whether particular designs can build community and whether it is a crucial organizing tool, we still need to ask whether designers should be attempting to build community? If community means different things to different people (George Hillary in his paper "Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement"<sup>28</sup> found some 94 definitions in the sociological literature), most designers who participate in the debate about how to best foster community see it as localized face-to-face social relations. It refers to what most of call "neighborhood" or "village" and evokes images of social interactions based on friendship, propinquity, and shared identity. No matter how they vary in the details through which they hope to realize community most presume "that the proper form of cities is some "structure of neighborhoods," that neighborhood is equivalent to "community," and "community" is what most Americans want and need."<sup>29</sup>

If, as noted above, it is presumptuous for designers to believe that they can design such communities, the presumption that territorially based community is an unalloyed good should also not be taken for granted. Ironically, by looking to community as the basis for rebuilding our urban world, architects and urban designers may be, however implausibly, proposing "a society without a city."<sup>30</sup> Cities have been historically the sites of the most diversity; places that have

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Bell & Newby (1973) *Community Studies*, New York, Praeger: 27

<sup>29</sup> David Harvey (1997) "The New Urbanism and the Communitarian Trap" in *Harvard Design Magazine* Winter Spring :69.

<sup>30</sup> Iris Young (1986) "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference" in *Social Theory and Practice* Vol 12. No. 1 Spring:2

been broadly inclusive at least since Ancient Rome if not before. Community, when defined by reference to face-to-face social interaction connotes a place that is narrowly inclusive, based, as it is, on a shared communal identity. As we know, the call for community schooling, for example, often was and still is merely a code for segregation.

It is certainly true that if it weren't for community based groups and social relationships many of us would find our lives significantly impoverished. This is especially true in our present circumstances in which there appears to be little sense of a larger social responsibility for our fellow citizens especially on the part of government. In its place, community based associations provide economic and social supports. For many low- and middle-income people their housing is a result of community based initiatives, their health clinics sponsored by community based organizations and their recreational activities supported by and located in local institutions. Community, for others, in gated developments like Seaside and Celebration in Florida, and Poundbury in Devon provides a sense of security and belonging and an escape from the ugly realities of so many of our inner cities.

If community does provide much in the way of support for its members, it also excludes those who are not members. As a child, I lived in a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York that epitomizes the neighborhood-based community for which many contemporary commentators long. Heavy pedestrian traffic on streets with small stores serving the local community, neighborliness, and systems of mutual support were the rule. My mother, who worked a full day, never had to worry about my well being as neighbors and shopkeepers looked after me until she came home. Storekeepers and other adults who were home watched to make sure that all the children were safe and that they behaved.

At the same time, however, the eyes on the street were as much about making sure those who were not part of the neighborhood -- strangers - did not stay in it as it was about watching children. My neighborhood was to a great extent racist, closed to outsiders, and inward looking when it came to citywide political issues.

There is always a danger, perhaps one that is inherent to community, that, in a place defined by an identity based on face-to face contact those who are not identified as part of the community are seen as outsiders, strangers to be kept at arm's length. Even among groups of lower income who start out allied with others to build their housing, once their housing is complete, often want to make it more or less exclusive and keep others out like those in more upper class places do. This is not to argue that those of lower income should not have the rights that those of upper income do. In both instances, the desire for exclusivity should serve as a caveat about the dangers of place based communities. This is especially true for those

communities that have a strong sense of identity, which often leads to protective forms of design like gates, walls, other physical elements or social practices that reinforce exclusion.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, when defining a community, especially when it involves community participation, we should always ask about who sets its rules, how participation is defined and by whom, and to what ends. As Arthur J Naparstek makes clear "a well-functioning community -- regardless of socioeconomic level -- provides an environment within which its members are able to establish standards of acceptable behavior that reflect the values of the group and advance its common goals."<sup>32</sup> The question of who can be construed to be a member of the community, and what is acceptable behavior is not easily resolved in many instances. One dominant group in a neighborhood may define community membership and exclude others who may even inhabit the same place.

Recently, for example, there was a community participatory process for the redesign of a number of public places in the Mission District in San Francisco. At community meetings, a number of homeless people and street-walkers showed up demanding to be heard as users, indeed the predominant users of these places. Although the homeless and street-walkers were making a basic claim of citizenship, many of the residents of the District and immediate neighborhood did not want to include them and Celebration in the discussions. For many, this would be understandable. Undesirables like the homeless and prostitutes should be banished from their neighborhood. These residents saw in prostitution, as many of us do, an ugly aspect of urbanity, and a threat to neighborhood well being that should be discouraged. And, while many of these same residents would argue that although homelessness is a shameful reality, nonetheless allowing the homeless to threaten the stability and serenity of the neighborhood will not solve the problem of homelessness. Moreover, because the prostitutes and homeless do not own or rent property in the area, they should not be seen as members of the community. For others, the demands of the prostitutes and homeless, even if unconventional and possibly threatening to their neighbors, raise important questions about the nature of community, neighborhood, and citizenship. By raising their voices and demanding to be heard, the prostitutes and homeless were

---

<sup>31</sup> See Steven Flusty, Steven, (1994) *Building paranoia : the proliferation of interdictory space and the erosion of spatial justice*, West Hollywood, Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur J. Naparstek, Dennis Dooley & Robin Smith (1997) *Community Building in Public Housing " Ties That Bind People and Their Communities"*, Washington, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

challenging local residents' willingness to care about and include in their deliberations and social interactions those who are different.

A community is by its nature restrictive-- for better or worse, depending on one's own beliefs. It is based on a shared identity and shared ideas about what are appropriate behaviors. As a result, in most communities, behaviors, not those of the individuals identified as members of the community are often frowned upon and even banned. Simple things like what kind of lawn, whether one can have clotheslines in the backyard, and where one can park a car are often legislated. More disturbing, in many communities there are restrictions on living arrangements -- extended households of three or more unrelated persons are times prohibited as are, ironically, communal style living arrangements. The range of restrictions varies but whether small or large, restriction is about exclusion, about diminishing difference and ultimately about keeping people of different backgrounds and sensibilities apart.

In the attempt to overcome what is seen as the fragmentation of modern life, faith is placed in community. It is, ironically, seen as a panacea for the loss of civic engagement and the diminution of national efforts to overcome urban inequalities, insecurities and instabilities. The emphasis on community not only potentially divides people, it places a heavy social and political load on local energies, local interests and local practices in the attempt to create a more livable urban society. We need to ask to what extent a phenomenon that is small, local, and based on face -- to -- face social interactions able to overcome broad and general structural problems? Moreover, isn't it just possible that by encouraging the interests we share in locally based communities, we might be diminishing our capacity to act as a social whole to work together regionally and nationally to address the problems that face us.

"Defensible space", for example, might lower crime in a particular neighborhood but, if defensible space principles are not established throughout a town or city, crime simply moves elsewhere. Community based development of housing may provide better housing for many who are in desperate need. At the same time, if this development is not connected to demands for larger structural investments in housing, more people in desperate need remain unaided than helped. Furthermore, if the community-based design produces a community dedicated to monitoring and maintaining its own housing, the result will be further social and political fragmentation, as each "community" fights separately against other communities for scarce resources. Redesigning rundown neighborhoods as mixed income communities does provide a basis for the renewal of these areas of a city and provides better housing for many lower-income residents. If, as is often the case, it leads to the removal of many or even some of those who had lived in the area before redevelopment, it also puts new pressures on other low-income

communities to adsorb those who are evicted as a result of a such redesign and "renewal". As Tricia Rose so cogently argues it was the so-called "slum clearance" programs that resulted in the creation of even worse social and physical conditions in such places as South Bronx, which had to adsorb the many relocated and dispossessed residents of neighborhoods undergoing 'renewal.'<sup>33</sup>

What helps the particular neighborhood and municipality may not help other neighborhoods or the larger urban region. At a time, when many are beginning to note that there is a strong need for more city-wide, indeed region-wide strategic planning, emphasis on community while understandable under present circumstances may well be counterproductive.<sup>34</sup> And, while community, may well provide support for some, it excludes others and diminishes our capacity for civic engagement and the toleration and indeed inclusion of difference.

### *Conclusion*

Rather than trying to build community, architects, by providing spaces for social contact like streets, parks, plazas and other spaces, which abut or are accessible too where we live, by eroding walls and boundaries between neighborhoods and "communities," can help to embody what urban life is about. Urbanity is what Iris Young calls the "being-together" of strangers". ...acknowledging their contiguity of living and the contributions each makes to the others".<sup>35</sup> Arguing for the being-together of strangers in the city is not only about moral good. Rather, being-together of strangers is over the long term a social necessity if cities, with their many and various groups individuals, are to find the basis for a social order that is not based on gated buildings, streets and raw police power. Moreover, by recognizing the need for the being together of strangers and those who are different we open up the city to its possibilities rather than limit its potential to the prejudices framed by exclusively local identities.

---

<sup>33</sup> See Tricia Rose (199 ) *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Hanover, Wesleyan University Press especially pages 30-31.

<sup>34</sup> See Harvey (1996 ) *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Differenc*, Cambridge, Blackwells for a more complete discussion of this issue. See Saskia Sassen (1991) *Global City*, Princeton, Princeton University Press and also Neil Smith (1996) *The New Urban Frontier*, London, Routledge for discussions of the changing nature of urban economics and its effect on local issues.

<sup>35</sup> Young op. cit.:21

By shifting the focus from community to civility<sup>36</sup>, from exclusion to encounter, from the locus of the neighborhood to the space of the city designers can be both less and more ambitious. They can be less ambitious by designing the streets, the squares, the buildings and other spaces in which all housing sits and that all cities, indeed all urban regions need and that they have been designing for centuries. They can be more ambitious by reminding us that in doing so architects and urban designers are challenging a society that has become more divided and more fragmented each day to begin to reengage an urban civility and take advantage of the spaces of encounter that design can offer.

In the design of housing architects can also be both less ambitious and more radical too. They can see housing as a place to dwell, but which is also an element among many in the design and production of the city and the region: the making of the physical form of urbanity. By doing so, they can join in a discourse and a set of social and cultural practices that remind us that it is through our potential connections – between the various physical elements that go into making a city what Isidore of Seville spoke of as "Cities of stone [urbs]" and between the many and diverse people who inhabit "cities of men [civitas]" - that cities come alive and only through which we will ultimately be able to adequately confront the broader problems of urbanity that face us all.

---

<sup>36</sup> For an incisive discussion of the design of civil space see Peter Rowe (1997) *Civic Realism*, Cambridge, MIT Press.