

The Museum of Modern Art

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Low Rise High Density: Issues and Criteria

There are a number of ways by which one may isolate the most critical issues affecting the quality of housing. One may either work through direct experience or by studying data drawn from current user needs.

Alternatively one may analyse the most recent criteria established for the design of housing. In practice the IAUS and the UDC were to use all of these methods as a way of arriving at a reassessment of the salient issues which a future housing alternative could be reasonably expected to meet. Amongst these issues we gave special priority to the following.

1. The establishment of a physical environment which could be capable of inducing at one and the same time both a sense of community and a sense of propriety, at a number of different scales. Where the former is evidently dependent on the capacity of the units to aggregate in such a manner as to evoke a sense of neighborhood compatible with pre-existing urban grain, the latter depends on a number of detailed variables affecting the individual unit, such as the particular mode of access or the possibilities for surveillance, or conversely the freedom from overlook.

2. A whole cluster of secondary but nonetheless crucial issues seem naturally to follow from these master concerns for community and propriety, in particular the potential for adequate child supervision from the dwelling and the capacity of design to induce in each household the desire to contribute to the spontaneous maintenance of the scheme as a whole. This last seems to stem directly from the general sense of ownership induced throughout the scheme, while the maintenance of security

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directly derives from an inherent capacity of the arrangement to provide for adequate surveillance.

3. Beyond these concerns there remains the demand for the dwelling to be as responsive as possible to the varying needs of the individual. This issue turns on the problematic notion of "built-in" flexibility; that is on the inherent capacity of the environment to be modified in accordance with the inhabitant's changing needs. In order to meet this option we attempted to provide more than one living space and to allow for bedrooms to double as either play or living spaces.

Before designing the prototype we had to translate these rather broad issues into a set of specific criteria for a housing prototype that could be applied with equal ease in either New York City or elsewhere in the State. It was thought that with but minor adjustment this prototype should be equally applicable in either urban or suburban situations, at densities which would be capable of not only promoting social interaction but also of assuring economic viability. With this model we intended to bring to the city dweller many of the immediate amenities that the suburbs have to offer, most particularly the private house with its private yard, while at the same time proffering to the suburban home owner a pattern of development which would create that specific sense of neighborhood than often seems best to be found within the city. The selected criteria that follow are typical those which played the most important or critical role in determining the form of urban low rise housing now being built in Brownsville.

In order to induce a balance between propriety and community we sought to provide as many units as possible with their private entrance directly

on the street, while at the same time clustering these entrances around public stoops. This had the immediate effect of limiting the rise and extent of internal public staircases and eliminating corridors entirely. In order to maintain security and to provide for immediate child supervision, the living spaces were to be disposed so as to afford easy surveillance over both the public street and the private yard. Hence all of the larger family units have a double aspect. Apart from cross ventilation this double aspect would also assure that at least one living space would have an appropriate orientation.

In general our criteria were derived more from the single family terrace house than from the multi-family high rise building. At the next scale above the house we sought to achieve a sense of territoriality by striving for outdoor spaces that would clearly differentiate between private, semi-public and public space. Finally, in the units themselves we tried to reflect the necessity in the case of a large family for the overall living space to be capable of simultaneous and conflicting use by different family members and for the other spaces, bedrooms in particular, to be capable of being acoustically isolated. In this respect we saw the public porches and stoops as providing an alternative to the private terrace.

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