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ANOTHER CHANCE FOR HOUSING
LOW-RISE ALTERNATIVES

INTRODUCTION

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The family housing now being built in the older cities of the United States seems to be falling behind suburban housing from the point of view of affording some sense of identification between the family and its dwelling. The cost of land and the difficulties of relocation have led to an ever greater emphasis on high-rise buildings as the standard urban housing solution for families of low and moderate income.

These high-rise "projects," as they are usually called, house a great many families on a relatively small amount of land, and they do provide decent living space in quantities which would be difficult to achieve at lower densities. However, their design and landscaping often remain quite sterile. The scale of such projects seems frequently to be way beyond any human dimension, and families, particularly young children, miss the feeling of a familiar, homelike atmosphere. Furthermore, such housing projects often seem not to fit in with the surrounding neighborhood, but rather stand apart from it.

We at the Urban Development Corporation think the time has come to ask ourselves whether the high rise, rather anonymous solution is the best one for low and moderate income families. Paricularly, we ask, is it best for young children. By now we have had experience in building both high- and low-rise housing across the state of New York. (However, almost none of our low-rise schemes are within the City of New York.) In our high-rise developements,as in all our projects, we have chosen to emphasize high standards of design, and have tried to make the ground level spaces

(more)

pleasant and interesting.

During our live-in program last summer, many members of the senior staff and their families were able to experience directly what it was like to live in our housing. Valuable insights were obtained from this experience and we hope to repeat the program again in the summer of 1973. We think there are situations where the high-rise approach is the right one and we intend to continue work on improved high-rise solutions.

However, out of our live-in experience and our concern for the identification of the family with its housing, and with an awareness of trends in Western Europe, we were pleased to have the opportunity of entering into partnership with the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) in a joint attempt to provide a low-rise alternative. After many meetings between the Institute and ourselves over a period of several months, it became clear that there was a consensus to focus on what we have been calling Low-Rise High-Density housing. In this we had to come to understand just how high was low-rise and just how low was high-density.

We had to focus particularly on what is called the "bedroom count." In the United States, density is usually expressed in terms of dwelling units per acre, whereas in Europe density is expressed in terms of people per acre. It was my own feeling, though I think it is widely shared, that what we were aiming at was offering this housing solution to families with an above average number of children, and therefore the final determination was what might be called a "low-rise - lots of children" solution.

From the very outset, the parties agreed that this was not going to be another theoretical exercise with a planning report and a proposal which would wind up gathering dust on a shelf somewhere. Working with the local community groups, the

Model Cities organization in Central Brooklyn, and with the various city agencies, we developed a real site and a real program which is presently slated to get under construction on the same day the exhibition opens at The Museum of Modern Art. We are particualry pleased to have been successful in obtaining an allocation of 236 funds which will permit the housing to be made available to families of low and moderate income.

After very careful consideration of various alternatives, we determined that Brownsville would be a very good location for this pilot project. This is a neighborhood that has recently suffered serious deterioration. If it is to be rebuilt successfully, the new low-rise prototype, both as a unit and as an aggregate whole, must afford not only a sense of individual identity but also a sense of community. A second version of the low-rise prototype is under study for a site on Staten Island. Here it is being adapted to preserve and enhance the amenities of suburban life before they are swept away by haphazard building.

The Urban Development Corporation has benefited greatly from the fresh perspective of the Institute, and I think it fair to say they in turn have benefited from our experience with the very real world in which we must operate. Both of us have had to adjust our ideas of what we would like to what we could in fact seek to achieve. I am personally confident that the end result will be widely popular with the families who live there.

We hope that the alternative here proposed will be useful to those seeking to improve the quality of life through housing not only in New York City but also in other cities throughout the state and the nation.

We are most grateful to the Institute and to The Museum of Modern Art for their willingness to co-sponsor this effort at improving the quality of the housing we provide. Through this exhibition and its accompanying catalog all New Yorkers can share with us both the problem and its proposed solution.

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