Dying Cities
Fighting The Crumbling Sense of Identity in American Cities

Residential/Commercial Development
Over-the Rhine Cincinatti, Ohio
Andrew Young
Thesis 2003

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The Problem

We have a problem in our inner cities. It is a problem that we created and it is a problem that we as designers must deal with. Many of our inner cities and inner city neighborhoods are now just a shell of their former grandeur. What has happened? The simplest and most direct way to answer this is sprawl, the fleeing of those who can afford it to suburbia and the pursuit of the “American Dream.” As the city expands more and more people move to its outer edges leaving many inner city neighborhoods to those who cannot afford to leave or are forced to stay as a victim of circumstance. Compounding this situation the city neighborhoods are losing their identity and sense of character to the passing of time and deterioration.

So why is this such a problem? In order to answer this question it must be looked at from several different ways. First of all, why are many people leaving the inner city neighborhoods? Though many arguments can be made about this inquiry, it is widely accepted that the quality of life is better outside of the inner city. Some reasons for the inferior quality of life in the inner city include overcrowding, poor air quality, safety issues and a lack of a connection with nature. Another direction from which to look at this problem is what happens after the people leave. The people who are leaving the inner cities are the people that can afford to make the move. With these people also go the taxes that they pay. Meanwhile the neighborhoods being left are often in severe need of restoration and rehabilitation. This leaves the inner city neighborhoods to the people who cannot afford to leave, and the city without sufficient tax revenue to upgrade the neighborhoods. These forces lead to a downward spiral in these communities. The neighborhoods soon lose their sense of identity and pride to deterioration. This is a problem that can quickly effect a community as a whole down to the individual.

The knowledge of this problem is not a new one. Many organizations have used several different strategies in order to improve the situations in the ever-deteriorating neighborhoods. These low-income strategies, though well intentioned, in many cases did more harm than good. The new architecture of
The Problem

These plans many time involved a repetitive copy of the same solution for every individual and for every city regardless of location. These examples of trying to use a fix it all solution for all neighborhoods caused many implemented plans to fail, and in many cases they furthered the deterioration of the areas that they were trying to help.

Thesis Scope

The responsibility of addressing this problem now lies with all of us. On the front lines of this battle are the designers of the future, including urban planners, architects and landscape architects. One of the key ways to approach this problem in our inner cities is to begin by focusing on the individual and then extrapolating to the community as a whole. For this investigation I will be looking at what architects can do to help improve the quality of life and restoration of identity and pride to these inner city individuals and neighborhoods. As stated before the improvement of the quality of life in these neighborhoods is a case-by-case investigation. This thesis is not a detailed solution to every new architecture project in an inner city neighborhood, but an outline of some steps that can be taken to investigate design in these situations. It is the intent of the project to develop these strategies in order to improve the quality of life for the individual and in turn the quality of inner city neighborhoods.
Architectural Solutions

The key in the architectural investigation of this thesis is focusing on the identity of individual space while recognizing the role of the community. Through up-lifting the pride and self-respect of the individual it is intended that the community will also be enhanced and a sense of identity can be achieved for both. The place in which architecture is most likely to influence people on an individual level is at home and at work. These are the places where people spend most of their time and where most of their social interaction takes place.

So how do you give an architectural space a sense of identity to an individual in a constricted urban setting? The key to this achievement is the study of several factors that affect the everyday life, and that are common in these declining urban settings. These issues include, but are not limited to the following:

Physical Context: As with all architectural projects context is important. In most deteriorating inner city neighborhoods the context can contain many examples of historical and cultural significance. The architecture itself may also introduce an architectural vocabulary that can be helpful in tying the project to the community.

Cultural Context: The culture of the site is also important in that it may be one that is not conducive to the architecture of the physical context. For example if a culture were one that is very private, the architectural characteristics would not want to be an open concept that would be alien to the users. So, the style of the architecture must capitalize on the opportunity to reflect the culture of the context.

History: The history of a place is also important, not only for the value of knowing historic sites and customs, but also to study how the neighborhood developed, when that architectural style started, what has changed culturally, and what aspects of history are appropriate to reflect in the architecture.

Social Interaction: Interaction between people is a very important factor in the redevelopment of these neighborhoods. It is important to know how to encourage this interaction in an architectural way. For example, if the people of an area seem to interact only in small social groups it may be appropriate to create different kinds of spaces for social groups to meet. It is also necessary to address this on the individual level in order to encourage all to participate.

Connection to Nature: A connection to nature is something that many inner city neighborhoods are lacking. This connection is one that is healthy for the individual and the community as a whole. With today’s technology it is possible to integrate natural elements into the architecture in tight urban settings. This will undoubtedly improve the quality of life in the area both physically and psychologically.
Now it is obvious that many of these categories seem to deal with the community as a whole rather than the individual. One very important part of this inquiry is that in an urban setting it is important to look at the social connections of people and the way a community functions in order to uplift individuals in a way that will encourage their interaction with the larger neighborhood.

A further investigation is then required to see how the individual can be autonomous within the encompassing social structure. The categories of investigation then becomes the following:

**Architectural Autonomy:** It is important to give the individual a since of ownership of their own personal space. This can be done in several ways. One of these is to make every individuals space different. Many are opposed to this because of the cost, but in many cases the same set of materials can create several different spaces for individuals. The key is to use the neighborhood studies from above and within the parameters fond create a design vocabulary that is flexible. This vocabulary can create autonomous spaces even in a dense urban setting. This strategy can also reduce the institutional look, found in many urban residential buildings, giving the project as a whole a more identifiable character.

**Selection and Flexibility:** Being able to individualize one’s housing plays a large role in the building of individual identity with architecture. Letting an individual customize spaces, as they need it is an important idea. Small strategies that can help in this context are paint color, window boxes, multifunctional rooms, and flexible open space in the floor plan.

**Appealing to the Larger Picture:** The individualization of space is an important idea, but the total isolation of the individual space would be a detriment, not only the individual, but also the community as a whole. In this way each individual space in the community should have a strong connection to the physical, social and cultural context of the whole.

In conclusion, the building of identity in an urban setting is a bifurcated process of research. To start, the community and the way in which it works must be studied in detail in order to facilitate the function of the overall architectural project. Then as the individual comes into focus, individual identity with space must be taken into account while still fitting into the parameters of the community. By building up the people from their seemingly hopeless situation it is possible to build communities that will be reshape the future of our inner city neighborhoods.
Project Introduction

To test the research of this investigation an architectural design project was completed in Over-the-Rhine, which is a severely deteriorated neighborhood in Cincinnati, OH. The project was a commercial/residential development for the neighborhood that put its emphasis on the individualization of the residential spaces while clearly addressing the social interactions of the community. In order to study this project it was important to look at the essence of the community and how the current population uses the spaces in which they lived and worked.

Brief History of Over-the-Rhine

Over-the-Rhine is a neighborhood that developed just north Cincinnati's downtown. When it began the neighborhood, like much of Cincinnati had a large German population. The area received its name from this German connection. In order to reach the neighborhood one had to cross a canal that ran just north of the city, this crossing was said to be like going across the Rhine River in Germany, so the neighborhood was called Over-the-Rhine. As the development of Cincinnati progressed the neighborhood grew and became very prosperous in its population and development. Soon after the flight of people to suburbia caused the area to decline in population and to undergo a cultural change. This change left the community poor and run down. Many urban renewal attempts have been made, but most have been terribly unsuccessful. Now Over-the-Rhine is an area made up of mostly African Americans dwelling in the remnants of the German community that resided there previously. This poor community is now the perfect example of an inner city neighborhood that needs help.
Context

Physical:
The community of Over the Rhine in Cincinnati, Ohio is currently a neighborhood that is in a progressive state of deterioration. It is covered by three-to-five story brick buildings most of which are from the early 1900s or older. The community reflects a rigid style that ties the community together through form and aesthetics, but many of the buildings are in desperate need of rehabilitation. Central Parkway borders the neighborhood on the south side, and is the dividing line between the neighborhood and downtown. To the North the community is bordered the wooded hills of Cincinnati. This physical context creates many interesting possibilities in the exploration of this thesis project.

Cultural and Social Interaction:
The culture of the Over the Rhine community is one that reflects the outfight of the more affluent members of the community over the course of time. Some of the results of this are sprawl, segregation and economic distress. This community is primarily low income in need of much resuscitation.

- Over the Rhine is Cincinnati’s most distressed neighborhood.
- Of its approximately 12,000 residents, 95% live below the official poverty level according to the last census.
- Over the Rhine historically has received many poor forced-migrants from Appalachia and the rural South.
- 5,000 of the 7,500 apartment units in Over the Rhine are below code or abandoned.
- Absentee landlords own 95% of the housing.

Facts From www.overtherhine.org

The community streets are constantly alive with pedestrian traffic. Many of the residents do not rely on vehicles for transportation. This gives the community a distinctive characteristic of a “Walking Culture” or “Street Culture” that affects all development in the area. This Culture leads to much social interaction on the street of the neighborhood. The demographic of the community consists of mostly migrant Appalachians and African Americans. All of these factors of the culture present a challenge to create an integrated project that is not exclusive to an individual group, but representative of the entire community. Similarly, it must provide a sense of place and identity for the community and culture.

Connection to nature
The urban environment of the neighborhood significantly reduces the number of natural elements that the people are exposed to. The need for this kind of connection is made apparent by the constant socializing of the people in the few parks that are present in the area. Most of these parks are small and run down and a much more prominent elements of nature are needed in the neighborhood.
The site is a small city block in the community of Over the Rhine in Cincinnati, Ohio. It is bordered on two sides (east and north) by three-to-five story brick buildings that are typical within the community. Most of these buildings are from the early 1900s or older and reflect a rigid style that ties the community together through form and aesthetics. The west side of the site has a few taller residential buildings that transition to the much taller downtown area to the south. The southern side of the site is bordered by the Kroger building, which is a large 30-story building that marks the immediate transition into downtown Cincinnati. With the changes in scale from the site to downtown there is also a change in the material pallet that makes up the area, from the brick of the historic Over-the-Rhine neighborhood to the glass and steel of the modern city. This physical context creates many interesting possibilities in the exploration of this thesis.
Site

As a very compact site, it creates the opportunity to explore identity in a densely populated area while at the same time exploring identity in a transitional space that ties the community and city together.

With the physical dichotomy that is in place around the site the cultures also change dramatically. The neighborhood as mentioned before is very poor and relies on the "Street Culture" for social interaction. This is in stark contrast to the city that is just across Central Parkway to the south. Because it is the main commercial and social street in Over-the-Rhine and it leads directly into the middle on downtown Cincinnati, Vine Street, which boarders the site on the west side, is the main artery that links these two worlds together. This gives the opportunity for the project to tie the two worlds together not only physically, but culturally as well.

Response

In response to the existing structure of the site several initial decisions were made that have a large impact on the project. First of all because Vine St. is an avenue of high social and commercial activity most of the commercial portions of the project were located in this area. Secondly in order to maximize the amount of direct sunlight that reaches the residents, the living units must be stacked to the north part of the site, away from the 30 story Kroger Building. Further because the site is a transitional space the material pallet can reflect both the downtown area and the neighborhood. The goal of this site response is to create a community structure that is identifiable with Over-the-Rhine while still addressing the city of Cincinnati and elements of nature.
# Program

## Residential Spaces

### Two Bedroom Units (9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space</th>
<th>Square Footage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living Room</td>
<td>200 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedroom (2)</td>
<td>200 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchen</td>
<td>125 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bathroom</td>
<td>50 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dining</td>
<td>100 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Net Square Footage: 875 sq. ft.

Grossage

(30% of net square footage) - Includes circulation, structure, interior partitions, and mechanicals.

Gross Square Footage: 1,140 sq. ft.

Total: 10,260 sq. ft.

### Three Bedroom Units (12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space</th>
<th>Square Footage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living Room</td>
<td>250 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedroom (2)</td>
<td>150 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master Bedroom</td>
<td>250 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchen</td>
<td>125 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bathroom (3)</td>
<td>50 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dining</td>
<td>100 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-use Space</td>
<td>120 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Net Square Footage: 1,295 sq. ft.

Grossage

(30% of net square footage) - Includes circulation, structure, interior partitions, and mechanicals.

Gross Square Footage: 1,685 sq. ft.

Total: 20,220 sq. ft.
### Work-Live Unit (5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Room</th>
<th>Square Footage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living Room (2)</td>
<td>150 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedroom (2)</td>
<td>175 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchen</td>
<td>125 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bathroom (2)</td>
<td>50 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dining</td>
<td>100 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Work Space</td>
<td>500 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting</td>
<td>100 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Net Square Footage**

1,575 sq. ft.

**Grossage**

(30% of net square footage)- Includes circulation, structure, interior partitions, and mechanicals.

475 sq. ft.

**Gross Square Footage**

2,050 sq. ft.

**Total**

10,250 sq. ft.

### Shared Spaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space</th>
<th>Square Footage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multipurpose Space</td>
<td>500 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational Space</td>
<td>1,000 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry Room</td>
<td>800 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facility Offices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Managers Office (2)</td>
<td>120 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work spaces (4)</td>
<td>90 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception</td>
<td>200 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting</td>
<td>300 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail Boxes</td>
<td>200 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobby</td>
<td>800 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Spaces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Café</td>
<td>1,750 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Spaces (5)</td>
<td>775 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Net Square Footage**

6,925 sq. ft.

**Grossage**

(50% of net square footage)- Includes circulation, structure, interior partitions, restrooms and mechanicals.

3,463 sq. ft.

**Gross Square Footage**

10,388 sq. ft.

**Total gross Square Footage (Entire Facility)**

51,118 sq. ft.
Design Concepts

Cultural Context

The point at which the culture and history of the context starts to become interesting is when the change from old German to the current demographic begins to happen. In order to play off of this contextual history the project begins with the boxy aesthetics of the traditional neighborhood. From this the aesthetic is then changed to address the needs of the current population. Carving into the box to create spaces that address the street culture, social interaction and connection with nature does this. Where these carved portions take place the materiality of the project also changes to address the transitional quality of the project not only in culture, but also in the physical context. In this way the materials become the glass and steel of the inner city. These cuts also allow the residential units to form a non-institutional facility form that enhances the idea of identity for each individual unit. This play on the history and culture of the place creates a project that is distinctly belongs in its context.

Social interaction

Social interaction is introduced into the project by the creation of social spaces such as the courtyard, roof garden, and community development spaces within the program. These elements have strong ties to the street
Design Concepts

and create compact urban spaces that continue to support the overall concept of addressing the individuality of the community. Each unit is set up to enhance that individuality of residential space, but is not designed to be socially isolated. Each unit has a strong tie to the exterior with stoops and balconies that tie the individual to the greater community. These links of social interaction create an environment that promotes individuality and social connectedness.

The Natural Hills of Cincinnati

The project as a whole is stepped to the north to reflect the sloping Hills of Cincinnati. This stepping occurs in reaction to the very tall buildings to the south of the site. The stepping allows the residential units to receive a maximum amount of daylight in order to create a healthier environment. To further this idea natural elements such as roof gardens, trees in the courtyard and window boxes introduce nature into and otherwise unnatural setting of the city.
First Floor

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Third Floor
Other Floors

Residential Units

Roof Gardens

Community Spaces

Lower Level Parking

Fifth Floor

Sixth Floor

Seventh Floor

Eighth Floor
Elevations

South Elevation

North Elevation
East Elevation
Section B
Three Bedroom

Lower Level

Living Room
Multi-purpose Space
Kitchen
Dining

Upper Level

Bedroom
Bedroom
Master Bedroom
Two Bedrooms

Lower Level

Upper Level
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Courtyard

Courtyard From Second Level

Courtyard From Residential Side
Roof Gardens

Second Level Roof Garden

Large Forth Level Roof Garden
Canopy

The canopy system is one that is set up to provide several services to the design of the facility. It provides shade to the roof garden area, introduces a natural element to the design and also serves to protect the users of the facility in exiting the upper floors.

Materials
The canopy system is an anodized aluminum that reflects the materiality of the downtown area of Cincinnati. This material terminates the facilities connection to the sky as if the glass and steel of the downtown are were splashed onto the building, tying it to the full context.

Natural Element
In order to introduce nature into the design the canopy is to have Ivy that will not only improve the aesthetics, but also assist in the shade and environmental quality of the roof gardens.

Protection
In cases where the roof garden becomes an exit for the facility the canopy system becomes a solid roof that is fire rated in order to meet code and protect the users in case of an emergency.
Windows

The window system of the residential unit is flexible in order to give the residence another tool to customize the space in which they live. This individualization of space is important because it not only effects on the interior space, but also influences the exterior as it address the community.

Closed Sills
The widow sills are to be set up in such a way that they can be closed in order to be a typical operable window. The scale of the windows is small in order to reflect the more intimate residential space.

Choice
The resident has a choice as to weather the sill is to be closed or if it is to be opened into a window box. These choices of customization are important to give the resident a feeling of owning or belonging in the space.

Identity of Space
The resident decides the way in which the window boxes are maintained. This gives the facility an identity that is not rigid or institutional. Further it gives each unit and individual identity in the facility as a whole.
Reflections

In any project dealing with abstract concepts such as identity and community it is difficult to measure the success of the results immediately. Only over time do true results of this type of work show themselves, and even then the impact may be unable to be fully measured. This makes immediate feedback difficult and shows the importance of learning from others who have attempted to address similar issues. Further over the course of time cultures and demographics can continue to change in such a way that projects that are so focused on the current culture may become obsolete. These factors are some that cannot be changed and show that any architectural endeavor is a risk, but if the endeavor is thoughtful and addresses appropriate issues it can be a stepping stone to even better developments in the future.

In order to improve this project there are several things that I would have liked to continue to investigate. Further development of the details of the interior and the exterior could have driven the concepts of the project even further to create one more layer of interest. I also would have liked to get the community itself involved in the design process. Doing this would have given another way to promote social interaction and created a sense of ownership in the community.

In conclusion the project was successful in many ways, but its true success or failure cannot be measured. Further involvement and development of the community would have been of great help to the design and the design process. Given more time issues of flexibility, environmental systems and technical details would have been developed in order to further progress the project. As the project stands it is the synthesis of five years of education that I have enjoyed and am proud of.


http://www.pyatok.com

http://www.irhine.com

http://www.cincy.com