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TOWARDS A BETTER HOUSING:

USING HISTORICAL, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL PRECEDENTS AS GUIDELINES FOR DESIGN

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THESIS PAPER
PREPARED FOR

COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING
BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

ARCHITECTURE 404
1 MAY 1989
ABSTRACT:

In this thesis I propose to establish design approach based on historical, social, and cultural aspects of the Douglas Park Area of Chicago, Illinois. I believe that these three issues will help maintain the integrity of the Douglas Park Area as I introduce a new housing type. The new housing is intended to create a cohesive fabric throughout the neighborhood as opposed to establishing barriers within the community. The overall integrity of the neighborhood will be reinforced to enhance the concern for community affairs that directly affect the lives of the inhabitants.
STATEMENT:

The housing project as well as the individual dwellings are to be a coherent part of the Douglas Park Area in the city of Chicago. The new housing type will elaborate upon the existing building form to establish a visual unity and territorial identification. The units will incorporate the social and cultural functions that are typical in the surrounding neighborhood. Throughout this thesis, I planned on testing the historical, social, and cultural aspects that are either present or not present in past precedents and incorporate the results into a contemporary typological redefinition of low rise/medium density housing that will reinforce the existing fabric. Finally, I want to establish goals that are high in standards which will produce a very thoroughly thought out end product.
OBJECTIVES:

I plan to use the historical, social, and cultural aspects of a neighborhood as a means of design for public housing. The historical, social, and cultural aspects occur both inside and outside the dwelling as well as within the neighborhood. The concerns that are important to the design are large and small in their characteristics. It is important to follow the typical cityscape of this specific area. An attempt was made to continue a row of houses so the housing would be seen as part of the neighborhood and not seen as public housing. The character of the block must read as a whole, by creating horizontal layering in the facade. It is also important to create an individual and different character on the facade by introducing a strong vertical element that breaks up the facade and acts as a gathering place. The front porch has become an exterior meeting place for both young and old alike. The front and back yards provide for the residents an area to add their own personal touch around their house. The
garden and porch areas have their roots in history since the beginning of the neighborhood.

The interior of the block will be a common space for which the residence can retreat from the city street. An alley feature is important to the block and is used as a common space for the residence of the project. It is important that this area be specifically for the residence. Special activities will be placed in this area which can be viewed from the mothers in while in their kitchen.

For the kitchen it is important that the location of the kitchen has a strong relationship with the interior and exterior of the house. It is here where the functions of the kitchen are very important to the dwelling and thus it becomes the heart of the house. The mother will spend most of her time here doing her chores, entertaining her friends, watching television, and watching her children. This is a place in which good and bad things can happen to the children. They might be rewarded with some homemade cookies or punished for breaking a family law.
The kitchen is an important piece that is integrated with the remaining spaces. It receives importance through its location and space. The entry's relationship to the kitchen must be strong with the front door. This view helps direct one from the entry to the kitchen or vice versa. The openness of the living spaces allows for a flowing of the kitchen space into the family room enforcing a stronger tie with the kitchen. This also allows one to see out of the kitchen into the family room as well as the front exterior. The kitchen must have an assortment of views to the backyard. This will help the mother to watch her children or to see what is occurring in the backyard.

The layout of the units on the site is set up to help create focus points. This is established by the alternating of the units in such a way that the kitchens focus into the backyards. The unit on the other side of the block are offset to maximize the views and keep any direct views into the unit opposite. At these major focus points are established for playgrounds such as basketball courts, children's playground, and group picnic areas. These areas reach into both sides of the block and establish a alley street down the center of the block.
CONCLUSION:

What was learned was that even in public housing it is important to design a livable habitat because it will affect the people who live there in the future. More emphasis should be placed upon the people rather than the rules and regulations. It is possible to design an alternative housing which can be more efficient and inexpensive while creating good architecture. As architects, we should be more strongly involved in the decision making for public housing along with sociologists and public workers instead of making rules behind closed doors.

I feel that I have not gotten deeply involved in all the pieces of public housing but what I have grasped was a strong foothold into the understanding of the issues. It is a challenging task with which I would like to pursue it in the future and put it into a real built form.
SITE CONTEXT:

The site is located just south of the downtown area on a city block that is bounded by 33rd Street to the north, Giles Street to the east, and Prairie Avenue to the west. The existing housing units are typically 3 1/2 story, masonry construction, either free standing or row houses from the turn of the century. The dwellings occupy most of the lot allowing for narrow gangways, small green areas in front, and small yards in back. The buildings are organized by a layering of floors. The first layer is a half-level below grade. The buildings create a consistent eaves line while keeping their own identities. There is one family per floor in most cases while occasionally a family will occupy the entire building. The upper three floors are serviced by a common entry and staircase. There is a separate stairwell going down to the lower level. A wood frame porch and staircase serve the rear of the building.

The front facade is the most articulated which wraps around the corner to join with the common brick on the side. The base is
usually of a heavier masonry construction. There are bays and projections that are full height or begin at an upper level. The entrance is slightly offset from the facade and is framed by some type of variation of columns and arch. The windows create a pattern both vertically and horizontally and are further emphasized in the change of pattern and material around the frame. The eaves are topped with parapets and gable roofs or a combination of the two.

The residents are black and from a predominantly low income bracket. To the west is a synagogue designed by Louis Sullivan, which is now a place of worship for the First Baptist Pilgrimage Congregation. Small, family owned businesses are located two blocks south on 35th Street. Nearby there is a public school and a city park. These buildings will all be considerations which will influence the design of the public housing.
ANALYSIS OF PRECEDENTS:

The research deals with both successful and unsuccessful precedents. I examined studies of housing projects more in depth to determine whether the projects follow the guidelines I have set as a means of design.

The Orton Keyes Project in Rockford, Illinois designed in 1969 by the firm of Knowland, Smith, and Ream is a more successful housing project. The project consists of 175 units that range from one bedroom to four bedrooms. The studies were done by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This exploration illustrates how the architect took into consideration the neighborhood and the residents. The design has allowed for some flexibility by the residents such as an areas for gardens, play spaces, and workspaces. The study also provides recommendations for improvement of the project.

The Harmony House and Canterberry Gardens are two identical housing projects designed in 1967 by Louis Sauer Associates. The design allow for 22 dwellings per acre ranging from
two to six members in a family. The housing projects are situated at different locations in New Haven, CT. The problem is that the two developments were showing differing results. The Harmony House Project is failing and creating a hostile atmosphere while the Canterberry Gardens enjoyed success and the residents are in a positive mood. This can be attributed to the higher density of units in the Harmony House project which allows for a shortage of play and work space around the project.

Easter Hill Village, on the west coast, designed in 1954 by the firm of Mars, Harrison, and Halpin is a housing project that won much acclaimed attention. It is consists of dwelling sizes from one to four bedroom units. The design physically looked impressive but after time there were signs of deterioration. The project was not thoroughly concerned with the social and contextual aspects of the residents as in the Orton Keyes Project. The Orton Keyes Project had allowed exterior space around the building which could be used as a private areas for work and play unlike the Easter Hill Village Project. There were studies made ten and twenty years later making recommendations
to improve the design.

One of the best things that happened to Pruitt Igoe, a National Award Winning Design, was its demolition. The project was designed by 1950 by Hellmuth, Leinweber, and Yamasaki. This housing project is an example of failure in design. The planning called for wiping out a large neighborhood to locate the projects. The design completely ignored the urban context and the social and cultural aspects of the residents. The project relocated families from their homes and moved them into the new dwellings. This action wiped out all the historical aspects that the previous neighborhood. The project had failed in its attempt to recreate a sense of neighborhood.
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