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Shades of Gray [Place Debate: Pleasant View Gardens]

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We baseball enthusiasts in the nation's capital are voyeurs. We drive thirty miles to arrive at Camden Yards, past the Inner Harbor, past the RTKL skyline forty stories above. We peep into blue-collar Baltimore, but not quite all the way to Lafayette Courts, which is six blocks further east.

Along the way, road signs highlight the collection of frypits, burgerworlds and gas stations in the bedroom communities between Baltimore and D.C. Commuter traffic reminds us of the spit-and-tissue paper townhomes that besot Prince George's County.

It is easy to dismiss all this as crass, though it is. Or typical, which it is. But doing so fails to see the rest. Ignoring the rest risks agreeing that the "in-betweens," as Leon Krier called them, are forever destined to be nowhere. Cut down the oak trees, pave Oak Lane. Tear down Lafayette Courts, build Pleasant View Gardens.

Dismissing these suburbs as banal fails to see the real people living in them. It fails to understand that real people happily raise children in them, look forward to coming home to them and, most of all, have chosen to plant roots there instead of in nearby Baltimore.

Nearby Baltimore. Lafayette Courts. The gospel according to Le Corbusier. In Scotland they refer to them as "estates." Camillo Jose Vergara calls them "the new American ghetto." Yards away, 45,000 middle-class, white baseball fans crowd Camden Yards and then Pickles Pub for one last beer before heading to their townhomes in their minivans, past the Bedding Barn, never seeing the pleasant views of Lafayette Courts and the black families living there.

Lafayette Courts as Pleasant View Gardens avoids the issues. It overlooks that the row houses of Baltimore are not what works: People work. Architecture can be irrelevant when people don't have work. Forgetting this is laughable, convenient.

If public housing works when residents have jobs, do monoliths need architectural improvement to become worthy places? Are our better angels in the hallowed ground of geometry, form and architectural codes, or in the sense of fair play that creates opportunity?

And if the architecture of low-income housing can become meaningless in the absence of hope, if the architecture of the suburbs can become meaningless in the presence of prosperity, then how much architecture should we concentrate on making? Where should poor people go anyway?

It is all about memory. When buildings are tall and isolated, and the people inside them are black while Orioles fans are white, the only connections we seem to have are the demolitions that recur every twenty years or so and the glad-handing that accompanies ribbon cuttings. The binding glue of denial and optimism is a powerful cocktail. HOPE. HOPE VI. HOPE NUMBER SIX. High rise, low-rise. Isolated, integrated.

The effort is admirable all the same. To even try to make a pleasant view must be worth something. There is reweaving. The quarrel is not with the design or with the intentions. To find fault with what's on paper is to misunderstand what hope is all about.

Yet, while Pleasant View Gardens is a design success, it is as much a nonplace as ever—because the in-between nonplaces along the interstate are full of happy people planting roots in townhomes, people who have never heard of this place and never want to. Because at the intersection of Central Avenue and Fayette Street a few dozen unemployed black men still spend their days. Because Little Italy is both eight blocks and a million miles away. Because there are no Pleasant View Gardens residents at Pickles Pub. Because Pleasant View Gardens does not have a pleasant view. Renaming, after all, is just renaming.

Pleasant View Gardens is a design success because there are now streets and alleys in place of superblocks, beginning with the menacing Post Office to the west. It is a design success because high-rises are out of fashion these days. The convenience of forgetting lures us to think that science is a replacement for virtue. Public housing redesign always works on paper, just one more technical solution. Photograph it now, so that when it is razed in a couple of dozen years, there will be a way to remember what it looked like, how we felt, what we forgot. Convenient memory.