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Martha Stewart vs. Studs Terkel?

New Urbanism and Inner Cities Neighborhoods that Work

Michael Pyatok



In Hanoi, supposedly under the rule of a totalitarian regime, private entrepreneurship at the home base is allowed to freely pursue its interests more than in most democratic-capitalist countries.

Photos: Michael Pyatok

We all recognize that urban infill and suburban sprawl are two sides of the same coin. But the task of urban infill development is Herculean because of many decades of systematic disinvest-

ment in inner cities coupled with public-private collusion in the expansion of suburbs.

The investment in middle- and upper-income flight has resulted in very apparent physical disrepair and abandonment of buildings within older, inner-city neighborhoods. The lack of inner-city investment has, in turn, accelerated the flight of jobs and created chronic unemployment. Whole populations have been abandoned, with little ability to find or hold onto work; new generations have inherited this problem and carried it into schools, which are devolving from places of learning to places of fear and fortification.

When we discuss strategies for improving these older neighborhoods, upgrading the real estate, particularly the appearance of buildings, is too often deemed the first priority. This is because real estate renewal, difficult as it may be, can usually be accomplished more quickly and visibly than reshaping neighborhoods so they allow more economic activity, or more easily than revitalizing neighborhood schools. Some planners argue that physical fixes are important because employers avoid areas that show severe signs of disinvestment; but this assumes the only path to economic development is importing outside employers, rather than incubating home-grown or neighborhood-based businesses.

The latest efforts to refocus attention on the inner city — whether by the Congress for the New Urbanism, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban

Development or local redevelopment agencies — are showing signs of this tendency to quick, cosmetic, physical fixes.

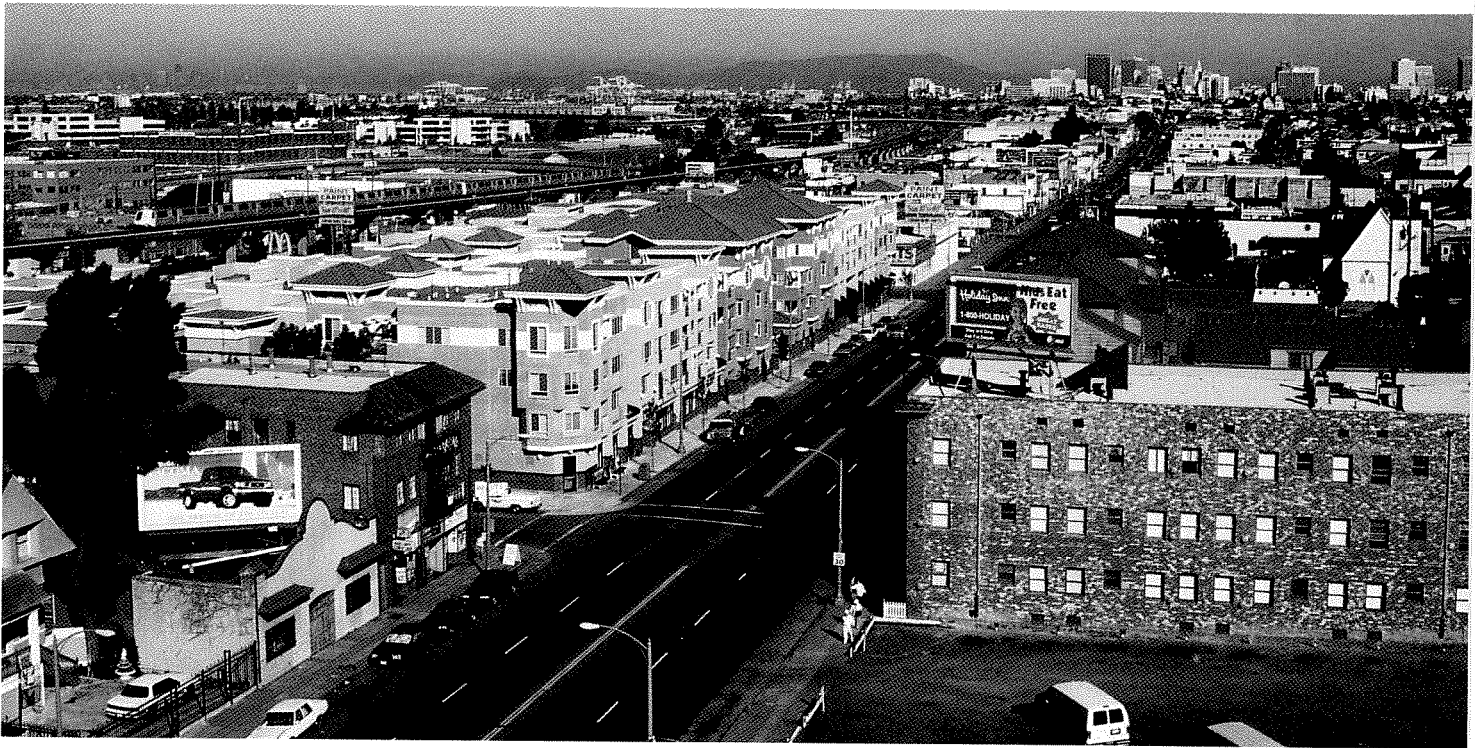
The cure mythology currently being promoted by these groups is to relocate poor people away from troubled housing projects, to rebuild the housing at lower density, and to import higher-income households, particularly homeowners, to live among the remaining low-income residents. The assertion is that mixing households with a range of incomes is healthier for a neighborhood than maintaining a homogeneous, low-income population.

This social engineering has its drawbacks for the people who toughed it out during the lean years. Importing neighbors who already have jobs does little in the way of providing real jobs for the underemployed or unemployed people who remain as part of the new mix, or for those who must move on and be excluded from the mix.

Moreover, the strategies of relocating the poor with rent vouchers, as the HOPE VI program does, or of making one-time reimbursements for relocation in order to make room for people with stable and higher incomes, forces the same painful social and economic costs that people forced to move experienced under earlier forms of urban renewal. It was not too long ago, of course, that we learned that just fixing the real estate is not enough, and that wholesale removal of people and their neighborhoods is inappropriate.

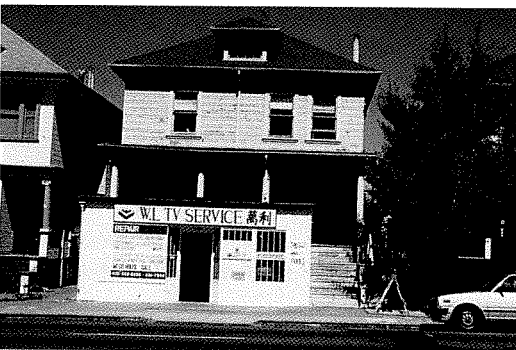
HOPE VI sponsors make the requisite claims that their projects are attending to the economic and social needs of the low-income residents. But it is clear that the priority is fixing the real estate to lure in outside residents who already have jobs — not cultivating the local economy by importing jobs, providing job training or offering micro-loans for small, home-based businesses.

Just as this new, mixed-income social policy is flawed, so too is the architectural and urban design clothing in which it is dressed. The architects designing communities built under these policies are fixated on picturesque architectural qualities that will attract people



Left: The traditional pattern of residential space above shops characterizes the portion of East 14th Street closer to downtown Oakland.

Above: Aerial view of East 14th Street looking toward downtown Oakland



with more discretionary income, rather than on designing neighborhoods that promote economic opportunity for people who are already there.

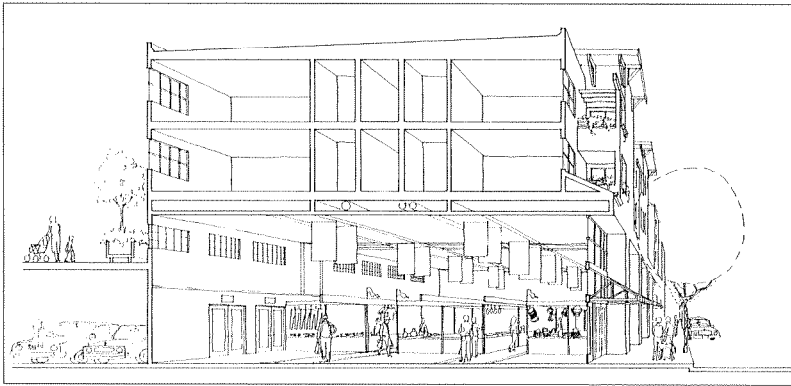
Apparently, the designers sincerely believe that unemployed or underemployed people need frozen, domestic stage sets from yesteryear that make them feel at home with their higher-income, employed new neighbors. Somehow, having a front porch is expected to catapult them into the middle class, which this kind of domestic imagery purports to reflect. In this sense, the Martha Stewarts of urban design are intruding on the lives of people like those that Studs Terkel documents — insulting their culture and ignoring their more significant economic needs.

Suggested Policy Corrections

These social and physical planning policies should be adjusted to accommodate the realities of life for those who must survive on modest incomes. The primary social and economic objective should be to encourage local entrepreneurial activity by existing residents — not architecturally repackaging neighborhoods or relocating people to other neighborhoods. A different set of architectural and urban design responses would facilitate this type of live-work community, responses that might seem downright *grundgy* to the Martha Stewarts of urban design.

Design Issues. Depending on parking requirements, it is possible for dwellings to be ground-related with both front sides and back sides at densities up to thirty-five or forty units per acre. This is a critical threshold because a ground-related dwelling, with a back side that is not visible from the more public street side, offers a stage for untidy, home-based businesses that require manual labor, such as repairing autos or appliances, making clothing or furniture, or providing hair and nail cosmetic services. These are somewhat *grundgy* activities that affect the physical appearance of real estate, but are critical steps towards economic survival for many families.

Alleys, often promoted by New Urbanists, also offer an excellent opportunity to households that need to



Hismen Hin-Nu Terrace

Top: Elevation of the Market Hall before opening

Above: Section through street-level Market Hall and upper-level residential

Photo and graphic: Pyatok Associates

Hismen Hin-Nu Terrace
Oakland, Calif., 1995

Sponsor: East Bay Local Development Corporation, San Antonio Community Development Corporation

Architects: Pyatok Associates, The Ratcliff Architects

engage in these types of messier ventures without destroying the proper, middle-class street appearances so valued by nearby homeowners and policy makers.

All dwellings can be designed, without any appreciable increase in size, so that a portion of the unit can be cordoned off, either for a messy income-producing activity or for rental to a tenant (without necessarily adding a kitchen), which can provide extra income to the primary occupant.

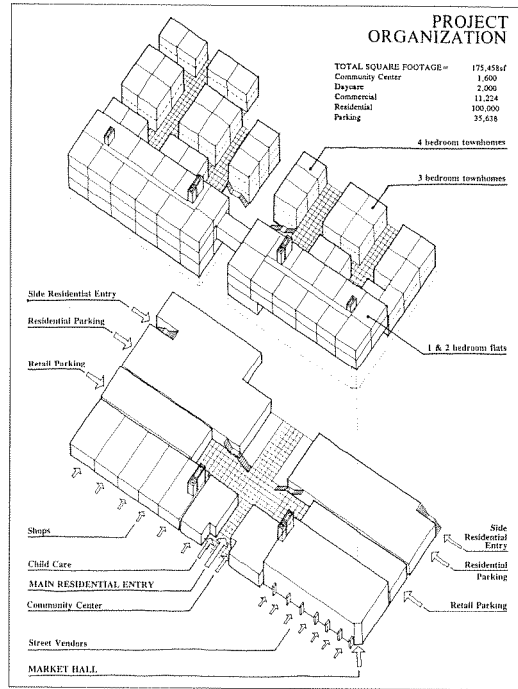
We should not borrow from early twentieth-century, middle-class notions of domesticity, which envisioned neighborhoods as picturesque retreats from messy, industrial work zones and embraced fantasies of craftsman bungalows, mini-mansions and other miniaturized references to the lives of landed gentry. If we must look to the past for models, perhaps we should seek inspiration in the entrepreneurial neighborhoods of our pioneer and urban immigrant days; perhaps we should also look more carefully at urban settlements in today's Third World. We need not mimic or romanticize the conditions and images of struggling under poverty, but we should borrow from them with appro-

priate revisions to meet, within reason, today's health, safety and comfort standards.

Codes, Covenants and Regulations. Perhaps twenty-five percent of today's inner-city residents live under the same difficult economic circumstances early immigrants and pioneers did. But this population is prevented by modern zoning, building codes, lending practices, and insurance and property management policies from having the opportunities that had been available in earlier times — using the home as a homestead, using the block as an incubator of small manufacturing and repair workshops, using the neighborhood as a thriving, messy exporter of goods and services. Instead, these policies and practices regard the neighborhood as a bucolic setting for retreat and home-based escapist consumption, relying upon local, cutesy retail centers to distribute goods that are produced elsewhere.

Zoning should be revised to permit small business uses, even those that might be considered light manufacturing, in inner-city neighborhoods. Rental property managers and lenders should recognize that those struggling up from the bottom are concerned less about the long-term exchange value of their dwellings (which produces income when the dwelling is sold) than they are about how their dwellings can be used to earn income now. Neighborhoods characterized primarily by working features (use value) and less by designed domestic re-sale features (exchange value) are less predictable and less tidy, but just as important economically.

Those of us who produce domestic imagery should carefully scrutinize the bias of worshipping the exchange value of homes as opposed to their use value, a bias that promotes frozen design conventions. As professionals and solid members of the middle class, many of us personally and professionally matured long after the times when such diverse uses were integrated within neighborhoods, blocks and dwellings out of necessity, with little complaint or sense of impropriety. Those of us who matured in places with these conditions must remind our colleagues of the rich opportunities that once existed in such neighborhoods.



Far left: Street vendor stalls
 Left: Project organization
 Below: Ground floor plan
 Photo and graphics:
 Pyatok Associates

Designing Working Neighborhoods

There were good reasons, in the late nineteenth century, for muckrakers and social reformers to see factory districts as unhealthy, polluting and disease-ridden areas. But the gradual and systematic purging of places to earn a livelihood from our neighborhoods eventually became a means to separate classes and races. In the process of sanitizing the city, the poor were not only relegated to their own zones but also denied the opportunity to engage in economic activities that would help them get ahead.

New Urbanists, colluding with HUD and HOPE VI in a quest to domesticate low-income neighborhoods, are not only perpetuating the tradition of displacing the poor but also imposing ever more restrictive architectural and planning straightjackets on those who are privileged to remain, preventing them from engaging in forms of economic self-improvement.

Inner-city redevelopment policies should reflect the cleaner means by which today's small entrepreneurs can produce goods and services manually, particularly at the micro-scales of the home, block and neighborhood. (It is ironic that current attempts to legalize or liberalize

home-based work have emerged as a result of middle-class demands for the right to pursue clean, white-collar occupations from unobtrusive home offices.) In this way we may be able to reinstate a stable foundation for working-class communities to raise their families with dignity, confidence and more self-reliance.

