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Refilling a Neighborhood

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West Coconut Grove stands in stark contrast to the ring of affluent properties that surround it. Retail and entertainment centers, expensive homes, Miami's City Hall and marinas full of custom crafts are within walking distance of this area of boarded-up stores and abandoned shotgun houses. There are well-kept homes and some successful businesses in the West Grove, but the overall impression is one of disinvestment and stagnation.

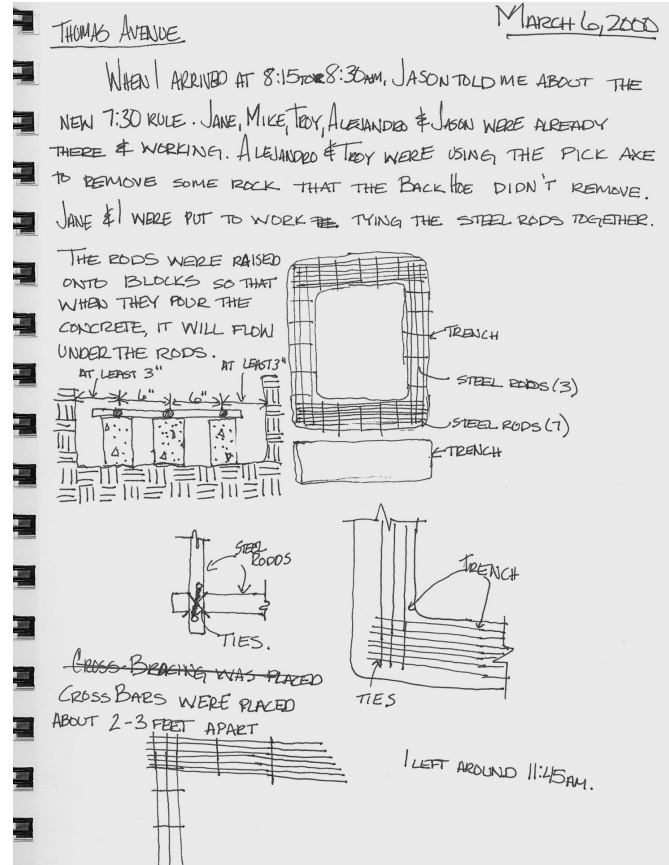
As director of the Center for Urban and Community Design at the University of Miami School of Architecture, I found that this neighborhood provided an opportunity to engage students, faculty and the university itself in understanding the social and environmental conditions in a community struggling for survival, right outside the university's doorstep.

In talking with residents, we learned of the West Grove's heyday in the 1940s as a community of families who looked out for each other from their front porches and church suppers, and an area where dwelling and outgoing were not separate attitudes. One dwelled there in order to have good outgoings with neighbors, friends, aunts, uncles and cousins. This was one of Miami's first neighborhoods and many of the same buildings and families that established its history still exist today. But over the years, with the onslaught of drug-related crime and absentee ownership, the neighborhood population has shrunk from 30,000 to 6,000 and shops that thrived on local customers can no longer survive.

Students in architecture, photography, history, communication and computer graphics were encouraged to undertake projects in this community. Photography students made portraits of people and places; history students recorded oral histories of residents; communication students made videos; computer design students made CD-ROM presentations. Mid- and end-semester reviews of all the projects were held in community meeting places, where students could share their observations with neighborhood residents.

The momentum grew as students from each department presented their work. There was an excitement to the learning as it brought the students out of the classroom and into the world of real people and real places. And as each group shared the enthusiasm for its own work, the relevance for the outcome became clearer.

We also tried to engage the community through this effort. Photographs were given back to their subjects; oral histories were incorporated into videos; words and images, people and places were woven into a documentary that was projected onto a building at a special public presentation one evening.



Most often, increased homeownership is stated as the basis for restoring stability to this community. If vacant lots and abandoned buildings could be developed for low- and moderate-income families, the proportion of stakeholders could increase and the community pride of ownership could return. I suggested that the architecture school offer a studio to design an affordable house in this community.

The students who opted for this studio project were introduced to the community by preparing maps that presented the conditions, uses, historical qualities and future utility of the buildings and properties. Through this exercise, the students observed first-hand the prevalence of the vernacular shotgun houses and experienced the heightened level of social interaction (good outgoings) that occurs on the streets and sidewalks of the West Grove. These observations became important ingredients of and measures for the houses they would design.

After mapping the assets of the existing neighborhood, the students were given the program for the house to be designed. All of the designs incorporated the interior



requirements and gave ample consideration to the houses' relationships to the yard and the street. During design reviews, which were conducted with members of the community, the street frontage, the outgoing part of the dwelling, was discussed the most.

During the course of the design, one community member, a local developer, became enthusiastic enough to offer to build one or more of the houses. He selected two designs. The first was a new two-story shotgun house (long and narrow with rooms stacked to one side) and the second was a renovated one-story shotgun with additions to make it a courtyard home.

The two-story shotgun house was designed by a team of four students thrilled to see their design take shape before graduating from architecture school. They threw themselves into the process of designing and redesigning, permitting and refining again, and eventually building their house. Many other students joined in the labor force to help and the presence of construction dirt in the classroom added a new dimension to the school.

Students who had been campus-bound (dwellers) and

were first introduced to the neighborhood under the protection of local escorts developed long-lasting relationships in this community and came and went with ease (outgoers). The community responded to the long-term commitment of the students and has now begun to trust the university with helping to plan for its future.

We hope to continue this program of student projects in the community. At each level—individual, the course of study, the student body and the university—the experience of going out from established environments to others nearby is well worth the effort.

Opposite: Student notebook documenting construction process. Courtesy Richard Shepard.

Above: The affordable house, designed and built by students. Courtesy Richard Shepard.