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Author

Dauids, Rene

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ADAPTING TRADITIONAL PROTOTYPES TO CONTEMPORARY URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS: DAYBREAK GROVE

The use of historical models in design is sometimes challenged because contemporary life is assumed to be fundamentally different from that of the traditional societies that developed them. However, the persistence of social patterns of behavior is evidence of a continuing need to assess both the architectural forms that have sustained them in the past and social changes from which new ones may develop.

The Resilience of Social Patterns

For centuries in rural hamlets and fishing villages, everyone knew everyone else, people stayed close to home and members of extended families lived close to one another. Collective memory and shared experience gave meaning and continuity to the randomness of everyday life.

Today, many people have retreated into suburban tract homes and regard their neighbors with suspicion. Because the average American household moves every few years, established communities of the sort found in primitive societies are difficult to maintain. Nostalgia for the intimacy of small-town life has inspired much sentimental writing on urban issues and promotion of what Deyan Sudjic has called the “community myth.”

Providing opportunities for community interaction, or “building community,” has become a much-discussed goal for design professionals involved in the provision of affordable housing. Their arguments are based on the assumption that the precarious lives led by improv-

erished people require the solidarity and support of those in similar circumstances.

Paradoxically, affordable housing is subsidized and rented to low-income families for only as long as their annual household income remains below certain predetermined income levels. Therefore, established communities in affordable housing developments can only thrive on economic failure and permanent dependency, the very conditions housing professionals should be working to eliminate.

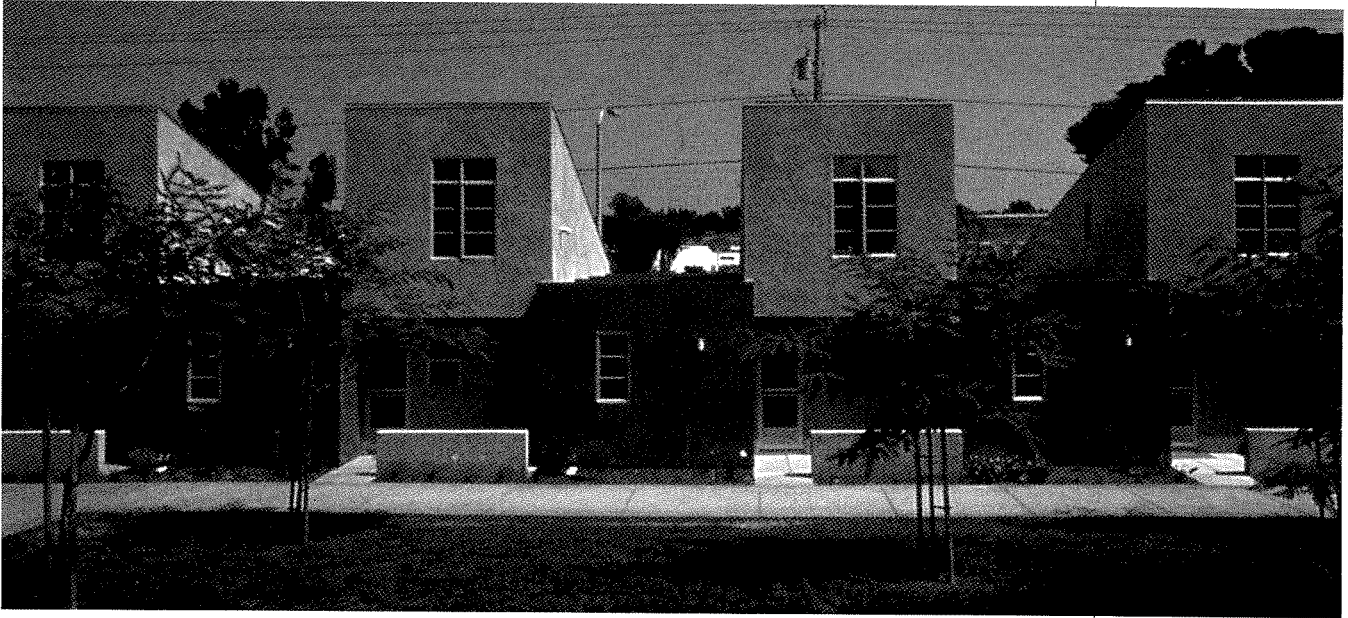
Adding to the many narratives of loss that have pervaded urban literature in the twentieth century, Leon Krier has written that “the myth of unlimited technical progress and development has brought the most ‘developed’ countries to the brink of physical and cultural exhaustion.” Krier believes that the return to reason can only be achieved with a retreat to the idioms of the pre-industrial era.

The recent revolution in communication technology has caused other designers to question the need for physical proximity altogether because the social conditions that made it necessary or desirable have disappeared. But to insist that technology has eliminated the need for human contact is, at best, an over-simplification. Contemporary culture is complex and diverse; many who live in traditional societies use advanced technology while those in the more developed world yearn for simpler ways of life.

The impact of advanced communication technologies on contemporary life needs to be placed in perspective. Access to them is presently limited to only a small fraction of the world’s population, and it remains to be seen whether computer modems, if and when they are universally available, will modify individual lives beyond recognition.

Below, opposite page:
Daybreak Grove
Photos and graphic: René Davids, Christine Killory





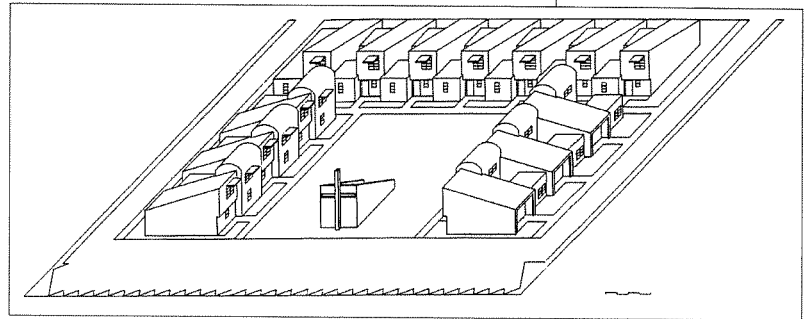
Sudjic correctly warns against the futility of attempting to recover a vanished past, but there are indications that people's desire for more social contact remains strong. The emergence of new building types, such as patient-family guest houses, which allow family members to assist with the care of hospitalized relatives, or the revival of others, such as coffee houses and farmers markets, are evidence of the desire for more social interaction at all levels of human existence. Margaret Crawford has written about the resilient urbanism that flourishes in marginal or overlooked areas of cities, from spaces under freeways colonized by street vendors to yard sales on suburban front lawns.³

Daybreak Grove

In the design of Daybreak Grove in Escondido, California, a thirteen-unit affordable housing project, my firm reinterpreted historical precedents to protect the privacy of the family unit, while creating opportunities for parents and children to meet and play. The project was commissioned by the North County Housing Foundation for low-income families, particularly single-parent families headed by women.

The complex was influenced by three important spatial and architectural constructs:

- the urban structure of traditional Latin American cities, where urban plazas are the focus of community life;



- the Carthusian Monastery, in which individual residential cells with attached private gardens are grouped around a cloistered court; and
- the California bungalow court, where a central space enveloped by houses is the primary organizing element.

Plazas While large plazas are no longer feasible as grand civic gestures in Southern California, scaled-down versions — *placitas* or *plazuelas* — can be adapted to evolving urban contexts. The traditional urban plaza is a void in the midst of dense urban fabric, but *placitas* in New Mexico are small plaza-like spaces in domestic situations adapted to the hybrid social and urban fabric that evolved as New Mexico became more culturally diverse.

This urban tradition is embraced in Daybreak Grove by organizing all units around a *placita*. The reinterpretation of the Spanish legacy of urban planning ensures the continuity of a tradition of civic values



Above: Daybreak Grove
Photo: René Davids, Christine Killory

and emphasizes its importance as a living heritage that can be passed along to succeeding generations as it is adapted to the scale and structure of contemporary neighborhoods.

The Carthusian Monastery. In Escondido, a sprawling medium-sized Southern California city with suburban fabric, the adaptation in urban form that must be made for a low-income housing complex requires considering the balance between the needs the individual family and the collective — a balance that the Carthusian monastery can provide. The monastery's potential as a model for residential design was already tested by Le Corbusier through projects like the Immeuble Villas.

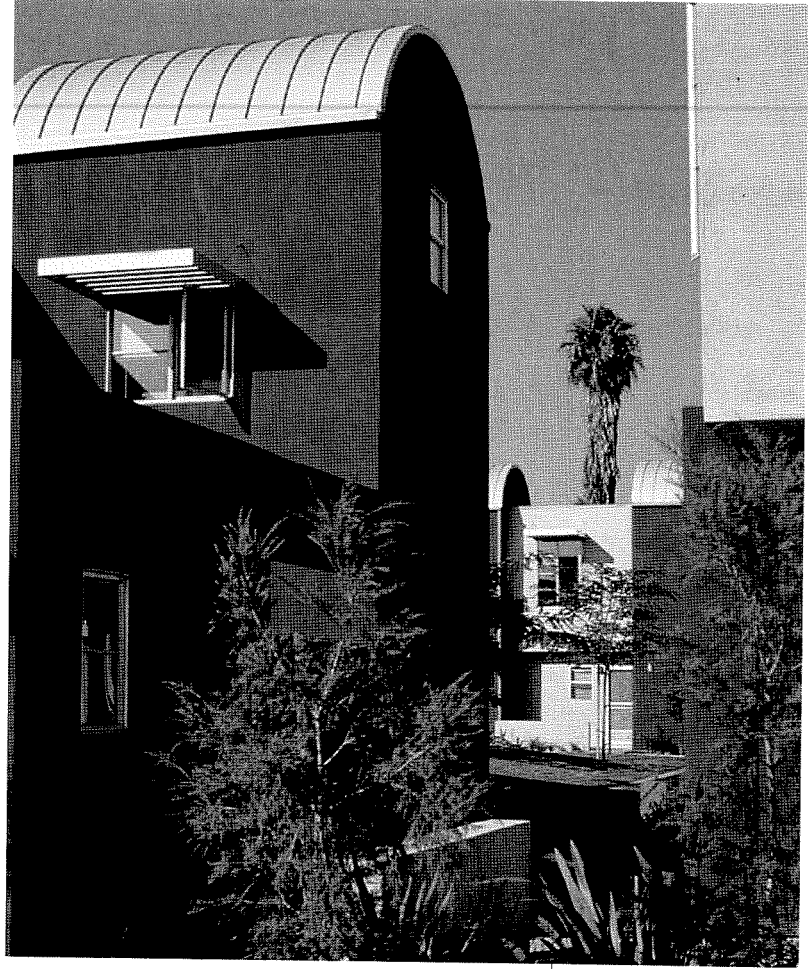
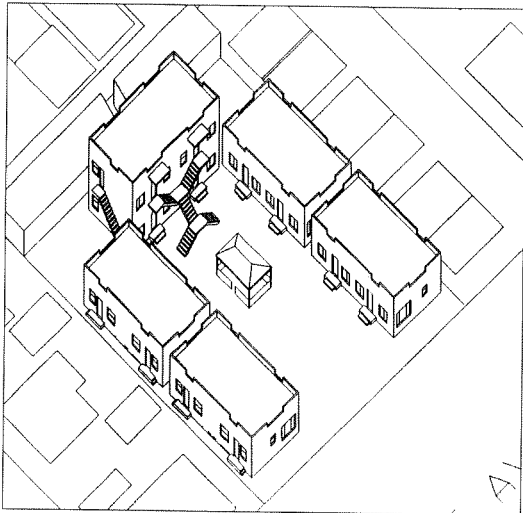
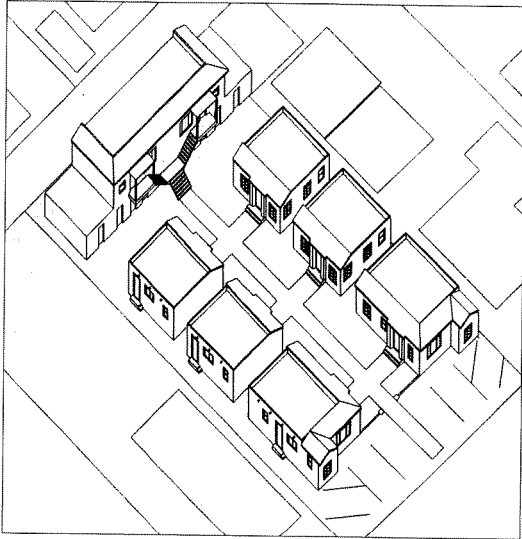
At Daybreak Grove, the typological influence of the Carthusian monastery is evident in the design of the individual units, each of which is configured around a small internal patio, providing the family with a private outdoor living space, and natural light and cross ventilation in every room. The residents are likely to be immigrants from Central and South America, and the rich variety of private and public outdoor spaces in the complex — front yard and porch, back yard and porch, common courtyard and private patio — encourage them to establish bonds of mutual support.

The Bungalow Court. The bungalow court is a configuration of small attached or free-standing residential units surrounding a central court which, like the Carthusian monastery, sustains an equilibrium between individual and collective space.

Since the early years of this century, these inexpensive living environments have fostered residential privacy and a strong sense of personal and family identity in urbanizing areas of California. The flexible size and layouts of bungalow courts allow them to be easily integrated with other housing types, including single-family homes, and adapted to a variety of urban situations, from transitional neighborhoods to established residential areas. The inherent adaptability of the type allows Daybreak Grove to flourish in an urban context otherwise devoid of distinctive residential character.

Daybreak Grove is ideally suited to its residents and location, but the historical typologies that informed its design should not be regarded as templates to be adopted in all circumstances. The same historical models might not be appropriate for other constituencies, neighborhoods or geographical locations.

Formulaic solutions should not be inflexibly applied to complex urban and human situations. Contrary to the



teachings of the Modern movement and the preaching of neo-traditionalists, architecture does not determine human behavior. However desirable from the designer's perspective, a particular pattern of settlement will only be successful if the cultural predisposition and the desire to adapt it are already present in the community.

Notes

1. Deyan Sudjic, *The 100 Mile City* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992), 280.
2. Leon Krier, *Drawings: 1967-1980* (New York: AAM Editions, 1981), p. XXV.
3. Margaret Crawford, "Contesting the Public Realm: Struggles Over Public Space in Los Angeles," in *Journal of Architectural Education* 49:1 (September 1995), 4-9.

Project Credits

Daybreak Grove, Escondido, Calif.
 Client: North County Housing Foundation
 Architects: Davids Killory, René Davids, AIA, Christine Killory, RIBA (principals in charge)
 Associate Architect: Studio E
 Landscape Architect: Leslie Ryan

Left, above: Daybreak Grove. Photos: René Davids, Christine Killory

Far left: Diagrams of two California bungalow courts. Graphics: Steve Gavino