

Over the centuries we have seen tremendous advancements in the development of materials, construction methods and technical triumphs over the stresses of our environment. Yet, with this, we seemed to have forgotten even the most basic, fundamental laws of conscious architecture. Instead of maximizing the efficiency of our housing, we have maximized our dependency on artificial heating and cooling, gazed blindly at the constantly evolving role of “family”, and have opted for high maintenance and replacement costs over well built, long lasting and truthful materials. To challenge, with any degree of reality, these trends in modern living, one would need to insert a new kind of architecture that could understand our past while adhering to today’s standard of feasibility and economy.

Defining the structure of families can no longer (nor has it ever) be distilled to one, encompassing category. Demographic studies of Martin Luther King Plaza indicate households headed primarily by single mothers with one or more children under the age of 19. Although statistics do not suggest an investigation into multiple housing types, more abstract or less prescriptive types will weather future typological changes and thus facilitate a more self-sufficient neighborhood. An objective of this project is not to obliterate firmly rooted ethnic ties, but encourage a more inclusive neighborhood environment. These needs necessitated a design both flexible and efficient.

Typical housing types of today parade bloated plans, sprawling out in every direction to accommodate every indulgent whim. *This* project defines the basic elements of living, trimming away the periphery that inhibits legibility and clarity. What remains, exploits the

potential of the open plan and the evolving nature of what a *family* is and will become.

Perhaps the most tangible aspect of this project is the chosen palette of materials. Materiality is of utmost importance to the project for reasons including its ability to communicate context, exhibit qualities of strength and longevity, reduce maintenance and display the wonders of their inherent beauty. The language of architecture cannot be separated from the order of the material. With this premise, the design of the units developed through a thorough understanding of brick, timber, concrete and glass. In a design conference in 1972, Louis Kahn eloquently stated,

“...Design demands an understanding of the order. When you are designing in brick, you must ask brick what it wants or what it can do. Brick will say, *I like an arch*. You say, *But arches are difficult to make, they cost more money*. I think you could use concrete across your opening equally well. But the brick says, *I know you’re right, but if you ask me what I like, I like an arch*. And you say, *Why be so stubborn?* And the brick says, *May I just make a little remark? Do you realize you are talking about a beam, and the beam of brick is an arch*. That’s knowing the order, it’s knowing its nature, it’s knowing what it can do and respecting that. If you are dealing with brick, don’t use it as another kind of secondary availability. You’ve got to put it into glory because that’s the only position it deserves.” (Wurman 152)

Brick, the primary building module is both structure and wall. Formed of the earth, rising from the earth to construct planes, surface, texture and when allowed, an elegant arched opening. Joseph Rykwert in his book, *The Idea of a Town*, writes, “the foundation rites of a city provide a key to

its history.” (30) It is important to understand that the transient nature of how we live must not be limited by a particular instant in time. Thus I imagined this project over the course of its lifetime: the mass against the light. The ruins left behind are the giver of new architectural life. Understanding a material does not give one free reign to corrupt, but unlock its potential.

Designing and building in a neighborhood of historic, finely crafted structures of the mid 18th century presented several difficult dilemmas. First, how does one translate that language into present-day terms and secondly, how does one develop a similar level of diversity and history between the individual units, so as not to present the street with a monotonous façade of endless doors and windows. By thinking of the units as an assembly of parts, the architecture developed both a level of coherency as well as diversity. The kit of parts include concrete lintels, steel lintels, prefabricated timber floor and ceiling trusses, concrete block and brick. “They are similar but not the same, repetitive without being endless. Doorways, windows, frames, fences and other details vary...they do get along with each other just fine.” (Jacobs)

Although the plans clearly delineate circulation and an efficient arrangement of spaces, they present a limited scope of the work. One can neither perceive scale, nor comfort or emotion. City life is more than the lines on paper. It’s the commerce of the local businesses, the view through a window, the shade from a tree. These moments are interwoven with the architecture to sculpt a street’s identity. It is with these that we begin to realize its success.