PLACES FOR PEOPLE
Housing in Historical Context
in Old Town
Alexandria, Virginia
by
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Master of Architecture

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The aim of this design thesis was to look carefully at the historical environment of the chosen site, and with the understanding developed from this exploration, to design a group of houses that would answer to the desires of the individual and the needs of the collective, or simply: to create places where people would wish to dwell.

"Houses must be special places within places, separately the center of the world for their inhabitants, yet carefully related to the larger place in which they belong." ¹
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The town of Alexandria was established in 1749 on the west bank of the Potomac River. The planters in the region had seen the need for a new town and had petitioned the Virginia Assembly for its establishment. A tobacco warehouse already existed on the site, a point where local crops were inspected and shipped. The town was laid out according to a grid pattern with straight streets, right-angled intersections and rectangular building lots, this type of plan being popular with the eighteenth century town planners of the region.

The original plan contained 84 half-acre lots. The buyer of a lot was required to build on his lot within two years of its purchase. The building could be of brick, stone or wood, at least twenty feet square and nine feet high, with a brick or stone chimney. No one was allowed to buy more than two lots. A half a block (two lots) was set aside for a courthouse and a market place.

The act establishing the town also named trustees to lay down regulations to ensure an orderly development of the new town. These rules resulted in solid rows of townhouses built along the street line. Some houses were built or begun before the restrictive resolution was adopted, showing interesting exceptions in the order.

Alexandria grew into a handsome town, trade being the reason for its prosperity. Soon the large lots were divided into smaller plots, on which were erected townhouses adjacent to each other on the street line, with gardens in the back. Prosperity and population growth also required extensions of the town boundaries. The original gridiron plan was expanded in three directions over the years.

In 1791 Alexandria was included in the new District of Columbia, and the construction of public buildings was prohibited on the Virginia side of the river. This restriction greatly strengthened the residential character of the town, which experienced a building boom in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Another such surge came after 1846, when the Virginia portion of the capital was given back to Virginia. The unique residential character is still evident today, for Alexandria never became a great commercial or industrial center. The pace of economic growth slowed down in the early 1800s, principally because the Potomac Canal failed to link the region with the Midwest. The town's importance as a major port declined steadily.

This development was probably fortunate, for otherwise the colonial city could hardly exist anymore as we see it today; the period of mercantile expansion in the late nineteenth century would have changed the city dramatically. As it is, the different historical layers are still apparent in Alexandria's Old Town, which continues to be a living urban community, not a museum. The town has preserved its unique character and a sense of special place. This should not only be preserved by every design, but interpreted in a new way. Understanding and respecting the context should be a design basis.

What makes Old Town unique is not an easy question. A great deal of the character has to do with spatial relationships that are perhaps also apparent in other towns and cities. Gradually some patterns begin to emerge, however, that are distinctly characteristic of Old Town: ways of treating the block, the street, the individual house... these are all important in the process of preserving the quality and sense of place that tell people where they are.
RHYTHM OF THE STREET

The streetscape of Old Town is characterized by the pattern of houses built on narrow lots perpendicular to the street. The street elevation of a block is not an uninterrupted wall, it consists of several related parts that together make a whole. The houses are often attached, sometimes separated by gaps, and usually varied in materials, color, height, or detailing. This differentiation of units creates a distinct rhythm and gives a human scale to the street.

HEIGHT VARIETY

The narrowness of the houses in a block allows for a great variety in the height or the roof form of neighboring buildings, without destroying the overall unity. A continuous eave height is not very important in a street elevation that consists of several attached narrow units; some variety in roof pitches and heights can actually add to the character of the street. However, when a unit is extended to fill all of the street elevation of a block, the traditional rhythmic street pattern is broken, and the new addition often appears too massive in all its dimensions.

STREET DETAIL

"A city is a place where a small boy, as he walks through it, may see something that will tell him what he wants to do his whole life." 9

The street is a place for happenings. There should always be something to look at, to catch your interest. In the traditional parts of Old Town the edge between house and street is treated with care and detail, extending the realm of the house to the street. The houses always offer more to the street than just a blank wall, letting you catch glimpses of gardens and views through windows. Thus, the edge is a place where the realms of the house and the street overlap, and it needs to be detailed accordingly.

GAPS

Narrow gaps between the houses offer sudden views to the interior of block. These glimpses to spaces beyond the urban room of the street extend the spatial experience of the passer-by; the street boundary is clearly defined by the houses, but at the same time you are allowed to see a view of an outside in an inside, to scenes of stories unfolding...
ENTRY TRANSITION

Entering a home is a sequence of thresholds: you open a gate, step off the brick sidewalk to a path, go up some steps, pause inside a porch... Even when there is very little space between the sidewalk and the front door, a place of transition is created by a few steps turning from the door. These steps are treated almost like porch, they are a place for stopping, sitting down to read the paper, or growing flowers.

MATERIALS

"It is essential, above all, that the ground level surfaces we walk on... be soft enough, at least, to show the passage of time, in gradual undulations and unevenness, that tell the story of a thousand passing feet, and make it clear that buildings are like people - not impervious and alien, but alive, changing with time, remembering the paths which people tread." 10

The aging of materials - not just on the floor, but on the walls, benches, doorknobs - contributes to the historical layering of a city. The signs of age show that the city is a changing, growing thing, molded by people. How the different materials have been put together tells of the care and concern people have had for the place where they live.

FLOUNDER HOUSES

"... a half house formed as if a gabled structure were split down its center... It is believed that this unique form originated as a result of the early ordinance requiring each lot in the new town be built on by the purchaser within a limited time period. As a result, a rear wing was erected to validate the deed, but the main structure was never constructed." 11

"Emptiness may resound without sound, may be filled by its potential to be filled, and make open what is complete... Architecture with emptiness is thus always unfinished: if not literally then by the space it makes and the potential it shows. We become engaged with the intervals and open ends." 12

VIEW TO WATER

Alexandria is a river town, and the presence of water can be felt several blocks from the waterfront. Long straight streets perpendicular to the water's edge grant you views of the river that was the main reason why the town was founded in the first place. The water draws people to its edge; it is coming from somewhere and going to another place, and the river connects the town to a larger order, to all the places it has run through and is going to.
The site slopes gently towards the river. It is surrounded on the south and north sides by several full-grown trees. Two trees also shade the grassy patch in the middle of the lot.

The neighboring blocks to the north and south are residential, built in the 1970's, with fenced-in backyards facing the alley in the south and the front facades lining Queen Street to the north. The elevations of the houses in these residential blocks follow the traditional rhythmic pattern of Old Town, but the treatment of the whole block is very different, and it does not give as much to the street as the traditional blocks do. The separation of public and private domains is rather crude, expressed with "No Trespassing"-signs and high, forbidding backyard fences facing the street. The treatment of the edge where the house meets the sidewalk is not very skilled either; the human scale is interrupted in each house unit with the large scale of the automobile: wide garage doors.

To the west on Lee Street are small shops and restaurants, and the block is broken into several building units. One of these is a three-story building with carefully detailed brickwork and an emphasized, almost tower-like corner.

On the east, riverside, over Union Street the parking lot is bordered by a box-like office building of dark red brick. The northeast corner on this side is open, however, offering a wide view of Founder's Park and beyond it the river. This view gives a very strong diagonal orientation to the whole site.
Walls around a courtyard
Public place
Something to the street
View to the river
Diagonal movement through
Raised "street"
Thresholds
Degrees of privacy
Orientation to the sun
Two considerations prompted the design: the interpretation of the traditional ways of treating the street and the house in such a way that would add positively to the townscape, and the creation of a sequence of public and private places for people, to be experienced through series of thresholds.

The project consists primarily of housing for small families, but the street level is for retail and services, much like in the traditional houses of Old Town. The building occupies the perimeter of the half-block site, leaving an open courtyard in the middle. The courtyard is on various levels, providing spaces with different degrees of privacy, and also allowing light to the parking area underneath. The site slopes considerably, and because of this the units step down towards the riverside. The units are paired and have gaps between them. This creates a rhythmic pattern in the elevation, very similar to the traditional buildings of Old Town.

The first level above ground is public, with shops, a day-care center, an art gallery, and a café around the central courtyard and on the three street sides. The alley side is more residential in character, with home-offices that are connected to the flat above. The office and the flat can also be totally separated to form two different apartments.

Under the public shop level is a level for parking, storage and laundry rooms. The parking level has space for sixty-eight cars and is entered from the southeast corner of the site.

The central courtyard is a public place: a place for people to gather in, to shop, to visit the gallery, to drink a cup of coffee on the café terrace, or to watch the children in the playground. The courtyard can be entered from the southwest and northeast corners to encourage diagonal movement through the space. A stair/elevator tower occupies part of the southwest corner; the northeast corner is open except for a pool and trees which connect the site with the park across the road, and the river beyond the park. Glimpses of the river can be seen from the courtyard, but a better view opens from the terrace of the tower, or from the private roof gardens of the townhouses.

Housing is situated above the public shop level. A walkway wraps all around the courtyard like a semi-public raised street, with porches and places for plants and benches. The bearing walls of white brick that separate the units extend to the walkway, creating a rhythm of walls and openings. The infill walls between the bearing walls are reddish-brown structural clay tile and glass block. All the flats are entered from the walkway via porches. The townhouses above the flats are entered from the walkway also, through gaps between units, where a flight of stairs leads to the street side away from the courtyard.

The housing units are small, to respond to the need of housing for small families. The flats have one bedroom, the townhouses either two or three, depending on whether the living room is double-height or not. The units differ according to their orientation; all the living rooms face south or west.

Each unit has some private or semi-private outdoor space, either a porch off the walkway, a roof garden, or a balcony. Most units have at least two outdoor spaces, usually a porch (semi-private), and a balcony (private). All the outdoor spaces are places that catch sunlight, only the north elevations have no porches or balconies.

The interior of a unit is divided in two by a white brick wall that runs the whole length of the unit, ending in a brick chimney. This wall separates the entrance room from the more private rooms. Against the wall are built-in shelves for storing books or anything the occupant of the apartment chooses to exhibit. The entrance room becomes a place that tells something of the person who lives in that particular home.

"...We approach the designed physical environment first and foremost as a setting for human behavior. Thus we consider the design of housing primarily as the design of a place for eating, sleeping, loving, playing, socializing, and raising children." 13
Entrance Room

The entrance room is a place of transition between the porch and the private rooms of the home, a place that greets you and says welcome. Light enters from both ends, and narrow slits of light also break the length of the room. The wall between the other rooms and the entrance room is thick, and in this thickness are shelves for storing favorite objects...

"Architecture need do no more than assist man's homecoming." 14

"We must prepare the dwelling only to the point at which man can take over." 15

Roof Terrace

A roof terrace opens from the upstairs hallway of the townhouse. Part of the terrace is glass-covered like a conservatory, and on both sides of this are two open-air terraces. The terraces can have different characters, depending on the interests of the person who dwells in the home; one can be for growing herbs or flowers, the other for entertaining guests.
4 Ibid.
5 Reps, pp. 207-209.
6 Cox, p. vi.
7 Reps, p. 209.
15 Ibid., p. 76.


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