Title
Martha Steward vs. Studs Terkel? / New Urbanism and Inner Cities Neighborhoods that Work [Speaking of Places]

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2b67z1kn

Journal
Places, 13(1)

ISSN
2164-7798

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Publication Date
2000-07-01

Peer reviewed
Martha Stewart vs. Studs Terkel?
New Urbanism and Inner Cities Neighborhoods that Work

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We all recognize that urban infill and suburban sprawl are two sides of the same coin. But the task of urban infill development is hopeless because of many decades of systematic disinvestment 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 start 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 reviving neighborhoods as 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 inculcating home-grown or neighborhood-based businesses.

The latest efforts to refocus attention on the inner city — whether by the Congrass for the New Urbanism, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or urban revitalization 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 homogenous, 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 1988 VFA program does, or making one-time reimbursements for relocation in order to make room for people with stable and higher incomes, force the same painful social and economic costs that people forced to move experienced under earlier forms of urban renewal. It was 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.

The sponsors of V3 programs 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 in 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 fretted on picturesque architectural qualities that will attract people...
with more discretionary incomes, 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—involving 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 grungy to the Martha Stewarts of urban design.

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

All dwellings can be designed, without any appreciable increase in size, so that a substantial portion of the unit can be conditioned 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 tinsy, industrial work zones and embraced fantasies of craftsman bungalows, mini-mansions and other miniar- ized 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 romanti- cize 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 immi-
grants and pioneers did. But this population is pre-
vented by modern zoning, building codes, lending practices, and insurance and property management policies from having the opportunities that had been avail-
able in earlier times — using the home as a home-
stead, using the block as an incubator of small manu-
facturing 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 bacillus setting for retreat and home-based escape consumption, relying upon local, cutey 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 manu-
facturing, in inner-city neighborhoods. Rental prop-
erty 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 character-
ized 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 condi-
tions must remind our colleagues of the rich opportu-
nities that once existed in such neighborhoods.
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 DOT in a quest to domesticate low-income neighborhoods, are not only perpetuating the tradition of displacing the poor but also imposing even more restrictive architectural and planning strictures 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 legitimize or liberalize bottom-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 reinitialize a stable foundation for working-class communities to raise their families with dignity, confidence and more self-reliance.