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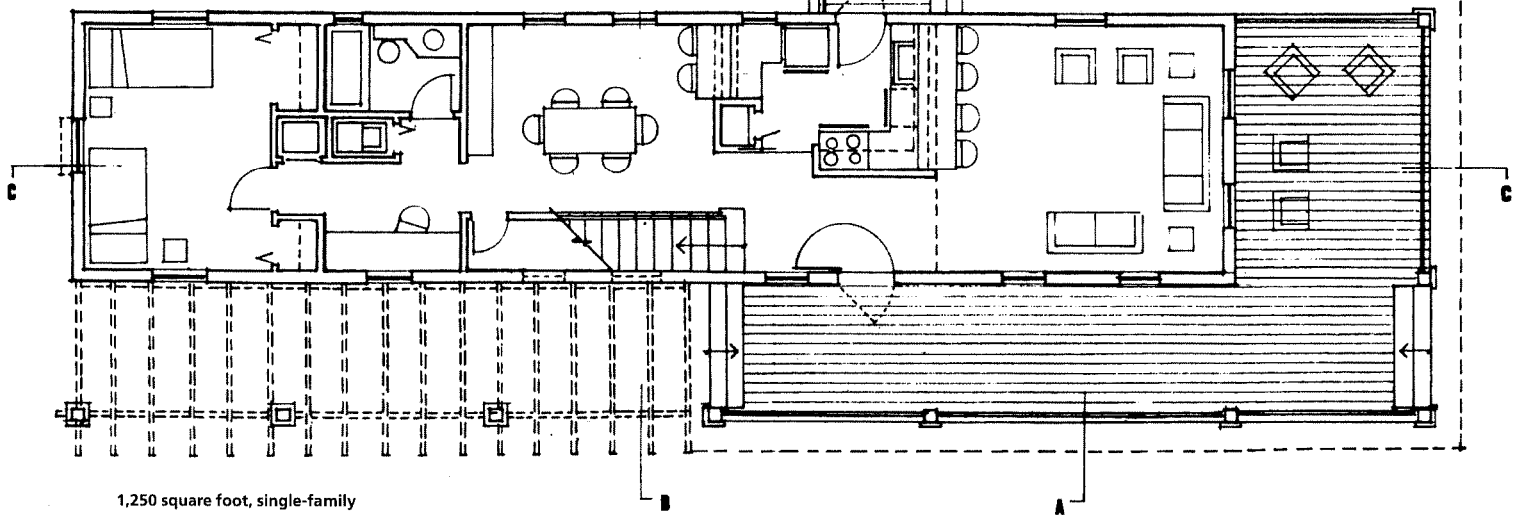0731-0455

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Unacceptable

1,250 square foot, single-family wood-frame house, with typological ties to shotgun, camelback and side porch houses of the American Southeast. Illustrations courtesy author, unless indicated otherwise.

Echoes

Sounding the depths of the contextual response in subsidized affordable infill housing

In May, 1992, the city of Delray Beach and its Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) held a competition for the design of affordable housing, to be built on scattered vacant lots throughout Mount Olive, a turn-of-the-century, African-American neighborhood. The brief encouraged contextual proposals.

We responded by turning to examples of the shotgun, a house type brought to the Florida Gold Coast by its earliest African American (Caribbean) settlers — and the Charleston single house, a type indigenous to a region with history and climate greatly similar to those of Mount Olive. Our competition entry

We believed the authenticity of the
and climatic appropriateness,
expressing the most compelling

transformed those types into a building similar, but in no way identical to, the houses currently existing in the neighborhood.

We believed the historic authenticity of the shotgun and the urbanism and climatic appropriateness of both types were vehicles for expressing the most compelling elements of Mount Olive. We hoped that the proposal of a contemporary house drawing upon elements of each while mimicking neither would contribute to the development of the neighborhood in a manner respectful of its context. It was our hope that residents would find self affirmation and empowerment in our proposal.

The jury awarded our small house a first prize. During the awards ceremony, Christopher Brown,

Events in Delray Beach have forced us to reflect on the current interest of the profession in a regionalist architecture of culture. They have raised important questions relative to the generation and communication of meaning in architecture. The competition results have caused us to re-examine our belief that such meaning is fluid, something that emerges from history and use in a specific geographic and cultural context. Our proposal effectively argued that a change in use and a redefinition of context might, over time, also result in a change in meaning. Yet the results of the competition have prompted us to reconsider the use of building typology not only as a contextual design tool, but also as a way of defying the limitations that adherence to the socially con-

Typical shotgun and "cracker" houses in the Mount Olive neighborhood, Delray Beach, FL.
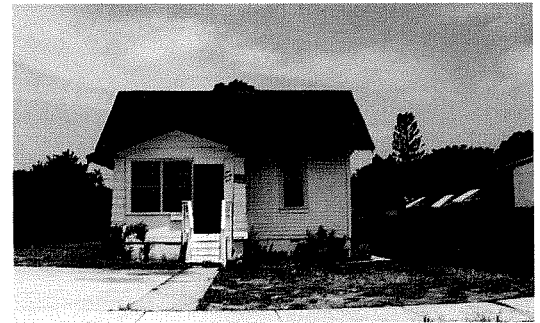
director of the Delray Beach CRA, explained to us that judges saw merit in its understated, dignified approach to filling missing teeth in the fabric of a historic neighborhood while enhancing the value of a unique place.

The cold reception that greeted the announcement of the competition results took its sponsors (not to mention us) completely by surprise. Prospective African-American residents of Mount Olive have refused to commission any building with a resemblance to the quarters of their ancestors, explaining that houses with such clear lineage to a slave past could only serve to stigmatize and marginalize them further. As a result, our house has not been built.

structed meaning of a built form (the shotgun house) clearly places on an interpretive community (the residents of Mount Olive).

The outcome of the Delray competition has also caused us to examine the place of historic preservation in the context of government-subsidized, affordable housing. And it has prompted us to scrutinize the modern insistence of our profession on forging a link, however uneasy, between the form and content of our work. For even in the face of empirical evidence indicating that a conjunction of the two is less than ideal, a Romantic separation of form and content in contemporary practice has proven increasingly unsatisffactory for both architect and client.

shotgun, and its urbanism were vehicles for elements of Mount Olive.

We are convinced, in short, that the Delray competition is not simply another instance in a long history of miscues between architects and clients. Rather, it is the theater in which a fundamental tension in the direction of current architectural practice has inadvertently been revealed.
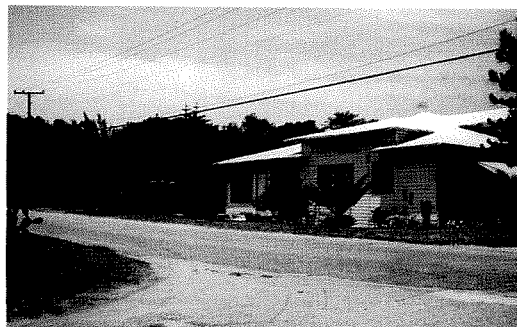
Mount Olive and Shotguns: Architecture and the Racial Past

Originally built amid pineapple and mango groves in the 1890s, Mount Olive centers around (and unofficially takes its name from) the Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church, home of the oldest African-American congregation still active in Palm Beach County. The neighborhood, a product of a deeply segregated South, was purposely set so far

apart from white Delray (at the eastern edge of the Everglades) that it virtually defined the frontier of civilization at the time of its founding.

Mount Olive was one of many Colored Towns whose labor supported the agricultural and tourist economies of the Florida Gold Coast through the mid-twentieth century. Despite far-reaching changes wrought by the civil rights movement, contemporary Mount Olive is full heir to a history of post-Emancipation Proclamation racial injustice.

Currently, Mount Olive's housing stock consists primarily of single-family detached residences one or two stories tall (wood-frame Florida Cracker houses as well as Mission-style

masonry houses). Lots range from 50 to 75 feet wide but are uniformly 130 feet deep. Much of the neighborhood's social life centers on the street, played out on front porches, yards and driveways. The houses, which are in varying stages of disrepair, comprise the fabric of a historic neighborhood in peril of disintegration — a neighborhood languishing as it loses its upwardly mobile population to the suburbs.

Shotgun houses are common in this neighborhood. Uniformly one room wide, extended in length (and sometimes height, as in the camelback variation), they can be found throughout the South, precisely in African-American neighborhoods like Mount Olive. Most were constructed as slave and agriworker housing during the 1800s,

but variations on the type were built during much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The type has subsequently been the basis for considerable contemporary design exploration across a range of regional, cultural and economic contexts.

Both the shotgun and the Charleston single house are uniquely suited to a sub-tropical, urban context, such as Mount Olive. Both have deep porches and cross ventilation in every room. Their narrow structural bays and simple framing systems make them strong in the face of hurricane winds, as well as inexpensive and easy to build. Both types were traditionally erected without front setbacks on contiguous narrow lots. These houses generated tight, pedestrian-scale environments whose

focus was life on the street as filtered by the semi-public space of their front and side porches.

Historians of vernacular architecture have unearthed considerable evidence that the shotgun house has its origins in a West African residential prototype and was first brought to the New World in the 1700s by the West Indian slave trade.[1] Today the shotgun is widely regarded as a significant African contribution to the American built landscape, an expression of African culture carried on in the face of extraordinary strife. Nevertheless, dismissive of the early origins of the shotgun, and despite the fact that our proposal married it to a house that historically housed both rich and poor, Mount Olive residents persist in rejecting it, focusing on the social meaning of its more recent history.

Aerial view of Mount Olive neighborhood.
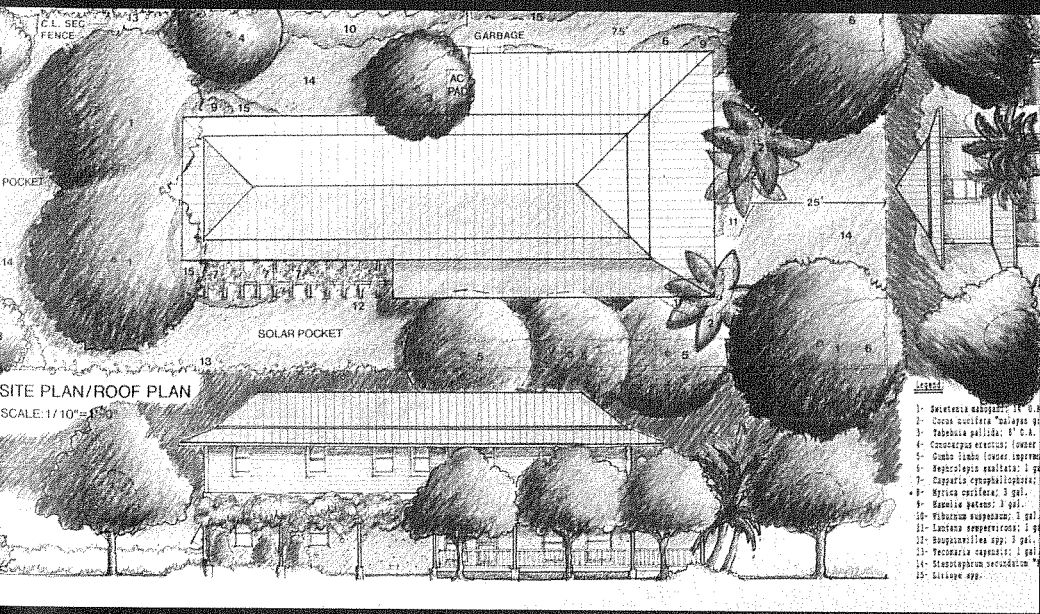

The Delray Beach Competition

The Delray Beach competition was part of a program to provide well-designed, affordable, single-family houses for residents with annual incomes ranging from $17,000 to $25,000. City officials sought to assemble a portfolio of designs for the southwestern district of the city, which includes approximately 9,000 residents, some 3,000 homes and some 300 scattered, buildable lots. Pending land acquisition by the city, prospective residents, pre-qualified by the CRA and state lending agencies, would be free to choose a new home from among the winning designs. City-approved builders would then cooperate in constructing the homes.

The competition, whose stated intent was "to upgrade traditionally neglected neighborhoods through new affordable construction," was announced in spring, 1992. Organized by Elizabeth Debs, a Delray Beach architect with affordable housing experience, it drew 45 completed submittals. The brief explicity insisted on affordability and ease of maintenance. It encouraged, but did not require, a contextual response.

Four entries were awarded first prize, ours the first among that group. We proposed a $40,000, three-bedroom, two-bath, 1,250 square foot, single-family wood-frame house, with typological ties to shotgun, camelback and side porch houses. It was intended neither as a literal reconstruction of neighborhood structures nor as a romanticized, sanitized version of the past. Rather, it represented a desire to reinforce and validate the morphology of a significant place by adding to it in (relative) kind, while offering new housing stock that included spatial variety and modern conveniences.

Our interest in the Delray competition came from a conviction that urban infill presupposes the neighborhood as a social construct and artifact worthy of conservation. We believe that designing within recognizable building traditions allows forms to become the repositories of multiple simultaneous meanings, resulting in a richness, at both urban and architectural scales, of incalculable worth.

Our proposal for a shotgun – side porch house did not intend to freeze Mount Olive in time, either physically or psychologically. We hoped to
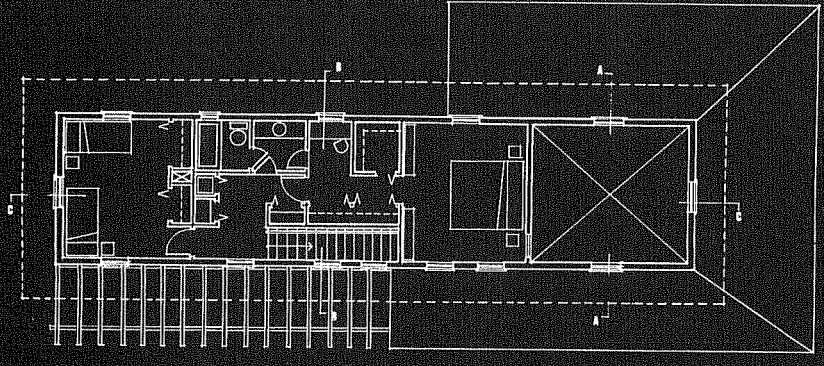
SITE PLAN/ROOF PLAN
SCALE: 1/10" = 1'-0

Legend:
1- Swietenia mahogani; 14' O.A.
2- Cocus nucifera "malayan green"
3- Tabebuia pallida; 8' O.A.
4- Conocarpus erectus; lower
5- Gumbo limbo (bursera simaruba)
6- Neptrolepis exaltata; 1 gal.
7- Capparis cynophallophora;
8- Myrica cerifera; 3 gal.
9- Hamelia patens; 3 gal.
10- Viburnum suspensum; 3 gal.
11- Lantana sempervirens; 1 gal.
12- Bougainvillea spp; 3 gal.
13- Tecomaria capensis; 1 gal.
14- Stenotaphrum secundatum "
15- Litiope spp.

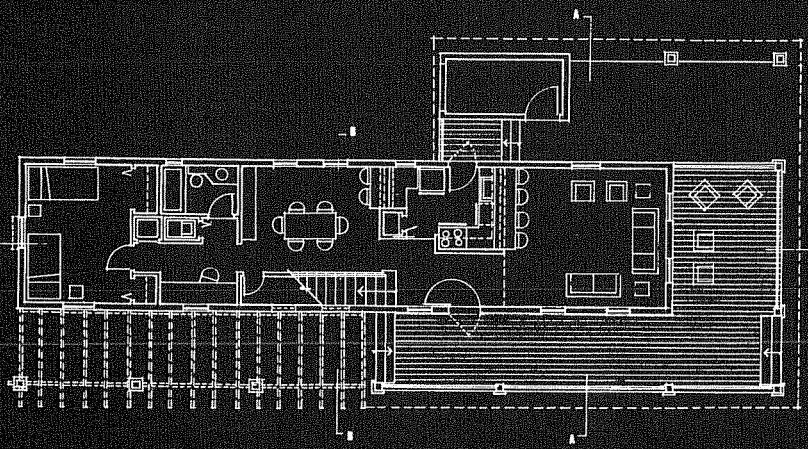Roof plan, site plan and side elevation.

Front elevation.

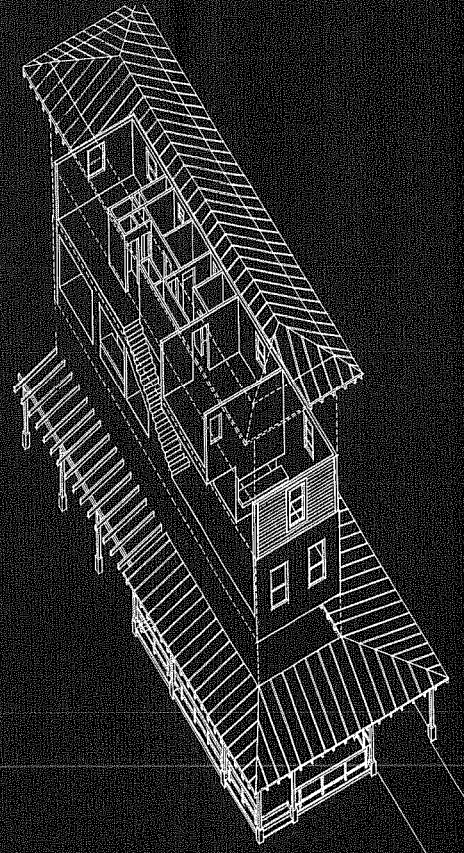# Proposal for Delray Beach Competition

Architect: Marilys R. Nepomechie.
Landscape architect: Molly Feltham-Adams.

Second floor plan.

Ground floor plan.

Residents explain that the image suggested by our house carries with it powerful and abhorrent associations with the Jim Crow history of Delray Beach.

Above and opposite page:
Typical new construction in
Mount Olive.

tively devalue what the larger interpretive community has come to hold dear: a cohesive tectonic construct that can support a sense of community.

The houses that Mount Olive residents are choosing to build suffer the hallmark ills of the region-neutral, developer-designed, single-family houses that have sapped the vitality of late twentieth century (sub)urbanism. These houses turn their backs on the streets, traditionally a place for community life, centering instead on private interior spaces and rear yards. They undermine the character of the neighborhood by the non-contributing aesthetic of their materials, tectonics and proportions. And in flagrant contradiction to the demands of a subtropical climate, they have deep sections, low ceilings, shallow roof overhangs and single-exposure spaces that prohibit cross-ventilation.

Ironically, our site-specific, wood-frame, typologically-based affordable house may well be built, not in a modest neighborhood where it represents an extension of local building traditions, but in the central Florida town of Loughman. A newly-minted "neo-traditional" town, Loughman is being crafted as a nostalgic (re)vision of suburbia for upper- and lower-middle classes. In search of an affordability that supports thematic continuity, the designers and developers have responded to the value of the type solely as artifact, and have thus focused on the objective merits of a region-specific architecture rather than on the socio-economic context in which that form was first built.

Gentrification, in fact, may be the only route through which Mount Olive will remain physically intact. Inhabitation by a middle class disassociated with the neighborhood and its history, responding instead to a reinvented, commodified take on the small-town America of yesteryear, seems far more likely to result in the physical preservation of Mount Olive than the reconfiguration that would render the neighborhood palatable to current and prospective residents.

encourage simultaneous processes of preservation and transformation by working within the framework of the existing spatial urban structure (de facto zoning codes) and the parameters of existing typology (vernacular building strategies). Aware of the African roots from which the shotgun typology emerged, we assumed that both current and prospective residents shared our respect for the history and physical make-up of the neighborhood.

Yet prospective homeowners who have approached the Delray CRA since the competition have shied away from our design precisely because it draws, however indirectly, upon these roots. They explain that the image suggested by our house carries with it powerful and abhorrent associations to the Jim Crow history of Delray Beach.

Self Determination, Preservation and the Ironic Solution of Gentrification

Instead, would-be residents of Mount Olive prefer what can only be described as white, middle-class housing circa 1960. This reaction has placed the physical integrity of Mount Olive in jeopardy, as gaps in the neighborhood fabric are filled with impoverished versions of suburbia and, gradually, existing vernacular houses are demolished and replaced with more of the same. Imprisoned by the limitations of their interpretations and associations, Mount Olive residents effec-

Were this to occur, the artifact, bereft of the descendants of its original inhabitants, would remain physically intact, if ultimately romanticized. Yet the most valuable part of Mount Olive's genius loci would be lost, as would the hope of the Delray CRA to provide in situ housing for part of the city's population.

This is the gentrification pattern for many American inner cities: developers acquire run down, potentially valuable, downtown real estate inhabited by the poor. It is refurbished and subsequently marketed under circumstances that displace its original residents in favor of upwardly mobile people seeking something newly fashionable.

Mount Olive might have become an unusual variation on the typical gentrification pattern. Its architecture is only beginning to be considered significant, and its location has yet to become truly valuable. As a result, although demolition and reconstruction were not economically out of the question, it became possible to consider retaining the neighborhood for its current population. The brief, written by the Delray CRA, underlined and supported that possibility. Post-competition events have all but destroyed it.

At What Cost Preservation?

In recent years, the City of Delray Beach has gone to considerable lengths to refurbish its significant historic structures. Residents have supported municipal preservation efforts, approving funds to restore City Hall and tax credits to private owners who preserve historic properties.

In theory, Delray could designate Mount Olive an historic district and so insist on its preservation, encouraging residents to remain and engage in the effort. But it is highly uncertain that the historic designation would wield any persuasive power with either current or prospective inhabitants. Instead, we suspect that placing Mount Olive among protected historic districts would only hasten gen-

trification, taking the neighborhood away from its current residents altogether. Similarly, our experiences indicates that enacting architectural and zoning codes directed at maintaining the physical character of the place would only be seen as coercive, paternalistic efforts to keep a disadvantaged segment of the local population oppressed.

Historic district status for places like Mount Olive, while not unheard of, is hardly commonplace in South Florida. A poor neighborhood with an unsavory history is not readily seen as worthy of preservation unless the proposal is accompanied by an economically and socially attractive promise of gentrification. In cases where the context itself is either socially embarrassing or otherwise questionable, and where gentrification is not the ultimate goal, mandated preservation is immediately suspect. This holds true for current residents (who devalue their own holdings and can only envision a radical transformation of their neighborhood), for building and zoning boards (whose members seldom understand the goals of preservation are not solely economic) and for the general public (whose support fuels and protects preservation efforts).

The price of preservation, as it is currently practiced, is unreasonably high for a neighborhood like Mount Olive. Such realities speak volumes about the typically exclusive character of our historic areas and suggest a need for more

We have ended up exactly
deciding that the best interests of a place
by something other than

careful scrutiny of their economic and social dynamics both before and after historic district designation. At stake is the very definition of the city, an organism whose physical form preservationists work to maintain, but whose social, cultural and economic content are the sine qua non of its multi-dimensionality and authenticity.

Forging a Design Attitude for a Post-Romantic Professional Practice

The clear disjunction of form and content represented by the Mount Olive competition also raises important questions for what Thomas Fisher has called a post-Romantic era of professional practice.[2] These questions not only probe the ambivalent social role of preservation, but also direct self-reflexive inquiries about the design stance of the profession. As architects, how independent do we want to make form from content? How independent do our clients want us to make the two? In a competition like this one, in which the jury and the intended inhabitants of the project turn out to have vastly different agendas, is it ever really possible to reconcile form, content and meaning?

Hoping to avoid some of the land mines of many decades of institutionalized separation among architects, clients and the physical context of their work, and in the absence of a flesh and blood client, we naively thought that by serving Mount Olive, we were serving its inhabitants. We assumed a positive correspondence between a physically cohesive place, neighborhood identity and resident satisfaction. In purposeful contradiction to the late eighteenth-century, Romantic disassociation of form, user and meaning under which contemporary practice often labors, we harbored the illusion that by building according to the laws of the vernacular as translated into a type, we would be doing our part not only to conserve the neighborhood but also to empower the people who lived there.

It seems clear to us now that we were operating in a context that simply did not permit us to find a solution that would save Mount Olive while finding favor in the eyes of its population. We (and the prototype clients we conceived) held a widely different vision for the future of Mount Olive from its present and prospective residents.

The desires of Mount Olive residents had one important parallel with ours and one important difference. Like us, the residents assumed a correspondence among the place, its form and its intended inhabitants. But while we posited a necessary correlation among place, form and user, they instead posited a complete identification between themselves and their physical surroundings. In a social context that imbues image with tremendous power, especially in terms of self-identity and self-determination, it is not surprising that Mount Olive residents, in rejecting the content associations of the shotgun, also rejected its image, and thus its form.

The Re-Interpretive Agenda

Our proposal for Delray Beach was a plea for pride in both place and history. We saw these as a source of strength from which to forge a future, rather than a shackles to an oppressive past. Yet we find ourselves in the unexpected position of having to re-evaluate a scenario in which preservation and continuity, even as interpreted through the elastic prism of typology, are perceived as symbols of a coercive rather than natural fit between form and content.

We had hoped that the African roots of the typology would lift it above the stigma of its more recent history and refocus the attention of prospective residents on its cultural authenticity and intrinsic value as a tropical residence. The example of the Charleston side porch house, which, from its inception, existed in both ramshackle and luxury editions, seemed reason enough to assume

where we so wanted not to be:
and its people are served
what they themselves expressly desire.

that the shotgun, too, might be manipulated to bridge the gap in economic and class differences.

In retrospect, the reaction of Mount Olive residents to this design is far from incomprehensible. The desire to leave a position of social and economic marginality in favor of full assimilation and acceptance by the larger culture virtually defines the ethnic, racial and immigrant history of this country. But membership in that larger culture is purchased at a dear price. The cost of assimilation and accommodation for racial, national and ethnic groups in America has always included a collective forgetting, a loss of specific identity, history and past.

It is precisely against that loss that our small house was a physical argument. We chose to rail against a collective amnesia because we considered that it should be difficult, not to say inauthentic, to accept a manufactured, fictionalized history in lieu of a genuine past. We hoped that typologically based design in a meaningful context might be the vehicle through which real history had a chance to survive its potential trivialization and commercialization. Beneficiaries would include groups whose history might be preserved long enough so that the pain of old memories could be incorporated into a newly positive collective identity, and American cities, which would become increasingly multi-dimensional as they found ways to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

In an effort to refrain from imposing foreign ideas on either a people or a place, our design sought to speak the physical language of Mount Olive and its history, supporting an architectural fabric that would strengthen a rundown but viable inner-city neighborhood. Ironically, largely as a result of a competitive process that separated user from professional, we have ended up exactly where we so wanted not to be: deciding that the best interests of a place and its people are served by something other than what they themselves expressly desire.

Although we believe strongly that we see far-reaching consequences in blind acquiescence to as narrow a reading of an architectural form as Mount Olive residents wish to impose on themselves, we also understand the historically devastating results of professional hubris. Nevertheless, Mount Olive residents might reconsider the voluntary self-imprisonment inherent in this particular social construction of meaning.

We suspect that Mount Olive residents would mourn the disappearance of their former neighborhood in the aftermath of the destruction that would result from yielding to their preferences. We cannot help but suspect that our small shotgun house, hopelessly ravaged now by unacceptable echoes in the eyes of Mount Olive residents, would appeal to them if they were to come upon it in Loughman, or in their own, long-since-gentrified former community.

By then, however, Mount Olive would have become a different place, transferred to people unfamiliar with, and perhaps uncaring about, its history. By then, it would be far too late for former Mount Olive residents to reclaim and ultimately re-create their own past with any degree of authenticity in a historically meaningful location.

After considerable reflection, after acknowledging frankly that our solution may not be the best or most appropriate in all cases, we have (gingerly) returned to our original position. Despite the local response, we find ourselves unable to ignore the vast chasm that separates a transformation and reinterpretation of the history of enslavement from its abandonment, either through the destruction of its physical remnants or through gentrification. We must conclude that in our own estimation, at least, genuine empowerment for Mount Olive residents lies in embracing and celebrating their history rather than in succumbing to the urge for its destruction.

Notes

1. For example, see John Vlach, *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

2. Thomas Fisher, "Escape From Style," *Progressive Architecture* 9 (September 1994), pp. 59-63, 100. Fisher believes that the economic, social and intellectual frameworks increasingly guiding the profession will dictate a critical architecture of "content, context, climate and culture of place" (p. 63).