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DIALECTIC IV

ARCHITECTURE AT SERVICE?
A profession between Luxury Provision, Public Agency and Counter-Culture

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Joe Colistra is an Associate Professor at the University of Kansas where he teaches Social Entrepreneurship Design Studios and Professional Practice. He has also held teaching positions at the University of Colorado and the American University of Sharjah. Both his research and practice focus on urban design, housing, and community development projects. He is a licensed architect and founding principal of in situ DESIGN.

CRITICAL PRACTICE: ALTERNATIVE MODES OF DEVELOPMENT

JOE COLISTRA

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an alternative mode of community development that promotes participatory action and empowerment through design. When residents in an historic residential neighborhood of Denver, Colorado learned of a plan to build speculative housing, they pooled resources and expertise in order to buy the land out from under a developer and build a project they felt would be more congruent with the scale and character of their neighborhood. This self-development model generated a great sense of pride and accomplishment as the neighborhood witnessed the emergence of a community asset shaped with their own ideas and resources. The group found a voice through architecture. They chose to be active agents in the process of community building rather than allow their interests to be appropriated by outside forces.

Forty-two long-time residents, all living within a few blocks of the project, put their own homes up for collateral in order to secure a construction loan for this \$2.5 million townhouse development. Acting as community organizers, we were able to leverage the first project's success into several other community-based ventures.

As the architects, we were cognizant of the political nature of this process and led the citizen group through the participatory actions of establishing a pro forma, setting up a Limited Liability Company, acquiring the land, securing financing, selecting professional engineers and contractors, and ultimately designing and constructing the project. These processes are appreciated as larger components of community building. Unlike gentrification, where return on investment leaves the neighborhood, all profits from this project stayed within a few blocks. More importantly, neighbors willing to invest in their communities are investing in themselves and the belief they can act critically and strategically to restructure a world they cannot completely remake.



Figure 1: Community Groundbreaking (photo: David Carnicelli)

INTRODUCTION

These case studies present a design process in which the traditional roles of both the architect and client have been contested. These projects test participatory development strategies that not only engage community but also deliver a built environment that reflects the values and mores of that community. The group that contacted us for assistance were not real estate developers; rather, they included an attorney, accountant, city planner, historian, real estate broker, teacher, computer programmer, health care professional, non-profit administrator, and several members of the building trades working primarily for small neighborhood contractors. These residents all lived in the Curtis Park neighborhood in Denver, Colorado.

The fact that the neighborhood provides housing options for this group speaks to the diversity of the neighborhood. (Figure 1) A five-minute walk from Denver's central business district, the area is one of the city's oldest neighborhoods. It is also one of the most economically and racially diverse. Its tree-lined streets include Victorian mansions, Italianate rowhomes, and quaint Queen Anne bungalows that have miraculously survived the destructive tendencies of American urban revitalization.

When these neighbors learned of a plan to build a 16-unit apartment building on an empty lot between two historic single-family homes, they began to seek an opportunity to operate within the market forces that were luring investment to their neighborhood. They sought to provide an example of a viable real estate development while protecting the neighborhood's historic character. Our firm was working on several small projects in and around the neighborhood when the group engaged us to imagine possibilities for the property. The resulting project, Champa Terrace, involved collectively creating a unique participatory model of development within the community.

Once envisioned as a primary connector to the Denver Airport, Curtis Park has remained zoned as a high-density growth corridor despite the relocation of the airport twenty years ago. This zoning so close to downtown makes the neighborhood ripe for redevelopment typically associated with gentrification: older building stock replaced by new amenity-rich market rate housing.

Long-time committed neighbors, largely through their neighborhood organization, are constantly on the watch for gentrifying developers looking to build large-scale projects on consolidated lots made possible by razing historic buildings,

despite the existence of a few limited historic districts. In the past, the group has even been successful in establishing a few limited historic districts in an attempt to protect the character of the neighborhood.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Our firm, in situ Design, was contacted by a core group of leaders within the neighborhood organization to assist them in exploring development options. We assisted twenty-three neighbors in forming an investment group called CPIG (Curtis Park Investors Group) that set out to design and construct an infill project they felt to be more congruent with the scale and character of their neighborhood. (Figure 2)



Figure 2: Champa Terrace (photo: David Carnicelli)

From a broad range of professions and economic backgrounds, residents were brought together by concerns about the future of their neighborhood. A true example of crowdsourcing, these long-time residents, all living within a few blocks of the site, put up their own homes for collateral in order to secure a construction loan of \$1 million. We expanded the traditional services provided by an architecture firm by assisting the group in becoming politically organized.

An operating agreement was drawn up outlining the structure of the limited liability company (LLC) that set up shares in the venture to be acquired for as little as \$5,000. This allowed as many people as possible to participate in the process. As with any LLC, a core group was established as Managing Members. Remaining investors were established as Members. The group established Articles of Incorporation, opened a bank account, and began the process of soliciting investment dollars.

Informational brochures on CPIG were distributed throughout the neighborhood and \$40,000 was collected in just one week. This provided the group with earnest money to put down on the lot in question. As it became increasingly clear that the group had the resources to self-develop the site, they initiated conversations with a local bank. The bank was happy to loan \$1 million to a group willing to put up their own homes as collateral. They recognized the power that came with organizing politically. Appreciating the sizable opposition to a large speculative apartment project, the original real estate developer who had been interested in the site retreated. In the coming months, we continued working with CPIG to develop a 4-unit townhouse project that would be called Champa Terrace.

While none of the investors had development experience, we drew on the collective knowledge and resources to establish a pro forma, acquire the land, secure financing, and select professional engineers and contractors to ultimately construct and sell the project. Our services began as a simple hourly rate but grew into a professional services agreement as soon as the project scope was better defined. We led the group through the development process, but they systematically made every decision.

For example, when interviews were conducted to hire a contractor, we structured an evaluation sheet that could be weighted and scored by the investment group. At the conclusion of the interviews and lengthy discussions, they voted based on the number of shares each controlled. This process continued in order to make decisions on everything from color selections to the execution of our contract. The group appreciated all these processes as larger components of community building.

PARTICIPATION

Large open-meeting design workshops were facilitated in order to arrive at a project with which the group felt comfortable. Operating out of a neighborhood storefront shared with a coffee shop prior to this development project, our architectural office became a central meeting place for both the project and the community. Citizen-investors stopped by incessantly to view progress; the need to provide real-time renderings of design updates and the impact on the cost model necessitated an integrated approach using Building Information Modeling (BIM). (Figure 3) As laypeople, the group expected the intricacies of the project to be communicated visually in an accessible way. They also needed the project's formal information translated into cost and schedule ramifications.

One might believe the technology of advanced BIM software would alienate the stakeholder group; however, we found the opposite to be the case. It was the use of the BIM model as an information-centric construct that allowed dialogue to occur. We were able to move beyond token participation towards a dialogical practice. This deep knowledge allows for the transformation from silent investor to active participant.

The project sold out before the completion of construction at prices well above what is typical for the neighborhood. This was a win-win for the investors; not only did they see a healthy return on investment, their own property values were driven up as well. Unlike gentrification, where return on investment leaves the neighborhood, the profit returned to members of the investment group stayed within a few blocks of the project.



Figure 3: Building Information Modeling (BIM) (figure courtesy of in situ Design)

MERCHANTS ROW BROWNSTONES

The recipient of several design awards, Champa Terrace was lauded in the local press for its proactive approach to community development. With some coaxing from the architects, the core group of twenty-three neighbors was persuaded to roll over their profits from the project into a larger, more complex project that would be named Merchants Row Brownstones. The initial goal of this second project was to investigate development options for another empty parcel of land in Curtis Park.

The development group for this second effort grew to forty-two neighbors. As before, most lived within blocks of an empty site that was vulnerable to outside development, and several put their personal residences up for collateral in order to close on a \$2.5 million construction loan.

Discussion held in town hall-style meetings resulted in a 6-unit multifamily housing development modeled after a rowhome prototype common to the neighborhood. Because this project was significantly larger than the first, several presentations were also made to the broader community at neighborhood organization meetings. The investment group prioritized the relationship of form, mass, and scale to the surrounding architecture. Rowhomes, particularly on corner properties, are a common typology in the neighborhood. Also, a tripartite (base, middle, top) organization of the massing is common. We achieved this by utilizing ground-face masonry units to convey a rusticated base. A field of brick composes the middle. Precast units atop the masonry wall are an indication of an abstracted cornice. Raised entry stoops all face the street with glass canopies that mimic the cable-stayed canopy



Figure 4: Merchants Row, Champa Street view (photo: Frank Ooms)

Structured slightly differently, the investment group on the second project was so large that we tiered the investment into guarantors, who would receive a preferred return upon the repayment of the loan, and non-guarantors. This structure was based primarily on meeting the minimum collateral requirements of the bank. The decision making process remained the same as the first project: one share buys one vote.

of the adjacent 1890s structures. (Figure 4) The first floor elevation set at 5'4" allows inhabitants to engage passersby at the sidewalk while maintaining a comfortable separation between the public and private realms.

As the section illustrates, (Figure 5) this strategy does not allow for the ceiling height required for a garage and thus units step up around a three-story lightwell that allows daylight to penetrate



Figure 5: Merchants Row Brownstones, Section (figure courtesy of in situ Design)

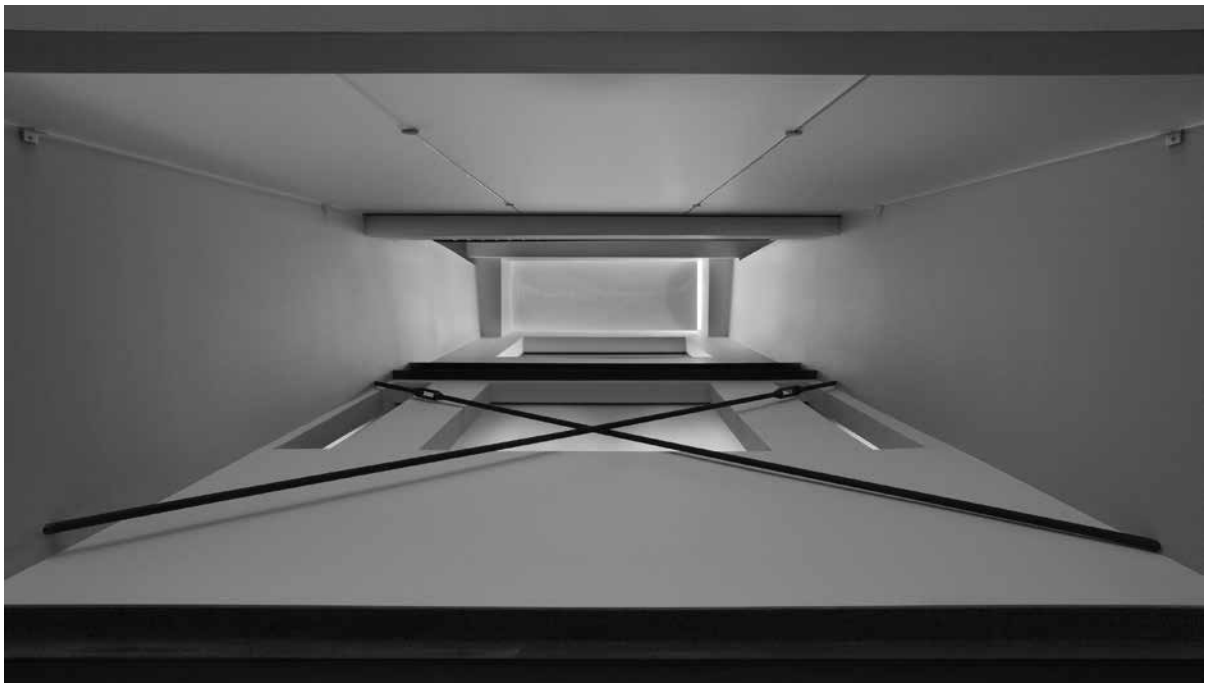


Figure 6: Merchants Row Brownstones, Lightwell (photo: Frank Ooms)

deep into the units. (Figure 6) This alleviates the challenge of bringing light into long interior units where side windows are typically not possible. Frosted glass partitions at the master bedroom and master bath also utilize borrowed light, an advantage of the vertical configuration of the units. Had the pro forma required us to stack apartments over the walk-up townhomes, this daylighting strategy would not have been possible. Despite being zoned for higher density, the investment group was actually willing to underbuild the site, believing the highest-and-best use for the property was to limit the height at three stories. They felt this to be more compatible with the neighborhood. Another advantage of the ground-to-sky units is

the potential inclusion of accessory dwellings in the development model. While land costs drive a certain product, it was important to the group that the project be configured in such a way that it could resist the homogenizing mechanisms of gentrification. Walk-out basements are marketed as “flex-space,” perfect for a home office in order to side-step parking requirements, but are easily configured into an affordable rental unit or granny flat. Again, this is a strategy that probably would not have been considered within a purely profit-driven model.

It was also important to the group that critical design concepts not be compromised by misguided zoning regulations or historic district

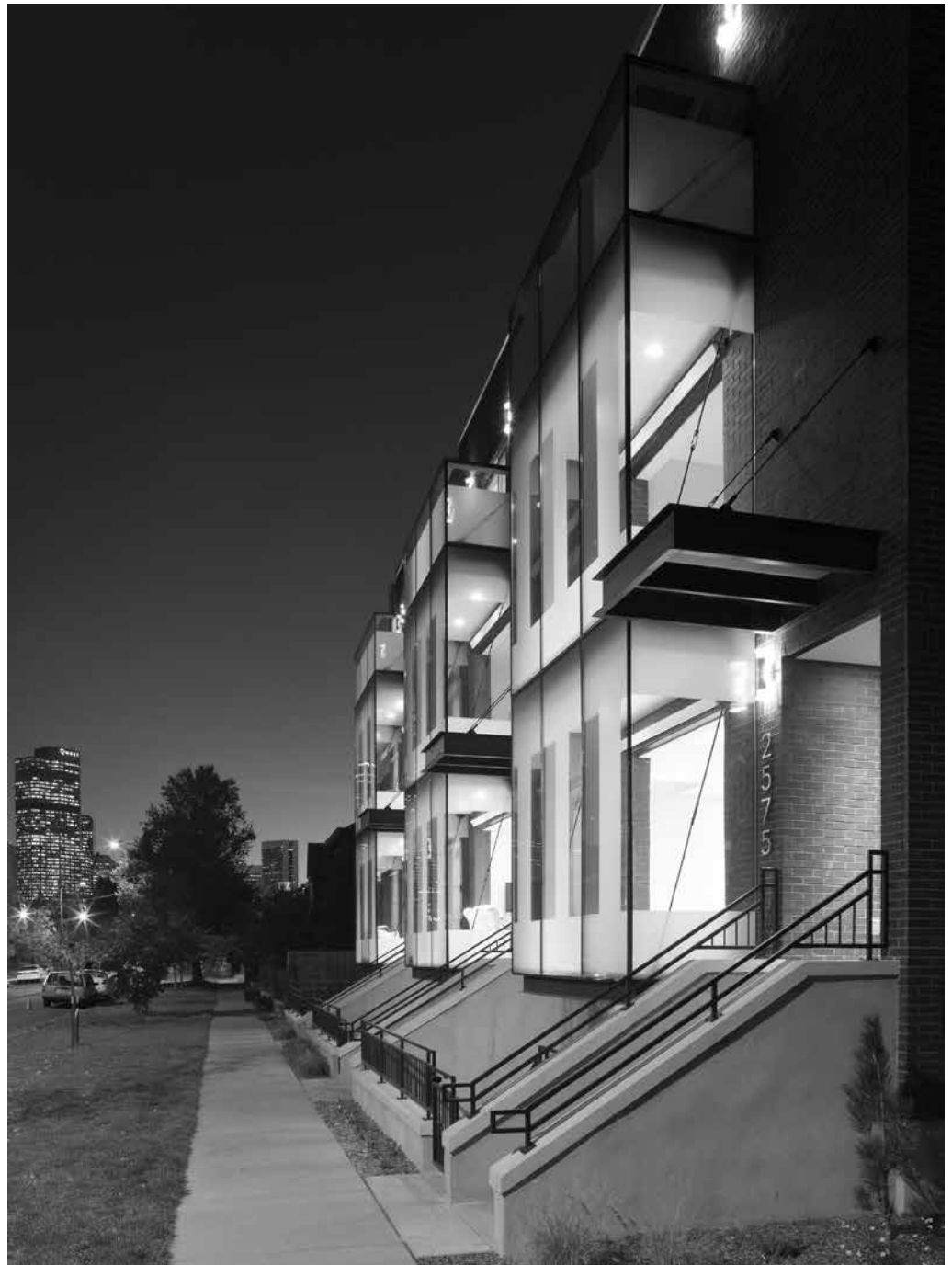


Figure 7: Merchants Row Brownstones, Window Bays (photo: Frank Ooms)

design guidelines. The carefully labeled “flex-space” is a case in point. Another procedural nuance that offered resistance to the regulation of the built environment and was critical to the project’s success was the categorization of the units as Attached-Single-Family. Not only did this reduce professional liability associated with condominium developments, it also allowed the group to avoid the creation of a homeowner’s association. One requirement of this classification is that each unit must maintain its own lateral bracing; that is, should one unit’s lateral bracing be compromised, adjacent units must maintain their own lateral stability. This is

made visible in the design by exposing the steel cross bracing in the three-story lightwells.

The primary feature of the exterior is a reinterpretation of the historic bay window: a three-story structural glazing system. Stepped out from the façade, side windows at the bay frame views to downtown while the translucent bays glow to activate the street with vitality at night. (Figure 7, 8) In keeping with the do-it-yourself nature of the development process, the glazing system employs extremely simple standard construction detailing to achieve the glass bay. (Figure 9) Despite historic district



Figure 8: Merchants Row Brownstones, Window Bays
(photo: Frank Ooms)

guidelines that require punched windows in a solid field, the group was able to convince the Historic District Review Board that the pattern of frosted and clear glass configured in the proportions of window openings in the neighborhood met the intent of the guidelines.

Convincing the development group to challenge the literal reading of the historic district design guidelines was no small accomplishment, given that many of the investors had an affinity for historic preservation that bordered on militant. Also significant was the fact that many of the neighbors had been involved with establishing the historic district.

Through models, renderings, and analysis diagrams the group came to agree upon the

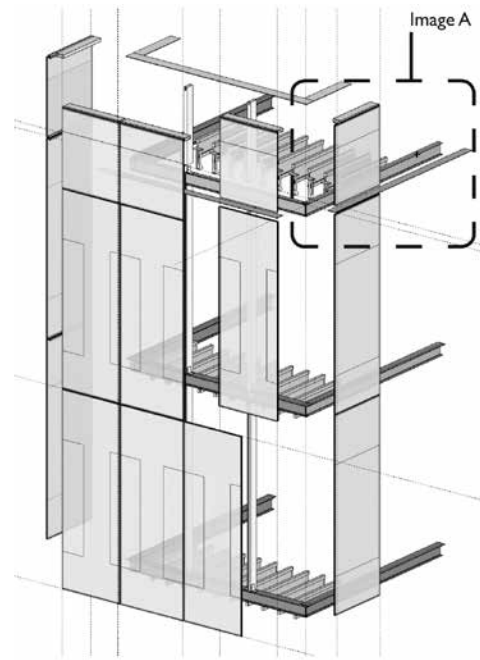


Figure 9: Merchants Row Brownstones, BIM

notion that contemporary development should not try to replicate historic buildings, but rather, contribute to an ongoing conversation with the existing context.

These glass bays have an undeniable temporality to them. They not only define space and mediate light but also reflect back the neighborhood context. They allow volumes to change throughout the day, and the varying translucency allows the glass to seemingly exist in various states of solidity simultaneously.

The varying depth of space inside the units also allows the bystander to glimpse into the units but views are distorted and blurred as the light changes.

CONCLUSION

It is a commonly held belief that a development process that values community input could not possibly yield the same design quality afforded to projects not shackled by design by committee. However, like the first project, this one sold out quickly and received several awards, confirming that consensus-driven participation need not be seen as a design process that delivers mass appeal to the lowest common denominator, unreflectively and without the potential for a cohesive theoretical stance.

This model of community development, requiring very difficult decisions regarding profit versus density and working within a political system, generates a sense of pride and accomplishment as the structure takes shape. The willingness to invest in one's own neighborhood reflects a willingness to invest in oneself, and the belief that these actions can allow one to act strategically and critically to restructure a world one cannot wholly remake.

While the process presented here aspires to empower a community through a participatory design, it does not fully engage issues of inclusion and poverty. It admittedly succumbs to existing market forces and invites meaningful participation by those who can pay the price. However, it is perhaps only through working within this system that an incremental reordering might occur.

The design and construction process is but a fleeting moment in the life of a building, but the buildings themselves remain as clear territorial demarcations of community. While the scale of the community intervention shown here is small, the participants move through and away from this process changed forever from passive occupants of a built environment to citizens armed with the knowledge and resources to act upon the world.