

IT TAKES A VILLAGE (2)

If we are truly going to talk about solutions to the housing crisis – homelessness and foreclosures – it will be necessary to begin with a critique of what we currently have: single family, detached housing, privately owned. I'd like to propose a return to bungalow courts of the early 20th century. They were a response to the need for housing for the working poor who could have the amenities of home without the cost and maintenance that came with a single family residence on its own lot. The bungalow was normally a one story home that opened to a common garden. The courts could include a common laundry and/or clubhouse and were the makings of its own community.

“The court...was both an expedient way to minimize the value of city land, and an attempt to entice urban residents with a sense of community all too often lacking in fast growing cities of the early 20th century. Even a narrow 50-foot lot could be made to accommodate two rows of small cottages, facing inward on a lawn or driveway. In this way, a builder might fit four or more small units in a space which otherwise would be occupied by one, slightly larger house. On higher priced city land, such crowding might be the only way for a developer to guarantee a return on his investment. Bungalow courts offered a cheap alternative to the anonymity of apartment living; they represented the opportunity for a patch of lawn and a shelter from the street, all at a cost well below that required for a full home.” (15, Drayton)

Historically, courts were identified as a solution for some social issues. For example, in 1913 Ladies Home Journal identified courts as a solution for single women needing “safe, reliable housing”.

“Bungalow courts have been proposed as low-income housing ... for GI's and for GI's and homeless families ... In addition, bungalow courts function as micro-communities for groups such as elderly women and the young, bungalow courts function as micro-communities for groups such as elderly women and the disabled, and as housing for workers of all income brackets.” (20, Drayton)

This is a perfect arrangement for mothers with young children, for Assisted living, seniors, or the handicapped, or for those who just like to think outside. What's truly different about this housing is that it may also be a place to work.

There are two theoretical issues which we must critique before we can begin the Discussion of alternative housing. We must go back and identify how we function; most would quickly identify the individual as the basic unit. But, in spite of the theoretical emphasis on the individual we function as units or groups in society. Race, gender and class are meaningful conceptions in law and policy. Similarly, in the city the neighborhood, the community, the town, even the apartment building, gives meaning to the individual, to who we are. But, despite this, capitalism views the individual as primary.

The second theoretical issue which we must confront is the idea of exchange value. Exchange value is primary in any discussion because it refers to the money associated with the item in a capitalist system, and thereby determining value. The housing crisis in the US demonstrated the real difference between use value and exchange value and what parties were associated with either.

The housing crisis demonstrated dramatically how mortgages/exchange value had outdistanced individual's ability to pay and had nothing to do with the value of these houses to the people who lived in them. Sharing cost is something that the co-housing movement has pioneered but we must go one step further. For a real discussion of alternative housing to begin we must recognize the changing structure of families and work which may leave children alone and adults overwhelmed.

The single family house in the suburbs was a post WWII craze. Its popularity was assured by the GI Bill which made government assistance/loans available for vets and made home purchases possible for returning vets. The suburbs were supposed to be a step up from the noisy, polluted, industrial city of work. Shopping malls would follow buyers to the suburbs and highway construction connected everything but women who were more isolated than ever, in their detached, kitchen centered, single family houses. Gender had become the dominant means for defining roles and work in the home.

Today the family is significantly different. Not only are there more female headed households but most women work. It is necessary to look closely at all the tasks and roles that a family needs to be functional. In our alternative housing many of these tasks can be performed by non family members in exchange for housing or for cost.