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Infill Housing: A Design for Savannah's Victorian District

Bob Burnham

Background

This design for infill housing was developed in response to the Historic Savannah Foundation's Residential Design Competition for the city's Victorian District. The competition's objective was to stimulate creation of designs which would be at home in the district and would also be feasible for private development. It was hoped that the results would serve as an example for potential developers.

Program

The conditions were very specific and highly constraining. The site on West Waldberg Street is a gap between existing buildings. Setbacks and height restriction limited the buildable volume to 63' x 110' x 40' high. A fourplex building type was required, with a total of eight units specified. All units were to have their primary orientation to the street. Maximum unit size was limited to 1200 square feet and the desired spaces were listed. The market identified for the project consisted principally of young professionals. Expected purchase prices were \$50,000-\$60,000.

Building Organization

The project is made up of two basic living units: a two-story unit stacked above a one-story unit. Handed pairs of these stacks are arranged around a single exterior entry area. Two of the resulting fourplexes make up the project. The one-story unit is organized around an exterior courtyard. The two-story units have two exterior decks. Each unit is given

the maximum south facing edge consistent with the constraints. Large areas of south-facing glass are protected from the sun during overheated periods by trellises. Maximum cross ventilation potential results from the placement of spaces and windows. A solar hot water system has been incorporated for domestic water heating.

Qualities

The qualities of the design derive from basic intentions: a desire to make living places which are perceived as large, gracious and private, and the need to make a place which is both friendly to its neighbors and memorable.

The unit's plans are strongly influenced by the desire for apparent spatial generosity. Real dimensions are stretched to the maximum given the program's area limitations and unit efficiency expectations. Exterior space is borrowed and an attempt is made to mark distinctive zones within each unit. The one-story units are lengthened to the limit as they wrap around the courtyard. A strong sense of separation and distance is developed between the bedroom area and the living/dining space. The corridor connecting these areas is rhythmically marked with openings in an attempt to elongate its sense. The courtyard is experienced from several vantage points within the unit. It is fully claimed by the unit, a virtual extension of it. The living room and dining room are combined and given the maximum possible volume to provide a

truly large space.

The upper unit extends itself vertically to achieve a sense of distance. Three distinct levels within the unit contribute to a sense of richness — several places within one. The living room is enlarged by the stairwell and given maximum practical volume to create a sense of spaciousness. Both the living room and dining room are extended beyond their boundaries by adjacent exterior decks.

The facade design is influenced by several objectives in addition to the desire to blend. The plane which makes up the edge of the streets in the district is an important spatial feature. This edge is not monolithic. Minor variations occur in alignment and height of the elements along the street. Some groups of houses in the district keep the plane too rigidly. Close spacing, complete planar alignment, and strong vertical proportions give these rows the sense of people in a crowded line, each drawn up to his/her full height, sides pulled in to avoid touching, eyes straight ahead to prevent embarrassing contact. In this proposal, the facade keeps the street edge, but in a relaxed fashion. Windows of the first floor units stand back to keep the line loose. All units come together at the ground in the entry space. It is as if they were loosely grouped for a family portrait while holding hands.

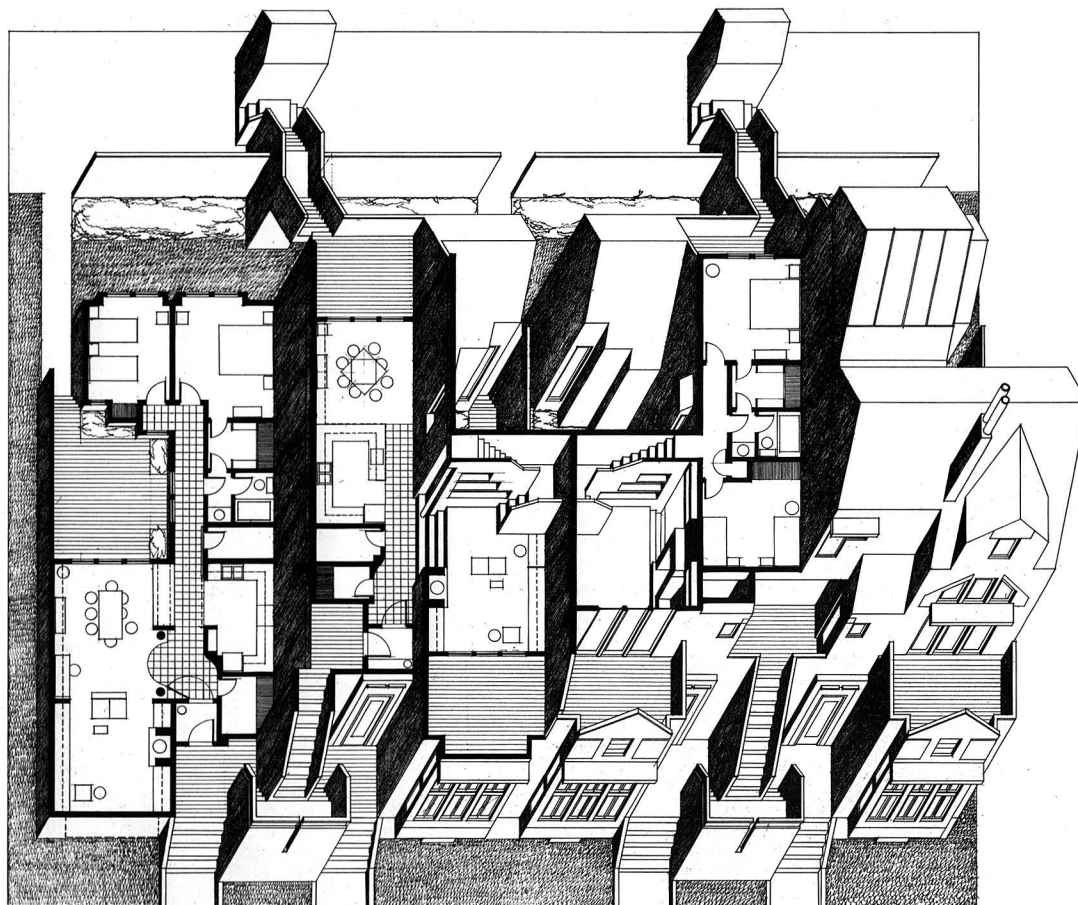
Most of the 19th-century buildings in the district were built as single-family residences. Many of them are

now subdivided, but the order equates one vertical building with a living place. Unit density requirements in this situation make it impossible to reproduce the order and still give each unit identity. Strong unit identity may be a definite asset if not a necessity in the market situation. The relationships established between the bays, entry spaces, and the planes in the proposed facade creates distinct identities at three levels: the unit, the fourplex, and the total building.

The facade picks up more directly on Victorian design idioms through the use of bays, vertical proportions and a composition made up of elements which are bi-laterally symmetrical. Covered porches were originally studied, but abandoned because they were incompatible with the program and unlikely to be used given current living patterns. Hence, the final essay is a composition of bi-laterally symmetrical bays with vertical proportions.

As a recognition of this building's time and place, the character of facade detailing is progressively varied. The planes closest to the street and ground have a density and fragility of pattern reminiscent of the surrounding buildings, while receding planes become more abstract and simpler in pattern.

NOTE: The design shown here is basically the same as the design which was one of five winners in the competition. Minor refinements have been made to the south facade and the roof form.



Axonometric of various floor levels



View from the south