

Splendid Vacancies

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In recent years, soaring real estate markets have created a worldwide housing crisis.

The current boom was predictable: high demand, low supply and a dysfunctional economy in which wages are stagnant, added to restrictive zoning and poor public policy, have turned housing into an artificially scarce commodity.

SPLENDID VACANCIES stresses the critical role of public vacant and under-utilized urban land in countering real estate speculation by exploiting the potential of small-scale infill residential buildings to contribute to urban centers' affordable housing needs.

Undervalued by developers due to their small size and odd shapes, most of these lots represent a viable alternative to suburban sprawl and serve as the ideal background for experimentation with alternative modes of collective living where use value is prioritized over commodity form, making the resultant buildings less fungible as assets.

THE STRATEGY

Through a collection of small-scale limited-profit residential projects that occupy leftover spaces and react to specific conditions in different cities and their neighborhoods across the US, the proposal explores alternative ways of initiating, funding and operating buildings dedicated to housing in metropolitan centers.

The final strategy was developed in three parts: as an urban strategy that uses urban voids as testing grounds for communal governance; as a site-less prototype that fosters new forms of collective dwelling; and as specific projects resulting from its application to existing sites.

THE PROTOTYPE

The basic prototype has been designed as an elastic and evolving framework for all the aspects of building, from construction to ownership, to accommodate fluid living arrangements. Conceived as a repeatable structure, it can be implemented in different infill sites, mainly long and narrow, and in various configurations, becoming potential nodes of activity within the neighborhoods.

Particular attention was given to the configuration of the ground floor, the role of the circulation core and the central lightwell as catalysts for productive social friction, and the rethinking of privacy dynamics that subvert inherited typological rules.

The section is a critical element of the project: the proposal questions pervasive myths about privacy and community by breaking up the traditional apartment for the nuclear family into expanded spaces (day rooms) and compressed spaces (night rooms) assigned to different floors. To facilitate spatial flexibility and programmatic promiscuity, the proposal goes beyond height restrictions to explore new existenzminimum as parts of a larger system that dissolves the dwelling unit into gradients of privacy and facilitates shared living. From the unregulated space of a mezzanine to multistory clusters, the prototype offers the possibility of alternative decentralized domesticities in which individuals live across the entire building height.

Additional internal circulations preserve the possibility for space to evolve with its users, involving forms of minimal intervention to remain open, indeterminate, adaptable, and transformable in time by residents to respond to changing spatial needs.

This not only enables larger communality without the loss of privacy, but also makes the apartments more flexible in the long run and therefore usage of space more efficient.

The structure responds to this socio-spatial configuration through the combination of primary concrete slabs every 23 feet and secondary and lighter CLT slabs that inserted in between can be displayed in different positions depending on the vertical distribution of domestic life. This results in a variety of possible layouts generated from the concatenation of day (14') / night



Figure 1. *A Blended Home*. View of the ground floor open alleyway from the communal backyard.

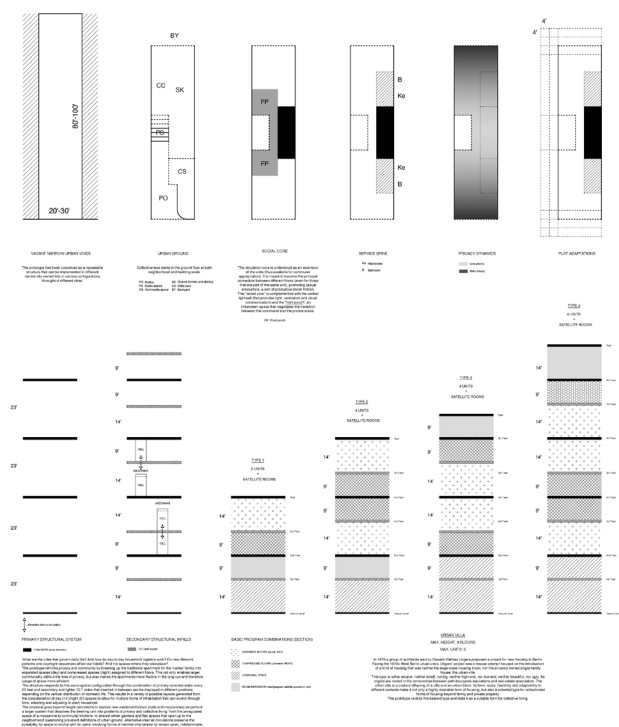


Figure 2. The prototype. Plan & Section: Conceptual Diagrams.

(9') spaces to allow for multiple forms of inhabitation that can evolve through time, adapting and adjusting to each household.

In terms of social and financial structure, the prototype is based on a Community Land Trust model combined with the management system of a Mutual Housing Association: the former would provide a framework for long-term land-use planning and control, while the latter would facilitate housing development and the use of cross-subsidies and economies of scale to make housing more affordable. Separating the land as a form of property from that of the building prevents land speculation and therefore allows the development of alternative affordable housing projects within underserved communities. These kinds of initiatives aim to achieve social resilience through democratic ownership, creating flexible and inclusive living environments that encourage principles of sharing and co-operation beyond traditional modes of habitation.

NYC

The first case study is NYC, a city that is well known for its socio-economic inequalities, the prevalence of unoccupied public land, and a long-lasting housing crisis, among other pressing issues, and therefore, a fertile site for experimentation on housing alternatives, new collective forms, and urban ground activation.

Here, the two implementations occupy public vacant lots in Upper Manhattan, in Harlem and El Barrio neighborhoods.



Figure 3. The prototype. Interior Layout: Conceptual Diagrams.

The former is synonymous with Black American culture, and the latter is home of the largest Hispanic community in the city. This is an area of under one-and-a-half square miles that sparks excitement, optimism, and pride, and where the architecture of the streets is a manifestation of the human ecology.

Delving into this loaded built environment that has long been a testing ground for architectural and urban strategies, both projects aim to become an active part of the surrounding neighborhood. Opening up the lower levels, the proposals claim their role in the configuration of the urban ground and become a continuation of the street, anticipating a vertical sequence of inhabited platforms where private and shared space are equally divided as a reflection of social life in the area.

In *A House Like us*, the ground floor unfolds in the form of a public stair, a gathering space understood as transition between the public and the private realm. This open part of the program is complemented with shared spaces in the ground and first floor like a workshop facing the street, communal kitchen and dining, daycare, and a community garden.

In *A Blended Home*, a sort of evolved version of *A House Like Us*, an open alleyway connects the street with the back garden, creating a smooth transition between both and the communal spaces in the ground floor.



Figure 4. *A House Like Us*: lower levels as urban ground.

In addition, in this second iteration, the overall system is simplified to generate spaces that don't prejudice future uses and enhance appropriation and future evolution.

Consequently, infill spaces are organized based on the combination of a basic set of cells that incorporate interchangeable functions.

In the expanded floors, these pieces float around a central programmatic element: the attached front porch.

This quintessential component of the traditional American suburban and rural home, with its outdoor nature that makes it unique, placed the private life within view of the public life, providing a space for people to engage with their community while remaining within the comfort of their own home.

When applied to an urban context, and as part of a vertical aggregation of homes, this updated version of the front porch expands the communal nature of its predecessor to become an antidote against social isolation and exclusionary forms of ownership.



Figure 5. *A House Like Us*: View of the ground floor open stands and community spaces.



Figure 6. *A House Like Us*: Sequence into the 5th floor.

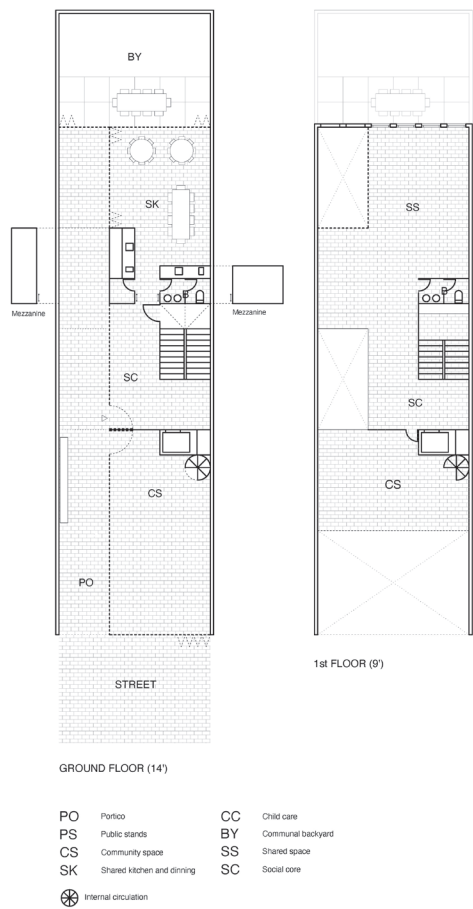


Figure 7. *A Blended Home*: lower levels plans.



Figure 8. *A Blended Home*: View of the ground floor open alleyway from the street.

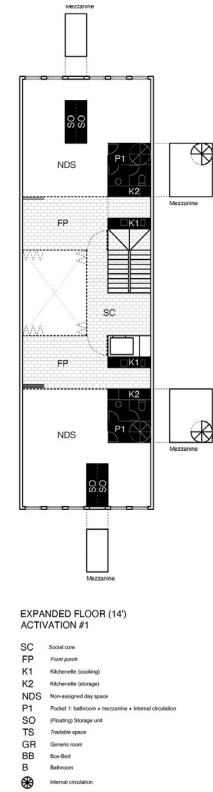
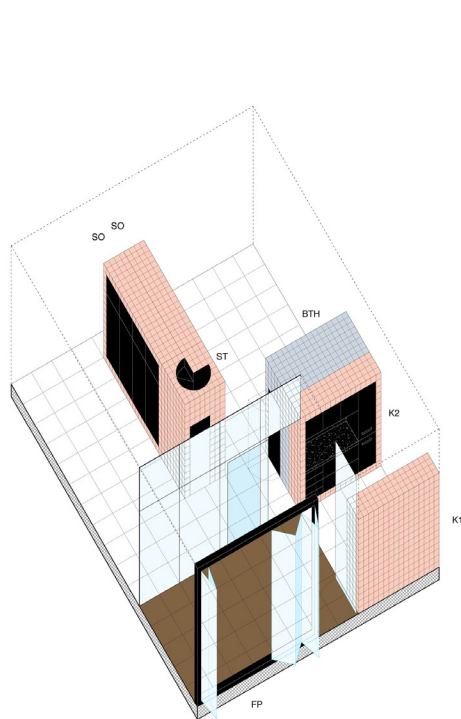


Figure 9. *A Blended Home*: The (attached) Front Porch..

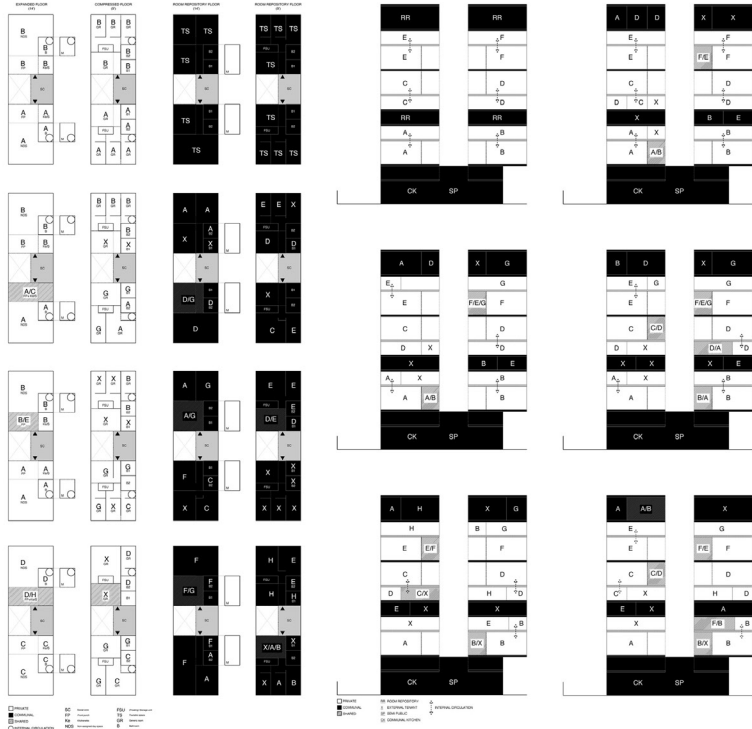


Figure 10. *A Blended Home*: alternative decentralized domesticities (various configurations).