

Communities By Design, a
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education
organization, in cooperation with the
City of Redwood City,
is pleased to present:

The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND THE ROLE OF DESIGN

2004-05 SEASON: FORUM #2
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2004
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On November 3, 2004, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit “Communities By Design” hosted the second presentation of the 2004-05 Forum season, with a presentation by **Michael Pyatok**. Mr. Pyatok – who is Principal of Pyatok Architects, an architecture, planning and research firm with offices in Oakland and Seattle – spoke about “Affordable Housing and the Role of Design.”

Mr. Pyatok began his presentation by identifying and describing what he sees as the twelve “designers” or “architects” that contribute to the development of affordable housing. Mr. Pyatok described each of these stakeholders and the role they play within the affordable housing development process:

1. Advocates – Promote affordable housing as good business sense.
2. Elected Officials – Help direct public resources to affordable housing efforts.
3. Lenders/Investors – Provide the financial resources required for the construction of affordable housing.
4. Regulators – Enforce applicable laws and policies regarding affordable housing; regulators can help or hinder the development of affordable housing.
5. Sponsors/Developers – Guide the development process from conceptual plans to a physical product.
6. Government Housing Agencies – Develop laws and policies that advance affordable housing.

7. Technical Consultants – Provide the knowledge required to build the project.
8. Contractors/Manufacturers – Install/develop the final housing product; contractors/manufacturers have tremendous power over the type of housing that is built.
9. Neighbors – Live in the community surrounding the affordable housing; neighbors can have a significant impact on the success of an affordable housing development.
10. Property Managers – Oversee the physical and financial well-being of the affordable housing community.
11. Service Providers – Offer critical developmental services such as childcare and adult education to the affordable housing community.
12. Residents – Serve as the final judges of a project’s success. There are three central themes that run throughout affordable housing, according to Mr. Pyatok: housing and jobs, housing and services, and community participation in design. The success of an affordable housing project hinges on the degree to which these themes are considered during the development process.

According to Mr. Pyatok, there are three central issues that need to be addressed during the development of an affordable housing project to ensure its success: housing and jobs, housing and services, and community participation in design. The connection between housing and jobs is clear – a successful development must be located close to employment opportunities and the housing development should support residents that choose to conduct their work within the home, such as sewing or appliance repair. The housing development must also provide basic services such as childcare and adult education programs so that residents can strengthen their skill base. Also, it’s important to include the needs, values and concerns of the community in the design process so that the residents and their neighbors can be proud of the area in which they live. Affordable housing must be designed to accommodate unconventional households, sometimes even three or four generations living under the same roof.

The physical design of an affordable housing project plays a key role in how a development is received by the community. Most importantly, the development must be “designed defensibly” and incorporate concepts such as eyes on the street and controlled access points. Also, the look and feel of the development must fit with the character of the surrounding area. In other words, there must be a good “neighborhood fit.” Finally, there must be opportunities for residents to personalize their home so that there’s a sense of ownership and belonging amongst the residents of the community. Mr. Pyatok explained how flower-boxes, flag holders and shelf spaces are all excellent examples of ways to encourage residents to reflect their identity and personality within their living space.

Mr. Pyatok used several case studies to illustrate the role that design played in the affordable housing project plans that were developed by his firm. In the early to mid 1900s, Swan’s Market in Oakland was a thriving department store and food market in one of the city’s bustling commercial districts. The building was boarded up for 20 years until it was turned over to the nonprofit East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation for redevelopment. What emerged from the planning process was a mixed-use, mixed income development with affordable housing and co-housing units and a public plaza to “draw city life” into the project. The co-housing component of the project (a form of “affordable housing for the middle class,” according to Mr. Pyatok) is unique because of the small distances between each unit. The bedrooms are twelve feet apart instead of the standard 20 feet and the living rooms are a mere eighteen feet apart instead of the usual 30 feet apart.

East 14th Street in Oakland is home to one of the most ethnically diverse communities in the Bay Area. Mr. Pyatok was able to honor the cultural traditions of these local residents when he created the plans for rehabbing a post-World War II development along this corridor. The project

incorporated many design details to reflect the ethnically-rich nature of the area: a local Asian artist designed the paneling on the building's towers, an African American artist created the tiling for the building's courtyard and entryways, and Latino artists constructed an iron "sunburst" for the entry gate. The 92-units of the complex were broken into four smaller buildings each with its own entrance, making the development safe because it was less porous. The project even included small 5-foot deep spaces at the building's street-level to create opportunities for small-scale commercial activities for residents that had previously been selling things of the backs of their cars.

Mr. Pyatok's was able to integrate the character of the community into the design of a refugee center in Seattle. At one of the early conceptual meetings, the design team noticed that many of the women at the workshop were wearing the brightly colored clothing of their native countries. The color scheme of the refugee center was made bright and bold to be consistent with the color of the resident's clothing. Also, the footprint of the units was so small that the outdoor patio of the upstairs town homes sat directly above the living room of the downstairs flat – a certainly unconventional but efficient design scheme. "No use gets away with being one story," says Mr. Pyatok. "You have to layer the uses to get the density up."

Rancho Cucamonga, California heeded the advice of its community and Mr. Pyatok when they built their much-needed affordable housing development. Instead of creating one large development, the residents decided to build six, smaller "cluster" developments each with its own courtyard. Mr. Pyatok also enhanced the security of the complex by incorporating low walls over which residents could see even when they were sitting down. In addition, local Latino artists added elements of art throughout the complex to pay tribute to the cultural history of the area's residents.

Mr. Pyatok concluded his presentation with a case study from a homeless housing project that he designed in Redmond, Washington, a suburb of Seattle. By creating natural connections to the surrounding area and creating a good "neighborhood fit", this project was able to overcome much of the resistance that is usually associated with homeless housing projects, in spite of its being twice the height of any building in the downtown. Mr. Pyatok also explained that because Microsoft is located in Redmond, the city is home to a younger, open-minded population that may be more accepting of non-traditional housing developments.

The Forum concluded with a few questions from the audience and continued discussion with Mr. Pyatok.

Boris Dramov, FAIA, will be speaking at "The Forum at Redwood City: A Continuing Conversation on City Design" on **Wednesday, December 1st, 2004**, from 6:00 - 7:45pm! Don't miss this provocative discussion on **Transforming Failed Freeways Into Successful City Streets and how fixing our streets can restore community and create a sense of place**. Please join us as Mr. Dramov shares his innovative work and discusses the implications of these ideas for the state highways and streets in our own communities.