

Radical Access

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This paper seeks strategies by which architecture and architectural pedagogy might be radicalized toward more equitable ends. It uses a current debate in local politics as its context, and it enlists a process of continuous engagement as its method. In this case, the debate is over a text amendment to the zoning ordinance (ZOTA) of Lexington, Kentucky that would allow the construction of accessory dwelling units (ADU), and the method of engagement is based on students, faculty, and practitioners in architecture working with planners, residents, and administrators to help define the terms of the ZOTA. Together, these strategies propose a framework for design centered around the concept of radical access. While interpretations of this concept can and should vary widely, this paper presents two possibilities: how to take a radical position relative to an accessible city, and how to take a radical stance toward the accessibility of the discipline of architecture.

To begin, we formed a partnership consisting of multiple stakeholders to imagine how design might factor into the ZOTA process. The collaboration unfolded in three phases. First, we sponsored a design competition for both students and professionals. Crucially, the competition launched only weeks after the initial release of the comprehensive plan draft, which identified a need for expanded housing choices, including ADUs. An exhibition of the competition entries enabled public engagement with a range of possible solutions, and it provided a platform for the newly elected mayor to voice her support of the effort.

Second, we worked with the planning department to develop a handbook that outlines important design principles for ADUs. Guided by these principles, we designed a prototype and built a physical model for a typical residential lot. The prototype enlists passive design principles to facilitate natural heating, cooling, and lighting, as well as universal design principles to promote accessibility. To lower the impact on existing sewer infrastructure, it detains rainwater onsite for future irrigation, and to reduce its carbon footprint, many of the structural and finish materials would derive from sustainably managed forests. Conceptually, the prototype draws inspiration from the continuously changing character of the built environment.

At its entry, the unit presents a roof profile that reflects much of the existing residential landscape, and toward the back, this profile is inverted to create an unconventional roof that signifies a departure from existing practices.

Third, we presented the prototype at a series of public meetings hosted by the planning department. Concerned with maintaining privacy between the main house and the ADU, the model demonstrated ways of orienting views and creating protected outdoor space. The competition entries were also on display, offering additional opportunities for public engagement with a wide range of possible designs. Reporters from local papers and television stations attended these events, and the designs featured prominently in their coverage.

Ultimately, this project is an experiment in designing for radical access, understood as a root-level engagement in political processes, as well as a disciplinary reckoning with how designing for people with disabilities is understood.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks strategies by which architecture and architectural pedagogy might be radicalized toward more equitable ends. It uses a current debate in local politics as its context, and it enlists a process of continuous engagement as its method. In this case, the debate is over a text amendment to the zoning ordinance (ZOTA) of Lexington, Kentucky that would allow the construction of accessory dwelling units (ADU), and the method of engagement is based on students, faculty, and practitioners in architecture working with planners, residents, and administrators to help define the terms of the ZOTA and to envision its possible implications. Together, these strategies propose a framework for design centered around the concept of radical access. While interpretations of this concept can and should vary widely, this paper presents two possibilities: how to take a radical position relative to an accessible city, and how to take a radical stance toward the accessibility of the discipline of architecture.

First, to be radical in relation to the city means becoming involved in civic processes at a fundamental level, or as one definition the term 'radical' suggests, "of, relating to, or proceeding from a root."¹ For this project, the problem is an extreme housing shortage, an affordability crisis, and an ability bias in the existing city. The root of this problem, from a legal and political perspective, is the local zoning ordinance which

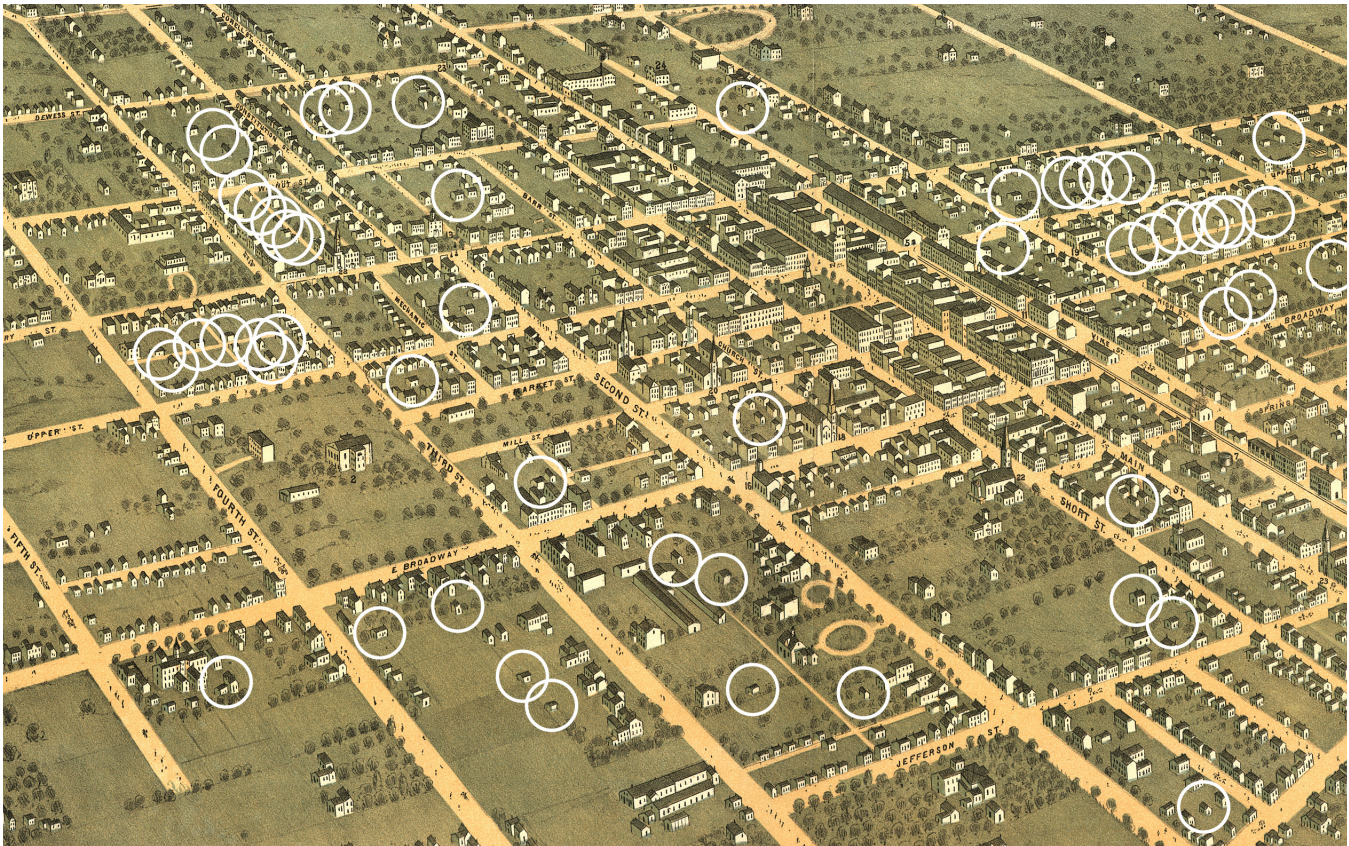


Figure 1. Detail of Albert Ruger's "Bird's eye view" (1871) with accessory dwellings circled.

governs planning and development. For Peter Marcuse, a radical urban agenda is outlined in the first step of what he calls 'critical planning,' which demands "stepping back and analyzing the *roots* of the particular problem, making clear what forces and actors are responsible for it and what structural conditions bring it about."² Changing the zoning ordinance to make accessible a greater variety of housing options for a wider demographic, then, becomes one way of radicalizing architecture.

Second, to promote radical access in the discipline means actively cultivating and inclusive attitude toward disabilities. Or, as another definition of the term 'radical' suggests, to favor "extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions."³ That accessibility has been so tarnished in the field of architecture—especially in pedagogy—to effectively normalize discrimination is intolerable. Moreover, the notion of disability as something to be accommodated is itself a problematic framing. As David Gissen writes, "disability is a relative category, constructed in spaces that produce disabled bodies and minds."⁴ To design spaces that are *eminently* accessible and not *simply conforming*, then, is another way of radicalizing the field. In other words, a reframing of the discourse surrounding disabilities in architecture could foreground accessibility as a design opportunity, rather than merely encourage it as a safeguard against penalties.

The paper consists of two parts. The first part outlines the historical and political context of the proposed ZOTA, including a brief survey of relevant case studies and a summary of the local debate issues. The second part documents an example of how a phased collaborative design approach might instrumentalize the concept of radical access in architecture.

PART 1: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Like many municipal governments in the United States faced with suburban sprawl and housing shortages, the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government (LFUCG) is attempting to amend its zoning to allow for ADUs. Commonly known as 'granny flats,' ADUs can offer improved urban access for people with disabilities while contributing to the density and diversity of the built environment. To be expected, the debate over this amendment is rife with controversy. Recent research, however, shows evidence that when cities prohibit ADUs, the effect is to increase the potential "to drive up housing costs, reduce housing options for new households, encourage sprawl, and exclude new residents."⁵ Moreover, these local prohibitions of ADUs "often discourage or inhibit the development of economically diverse, mixed-use neighborhoods that can help support educational achievement and economic mobility for low-income families."⁶ Despite these findings and an abundance of case study empirics, the resistance in Lexington is steadfast.

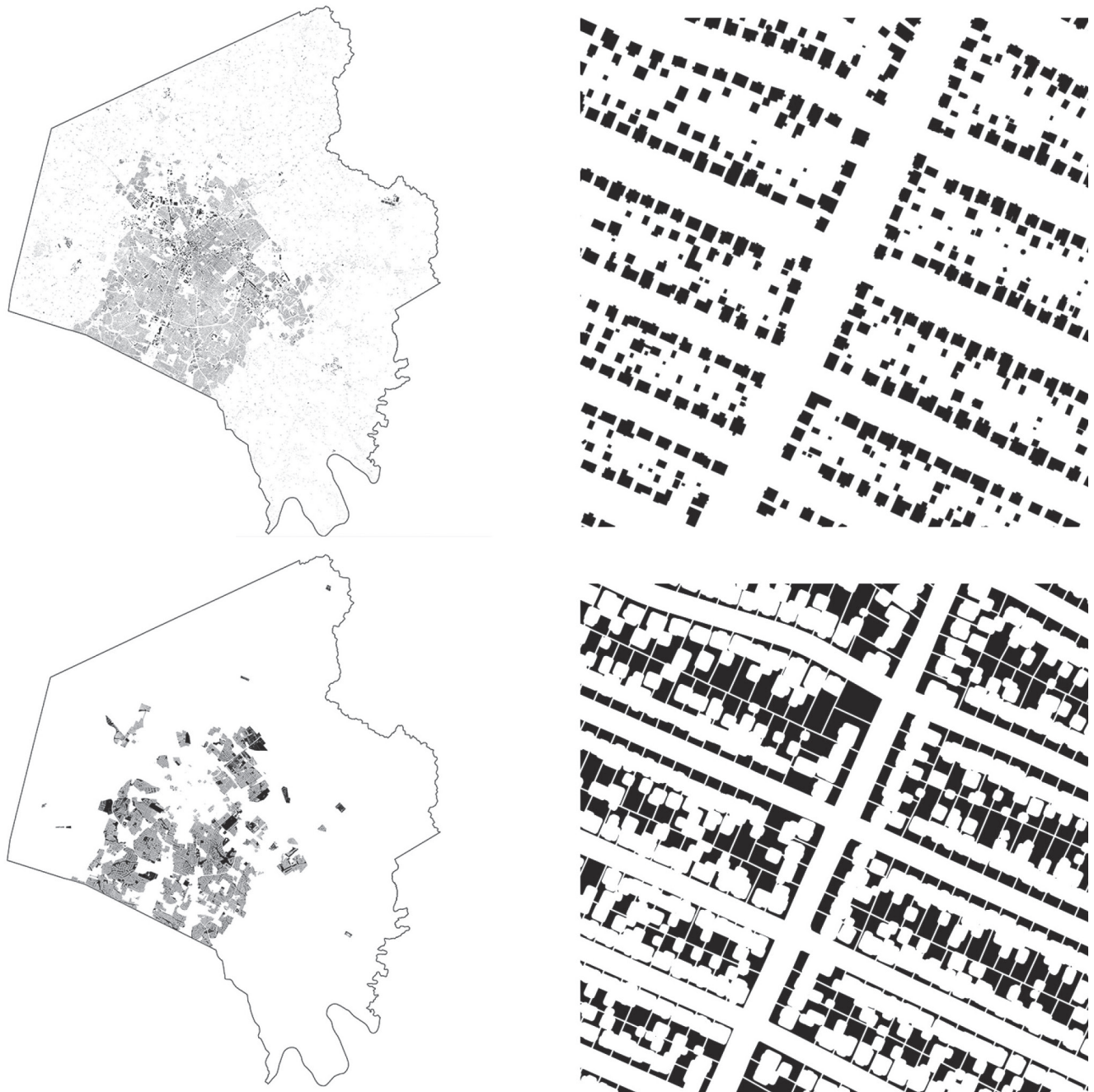


Figure 2. Maps showing existing building footprints in Fayette County and a typical residential neighborhood (top), and maps showing the eligible residential zones and lots with proposed setbacks subtracted.

The presence of secondary buildings on residential lots in the urban morphology of Lexington is not new. Historical evidence shows accessory dwellings in the antebellum period, used as both slave and non-slave housing, and it requires only a shallow dive into the archive to see this. Visual evidence from a perspective map from the 1870s shows accessory buildings on large estates.⁷ (Figure 1) In a textual account, a local industrialist reflected on his experiences growing up in Lexington, mentioning a “carriage house” where one of his childhood

friends lived, sometime in the 1810s.⁸ And in geographer Rich Schein’s account of the urban morphological development of Lexington, the presence of slave quarters as accessory buildings on white landowner property is documented as early as the 1820s.⁹

Houses accessory to the primary residence have been in existence nearly as long as Lexington itself, which was founded in the 1770s, so to bristle at the prospect of widespread changes in the urban form of Lexington ushered in by the proposed



Figure 3. Model of ADU prototype for display at public meetings, alongside the winning competition entries.

ZOTA, then, is historically inaccurate. In fact, accessory dwellings have been integral to the development of Lexington, however different the pressures from which they arose. In considering the reintroduction of ADUs nearly 250 years later, their role in the creation of a racialized landscape should be remembered. Architecture that was once used to enable slave labor on which the city was built might be used in the fight against historically inscribed inequality. While precise predictions cannot be made, a recent study suggests that ADU permitting positively correlates with concentrations of minority households.¹⁰ Not only are ADUs germane to the urban form of Lexington, their reintroduction might offer possibilities for combating the historic racism inscribed in the built environment.

CASE STUDIES

Though contextually specific, the battle to introduce (or reintroduce) ADUs is not new. Many cities on the West Coast, including Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, Eugene, and Santa Cruz, began allowing ADUs around the 2000s, but in some cases, any significant construction of ADUs has only recently begun. Portland, for example, issued 86 permits in 2010 and 615 in 2016.¹¹ In a rather extreme case, Los Angeles saw 142 permits in 2016 and nearly 2,000 in 2017. Further contrasting other cities, Los Angeles is experimenting with a regulation that allows ADUs to satisfy part of its affordable housing supply.¹² Regional to Lexington, other cities began approving ADU construction

around the same time, including Nashville, Asheville, Durham, and Fayetteville. Development of ADUs in these cities has been similarly slow. In Durham, for example, only 72 permits have been issued since 2007.¹³

While important cultural differences and policy distinctions exist among these case studies, several observations persist. First, ADUs are incapable of single-handedly shoring up a housing shortage, and their proponents are often the first to acknowledge this. At best, they can serve a niche market that would lighten the burden on the rest of the housing stock. Second, ADUs are only modest contributors to the affordable housing supply, if at all. In fact, the cost of most ADUs far exceeds any reasonable expectation of affordability. However, by contributing to the overall housing supply, the burden on the affordable housing market would be similarly lightened.¹⁴ Third, ADUs offer a unique housing type in previously inaccessible areas, enabling greater diversity and density through piecemeal and incremental changes in the urban fabric. In short, ADUs increase the housing supply, indirectly contribute to housing affordability, and increase diversity and density.

LOCAL DEBATE

Proponents of the ZOTA fall into several categories. For some, the motivation is financial. Since the proposed amendment does not prohibit short-term rentals, one resident at a recent public

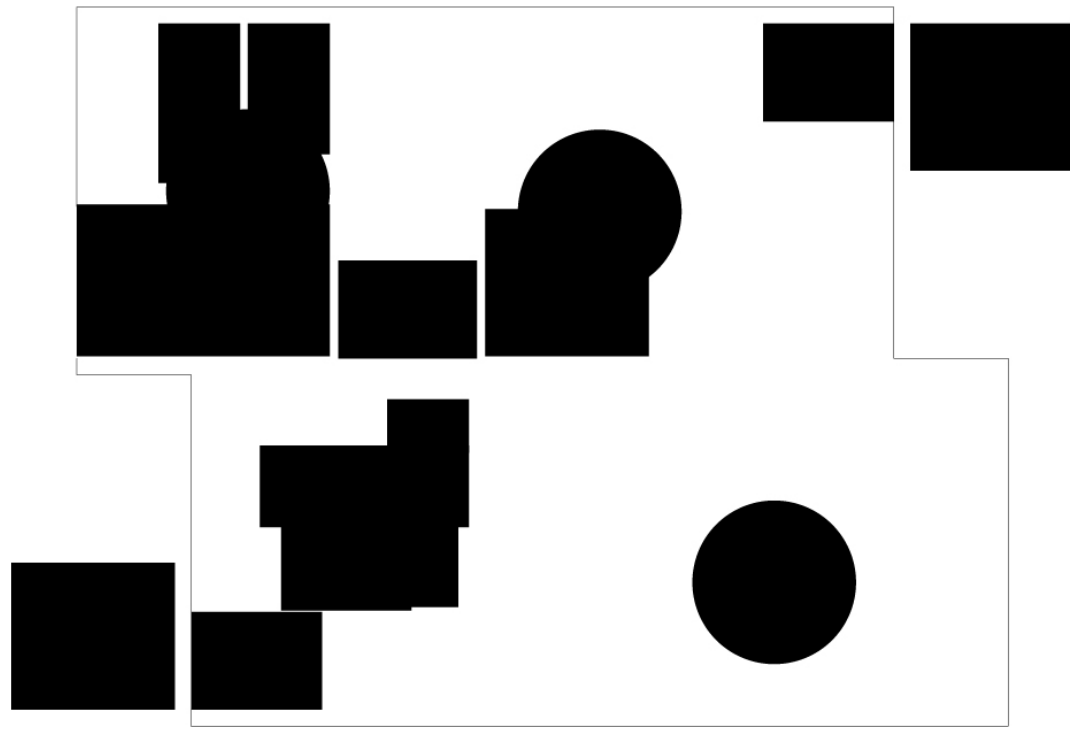
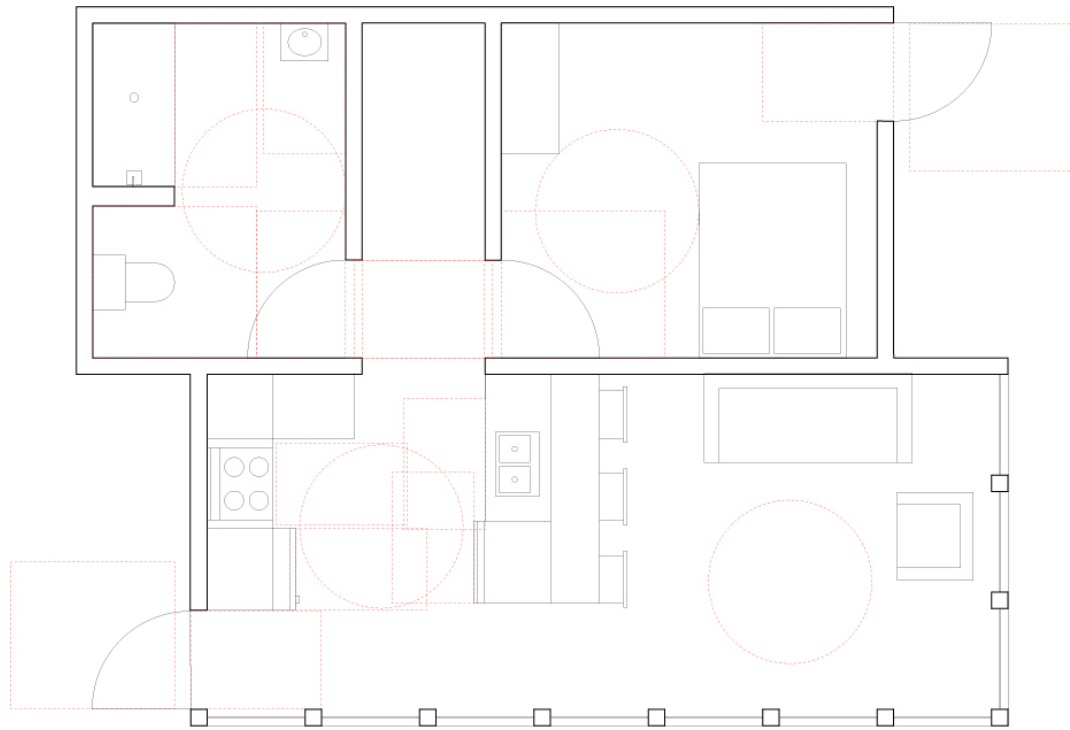


Figure 4. Plan showing required clearances according to universal design principles.



Figure 5. Interior rendering of living space beneath exposed rafters arrayed along a ruled surface.

hearing expressed the desire to supplement retirement income with rent revenue from an ADU.¹⁵ Another resident expressed the desire to simply add value to existing property by building and ADU.¹⁶ For others, the motivation is political. Recognizing the existing segregation and uneven access present in many Lexington neighborhoods, some supporters of the amendment are treating it as one way of dismantling inequality.¹⁷ And from a planning perspective, the amendment has received endorsements from national organizations.¹⁸

The greatest support for the amendment comes from those advocating for aging in place.¹⁹ Much of the existing housing stock in Lexington is inaccessible to disabled residents, which creates *de facto* segregation based on ability. However, disability advocates do not consider ADUs to be the only strategy for making a more inclusive built environment. Rather, those seeking to better integrate elderly and disabled residents in urban life consider ADUs as one piece of a much larger puzzle, what the LFUCG division of Aging and Disability Services calls a “continuum of care.”²⁰ In this model, ADUs fall on the early end of the spectrum alongside modifications of existing houses that include universal design features, and shared houses that integrate individual spaces and communal zones. At the other end of the spectrum are non-medical independent living communities, assisted living communities, memory care, and skilled medical care.

Critics of the ZOTA also fall into several categories, but much of the contention lies in the allowance for short-term rentals.²¹ While some cities have included a restriction of short-term rentals in their ADU planning documents, others have removed this ban or omitted it altogether. In Lexington, the principle of permitting short-term rentals is consistent with the lack of rental restrictions imposed on other residential properties. And even though the ZOTA includes an owner-occupancy stipulation to the short-term rental clause, critics are skeptical of its potential enforcement, especially concerning absentee landlords near campus.²² Further concerns include the lack of parking requirement, the maximum number of unrelated persons per dwelling remaining at 4, the maximum allowable size of 800 square feet, and the minimum setback of 18 inches from lot lines and existing structures.²³ And throughout the discourse of its detractors, mentions of unsafe construction, unappealing aesthetics, and general ruination of neighborhoods pervade. Yet paradoxically, these residents also express their support for providing additional housing options for disabled residents—just not this ZOTA.

PART 2: DESIGN PROCESS

Prior to these debates unfolding in the public realm, we formed a partnership with LFUCG and AARP to imagine how issues of design might factor into the process. The collaboration unfolded

in three phases. First, we sponsored a design competition for both students and professionals. Crucially, the competition launched only weeks after the initial release of the comprehensive plan draft, which identified a need for expanded housing choices.²⁴ Among these expanded choices was the ADU, which became the subject of the design competition. While ADUs can be built as attached structures on existing houses, the competition sought ideas for detached ADUs, since these are often the more controversial type. Based on zoning constraints approved by other cities, we wrote a brief that stipulated a standalone building with a maximum area of 500 square feet, a maximum height of 20 feet, and various setbacks from lot lines and existing structures. Most importantly, however, were the requirements for universal design features, as this was a project that sought to radically alter the terms of access in the built environment. An exhibition of the competition entries enabled public engagement with a range of possible solutions, and it provided a platform for the newly elected mayor to voice her support of the effort and commend the entrants' efforts. (Figure 2) The competition and exhibition also granted participants an opportunity to engage with policy as it is being shaped, and the initiative received both local and national press. In the early stages of the zoning amendment process, we wanted design to play a central role, and by generating a range of possible solutions from a variety of different perspectives, the effort gained significant momentum and widespread visibility.

Second, we worked with the LFUCG planning department to develop a handbook that outlines important design principles for ADUs. The handbook also included reproductions of all competition submissions, which enabled further circulation on digital platforms, including the LFUCG and AARP websites. Guided by the principles outlined in the handbook, we then designed a prototype and built a physical model for a typical residential lot. (Figure 3) Following the published guidelines, the goal for this prototype was to create an environmentally sensitive and universally accessible intervention that blends in with the existing urban fabric. (Figure 4) To achieve this, the prototype enlists passive design principles to facilitate natural heating, cooling, and lighting, as well as universal design principles to promote accessibility. To lower the impact on existing sewer infrastructure, it detains rainwater onsite for future irrigation, and to reduce its carbon footprint, many of the structural and finish materials would derive from sustainably managed forests. Conceptually, the prototype draws inspiration from the continuously changing character of the built environment. At its entry, the unit presents a roof profile that reflects much of the existing residential landscape. Toward the back, this profile is inverted to create an unconventional roof that signifies a departure from existing practices. (Figure 5) Between these profiles, the underside of the roof undulates as it reconciles the conventional with the unconventional.

Third, we presented the prototype at a series of public meetings hosted by LFUCG. Concerned with maintaining privacy between the main house and the ADU, the model demonstrated ways of orienting views and creating protected outdoor space,

among other considerations. The competition entries were also on display at these meetings, offering another opportunity for public engagement with a wide range of possible designs. Reporters from local papers and television stations attended these events, and the designs featured prominently in their coverage. The prototype was also presented to the planning commission during one of their working sessions. At each of these events, attendees are encouraged to take a postcard documenting the design features of the prototype, further extending its media reach. On October 19, 2019, the planning commission will vote on the amendment. If the amendment passes the planning commission, city council, and the mayor, our goal is to find an appropriate site to build a full-scale prototype.

CONCLUSION

To promote greater equality in the built environment requires that architecture become radicalized. The reactionary model of most service-oriented practices must be reconsidered. Present injustices will undoubtedly endure unless radical and progressive actions are taken to dismantle historic and contemporary structures of oppression. While admittedly modest in its scope, this project shows how collaborations between students and professionals, planners and administrators, and residents and activists can help radicalize the field of architecture in relation to issues of accessibility. Importantly, the collaboration began early in the planning process, and was able to provide a catalog of images and examples that would be used in subsequent events. Rather than waiting to design the possible outcomes of a proposed text amendment, this project contributed to shaping the amendment through early engagements. Ultimately, this project is an experiment in designing for radical access, understood as a root-level engagement in political processes, as well as a disciplinary reckoning with how designing for people with disabilities is understood.

ENDNOTES

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