Community Homes: Race, Politics and Architecture in Postwar Los Angeles

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After World War II, the national housing shortage was especially acute in Los Angeles. The city's housing supply was already stretched thin; first, due to migration from the "dust bowl" during the 1930s, and second, because of the millions of industrial workers that came during the war to work in defense industries. With a third wave, the resettlement of veterans, came a true emergency. For each of the next five years, according to market analyses, 100,000 units of new housing would be needed to satisfy demand. As a stop-gap measure, the city erected 'villages' of temporary houses in public parks, such as Rodger Young Village, which consisted of 750 war-surplus Quonset huts.[1]

A crippling shortage of materials intensified this housing emergency. Architect Gregory Ain found "veteran after veteran turned up in his office for advice about building a home." He told them all the same thing: "Trying to build one small house today is next to hopeless. Small builders can't get materials. Big builders won't take small jobs. But if a group of veterans pool their plans and finances they might interest a big builder and stand some chance of getting new homes."[2] It was amidst this atmosphere of emergency and scarcity that, in January 1946, 15 members of the motion picture cartoonists' union met to discuss forming a housing cooperative.

They called themselves "Community Homes." Within weeks eighty-eight families subscribed, and the group drew up a prospectus, by-laws, and bought 100 acres of land, forecasting a community of 280 families. They began working with Gregory Ain, the architect, who assembled a"'dream team' including planners, local housing officials, and landscape architects. Community Homes was to be the first fully conceived social and aesthetic solution to the city's postwar emergency.

As the cooperative grew, a majority of the new members came from Hollywood unions; others came from friendships developed through political organizations. Many were socialists or communists, and therefore, the project had an explicitly political character. Bill Hurtz, who was elected the cooperative's president, had made his name as the animator who led the strike against Walt Disney in 1941.[3] The cooperative was also racially integrated from the beginning, and eventually, non-whites made up about 6 percent of the 280 members, including the singer Lena Horne.[4] In the context of postwar housing, to be organized as a cooperative was a fundamentally political act, but they found from the start that to be racially integrated was truly radical. When the cooperative completed their purchase of land, a local Race Restrictions Board asked them to place restrictive covenants on a portion of the property, but they refused.

Architect Gregory Ain carried a reputation as "one of the best modern architects,"[5] but it was his politics that made him a fitting choice for this group; at the time he would have been identified as 'sympatico' or a 'fellow traveler'. Having been raised in working class Los Angeles, Ain spent part of his childhood with his family at Llano Del Rio, an experimental cooperative farming colony in the desert north of the city, which has been called "the most important non-religious utopian colony in Western American history."[6] He participated in Communist Party meetings in the 1930s; he was also publicly named as a Communist by the California Un-American Activities Committee in 1947. Many of Ain's most important private houses were completed for clients who were active in the party, and indeed many of these buildings functioned as meeting

houses.[7] In other words, there is an extensive unreported history of a Communist architecture in Los Angeles, which was organized around Gregory Ain. Community Homes, at least to an extent, shares in this identity.

The plan for "Community Homes" included 280 detached single-family homes, as well as schools, community buildings, and a shopping center, in other words, a completely planned community. In the typical private housing tracts of the time, the physical planning emphasized automobile traffic and the privatization of land, a pattern with political connotations. Bill Levitt famously said: "No man who owns his own house and lot can be a communist."[8] But Ain and his team worked from a position of criticism relative to these merchant-builders. The postwar housing emergency, Ain said, would be "a problem in planning, which, if not well solved now by the architects, will be badly solved later by the jerry-builders.... Most contemporary work is done in a fever of ruthless money-making. That attitude must be replaced by an entirely different set of values."[9] Likewise, the project's site planner, Simon Eisner, argued that designers should resist the priorities of the real-estate industry: "If architects have learned anything during the past lean years it certainly should have been the need to consider housing in terms of an overall pattern instead of on the basis of a single unit."[10]

The 'overall pattern' that Eisner and Ain developed for Community Homes gave precedence to public space over private, making it radically different from tract housing of the time. Sixteen acres of the one hundred total were given over to greenbelt parks, pocket recreation spaces, and what they called 'finger-parks', which were located at the center of each block, connecting each family's back yard. These finger-parks, in combination with the plan's "ingenious street design," allowed children to play in protected areas, separate from traffic.[11] A New York Times journalist noted that "it will be possible to go from one spot to another in any part of the property, on foot, tricycle or roller skates, without having to cross a street."[12] A city planning commissioner wrote: "In my opinion, this sub-division is the finest example of land planning for individual home ownership which has ever been presented to the Planning Commission for approval."[13]

Ain's house designs ranged from a 2-bedroom model at 784 square feet to a 4-bedroom plan measuring 2,016 square feet. Prices ranged from $7,500 to $15,000. These were absolutely consistent with the market rate for new tract homes, but no Los Angeles tracts exhibited this range. The architecture, then, was oriented to a unique degree of socio-economic diversity. The houses themselves were designed in a modernist idiom of flat roofs and glass walls, and their floor plans included several innovations which Ain had pioneered, based on feminist ideals and progressive theories of parenting. He advocated placing the kitchen at the center of the house and 'opening' it, which would allow the housewife to watch young children in the living room or backyard while she worked. He also employed movable partition walls, which mitigated the small size of the houses by allowing them to be reconfigured according to changing needs. Ain called his houses "flexible," and he argued that they would give older children a "greater independence and responsibility."[14]

What made "Community Homes" extraordinary as work of design was the relationships between houses; the brilliant integration of planning, architecture, and landscape design. The scale of the community was broken down into nineteen 'neighborhood groups' of 14-20 houses each. Ain designed thirteen different house types, each of which could be reversed, and this produced an immense array of possible combinations, like a mathematical game. In his theoretical writings, Ain frequently spoke of "...the need to consider the relation of one dwelling to another,"[15] a philosophy which recalls Eliel Saarinen's comment of the same period: "Always design a thing by considering it in its next larger context — a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in its environment, an environment in a city plan."[16]

Ain also worked in collaboration with landscape architect Garrett Eckbo, and from the earliest conceptual stages, the two of them developed strategies to integrate the buildings and landscape. Significantly, Ain's first drawings for the project, submitted to the cooperative in April 1946, included a short narrative which did not describe the features of the houses themselves at all, but instead emphasized the spatial relationships between the houses and the landscape:'"All houses have protected living gardens ... away from the entrance side. Garages are paired at alternate lot side lines, for minimum interruption of continuous front land-

scaping."[17] Eckbo clearly appreciated the intelligence of the plan and embraced the problem of working at different scales. He found that "the houses had a repetitive clarity with subtle variations. They challenged me to exploit variations … within overall unity."[18] On close reading it is possible to infer from Eckbo's statement of the problem that the designers faced a difficult balancing act, encompassing: first, the need for repetition of a few house types for economic efficiency; second, variations, to ameliorate the problem of homogeneity; and again, thirdly, social unity, to make space that engendered a feeling of community.

Eckbo, who became a member of the cooperative himself, developed street tree plans for the neighborhood that sought to alleviate the mechanical feeling of the underlying gridiron pattern.[19] He did so by making space, using techniques of modernist painting. He used trees to expand blocks across the suburban pattern the way that Mondrian would construct space beyond the frame of the picture. He wrapped the landscape continuously around corners, a reinterpreted treatment of the three-dimensional relationship between front and side, as in Picasso's human figures. When Eckbo's tree plan was overlaid on Ain's distribution of houses, the resultant interference pattern would mean that not one of the 280 houses would be alike.

One of the common complaints about post-war tract housing was that the uniformity of the suburbs seemed to deny individuality. Lewis Mumford, in his description of Levittown, described the pattern this way:

> "a multitude of uniform houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold."[20]

By contrast Community Homes projected a particular social life for its residents and, in effect, constructed different subjects. The community building was intended to be outfitted with "craft equipment for the teenagers," and would also include an assembly hall for lecture programs, the content of which can only be imagined. Most provocatively, the cooperative planned for social structures oriented to the liberation of housewives.

"Sitters will be superfluous," the New York Times reported, "since each mother will take her turn at watching all the pre-school children of her neighborhood group."[21] In similar vein, Ain placed "two-family drying yards" between pairs of homes, offering the opportunity for shared work.

For all of their comprehensive planning and organizational skill, the cooperative failed to anticipate the conservative political position of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), and this in fact proved to be the project's fatal flaw. After a heartbreaking period of more than three years of planning, stops and starts, good news and bad news, during which time members simply waited through one delay after another, some living in trailers or other temporary accommodations, the cooperative was finally disbanded and the land was sold in late 1949. None of the houses were built.

In part FHA opposed the project, according to cooperative member Max Lawrence, because "they thought we were all crazy radicals."[22] Certainly this political identity was encoded in the architecture itself. FHA was commonly hesitant to insure mortgages for houses with flat roofs, refusing to consider them sound, long-term investments, perhaps in part because modern architecture was beginning to be associated with socialism and communism at the dawn of the McCarthy era. Ain and other progressive architects frequently found difficulty with restrictions they found capricious. Architectural Forum reported: "Most"'modern' architects who have encountered FHA processing agree that the most disheartening aspect of the situation is official insistence on routine planning with which they are familiar and a complete unwillingness to try anything new."[23] At one of Ain's other housing projects, which was designed in a similar architectural style, FHA repeatedly asked that Colonial, Cape Cod, Italian and Spanish-style houses be included — styles that represented political conservatism.[24]

However it was Community Homes' policy of racial integration that ultimately caused FHA to reject the project. Ain, the architect, later recalled that

the project failed because FHA considered it "a bad business practice"[25] to provide mortgage insurance to integrated projects. Drayton Bryant, the cooperative's treasurer, recalled that when negotiations began with local FHA staff, he found "the issue of importance, as stressed by them, was the interracial character of the ... development."[26] When local FHA officials surprisingly rejected the site plan four months after it was submitted, the cooperative appealed this decision to the highest levels. FHA Commissioner Raymond M. Foley responded in July 1947, by saying that, because the project's racial makeup significantly increased the risk, "we are not warranted in accepting the risk, regardless of the nature of the cause producing that effect."[27] In other words, the cooperative could not escape the real estate industry's position that integration constituted lower property values in the Los Angeles housing market, even though they themselves were oversubscribed at the time, for houses which did not yet exist.

Foley did not issue a firm denial, but he allowed the cooperative to seek a private lender willing to submit an application. No Los Angeles banks would do so, but a Chicago investment company agreed to loan Community Homes the three million dollars it needed for construction. FHA then rejected this application on the grounds that the Chicago company was not an approved mortgagee for the area. The cooperative, meanwhile, was "informally advised" that FHA would go along if restrictive covenants were placed on all but twenty of the lots; processing would be completed within two weeks. For the second time, the cooperative refused this Faustian bargain. Ironically, race restrictive covenants would be struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court less than a year later in the landmark case of Shelley v. Kraemer.[28]

While Community Homes could be commended for its principled stand, it could also be criticized for naivety. Vernon DeMars, perhaps America's leading authority on cooperative housing in this period, took the latter stance. In a special issue of Progressive Architecture, DeMars made this statement, which was in fact a thinly-veiled reference to Community Homes:

> Co-operatives have traditionally insisted on nondiscrimination as to race, creed, and color; a rather academic consideration in England or Scandinavia, and one presenting no difficulty in running a consumer's grocery store in the United States. Housing is something else again, and co-operatives should abandon not idealism but naiveté.[29]

There were, however, similar cooperative housing projects which did abandon their principles. In Los Angeles, Mutual Homes Association had a similar organizational structure and a similar membership profile including many creative artists from Hollywood, but a very different physical plan and more expensive houses. Like Community Homes, they sought to be integrated but found that restrictive covenants would be a requirement of FHA. After a contentious debate, the Mutual Homes Association voted to accept the race restrictions. They indeed obtained financing, and the project was built in 1948-49, just as those restrictions were lifted. A happy ending? Not exactly. Mutual Homes was not integrated as of 1960.[30]

Despite FHA's resistance, Community Homes struggled fruitlessly for another two years seeking private financing even as its membership dropped off, and in February 1949, the story of the group's plight made it all the way to the desk of President Truman. In a 21-page letter to the President on the subject of FHA's racism, Thurgood Marshall, working for the NAACP, used the case of Community Homes to illustrate the bureaucracy's resistance to integration. Marshall concluded: "The achievement of racial residential segregation is the purpose and the effect of FHA's policy."[31] The long-term social implications of this are staggering to consider.

Because it was not realized, the true character of Community Homes will remain in the realm of speculation. Had it been built and inhabited, would the neighborhood have attained the feeling of an artists' colony, or would it simply have functioned like a typical suburban tract? It is impossible to know. Ultimately the historical significance of Community Homes is this: through its financial organization, through its political character, through its policies of racial inclusion, and through its physical planning, the community projected a resistant alternative to the to the corporate values of the housing industry and the racist policies of the Fed-

eral Government. Esther McCoy highlighted these issues when she wrote the project's sad epitaph:

"Five years after Community Homes was disbanded and the property sold, [the neighborhood] was the lowest common denominator of tract housing—no green belts or finger parks, just houses set row on row as exactly as markers in a VA cemetery. In the cemetery, however, there was no [racial discrimination]."[32]

NOTES

1. Dana Cuff, The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism (Cambridge, MIT Press), 2001, 55, 172ff.

2. Mary Roche, "Group Living for Veterans," New York Times Magazine (August 4, 1946); 34,

3. For Disney, Hurtz drew the dancing mushroom sequence in Fantasia. He was a founding member of the United Productions of America (UPA), where he won an Academy Award in 1951. He later directed the "Rocky and Bullwinkle Show" for over twenty years.

4. Eunice and George Grier, Privately Developed Interracial Housing, An Analysis of Experience (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1960, 144.

5. Frank Wilkinson, interviewed by the author, January 22, 2004, Los Angeles, CA.

6. Quoted in Sebastian Rotella, "Llano Del Rio Cooperative Colony 1914-1918" Los Angeles Times (May 28, 1989): B8.

7. The connection between Ain's politics and his architecture is the subject of my doctoral dissertation, "Gregory Ain and the Social Politics of Housing Design," UCLA Department of Architecture, forthcoming.

8. Quoted by Kenneth T. Jackson in Crabgrass Frontier (New York: Oxford University Press), 1985, 231.

9. Ain, quoted by Esther McCoy, in Contemporary Architects, Muriel Emanuel, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 19-20.

10. Simon Eisner, "Future Cities: A Challenge," Arts and Architecture (January 1945) 31, 50-52.

11. Grier, 145.

12. Roche, 35.

13. Grier, 145.

14. Ain, "The Flexible House Faces Reality," Los Angeles Times Home Magazine (April 15, 1951), 4-5, 23.

15. Ain,""Designs for Postwar Living: Jury Comments," Arts and Architecture (August 1943) 24-27.

16. Saarinen, quoted by his son Eero in Time, July 2, 1956.

17. Notes from an unpublished drawing entitled "3 typical contiguous lots" dated April 28, 1946, "Community Homes" file, Gregory Ain collection, Architecture & Design Collection (ADC), University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.

18. Esther McCoy, "Garrett Eckbo: The Early Years." Arts and Architecture [The Perception of Landscape] 1, no. 4 (1982): 39-40.

19. These landscaping plans, Eckbo recalled, were approved by the cooperative members through""a thoroughly democratic process." Dorothée Imbert, "The Art of Social Landscape Design," in Garrett Eckbo: Modern Landscapes for Living, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 154.

20. Lewis Mumford, The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.), 1961, 486.

21. Roche, 35.

22. Max Lawrence, interviewed by the author, June 15, 2004, Bel Air, CA.

23. "Apartment Boom..." Architectural Forum (January 1950); 104-105.

24. "One Convertible Plan," Architectural Forum (April 1949) 126-128.

25. Ain, quoted in, Esther McCoy, The Second Generation (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984), 121.

26. Quoted in Grier, 148.

27. Letter from Raymond M. Foley, FHA Commissioner, to Community Homes, Inc., July 3, 1947, quoted in Thurgood Marshall, "Memorandum to the President of the United States Concerning Racial Discrimination by the Federal Housing Administration," National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Library of Congress Manuscript Collections), February 1, 1949, p. 7.

28. Shelley v. Kraemer 334 U.S. 1 (1948), decided May 3, 1948.

29. Vernon DeMars, "Co-operative Housing: An Appraisal." Progressive Architecture 32 (February 1951); 77.

30. Grier, 155; also need a note on Mutual Housing

31. Thurgood Marshall, "Memorandum to the President of the United States Concerning Racial Discrimination by the Federal Housing Administration," National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Library of Congress Manuscript Collections), February 1, 1949, 14.

32. McCoy, The Second Generation , 121.