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Construction Cost Savings

Why can't the mass production techniques that crank out millions of cars every year be applied to housing, where the need for great quantities of new units at lower costs is becoming critical? They can, but only theoretically. You can't mass produce unless you have a mass market. A car is a finished consumer product designed for mobility. A house is neither.

Housing is still a regional, rather than a national market. A mass market big enough to create effective mass production will be created only when local building codes with individual and contradictory requirements are eliminated, labor unions agree to end jurisdictional disputes that prevent the use of prefabricated building units, and when financing is universally available for low-income housing. These conditions do not exist at present, nor are they likely to in the near future.

PREFAB UNITS EXIST

Prefabrication already exists in housing to a considerable degree. Roof trusses, bathroom and kitchen components, window and stairway units, and wall panels are available. Some experts believe that further savings may come, not from houses manufactured in factories, but in the creation of small factories or assembly operations on the building site.

But, while experiments in reducing housing costs through new technology must not be discouraged, architects with broad experience in housing say that a more realistic promise of savings will come through more efficient use of land. Land and financing costs often amount to more than half of the price of the house purchase. A new wall or structural system could, at best, affect the overall cost by one or two percentage points. But, if higher densities can be achieved through better planned "mixes" of house types, with townhouses and highrise apartments predominating in a town-like setting, development costs per acre of land can be lowered, and public services—roads, schools, sewage and water lines, police and fire protection, etc.—won't be stretched out as far. These situations will be reflected in lower costs and lower taxes.

HIGH-SPEED TRANSIT VITAL

Such compact communities can be planned and built at varying scales and at considerable distances from the city if certain criteria are met. Housing experts say they will be most successful when fitted competently into a comprehensive master plan for the metropolitan area, and linked to the city by high-speed transit. A high-speed rail system, usually found as a combined subway and surface system, can handle 20 times the number of passengers of a highway, and do it without parking problems. Thus, as the cost squeeze worsens, the California rambler, or what passes for it in many housing sub-divisions, will be on the way out in the years ahead. Towns and villages will be on the way in. Higher densities are coming, whether we like it or not.

The ideal will be a future fusion of better planning—including the hookup of satellite towns and parent city through high-speed subways and rail transit—with a genuine mass production technology that creates well-designed housing units for a single and unobstructed national market.

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July, 1969
Evergreen Plantation

WALLACE, LOUISIANA

One of the finest groups of plantation buildings surviving in Louisiana is the collection of splendid structures comprised of Evergreen Plantation, situated in St. John the Baptist Parish. It was purchased and restored some twenty-five years ago by Mrs. Matilda Gray, its present owner.

The builder of these buildings appears to have been Pierre Clidament Becnel, whose wife and parents, Pierre Becnel and Magdaline Ilaydel, were married in the parish church of St. Charles, on June 2, 1772. It was from his grandmother's estate that P. C. Becnel bought the plantation buildings in 1823 for $77,000. P. C. Becnel eventually became full owner of the plantation, and it is the latter and the other ½ to P. C. Becnel, the latter, which belongs to the present owner. The schedule of P. C. Becnel's properties concludes with the following listing:

A two story master house, with brick columns, measuring 66 feet in length by 42 feet in width, and on the sides, belonging to P. C. Becnel, according to an act, a copy of which is here attached, estimated $10,000. Two brick pigeon houses 14 feet square, 20 feet in height; two small houses serving as kitchen and servants chambers, coach houses, store houses, stables, etc., the whole estimated by the appraisers of the Union bank - $3,000. An (entrance) inclosure of 8 arpents in area - $1,500.

These are undoubtedly the much admired buildings of Evergreen Plantation, perhaps the most important group of plantation buildings surviving in Louisiana. After the Becnel family gave up Evergreen in 1894, it was purchased by the Songy's who owned it for many years. Then for some years it was unoccupied, the potential prey to vandals until rescued in 1944 by Mrs. Gray, who, with architects Richard Koch and Douglass V. Freret successively, restored the plantation and its grounds, one of the show places on the old River Road.

The Louisiana Architect
Evergreen - Front before restoration

Entrance door

Stair detail - front

Back stair

Evergreen today

Photo by Frank Lotz Miller

Photos by Richard Koch, FAIA and Robert W. Tibbs

July, 1969
Stone Village
BLANCHLAND, NORTHUMBERLAND, ENGLAND
Downtown Lake Charles has experienced the plight of all cities as they make the transition between 50 and 100 thousand population; it has outgrown its capability to effectively serve the urban community as the only retail center. Problems and symptoms of greater problems are apparent everywhere. There are 34 vacancies in the five major blocks of Ryan Street, Lake Charles' traditional "main street". Assessed valuation is low and dropping steadily. Parking lots are prevalent but largely unpaved and uninviting. Traffic congestion is almost unbearable with trucks, busses, taxis and automobiles all using the same paths through downtown, forcing pedestrians to seek safety on the sidewalks. All of these characteristics are painfully obvious today, and the

Lake Charles Downtown Redevelopment Project
J. J. CHAMPEAUX, AIA
Director, Office of City Planning

The primary catalyst in OPERATION HEARTBEAT is a fully landscaped, four block Pedestrian Mall, which extends from the Courthouse and City Hall along the four major blocks of Ryan Street. The Mall includes, in addition to landscaping, five pavilions to be used for sidewalks sales (rotation basis among adjacent retail stores). The multi-level pavilions will also serve for public activities such as art exhibits, display area for the Petro-Chemical Industries, McNeese State College, and Civic Clubs for any public-oriented activities. Colorful banners will identify sales and public activities, and a coordinated canopy scheme will provide cover for inclement weather.

Street and parking improvements, including the four lane traffic loop, is estimated at $650,000 and the first phase of construction is under contract as of June 4, providing two legs of the traffic loop. Completion of all street improvements is anticipated by March, 1970 (9 months) and the Mall construction will begin at that time.

The Mall is estimated to cost approximately $350,000 for the four block development between Kirby Street and Mill Street. Costs of the Mall will be assessed to abutting property owners along Ryan Street at approximately $100.00 per front foot. The traffic loop will be financed the same way, cost per front foot varying according to construction necessary. The traffic loop costs will be equalized so that no property owner will be forced to carry greater than his share of the developments.

Support of OPERATION HEARTBEAT has been community wide, and the major financial institutions have indicated a desire to contribute beyond their front footage assessments in order to lessen the burden on some of the smaller establishments within the downtown area. Ribbon cutting ceremonies are anticipated in October of 1970, and the following Christmas season is anticipated to be an astronomical event for Lake Charles.

Two blocks from the Mall will be the $10,000,000-plus Auditorium, Convention facility due to be completed in 1972. The well-appointed theatre will seat 2000, convention facilities will support up to 6000 delegates, and the arena is a flexible, multi-use facility with a capacity of 7200 seats. The Capital Improvement Program will finance the facility, and urban renewal funds were used to clear the previously blighted lakefront and provide the land fill and retaining wall to support the civic complex.

OPERATION HEARTBEAT, together with the Auditorium-Convention Facility on the Lake, is expected to be a strong catalyst in a total Downtown Redevelopment, and many retail businesses have begun planning expansion and renovation of existing structures. Long range plans call for major East-West and North-South arterial streets to tie into the Inner Traffic Loop, providing maximum accessibility for the Pedestrian Mall.

The design of the Traffic Loop and Pedestrian Mall was completed in six months by J. J. Champeaux, AIA, Director of City Planning. During this period, over 30 business and civic groups received slide presentations by Champeaux explaining the problems existing in the Downtown area, and groundwork was laid for the receptive thinking of merchants and businessmen to support OPERATION HEARTBEAT as finally presented.

The Southwest Louisiana Chapter, American Institute of Architects, and Faculty and Students of Architecture at McNeese donated much of their time and talents in assisting Champeaux with the presentation phase of OPERATION HEARTBEAT, as reflected in the drawings and model used to gain public support of the project.

In the interest of establishing Downtown Lake Charles as a regional center for retail trade, finance, business, government and culture, OPERATION HEARTBEAT has reflected a coordinated effort of business and professional leaders, citizens, public officials, members of the American Institute of Architects, students of Architecture, and also reflects the goal of the Director of City Planning for total community involvement in the Planning Process.

July, 1969 Photos by A. J. Rybiski, Jr. 11
OPERATION HEARTBEAT

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