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Negotiating for the homeless: a case study in Burlington, Iowa

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Negotiating for the homeless: A case study in Burlington, Iowa

by

John Manth Eberline

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

Department: Architecture
Major: Architecture

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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Ames, Iowa
1992
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INTRODUCTION

1-20-92

John,
See me ASAP regarding Burlington assistantship, they have the funding and it is a go . . .

Bob (Findlay)

This was the note I found left on my desk at school by Robert Findlay notifying me that the National Trust for Historical Preservation would be funding my work in Burlington, Iowa where I was to prepare a design for the renovation of the abandoned Union Hotel. At the time I couldn’t have realized how powerful a one line message could be. I certainly didn’t know that it would take nearly a year to write its conclusion. I was interested in transforming the hotel into a shelter for single women with children and incorporating its design into my thesis. In Burlington a committee had been formed with an agenda of their own for the hotel and the ensuing months would be an exchange of expectations. The principals then are the Community (Burlington), the Client (the Committee), and myself (the Designer). Each presentation is designated as a round and the conclusion is the summary of our cumulative gains and losses throughout the process.
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Robert Hayes, founder of the National Coalition for the Homeless, writes, "There are three root causes of homelessness in America: lack of housing, lack of housing, lack of housing" (Coates, 1990, p. 128). To be homeless quite simply means to be without basic shelter. The ramifications of this are enormous for the individual as well as the society. To be homeless means to be cut adrift, set apart, denied. To be homeless is to be young or old, man, woman or child. The number of homeless range from an estimated 250,000 by the federal government up to three million by the National Coalition for the Homeless (Bingham, Green and White, 1987, p. 52). To be homeless is to be without place or direction, only in or out. On any given night in Los Angeles 45,000 people are believed to be sleeping in cars (Coates, 1990, p. 26).

To be homeless means to be hungry. Statistically thirty-six percent of the homeless go one or more days per week without eating. One in six go two or more days without food (Burt and Cohen, 1983, p. 15).

To be homeless is to be without a wide range of services from healthcare to daycare. To be homeless is to have committed a crime, to be moved along and set aside, to come and go but never rest. To be homeless is to fall into a deep, hollow pit, disoriented, disbarred
and disenfranchised.

Each year, 2.5 million people are displaced from their homes. At the same time 500,000 low rent units are lost annually to urban renewal, highway projects, abandonment, gentrification and arson (Thorman, 1988, p. 45). Add to this the fact that during the Reagan administration housing subsidies were cut by sixty percent, and the result is the squandering of human and material resources measured in needless suffering. The irony is that both are disposed of in similar fashion. The homeless are warehoused in overcrowded governmental shelters while at the same time the very building components necessary for future housing is being buried in dump sites. Both are acts of social disinvestment, but now their numbers and volume have become too great to be ignored. Even the homeless no longer respond to the economic vagaries of slide and recovery. Once considered a transitory segment of society they have now become a permanent subclass - one that's younger (an average age of 26 versus 57 years five years ago) and more vulnerable (women with children comprise 40% of the homeless population) than ever before (Coates, 1990, p. 25).

To be homeless means to be all of these things, but most importantly to be homeless means to "lack housing." Therefore, I propose a second Declaration of Independence, a manifesto of sorts that states: When the government hasn't the will to provide adequate shelter for its citizenry then it's incumbent upon those citizens to
provide it for themselves. As simple as that. A practical, undiluted solution that challenges each of us to take responsibility for our lives. To accomplish this I propose the formation of a community of self-help that combines a system of urban homesteading and work equity to create adaptable housing from reclaimed materials and redemptive technologies. I further propose that this community be based around the needs of the most at-risk group of homeless, single women with children. George Grant in his book, *The Dispossessed*, states, "A full 77% of this nation's poverty is now borne by women and their children."

Their is a specialized problem. On one hand they need to stabilize their living conditions in order to care for their children while at the same time developing new skills to sustain a change of lifestyle. To facilitate this a new form of transitional shelter is needed - one that actively pursues the common goal of securing low cost, affordable housing through a system of education, work equity and material exchange.
PRECEDENTS

While searching for examples of transitional housing I was reminded of an architect I had been arbitrarily assigned to study years before in a class. His name was Aldo van Eyck and his project was the Hubertus House which in English means harbor house. At the time I couldn’t have realized the profound effect he would have on my own design of a shelter in Burlington, Iowa. In this section on precedents I’ll also consider two lesser models. One is the work of Lucien Kroll at Woluwe - Saint Labert as well as at the Academy of Expression in Utrecht. The other is Warren Village in Colorado where transitional housing actually works and even thrives. There are, of course, many others but these I feel set the parameters for my own investigation.

In 1982 Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck completed work on a transitional shelter for single women with children (the Hubertus House) in Amsterdam (Figure 1). Admittance into the program is based on a client’s inability to temporarily function on their own because of emotional and relational problems. They are either pregnant or mothers of young children (Hertzberger, Van Roijen-Wortmann and Strauven, 1982, p. 28). The agency’s goal is to provide a secure, caring environment. In the past the plight of shelter residents was compounded by an unwillingness on the part of society to deal with their problem. The irony is that they were considered somehow
Figure 1. The Hubertus House by Aldo van Eyck
scandalized, their roles reversed and found guilty by association. Ultimately they were shunned from public scrutiny and sentenced to anonymity behind reclusive walls.

Van Eyck rejects this insisting that to do so only serves to further stigmatize the victims. For him the solution is to literally tear the walls apart and make what was once hidden visible. He describes the role of the transitional shelter as being "required to be both public and private, open and closed, acting as an in-between place that in the process of admittance prepares for departure" (Hertzberger, Van Roijen-Wortmann and Strauven, 1982, p. 108). He terms these dichotomies "twin phenomena" and states that although opposite in meaning they share a reciprocal relationship with each other. It's this reciprocity which once activated creates a dialogue. This is evident at the Hubertus House where instead of attempting to blend the facility into the community and disguise the special needs of those inside, he loudly proclaims their presence by painting the facade in a brilliant assortment of colors. These same colors are carried throughout the interior of the building, reinforcing its public stance. This openness is further accentuated by his extensive use of glass along the street edge which provides a simultaneous view in and out and at the same time remains both secure and involved. The use of glass also infuses the project with natural light, activating it in much the same way as the bright coloration to draw the outside in.
He continues this exchange by exposing a set of circular stairs that rise between floors to loggias and rooftop gardens. From here the resident is given a variety of vertical lookouts from which to reference themselves in relation to others. The same is true for the pedestrian who sees framed legs and bobbing heads climbing and descending. Suddenly the faceless are given human form and new perspective. In this way the horizon is never set. It’s kept in constant motion up and down and from side to side, the intrinsic ambiguity adding surprise and discovery.

Van Eyck writes, make of each place, a bunch of places of each house and each city, for a house is a tiny city, a city a huge house. Get closer to the shifting center of human reality and build its counterform - for each man and all men, since they no longer do it themselves (Hertzberger, Van Roijen-Wortmann and Strauven, 1982, p. 49).

Another interesting aspect of the Hubertus House is its treatment of children who are housed in a separate wing of the building from their mothers. The concept is adapted from that of an Israeli Kibbutz. Here the idea is to allow the mother time to decompress by insuring care for the young by others. A communal central kitchen located between the adults and children’s wing acts as a natural pivot from one to the other.
Another architect whose approach to public housing I found to be unique is Lucian Kroll from Belgium. Instead of dictating the beginning and the end of a design he lets a project build itself. By that I mean he believes in an organic process that relies on the participation of the user and the builder and the community in an on-going narrative of decision-making. This democratization is often chaotic and fragmented, producing makeshift forms and jerry-rigged solutions that are not only tolerated but fostered. And like van Eyck he too willingly rejects the rules of conventionality in favor of a wider humanistic viewpoint. During the renovation of the Academy of Expression at Utrecht sections of interior walls were torn out for new openings and the brick left ragged and unfinished as a record of its transformation (Figure 2). In the introduction to Kroll’s book, Building and Projects, Wolfgang Pehnt writes, "For Kroll, the new has its place in and next to the old, not in place of the old" (Kroll, 1987, p. 9). Therefore time can never stop the process and whether a project is added to or left in ruin is inconsequential to him. What matters is its continuing germination.

The student quarters at Woluwe - Saint Lambert in Brussels is Kroll’s largest project to date and offers further insights into his philosophy of design.

In order to better facilitate construction, Kroll chose a standard building system and then modified it to make it more responsive to the
Figure 2. Renovation of the Academy of Expression by Lucien Kroll
users and the community. First, instead of ordering a single window type he incorporated many different styles and sizes to add texture to the exterior. He then asked the workmen, "to complete parts of the building to their own taste: to combine concrete with brick, to pour cement into molds in which the had glued leaves, to build two huge statues from cement, to form curves with stones, and so on" (Kroll, 1987, p. 44) (Figure 3).

In one building he employed an open floor plan and provided the students with easy to assemble partition modules to create their own living spaces. At another he was told that students would sometimes rent or buy a small house and then tear out floors and walls and stairs and rebuild it according to their own design. This became the inspiration of the Lofts, a three story space with lofted floors open to the exterior wall that students continually rework into individualized multi-level housing. One student, an American, built an apartment for himself that was a single, small room over twenty feet high (Kroll, 1987, p. 48) (Figure 4). To me the genius of Kroll is his absolute commitment to an exploration of the diversity of opinion and the belief that all of us are enriched by the experience.

Warren Village in Denver, Colorado is quite different from the Hubertus House or the free-wheeling philosophy of Kroll but still extremely successful in its single-minded determination to advance families from social care to a self-determined lifestyle. Begun in 1974
Figure 3. The brick statues at Woluwe-Saint Lambert
Figure 4. The building of the lofts and the subsequent reworking of space by students
with 96 units a second phase of 106 units was completed in 1984.

Originally founded by the Methodist church the project is now run by two non-sectarian, non-profit organizations. To be considered for the program prospective tenants must meet a number of eligibility criteria: "A single household head who is at least 18 years of age; and children not older than eleven years at the time of enrollment; no more than four children per household; a source of income to pay rent (aided by the state); children must live with their parents; and residents must express a strong need and desire to reach personal development and financial goals" (Franck and Ahrentzen, 1991, p. 150).

Personal objectives range from improved employment skills to better parenting. On-site services include counselling, job training and education. A large daycare is also offered. The success rate has been striking. A survey conducted by ABT Associates in Boston found that 47% of the residents were employed at the time of admittance to the program and that within two years of leaving 94% were employed. The enormity of this gain is also reflected by the fact that initially 65% were receiving public assistance and within two years the number had gone down to 6%. "This type of supportive residence along with the requirements for residency contribute to these trends" (Franck and Ahrentzen, 1991, p. 150).

Warren Village received its initial funding from a loan by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) which in order to insure its
investment stipulated that the design and construction resemble conventional housing types for families. Consequently apartment sizes range from 520 to 965 square feet for one, two and three bedroom units. The village was also required to include commercial space within the complex (Franck and Ahrentzen, 1991). The program works, despite the governments conditional support, because of its selectivity in accepting only highly motivated participants. This would become the central point of my own program and in the end a point of contention with others.
THE COMMUNITY

Burlington, Iowa is located on the west bank of the Mississippi River in an area known as the Flint Hills. Founded in 1834 at the conclusion of the Black Hawk Wars, Burlington was the first Iowa capital of the Wisconsin Territory. The convergence of river and rail traffic made this pioneer settlement the "Gateway to the West" surpassed only by St. Louis. By 1885 the city had a population of 38,000. Today the population is approximately 28,000. Early economic activity was spread along the riverfront in docks and warehouses.

In the 1850s James Wilson Grimes, the future governor of Iowa, was one of Burlington's most influential citizens. At his urging Iowa entered the Union as a free state. He also changed the course of local history by convincing the railroad to build its river crossing in Burlington. Following the Civil War, Grimes built the Union Hotel across from the Union Depot to accommodate the growing rail trade. The 100 room hotel originally fronted on Main and Elm Streets. Later additions to the south and west formed an open square with an interior courtyard. Eventually the courtyard itself was converted into a one-story building. "In 1882 the hotel could accommodate 130 guests, was lighted with gas and had water on each floor" (Montgomery, 1990). By 1888 the hotel was heated by steam and lighted electrically (Figure 5 and 6).
Figure 5. The Union Hotel built in 1882
Figure 6. A model of the Union Hotel showing its original floor plan arranged around an interior courtyard.
More than simply being a working man's hotel it was a gathering place for the "elite" with two dining rooms and parlors, tiled floors, tin ceilings, and even those modern essentials, hot and cold running water.

The ownership of the hotel has changed a number of times, reflecting a general period of decline in Burlington's status as a major shipping center. At various times the hotel has housed a wagon factory, a fruit market and a cold storage facility. Burlington Main Street quite literally saved the building from demolition, convincing the wrecking crew to stop while it negotiated with the bank for an alternative solution. Main Street was given title to the property for $1 plus a $10,000 pledge for roof repairs.

Main Street of Burlington is a member of the national Main Street organization chartered for the purpose of preserving and restoring historic districts. The local chapter was incorporated in 1985 and is funded through a public and private partnership. Their first concern is to secure an endangered property and once that has been accomplished to find a new tenant to revitalize it (Montgomery, 1990).

Before agreeing to work on the project I met with local representatives of Main Street and was given a tour of the three story hotel (Figure 7). The main floor is an open lobby with twelve foot high tin ceilings covered with acoustic tile. Years of neglect and patchwork have begun to peel away the various layers revealing its original construction of three course brick exterior walls and post and
Figure 7. The hotel as it looks today. Top photo taken from inside depot lobby.
beam interior bays. At some point a workman had cut through a basement level support which in turn weakened the stacked columns above, creating a chain of structural failure that culminated in the placement of an exterior steel brace to prevent further buckling. The most severe structural damage, though, is in the back of the building on the west side (Figure 8). This was the last addition to be built and despite its relative youth the walls are deeply cracked from the effects of differential settling. Windows are broken and boarded over and plaster is crumbling off the ceiling. Pigeons have entered the upstairs of the building and settled into a life of voluntary capture, occasionally bursting out of the rooms in a rush of flight whenever they feel threatened. Many never escape and eventually join the mounting pile of debris (Figure 9).

The main stairway winds up from the lobby like a fragile wooden tendril, making tenuous attachments at each floor. Missing treads and exposed stringers add to the skeletal effect. The guest rooms are located on the second and third floors. In the main wing, facing the river, a double-loaded corridor nearly fifteen feet wide acts as an upper lobby. A large room at the south end may have been used for linen storage. The halls in the other wings parallel the courtyard wall and are more conventionally sized at five feet. The ceiling height throughout is ten feet. The rooms are small, averaging 9' x 16'. Those in the main section share bathrooms that were latter day add-ons, jutting out into the corridor. A public restroom, located on
Figure 8. The west wall of the Union Hotel
Figure 9. The interior of the hotel
an inside corner, serves the others. As mentioned earlier, the courtyard was enclosed as a single story addition and so, from the residential floors, you look down onto its roof.

Actually, it was this view in plan that first piqued my interest in the hotel project because it meant that the building could have an interior life quite different from that of its formal facade, and with the removal of the courtyard roof the ground element could be re-introduced into the design and a whole new set of programmatic conditions realized.

On the initial tour through the site I was struck by the volume of the building and the amount of air and light that had been left alone for years to mix its own chemistry. It seemed to me that far from being a place where time stood still it was, in fact, just the opposite. Here time was like a spinning clock rushing up and down the hallways in a profusion of night and day and light and shadows. So although time may be fluid the building is old and worn, nearing a state of complete degradation. The good news, though, is that it remains fundamentally sound despite the extreme effects of weathering and abandonment. So the question is not whether it should be saved (it should) but rather whether it can be saved.

Across the street from the hotel is a railroad depot operated by Amtrak. Built in 1882 it was destroyed by fire and rebuilt in 1943 (Figures 10 and 11). And, like the hotel, it has fallen on hard times. A portion of the building has been closed off and left in disarray.
The railroad has tentatively offered the building to the Main Street organization if they can find a use for it. Main Street then proposed that I consider using it in conjunction with the hotel.

Another structure located near the depot and the hotel is the McArthur Bridge which was built in 1917 and is in the process of being replaced by a new suspension bridge that's being constructed next to it. In the past, old bridges were routinely dynamited and sunk in the channel. This time, though, because of its proximity to the other bridge the steel frame will be disassembled and lifted out. Both bridges are in full view of the hotel and as such provide an active metaphor for a transitional shelter which seeks to link people and places. The other aspect of the bridge which could be incorporated in the design are its own disassembled pieces which could be reconfigured for use in the structural repair of the hotel (Figures 12 and 13).
Figure 10. The Union Depot built in 1882 across the street from the Union Hotel
Figure 11  The depot as it looks today
Figure 12. The McArthur Bridge
Figure 13. Site plan
THE CLIENT

The client is a committee made up predominantly of local and state agency representatives who were asked by Burlington Main Street, a preservationist group, to develop a proposal for use of the Union Hotel. The director of the Southeast Iowa Community Action Organization initiated the idea of converting the hotel for use as low-income housing. She then asked the Regional Planning Commission to assist in the funding process which included identifying specific sources of state and federal monies allocated for this purpose and the subsequent writing of grant proposals. At the same time a local minister who was interested in opening an emergency shelter for transient men was approached by the committee and asked to share tenancy of the hotel. A local architect was also invited to join the committee and provide technical expertise for the project.

My involvement came as a result of an inquiry from the committee to the university's architecture department for someone to assist in the preparation of preliminary plans and concept sketches for the renovation of the hotel. The faculty member in charge of the community outreach program knew of my interest in housing for the homeless and offered my name for consideration.

For purposes of this discussion I've decided not to name members of the committee directly but instead to refer to them by their work
designations or collectively as a group. The major participants were the Director, the Director’s Assistant, the Minister, the Architect and the Planner.

This was my first experience in designing with a large number of people and although we shared a common goal each of us pursued it from a different point of view. The fact that we were here at all is a matter of historical precedent that bears review in light of the prevailing attitude toward public housing. In 1937 the Federal Housing Act was passed which authorized the expenditure of public funds for low-cost housing. The effects of the Great Depression that had begun with the stock market crash in 1929 were still being felt and the passage of this bill was seen primarily as a way to stimulate employment. Of secondary importance was the creation of decent housing for low-income families.

By 1949 another Housing Act was enacted, declaring that "the general welfare and security of the nation, and the health and living standards of its people require the realization as soon as feasible of the goal of a decent home and suitable living environment for every American" (Ringheim, 1990, p. 13). Clearly the impetus had changed from a single economic motive to a broader social one.

By the late 1960s a new approach to the housing problem was initiated. In this instance the federal government removed itself from the direct financing of housing and instead subsidized mortgages at
below market interest rates to non-profit and profit-oriented groups as a way to stimulate growth in the housing industry. This changed again in 1973 President Nixon declared a moratorium on all subsidized housing and by 1976 the construction of low-income units came to a halt (Thorman, 1988, p. 67). "Wisely, the administration did not cut the far more costly housing subsidies for the middle and working-class homeowners (that is, tax deduction for mortgage interest)" (Hoch and Slayton, 1989, p. 211). To do so would have meant cutting their own base of political support. Housing assistance for low income families was shifted to a new program called Section 8 in which the government pays the landlord the difference between a fixed percentage of income (30 percent) and the fair market value of the unit. It's not surprising that the ones to reap the greatest benefits from this were the developers.

During the Reagan years the intent was to do away with the low-income housing programs, and, in fact, nearly 60 percent of the housing budget was cut. This meant a drop in the number of federally subsidized housing starts from 144,348 to less than 23,427 per year (Hoch and Slayton, 1989, p. 211). At the same time the government’s indifference to the plight of the homeless had become so complete that HUD actually declared there were no homeless Americans. Peter Salins writes, "In the absence of a revolutionary change in Washington’s attitude toward housing, do not look to the federal
government for a comprehensive or enduring solution to the housing problems of the poor" (Thorman, 1988, p. 68).

So while the government attempted to define its own social role, a new movement had begun in the private sector, one whose roots trace back to the founding of this nation. The movement is known as homesteading. The original Homesteading Act of 1862 gave families who were willing to relocate to the western territories 160 acres of free land in exchange for five years of farming it.

Later in the 1930s the Great Depression spawned another return to the land in the form of the government's subsistence Homestead Program. The rationale was that the Industrial Revolution with its dependence upon specialization had deprived most citizens of the ability to provide for their own basic necessities. The aim of this program was to allow people to reclaim parcels of federal land contingent upon their willingness to be retrained in agricultural and land management practices that would allow them to become self-supportive.

The latest trend in homesteading began during the 1960s at the height of a fundamental population shift away from the cities to the suburbs. The result was the social and economic abandonment of the inner cores of the cities. This coupled with the divisiveness of the war in Vietnam and the jolt of the Middle East oil embargo served to heighten the awareness of the finite level of resources available to us. The difference, though, for the new pioneer was that they weren't being
asked to move farther out into the uncharted frontier but rather were being asked to move back to the city in an attempt to resettle urban America. Here self-sufficiency was no longer dependent upon the land's ability to produce food, that function had been relegated to others, now the land was being asked only to provide shelter.

The first modern urban homesteading act was signed May 18, 1973 in Wilmington, Delaware, authorizing the formation of a Homesteading Board to more efficiently assist in the transfer of ownership of abandoned buildings taken back by the city and to act as policy-maker for applicant selection and funding. Similar programs were also begun in Baltimore and Philadelphia with the mandate to:

1. Turn abandoned and untaxed properties into maintained and taxable properties.
2. To provide for increased homeownership.
3. To retard urban decay by giving responsible people a stake in their neighborhood.
4. To foster migration back to the city.

Typically, the minimum requirements for an applicant were that they must be 18 years of age and head of a family; a citizen of the U.S. with access to financial resources; the ability to rehabilitate the structure and bring it up to code within 18 months; and finally the willingness to live in it for three years (Hughes and Bleakly, 1975, p. 113). For the urban homesteader the association with the past and with those who accepted the challenge before them is undeniable. The reality is
though, often less heroic. The real enemy has become entrenched in the bureaucracy of banks and building inspectors, in falling property values, unemployment and crime.

And yet despite these formidable obstacles self-help remains the oldest and most traditional manner by which people house themselves. A study by the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1969 estimated that nearly 20 percent of all single family new construction starts are by owner-builders (Hatch, 1984, p. 105). The reason is savings. According to the February 1981 issue of New Shelter magazine, "20 percent of the cost of a new home can be saved if the owner takes on the contractor role. If an owner finishes the interior of a contractor-built shell, savings can reach 44 percent. If the house is entirely built by the owner, the cost can be reduced 58 percent, and if recycled building materials are used, the cost can be reduced by 65 to 72 percent" (Greer, 1988, p. 133).

Therefore, it's not surprising to find that the concept of self-help has become expanded to include entire organizations whose sole purpose is to combine their skills and resources in an effort to lower costs. For instance, in Harlem the Black Muslims have formed housing cooperatives to revitalize abandoned tenements. In Dallas, Common Ground takes unwanted housing, much of which has been targeted for demolition, and renovates it for households earning less than $12,000 per year. Another example is Habitat for Humanity which operates in
170 cities around the country and uses its own funds to finance construction and provide low interest loans. A large portion of the work is done by volunteers including the prospective owner who is usually required to contribute at least 250 hours of work on their home plus an additional 100 hours of work on a future project for the group.

These are vitally important programs, the difficulty arises when they’re asked to enlarge their services beyond the scope of short term goals to the long-term administration of social programs. There are many successful exceptions to this of course but in Burlington, like so many other places, a partnership between the private sector and the government seems to work the best, giving each party the opportunity to broaden their agenda.
THE DESIGNER

When I began the process of selecting a topic for my thesis I was interested in studying the use of recyclable materials in our society. Eventually, though, I chose to narrow the scope of the investigation to the reclamation of structural building materials. My interest in the subject had actually begun years earlier. At that time I was working in construction and had begun collecting leftover parts of buildings from the different job sites I had been on. The idea was to amass as much material as possible and reassemble it into my own eclectic vision of house.

Occasionally, though, I had watched as a derelict structure was being bulldozed to the ground or intentionally razed by a local fire department for practice and wondered at the outcome. By then the buildings were little more than blank facades, their ridge beams broken and their side walls angled toward collapse. Even so it seemed incongruous to smash and burn them out of existence. Before this I had always assumed there was an endless natural warehouse from which we could scrap and kindle at will. In fact, though, the great forests are gone and what remains are fragile reminders of the past. My house entered that same realm of memory and before I left for school I sold or gave away the last bits and pieces of my dream.
The transition from a consideration of discarded parts to discarded people came from another sense of loss and in many ways this thesis is an attempt to resolve those feelings. I had begun researching the composition of landfills when it occurred to me there was a real correlation between who we are and what we’re willing to throw away. What I found is that the inventory of a landfill is also an inventory of ourselves as a culture. This is nothing new to an archaeologist but to me it was significant because I realized that in our society everything is expendable. This is especially true if you are homeless and nameless and happen to die on the streets of Los Angeles. The following is an account of the disposal of anonymous bodies in L.A.

If no one comes to claim the body, it is brought to the city Crematorium. The Crematorium is staffed by General Relief recipients, who burn the bodies as their work assignments. The bodies are burned for one hour, then swept into boxes like orange crates. Each box is marked with a paper tag with a case number and either a name of John Doe or Jane Doe. If no one claims the body, the crate of bones and ashes is dumped without ceremony into a plywood-covered pit outside the Crematorium. There are no markers on the pit. Workers at the Crematorium say they burn eight to twelve bodies a day (Thorman, 1988, p. 39 [taken from the Catholic Worker, June/July 1984]).

The dignity of the dead isn’t the question here, but rather the rights of the living. David Stockman, the former Director of the
Budget, summed up the attitude when he said, "I don’t think people are entitled to services. I don’t believe that there is any entitlement, any basic right to legal services or any other kind of services. I don’t accept that equality is a moral principle" (Hombs/Snyder, 1983, p. 18).

Obviously he’s never found himself alone and broke without shelter. I have and the experience is still as vivid and disturbing now as it was then. I remember the first night I slept "out" - out being on a couch, a floor, the car and then even farther out into a backyard, a garage, a campsite, a canyon, anywhere that offered relief and sleep when there was nowhere else to go. In many ways I felt like an urban Huck Finn except that my raft had a blown tire and was snowbound, stuck in the mud while all around me the river was rising perilously close. Those were desperate times the memory of which has joined the ghosts of other shapes and shadows that still occasionally haunt my sleep.

It’s been said that if you weren’t mentally ill prior to becoming homeless then the chances are good that becoming homeless will make you mentally ill. What was my state of mind? I know that there were many times when I was cold and hungry and afraid. I know too that I wasn’t alone out there and that today there are more homeless people than ever before, their numbers rivaling even those of the Great Depression. Most are underhoused as opposed to the extreme
of being homeless. For many, though, the distinction between the two is too close to call.

So how does all of this factor into the design? For one thing I no longer trust governmental statistics which gauge the human condition in fractions and percentages of suffering. I understand too that like so many others I chose not to be listed among their records. To them I had simply disappeared. And unlike David Stockman I do believe that we share a moral responsibility for one another that goes beyond privilege and power. In fact during the design I actively pursued a social program for the shelter that at the very least could be considered idealistic in that it attempted to empower those who are the least powerful. To do this I proposed a community of self-help, which sounds simple enough, but what I didn’t realize is that social change moves at a slow, rusting pace and even critical need is subject to the laws of slow motion.
ROUND ONE

And so it began. The terms of the agreement called for me to draft preliminary plans and concept sketches for the renovation of the hotel. In return I would receive a research assistantship, work experience and a site for my thesis. My only concern was that it would prove to be too restrictive. My first choice for a thesis topic had been to use salvaged parts of buildings to create new structures. It was even suggested that there were things other than traditional materials that could be used. For example, scrapped naval ships, metal silos, the fuselages of planes, wings and struts, and all sorts of extinct mechanical carcasses that were just waiting to be recast into modern high tech forms.

Instead what I was being offered was the hulking remains of a seemingly empty-eyed building and I seriously questioned my ability to effect its resurrection. I still hadn’t met with anyone in Burlington and in fact all I knew was that they were interested in some type of transitional housing. With that in mind I was told to begin preparing a presentation for them. But a presentation of what? My own ideas? Floor plans? A brief history of life in the urban jungle? My faculty advisor said why not present elements of design based on related models--Van Eyck, Kroll and others. From there I could describe the formation of a community of self-help and ways to revitalize the
building. And so a few weeks later armed with a slide projector and various models, Bob Findlay and I drove to Burlington to meet the committee in the Director’s conference room. The presentation began with a slide of the Ise Temple in Japan (Figure 14). This may seem like an odd choice but it was done to illustrate a point about recyclability. The temple was built in the 4th century and every twenty years since then its been taken down and completely rebuilt. It uses wood grown on the temple grounds that’s harvested and replanted in a continuous cycle of growth and regeneration.

The idea is so simple and yet profound. The urban landscape of today is filled with similar re-usable materials that if managed correctly could provide endless housing opportunities. Instead we’ve chosen to ignore them and this attitude has been extended to include anything that we deem expendable, even ourselves.

Mitch Snyder wrote,

We live in a disposable society, a throwaway culture. The homeless are our human refuse, remnants of a culture that assigns a pathologically high value on independence and productivity. America is a land where you are what you consume and produce (Hombs/Snyder, 1983, p. 4).

Just ask the tens of thousand of people each year who are subjected to this painful economic lesson. I then restated other
Figure 14. Ise Temple in Japan
numbers of other people living without a place to call home - especially women and children who bear the majority of this nation's poverty and comprise its most vulnerable group. The paradox is that each year thousands of buildings are also abandoned and made homeless. It's happening in the biggest cities in New York and right here in Burlington. We're literally throwing away the very things we need to be saving.

In my thesis I was proposing a community of self-help that would reclaim housing and building components and be based on needs of the most at-risk group, single women with children.

One of the best examples of a transitional shelter for single women with children is Aldo van Eyck's Hubertus House. When the slide came up on the screen it suddenly seemed too loud and out of place for such a dark and quiet gathering. Someone asked if I advocated painting the Union Hotel the way Van Eyck had painted the Hubertus House and, when I replied, no, they seemed relieved. If anything, I was interested in maintaining a formal front facade while allowing the back of the building the freedom to develop its own organic sense of community. I also knew that the hotel was being considered for historical registration and if that happened then preservation, not people, would drive the design. At this point I was willing to concede a part for the whole.

If they were uneasy about the choice of colors, they were shocked by van Eyck's program of separating mothers from their children,
calling it a "European thing" - the implication being that mothers in the U.S. were less likely to abdicate their parental role in favor of mad experimentation. Actually I was all for it, seeing it as a means of re-building the family rather than tearing it apart. I had even decided that the first and second floors of the west wing would be the best location for the children’s activities. I had always assumed that the roof should be taken off the courtyard and the new community given its own interior park with children on one side and adults on the other. Here they could be safely cared for while their mothers developed new skills for the future. To better light the courtyard and give it a more human dimension I proposed removing the third floors from the south and west wings. Later I was surprised to learn that the committee also felt that the courtyard should be re-established but instead of daylighting it from above, they wanted to demolish the entire west wing. This made sense because of its severe structural instability.

Throughout the early part of the presentation I tried to emphasize Van Eyck’s philosophy of the shelter as an "in-between place" which was both open and closed, public and private. Here again the idea was to raise a fundamental issue of the role of the shelter to its residents and to the community. In my view it had to act as a bridge between the parent and the child and the family and society. This analogy, I felt, could be broadened even further to include an actual bridge, the McArthur, whose parts could be used in the
restoration of the building. I then qualified that by saying, "in my thesis," which let it pass without comment. That wasn’t exactly true but already I was having to dodge and deflect some things that had seemed so clear only moments before.

It was time to discuss the problem at hand and to do this I used a plexiglas model of the hotel (Figure 15). The model was made to show the existing structure with its current floor plan layout. The design elements (actually Bauhaus Blocks) were used as a means of studying the residential floor corridors and demonstrating how they could be transformed architecturally from nondescript institutional hallways into multi-layered village streets (Figure 16). The sequence begins by dividing the corridor into individual blocks and giving each block its own stylized entrance designed and constructed by each resident. This was meant to foster pride through personal involvement and to reinstate the right of choice. The use of lofts in the apartments increased the living space while also adding variety. Natural light is introduced at either side of the street corridor to warm the edges and provide lookouts from the building. In its most prosaic sense it’s the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. The last element is a circular piece which acts as a collection point, a sort of community well or communal kitchen. It may even be a modern day kiosk that swirls the flow of traffic around it.
Figure 15. Existing hotel layout with the third floors removed to light the courtyard
Figure 16. Transforming the corridor and the apartments with elements of design
Of course without a program to design for, elements are really nothing more than disconnected pieces and speculative relationships. This project was unique in that it required at least two different types of programs: one social and the other architectural.

I based the social program on my belief that the homeless should house themselves. After all, it was their primary concern. But they can't do it alone. I repeated the need for a community of self-help that combines a program of urban homesteading and work equity to create affordable housing from reclaimed materials and redemptive technologies such as passive solar and wind generated power. The shelter was to be a staging area for highly motivated single parents who were to be selected from anywhere in the United States to learn new skills in a work/study cooperative with the organization. Here I envisioned an on-going process of renovation first at the hotel and later, when that was completed, the creation of new shelters in other previously abandoned buildings. The work experience could include training in everything from construction to daycare, clerical, computer, food service, management; anything that revolved around the central task of rebuilding both the physical environment and the family unit. The transition from the shelter to individual housing was to be done in association with other residential housing groups. The client would apply their new skills as a form of work equity to qualify for affordable housing with the ultimate goal of self-sustaining ownership.
The inclusion of the depot into the design presented what I still believe to be a dynamic opportunity to expand the impact of the shelter beyond Burlington throughout the Midwest. Prior to this I was concerned that basing a program solely on renovation might be too limiting. Anyway, I still hadn’t found a way to incorporate the use of reclaimed building parts. Also I wasn’t convinced that retraining the residents would be enough of an enticement to insure their placement with other groups and guarantee their long term housing (Figure 17).

The depot would act as a conduit for salvaged materials collected along the river and rail routes. In many ways it would be the Goodwill Industries of building, finding new users for old products - everything from brick and lumber to steel trusses and kitchen fixtures. For example, if a building with re-usable lintels or stone coping or structural steel was being torn down hundreds of miles from Burlington but had access to the rail line or river traffic, then those parts could be shipped to the depot and stored for later distribution. From here they could be sent anywhere up or down the same route for use by other housing groups. The cost would be a minimal charge for handling and delivery. However, the real benefit to the shelter would be the tangible exchange of goods and services for the future housing needs of the residents.

The second programmatic consideration is architectural and here the question is how to restore life to a dying building. In human terms
Figure 2. Renovation of the Academy of Expression by Lucien Kroll
the hotel is analogous to a skeleton with a fragile heartbeat. To revitalize it requires:

1. Structural repair.
2. The introduction of light, air and color
3. Making the building responsible to its own heating, cooling and power needs.
4. De-institutionalizing the design to allow for individual expression.
5. Re-inhabiting it with life and purpose.

At the end of the presentation there was a general discussion by the committee of their concerns. I was relieved when they said they too were interested in developing a transitional shelter for single women with children. The Director said it would be administered by her agency and produced a single page of space requirements for the apartments, the administration and daycare. I was surprised by the conventional format of the apartments. They seemed so self-contained and sanitized with their complete kitchens and cabinetry, space for a microwave and dining, a living room and individual bedrooms. At the time I thought it was simply a naive response to the problem - one that preferred to view homelessness as some kind of gracious lifestyle gone astray. Later I would learn how intransigent her idea was.

But for now the issue was flexibility of design. If this was to be transitional housing then it had to accommodate a variety of family sizes and do it in a way that optimized the space for others. This
was reinforced by the Minister who said he liked the idea of having wide corridors that served as streets with designated areas for community activities. The Director disagreed saying she thought there should be more emphasis placed on individual unit size and less on hallways. Already the course had been set and, in truth, the course was nothing more than a retreat to the logic of the past.

Now it was the Minister’s turn. He said his church group would be using a portion of the facility for their own project, an emergency shelter for homeless men. Somewhere in my mind a door slammed shut as I tried to reconcile the news. I had visited an emergency shelter in Des Moines and had come away feeling as if I’d just been released from jail. This was housing of last resort and the people I had met there were its last chance survivors. I tried to imagine how transient men, many of whom had chosen for any number of reasons to live anonymously, could be expected to interact with young mothers and children. Apparently I was the only one who regarded it as a problem. The Minister had already decided that the first two floors on the north wing of the hotel would be the best location to house a dozen or so clients and staff. And that was it.

The meeting ended with the understanding that I would return in a few weeks with a preliminary floor plan. Privately I wondered if I should take the opportunity to run.
In Ames I was describing the hotel to a friend of mine. Essentially I told her that it was a large empty cube composed of straight lines and right angles and somehow I wanted to bend the geometry to create a new pattern of movement. Her reply was that what I really wanted to do was to make the floor plan dance and she was correct. I wanted the old hotel to laugh and dance and jump for joy and this was the feeling I took with me to Burlington for the second presentation.

At the first meeting we had agreed that the west end of the building was to be demolished and the courtyard roof removed so I didn’t include them in the new plans. I also tried to incorporate the first two floors of the north wing for the emergency shelter as the Minister had suggested but soon gave that idea up when I came to the conclusion that, for reasons of safety, the two programs had to be isolated from each other. This meant they couldn’t share elevators, stairways, corridors or even common entrances. The same thing applied to the courtyard which was restricted for use by the resident families only.

By code I had to provide an elevator for the upper story residential floors. I had already located one by the main stairway for use by the families. If the emergency shelter was to remain two stories as
proposed then it too would need a separate elevator. At this point I
decided it would be easier to simply add an addition to the ground
floor of the north wing and have the emergency shelter on a single
level. One of the benefits of doing this is that I could light the new
dormitory and dining area with skylights instead of conventional
windows which were potentially intrusive to both groups (Figure 18).

The location of the kitchen between the dining areas acts as a
pivot between the two sections, serving both shelter and daycare dining
needs. Van Eyck used the kitchen in much the same way at the
Hubertus House, allowing it to act as an intermediary between the
children and the adults. Here, though, access would be limited to the
residential side. A single locked door near the elevator would block
admittance from either side of the two shelters. These may seem like
extreme measures but I felt they were necessary in order to insure the
trust and well-being of the families.

The other addition I made was a sun porch which ran across the
courtyard, connecting the south wing to the daycare classrooms and the
administration. The porch also served as a play area for the children
on days when the weather wouldn’t permit outdoor activities. At the
far end of it another stairway was included to conform with code exit
requirements.

In the daycare classrooms I curved the walls to form circles and
divisions, otherwise the rooms would have been like long sterile
Figure 18. Ground floor
I was surprised that the committee agreed. They even liked the sun porch and the addition to the emergency shelter. The problem, though, was that the daycare center had a direct street entrance for use by the community and the Architect offered a vision of wild, exuberant children chasing one another through the doors into the traffic on Main Street.

For her part, the Director objected to the kitchen but couldn’t explain why. The Minister thought it was a good idea even though his shelter wouldn’t need it because the "clients" would be in by 8 p.m. and out by 7 a.m. Any food preparation for them would be minimal, requiring only a microwave and small refrigerator in the dining area. I had been looking for a way to somehow integrate both programs and this seemed like my best last hope for them to share at the very least a neutral border.

The Minister brought up the point that while his shelter was primarily for men some provision had to be made to accommodate the occasional transient woman who like her counterparts, was simply passing through. Since the men were to be placed in dormitory-style housing the woman would need her own apartment and toilet facilities. The Director then requested offices for her counselors as well as a nursery for infants and suddenly I began to wonder how many more additions to additions would be necessary in order to fill the growing list of contingencies.
Figure 19. Residential floor plan, Option "A"
Next we looked at the upstairs residential floor plan I had labelled Option A. After the first presentation Bob Findlay and I had toured the hotel and concluded that the easiest most cost effective way of converting the existing rooms to flexible family units was to simply use open door corridors between the rooms. This allowed virtually any size family the ability to occupy the space it needed and then to lock the corridor shut at the last door. The existing bathrooms which protruded into the corridor (the interior street) could be incorporated into the scheme. Rooms at either end of the street were removed to permit natural light, and a laundry (the community well) was included. The north and south wings were made into two single apartments with conventional layouts.

Personally I thought the plan was acceptable but not very exciting. The rooms were small and claustrophobic and offered very little in the way of an enhanced living experience. I also disliked the idea of featuring the bathrooms along the interior street instead of individual porches or family rooms. Entering the floor from the main stairway or elevator was also a problem because the resident faced a wall instead of an unobstructed, protective view. Also there weren’t any communal vantage points into the courtyard. If you didn’t have an apartment on the west side the only way to monitor the children playing in the courtyard would be to go to the corner of either wing and peer through the window. The Architect’s objection was again code-related.
The rooms couldn’t be used as corridors, they had to adjoin a common hallway. Also the main stairway had to be enclosed and fireproofed. Despite this the committee thought it was a novel approach and seemed to enjoy puzzling out room configurations.

An alternative plan, Option B, was presented to show how conventional housing might work especially if it was done in conjunction with the flexible plan. Initially a family would be placed in the flexible housing and as they progressed in the program moved to the more conventional plan on the other floor (Figure 20). The aspect I liked best about the second plan was that it opened the courtyard wall bringing in light and air and sights and sounds. This was quite different from the packed chaos of the flexible plan. By contrast this plan was almost too ordered and sedate. As usual the Architect began his critique with the words "code violation." The family rooms had to be set against exterior walls where they could gain direct access to natural light. The condition I had used borrowed light across a corridor which was unacceptable. The only way it could be brought into compliance was to factor in the skylights in the rooms.

Parking was another problem. Since the hotel occupied the entire site some provision for off-street parking would have to be made subject to the city’s own requirements for a multi-use facility. The Director saw a similar situation for her daycare operation which by law was required to provide seventy square feet of playground space per
Figure 20. Option B, floor plan and model
child. The addition to the emergency shelter had reduced the size of the courtyard at a time when, if anything, it needed to be expanded. After a long pause the Assistant remarked that they had a vacant lot opposite the hotel on Elm Street. The news set off a flurry of speculation, ending with the Director claiming the lot for a second playground and the Architect and the Assistant agreeing that Elm Street should be closed by the city and converted into parking.

The meeting ended with the feeling that we had just averted a major crisis and that with a little luck we would be able to solve many more. Before I left Burlington, I met with the local building inspector and the city planner to discuss the project with them and although I was angry at myself for making so many code-related mistakes I was encouraged by the overall progress. The major pieces were in place and everyone seemed committed to making it work.
ROUND 3

If the first part of the design phase had been influenced by Van Ecyk's own philosophical Zen then Round Three belongs to the often discordant, disruptive world of Lucien Kroll and his stream-of-conscious brand of creativity. Up to this point I had been quite deliberate in searching for a solution and when I felt I had found it I let my imagination take flight and soar in all directions. It wasn't until later that I came to understand the mechanics of working with a group and how, as Kroll knows, spring-loaded it can be.

Among the changes on the second set of plans (Figure 21) was the relocation of the daycare entrance from Main Street to the Elm Street side of the building. Other changes included the substitution of conference rooms for the dining and kitchen facilities as well as the addition of counseling offices and a nursery. In the emergency shelter frosted glass was used as a partition wall to separate the sun porch from the dining area. This was done again to define a neutral border between the programs - one that intentionally blurred visual and physical contact between the two while at the same time acknowledging each other's presence.

The upstairs floor plan, Option C, employs a new system for apartment flexibility using multi-doored bedrooms based on the first floor plan, Option A, but with a twist. Instead of opening from room
Ground floor

Residential floor plan, Option "B"

Residential floor plan, Option "C"

Figure 21. Floor plans
to room, neighboring apartments share the alternative of adding or subtracting as many as four bedrooms between them. A more detailed explanation was sent in the following letter to committee members.

To the friends of the Union Hotel:

Greetings -

Enclosed are revised floor plans. Please feel free to rip, tear, mark and scribble. I thought our last meeting was very productive and I’m encouraged by your commitment and insight. I look forward to our next meeting.

Take care,

John Eberline

1. EMERGENCY SHELTER

The office and meeting rooms have been expanded. A separate women’s facility is accessed from the meeting area for greater security. The main bathroom for the dormitory is also removed from immediate access to better monitor its usage. Inside the bathroom an area has been allocated for showering and laundry. The use of frosted glass block in the
meeting room along the exterior wall could provide more light as well as non-visual contact with the rest of the building.

2. ADULT COUNSELING/CONFERENCE

The main daycare entrance opens on to Elm Street (?). This placement should satisfy state daycare requirements as well as linking the adjoining vacant lot (playground). If the street could be closed, a vehicle pick-up/drop-off point could be created at the door. The door also needs a protective enclosure (air lock) which should express a childlike quality and could even resemble stacked toy blocks.

The main stairway has to be enclosed to meet code requirements. Therefore, it made sense to reconfigure it to open access to the elevator. The steps up to the elevator are replaced by a small ramp.

The conference rooms could employ movable partitions to open into each other. Small kitchen units can be easily located in either of the rooms. The waiting area serves three counseling offices and the daycare, allowing privacy for clients as well as a collection point for parents to pick up their children. The placement of the bathroom offers accessibility from the lobby to both in-house users and visitors.
3. DAYCARE

With the location of the new daycare entrance, the exterior exits along Main Street are no longer needed and are kept locked. By code the toilet facilities, which include two water closets each for boys and girls, will accommodate up to fifty children. Within the same unit, two coat closets provide enclosure and storage.

In the nursery, an existing stairway to the basement has been removed and its access incorporated by the new stairway on the south wall. The two bathrooms from the previous plan have been consolidated into one, leaving more room for food preparation as well as room for a partitioned lounge with an attached changing table. Again the exterior door on Main Street would be taken out of use and kept locked.

4. HOUSE MANAGER

The size of the apartment has remained the same. I'm assuming that the house manager will have a family or, if not, then will use the extra space for office needs.

5. RESIDENTS’ FLOOR - OPTION B

I met with John Mercer, the Burlington Building Inspector, and was told that with some modification the plan would be acceptable for the third floor.
These modifications entail retaining the original stairway configuration and enclosing it to meet fire standards. The need for secondary exits from the apartments was discussed and allowed as is. If this becomes a consideration, I believe these exits can be included in the North and South side apartments through the bedrooms fronting the interior street. The two middle apartments are already connected to the attached fire escape.

6. RESIDENTIAL FLOOR PLAN - OPTION C

This floor plan offers an increased flexibility in housing and could be adapted to either floor. Bedroom doors are opened or closed, locked or unlocked, depending on family size requirements. These doors when locked between apartments can be replaced with soundproofed wall units on door hinges.

The interior street follows the line of existing skylights. The concept of the street is retained. The community area acts as a community park providing needed light and access to the courtyard below. It also provides a natural meeting place for the residents. A sliding door and balcony offer ventilation and immediate communication with those in the courtyard.

I was disappointed to lose the kitchen and the residential dining room on the first floor because they represented a real opportunity for
communal activity. I wanted to be able to enter the building and hear the sounds of children playing mingled with the aroma of food and the accompanying clatter and chaos that signal life. By contrast the inclusion of conference rooms seemed empty and perfunctory and the new counselors’ offices were closed instead of open. I had begun looking at ways to promote a larger sense of community rather than merely simulating it on each floor. The code required that interior openings between the floors be fireproofed and sealed which meant I would have to find other ways to involve the residents.

While looking for ideas I came across the work of Frederick Hundertwasser, an artist/architect who, like Kroll, believes in exercising the anarchy of design. At the Hundertwasshaus an apartment complex in Vienna, residents are encouraged to paint whatever they want on the exterior of their apartments as far as they can reach from their windows. The result is a collage of brightly colored patchwork, marking the bounds of each occupant. I tried to imagine what the Assistant’s reaction would be to this and, in fact, at the next presentation I showed him a picture of the building and suggested that maybe we should consider some variation of measured expression for the shelter residents to which he responded with a groan. At least it was a response of sorts. So far the group had only talked in general terms never really defining the shelter. The only program I had heard was the one I had presented at the first meeting, and as I was about
to discover much of it had already been rejected. For now, though, I felt I could fulfill my obligation with the committee in Burlington and at the same time feel free to pursue an alternate course for my thesis.

One of the issues that had been set aside and one I wanted to address again was to articulate a relationship between discarded building materials and people. For instance, if the west wing was demolished, as planned, then as many as thirty thousand bricks could be recovered from the three-course-thick walls. The infill would probably be a softer brick than those on the face but all would be re-usable in one way or another. There would also be timber and planking, glass, trim and mechanical piping all of which could constitute the initial inventory at the Depot and be sold or bartered for other services. The materials could be used to build the addition to the emergency shelter or to add another story to the building.

The other issue that had been neglected involved making the shelter and those who lived there as self-sufficient as possible. This meant not only being concerned about housing, daycare and educational goals but also how to do something as basic as growing food to feed themselves. But where? The courtyard was already overloaded with possibilities, including plans for a playground and a treehouse. What was needed was a greenhouse. Two possible sites for it were the south facing wall of the courtyard and the roof. Steel trusses from the bridge could be used to construct a two story frame against the wall
or to span the roof and support a structure (Figure 22). The same members could be used to attach banks of solar panels or be cantilevered as decks or sunscreens. The variations seemed limitless. However, it was the opening of the courtyard roof which really brought the design full circle. The floor beneath it would have to be removed, exposing a portion of the basement. The basement walls would then be sealed and backfilled to bring it to the same level as the first floor. An alternative plan would be to create a terraced garden or better yet an underground addition but for now the chance of doing that seemed remote. The irony was that suddenly I found myself with the equivalent of a landfill in my own backyard and thousands of bricks with no where to go but down or out.

The second set of floor plans had just been completed and mailed to the committee when I realized that they were as flawed as the first set. Two of the bedrooms didn’t have direct access to exterior light which meant they also didn’t have access for escape in case of fire. It was such an obvious mistake but in my quest for flexibility of apartment size I had completely overlooked it and was, therefore, guilty as hell. I immediately began work on a third plan which consolidated a number of ideas from the first presentation. One of these was the re-introduction of lofts into the apartments in part to compensate for the loss of the two bedrooms as well as to expand storage space (Figure 23). This latter function was according to regulation, their sole
Figure 22. Possible locations for greenhouses using bridge girders
purpose, but after a discussion with the building inspector it was understood that once the legal criteria had been met their eventual usage was left up to each occupant to decide. I should explain that I wasn’t trying to intentionally break the rules but only to bend a few that were well-intentioned but unrealistic. The lofts served to enrich the space by providing, in Van Eyck’s words, "a change of interior horizon." They also added variety and were fun.

In the hallway (the interior street) bulkheads were placed above the apartment entrances to act as roof overhangs or protective porches to soften the hard edge of the intersecting walls and ceiling. Where they met the lofts, the bulkheads were fitted with small rectangular windows that looked out on the scene below (Figure 24). Another idea that evolved from the first presentation was the spiral plexiglas element, the "collecting piece," that was meant to represent something like a kiosk or community well and, in fact, became the laundry. Both residential floors had them, one above the other, and I found that by opening the intervening floor the upstairs and downstairs communities could be brought together in a common setting (Figure 25). A narrow walkway bridge spans the opening to the stairwell. From the interior street it’s made visible by waist-high glass block that shadows movement across it. Van Eyck used this same principle of perspective in his main stairway at the Hubertus House. Soon I began to explore other vertical relationships in the building. The north and south wings with their
Figure 23. Floor plans
Figure 25. Models of new two story laundry
Figure 26. Interior perspective of laundry
single long apartments never quite meshed with the rest of the design so I divided them into smaller two story units (Figures 27 and 28). From the standpoint of the community these would be considered the suburbs in that they were the newest and most isolated from the others. This new verticality, though, actually increased their presence from floor to floor. The same thing is true of the community areas which were linked at their balconies by stairs. They were also made more parklike by raising them off the floor a few feet and bordering them with planter boxes (Figure 29).

It seemed to me that the design had finally come alive and I was excited by its level of complexity. I wanted to tell the others how much I had learned about the site and the building and the bridge and the depot. I thought I could almost see the families in their apartments or at the park or in the laundry. Kids were everywhere streaming back and forth from the sun porch to the courtyard to the daycare and dining room. The gardens on the rooftop were green and growing and you could feel change from top to bottom (Figures 30 and 31).

My reverie ended abruptly with the arrival of the following letter and floor plan from the Director outlining a "few changes" (Figure 32).
Figure 27. Models of two story apartments in north and south wings
Figure 28. Perspective and sectional view of two story apartments
Figure 29. Model showing interior with the community area park
Figure 31. Composite view of a treehouse in the courtyard
Figure 32. The Director's floor plan
Dear John:

I've been looking over the drawings for the first floor of the Union Hotel and have a couple of thoughts to pass on to you.

What about:
- Putting two classrooms in the area where the emergency shelter is
- Put the nursery where the house manager is (this way the children could have direct access to the playground and wouldn't have an exit to the busy street on the east)
- Put the house manager up by the front office
- Keep the kitchen close to the two classrooms
- Move the emergency shelter to the southeast part of the building
- Move the conference area and small offices

I discussed this with Reverend _________ and he had no problem with it.

I have a "rough" drawing to explain what I mean. There are some problems with it I'm sure. You probably will think I'm a little crazy, too. But I'll send it along for what it's worth.

Look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
I couldn’t believe it. In a single stroke they had turned the design inside out. The emergency shelter was to be moved to the front of the building where the transients were to be housed in what amounted to the storefront windows. If previously I had thought I could remain somehow neutral and be able to separate their work from mine I was wrong. I quickly wrote the following reply and sent it to all the committee members along with copies of the proposed changes.

April 10, 1992

Dear :  

In the spirit of continuing dialogue I offer these thoughts and as always wish you well.

A couple of days after I sent you the latest set of plans I went to my mailbox and found your April 2nd revisions. I think before we proceed further we need to redefine the role of this facility - or at least I need to better understand your intent. For instance: What is the ultimate goal that this organization envisions for these families? If it’s to act as a transitional shelter until affordable housing can be secured what type of training and skill level must each client receive in order to sustain a new lifestyle? Who will provide it? What’s the role of the counselor? Again, what type of guidance do they provide? What qualifies a family for admittance into
this program and what contribution are they expected to make toward its success? Within the building what is their communal role? Is there a shared work ethic? Will they be involved in the actual renovation? Who makes the rules? What’s the role of the house manager? How do you enter the building? Is the front door a keyed access for residents or do they require constant surveillance?

The inclusion of an emergency shelter into this program offers an interesting twist and one that certainly generates its own line of questioning. Foremost among these is how to isolate it from the general building population and yet retain its public function. What are the rights and expectations of these clients and how do they impact the rights and expectations of those living in and around the building? How are they perceived? What street presence do they require? What are their security needs? Within the hierarchy of the building program are they of primary or secondary importance?

The main floor at the entry level is differentiated from the upper floors by both historic and perceptual differences. Traditionally as the most publicly accessed area it has come to be regarded as commercial. The exaggerated bays along the front of the hotel are meant to profile this. My question is, How do you best allocate this space for a non-commercial venture and still retain its openness to
the community?

In looking at the revisions I was at first intrigued by the idea of exchanging the placement of the daycare with that of the emergency shelter, but while it solves a number of logistical problems I wonder if it doesn’t create even larger ones - most of whom fit into the historical/perceptual category. There’s one, however, that’s code related and concerns the need for an emergency exit. If it’s located in the back on the sun porch corridor and even if it’s secured by an alarm, it still affords unwanted access to the stairways and elevator system and from there to the upper floors. I’m also concerned about the effect of featuring the emergency shelter on the front of the building. Again this seems to violate the public perception of zoning differences between commercial and residential. I think this also applies to the placement of the house manager along this same wall. It’s as if people are being housed in storefronts - and not just ordinary people (the house manager aside) but those who are viewed with real concern and trepidation, and as a result are typically placed in the most restrictive of settings.

So that’s it, many questions and I know that before we’re done there will be many more. I’m also convinced that if we ask enough of the right ones we’ll get more than our share of the right answers.
I have another idea for a residential floor plan that I'll be sending out soon. In the meantime, I'll forward this to the others and await their response.

Take care,

John Eberline

It had been a long time and I still hadn't received any replies from them. One day, though, Bob Findlay asked me if I'd heard the news about the fire the night before in Burlington. A building in the historic district had been burned to the ground by an arsonist and for a moment I saw the same match ignite my thesis. "But it wasn't the hotel," he said, and we both nodded in relief. Finally the Planner called and asked me when I was going to make another presentation. When I told her I hadn't heard from the others she said she'd find out what the problem was and call back. Soon the Director called and said everything was fine and that she agreed with me. The Planner was next and said that the Minister had told her he didn't like the changes anyway. Also I could have the pivotal kitchen again on the first floor. This was almost too good to be true. Apparently I had won without having to fire a shot. We decided on a date for the
next meeting and I got ready to go. I had already prepared models for the residential areas so that’s where I’d begin the discussion.

On the appointed day I arrived early in Burlington and tried to find Ray Montgomery of the Main Street group to go with me to the hotel while I remeasured ceiling and window heights. When I couldn’t find him I used the key he had given me months before and let myself into the hotel. As I entered the building I remembered his warning to never go into it by myself because if I got hurt it would be a long time before anybody found me or worse I could be found by someone I wouldn’t want to. I walked through the lobby and stopped at the stairs. The building was encased in solitude. I listened for a sound and when I didn’t hear any I backed away and left. Once outside I relocked the door and drove to the office of a local realtor who was also a member of Main Street. He reluctantly agreed to return with me to the hotel, insisting that he didn’t understand what the big deal was. In the upstairs corridor startled pigeons caromed out of the gray mottled light, striking the walls around us. Ray was right, this was no place to be by yourself.

When the measurements were completed, we went outside and the realtor gave me another admonition to think about. He had been at the first presentation and liked the part about creating a community of self-help for the shelter residents, an idea which he thought was compelling. He warned me, though, that if the Director had her way
she’d turn it into a welfare hotel and neither he nor the community would support that. I told him if that happened then I’d quit. With that said he returned to his office and I went to what would be my last meeting.

The Director’s conference room was crowded with many of the same people from the first meeting as well some others I didn’t know. The Minister had sent word that he wouldn’t be able to attend and that he was satisfied with the design of his part of the shelter. I began by reviewing the earlier plans that had been sent to them in the mail and then continued on to the new set using models to illustrate different points. At the end I asked if there were any questions and the room went still. Eventually someone commented that the placement of the daycare entrance might interfere with the counselors and the administration. Someone else suggested entering off the alley and then there was the matter of including a kitchen again in the downstairs. The daycare classrooms were next and it was decided to close off open access between them. Also they only needed one toilet each. The Architect commented that the urinal I had included in the boys’ bathroom would have to be about a foot off the ground for a pre-schooler to use and the place broke up in laughter.

The critique of the upper floor plans was less humorous. The Director wanted to know why there weren’t any closets in the rooms and how I intended to handle that. I said I thought shelving on the
walls and pegs would work. The Architect thought so too, but she wasn’t convinced.

She liked the lofts but the flexible bedroom idea bothered her. Which apartment would control the thermostat and who pays the utility cost? It was a good question and even though I didn’t have an easy answer I still felt the advantage of having it far outweighed the problems associated with sharing. And then there was the size of the rooms. They seemed so small. I stepped off the approximate length and width of a typical bedroom and agreed but added that they met the minimum code requirement and besides they were aligned with the existing wall layout of the hotel. The Architect said he could see both points and was noncommittal. The Assistant suggested that I call someone at another federal agency in town and ask what they considered a minimum size to qualify for funding. The Director of Main Street finally made the call and reported that the room sizes were fine.

By now the meeting had been reduced to a discussion between the Director, the Assistant, the Architect, and myself. A woman who I’d never met came into the room and took a seat at the table. She was African-American and it occurred to me that until now there hadn’t been any minority participation in the group. She listened quietly as the Director and the Assistant questioned one another about the new two story apartment design in the north and south wings. "Can long
term and short term residents be mixed together on multiple floors?"
The one asked the other, and I heard myself say, "What long term
residents and for how long?" The Assistant told me the length of stay
could be five or six years, maybe longer. More questions followed
and I learned that any family in Burlington who qualified for Section
Eight housing was eligible. "And what do they have to do in return?"
I asked. "Well . . . nothing," came their reply. This was the first
time I had heard the term "long term residency" mentioned in
connection with the project and it took me a minute to sort out the
implications. It became clear that the transitional shelter as I had
conceived it was gone and with it the community of self-help and the
mandate for change. The homeless would no longer be concerned with
the need to house themselves and from now on the clients' only
motivation would be to qualify for aid. Another admonition had come
ture. This time it was the realtor who was right.

I wanted to know when we had discussed this and the Assistant,
who was becoming annoyed, said it was discussed at the last meeting
but because I probably didn't understand the terminology I had missed
it. My reply was that I knew what Section Eight Housing was.
"How else can we finance this, John?" It was the Director speaking
and after a long pause I knew and I couldn't answer her question.
You'll have to draw another floor plan, they said, and make the rooms
larger. And on the first floor find another entrance for daycare - and
add a kitchen and all the other things we talked about. The only thing I could do was protest by saying that enlarging the rooms wasn’t that simple and besides what about apartment flexibility? "We don’t want it flexible," said the Assistant and I knew he had spoken the truth.

Everything was to be kept in place and left unopened. That was the real message of the program, the underlying theme that had been so difficult for them to articulate and for me to comprehend. The part I still didn’t understand, though, was the function of the counselors. If there really wasn’t to be any change then what were they there for? The Assistant began to explain that they were there to advise the families - to offer assistance - and of course to help them become more self-sufficient. Suddenly the newest member of the group, the African-American woman, threw her head back and roared with laughter. Everyone else watched her in stunned silence until she regained her composure and looked away, blushing. The meeting had come to an end.
CONCLUSION

On the way back from Burlington, I stopped at a rest area along the highway and saw a note taped to the door asking for donations to help a man and woman who were stranded. In the parking lot I saw them. The woman was slumped in the front seat of a car looking tired and drawn while the man stood outside talking to someone else in another car. They were older and I felt embarrassed for them. I wanted to tell them how exhausting my afternoon had been on their behalf, discussing the needs of the poor and the homeless and how we had to confront the problem and quit ignoring it. I wanted to say those things but I didn’t. Instead I got back into my car and drove away feeling embarrassed for me.

It took me a long time to complete the last set of floor plans. Actually it took me a long time to start. The major pieces were still there: the interior street, the laundry, the park, the two story apartments, the daycare, the sun porch and the addition to the emergency shelter. What was missing was its heart and it was a blank space that I couldn’t fill. The plans which were mailed back to Burlington did change the room sizes and the daycare entrance but they seemed lifeless (Figure 33).

It’s been said that one of your first realizations when you’re homeless is how few keys you need. It’s true. Suddenly you find
yourself closed off and isolated from so much of the world you had known before. The intent of this thesis was to explore ways to remove some of those barriers. As usual the greatest obstacle is often ourselves, and whether it's a single thoughtless act at a rest area or a lack of compassion by a government for its people, the result is the same. Another door has been locked shut. At one point the design came alive to me and I saw its possibilities. The homeless could be taught to house themselves and to provide for their own futures, and the shelter could be a place of hope instead of last resort. I was disappointed when members of the committee in Burlington chose to continue the policies of the past. Those policies haven't worked before and they won't work now because they're predicated on a program of containment that refuses to recognize the power of the human spirit to elevate itself.

Since leaving the project I've kept in contact with the Planner. I was surprised to learn, like most of the members of the committee, she didn't find out about the new program until the last meeting. Maybe the truth is none of us wanted to know. The Architect has estimated that it will cost 2.4 million dollars to complete the renovation. The Planner is supposed to be the fund raiser and she has her doubts. The Minister too has grown impatient with the process and is considering locating the emergency shelter elsewhere. If the hotel doesn't work as a site, the Architect said he knows of another building in Burlington that might be better suited to their needs.
Across the street from the hotel the depot is still being used by the railroad. Meanwhile the new bridge is nearing completion and the old McArthur Bridge will be gone within the year. As for me, I'm left with mixed emotions. This was a difficult process to be involved in but also an extremely rewarding one, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to have participated. I wish the committee the very best. Most are social workers who've chosen to make helping others their life's work and I have tremendous respect for them. It's one thing to design a program and quite another to have to stand in the doorway day after day and make it happen. I still feel that the real key is the heart and once that's been unlocked anything is possible.
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