

EXPANDING ARCHITECTURE DESIGN AS ACTIVISM



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Architecture and Social Change: The Struggle for Affordable Housing in Oakland's Uptown Project

ALEX SALAZAR

Communities,
activists, and
designers prove
that when people
work together,
affordable housing
can become a
reality even when
challenging the
agendas of the
most powerful.

Left

Protesters outside the Westerner Hotel in Oakland during the Gentrification Tour in 2001. The Westerner was a privately held, run-down, single-room occupancy hotel with about thirty units. The site was bought by the city, which evicted the tenants in preparation for the Uptown project.

There have been significant changes in the affordable-housing field as it has grown and professionalized over the past few decades. Nonprofit developers and the private architecture firms that serve them have increased in size and sophistication, enabling them to compete on larger and larger projects—and causing them to become more distanced from local communities. Perhaps this distancing is the inevitable outcome of the growth and development of stable, well-respected firms that can navigate the inner-city obstacle course of neighborhood groups, affordable-housing advocates, and government departments while creating the award-winning projects demanded by clients and the profession.

Unfortunately the gap between the nonprofit development field and grassroots groups has become too wide to ignore, and some of the people that affordable housing was originally meant to serve are falling through the cracks. To solve this problem a whole new generation of community-based organizations has arisen, led by young, dynamic, politically sharp activists who take race and class issues seriously. They are not designers, and they do not know what “community design” is; but they are challenging established nonprofit developers and architecture firms to reexamine their roots and rediscover why they entered the nonprofit field to begin with. These activists are creating opportunities for young community-design architects and planners to get involved in antidisplacement affordable-housing work in a meaningful way while doing design work for progressive causes that can make a difference.

The dilemma, however, is that very few young architects want to get involved, and those who are interested do not know where to begin. They may have the skills to make a great contribution to the affordable-housing landscape, but the culture of mainstream practice trains young professionals to think of community design only as a method for getting projects approved by city planning departments. The greatest challenge facing today’s community-oriented architects is to learn the skills taught and practiced in mainstream firms while putting those skills to work for grassroots organizations. This means taking the time to learn high-quality

design and technical skills on large-scale multifamily housing projects, a process that takes years, while also getting involved in organizations that see the lack of affordable housing as an issue not of design and production but of power.

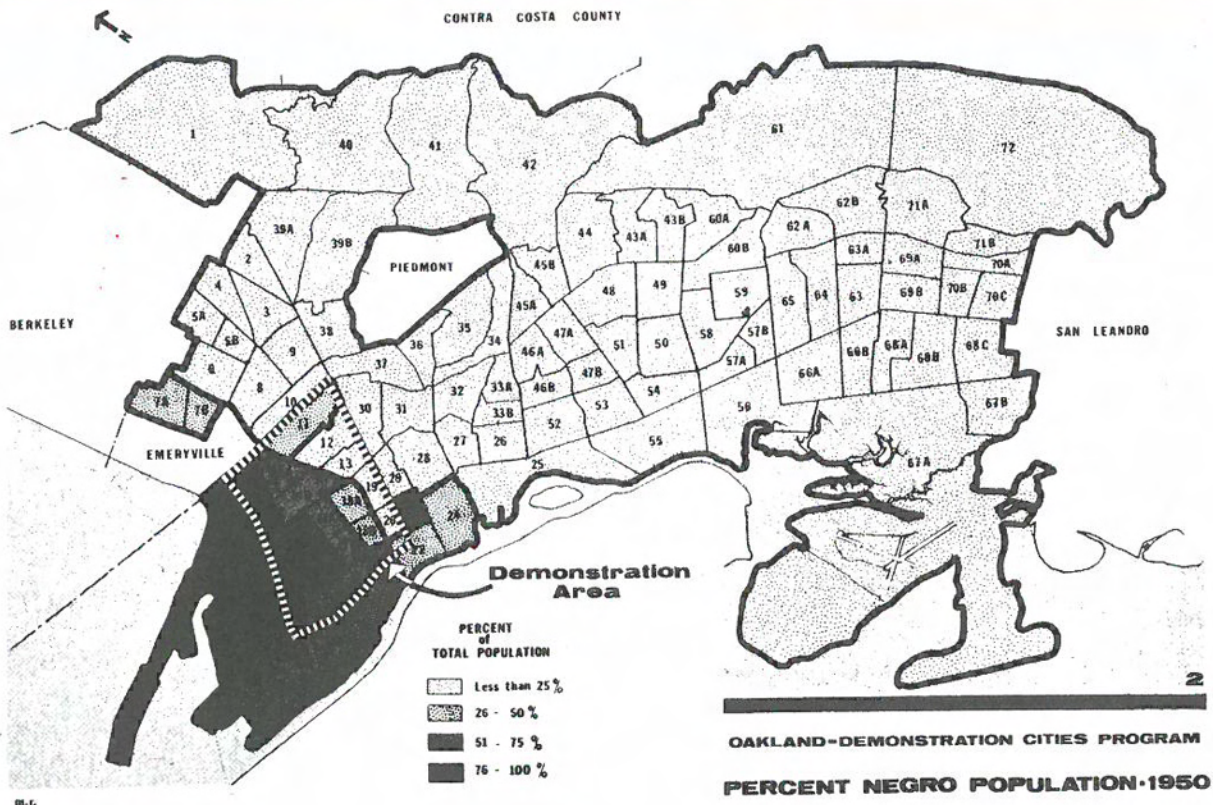
A focus on power is a crucial element in putting design at the service of justice. This discussion is ultimately about power: the power of developers to push out low-income communities of color, and the power of grassroots community-organizing groups to resist that effort.

The Slumification and Jerryfication of Downtown Oakland

Starting in the 1930s Oakland, California, became a point of disembarkation for African-Americans who were fleeing Southern racism and who found employment in Oakland’s wartime port economy. By the 1950s a backlash was under way: whites were in full flight to the suburbs, and race-based policies like redlining became part of local planning. For example, redevelopment studies in the 1950s and 1960s documented the African-American population and were used to plan the removal of African-Americans under the guise of improving dilapidated housing.

The failure to meaningfully address political and social inequities in the city, coupled with the decline of Oakland as an industrial center, gave rise to the West Coast civil rights movement and the Black Liberation struggle. West Oakland, in particular, became a hotbed of activism in the 1960s and 1970s, epitomized by the rise and fall of the Black Panthers, who polarized the city and helped contribute to Oakland’s reputation as one of the most dangerous places to live in the country.

Not much changed physically in the downtown area until the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989, when commercial and historic buildings, along with miles of infrastructure, were left in ruins. The quake significantly damaged most remaining single-room-occupancy hotels, forcing thousands of very low-income people, mostly African-Americans, into homelessness. In the vacuum left by fleeing private developers, nonprofits stepped up their advocacy for affordable housing and harnessed state and federal resources to do the job.



Kaplan / Gans Associates 300 Broadway San Francisco

Oakland's Uptown

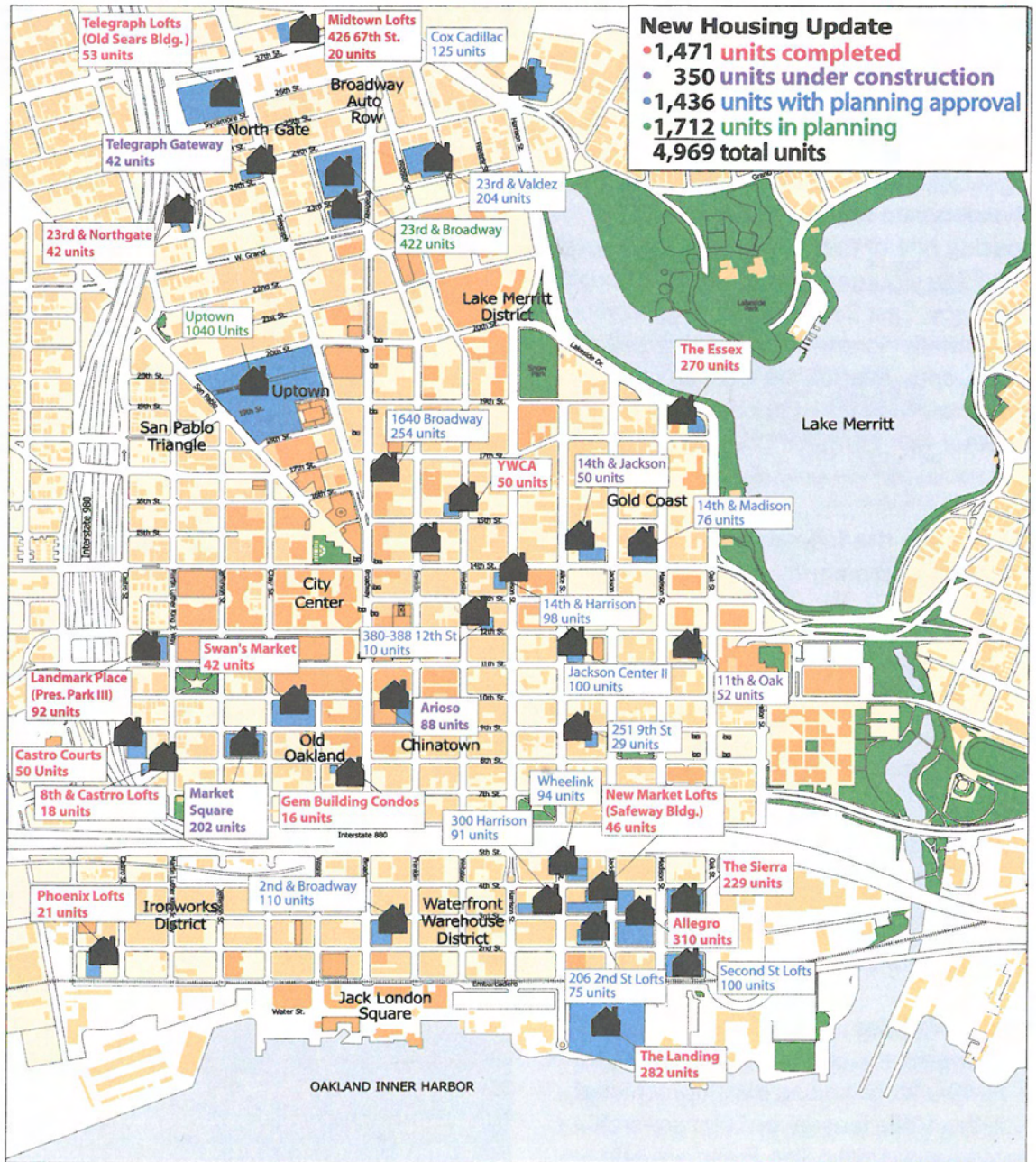
Despite the association of the term "affordable housing" with the drug-infested, crime-ridden public housing projects of the past, there is a growing awareness that affordable housing actually increases property values. Downtown Oakland is a classic example. Throughout the 1990s nonprofit developers were the first to produce attractive, high-density buildings on infill sites in the riskiest areas. Projects that revitalized streets and contained social services for extremely low-income residents were often mistaken for market-rate developments. Twenty years in the making, they were the fruit of labor by an active community of advocates and nonprofits that helped generate the financial and political will to address housing inequities.

By the time former California governor Jerry Brown became mayor of Oakland in 1998, however, neighborhood stability had spurred a booming condo market, and gentrification and displacement had become commonplace. Oakland's affordable-housing

history appeared to be forgotten, along with Brown's New Age sensibilities and the left-wing talk-show persona that helped him win the election. As mayor Brown was born again, this time as a realist aiming to liberalize Oakland's political economy. During his first year in office he launched several new policy agendas, including the creation of charter schools, the reorganization and expansion of the police department, the promotion of environmental responsibility, and the 10K plan, an effort intended to attract 10,000 residents to Oakland's downtown core.

According to Brown, 10K would create a new "Ecopolis," where an environmentally friendly city could reduce suburban sprawl by producing "elegantly dense" downtown housing linked to public transportation. Brown hoped that a variety of condo projects would help revitalize the heart of the city, providing an upscale twenty-four-hour commercial economy that had not operated in Oakland for more than thirty years.

Left
 Redevelopment
 Agency of Oakland
 Demonstration
 Cities Program,
 a map tracking
 the distribution of
 African-American
 households in
 Oakland, California,
 in 1950



Right
 City of Oakland
 Community
 and Economic
 Development
 Agency
 Location map for
 all 10K projects
 in 2004

While the 10K plan was not entirely at odds with the nonprofit developments that preceded it, attitudes about the scheme changed in 1999, when the dot-com boom caused housing affordability to become a major issue. Downtown rental prices increased 40 percent in 1999 alone. No-cause evictions tripled, disproportionately affecting low-income minorities living in East and West Oakland. This context explains why Brown's infamous "slumification" speech backfired. In a public address to affordable-housing advocates early in his mayoral term, Brown described Oakland's economic future as a choice between 10K gentrification and the "slumification" of downtown perpetuated by new affordable-

housing projects. Brown's terminology lent credibility to the view that 10K was a racialized plan serving middle- and upper-class whites, mostly San Francisco commuters, while fostering gentrification and displacement of the low-income minority communities that had lived in downtown Oakland for generations. Brown's rhetoric also fueled downtown residents' desire to fight his plan.

Artists living in the warehouse districts were some of the first to be displaced in the early boom years, and they quickly dubbed the 10K plan the "Jerryfication" of Oakland, a term later embraced by the mainstream media. Advocates for tenants and the homeless organized around

evictions and rising rents, creating Just Cause Oakland, a tenant-rights ballot initiative and organizing project that mobilized record numbers of tenants to speak out against displacement. Other concerned organizations, including labor unions and church-based coalitions, began making housing one of their key organizing issues. Amid this resurgence of grassroots housing advocacy, East Bay Housing Organizations, an umbrella nonprofit housing advocacy group, spearheaded the Coalition for Workforce Housing (CWH) to bring activists together with nonprofit housing developers and social-service providers.

CWH made the following demands of the city government:

- Twenty-five percent of 10K housing must be affordable to households earning \$35,000 or less.
- The city must enact a “Just Cause for Eviction” ordinance and must not displace residents for the 10K plan.
- The 10K plan must preserve single-room-occupancy hotels and downtown social services for extremely low-income people.

While CWH demands addressed the 10K plan overall, the real target was the Uptown, a 1,040-unit mixed-use development that was the 10K’s largest and highest-profile component. Unlike San Francisco and San Jose, Oakland had seen little new market-rate development in the 1990s, so when Uptown came along, city leaders were easily persuaded to give a \$60 million sweetheart-deal subsidy to Forest City, Uptown’s developer.

This largesse made the Uptown a focal point for advocates, and by the summer of 1999 CWH had launched a three-pronged advocacy strategy:

1. Bring media pressure to bear.

Early in the campaign, CWH held a series of public events that highlighted the lack of affordable housing downtown and in the Uptown project. In March 2001, three hundred Oakland residents of all economic and racial backgrounds came together for a “Gentrification Tour.” Homeless and tenant advocates marched near the Uptown site and visited a dozen surrounding locations where residents had been evicted or would soon be at risk. The event raised awareness of displacement and put the media spotlight on city officials’ positions on housing issues.

2. Act as a public-policy watchdog.

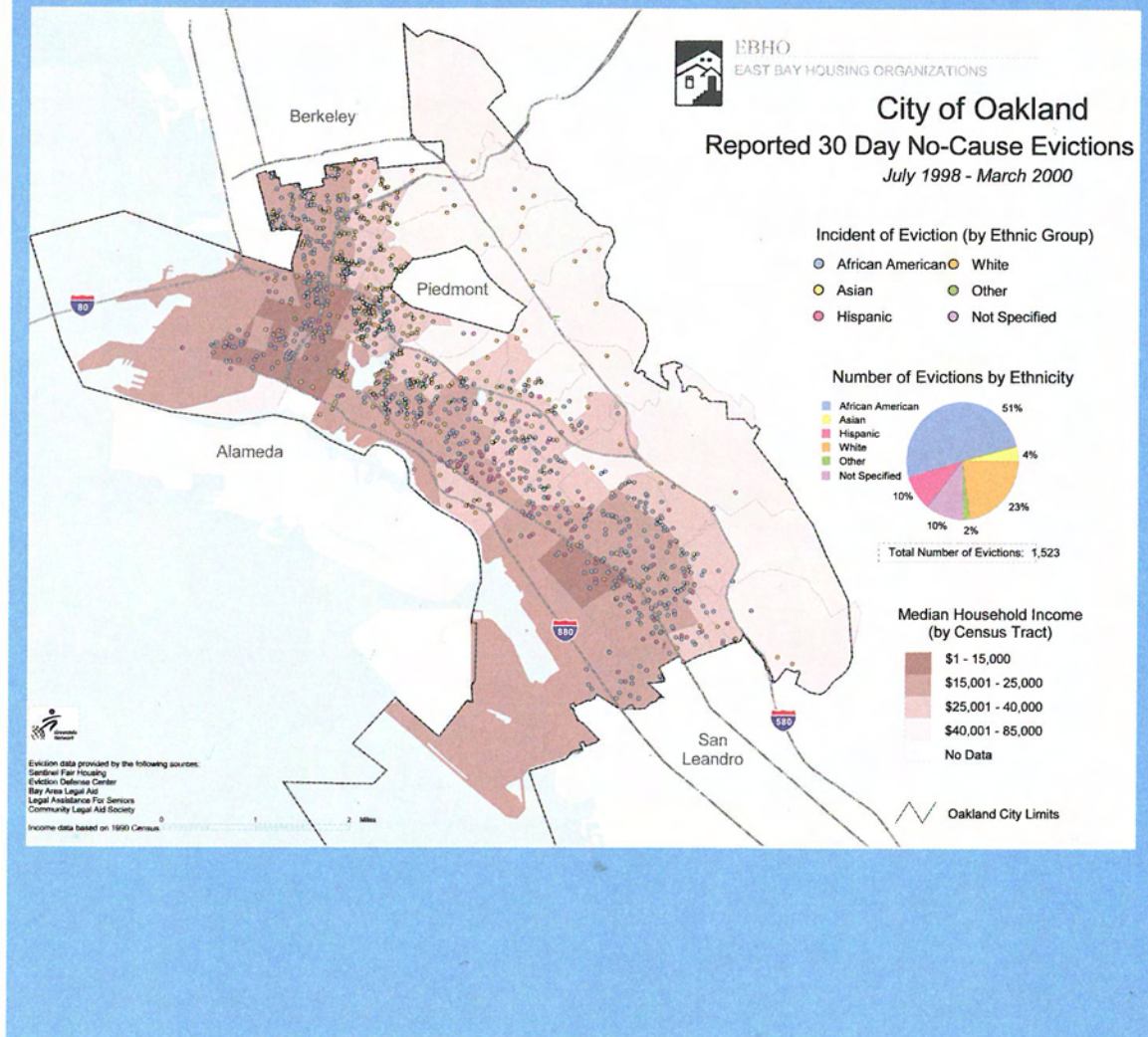
CWH participated in nearly all city-sponsored meetings regarding housing and used these platforms to promote its demands. In the winter of 2003, twenty residents and advocates took over an Uptown community-design charrette and forced the design team and city staff to hear testimony from local residents and review a presentation of the CWH affordable-housing design proposal.

3. Reevaluate Uptown from a community-design standpoint.

In 2002 volunteer architects and planners developed an affordable-housing design proposal for the Uptown site, demonstrating how the community’s demands could be met without significantly changing Forest City’s development plans. This organizing culminated a year later with a CWH-sponsored community-design charrette. Approximately thirty coalition activists and community members turned out to study the Uptown’s gentrification impact and to give input into the mix of units and levels of affordability in the CWH design proposal. City staff and the Forest City development team participated in the event, which demonstrated to the city and the developer that CWH had the technical knowledge to challenge the development on an informed basis.

**Right
East Bay Housing
Organizations,
Oakland**

City of Oakland:
Reported 30 Day
No-Cause Evictions,
July 1998–March
2000. The majority
of “no-cause”
evictions affected
low-income
minorities living
in Oakland’s flat-
lands, between the
580 freeway and
San Francisco Bay.



An Alternative Approach

The CWH proposal worked within the Uptown development grid, but it used two of the city blocks to create stand-alone affordable-housing developments with on-site social services. CWH’s plan was for these buildings to serve families and extremely low-income tenants, offer social services, and help Forest City make good use of less-desirable land parcels that were risky for market-rate buildings. This scheme would utilize a variety of funding sources to produce more than 210 units for residents earning incomes from 20 to 50 percent of area median income (AMI). It also followed many of the design principles promoted by New Urbanists: orienting ground-floor uses like retail stores to the street for a pedestrian-friendly environment; articulating building scale, form, and massing to fit the context of the neighborhood and the particulars of the site; and orienting dwelling units toward the street, with front stoops and windows, in order to increase

safety and create a neighborhood atmosphere. Uptown’s affordable housing was to be concentrated in these two city block sites. CWH proposed that Forest City partner with local nonprofits to develop and/or manage these buildings.

CWH’s plan to focus on two sites was also strategic, as the organizers knew that once they entered negotiations with Forest City, they would need something to give up in a compromise. This strategy paid off, as it turned out that one of the proposed sites was still owned by the city. As a result of public pressure, the city’s redevelopment staff was pulled into negotiations, giving CWH leverage with the developer. Subsequently, CWH gave up one site and in return convinced the developer to set aside the city-owned parcel for a local nonprofit. This affordable-housing development, by Resources for Community Development, is under construction and will be completed in 2008.

The Power of Community Design

The CWH's campaign in Oakland showcases the real power of community design: not as a neutral "method" used in the design profession, but as a tool to help achieve political, economic, and social change. CWH's work was, at its heart, not about designing individual buildings. Instead, it was one step in a process of building neighborhood power.

Indeed, community organizing around affordable-housing issues has since spread to two other major redevelopment projects in the city. New coalitions have formed to take on some of the largest market-rate housing developers in the region. Out of these political struggles, new leaders have emerged and community-design strategies continue to evolve. Community-design campaigns such as the Coalition for Workforce Housing remind us that inclusive, grassroots-driven efforts can ensure that housing developments are held publicly accountable in a meaningful way.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this text was published in Shelterforce, spring 2006.

Right
Coalition for
Workforce Housing
First conceptual
elevation of
proposed affordable
housing in Oakland.
2003. Rendering
by Alex Salazar

