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R8

THE ACTIVIST DESIGNERS

The Team R8 around Jonathan Kirschenfeld, Karen Kubey, Nancy Owens, Susanne Schindler, Brian Schulman and Erin Shnier can be seen as a good example of “activist designers” or “applied sociologists”. In their work, Team R8 put their design and architecture expertise entirely to use to find creative solutions for New York City’s pressing affordable housing crisis.

THE POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR R8 ARE SOME HARD DEMOGRAPHIC FACTS. 33 PERCENT OF TODAY’S NEW YORKERS ARE SINGLE, 24 PERCENT SHARE HOUSING UNITS WITH OTHER ADULTS. 9 PERCENT ARE SINGLE PARENTS AND ONLY 17 PERCENT ARE THE TRADITIONAL NUCLEAR FAMILY. YET THE HOUSING STOCK AND MANY OF THE REGULATIONS THAT GOVERN RESIDENTIAL CONSTRUCTION STILL HAVE THE NUCLEAR FAMILY AS IT’S TARGET. THE RESULT IS A TREMENDOUS SHORTAGE OF HOUSING FOR THE ACTUAL POPULATION OF TODAY’S NEW YORK, WHERE THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY IS A MINORITY.

Small units that were available at low cost 30 years ago have been replaced by luxury development and the city’s growing hunger for hotel space to accommodate international tourists.

At the same time, a large underground market has developed. Basement and attic spaces are rented out as apartments, two- to three bedroom apartments are shared by four or more unrelated adults, which, technically, is illegal. In order to tackle this problem, the Team R8 has sought loopholes in residential building regulations and codes. And they have found them.

The New York City zoning code allows for so-called micro-units complemented by shared amenities only under Use Group III, or “Community Facilities”. This includes dormitories, convents, and supportive housing, or long-term assisted living for special-needs populations. The regulatory framework is more flexible than Use Group II (residential housing), for instance by not requiring parking and allowing for smaller courtyard dimensions, which can substantially lower cost and make irregular and small parcels buildable.

Now Team R8 has proposed to extend the applicability of these regulations from

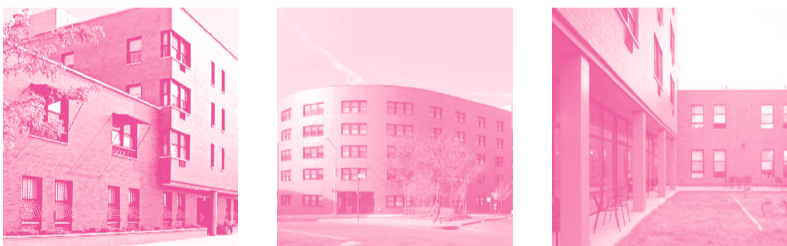
community facilities to all residential construction. This would make a whole new range of housing options possible. The unit size could be reduced, no parking space would need to be made available, amenities could be shared and the required courtyard space could be reduced.

Of course Team R8 has concrete design proposals in place for the scenario in which the Supportive Housing regulations would be extended to a variety of sites, particularly to neighborhoods zoned as “R8” – meaning areas with midrise, dense apartment buildings.

The designs would provide a whole new range of affordable housing options to New Yorkers, at rates between 450 and 750 dollars per month. There would be large shared apartments with flexible space, that could be inhabited by several families, there would be small individual units with shared amenities, as well as loft-type spaces that are inhabited by a number of single individuals.

Key to these designs is the willingness to share spaces and amenities as well as the philosophy that in New York, the city itself, is a living room, a communal space shared by all at all times. That, of course, is merely the acknowledgement of an existing reality and it’s incorporation into design and policy. As such it aligns well with R8’s overall strategy. To stop building for the imaginary nuclear family and start providing for an existing and underserved population is a mark of true design activism.

Written by Weltstadt Correspondent
SEBASTIAN MOLL



Three examples of recent supportive housing projects by architect Jonathan Kirschenfeld in the Bronx and in Brooklyn. These irregular infill sites could only be developed thanks to the more flexible dimensional requirements of Use Group III. © Team R8

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THE CITY AS A LIVING ROOM

Team R8 (Jonathan Kirschenfeld, Karen Kubey, Nancy Owens, Susanne Schindler, Brian Schulman, Erin Shnier, and Margaret Tobin)

TEAM R8 IS A COLLABORATIVE OF PROFESSIONALS WITH EXPERTISE IN ARCHITECTURE, LANDSCAPE, URBAN DESIGN, RESEARCH, AND REAL-ESTATE DEVELOPMENT. WE RESPONDED TO THE CHALLENGE OF EXPANDING HOUSING OPTIONS FOR NEW YORKERS ON THE BASIS OF TWO PREMISES:

First, whatever the size and make-up of a household, in New York the city is your living room. New Yorkers can live in small spaces because the city beyond has so much to offer. The design task does not end at the unit's front door, and the unit cannot be designed without considering the shared and the public realms beyond, both on the interior and on the exterior of the building.

Second, we don't need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to regulatory reform. Architect team-member Jonathan Kirschenfeld's experience in supportive housing reveals that the zoning regulations governing "community facilities" (which includes this form of special-needs housing) is well-thought out and intelligent: certain minimum dimensions, such as those governing courtyards, are less restrictive than in conventional residential construction, allowing for the development of difficult infill sites; there is no minimum unit size; and there are no requirements for providing parking.

We therefore propose to extend these existing regulatory advantages, which can significantly lower the cost of construction and increase design opportunities, to all residential construction, making the pleasures of single and shared living available to all New Yorkers.

Our proposal for underused sites along the Grand Concourse in the Bronx thus comprises a major redesign of the thoroughfare from its current eleven lanes to a pedestrian-friendly greened

urban space allowing for passive and active recreation. We selected the Grand Concourse for its R8 zoning, which allows for the densest mid-rise housing in New York City, ideal to test our hypotheses regarding current housing needs.

We designed three housing types that range from very small, live-work spaces (the SRO Redux), to independent Micro Units (the Studio Mix), to very large, reconfigurable apartments (the Flux) that vary in their relative degrees of private, shared, and public spaces.

Whether the upgrading of the Grand Concourse and other comparable New York infrastructure needs to come first, or private developers will take the lead: the City as Living Room enables single and shared housing for all.

THE SRO REDUX provides minimal, live-work units for singles. In contrast to the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) building of the past, the SRO Redux adds extensive shared amenities to its small, 150-square-foot units. Two units share a bathroom accessed from a semi-private work area. This work area, screened from the sleeping area, opens onto a wide, day-lit, and naturally ventilated corridor featuring a long, continuous counter that can be used by all for working, eating, or gathering. Each kitchen, part of this multi-use corridor, serves six units.

THE STUDIO MIX apartment building combines densely packed, self-sufficient units for singles or couples with an array of shared spaces. Each studio provides a full kitchen and bathroom that are ADA accessible. Two rows of apartments line a central corridor, with shared amenities located on the building's ground floor, courtyard, and roof levels.

While this studio design is far from revolutionary, its 275-square feet – smaller than the 400-square-foot minimum currently required by residential construction in most areas of the city – makes it a micro-unit ahead of its time.

THE FLUX is a large, flexible apartment building that can be easily adapted to the changing needs of a household of friends or multiple generations of a family. Each apartment features connectable rooms of similar sizes, which are suitable for living, sleeping, or working. Spaces also can easily be separated to create an independent office, rental apartment, or accessory dwelling unit (for a nanny or in-law). Apartments range from eight to twelve rooms, or a total of 1,700 to 2,300 square feet.

SRO Redux, Typical upper floor plan for a site on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. © Team R8

TEAM R8:

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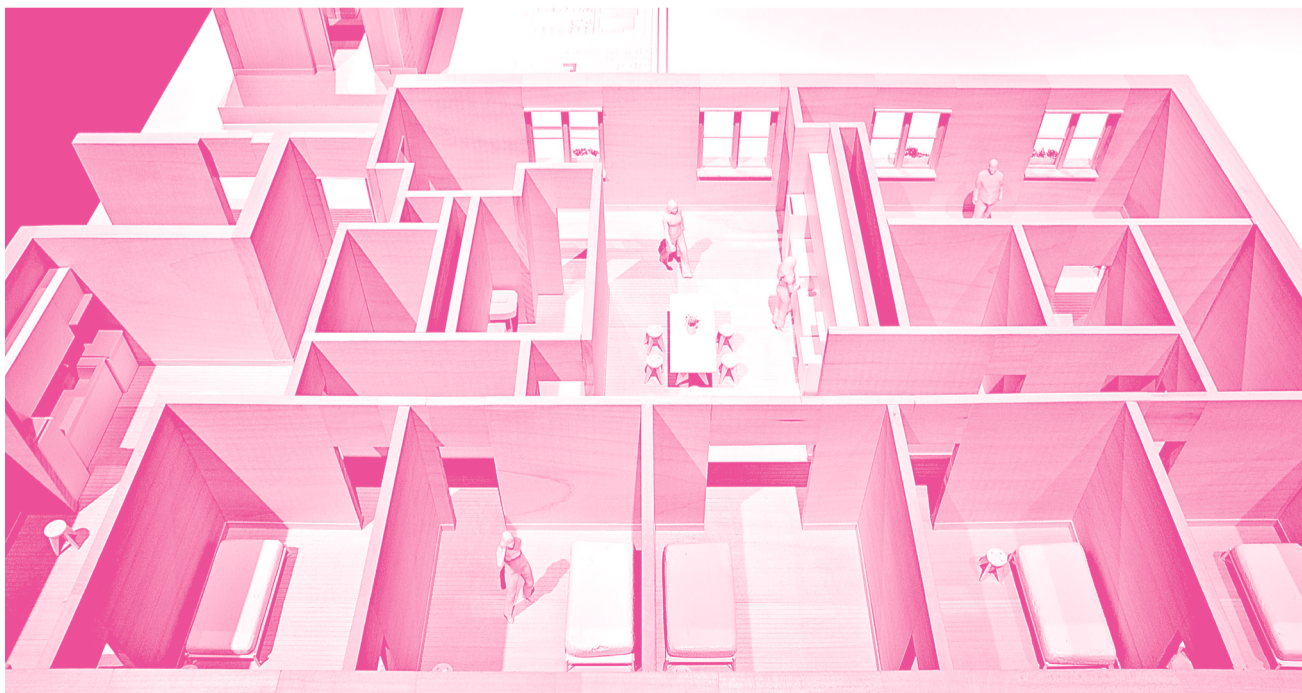
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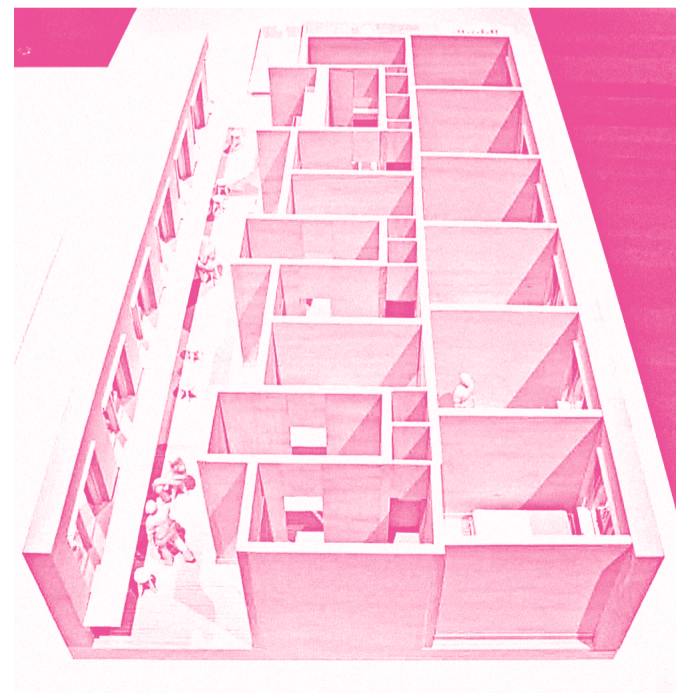
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The Flux, a large subdividable unit for households that wish to live together, with seven or more generous rooms that can be interconnected or separated. © Team R8



SRO Redux, model view. The daylit corridor becomes space for maximum social interaction and work, while the individual units are staggered to provide semi-private and private space. © Team R8



Cities and Citizenship posters in the window of the Goethe-Institut Wyoming Building © Goethe-Institut New York

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