

WHEN IT COMES TO BEING INTERESTING, tribal catastrophe has the advantages of more plot and more fast-paced action than ecological catastrophe. A whole new genre of fiction and film is emerging around terrorist plots and nuclear proliferation.

The spies and double agents following black-market traffickers in enriched uranium seem always to do so against a background of British and European social housing projects that are exactly the sort of things architecture students throughout the world are still busy learning to design in their housing studios—at Harvard, at London’s AA, at Moscow University, everywhere. These are just like the housing celebrated on the hallowed walls of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the housing estates into which the European Union herds its Arabs, its Africans, its Algerians and its Turks—avant-garde aesthetics conjoined with the politically reactionary in a truly poisonous brew. Universalism breeds tribalism: in these housing estates Muslim youth learns that Europeans despise them, for if they didn’t, why would they build these places for immigrants and not live this way themselves? The physical fabric of these placeless, history-less housing estates is the opposite of the seamless, ungated but particularized New York of Richard Sennett, who in fact grew up in Chicago’s infamous Cabrini Green public housing project.

## *from* Cosmopolis

European social housing in many places is repeating the story of the American public housing disaster, but with fewer good intentions and far more architectural narcissism. The United States Public Housing Act of 1937 set out to make a new and better world for America’s poor—more rational, sunlit, healthy and economical to produce than any public housing had ever been. The result was the complete identification and segregation of an impoverished underclass by building type.

We all know or should know what hell-holes American public housing became and the lasting scars it left. And the drug gangs of American public housing projects, violent as they were and are, don’t know anything about enriched uranium or double agents.

Cosmopolitan is the best word I can find to describe the opposite of the sectarian tribalism that is so richly nourished by identifying races and classes by building type and style and then isolating them from the city around them. During the Clinton administration, with considerable help from The Congress for the New Urbanism, there was a genuine and at least partially successful attempt to substitute the cosmopolitan for the sectarian in the realm of housing America’s poor. The intention of HUD’s HOPE VI program was to integrate immigrant populations and our indigenous poor into classic American neighborhoods. It is easy to point to HOPE VI projects that did not fully succeed and thereby miss an important piece of history. Some of

HOPE VI's architecture is not so terrific and in some instances people were displaced without a real opportunity to return. But where it succeeded, HOPE VI created a cosmopolitan condition for hundreds of thousands of residents who had been denied it by building racially and economically mixed districts that are seamless, sometimes beautiful parts of the cities around them.

There is nothing esoteric about the need for a cosmopolitan urbanism or the means to achieve it. An example: Our office is currently engaged in the effort to rebuild San Francisco's most violent and decrepit public housing project, a terrible place called Hunters View. Though it is partially vacant and boarded up, Hunters View remains home to about two hundred mostly African American families, some of whom have lived there for three or four generations. In the current absence of Federal HOPE VI funding, San Francisco's mayor, Gavin Newsom has launched a rebuilding program called HOPE SF (a more optimistic name than NO HOPE VI) but it is a huge stretch for City funds to accomplish something so ambitious.

Hunters View is the demonstration project for HOPE SF. As architects for the rebuilding, we have regular community meetings on the site and we have listened to an incredible litany of tragic stories of shootings, rape, roaches, rats, fatal fires, the wasted lives of young people and gang terror so violent that kids cannot venture into the adjacent project without fear of being shot.

At one recent community meeting, we walked around with small groups of residents and asked them to record what they thought about our proposals for various parts of the site. When the larger group reconvened, we asked a resident named James to report on his group's observations about the southern edge of the site. James is a white man about thirty-five, who has lived in Hunters View since 1979. With no affectation whatsoever, James speaks in the cadences of his black neighbors to whom he refers as his brothers and sisters. Each time I have seen him he has worn a huge Cleveland Cavaliers jersey down to his knees, behind which is a very substantial person. Most of the others on the tenants committee like it when James gets to collect the Housing Authority's fee for making dinner for the meeting, because his jambalaya is reputedly the best in the neighborhood. Initially James was reticent about doing the talking, but an aerial photograph that included the wreck of a community center just south of the site got him started. We didn't record his speech, but it went pretty much like this:

*These young kids now with their guns – they don't even bother with drive-bys. They doing walk-bys. Bam! When we were growing up, it was different. Nobody got into trouble. We went to that community center, right there (pointing to the photograph) and it was clean and beautiful. I learned to shoot pool, I learned macramé (that's what he said) and I played basketball. We all did those things all the time. There was macramé stuff all over the neighborhood and nobody got in trouble. Now that place is fallen apart and the director is a bad man. He should go and if you rebuilding this whole neighborhood, it don't make sense not to rebuild the community center.*

I said to James that it would be hard to rebuild the community center, because it was not owned or operated by the Housing Authority who is sponsoring the rebuilding. I asked if it would

be just as good to have new places for pool, macramé and basketball on the Hunters View site instead of next door.

*NO!* he said, *you don't understand what I'm saying. The reason we didn't get in trouble was that kids from all over the hill went to the community center. I grew up with people from the other side of the hill. Some of them still my brothers and sisters. Now, Hunters View kids shoot people from the other side of the hill.*

There it was, clear as could be. James is a northern white man who excels at jambalaya. He is a San Franciscan who wears the colors of the Cleveland Cavaliers. He is a big tough guy who is proud of the macramé he once made. And he considers black people who live on the other side of the hill his family. Compared to the teen-aged gun slingers of Hunters View, James has had a cosmopolitan life.

I can't help thinking that there must be people like James in Gaza, Hebron, Sarajevo and Baghdad, people whose life experience is as liberal and tolerant as his, who have watched their communities fold in on themselves. Folding in is the trigger for the gratuitous violence that has made Hunters View a hell hole. In a much bigger and more dangerous way, it is the same folding in that is occurring many places in the world and has occurred many times in the past. With James' moving speech, one sees the link between the life of Raoul Wallenberg and what one can do as an architect. Certainly at least a couple of things are now clear about what we should do at Hunters View. First, we should try like hell to get the money to rebuild the community center and focus the rebuilding as much on the linkages of Hunters View to the world outside as on replacing the squalid, horrible buildings.

For a long time it has been wildly unfashionable to claim that architecture can help society. We suffer a generational embarrassment about the naive and hubristic claims of an earlier generation of architects and urbanists that turned out to be so wrong. But James' story and all the stories about how the isolation of Hunters View has bred its culture of violence show how the physical city shapes the psyche. You can't convince someone who has lived their life in Hunters View that architecture and urban design are not important.