A Critique: New Urbanism, Hope VI, and Just Outcomes at Mission Main

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I. Abstract

The transformation of Boston's dense public housing projects into mixed-income, lower-density projects is the mirror image of the calls for increased densification in the rest of the city. Public housing has been transformed based on an argument that high-rise, high-density sites inherently are problematic, a rhetoric that has resulted in the net decrease of low-income housing units. New Urbanist principles are used to justify the physical reduction of units, while income mixing decreases the number of units available even further, incorporating a significant percentage of market-rate units into most projects. The case study of Boston's Mission Main traces this net reduction of affordable housing units, and given the fact that there are 37,000 families on the waitlist for a subsidized apartment according to the Boston Housing Authority (Kohli, 2023), it seems almost impossible to justify any reduction in the cities inadequate affordable housing stock. That being said, the redevelopment at Mission Main integrates New Urbanist ideals for a reason, they promise an active social environment, improved safety, and the development of community networks. This paper aims to investigate whether physical planning principles can be generative of positive social outcomes, as well as questioning whether de-densification was an intended outcome of this process or a byproduct of using new urbanism in an urban context.

II. Public Housing

In Boston, public housing was built in response to the assertion that "slums cost money", this was evidenced by the fact that the tax revenues brought in from these "slums" were substantially less than the amount that the city paid to maintain that area (Vale, 187). These slums were mapped out as desirable areas for public housing projects in red-lining maps, as well as maps made by the State Board of Housing. The Housing Act of 1937 was the first federal program for publicly managed and owned multifamily developments, and Boston's first of the pre-war housing developments to break ground in Boston was the Charlestown development, which broke ground in 1939. Seven additional projects, with 5,000 total multifamily units were built in Boston during this initial public housing initiative, from 1940 to 1942

(Vale, 191). Importantly, these projects maintained the existing densities of the sites they were built on but often gave no preference to those displaced in rehousing. After this first phase of public housing production in the post-depression era, the second boom of public housing was in response to the return of veterans, and the housing shortage that came with this influx of people. A graph of Boston's public housing production can be seen in Figure 02, both of these family public housing booms can be seen, as well as the sharp drop off at the end of the 1950's. All of the projects built during this time in Boston look eerily similar, brick walk-up buildings situated as towers in a park (Images 01 and 02).

Projects built during these two initial waves of public housing production in Boston have, for the most part, slipped into a state of disrepair. In 1969, the Brooke Amendment was established, capping the rents that public housing tenants were charged at a percentage of their income (HUD, Major Legislation). Though this amendment aimed to protect residents, it had a measurable negative impact on housing authorities, who lost funding, leading to poor maintenance of facilities and properties. As projects fell into disrepair, President Nixon froze new public housing projects in 1978 and developed the Section 8 voucher program as an alternative (Huduser, 63 Years). The Section 8 voucher program shifts the burden of affordable housing development from the government into the hands of private developers, a trend that continues today. In 1992, the HOPE VI grant is developed to revitalize the worst public housing projects into mixed-income neighborhoods. The ideals of the Congress for the New Urbanism were integrated into HOPE VI and defined solutions for both the financial and physical problems of public housing which are discussed at length in the next section.

III. The Congress for the New Urbanism and HOPE VI

A. *The Congress for the New Urbanism*

The emergence of new urbanism as an urban design movement can be traced to the 1980s, though many of the ideals can be traced back to the 1951 book, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, by Jane Jacobs. With ideas centered around walkable and mixed-use neighborhoods, the formation of the Congress for the New Urbanism can be seen as a direct reaction to the white flight that had occurred in

the 1950s and 1960s, as wealthier people fled the cities because of the perception that they were dangerous and dirty. Urban designers began seeking the return of the walkable, dense, mixed-use neighborhoods as an alternative to the suburb, but also as an alternative to the modernist city, which prioritized efficiency above the human experience. Similar to the way modernist goals of efficiency and structural honesty were translated into the pilotis or modular housing typologies, new urbanist ideals have taken on specific physical translations. For instance, the pitched roof makes its way into many projects, not because it helps with walkability or density, but because it is symbolic of the historical neighborhoods they are attempting to replicate. The Congress for the New Urbanism was founded in 1993 and in their own words, "has had enormous influence on the planning, design, and development of towns and cities worldwide" (CNU, Who We Are).

B. HOPE VI

HOPE VI stands for "Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere" and was developed by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1992. With the central premise of deconcentrating poverty by promoting income mixing, this program provides awards of up to 50 million dollars to housing authorities who have "severely distressed public housing units" (HUD, About HOPE VI)**.** The program was developed in response to the 1992 assessment of public housing, which showed that "6.5% of the housing stock is severely distressed" (Gross, et al, 187), as well as the high crime rates and effects of these sites of concentrated poverty on people's perception of the city as a whole**.** The stated goals of HUD's HOPE VI program were to "change the physical shape" of public housing, "help to foster the "self-sufficiency" of residents, deconcentrate poverty by "establishing mixed-income communities," and lastly "forging partnerships with other agencies" (HUD, About HOPE VI). The award can be used to achieve these goals through "major rehabilitation," "new construction," "the acquisition of new sites," and the development of "supportive service networks for residents" (HUD, About HOPE VI). This redevelopment program changed the face of public housing, especially after HUD eliminated its 1:1 unit replacement requirement in 1995 (Gross, et al, 187), and demolition and rebuilding became more economically feasible than renovation.

Though the Congress for the New Urbanism was smaller then, "the original HOPE VI Notice of Funds Availability specified New Urbanism by name" (CNU, HUD HOPE VI). The involvement of New Urbanism stems from Henry Cisneros, who was the secretary of HUD during this period. He "visited Kentalnds… to discover how new urban ideas could improve public housing. He signed the Charter of the New Urbanism in Charleston in 1996" (CNU, HUD HOPE VI)**.** The CNU formed a task force for this "Inner City" design work, which eventually resulted in the *Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design*, which are discussed at length in Section IV. The integration of these urban design ideas into the HUD grant process results in a relatively homogenous group of projects that were redeveloped through HOPE VI. Images 04-09 show a few of the projects redeveloped under HOPE VI, and the consistent aesthetics of these projects, despite their varied contexts, demonstrate the universalism of new urbanist design.

IV. Mission Main

A. Introducing the Mission Hill Projects

The Mission Hill Projects were initially built in 1940, with 1,023 units in 39 three-story walk-up buildings. Mission Main borders a high concentration of institutions including Wentworth University, Northeastern University, and Longwood Medical area. The original buildings existed on a superblock, with circulation and parking confined to perimeter streets, a site plan of the original design is seen in Figure 03. Over time the units were combined as the demand for larger unit sizes increased, and the unit count at the time of demolition was 822 units. The crime rate at Mission Main Housing was the highest of all Boston Housing Projects, with an average of 11 instances per day between 1991 and 1992 (Kornegay, 44). Boston Housing Authority attributed this high crime rate not only to the concentration of poverty, but also to the physical form, writing, "the physical structures provided a maze of indefensible spaces where police pursuit was nearly impossible" (BHA, Mission Main). In 1993, the number of occupied units had dwindled to around 700, with a building assessment concluding that 56% of the buildings were in poor condition (Volith and Zielenbach, 103). The poor conditions of the units, as well as the crime rate,

resulted in the "turndown rate for residents offered a unit at Mission was 74 percent, and the move-out rate was 21 percent" (Volith and Zielenbach, 103). The high turndown rate and move-out rates combined to result in a "constant vacancy rate of nearly 17%" (Fosburg et al.).

By the numbers, the density of the original project, before units being combined was 51 units per acre, this was in line with the other public housing projects built in this initial public housing boom, after the enlargement of units, the resulting density was 41 units per acre. Taking the constant vacancy rate into account, we can assume that of the 822 units that were available in 1992, only about 680 were occupied.

B. The New Mission Main

Boston Housing Authority applied for a HOPE VI grant in 1993 for Mission Main. Mission Main and Orchard Park were both eligible to apply, but because "institutions which are located around Mission had attempted to get ownership of the development for many years," (Kornegay, 50) the city felt increased pressure to address the problems associated with the development. The original plan for Mission Main's redevelopment abided by the 1:1 unit replacement rules, and called for the renovation of the existing units. Until, in 1995, the Boston Globe "announced that instead of renovating, the development would be razed, rebuilt" (Fosburg et al, 5-7). The new plan and resultant development reduced the unit count from 822 units to 535, and due to the implementation of the key idea of income mixing, only 445 of those units were available to residents earning less than 60% of AMI (Volith and Zielenbach, 103).

By the numbers, the total number of available affordable units decreased by 377, from 822 units to 445. The density decreased to 23 units per acre, from the 41 units per acre that existed in the 1990s. Interestingly, the net FARs (excluding the area of roads), increased from 1990 to the HOPE VI redevelopment. The FAR of the original plan was 0.76, which increased to 0.99 after the redevelopment was complete. This calculation in relation to the discussions of dwelling units per acre, reveals how much the unit sizes increased, while simultaneously the

amount of buildable area decreased significantly, because of the increased amount of public right of ways in the redevelopment.

C. The Analytical Method

To further analyze the built result of this redevelopment, I used the *Principles of Inner City Neighborhood Design* jointly developed by the Congress for the New Urbanism, and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. The introduction states that these principles "are intended to serve as a framework for both the design and the process of designing HOPE VI and other urban infill developments," (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 1). The Congress of New Urbanism explains that these principles "can help housing agencies and developers build communities rather than just buildings" (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 3). In analyzing Mission Main, I organized these principles into pairs and worked my way from the largest scale to the smallest scale design strategies. This analysis omits two principles identified, namely, "infill development," which encourages the reclamation of small, blighted parcels, and "design codes," which outline the importance of graphic design guides for future growth, (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 32) something which was not planned for in the case of Mission Main. Throughout the analysis, I aim to investigate both whether or not the principle was implemented at Mission Main, and whether or not the principle, if implemented in this context, led to a just outcome.

D. "City Wide and Regional Connections," and "Local Architectural Character"

The first principle, "city-wide and regional connections" is described as the idea that "neighborhoods should be connected to regional patterns of transportation, land use, open space and natural systems" (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 18). In the case of Mission Main, Figure 05 shows that the new streets that were added in the redevelopment do not connect to the existing street grid, and where there was an opportunity to connect the grid, McGreevey Way instead ends in a cul-de-sac, which creates a strange gateway condition, as seen in Image 03. The decision not to connect McGreevey Way sits in direct conflict with the principles of the CNU, which seek to allow the public

housing project to operate as a piece of a larger system, rather than as a separate enclave. Despite the disconnect for vehicular transit, the site does have good public transit access, with the Orange Line's Roxbury Crossing stop about 2 blocks South, and the Green Line's Longwood Medical Area stop on the Northernmost edge of Mission Main.

The second principle that relates to the surrounding context is "local architectural character," explained as "the image and character of new development should respond to the best traditions of residential and mixed-use architecture in the area" (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 30). As seen in Figure 05, there is no clear dominant architectural style of the surrounding buildings, which include high-rise residential buildings, churches, 5-over-1s, triple-deckers, and institutional buildings. The architectural style that Mission Main seems to emulate is the triple-decker, however, unlike the detached triple-deckers on Mission Hill, Mission Main instead opts for attached row houses. Mission Main's rowhouses also use pitched roofs that are more similar to typical suburban residences than anything found in this area of Mission Hill. The chosen "aesthetic" of New Urbanism includes this pitched roof style, demonstrated by Images 04-09 (The New Face of America's Public Housing Award) which show a selection of the awardees of the "New Face of Public Housing Award," which is given out by the CNU. The decision to emulate the pitched roof that is most reminiscent of a typical suburban residence seems to be out of place on the site.

E. "Mixed Use," and "Neighborhoods"

The second two principles relate to the scale of the neighborhood. The first of which, the CNU identifies as "mixed-use," or "promoting the creation of mixed-use neighborhoods that support the functions of daily life: employment, recreation, retail, and civic and educational institutions" (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 16). In analyzing the built form of Mission Main in isolation, this facet becomes almost irrelevant. On its own, Mission Main is almost purely residential, except for one community center, which is highlighted in Figure 06. The second principle, "neighborhoods," is explained as "compact, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed-use with many activities of daily life within walking distance," and "should not take the form of an isolated 'project'" (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood

Design, 12). Similar to the "mixed-use" principle, "neighborhoods" are not appropriate to analyze in isolation. Because Mission Main is embedded in its urban context, it's surrounded by amenities, restaurants, schools, and businesses. In this context, Mission Main itself has a dearth of amenities, but at the same time, provides it's residents with all the amenities that Boston has to offer, simply by existing along public transit routes. The architects describe Mission Main as, "designed as small clusters in blocks to create a sense of community" (Chia Ming Sze Architects). This idea of smaller block clusters within a larger neighborhood is relevant to this idea of compactness, but the lack of amenities within the blocks undermines this intention. The scale of Mission Main provides a three-by-three block chunk of housing which is not out of scale with other purely residential neighborhood blocks on Mission Hill. The proximity of the site to amenities outside of the boundaries of Mission Main allows the project itself to exist without having to deal with the complexities of ownership that a mixed-use public housing project might entail.

F. "Public Open Space," and "Streets"

The next two principles I chose to investigate in their relationship to Mission Main relate to open space networks and the street. The CNU defines the principle of "public open space" as "the interconnected network of streets and public open space should provide opportunities for recreation and appropriate settings for civic buildings" (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 22). The principle "streets," further defines the task of urban design as "the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use. Neighborhoods should have an interconnected network of streets and public open space" (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 20). These principles go hand in hand, reinforcing the importance of truly public space in urban areas. Figure 07 fills the streets with the darkest green, sidewalks and the most public open spaces with a mid-toned green, and ambiguously public spaces within the individual blocks with the lightest green. These semi-private open spaces within the courtyards are only connected to the street via thin sidewalks which are also feel ambiguously semi-private as a non-resident. The network of streets itself, as mentioned in *Section D*, does not tie into the existing street grid, but the small blocks present a very clear public realm of the street. The gray areas, parking lots, take

up 3.33 acres, of the 23 total acres at Mission Main, and though they are public, they do not provide the same opportunities for interaction, shared use or connection. The importance of streets, and the percentage of the total area given to parking lots rather than greenspace seems antithetical to the ideals of walkability that the CNU stands for.

G. "Safety and Civic Engagement," and "Dwelling as a Mirror of Self"

The next principles to engage with can be grouped under the umbrella idea of "defensible space." The first piece "safety and civic engagement" calls for "the relationship of buildings and streets enabling neighbors to create a safe and stable neighborhood by providing "eyes on the street" and should encourage interaction and community identity. Provide a clear definition of the public and private realm through block and street design" (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 24)**.** This principle relates to the CNU's explanation of the importance of "streets" but goes a step further to establish a relationship between the private and public realms. The second principle, "dwelling as a mirror of self," is a bit more abstract, but its explanation has a clear physical outcome, stating that "the dwelling is the basic element of a neighborhood and the key to self-esteem and community pride. This includes the clear definition of outdoor space for each dwelling" (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 26). In Figures 08 and 09, the light green areas highlighted show the extent of these private, defensible outdoor spaces at Mission Main. Additionally, the architects describe Mission Main as "designed for security and defensible space," (Chia Ming Sze Architects) showing a clear connection to this ideal. In terms of how the new projects compare to the original Mission Hill projects, there was a clear prioritization of individuality in the design process, shifting from a walk-up housing module with a shared entrance for 12 units, to a design where entrances are only shared by 1-2 units. This prioritization of individuality over the collective again relates more closely to suburban houses than to a typical urban condition. I question whether this prioritization of individuality, and the reflection of oneself in their environment is an appropriate strategy in such an urban context. Considering that most luxury apartment buildings make no effort to provide individual, defensible outdoor spaces, it seems that these ideals are only deemed important by New Urbanists, or the residents of public housing.

H. "Diversity," and "Accessibility"

The next principles I have grouped have direct impacts on the unit designs utilized in the projects. The CNU's principle of "diversity," states that projects should "provide a broad range of housing types and price levels to bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction -- strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community" (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 10). At Mission Main, there is a range from one-bedroom elderly units to four-bedroom family units. In terms of the units themselves, the 120 one-bedroom elderly units sit at the Northern corner of the site, and are all contained within a midrise double-loaded corridor building, whereas the family units are spread across the site, with 415 total family walk-up units. Separating the elderly and family units in this way does not seem like it would support the daily interactions that were targeted by the CNU with this goal, but it does allow their principle of "accessibility" to be integrated more seamlessly into the project. From my understanding, the 120-unit midrise is entirely accessible, and a selection of the family units across the site are also ADA-compliant. The other point within their definition of "diversity" is a diversity of incomes, which Mission Main achieves by providing 445 units of public, affordable housing, and 90 units of market rate rentals. By providing both affordable and market route housing, the project seeks to better integrate itself into it's surroundings.

Due to the specific location of this project however, one could argue that the inclusion of 2, 3, and 4-bedroom apartments targeted towards families, and 1-bedroom apartments for the elderly, does not incorporate the largest chunk of the local population, which includes students and young professionals. To truly become integrated with such a heterogeneous population, the units would have to cater to more than just "family" and "elder" users.

I. "Citizen and Community Involvement," and "Economic Opportunity"

The last two principles have to do with direct community involvement during the design and construction process. The first of which, "citizen and community involvement," stipulates that designers

should “engage residents, neighbors, civic leaders, politicians, beauracrats, developers, and local institutions throughout the process of designing change for neighborhoods” (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 6). Importantly this principle has no specified physical outcomes, unlike the rest of the principles presented in this document. At Mission Main, weekly meetings were held on Saturdays with the residents, however, in the HUD’s analysis of the project, they refer to this community involvement as “peripheral,” suggesting that while the residents were talked to weekly, they were not truly integrated into the design process. The other principle, “economic opportunity” suggests that the “design of a neighborhood development should accommodate management techniques and scales of construction that can be contracted to local and minority businesses” (Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design, 8). Though I have not been able to find details about exactly what construction team worked on the project, due to the large-scale nature of this project, I assume it was not a small local construction company. One of the stated goals of the project however was to promote economic development in the community by “providing jobs to residents,” which aligns with this principle almost exactly. I find this principle slightly misleading, as residents can be involved with projects of any scale, though they might not be able to be the head contractor for a project.

V. Conclusions

Through analyzing Mission Main, and the *Principles of Inner City Neighborhood Design* in this way, a pattern has become clear, most of these principles aim to achieve lofty social goals through specific physical design features. It seems to me that these specific physical goals, though the shape of the physical environment is important, can only achieve their desired socio-economic goals in conjunction with government services that can adequately assist residents. In the example of Mission Main, the redevelopment resulted in the displacement of 486 families, “300 moved into the new units, with approximately 80 opting to move to other public housing developments in the city, and the rest choosing vouchers”(Center for Community Change, 108). Mission Main provides a better living situation for the people who were able to continue to live there, but makes little to no effort to improve the overall

problem of a shortage of affordable housing in the region. This leads me to my biggest critique of this redevelopment, who is public housing for, if not for the people on the waitlist? It seems like the strategies of the CNU could have resulted in a more dense outcome without having to give up the walkability or connectivity that is paramount to the design. I question whether the density was limited by the 1:1 parking ratio they wanted to achieve, or whether it was truly deemed safer and more appropriate for this site to decrease it's density so drastically.

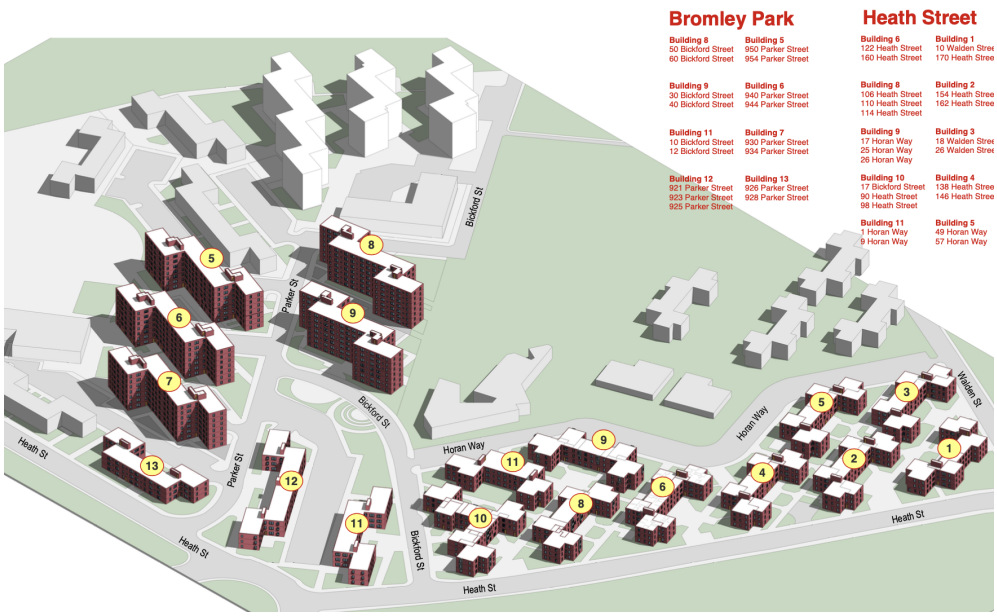
In Image 10, I provide a photo of J. Vue, built in the 1970's, J. Vue is a dense, luxury apartment building, and no one has suggested that the form of this building is inherently bad because of its scale. New urbanism is used, in conjunction with the integration of private developer's desires for higher income mixing to justify a decrease in the number of affordable housing units. There are cases across the country of new urbanism being used to increase the density of suburban, sprawling neighborhoods. At Holly Park, a fellow HOPE VI grant awardee in Seattle, the 871 original low-income units were transformed into 1,390 units (CNU, New Holly). The density was increased, but the number of low-income rentals remained consistent, due to the incorporation of subsidized homeownership units, and 422 market-rate units. This case study proves that while new urbanism can be used to appropriately increase density in sprawling neighborhoods, there is no clear justification for its use in urban neighborhoods which are made less dense by their transformation.

Word Count: 4,267 words

VI. Anecdote

My interest in researching this topic stemmed from a renovation project I worked on during my first co-op at Mildred C. Hailey, formerly Bromley-Heath, another Boston Housing Authority project. During the research phase of the project, we worked with excel spreadsheets, and plans from 1940 to understand how units had been combined, and performed weekly site visits. During these site visits, myself and one other employee of the company would go into thirty units to investigate the condition of the units, take photos, and attempt to map out the internal layout of each of the units. Not only was this process mentally arduous, trying to orient oneself in the repetitive buildings, but it was also emotionally exhausting. The condition of the apartments varied hugely, but what was most exhausting and frustrating was listening to people tell me about the state of disrepair, citing flooding, mold, leaks, issues with maintenance, etc, and having no foresight on what would actually be possible to fix given the small amount of money that was being put towards these renovations. Though there are obviously problems with Mildred C. Hailey, I firmly believe that they stem from a lack of funding and maintenance, not the density itself. The fact that as an intern I was expected to guide a project manager who was working full time on a different project through these buildings also made these visits sort of unbearable, and infinitely stressful.

While I recognize that this is not effective community engagement, and should not have been done in this way, I also recognize that the firm I was working at, and the Boston Housing Authority did not have the funds available to truly devote the amount of time or resources a full inventory of these 800 units. During our weekly visit, we would discuss our plans and findings with the managers on site, and through their involvement gain even more knowledge about what may be, or may not be possible. I reflect on this experience often, as I grapple with the history of public housing, and it constantly helps me to look at projects with the point of view of an under funded public housing authority.



Revit Export, Wimpe.

VII. Figures

Figure 01. Mission Main Housing Development, Wimpe.

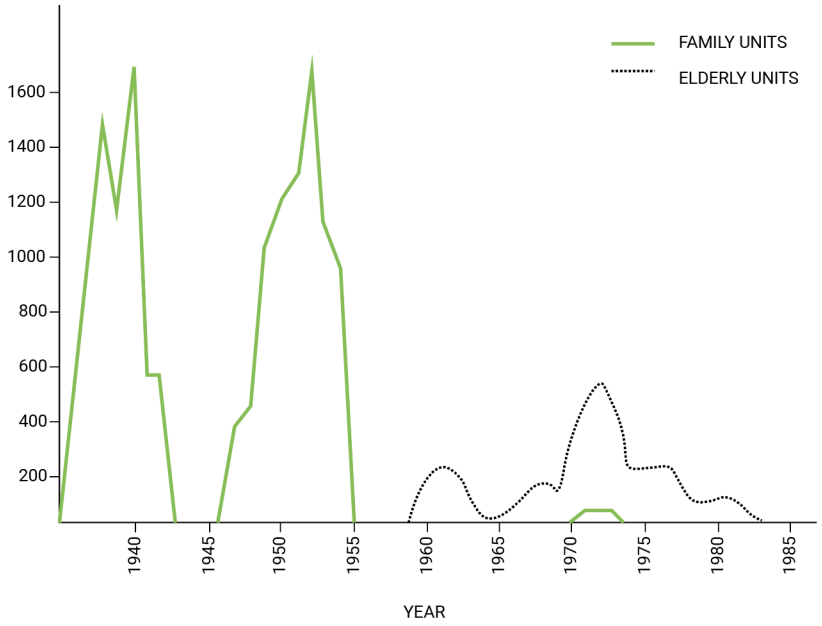


Figure 02. Graph of Public Housing Production in the Boston Overtime, Wimpe.

Figure 03. Original 1940 design of Mission Main, Wimpe.

Figure 04. Current Site Plan of Mission Main.

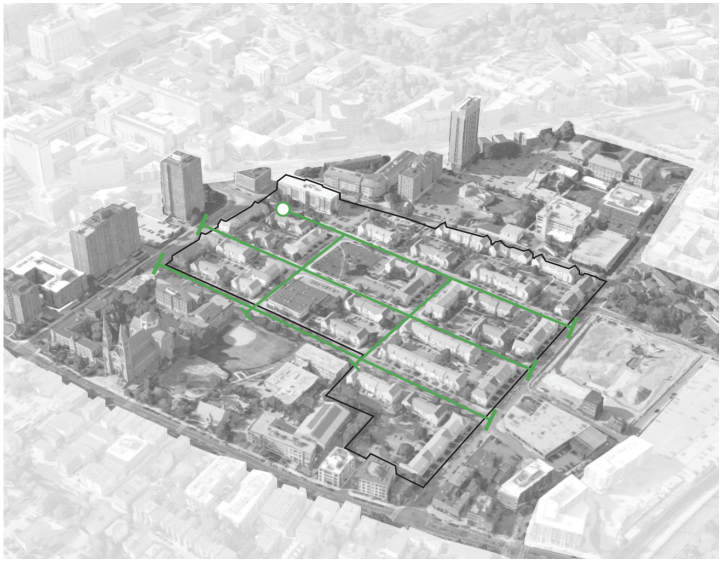


Figure 05. Connectivity and Local Character @ Mission Main, Wimpe.

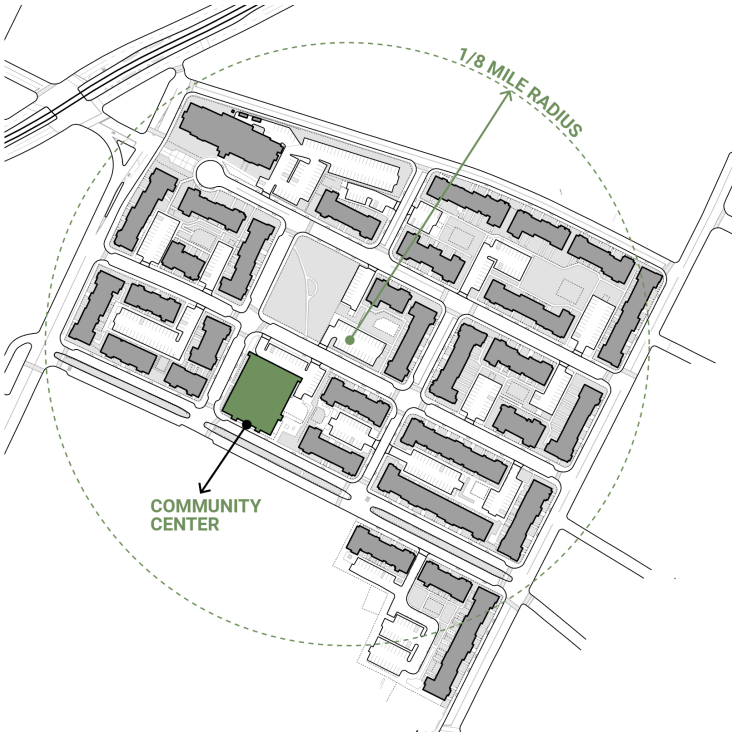


Figure 06. Mixed Use Neighborhoods @ Mission Main, Wimpe.

Figure 07. Streets and Public Open Space @ Mission Main, Wimpe.

Figures 08 and 09. Defensible Space @ Mission Main, Wimpe.

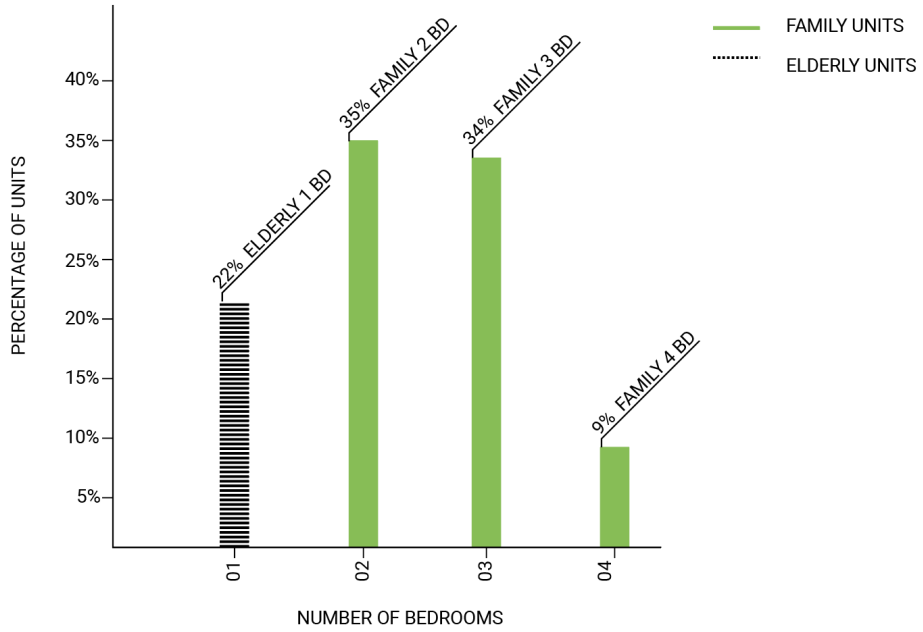


Figure 10. Unit Diversity @ Mission Main, Wimpe.

VIII. Images

Image 01. Mission Hill Projects, "Dirty Old Boston" via Facebook.

Image 02. Screenshot from "Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston", 1978.

Image 03. Photograph of col-de-sac condition, Wimpe.

Images 04-09. Images of projects awarded the "New Face of Public Housing" Award.

Image 10. J. Vue Residences, Wimpe.

Image 11. Typical Front Yard Condition @ Mission Main, Wimpe.

Image 12. Ambiguously private/public access to courtyards @ Mission Main, Wimpe.

Image 13. Parking Lot condition with Mission Hill Church beyond, Wimpe.

IX. Citations

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