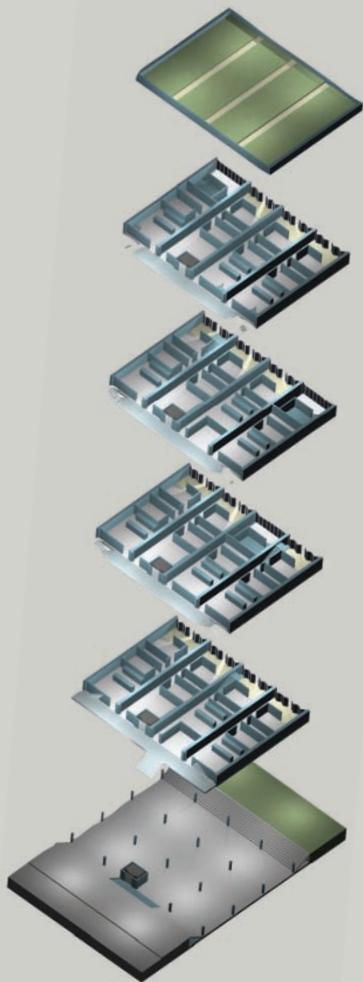


FILLING THE VOID



The middle class is disappearing because we as a society are not providing them with an environment in which they can exist. When deprived of a container, water runs off and vanishes. Any project aiming to serve the housing needs of the middle class must therefore be affordable. One can almost say that the middle class needs its own public housing program. But be mindful: 'affordable' is not to be equated with 'cheap'. New middle-class housing must therefore make the most of its opportunities to cut costs: centrally located, stacked plumbing cores; economy of materials and articulation; equal provisions for the single professional bachelor and the family of three, and the two roommates who choose to take on a third to lower their monthly expenses (one bedroom, two- and three-bedroom convertibles). In order to extrapolate this as a general concept, any scheme must be able to be applied to any-sized gaps in the urban fabric (allow for multiple spatial configurations).

There are voids everywhere, left-behinds and gaps. One bay here, five there. In some places, all that marks an opening is an overgrown plot of concrete, littered with refuse and the stray steel cable from a long-gone structure. In other places and to varying degrees, these gaps have been filled by functions that are viable, if not efficient; these uses must be respected. The Harlem site is now occupied by one such use; therefore, any intervention on the site must respect the community garden that is situated there today.



Before long, the United States will be forced to quit playing the part of the laggard of the pack when it comes to sustainable design. Our buildings and communities must be developed with sustainability in mind if they are to remain viable for the long-term. A transparent front-loaded circulation corridor offers an opportunity for solar heat gain in the winter, indirectly heating the units beyond. Vent this shaft at the top and the bottom and light is introduced without heat gain in the summer. Private garden patios on the back of the building serve the dual function of providing another air buffer on the back of the building and offering deep overhangs for sun control. Roof gardens replace the spirit of what the building's footprint has replaced and also lower the building's albedo.

Why not let an intervention encompass all degrees of privacy and community in one site? Let the public into the building. In fact, let them underneath it, so that they can reach the community gardens that are situated behind the building mass, protected from the street. Raise the building up off the ground, and then it becomes an all-too-perfect metaphor, a building that rests not on sand or stone, but on the community in which it is situated. Then, pull the common spaces of the building to the front of the site, located in a transparent mass that floats along and above the street. The building's specific community is then on display to the public; nothing to hide, everything to show. One then enters his or her apartment in plain view, moving into the public areas of their unit, dropping degrees of open-ness and publicity as they walk to their bedroom, at the back of the building, sheltered and at home. And cut from the same clay that is the essence of the current site, the tenant has a private garden space of his or her own abutting their room, able to be opened to the air (or closed off and made into an alternate living space).



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