Architecture

Realistic idealist

Peter Landon's shrewd, humane plans for reshaping Cabrini-Green

By Blair Kamin
TRIBUNE ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

T
he locks that once tumbled past his shoulders are gone but not his 60's sense of mission. Peter Landon, who grew up in Winnetka, is still on the front line of social change—and on the fault line of civil division.

Landon's work, said by the tracks of the Ravenswood line, is wedged between the high-priced condos of the Near North Side and the high-rise public housing of Cabrini-Green. Bringing these worlds together, the 47-year-old architect realizes, will be much tougher than uttering Rodney King's noble plea, "Can't we all get along?"

Landon knows that from experience. About 10 years ago, some kids from Cabrini wandered a few blocks north of the project and started playing in the front yard of Landon's modest frame house in Lincoln Park. They seemed harmless enough, so Landon let them play with his son, Simon.

"The kids called him 'Simon's dad.' One day, one of them chalked a message on Landon's front porch. "Dear Simon's dad," it said, "I just wanted you to know that I live at Cabrini-Green... I hope you still like me."

Now, a year after the federal government's takeover of the Cabrini-Green project, the sort of person-to-person encounter has been all but forgotten as politicians and bureaucrats try to cut the deal that will reshape Cabrini with the help of $50 million in federal funds.

If architects like Landon are out of sight, they should not be out of mind. They and their developer partners have competing visions for Cabrini. Which plan or combination of plans is selected by the CHA will do much to determine the future of public housing in America—and whether the wall that divides rich and poor, white and black, on the Near North Side finally will come down.

Amid this high-stakes drama, Landon is a fascination playing the ex-hippie trying to reform "The System" from within. But he's no naive do-gooder. In the fight for better architecture, he knows how to play the angles Chicago-style.

Five years ago, when he was working on a $4 million renovation of a government-subsidized Uptown high-rise, Landon sought to place a mural of glass mosaic tile in the vestibule. His aim was to express the identities of people from more than 30 countries living there. That humanistic touch, which cost $15,000, never would have made it past the bureaucrats if Landon had listed it as "art" in the budget. He called it "like," and the mural slipped through.

To the Machine Age high-rises of Cabrini-Green, Landon brings a sensibility influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement of the 19th Century artist and socialist William Morris. His approach is about crafting an economically and racially diverse community as well as restoring a sense of artistic craftsmanship.

His plan is restricted to a 9.3-acre redevelopment site near Cabrini's eastern border and is far less expensive than the highly publicized proposal advanced by Chicago developers Dan McLean and Allison Davis. Nonetheless, it has been attracting good notices.

In place of red-and-white high-rises, marooned amid oceans of supersized city blocks, Landon sees an urban quilt sewn from a fabric of row houses, coach houses, town houses, single-family homes, and two- and three-flats. The homes would recall those that 19th Century American carpenters fashioned from pattern books, though modern techniques would make them easier and thus less expensive to assemble. The street grid would be restored to Cabrini, the blocks would be squarish and, like the homes lined up along them, built to a human scale.

The $22.7 million blueprint, which would build 156 units with 74 devoted to public housing, is a model of good urban design. But, more important, an economic architecture forms the foundation of Landon's plan. As the neighborhood becomes gentrified, he reasons, taxes and rents will rise and those who live there now will be pushed out. So Landon proposes schooling Cabrini residents in small-business development, day care, building management and the construction trades.

Some Cabrini residents would continue to live in subsidized rental units. But others, gainfully employed, would have the financial clout to buy homes priced as low as $60,000. They would become real stakeholders in a neighborhood they don't want to leave. And in Landon's novel view, the new Cabrini would bring at least a hint of racial and economic diversity to socially isolated Lincoln Park.

Pie in the sky? Perhaps. Yet Landon and his affiliated developer, the Thrush Companies of Chicago, were among the survivors when the real estate firm overseeing the redevelopment of Cabrini threw out four of the 10 proposals earlier this year. When the non-profit Metropolitan Planning Council rated the six plans, the Landon-Thrush plan won as many high marks as the McLean...
Davis proposal. It also has been praised by Cabrini residents, who have fought to prevent the development and avoid displacement.

Such concerns are miles apart from London's childhood on the San Francisco Peninsula, where she grew up in a middle-class neighborhood.

He built low-cost artist's lofts in San Francisco, worked for three years in his home town of Richmond, and then moved to Phoenix, where he held several teaching and administrative posts at Arizona State University. At the same time, he was doing freelance work for the Chicago Bulls, a major city planning group.

The Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City—one of the most prestigious cultural institutions in the world—is currently under construction. It will be a multi-purpose facility that will house an opera house, a concert hall, and a gallery for contemporary art.

London says he learned not only how to do business, but also an approach to architecture that doesn't rely on materials, spare, but elegant. He opened his own firm in 1987.

"I'm sorry to see him go," Weese says. "His work could be misunderstood by some people. It's certainly very idiosyncratic. But that's what makes him so individual.

The London Center also offers opportunities for community involvement. The group has been working with local residents on various projects, including the development of a community center and the creation of new public spaces.

Those who have lived there for more than 30 years recall that the project once was well-managed, with active participation from the residents. Today, they say, the neighborhood is safe and peaceful, a place where children can play and people can relax.

Yet London's plan has significant weaknesses. It contains no on-site day care that would enable parents to work or attend school. And while the project is intended for low-income families, it will not serve the needs of the homeless or others like them. The great urban design danger is that the new neighborhood will become a monolithic sameness in an already diverse neighborhood, with a lack of variability—e.g., aesthetic, ethnic, and economic. That is the social promise Peter London is crafting.