



Architecture

Realistic idealist

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

By Blair Kamin

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The locks that once tumbled past his shoulders are gone but not his '60s 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 social division.

His office, hard 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 Chicago Housing Authority, that 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 fascinating player: 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 liv-

ing 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 "tile," 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 extensive 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 prefab techniques would make them easier and thus less expensive to assemble. The street

grid would be restored to Cabrini, the blocks would be small and, like the homes lined up along them, built to a human scale.

The \$28.7 million blueprint, which would build 185 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-

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Davis proposal. It also has been praised by Cabrini residents, who appreciate its emphasis on jobs and avoiding displacement.

Such concerns are miles apart from Landon's childhood on the North Shore, yet he is no arriviste in the field of low-income housing. He built low-cost artists' lofts in San Francisco, worked for three years as a carpenter and spent time at Arcosanti, the utopian city of architect Paolo Soleri in the desert north of Phoenix. Eventually, he landed a job in the office of Chicago architect Ben Weese, who long has had social housing in his portfolio.

There, Landon says, he learned not only that it was possible to do work you can believe in but also an approach to architecture that valued a straightforward use of materials, plus a spare, but elegant, simplicity. He opened his own firm in 1987.

"I was kind of sorry to see him go," Weese says. "His work could be misunderstood by some people. It's certainly very idiosyncratic. But it's fresh. His take on things is very individual."

It also stems from the grass roots. After the CHA requested proposals for Cabrini last fall, Landon started organizing meetings at a Near North Side community center. At the first meeting, Landon and crew set out 40 chairs. They got a crowd of seven, which was where attendance stayed. Even so, the gatherings helped Landon see Cabrini from an insider's perspective.

Those who had lived there for more than 30 years recalled that the project once was well-managed and that they were proud to live there. Landon also learned that the strands of a community are interwoven in complex ways. "Why do you hang out with gangbangers?" he would ask the "good" kids. One of them replied: "We can hang out together, then we listen to tunes, play ball and chill. When it comes time to do business, they go their way and I go my way."

Landon's plan is enriched by these complexities; he does not believe in the simplistic solution of blow it all up and start over. Just as the project's urban fabric needs to be restored, the better aspects of its social fabric need to be preserved. His traditional-looking houses are adaptive to the modern realities of that fabric: A two-bedroom townhouse has a compact ground floor that can be work space for a cottage industry or an extra bedroom for a grandmother or a member of the tenant's extended family.

Yet Landon's plan has significant weaknesses. It contains no land off-site that would enable CHA officials to spread out Cabrini tenants, breaking up the mass of poverty that now bedevils the project. Nor does it have major parks, rapid transit stops or commercial areas, as the McLean-Davis plan does.

All of which argues for the CHA combining these two fundamentally sympathetic approaches and others like them. The great urban design danger is that the new, low-rise Cabrini will seem like the work of one hand, exhibiting a monolithic sameness. The best urban neighborhoods, in contrast, are expressions of democracy's diversity—aesthetic, racial and economic. That is the social promise Peter Landon is crafting.