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Shingle by shingle: Designing quality in a housing crisis - by Brent Mangel

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Brent Mangel
Mangel Architects

Eric Bibb, a blues artist, wrote a song called “Shingle by Shingle” and sings “I’m fixing up the roof, shingle by shingle... got water in the well and I’m grateful.” We can be grateful that for most multifamily designers in New England, even in this time of uncertainty, our pipelines are strong—our own “water in the well.” But when it comes to the availability of high quality yet affordable housing, the well is nearly dry. We can do better.

We are indeed still facing a housing shortage, and some would argue that mass production of large scale garden-style dwelling units in the suburbs, will do the trick. These will help, but it’s not a cure-all.

We live in reactionary times when “fix it fast” thinking leads us far too often to design it fast, build it fast and sell it fast. Consider this article a red flag raised. There are dizzying arrays of multi-family residential options being brought to the market, and we are all gambling and guessing on what type will be viable and appropriate for long term stability of the regional housing market. The options range from 280 s/f tiny homes in South Boston to 1,600 s/f apartments in the suburbs. The question on everyone’s mind is which will succeed in a post-Covid-19 world and why?

As buildable parcels decrease and construction costs increase, something has to give. Unfortunately, it’s the quality that is often sacrificed—size of the units, the number of bedrooms and baths, and in many cases, thoughtful planning, design and construction.

At Maugel, we work with many developers, builders and planners in the housing industry, each with their own vision, perspective and budgets. Some believe that pre-manufactured and Accessory Dwelling Units should be part of the mix. These are second homes allowed by local zoning to be added to existing single family home parcels for use by in-laws or even renters.

Others, promote affordable housing in re-purposed mill buildings, schools and even churches usually incentivized with historic tax credits. Even the “Big House” is back, which are multi-unit buildings that look like large estates. Another client is promoting housing towers in a suburban community. Whatever the building type, we believe the real key to responsibly meeting our housing demands is quality: in its planning, its design and its construction.

One builder expressed his frustrations with rising construction costs of between 3% and 8% annually, and the extreme pressure to eliminate quality features that make great spaces, places and dwellings. He encouraged us as designers to seek new products, materials, building systems, and design prototypes to diminish costs and elevate quality. Challenge accepted...and we MUST do better.

Those of us who are fortunate enough to work in the commercial real estate industry, especially in the architectural and engineering professions, have an incredible opportunity and a powerful obligation to hold the line against quality erosion. As a first step, we can work with local zoning

officials to make significant improvements to ordinances that will plan for and incentivize the development of high-quality living communities in proximity to employment and amenity centers. Small dwellings that are big on style are trending upward when accessorized with smart-spaces and local amenities.

In response to the pandemic, it is likely that a migration to the suburbs will occur for companies, jobs, and housing as employees experience and appreciate remote working and the extra time they have gained sans commute. When it does, we will have opportunities to design a new type of housing that protects us from viruses and preserves green space by building vertically.

Whatever the housing type, let us be motivated by a concern for the occupant's health and safety in high quality living dwellings. We need to take the time to design dignified, efficient, tech-smart, vibrant living environments for all economic sectors. We should be advocates of developing housing right, not fast: designing housing exceptionally, not easily, and solving the housing crisis with quality—one step at a time—Shingle by Shingle.

Brent Mangel is the founder and president of Mangel Architects, Harvard, Mass. and Portsmouth, N.H.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540