

Plans for the future

Students research the problems and pluses of urban housing

By Roger M. Showley

STAFF WRITER

April 10, 2005

Feminists miss the mark on their critique of housing design.

San Diego developers miscalculate the level of housing demand in Imperial Valley.

Smart growth won't work here without major reform to building and zoning regulations.

And redevelopment doesn't always have to result in displacing area residents and businesses.

Such were some of the conclusions presented last month at the 15th annual Urban Studies and Planning Expo, showcasing the work of urban studies seniors at the University of California San Diego.

The 46 students spent 20 weeks, including 4,000 hours of internships, researching a variety of issues, from housing to health care, most dealing with San Diego problems. Some of the seniors say they plan to carry on their work professionally after graduating in June.

"Really, you are right on top of some interesting trends," San Diego City Councilman Scott Peters told the students at the exhibition on campus. "We want to keep you engaged as individuals. We'll need your minds and we'll need your training to do that."

Here is a sample of some of the students' findings. More can be learned about the program by checking the course's Web site, regionalworkbench.org/sequence/.

Feminist critique

Keith Pezzoli, the UCSD professor who supervised the student work, awarded the top academic prize to Sin Hillier, 21, who as president of the campus Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance, critiqued feminist critics of housing design.

She said feminists have condemned housing for "oppressing" women in the way single-family homes have been designed but they "fail to apply what they have learned in any practical fashion."

Hillier lived in San Ramon before enrolling at UCSD and plans to work in an international environmental consulting firm in the Netherlands for a year before studying urban design at the University of Cardiff in Wales.

In her 23-page paper, Hillier said feminist architectural critics have focused exclusively on suburban lifestyles and ignored the design needs of low-income single mothers, who are most concerned about the safety of their children.

"Traditional feminist critique of architecture has been sufficient for analyzing a single-family, suburban home," she wrote. "Unfortunately, it does not go far enough to be useful in analyzing low-income housing and the effects of certain kinds of architecture on the perpetuation of inequalities and disadvantages facing low-income women."

Hillier contrasted the infamous Pruitt-Igoe apartment towers in St. Louis and Daybreak Grove, a 13-unit housing project in Escondido.

Built in 1956, Pruitt-Igoe consisted of 33 11-story high-rises containing more than 2,700 subsidized apartments. Designed in part by the same architect who later did the World Trade Center's twin towers, the complex was demolished in 1972-73 because of chronic vacancies and vandalism. Hillier said the modernist design was intended to eliminate wasted space but failed to provide space for community interaction.

"The most important consequence was that the inhabitants did not have a feeling of responsibility toward their neighbors," she said. "Without this united front against outsiders and criminals that terrorized their buildings, the cycle of crime and fear continued."

Daybreak Grove, built in 1993 and designed by the San Diego architectural firm Davids Killory, consists of 13 bungalows grouped around a common play space that residents can monitor from their kitchen windows.

"In terms of design, elements found inside the Daybreak Grove bungalows demonstrate an understanding of the needs of low-income mothers," Hillier said. "At 800 square feet, (Christine) Killory and her associates designed each bungalow to its fullest potential."

Imperial Valley investors

Donald Povieng, 21, originally from Huntington Beach, found that the Imperial County housing market, a growing bedroom community for San Diego workers seeking lower-cost homes, is instead attracting too many speculators and investors.

"The very same real estate investors who were active in the San Diego housing market now seem to be emerging in Imperial County," said Povieng, who plans to earn a law and business degree at the University of San Diego while working for a private home builder after graduation.

"The presence of these investors, I argue, negatively alters the dynamic of housing markets by abnormally inflating housing prices, which directly undermines the very principle of bedroom communities."

Visiting one El Centro project, he saw 15 homes ready for move-in Jan. 20.

"A mere 15 days later, nine of these 15 homes had 'for rent' signs taped to the garage doors," he said.

Some developers have begun to combat speculation by requiring buyers to sign no-rent and no-resale agreements, Povieng said. When he checked 172 homes sold in one subdivision without these restrictions, the sales office told him 103 homes or 43 percent were investor-owned.

Povieng also checked the traffic between San Diego and Imperial counties and noticed that while crossings are increasing, eastbound traffic is still twice that of westbound commuters.

"These numbers dramatically contrast the expectation of the home builders that new home buyers in Imperial County would be commuting to work in San Diego," he said.

With new homes being snapped up so quickly and then resold or rented, Povieng believes some builders are planning more projects than the market can bear, based on the relatively low income Imperial households earn.

"The presence of the investor directly disrupts the entire regional housing market by individually disrupting housing markets at the community level," he said.

Smart growth faltering

Shaun Vigil, 22, who grew up in Walnut Creek and wants to work in transportation and land-use planning after graduation, was one of several students who analyzed San Diego's record in implementing smart-growth principles.

He noted that various jurisdictions have passed laws and plans to encourage better coordination between transportation and housing but he said "little headway has actually been made" in reducing traffic.

"I have found that there are many flaws in our political structure that prevent smart growth from actually occurring on a level that can actually make a difference in current and future growth patterns," Vigil said.

He said San Diego's "city of villages" plan, promoted by Mayor Dick Murphy, has nothing to show so far because none of the five pilot villages approved has yet moved to the construction stage.

Beyond the city's efforts, Vigil said none of the new master-planned communities built in recent years truly represents a good example of smart-growth design.

He blamed zoning codes and building regulations for not allowing smart growth to get off the ground and said the failure to correct existing infrastructure problems leads neighborhoods to oppose new development that might make conditions worse.

Transportation planning also is failing produce smarter growth, he said, pointing to the UCSD community itself as a good example.

"UCSD is the county's third largest single employer," he said, "yet it is not located near any light-rail transit," while bus service to the campus is too slow to accommodate the needs of students, faculty and staff. A light-rail line is in the planning stages but is not expected to be completed for several years.

But even if the trolley line existed, he said, San Diego is too spread out to benefit.

"Many of our commuters are not commuting short distances where light rail and bus might be viable options, even if they were in close proximity," he said.

Vigil did not suggest an alternative transportation system or better planning approach. But he did say area agencies should streamline approval processes and adopt more effective strategies.

"Then will San Diego begin to change its course of sprawl that has dominated it for the last half-century," he concluded.

Redevelopment without displacement

With redevelopment becoming an ever-more popular planning tool, Santiago Perez, 21, who lives in Paradise Hills, lauded the Mi Pueblo pilot village plan submitted by Casa Familiar for San Ysidro because it retains existing businesses and residences rather than displacing them.

Too often, Perez said, "the benefits of redevelopment in terms of economic or political incentives are obtained only by the political elite and deep-pocket investors/developers that have the ability and money to develop projects that result in significant financial gains."

But after working as an intern with the city's redevelopment agency, Perez said the Mi Pueblo plan avoids that pitfall by including financing that allows existing residents to remain in place.

As for commercial uses, the nonprofit status of the program should benefit existing property owners rather than outside developers.

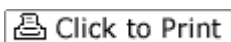
"With the exception of a few businesses that do not comply with present zoning regulations because they are nonconforming uses of land," he added, "the markets, restaurants and fruit stands will remain in the area in an attempt to preserve the community's character and culture."

Roger M. Showley: (619) 293-1286; roger.showley@uniontrib.com

[»Next Story»](#)

Find this article at:

http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20050410/news_mz1h10urban.html



Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)