

Courtyard Housing Revival

DESIGN

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Courtyard housing, which was widespread in Los Angeles in the 1920s and 30s, is an attractive alternative to the standard developer formula. Such housing consists of rowhouses wrapped around an open space, with front doors opening onto the court and rear doors opening onto alleys. (The bungalow court is the detached-housing variant.)

The courtyard is a carefully designed space, often with formal gardens, water, and seating. The appeal of such housing is easy to see. Far from being a designer frill, the courtyard is an essential element in the life of the homes immediately surrounding the space and a "building block" of coherent urbanism for an entire urban district.

For people living around the courtyard, the space provides a sense of safety and privacy; the courtyard is a quasi-public space that mediates between the home and the street. For the city at large, the courtyard is an urbane housing type that can fit well into a variety of different settings, including single-family housing.

Reviving the Courtyard Form

Strangely, almost no such courtyards have been built in Los Angeles since the early 1930s. In recent years, however, Elizabeth Moule and Stefanos Polyzoides, partners in the firm [Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists](#), have attempted to revive the form with a dozen projects in Southern California.

Two of their recent projects are "Seven Fountains" in West Hollywood and "Mission-



The north court of Seven Fountains multifamily housing by Elizabeth Moule and Stefanos Polyzoides, as seen from the east.
Photo: Jean-Maurice Moulene



The north court of Seven Fountains as seen from the west.
Photo: Jean-Maurice Moulene



In the interior of Seven

Meridien," a mixed-use project at a future light-rail station in South Pasadena. They show Moule and Polyzoides trying to adapt the courtyard to modern-day requirements, while issuing an implicit challenge to the building industry about standardization.

It might have been understandable if the architects had attempted to replicate one of the superb Hollywood and West Hollywood courtyards that Polyzoides had documented, along with coauthors Roger Sherwood and James Tice, in their [Courtyard Housing in Los Angeles](#). But importing an antique model, however admirable, to present-day Los Angeles is not the approach of a real architect.

"Modern architecture is not about style," Polyzoides says. "The original intent of modernism was about solving new problems." Each new site, each budget, must be approached as a new problem, even while preserving the basic typology of the courtyard.

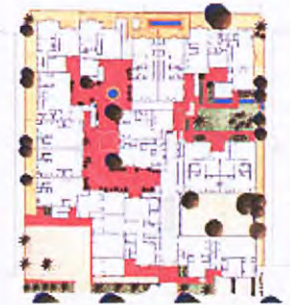
Polyzoides and Moule approach architectural design as town planners would. They design the open spaces — the courtyards, landscaping, and parking — and then arrange the housing units around these conditions. This is key to their nonstandardized approach. The typical developer would arrange the units, usually at the maximum density allowed by zoning, and then afterwards carve out some space for planting, patios, or a central courtyard. Although nearly all small apartment buildings have courtyards of some kind, they are rarely well designed or inviting spaces.

Courtyards Mediterranean Style

In West Hollywood, Moule and Polyzoides have taken a style that might be regarded as bankrupt — the deracinated Mediterranean style that carpets much of Southern California — and turned out a beautiful, intelligent, supple building, full of formal beauty and surprise. The project attests to Polyzoides' belief that style, per se, is secondary to the deeper issues of architectural thinking.

Fountains, a "green" courtyard preserves a specimen tamarisk palm.

Photo: Jean-Maurice Moulene



Seven Fountains site plan.

Image: Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists



Section through Seven Fountains courtyard housing.

Image: Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists



With courtyards concealed behind what appear to be single-family bungalows, the

Insofar as it is not "abstract," Seven Fountains is not a modernist building. But it is a completely contemporary building, with many unshowy lessons learned from ancients and moderns alike. Here, on a site of 180 by 160 feet (55 by 50 meters), the courtyard typology is used with virtuosity and freedom to create a series of interconnecting courtyards, each with its own character.

A notch is cut out of the front elevation to create a walled courtyard which hides the entrance to the subterranean garage. In the interior of the project, a "green" courtyard preserves a specimen tamarisk palm. The large courtyard in the center, unlike the comparatively simple courts in the surrounding historic projects, is a complex and restless space that wraps around the buildings, and reveals a series of "hidden," secondary courtyard spaces, one after another, as one walks through the complex.

Polyzoides says he is particularly proud of the asymmetry of the project, which harkens back to the asymmetry of mission-style architects like Wallace Neff. Seven Fountains in no way resembles production housing.

While the architects did not make any overt allowances for sustainability, the courtyards were designed to maximize sunlight and ventilation for all units; each unit has windows on two sides to allow cross ventilation.

At Home in a Bungalow Neighborhood

The Mission-Meridien project in South Pasadena shows the potential of the courtyard type to expand into a neighborhood-scale urban scheme. Polyzoides has replaced a row of dilapidated single-family bungalows with a variety of units dispersed around three different courtyards.

The 67-unit project contains a wide variety of housing types, including two- and three-story townhouses, flats, lofts, and three single-family houses on the north end. To make the

Mission-Meridien project fits easily into an established South Pasadena neighborhood.

Image: Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists



The Mission-Meridien project replaced a row of dilapidated single-family bungalows with a variety of units dispersed around three courtyards.

Image: Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists



Mission-Meridien increases the density of its neighborhood without altering its character.

Image: Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists

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project palatable to the immediate neighbors, the three courtyards are arranged behind what appear to be the facades of three craftsman-style bungalows. The scheme may serve as a prototype of how to build medium-density projects in existing single-family neighborhoods without disrupting the traditional character or scale of the blocks.

Residential construction is a hidebound trade. Moule and Polyzoides have yet to convince builders that their nonstandard projects can be built as economically as standardized housing. However, these projects should convince builders that courtyards are versatile and neighborly and that they allow architects and developers to combine different kinds of units easily into a single project.

Seven Fountains and Mission-Meridien have been well accepted by the public, and hence will be acceptable to developers, at least those who do not need to "max out" their sites with the highest permissible number of units.

The remaining and urgent question is how can codes be changed to encourage courtyards and other forms of housing that are desirable from an urban design standpoint, and to discourage cut-rate speculative apartment buildings that offer little open space for their tenants, and even less regard for an attractive streetscape.

The answer does not lie entirely in the realm of design. Good examples of habitable and humane housing already exist. The deeper problems are cultural and political. We must first acknowledge that density is coming — indeed, is already here — and needs to be addressed throughout the community.

The answer may partly lie in a supportive political environment, which is no less important than esthetic theory or building technology in making our cities into places where we want to live. When the politicians and building codes finally acknowledge public acceptance of these ideas, Moule and Polyzoides will have provided some models for others to follow.

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