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Astoria Houses 2.0: "Keeping it Astoria"

The neighborhood of Astoria in Queens, NY exhibits a distinct richness, diversity, and quietude that is rooted in an eclectic mix of mostly residential architecture. However, as gentrification continues to permeate into the outer boroughs of chaotic city centers like Manhattan, the result is a deep transformation of historic landscapes. The disruption caused by the arrival of modern urban developments in Astoria has reinforced residents aversion to modern housing planning. Nonetheless, the need for housing - specifically affordable housing - remains, and building - the hallmark of gentrification - continues to be the most effective solution to this issue. As such, contemporary city dynamics prompt a redefinition of our interactions with the built environment, in particular as it relates to authenticity in public life. Thus, my design solution proposes a new type of housing project, one in which modernity exists synchronously with history. *Astoria Houses 2.0* is a sustainable, affordable, and modular housing development, in which the old converses with the new.

Part of Astoria's attractiveness is its cultural and social diversity which dates back to the 17th century when German, Dutch, and English immigrants first settled. Several waves of immigration ensued in the following centuries which brought large populations from Ireland,

Italy, and Greece, and later from Arab states and South America. “Melting pot” is an accurate descriptor for the welcoming neighborhood that is Astoria. Its legacy as a quiet residential enclave, though, begins in the 1800s when wealthy merchants settled along the East River to build mansions. Shortly thereafter, other types of housing developments were built: modest houses with balconies, row houses, and eventually, brick apartment buildings. These buildings are the foundation of Astoria’s architectural eclecticism, a characteristic which makes it both singular and attractive.

Industrialization in the 1860s changed Astoria’s topography by introducing industrial infrastructure mostly along the waterfront, which is still apparent today. Then, in the 1990s and continuing into the 21st century, globalization - a phenomenon encompassing complex processes of market liberalization, population growth, and urban sprawl - developed exponentially. While the consequences of such dynamics most profoundly impacted city centers like Manhattan, these processes are now spreading to neighboring areas like Astoria.

As a result, it seems that Astoria is becoming less of a neighborhood unto itself, with its own separate identity, and more of an *alternative* to Manhattan - a cheaper, perhaps more accessible alternative. In fact, many residents I spoke to complained about the fact that the new privately funded and privately developed rental apartment buildings are attracting young and wealthier people, which is transforming Astoria into a “second Manhattan”. Residents also expressed concern over how the future influx of people would exacerbate congestion, and of course, raise rent prices. This shows the complex nature of gentrification: it creates ripple effects which are born and grow out over time. Inconspicuously, it changes the character of neighborhoods, but its most noticeable effects remain visual. Thus, Astoria risks being drowned

in a sea of sameness - the same stark, rigid, massive apartment blocks - at the expense of its multifaceted diversity.

The varied nature of Astoria's housing stock is not only an expression of aesthetic heterogeneity. Ultimately, it is a reflection of the diversity which makes Astoria Astoria: the diversity of its people. Dwellings are physical manifestations of what makes people who they are: their identity, their values, their culture. They are dynamic structures, at once reflecting the lives that live within and, accordingly, morphing with time. A house, then, is not just a *functional* object; it is personal and precious. It should not, then, be treated as a mass produced commodity. Yet, these new housing blocks are doing exactly this: imposing themselves in a conversation that is not theirs to participate in, eroding the history that has been thriving for decades, and threatening the livelihood of the community. Their impersonality and blandness is strikingly apparent as one walks through Astoria. As such, these markers of gentrification - which do not appropriately respond to the specifics of place - only worsen people's aversion toward this contemporary expression of growth. In other words, modern developments feed into a type of mobility in which the young and wealthy come to Astoria for more affordable rent, and stay because they realize it is a delightful place to live in. How, then, do we help mitigate the negative effects of gentrification?

While houses are not public spaces, they are the connecting points between the public and private spheres. In a neighborhood like Astoria - which is primarily residential - dwellings become especially important to the maintenance of public life, to the preservation of community, and, ultimately, to the creation of *authentic* interactions. The negative effects of a lack of houses

in a place like Manhattan is offset by the existence of innumerable sites in which public interactions are facilitated - such as parks, squares, and even transit lines. In residential Astoria, these transitory spaces are fewer, so people rely, in part, on its homes to express a sense of authenticity. As Jane Jacobs explains in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*[1], stoops - the physical thresholds between the communal sidewalk and the private abode - replace traditional public spaces. Yet, straight edged apartment complexes do not allow for stoops.

Evidence shows that construction of luxury apartment buildings is on the rise in Astoria[2], as private developers take advantage of run-down infrastructure and exploit the neighborhood's uniqueness. This is such despite residents' vehement opposition towards these types of developments - as demonstrated by the ongoing protestation against the Sunnyside Yards redevelopment in Queens[3]. This is when an evaluation of gentrification becomes necessary: is it "good" or is it "bad"? Opponents will emphasize its negative effects: the displacement of low to middle-income residents in favor of a more affluent demographic and the erosion of neighborhoods' identities. But, gentrification is just as much an *organic* process - part of the natural evolution of cities - as it is manipulated and capitalized on. It is a side effect of globalization dynamics - population growth, market liberalization, and urban sprawl among others - which rapidly developed starting in the 90s. Increased connectivity between countries

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[1] Jacobs, Jane. "The Uses of Sidewalks" in *The Death and Life of Great Cities.* (Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc. New York), 1992.
[2] "The Gentrification of Astoria - The Story of Astoria." Macaulay Honors College. https://macaulay.cuny.edu/seminars/rosenberg09/articles/t/h/e/The_Gentrification_of_Astoria_3a1c.html#cite_note-8.
[3] Hackett, Kristen. "Opinion: Stop Sunnyside Yards! Reparative City Building Now!" City Limits, December 16, 2019. https://citylimits.org/2019/12/16/opinion-stop-sunnyside-yards-reparative-city-building-now/.

encouraged a wave of immigration during this decade, which automatically resulted in an increase in population. With such an increase came an increased need for housing.

Globalization is still in effect today, with cities continuing to develop and spread outward as a result. As such, it is not necessarily desirable to *stop* building. The dire need for housing calls for immediate action and building is proven to be one of the most effective solutions[4]. After all, the only way to answer the demand is to increase the offer. What *is* undesirable is the mass production of housing units which do not appropriately respond to sites' identities and characters. The problem thus lies in the way we approach building residential infrastructure. While privatization may allow access to more diversified sources of funds, it often leads to buildings which are inaccessible and awkwardly stand out. A visual tension inevitably ensues between existing buildings and new ones, which becomes the foundation to a dichotomous relationship between newcomers and current residents. Consequently, this friction prompts a redefinition of the concept of authenticity as it relates to the built environment: if we wish to maintain harmony between public and private spheres, if we wish to maintain authenticity in public life, then we must change our preconceptions of gentrification and modernity. We must develop an appreciation for what is new, with an understanding that as cities evolve their built environment will reflect that change. For this to have any substantive effect, we must then also change the way we *build*.

[4] Matthew Yglesias, "Everything you need to know about the affordable housing debate," *Vox*, May 11, 2015, https://www.vox.com/2014/4/10/18076868/affordable-housing-explained.

Historically, one way in which cities have attempted to control, and in cases, thwart building is by enacting zoning laws. Zoning is the most basic form of city planning: governments and local municipalities literally draw out - "plan" - zones in certain areas and regulate the use and size of these zones. In 2010, the City Council approved a contextual rezoning in Astoria, in which R5 and R6 districts were replaced with R5B, R5D, R6A, and R6B districts[5]. These classifications limit the height of new developments and ensure that new buildings work in continuity with existing residences. This has proven to be an effective way to artificially modulate residential design initiatives. However, the 2010 rezoning only applied to one area of Astoria, meaning that the rest of the borough was - and is - still vulnerable to out-of-scale development. Taking a walk in Astoria today reveals this striking heterogeneity with the presence of modern buildings completed well after 2010. It seems, then, that zoning laws only act as band-aids to deep-rooted city planning issues. As has been demonstrated in Astoria, they merely delay the construction of unwanted projects, rendering the process of gentrification cyclical. Rezoning is one possible solution to a complex problem, but has questionable outcomes. Therefore, in order to achieve lasting change and get at the core of the matter, I believe we need to modify both our mentality and approach to city planning.

Modern modifications of the built environment have redefined the scale and scope of social interactions at an extremely fast pace. As Sharon Zukin explains in *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Spaces*[6], the public and private spheres have merged. Private stakeholders are now in charge of public spaces, and public entities are responsible for many new

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[5] "Astoria Rezoning Approved." CityLand, April 13, 2012. https://www.citylandnyc.org/astoria-rezoning-approved/.

[6] Zukin, Sharon. "Union Square and the Paradox of Public Space" in *Naked City The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Spaces*, 125-151. Oxford University Press, 2010.

housing projects. Homes exist in and *shape* public spaces, but their primary function is private. As a consequence, residences can no longer be just *facades*. They must be resilient infrastructures, adapted to both local needs and broader city demands. They must reflect both their immediate surroundings, and the wider network of urban dynamics. In short, homes must modernize.

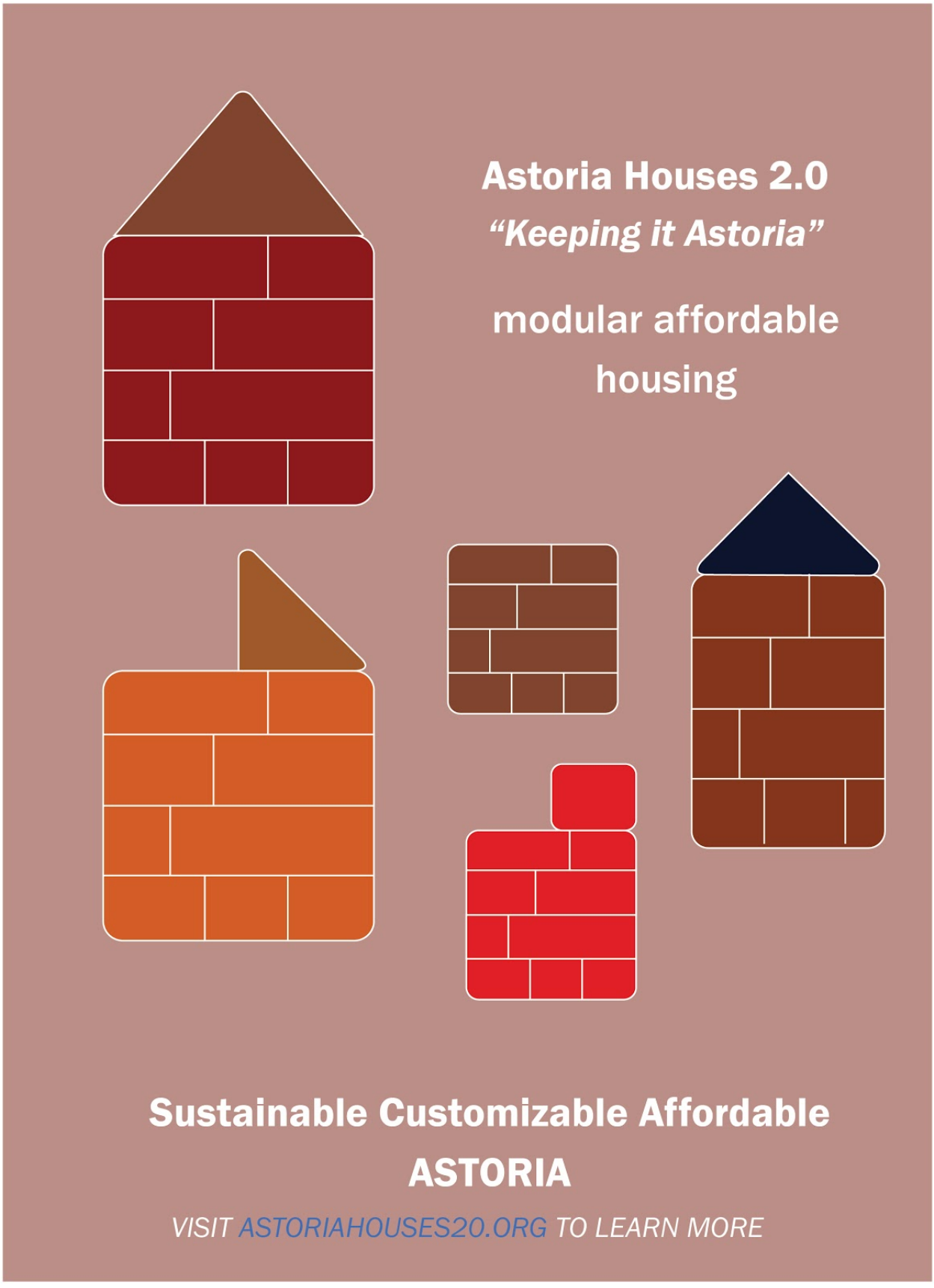
Thus, my design solution attempts to respond to affordable housing needs in Astoria, while offering a new paradigm for modern city housing development. *Astoria Houses 2.0*, as it would be called, is a sustainable and affordable housing project adapted to its location. The design employs the traditional gabled roof structure - arguably the most recognizable form for a house - and decomposes it into cubes, tetrahedrons, and rectangular prisms. These modules are then arranged in various configurations to create unique and site-specific structures. Relying on prefabricated geometric shapes allows for a more streamlined construction process, hence reducing costs. The simplicity and modularity of the houses also creates opportunities for customization, which is essential in a place that is known for its diverse architecture and the unique variations each type of infrastructure presents. My design indeed counters the stark straight edged facades we have been used to seeing, and which have given gentrification its bad reputation.

Accordingly, *Astoria Houses 2.0* challenges the notion that gentrification is inherently damaging. Can we respond to current issues of urbanity by modernizing our building processes? Can new developments preserve and even create a sense of authenticity? This project aims to do exactly this. The development is respectful of Astoria’s history, but harnesses contemporary

design aesthetics. The use of sustainable materials makes it durable, designed to last through multiple generations, able to accommodate future needs, while also enriching Astoria's topography. By offering an alternative to the luxury apartment rentals which have been - and continue to be - built, it shows that housing development can and should be accessible, inclusive, and sensitive to neighborhoods. Through disassembly and reassembly, modern residential construction is materially and metaphorically rehabilitated. It becomes a model for a new way to build that can be applied to other gentrifying neighborhoods.

In sum, *Astoria Houses 2.0* seeks to continue Astoria's legacy as a quaint residential enclave away from Manhattan while acknowledging and responding to the reality of the housing crisis in a way that enables dialogue between built environments. I attempt to show that authenticity and modernity are not mutually exclusive.

Below is a flyer presenting my development concept, as well as an example of how it would be materialized in the real world.


Astoria Houses 2.0
"Keeping it Astoria"
modular affordable housing
Sustainable Customizable Affordable
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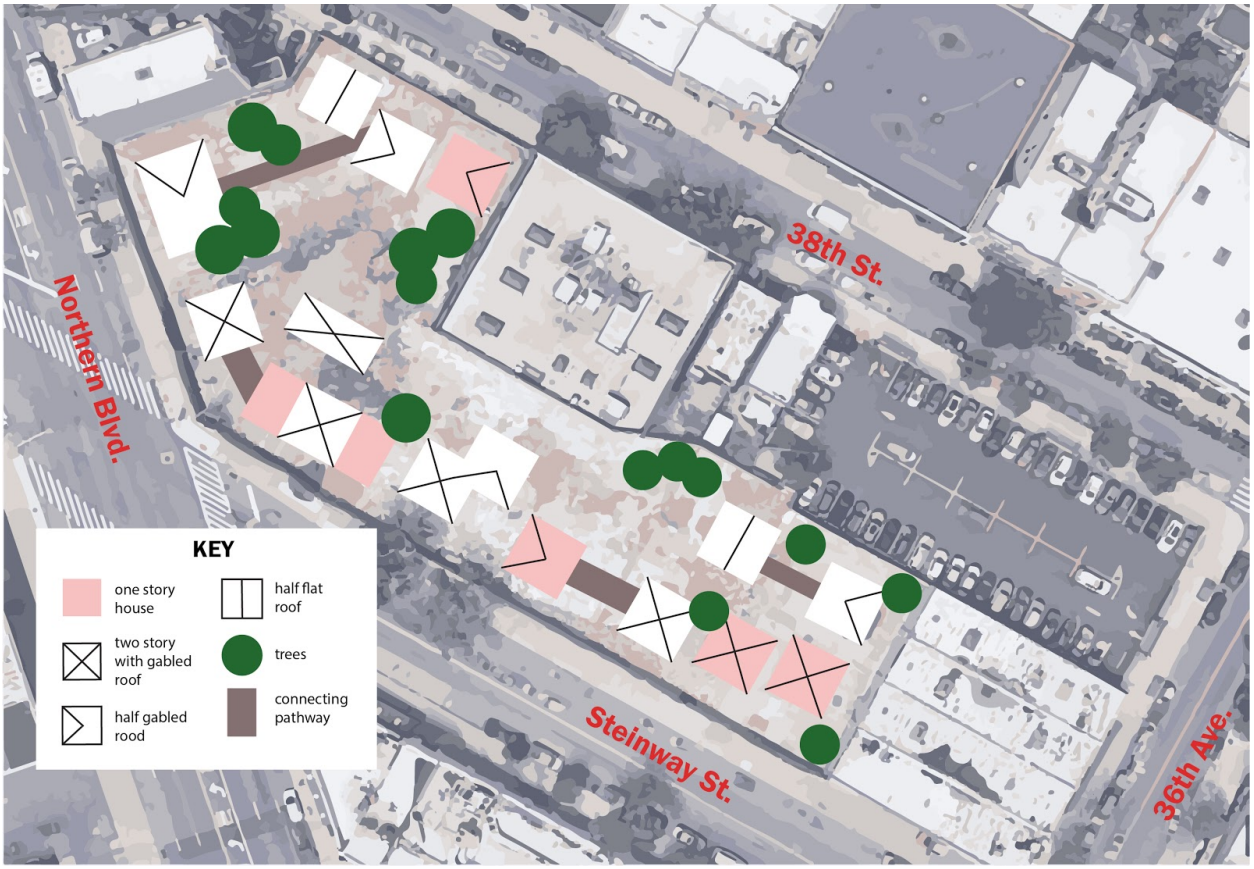
Northern Blvd.
38th St.
Steinway St.
36th Ave.
KEY
one story house
half flat roof
two story with gabled roof
trees
half gabled rood
connecting pathway