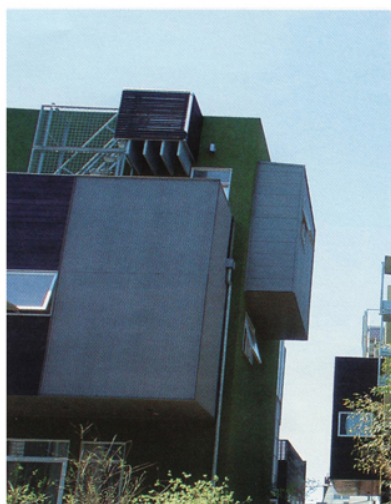


METROPOLIS

The Metropolis Observed



Each of Rag Flat's five freestanding trinity town houses is slightly different. They're separated by narrow spaces that allow for light-grabbing bays (left) and small private gardens (top).

community," the architect says, explaining why they chose the form. Sustainability is also important. While urban living is by definition eco-friendly—packing people in the city preserves undeveloped peripheral land—Rag Flats also relies on a number of distinctly modern green features, including rainwater collection for landscaping and gardens, super-efficient radiant heat, shared rooftop solar panels, and ample windows to reduce the need for artificial lighting.

The Rag Flats site is unique in that it allowed the architects to preserve the streetscape and create a disaggregated village. Most vacant lots force architects to make a choice. The light-flooded trinities work because they deviate from the street grid. But the two reconfigured row homes, while less architecturally ambitious, are probably more widely applicable to urban America—and a particularly valuable example in Philadelphia, where Mayor John F. Street is notorious for favoring demolition over renovation in decaying neighborhoods.

"One of the reasons Rag Flats is exciting is that it's such a creative approach to market-rate infill housing," says John Kromer, who formerly headed the city Office of Housing and Community Development, and now consults at the University of Pennsylvania's Fels Institute of Government. But he notes, "The potential drawback [is that] the best outdoor spaces are on the rooftop and in the courtyard, not on the street."

As the architects at Onion Flats are the first to admit, their project is an exploration, not the last word. For McDonald, too much contemporary urban design either mimics the nineteenth-century red-brick vernacular or imports the suburbs. "A lot of New Urbanism is suburbanism," he says with disdain. Rag Flats aims to forge a middle way—preserving traditional urban forms in contemporary language. It's certainly a conversation starter. —Daniel Brook

architecture

Row After Row

A hands-on group of Philadelphia architects update a traditional type of urban housing.

Fishtown, a working-class neighborhood of row houses north of Philadelphia's city center, may seem an unlikely spot for avant-garde architecture. But an ambitious reinvestigation of the urban single-family home is taking place there. While the city's gracious Gilded Age town houses remain in demand, the smaller homes built for factory workers at the turn of the twentieth century often don't appeal to today's home buyers. Architect Tim McDonald of Philadelphia-based Onion Flats, a development-design-build collaborative founded in 1997, hopes that Rag Flats—an 11-unit complex completed this summer—will help change that.

Onion Flats converted an abandoned factory into loft apartments, reconfigured two adjoining row houses, and created an intimate village of free-standing three-story homes in the rear courtyard. "Factory buildings," he admits, "tell you what to do. You just read the building." The project really shines in the single-family units, where the goal was to achieve "a balance of density and open space, of privacy and community."

In the larger of the two attached houses, Onion Flats created an airy interior using an atrium with

a rooftop skylight that illuminates the entire three-story structure. In the other extant row home, the architect used internal windows between rooms to achieve a similar though less dramatic effect. "Why should you go into a room in the middle of the day and switch on a light?" McDonald asks.

Onion Flats riffed on a traditional form in the courtyard, popping houses known as "trinities"—modest square colonial-era row homes that have one room on each of three floors—out of the street grid and organizing them as a freestanding cluster rather than a line of attached housing. While their interiors were conventionally dominated by a staircase—often a narrow spiral one to preserve precious open space—in Rag Flats the minimalist metal staircase is pushed into a windowed bay, which also serves to let in plenty of light. Additionally the porches and roof terraces of each trinity are oriented in different directions, allowing a suburban dose of privacy within the dense urban context. "Roofs are urban rooms," McDonald says.

"[The trinity is] a fundamental urban typology that makes sense for a lot of reasons—density, com-