Urban Homesteading
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jun 9, 1975; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
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After a brisk but limited beginning, the urban homesteading program is falling victim to the common American attitude of excessive expectations and instant cynicism. Actually less a program than an *ad hoc* effort to rehabilitate abandoned housing stock by selling buildings for token sums to those who will restore and live in them, this pioneering experiment is now undergoing all the pains common to bootstrap renewal.

The fact is that urban homesteading, a concept of good sense and humanity, still provides no free lunch. After that initial "dollar" purchase price, the work to be done is neither easy nor cheap. "Sweat equity" has to be matched by funds that are too frequently underestimated. The poor and the underprivileged need special help and guidance to do what the middle class has the training and resources to carry out. And a few restored houses do not turn a neighborhood, or a city, around.

But learning these obvious lessons is no license for declaring a good idea dead or inoperative, as the pessimists are now doing. It is just as obvious that many miles of downtown Brooklyn and extensive sections of the city of New Orleans, for example, have had a residential rebirth by an almost identical process, with the same pains and problems. The point is to make the process work for a broader social and economic range.

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This makes particularly welcome the announcement by the Department of Housing and Urban Development that it is about to back urban homesteading in a $5-million program in ten communities. No one pretends that the present scope of the operation will make more than a dent on the disaster areas of older cities. But existing Federal policies have done much to encourage blight and disinvestment in these neighborhoods by subsidizing suburban sprawl and ghettoizing public housing. A change in those policies is essential if the vicious cycle of deterioration is to be reversed.

What HUD can do now is to provide the coordination and incentive for the necessary public commitment of services and assistance at the city level with private commitment from lending institutions. Success depends on long-term joint efforts. The one thing that is clear in these early stages is that the modest homesteader on his own has all the strikes against him. But well-managed group programs on a community scale, such as U-Hab by New York's Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, are working. This kind of rehabilitation is not limited to middle-class neighborhood stabilization; it is a way for the less privileged to find homes in strengthened communities.

Urban homesteading is a long, slow, hard route to salvation, but its soundness is indisputable in terms of appalling abandonment figures and deteriorating urban environment. The preservation of existing houses and neighborhoods is the first line of defense in the cities' battles to survive.

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