SCENARIO

Home is both a physical and a spiritual need. As users of our houses we might take for granted the value of having a place we can call “home”. But the fact is that as the demand of housing rises, and consequently the price of housing rises, the capacity of people to afford a place to live is dramatically decreasing in many cities across the US. Within the past century, different strategies have been devised and tested aiming to facilitate access to houses: from stigmatized public housing developments, to rent control, mixed-income buildings or housing vouchers; where affordability implies high subsidies that for the most part go into paying excessive construction costs to build low quality, spatially insufficient or inefficient, segregated and aesthetically poor houses. As more people seek accommodation in cities, market forces press against, making urban residents spend a disproportionate part of their income in securing a roof, if they can find one. Hence housing takes competing meanings: home for some, investment or commodity for others.

In such scenario, much attention is placed on figuring out the financing and little on simultaneously updating housing typologies, construction techniques, zoning regulations and social ecosystems. So, while urban dwellers today hardly fit traditional family categories, housing developments are strictly based on standardized units and layouts from the past. While off-site fabrication methodologies could help improve construction time, quality, cost and safety, most housing projects resist innovation. And while sharing economies are enabling people to own less and share more, and to find new productive uses to the spaces they inhabit, planning instruments, construction industry and real estate market fail to adapt to social and cultural shifts that speak about the needs and aspirations of very diverse people.

CHALLENGE

This studio is a space of questioning and experimentation, to reframe our ideas about housing and its urban role and to refresh obsolete paradigms. Here and through the agency of architecture, students will design dense mix-use prototypes that creatively speculate with contemporary forms of domesticity and urbanity able to reinstate lost urban values. Research will be carried to learn about the status quo, ground discussions and dissect relevant precedents. Projects will experiment with the definition of home and city, unit and system; with public-private adjacencies; with modularity and aggregation strategies; with new materialities and construction logics; with use and propriety models and domestic economies; to support their explorations on how to design, build and live more affordably. The goal is to do much more with much less, achieving high quality architectures able to pursue poetic concepts and use resources thoughtfully. Designs -understood as systems with scalability potential and flexibility to adjust their parameters to varying conditions of site, density and program- will develop a series of case studies for Boston, MA, responding to the city’s Request for Information on how to combine new housing developments with existing public assets in order to activate residual sites and build more livable, diverse and inclusive neighborhoods. Each proposal will be its own independent exploration at the same time it is part of a collective debate; and all proposals together will then assemble into a cohesive set of design guidelines that expand our imagination on the studio topic.

Through an active multimedia lens that involves intensive model making, drawings, photography, catalogs, movies and more, a diverse collection of materials will support a process of radical thinking.