

Can Cape Cod Sharks save the Missing Middle?

The aftermath of the fighting in World War II left Europe devastated. To address this devastation, the United States devised the Marshall Plan. An enormous amount of aid poured into Europe in the years following the war. The U.S. did not ask to be repaid. Was the stabilization and preservation of Europe payment enough?

These days, loans are delved out in real time on our televisions. The television show, Shark Tank, pairs up real life business executives (sharks) with entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs enter the Shark Tank to pitch their ideas to the sharks. If the ideas make financial sense, one or more sharks offer to help the entrepreneur with a combination of business acumen and financing. Sharks fully expect a return on their investment as it is their expertise and assets that bring success to the entrepreneurs' business ventures.

Enter Cape Cod and the Missing Middle. "The Missing Middle," cover story ran in the Cape Cod Times (CCT) on November 8th. The CCT used the term, "Missing Middle" to refer to a group of people priced out of the housing market; people with too much income to qualify for 'Affordable (subsidized) housing, but too little to afford "Market Rate" housing. In the article, Jay Coburn, executive director of the Community Development Partnership in Eastham said, "the only way to get out of this problem is to build our way out." But how do we build specifically for the missing middle?

As with many phrases, the meaning of "Missing Middle" has morphed over the years. Architect Dan Parolek of Opticos Design, coined the term in 2010. The original meaning was "a range of multi-unit or clustered housing types compatible in scale with single-family homes that help meet the growing demand for walkable urban living." It is "missing" because it simply hasn't been built for a very long time; in large part intentionally zoned out of existence. The fact that it is now missing, is an unintended consequence of what was thought for decades to be the best way to house people, in single family homes on large grassy lots.

The Cape Cod Commission worked with Union Studio to produce a comprehensive Missing Middle housing study in 2020 that laid out

recommendations for meeting the demand for missing middle housing. It is aptly titled, "Case Study: Housing on Cape Cod. Missing Middle." The study states that, "Financing to this day has been based around these polar-opposite zoning types (the single family home and the multi-family apartment complex), making it hard to finance a small-scale multi-family home as it is still seen as undesirable within a residential context."

Missing Middle housing is by design, intended to be 'affordable, which generally means housing that does not exceed over 30% of the renter's income. What if Cape Cod had a special missing middle financing program that encouraged local builders to construct missing middle housing? There is money to be made in 'affordable housing which is why developers have built and are proposing to build large scale market rate communities on Cape Cod.

It seems, when it comes to housing, Cape Codders work against instead of with each other. Instead of blaming wealthy families who call Cape Cod their summer home for all the housing woes, how about instead, we seek their help. They love this precious place too and have a vested interest in seeing Cape Cod succeed in every way. Couldn't a handful of them step forward to act as the sharks of the Cape Cod Shark Bank? A bank of sharks with the business sense of Shark Tank and the human sensibility of the Marshall Plan.

Couldn't the sharks of the Cape Cod Shark Bank help build missing middle housing on sites that require more capitol to develop? Sites that aren't desirable to the big guys. Sites that require true nuanced redevelopment. Sites that, once redeveloped, would blend with and complement existing neighborhoods. I think each one of us could think of a site near us today and ask, "Why isn't somebody redeveloping that parking lot, empty lot or vacant building as housing?"

Couldn't we at least try? Couldn't local financial institutions or existing housing programs administratively host and support the Cape Cod Shark Bank? If return on investment is not enough of an enticement for prospective sharks, would the stabilization and preservation of Cape Cod be payment enough?