

Essential Dwelling:

Learning from Paul Revere Williams

Project: ADUs and Rowhousing in Chicago

STUDIO TOPIC

The School of Architecture periodically offers graduate studios focusing on the question of the “essential dwelling.” These studios challenge students to rethink housing, to design dwellings that are small in scale but expansive in concept. Limited to 1,000 ft² (93 m²), the essential dwelling aims to be efficient, functional, and inspirational for its users.

This version of the Essential Dwelling studio will be directed toward the urban context and will take its inspiration from an important though often overlooked American architect, Paul Revere Williams. Williams was a groundbreaking and prolific architect. During his 50-year career, he designed more than 3,000 buildings, ranging from small single-family houses to large institutional and public buildings.

Especially relevant to the Essential Dwelling studio are two books of small-house designs he published in the 1940s: *New Homes for Today* and *The Small Home of Tomorrow*. Williams is also historically important as a pioneer in the architectural profession: he became the first Black member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in 1923 and was the first Black architect to be named a Fellow of the AIA in 1957.

Williams believed the design of small, affordable housing was an important challenge for architects. Looking back on his long career, Williams wrote in *Ebony* magazine in 1963:

"If I were young today, I would start with the need for the development of the small home with the thought that a charming inexpensive home could be produced for the masses by forgetting the formula of houses today and mixing imagination with my thinking. What the world needs today is a new concept for a substantial, economical house."

We will follow Williams' recommendation to forego the formulaic approach to housing and to instead employ imagination in rethinking the essential dwelling for today's urban context.

What constitutes an “essential dwelling” in 2025 and beyond? How can well-designed, compact housing units contribute to improved density and economic opportunity? And how can this be done in ways that limit energy consumption and carbon footprint?

PROCESS & PROJECTS

The studio will begin by studying the work and career of Paul Revere Williams, including close reading and analysis of his two books of small house designs. We will then apply this knowledge toward the design of essential dwellings of two types, both sited within the urban setting of Chicago's south side:

- **PROJECT 1**

- **Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs).**

- Each student will individually design a series of ADUs for a site in Chicago, based on the 2020 ADU Zoning Ordinance, which aims to expand housing access across the city. It encourages affordable housing options by allowing the creation of new residential units in the rear yard of existing houses for homeowners needing extra income, or those who wish to create separate spaces for multi-generational families. ADUs must contain less than 700 square feet.

- <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/additional-dwelling-units-ordinance/home.html>

- **PROJECT 2**

- **Multi-unit Rowhouses.**

- Each student will also work in a team with another student to design larger aggregations of dwellings in the form of multi-story, attached rowhouses on a different site in Chicago. Projects will comprise 5,000 to 10,00 square feet of interior space, and students will have an opportunity to develop the specific program for their housing proposals.

With equal emphasis on design excellence and the technical components of integrative design, our ultimate goal is to develop design proposals that are both conceptually and technologically rigorous.

The studio process will be based on experimentation with form, program, structure, and enclosure, developed through iterative design studies seeking to integrate programmatic elements with the local climate. Students will be introduced to energy and daylighting analysis as an integral part of a climate-responsive design process, including net-zero energy strategies.

Projects will be developed and presented in multiple media: large-scale sections and detailed plans, digital and physical modeling at a range of scales, and diagrams and details of structure, envelope, and environmental systems.