Even the crankiest critic of the housing program would be impressed by Pleasant View Gardens’ attractive architecture and streetscapes. The new neighborhood boasts a park and detail straight from the Congress for the New Urbanism’s central park, tree-lined streets, wall alleys and design details that reference historical row-house architecture. (No front porches, though, and no corner stores.) The success of this attention to form will largely depend on the caring it calls forth from its residents. Will this new community develop and maintain a civic infrastructure to complement its physical organization?

This project also combines many intriguing elements that point to a more comprehensive view than the public housing partners have typically demonstrated in the past. It has been conceived with attention to employment opportunities and incorporates a job-training center, health care, elderly housing and recreation. It is situated next to schools and Baltimore’s central post office, which, one hopes, would provide some residents opportunities to walk to work. Planners have long hoped to see economic development officials talking to housing authorities, though most of the promise is yet to be realized.

On the surface, we learn from Pleasant View Gardens that given enough money, about $105 million, you can replace ugly, dysfunctional, public housing with 338 units of attractively designed public housing and related facilities. Beneath the surface, though, this project provokes two basic questions: are we being truly comprehensive in our planning, and are we ensuring that implementation of these objectives is sustainable, both financially and physically? The specifics apply to Baltimore but the issues speak to other projects elsewhere.

The quality of Pleasant View is a jarring contrast to the very harsh surroundings. The perimeter of the project is fenced attractively, and the sad brick-and-asphalt housing, vacant lots and abandoned commercial buildings on nearby blocks call for acknowledgment of their plight. Perhaps it is possible to walk to adjacent facilities, the surrounding environment is not inviting enough to tempt one to do so.
A great opportunity for reaching out to the surrounding area would be to redesign the Old Town Mall, a once-attractive commercial street that was closed to cars and has become a drab, depressing and largely unvisited pedestrian mall. Some work is under way, including the recruitment of a supermarket, but to date there are no plans to reopen the street to cars. One of Baltimore's seven original public food markets is also located here. Recently reduced in size, Belair Market still needs to serve the residents of Pleasant View Gardens and others in the immediate area.

So, is there a bigger view of the city operating here? What are the plans for the public markets, critical elements of the city's identity and civic infrastructure? Will the Baltimore Development Corporation work with the housing authority to attract employment opportunities to the general area—and put hope behind the training?

Pleasant View Gardens, for all its positive aspects, cannot be replicated because it is simply too expensive. With public dollars dwindling, we must be more strategic in our approach to reinventing in cities. How it can be credited with demonstrating concepts of community and pedestrian scale that urban designers have long advocated, but its impact on housing policy will be slight without comprehensive changes in federal investment policies and in local economic development and education policies.

One issue relates to the long-range plan for each city. Once the decision is made to remove inferior public housing, shouldn't we look comprehensively at the future land use rather than assume we must replace housing with housing on the same site? Shouldn't we consider balancing new construction with renovation?

Baltimore, with at least 20,000 vacant houses, needs to put some of those units back in use as a complement to new construction. The Historic East Baltimore Corporation has balanced historic preservation and renovation with strategic demolition and new construction; a similar approach could help stabilize declining neighborhoods throughout the city. Healthy, attractive neighborhoods should get attention before they fall into trouble. Public dollars should be spent strategically to create mixed-income, mixed-use neighborhoods, rather than attractive but unsustainable enclaves.

What will Pleasant View Gardens look like in five years? In ten years? Unless the underlying issues of segregating uses and incomes, civic responsibility, education, economic opportunity and comprehensive planning are addressed along with site design, history may repeat itself at Pleasant View Gardens. Even worse, the rest of the city may continue on the long, painful course of managed decline.