

Semi-Urban Suburbia: An Overlooked Multifamily Housing Type and Its Effects on a Shifting Suburbia

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We must recast the way we conceptualize suburbia. The dominant view of the single family home and the nuclear family as the sole protagonists of suburbia is outdated and limits the potential future of suburbia. Suburbia has shifted dramatically since the massed produced prototypes of the 1950's and, in this shifting, holds the potential for more diverse, active, and sustainable models of development. A population exists in suburbia that prioritizes interaction, is not exclusively family centered, and in a word is more urban.

This population, along with existing models of suburban apartment typologies, provides impetus for creating semi-urban nodes in suburbia. These are nodes that are dense, promote interaction, and invite a diverse range of individuals. The roots for densification that architects and planners have tried to apply to suburbia lie latent and unnoticed in much of the existing suburban development and population. Unlike many current models of suburban development, however, the proposed densification is not focused on the nuclear family, the single family home, or the bucolic environments that have been promoted to date.

Suburbia Shifted

When William Levitt first broke ground on Long Island over 50 years ago, the composition of this nation was much different than it is today. Levitt targeted young families for the detached single family homes he bundled with family centered amenities.

Levittown would come to hold legions of early suburban residents, overwhelmingly white, who commuted to the city for work while raising their families and pursuing the homogenous 'American Dream.' What was then an innovation has today become the established image of the suburbs.

The truth, however, is that this entrenched image has little to do with the current reality of suburbia. Demographics and lifestyles in suburbia have expanded far beyond the nuclear family and its firmly stereotyped way of life. Today, less than ¼ of the households in this country are 'Married with Children' compared to almost half of the households in Levitt's time.¹ Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians are now one of every four suburban residents. This ratio is even higher in ethnically diverse 'melting pot suburbs' around cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington D.C., further broadening the diversity of suburbia.² In addition, across the country individuals are waiting longer to marry and longer to have children, introducing a mix of young singles and couples into suburbia whose lifestyles are not centered on the family.³ With almost 80% of jobs in metropolitan areas located in the suburbs,⁴ many of the individuals living in suburban apartments move there to minimize commutes to suburban employers⁵ and not necessarily for the stereotyped suburban lifestyle.

An article in the New York Times earlier last year described this wave of singles moving into suburbs as wanting proximity to their

employment but also urban amenities such as 'opportunities for recreation, and bars, restaurants and bookstores where other singles congregate.'⁶ The change in the demographics of suburbia has changed the sociology of suburbia.

This shift in suburban population holds the potential for a different type of suburban reality. The suburbs have historically focused around idyllic pastoral images that were centered on family life and the creation of village-like communities. The Garden City movement and romantic countrified traditions have historically been, and continue to be, the primary models for suburban development. The latest incarnation of this model has been the New Urbanist developments which continue to hold up small European hamlets and areas such as Letchworth, England as models for development. With the diversifying of the suburban dweller and the suburban lifestyle, this pastoral ideal becomes only one of many possible models for suburbia.



Fig. 1. Archstone has developed typical suburban apartments such as these in nearly every state in the country.

The physical composition of suburbia has also shifted. As was documented by Joel Garreau, suburbia is no longer an endless expanse of bedroom communities but instead is now becoming an 'edge city' with a wide mix of uses.⁷ This has dramatically reduced the daily reliance on the central city and a majority of commutes are inter-suburb and not suburb to city center. Suburban residents often live, work, shop, and find entertainment in the suburbs themselves, shifting the suburbs beyond a vision of undifferentiated bedroom communities and instead incorporating a wide range of activities and lifestyles.

According to the US Census and the National Housing Survey, the largest growing housing type in suburbia is no longer the detached single family home, but the multifamily home. This trend has been consistent since 1970 and has only accelerated in recent years.⁸ Today, one in five housing units in suburbia is multifamily. While the overwhelming majority of thought about suburbia continues to center around the single family home and densities of 4 to 8 units per acre, there are numerous overlooked pockets of development that far surpass this density.

The most common form of multifamily housing in suburbia is the suburban apartment building. Also known as 'Garden Apartments,' these ubiquitous buildings of 30 to 40 units per acre (similar to the average density of San Francisco) exist throughout the country.⁹ These apartments are typically three to four stories, largely rental properties, and are often located as buffers between single family homes and commercial areas (see fig. 1 and 2). Architects, planners, and developers have rarely capitalized on the latent synergy between the high density suburban apartment housing and adjacent commercial areas.

These areas are typically developed in the characteristic detached suburban manner where each use is segregated and only connected by anonymous auto-oriented streets. There is no appreciable public space, buildings are far from the street, and block sizes are large, minimizing variation, potential activity, and the area's attractiveness to pedestrians (see fig. 3).

The suburban apartment building accommodates a population who cannot or does not want to partake in the single-family home 'American dream' but still, by desire or necessity, lives in the suburbs. Many of the individuals living in suburban apartments move to the suburbs to minimize commutes to suburban employers or to find a more affordable cost of living. These apartments accommodate many of the lifestyles and moments in the lifecycle which do not coincide with Levitt's patent suburban dream.¹⁰

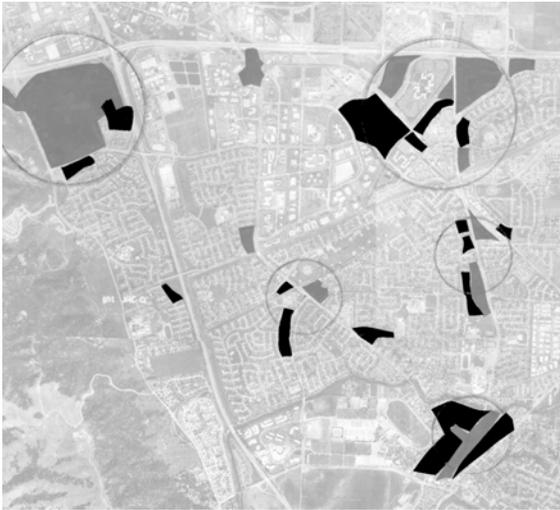


Fig. 2. Multifamily housing (dark grey) consistently located around commercial retail areas (light grey). Pleasanton, California.

It provides an alternative for those who are still single, for those who cannot or wish not to buy a home, for those without children, recently divorced, or recently left with an empty nest. These are individuals who often prefer to rent rather than own, are more transient, and are often uninterested in the quality of local schools or the rate of local property taxes. This population is fundamentally different, in a sociological sense, from the suburban nuclear family. They often do not have an internal family structure and therefore a large amount of interaction and socializing occurs outside the home. These populations invite dense interaction and would thrive in a more urban environment.



Fig. 3. Seven lane road separating two suburban apartment developments, each with densities over 30 units/acre and located less than a quarter mile from retail area. (Pleasanton, California)

In all, the composition of suburbia, in regards to the demographics of its inhabitants to its physical structure has completely transformed. The result of all of these shifts is a fundamental shift in the suburban dweller and potential suburban lifestyles. The conception of suburbia by architects, urban designers, and planners must expand to incorporate this broader reality.

The Semi-Urban

Based on this new range of suburban dwellers, there is the potential to create a version of urbanity in suburbia that promotes and prioritizes interaction while not rising to the frenetic pace of the central city. Semi-urban nodes within suburbia would take advantage of the mix of uses and lifestyles that are emerging in the periphery of our cities, providing opportunities for dense interaction.

The new population of suburbia is not the inwardly focused nuclear family or even the community centered individual. This is a more urban population in a sociological sense. The interest is not in community life, but on public life. As defined by Michael Brill, 'Public life is sociability with a diversity of strangers; Community life is sociability with people you know somewhat.'¹¹ While most recently proposed models of suburban development focus around ideas of shared values, known neighbors, and familiar shopkeepers, the semi-urban node is focused on the synergy of individuals with diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and routines coming together. As Louis Wirth states in his essay 'Urbanism as a Way of Life,' the urban condition '...has not only tolerated but rewarded individual differences. It has brought together people from the ends of the earth because they are different and thus useful to one another, rather than because they are homogeneous and like-minded.'¹²

The notion of semi-urbanity is a significant break from the village ideal that has dominated suburban development for most of the last century. Georg Simmel in his essay 'Metropolis and Mental Life' highlights the nature of urbanity and the difference between an urban and village society. Close social bonds of kinship and community define the village or rural society. In these societies an individual may have a large number of close

primary relationships, but the binds of society limit his expression and development.

In contrast, the urban condition 'grants to the individual a kind and amount of personal freedom which has no analogy whatsoever under other conditions.'¹³ It is a liberating experience that welcomes a diverse range of lifestyles, prizes uniqueness, and reward its participants with synergy and vitality. Unlike the family centered suburban stereotype, a semi-urban version of suburbia is rooted in the differences of its inhabitants. It does not shun uniqueness, but seeks it.

The 'stranger' is a critical dimension of the proposed semi-urban condition. As described by Simmel, the role of the stranger represents two relationships, the stranger as something that is not known and the stranger as something that is different. The stranger as something not known is the experience of seeing or interacting with people, things, or situations which are new. The stranger as different, however, is the notion that people, things, or situations encountered may not only be unknown, but also different than yourself or the context around you. It is this dimension that adds to the excitement, surprise, and risk of potential interactions in the semi-urban condition.

Implications for Design

The design implications of this shift towards semi-urbanity in suburbia are significant. First and foremost, suburban apartment buildings should be mixed with commercial areas to create active, synergistic nodes. These nodes . These nodes should reach out to surrounding lower density development to become centers and make connections possible. There is currently an existing mix of commercial and high density residential uses lying latent in suburbia. By connecting these areas s a semi-urban environment, sexisting and sand providing viable public spaceh, semi-urban nodes can come to life where detached blankness currently exists.

In order to move past the bucolic visions of garden cities, the village green needs to give way to the dense urban street as the center point of development. Public space that encourages interaction and activity more than repose needs to be the focus. This public space can invite Simmel's vision of 'the

stranger' to linger, see, and be seen. Indeed, precedents for development need to shift from the village and small town to more urban models. The notion of a society based on family connection and more singular notions of community need to shift to incorporating conditions where difference, individualism, and a wide range of interaction are central.

As has been observed in a number of recent design alternatives for suburbia, suburban streets and open space need to be rethought. Streets and open space are the critical armature necessary for the creation of the semi-urban experience. They are the arena through which the potential and forced interactions set up by density are allowed to play themselves out. The typical large block, suburban street pattern with its minimal intersections and minimal number of connections to larger streets must be redesigned. By thinning the width of some of the existing streets and adding a number of smaller, interconnected streets, areas as a whole become more walkable. Streets are no longer primarily designed for the automobile, and pedestrians enjoy a number of different options to traverse any given area (see fig. 4). In addition, a more intricate street pattern allows and guarantees a finer grain of development with a larger number of accessible lots.



Fig. 4. Typical suburban street patterns (left) and a proposed denser and more varied street pattern for the same area (right).

Within a new street pattern, the platting of parcels needs to create a fine grain scale of development that promotes diversity in building size and type. Larger parcels which can accommodate taller buildings and larger floorplates should be located around central commercial streets. Residential parcels should be narrow to allow for a range of development options including apartments and townhouses.

Variation in the physical environment is an important trait of the semi-urban condition as it expands the range of experiences and interactions that exist in an area. A vital aspect of platting is the potential for some parcels to be merged with adjoining parcels for variation in the fabric of an area to occur. This variation not only increases the visual interest of streets, but also encourages different sizes of development and unit dimensions that can attract a range of residents. A comparison of an area with and without the allowance of parcel agglomeration shows the dramatic effect this can have on creating a varied environment. (see fig. 5)

Designs for semi-urban nodes should not simply attempt to create a new focal point for a specified area. Instead, they should build upon existing moments of activity and connect these moments to a central core. As activity and interaction are the goals, existing areas of activity should be highlighted and incorporated. Commercial strip malls can be seen as one of the few areas in suburbia where the automobile is briefly left behind and interaction occurs. This auto-dominated area will continue to exist as a large portion of the population does not and cannot live in close enough proximity to eliminate the automobile. Semi-urban designs should build upon this moment of activity and connects existing auto-oriented commercial areas to more pedestrian oriented commercial and residential areas. This will allow for the integration of new and existing commercial areas, positioning new commercial streets as extensions of the strip mall and capitalizing on existing activity.



Fig. 5. Strict platting designation (left) compared to a looser platting approach (right) that allows and invites agglomeration in order to create a varied physical environment.

Lessons might be learned from one of the emerging semi-urban nodes in suburbia, the

mall. The mall exists in suburbia as a location of density, intense interaction, and shared public space. Margaret Crawford, in her essay "The World in a Shopping Mall," describes the mall as the agora of twentieth century America.¹⁴ Malls have been able to take individuals out of their cars and into human scaled interaction for the purpose of consumption. While these areas lack a wide range of variety due to their exclusion of certain individuals and activities, they often stand as areas where contact between individuals in suburbia is possible.

Some suburban malls have highlighted a condition of semi-urbanity to draw in customers. Santana Row in a suburban area of San Jose bills itself as 'the ultimate urban experience' in 'an urban neighborhood that is buzzing with options.' It, along with models such as Phillips Place outside of Charlotte, have added suburban apartment housing to the basic mall typology to create areas that promote interaction between diverse individuals. The goal is not family centered community, but fluid communities that focus on the specific interests of the individual. These malls are not based on a 'village green' concept, but are instead more interested in creating dense urban streets.

Part of creating the semi-urban condition lies with who controls public space. Publicly held places, by definition, must welcome the whole of the population. This allows a wide range of participants in the public space, welcomes the presence of 'the stranger,' and allows the space to include activities that are broader than consumption. Public protest, celebration, and expression are all equally permitted.

This point presents a challenge in creating the semi-urban condition in suburbia both due to the scale of typical suburban developments and the level of planning expertise or participation wanted by many suburban municipalities. For publicly held space to be a center of semi-urban nodes, suburban governments and planning offices will need to increase both their sophistication and control of planning and development. They can no longer rely on developers to produce total environments. Instead, they must create frameworks within which developers work, instilling diversity, and promoting options that evolve with time to reflect changing populations.

Implications for Teaching

The shift in the way that we understand suburbia has large implications for how we teach courses on suburbia, be it in design studios or lecture courses. Foremost is the movement beyond the discussion of the single family home and the nuclear family as the sole protagonists of the suburbs. Incorporating more diverse lifestyles, the debate should broaden to include a wide range of environments for suburbia and suburban residents. This should include environments that are semi-urban and are focused on populations who prioritize interaction, thrive on diversity, and may not aspire to the single family home, the nuclear family structure, or the lifestyle this implies. The general tone of proposed suburban alternatives has to move beyond discussions of the village and 'tight knit community' and should embrace more urban prototypes.

The suburban apartment building as a type should be highlighted in studios and classroom discussions dealing with suburbia. Although it currently exists throughout the country, this type is rarely studied in academic settings. The professional architectural world is starting to acknowledge this type with the recent publication of high-profile projects in design magazines.¹⁵ New prototypes for multifamily housing in suburbia should be investigated. Looking at existing examples and understanding the populations that inhabit them can serve as a stepping stone for some of the denser, more urban, and more environmentally sensitive developments that are commonly subjects of academic projects.

A study of the characteristics that create urban environments should be investigated and included in discussions about the suburbs. How much of urbanity is based on physical design, on questions of control, or on the population that resides there? These questions should be flushed out and design proposals should be evaluated with criteria of semi-urbanity in mind.

Finally, all of these new directions should be studied in light of integration into the existing suburban fabric. How can semi-urban nodes fit into current patterns of development? What connections can and should be made to existing residential developments and commercial areas? How can the semi-urban

node start to organize both new and existing suburban areas?

The re-alignment of our discussions and teaching on suburbia with the reality of suburban composition and lifestyles will not only better prepare students to act upon the suburban environment, but will also help shape the greater debate on suburbia in the profession.

Endnotes

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- ⁹ Richard M. Haughey, *The Case for Multifamily Housing*, Second Edition. (Washington D.C.: ULI-The Urban Land Institute, 2003) and Adrienne Schmitz, *Multifamily Housing Development Handbook*. (Washington D.C.: ULI-The Urban Land Institute, 2000).
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- ¹³ Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in Kurt H. Wolff ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1950): 416.
- ¹⁴ Margaret Crawford. "The World in a Shopping Mall." in Michael Sorkin ed. *Variations on a Theme Park*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).
- ¹⁵ See 'Multifamily Housing' in *Architectural Record*, Vol. 193: No. 7, (July 2005).