

Fringe Urbanism: Latent Potential in Suburbia

NICO LARCO
University of Oregon

INTRODUCTION

Suburbia is changing. What was originally the exclusive realm of the single family home and the nuclear family in William Levitt's bedroom suburbs has slowly become more economically, programmatically, and demographically diverse. Suburbs now host a range of uses including commercial, retail, and service industries, and are no longer dependent on central cities for their vitality.¹ Married with children describes only a quarter of suburban households² and a wide range of lifestyles have gradually been introduced into suburbia. Singles, gay couples, roommates, divorced families, single parents, empty-nesters, and retired individuals now far outnumber the traditional nuclear family in the suburbs.³ This demographic shift represents an even broader shift in lifestyles. The suburbs are no longer solely about borrowing a cup of sugar from next door while the kids play in the garden, but now also include going to the bars, meeting at the coffeehouse, visiting the gym, finding someone to share daycare, looking for something to do during retirement, and getting a job to supplement a pension. Individuals are not moving to suburbia solely for the nuclear family/single family home lifestyle, but instead because of proximity to jobs, because their friends live there, or because of affordability.⁴

This change in suburban lifestyles is a dramatic shift from social structures/relations that exist primarily internal to households (e.g. the nuclear family itself), to ones that are either equally or primarily external to households (e.g. friends, significant others, strangers, co-workers). While in the original version of suburbia, the detachment and enclave design of the home might arguably have been in tune with the social structure, today that same form creates isolation in a population that is structured around more external contacts. In

short, for a significant population of suburbia, a more urban environment is appropriate. It is critical to note, however, that this population is not distributed equally throughout suburbia and is not necessarily related to the single family home. This population is instead concentrated in suburban multifamily housing.

SUBURBAN MULTIFAMILY HOUSING

Suburban multifamily housing, also known as suburban apartments, is ubiquitous throughout the country. Currently, one in four housing units in the suburbs are an alternative to the single-family home and since 1970 suburban multifamily housing has been the largest growing housing market in the United States, far outpacing the growth of suburban single family homes. Suburban multifamily housing comprises over 9 million units of suburban housing stock, and if current trends continue, 5 million additional units will be constructed in the next 20 years.⁵

This housing type is developed at densities from 15 to 40 units/acre and typically consists of a series of two to three story multi-unit buildings surrounded by parking and separated from adjacent properties by large planted or built buffers (See Figure 1). A 'club house' in the center of these developments, often purposefully residential in character, typically contains the leasing office as well as small gym, outdoor pool, meeting rooms, and public living rooms complete with large screen television.

The residents of suburban multifamily housing represent a range of lifestyles that are quite different than the stereotypical nuclear family lifestyle. Suburban multifamily housing is primarily rental property (although condominiums have recently flourished) and currently provides a housing option

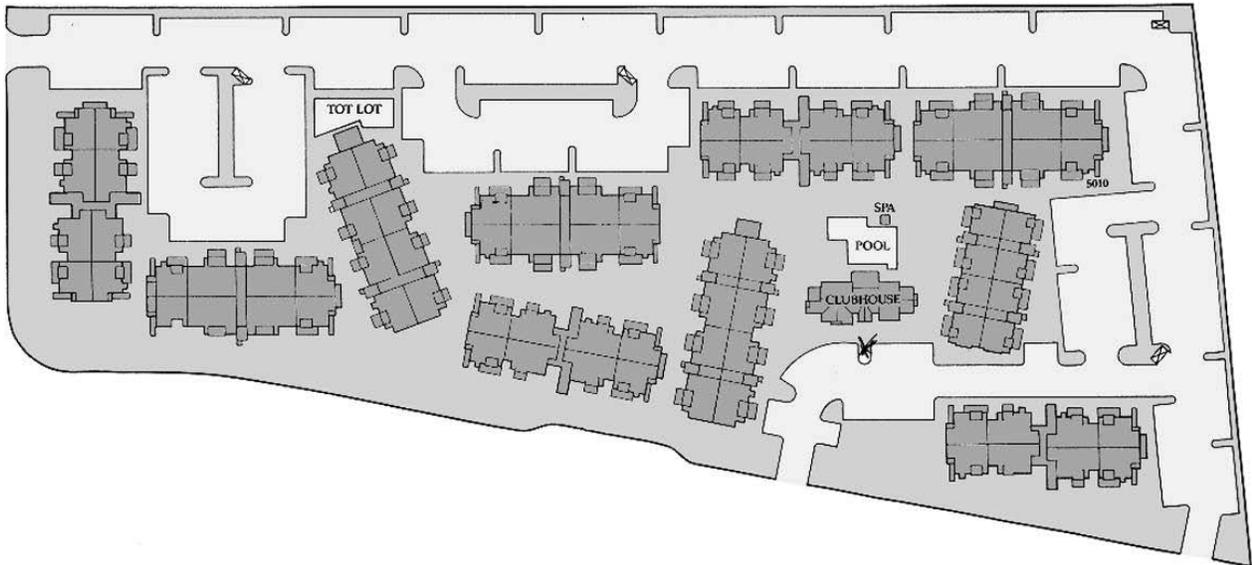


Figure 1: Typical Suburban Multifamily Housing Designs. (Clockwise from upper left: Eugene, Oregon; Phoenix, Arizona; Pleasanton, California, typical plan from Pleasanton, California, and Sun Prairie, Wisconsin)

for a large population that, for reasons of mobility, ease of maintenance, or a resistance or inability to pay a large down payment, is interested in living in the suburbs but not in owning a single family home. This includes a large proportion of singles, young professionals, single parents, and the elderly. Contrary to popular stereotypes, suburban multifamily residents are by no means solely low income residents as they represent the full range of income levels and a range of lifecycle stages. These residents are also more mobile, have less children, are more racially and ethnically diverse, and are less dependent on the automobile compared to suburban single family residents. The demographic characteristics of suburban multifamily housing residents are in many ways less like their single family home neighbors and more similar to urban residents. Suburban multifamily housing provides an alternative housing solution for this population and is an existing and widespread model for bringing density into suburbia.

While most of suburbia is spread out and single use, negating any potential for synergy and urbanism, this is not the case for suburban multifamily housing. Suburban multifamily housing has typically been located adjacent to commercial development throughout the country.⁶ Suburban zoning codes typically place mid to high density housing around commercial areas largely to use the multifamily housing as a buffer between commercial developments and surrounding single family homes. While planners have chosen this location for reasons of separation, it creates the widespread, charged, and overlooked condition of density near commercial development in suburbia. This condition contains the demographics, density, and mix of uses that are the roots of semi-urban nodes in suburbia.

Recent arguments for shifting the urban nature of suburbia have overwhelmingly focused on large scale, New Urbanist master plans. While this approach is valid and has been effective, the vast majority of suburbia is not developed as part of a mixed use master plan, but instead consists of smaller, single-use developments that are guided primarily by zoning. If there is to be a true change in the nature of suburbia, it will need to occur at this smaller scale of developments. The reliance on the master plan approach for bringing urbanism to suburbia overlooks the fact that the foundations of urbanism in the suburbs do not need to

be imported or master planned; they already exist around suburban multifamily housing and are widespread throughout the country. The main barriers to creating true semi-urban nodes in suburbia are not density, the mixing of uses, or adjacency, as is typically argued; it is instead centrally a question of design.

JUST ANOTHER ENCLAVE...

The design of suburban multifamily housing has followed typical patterns of single-family suburban development. Projects are considered, designed, and evaluated individually with little or no deference or reaction to adjacent conditions. Typical of the suburban development culture, each project looks inwardly with no connections across property lines and only minimal connections to arterial roads. Code dictated buffers or self imposed walls and gates separate each development from the one next to it. The car is still 'king' as many of these housing developments resemble a series of building islands surrounded by a dominant sea of parking.

The internal structure, at the street scale, is disjointed and consists of small scale moves (loops or pods) that do not offer any internal physical or organizational connection between areas. This suburban inspired street pattern limits interaction and minimizes walkability. Pedestrian environments are often limited to small paths that connect the parking lots to building entrances, leaving little reason to linger or interact in the public realm. The street is not designed as a place that houses multiple uses and promotes interaction, but instead is designed as a place dominated by the automobile, a mobile private space.

In terms of creating urbanism, the most limiting aspect of this design trend is that at all scales, privacy and detachment are consistently given precedence over public-ness and connection. In urban environments, the private realm is arguably minimized and even where it exists, it is interlaced with public areas in order to allow interaction. If urbanism can be described as a concentration of potential and forced interactions and that to be in the urban condition is to partake in, and surrender to, interaction,⁷ then the current design of suburban multifamily housing negates all of its dense, mixed use urban potential and propagates the decidedly un-urban condition of traditional suburbia.

LATENT URBAN POTENTIAL

There are a number of design related opportunities that can capture the potential of suburban multifamily housing and create semi-urban nodes in suburbia. The 'Fringe Urbanism' Studio held in the Department of Architecture at the University of Oregon in the Fall of 2007 asked students to specifically confront this issue, to define urbanism in relation to design, to identify areas of design intervention, to posit potential solutions, and to test these solutions against real-world constraints. In an example of how the studio environment can act as a laboratory for actual projects, the studio visited a number suburban multifamily projects, met with architects, planners, and developers working on these projects, and coordinated with Todd & Associates Architecture in Phoenix, Arizona to create design proposals for an actual property they were designing/developing with multifamily housing. The project was located in eastern Phoenix and was adjacent to commercially zoned land that was proposed to hold a strip mall with a grocery store and a floating pad restaurant, the typical suburban multifamily development condition of density adjacent to commercial property.

As the studio was intended to work within real-world constraints, students started the investigation by analyzing zoning regulations in relation to multifamily housing. Consistent with jurisdictions around the country, the Phoenix zoning code has little to say about multifamily development. Most multifamily codes evolved as a slight variation on single family codes and dictate such things as height, density, and property line setbacks. While these regulations are fairly useful in regulating single family homes (where each property houses a single building), they have little effect on suburban multifamily housing where multiple buildings are on a larger single property and where all the vehicular and pedestrian infrastructure is typically internal to that property. A few aspects of the code that do directly affect multifamily design include designated parking ratios, limits to the visibility of parking from the street, and mandated height 'step downs' near single family homes. Typical of the 'buffering use' of multifamily housing, these regulations overwhelmingly address how a development will be viewed from adjacent properties but not at all how it will be internally organized or how it might potentially connect to these adjacent properties.

Also similar to other zoning codes around the country, Phoenix mandates a constructed or green buffer between dissimilar uses. A primary premise that we were interested in testing through the studio was what would happen if this mandate no longer existed and instead access could be shared between properties. What potential would this create and what conflicting conditions would need to be mitigated. While the culture of mandated buffers heavily deters conditions of urbanism, it has historically proven useful in containing nuisances derived from adjacent dissimilar uses. By changing this one aspect of the code, students were forced to deal with both the positive and potentially negative aspects of the connection and interaction that defines urbanism.

With the conditions existing at the site, connection to the adjacent strip mall was a central focus. The strip mall itself is a well developed typology with requirements that are seemingly incompatible with housing. It demands large swaths of parking, has historically been anathema to pedestrians, and has a strong frontal presence along with an inhospitable back. While these challenges exist, the strip mall typology also holds great potential for urbanism in suburbia in that it is a large magnet for people, often contains a mix of uses that are specifically grouped to create synergy, and has the power to draw people out of their automobiles and onto a concentrated pedestrian strip in front of stores. The task for students was to appropriate and contribute to the potentially positive aspects of the strip mall while mitigating the negatives. Removing the barriers between the housing and the strip should not relegate the housing to the position of yet another strip mall storefront.

At the same time, the studio wanted to be true to the fact that the strip mall could not be magically transformed into a 'corner store'. The scale of the strip and its parking (in respect to its size, its economic needs, and its customer catchment area) do not allow for this type of transformation. The intention in the studio was not to banish the automobile or its culture, but instead to plug into parts of this reality and to highlight and expand the aspects of the strip that did not directly include the automobile.

Building on the theme that promoting or allowing the urban condition requires minimizing the enclaved

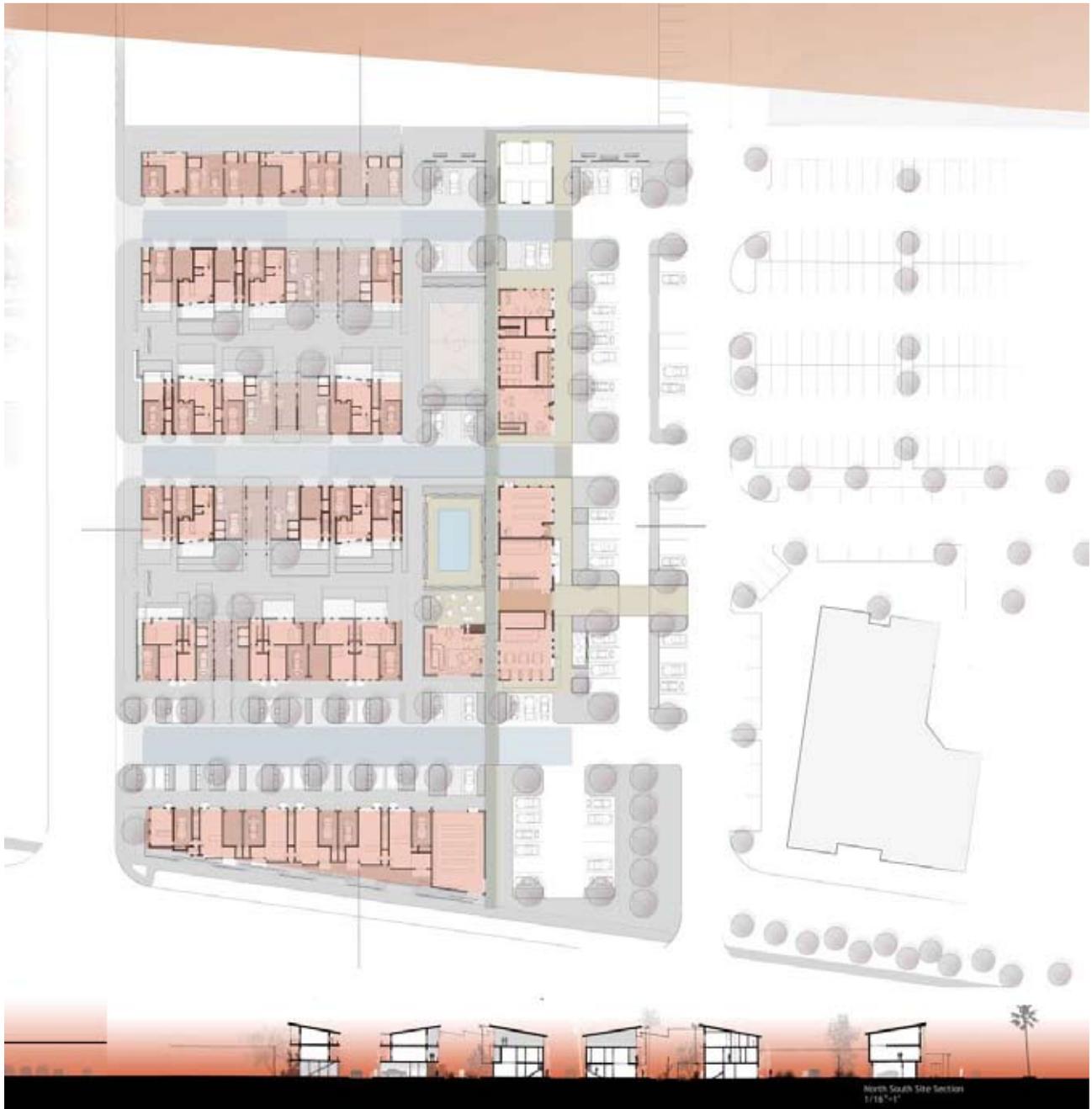


Figure 2: 'Imminent Urbanism' by Megan Griswold, Tracey Bascue, and Marc Griffin. The 'Shared Commercial' vertical bar in the middle mediates between housing to the west (left) and existing commercial strip to the east (right). Residential bars running east/west have units framing local minor streets and back onto shared semi-public open space.

and private nature of suburban multifamily housing developments, students addressed not only the larger scale, urban design aspects of this development type, but also looked at smaller scale issues of building design, its integration with the site, and its graduated mediation of public and private space.

DESIGNING FOR URBANISM

Students employed a range of strategies to challenge current design trends in suburban multifamily housing and to capitalize on the latent urbanity of this housing type. At their core, all strategies

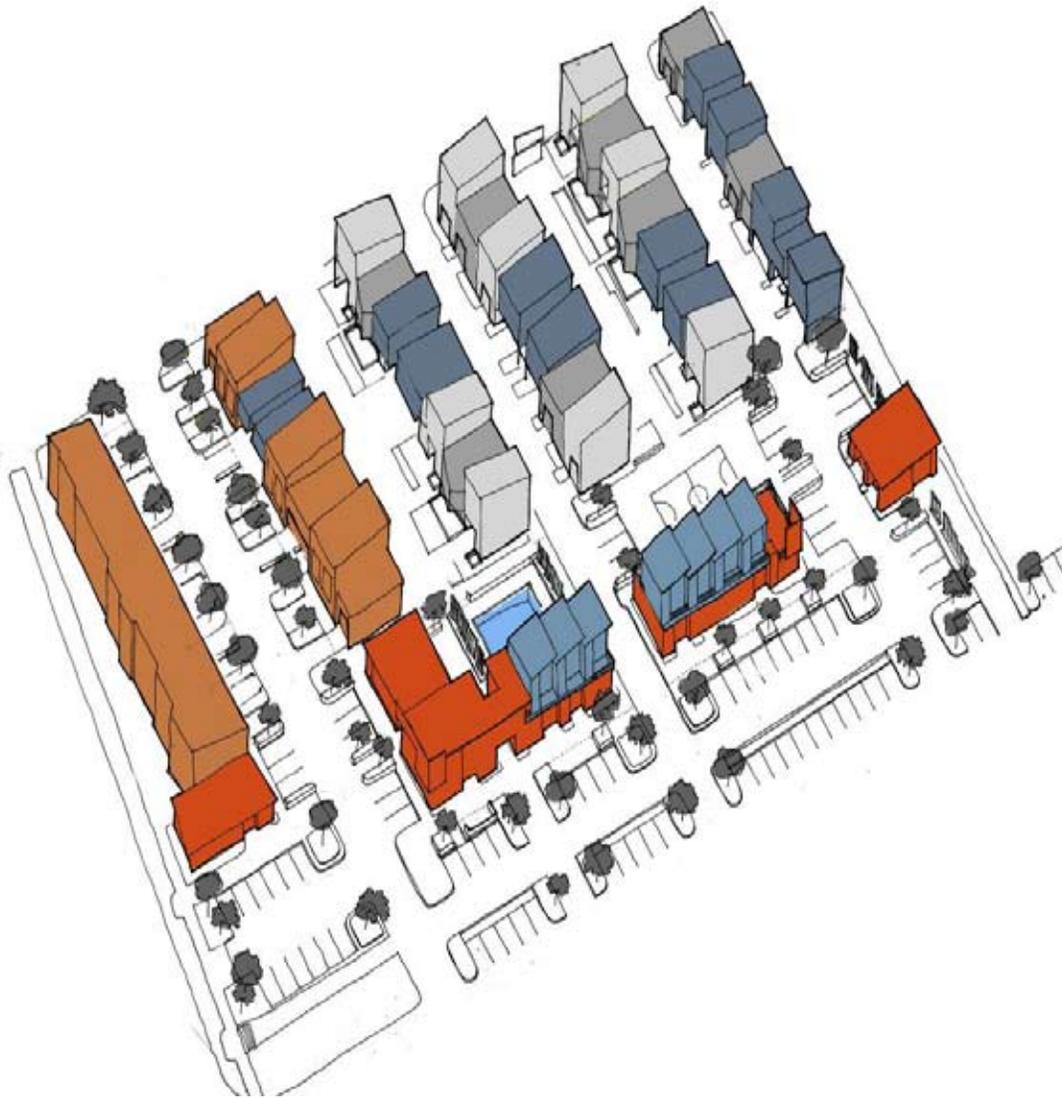


Figure 3: 'Imminent Urbanism' by Megan Griswold, Tracey Bascue, and Marc Griffin. Massing of Housing and 'Shared Commercial'. (Existing strip mall continues along bottom right of drawing).

focused on minimizing private and enclaved space in order to increase the opportunities for potential and forced interactions, and hence promote a semi-urban condition. The largest challenge for most projects was the integration with the neighboring strip mall. With the mandated buffer requirement removed, students applied strategies that would allow connection and interaction with the strip mall, but would still maintain a semi-permeable threshold that could transition between more residential versus commercial areas. To do this, students re-conceptualized the strip mall as a location with concentrated pedestrian activity, lavish existing

landscaping (which abounds in most Phoenix strip malls), and potentially synergistic uses.

In the 'Imminent Urbanism' project by students Megan Griswold, Tracey Bascue, and Marc Griffin (See Figure 2 and 3), a series of east/west roads organize the multifamily housing into linear bars that connect to the commercial lot. This basic organization is developed to promote graduated degrees of activity throughout the entire site and allows connection while still respecting the different needs of the more commercial versus more residential areas. A bar of north/south oriented 'shared commercial'



Figure 4: 'Desert Re-Urban' by Sarah Bair, Brian Starkey, and Jordan Fay. Commercial mixed use crescent continues existing strip mall to the east (right). Open space/plaza mediates between existing strip and housing project and re-defines the character of the existing strip.

development marks a threshold that mediates and facilitates the interaction of these two areas.

This shared commercial space acts as a continuation of the existing commercial strip, but includes

programs that are specifically geared towards the multifamily residences. These programs include the rental office as well as a combination of day care, bar, laundromat, and/or public gym. In essence, the program of the club house is 'externalized' so



Figure 5: (from upper left) a. Layered spaces created through shading strategies in 'Desert Bloom' by Alaina Pinney, Mark Steinhardt, and Jonathan Thwaites; b. Inhabitable indoor/outdoor spaces mediate between the street and more private interior space in the project by Mike Magee and Erik Bishoff; c. Articulated residential bars create spaces with varying degrees of public-ness/privacy in 'Imminent Urbanism' project by students Megan Griswold, Tracey Bascue, and Marc Griffin.

that it serves the residents as well as invites non-residents to participate. This builds potential for interaction with individuals living outside of this development as well as creates a venue for continued interaction with ex-residents who may have moved to other nearby developments.

Continuing the gradual transition to more residential areas, a bar of active open space (a pool and tennis court) is located to the west of the shared commercial area and continues the mixing of public and private space. This area is followed by the core residential area where units are organized along

the east-west streets on one side and face continuous semi/private green strips on the other. The streets themselves become narrower as they enter the residential area and are surfaced with materials that help demark them as local/slow streets. The southern-most street includes live-work units (a building type that has recently grown in Phoenix) to broaden the range of potential renters and to provide an intermediate level of commercial activity that slowly blends into the residential area.

The whole organization of this scheme creates graduated levels of public-ness going from the existing strip mall, to the 'shared commercial' strip, the live-work units, the east-west streets, the shared green strips, and finally into each private unit. The design and programming of each level allows and promotes interaction with a different group: strangers, people with similar interests (in the shared commercial strip), neighborhood residents, immediate neighbors, and finally roommates or family. It is the heightened degree of this interaction which defines the urban experience and transforms this area into a semi-urban node. Whereas the arguably non-urban designs of typical suburban multifamily housing strongly delineates private space once inside the development, this scheme softens that definition and allows increased interaction at a range of scales.

In the 'Desert Re-Urban' project by students Sarah Bair, Brian Starkey, and Jordan Fay (See Figure 4), the connection between the strip mall and the more residential areas is created through a continuous mixed use commercial/residential crescent that faces the existing strip. This crescent gives specific attention to the pedestrian area so that it stays cool in the afternoon sun and accommodates a range of uses. While the 'Imminent Urbanism' project has its shared commercial area buffered from the existing parking lot by planted strips, this project includes a full outdoor open space to create the transition. Building on examples seen in Phoenix and in Los Angeles, this outdoor space hosts minor commercial uses as well as a seating area and a fountain designed to help cool the air. With this approach, the project not only connects to the existing strip mall, but in turn, redefines the entire strip and changes its nature. While the existing commercial uses remain and can function as before, they are now also part of an expanded semi-urban node that includes public space, a denser, more in-

cluding pedestrian environment, a broader range of commercial and non-commercial programs, and an increased potential for interaction.

The connections leading to the residential areas to the west are then treated as minor streets with narrow connections through the crescent. Residential buildings are organized around courtyards to create a graduated transition between public and private space. Once again, the degree of public-ness is slowly graduated as is the range of individuals that might inhabit different areas of the project.

At the architectural scale, students continued focusing on the urban condition through the intermixing of public and private space. A number of student groups use sustainable strategies for hot, arid climates to facilitate this mixing. Some projects use layering of materials, spaces, and screens as shading devices to create interstitial spaces that blur inside and outside. These spaces give definition to the typically left-over outdoor space and allow for an inhabitation of the areas between buildings. Within these spaces neighbors and visitors have the opportunity for both direct and indirect interaction, enhancing the urban experience of the place (See Figure 5a).

Many students gave special attention to the first and second floor units, attempting to build on the potential interaction these units have with the street. In the project by Mike Magee and Erik Bishoff, the floor is slightly elevated with all public spaces pushed towards the street with large glazing connecting to inhabitable outdoor spaces (See Figure 5b). A series of angled stoops create a rhythm of more and less exposed areas along the street, varying the degrees of public-ness/privacy.

In the 'Imminent Urbanism' project by students Megan Griswold, Tracey Bascue, and Marc Griffin (discussed above, See Figure 5c), the residential bars become semi-permeable entities where gaps become spaces for parking, pass-throughs, and shaded outdoor spaces. The building mass is allowed to fluctuate and extend into the landscape to create semi-private areas that are open to the elements and to views.

It is critical to note that in addition to the strategies described above, students consistently applied a few simple strategies that are current conventional

wisdom in urbanism but are somehow overlooked in suburban multifamily design. The street networks in all projects are clearly defined and often connect all the way through a project. Instead of clustering building islands within seas of parking, the street is given a presence and is framed by the built environment. Buildings, in general, are located on streets, not allowed to float in the landscape, and are used to create defined open space and clear figure/ground relationships. These are all widely understood best practices that are simply not applied to typical current designs of suburban multifamily housing.

Beyond this, however, the real invention in the studio was repositioning the conceptual framework of suburban multifamily housing and capitalizing on the latent urban potential of this typology. This included how the suburban multifamily housing *program* could be integrated to an adjacent standard commercial strip mall to create a semi-urban node in suburbia, how suburban multifamily buildings could contribute to the urban realm, and how we could build on the desires of a latent and overlooked urban population in suburbia.

WHAT NEXT?

(SHIFTS IN THE REAL-WORLD)

Suburbia has been, and continues to be, shifting and suburban multifamily housing and its residents are a growing aspect of this shift. This housing type provides tremendous potential for recasting our definition of suburbs and, through design, transforming the charged potential that currently exists in the fringe areas of cities around the country. The *current* mix of program, density, and demographics in suburbia can be transformed into semi-urban nodes without the need for imported, idealistic, or large scale master plans. The basics are there. It is design, at the site and building scale, that is lacking.

The intention of the 'Fringe Urbanism' studio was to bring attention to suburban multifamily housing, to revisit current design trends, and to envision and test alternative models. These lessons can be applied to countless projects throughout the country that are currently garnering little attention from designers, urbanists, and those attempting to change the nature of our current suburban envi-

ronment. Urbanism is latent in today's suburbs, and architects are in a charged position to help uncover it.

ENDNOTES

1. Garreau, Joel. 1991. *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. New York: Doubleday Books.
2. U.S. Census Bureau. 2000. Chapter 5: Living Together, Living Alone: Families and Living Arrangements, 2000. Review of Reviewed Item. *Population Profile of the United States: 2000*, <http://www.census.gov/population/pop-profile/2000/chap05.pdf>.
3. Larco, Nico. 2008-forthcoming. Suburbia Shifted: Overlooked Trends and Opportunities in Suburban Multifamily Housing. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*. ; Goodman, Jack. 1999. The Changing Demography of Multifamily Rental Housing. *Housing Policy Debate* 10 (1):31-57. For a historical account of this same trend, see Horowitz, Carl F. 1983. *The New Garden Apartment*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Center of Urban Policy Research.
4. U.S. Census Bureau. 1973 through 2005. American Housing Survey National Microdata.
5. Ibid.
6. Moudon, Anne Vernez, and Paul Mitchell Hess. 2000. Suburban Clusters: The Nucleation of Multifamily Housing in Suburban Areas of the Central Puget Sound. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 66 (3):243-264.
7. For descriptions of the 'urban condition', see Wirth, Louis 1938. Urbanism as a Way of Life. *American Journal of Sociology* 44:1-24; Brill, Michael 2001. Problems With Mistaking Community Life for Public Life. *Places* 14 (4):48-55; Larco, Nico. 2003. What is Urban? *PLACES: The Journal of Environmental Design* 15 (2).