

New Middles: Documenting Intermediate Scale Housing in the Texas Triangle

JAMES MICHAEL TATE
Texas A&M University

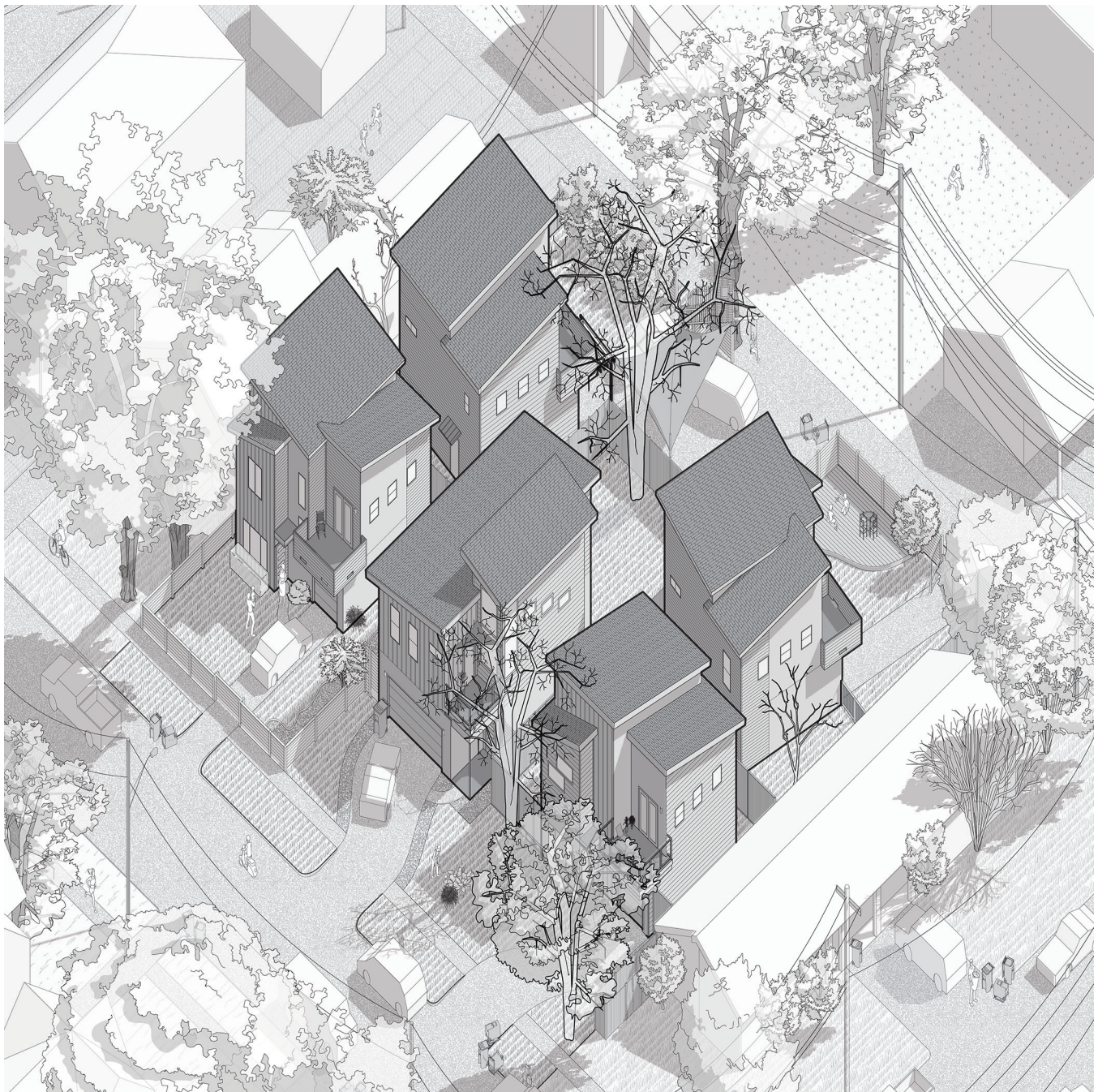


Figure 1. New Middles in urban neighborhood being redeveloped. Image by James Michael Tate.

In physical form, legal framework, and mindset, Texas has long privileged an atomized unit-based approach to housing. Horizontally dispersed subdivisions are the dominant fabric. Recently, however, more urban settling patterns are gradually transforming downtown districts and surrounding neighborhoods in Texas' largest cities. Housing types in Texas are becoming more diverse. During the past two and half years, my efforts have become more focused on documenting and designing dwelling typologies that explore an

intermediate scale of multi-unit housing. In Texas these exist as New Middles.

The project presented here is an ongoing documentary drawing investigation. It's inclusive of a diverse range of built examples. None were designed by me, some are architectural projects, and others are the work of developers or home builders. The projects documented are sometimes identified by me while travelling through a neighborhood,

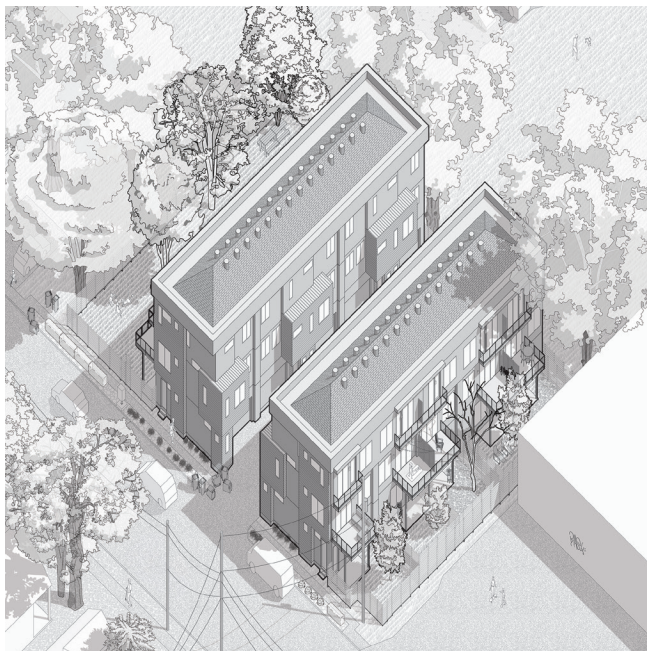
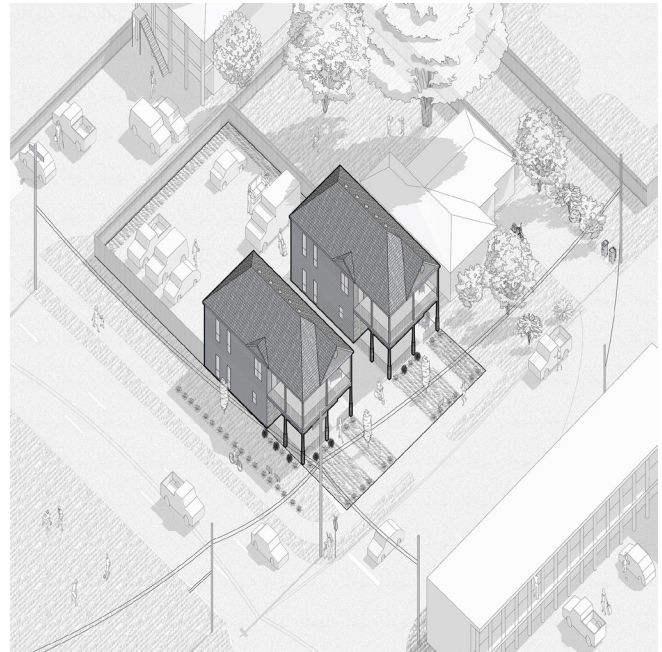


Figure 2. Larger Examples of New Middles. Image by James Michael Tate.

Figure 3. Doubling Example of New Middles. Image by James Michael Tate.

and others are found searching Zillow. Some are motivated by profit-driven real estate speculation, others are the work of non-profits trying to create affordable housing options, and others suggest motivations that are trying to bring value or provide diverse housing stock in neighborhoods undergoing redevelopment.

Located in the second largest state, both in physical size and population, I situate this investigation within what is referred to as the Texas Triangle. This megaregion includes five major cities: Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, and San Antonio. My efforts in these cities largely focus on specific neighborhoods where infill sites are a place of increased density, and in parts of the metropolitan periphery where new mixed-use developments – as they are called – are incorporating a more diverse mix of housing types in anticipation of future growth. Additionally, documentary efforts are inclusive of smaller metropolitan and micropolitan areas of the Texas Triangle. These rural settlements are largely overlooked and under-resourced when it comes to the topic of housing, yet they face numerous housing challenges.

As the Texas Triangle experiences sustained growth there are visible examples of new large multi-unit apartment buildings in the major urban centers. Such objects sit atop vast tapestries of single-family houses thinly spread well into the countryside. In smaller and medium size metropolitan and micropolitan areas, detached single-family houses are the most common dwelling type. While this could suggest housing here is limited to single unit houses and large apartment buildings, there is increasingly a third typology that could increasingly become important to this megaregion over the next decade.

Housing typologies that are more than one unit, but less than ten - or - housing that is bigger than a house but smaller than an apartment block, are producing a new middle scale in the Texas Triangle. This project documents realized examples of these dwellings in metropolitan and micropolitan areas. The same territory that enabled the creation and proliferation of McMansions in the late twentieth century, it's possible to imagine a future where intermediate scale housing could play an important role in the building out of this megaregion.

The examples presented here will continue to expand into a larger atlas. The goal is to promote awareness and alternatives to single-family detached housing in a part of the United States that will experience the creation of millions of new housing units over the next decade. Intended to be useful as a resource, the project content is crafted to be understandable to a general audience while being methodologically rigorous as an architectural research endeavor.

The project acknowledges that a Texas mindset positions houses as commodity product more than social guarantee. Prevailing forces in the Texas Triangle maximize profit gain for



Figure 4. Accessory Dwelling Unit New Middles. Image by James Michael Tate.

the homebuilding industry but do little to increase housing options that can help address long-term social, economic, and environmental challenges. Twentieth century land use patterns and real estate speculation in major metros and micropolitan areas in the megaregion set a precedent that has become an obstacle. The cultural expectation for detached single unit housing of considerable size and opulence with clear property boundaries is deeply engrained at this point. Whether or not that accurately reflects emerging public goals for housing,

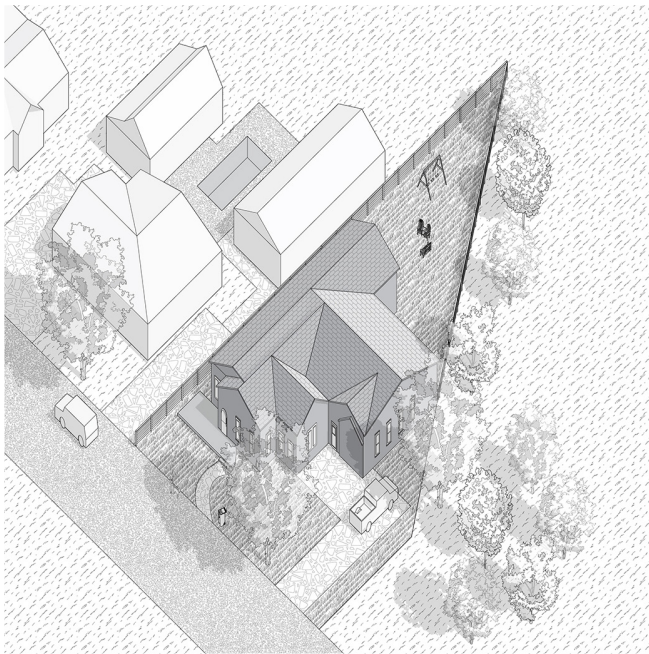


Figure 5. Addition to existing house New Middles. Image by James Michael Tate.

the reality is middle scale housing options are on the rise. This investigation began with the idea of making those examples more visible, expanding and diversifying housing stock.

Over the past two decades, those who provide housing in the state as a profitable business or in the public interest, have started acknowledging that while the state is a vast territory, areas where projected growth is likely to happen demonstrates a need to rethink how houses and neighborhoods are designed. So far, this is primarily solved by reducing single-family detached lot sizes and optimizing efficiency of subdivision plat plans. However, scattered across the mega-region are housing advocates, individual home owners, block scale developers, and national homebuilders who are responding and acting locally to larger forces. Through middle scale housing interventions, they are addressing a housing gap as a way to build a more diverse, affordable, and resilient future. This project brings a cross section of these together.

The project expands the view of housing in the Texas Triangle; rethinking models of housing where current choice is generally understood as limited to large multi-unit or single family detached. Ultimately the goal is advocate for models of housing that can challenge prevailing suburban subdivision strategies, moving toward middle scale housing that can be understood as contributing to the social infrastructure of the places people call home.

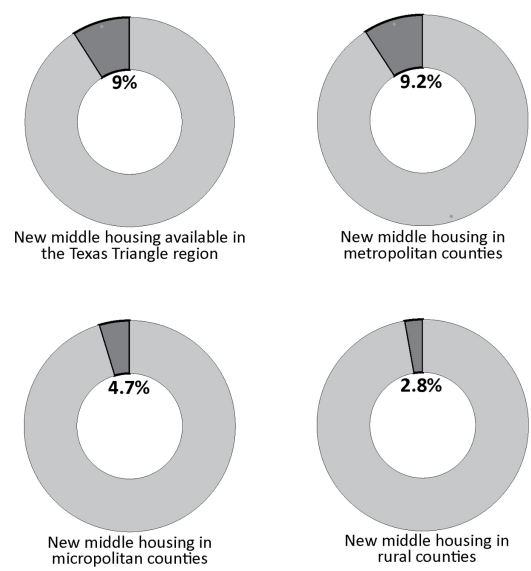
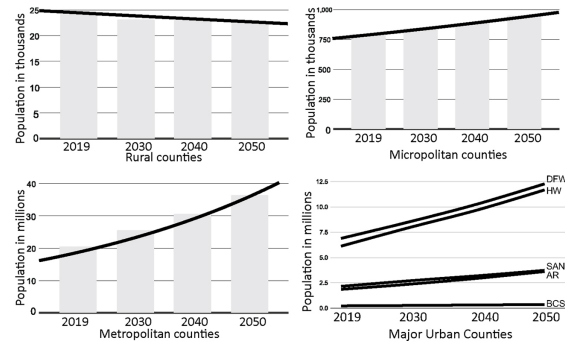
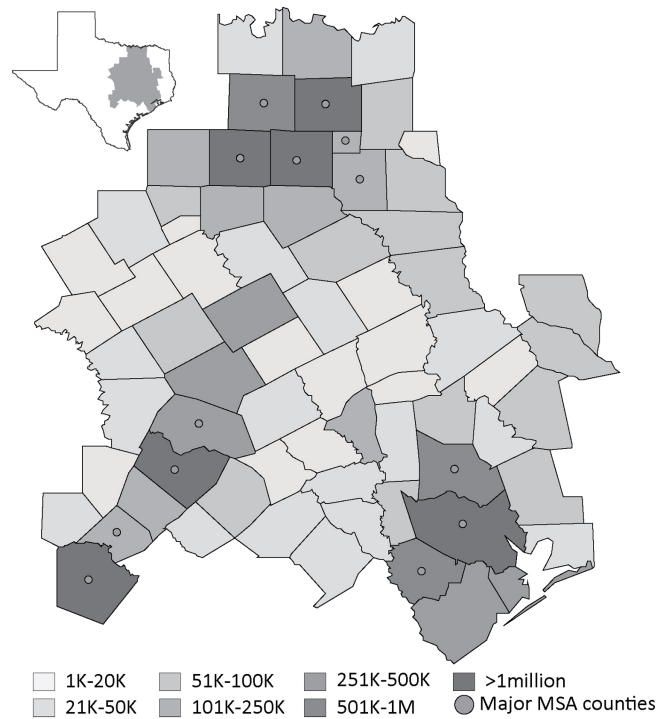


Figure 6. New Middles by the numbers. Image by James Michael Tate.

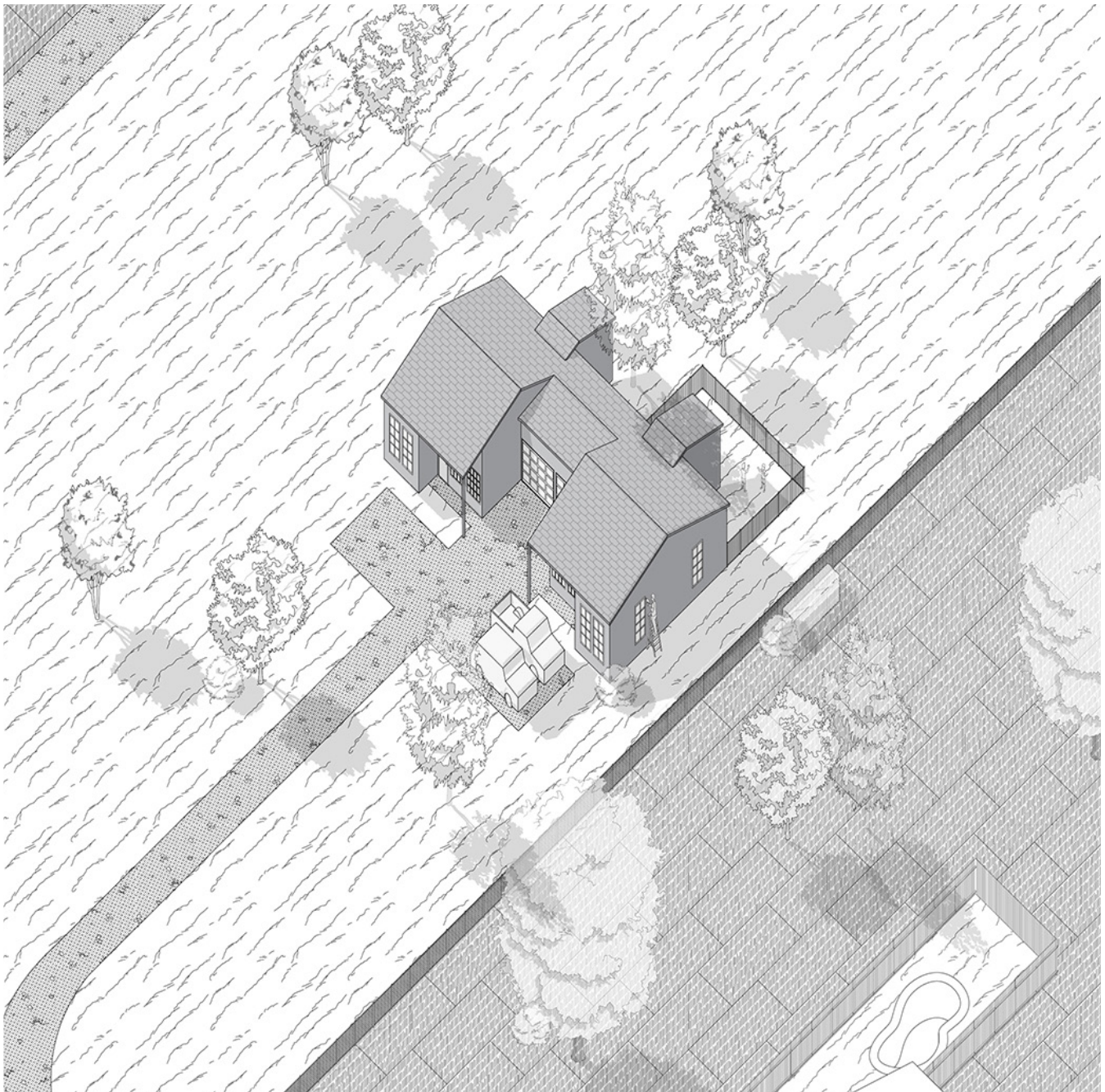


Figure 7. New Middles in the rural countryside. Image by James Michael Tate.