

Finding Common Ground: Reimagining Suburban Housing and Public Space

S. OMAR ALI

Tulane University

NIMET ANWAR

Tulane University

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INTRODUCTION

Finding Common Ground is a speculative project that rethinks the exclusionary and constrained idea of single-family zoning in the suburbs and exurbs in North America. Currently, there are many issues contemporary suburban housing must address ranging from climate change, accessibility of affordable housing, changing demographics, constrictive zoning codes, and problematic housing and economic policy. In order to implement actionable and meaningful change in the suburban landscape, Finding Common Ground studies and projects design, policy, and economic frameworks that respond to the evolutive and varied needs of its suburban residents.

“Its various ingredients have in many places remained quite separate. This suburban segregation is spatial, but it is also social, cultural, and economic.”

—Reinhold Martin, Leah Meisterlin, and Anna Kenoffcurrent, *Buell Hypothesis: Rehousing the American Dream*

BEYOND THE AMERICAN DREAM

The postwar typical suburban single-family home was a monolithic and generic solution for the quest for the American dream.¹ The aspirations of the dream centered around home and land ownership, an escape from the changing demographics of the city, and redefined the relationship between families, their individual homes, and their communities.² However, in recent decades, there has been a sharp shift in suburban demographics from primarily white middle-class families to greater diversity in age, family unit structure, socio-economics, and demographics. The suburbs today are drastically more diverse than the rest of the country and are an accurate reflection of the growing demographics of people of color throughout North America.³ With the sharp rise of diversity, the typical suburban detached single-family house no longer accommodates the growing needs of society.

To address the disconnect between the evolving needs of the suburban residents and the static nature of the existing suburbs local land-use regulations that have mandated the single-family detached housing type must be reimagined, as most North Americans live in areas that are predominantly zoned for detached single-family houses.⁴ Historically and consistently, restrictive zoning policy has prioritized single-family dwellings over other typologies, which has compounded issues of housing affordability, sprawling developments with little density, high rates of emissions from heavy reliance on automobiles, and equity amongst residents.⁵ The existing local land-use regulations should be replaced, in favor of inclusionary medium-density, or missing middle housing that is built by right and without zoning variances.

HOUSING THE MULTITUDE

Missing middle housing is an evolution of zoning codes to include a more diverse range of housing types in suburban neighborhoods to provide affordable housing for a spectrum of price points.⁶ This will inherently build more diversity, allowing for the changing demographics of the suburbs, and will lead to more walkable neighborhoods.⁷ Middle-scaled housing is tuned to the smaller scale of the neighborhood and emphasizes space over maximizing units and financial return. By introducing a variety of housing types to the suburbs, the forms of exclusion such as fences will be minimized, if not eradicated completely, in return for a more collective and shared experience. Through the density and clustering of middle-scaled housing, space is made available for larger civic-minded projects to serve as cultural catalysts for change in the city.

Finding Common Ground encourages varied collective engagement and interaction throughout the suburbs by pairing typical adjacent lots into double lots and rotating the orientation of the housing from north-south to east-west, to make the most of the double-wide properties, and to have an effective orientation regarding passive energy systems. See *Figure 2*. This subtle change in the orientation of the housing footprints and the use of the auxiliary pedestrian laneways emphasizes the human experience over that of the car and fades the literal manifestation of lot lines in favor of a more shared experience between neighbors. The newly established shared datum at

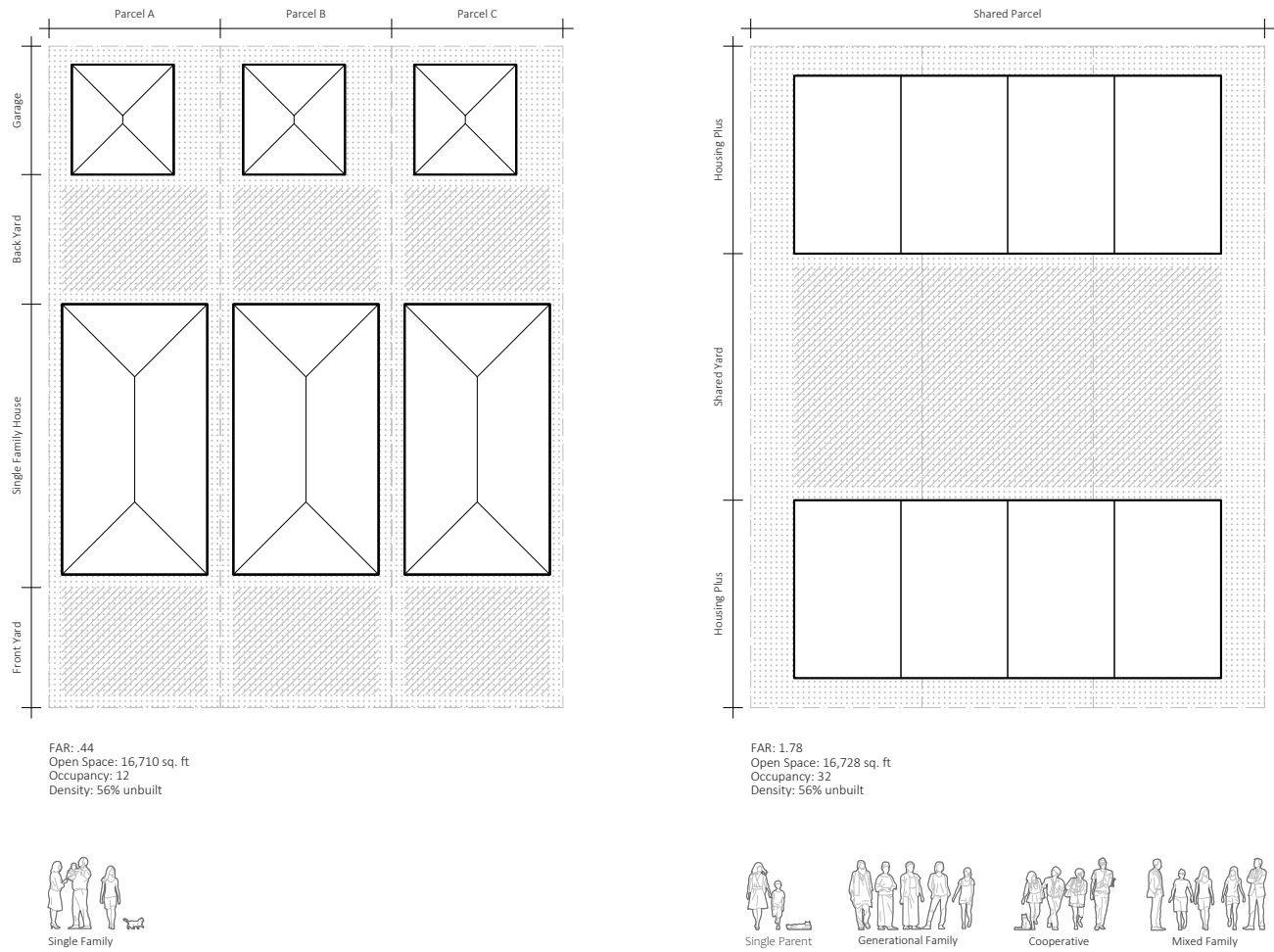


Figure 1. Existing suburban lots with privatized front, side, and backyards (left) and the reimaged shared lots with a common ground (right). Drawing by NO OFFICE and Jose Varela Castillo.

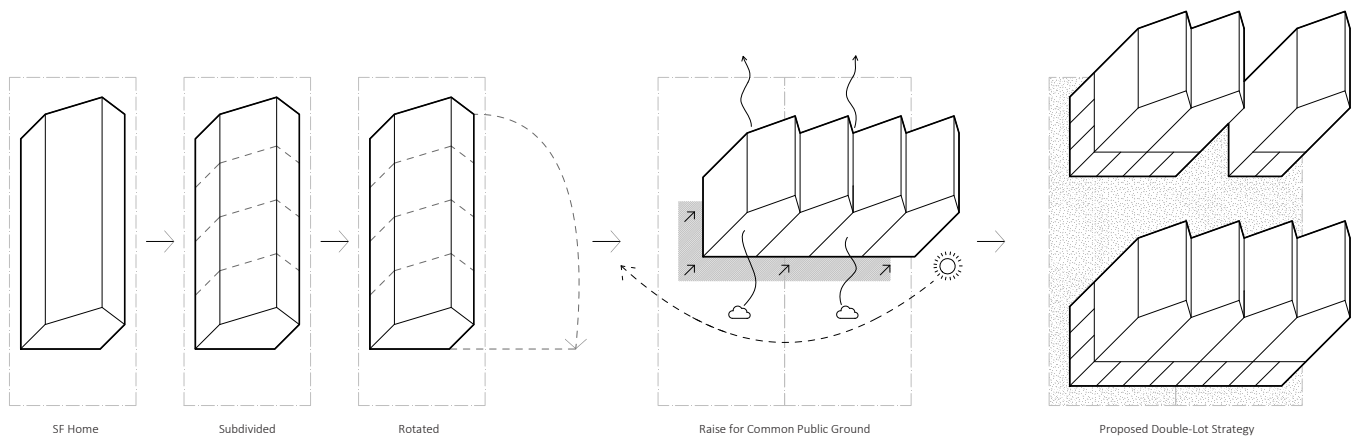


Figure 2. The transformation of the single family residence into middle scale housing clusters with shared public realm. Drawing by NO OFFICE and Jose Varela Castillo.



Figure 3. Elevation oblique of Finding Common Ground deployed across four neighborhood blocks. Drawing by NO OFFICE.

the ground level extends beyond the typical boundaries of the front, back, and side yards, in exchange for a more public common ground.

The deviation from the static detached single-family residence to inclusive diverse housing types encourages use by a multitude of residents. The variation of housing offers flexibility and adaptability to the inhabitants that may have evolving needs or circumstances. The single-family residence is limited to the 'nuclear family', whereas in this project housing units can be rented, shared, borrowed, and/ or owned amongst families both immediate and extended, friends, students, colleagues, neighbors, and visitors. *See Figure 1.* The ground level of the housing clusters is activated by operative small-scale retail or studio space frontage that engages the street and the mid-block shared common spaces. Social amenities are also integrated into the project by implementing a series of large-scale social condensers that fulfill the need for sheltered

public and accessible space and are a commons for civic engagement. *See Figure 8.*

Accessibility to affordable and mixed-income housing allows for greater diversity and equity among residents. Typically, mixed-income communities enhance social order and provide more equitable public services and amenities.⁸ The programming of the ground level spaces below the housing offers opportunities for small local shops that both serve the community and provide income-generating opportunities. The small-scaled housing clusters serve as accessory dwelling units that can be rented for additional passive income to residents to offset the cost of homeownership. Inclusionary mixed-income housing foregrounds the integration of diverse groups of people over profit and exclusionary practices.

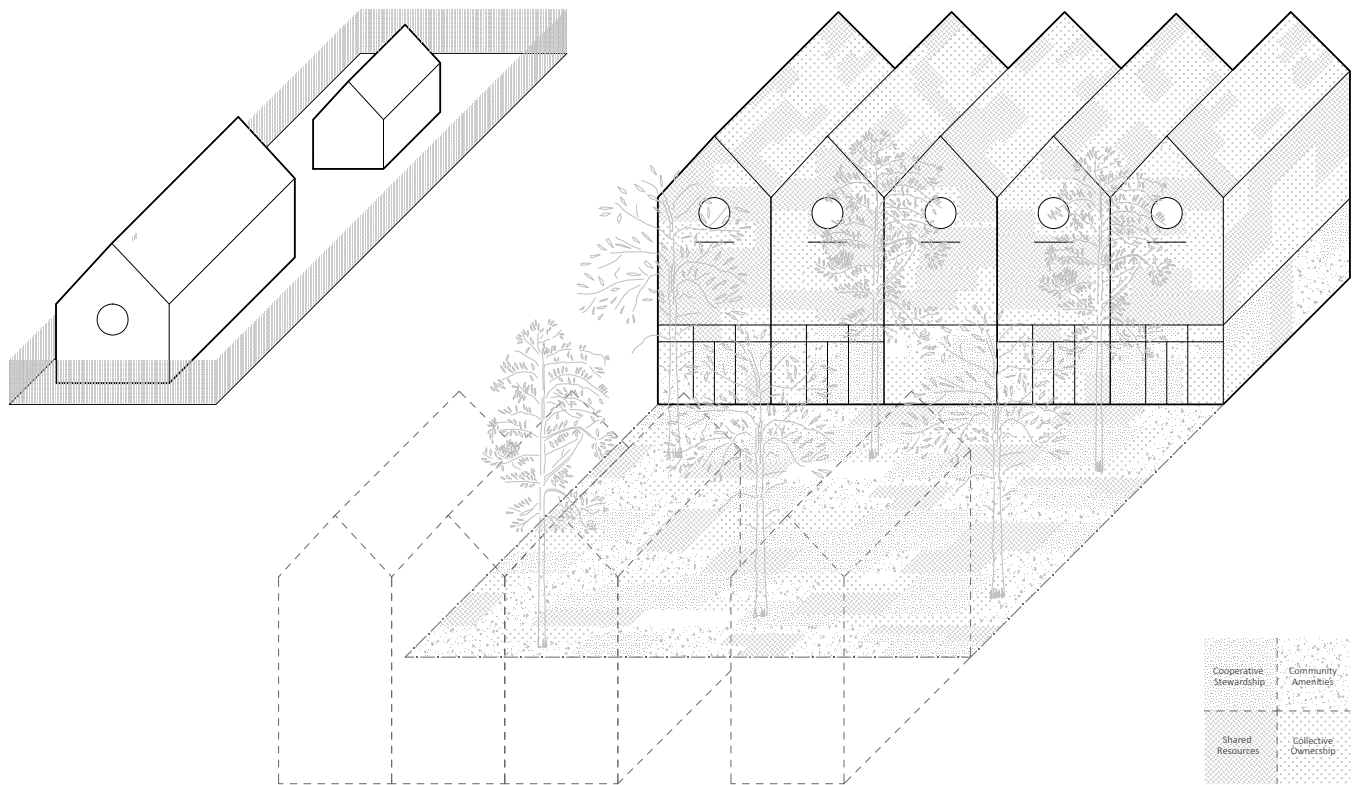


Figure 4. Boundary of the detached-single family residence compared to the patchwork of the shared common ground. Drawing by NO OFFICE and Jose Varela Castillo.

CONCLUSION

Finding Common Ground speculates on the potential of housing at the middle scale and a shared public realm in the contemporary suburbs. The disconnect between the suburban context and its evolving constituents has been studied recently throughout the architectural and planning discourse, and it is important to note that there is no singular position to address this complex condition. Though this project explores many ideas vital to transforming the suburban landscape, it is not a complete and all-encompassing solution. There are many avenues that can still be explored in this area such as the non-capitalist model of community land trusts and the stewardship of land.

The existing condition of the typical suburbs has been confined to a singular consensus of the needs of some, and not all. The ambition of the project is to inject variation and flexibility within the housing typologies to accommodate mixed-use programs and mixed-income residents. Through a careful negotiation of existing conditions, the resultant transformation pilots larger civic-minded projects, a higher density of housing, privileges the pedestrian experience over the car and enables a focus on cultivating a shared collective experience.

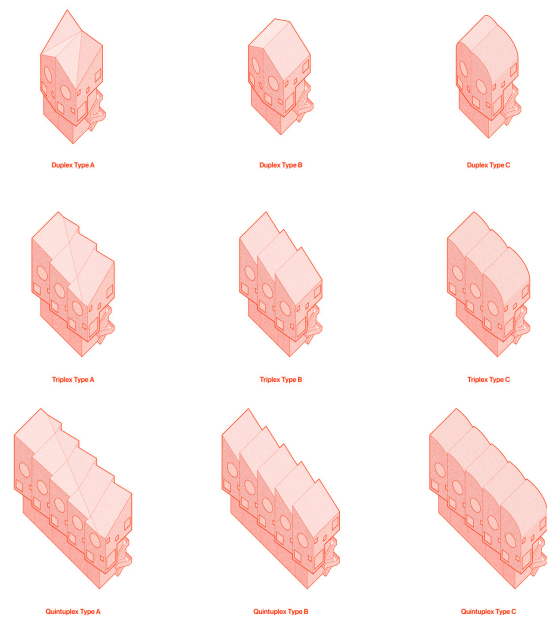


Figure 5. The variation of housing types. Drawing by NO OFFICE.



Figure 6. View across a cultural catalyst with housing clusters beyond. Drawing by NO OFFICE, Yoojin Park, and Olivia Vercauysse.



Figure 7. View towards the housing stair along the common ground. Drawing by NO OFFICE, Yoojin Park, and Olivia Vercauysse.

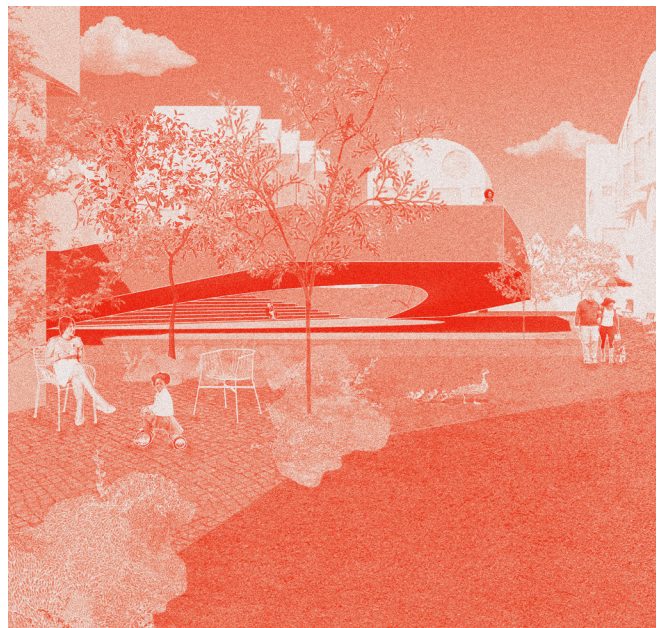


Figure 8. View of one of the cultural catalysts within the housing clusters. Drawing by NO OFFICE, Yoojin Park, and Olivia Vercauysse.

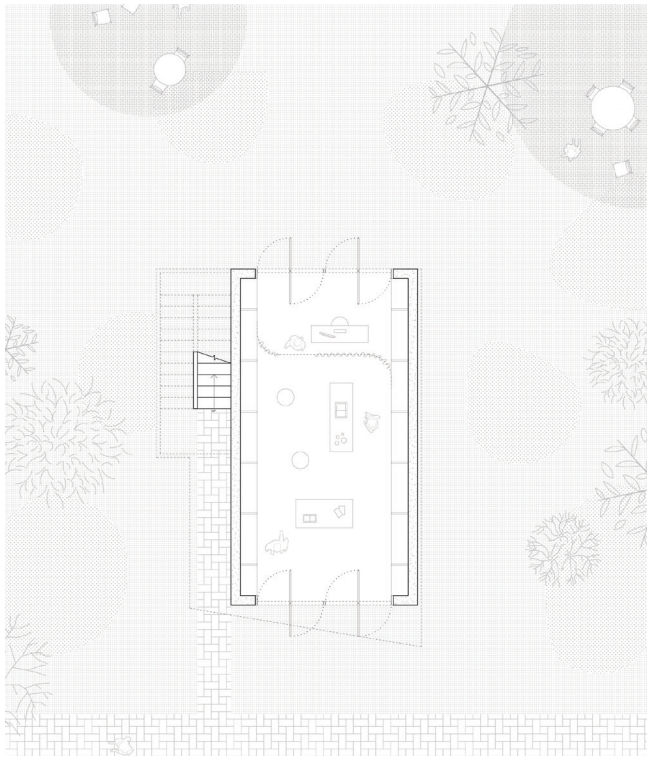


Figure 9. Common ground plan of retail studio and shared public realm.
Drawing by NO OFFICE and Olivia Verduyze.

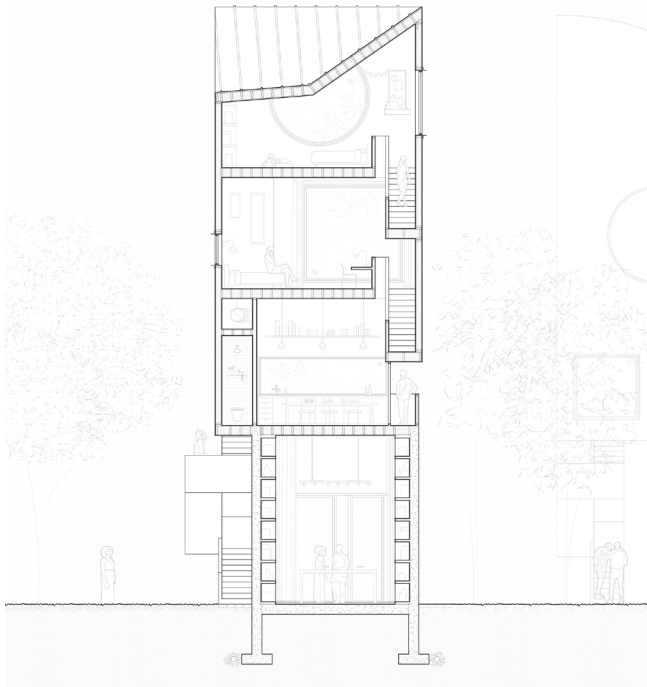


Figure 10. Section through a typical retail studio and efficiency housing.
Drawing by NO OFFICE and Olivia Verduyze.

ENDNOTES

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