

Adapting Boundaries: Maintaining Small Retail Strip Malls While Expanding Affordable Housing

MITCHELL HUBBELL

Tulane University

Keywords: Affordable Housing, Suburbia, Urban Design

INTRODUCTION

Adapting Boundaries reimagines strip mall sites as opportunities for affordable housing infill and develops a residential building typology adapting to the rear of these sites. Additionally, the project addresses low residential lot availability in North America, focusing on Los Angeles, California as a case study. A lack of residential lot availability has caused Los Angeles researchers, including Dana Cuff, to challenge designers in pursuing more innovative housing typologies that address this issue.¹ California's "Middle-Class Housing Act," Senate Bill 6 and Assembly Bill 2011, makes this challenge more feasible, allowing housing on sites previously zoned for commercial use and providing a framework for design. *Adapting Boundaries* focuses on the city's ubiquitous strip mall inventory and the recurrent boundary condition between the rear faces of strip malls and the neighborhoods behind. The project questions how the boundary between residential and commercial zones can be altered, promotes low-rise, high-density housing, and encourages neighborhood connectivity [1].

CONTEXT

The boundary between commercial and residential zoning developed with the rise in automobile culture and has been noticed for decades, a prime example being Venturi, Scott-Brown, and Izenour's description of these roadside buildings.² A divide in program, scale, and walkability is created and often resolved with a privacy fence separating grassy lawns from loading docks. It is important to note that this commercial development born in the mid-20th century is swiftly aging, and authors like Alexandra Lange have argued that the age of these buildings also makes them historical.³ While most of these buildings might not require historic preservation, communities in North America are progressively suburbanizing, requiring architects and urbanists to address the future of these typologies.⁴ *Adapting Boundaries* attempts to recognize the value in this overlooked building and site typology, retrofitting them to adapt to contemporary needs.



Figure 1. Boundaries. Diagram by Author, Imagery via Google Earth.



Figure 2. Site Axonometric (New Housing Units in Blue). Drawing by Author

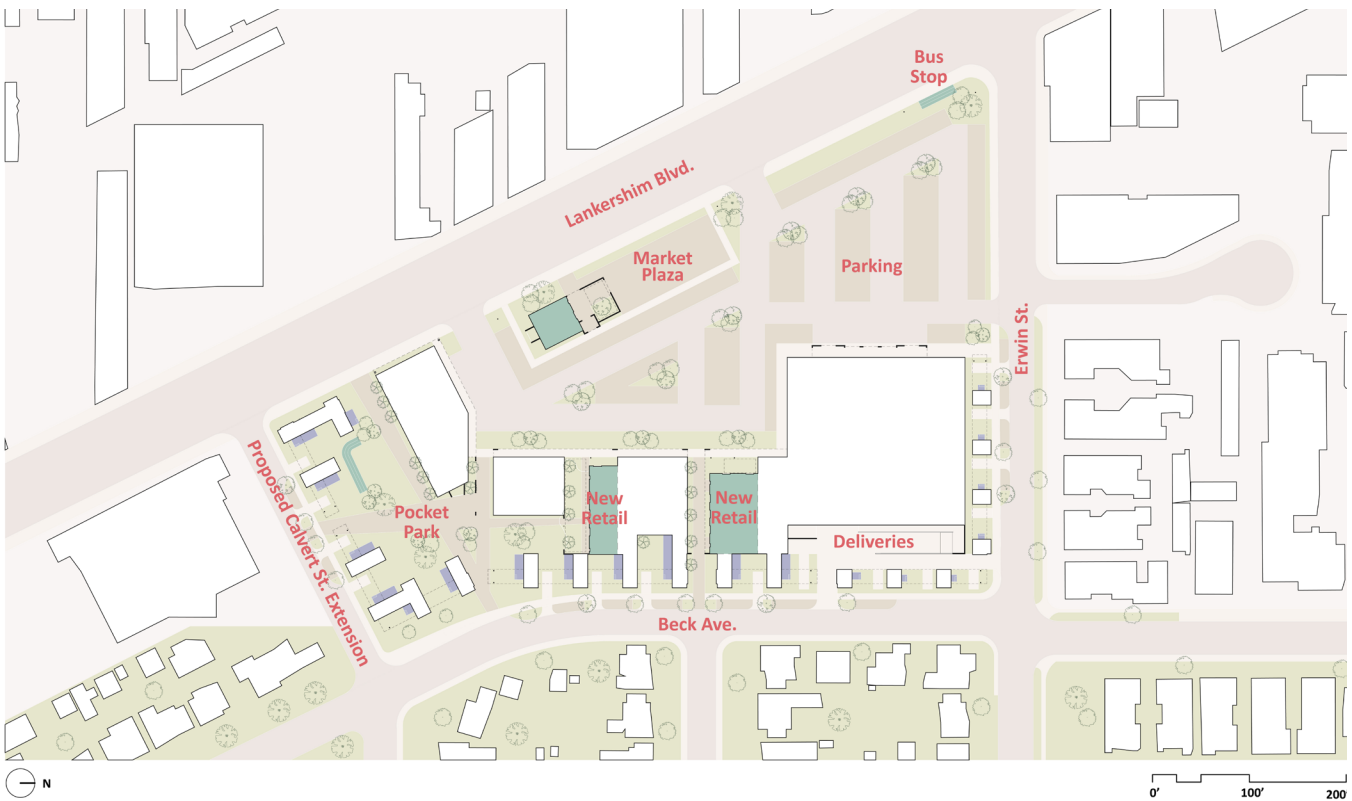


Figure 3. Site Plan. Drawing by Author

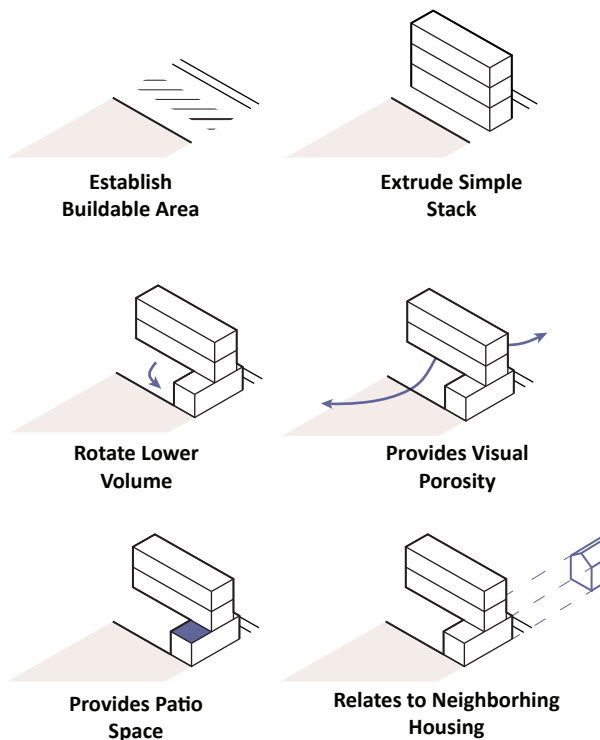


Figure 4. Unit Massing. Diagram by Author.

PROPOSAL

Adapting Boundaries offers an alternative to the large-scale redevelopment of retail centers with incremental housing that preserves small-scale retail tenants, often vital to communities. Researchers like Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson understandably promote large-scale retrofit projects as the solution to urban sprawl, while this project offers an incremental and lower-impact alternative.⁵ The site being investigated is a neighborhood retail center on Lankershim Boulevard in North Hollywood. Los Angeles was selected as a general location for its legacy of post-war urbanism, its history as the birthplace of strip malls, and the recent California legislation promoting commercial to residential site conversions. The site in North Hollywood is an aging retail center with several tenant vacancies and provides an example of a commercial and residential boundary condition separated by a street.

The proposed housing units wrap the rear perimeter of the site, while pedestrian pathways cut through several vacant tenant spaces [2-3]. Designed to fit on sites with limited depth, the primary living space in the thin housing unit is elevated for ground-level visual porosity and the flow of existing activities beneath [4]. The ground floor is intentionally flexible, extending perpendicularly from the main living volume to the rear of the strip mall [5]. This flexibility supports diverse family structures as a response to shifting demographics, offering a ground floor space available for a variety of purposes including home offices, in-law suites, and short-term rentals [6].

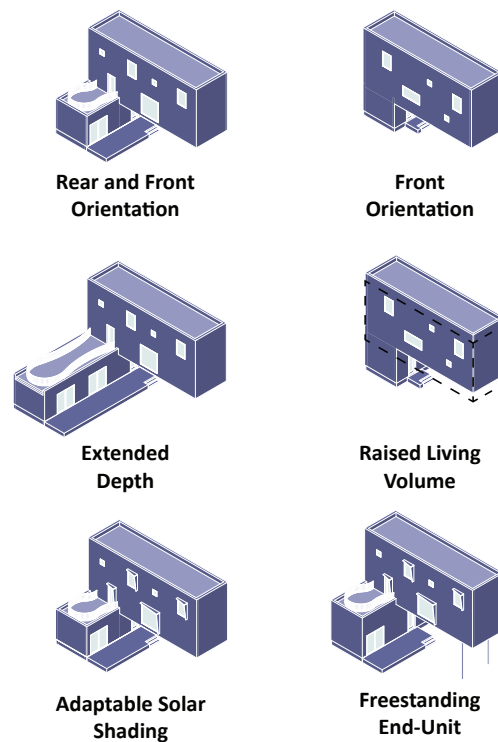


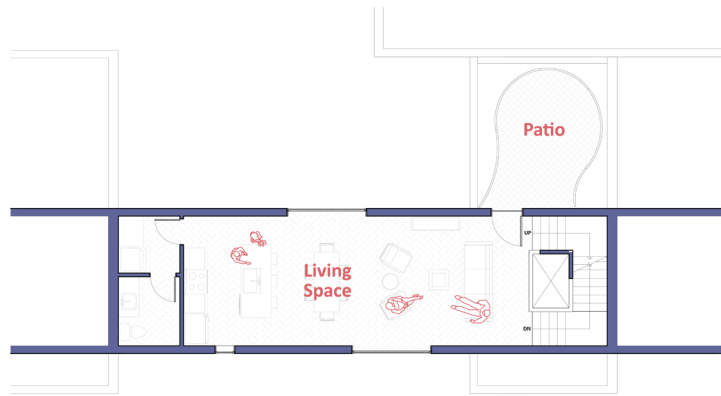
Figure 5. Unit Variation. Diagram by Author.

The new housing intervention recognizes that retail center owners tend to sell or rent portions of existing parking lots for satellite buildings and imagines a scenario where the rear of the site is also subdivided for development. This scenario creates a host of technical complexities, including zoning and parking limitations; however, the Middle-Class Housing Act has begun to overcome some of these issues by allowing residential use on commercially zoned sites. Apart from technical complexities, there are social acceptance issues that need to be addressed for this new housing typology. While individual preference for single-family residences and the threats of NIMBY-ism create difficulty for ADUs and unique housing models, *Adapting Boundaries* attempts to provide a favorable project for neighbors immediately across the street. Instead of viewing dumpsters, delivery trucks, and blank stucco walls, nearby residents receive a streetscape of new housing, trees, and planting beds with incoming neighbors.

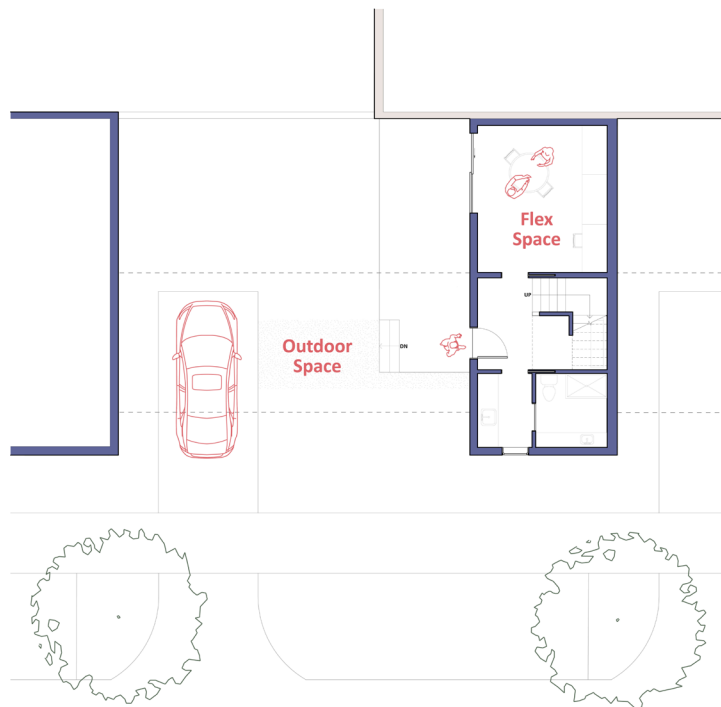
Adapting Boundaries creates a replicable tactic to increase the supply of housing in Los Angeles and introduce a new housing typology in response to the nationwide affordable housing crisis. The reasons for the current housing crisis are complicated, but one important factor is the decline in single-family residential lot inventory in major U.S. cities. Los Angeles, despite being perceived as a low-density city, has one of the lowest inventories of single-family housing lot availability.⁶ *Adapting Boundaries* promotes inclusionary zoning and highlights a portion of land not previously utilized. With approximately 35,000 acres of retail land in Los Angeles County, these sites provide a large area



Typical Unit - Third Floor Plan



Typical Unit - Second Floor Plan



Typical Unit - Ground Floor Plan

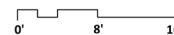


Figure 6. Unit Floor Plans. Drawing by Author.

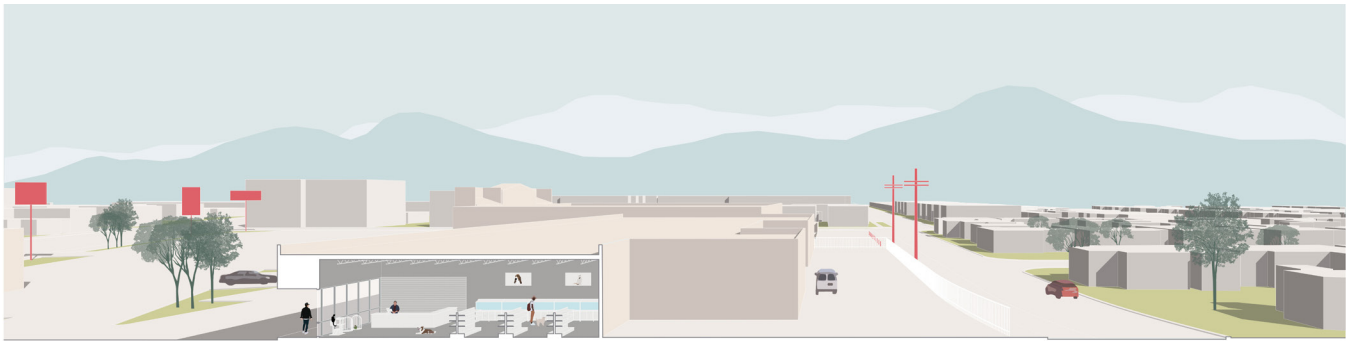


Figure 7. Before and After Site Sections. Drawing by Author.



Figure 8. View of Unit Facades. Drawing by Author.



Figure 9. View of Pocket Park. Drawing by Author.

to reconsider.⁷ Aside from legislative initiatives, housing affordability in *Adapting Boundaries* is gained primarily through low land cost, building on land that has not been considered as a viable site. Additionally, the site's location along the Lankershim bus line and one mile from the B Line metro station supports residents who do not use cars, highlighting an important relationship between public transit and affordable housing. In general, most retail centers in Los Angeles exist on commercial corridors, which often have bus access. Finally, modest unit size, wood-framed construction, and the mass production of units aim to bring material costs down.

CONCLUSION

Adapting Boundaries contributes to the greater task of retrofitting suburban environments by addressing the specific boundary between strip malls and residences, proposing a new, incremental typology for housing and development of mixed-use sites. Mixed-use developments are often conceived as brand-new, large-scale interventions, but introducing new housing in underperforming retail sites can also be considered. This type of development can begin to reclaim these spaces of commodity by considering community needs over corporate profit. Strategies developed in this project can be distilled and replicated on



strip mall sites and similar narrow-footprint sites across North America to provide housing for communities in need [10]. The modular nature of each unit and its flexible footprint depth allows the project to be replicated on other boundaries, building on commercial sites that face single-family residences.

ENDNOTES

1. Cuff, Dana, "The Politics of Density," interview by Charles Waldheim, *Future of the American City*, Harvard GSD, March 5, 2020, audio, 46:36, <https://fotac.gsd.harvard.edu/listen/the-politics-of-density>.
2. Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 35.
3. Lange, Alexandra, "Meet Us by the Fountain," interview by Roman Mars, *99% Invisible*, June 14, 2022, audio, 41:28, <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/meet-us-by-the-fountain/>.
4. Keil, Roger, "After Suburbia: Research and Action in the Suburban Century," *Urban Geography* 41, no. 1 (November 2018): 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2018.1548828>.
5. Dunham-Jones, Ellen and June Williamson, *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Retrofitting Suburbs* (New York: Wiley, 2011), xxvi.
6. "Lot Supply Index for New Single-Family Housing Across 30 Different Cities in the United States from 1st Quarter 2020 to 3rd Quarter of 2022," Statista, accessed March 13, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1240543/new-home-lot-inventory-usa-by-city/>.
7. Garcia, David and Issi Romem, "Residential Redevelopment of Commercially Zoned Land in California," Turner Center for Housing Innovation at UC Berkeley (December 2020): 6. <https://turnercenter.berkeley.edu/research-and-policy/commercial-zoning-december-2020/>.

Figure 10. Replication. Diagram by Author, Imagery via Google Earth.