

# Radical Middle Grounds

CENTER 25

New agendas for medium-density housing

## **Radical Middle Grounds** New Agendas for Medium-Density Housing

2025 ACSA Creative Achievement Award

**Dip.-Ing. Arch. Martin Hättasch**  
Assistant Professor  
The University of Texas at Austin  
School of Architecture

# Radical Middle Grounds

## New Agendas for Medium-Density Housing

For a decade, the term “missing middle” has described a range of housing largely lacking in North America today. It offers a possible solution to the current housing crisis by providing economically and ecologically sustainable alternatives to sprawling, car-dependent suburbs of single-family homes, while retaining the more desirable qualities of suburban living that multifamily apartment blocks rarely offer.

The “Radical Middle Grounds” project examines the potentials of this medium-density range of housing beyond historical and typological templates commonly associated with current missing middle debates. Rather than reducing the “middle” to a vague notion of compromise, the “radical” middle ground aims to leverage different perspectives toward transformational practices of housing much needed in response to contemporary challenges. The project curates the voices and projects of students, architects, historians, and economists who operate on the middle ground of density (between house and apartment block) and equally understand this middle ground as a discursive territory of exploration, interdisciplinary collaboration, and design speculation. Radical Middle Grounds combines design education, institutional and professional engagement, and scholarship in three interrelated formats:

### Part 1 - Exhibit

November 10–17 2023, Mebane Gallery,  
The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture

### Part 2 - Symposium

November 10, 2023, Mebane Gallery,  
The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture

### Part 3 - Publication

CENTER 25 *Radical Middle Grounds:  
New Agendas for Medium-Density Housing*,  
edited by Martin Hättasch (Center for American Architecture and Design, The University of Texas at Austin, 2024).

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<https://soa.utexas.edu/caad/caad-publications/center/center-25>

The project was supported by UT Austin’s Center for American Architecture and Design (CAAD) and the Graduate Program in Urban Design.

**Martin Hättasch** is a German architect whose work focuses on the intersection of architecture and urbanism, questions of housing, monumentality, and their numerous overlaps. He holds degrees from TU Braunschweig and Princeton University where he studied as a DAAD fellow. A registered architect in the Netherlands, he has worked with firms in the US and Europe, including Atelier Kempe Thill, OMA, and WW Architecture and has held academic positions at Rice and Syracuse University, and is currently an Assistant Professor at The University of Texas at Austin. With a focus on housing, he has worked with the City of Austin to develop planning scenarios for Austin’s St. John neighborhood, resulting in a unanimous Austin City Council resolution in 2020 to adopt the study’s results for future planning. His work has been published in numerous venues, including *The Plan Journal*, *Architect Magazine*, and MIT’s *Thresholds* journal. His studio “A Home is Not a House,” focusing on the question of medium-density housing, was awarded the 2018 Architect Magazine Studio Prize, and he is the recipient of the 2022 ACSA/AIA Housing Design Education Award.

# Background

## Medium Density Before and Beyond the Missing Middle

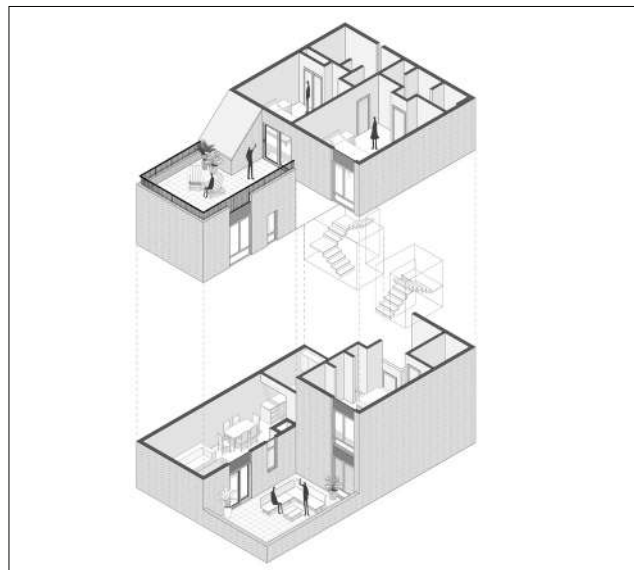
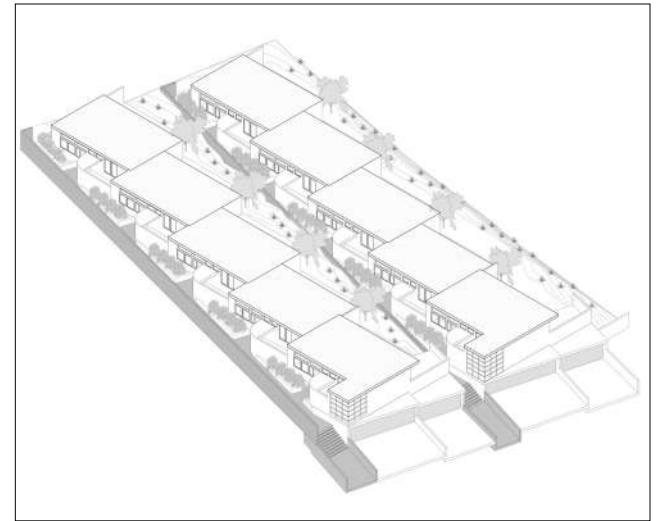
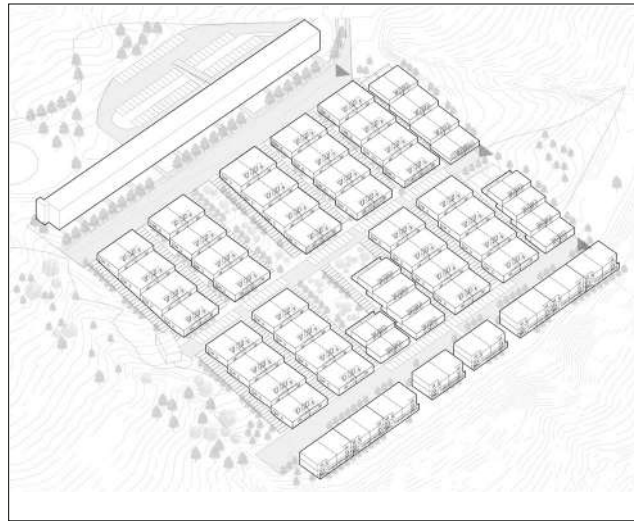
Sparked by affordability crises and promoted by concepts such as the “missing middle,” the housing range located in density between the single-family house and the apartment block has gained traction among planners and municipalities. Yet, often reduced to zoning questions, focused on retroactive densification, or preoccupied with rediscovering premodern types, contemporary debates fall short of the transformative agenda and design innovation with which these types were explored by the avant-gardes of the postwar decades. In light of ever-exacerbating crises of affordability and ecology as well as changing demographics and models of cohabitation, this dwelling type’s potential for recurring reinvention may be exactly what is needed in response to today’s mounting challenges.

The conceptual basis for the Radical Middle Grounds project emerged from an exploration of the lineages of radically new housing ideas at the medium-density range in the advanced elective seminar “Urban Housing – Typology and Invention” in 2022 and 2023.

Students studied projects across scales, from the individual unit to resulting urban morphologies, and with attention to the processes and conditions by which they were formed.

### Credits

All student work shown on this page was produced as part of the 3-credit-hour seminar “Urban Housing – Typology and Invention,” taught by Martin Hättasch in the spring of 2022 and 2023.



*Top left:*

#### **New Technologies**

*Elm Street Housing, Werner Seligmann & Associates, 1972.*

*Units were prefabricated off-site before being assembled, greatly reducing construction costs.*

*Drawing by Yuqing Wang, Aparna C. Rajan, 2022*

*Top right:*

#### **New Processes**

*Avenel Cooperative Housing Project by Gregory Ain, Los Angeles, 1947.*

*The project pioneered alternative models of collective ownership at times of a post-WWII housing shortage.*

*Drawing by Stephen Crews and Samantha Gilk, 2023*

*Bottom left:*

#### **New Typologies**

*Penn's Landing Square, Louis Sauer, 1968.*

*Stacked duplex units enable a higher density while maintaining private ground floor access.*

*Drawing by Maria Berrios, Mila Santana, Andres Mendoza, 2022*

## Part 1 - Exhibit

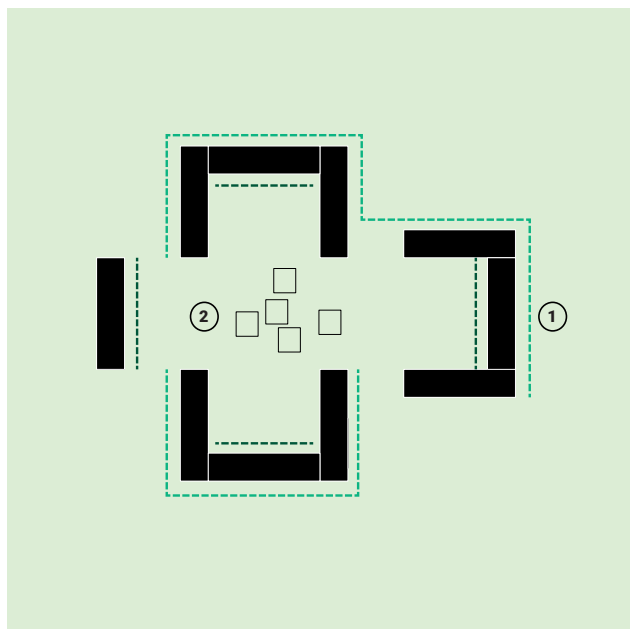
The *Radical Middle Grounds* exhibit took place from November 10–17, 2023 in the Mebane Gallery at The University of Texas School of Architecture and served as a spatial backdrop for a symposium of the same name. Conceived as a “room within a room,” it showcased student work created in housing design studios led by the nominee over the last few years, and at the same time provided a preview of the forthcoming *Radical Middle Grounds* book. With the outside dedicated to the display of student work, the inside of the newly created space provided a more intimate setting for a series of digital projections representing the three thematic middle grounds of the symposium and book. For visitors moving through the gallery space, the seemingly simple object opens up changing perspectives and views on the work exhibited and allows for different degrees of immersion.

### Collaborators & Funding:

The exhibit was curated, designed, and assembled by Assistant Professor Martin Hättasch supported by the Center for American Architecture and Design (CAAD), with funding from the Urban Design Program’s Sinclair Black Endowed Chair in the Architecture of Urban Design.

### Student Compensation:

1 student was employed to support exhibition installation activities, appointed for 140 hours at the school’s standard rate for master’s level students.



### Exhibit Plan

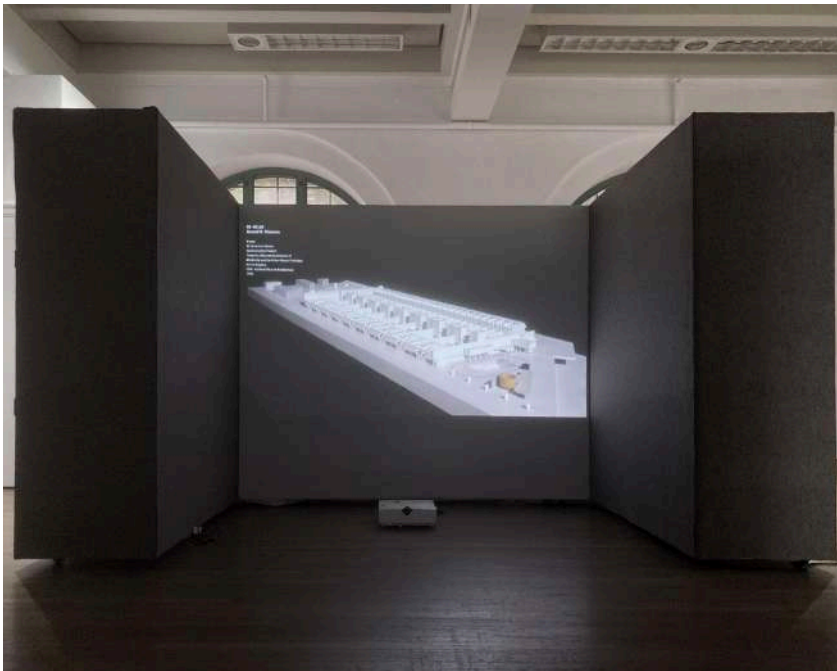
*The outside of the exhibit volume (1) showcased student work undertaken in various design studios taught by the author. The inside (2) consisted of a preview of materials from the forthcoming *Radical Middle Grounds* book.*



### Exhibit Photograph (by author):

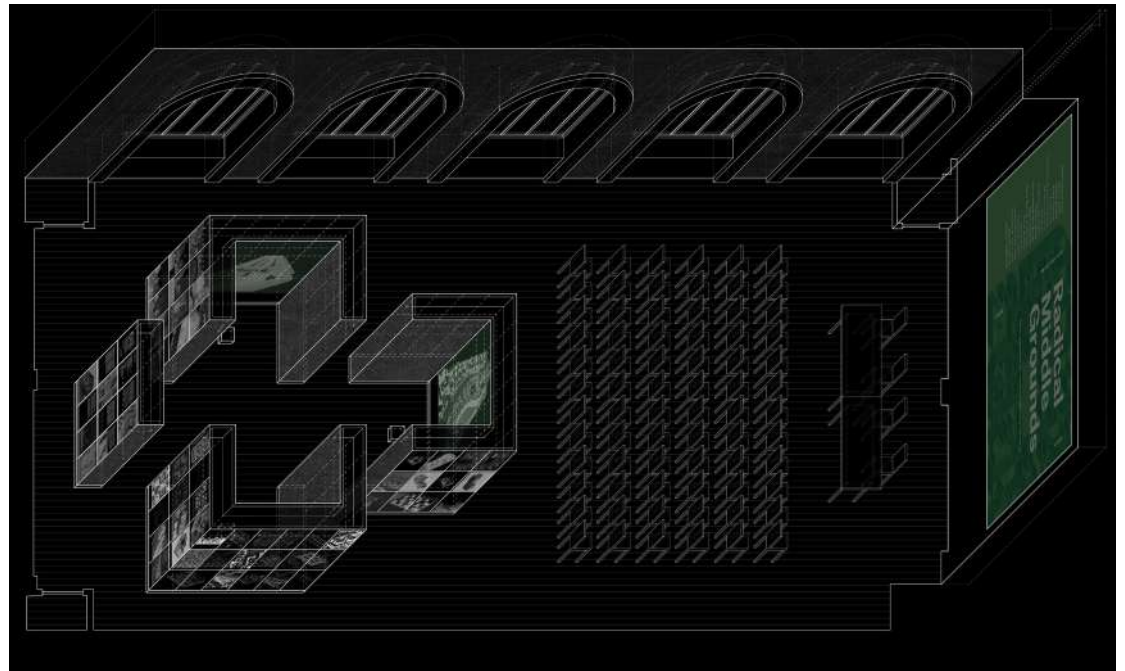
*The spatial layout of a “room within a room” enabled various viewing experiences, and degrees of immersion.*

## Part 1 - Exhibit



**Photograph** (by author)

*On the inside, the exhibit created three projection booths to provide a focused preview of materials from the forthcoming book. Industrial felt was used on inward-facing surfaces for sound absorption and to create a space of focus and immersion within the larger gallery space.*



**Axonometric View of Exhibit in Context** (drawing by author)

*The exhibit is conceived as a free-standing room within the larger gallery.*

All student work featured in the exhibit was produced in the context of 6-credit-hour design studios taught by Martin Hättasch between 2018 and 2023.

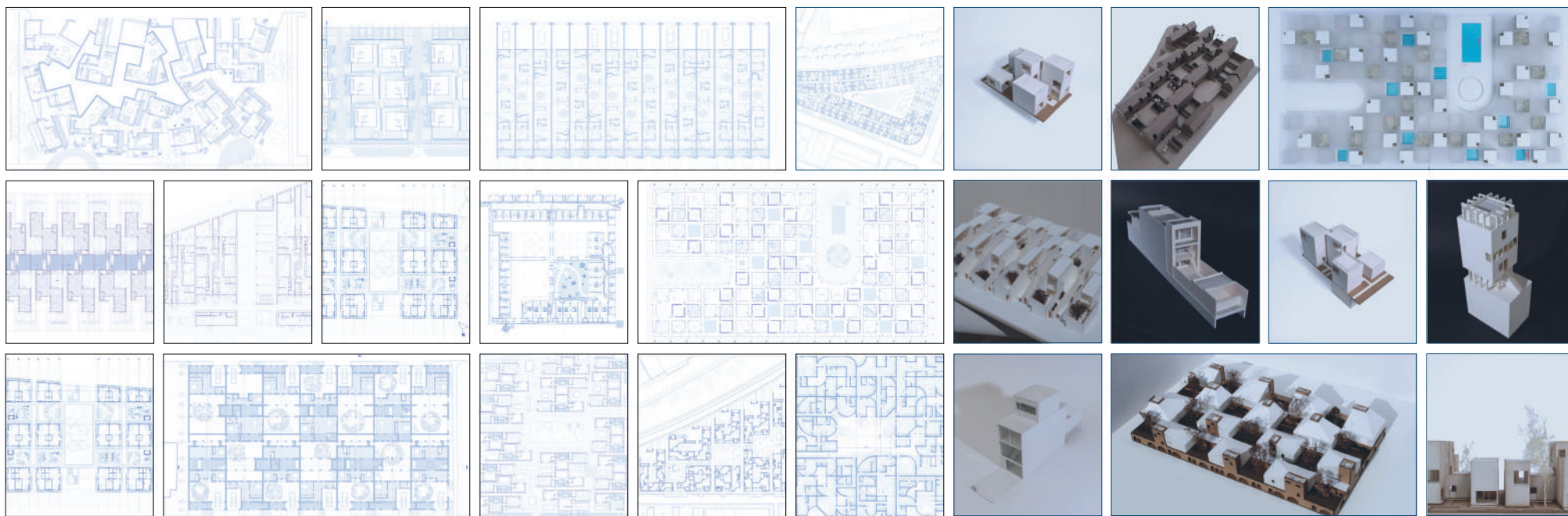
### **Students:**

Winn G. Chen, Kirsten Stray-Gundersen, Michelle Powell, Stella Coble, Ezra Wu, Juan Acosta, Gable Bostic, Kendall Fleisher, Dylan Treleven, Dylan King,

Elijah Montez, Brenden Murphy, Bradley Jury, Emily Andrews, Tatiana Baglioni, Andre Boudreaux, Joseph Rocha, Aubry Klingler, Jacob Middleton, Andrew Helmbrecht, Taylor Luehr, Ian Beals, Guopeng Chen, Krishnan Lal Mistry, Allison Walvoord, Lexi Benton, Amaya Lucas, Italia Aguilera, Iuliia Tombovtseva, Hannah GeorgFredricks, Jessica Chen, Rebecca Gawron, Paul Hazelet, Amelia Mickelsen,

Sean Reynolds, Marcos Crane, Benito Martinez, Haley Lundquist, Daniel Alvarez, Stephen McCann, Claire Greene, Ashley Skidmore, John Stenzel, Margaret Bunke, Zeke Jones, Stephanie Almdares, Arlene Ellwood, Caitlin Crozier, Crystal Torres, Yuqing Wang, Aparna C. Rajan, Kai Liu, Ashwini Munji

## Part 1 - Exhibit



### Exhibition Panel Layout

*Curated as sets of related representations rather than individual projects, the work revealed the wide range of possible solutions offered by the malleable medium-density housing range.*

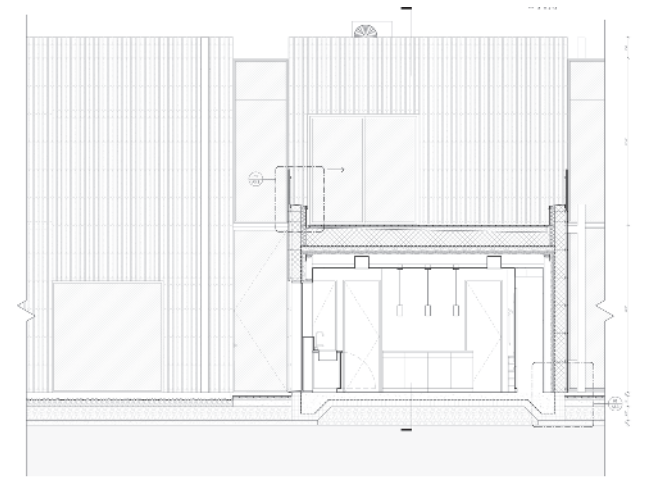
The organizing principle of the exhibit was to group projects by type of representation rather than as comprehensive individual projects—to enable an understanding of the work on housing as a category of urbanism with common traits and differences.

Projects appeared as a range of possibilities in plan, section, or model, rather than finite spatial entities, wrapping around the exhibit space. The inclusion of student work in the exhibit contributed to the students' sense of ownership and excitement about the event, as they un-

derstood their work to be a valuable contribution to the discourse on housing that could be viewed alongside the work they had studied as precedents and discussed with symposium participants.

# Part 1 - Exhibit

## Samples of Exhibited Student Work



### Student Project

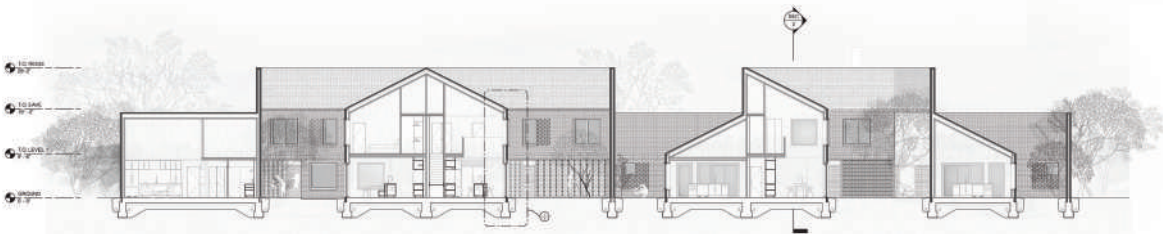
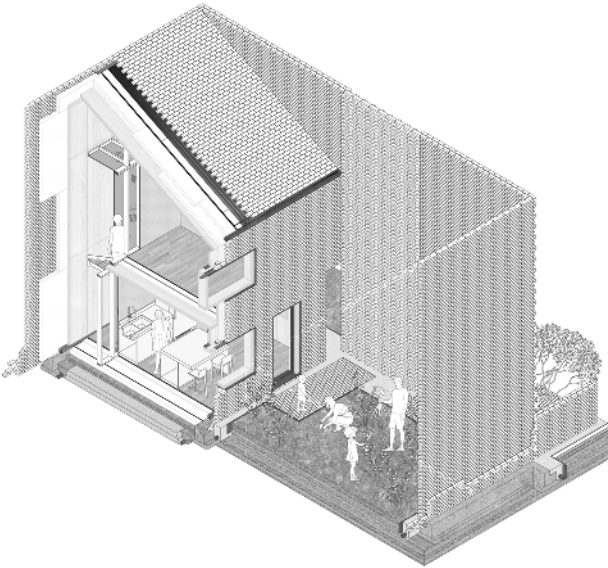
Kendall Fleisher & Dylan Treleven

Advanced Integrative Studio, Fall 2022

Instructor: Martin Hättasch

# Part 1 - Exhibit

Samples of Exhibited Student Work



**Student Project**  
Marcos Crane & Benito Martinez  
Advanced Integrative Studio, Fall 2022  
Instructor: Martin Hättasch



## Part 2 - Symposium

The Radical Middle Grounds symposium was held on November 10, 2023 at The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture. Advancing the spirit of postwar experimentation rather than its forms, the symposium brought together leading scholars and practitioners from a variety of disciplines such as economics, architecture, history, and urban design for a day of presentations, debate, and exchange with local audiences. Participants explored housing as a vector for the transformation of existing norms and established biases, centered around three middle grounds: “Between Unit and City,” “Between Politics and Form,” and “Between Typology and Invention.” By speculating on and experimenting within this “middle ground” (both in terms of housing types and the middle grounds between disciplines), the symposium contributed to enabling this space to eventually emerge as a new epicenter that can support innovative housing solutions in response to the housing crises we face today.

<https://soa.utexas.edu/news/symposium-explores-medium-density-housing>

### Collaborators & Funding:

The program was organized by Assistant Professor Martin Hättasch and the Center for American Architecture and Design (CAAD), with funding support from the Urban Design Program’s Sinclair Black Endowed Chair in the Architecture of Urban Design.



The poster features a large, stylized graphic of a city grid in shades of green and white. The title "Radical Middle Grounds" is prominently displayed in the center. Below the graphic, the text reads: "New Agendas for Medium-Density Housing", "Friday, November 10, 2023", "Mebane Gallery, Goldsmith Hall". At the bottom, it lists the organizing institutions: "The University of Texas at Austin, Center for American Architecture and Design, School of Architecture".

**10:00 a.m.**  
Opening Remarks

**10:30 a.m.**  
Between Unit and City:  
Housing as Urbanism  
*Dean J. Almy*  
*Scott Colman*  
moderated by Liang Wang

**Noon**  
Break

**1:00 p.m.**  
Between Politics and Form:  
Housing as Process  
*Marc Norman*  
*Susanne Schindler*  
moderated by Jake Wegmann

**2:00 p.m.**  
Break

**3:00 p.m.**  
Between Typology  
and Invention:  
Housing as Design  
*Neeraj Bhatia*  
*Brian Phillips*  
moderated by Martin Hättasch

**4:45 p.m.**  
Discussion

This symposium explores housing beyond the established extremes of (suburban) house and (urban) apartment as an incubator for new forms of (co)habitation and urban morphology. Architects and scholars will come together to discuss housing as a middle ground between unit and city, between form and process, and between enduring typology and design invention. Their conversations will offer a preview into themes that will be further explored in the forthcoming book *Radical Middle Grounds*, edited by Martin Hättasch as part of the Center for American Architecture and Design's CENTER series.

This program is organized by the Center for American Architecture and Design, with support from the Urban Design Program's Sinclair Black Endowed Chair in the Architecture of Urban Design.

For additional information visit: [soa.utexas.edu/events/radical-middle-grounds](https://soa.utexas.edu/events/radical-middle-grounds)

**Symposium Poster and Program**  
*(image: Martin Hättasch, based on a drawing by Aubrey Klingler / Jacob T. Middleton)*

### Student Compensation:

2 students employed by CAAD supported this event through assistance with event promotion, day-of event support, and related administrative tasks. Their respective appointments were for 10 hours/week (a federal work-study position funded in part by CAAD) and

15 hours/week (a student technician position centrally funded by UT Austin), both for the duration of the fall 2023 semester (to support this and other CAAD activities).

## Part 2 - Symposium

The symposium was attended by students and faculty from all programs at the school, including Community and Regional Planning, Architecture, Urban Design, Landscape Architecture, and Interior Design. In addition, it served as a forum of exchange between members of the local architecture community and the academy. The event attracted particular attention from local advocacy groups (such as AIA Austin's Housing Design Advocacy Committee) involved in working with the City of Austin on reforming current restrictive single-family zoning practices, and the outside expertise of the presenters provided valuable insights on how to enable better housing practices.

### Speakers

- Dean J. Almy (The University of Texas at Austin)
- Neeraj Bhatia (California College of the Arts/The Open Workshop)
- Scott Colman (Rice University)
- Marc Norman (Schack Institute of Real Estate, NYU)
- Brian Phillips (Interface Studio Architects)
- Susanne Schindler (ETH Zürich/Harvard GSD)

### Moderators

Martin Hättasch, Liang Wang, Jake Wegmann



### Symposium Photographs

Left: Peiying Yang  
Right, top and bottom: Kelsey Stine

## Part 3 - Publication

The 194-page book *Radical Middle Grounds: New Agendas for Medium-Density Housing* was published as the twenty-fifth volume of the Center of American Architecture and Design's CENTER series in June 2024. The book expands the structure set up by the symposium in three sections that further develop an understanding of housing as a middle ground between unit and city, between form and process, and between enduring typology and design invention. With a total of nineteen contributors the publication brings together scholarly essays, projects, and buildings exploring these middle grounds.

<https://soa.utexas.edu/caad/caad-publications/center/center-25>

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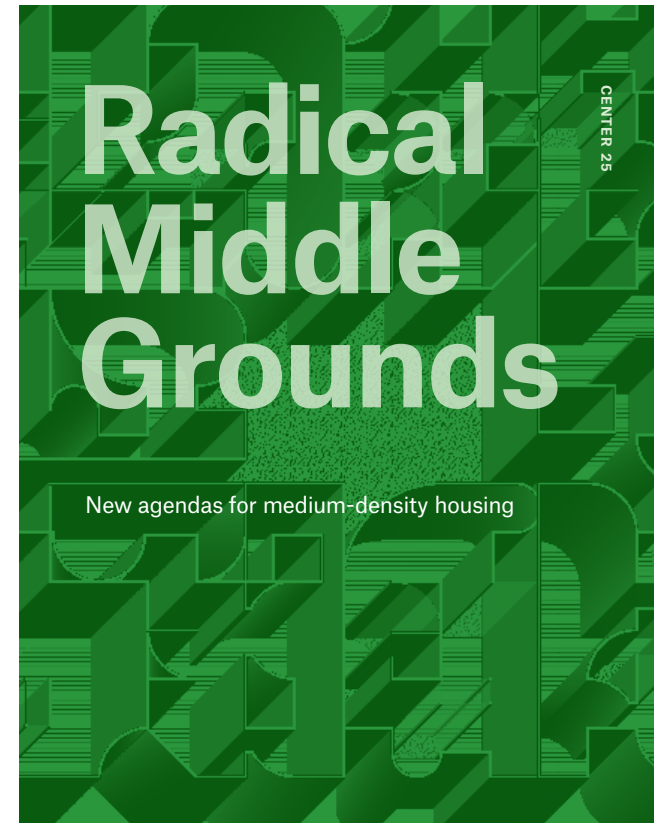
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### With Contributions by:

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Neeraj Bhatia  
Scott Colman  
French 2D  
Fernando García-Huidobro  
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Nelson Mota  
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Marc Norman  
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Brian Phillips  
Albert Pope  
PRODUCTORA  
James Michael Tate  
Russell N. Thomsen  
Rohan Varma  
Allison Walvoord

### Student Compensation:

2 students employed by the Center for American Architecture and Design (CAAD) supported this publication through editorial and administrative support. Their respective appointments were for 20 hours/week (a teaching assistant position centrally funded by UT Austin, summer 2022–spring 2023) and 15 hours/week (a student technician position centrally funded by UT Austin, fall 2023–spring 2024). These students are credited as Assistant Editors.



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*The book organizes contributions in three sections ("middle grounds") that explore particular opportunities and potentials. Projects are interspersed with essays, aiming at an organic flow rather than a categorical division between scholarship and practice.*



## Introduction: What Is the Middle Ground, Anyway?

Martin Hättasch

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### “What Is the Middle Ground, Anyway?”

That is the title and central question of a 2006 article by Harvard historian Philip J. Deloria<sup>1</sup> in which he revisits Richard White’s *The Middle Ground*,<sup>2</sup> a monumental cultural history of the interactions among Indigenous tribes and European settlers in the North American Great Lakes region. An admirer of White’s book, Deloria reflects on the use of the term “middle ground” and how, after reading the book, his own usage began almost imperceptibly to lose the nuance of White’s original meaning, and became a “general metaphor, a kind of watered-down idea about the mechanisms of compromise” with “everything . . . starting to turn into a middle ground.”<sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, neither White’s nor Deloria’s scholarship was on my mind during early discussions about how this book might frame issues of housing in today’s context. And I was certainly guilty of the same vagueness Deloria describes when I started to use the term to describe what I felt was lacking from discussions about housing that often take place in many specialized bubbles of expertise—in architecture and urbanism, but equally in technology, zoning, finance, policy, and planning. In my initial conversations with contributors there was nonetheless a strong intuition that a “middle ground” could mean more than mere compromise, more than a refusal to define one’s position, and more than a watering down of boundaries. Instead, it could signal a territory of negotiation and experimentation in its own right: a territory to explore the spatial and architectural opportunities of housing density beyond known binaries of the low-density “house” and the high-density “apartment”; to frame housing as a crucial link between how we live as individuals and what our cities look like; and to discover potential synergies among the many processes that generate housing. We had a sense that there was an emerging body of work already operating beyond established binaries of zoning versus design, apartment versus house, city versus architecture; a sense that, on middle grounds, a renewal of housing as a project of social, formal, and urban relevance was taking shape.

White himself describes the concept of the middle ground like this:

*On the middle ground diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings. People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the values and practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both the values and the practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices—the shared meanings and practices of the middle ground.*<sup>4</sup>

For White, the concept of the middle ground is all three of the following: a physical space (in his case, the territory of the Great Lakes), a chronological concept (such as the time between “the historical foreground of European invasion and occupation” and the background of native American “defeat and retreat”<sup>5</sup>), and, most importantly, a dialogic process of cultural production that can produce new meanings. Interestingly, these meanings are not produced through a process of compromise, but rather of creative misunderstanding, notably attempting to make sense of the other’s position from one’s own (limited) vantage point. For White, therefore, this process—precisely because it is flawed—ultimately allows “in-betweenness” to emerge as a “conceptual thread”<sup>6</sup> from which new and distinct (cultural) practices develop.

White’s triple-definition of the middle ground thus serves us not in terms of its subject matter—this book is not intended to connect the early period of interactions between European settlers and North American Indigenous tribes to today’s housing challenges, though an exploration of how colonial practices have affected the ways in which we look at real estate today in North America has merit as a project in its own right—but because it offers a uniquely comprehensive conceptual framework for what it means to operate on the middle ground. As a physical attribute, the middle ground in housing describes a density range that falls in between the large apartment block and the single-family house as well as the morphological consequences of this medium-density range; as a chronological concept it can help frame the evolution of these housing

types in practice and discourse; and as a dialogic process it encompasses the ways in which housing is generated today.

#### Missing Middle Ground

The idea to frame practices of housing through the notion of “in-betweenness” is not entirely new. In architecture and urbanism, the idea of “missing middle” housing was formulated from within the discourse of New Urbanism more than a decade ago. The concept builds upon the apt identification of a key problem that North America’s growing urban centers have been facing over the last decade, namely that housing has gravitated toward extremes: on the one hand, efforts at densification have sparked massive developments of multistory apartment blocks; on the other, the freestanding single-family house has remained the unchallenged ideal of many Americans to date. Nationwide, single-family homes continue to make up by far the largest share of housing while large multifamily structures have seen a steady increase over the last decade. This development has led to spatial and social disparities. And while multiunit structures have accelerated the urbanization of a few neighborhoods and corridors and cater to a transient population of young professionals, rising property values have made the “house” an increasingly unattainable dream for many middle-class families.

Against these extremes, missing middle housing proposes a density range between the apartment block and the single-family house, while at the same time alluding to the idea of a vanishing middle class. The missing middle promotes walkable neighborhoods with densities able to sustain

local amenities and businesses without sacrificing essential comforts of the single-family home. Gaining ground throughout planning departments across North America, the idea has been increasingly reflected in the rewriting of zoning codes.

But despite the groundwork being laid, the missing middle appears to be stuck in the inoffensive territory of compromise rather than—following White’s middle ground—building momentum toward new trajectories of practice. Its undeniable successes have been in calling attention to the underrepresented medium-density housing range between sprawling suburbs and dense urban apartment blocks or towers, as well as softening zoning restrictions that otherwise prevent anything but freestanding single-family houses from being built. But it has remained a project without a discourse. Current missing middle housing all too often remains entangled in a retrogressive formal agenda and the desire to create a simulacrum of a premodern city. The heavy-handed focus on typologies from the American interwar years (figure 1) prevalent in many New Urbanist interpretations of missing middle housing is often coupled with an unquestioned acceptance of the most economic customary construction techniques available today. Consequently, housing types are reduced to mere plug-in components, fundamentally divorced from their material nature, and from the climatic, social, and urban conditions that shaped their development. This dual predetermination of form and construction leaves little space for speculation on either end.

At the same time, an explicit desire to “fit in” to the cultural and symbolic space of existing inner-ring suburbs and a focus on retroactive



1. Historic example of missing middle housing: H. R. Albee Fourplex, Portland, 1917. Photograph by Ian Poellet via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albee\\_Fourplex\\_1\\_-\\_Irvington\\_HD\\_-\\_Portland\\_Oregon.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albee_Fourplex_1_-_Irvington_HD_-_Portland_Oregon.jpg)

densification—often in already gentrifying neighborhoods—follows the existing market-driven logic of housing production. In turn, the gap between attractive and walkable inner-ring suburbs and the continued outward land grab of affordable peripheries is further cemented in this supply-and-demand logic. With some exceptions, missing middle housing in its current manifestations rarely questions the persistence of the nuclear family unit as the basic building block of housing, thereby implicitly catering to a specific and limited demographic and lifestyle. Simply put, the missing middle as commonly defined and promoted today has opened up an important middle ground for housing and urbanism, but has stopped short of providing either the discursive depth or practical imagination to build on it.

#### Radical Experimentation: A Modernist Legacy

All but absent from today’s discourse on missing middle housing is the rich legacy of modernist experimental housing that explored the

middle ground between house and apartment, both as a typological experiment and a radical way of rethinking the relationship between individual, collective, and city. The period from the 1950s to early 1970s saw an explosion of experimental housing projects built across Europe and North America. Many were the result of an unprecedented postwar economic boom combined with the optimism of a progressive social agenda. At the same time, many of these housing projects were conceived as a disciplinary counter model to the aging prewar modernist doctrine of the Functional City laid out by the *Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) in 1933. Voicing discontent with the dogmatic approach of CIAM’s old guard, a young generation of architects—several from within CIAM ranks—sought to replace both the functional segregation of the city into distinct zones (living, working, leisure, and transport) and the freestanding object building (often referred to as the modernist “tower in the park”) with an integrated spatial and (infra)structural framework

for occupation that could accommodate a variety of uses and move fluidly between unit, cluster, and city scales. Prolifically explored in Europe—for example by the members of Team 10, a loosely organized avant-garde group that emerged out of CIAM<sup>7</sup>—these projects sought inspiration beyond the classic modernist canon of abstraction: George Candilis and Shadrach Woods, working in Morocco as part of the ATBAT-Afrique group (a branch of Le Corbusier’s *Atelier des bâtisseurs* formed in 1947), took inspiration from the North African vernacular and its courtyard typologies, while Alison Smithson coined the term “mat” building to describe expansive low-rise clusters of dense urban fabric that organized space and (infra)structure as a continuous matrix of habitable space. In the Netherlands, meanwhile, figures such as Aldo van Eyck focused on in-between spaces and threshold conditions, and conceived projects such as his Amsterdam orphanage with the conviction that one ought to “make of each house a small city and of each city a large house.”<sup>8</sup>



2. Early example of innovative medium-density housing: Horatio West Court Apartments by Irving John Gill, 140 Hollister Street, Santa Monica, Los Angeles County, 1919–1922. Photograph by Marvin Rand. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Historic American Buildings Survey, HABS CAL, 19-SANMO,1-; <https://www.loc.gov/item/cao298/>

In North America, this legacy goes back to architects such as Irving Gill (figure 2) and Rudolph Schindler, who formulated unique architectural responses to the accelerating urbanization of the Los Angeles area in the first half of the twentieth century. Centered around the collective cluster scale of grouped units, and in Schindler's case often fully embracing the emerging automobile culture, these early projects simultaneously acknowledge and counteract the realities of the anonymous sprawling metropolis. In 1947, Gregory Ain created the first co-op-style housing models with his Avenel development (figures 3 and 4), setting the tone for a lineage of projects that explored alternative processes of collaboration to bring housing into existence: New York's Marcus Garvey Park Village, completed in 1976, is an ambitious collaboration between the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies and the York State Urban Development Corporation whose lessons have only in recent years begun to be reevaluated, while the Sun-Tech Condos in Santa Monica (1981) offer an example of

the developer-architect partnerships that, along the way, creatively subvert existing zoning restrictions.

As transatlantic architectural discourse became firmly established following World War II, many experimental schemes were built as public housing projects—often directly influenced by the European discourse of Team 10 and others, such as Werner Seligman's Elm Street housing complex in Ithaca (1972) as an interpretation of Atelier 5's Siedlung Halen in Bern (1957–1961) or Louis Sauer's public work in Philadelphia (figure 5). At the same time, scholars such as Serge Chermayeff sought to both refine the conceptual underpinnings of *Community and Privacy*<sup>9</sup> and advance substantial research into how specific housing types could respond to the needs of different user groups.

#### Radical Middle Grounds

The breadth and depth of the housing experiments undertaken during the post-WWII period provide us with an instructive template for a housing practice that searches for

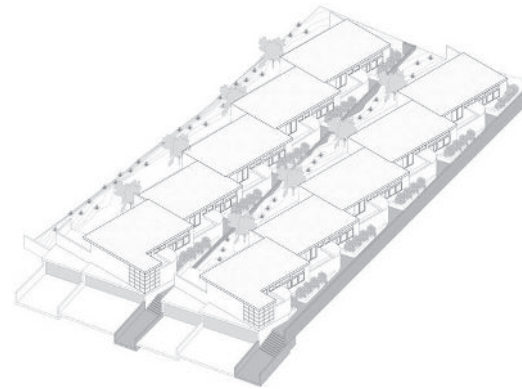
radical design solutions beyond the status quo through a rigorous engagement with social and technical challenges and opportunities. Despite the differences in context, and regardless of individual project successes or failures, the body of work that emerged during this period operates within several productive middle grounds. It frequently addresses the medium-density or the low-rise, high-density (LRHD) spectrum of housing, and should therefore be taken seriously when considering the missing middle range today. Crucially, architects of the 1960s recognized that the unit always prefigures a (possible) city, and the smallest domestic space begins to suggest attitudes toward the relationship between individuals, architecture, and the city; and therefore housing is inevitably a problem of urbanism. The almost infinite spatial and organizational malleability of the in-between density range still offers value today: at the unit level it can accommodate the changing needs of an increasingly diverse population beyond the nuclear family; at the cluster scale it can suggest

new forms of collectivity; and at the urban scale it can generate alternative morphologies for areas of urbanization no longer defined by a traditional city/suburb dichotomy. While the postwar architectural discourse on housing may have been far from what would be considered "interdisciplinary" by today's standards, it nevertheless hinged on the realization that housing is a process that involves a range of expertise and constituents, and whose outcome is always open-ended and cannot be "solved" by a single typology,

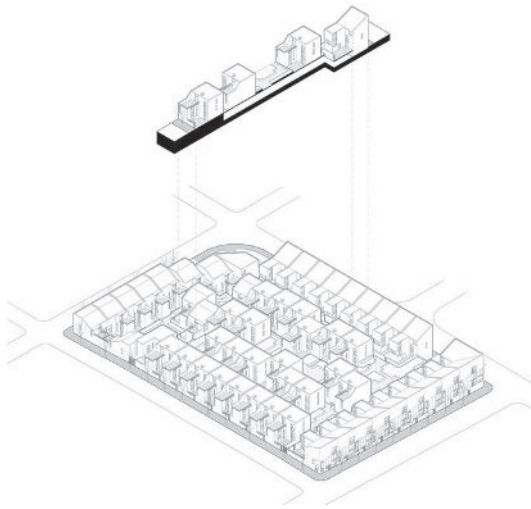
zoning constraint, or financial model. Consequently, it would be naive to think that forms of housing that originated in the 1960s could simply be transferred to today's economic, regulatory, ecological, and social environment, just as it would be to assume that typologies from the interwar years can successfully reshape cities today.

Building upon the lineage of postwar housing experimentation, this volume of CENTER brings together projects, practices, and scholarship that advance the spirit

of these projects rather than their form. The middle ground it proposes is multi-layered: At a basic level, all projects and essays in this volume explore housing as an alternative to the binaries of the suburban house and the high-density apartment building, and squarely fall into the missing middle range of about ten to thirty-five units per acre. More important than density as a number, however, is that all contributions resist both the fetishization of urban density as well as the idealization of historic vernaculars, and instead



3, 4. Toward a new process: Avenel Cooperative Housing Project by Gregory Ain, Los Angeles, 1947. Top: Drawing by Stephen Crews and Samantha Gilk. Bottom: Photograph by Kansas Sebastian via Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0: [https://www.flickr.com/photos/kansas\\_sebastian/4651758738/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/kansas_sebastian/4651758738/).



5. Toward a new morphology: Penn's Landing Square by Louis Sauer, Philadelphia, 1968. Drawing by Maria Berrios, Andres Mendoza, and Mila Santana.

establish the medium-density range as the physical middle ground for the exploration of organization, form, morphology, or process. At a conceptual level, the middle ground reveals a series of intersections where unit and city scale, collective product and collaborative process, and convention and invention come together, allowing the reader to understand each author's position as part of an open-ended discourse.

Section one, *Between Building and City: Housing as Urbanism*, turns to authors and projects concerned with the reciprocity between the smallest spatial unit of housing and the broader form of the city as a direct reflection of how we live and interact, and with the resulting morphologies as an embodiment of our ecological, economical, and social values.

Section two, *Between Form and Process: New Collective Agendas*, examines housing as a project that involves a multitude of participants and constituents, whether directly reflected in spatial layouts to address changing attitudes toward collective space or as collaborative processes by which housing is created.

Section three, *Between Permanence and Reinvention: Longevity and Adaptation*, poses the question of how housing models evolve, adapt, and change over time. Authors and projects in this section explore the productive tension between evolution and innovation in housing typologies, address notions of adaptability, and trace the persistence of discursive trajectories.

Each section assembles scholarly essays, projects, and reflections by designers, architects, historians,

and theorists who explore housing as a vector for transformation of existing norms and established biases. Some contributions are loud and polemic, others subtle; some are steeped in a degree of realism while others aim to forcefully break down established binaries with little concern for feasibility. All, however, embrace an ethos of speculation and experimentation that ultimately let the middle ground emerge as a new epicenter, and generate "new shared meanings" and "new practices," to return to Richard White's compelling definition. Attentive to the processes that establish the middle ground as a gray area of projections, misreadings, and "creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings,"<sup>10</sup> the work presented here maintains a precarious balance between disciplinary expertise and engagement

with the demands on housing set forth from outside the discipline.

Contributors enter this gray area knowingly and are not afraid to make leaps of faith to translate findings into the language of their field: Neeraj Bhatia's prototypical spatial plans distill complex sets of demographic information down to legible spatial diagrams which become relatable and inhabitable visions of what architectural consequences *could be*, while Peter Barber treats an entire city like an architectural object. Conversely, they let disciplinary concepts become muddled in everyday processes outside of the disciplinary comfort zone, for instance when James Michael Tate takes the constructivist linear city to the College Station suburbs to wrest moments of collectivity from housing subdivisions.

They create discursive middle grounds on the very pages of this publication, as when Marc Norman deconstructs and reconstructs Allison Waalvord and Krishnan Lal Mistry's speculative Urban Village project through the lens of finance and policy. They engage in feedback loops and evaluations of reevaluations, as in the case of Russell Thomsen revisiting his own practice's iconic *Re: American Dream* proposal as a mirror of urban change in Los Angeles. They de- and re-contextualize bodies of work, as when Scott Colman and Albert Pope reinvent Ludwig Hilberseimer's "equivalent city" as a counterargument to today's New Urbanist missing middle discourse. They turn colonial practices on their head as in the case of Nelson Mota and Rohan Varma questioning what we can learn from "sites-and-services" strategies in low-income, non-western contexts.

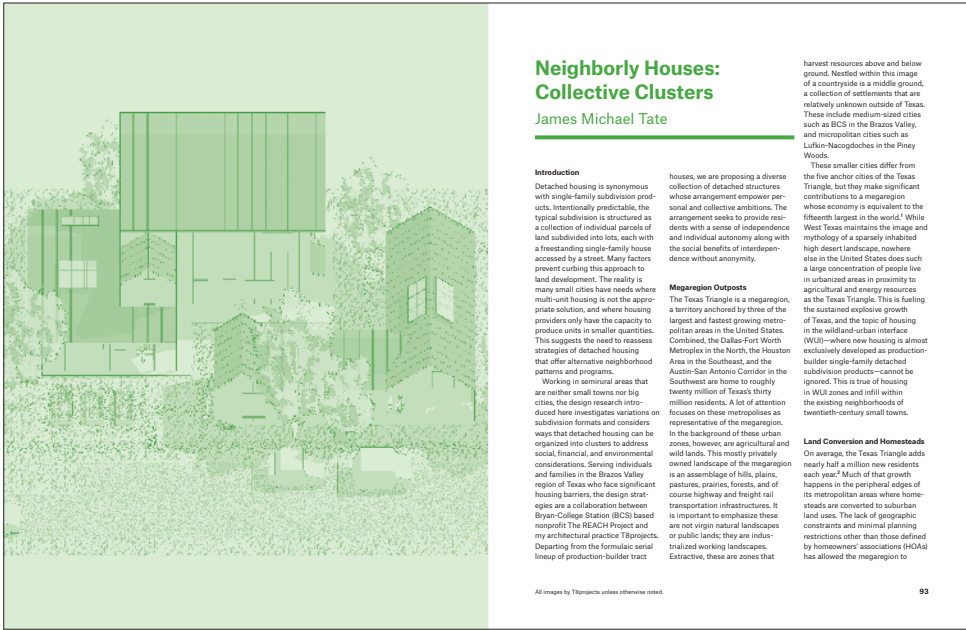
They set up theoretical frameworks—like Chris Masahiko Moyer's consideration of models of spatial and economic sharing—which are then demonstrated through relevant projects: PRODUCTORA pushes the boundaries of spatial sharing on a suburban Denver lot, while French 2D builds community through both process and form. They transform meticulous research into grand visions, like Dean Almy reinventing Austin, Texas, as a medium-density archipelago, but their research just as meticulously documents how change over time transforms these visions, like Fernando Garcia Huidobro revisiting the modernist housing development of PREVI. Finally, they throw Aldo Rossi for a loop as they push housing typologies to unprecedented outcomes: Brian Phillips and Deb Katz of ISA wrangle with codes, impossible sites, and economic imperatives to create skinny lofts and stack town houses on top of big-box stores.

Taken together, it is our hope that *Radical Middle Grounds* begins to point toward possible futures for a discourse on the increasingly relevant missing middle housing range: a discourse that embraces design speculation but does not shy away from the specifics of real-world conditions; a discourse that does not claim to have all the solutions; a discourse that is aware of its own history but is not self-serving; a discourse that neither insists on disciplinary purity nor preemptively declares disciplinary boundaries obsolete; and a discourse that is willing to suspend those boundaries where needed in the service of better agendas for housing in the twenty-first century.

## Notes

- 1 Philip J. Deloria, "What Is the Middle Ground Anyway?," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 63, no. 1 (January 2006): 15–22.
- 2 Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Introduction, XXVI.
- 3 Deloria, 15.
- 4 White, XXVI.
- 5 White, XXVI.
- 6 Deloria, 17.
- 7 For a good discussion on the emergence of Team 10 from within CIAM, see Eric Mumford's *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928–1960* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000) or Max Risselada and Dirk van den Heuvel, eds., *Team 10, 1953–1981: In Search of a Utopia of the Present* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2005).
- 8 Aldo van Eyck, "A Step towards a Configurative Discipline," *Forum* 16, no. 2 (1962): 82.
- 9 Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander, *Community and Privacy: Toward a New Architecture of Humanism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963).
- 10 White, XXVI.





## Neighborly Houses: Collective Clusters

James Michael Tate

**Introduction**  
Detached housing is synonymous with single-family subdivision products. Intentionally predictable, the typical subdivision is a structure to produce a collection of individual parcels of land subdivided into lots, each with a freestanding single-family house accessed by a street. Many factors prevent curbing this approach to land development. The reality is many small cities have needs where multi-unit housing is not the appropriate solution, and where housing providers only have the capacity to produce units in smaller quantities. This suggests the need to reassess strategies of detached housing that offer alternative neighborhood patterns and programs.

Working in seminal areas that are either small or medium-sized cities, the design research introduced here investigates variations on subdivision formats and considers ways that detached housing can be organized into clusters to address social, financial, and environmental considerations. Serving individuals and families in the Brazos Valley region of Texas who face significant housing barriers, the design strategies are a collaboration between Bryan College Station (BCS) based nonprofit The REACH Project and my architectural practice, 3Bprojecks. Departing from the formalistic serial lineup of production/individual tract

houses, we are proposing a diverse collection of detached structures whose arrangement empowers personal and collective ambitions. The REACH Project seeks to provide residents with a sense of independence and individual autonomy along with the social benefits of interdependence without anonymity.

**Metropolitan Outposts**  
The Texas Triangle is a megalopolis, a territory anchored by three of the largest and fastest growing metropolitan areas in the United States. Combined, the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex in the North, the Houston Area in the Southeast, and the Austin-San Antonio Corridor in the Southwest are home to roughly twenty million of Texas's thirty million residents. A lot of attention focuses on these metropolises as representative of the megalopolis. In the background of these urban zones, however, are agricultural and wild lands. This mostly privately owned landscape of the megalopolis is an assemblage of hills, plains, pastures, prairies, forests, and of course highway and freight rail transportation infrastructure. It is important to emphasize these are not virgin natural landscapes or public lands; they are industrialized working landscapes. Extractive, these are zones that

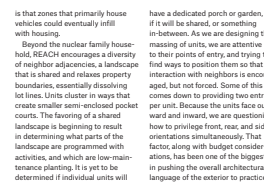
harvest resources above and below ground. Nestled within this image of a countryside is a middle ground, a collection of settlements that are relatively unknown outside of Texas. These include medium-sized cities such as BCS in the Brazos Valley, and metropolitan cities such as Lufkin-Nacogdoches in the Piney Woods.

These smaller cities differ from the five anchor cities of the Texas Triangle, but they make significant contributions to a megalopolis whose economy is equivalent to the REACH Project in the work world. West Texas maintains the image and mythology of a sparsely inhabited high desert landscape, nowhere else in the United States does such a large concentration of people live in urbanized areas in proximity to agricultural and energy resources as the Texas Triangle. This is fueling the sustained explosive growth of Texas, and the topic of housing in the wildland-urban interface (WUI)—where new housing is almost exclusively developed as production-builder single-family detached subdivision products—cannot be ignored. This is true of housing trends in the wildland-urban interface of twentieth-century small towns.

**Land Conversion and Homesteads**  
On average, the Texas Triangle adds nearly half a million new residents each year. Much of that growth happens in the peripheral edges of its metropolitan areas where home-owning is converted to suburban land uses. The lack of geographic constraints and minimal planning, which are low-maintenance planning. It is yet to be determined if individual units will



3. The collection of housing units within the proposed project organized based on site and formal characteristics.



4. The working site model is actively used at public meetings to show collective arrangement of detached units.

is that zones that primarily house vehicles could eventually infill with housing. Beyond the nuclear family household, REACH encourages a diversity of neighbor agencies, a landscape that is shared and relaxes property boundaries, essentially dissolving lot lines. Units cluster in ways that create smaller semi-enclosed pocket courts. The favoring of a shared landscape is beginning to result in determining what parts of the landscape are programmed with activities, and which are low-maintenance planting. It is yet to be determined if individual units will

have a dedicated porch or garden, if it will be shared, or something in-between. As we are designing the meaning of units, we are attentive to their points of entry, and trying to find ways to position them so that interaction with neighbors is encouraged, but not forced. Some of this comes down to providing two entries per unit. Because the units face outward, we are questioning how to privilege front, rear, and side orientations simultaneously. This choice, along with budget considerations, has been one of the biggest in pushing the overall architectural language of the exterior to practice

restraint, and allow difference and nuance to emerge through the arrangement of units. Each cluster block along the street works with the same basic building blocks but arranges them into different combinations. This should not be confused with each cluster having the same equal parts redistributed. While all clusters have a mix of households, and attempt to be equitable, some have more individuals. This decision was made because the same set of units on each block, rearranged differently, still resulted in each cluster being

too similar. Also, as the site conditions become swamped, there is less building footprint and more open landscape. These decisions are not determined by data, but rather are attempts to explore different formal arrangements and programmatic dynamics that promote different notions of individuals and collectives across the intervention. Some clusters are intended to be very intimate, almost an enclosed courtyard; others are an assemblage of means—being modest and generous, we say, REACH's programs, the realities of making the project move from vision to reality, is dependent on being consistent to a price point significantly less than the average house on the market. Different from the existing builder products, the proposed houses need to consider the long-term costs of maintaining and operating a house. Recognizing that, efficiencies in layout and form construction are important. Each house negotiates open and enclosed

spaces. Avoiding corridors, jack-and-jill bathrooms, and service cores helps with organizational design decisions. All houses will have some scale of entry or porch that establishes connections that prevent isolation and promote social bonds. Roof geometries are governed by pitches to utilize it performatively and to produce gestures that subtly express character. Scale of cladding, size of windows, depth of sashes, thickness, gutters, articulation of surfaces—utilitarian things are becoming modularized as the design develops to help gain efficiencies in building construction. As the avenues, we are beginning to study ways that some detached units can become non-symmetrical duplexes or have a party-wall face, edge, or corner with a neighboring unit. That recent development is also allowing us to keep the number of people

All images by 3Bprojecks unless otherwise credited.



## Hierarchy and Equivalence in Urban Reform

Scott Colman and Albert Pope

**Ecology of the Tract**  
This edition of CENTER puts forward the general problem of "medium-density" housing with the ambition to consider housing typologies overlooked by advocates of the "missing middle." Our response to the problem of a missing middle questions the polarizing approach by which this middle is defined. In that approach, with regard to urban form, a single, high-density center and a sprawling, low-density periphery are used to define a medium density in between. In terms of architectural form, the poles are defined by the dense mid- and high-rise buildings of the urban core and the detached, single-family house of the periphery. The "missing middle" is conceived to bridge this gap.

It is no surprise that the neo-traditionalist school of New Urbanism finds the notion of the "missing middle" compelling. Although the idea that cities have a center and a periphery is widely held, New Urbanists seem particularly committed to maintaining the traditional city's monocentric hierarchy. Fundamental to their orthodoxy is an analytical methodology that imagines a sectional line—a "transverse"—extending through the urban field from the dense and tall historic core of the city to the dispersed and low-rise urban edge. The intent of the transverse is to establish a mean density

in relation to which any increase in density can be defined as a contribution to urbanism and resistance to the problem of contemporary sprawl. While the efforts of New Urbanists to increase the density of the city are progressive, the modesty of the increase and its restricted location make their approach profoundly conservative. Historically, the middle of North American cities is built out with the row houses, duplexes, and courtyard apartments that emerged with the streetcar suburbs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Determined by its spatial history, advocates of the "missing middle" envision these historical typologies mediating the polarities of center and periphery. They advertise these mid-rise historic types as an alternative to Manhattan at the core and Houston at the periphery. But these historical models produce something quite different from the contemporary urban context. They are no longer higher density dwellings built for working class families. The New Urbanist "missing middle" gentrifies the inner suburbs of North American cities. This is the consequence of the urbanization that has taken place since the inner suburbs were built. The patchwork of detached-suburban grids constituting the inner suburbs is now dwarfed in scale by a surrounding ocean of

low-rise suburban development. This low-rise development, built since the 1950s, is characterized by a spine-based—or cur-de-sac—type of urban organization (Figure 1). The development created a new profile for the tract. The existing tract is no longer an even density gradient; it starts out high, then immediately drops, flat as a pancake. Instead of forming a triangle, the contemporary tract takes the shape of a hockey stick. The middle ground of a hockey stick profile is a very small portion of the city, the cusp between the core and the periphery. The focus on the historic typologies of the inner suburbs suggests the "middle ground" reformers are less concerned with a crisis in housing than with a privileged notion of "choice." For those at the high end, there is a genuine comfort in choosing to live in a simpler past. But a moderate increase in the density of the North American city's historic grid will do little to address the housing shortage or reduce the supercharged carbon consumption of our sprawling cities. By taking up historic housing types and focusing on the urban middle ground, this densification strategy turns its back on the vast expanse of suburbia and its increasingly diverse, predominantly working-class inhabitants.

In part, this blindness to the extent and diversity of the contemporary city is a consequence of suburban condition itself. Suburbanism is intended, inevitably, by spine-based, cur-de-sac urbanism. Indeed, the myths underwriting the suburbs have "working class" as their intended inhabitants to not think of themselves as "working class." In the dispersed Suburban Grid condition, there is a lingering symptom of belief in manifest destiny, a faith inextricable

for single-family typologies, each ground-story house with its own private garden, that attain densities of "80, 40, and 20 persons per acre" the latter to allow for large areas of private vegetable gardens (Figure 6). In 1951, Hilberseimer saw no need for Chicago to have a higher density than it did. "There is no reason to increase it any further," the report states. "At such a density it is possible to have large apartment buildings, single family houses and row houses of one and two stories." His primary concern was the reorganization of dwelling for equality and choice. Hilberseimer could not have envisioned the catastrophic consequences of low urban densities on our climate, but he could have easily

solved them within the bounds of his urban project. With respect to both expectations for space and consumption of land, his ideas may yet prove applicable. His proposal—with typological variety, a mix of uses, and sustainable densities—now seem like a magical feat of design. We have become so accustomed to the commodified uniformity and inefficient logic of the postwar suburb that the wide streets, front gardens, exorbitant setbacks, large houses, and oversized lots of North American settlement seem natural and something of a right. His denser single-family schemes—less specific masterplans than templates for invention—make clear that we can radically increase the density of our cities to reduce our carbon footprint while increasing

housing choice and affordability. And we can do so across the entire city, not just in the inner ring.

**Suburban Density and the Housing Problem**  
There is today, as there was in Hilberseimer's day, an enormous gap between what we can imagine and what we can produce. In the near future, this gap will have to close. Climatic disruptions and growing inequality are calling into question the exorbitant land use and energy-intensive lifestyles of our present mode of urbanization. The inflated expectations accompanying present urbanization have shifted the housing market toward the upper end of the income

spectrum and diminished the proportion of affordable housing stock. Moreover, the pressures on land are only increasing. We not only face the problem of limiting the consumption of land by housing, not least to limit urban sprawl and reduce growth in carbon emissions from private transportation and construction, we also face the problems of maintaining arable land for food production (which is declining in productivity with climate change) of mitigating the effects of climate change, such as flooding, and of producing and transporting clean energy. Although the scenarios vary, in any version of a sustainable future, the scale of this undertaking is mind boggling. We should be acutely conscious of the fact that we are solving the wrong problem. Massive investment in clean energy and battery technology is largely necessary because of the high energy consumption of the North American suburbs.

By regulating development according to the logic of equalization, we can consolidate our cities into denser—low-rise, high-rise, or mid-rise—settlements. The notion that we should simply accept the density of the existing North American city, limit our vision to the inner suburbs of our cities, or accept century-old typologies is self-defeating. We desperately need to increase the density of our cities, the freedom to invent new housing types, and the opportunity to put those types into an appropriate relationship, ecologically integrated with the landscape, at a local (sub-metropolitan) scale, across the city as a whole.



6. Density studies for single-family housing at "80, 40, and 20 persons per acre." Figure 10 in Ludwig Hilberseimer, et al., Plan of Chicago, 1929, vol. 1, board report. Ludwig Hilberseimer Papers, Papers and Booklets Series, Art Institute of Chicago.

- Notes**
- Ludwig Hilberseimer, "Flachbau und Flächbauwesen," Moderne Bauformen 1920:475.
  - See, for example, Hilberseimer, "Flachbau und Flächbauwesen," 476-78 and Ludwig Hilberseimer, "Flachbau und Flächbauwesen," Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung mit Zeitschrift für Bauwesen 51, nos. 53-54 (1921):772-77.
  - "The practical realization of these findings for the area being all located for building regulations, essential the distance of construction into dense (with differing requirements)... Eventually determined for the area (with varying intensity of use) in the park mode of land exploitation." Hilberseimer, "Flachbau und Flächbauwesen," 478.
  - See the section "Density" in Ludwig Hilberseimer et al., Plan of Chicago, June 1921, board report in the Ludwig Hilberseimer Papers, Papers and Booklets Series, Art Institute of Chicago, Series 6, Box 2, Folder 11.

## Sample Pages: Essays

Scholarly essays frame the discourse of each section. These essays are text-based contributions that delve into an issue in depth to advance the understanding of a particular set of ideas within the editorial framework of the radical middle ground.

Top left and right: "Neighborly Houses: Collective Clusters" by James Michael Tate. Bottom left and right: "Hierarchy and Equivalence in Urban Reform" by Scott Colman and Albert Pope.

## Housing Forms for New Family Forms

### Neeraj Bhatia

Year

2022

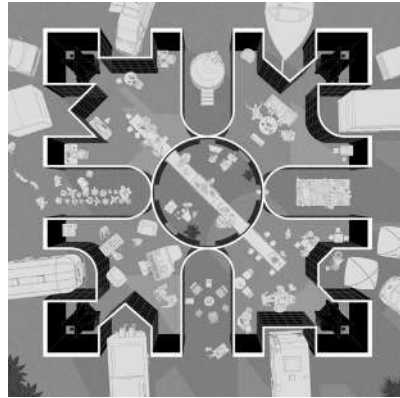
Program  
Residential / single unit

Size

Varies

Project team and collaborators

Design Team: Neeraj Bhatia and Dey Nguyen, THE OPEN WORKSHOP  
Commissioned by Andrew Bruno, One House Per Day



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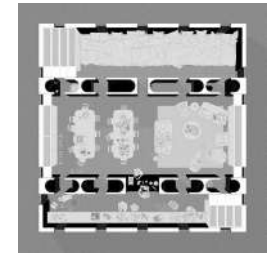
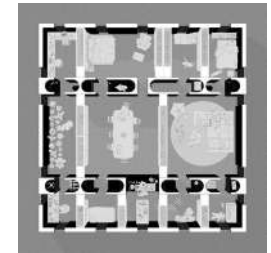
socialized with particular hierarchies and roles, whereas the latter need to establish protocols for governance.” Through an ongoing process of working together, negotiating, and organizing, found families employ commoning practices to deem what is to be named, valued, used, and symbolized in common.<sup>2</sup> Not only does this provide more agency for found families to define their own way of life, it recognizes that these family forms are continually evolving. Given the deeply entrenched regime of private property that commodifies the single-family home and its land, it is no surprise that little development effort has been afforded to found families. Despite the radical potential for domestic experimentation in found families, many occupancy structures that emerged for the nuclear family—as such, their forms often attempt to stabilize familial relationships while separating and individuating members within space.

The expansion of the legal definition of family needs to be complemented with housing forms that seek not to individuate the family members and reaffirm private property, but rather to acknowledge and support the evolutionary nature of new family forms, and their new forms of sharing and caring. New family forms are not commonly shaped according to received socialized hierarchies—their composition, organization, and structure are often designed and redesigned. This requires an architecture that enables different states of occupation and the reappropriation of space. The following houses challenge the single-family home by challenging the nuclear family itself, offering spaces that empower new family forms.

#### Notes

- 1 See for instance Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Stavroulaki Goulioti, “Familiar Homes: Toward a Concept of Domestic Spaces,” *Log* 38 (Fall 2018): 350–59.
- 2 David Briska, “The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake,” *The Atlantic*, March 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/the-nuclear-family-was-a-mistake/610202/>.
- 3 In its search for meaning, this issue of traditional families are increasingly able moving to multigenerational family structures to provide more support to the elderly while also providing shelter to a younger generation of professionals that are priced-out of the housing market. See Briska, “The Nuclear Family was a Mistake.”
- 4 Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (New York: London, 2022), 13.
- 5 Steven Staronick, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (ZED: London, 2016), 2–35.

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See 106. A Room for Everything: Part I. A unit, and mobile grid of walls, enclose domestic interventions that can be designed and redesigned to create a range of room sizes and adjacencies.

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## Bay State Cohousing

### French 2D

Year

2023

Location  
Malden, Massachusetts, United States

Program  
Residential / cohousing / thirty housing units (mix of studio, 1BR, 2BR, 3BR) and 5,000+ square feet of common spaces

Size  
48,700 square feet (living area: 33,500; underground garage: 15,200)

Project team and collaborators

Architect: French 2D, Boston; Jenny French, Anda French, AIA (partners); Estelle Yoon (summer intern)  
Associated Architect: Linda Neshamkin, AIA  
Structural Engineer: TFMoran  
MEP Engineer: Norian/Siani Engineering  
Civil Engineer: H.W. Moore Associates, a division of Hancock Associates  
Geotechnical Engineer: McPhail Associates  
General Contractor: Landmark Structures  
Landscape Architect: CBA Landscape Architects  
Development Consultant: Urban Cohousing  
Specifications: Putnam Associates  
Acoustical Consultant: Covanagh Tucci Associates  
Energy Consultant: ClearQuest  
Code Consultant: Commercial Construction Consulting

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1. Overview view: The building disorients away around a partially enclosed courtyard, stepping back and creating a vertical wall of commoning planting areas and outdoor social space that negotiates the site's topographical drop from front to back. Image: Nisha Kulkarni.

2. During open daily life, chance meetings and social encounters are enabled by the vertical interior of the semi-open courtyard forms, ensuring that each resident has a view to common space activities from their own floor above. Image: Nisha Kulkarni.

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Bay State Cohousing is a typology-challenging multifamily structure for a group of thirty households self-developing a community at the northern edge of Metropolitan Boston. Fit into a single form on a three-quarter-acre site, the project follows the cohousing model to balance communal and individual living. Each of the thirty units provides the amenities of a private home, while an ample “common house” program dispersed throughout the building also strengthens connections around shared spaces and resources. Key to this project is that the process of design parallels the process of building the community.

The building can be seen both as a single object and as a *heap*. It is a complex that layers multiple levels of public and private space and is intentionally not a scattering of buildings, which is the typical arrangement for many of the approximately 130 cohousing communities in the United States. Often rural or suburban, these communities sprinkle traditional single-family homes around a large common house of shared dining, cooking, and living spaces. On a tight site with strict zoning regulations, our consolidated approach instead allows for interwoven relationships between common spaces, individual apartments, and outdoor decks and gardens, all within a short walking distance to a major subway stop.

The design was developed through French 2D's own participatory design model, which is based on the belief that future residents have the capacity, and should have the agency, to make major decisions about the design of their living environment. Anda and Jenny incrementally cobuilt a vocabulary to connect visual and verbal descriptions to help future residents name their likes and dislikes. This model was carried out in two major workshops during each of the four design phases (visioning, concept, schematic and design development), and used defamiliarization techniques and alliance building through paired design conversations between members.

At the conclusion of the design development phase, the City of Malden amended their zoning regulations to explicitly prohibit buildings of four stories or greater in this zone. Without losing any program or relationships, French 2D redesigned the building in a two-month period to meet these new regulations. This quick redesign was only possible

## Sample Pages: Projects

Subtle variations in layout, graphic treatment, and fonts distinguish project-based contributions from essays. A goal was to fluidly integrate built and unbuilt work into the discursive context framed by the essays.

Top left and right: “Housing Forms for New Family Forms” by Neeraj Bhatia.  
Bottom left and right: “Bay State Cohousing” by French2D.

## Urban Village

### Krishnan Lal Mistry and Allison Walvoord

**Year**  
2018

**Location**  
Austin, Texas, United States

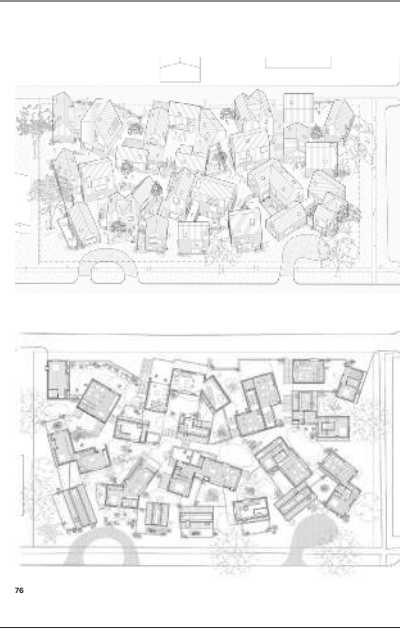
**Program**  
Residential / nineteen units

**Size**  
25,683 square feet

**Project team and collaborators**  
Krishnan Lal Mistry and Allison Walvoord, Assoc. AIA  
Studio instructor: Martin Hätsch, The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture



1. Exterior view. Spaces between units encourage interaction between the private and the collective realm.



2. Working paper, top: Urban Village bird's eye view. The assumed organization of "one unit equals one house" does not hold true in this scheme: a single unit may span several volumes, and, conversely, a single volume may accommodate several units.

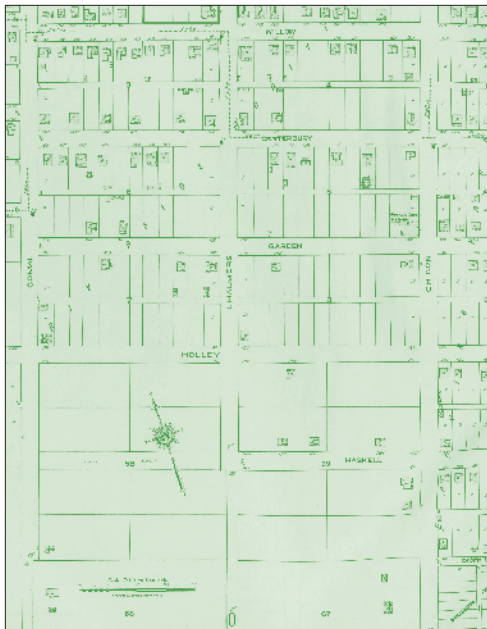
3. Working paper, bottom: Sectional floor plan.

All images by Krishnan Lal Mistry and Allison Walvoord.

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In Austin, Texas, as in most North American cities, the ideal of the free-standing house is inextricably tied to the idea of individual identity and in turn has been elevated to a planning doctrine under current building codes. In response, Urban Village takes "house-ness" to an extreme. A dense aggregation of self-similar objects on the site identify as "houses" at first sight and endorse the desire for formal and symbolic legibility of the private dwelling. Upon closer inspection, however, this assumed equation that "one unit equals one house" no longer holds true: a single unit may span several volumes, and, conversely, a single "house-volume" may accommodate several units. Living spaces interconnect in unexpected ways, presenting inhabitants with a wide variety of possible neighborly interactions reinforcing a comprehensive and shared identity through density and integration. Independent of their use as private patio or collective programs, the spaces between buildings effect a visual and physical connectedness that encourages moments of nearness in the community. The ground upon which the neighborhood unfolds is itself highly sculpted, generating sectional thresholds between collective and private spaces, and accommodating parking which is tucked under the living spaces and along the alley on the north side of the site. As a result, the community is legible at two scales: as a collection of individual objects and a single object that consists of many constituent parts. Urban Village thus oscillates between part and whole, affirming both individual expression and the presence of the collective in the city.



## Deconstructing and Reconstructing an Urban Village in the American Landscape

### Marc Norman

#### Why Can't We Have Nice Things?

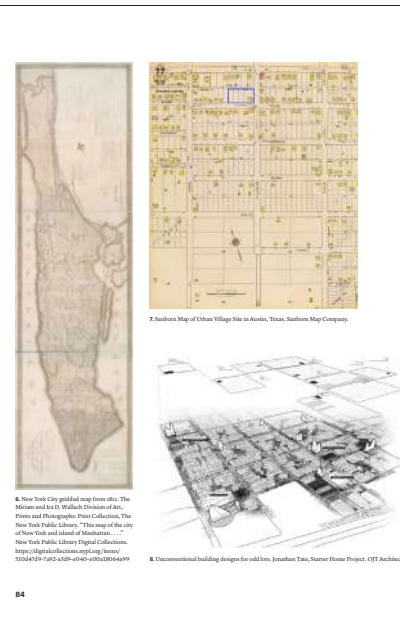
The American housing landscape is remarkably homogeneous. Across vast distances, climates, and historical conditions, certain elements are ubiquitous: the single-family detached home, the quarter-acre lot, the segregated business district, the shopping strip. Some reasons for this date back almost to the founding of the republic, others emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Together these elements are codified in law, regulation, finance, and an American ethos of life, liberty, and the pursuit of home ownership. Interestingly, they create a certain level of stability, but also stifle the freedom and creativity that might drive solutions to our most intractable problems, like housing affordability and equal access (Figures 1 and 2). Architects and planners have speculated on better models for housing design, finance, and policy frameworks for decades. From "towers in the park," which would marry the suburban idyll with higher densities, to Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House, which liberated the home from its site, we have interesting models to investigate.

However, these models either failed in terms of providing a long-term solution for social housing, or failed to scale in the context of innovative construction methods (Figure 3). Equally, in the world of finance, models for shared ownership, like the cooperative, or different ways of sharing space, like co-living, have interesting historical and extant examples, though have never made up even 3 percent of our housing stock.<sup>4</sup> Single-family regime multi-family is seen as a temporary condition on the way to ownership (Figure 4). Why do good ideas die between design and implementation? Why do the interesting prototypes written up in the architectural press stay one-off and fail to scale? What are the ways some of these innovative models might trickles into and start to affect the flow of the river that is the housing system? Answers to these questions are many and require knowledge not only of design and policy, but also of FIRE (Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate) as well as the history of each of these sectors in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

This investigation attempts to overlay the complexity of our systems of real estate and finance onto a speculative design project that endeavors to change the way neighbors relate to each other and the ways that families occupy space. The designer will always bring a certain expertise, foreign and almost magical in the eyes of the financier, but also overly optimistic and a tad naive. Likewise, the financier or developer will bring precedent and institutional knowledge, but also a willful pragmatism that often forgoes debate over the efficacious and the expeditious, the tried and the true. Rather than the space between high and low density, a relevant "middle ground" to explore is the space between the speculative and the practical, where both ends are challenged and transformed in the back-and-forth between design and finance, land use and tenure, zoning and occupation.

The plan for Krishnan Lal Mistry and Allison Walvoord's Urban Village project immediately reveals an incongruity with the surrounding landscape and our notions of ownership and occupancy (Figure 5). The proposed scheme takes a rectangular lot of 0.8 acres and combines parcels to create a nineteen-unit development in a primarily single-family neighborhood in Austin, Texas. Both lot lines and living patterns become jumbled in this scheme in order to "nest" units across multiple volumes while other larger volumes can hold multiple units. The scheme examines how the seemingly opposing ideas of individual expression and collective living can be embodied in a single catchment," according to Walvoord and Mistry.

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7. Sushkov Map of Urban Village Site in Austin, Texas. Sushkov Map Company.

8. New York City grid laid atop from 1811. The Million and a Half: William H. Wilson et al., Prints and Photographs: Photo Collection, The New York Public Library. "This map of the city of New York and Island of Manhattan..." New York Public Library Digital Collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/51034769-7472-a249-4040-000180104499>

8. Unconventional building design for addition, Jonathan Tate, Starter Home Project. OJT Architects.

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explorations of Gordon Matta-Clark come to mind, as well as the developments over the last decade by architects and developers who have experimented with forms that deviate from the traditional gridded block and lot pattern.<sup>6</sup> The difference between these schemes and Urban Village is that they were formulated to exploit inefficiencies and create housing where conventional development would not typically be built. Jonathan Tate, principal of the architectural practice OJT, has produced developments in New Orleans that have an ostensibly similar plan to Urban Village, but are driven by odd lots and left-over parcels in historic New Orleans neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> The form is truly driven by the constraints of a site rather than placing constraints on a currently conventional site. Given the actual urban context and regulatory environment, Urban Village as proposed requires not just design

interventions placed on a site, but a new set of mechanisms to bring the project as formulated from design to implementation (Figures 8 and 9).

#### Inventing and Subsidizing the American Dream

In the first chapter of Carol Willis's 1995 book, *Form Follows Finance*, she notes: "To develop the role of architects and designers to emphasize the parameters faced by municipal regulations and by functional, structural and programmatic demands." She does note exceptions, specifically Raymond Hood when she singles him out as "a designer who was able to manipulate both clients and the zoning envelope to produce buildings that broke the mold while still satisfying the rules of cost and return." Willis is discussing the form and finance of skyscrapers, but her words and

insights are applicable to suburban residential conditions that permeate the US housing landscape. Form indeed follows finance and also the myths we hold as truth. In investigating the projects of the Radical Middle Grounds studio, and specifically Urban Village, these are ideas worth incorporating into the analysis if we are committed to moving from paper to site, idea to implemented project.<sup>8</sup>

At once the greatest generator of middle-class wealth and the root of many of our problems, from sprawl to wealth inequality to commodification of a basic human need, the single-family house is the most ubiquitous, most subsidized, and most sought-after asset class. Beyond wood, stucco, asphalt, and glass, what we don't see are the subsidies, regulations, and protocols that shape housing, form, finance, and finance-ability. Changing the way we



9. Complex house on conventional lot, 2018 © Thomas Sushkov, New Orleans, OJT Architects. Photo by William Cinkler.

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### Sample Pages: Discursive Middle Grounds

The very pages of the book at times become middle grounds for internal conversations and critical reflections. Shown above is an example of a dialogue between a project (Krishnan Lal Mistry / Alison Walvoord, "Urban Village", top left and right) and an essay (Marc Norman: "Deconstructing and Reconstructing an Ur-

ban Village in the American Landscape," bottom left and right.), in which Marc Norman considers the project through a lens of real estate and finance.

# RE-RE:AD

## Russell N. Thomsen

*RE: American Dream* was a self-initiated proposal by a group of six young, Los Angeles-based architectural firms to redefine what constitutes property and ownership, and to reconsider notions of housing, neighborhood density, and the significance of form in Los Angeles. Participating firms were Roger Sherman Architects, Junk Black, Gutwin Shursh Architects, StudioWorks (Mary Ann Ray), Johnson Foveo Architecture, and COA (Ben Galen, Eric A. Kahn & Russell N. Thomsen). The work was supported by a grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and exhibited at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery in November 2014. A book documenting the work was published by Princeton Architectural Press.

**Re: American Dream**  
COA (Central Office of Architecture)

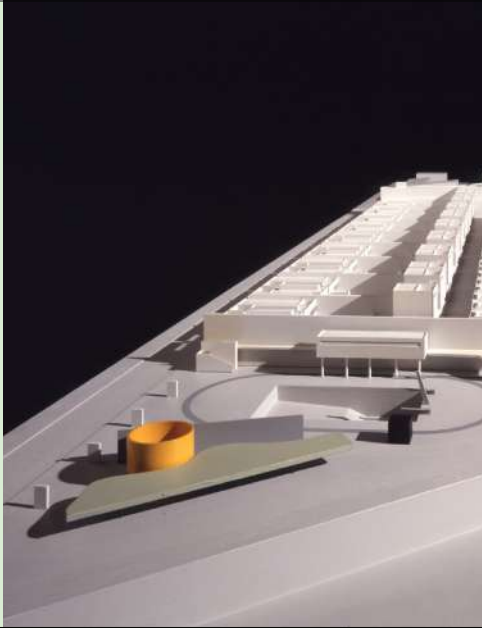
**Year**  
1995

**Location**  
Los Angeles, California, United States

**Program**  
Residential / 60 housing units (+ Retail, Office, Recreation)

**Size**  
Site area: 218,000 square feet  
Housing units (total area): 87,300 square feet  
Retail/office area: 24,000 square feet  
Recreation area: 32,000 square feet

**Project team and collaborators**  
COA (Ben Galen, Eric A. Kahn, Russell N. Thomsen (principal); David LeClere)



Originally published in 1995, *RE: American Dream* was conceived as a speculation on the future of the single-family house type in Los Angeles, that ubiquitous and enduring middle ground that continues to constitute a majority of the city's housing stock. All of us agreed that the future of the type was untenable in its current form. In spite of dire projections of exponential population growth, accelerating wealth disparity, and a looming environmental crisis, skepticism and anxiety toward urban density persisted. We quickly realized that conservative nostalgias were useless in the face of impending urgency: in the background of our collective memory, we remembered the words of Yeats: "The center cannot hold."

The projects intentionally sought out the most banal sites and circumstances. We avoided eccentric, problematic shapes, topographies, and situations in order to focus on type. A rigorous compilation of data gave us a quantitative understanding of existing conditions. Obvious imitations were quickly confirmed as alarming facts: the horizontal proliferation of the conventional suburban house type produced a kind of collateral damage where an ever-expanding urban perimeter would stress-test the limits of suburban infrastructures and resources that made it work.

Responding to pragmatic problems alone could have driven radical, imaginative architectural proposals. On the other hand, the city of LA had a rich history of imagining the new as an end in itself. But as projects of architecture, the work had to be both internally pragmatic and transformative at the same time: a call for architecture to respond not only as a formal speculation but also as a political

one as well, fully cognizant of its agency within the larger context of late capitalism. It was perhaps their ability to be both internally rational and manifest as a larger thesis about architecture in the city that brought gravity and durability to the proposals.

**Essential(CITY)**  
The evolution of Los Angeles somehow never produced a city (at least not in an instinctively recognizable form). Instead, it developed as a post-city with neither a single center nor a clear boundary, an odd amalgam of ecologies.<sup>4</sup> Originally, the territory of Southern California was developed as a series of vast, private, Mexican rancho; enormous swaths of property were secured by individual or family ownership and water rights, resulting in a large-scale division of independent, self-sustaining properties. As the city developed and land use transitioned to post-agricultural enterprises, the subdivisions went to work, playing the land as small, repetitive parcels serviced by large infrastructural networks. Any suggestion of an urban boundary quickly gave way to the force of capital, reconceptualizing the city as a thin, ever-widening film of sparsity. The ease of access to affordable, individual properties unwittingly produced repetitive practices (perhaps the ultimate expression of equity, at least for those with the means to own them). But instead of a model for collective community, it had become an index of individual isolation.

As a loose federation of parts animated by multiple, redundant centers distributed within an (often) unrecognizable ether, Los Angeles is, however, a surprisingly durable model of urbanism. Redundancy and

a lack of conventional hierarchy have lent it an ability to adapt nimbly in the face of change. Reyner Banham realized early on that the anti-urbanism of LA produced a model capable of loosely structuring a diversity of people, cultures, and architectures; aspirations for greater coherence were no longer relevant. While many in the east were dismissive of a place that no longer resembled the city as they knew it, others came to Los Angeles inspired by the de facto newness of a more flexible, vacuous urbanity. As one of our colleagues observed at the time: "We came to work in LA because it seemed like anything was possible; we could, like surgeons perform the most radical procedures, knowing the patient would never die."

**Urban Paradox**  
Democracy is the only social system in which every individual has a chance to express his or her particular will, every individual has a vote that counts. The paradox is that it only counts as one, as an abstract statistic. The individual's particularity is thus nullified by the very action of its expression. Examples could be multiplied, but the point is already clear—democracy simultaneously provides over the rise of the bourgeois individual and his or her anonymity; the modern individual allows the "person lost in the crowd."

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As architects, we are often called upon to produce identities for both individuals and groups, an external affirmation of difference to counter urban anonymity. At its worst, this impulse can push back against the benefits of more collective action as the atomization of interests forces them to compete for limited resources. At the same time, the image of a more unified, singular whole fails to recognize vital differences in constitutions, needs, and rights that inspire a sense of fair play, substituting the lowest common denominator for a more nuanced understanding of a diverse population. Instead, the urban paradox allows for both the individual and the collective to coexist in an almost contradictory but ultimately healthy tension. As Coyote rightly observes, to resolve the paradox is to kill it.

Beyond binary, top-down arguments for greater density (the vertical metropolis), status-quo separatism (the horizontal suburb), the paradox of community and individuality makes for a productive dilemma. How can the inhabitants of a city exercise their individual wills while at the same time participate in the collective benefits of the (greater) urban milieu? In the face of calamities that must be contained to full-blown catastrophes, the model of relentless individualism must give way; the scales must tip in the direction of more local, collective action. Crises can now happen anywhere, ultimately confounding nations, states, and cities everywhere. At the scale of our planet, the interdependence of the larger, global community dominates the local ground community, located in middle ground of urban housing, the paradox of a

collective of individuals may begin to enable a proliferation of local actions to advance an evolving model.

**Desperately Creative**  
Undermining the rigidity of the single-family house and its formulaic grasp on the American Dream opens opportunities for collectivity and new ways of living...also, Zaiger, "The American Dream, Luddite?"

The success of urban housing in any city depends on a diversity of solutions. The sum total aggregation of types, from the tower to the high-density slab to the single-family house constitutes a more elastic model for urban dwelling. But in Los Angeles, the ubiquity of the single-family house organized by the rationality of the urban block endures. Perhaps what has changed the discussion of housing more than any other is the dire lack of it, driven by a crisis of affordability.<sup>6</sup> Developers, driven to ever more creative models in the pursuit of maximized profits, have proposed much larger, discrete, isolated developments that in the name of security (think gated communities) and autonomous infrastructures, sever the link that housing once had with the urban structure of the city. It continues to be our contention that, as described in Ray and Charles Gerner's film *Powers of Ten*, the interdependence between the unit of housing, the infrastructure of the city constitutes a structure that enables the paradox to thrive. While urban exceptions abound (think of the city's topography of the Hollywood Hills, the non-septuors produced by massive, overhead freeways, and the object-buildings of Bunker Hill in downtown LA, to name a few),

the larger urban condition of the city remains animated by the block.

The American Dream has changed. The onerous script of a nuclear family owning a home within a stable, sparse neighborhood has evolved. Changing conditions in the form of cohousing, expanded family structures, cottage industry, accessory dwelling units, urban villages, and independent ownership models challenge the single-family type-scenarios, demand a rethinking of the radical middle ground of housing. Is the work proposed for RE: American Dream back in 1995 still relevant? Are the projects durable enough to respond to the changing ethos of a city in transition? Will the center hold, and can it hold more?

Rather than the erase-and-replace mindset that drives conventional urban renewal, we imagine a continuing evolution of the original, paradoxical proposal, where perhaps in a strange way the hand of the architect might no longer be needed. We envision a series of more discrete, DIY hacks that the original architecture might sponsor. If the excess of the postwar period in Los Angeles produced a dream manifest as a seemingly boundless duplication of individual homes, the sobriety of the present inspires us to move toward moments of shared interdependence (as Zaiger writes, "new opportunities for collectivity and new ways of living"). At this scale we believe the regulators must get out of the way.<sup>7</sup> The very rationality of the block enables a variety of tweaks within it, a series of local alterations and additions that will alter but not kill the coherence of the whole. Not unlike conditions found in the larger metropolis (think Manhattan), the underlying structure of a city supports the diverse ecology of life

each of varying size and each responding to its location within the block. The living area of each type of unit is located on a different level to maximize unobstructed views into neighboring units.

**Hauser Unit**  
Lot size: 22 x 185 feet  
**Three bedrooms**  
The forty-foot height of these units is a response to the heavily used nature of Hauser Avenue. The height yields two benefits: the projection of the interior of the block and the establishment of a strong street edge. These lots are accessible from both ends. Cars must park on the garage off the alley above which an additional room is located, while pedestrians may enter from Hauser. The living space is on the first floor and is open to the courtyard and the master bedroom is on the top.

**Ridgeley Unit**  
Lot size: 31 x 180 feet  
**Two bedrooms**  
Ridgeley Avenue is a relatively quiet street due to the Ballona Creek which crosses at the north end and runs through traffic. Units on Ridgeley are lower in total height but still provide an interior double height space as do all the units. Entry is through a small court on Ridgeley and the living space, which occupies the ground floor, maintains openness to the courtyard. The bedrooms are located on the first floor.

**Alley Unit**  
Lot size: 31 x 43 feet  
**One bedroom**  
These vertically organized units are distributed along the Ridgeley side of the alleys. Garages are shared by paired units. Pedestrian access from the street is maintained by way of an elevated semi-private walkway. The living space is a double height volume. At the top connected to a sleeping porch by an exterior stair. A bedroom is provided below the living area.

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The reduction of lot size is compensated by the efficient re-allocation of outdoor space. The great amount of land previously devoted to front and side yards and driveways has been internalized and made useful. Reduction of the building footprint allows the placement of additional units along the alley.

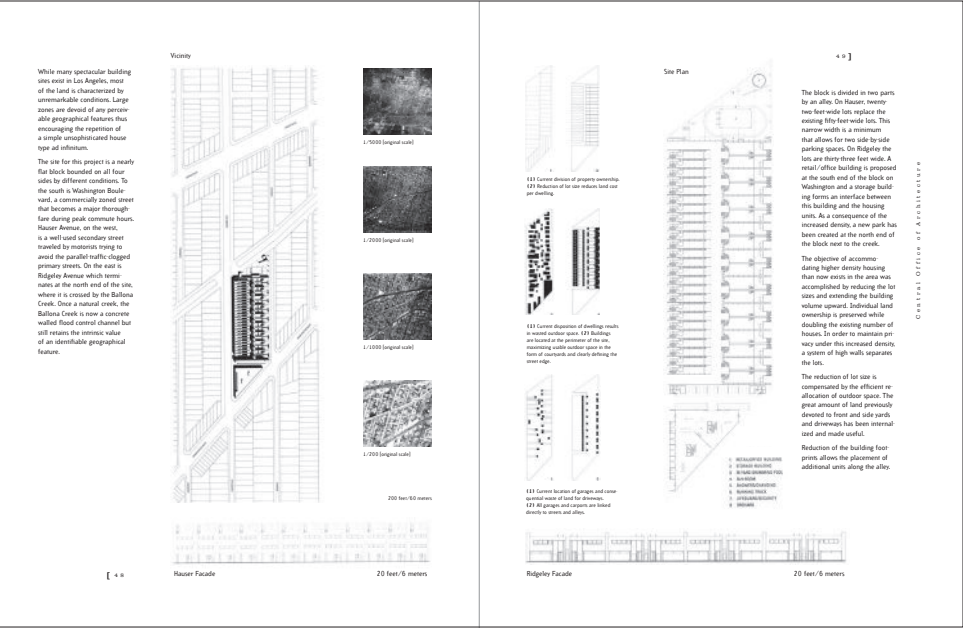
The block is divided in two parts by an alley. On the lower, narrow two-foot-wide lots replace the existing fifty-foot-wide lots. The narrow width is a minimum that allows for two side-by-side parking spaces. On Ridgeley the lots are thirty-three feet wide. A retail/office building is proposed at the south end of the block on Washington and a storage building forms an interlock between this building and the housing units. As a consequence of the increased density, a new park has been created at the south end of the block near to the creek.

The objective of accommodating higher density housing than new sites in the area was accomplished by reducing the lot sizes and extending the building volume upward. Individual land ownership is preserved while doubling the existing number of houses. In order to maintain privacy under this increased density a system of high walls separates the lots.

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### Sample Pages: Discursive Middle Grounds

In another instance of internal discourse, Russell N. Thomsen takes a fresh look at one of his own projects from almost thirty years ago which he designed with his practicing COA (Central Office of Architecture) as a polemic response to the exacerbating real estate situation in Los Angeles in the 1990s. What has changed since then? What has stayed the same? The piece is a reminder that our current housing

crisis is by no means a new phenomenon, and that there are precedents and ideas within architecture's recent history that remain relevant today. (images above: Russell N. Thomsen: "RE-RE:AD", referring to the original 1995 project "Re: American Dream," which is reprinted in this volume with newly digitized model photographs.)