Residential Diversification: An Infill Strategy for Suburban America

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From the Jeffersonian grid of the Northwest expansion to the more haphazard delineations of our suburbs, the direction of development and expansion in the United States has been steered by manipulations of the conditions, rules, and physical layout of property. Today, our nation’s system of suburban property delineation is arguably the most expansive spatial creation of the developed world. Its social, economic, and environmental impacts are vast and, as such, small alterations to the suburban economic and physical landscape can lead to vast social, economic, and environmental improvements. This paper outlines one small, potentially catalytic alteration.

The Current Problem

Our suburban housing market lacks the diversity of property sizes and housing types necessary to meet the economic and familial realities of contemporary Americans. Today, the typical American suburban development and the scale of house on which it is based do not correlate to the economic and social realities of the general population of potential homeowners. For proof, one need only compare the size of the typical American household with the average size of the American home. In the 2010 census, 26.7% of American households consisted of only one person and the average household size had declined to 2.59 persons. The average size of the American home, however, has steadily risen over the past 50+ years. The most recent United States Census report stated that the median size of the American home was 2,169 square feet. This is approximately three times the 750 square feet of the original Levittown single-family house of the 1950s.¹

We have created a system in which Americans who wish to build equity and own a home have no choice but to invest in a product that doesn’t meet their needs—that is much larger than they likely can take care of and more expensive than they can comfortably afford. If we wish to promote the ideal of responsible homeownership, we must align the types and scale of houses we build with the needs of the population that will buy them. We must create and support a market that consists of small starter homes, large family houses, and a variety of residences that support a broad diversity of lifestyles, family sizes, living situations, and incomes.

Instead, we have created a homogenous market. This homogeneity is a critical component of the real estate culture that has led countless homeowners to sign mortgages that cost far more than they can afford in order to purchase homes far larger than they require. The foreclosure crisis of the last four years clearly shows the consequences of this culture.

While these foreclosures and the current economic climate are a clear economic tragedy, they also offer an opportunity to steer suburban development in a more economically and environmentally sustainable direction—indeed, this is an opportunity to show how we might actually improve our existing suburban communities and potentially help numerous struggling homeowners through the economic crisis. In many ways, the foreclosure crisis is an incredible opportunity for our municipalities to promote responsible urban planning and help create a more diverse housing market to support the social and economic diversity of American households.

While we may weather the foreclosure crisis, it is emblematic of a much larger societal issue that must be addressed. If we support the ideals of homeownership—that is, if we believe that homeownership is a fundamental component of the American Dream and a stabilizer of our economy—then we must support a diversified housing market that provides potential homeowners the opportunity to purchase homes that more closely meet their needs.

A Possible Solution

To create a more diversified housing market and to give relief to struggling homeowners, municipalities should allow homeowners to sell a percentage of their property through the amendment of local zoning laws. (Image 1). Essentially, this would turn existing properties in...
these amended zoning regions into flexible assets for their owners. New suburban properties, carved out of the larger lots of current homeowners, would be measurable in square feet rather than acres. A smaller scale of residential property would come into the market, leading to the development of smaller types of homes and opening the doors of homeownership to a larger portion of our population.

This small alteration within our real estate system would harness the investment potentials of those Americans currently priced out of the homogenous housing market by providing a scale of property in which they can realistically invest. (Image 2)

In the short term, this system of small-scale real estate transactions would help infuse the market with badly needed investments. Partial-lot sales would help offset the debts of current homeowners while introducing a smaller type of home to the market. These smaller homes, in turn, would provide diversity in the market while helping to support a more economically diverse population of homeowners within the bounds of our existing neighborhoods.

Localities would decide whether these amendments would be implemented universally in their jurisdictions or only in certain centralized areas of their communities. Ideally, these zoning regulations would support greater densities in neighborhoods nearest to existing public transit, schools, and businesses, helping create more sustainable, walkable communities. These manipulations to the existing zoning codes would be used on a local level to strategically increase the density of suburban communities.
Long-Term Economic and Spatial Potentials

In stronger economic times, the option for partial-lot sales could become an incredible asset for homeowners, helping offset the costs of additions, alterations, and improvements made to homes across the country. It is estimated that Americans spend over $200 billion annually on home additions and renovations. (The past four years, of course, are exceptions). For instance, according to Harvard University’s Joint Center for Housing Studies, Americans spent $214 billion dollars on home renovations in 2002. As our economy improves, this proposal would allow homeowners to sell a component of their property to help pay for renovations and improvements, using their property as an incremental asset. Partial-lot sales would also create an economic rationale for homeowners to want smaller homes built alongside their existing higher-priced properties: instead of taking on additional mortgage debt, homeowners would have the option of selling a portion of their property to offset the costs of their desired improvements. Rather than being seen as a hindrance to existing property values, the inclusion of smaller, more diverse homes in a neighborhood might actually help add value to existing homes while reducing the debt loads of these homeowners. Architecturally, this cycle of symbiotic economic sales opens the door for what I call a combinative design dwelling. (Image 3)
Once suburban space is bought and sold at the scale of the square foot (rather than the acre or lot), we have the opportunity to reform the very notion of the property line. No longer would suburban properties need to be delineated only horizontally in plans; the property line could begin to delineate the suburban lot vertically. This would allow neighboring projects to be developed in concert with one another, creating more interaction between adjoining properties. Additions to existing homes could be developed in tandem with new homes for the buyers of the above-described “partial lot sales,” creating new types and scales of suburban houses. By this, I do not mean that various families would be housed together, but rather that their individual projects might be designed in combination with one another, leading to more architecturally and spatially interesting projects within the suburban context. For example, the new swimming pool for an existing home might be designed in combination with the one-bedroom bachelor pad of a young professional who just bought the adjacent partial-lot on the current owner’s side yard. (Image 4)
The home office addition of a young professional couple might be designed in concert with a retirement house for an elderly couple who just bought a piece of the young couple's lot in order to be closer to the city after downsizing their home. (The young couple is using this partial sale to pay for their home office addition.) The potential programmatic, sociological, and spatial combinations are endless. In each case, by combining the two separate construction projects together and designing them in tandem, new spatial opportunities arise. Similarly, by constructing the two projects in tandem—much in the same way that a group of townhouses are constructed as a single project—new efficiencies are possible. No longer are you building two walls within feet of each other; rather, you are creating one wall with dual purposes.

**Potential Benefits**

By making one adjustment to the typical suburban zoning laws, numerous economic and spatial rearrangements to the suburban context become plausible. By using this new adjustment in specific locations, local governments can strategically increase densities to enhance the quality of life of communities, making public transit more feasible, and creating better-defined, denser, walkable areas for local businesses. In essence, this one strategic zoning alteration—what Buckminster Fuller might term a “trim tab”—has the potential to begin a positive domino effect in our existing suburban communities.

Although this is not a cure-all for suburban problems, it is a first step, providing localities a method for potentially doubling the density of specific areas and neighborhoods in their jurisdictions. The real potential of this strategy, however, is its ability to transform our society’s preconceptions of the relationship between home size, density, and property values. The more comfortable homeowners become with higher density neighborhoods, the easier it is for municipalities to broaden the diversity of housing and building types within communities—bringing apartments, mixed-use buildings, and individual homes both large and small together in a more cohesive, livable, sustainable, economically diverse, and frankly, interesting urban community. The greater the diversity of housing and building stock in a community, the more likely the community is meeting the diverse needs of all its citizens and the closer we are as a nation to truly supporting the ideals of responsible homeownership.

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