Rediscovering the Logic of Garden Apartments

Paul Mitchell Hess

Cul-de-sacs, subdivisions, strip malls, office parks, industrial parks, edge cities—these are all familiar terms that evoke strong images of suburban development. The garden apartment is less familiar. Because the single-family house in its yard is so central to American notions of the suburb, apartments are rarely seen as important to this landscape. Nevertheless, understanding the environments created by apartments and the cultural and institutional logic behind them is critical to developing new, more sustainable practices of suburban design, planning and development.

Several features of existing apartment complexes make them particularly germane to discussions of suburban retrofitting. For one, apartments already occupy a large percentage of suburban housing stock, particularly in older, middle-ring areas. Using U.S. Census definitions, “attached” units comprise more than a third of all housing outside the central city. Some of these units are single-family “townhouses”; many more are stacked flats in garden-oriented complexes.

Second, suburban apartments are generally constructed at several times the density of single-family subdivisions. Further, large concentrations of them are often located adjacent to retail centers. Both attributes provide solid building blocks for any future effort to make suburbs more walkable and transit supportive.

Third, most suburban apartment zones are currently extremely hostile to pedestrian use. Bisected by traffic arterials, dominated by parking lots, and lacking such basic public infrastructure as sidewalks and local streets, they could benefit immediately, and substantially, from the attention of planners, designers and local officials.

Finally, these areas are already home to all kinds of people—including many families.1

Seattle-Area Complexes

Several dozen large concentrations of apartments in the Seattle suburbs provided the basis for this study. These clusters originated as part of a suburbanization of multi-family housing that began in the early 1960s, and continues today.4 The prevalence of such housing and the logic of zoning practice suggest that similar concentrations should be present in other American metro areas. Indeed, the study confirmed the presence of similar clusters around such cities as Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta.

In general, the Seattle apartment clusters were defined by large zones of garden apartment and townhouse development (of which the largest concentrations contain several thousand units), wedged between single-family subdivisions and local retail areas. The research examined these areas using a variety of sources and approaches, including historic census data, original zoning maps, early municipal plans, and changing lot patterns. In addition, sequences of development were examined in detail with regard to three areas—Juanita, Crossroads, and East Hill.5 Such zones are neither suburban downtowns nor edge cities, but smaller, mostly residential nodes scattered across the suburban realm. Average net densities were found to be about 25 units per acre, several times that of nearby single-family neighborhoods. Gross population densities—derived by including all land within a half-mile radius of a local retail center—were found to be similar to Seattle’s older, more walkable neighborhoods—about twelve people per acre.6 Like these older, desirable neighborhoods, retail centers adjoining apartment clusters usually also contained a range of convenience services including supermarkets, dry cleaners, hair salons, video stores, and restaurants.

Medium housing densities and nearby retail stores—two necessary conditions for pedestrian activity and street life—proved to be the extent of similarity between these apartment clusters and older, more established urban neighborhoods, however. Indeed, despite their relatively compact and regular pattern of land use, there is little historical evidence to suggest these apartment concentrations were ever conceived as neighborhoods to begin with. Instead, the sequencing of development and parcelization of places like Juanita and Crossroads emphasizes a different set of values.

In the first wave of post-World War II suburbanization, developers of single-family subdivisions gravitated toward land that was slightly removed from established roadways, places they could achieve economies of scale and create large, protected “communities” of detached houses.7 Soon after, new retail zones were built along nearby main roads, where they were exposed to mounting flows of traffic. Apartment complexes only began to emerge in this landscape starting around 1960. Prototypically, they were developed one by one on leftover parcels, too small to be optimal for subdivision, yet too removed from large roadways to be useful for commercial purposes. With no public streets, few connections to arterial roadways, no public improvements such as sidewalks, and landscaping and fencing that prohibited movement between properties, these environments evolved in ways that in many respects were the opposite of older, well-designed neighborhoods.


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A History of Separation

Pod-like development and the clustering of land uses in large single-use areas is a well-known part of the suburban story. Less well understood is the way different uses have historically been located with respect to each other—more specifically the way apartments have long been used to buffer single-family subdivisions from retail uses and large roadways.

The earliest zoning codes in the U.S. did not separate single-family and multifamily housing into separate areas. However, the cult of the detached “home” runs deep in American culture, and it became particularly virulent in the early twentieth century. According to then-prevail-
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Third, most suburban apartment zones are currently extremely hostile to pedestrian use. Bisected by traffic arterials, dominated by parking lots, and lacking such basic public infrastructure as sidewalks and local streets, they could benefit immediately, and substantially, from the attention of planners, designers and local officials. Finally, these areas are already home to all kinds of people—including many families.

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When it issued its landmark Euclid, Ohio, decision in 1926 establishing the constitutionality of zoning, the U.S. Supreme Court merely recognized patterns of separation between housing types that had already become widespread. In its ruling, the court even used language
were placed around the periphery, along the arterial streets. They should provide a high-quality residential environment. And playgrounds on interior local streets; and that they be differentiated from stores that faced onto arterial roadways. At the beginning of his monograph he also made it clear that neighborhood units were primarily conceived as places “for child rearing,” where “each dwelling devotes an equal amount of space to yard, shrubbery, and outdoor amenity,” and where children could “associate with homes which hold similar standards to their own.”

Perry’s most widely disseminated diagram of neighborhood-unit principles was also strongly oriented toward single-family housing. Apartments were found in this classic diagram, but only outside the residential interior, and undifferentiated from stores that faced onto arterial roadways. Protecting new suburban residential areas from the negative impacts of increasing amounts of traffic was also becoming a major concern in the 1920s. In this regard, Perry’s placement of apartments, not on local streets, but on what he at one point referred to as “traffic-ridden high ways” was telling. Other contemporary writers, such as Nelson P. Lewis, more fully defined this hierarchy of environmental values based on street types. At one end, arterials were conceived as highways for moving traffic between neighborhoods and across the metropolis. At the other, quiet, almost-private local streets were seen as providing access to “residences.”

Such a hierarchy was a defining feature of Clarence Stein’s famous plan for Radburn, NJ. There, single-family houses were placed on quiet cul-de-sacs accessed by collector streets, while retail and apartment areas were located along the main road to New York. For Perry, Lewis and Stein, apartments were clearly more related to the realm of commerce and traffic than to the protected world of the family.

Unequal Development

Such early-twentieth-century notions of street hierarchy were eventually institutionalized in almost every municipal transportation department across the U.S. through a standard street classification system. The neighborhood-unit concept, too, became extraordinarily influential. Indeed, it was used by a majority of planning departments in the U.S. into at least the late 1960s. In King County, in which Seattle is situated, was no exception. The county’s first plan in 1913 used language almost directly pulled from Perry, stating that the “ideal neighborhood” is made up of “a rather solid pattern of homes, linked by quiet streets and centered on an elementary school…. [A] small neighborhood shopping location may be spotted near the edge of the neighborhood.” A more ambitious 1964 plan similarly stated that “stable residential areas should contain pleasant homes,” and that “residential areas are best formed in elementary school neighborhood units.” As in Perry’s conception, and consistent with zoning and street hierarchies, apartments were to be “logically developed adjacent” to shopping areas, and “functionally convenient to a major or secondary arterial highway.”

By shaping zoning and exercising control over road widening and street construction, planners could implement the neighborhood-unit concept only imperfectly. Nevertheless, its philosophy came to imbue most U.S. suburban development in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, in the Seattle region (as in most other parts of the country), preexisting rural roads along the section and quarter-section lines of the Land Ordinance Survey were expanded in the years after World War II to serve as large, suburban arterials. Single-family zones and elementary-school sites were then developed within this arterial framework. In these single-family areas, planners found they were able to use subdivision regulations to require developers to build local streets, sidewalks, and other public infrastructure according to strict standards. But suburban apartment developers (who built on larger, often preexisting parcels that did not require subdivision) were not required to install such public amenities, even where projects contained hundreds of units. Access to these projects came directly from arterial roads along relatively low-quality driveways, and where interior walkways existed, they typically connected apartment buildings to parking lots, not to public streets on the exterior of the project.

The results of these practices may be seen today in clusters such as East Hill, which began to develop in 1947 at the intersection of two rural roadways. Forty years later, the area contains more than 3,400 apartments and a million sq. ft. of commercial space. Yet the public road network is virtually unchanged. Likewise, the block in Crossroads with the greatest concentration of apartments and retail use is more than 200 acres in size, but has no interior public streets. Indeed, one of the easiest ways to identify suburban apartment concentrations is to look on maps for arterial intersections surrounded by large areas without streets.

Important Lessons

One of the great tragedies of this history is that it has created an unpleasant and potentially dangerous pedestrian environment. Such parcelization patterns normally mean that, if they choose to walk, people living in these places face long, indirect routes to retail centers located just “next door.” And with legal, protected pedestrian crosswalks...
familiar to planning reformers, referring to an apartment in a district for “private house purposes” as a “parasite” that could lead to the destruction of the “residential character of the neighborhood.” In the years that followed, as legal doctrine continued to be developed, courts in many states further established a “zoning hierarchy,” with single-family housing at the top. In such a scheme, apartments not only could be, but should be, used to buffer such priority areas from other uses. Perry’s seminal concept of the “neighborhood unit” also spoke to the spatial relationship between single-family housing and apartments. The idea that cities should be made up of small, distinct neighborhoods containing local institutions to support family and social life was broadly discussed in the first decades of the twentieth century. In terms of planning practice, Clarence Perry’s 1929 monograph The Neighborhood Unit was the most fully articulated and influential statement of these principles. Perry argued that distinct neighborhoods should be bounded by arterial roadways, that they should have schools, parks and playgrounds on interior local streets, and that they should provide a high-quality residential environment. Local shops were also included in Perry’s vision, but they were surrounded by the periphery, along the arterial streets where they would not “blight” residential areas, and where they could gain the “trade of through traffic.”

Perry’s attitude toward apartments was somewhat ambiguous. He did not disparage apartment life, especially for “bachelors and childless couples.” And, writing from New York, he recognized the realities of large cities—even proposing that some neighborhood units might be composed entirely of apartments. But at the beginning of his monograph he also made it clear that neighborhood units were primarily conceived as places “for child rearing,” where “each dwelling devotes an equal amount of space to yard, shrubbery, and outdoor amenity,” and where children could “associate with homes which hold similar standards to their own.”

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The results of these practices may be seen today in clusters such as East Hill, which began to develop in 1947 at the intersection of two rural roadways. Forty years later, the area contains more than 3,400 apartments and a million sq. ft. of commercial space. Yet the public road network is virtually unchanged. Likewise, the block in Crossroads with the greatest concentration of apartments and retail use is more than 200 acres in size, but has no interior public streets. Indeed, one of the easiest ways to identify suburban apartment concentrations is to look on maps for arterial intersections surrounded by large areas without streets.

Important Lessons
One of the great tragedies of this history is that it has created an unpleasant and potentially dangerous pedestrian environment. Such parcelization patterns normally mean that, if they choose to walk, people living in these places face long, indirect routes to retail centers located just “next door.” And with legal, protected pedestrian crosswalks
located only at traffic signals (sometimes a half-mile or more apart). In the central roadways apartments face onto create substantial barriers to movement and communication.

Furthermore, unless a local government has specifically provided them, such arterial streets often lack complete sidewalks. Since sidewalks are primarily provided by private developers as part of the subdivision process, nearby single-family zones may be well provisioned with them. But many arterials were once rural roads which have simply been expanded several times to handle ever-greater traffic flows, without any agency considering the needs of pedestrians. As already mentioned, apartment concentrations have two needs: sidewalks and pedestrian networks, although insufficient, for creating walkable suburban neighborhoods: medium densities, and housing and convenience services in close proximity. Such conditions do not tell us how or why to retrofit. But they do show that the expenditure of scarce resources for basic pedestrian infrastructure would have a powerful transformative effect.

In a few cases, local governments and developers have made a good start. In Crosstrees, the City of Bellevue has made substantial upgrades to sidewalks and streets. The local mall, too, has built pedestrian walkways connecting building entrances, through parking lots, to surrounding streets.

Residents are clearly desirous of such improvements. For example, one previous study of pedestrian activity in Crosstrees showed that more than 100 people per hour walk uphill and downhill. In the absence of provision pedestrian infrastructure in places like Crosstrees is a further indicator that more of the real thing is needed. However, the dilemma of how to retrofit such apartment clusters also provides lessons that go beyond building a few sidewalks. One is that basic planning tools such as zoning, subdivision, and road classification will be necessary, although insufficient, for creating walkable suburban neighborhoods: medium densities, and housing and convenience services in close proximity. Such conditions do not tell us how or why to retrofit. But they do show that the expenditure of scarce resources for basic pedestrian infrastructure would have a powerful transformative effect.

A New Progressive Vision

I have argued here that many of the planning tools developed in the first part of the twentieth century privileged single-family areas at the expense of apartments. These practices are still largely in place, and need to be challenged. But there may be a larger, more positive lesson to be learned from the period when these planning tools were first developed. Early-twentieth-century reformers used strong arguments concerning the public good to establish new, often-controversial planning powers. In the early part of our own century, this legacy should be expanded, not discarded.

New strong arguments are now needed to define suburban areas that are more than the existing planning tools recognize and to defend appropriately and inappropriately housing types and start transforming suburban apartment clusters into suburban neighborhoods.

Notes

located only at traffic signals (sometimes a half-mile or more apart). Central roadways stop and restart as local roads are inserted. As a result, suburban roads are longer and more expensive to maintain—about twice as expensive per mile as mainline highways. Urban arterial roads may be 10 to 12 miles long, whereas suburban arterial roads may be 20 to 30 miles long.

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Unfortunately, almost all such regulations are irrelevant to creating walkable suburbs. The one exception is “connectivity standards.” In Crossroads, the developer was required to provide connections between apartment buildings and streets, office buildings, and retail developments—even into single-family zones. This, indeed, will be hard work. It will require challenging entrenched property rights and fears of “transient” apartment dwellers. And it will only happen piece by piece, over a long time.

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It time to start recognizing that the people living in those places, too, must be considered when we define how buildings are shaped by public concerns. Only then can we confront deep cultural attitudes about appropriate and inappropriate housing types and start transforming suburban apartment clusters into suburban neighborhoods.

Notes


2. See P.M. Hess, A.V. Moudon, et al., “Nearby Neighborhood Site Design and Pedestrian Transit,” Transportation Research Record 1493 (1996), pp. 9-19. Good development densities were based on a conceptual handwaving from the retail zones, and in the "central" core area from the apartment complexes. In both cases, not more than 100 people per hour walk around the main central development area, while residential sidewalks are used by less than 25 people per hour. 

3. It is difficult to study the socioeconomic characteristics of apartment areas because they do not correspond to common boundaries. Generally, apartment clusters tend to be slightly poorer and more socially mixed than the larger areas around them. The presence of children is clearly evident in many of them. See A.V. Moudon and P. Hess, "Suburban Clusters: The Nucleation of Multifamily Housing in the Suburban Areas of the Central Puget Sound," Journal of the American Planning Association, Vol. 66, No. 3 (2000), pp. 243-64.


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8. Among the early family units were the “studio apartments,” “quickettes,” and “twonettes,” of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In the early 1940s, the apartment building also included a great deal of retail space. The typical floor plan of the unit is shown in Figure 4. Among the major types of apartment complexes are the “single-family" and “two-family” complexes, the “duplex” complexes, and the “apartment complex". The typical floor plan of the unit is shown in Figure 4.
