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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.¹ 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 make up 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 cores of large urbanized areas. Some of these units are single-family “townhouses”; many more are stacked flats in garden-oriented complexes.²

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.³

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.

Opposite: Informal infrastructure creating missing connections in apartment clusters.



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.⁸ According to then-prevail-

ing views, the single-family home was the only appropriate environment to nurture morality and family life. Its corollary was that apartments were inappropriate for families and fostered immoral behavior. Following this logic, early proponents of zoning forcefully argued that apartments were an “invading” land use in “residential areas.” By 1916, Berkeley, California, had established what is generally recognized as the first exclusive single-family zone in the U.S.⁹

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



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.”¹⁰ 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.¹¹

The 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.¹² 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 placed around 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.”

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.

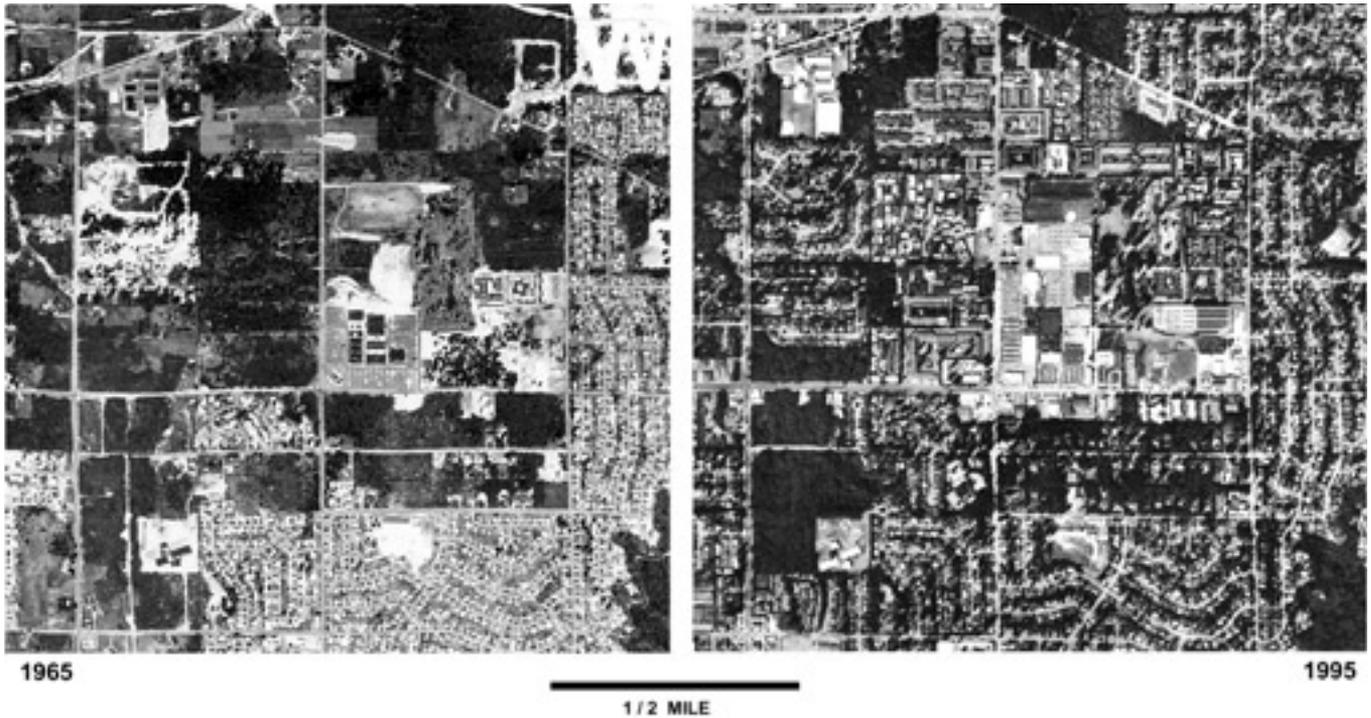
Protecting new suburban residential areas from the negative impacts of increasing amounts of traffic was also becoming a major concern in the 1920s. In this regard, Perry’s placement of apartments, not on local streets, but on what he at one point referred to as “traffic-ridden highways” was telling. 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.”¹³

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

Left: Juanita land use diagram showing typical suburban arrangement of apartments located between retail area and single family subdivisions.

Right: Clarence Perry’s single family Neighborhood Unit diagram, 1929.

Opposite: Crossroads in 1965 (left) and 1995 (right). In 1965 the retail area is starting along main roads nearby new single-family subdivisions. By 1995 the retail area was expanded and several thousand apartments were developed, but no new public through-streets or blocks were created in the process.



the main road to New York.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

King County, in which Seattle is situated, was no exception. The county's first plan in 1958 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."¹⁷

By shaping zoning and exerting 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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 1965 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."²⁰ And with legal, protected pedestrian crosswalks

located only at traffic signals (sometimes a half-mile or more apart), the arterial 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 sidewalk systems. 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 conditions necessary, although not sufficient, for creating walkable suburban neighborhoods: medium densities, and housing and convenience services in close proximity. Such conditions do not tell us *how* to retrofit. But they do suggest 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 Crossroads, 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 Crossroads showed that more than 100 people per hour walk to the retail center.²¹ The creation of provisional pedestrian infrastructure in places like Crossroads 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 insufficient to create connected, walkable street systems in such non-single-family areas. One such tool developed recently in a number of U.S. cities to promote smaller, more walkable blocks has been “connectivity standards.” Unfortunately, almost all such regulations are irrelevant to existing multifamily areas because they can only be put into play as part of the subdivision process.²²

Several cities have tried other strategies. For example, Bellevue recently tried to break up the huge blocks in Crossroads by requiring easements along the edges of redeveloped parcels. Ultimately, however, this strategy only created isolated pathways that middle- and high-school students were the only ones daring enough to use.

Redeveloping tired retail areas as mixed-use, street-oriented places has been another important redevelopment

strategy. In Juanita, for example, a small conventional shopping center has been replaced by more than 450 apartments and 60,000 sq.ft. of retail space.

Creating incentives for this type of redevelopment is a largely untapped resource, but it cannot transform the larger disconnected fabric of the clusters. To really retrofit these places, fences will have to be pulled down, and new, truly public streets will have to be pushed through apartment 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.

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 apartment areas as more than the necessary, but undesirable periphery of residential areas. Detached single-family housing may be the preference of most suburban apartment dwellers, but the reality is that more suburban apartments are being built than ever.

It is time to start recognizing that the people living in these places, too, must be considered when we define how built environments should be 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

1. There is a well developed literature on the pre-World War II apartment. See E.C. Cromley, *Alone Together: A History of New York's Early Apartments* (Cornell University Press, 1990); R. Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); R. Dennis, “Interpreting the Apartment House: Modernity and Metropolitanism in Toronto, 1900-1930,” *Journal of Historical Geography* Vol. 20, No. 3 (1994), pp. 305-22; and J. Hancock, “The Apartment House in Urban America,” in A.D. King, ed., *Buildings and Society: Essays on the Social Development of the Built Environment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 151-87. For

exceptions on the suburban apartment, see R. Schafer, *The Suburbanization of Multifamily Housing* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1974); and C.F. Horowitz, *The New Garden Apartment: Current Market Realities of an American Housing Form* (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1983).

2. U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 2000, for urbanized areas of over 1,000,000, STF3, table H30, subtracting out housing by type in the core central places as defined by the name of the area. On average, 35 percent of the remaining housing is some kind of attached unit, with 7 percent in single-family attached units, and more than 14 percent buildings with more than ten units. Because of smaller average household sizes, about one-quarter of the suburban population lives in attached housing. Suburban garden apartments are typically three-story, walk-up buildings with through-building apartment units.

3. It is difficult to study the socio-demographic characteristics of apartment areas because they do not correspond to census 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.

4. 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.

5. Development histories are primarily based on visual records. There is remarkably little archival evidence of planning and development decisions in this era. Some arguments in this article are more fully elaborated in P.M. Hess, "Apartments Apart: Site/Non-Sight and Suburban Apartments," in C.J. Burns and A. Kahn, eds., *Site Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

6. See P.M. Hess, A.V. Moudon, et al., "Neighborhood Site Design and Pedestrian Travel," *Transportation Research Record* 1674 (1999), pp. 9-19. Gross development densities were based on a conventional half-mile walking shed from the retail zones, and usually extend well beyond apartment areas and into much lower density zones. Including only the apartments and retail lands raises densities much higher.

7. For the Seattle area, see M.R. Wolfe, "Locational Factors Involved in Suburban Land Development," Department of Urban Planning, University of Washington, Seattle, 1961?. For the role of large subdividers more generally, see M. Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders: The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

8. On the cult of the single-family house, see, especially, R. Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); K.T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and D. Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003). Specifically on views toward apartments, see K. Baar, "The Movement to Halt the Spread of Multifamily Housing, 1890-1926," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 58, No. 1, (1992).

9. See a good comparison of Berkeley and New York in R. Fischler, "The Metropolitan Dimension of Early Zoning—Revisiting the 1916 New York City Ordinance," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (1998), pp. 170-88. Fischler argues that, while ineffective, the New York ordinance too was very concerned with protecting areas of houses. Building codes and other laws were also used to exclude apartments before the development of zoning. See, for example, R. Dennis, "Zoning before Zoning: The Regulation of Apartment Housing in Early Twentieth Century Winnipeg and Toronto," *Planning Perspectives* Vol. 15, No. 3 (2000), pp. 267-99.

10. VILLAGE OF EUCLID, OHIO v. AMBLER REALTY CO., 272 U.S. at 394. The court is quoting the Supreme Court of Louisiana here, but this language was common with nearly identical language used.

11. D.R. Mandelker, *The Zoning Dilemma: A Legal Strategy for Urban Change* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971).

12. C.A. Perry, "The Neighborhood Unit," in *Neighborhood and Community Planning* (New York: Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, VII, (1929). Johnson has argued that Perry "appropriated" the concept from William Drummond. See D.L. Johnson, "Origin of the Neighborhood Unit," *Planning Perspectives* 17 (2002), pp. 227-45.

13. N.P. Lewis, *The Planning of the Modern City: A Review of the Principles Governing City Planning* (New York: Wiley, 1923).

14. Like Perry, Stein was a member of the Regional Plan Association of New York. Radburn, stripped of its community facilities and orientation, has been seen as an important prototype for the postwar, subdivision. Interestingly, Stein was also closely involved in the design of Baldwin Hills Village in Los Angeles, the prototype for the suburban garden-apartment complex. See C.S. Stein, *Toward New Towns for America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966).

15. The system is conventionally defined as limited-access highways, major arterials, minor arterials, collectors, and local streets.

16. T. Banerjee and W.C. Baer, *Beyond the Neighborhood Unit: Residential Environments and Public Policy* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1984).

17. King County Planning Commission, *Comprehensive Plan for King County*, Washington (Seattle: King County Planning Commission, 1958); and King County Planning Department, *The Comprehensive Plan for King County*, Washington (Seattle: King County Planning Department, 1964).

18. Although Perry's model was most concerned with the area around New York City, where the ordinance survey grid does not exist, it does not seem coincidental that he proposed 160 acres—the exact area of that most ubiquitous unit of land development, the quarter-section—as the ideal size.

19. See M. Southworth and E. Ben-Joseph, "Street Standards and the Shaping of Suburbia," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Winter 1995), pp. 65-68. Not all jurisdictions required sidewalks.

20. Straight-line distances between housing and the center of retail districts are often equivalent to those in older, gridded neighborhoods, but indirect walking routes make actual travel distances farther. See P.M. Hess, A.V. Moudon, et al., "Neighborhood Site Design and Pedestrian Travel," *Transportation Research Record* 1674 (1999), pp. 9-19.

21. *Ibid.*

22. See K. Bulter, S.L. Handy, et al., *Planning for Street Connectivity: Getting From Here to There* (Chicago: APA Planning Advisory Service, 1999). Portland is an exception, and has also looked at "campus-like" development. New Urbanist development has also created small blocks, but only as a part of large, master-planned communities designed as a piece on greenfield sites, not in the more incremental, less coordinated development typical of suburban apartment clusters.