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Ossified Dwelling: Or Why Contemporary Suburban Housing Can't Change

Renee Chow

To find sites for suburban change, planners and designers normally look to malls, big-box retail, commercial strips, office parks, and institutions such as schools or libraries—places with large dimensions that can take on smaller scales of use. It will come as no surprise then that there are fewer sites to be found in single-family residential settings. This lack of potential raises a pair of questions: Why can't the suburban housing stock change? And is this significant?

A short historical perspective helps answer the first question. By tracing the development of single-family residential settings since World War II, one can see how American suburban houses and their settings have become increasingly resistant to change.

The second question begs an issue of values. Although the formal attributes of housing are not deterministic, they are material in enabling choices in everyday living over time. In this sense, present trends in suburban house design should be a cause for concern. Suburban settings should have the potential to convey and receive impressions, to inspire a dialogue between place and inhabitant that grows rich over time with a range of interpretations. But this will not happen unless planners and designers become advocates for new approaches that seek not just to solve immediate program requirements but build the capacity for transformation.

Suburban House Types since the 1950s

As June Williamson describes elsewhere in this issue, present trends in suburban single-family housing may be traced to the post-World War II development of Levittown, NY. This Long Island community introduced an industrial model for mass-producing housing based on what was then considered the minimum activity spaces required for a typical family.

The drawings here illustrate the internal layout and external relationships of these houses. Based on FHA standards, the Levitt and Sons house was 750 sq.ft. in size (25 by 30) and contained a living room, eat-in kitchen, two bedrooms, and a bathroom. Potato fields were plowed under to create a network of streets to provide access to lots of 6,000 sq.ft. (60 by 100), on which such houses were offered with four basic choices of exterior appearance.

A combination of forces—the postwar housing shortage, government financing, and a belief in efficiency of production—made the Levittown model a huge success. In the years that followed many other developments followed its lead, spawning an industry that changed the American landscape. Typical of these is the second example shown here. Built in the Midwest city of Lincoln, Nebraska(?), it

contained similar, compact houses erected on lots about half the size of those in the original Long Island development.

By comparison, the third set of drawings show how today's suburban houses have grown much larger. A typical program now includes more spaces: separate informal and formal eating areas, great rooms as well as living rooms, a guest room in addition to separate bedrooms for each family member, and multiple bathrooms. And two or more cars usually need to be sheltered.

Built in the early 1990s in Clayton, California, the development shown contains lots that are 600 sq.ft. smaller than those of Levittown; but its houses are more than three times larger. Whether 1,200 or 3,500 sq.ft. in size, such houses are usually located near the middle of their lots. In front, a 20-foot yard holds a parking apron; a 15- to 20-foot back yard is deep enough for a barbeque and a swing; and 3- to 5-foot side yards (depending on local zoning) provide minimal separation between neighbors.

Sources of Resistance

Retrofitting implies that an existing setting needs to be modified for some new component or use. Beyond a general updating of equipment and finishes, most residential modifications aim to make a house better match a desired lifestyle—either because there is a mismatch between the spaces of the house and the needs of an incoming household, or because the needs of an existing household change. By observing how residents make changes to the settings above, it is possible to see several trends that have increasingly limited the potential for retrofitting newer suburban homes.

First is an increasing inability to change the uses and configuration of spaces within a house to suit different or changing lifestyles. Since Levittown, much suburban development has been based on the idea of a model home. A developer first identifies a market, then defines its lifestyles, then programs spaces to meet them. Along the way, normative assumptions direct the design of spaces—their sizes, configurations and adjacencies. In this programmatically driven process, each assumption about a way of living increases the specificity of spaces for prescribed activities. This is not to say that other activities cannot take place within a space, but the potential for other uses diminishes as it becomes increasingly difficult to use specialized layouts in ways other than intended in the initial design.

If change cannot be absorbed within a house, then residents may seek to enlarge it to accommodate new needs. Yet this option also has become difficult in newer suburban settings because of a tendency to size lots to their program-



matic minimum. In Levittown—developed when land costs were insignificant compared to construction costs—the original building footprint covered only 12.5 percent of the lot. Furthermore, the house was positioned to one side of its yard, allowing car access and parking on the other. Such positioning embedded the capacity to expand the house sideways, and over the years homeowners have done just that. They have also built into the rear yards of the house and added second floors. The result today is that the small, highly programmed core houses still sustain the community and remain visible along the street, even though additions have created considerable variation between them.

The possibility for alteration is far more limited in the Levitt-like development in the Lincoln. Here the original building footprint covers nearly 30 percent of the lot, and every space, indoor and out, has an assigned use and minimal dimension: 25 feet for a front yard, 15 feet for the rear, 10 feet for the side yard with the car, and 5 feet on

the other side. Such tight dimensional structures and the position of the house limit the potential for change; and, indeed, only a few small interior and exterior modifications have been made.

In the California example, options for change are even more constrained. Here the lot size is 45 feet by 120 feet, but the lot coverage is nearly 40 percent (in some contemporary developments coverage may be nearing 50 percent). Indeed, as the trend toward bigger houses on smaller lots advances, front and rear yards have come to function largely as zones of protection, while residual side-yard spaces become too narrow to accommodate any use at all.

The organization of building systems in a new suburban house also works to limit change. Mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems (as well as window, door, and other household products) have all been developed to take advantage of light, flexible, wood-frame construction. Such features may fit neatly in structural cavities or run



freely through stud walls and joist floors. But the web of systems they produce spreads uniformly throughout the house, making it difficult to reconfigure. Likewise, the loadbearing structure of the house supports only its initial configuration, ignoring any potential for change easily derived from repositioning nonloadbearing walls.

Beyond physical design, economic and legal issues also reinforce stasis. U.S. tax policy and financial systems, designed to promote homeownership, have transformed the home into most Americans' largest source of equity. The desire to protect this asset reinforces demands for a moat of green to isolate one house from the next. Zoning guidelines and homeowner regulations further reinforce the status quo, as any random, unplanned change is perceived as a threat to everyone's property values.

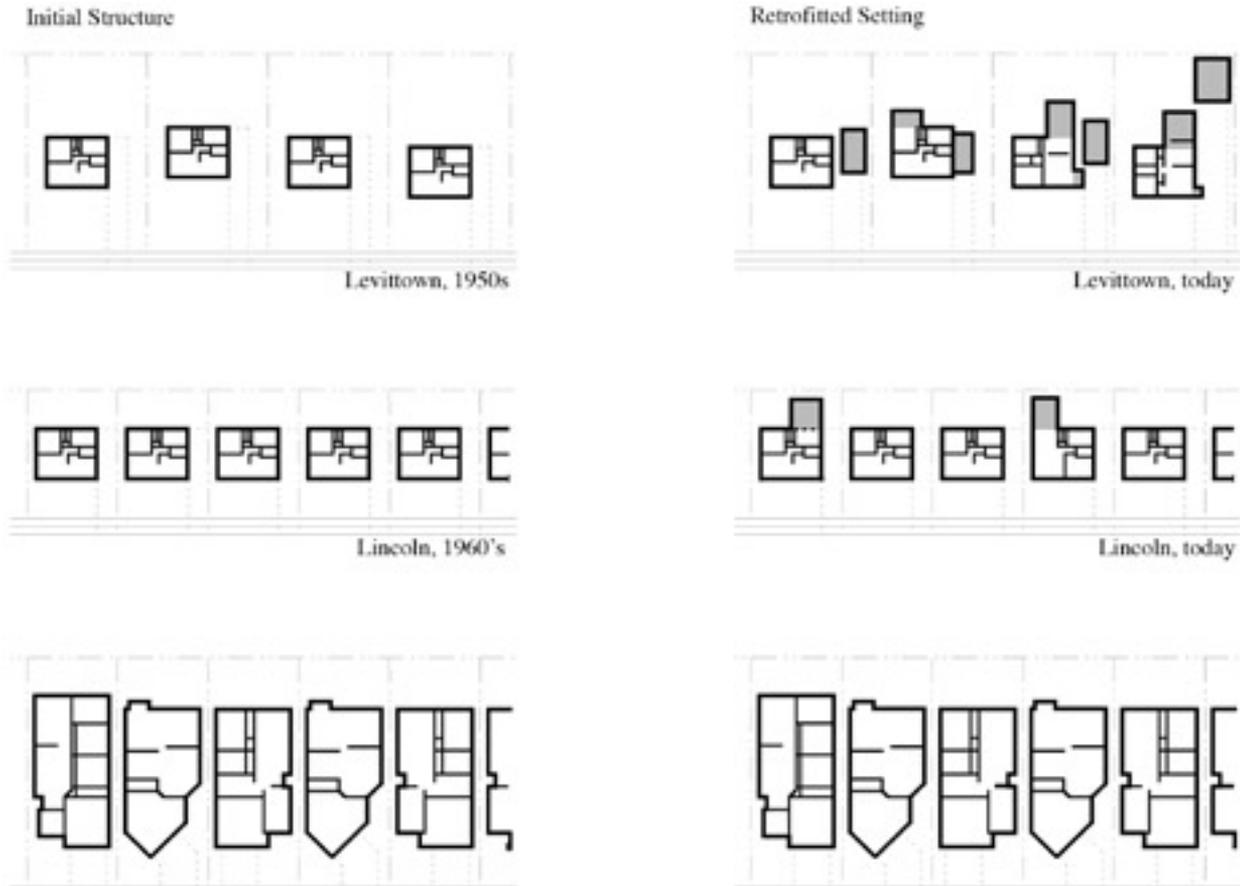
Embedding Capacity

Is it significant that suburban settings are becoming more difficult to change? When houses cannot support change, our choices become limited—we must adapt the way we live, or move. In the present environment of ossified houses, the most common way to accommodate evolving lifestyles therefore has become to “trade



up”—from starter home, to family home, to home-office, to retirement home. But this means residents often find themselves in a bind, moving from one neighborhood to another to find more appropriate space, or choosing to stay in place despite the inconveniences. Our choices become bifurcated—between commodity and community.

Good communities have the ability to reinvent themselves. They have the capacity for incremental modifications that allow people to participate in and trans-



form them. And they become richer and more complex by supporting a diversity of ways of living while sustaining the overall character of the setting.

Places like Charleston, Cambridgeport, and San Francisco have large areas of single-family houses that illustrate this ability for house and setting to become more layered through time. Yet, as the examples here indicate, even Levittown held some capacity for change that has been eliminated in newer suburban communities.

Retrofitting residential areas of suburbs implies incremental modifications, not the wholesale clearing of houses and neighborhoods. The challenge will be to find more ways to embed capacity in housing fabric. But unlike the retrofitting of large industrial, institutional or retail structures, residential retrofitting will require build capacity that is fine-grained and that can better accommodate choices for different ways of living—an array of dimensions and forms from the room to the neighborhood.

In today’s high-priced real estate markets large lots can

no longer be seen as a solution. Planners and designers must begin by reorganizing building systems to embed a hierarchy that distinguishes the more permanent from the transformable. The suburban fabric can also be restructured to control public to private relations so that growth can be anticipated between neighbors. Finally, model houses can be re-formed to create the potential for simple additions that do not increase their footprint.

None of these propositions are drastic or new. What residential retrofitting in the suburbs will require is a paradigm shift that recognizes the value of change.

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