

IMAGINING A DENSER SUBURBIA

Introduction

Anthropogenic climate change requires immediate solutions. In 2021, the building and construction sectors accounted for over 34 percent of energy demand and around 37 percent of CO2 emissions, totaling ten gigatons (Skeikh, 2022). These figures have continued to grow year after year despite concerted technological efforts to increase energy efficiency, but technological advances have proven no match to a society that builds at an unchecked pace (Iturbe, 2019). Increasing density, however, provides a straightforward path to more compact and efficient cities: small apartments require less materials, people drive less in urban communities, and reduced sprawl means less habitat destruction. The urban fabric of American cities that predate the automobile offer a ready solution, and Chicago — with its 1837 motto *urbs in horto* (city in a garden) — is a prime example. The sobering reality, however, is that roughly sixty percent of Americans live in energy-intensive, low-density suburban settlement patterns characterized by single-family detached homes and automobile dependence. Global warming is a crisis that demands immediate and decisive changes, but any solutions that don't consider, accommodate, and build upon deep-seated American ideals of living will certainly fail. America is a faux-bucolic suburban nation, and while the suburbs need to change — that is, they need to be densified — the solution to densification must be quintessentially suburban.

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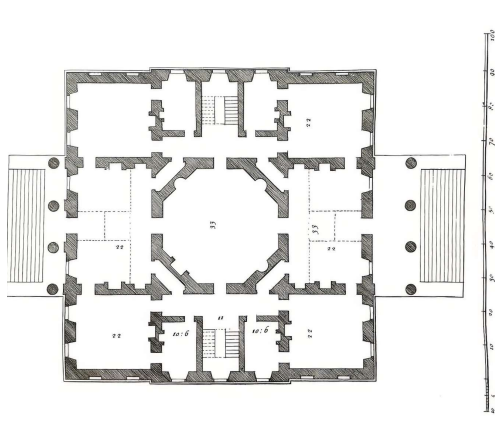


Figure 1: In Plate 44 of James Gibbs's *A Book of Architecture* (1726), we can see both Enlightenment and Renaissance circulation strategies. (Source: Archer, 2009.)

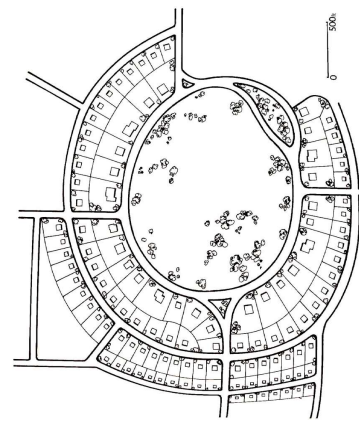


Figure 2: Andrew Jackson Downing's 1850 proposal for a "rural village," drawing by Hollyhock Woodruff. (Source: Archer, 2009.)

The Enlightenment and Housing

The modern idea of the single-family detached home is a product of the Enlightenment. The influential works of the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises of Government*, and other Enlightenment thinkers fundamentally altered western society. The movement prompted an infatuation with individuality, a desire to articulate one's unique characteristics, and a want for privacy, solitude, and retreat into the self (Archer, 2005). The detached home was the perfect vehicle for realizing these ideals, and as a result private property, along with a host of other Enlightenment notions, were codified into English law in 1689 (White, 2018). At the same time, England's nascent merchant and professional classes began to use their newfound fortunes to build detached homes in the periphery of London.

Enlightenment principles underpin the founding documents of the United States. John Locke wrote about the importance of "life, liberty, and estate." Even though Jefferson replaced "estate" with "the pursuit of happiness," he nevertheless regarded private property highly. In fact, the founding fathers held a deep-seated aversion to high-density settlements. In the words of George Washington, the "tumultuous populace of large cities are ever to be dreaded," (Hirt, 2015). These statesmen envisaged a rural nation of yeoman farmers, and early American authors from Thoreau to Emerson poetically advanced this ideal (Hirt, 2015). When the influential European Romantic movement idealized rural living, it wasn't easily attainable for Europeans. By this time, Europe had practically no untouched nature to speak of. In America, however, it was a very real possibility. Land

was abundant and the government wanted it settled. By the time of Walt Whitman (1819-1892), ownership of land had become an expectation, essentially a rite of passage. In his own words: "A man is not a whole and complete man until he owns a house and the ground it stands on," (Jackson, 1985).

Conjuring Illusions

Between 1880 and 1890, Chicago's population doubled from 503,165 to 1,099,850 (Reif, 2005). This is typical of the urban population booms in the era between the end of the Civil War and the Great Depression. Although rural families moved to the cities en masse in search of work, the low-density living prescribed by the founding fathers remained the dream, as evidenced by works like Henry David Thoreau's (1817-1862) *Walden* (1854). Railroad technology was employed to create commuter suburbs, and by the late 1880s, Chicago had 70,000 railroad commuters and a suburban population that exceeded 300,000 (Jackson, 1985). With the invention of the electric streetcar, even more Americans were able to live in rectilinear suburban environments, as long as they were within walking distance of the station. In the 1890s, United States street rail ridership, at two billion trips per year, was double the rest of the world combined (Jackson, 1985).

America's infatuation with new technology pushed ultra-high and ultra-low-density building settlements to the forefront of architecture at the turn of the 20th century. It is little surprise that Frank Lloyd Wright, arguably the most famous American architect, proposed both a mile high tower and the Broadacre City (he later claimed credit for suburbia when touring Boston's suburbs with Alvar Aalto) (Stern et

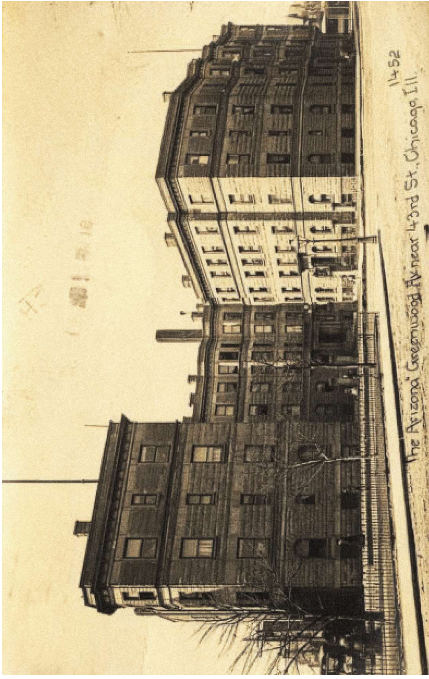


Figure 3: Treat & Folts, Arizona Apartments, 1892. This is one of the earliest examples of a reconfigurable Chicago courtyard house. The inspiration has been traced to European tenements and hospitals designed to allow for more air and light. (Source: Bluestone, 2017.)

al., 2013). American architects understood that they couldn't offer truly rural neighborhoods to urbanites who wanted quick access to the city, so they decided to create an illusion. The sleight-of-hand architects and planners employed had been in the works since at least 1828 when "Picturesque" landscaping was adopted to create an irregular lake in St. James Park, England (Frampton, 2020). In this instance, the orderly, rectilinear French Cartesian approach, typified by places like Versailles, was rejected, and Americans embraced picturesque landscaping wholeheartedly. Somehow, they figured, curvilinear geometries and planted vegetation could create the illusion of organic pastoral life in highly artificial and engineered environments. As early as 1850, we can see that the "rural village" proposal of the prominent American architect Andrew Jackson Downing featured curvilinear roads, large setbacks, and ample landscaping (Archer, 2005). Decades later, with the invention of the automobile, this illusion became widely attainable for urbanites, and by the 1930s, the FHA attempted to democratize this dream by making backed-mortgages contingent on, among other things, curvilinear roads.

Reframing Tenements

At the turn of the 20th century, while most people wanted a single-family home, and a remarkable percentage were granted their wish, it was clear that multifamily housing was still needed. When Chicago's Builders and Owners Association met to discuss promoting multifamily construction in 1902, the first order of business was tackling the stigma:

"The word 'tenement' brings us back to conditions in certain parts of the world from which we have escaped. We wish to be up to date and to have apartment building environments, which, even in name, will be something of which the city can be proud. We desire to substitute the word 'apartment' for the word 'tenement' wherever it occurs in this ordinance," (Bluestone, 2017).

This highlights the importance builders placed on how they framed multifamily housing to a suspicious public — questions developers are still pondering today.

The Chicago courtyard house in particular is worth considering. These buildings were explicitly designed to provide aspects of the single-family home experience in buildings that could squeeze well over 50 apartments onto 80 by 125-foot plots. Lush courtyard lawns helped these dense multifamily homes blend into neighborhoods made up predominantly of single-family homes, and it is precisely their relationship with the street — connecting the garden with public parkways — that differentiated them from their European counterparts. Numerous entryways meant residents only shared their front-door landing with one other unit, and while this was meant to improve privacy, it also guaranteed that residents would meet their immediate neighbors in the spirit of fitting in, courtyard house stylings followed popular detached home patterns. Buildings were "dressed" in Gothic, Georgian, colonial, and Renaissance ornamentation (Bluestone, 2017). Courtyard houses mixed with single-family homes remarkably well to create streets where people from varying economic strata coexisted.

Status Quo

Despite the charm of Chicago's leafy neighborhoods, suburban living characterized by single-family homes and automobile-dependent communities exploded after the Second World War. By 1960, 68.8% of Americans lived in detached homes (United States Census, 2000). The laws and financial vehicles — from zoning to the G.I. Bill — that facilitated this imbalance were ultimately born out of popular sentiment. People equated white picket fence houses with the American Dream, and they shivered at the thought of multifamily housing. It attracts dangerous people, went — and goes — the thinking. If a person subscribes to the teachings of Andrew Jackson Downing, or anyone else who has advanced suburban exceptionalism, how can they think otherwise? The belief that single-family homes make their residents more virtuous also implies a belief that the inhabitants of multifamily homes are somehow *less* so.

The era of building that preceded the Great Depression provided an approach to urban living that is admired and sought after today but rarely expanded upon. Tiny, hundred-year-old apartments in Chicago's north side Andersonville neighborhood regularly sell for a million dollars because of the dynamic living style they offer, not the quality of the apartment itself. Research shows that more Americans want walkable neighborhoods (Parolek, 2020). Meanwhile, the suburbs immediately surrounding American cities are rapidly replacing older 1000-square-foot homes with 2500-square-foot ones, but they ardently resist multifamily housing. Most high-density suburban projects are zoned apart from single-family home streets, leading developers to build bulky multistory "clubhouses" with double-loaded corridors, large parking lots, and little connection to their surrounding community (Lasner, 2023). The accessory dwelling unit movement has made headway, but at best zoning still relegates most multifamily housing to newly established town center shopping districts or peripheral regions (Williamson, 2015; Dixon, 2015). Changing this situation requires changing minds and votes.

There is no reason that the density of American suburbs cannot be increased several times over without fundamentally altering the illusion they offer, and — provided that it be made less wasteful — there is nothing wrong with this illusion either. Multifamily infill buildings can be scattered among detached single-family homes in a manner that preserves the verdant, neighborhood environment Americans want. This can provide people who can't afford a single-family home, or perhaps lack the desire to take care of one, with the opportunity to enjoy a quintessentially American way of living. The city of Chicago proves this is possible, and global warming demonstrates that suburban living in the current sense is untenable. While this paper suggests one solution — infill courtyard houses — this is merely offered as a starting point. Changing the American way of life to better protect the natural environment is a complicated debate with no single simple solution, but Chicago's courtyard houses do clearly demonstrate the power of architecture and the duty of architects. By appealing to suburban desires, architects can make urban living more palatable, and in this age of global warming, if practiced correctly architecture can make it easy for consumers to make the right choice.

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Figure 4: American Gothic, by Grant Wood (1930), is a Rorschach test of American cognition. One viewer might see a handy portrait of the American pastoral heritage, another might see a Sears kit house occupied by a couple in Sears-bought clothes. (Source: Jamerwalter, 2021.)

Conclusion

The Chicago courtyard house didn't capture the interest, and down payments, of middle-class Americans because it offered Parisian urbane living; rather, it repackaged a European urban typology in strictly suburban and therefore American terms. In 1898, the Chicago architect Irving K. Pond wrote that "the dweller in an apartment has the same right [to privacy and pride] as has the householder, and it is the duty of the architect to respect these rights." (Bluestone, 2017). One approach to reduce the size, and corresponding ecological destruction, of American cities is to densify suburban areas. Success requires architects and planners to think in the same terms as Pond. They must make a concerted effort to tap into that oft-neglected strain of the American zeitgeist — the suburban itself.