reinventing the American Dream
the city in the suburb
How can a nonviable suburban environment transform to become feasible, holistic community?
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understanding the factors that led to the creation of suburbia and its subsequent decline is essential to reconfiguring the future of the suburban environment.
the modern suburban environment rose out of an unprecedented demand for a new way of life. The American Dream was centered around motives of ownership and independence.
“In suburbia, organization man is trying, quite consciously, to develop a new kind of roots to replace what he has left behind.”

William H. Whyte, “The Organization Man (1956)”

- Following World War II America experience a severe housing shortage.
- GI Bill, National Housing Act of 1943, and the Interstate highway system encouraged suburban living.
- Changing mindset: consumerism spawned from new prosperity, corporate “mass media”, and a longing for the unknown.
From this new mindset
new attitudes were born.

car provided freedom
house symbolized success
city was dirty and hectic
solitude valued
The suburban environment is largely an attempt to create an orderly system for living. The suburb is simple. It utilizes a small kit of parts.
the problem is not the parts but the separation of the parts

subdivisions

strip malls
shopping centers

office parks

separation
This physical separation of parts creates detached environments that typically act in cohesion. In the suburban context this separation breaks the economic cycle of production and consumption. This leaves the housing aspect of suburbia, the subdivision, void of production. It is an environment dominated by consumption. It relies on the importing of capital from outside of the mono-functional community.
The economic downturn was brought on by predatory lending, foreclosures, consumer habits, fuel costs, and unemployment has contributed to a shrinking middle class and an inability to finance the continuation of suburban practices.

The middle class dropped from 61% in 1971 to 51% in 2011.

Suburbia can only survive in times of excess capital.
Income levels have dropped substantially with the inflation adjusted median worker making $32,000 in 2010, and $33,000 in 1968. The average American today does not live as frugally as the 1968 counterpart. This decrease in capital clashes with an inverse increase in lifestyle expectations creating a disparity that produces a culture of living beyond one's means. As a nation, America is living beyond its means.

2011 household incomes were 8.1% lower than 2007.
the suburban environment cannot adapt to times of financial distress.

Urban areas are more capable of "weathering the storm" due to their ability to evolve.
the suburbs are becoming what they are trying to escape:

- poverty
- danger
- filth

Since 2000, the number of suburban poor has increased by 53%.

55% of the America’s poor live in the suburbs.

Higher suicide rates, more young drivers.

Many foreclosed homes are left abandoned and become dilapidated.

US Census
• young people don’t want to live in the suburbs
• elderly people are not able to live in the suburbs
• families are finding that isolation is not the best way to raise a family
suburbia is not practical
and no longer is it desirable

changing mindsets
In 2004 the vehicle miles traveled per capita began to decrease for the first time since World War II and has continued to decrease every year.
The house is seen as an extension of the individual. It is seen as an indicator of success, not a machine for living. The unnecessary dining rooms, sitting rooms, and extra bathrooms serve as symbols instead of functioning spaces. Thus, the single family residence has become an empty shell that emphasizes status instead of practicality, efficiency, or effectiveness. It is an actualization of excess. When excess is removed so is the feasibility of the single family home.
The highest percentage of individuals who prefer to live in smart growth neighborhoods are those between the ages of 18-29 and 60+
The original inhabitants were starry-eyed explorers of a new land and a new way of life. Today's suburbanites are stereotyped as soccer moms and weary commuters.
Basically, the dream has changed.
Suburbia has failed.

They have failed economically, socially, environmentally, politically, culturally, and architecturally. The question is, what is to be done with the unsuccessful suburban landscapes?

Are they to be abandoned, destroyed, or reclaimed?
In order to change the path of the suburban environment, the "American Dream" must be altered.

Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream
- Museum of Modern Art

From the speculation of the Buell Hypothesis, New York City's Museum of Modern Art commissioned five design teams to create proposals for redesigning the future of housing in the midst of the foreclosure crisis. Each team was assigned a specific site in an area with a high foreclosure rate and asked to imagine a future environment that would be socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable.
Studio Gang Architects  
The Garden in the Machine  
Cicero, IL

This proposal creates a new housing type made of modular house elements that allows for the mixing of ages and family types. It is based on a limited equity cooperative concept where the community owns the land and amenities while the individual owns their home.

WORKac  
Nature-City  
Keizer, OR

The design team created their version of a modern garden city that focuses on integrating nature into a sustainable mixed-use community that provides varied environments containing a diversity of scale and density.
“...no matter how much work and time we have spent, the people who live there can form the spirit and character we have sought for it. We all feel that unless the town-hall spirit in which Park Forest was created is captured and held by the people we will have failed. This is our gamble. We’re betting on the people.”

Philip Klutznick, Park Forest founder

“The goal is to provide a fully integrated and livable community. The aim is to capture all the advantages of country living in an urban atmosphere within the economic reach of those who will live in the town.”

Park Forest Preliminary Prospectus
The suburb was really a social experiment. It was also a political and economic experiment. The difference between Park Forest and other large developments such as the Levittowns was that Park Forest did not only provide housing but provided a whole system including jobs and retail along with the housing.

Park Forest as example of developer lead suburban town. It is a town, not a development. It is led by capitalist intentions while realizing the complex economic cycle of the suburban environment and the need for complex social interactions in a successful community.
“Not only is a society healthier when its diverse members are in daily contact with one another, it is also more convenient.”
Duany, Plater-Zyberk, Speck “Suburban Nation (2010)"

pros:
- proposes holistic sustainable communities
- creates density while allowing for individual ownership
- designed to create production and income

cons:
- does not facilitate the adaptation of existing suburban environments
- today’s communities do not operate the same as in the past
- new communities must facilitate change
“Each year we construct the equivalent of many cities, but the pieces don’t add up to anything memorable or of lasting value. The result doesn’t look like a place, it doesn’t act like a place, and, perhaps most significant it doesn’t feel like a place.”

Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck

“Suburban Nation”
we have an enormous investment in the suburban environment in terms of resources, land, infrastructure, and potential. There is a responsibility to adapt that investment into something effective.

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“Suburban nation”
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This is what the research led to:

saving suburbia
2062 Williams street

Current value: $250,000
Last sale: $300,000 (2005)
Depreciation: $50,000

2054 Cardinal Drive

Current value: $270,000
Last sale: $280,000 (2002)
Depreciation: $10,000

2053 Williams street

Current value: $250,000
Last sale: $280,000 (2007)
Depreciation: $30,000

2051 Cardinal Drive

Current value: $240,000
Last sale: $289,000 (2004)
Depreciation: $70,000

2050 Williams street

Current value: $215,000
Last sale: $306,000 (2006)
Depreciation: $91,000

2049 Cardinal Drive

Current value: $280,000
Last sale: $320,000 (2007)
Depreciation: $40,000
foreclosed

unkempt house and lawn

no sidewalk

walking path

for sale

large trees

neglected roofing

overgrown plantings

uncared for and weed ridden lawn in both park and yard

site info
HOUSE ON A HILL (of houses)

Suburbia Stacked

abstracting
existing

wrap in shell

remove back of existing structure

inhabit

result
existing framing + structural shell + post & beam system = hybrid system
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urban mixed-use

suburban

vs

isolated-use

mixing use
goals

- reconfigure existing materials and infrastructure to create a walkable neighborhood
- create environments that allow for a socially diverse community
- inject productivity into a consumerist economy
- provide a hub for dynamic social interactions
- facilitate the evolving nature of communities
before & after

existing

proposed

jobs    households    services & opportunities

0       4             none

entrepreneurial, market, restaurant, cafe, gym, daycare, office space, live/work, communal, event space
• creates hub of urban activity that fosters social interactions
• provides jobs and income
• supplies daily needs
• represents community
• capable of evolving to meet changing needs
area: 19,000 sq ft
retail spaces: 11
jobs: 50+

services:
• market
• restaurant
• cafe
• daycare
• gym
• rental spaces
restaurant
live/ work
• eliminates commute
• cooperative office spaces provide complex business interactions
• low overhead for startups
• diversity of office settings create a active environments
area:
14,000 sq ft

office spaces:
75+
• allow for diversity
• eliminate excessive suburban rooms by adding shared communal spaces
• live/work units provide feasible small business opportunities
area: 12,500 sq ft

Units: 14
- live/work: 4
- studio: 7
- 2 bed: 3
6th floor
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before
inactive
monocultural
disconnected
isolated
dull

after
diverse
vibrant
interactive
productive
mobile
before
consumptive
dependant
decaying

after
productive
sustainable
independent
adaptable
before
automobile reliant sprawl

after
dense reuse walkable
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