

## Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between family structure, domestic space, and social interaction, questioning how housing designed for the Euro-American nuclear family performs when occupied by alternative and contemporary forms of living. While suburban housing in the United States has historically been shaped by ideals of privacy, separation, and frictionless domestic life, demographic, cultural, and economic shifts have destabilized the nuclear family as the dominant household model. Drawing from sociological and architectural scholarship, this research examines how immigrant, multigenerational, and culturally diverse households organize domestic life through extended networks of care, shared resources, and collective spatial practices, revealing a growing mismatch between the spatial organization of suburbia and the social realities it now accommodates.

In response, the project proposes a design framework that translates these collective domestic practices into a suburban context through incremental spatial adaptation. Rather than dismantling suburbia, the proposal introduces a modular “kit-of-parts” system that enables neighboring properties to collaboratively increase density within underutilized backyard spaces. This approach supports informal networks of care by allowing multiple households to coexist within a shared spatial framework while maintaining independent living arrangements. By rethinking suburban space as an adaptable fabric, this thesis positions the productive reuse of existing land as an alternative to demolition or continued sprawl, demonstrating how suburbia can support diverse family structures, cultural practices, and social needs without disrupting its recognizable character.

## Executive Summary

Suburban housing in the United States has long been shaped by a specific vision of domestic life centered on the Euro-American nuclear family. This model prioritizes privacy, separation between households, and clearly defined boundaries between domestic activities. While these spatial arrangements once reflected dominant cultural norms, demographic, economic, and cultural changes have significantly altered how people live together today. Households are increasingly diverse, including multigenerational families, single parents, unrelated adults sharing homes, and extended kin networks. At the same time, the rising costs of childcare, eldercare, and housing have intensified the need for informal systems of support within communities. Despite these changes, the physical organization of suburbia has remained largely unchanged, creating a growing mismatch between how suburban homes are designed and how they are actually inhabited.

This thesis investigates how suburban housing might adapt to support more diverse forms of living while maintaining the familiar fabric of suburban neighborhoods. Rather than proposing large-scale redevelopment or the demolition of existing homes, the project explores how small, localized changes within suburban lots could allow neighborhoods to evolve gradually over time. The central design proposal is a flexible system that enables homeowners to collaboratively adapt their properties by pooling adjacent lots and introducing additional housing units within underused backyard spaces. By increasing housing density in a controlled and incremental way, this approach aims to support informal networks of caregiving while also addressing issues of affordability, social isolation, and social functions.

The proposed system operates through cooperation among neighboring property owners. When several homeowners agree to participate, their backyards, pending changes to local zoning regulations, can be reorganized collectively to accommodate new residential units and new social

programs. These units provide rental opportunities that generate additional income for property owners while also creating more affordable housing options for renters. In this way, the system improves economic accessibility for both groups: renters gain entry into neighborhoods that might otherwise be financially inaccessible, while homeowners benefit from new sources of income that help offset rising living costs. The proximity created by these additional dwellings also fosters opportunities for shared caregiving and everyday social support, allowing neighbors to assist with childcare, eldercare, or other daily needs while maintaining independent households. Importantly, variations in household size and spatial organization are not only economic responses but are also deeply influenced by cultural values, which shape how families live together, share space, and form networks of care.

Architecturally, the project proposes a modular design framework organized through a flexible grid applied at the scale of the lot. Within this system, property owners select from a set of housing modules that respond to varying household needs and site conditions. The framework allows configurations to adapt based on the size, shape, and number of participating lots, enabling a range of spatial outcomes while maintaining a coherent organizational logic. In contrast to the ad hoc, single-lot adaptations that currently characterize suburban change, this approach introduces a coordinated structure in which individual interventions contribute to a larger spatial system. Units can accommodate diverse living arrangements—from small households to multigenerational families—while the underlying grid ensures that these additions operate as part of a unified framework rather than isolated modifications.

The methods used in this thesis combine historical research, cultural analysis, and design experimentation. The project first examines the historical development of suburbia and the social ideals that shaped its spatial organization. The rise of the nuclear family in the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries played a central role in shaping suburban housing, reinforcing ideals of independence, privacy, and clearly separated domestic roles. These assumptions were embedded not only in social expectations but also in the physical layout of houses and neighborhoods.

The research then examines how contemporary households increasingly diverge from these historical norms. Sociological studies and demographic data show a steady rise in multigenerational households, shared living arrangements, and alternative family structures. In addition, immigrant and culturally diverse communities often maintain traditions of extended family living and shared caregiving that differ from the nuclear family model. These practices frequently lead residents to modify suburban homes through additions, informal conversions, or accessory dwelling units (ADUs). Across the United States, many municipalities have begun revising zoning laws to permit ADUs and other forms of incremental housing in response to housing shortages and changing demographics. Research from organizations such as the AARP Public Policy Institute and the Urban Institute indicates that ADUs are increasingly viewed as a strategy for aging in place, increasing housing supply, and supporting multigenerational living.

These trends suggest that there is both a cultural and economic demand for more flexible forms of suburban housing, as well as for the integration of social programs that support community interaction and shared resources. However, current approaches typically occur on an individual lot-by-lot basis, limiting their broader impact on neighborhood structure. This thesis therefore explores how coordinated action between neighboring property owners could extend these incremental strategies into a more accessible and replicable framework for suburban adaptation—one that operates as a simple system that can be applied across different sites without the need for a designer. In this way, the approach is intended to be self-deployed and driven from the bottom up by property owners themselves. Importantly, the proposed system

requires only relatively small adjustments to existing zoning regulations, such as allowing shared backyard development or slightly increasing allowable density within residential lots, while also creating opportunities to embed spaces for collective use and community engagement within the suburban fabric.

The significance of this project lies in its attempt to rethink suburbia not as a static housing and atomized social model but as a socially, functionally, and spatially malleable system capable of gradual uniform transformation. Many suburban homes were built for a particular moment in social history, yet the buildings themselves often remain in place long after household needs have changed. As a result, families frequently face the difficult choice of either leaving their communities or demolishing and rebuilding homes in order to accommodate new circumstances. This thesis proposes an alternative: rather than forcing people to move or build new homes when they no longer fit their lives, the proposed spatial fabric of suburbia can be adapted to better support changing social realities.

By introducing flexible housing modules, shared backyard development, and collaborative property strategies, the project demonstrates how suburban neighborhoods might evolve to support collective care, cultural diversity, and economic resilience. These interventions maintain the recognizable scale and character of suburban environments while enabling new forms of living to emerge within them. In doing so, the thesis suggests that suburbia—often criticized as culturally rigid and outdated—can instead become a platform for social and spatial experimentation, adaptability, and community support in the face of shifting social conditions.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Historical Roots of Suburbia</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Contemporary Mismatch</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Alternative Spatial Practices</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Current Limitations</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Evaluating Markets</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Design Inquiry</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Critical Statement</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>29</b>

## Preface

This thesis emerges from the intersection of my studies in architecture and sociology. Throughout my academic experience, I have become increasingly interested in how the ways people live—shaped by culture, economics, family structures, and systems of care—interact with the built environments they inhabit. Sociology has provided a framework for understanding these social dynamics, while architecture offers a means of responding to them spatially. Bringing these disciplines together has led me to ask a simple but persistent question: *how might the design of everyday housing better reflect the realities of how people actually live?*

In studying suburbia, I became particularly interested in the disconnect between the spatial assumptions embedded in suburban housing and the diversity of household structures that exist today. Many homes were designed around a narrow model of domestic life centered on the nuclear family, yet contemporary households increasingly represent a different way of life centered around shared living arrangements and extended networks of care—partially as a cultural practice and the rising cost of living. Observing this mismatch revealed an opportunity to explore how architecture might adapt to support these evolving social conditions.

This work also reflects a broader reflection on the agency of architecture itself. While architecture often operates within economic, political, and regulatory constraints, it still holds the capacity to influence how people relate to one another and to the spaces they inhabit. The built environment quietly shapes patterns of social life—structuring proximity, privacy, interaction, and care. For this reason, architecture carries a responsibility not only to respond to existing conditions, but also to question the assumptions embedded within them. Recognizing this agency invites architects to engage critically with the social realities their work supports, and to imagine spatial possibilities that make room for more inclusive and responsive ways of living

## Chapter 1: Historical Roots of Suburbia

The spatial organization of housing reflects the social structures and cultural values of the societies that produce it. Domestic architecture does not simply shelter families; it shapes how relationships unfold within the home by organizing proximity, privacy, and movement between individuals. As architectural historian Robin Evans argues, the layout of domestic interiors fundamentally structures social interaction, determining whether household members encounter one another frequently or remain spatially separated<sup>1</sup>. The suburban house in the United States represents one of the most influential examples of this relationship between social norms and spatial form. Designed around ideals of privacy, independence, and clearly defined domestic roles, suburban housing emerged alongside the rise of the Euro-American nuclear family and helped reinforce its dominance throughout the twentieth century.

To understand this relationship, it is necessary to examine the historical transformation of family structures and the ways these transformations influenced domestic architecture. Prior to the rise of the nuclear family, households in early modern Europe were often organized around extended kinship systems. Historian Lawrence Stone describes these earlier arrangements as “extended stem families,” in which multiple generations—often including married sons and their families—lived together under one roof<sup>2</sup>. These households functioned not only as social units but also as economic systems. Labor, property, and inheritance were coordinated across generations, and household membership frequently expanded or contracted depending on economic conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, Robin. “Figures, Doors, and Passages.” *Architectural Design*, London: 1978. - 267

<sup>2</sup> Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*. New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1977. - 65

Marriage within this context was typically understood as an economic alliance rather than an emotional partnership. Families arranged marriages in order to consolidate property, secure economic stability, or strengthen social ties. As Stone notes, emotional attachment between spouses and children was often limited by high mortality rates and the economic pressures of early modern life<sup>3</sup>. Domestic life therefore centered on practical cooperation rather than the sentimental ideals that later came to define the nuclear family.

Architectural space reflected this collective structure of family life. Evans describes how many early houses were organized through sequences of interconnected rooms arranged in an enfilade or matrix configuration. In these layouts, rooms often had multiple entrances and served simultaneously as circulation routes and living spaces<sup>4</sup>. Movement through the house required passing through the rooms of others, making privacy nearly impossible.

These spatial arrangements produced a domestic environment characterized by constant interaction. Household members encountered one another frequently throughout the day, reinforcing the interdependent nature of extended family life. Evans argues that these spatial patterns reflected a cultural context in which privacy was not yet considered a central social value. Instead, domestic architecture encouraged proximity and shared experience.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, profound changes in economic and social organization began to reshape both family structures and domestic architecture. Stone argues that the rise of capitalism and the growth of urban markets contributed to the emergence of smaller, more independent households<sup>5</sup>. As economic production moved outside the home and

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<sup>3</sup> Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*. New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1977. - 65

<sup>4</sup> Evans, Robin. "Figures, Doors, and Passages." *Architectural Design*, London: 1978. - 268

<sup>5</sup> Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*. New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1977. - 65

into factories, workshops, and commercial enterprises, the household ceased to function as the primary site of economic activity.

This transformation was accompanied by a shift in cultural attitudes toward family life. The family increasingly became understood as an emotional unit centered on child-rearing and moral development. Marriage came to be associated with affection and companionship, and parents developed stronger emotional attachments to their children. These changes laid the foundation for the emergence of the nuclear family as the dominant household structure. Architectural space adapted to these new cultural expectations. One of the most significant changes in domestic architecture during the nineteenth century was the widespread adoption of the corridor plan. Unlike earlier houses with interconnected rooms, corridor plans allowed each room to be accessed independently through hallways. This arrangement reduced the need for household members to pass through one another's spaces and made it possible to isolate rooms for specific functions.

Evans argues that this shift represented more than a technical improvement in circulation. Instead, it reflected a profound transformation in social values. Corridors created a domestic environment in which individuals could withdraw from interaction and maintain personal privacy. Evans famously characterizes the corridor plan as an "architecture to hide in," emphasizing how the new spatial arrangement allowed individuals to avoid unwanted encounters within the household<sup>6</sup>. The corridor plan therefore reinforced emerging cultural ideals of individual autonomy and personal privacy. Rooms became specialized spaces dedicated to particular activities, such as sleeping, eating, or entertaining guests. This specialization of

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<sup>6</sup> Evans, Robin. "Figures, Doors, and Passages." *Architectural Design*, London: 1978. - 268

domestic space helped structure everyday life within the home while reinforcing the independence of the nuclear household.

These developments were closely tied to the rise of the middle class. Robert Fishman situates the emergence of suburbia within this broader transformation of bourgeois domestic life. In *Bourgeois Utopias*, Fishman argues that suburban environments developed as spatial expressions of middle-class aspirations for privacy, moral order, and separation from the industrial city<sup>7</sup>. Early suburbs in nineteenth-century England were initially conceived as residential retreats for middle-class families seeking refuge from urban congestion and pollution. These environments provided access to nature while reinforcing the moral values associated with family life. Fishman describes suburbia as a “bourgeois utopia” in which domestic life could be protected from the perceived dangers of the city<sup>8</sup>.

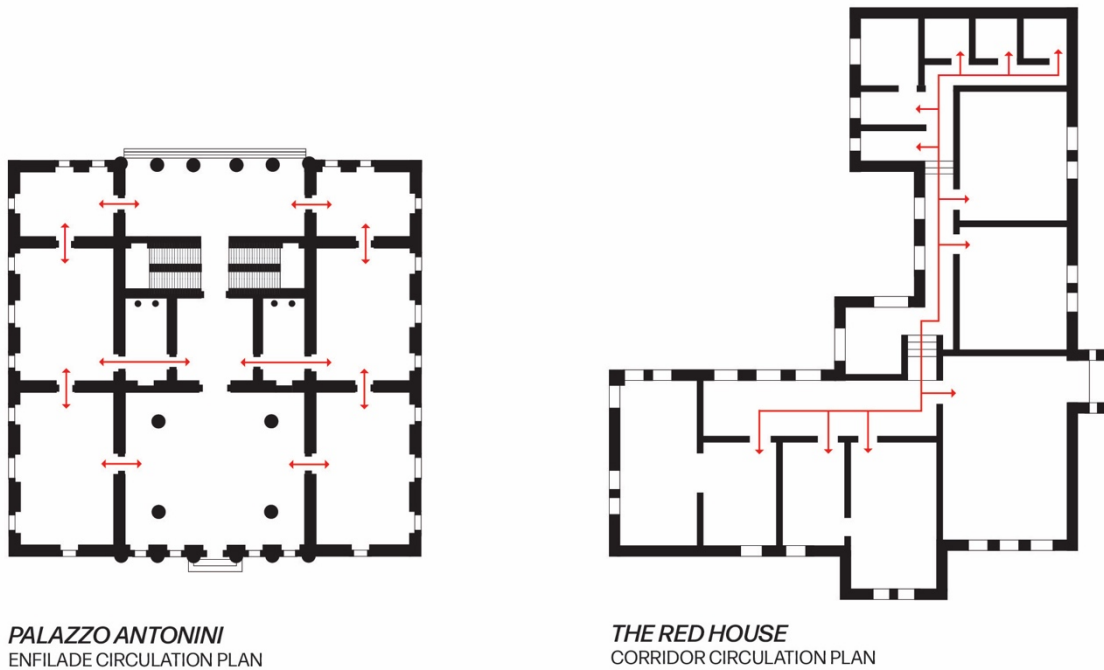
Suburban housing also reinforced a specific gendered division of labor. Men traveled to the city for employment, while women remained in the home to manage domestic life and raise children. The suburban house therefore functioned as both a physical and ideological space that reinforced the cultural values of the nuclear family. The twentieth century further intensified this relationship between suburban space and family structure. After World War II, mass suburbanization reshaped the American landscape through the rapid construction of large-scale housing developments. Communities such as Levittown standardized suburban housing through industrialized construction techniques, allowing developers to produce large numbers of nearly identical houses.

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<sup>7</sup> Fishman, Robert. *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. New York: Basic Books, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Fishman, Robert. *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. New York: Basic Books, 1987.

These homes were designed explicitly around the nuclear family model. Bedrooms were arranged for parents and children, kitchens functioned as spaces for domestic labor, and private yards reinforced the separation between households. Suburban neighborhoods therefore became physical landscapes built around the assumption that each home would contain a single self-sufficient family. Yet the social conditions that produced this spatial model have changed dramatically. As family structures diversify and economic pressures reshape domestic life, the rigid spatial assumptions embedded in suburban housing have begun to reveal their limitations.



**FIGURE 1- Diagram of changing circulation strategies (Self, 2026)**

## **Chapter 2: Contemporary Mismatch Between Suburbia and Modern Families**

The suburban housing model that emerged in the twentieth century was designed to support a particular vision of domestic life centered on the nuclear family. Yet contemporary demographic patterns suggest that this household structure is no longer dominant in the United States. Over the past several decades, family formation patterns have diversified significantly, creating a growing mismatch between the spatial organization of suburban housing and the social realities of contemporary domestic life.

Statistical trends demonstrate the scale of this shift. In 1970, approximately 69 percent of adults in the United States were married. By the early twenty-first century, that number had declined to approximately 51 percent, reflecting a broader transformation in how families form and organize themselves<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, births outside of marriage have increased dramatically, and fewer children are raised in households with two married parents than in previous generations. In 1970, approximately 82 percent of children lived with two married parents; by 2010, that number had declined to 63 percent<sup>10</sup>. These changes are the result of several intersecting social transformations. Increased participation of women in the workforce has altered the economic foundations of marriage and family life. Legal recognition of same-sex marriage and domestic partnerships has expanded the range of socially recognized family structures. Cultural attitudes toward cohabitation, single parenthood, and childlessness have also shifted significantly, allowing individuals greater flexibility in how they organize domestic life.

Economic pressures have further accelerated these changes. Rising housing costs, childcare expenses, and healthcare costs have made it increasingly difficult for individuals to

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<sup>9</sup> "The rise of Asian Americans." Washington, DC: Pew Social & Demographic Trends (2012).

<sup>10</sup> "The rise of Asian Americans." Washington, DC: Pew Social & Demographic Trends (2012).

maintain independent households. In many metropolitan areas, housing affordability has become a major barrier to homeownership, particularly for younger generations. As a result, many families rely on extended kin networks for financial and caregiving support. These conditions have contributed to the increasing prevalence of multigenerational households. Research indicates that households containing three or more generations have grown steadily over the past several decades. These living arrangements allow families to share housing costs, childcare responsibilities, and eldercare duties, creating systems of mutual support that reduce the financial burden placed on individual households.

Despite these social transformations, the spatial organization of suburban housing has remained largely unchanged. Most suburban homes are still designed around the assumption that a single nuclear family will occupy the house. Bedrooms are typically arranged to accommodate parents and children, while living spaces such as kitchens and living rooms are designed for small family units rather than extended kin networks. This spatial rigidity produces a growing mismatch between housing design and domestic reality. Multigenerational households often require additional private spaces for elderly family members or adult children. Single-parent households may rely more heavily on extended relatives for childcare, requiring domestic arrangements that allow multiple caregivers to participate in everyday life. Yet suburban houses rarely provide the spatial flexibility needed to accommodate such arrangements without significant modifications.

The mismatch between suburban housing design and contemporary family structures becomes even more pronounced when cultural variations in family organization are considered. Many immigrant and minority communities maintain family traditions that emphasize extended

kinship networks and collective caregiving responsibilities. These traditions often produce spatial practices that differ significantly from the assumptions embedded in suburban housing. Understanding these cultural differences is essential for recognizing the limitations of suburbia as a spatial model. While demographic data reveals the diversification of family structures in general terms, examining specific cultural practices reveals how deeply family organization shapes the ways people inhabit domestic space. In many cases, suburban housing does not simply fail to accommodate contemporary families—it actively constrains cultural forms of domestic life that prioritize collective living arrangements. Examining the spatial practices associated with these cultural traditions therefore provides an important framework for understanding how suburban housing might evolve to better support diverse forms of domestic life.

### Chapter 3: Alternative Spatial Practices

While suburban housing in the United States was designed around the ideals of the nuclear family, many cultural traditions emphasize extended kinship networks and collective forms of living. These traditions shape domestic spatial practices in ways that differ significantly from the assumptions embedded in suburban housing design. Examining these practices reveals how cultural values influence the organization of domestic space and highlights alternative models of living that challenge the spatial norms of suburbia.

One of the most significant cultural frameworks shaping household organization in many communities is the concept of familism. Familism emphasizes the prioritization of family needs over individual autonomy and promotes strong commitments to extended kin networks. Among Hispanic families in the United States, familism plays a central role in shaping patterns of household formation and domestic life<sup>11</sup>.

Research indicates that Latino households tend to be larger than those of non-Hispanic white families and are significantly more likely to include extended relatives living together. Hispanic families are also less likely to live alone and more likely to share housing with other relatives, reflecting cultural values that emphasize collective responsibility and interdependence<sup>12</sup>. These patterns of household organization often produce domestic environments in which multiple generations share resources and caregiving responsibilities. Urban planner James Rojas describes how these cultural values translate into spatial adaptations within suburban environments through what he calls “Latino vernacular.” Rather than adhering

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<sup>11</sup> Landale, Nancy S., R. Salvador Oropesa, and Cristina Bradatan. "Hispanic families in the United States: Family structure and process in an era of family change." *Hispanics and the future of America* 5 (2006): 1-30.

<sup>12</sup> Landale, Nancy S., R. Salvador Oropesa, and Cristina Bradatan. "Hispanic families in the United States: Family structure and process in an era of family change." *Hispanics and the future of America* 5 (2006): 1-30.

to the traditional suburban emphasis on privacy and separation, Latino households often transform the spaces surrounding their homes into sites of social interaction and cultural expression<sup>13</sup>. Front yards, for example, frequently become active social spaces where neighbors gather, children play, and families interact with the surrounding community. In many cases, fences that might traditionally function as barriers between properties instead serve as places where people pause to talk and socialize. Rojas notes that these adaptations often make suburban neighborhoods more walkable and socially vibrant by encouraging interaction between residents<sup>14</sup>. Porches also play an important role in these spatial practices. Rather than functioning purely as architectural features, porches become spaces for everyday activities such as socializing, observing street life, selling goods, or hosting family gatherings. These practices blur the boundaries between public and private space, creating environments that foster stronger social connections within the neighborhood.

African American family traditions also emphasize extended kin networks and shared caregiving responsibilities. Sociological research has demonstrated that kinship networks play a central role in supporting households through the exchange of goods, services, and childcare. Rather than relying solely on parents within a nuclear household, caregiving responsibilities are often distributed across a broader network of relatives<sup>15</sup>. David Briscoe's research highlights the importance of kin interaction and mutual aid within African American communities. These networks allow families to adapt to economic challenges while maintaining strong social connections. Parenting responsibilities may be shared among grandparents, aunts, uncles, and

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<sup>13</sup> Rojas, James. "Latino Vernacular Is Transforming American Streets." NorCal APA (2014).

<sup>14</sup> Rojas, James. "Latino Vernacular Is Transforming American Streets." NorCal APA (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Briscoe, David L. "Distinctive features of the African-American family: Debunking the myth of the deficit model." *Ethnic Studies Review* 23.1 (2000): 97-122.

other relatives, creating flexible systems of support that extend beyond the nuclear household<sup>16</sup>. Carol Stack's ethnographic research further demonstrates how these kin networks function as systems of reciprocal exchange. Family members provide childcare, housing, or financial assistance when needed, with the expectation that support will be returned when circumstances change. These networks therefore operate as systems of mutual obligation that distribute responsibilities across extended family relationships<sup>17</sup>.

Caribbean immigrant families in the United States often maintain similar patterns of multigenerational living. Research conducted by the Migration Policy Institute indicates that Caribbean households frequently include grandparents or other adult relatives living alongside parents and children<sup>18</sup>. These arrangements allow families to share childcare responsibilities while providing economic stability and emotional support. Caribbean domestic spaces often reflect these collective living arrangements. Homes may include shared rooms that accommodate multiple family members rather than emphasizing individual privacy. Kitchens and dining areas serve as central gathering spaces where families share meals and social interactions. These spaces function as the social core of the household, reinforcing family relationships through everyday activities.

Asian American households also frequently incorporate multigenerational living arrangements shaped by cultural traditions emphasizing family unity and filial responsibility. In many Asian cultures, filial piety requires adult children to care for aging parents, often leading

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<sup>16</sup> Briscoe, David L. "Distinctive features of the African-American family: Debunking the myth of the deficit model." *Ethnic Studies Review* 23.1 (2000): 97-122.

<sup>17</sup> Briscoe, David L. "Distinctive features of the African-American family: Debunking the myth of the deficit model." *Ethnic Studies Review* 23.1 (2000): 97-122.

<sup>18</sup> Hernandez, Donald J. "Changing demography and circumstances for young Black children in African and Caribbean immigrant families." Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute (2012).

multiple generations to share the same household<sup>19</sup>. Research on Asian American households indicates that these families are significantly more likely than white American families to live in multigenerational homes. One study found that Asian Americans are approximately twice as likely as white Americans to live in households containing three or more generations<sup>20</sup>. These arrangements allow families to share economic resources while maintaining strong intergenerational relationships.

Cultural practices within Asian households often shape the spatial organization of domestic environments. Kitchens and dining rooms frequently serve as central gathering spaces where extended families share meals and reinforce familial bonds. Architectural elements such as transitional spaces at the entrance of the home may reinforce cultural rituals such as removing shoes before entering the house, symbolically marking the boundary between public and private life<sup>21</sup>. Many Asian homes also include spaces dedicated to honoring ancestors or performing family rituals. These areas serve as reminders of the importance of intergenerational relationships and reinforce cultural values centered on family continuity and respect for elders. Across these cultural contexts, domestic space functions less as a site of individual privacy and more as a platform for collective living. Shared meals, multigenerational caregiving, and extended kin networks produce spatial practices that differ significantly from those embedded in suburban housing design.

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<sup>19</sup> Sharma, Priyanshi, et al. "How We Live: Characteristics of Multigenerational Households among Asian Americans (2006-2018): Multigenerational Households and Asian Americans." *Journal of Asian Health* 5.1 (2025).

<sup>20</sup> Sharma, Priyanshi, et al. "How We Live: Characteristics of Multigenerational Households among Asian Americans (2006-2018): Multigenerational Households and Asian Americans." *Journal of Asian Health* 5.1 (2025).

<sup>21</sup> Caligor, Livia. "In Asian American Households, Family Influences Every Design Decision." *Architectural Digest* (2024).

These cultural practices reveal the limitations of the suburban housing model. Suburban environments were designed around the assumption that households would consist of small nuclear families living independently from extended kin networks. Yet many cultural traditions emphasize forms of domestic life that depend on proximity, shared spaces, and collective systems of care. Recognizing these alternative spatial practices therefore provides an important framework for rethinking suburban housing. Rather than treating suburbia as a fixed model of domestic life, architects and planners can draw inspiration from cultural traditions that emphasize collective living arrangements. These practices suggest new possibilities for organizing domestic space in ways that support diverse family structures and strengthen networks of social support.

## Chapter 4: Current Limitations

The limitations of suburban housing extend beyond the design of individual homes and are embedded within the regulatory frameworks that shape suburban development. Zoning, in particular, has played a central role in structuring how domestic life is organized across suburban landscapes. Historically, zoning has reinforced the nuclear-family model by privileging low-density, single-family housing and restricting the number of households permitted on a single lot. In doing so, it has codified ideals of privacy, independence, and separation within the built environment.

At the same time, zoning should not be understood as a fixed constraint but as a system capable of adaptation. The same regulatory mechanisms that limit density and restrict alternative housing arrangements can be adjusted to support new forms of domestic life. Reframing zoning as both an impediment and a potential tool for change allows suburbia to be understood not as a static condition, but as a system open to incremental transformation. Suburban zoning is typically organized through the subdivision of land into discrete parcels, each intended to support a single household. As Rene Chow describes in *Suburban Space: The Fabric of Dwelling*, this produces a fragmented spatial condition in which each lot functions as an isolated unit rather than part of a larger relational system<sup>22</sup>. Property lines, setbacks, and use restrictions reinforce this separation, limiting opportunities for shared living arrangements or coordinated forms of development across neighboring lots.

This spatial logic extends beyond the parcel to the broader structure of suburban environments. Robert Fishman identifies suburbia as a landscape historically defined by separation from the city and from extended social networks, reinforcing the autonomy of the

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<sup>22</sup> Chow, Rene Y. *Suburban Space: The Fabric of Dwelling*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2002.

individual household<sup>23</sup>. Albert Pope further describes how contemporary suburban development operates through “limited access communities,” in which hierarchical circulation systems—such as cul-de-sacs and arterial roads—restrict connectivity and control movement<sup>24</sup>. At both the neighborhood and lot scales, these patterns produce environments in which interaction is limited and collective forms of living are spatially constrained.

Yet these same frameworks also present opportunities for change. In recent years, municipalities have begun to revise zoning regulations to permit accessory dwelling units, shared housing arrangements, and other forms of incremental densification. These adjustments demonstrate that zoning can function as a flexible tool, capable of accommodating evolving social and economic conditions. Small shifts in regulation—such as allowing shared backyard development, increasing allowable density within residential lots, or enabling coordination between adjacent property owners—have the potential to significantly expand the range of housing configurations available within suburban neighborhoods. Rather than requiring large-scale redevelopment, these changes operate within the existing fabric of suburbia, allowing it to evolve gradually.

Understanding zoning in this way reframes the design challenge addressed in this thesis. Instead of working against existing suburban structures, the project explores how targeted regulatory adjustments can support more connected and adaptable forms of domestic space. By leveraging zoning as both a constraint and a tool, suburbia can begin to accommodate collective living arrangements while maintaining its recognizable form. This shift forms the basis for the design proposal that follows, which investigates how a coordinated, lot-based system of

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<sup>23</sup> Fishman, Robert. *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. New York: Basic Books, 1987.

<sup>24</sup> Pope, Albert. *Ladders*. Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.

incremental development can operate within existing suburban regulations to support more flexible, socially connected modes of living.

## Chapter 5: Evaluating Markets

Recent housing trends suggest that demand for more flexible suburban living arrangements is already emerging. Rising housing costs, demographic aging, and changing family structures have encouraged many households to explore alternative forms of domestic organization that diverge from the traditional nuclear-family household. While suburban housing was historically designed to support small, self-contained families, contemporary economic and social conditions increasingly encourage cooperative living arrangements that allow families to share resources, caregiving responsibilities, and housing costs.

One of the most visible responses to these pressures has been the growing adoption of accessory dwelling units (ADUs). ADUs are small secondary housing units located on the same lot as a primary residence, often constructed in backyards, garages, or basement conversions. These units allow homeowners to house elderly relatives, adult children, or renters while maintaining independent households. Across the United States, municipalities have begun revising zoning regulations to permit ADUs as a strategy for increasing housing supply without dramatically altering the scale of suburban neighborhoods<sup>25</sup>.

The rising popularity of ADUs reflects broader demographic changes. The United States is experiencing a significant increase in multigenerational households, driven by both economic necessity and cultural preferences for extended family living. According to housing research conducted by the Urban Institute, multigenerational households have grown steadily since the early 2000s, with millions of households now including three or more generations under one

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<sup>25</sup> Mukhija, Vinit, et al. *Aging in Place and Accessory Dwelling Units*. UCLA Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, 2016.

roof<sup>26</sup>. These arrangements often provide mutual economic benefits, allowing families to share childcare, eldercare, and housing costs while maintaining close social support networks.

At the same time, aging populations have created new housing needs within suburban communities. Many older adults wish to remain in their neighborhoods as they age rather than relocate to institutional housing or retirement communities. Housing organizations such as the AARP Public Policy Institute have identified ADUs as a key strategy for supporting “aging in place,” allowing older residents to live near family members while maintaining independence<sup>27</sup>. These units allow families to provide informal caregiving while avoiding the high costs associated with formal eldercare services.

Housing affordability has also played a major role in the resurgence of multigenerational living. In many metropolitan regions, rising housing prices have made homeownership increasingly inaccessible to younger generations. Living with extended family members or sharing housing with relatives has therefore become an important strategy for navigating housing costs. In response, some developers have begun designing homes specifically intended to accommodate multigenerational households, incorporating separate entrances, secondary kitchens, and flexible living spaces.

These emerging housing trends suggest that suburbia may be entering a new phase of transformation. The suburban housing model that dominated the twentieth century was built around the assumption that each home would contain a single nuclear family. Yet the realities of contemporary life—ranging from demographic aging to economic pressures and cultural diversity—are increasingly challenging this assumption.

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<sup>26</sup> Choi, Jung Hyun, et al. *Multigenerational Households in the United States*. Urban Institute, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Rodgers, Will. *Accessory Dwelling Units: A Step Toward Housing Security*. AARP Public Policy Institute, 2020.

Rather than abandoning suburbia entirely, these trends point toward the possibility of adapting suburban environments to accommodate new forms of domestic life. Accessory dwelling units, multigenerational housing designs, and cooperative living arrangements represent incremental strategies for increasing flexibility within existing suburban neighborhoods. Importantly, these adaptations allow suburbs to evolve gradually while maintaining their familiar physical character. This shift aligns closely with the argument developed throughout this thesis. Earlier chapters demonstrated how the spatial organization of suburbia emerged from specific historical assumptions about family structure, privacy, and domestic independence. Yet contemporary households increasingly diverge from those assumptions, relying on extended kin networks and collective forms of care that require more flexible spatial arrangements.

By recognizing suburbia as a spatial fabric rather than a static housing model, architects and planners can begin to imagine new forms of suburban living that support diverse family structures. Shared backyard developments, modular housing systems, and collaborative property arrangements could allow neighborhoods to evolve gradually while strengthening networks of social support. In this sense, the growing interest in ADUs and multigenerational housing is not simply a response to housing shortages or demographic change. It represents a broader cultural shift in how domestic life is organized. Suburbia, once designed to reinforce independence and separation, may increasingly become a platform for collective living and shared systems of care. These developments suggest that the suburban landscape—often criticized as rigid or outdated—holds the potential to evolve into a more adaptable and socially responsive environment.

## Chapter 6: Design Inquiry

The preceding research identifies a fundamental disconnect between the spatial assumptions embedded in suburban housing and the diversity of contemporary family structures. Suburbia has historically been organized around ideals of privacy, separation, and the nuclear family; however, demographic, cultural, and economic shifts have increasingly destabilized this model. As the costs of living and care continue to rise, suburban environments often fail to support the ways people now live, age, and rely on one another. This project responds by proposing a framework through which suburbia can adapt incrementally, accommodating a broader range of households while fostering networks of everyday support.

At the core of the proposal is a “kit-of-parts” system designed to be adaptable, replicable, and accessible. Rather than relying on large-scale redevelopment or top-down planning, the system is intended to be implemented by homeowners themselves. Adjacent property owners may choose to collaborate by combining their lots into a shared development, introducing additional housing within underutilized backyard space. In this way, the project operates as a bottom-up model of suburban transformation, enabling residents to initiate change based on their own needs. The financial structure supports this approach: participating homeowners share construction costs and, in turn, share rental income from the new units, generating an additional and ongoing source of revenue.

The proposal is tested in Mattydale, a neighborhood in Syracuse, New York, characterized by small single-family homes and relatively large lots. Although zoning regulations allow for up to 30% lot coverage, existing conditions average less than 15%, leaving a substantial portion of land underutilized. This discrepancy reveals an opportunity to increase density within current zoning regulations. To illustrate how the system operates socially, the

project considers a specific group of participants. Existing homeowners include elderly residents seeking supplemental income, empty nesters with underused space, and one traditional family. These residents elect to collaborate and combine their properties and mortgages into one lot with one mortgage, making a shared development. New residents include young professionals, such as a young adult living at home, single parents, and extended family members. While each household maintains independent living space, their proximity enables informal systems of support to emerge. Residents can assist with childcare, share responsibilities for eldercare, and benefit from increased day-to-day social interaction that is often absent in conventional suburban settings.

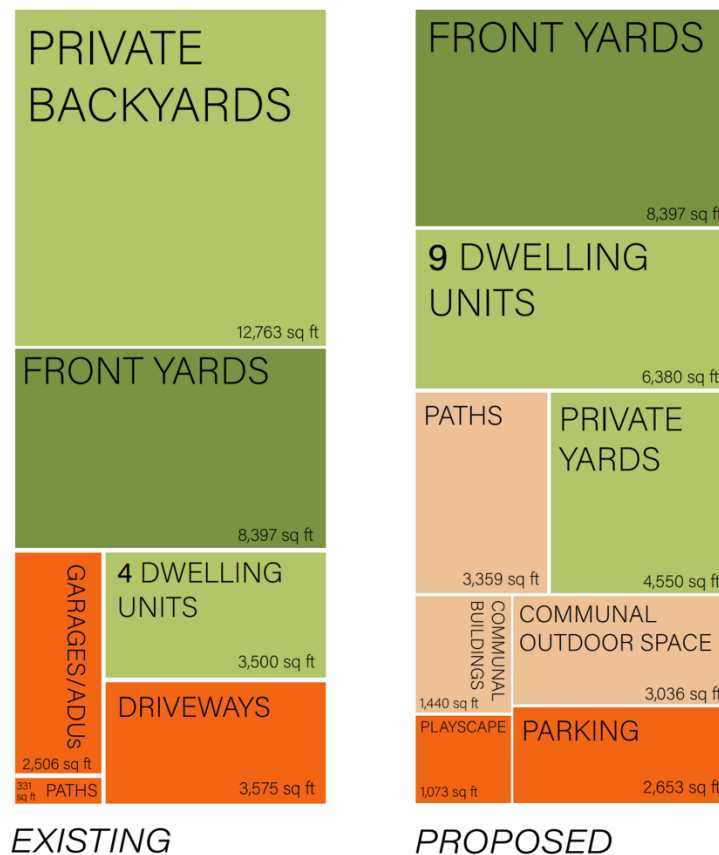
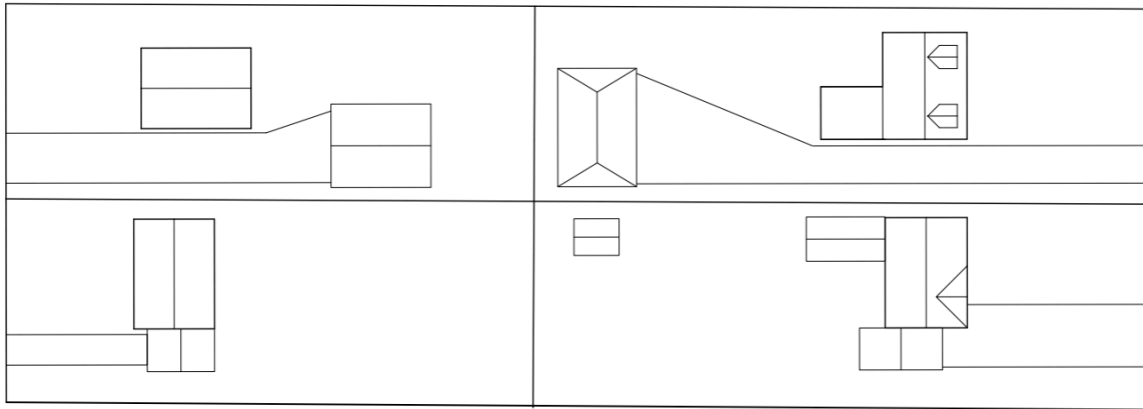
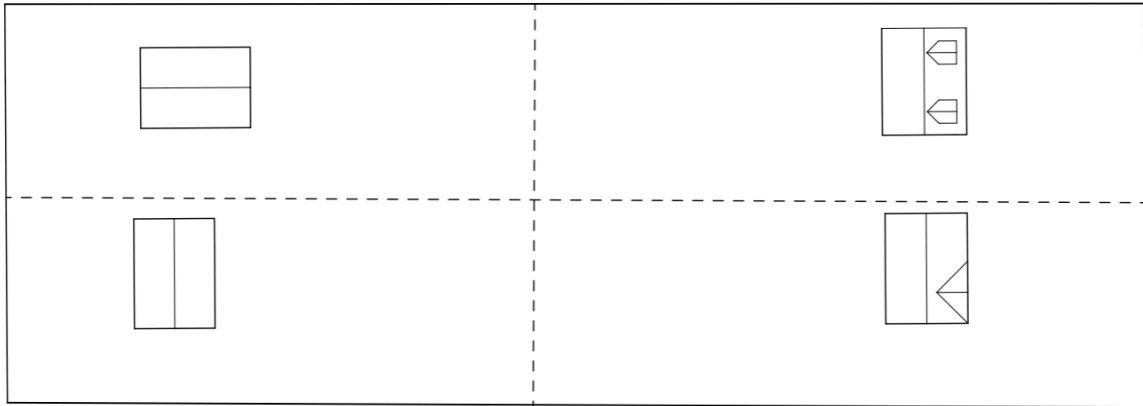


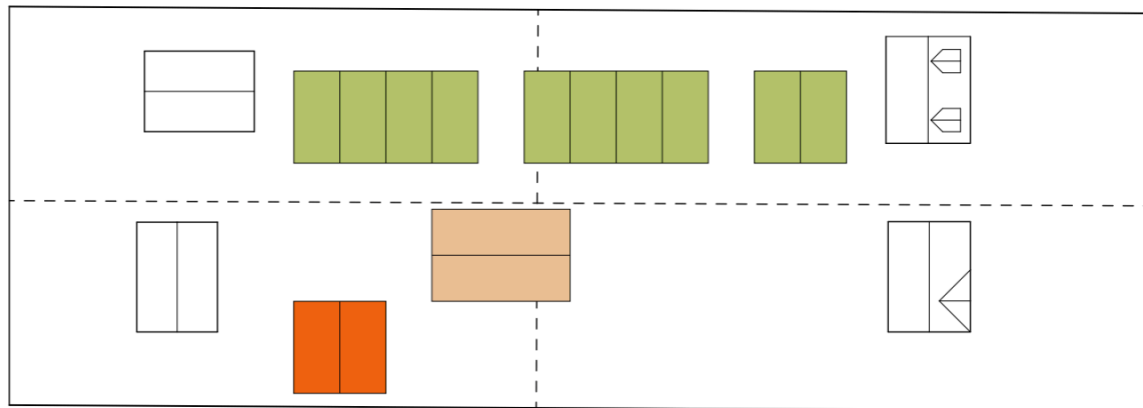
Figure 2- Comparison of use of lot between existing and proposed strategy (2026)



1 Four dwelling units on four lots. The owners realize a shared interest in increasing the density of their property.



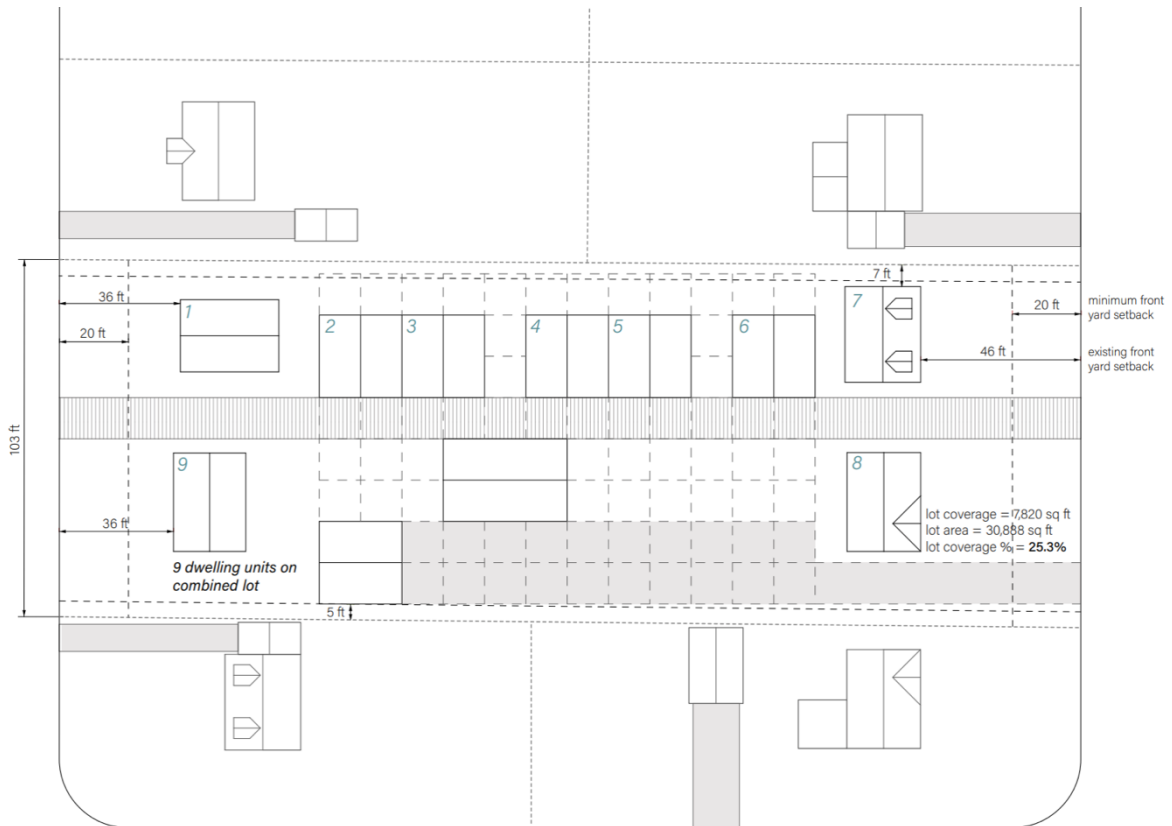
2 Four lots are combined, creating one 31,000 sq ft lot. Garages, ADUs, and driveways are demolished. The combined lot is shared equally amongst the owners.



3 Owners collectively fund the construction of five dwelling units, and one communal unit, and one utility unit. Owners equally split income from dwelling unit rent.

## FINANCIAL MODEL

**Figure 3- Diagram of Financial Model (2026)**

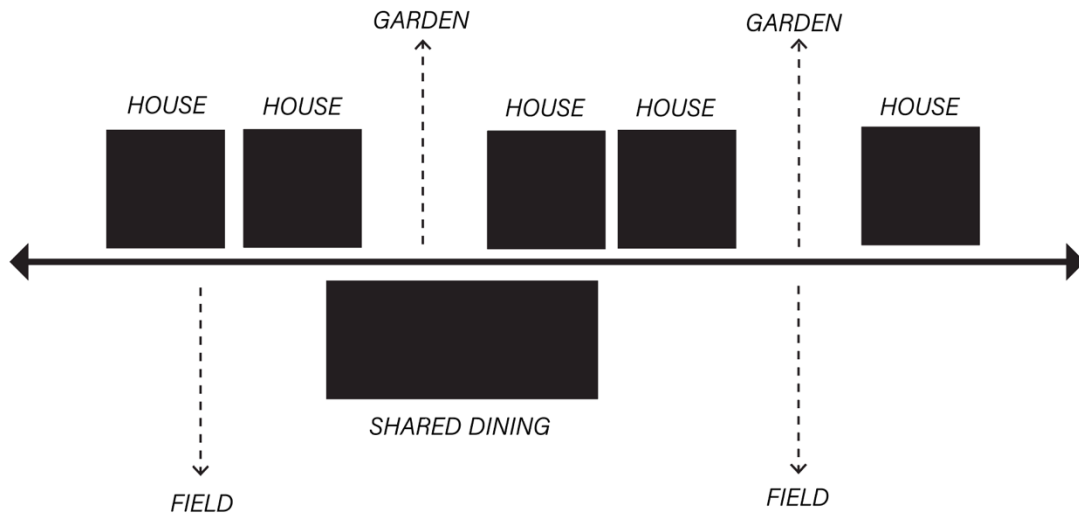


### R1-A ZONING COMPLIANCE OF PROPOSAL

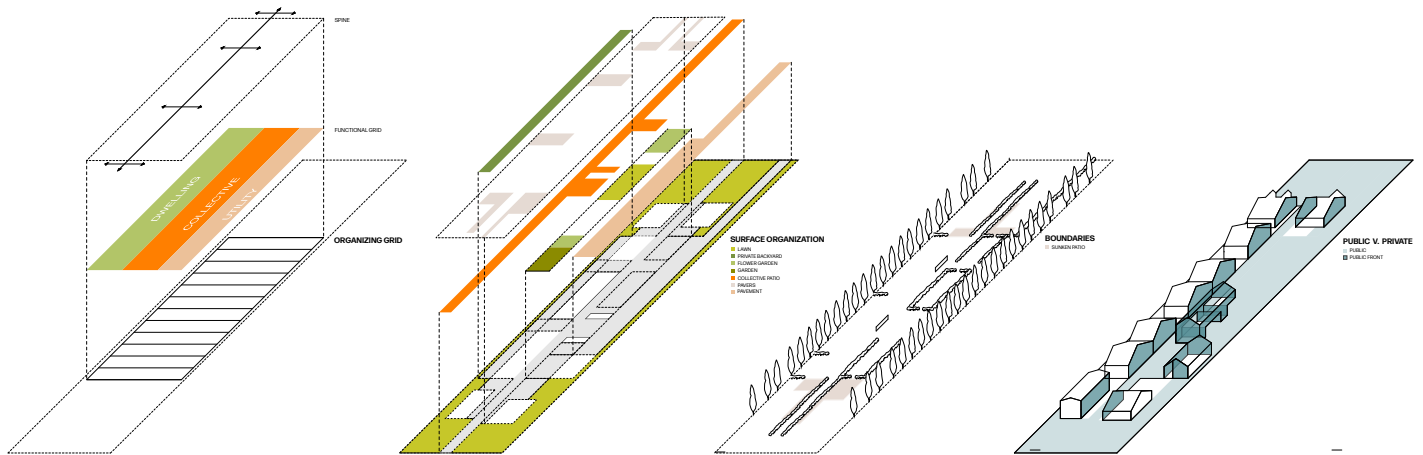
Town of Salina General Legislation, R-1A Districts: One Family Residential District (§ 235-8)

**Figure 4- Diagram of zoning compliance (2026)**

The spatial organization is structured through three bands: dwelling, communal, and utility. The dwelling band provides compact, independent homes with private outdoor space, ensuring autonomy for each household. The communal band functions as the social core, containing shared spaces such as a kitchen, dining area, flexible gathering spaces, and green space, connected by a central path. The utility band accommodates parking, storage, and play areas. Together, these elements balance privacy and interaction, allowing residents to engage with one another on their own terms. This organization balances independence and interaction, allowing residents to engage with one another on their own terms while embedding shared spaces within daily routines.



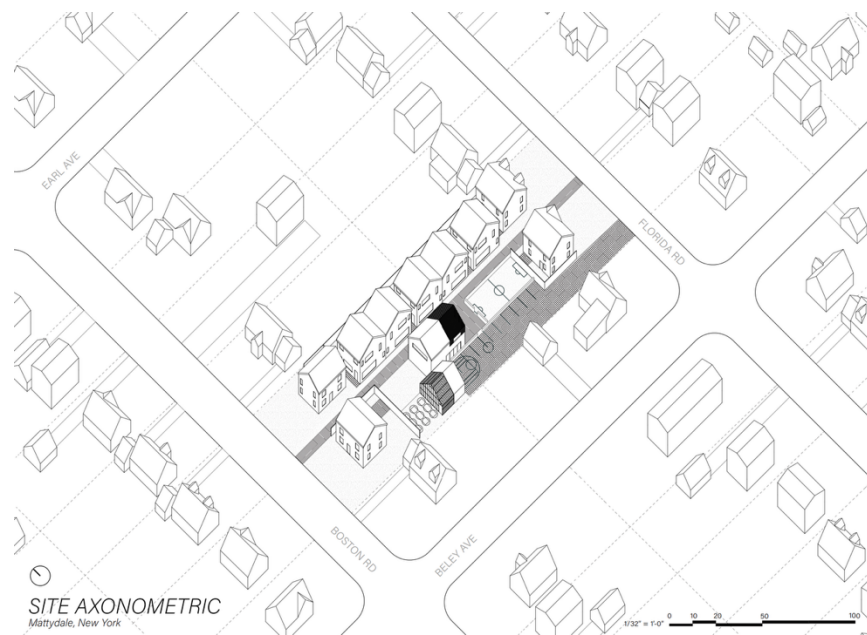
**Figure 5- Conceptual diagram of circulation spine and project organization (2026)**



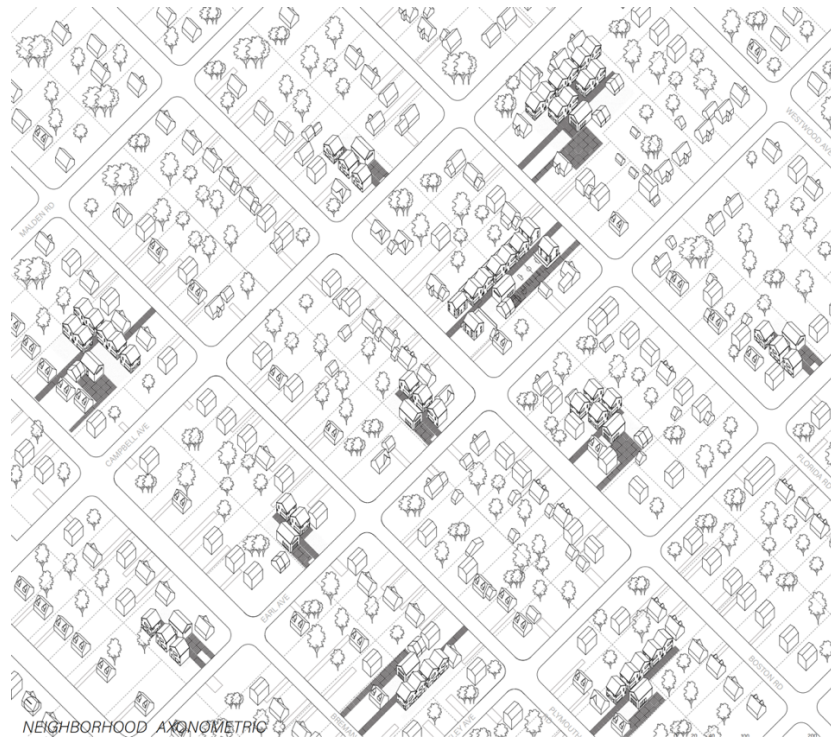
**Figure 6- Diagrams of organization and surface strategy (2026)**

Importantly, the proposal is designed to operate within the existing character of suburbia. All new construction is located behind the original houses, preserving the familiar streetscape and scale of the neighborhood. From the street, the suburban environment remains largely unchanged, while the backyard becomes a site of transformation. This approach allows for incremental change that is both spatially and socially legible, aligning with the existing fabric rather than disrupting it.

By enabling multiple households to share spatial resources while maintain independent living arrangements, the project supports forms of domestic life that reflect contemporary conditions. It demonstrates how suburbia can be reimagined as a flexible and evolving fabric—one capable of accommodating diverse family structures, cultural practices, and social needs. Rather than replacing suburbia, the proposal positions it as a site of adaptation, where underutilized space becomes the foundation for more connected, inclusive, and resilient communities.



**Figure 7- Axonometric of developed scenario (2026)**



**Figure 8- Projection of system across multiple lot combinations (2026)**



**Figure 9- Render of communal spaces (2026)**

## Critical Statement

This thesis positions suburbia not as a failed or obsolete housing model, but as a spatial framework capable of adaptation. Architectural discourse has long treated suburbia primarily through two lenses: either as a landscape to critique or as a territory to replace through densification and urban expansion. While these critiques have revealed important social and environmental shortcomings of suburban development, they often overlook the reality that suburbia remains the dominant residential environment for millions of people. As noted in Joel Budd's "Planet of Suburbs" in *The Economist*, suburban living continues to grow globally, suggesting that its appeal is both persistent and widespread<sup>28</sup>. The question, then, is not whether suburbia should exist, but how it can evolve to better respond to contemporary social and environmental conditions.

The work presented in this thesis explores the possibility that suburban neighborhoods can become more socially responsive through incremental adaptation rather than wholesale transformation. By examining the historical relationship between the nuclear family and suburban housing, alongside cultural traditions of multigenerational and collective living, this research highlights the mismatch between current domestic realities and the spatial assumptions embedded in suburban environments. The design proposal responds to this mismatch by suggesting a system through which suburban lots might be reorganized collaboratively, enabling multiple households to share spatial resources while maintaining independent living arrangements.

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<sup>28</sup> Budd, Joel. "Planet of Suburbs." *The Economist*, 2023.

More broadly, this thesis seeks to contribute to a conversation within architecture about the future of suburban space. Instead of viewing suburbia as a static landscape defined by separation and individual ownership, it proposes understanding suburban neighborhoods as evolving spatial fabrics capable of supporting networks of care, cooperation, and community. In doing so, the project encourages architects and planners to consider strategies that adapt existing suburban environments to contemporary social needs, rather than relying solely on demolition or continued outward expansion.

The intended effect of this work is not to prescribe a singular architectural solution, but to reframe how suburbia is understood within the discipline. By demonstrating how small-scale spatial interventions might enable more flexible domestic arrangements, the thesis invites architects to see suburbia as a site of transformation rather than limitation. Ultimately, the work aims to stimulate broader conversations about how architecture can support diverse family structures, strengthen systems of mutual care, and create suburban communities that are both socially connected and spatially resilient. In the future the ever popular “American Suburban Dream” can be as spatially diverse as the types of people who inhabit it.

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