

A Conversation:

THE PERSISTENTLY MISSING MIDDLE

The State of Housing Design and Development in New England

September 17, 2024

Agenda

- **Welcome** (5 minutes)
- **About the SOHD Publication** (10 minutes)
- **About the Missing Middle & Panelists** (5 minutes)
- **Panel Discussion** (45 minutes)
- **Q&A** (15 minutes)
- **Networking** (in-person; 35-40 minutes)

Welcome



Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies strives to improve equitable access to decent, affordable homes in thriving communities. We conduct rigorous research to advance policy and practice, and we bring together diverse stakeholders to spark new ideas for addressing housing challenges.



The Boston Society for Architecture is a non-profit membership organization committed to improving the quality of life for Boston-area residents by championing innovation in the built environment with an emphasis on equity and sustainability.

The State of Housing Design 2023



It Takes a Village

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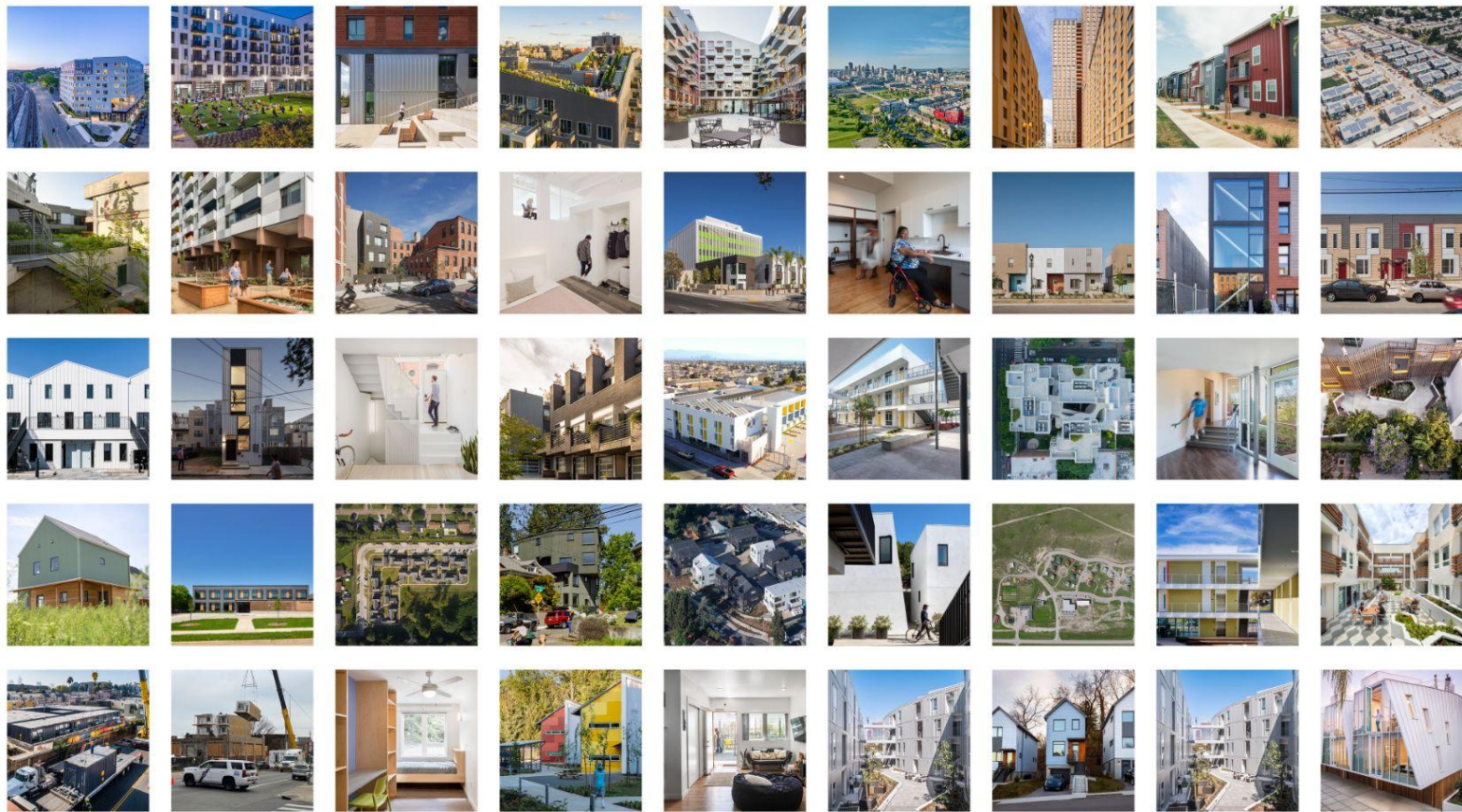
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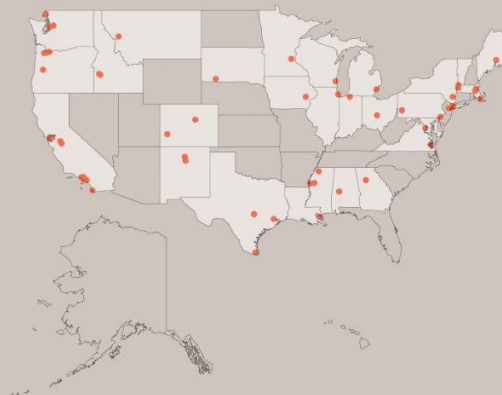
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Farshid Moussavi (GSD)



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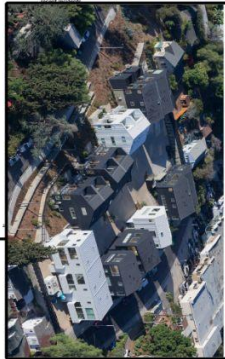
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Not enough housing is being built across the country period. Housing density—the number of individuals per lot—is at a geographic scale—is still the below what could be supported by local infrastructure in most of our metropolitan areas. We have ideas to increase density, but we have not seen the increase in lower density areas to avoid more sprawl or growth-dependent, which have well-documented negative environmental, economic, and social effects. However, we have seen some interesting examples of density, and building organizations can clash with collective perceptions of what is acceptable. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's "Open Space" program (often known as the "Open Space" program) is a good example of how best to accommodate more homes in the same space. "Open Space" refers to a design strategy that many projects use to elaborate and connect with existing open space. The program is a good example of a high-level local residential typology. For example, this includes designs with front door, front porches, and a view of the rear of the lot, and open space with a fence and a view of the rear of the lot. The program also includes a parking lot, parking in a shared. Although many of these design methods are well established, conveying density may come at the cost of a variety of other things. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's design kit's edge of a cultural built—creating complex character with

In 2016, architect Rafael Sanjar and the firm "slush density" to describe a rural family residential development that her firm, Sanjar Architects, designed in Los Angeles's Los Park. The neighborhood historically is a mix of Latino families and Cuban artists and writers, says clearly, then very engaged, participating in the neighborhood's evolution. A new construction was located in the neighborhood as a harbinger of displacement and destruction of the old, slush density was often false. Although the term "slush density" conveys a convoluted semantic approach, a way to let the existing context, and also reflects the aesthetics of a neighborhood in transition. Changing neighborhood's physical character, however, both negative and



Overall, with a low, the likelihood of future acquisitions is significantly lower for companies with the high-leverage strategy.

Institution report: for example, notes that Washington, DC requires special permission for higher density in areas zoned single-family. Zoning is an zoning-code terminology; the report identifies how the language of the code privileges low-density to "protect [single-family] areas from inconsistent types of residential development." Words like "protect" and "invasion" suggest that code is weaponized against outside threats. Indeed, the report's authors stress that

The Small Lot Subdivision Ordinance, first adopted by the city in 2005 as amended in 2010, was touted as a solution to increase affordability in a tight market via infill housing. The ordinance included reduced setback requirements and lot sizes. Building new units—in the form of detached townhouses—in a lot zoned multifamily or commercial was meant to target first-time homebuyers, although it is equally true that other, more affluent

28 *Journal of Management Inquiry*

8 "Construction of Santa Monica Apartments Building Approved," *Whisper of the Coast* (San Francisco), 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026, 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, 2031, 2032, 2033, 2034, 2035, 2036, 2037, 2038, 2039, 2040, 2041, 2042, 2043, 2044, 2045, 2046, 2047, 2048, 2049, 2050, 2051, 2052, 2053, 2054, 2055, 2056, 2057, 2058, 2059, 2060, 2061, 2062, 2063, 2064, 2065, 2066, 2067, 2068, 2069, 2070, 2071, 2072, 2073, 2074, 2075, 2076, 2077, 2078, 2079, 2080, 2081, 2082, 2083, 2084, 2085, 2086, 2087, 2088, 2089, 2090, 2091, 2092, 2093, 2094, 2095, 2096, 2097, 2098, 2099, 2100, 2101, 2102, 2103, 2104, 2105, 2106, 2107, 2108, 2109, 2110, 2111, 2112, 2113, 2114, 2115, 2116, 2117, 2118, 2119, 2120, 2121, 2122, 2123, 2124, 2125, 2126, 2127, 2128, 2129, 2130, 2131, 2132, 2133, 2134, 2135, 2136, 2137, 2138, 2139, 2140, 2141, 2142, 2143, 2144, 2145, 2146, 2147, 2148, 2149, 2150, 2151, 2152, 2153, 2154, 2155, 2156, 2157, 2158, 2159, 2160, 2161, 2162, 2163, 2164, 2165, 2166, 2167, 2168, 2169, 2170, 2171, 2172, 2173, 2174, 2175, 2176, 2177, 2178, 2179, 2180, 2181, 2182, 2183, 2184, 2185, 2186, 2187, 2188, 2189, 2190, 2191, 2192, 2193, 2194, 2195, 2196, 2197, 2198, 2199, 2200, 2201, 2202, 2203, 2204, 2205, 2206, 2207, 2208, 2209, 2210, 2211, 2212, 2213, 2214, 2215, 2216, 2217, 2218, 2219, 2220, 2221, 2222, 2223, 2224, 2225, 2226, 2227, 2228, 2229, 2230, 2231, 2232, 2233, 2234, 2235, 2236, 2237, 2238, 2239, 2240, 2241, 2242, 2243, 2244, 2245, 2246, 2247, 2248, 2249, 2250, 2251, 2252, 2253, 2254, 2255, 2256, 2257, 2258, 2259, 2260, 2261, 2262, 2263, 2264, 2265, 2266, 2267, 2268, 2269, 2270, 2271, 2272, 2273, 2274, 2275, 2276, 2277, 2278, 2279, 2280, 2281, 2282, 2283, 2284, 2285, 2286, 2287, 2288, 2289, 2290, 2291, 2292, 2293, 2294, 2295, 2296, 2297, 2298, 2299, 2300, 2301, 2302, 2303, 2304, 2305, 2306, 2307, 2308, 2309, 2310, 2311, 2312, 2313, 2314, 2315, 2316, 2317, 2318, 2319, 2320, 2321, 2322, 2323, 2324, 2325, 2326, 2327, 2328, 2329, 2330, 2331, 2332, 2333, 2334, 2335, 2336, 2337, 2338, 2339, 2340, 2341, 2342, 2343, 2344, 2345, 2346, 2347, 2348, 2349, 2350, 2351, 2352, 2353, 2354, 2355, 2356, 2357, 2358, 2359, 2360, 2361, 2362, 2363, 2364, 2365, 2366, 2367, 2368, 2369, 2370, 2371, 2372, 2373, 2374, 2375, 2376, 2377, 2378, 2379, 2380, 2381, 2382, 2383, 2384, 2385, 2386, 2387, 2388, 2389, 2390, 2391, 2392, 2393, 2394, 2395, 2396, 2397, 2398, 2399, 2400, 2401, 2402, 2403, 2404, 2405, 2406, 2407, 2408, 2409, 2410, 2411, 2412, 2413, 2414, 2415, 2416, 2417, 2418, 2419, 2420, 2421, 2422, 2423, 2424, 2425, 2426, 2427, 2428, 2429, 2430, 2431, 2432, 2433, 2434, 2435, 2436, 2437, 2438, 2439, 2440, 2441, 2442, 2443, 2444, 2445, 2446, 2447, 2448, 2449, 2450, 2451, 2452, 2453, 2454, 2455, 2456, 2457, 2458, 2459, 2460, 2461, 2462, 2463, 2464, 2465, 2466, 2467, 2468, 2469, 2470, 2471, 2472, 2473, 2474, 2475, 2476, 2477, 2478, 2479, 2480, 2481, 2482, 2483, 2484, 2485, 2486, 2487, 2488, 2489, 2490, 2491, 2492, 2493, 2494, 2495, 2496, 2497, 2498, 2499, 2500, 2501, 2502, 2503, 2504, 2505, 2506, 2507, 2508, 2509, 2510, 2511, 2512, 2513, 2514, 2515, 2516, 2517, 2518, 2519, 2520, 2521, 2522, 2523, 2524, 2525, 2526, 2527, 2528, 2529, 2530, 2531, 2532, 2533, 2534, 2535, 2536, 2537, 2538, 2539, 2540, 2541, 2542, 2543, 2544, 2545, 2546, 2547, 2548, 2549, 2550, 2551, 2552, 2553, 2554, 2555, 2556, 2557, 2558, 2559, 2560, 2561, 2562, 2563, 2564, 2565, 2566, 2567, 2568, 2569, 2570, 2571, 2572, 2573, 2574, 2575, 2576, 2577, 2578, 2579, 2580, 2581, 2582, 2583, 2584, 2585, 2586, 2587, 2588, 2589, 2590, 2591, 2592, 2593, 2594, 2595, 2596, 2597, 2598, 2599, 2600, 2601, 2602, 2603, 2604, 2605, 2606,



an experimental approach to
the study of the human mind

Robert G. Thompson, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago

into the windows of the dream houses, and other people live, about whom we're at right now" he said, holding up a painted rock from his childhood.⁷

dentist/neighborhoods with or without teeth, gentle, or disguised desire. Orange passed legislation eliminating exclusive single-family zoning in 2016. California followed in 2021 with SB 9. The California House Act, which allows for up to six units on a lot, is a landmark in the "multifamily development." Its passage was not free from postbucked Under SB 9, landmarked and historic districts are exempt, so the City of Pasadena, a place known for both beautiful craftsman homes and racist histories of redlining, proposed a narrow exemption delineating the entire city a landmark district, a move that generated critical media attention.

The Outpost, a four-story, 10-unit project in Portland, Oregon, takes advantage of the state's higher-density policy and sets a new paradigm for both preservation and how we live together. Boobie Siddons Architects preserved an existing nineteenth-century home on the property and worked with real-estate developer Owen Gabbert and co-living platform Open Door to build a mini-tower: two handsome board-and-batten-clad cubes stacked with a twist.

From the outside, the Outpost's density doesn't appear particularly disguised. Its contemporary design displays two layers of vertical-screen shading, like pitched roofs or vertical louvers, that filter light and air. The effect is one of singular cohesiveness, as though the entire house on the hill has both. What is concealed, however, is an experiment in communal living. Shared spaces include the kitchen plus dining and living areas. The project also queries a greater lesson, as disguised density asks us to question the sanctity of the single-family home. As reported by Jay Caspian Kang, suburban neighborhoods are more diverse than our collective imaginary.¹⁹ The Outpost's homes contain three generations, older single people, or groups of Tabor friends. Designing multifamily housing within single-family neighborhoods challenges the notion of the nuclear

Designing with dispersed-density strategies allows housing to respond to shifting social and urban-planning realities. But is it enough? Well, designers, "mixing-middle" housing is necessary to address scarcity and affordability, our language shouldn't hide the urgency. D1gusted density may yield too much agency to NIMBY societies and, in doing so, favors mediocrity over the true need for larger, multifamily buildings.



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- a The Residence of Greg Park, David Section, Amsterdam, NY
- b Ashland Apartments, Koning Eisenberg Architects, Cambridge, MA
- c The Outcrop, Beebe Jackson Architects, Portland, OR
- d Canyon Drive, GMP, Los Angeles, CA
- e Blackbirds, Beebe Architecture, Los Angeles, CA

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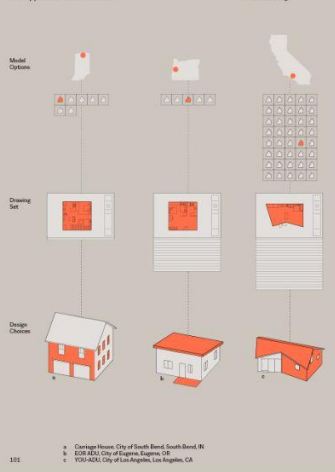
Content areas not indicated with an author
were collectively written, drawn, and
edited by the editing and research team.

Pre-Approved Plans

Many cities are looking for new ways to directly support small-scale neighborhood housing development. One trend has been the production of pre-approved designs, typically provided for free by the city or directly through local architects for a small fee. Although the plans recall the Sears and Roebucks kit homes that could be purchased from a catalog, what's new is the fact that cities themselves are now designing and publishing drawings, an approach that reflects municipalities' efforts to reduce the financial cost of approvals and the lengthy period they often take. For example, Eugene, Oregon, offers four ADU designs by local architects (for purchase at a flat rate) and one by its own planning office that can be modified with a shed or gable roof, and a large or small porch. The set is 14 drawings, complete with structural illustrations to facilitate construction (although each sheet has a disclaimer limiting the city's liability and implying a need to formally engage the requisite professionals before applying for a permit). Los Angeles commissioned 30 architecture firms to produce 72 pre-approved ADU designs, each ultimately owned by those firms. The city's own design, YOU-ADU, comprises 21 pages certified by the city engineering department and local consultants. Developers or homeowners are given a sheet with checkboxes for customization that range from sprinklers to cladding choices. (A disclaimer stipulates that the model may not work for every site and that additional review may be required to evaluate its content.) Finally, South Bend, Indiana, has produced a catalog of seven urban housing types rather than an exhaustive set of construction drawings. The types, each with sub-variations for different densities, illustrate for public and professional audiences the kind of missing middle housing the city is seeking to encourage.

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Pre-Approved Plans Processes



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Finally Single (Room Occupancy)

Love is hard to find, good roommates harder still. And yet, for too long there have been few alternatives to high-priced studios or one-bedroom apartments. One solution is the single-room occupancy (SRO) dwelling, SROs, which typically lack a kitchen, living space, or private bathroom, were widely outlawed in the 20th century for health, safety, and maintenance reasons. Today, however, SROs are on the rise. No longer boarding houses—and no longer sponsored, as they once were, by the YMCA—SROs today take the form of university housing, co-living, and hostels. Treehouse Hollywood, designed by Soler Architecture and Knobl Design in Los Angeles, targets young professionals, providing rooms for 60 residents across three- and five-bedroom and studio units. These co-living units are minimalist; they include only ensuite bathrooms and outdoor smoking, dining, eating, socializing, and working spaces to other locations in the complex. Another co-living venture, The Outpost, designed by Beebe Skidmore in Portland, Oregon, takes shape as a heated bony form built upon an existing single-family home. Inside, 16 rooms negotiate the rotating plan geometry, somehow sandwiching in a second floor of dedicated communal space. Although the name signifies being on the cutting edge of a new movement, its structure refers to the surrounding homes, which are traditional in style. The exterior character reinforces this dual concept, with rotations in cladding and frontages but similarity in color choice and materiality—establishing a nuanced vision of collective living in solo structures. In nearby Portland, Joban's First Cousin—a mixed-use, low-rise SRO scheme—provides 11 rooms for people transitioning away from homelessness. Furnished only with a small storage area, a bed, and a sink, the rooms stack on top of communal bathroom, kitchen, living, and dining spaces. Compared to units in traditional apartment buildings, units in SROs can be smaller and more nimble, often unadorned by set walls or plumbing stacks. By departing from the typical model of thinking only in a fixed-unit framework, SROs move towards one based upon people, and the diverse ways in which we can provide them housing—together, and alone again.

² Recently, the Minneapolis City Council enacted an ordinance aimed explicitly at bringing SROs back. Minneapolis Planning Commission Member Keith Ford stated, "My time as the City Council SD person was over, we were aligned with getting rid of SROs, which were an important part of the housing system. Minneapolis Council Members [renewed] bringing back the housing system." <https://www.minneapolis.gov/news/2022/11/14-a-bill-that-offers-affordable-housing-options-minneapolis-council-renewed-proposal-bringing-back-the-housing-system/>

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Split Plans



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Why not simply ask what people thought was happening in housing design?

From early August to late November 2022, we circulated a brief survey, with prompts meant to gauge general trends. We sent it to the Center's mailing list, then to the broader Harvard Graduate School of Design community. Our aim was to capture on-the-ground feedback from those actively designing, building, or shaping housing design in some way nationally.

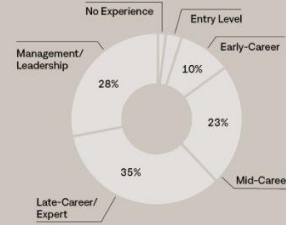
We received over 1,300 unique responses from across 42 states and territories. Respondents hailed from Boston to Honolulu, from Cañon City, Colorado, to the town of Eagle Butte in South Dakota (population 1,258 in 2020). Gender demographics were split equally, with a majority-white respondent base. Most were mid- to late-career practitioners with the job title of designer, advocate, or developer, although many checked multiple boxes.

The survey intended both to inform the framing of the publication and to gut-check our early assumptions on emerging design trends. There was a healthy overlap between the themes that emerged in the responses and those that were taking shape in our research: respondents were—like us—keen to talk about sustainability, family-sized units, zoning, density, and affordability. However, there was also a level of disconnect between the kinds of work people told us about and the kinds of work we ended up focusing on in the book. This was evident in the large number of responses related to single-family and low-density developments—typologies that produce a large amount of housing nationally but that are not represented proportionally by the projects we feature in the book.

What's clear is that almost everyone is very concerned with the state of housing: generally, respondents wrote in animated language that we build too little, for too high a cost, and with not enough care. This section gives an overview of the survey itself, dissecting each question we asked, followed by selected quotes of respondents.

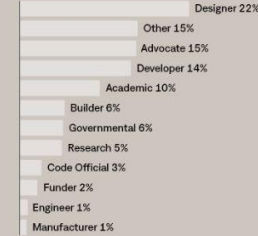
Experience Level

Percentage of total respondents



Primary Role/Job in Housing Production

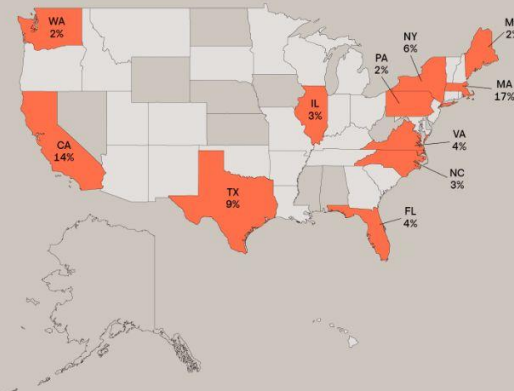
Relative frequency of roles by respondents



States Where Respondents Work

States with responses

States with 2% or greater representation



Question 1: Trends

In the last two years, what design ideas have you noticed the most in newly built housing?

Smaller
All Electric
Affordable
Modular
3D-Printed
5-Over-1s
Micro
Open
Home Offices
Large
Multi-Materials
Highly Efficient
Luxury
Adaptive Reuse

Alternate Energy
4/5 Stories
Age in Place
Higher Density
Timber
ADUs
Accessible
Passive
Expensive
Tiny
Wood
Modern
Amenity Spaces
For Families

The above list represents the most commonly mentioned topics in order of response frequency. The highlighted topics on size and density are what we heard most about.

16

Here is what we heard about:

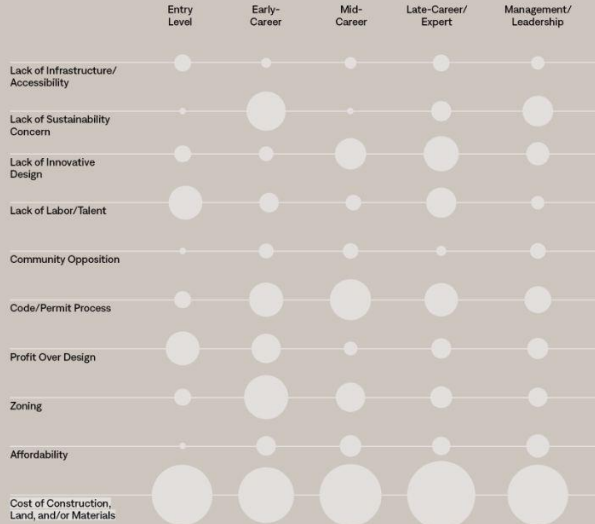
Size and Density

Code Official in Montana	" <u>Smaller living space</u> but <u>more storage space</u> ."
Academic/Advocate/Builder/Designer in Massachusetts	"Lack of verticality, acquiescence to neighborhood groups, even for projects at the periphery of neighborhoods and commercial districts."
Advocate in North Carolina	"The designs here in Raleigh, North Carolina, are more Miami-esque, meaning, they are tall/narrow in stature, built on <u>small tracts of land</u> , typically have a lot of natural lighting."
Designer in California	" <u>Out of scale</u> , malproportioned, <u>out of context</u> with surrounding neighborhoods."
Academic/Designer in Oregon	"Smaller residences, <u>tiny houses</u> , <u>clustered developments</u> and townhouses."
Academic/Researcher in Georgia	"Prefabricated structures sited in <u>smaller infill lots</u> ."
Academic/Designer/Developer in California	"In San Diego Co-Housing, multiple tenants share a space with one kitchen and living room. In some configurations, each bedroom has its own bathroom and main entrance, and the <u>shared kitchen</u> and living areas are centrally located."

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Question 2: Barriers

In your industry or role, what do you see as the biggest external factors to building well-designed (as you define it) housing?



The above graphic of circles represents the relative density of responses grouped by thematic topic and organized by respondents' experience level. Cost is highlighted as the topic we heard most about.

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Here is what we heard about:

Cost

Entry-Level

"Simply the cost. I am in a legacy Rust Belt city. It is hard to pencil out projects from the private sector, let alone with public funding. I would add that zoning and the regulatory process of getting a project approved from local municipalities incur unnecessary costs and wait times to the pre-development process."

Early-Career

"'Luxury' focus—often high-rise. Inequitable focus—gentrification and displacement; innovations are reserved for the most privileged; those displaced are the most distanced from well-designed housing."

Mid-Career

"Forgetting that middle- and low-income people exist; catering construction and design only to the super-rich."

Late-Career

"There is a lack of government funds to build deed-restricted, high-quality affordable housing."

Management/Leadership

"Cost of housing—builders have to rethink the 1,400-square-foot home (which was 40 percent of new construction in the 1980s; only 7 percent now) for affordability with much increased functionality."

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Question 3: Missing Links

What is missing most from housing design today?

Affordability
Renewable Energy and Efficiency
Knowledgeable Partners
Resilience and Green Infrastructure
Feasible and Cost-Efficient Design
Design Guidelines
Variety
Quality Building Materials
Original Designs
Joy
Bike Parking
Connection to Outdoor Green Space
Effective Renovation Strategies
Demographic Flexibility in Units
Design-Build Partnerships
Contextual and Scalar Designs
A Sense of Community
Skilled Labor
Collective Models of Ownership
Wider Range of Typologies
Density
Open Competitions
People's Life and Histories
Mix of Income Levels
Family or 3/4 Bedroom Apartments
Willingness to Make Less Profit
Up-to-Date Building Codes
Material Sensoriality and Details
Focus on Equity
Accessible Entries and Units
Character

If you could change one thing to enable better design in housing, what would it be?

Restrictive Zoning and By-Right Housing
Onerous Design Guidelines
Spatial Flexibility Over Time
More Open Space
More Renewable-Energy Incentives
Cooperative Buying Power
Access to Multimodal Transportation
Increased Density
Remote Work Areas
Accessible Bathrooms
More Durable and Sustainable Materials
Give Design a Soul
Make Rehab Easier/Cost-Effective
Speed Up Construction
More Natural Light
Engage Youth in Design Thinking
Encourage Passive Energy Systems
Cultural Understanding of the American Dream
Designers Who Engage the Community
Acceptance of Smaller Homes
Developer Commitment
Publicly Fund Housing R&D
Encourage Youth in the Trades
Two Means of Egress Rule
Broader National Building Standards
Non-Vinyl Flooring
More Architects Designing Housing
Public Typical Drawings/Details
Education of Regulators
Efficient Municipal/Community Review

The above lists plot the terms we heard most in each category.
Highlighted terms related to zoning were the most commonly mentioned in response to the second question.

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Here is what we heard about:

Zoning

Other	"By-right housing—put simple parameters on the design and zoning, let people innovate, and require engagement with residents, neighborhood, etc."
Academic/ Advocate Builder/ Designer	"[Establish a] clear agenda stated from the City of Boston as to what its goals are, instead of us having to discover them in the process of applying for building permits."
Developer	"The regulatory approval process is taking two to three years in the Seattle region. That is really affecting our ability to increase the housing supply. Also, cost pressures remove the ability to try new enhancements or extras."
Designer	"Probably regulations around zoning allowing for and/or incentivizing densification in suburbs and exurbs. Also, it's imperative that cities continue to be able to require developers to do public improvements."
Advocate/Designer/ Researcher	"Legalize point access blocks to 6–10 stories, to unlock small- and medium-sized mid-rise projects in more of the city. This is the backbone of cities the world over, outside the US and Canada."
Builder	"Planning codes and planners should want to be able to approve projects that don't all look the same and should be allowed and/or mandated to deviate from time to time—for sheer boredom of the architecture's sake and the jumbled city masses they are producing. All repetitive."

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Question 4: Built Work

In the last two years, what small trends or peculiar details have you noticed in new housing?



Across all regions, people told us most about fake materials, prefabrication, modular buildings, outdoor spaces, mass timber construction, home offices, smaller spaces, higher density, sustainable features, and repetitive designs. The graphic above illustrates the various responses we received across country organized by region and alphabetically; and highlights the topic we heard the most about: materiality.

Here is what we heard about:

Materiality

Baton Rouge, Louisiana	"The use of synthetic cladding materials masquerading as something else—tile and plastics faking as wood, cladding misleading people to be wood that never needs painting, etc. The falsehood of materials."
Washington, DC and Arlington, Virginia	"More glass and metal, less stone/brick."
California	"Many times, clients, contractors, peers want to use materials that are recycled or certified but aren't durable physically or have a versatility of use (can't be refinished, will go out of style quickly...etc.)."
St. Louis, Missouri	"The use of black and gray colors on everything."
Santa Fe County, New Mexico	"Subway tiles. Barn doors. Fake-rock facades. Roof beams in all directions."
Columbus, Ohio	"Mr. Potato Head housing. Overuse of craftsman elements: board and batten, standing-seam metal roofs, etc."
Cambridge, Massachusetts	"I see lots of large, single-family homes that are white, neocolonial style with black windows."

Disguised Density

Not enough housing is being built across the country, period. Housing density—the number of individuals per unit in a geographic area—is still far below what could be supported by local infrastructure in most opportunity areas (close to transit, jobs, and services). Housing supply must be increased in lower-density areas to avoid more sprawl or greenfield development, which have well-documented negative environmental, economic and social effects. However, accompanying increases in height, street frontage, and building agglomerations can clash with collective perceptions of neighborhood character. NIMBY (“not in my back yard”) opposition to development often foregrounds these concerns as part of a national debate on how best to accommodate more homes in the same space. “Disguised density” refers to a design strategy that many projects use to obfuscate their unit count with architectural moves that fit more closely with established local residential typologies. For example, this includes duplexes with one front door, townhomes squished to the rear of the lot, and apartments with far fewer visible windows. Entrances are hidden, surroundings are mimicked, and parking is shrouded. Although many of these design methods are well established, concealing density may come at the cost of creating a fantasy world of urban stasis. We highlight projects built on this knife’s edge of a cultural battle—creating compelling character within the tight constraints of neighborhood and market demands.

In the US, where overcoming single-family zoning is still the prevailing regulatory hurdle, these projects exemplify the contemporary compromises involved in adding density where the status quo rejects it. Notable projects in Los Angeles, Seattle, Greenville, and Boston blend local vernaculars with novel urban form-making. Of particular note in the past few years was an open design competitionⁱ organized by the Los Angeles Mayor’s Office and the city’s Chief Design Officer, which generated new typologies of low-rise density. Entries blended international precedents with local lot dimensions and integrated home-grown American types with new policies.ⁱⁱ In the following essay, Mimi Zeiger breaks down these concepts, outlines several projects, and explores what this trend means for density in American cities.

by Mimi Zeiger

In 2016, architect Barbara Bestor used the term “stealth density” to describe a multifamily residential development that her firm, Bestor Architecture, designed in Los Angeles’s Echo Park. The neighborhood, historically a mix of Latinx families and bohemian artists and writers, was slowly, then very rapidly, gentrifying in LA’s overheated housing market. Any new construction was bound to be suspect—both as a harbinger of displacement and disruption of the old, streetcar-era urban fabric. Although the term “stealth” conveys a contextually sensitive approach, a way to fit into an existing condition, it also reflects the anxieties of a neighborhood in transition. Changing a neighborhood’s physical character threatens both longtime and recent residents.

Bestor drew inspiration from the modest single-family homes and occasional low-rise courtyard apartment buildings that line Echo Park’s hilly streets. Named Blackbirds, Bestor’s complex combines these two typologies to organize a series of duplexes and triplexes around a central parking court. Each building *stealthily* resembles a single-family home; the design uses pitched roofs and exterior paint color to break up the bulk of larger volumes, so new construction blends into the surrounding scale. “Two free-standing houses are connected by flashing, and the roofline creates the illusion of one house mass,” Bestor explained to the online publication Dezeen. “Three houses, whose separation is masked, has the illusion of being two houses.”¹

Stealth density is just one possible expression of this strategy. The editors of this book chose “disguised density,” and a 2019 Brookings Institution report used the term “gentle density” to argue that replacing detached single-family houses with more homes on a lot could help reduce housing prices in desirable locations without disrupting the neighborhood. This “missing middle” between the stand-alone home and the dreaded apartment tower takes the form of multifamily townhouses, duplexes, and semi-detached structures packed tightly on a lot. “Building more housing on single-family parcels doesn’t require skyscrapers,” noted the report’s authors, Alex Baca, Patrick McAnaney, and Jenny Schuetz.²

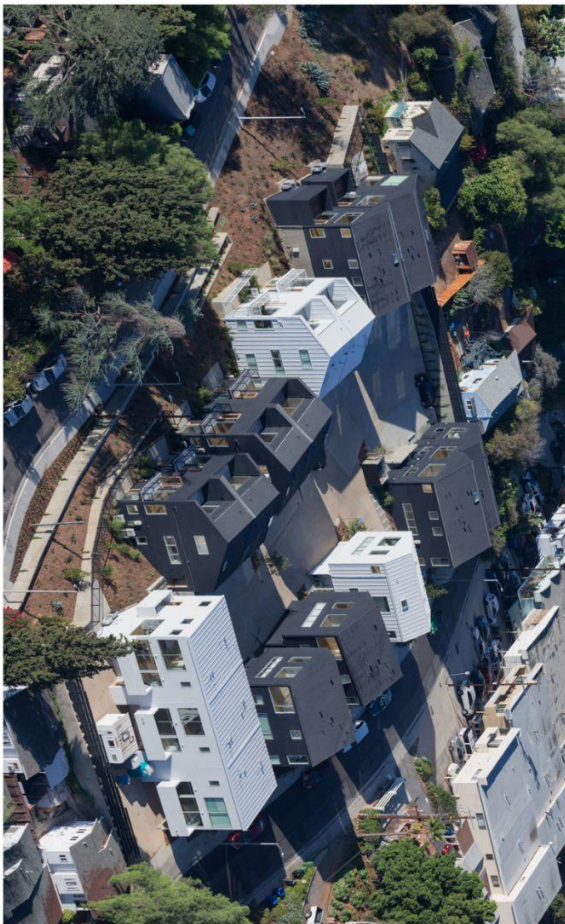
Stealth. Disguised. Gentle. With each, language is used to deflect the fears and misconceptions that have accumulated around multifamily housing—biases that align multiunit buildings with the past specters of bleak public housing projects. That new development must slip quietly into a neighborhood underlines the long-held entitlement of home ownership and bias of single-family zoning. The Brookings

1 “Bestor Architecture Uses ‘Stealth Density’ at Blackbirds Housing in Los Angeles,” <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/09/28/bestor-architecture-blackbirds-housing-stealth-density-echo-park-los-angeles/>.

2 “Gentle Density Can Save Our Neighborhoods,” <https://www.brookings.edu/research/gentle-density-can-save-our-neighborhoods/>.

i “Low-Rise: Housing Ideas for Los Angeles,” <https://lowrise.la/>.

ii See also: “Come Home Chicago: Missing Middle Infill Housing Competition,” <https://www.architecture.org/learn/resources/come-home/>.



Viewed from above, the buildings of Better Architecture's 18-unit Blackbirds housing complex resemble single-family homes.

3

ibid.

Institution report, for example, notes that Washington, DC, requires special permission for higher density in areas zoned single-family. Zeroing in on zoning-code terminology, the report identifies how the language of the code privileges low-density to "protect [single-family] areas from invasion by denser types of residential development." Words like "protect" and "invasion" suggest that code is weaponized against outside threats. Indeed, the report's authors stress that "protection" entrenches economic and racial segregation.³

Both Blackbirds and Lorcan O'Herlihy Architects' (LOHA) multifamily housing development, Canyon Drive, follow City of Los Angeles policy guidelines. The Small Lot Subdivision Ordinance, first adopted by the city in 2005 and amended in 2016, was touted as a solution to increase affordability in a tight market via infill housing. The ordinance included reduced setback requirements and lot sizes. Building more units—in the form of detached townhouses—on a lot zoned multifamily or commercial was meant to target first-time homebuyers, although it is arguable if this plan was truly successful. In early 2022, two-bedroom, two-bath units at Canyon Drive were sold for around \$1.4 million each. Although the price is conceivably less than a ground-up, single-family home on the same lot, the units sold for considerably more than the \$1 million average home price in Los Angeles.

4

³\$224K Grant from Planters Bank and Trust and FHLB Dallas Creates 42 Homes," <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20180615005840/en/224K-Grant-from-Planters-Bank-and-Trust-and-FHLB-Dallas-Creates-42-Homes>.

The authors of the ordinance recognized that increased density and potentially bulky massing indicative of multifamily housing would set off alarms, so a series of design guidelines dictates specific articulations of facades, entryways, and rooflines to prevent blank and boxy edifices ill-suited to the surrounding context. At Canyon Drive, for example, each unit has a unique identity. LOHA inflected the roofs of the townhouses so that each facade resembles a mid-century-modern A-frame perched atop the garage podium.

Similarly, in Greenville, Mississippi, the pitched roofs and shaded front porches that characterize the 42 townhouses of The Reserves at Gray Park suggest that individuation is neither simply an appeasement to NIMBYs nor a market strategy, but also a way of establishing identity and dignity for residents. Composed of one-, two-, and three-bedroom units, the affordable housing project by Duvall Decker with the Greater Greenville Housing and Revitalization Association serves low- and very-low-income renters. It's the city's largest single-unit housing development in more than 30 years.⁴ Here, disguised density works to deflect the stigma historically associated with affordable housing, while demonstrating that an alternative to a detached single-family home might offer more than the suburban ideal. What if the American Dream was not about individual ownership and a green front lawn but, as illustrated at The Reserves at Gray Park, found in shared public spaces designed to foster community interaction and sustainable site planning?



The multiunit buildings of the Blackbirds complex cluster around a shared courtyard and parking area.



The inflected roofs of the townhouses in Lorcan O'Herlihy Architects' Canyon Drive project are designed to evoke the A-frame home designs that were popular in the mid-twentieth century.

5 "Construction of Santa Monica Apartment Building Appealed," https://www.surfsantamonica.com/san_sito/the_lookout/news/News-2015/January-2015/01_23_2015_Construction_of_Santa_Monica_Apartment_3208Building_320Appealed.html.

In many ways, disguised density is a study of aesthetics and perception: both a design exercise in vernacular typologies and a strategic game of hide-and-seek. But camouflage can't always ward off NIMBY critiques. Opponents of the Ashland Apartments in Santa Monica accused Koning Eizenberg Architecture of "shoe-horning too much building into the site" and brought concerns about increased traffic to Santa Monica's Architectural Review Board.⁵ The opponents were large neighbors—Santa Monica homeowners concerned about the project's direct impact on their quality of life and property values. Considered a "preferred project" by the City of Santa Monica, the 10-unit development on a terraced hillside reflects higher density than normally allowed under code but was given an exception to incentivize more family housing to the area. Studios and two- and three-bedroom apartments are divided among four structures. According to the architects, the project achieves a density of 30 units/acre by bridging scales between a residential neighborhood (the source of the complaints) and a high-density, mixed-use development along Lincoln Boulevard to the west.

In 2019, the same year that Ashland Apartments opened, *Architecture Australia* ran an article about architects Hank Koning and Julie Eizenberg, describing their work as "smart, generous and empathetic,"⁶ which is best embodied at Ashland in the abundance of private and shared outdoor spaces that allow residents room to socialize and take advantage of Southern California indoor-outdoor living.

6 "Smart, Generous and Empathetic": The Housing Projects of Koning Eizenberg Architecture," <https://architectureau.com/articles/hank-koning-and-julie-eizenberg/>.

Ashland Apartments sits on a previously unbuilt lot in the center of the block and is edged on three sides by the backyards of adjacent properties. With no street frontage of its own, the other houses in this highly desirable neighborhood mask its overall density. A long, narrow (and contentious) driveway connects from the curb to the underground parking lot. The multiyear clash was, literally, a skirmish over "not in my backyard."

Although density triggers fears of "too big," "too much," or "invasive," at the heart of these kinds of fights is a battle over the continued viability of single-family zoning in neighborhoods, cities, and states where homelessness is on the rise, affordable housing is out of reach, and sprawl is no longer an option. As a paradigm, single-family zoning was built on pastoral fantasies and systems of social and racial exclusion. Bursting the fever dream of individual homeownership and the loose-fit urbanism it produces is bound to provoke conflict. During an event hosted by Laboratory for Suburbia that questioned what "house" means—both as a spatial product and as home—Gustavo Arellano, an Orange County-based journalist who writes on issues of politics, race, and suburbia, suggested we shatter our collective intoxication, using language that verges on revolution. "[I have to] throw this rock



An aerial image shows the change in density between the low-density suburban context of Greenville, Mississippi, and the townhouses of The Reserves at Gray Park.



Although The Outpost appears larger than its single-family neighbors, the building conceals an experimental approach to multifamily living.

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Disguised Density

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Koenig Eberberg Architecture distributed 10 units across four five-standing buildings at the Ashland Apartments, allowing patios and communal walkways to fill the spaces in between.



into the windows of the dream I have, and other people have, about where we're at right now" he said, holding up a painted rock from his childhood.⁷

7 "Sprawl Session 3: House as Crisis," <https://laboratoryforsuburbia.site/SS3>.

8 "Senate Bill 9 is the Product of a Multi-Year Effort to Develop Solutions to Address California's Housing Crisis," <https://focus.senate.ca.gov/sb9>.

9 "Attorney General Bonta Puts City of Pasadena on Notice for Violating State Housing Laws," <https://oag.ca.gov/news/press-releases/attorney-general-bonta-puts-city-pasadena-notice-violating-state-housing-laws>.

The Outpost, a four-story, 16-unit project in Portland, Oregon, takes advantage of the state's higher-density policy and sets a new paradigm for both preservation and how we live together. Beebe Skidmore Architects preserved an existing nineteenth-century home on the property and worked with real estate developer Owen Gabbert and co-living platform Open Door to build a mini-tower: two handsome board-and-batten-clad cubes stacked with a twist.

From the outside, The Outpost's density doesn't appear particularly disguised. Its contemporary design displays few tropes of contextual sensitivity, like pitched roofs or vernacular overhangs, even though the other house on the site has both. What is concealed, however, is an experiment in communal living. Shared spaces include the kitchen plus dining and living areas. The project also offers a greater lesson, as disguised density asks us to question the sanctity of the single-family home. As reported by Jay Caspian Kang, suburban neighborhoods are more diverse than our collective imaginary.¹⁰ Existing homes contain multiple generations, older single people, or groups of TikTok influencers. Designing multifamily housing within single-family neighborhoods challenges the notion of the nuclear family as the default resident.

Designing with disguised density strategies allows housing to respond to shifting social and urban planning realities. But is it enough? Well-designed, dense, "missing-middle" housing is necessary to address scarcity and affordability; our language shouldn't hide the urgency. Disguised density may yield too much agency to NIMBY anxieties and, in doing so, favors modesty over the true need for larger, multiunit buildings.

10 "Everything You Think You Know About the Suburbs Is Wrong," <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/18/opinion/suburbia-poor-diverse.html>.

Disguised Density Projects

Typical Floor Plans

■ Dwelling Unit



- a The Reserves at Gray Park, Duvall Decker, Greenville, MS
- b Ashland Apartments, Koning Eizenberg Architects, Santa Monica, CA
- c The Outpost, Beebe Skidmore Architects, Portland, OR
- d Canyon Drive, LOHA, Los Angeles, CA
- e Blackbirds, Bestor Architecture, Los Angeles, CA

Small and Skinny

There exists big value in building small. Whereas the market pushes both suburban homes and multifamily housing to grow only larger in scale, we have identified many skinny homes, townhomes, odd lots, and small urban infill projects that disregard these norms. In response to exorbitant land costs in some markets, developers are increasingly turning to oddly shaped, narrow, or otherwise undesirable lots and challenging designers to maximize their livability. One immediate benefit of designing on smaller lots is that it creates more attainable rental and homeownership opportunities from sheer smallness. While the average home has grown over the past few decades, the typical household has shrunk,¹ creating an inverse reality in US cities, whereby those with less money must pay to live in homes that are larger than necessary. Finally, small homes—especially those with common walls, such as townhomes—use less energy than large, detached dwellings. These projects, which weave a common thread of less-is-more, show that typical zoning and regulatory standards do not meet the moment. Less space and less energy use at a better price point is often preferred but not provided.²

For both overlooked urban lots and underused suburban parcels, small and skinny designs have offered alternatives to vacant lots. Some city agencies have partnered with architects to generate ideas for small lots that developers typically overlook. In 2021, Only If Architecture completed work on its Narrow House project, originally a finalist in the “Big Ideas for Small Lots NYC” competition jointly run by New York’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development and the American Institute of Architects. Other notable projects of the type in recent years include the Black Street Development by Module, Habitat for Humanity’s Oxford Green by ISA, and the Pittsfield Tyler Street Development by Utile. All imagine new typologies that both reference their historic context and anticipate a denser urbanism in the future—designing smaller spaces for the long haul. In her essay, Inga Saffron examines the rowhouse through both personal and architectural dimensions, focusing on one of the nation’s meccas of the skinny typology: Philadelphia.

i “Whatever Happened to the Starter Home?” The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/25/upshot/starter-home-prices.html>.

ii “What Happened When Minneapolis Ended Single-Family Zoning,” Bloomberg, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-08-20/what-happened-when-minneapolis-ended-single-family-zoning?leadSource=verify%20wall>.

by Inga Saffron

My Philadelphia rowhouse began its life shortly after the Civil War. It was originally three rooms stacked vertically like children’s blocks, with a cooking area and privy located in the yard. Such tiny houses are known as “Trinities” in Philadelphia, and they were built as cheap shelter for immigrants and the working class. Because Trinities were often purchased on an installment plan, their owners could expand their properties as their circumstances improved, a practice that Jane Jacobs dubbed “unslumming.” My Trinity was probably enlarged in the early twentieth century when an addition was put on the back, creating a second room on each floor. The owners no doubt used the occasion to install indoor plumbing and gas heating. In the 1980s, a loft-like fourth story was added. Today, the former Trinity is a four-bedroom, two-bath house, the vertical equivalent of a modest rancher. Yet, the entire property, which includes a cozy, tree-shaded patio, could probably fit within the confines of a typical suburban driveway.

If you were to look out from one of Philadelphia’s downtown skyscrapers, you would see block after block of similar red-brick rowhouses, stretching for miles across the pancake-flat landscape, some 400,000 in all. Philadelphia certainly didn’t invent the form, but it has embraced the row like no other American city. Attached houses, which are typically 16 to 20 feet wide in Philadelphia, account for about 60 percent of the city’s housing stock.¹ They come in a variety of sizes, with the Trinity being merely the starter version.

The larger rowhouses are sometimes jokingly called Quaker mansions because their facades are so plain. There are also ornate Victorian examples, dripping with gables and gingerbread and clocking in at 4,000 square feet. But whether they are glorified tenements or miniature palaces, all rowhouses share party walls with their neighbors.

This intimacy sets the pattern for our daily lives: how we move through the streets, how we socialize, how we arrange our civic relations. People of all classes and races live in rowhouses. That makes the rowhouse the city’s most democratic residential form.

Philadelphia takes pride in being a city of homes—single-family homes, to be technical about it. Yet it remains one of the densest, and most affordable, big cities in America. How can that be? From everything we’ve been told about America’s growing housing crisis, single-family zoning is the enemy of affordability. If we hope to create enough housing for everyone, advocates say, we must build more apartment buildings, more microunits, more ADUs, more SROs. They are not wrong. But they also tend to underestimate the

1 “Philadelphia, PA, Housing Statistics,” InfoPlease, <https://www.infoplease.com/us/census/pennsylvania/philadelphia/housing-statistics>.



Philadelphia's ubiquitous rowhouse typology may offer solutions for a growing housing density issue.



An aerial view shows blocks in Philadelphia lined with rowhouses.

potential of the humble rowhouse. Packed together on small lots, these compact homes can yield densities that rival some apartment buildings. The rowhouse can make our communities more affordable, sustainable, and walkable. There's another word I would add to that list, one that has been less in vogue these days: neighborly.

The social changes brought on by the pandemic are likely to only increase the appeal of the rowhouse. Now that more people are able to work remotely, they can, theoretically, live anywhere. Although many professionals have decamped for the suburbs, others have discovered that the supply of moderately priced houses and starter homes is actually quite limited, especially in inner-ring communities. As a result, many young families are forced to choose between living in the exurbs or remaining in a cramped city apartment. For low-income workers, there are even fewer options for decent housing.

This is where the rowhouse can offer a middle ground. With a rowhouse, you get the privacy of a single-family home, along with access to a yard, but generally at a lower price point. It's spacious enough to set up a home office or makeshift classroom and accommodate a washer-dryer. Yet, it's environmentally superior to a free-standing house. Its compact form and shared party walls mean a rowhouse requires much less energy to heat and cool.

Philadelphia's dense rowhouse districts are also the model for the sustainable 15-minute neighborhood that is now the subject of so much buzz. The city's rowhouse neighborhoods are typically arranged around a commercial street lined with stores, restaurants, and, maybe, an elementary school, which means you don't need to get in a car for your basic needs. After I began working from home during the pandemic, I was surprised to discover the busy weekday world outside my front door: The steady parade of people walking dogs. Daycare workers marching their charges to the playground. The chatty USPS delivery guy who wanted to talk about my columns in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. In the evenings, my neighbors drank "Quarantinis" on their front steps, and we toasted each other from our socially distanced perches. I actually felt more connected during those early, scary months of 2020 than ever before.

Of course, rowhouse neighborhoods aren't unique to cities. Plenty of suburban communities have welcomed townhouse developments into the mix. Compared with stand-alone houses that sit on half-acre lots, these developments can be quite dense. But they have nothing on the traditional Philadelphia rowhouse block. Thanks to the preponderance of tightly packed rowhouses, Philadelphia has the smallest average lot size of any American city: 1,100 square feet. My four-bedroom house occupies just

980 square feet of the Earth, garden included. That works out to about 40 houses to the acre. Philadelphia may not be as dense as New York, but it's virtually tied for density with Chicago and Miami—two cities known for high-rise living.²

² "The 300 Largest Cities in the United States by Population 2023," World Population Review, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities>.

³ "Vehicle Ownership in U.S. Cities Data and Map," Governing, <https://www.governing.com/archive/car-ownership-numbers-of-vehicles-by-city-map.html>.

Suburban townhouse developments rarely achieve Philadelphia-level densities for one obvious reason: parking. The space allotted for streets and grass also tends to be more generous. Once you make room for those amenities, you're lucky to get 18 houses to the acre. Because Philadelphia has remained faithful to its Colonial-era grid, residential streets in its older neighborhoods are rarely wider than 35 feet, and some are just 10 feet across. More important, most rowhouses built before the 1950s have no dedicated parking. Although Philadelphians are just as obsessed with their cars as other Americans, they have learned to make do with street parking. A third of the city's households still don't own cars.³ The concentration of rowhouses is what allows Philadelphia to sustain one of the most extensive transit systems in the country.

Still, today's rowhouse is not Ben Franklin's rowhouse. During the late twentieth century, when Philadelphia's economy was in decline, almost no new housing was built. The market began to revive in the early 2000s, after the city introduced a generous property tax abatement aimed at encouraging the middle class to buy homes in the city. Construction has pretty much been nonstop since then. Tens of thousands of new rowhouses (as well as thousands of apartment units) have been built across the city, and many more have been renovated. Since most new construction is infill, and replaces buildings that were lost during the long decline, the new houses are simply fitted into the empty space. But although the modern rowhouse occupies the same footprint as its predecessors, it has been aggressively adapting to modern tastes and technology.

It's safe to say that no one is building Trinities in Philadelphia anymore. Most new rowhouses are now four stories, 3,000 square feet, and squarely aimed at middle-class professionals, with prices often exceeding \$400,000. (By contrast, my expanded Trinity is still less than 2,000 square feet.) We've also seen the rise of a new luxury format that I call the McRowhouse, five stories and more than 5,000 square feet. One way to fit all that square footage on the same rowhouse lot is to build up—one reason the average rowhouse has gotten significantly taller in recent years. A cluster of 65-foot-high McRowhouses just went up in my neighborhood, with prices starting at \$2 million. Elevators are now standard in such developments. I've toured McRowhouses that come with media rooms and rooftop dog parks. But even the 3,000-square-foot versions boast amenities that



ISA's Tiny Tower origami staircase doubles as a circulation core and light well.



The 1,250 square foot single-family home glows at each of its five levels. While mindful of setbacks, it fills the site boundaries to achieve an elegant but efficient form.



Oxford Green's facade module pays contextual tribute within an economy of means, addressing both scale and cadence as critical means of creating human-scaled neighborhoods.

are considered standard in the suburbs, including kitchen islands, home offices, 10-foot ceilings, and, increasingly, dedicated parking.

When Philadelphia overhauled its zoning code a decade ago, it briefly toyed with the idea of prohibiting parking in all new rowhouses. In the end, the city decided to leave the decision up to the developer. And since off-street parking is a highly desired amenity, virtually all new rowhouses today come with a dedicated parking spot of some kind. But Philadelphia planners did manage to insert a clause in the new code that prohibits garages that front onto residential streets. Today's garages are usually tucked in the back of the rowhouse and accessed through a common driveway or alley street. The arrangement works particularly well when the developer controls a large site and can arrange two rows of houses around an internal courtyard. Besides providing access to the garages, the drive aisle often doubles as a communal play space or a venue for cookouts and neighborly get-togethers. Since the driveways are collectively maintained, they effectively force residents to work together as a community to keep them in good shape.

As new rowhouses have gotten bigger, so have old ones. Across the city, owners are adding an extra floor to their nineteenth-century rowhouses. These overbuilds are primarily concentrated in neighborhoods populated by affluent professionals. In the past, this demographic might have headed for the suburbs once they started a family. Being able to add another bedroom or two to a 1,400-square-foot house makes it easier to raise children in the city. Planners are deeply torn over the trend. They want middle-class families to put down roots and pay taxes. But the overbuilds can transform former working-class houses into luxury properties that can easily sell for \$1 million.

4 "Philadelphia Housing Market," Redfin, <https://www.redfin.com/city/15502/PA/Philadelphia/housing-market>.
5 "QuickFacts: Philadelphia City, Pennsylvania," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/philadelphia-city-pennsylvania>.

Overall, Philadelphia remains one of most affordable big cities in the US. You can still buy a decent-sized rowhouse for under \$250,000, according to Redfin.⁴ That price is actually less than what it costs to build a new home these days. Philadelphia still has patches of abandonment, where you can find a vacant shell for under \$80,000. But planners worry the city won't stay a bargain much longer. Philadelphia is a conundrum: It has the highest home ownership rate among Northeastern cities, 53 percent. Yet it remains the poorest of America's 10 largest cities, with a poverty rate hovering around 22 percent.⁵ Surprisingly, many poor families own their homes, thanks to a tradition of passing down Trinities to children and grandchildren. But that doesn't make those residents immune to displacement.

As in other cities, the grinding process of neighborhood change is transforming many old rowhouse neighborhoods. Over the past two decades, Graduate Hospital, a formerly Black neighborhood on the edge of Center City (downtown),



In Austin, Texas, Habitat for Humanity is investing in building higher-density housing through the rowhouse model. Mueller Row Homes, designed by Michael Hsu Architects, gives a dynamic massing and elevation movement to the traditionally staccato housing type.



Utile's modular housing model takes on infill housing as a repeatable and scalable model for a variety of site conditions.

168

Small and Skinny

Designed by Only if Architecture in Brooklyn, Narrow House is a single-family home occupying a site that is only 13 feet, 4 inches wide.



169

The Philadelphia rowhouse has survived, in large measure, because of its adaptability and efficiency. A simple rectangular box, punctuated by windows, the rowhouse can be gutted, rebuilt, and turned into exactly the house you want. And then you can remake it all over again. As Philadelphia's historic preservationists like to say, the most environmentally friendly house is one that already exists. If you recoat the roof and patch the mortar every few years, a rowhouse will pretty much last forever.

10 "The Informal as Inspiration for Rethinking Urban Spaces: Architect Teddy Cruz Shares 5 Projects," TED Blog, <https://blog.ted.com/architect-teddy-cruz-shares-5-projects/>.

When you think about it, the Philadelphia Trinity is a lot like the houses built by residents in the world's informal settlements. Those structures usually start out as one or two rooms. They're expanded as the owner's family and income grow. In a 2014 TED talk, the San Diego-based architect Teddy Cruz suggested that such an iterative approach could become a model for affordable housing in the US.¹⁰ Of course, many favela residents do their own construction, something that is unlikely to happen widely in the US. But what if developers offered starter Trinities on lots that allowed for expansion? We know that many single-family communities in America are deeply resistant to apartment buildings. Perhaps the rowhouse, which is also a form of single-family housing, would be an easier sell?

So much of the national conversation around housing and climate change has focused on getting people to accept smaller living quarters. Housing advocates tend to get most excited about the boutique solutions—the microunits and ADUs. But we shouldn't dismiss the real yearning of ordinary Americans for a place of their own, a patch of yard, and a community of neighbors. Because it offers both privacy and affordability, the rowhouse is an attractive option. It won't solve all of America's housing needs, but the rowhouse might be the best hope we have to convince large numbers of people that they can live both sustainably and comfortably in cities.

Small and Skinny Projects

Typical Floor Plans

Rowhouse



- a Habitat Mueller Row Homes, Michael Hsu Office of Architecture, Austin TX
- b Tiny Tower, ISA, Philadelphia, PA
- c Oxford Green, ISA, Philadelphia, PA
- d Pittsfield Tyler Street Development, Utile, Pittsfield, MA
- e Narrow House, Only If, Brooklyn, NY

Legalizing Single Stair Housing in Massachusetts

A Report on the Impact of Allowing Mid-Rise
Point Access Blocks on Housing Design and
Development in Greater Boston and Beyond.

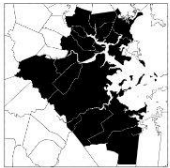


BOSTON
INDICATORS

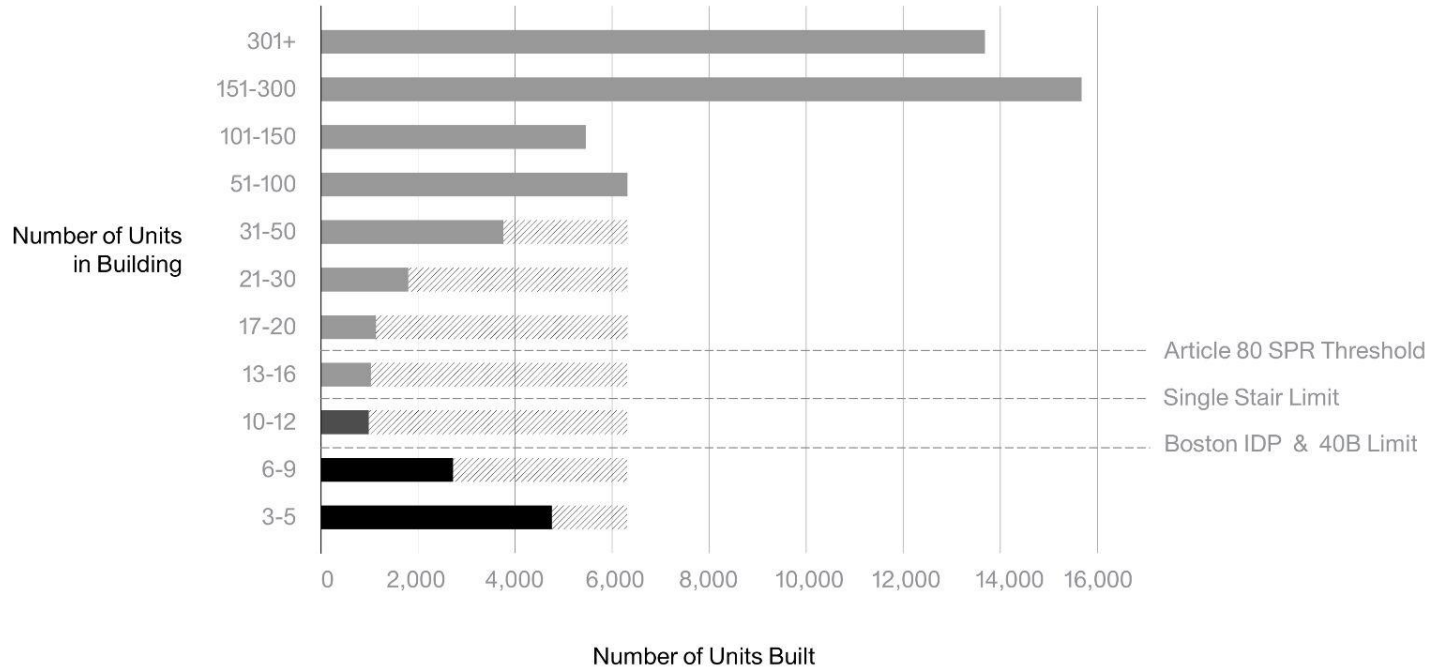


utile

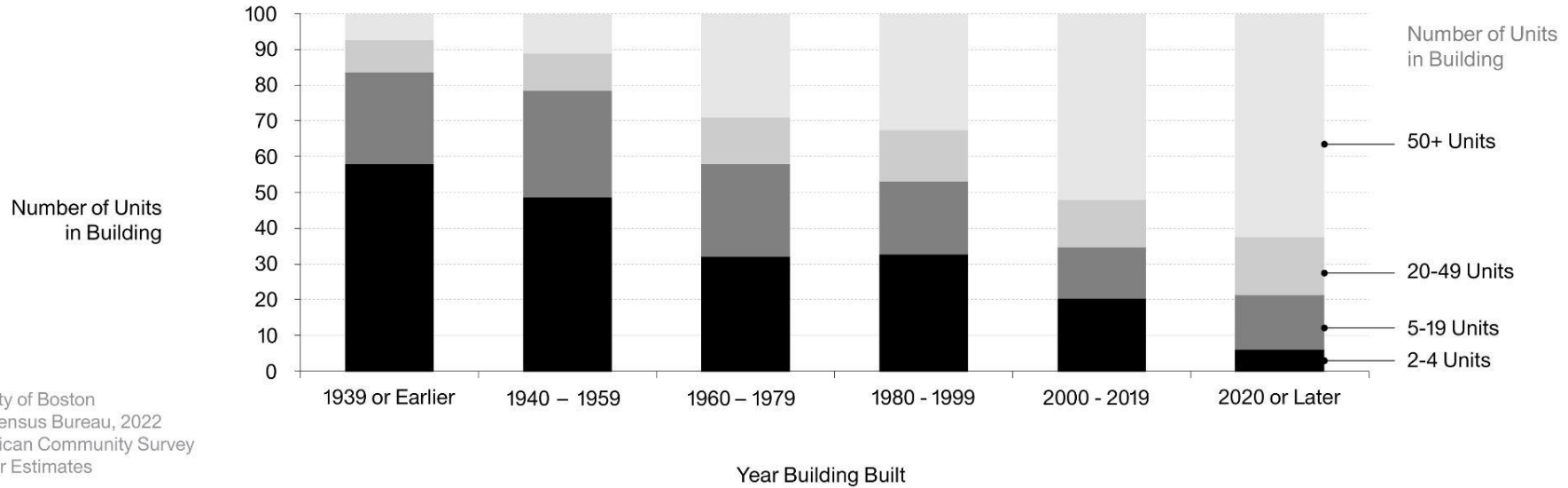
"Greater Boston"
MBTA Rapid Transit
Communities



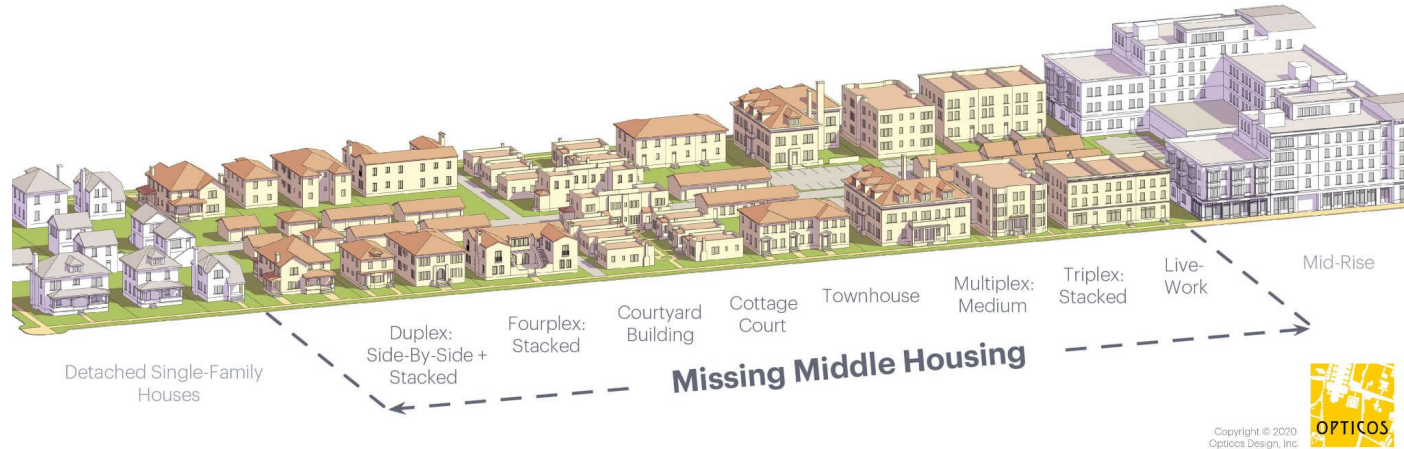
Total Housing Units Built in Greater Boston
by Number of Units in the Building (2001-2022)



Share of Total Housing Production by Building Unit Count
as a share of all units built per year



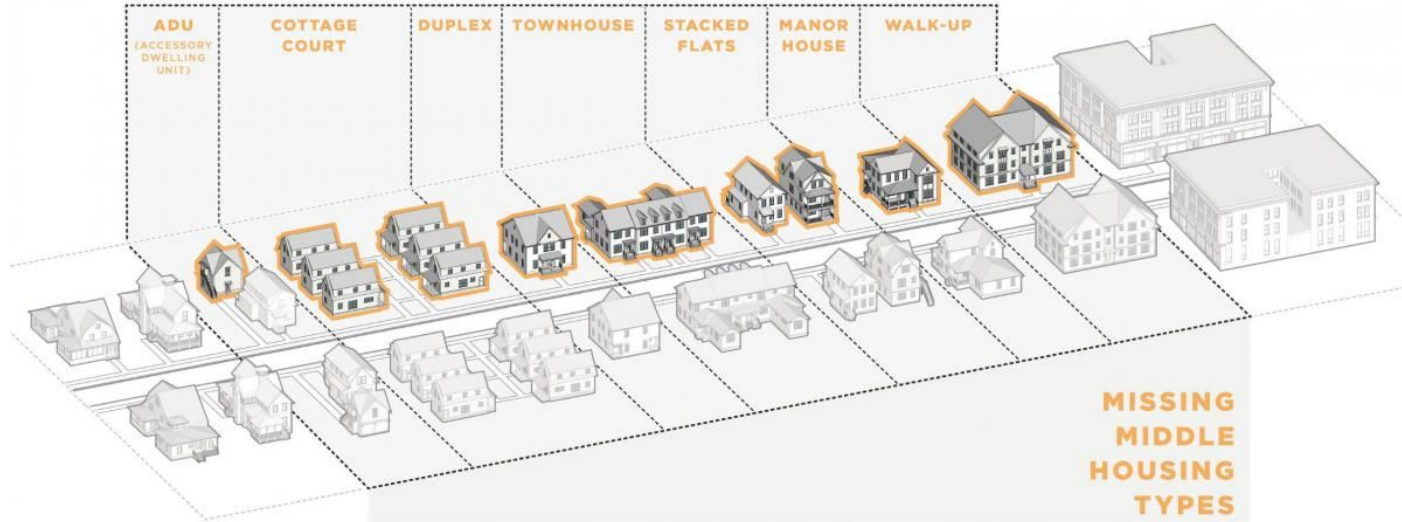
About the Missing Middle



Missing Middle Housing is “a range of house-scale buildings with multiple units—compatible in scale and form with detached single-family homes—located in a walkable neighborhood.”

<https://missingmiddlehousing.com/>

About the Missing Middle



Common missing middle housing types in New England.
Created by Union Studio as part of “Case Study: Housing on Cape Cod. Missing Middle”

Introducing our Panelists



Sam Naylor

Moderator



**Hansy Better
Barraza**

Panelist



Jonathan Evans

Panelist



**Theodore
Touloukian**

Panelist



Paige Roosa

Panelist

Hansy Better Barraza
Studio Luz

WELCOME HOME BOSTON NOTTINGHAM PARCELS

STU
DIO
LUZ
ARCHITECTS



12 HOME OWNERSHIP UNITS IN DORCHESTER
12,662 SF - 2 PARCELS

CONTEXTUAL TYPOLOGIES



CONTEXTUAL TYPOLOGIES



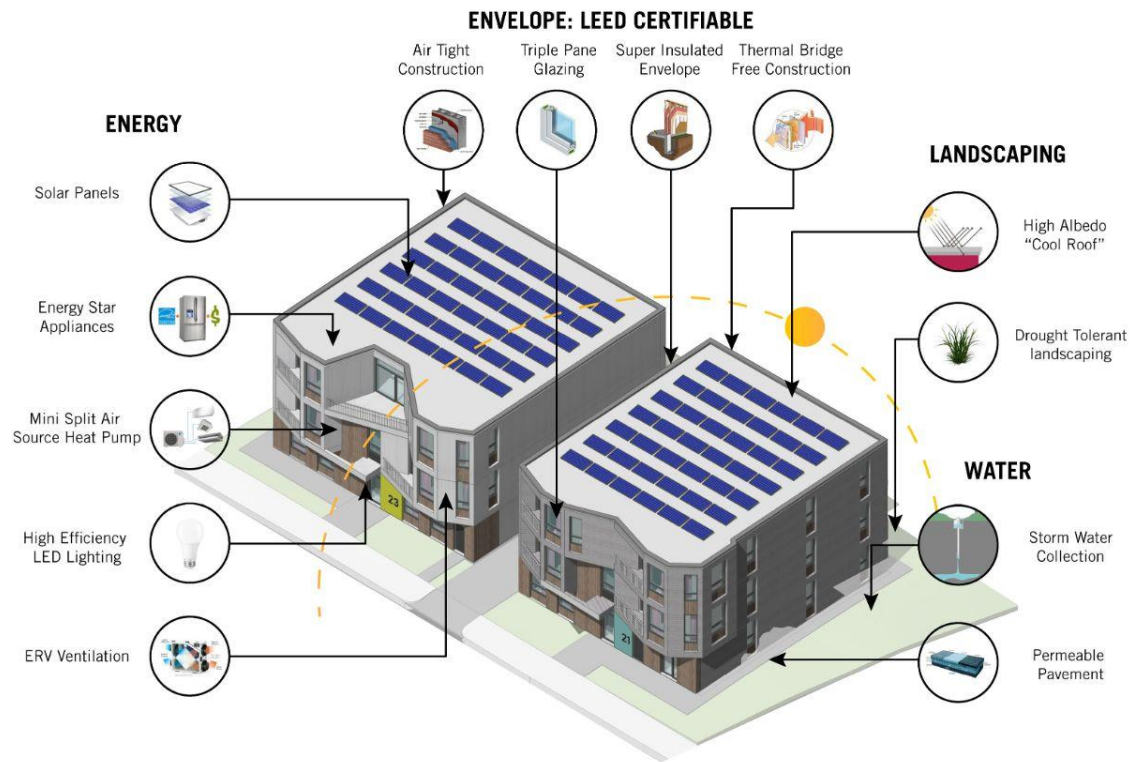
27 NOTTINGHAM STREET
3 Story 6 Unit Apartment

23 NOTTINGHAM STREET
Proposed 3 Story 6 Unit Apartment

21 NOTTINGHAM STREET
Proposed 3 Story 6 Unit Apartment

19 NOTTINGHAM STREET
2 1/2 Story Single Family Residence

SUSTAINABILITY IN MIDDLE HOUSING



PROJECT SUMMARY



LEVEL 2 PLAN

Program Breakdown:

UNIT TYPE	UNIT SF	UNIT COUNT
1 BEDROOM	610	1
2 BEDROOM	750 - 820	7
3 BEDROOM	1060 - 1110	4
EGRESS		TOTAL: 12
UTILITY		

HOME OWNERSHIP UNITS
(6 UNITS PER BUILDING)



Lot Size:

12,662 SF within 2 parcels

Zoning District:

Dorchester Neighborhood

Zoning SubDistrict:

3F-5000 Three-Family Residential

Zoning Overlay:

N/A

Occupancy Classification

Residential Use Group R2

Construction Type

Construction Type VA

Any Materials

All Wood Framing

Gross Square Footage: 14,185 SF

Ground Floor 4,130 SF

Second Floor 5,027 SF

Third Floor 5,027 SF

Jonathan Evans
MASS Design Group



Hudson River

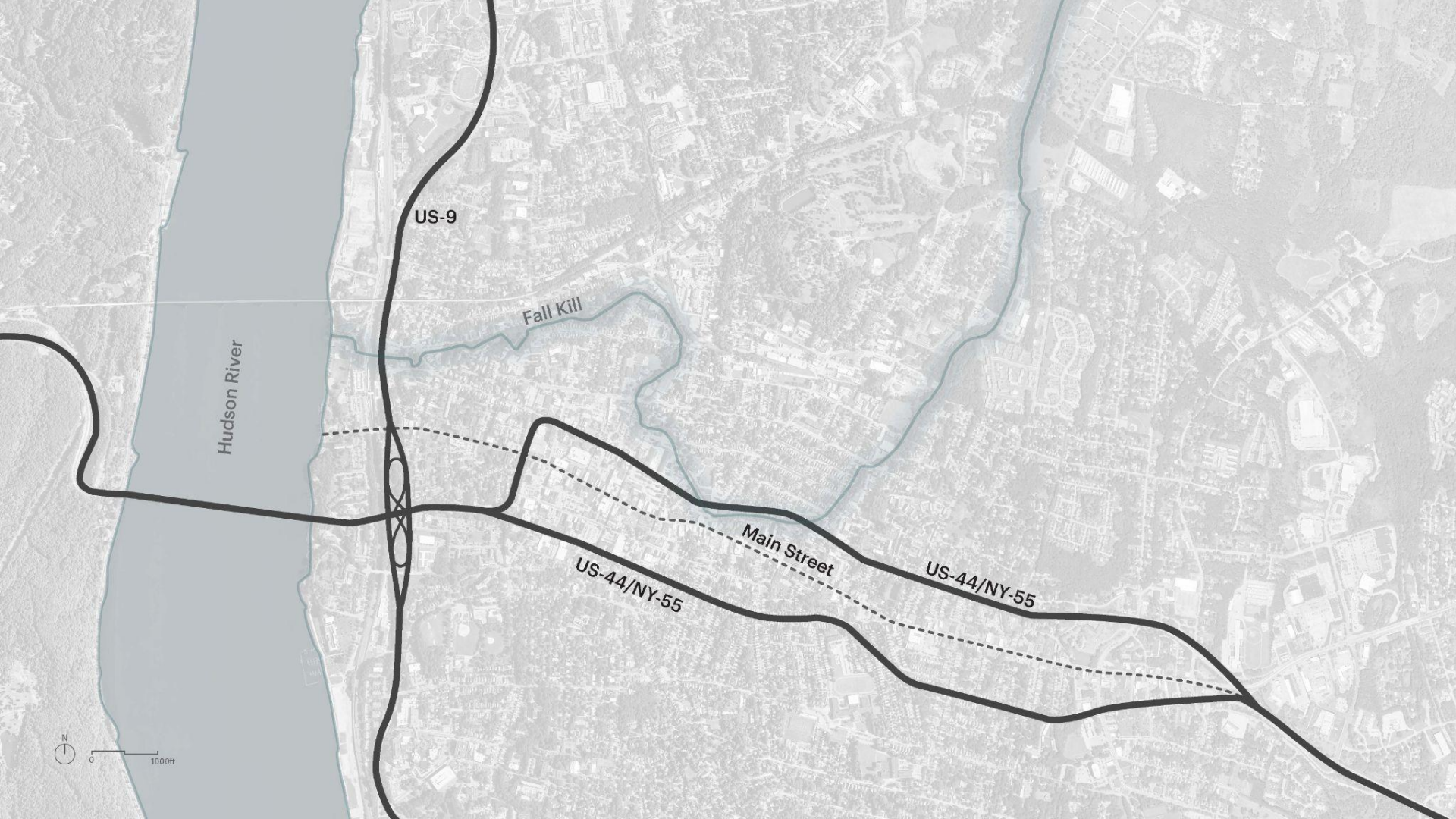
Fall Kill

Clinton Street

Main Street



0 1000ft



Hudson River

US-9

Fall Kill

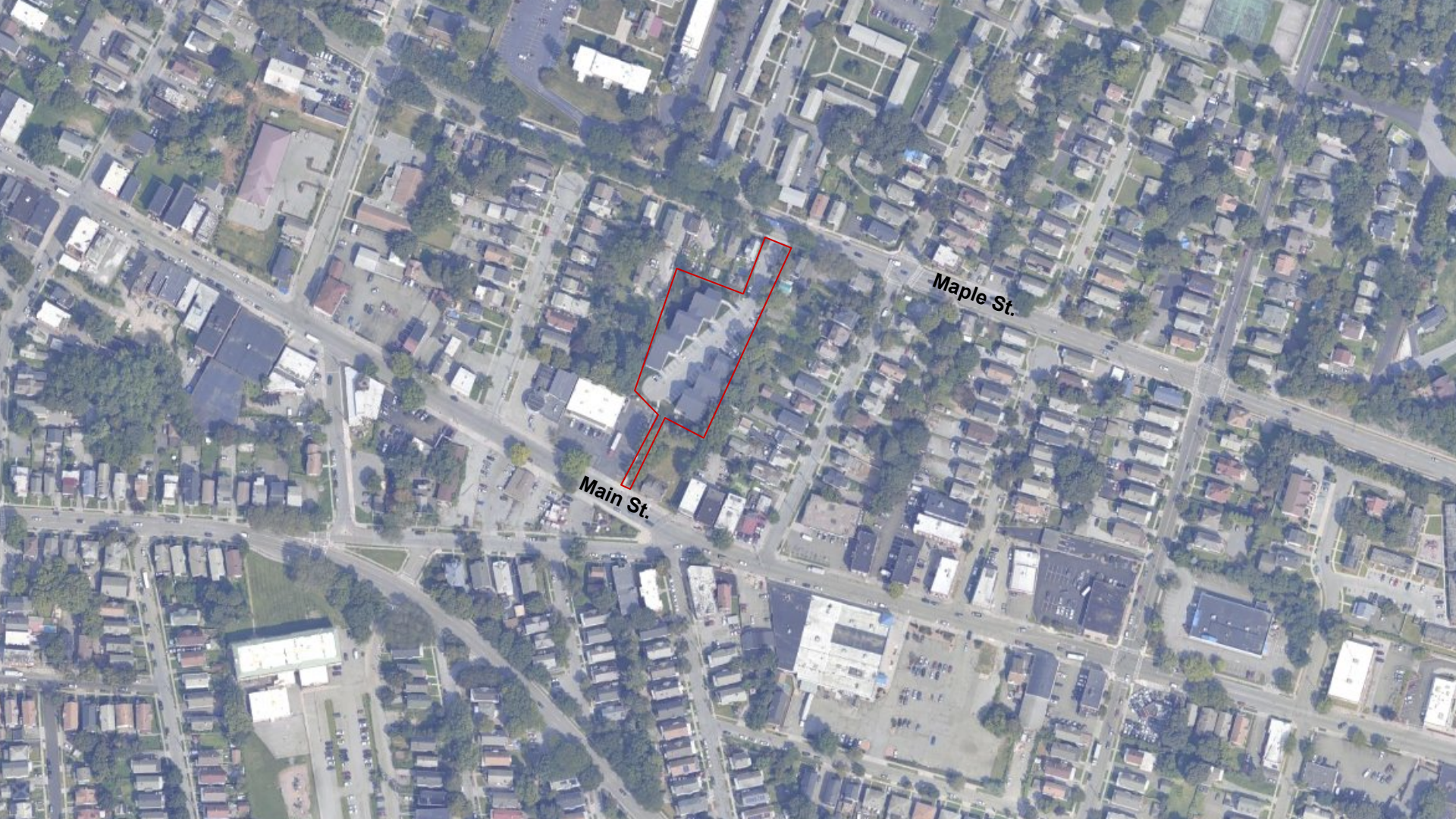
Main Street

US-44/NY-55

US-44/NY-55



0 1000ft



Maple St.

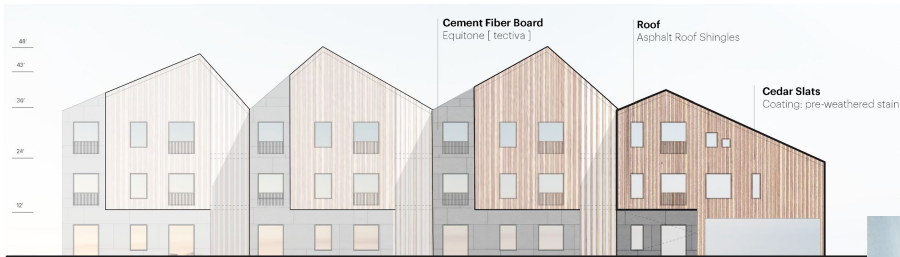
Main St.







Salibox Roof Front
1/16"=1'-0"



Salibox Roof Rear
1/16"=1'-0"







Theodore Touloukian
Touloukian Touloukian Inc.

108 Dorchester Street

South Boston, MA





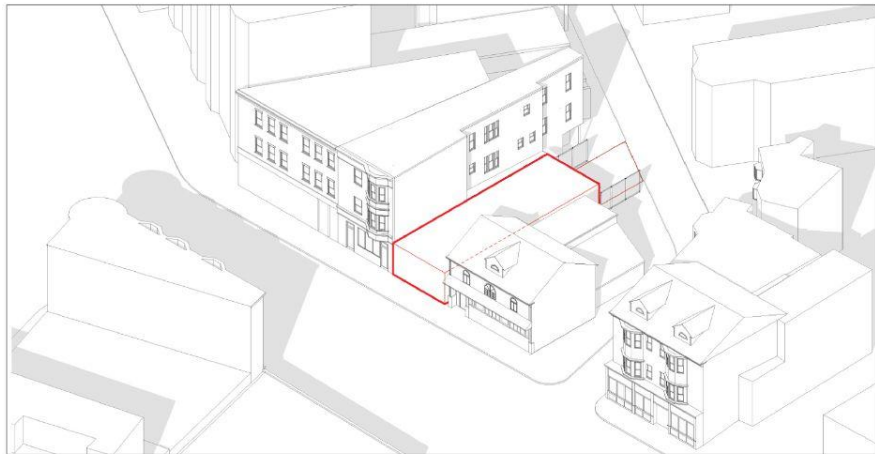
CORNER MARKET

GOURMET
Est. 1986
COFFEE

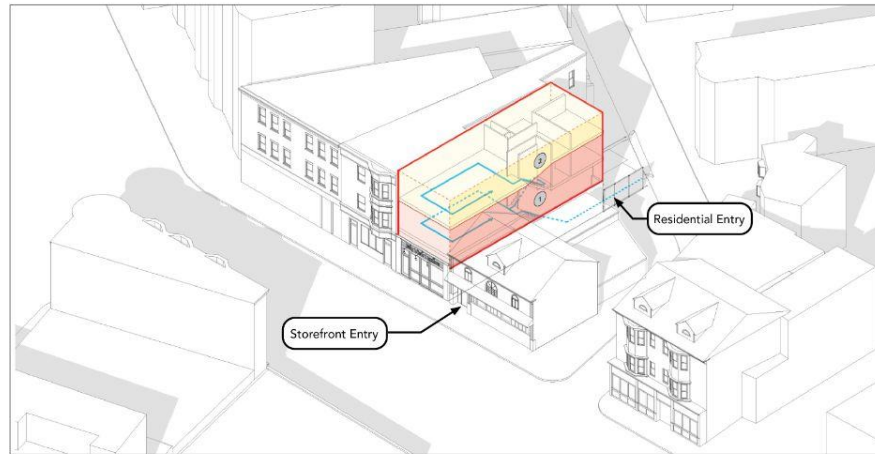
Est. 1986  GOURMET COFFEE

Bay View Liquors

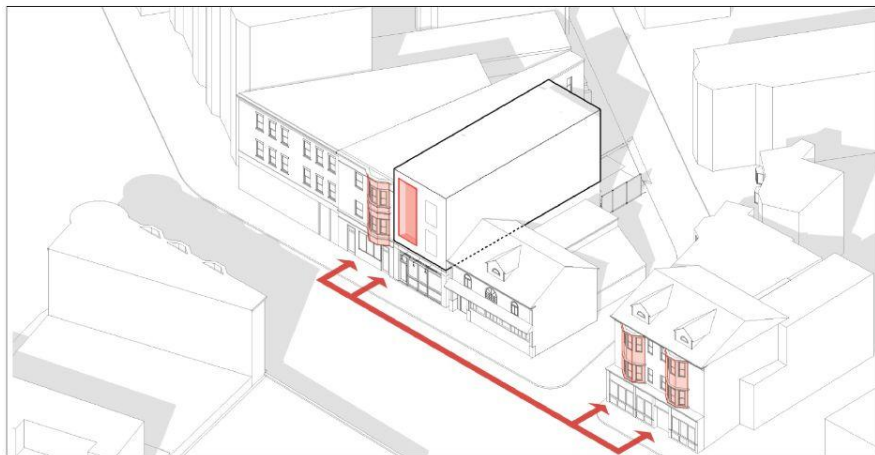
THE



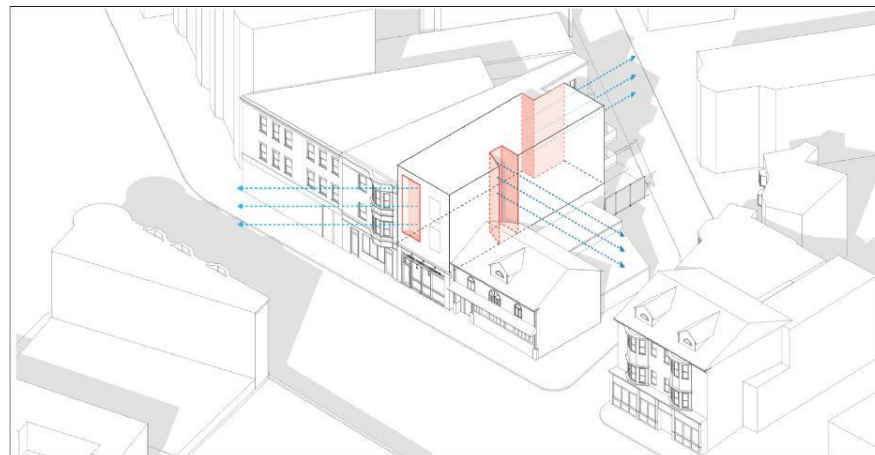
Existing Building



Residence Circulation / Unit Division



Inverse Interruption of Bay Window



View Corridor



SILVER ST

Hardware

Bay View Liquors

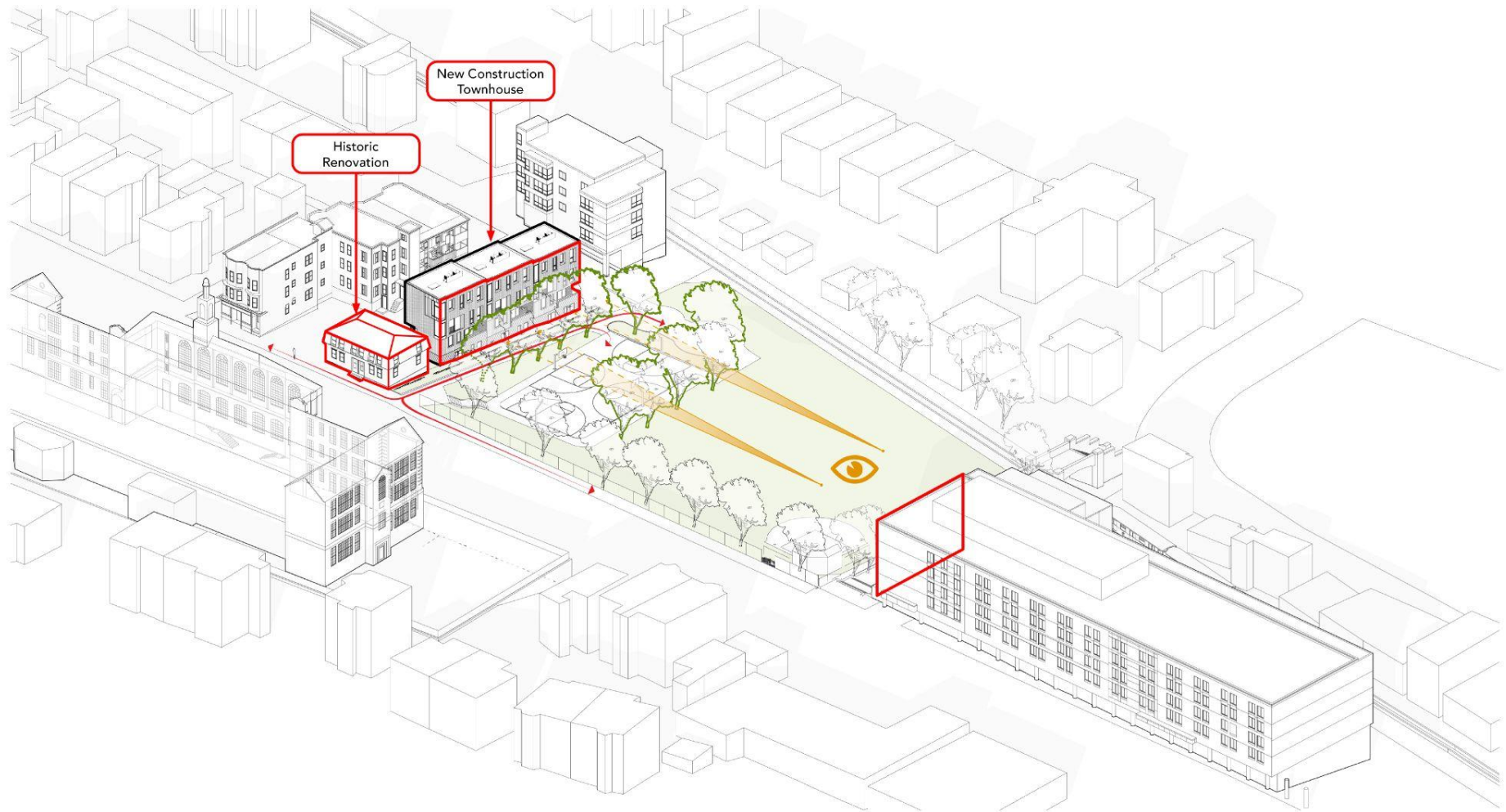
GOURMET
COFFEE

GOURMET
COFFEE

Boylston Street Residences

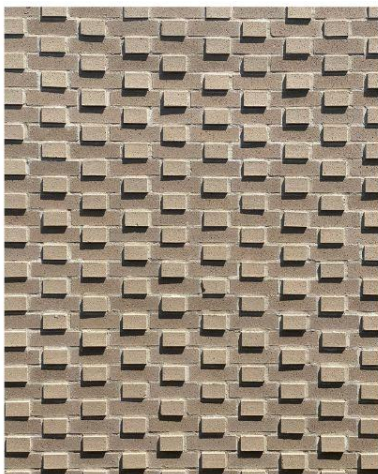
Brookline, MA



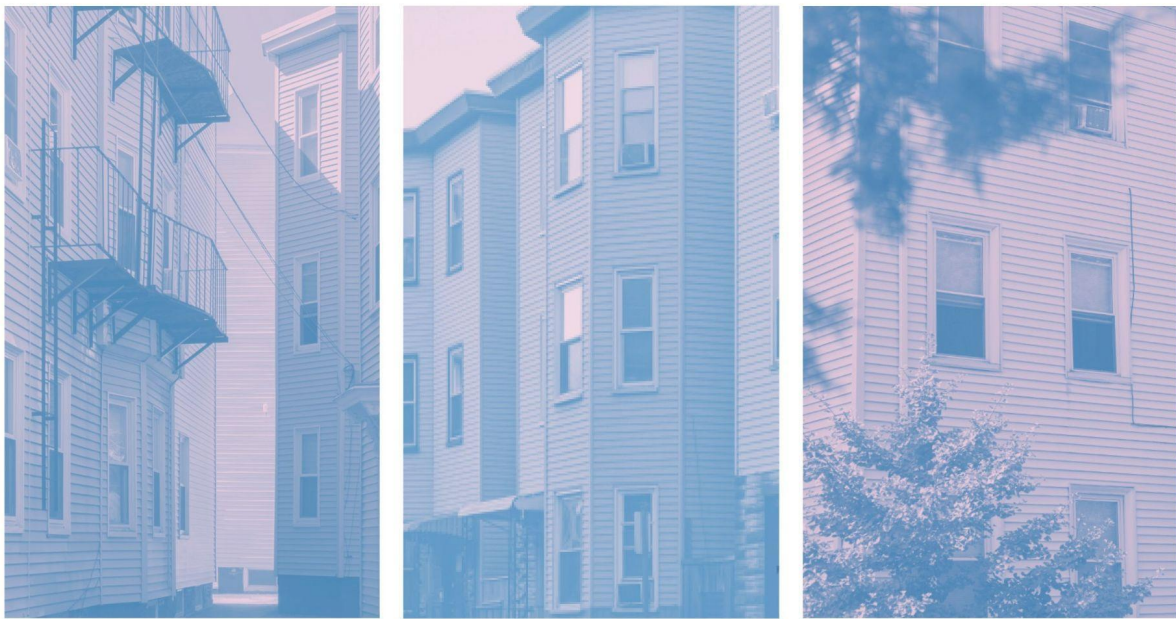












CO-CREATING BOSTON'S FUTURE-DECKER

Request for [Innovative] Proposals



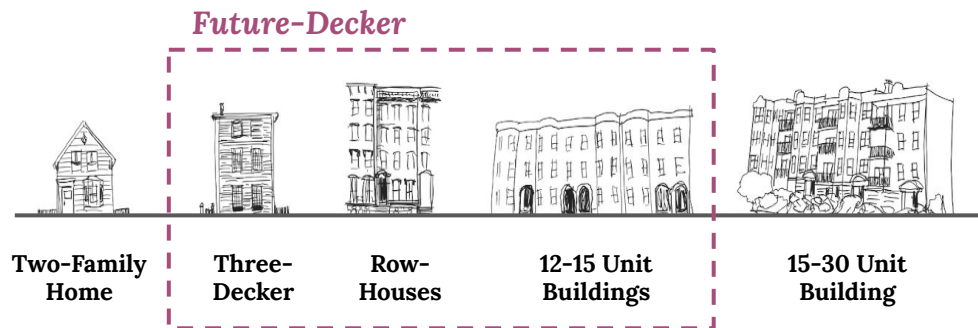
Housing

PROJECT OVERVIEW



Housing

Co-Creating Boston's Future-Decker was a **two-phased** initiative where teams were invited to propose new multifamily housing (6-15 units) that can efficiently be built on small, infill sites.



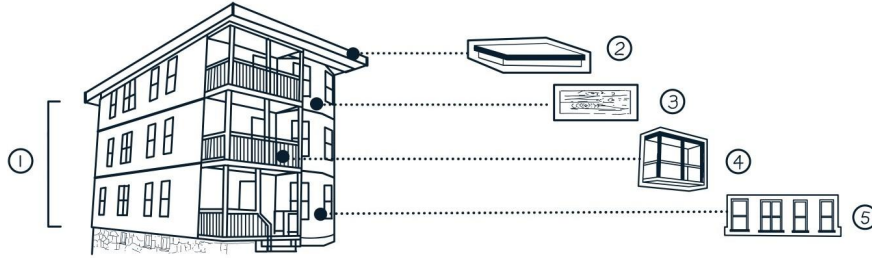
Phase I

Request for Ideas (RFI) is released, inviting residents, advocates, designers, and all who are interested to share ideas for multifamily housing across 4 Boston neighborhoods.

Phase II

Request for Proposals (RFP) is released with the goal of receiving pilot proposals that experiment with new design and construction methods to create ownership housing models on small city-owned sites.

THE CHALLENGE



Elements of a Triple-Decker:

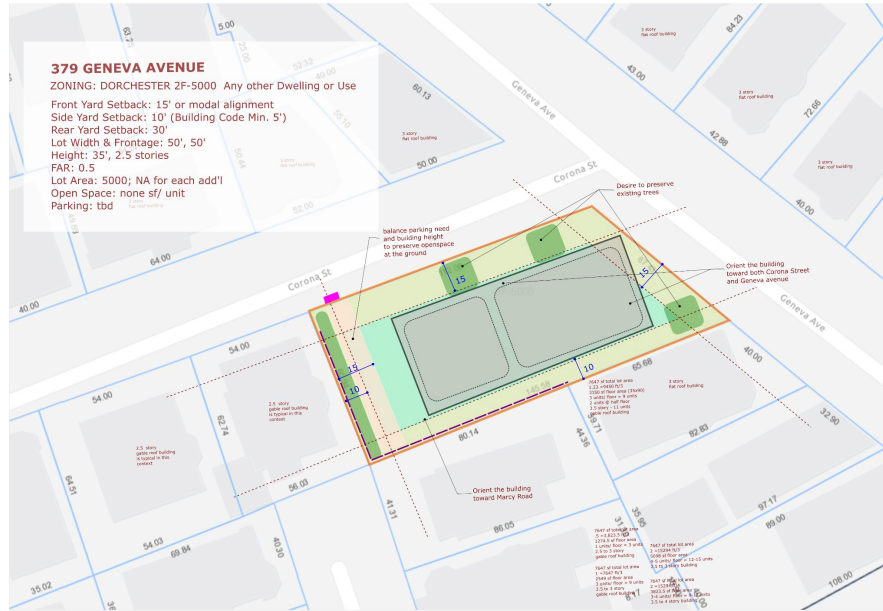
1. Three floors
2. Flat Roof (typically)
3. Made of Wood
4. Decks & Porches
5. Carefully Placed Windows

NOTE: Boston's "future decker" may not look like the traditional triple deckers throughout Boston today!

What's Boston's next iteration of the triple-decker, an affordable*, replicable, and adaptable housing typology that fits contextually with a range of site, zoning, and neighborhood conditions?

*Affordable to households earning 80-120% of AMI (\$110,650 to \$138,300 annually)

THE SITES



Address	Parcel ID	Square Footage	Assessed Value	As-Is Appraised Value	Combined Appraised Value
379 Geneva Avenue	1500843000	7,647	\$164,400	\$315,000	\$665,000
569 River Street	1801709000	6,884	\$164,800	\$350,000	

THE OUTCOME



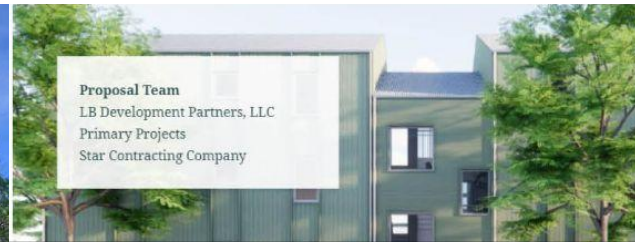
Housing



Proposal Team
Athena Real Estate Development,
LLC
Hacin
Kaplan Construction



Proposal Team
Escazu Development
Oaktree Development



Proposal Team
LB Development Partners, LLC
Primary Projects
Star Contracting Company

6 proposals, using on-site, panelized, and volumetric modular construction methods
\$603,765/unit median total development cost (not including land)
\$313,293/unit median additional public subsidy requested

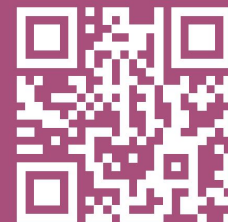


Proposal Team
Avanru Development Group, Ltd.
Sampson Architects



Proposal Team
Norfolk Design & Construction
Neighbor Architects

Check out the
story map!



KEY TAKEAWAYS



Housing

- (1) Even with heavily discounted land and the use of offsite construction methods, public subsidies are needed to achieve a price point affordable to middle-income households
- (2) Offsite construction has the potential to minimize the gap between what it costs to build and what a middle-income household can afford (*replicability and scale matter*)

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

Offsite Construction for Housing Development on Urban Infill Lots



CITY OF BOSTON
HOUSING INNOVATION LAB

ISSUE DATE: September 10, 2024

RESPONSE DEADLINE: October 11, 2024

Michelle Wu, Mayor
Sheila A. Dillon, Chief and Director, Mayor's Office of Housing



Housing



Panel Discussion

Q&A

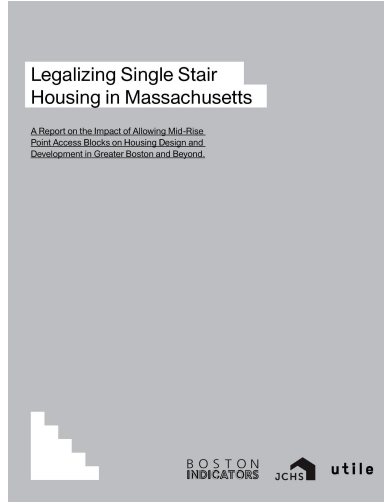
Upcoming Events



BSA Designing Just Futures Summit

@ BSA and across Greater Boston

September 19th and 20th, 2024
All Day!



Single Stair Report Release

@ The Boston Foundation

October 10, 2024
9am-10:30am



The 2024 Ivory Prize Housing Innovation Summit

@Online & Harvard GSD

Friday, October 25
12:30-5 pm

Contact Us:

jchs@harvard.edu

bsa@architects.org



Thank you for joining!

THE PERSISTENTLY MISSING MIDDLE

The State of Housing Design and Development in New England

September 17, 2024