WALKER ART CENTER

Neighborhoods and Suburbs

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There have been only two types of urbanism in North America:
The neighborhood pattern,
which was the model from the first settlements
to the middle of this century,
and the suburban pattern, which has been the model since.
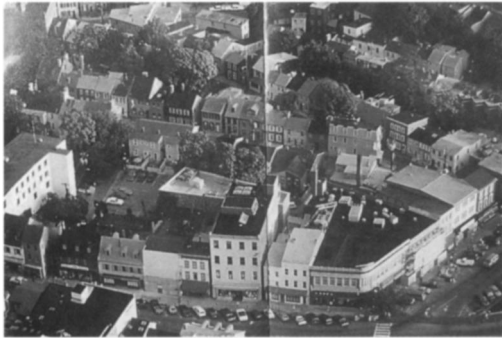
Neighborhoods are urbanized areas containing a balance of human activity: a variety of housing, adequate shopping, a range of workplaces, and the facilities for elementary education. These are integrated to other neighborhoods by a network of small streets. Neighborhoods aggregate to form towns and cities, while a single neighborhood standing free in the landscape is a village.

Suburbia has the same human activities separated into "zones." These appear as "residential subdivisions," "shopping centers," and "office parks." These elements are interconnected by a system of few but large thoroughfares including arterials, collectors, and highways.

Both models are similar
in their initial capacity to accommodate people and their activities;
but the suburban model tends to develop
environmental, social, and economic deficiencies that choke off its sustained growth.

The differences between these models are not statistical but physical,
the most important of which are illustrated below:

building codes

Suburban codes specify the function of buildings, but their size and disposition on the lot is variable. This creates the potential for situations which are incompatible physically, thus eliminating mixed-use as an option.

Neighborhood codes control the size and disposition of buildings, assuring physically compatible situations, and permitting the function of the buildings to vary initially and to change over time.

shopping

The shopping centers of the suburban communities are physically isolated from the adjacent housing subdivisions, forcing all residents, even the most proximate, to drive.

The commercial areas of neighborhoods are seamlessly integrated with housing, providing residents a gradient of choice: to live adjacent, close, or distant from the activities of the center.

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Marcia Due
Columbia County, New York, 1993

Marcia Due
Dutchess County, New York, 1990

Marcia Due
Columbia County, New York, 1992

Marcia Due
Dutchess County, New York, 1989

business

The businesses in sub-urbia are in office parks segregated from shops and restaurants, forcing midday commuting and creating depopulat-ed zones at night and on weekends when businesses are closed.

Neighborhood busi-nesses are integrated, often with shops below and housing adjacent, which supports activity all day long.

open space

Suburban open space is defined by quantity, and usually disposed orna-mentally in strips to extend the backyards of certain houses, where it is neither useable nor visible by the larger community.

Neighborhood open space is defined as "squares" or "parks," which are of specific use to the community and always located on the fronts of buildings, where they are accessi-ble to the public.

public space

Suburban public space is occupied sporadically, usually during specifi-cally organized activities such as festivals.

Neighborhood public space is occupied inevitably and constant-ly by virtue of its con-nection to daily activity.

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housing

Suburban housing is segregated by income into enclaves, enabling separate security and maintenance services supported by home- owner association dues, fostering a breakdown of the larger community.

Neighborhood housing is slightly segregated by street (apartments on one street, townhouses on another, and houses on a third) but integrat- ed by geographic prox- imity, shared public space, and common taxation for municipal services.
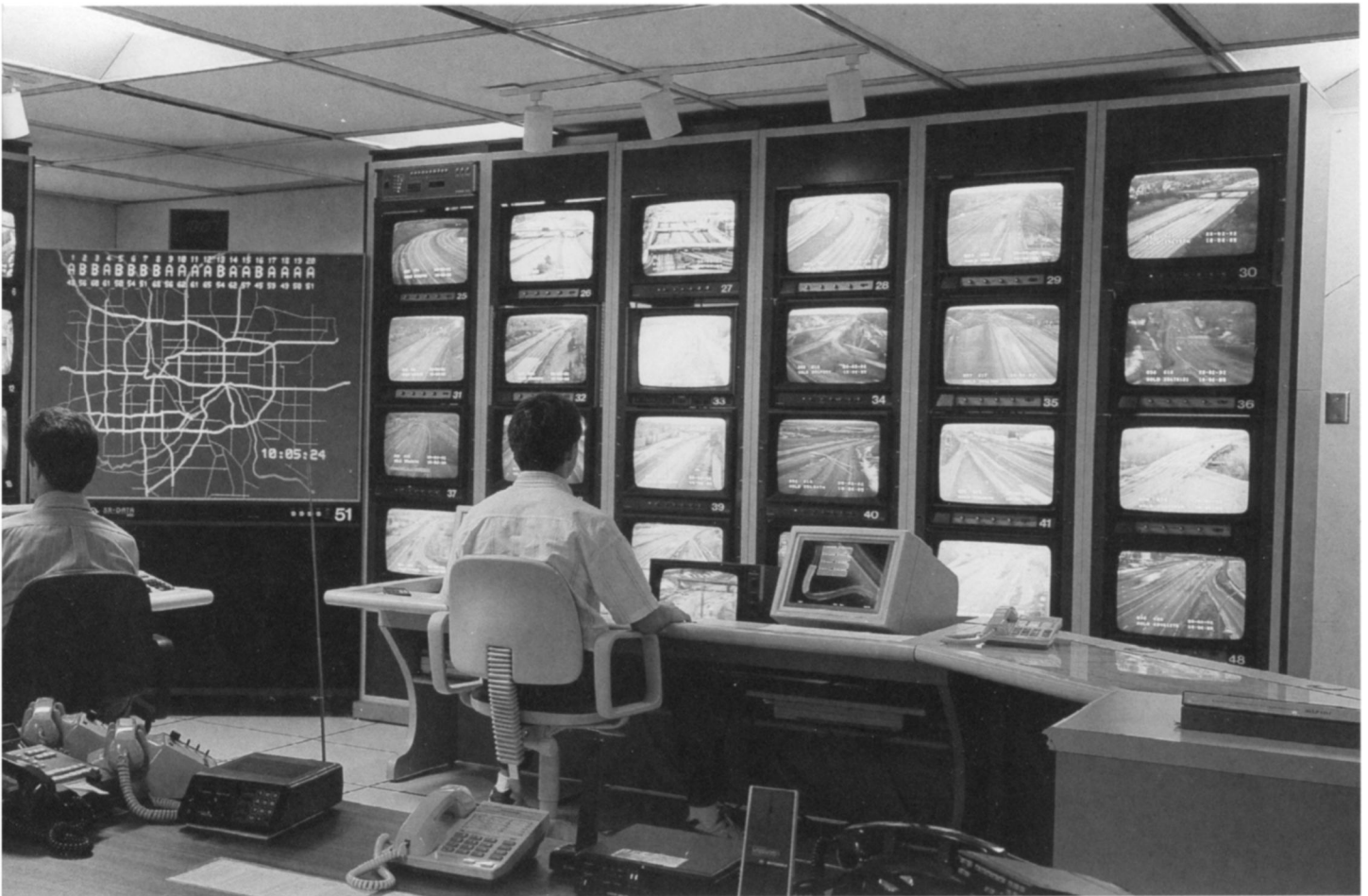
affordable housing

In suburbia affordable housing is subsidized and usually provided in large clusters at locations separate from middle- income housing, creat- ing problematic concen- trations of poverty.

In neighborhoods there are rental apartments at the rear yards of middle-income houses, which provide econo- mically integrated and individually supervised affordable housing, as well as supplemental income for the mort- gage payments of the home owners.

civic buildings

Suburban civic build- ings for education, religion, meeting, and culture are often built at undistinguished sites that become available opportunistically.

Within neighborhoods honorific locations at squares or at the termi- nation of street vistas are reserved for civic buildings; such sites support the relative importance of buildings, which may be quite modest.

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Managing Scale:
Metro Traffic Control
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Christopher Faust,
Suburban Documentation
Project, 1992

Minneapolis and St. Paul have one of the nation's most extensive "smart" freeway systems whereby traffic is monitored by closed-circuit camera and managers control metered access at all on ramps. In this view, two operators oversee banks of monitors with a metropolitan freeway map showing the freeway loop built around the periphery of the suburbs in the 1960s. New growth now extends 20 miles farther in all directions.

street layout

Suburban street layouts are most often aggressively curvilinear, which causes disorientation and makes it difficult to find addresses without specific directions.

Neighborhood street layouts may bend as necessary to accommodate existing conditions, but each street trajectory retains its cardinal orientation.

garages

Throughout suburbia, garage doors are the primary facade expression of houses, making the experience from the street both boring and unpleasant, especially on smaller lots where the driveways cover over the front lawns.

In neighborhoods, lanes or alleys permit garages to be at the rear, freeing the facades for socially interactive elements such as windows, porches, and stoops facing the street.

building articulation

The architectural expression of suburban buildings is usually highly articulated and rotated relative to the street, precluding the stable definition of space as place.

Neighborhood buildings are only modestly articulated and all buildings are aligned, creating a wall that defines a sense of place.

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facades

The building articulation of suburban houses is primarily at the facade to create "curb appeal" leaving little architecture for the rear yard.

Facades of neighborhood houses are simple, leaving recourse to articulate private spaces at the rear yard.

landscaping

Suburban landscaping is deployed ornamentally, creating a scenography in support of the real estate sales effort.

Neighborhood landscaping is primarily remedial, makes spatial gaps, and corrects excessively wide street spaces.

curb radius (corners)

The radius at the curbs of suburban streets is large, increasing the crossing distance for the pedestrian and permitting cars to turn without slowing down.

The curb radius of neighborhood streets is small, minimizing the distance between sidewalks and forcing cars to a stop before turning.
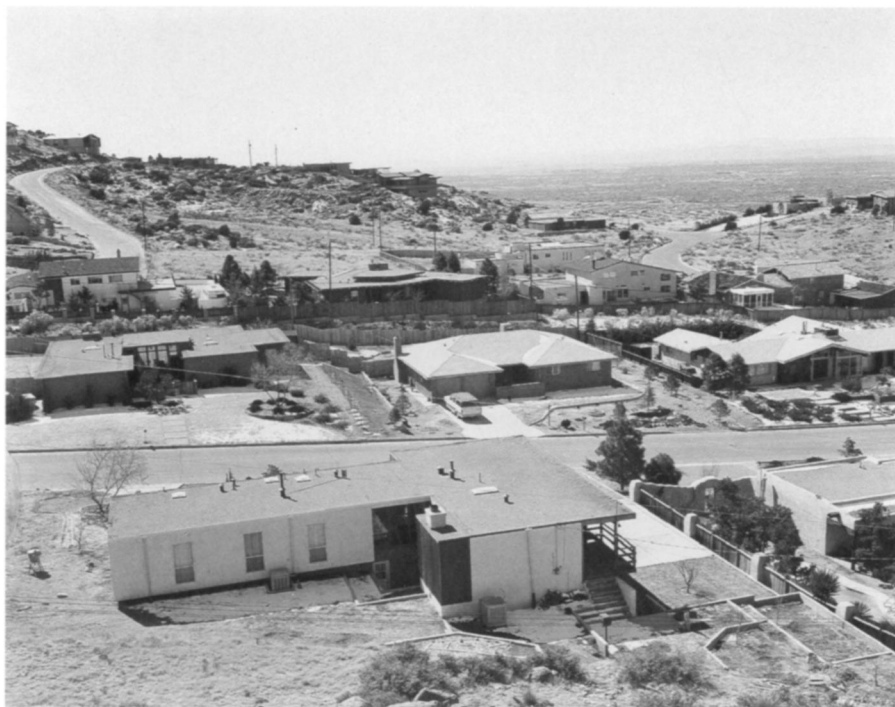
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Nicholas Nixon
Glenwood Heights
Albuquerque, 1974

Nicholas Nixon
Housing Development, Academy and San Mateo
Albuquerque, 1974

traffic

Suburban residential "collectors" are much too large (sized for an unlikely conflagration of emergency vehicles), encouraging the typical car to speed, thereby justifying the need for the cul-de-sac.

Typical neighborhood streets are sized to be no larger than demonstrably necessary for emergency vehicles, forcing cars down to speeds which are compatible with residential use.

urban fabric

Suburban arterials are specialized for traffic, creating spaces inhospitable to buildings and people, thereby sundering the urban fabric.

Neighborhood boulevards are complex accommodations for traffic, parking, trees, and sidewalks, creating habitable public spaces that weave the buildings into an urban fabric.

intersections

Major suburban intersections are geometrically designed for the fast and free flow of traffic, withdrawing enormous areas from other use and negating the possibility of mitigating construction costs.

Major neighborhood intersections are designed to create useful parks and to accommodate marketable building sites.

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The Neighborhood pattern has several positive consequences:

By bringing most of the activities of daily living into walking distance,
everyone, but especially the elderly and the young,
gain independence of movement.

By reducing the number and length of automobile trips,
traffic congestion is minimized, the expense of road construction is limited
and air pollution is reduced.

By providing streets and squares of pedestrian scale
neighbors, walking, come to know each other
and to watch over their collective security.

By providing appropriate building concentrations
at easy walking distance from bus stops,
public transit becomes a viable alternative to the automobile.

By providing a full range of housing types and work places,
age and economic classes are integrated
and the bonds of an authentic community are formed.

By providing suitable civic buildings and spaces,
democratic initiatives are encouraged.

The Suburban pattern has several negative consequences:

By assuming the need to drive to and from all activities,
the need for larger streets and parking lots is a self-fulfilling prophecy
and the natural landscape is consumed.

By consigning the available public works budget
to transportation infrastructure,
the human infrastructure of civic buildings is starved.

By separating areas, the investment of personal time
in the activity of commuting is mandatory.

By being forced into multiple automobile payments,
many cannot qualify for home mortgages.

By being dependent on adult drivers,
the young lead an unnecessarily circumscribed existence.

By losing self-sufficiency once they lose their driving ability,
the elderly must be re-housed in retirement communities.

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