

SUBURBAN CITY: REDEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY'S IDENTITY

By

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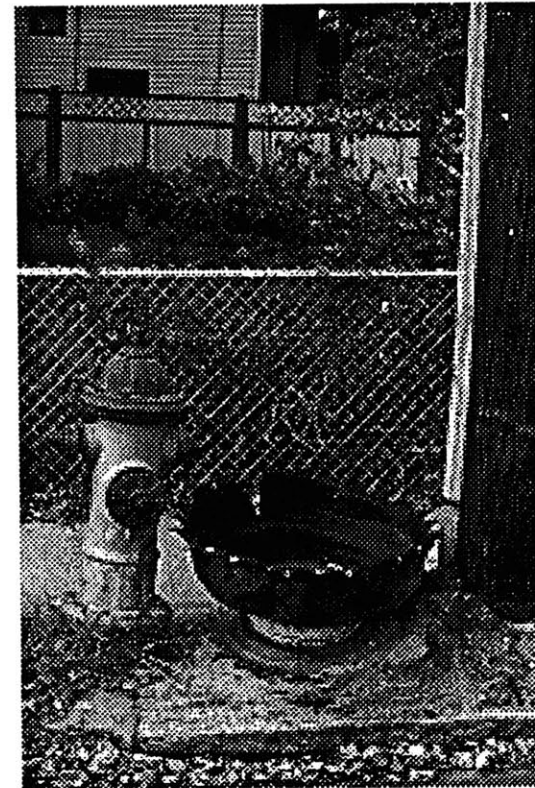
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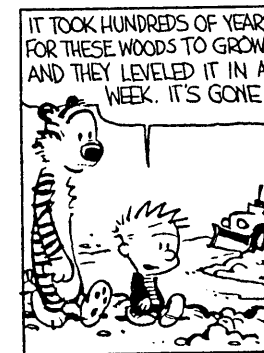
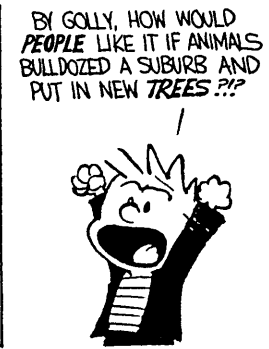
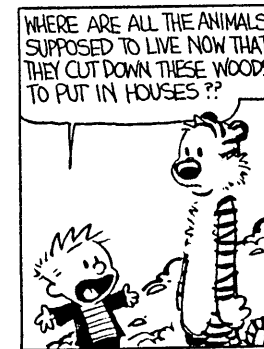
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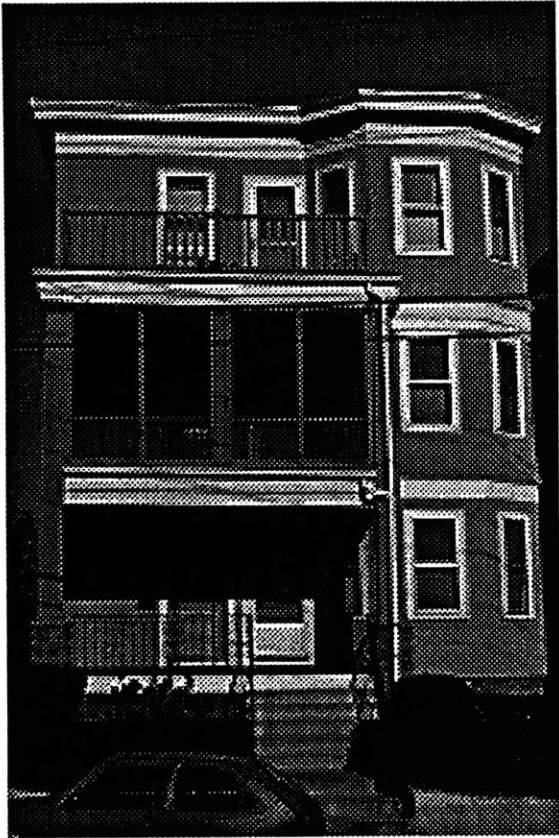
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ABSTRACT

SUBURBAN CITY: Redevelopment of a Community's Identity

By

Jean-Pierre Parnas

Submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 8, 1992
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Architecture

The thesis is a proposal for a community center and residences in Somerville which takes into account three aspects of American residential culture: 1) the changing structure of the traditional family; 2) the changing suburb and the competition with traditional center cities; and 3) the loss of community identity that is a consequence of the first two.

The project takes as reference research into the culture of the American neighborhood, suburban or urban, as well as various architectural, programmatic and contextual examples.

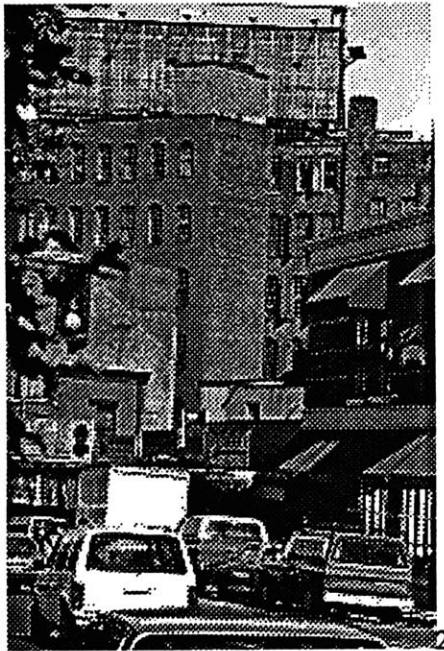
Thesis Advisor: Jan Wampler

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SUBURBAN CITY



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FOREWORD

Suburban : Any relatively dense residential area that is not urban.

Urban : Any dense residential area that is not suburban.

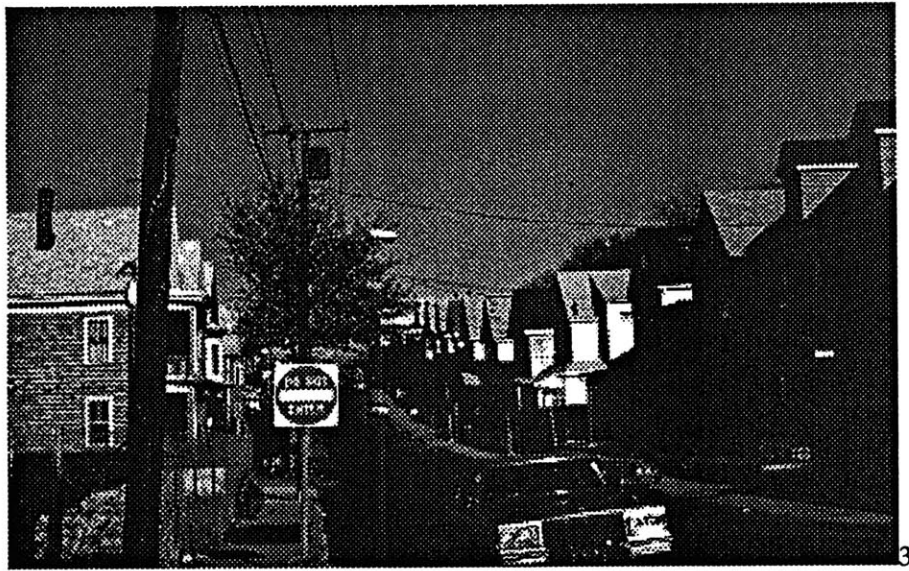
City : Any combination of the above two terms which forms a conglomeration of residences and the activities which support it.

The differences between the terms urban and suburban have historically been quite large. For nearly as long as they have been needed to explain their differences, the two terms have swung between extremely strong negative and positive connotations , depending on the political and economic conditions. Today, however, the differences are much less apparent. There are many of the same social, financial, political, and traffic problems in both environments. Both seem to have the same degree of benefits and drawbacks for families. And, as suburbs are attracting more businesses, both support a similar amount of culture.

The result is that both terms have taken on a degree of ambiguity which is reflected in the culture through perceptions of both environments: some say suburbs are unhealthy and some say that urban areas are unhealthy. The term city in this case is now a better definer because it can be used for both suburbs and urban areas. Suburbs today are much more like urban areas than they were at the turn of the century. Therefore the title Suburban City refers to the suburb as a city in the sense that it is beginning to—or should start to—have the same diversity of people, variety of places and neighborhoods and identifiable physical structure as urban cities have.



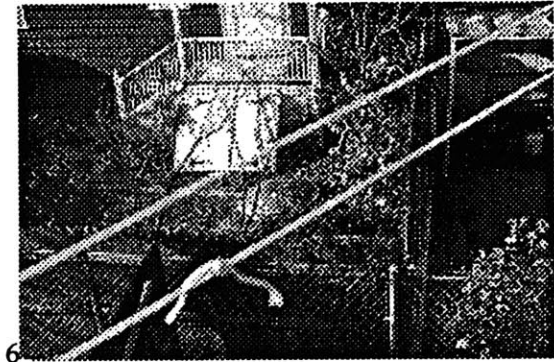
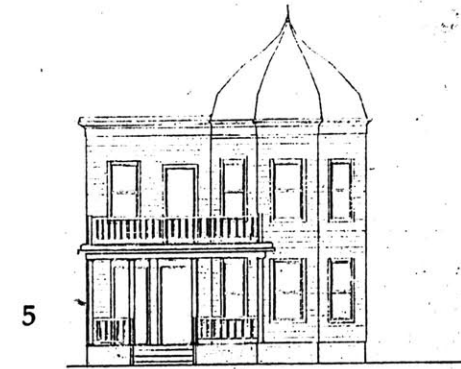
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INTRODUCTION

The ideas surrounding the complex of America's residential culture can be broken into three parts. 1) The detached (often single-family) house is seen as a bastion for the nuclear family and for the strength of the family in society. 2) The arrangement of detached houses and the attitudes which both support and are supported by it constitute a complex cultural system which promotes the establishment and control of private property. 3) The neighborhood of the collection of houses constitutes a community which is based on the individual and the individual family and promotes the autonomy of the individual.





1) the House

A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. ...The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.

- Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space

...Houses must be special places within places, separately the center of the world for their inhabitants, yet carefully related to the larger place...

-Charles Moore, et al, The Place of Houses.

At home, in the bosom of the familiar meanings, we are at our freest, out of the public view, spontaneous and unguarded, tending to one another's upsets and replenishing each other's equilibrium for ambiguities ... Strangers are kept out...

-Constance Perin, Belonging in America

The house is the symbol for the strength of the family in American culture today; the family that is self sufficient and independent. For Gaston Bachelard the House is a place where daydreams occur and where childhood memories are re experienced. The outside world is closed off and the interior becomes serenity and intimacy: *...as a shelter, it is fortifying.* (Bachelard). This is the place where the family is in control of outside influences; where the family's social rules are in place. Charles Moore, et al also promote the house as a world unto itself and suggest a very personal connection between the house and its inhabitant that remains on an emotional and intuitive level. This connection is intended to give insight into the designing of houses for both the designer and the inhabitant. Moore does make reference to the *...community that surrounds you* , but this is clearly subordinate to the desires of the owner of the house; the house is *...the inhabitants dreams made manifest.* Both Moore and Bachelard define the house as deriving out of the inhabitants dreams. But what are these dreams and from where are they derived?



2) the Culture

...today's popular culture...dwells on passion, willfulness and the trappings of individuality rather than on the common principles and ideas which bind us together and form our culture. Today's suburbs seem to be a manifestation of the extension of that ideology into the physical environment.

-Thomas M. Colbert, Beauty and the Beast

'I think living alone is something everyone strives for at some point. ...In a way you need to prove to yourself you can do it on your own, that you don't need a roommate, ...a boyfriend or a husband. That you can...manage...your household and have it run just fine. Its a great feeling'

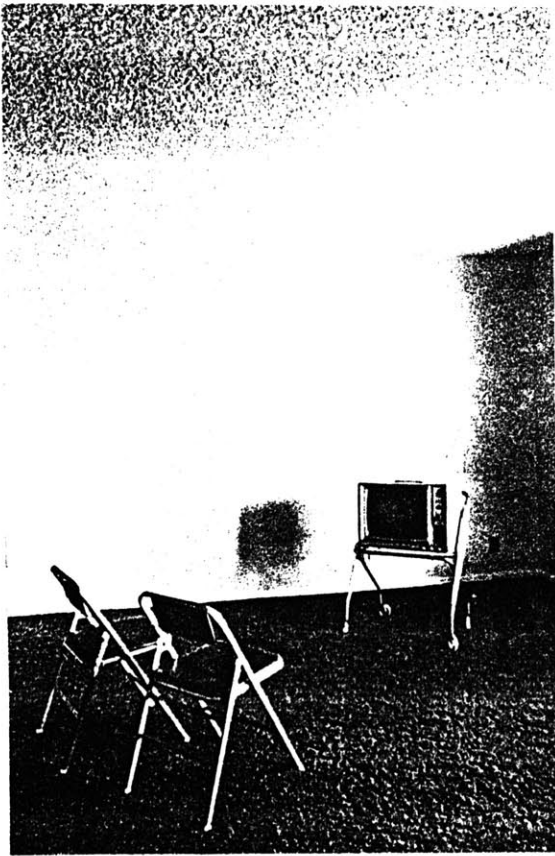
Author:In the United States in 1990, almost 23 million people lived alone, a 26 percent increase since 1980.

-Laura White, from: "Home Alone" by Wendy Kalleen

In pre-industrial societies the two institutions which sustained intimate contacts between adults were the extended family and the local neighborhood community...But...the modern nuclear family [now]only contains two adults.

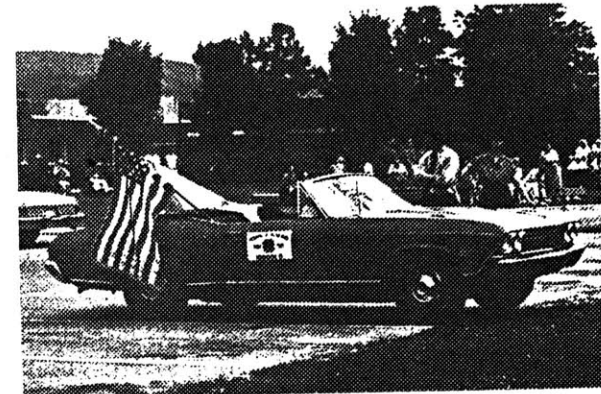
...Furthermore, one third [now one-half],of all households in urban areas, contain only one adult

Christopher Alexander, The City ...1966



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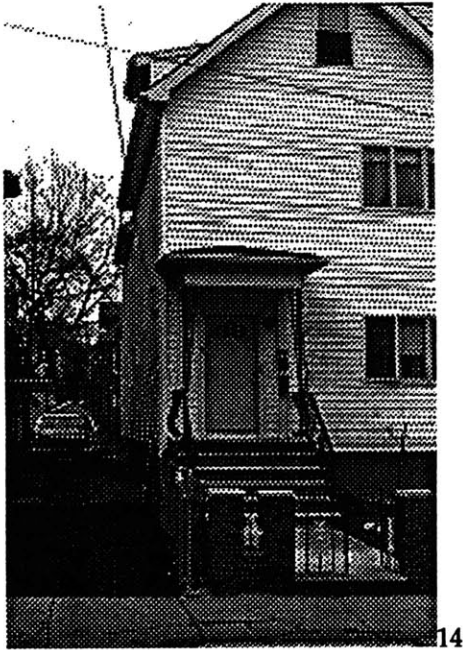
Residential suburban culture in America today is dominated by concerns for the individual, the private owner. Ownership is above all the symbol of success and the house is clearly the symbol of ownership. The single-family, detached house which dominates the housing industry is itself dominated by the need to market to the individual and has no incentive to support community. The importance of privacy for families as an amenity has become so important that the common ground which constituted the traditional community is disappearing: *Common use and common ownership violate the ideal of Private Property...*(Perin)



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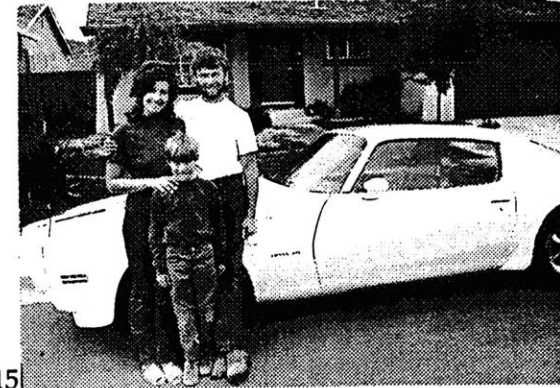
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This reflects on the attitude society has towards individuals. Christopher Alexander in 1966 explained of the fundamental need for intimate human contact which can only be achieved through daily, casual meeting among the same people. Alexander goes on to express concern that as residential areas become more and more dense and as daily life realizes more choices and a faster pace, the number of people one is in contact with on a daily basis increases. Subsequently, the quality of those meetings decreases. This, according to Alexander, causes alienation and a tendency towards isolationism. However, there is also a fundamental need for the expression of individuality which becomes stronger as the opportunity for intimate contact, and therefore community, decreases. This need is manifested through the detached house and its included privacy and protection. Thus as people come to feel more alienated they tend to need to express their individuality even more strongly, which in turn leads to more emotional distance between people.

The American family appears to be trying to hold on to this dream of independence even though the structure of the family is breaking down. Apparently one half of all family households are headed by a single parent and as stated above, the percentage of people living alone is increasing dramatically. Despite these facts there is a general reluctance to admit to the need for interdependence among families and individuals....*individualism is very different from healthy democratic respect for ...individuals rights. It is the pathological over-belief in the self sufficiency and independence of the individual and the individual family, and a refusal to permit dependence of any emotional weight to form.*(Alexander). The housing industry has not addressed these issues: Subdivisions are designed and built as they were thirty or forty years ago. Families have very little choice but to live in isolation of each other and must find ways outside of the system to develop interdependent living conditions: There are now more than ever in the U.S. cooperative residences and linked public-private projects being built.



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3) the Community



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...autonomy and withdrawal, the pathological belief in individual families as self-sufficient units, can be seen most vividly in the physical pattern of suburban tract development. ...The houses stand alone: a collection of isolated, disconnected islands. There is no communal land, and no sign of any functional connection between different houses. Christopher Alexander, The City as a Mechanism for Sustaining Human Contact, 1966

The chief symbol of privacy and guarantor of each family's claim to it is an unblemished lawn...
 -Perin, Constance *Belonging In America*



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[There is]...a very large investment among everyone in the community to basically pretend...problems don't exist...[The residents] believe they are buying protection from the kind of problems they all know exist in the city.
 -Jon Dunn, Exec. Dir. of Newton Multiservice Center from: "Suburban Strife: Family Problems Surface in Affluent Settings" by Boston Globe staff

Americans are likely to flee...ambiguities by not knowing their neighbors at all.
 -Perin, Constance *Belonging In America*

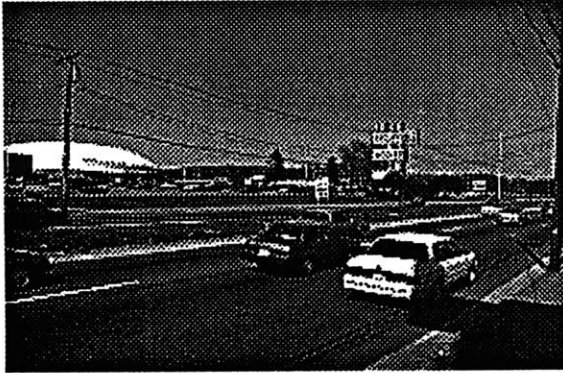
Suburbs have come to a point in their development, at which they are now beginning to compete with the traditional urban, center cities for economic and cultural identities. As both businesses and residents move from cities to suburbs, the suburbs are forced to take on a larger cultural burden than they were originally intended to have. The inherency of relatively large lot sizes in suburbs works against the possibility of accommodating this burden through small-scaled, but dense centers, and results in homogeneous land use.



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These factors and the greater efficiency of travel afforded by the car have produced centers--Malls-- which do not relate themselves to the residential structure of surrounding neighborhoods and can not accommodate any cultural needs. Malls, because of their strong connection to the car, serve far too many people to constitute what one might identify as a community; They are, in fact, too public. As commercial and cultural (ie cinemas) centers become more centralized, as the Mall is, trips to these centers become less frequent and therefore must be more efficient. With this comes a loss of regularity with which people need to establish relationships with others in a community. This new community breaks down all forms of interaction between fellow residents and forces people to withdraw and protect themselves from the inhospitable environment of traffic and strangers:...*Today's men and women suffer from a continual onslaught of information and sensations, a constant violation of their sense of identity.* (Branzi)

It can be concluded that the loss of community in modern life has negative effects on American culture. The change in the fundamentals of the family may or may not be caused by this loss of community, but the modern community does not in either case support this change. Social rules inhibit people from reaching out to strangers, but it may not be this attitude which is detrimental, rather the fact that there are so many more strangers in peoples lives and not enough close relationships. These rules are a holdback from when strangers were strangers to a community, not to an individual. For the culture is now one of individuals.





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CONCLUSION

Taking Alexander's view, these problems are a result of widespread densification and erode the individual's sense of being part of a group. However, the traditional community was based on densification to a degree. So there seems to be an inherent conflict between future development and society's needs for community. New development needs to promote greater density but must be sensitive to the local community and must in some way strengthen it.

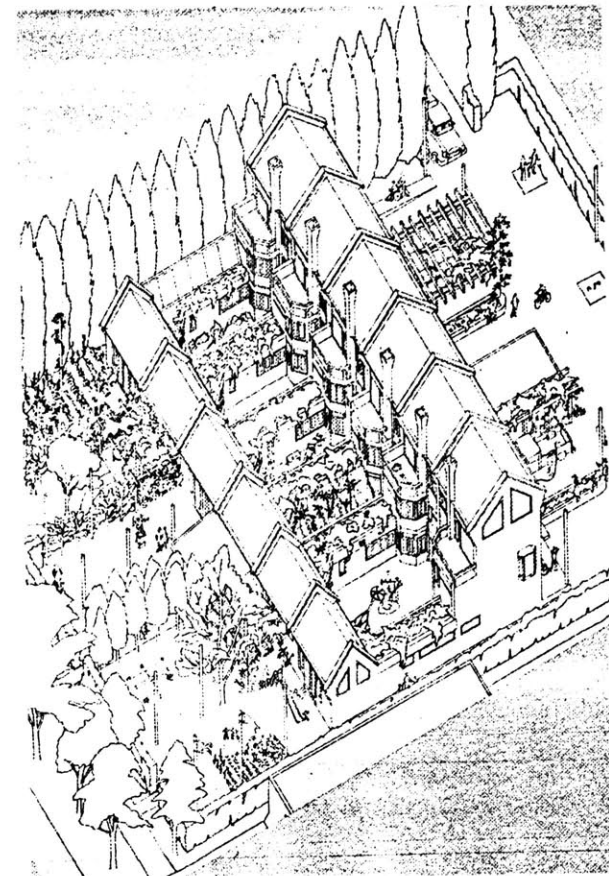
The position taken for this project is that the suburbs have a potential for community which can be realized by enhancing the existing identity through densification and centralization *to a degree*. The amount of densification and centralization is crucial to the life of the project. There must be a balance between densification--ie residential--and community--ie public use; In too many instances high density residences are developed without making an investment in the identity of such a large community. The assumption then is that an investment to better the community, while not necessarily financially profitable, is worthwhile from a social point of view.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN

The implications for the project fall into three categories:

- 1) The changing structure of the family and its relationship to the single-family house.
- 2) The growing need for interdependence between families or individual members of a community.
- 3) The need for identifiable centers on the local scale within the environment of undifferentiated growth and densification.

1) The changed family structure indicates for housing, a flexibility both in the design of the house and in the attitudes of the residents to allow a mix of family types within one neighborhood. The house for a typical family must now accommodate the equal possibility of one or two parents with children or a childless couple. Two approaches seem to be obvious: A) Design housing which is as flexible as possible to take into account the different family types and B) Specify the housing so that there is a range of housing types, each matching a specific family type. The attitude taken for the project is that both of these are too extreme and unrealistic. The design of a house can never be flexible enough to accommodate every family's specific needs and for it to be so flexible all variety and interest would be abolished.



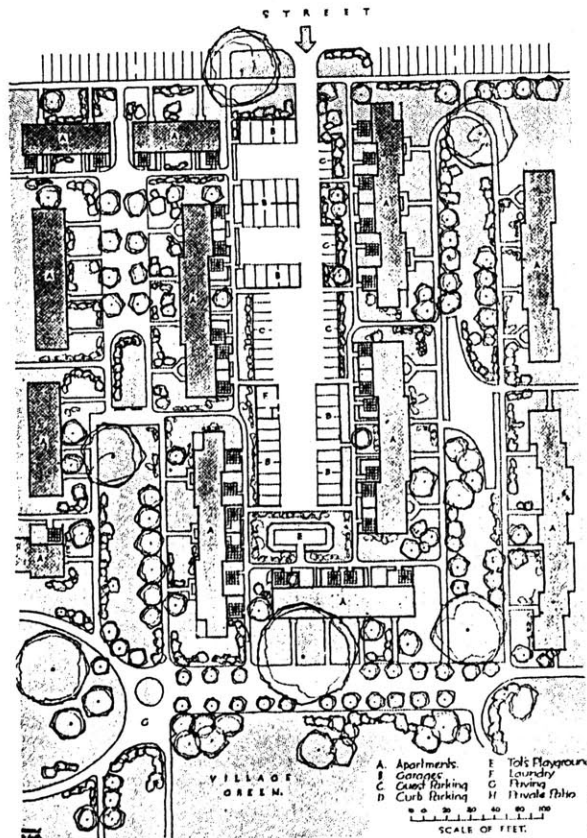


Fig. 149—Details of a garage court and two garden courts.

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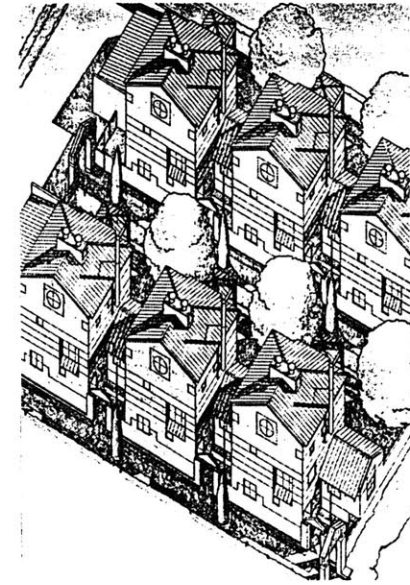
The other alternative assumes so much specialization that the house would hardly be able to be used by any other family except by the original inhabitant. The units must have a certain flexibility inherent in their design, but that there are certain household types which require specialization in the design of the unit. These households might include: single parent; two or more unrelated people; cooperative households (ie more than one family or group of single residents); etc.

2) The fact that the family structure is not as strong as it has been in the past--in other words, that the family can no longer consider itself completely self sufficient--indicates that there is a need for more interdependence among members in a community. The certain indications of this need are seen in the proliferation of support groups which have taken over the role of the traditional community. The physical manifestation of community-based social support is densification on a local scale and mixing residential uses with leisure and daily uses such as exercise and local grocery stores, laundry-mats, etc. The residents have the opportunity to interact on a casual and daily basis and to break barriers imposed by the need to have easy access to the car.

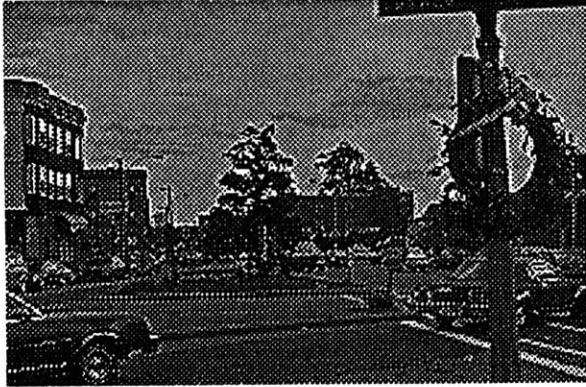
3) Suburbs have been developed with little hierarchy of public and private, pedestrian and vehicular. Within this environment, there is nothing within a certain group of houses or neighborhoods, which gives it identity and allows the residents a place where they can meet as members of a community. The project must take into account the neighborhood scale of planning and must address the potential for an identifiable center within a neighborhood. Because of the local nature of a center it is important to promote the pedestrian use of it through strong connections to the neighborhood. Clearly a project for a neighborhood center must rely strongly on its site for reference towards the design; one of the most important aspects of the design must be in discovering the character of the site and the neighborhood.



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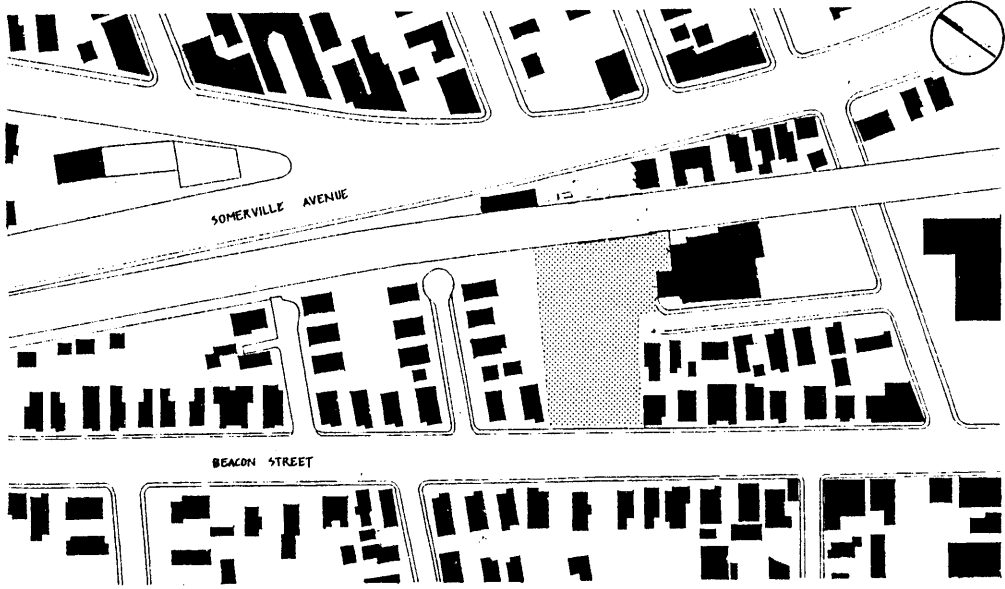
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SITE

The site of 309 Beacon street, Somerville is an L-shaped lot with a relatively large frontage on a major street connecting Somerville and Cambridge. This street has a fairly strong line of two and three-family houses in a pattern typical, although slightly less dense, of most of Somerville. This line alternates in a pulsing pattern between houses and commercial use buildings, including, several blocks away, a large *Star Market* supermarket. There is a small street along the side of the lot, which presents some smaller-scale houses within a seemingly closely-knit neighborhood. Directly adjacent on the east edge is a light industrial building which houses a small cabinet making shop and other small wood working shops.

The north side of the lot fronts along the commuter rail tracks, which run from downtown to the north-western suburbs. Across the tracks is Wilson square. Wilson Square is really only the triangular intersection of Somerville avenue and Elm street and includes a Christy's 24-hour convenience store and gas station; a Lechmere car wash with both self-serve and automatic car wash services; a laundry-mat; and one or two non-descript stores. The car wash clearly dominates the site-side of the square and faces directly towards the site across the rail tracks.



The site chosen in Somerville is applicable to address the above implications because it exhibits the potential for diversity and coherence which is part of the definition of a community and at the same time has experienced the overgrowth exemplified by the typical suburban subdivisions. Somerville consists in fact of many local centers which hold a potential for strengthening the identity of their surrounding neighborhoods. Once again, however, overgrowth has forced many of these centers either to accommodate the increase of people or become swamped under it. The consequence of this progression is that centers are becoming larger. They need to serve more people, and therefore are becoming over-centralized.

These larger centers serve the practical needs of residents very efficiently, but do not support the need for local contact and community. The proposal for a community center and residences projects a center at a scale smaller than that of the commercial center and of a different focus. The project addresses the missing local contact by including uses which promote daily activity.



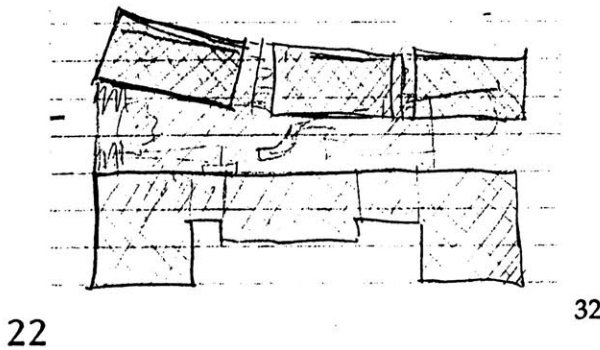
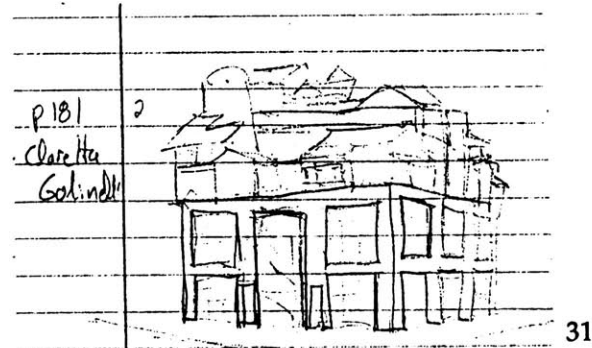
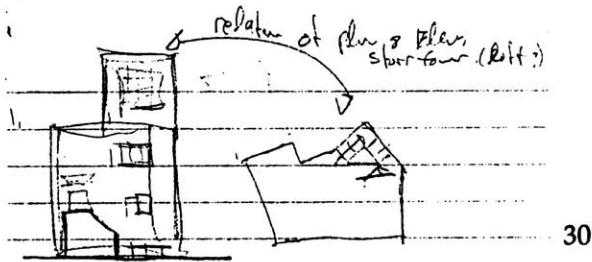
REFERENCES

References were gathered in three categories, each having different impacts on the project:

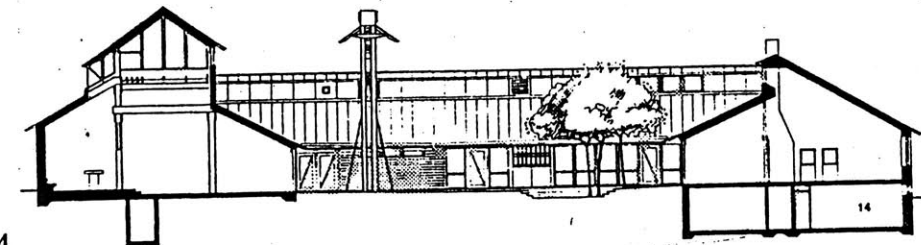
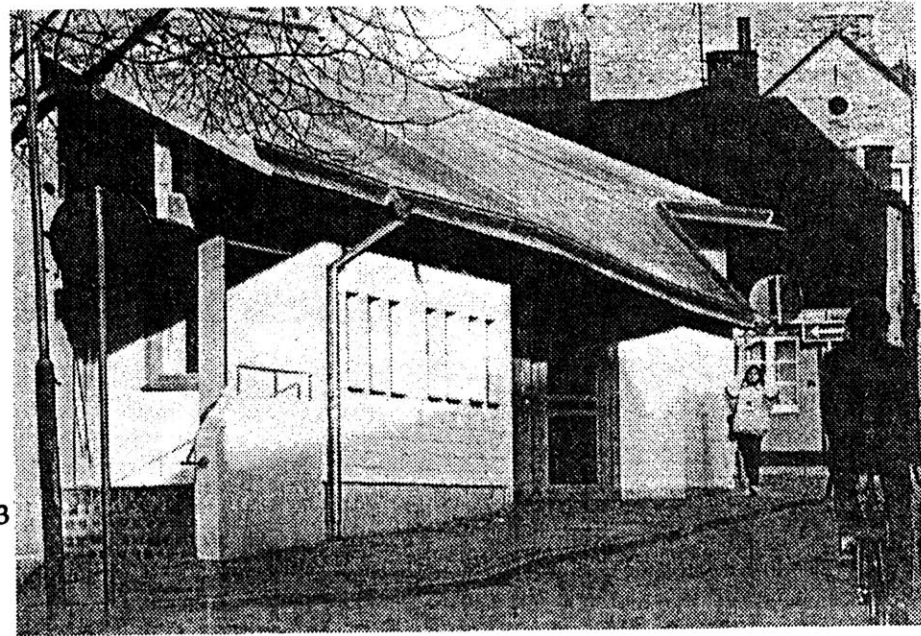
- 1) Architectural. Existing or proposed projects which had a clear intention towards developing a community, were used to gain a formal and symbolic understanding of community.
- 2) Programmatic. These were used to gather specific information for the program of the project.
- 3) Contextual. The site had a great influence on the project through the existing housing types and the density of the spaces.

1) Architectural

Figures 33 and 34 show a community center project in Norway, which describes a significant public open space. The space is connected to the street through the complex itself and defines the street at a pedestrian scale.



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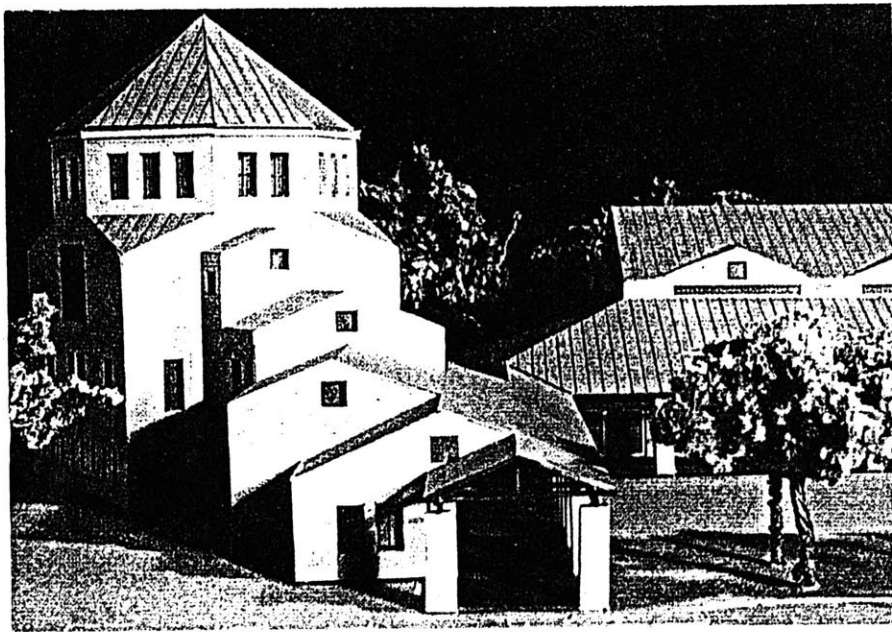


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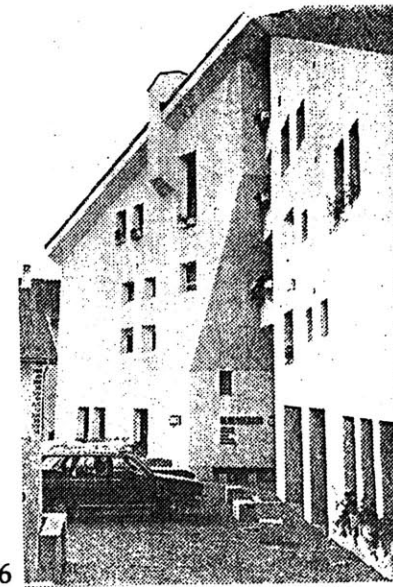
Architectural references

Figure 35 is project for a large athletic and civic center in Texas. The significance of the public open space is apparent in the planning (see p25 fig 43) and is symbolically supported by the arcade which runs around it. The tower, which holds the court house, in this case serves as a civic symbol and amplifies the public space.

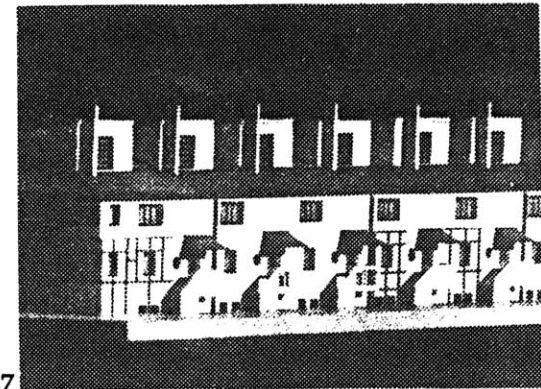
Figures 36 and 37 are two apposing projects, one (fig 36) is a community center in Germany which incorporates housing; the other is a housing project in Vienna which relies on the housing itself to support community.



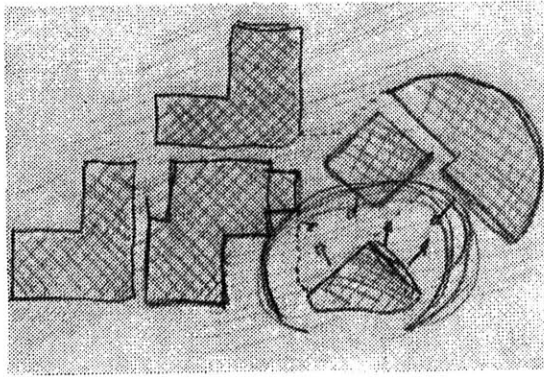
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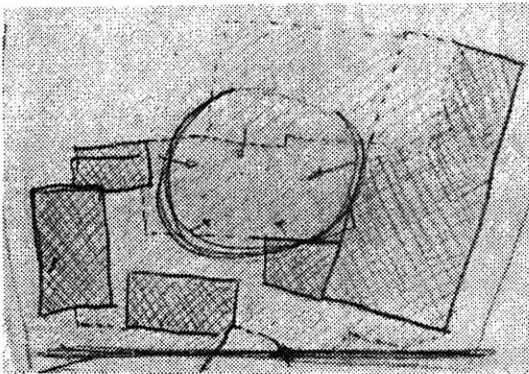
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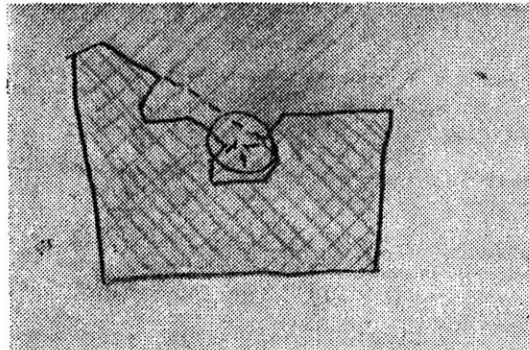
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2) Programmatic, Organizational

The diagrams in figures 38 - 40 describe how three projects define exterior space through the arrangement of their pieces.

Figure 41 shows a community center in New York which supports the idea of a pedestrian way through the complex but within the city.

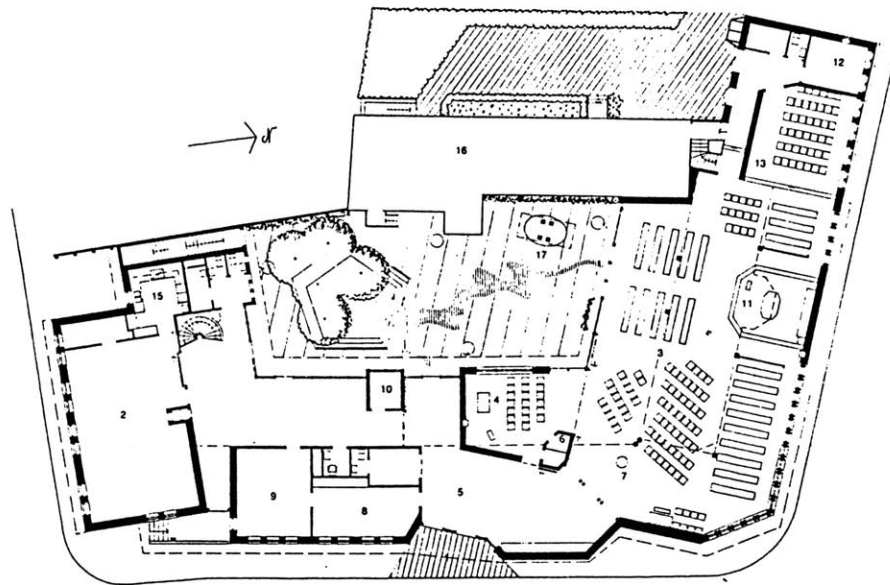


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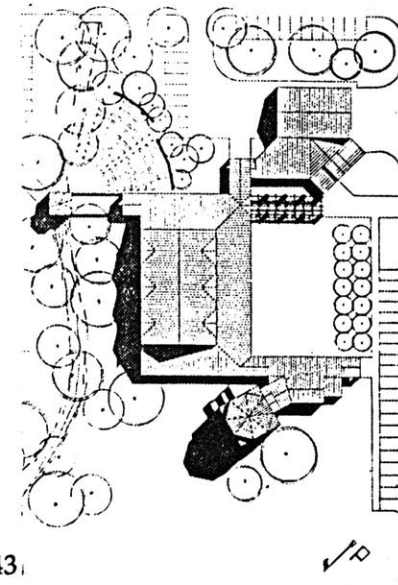
Programmatic references

Figures 42 and 43 are the plans for the projects in figures 33 (p22) and 35 (p23) respectively. Figure 42 is organized around the open space connecting to the street, at the west (down) through a formal entranceway. The plan in figure 43 reveals a different attitude towards the street. The public space is open towards the main street to the south (at the right) in the plan.

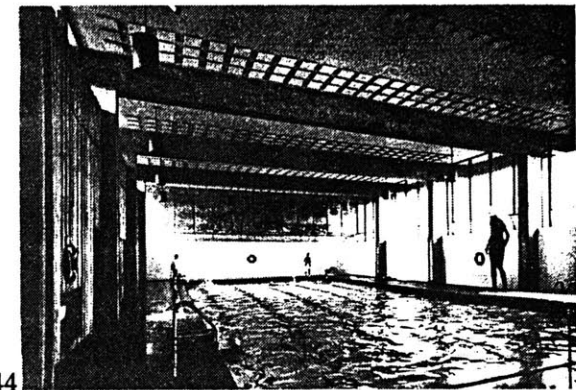
Figure 44 shows an example of one of the possible uses within a community center.



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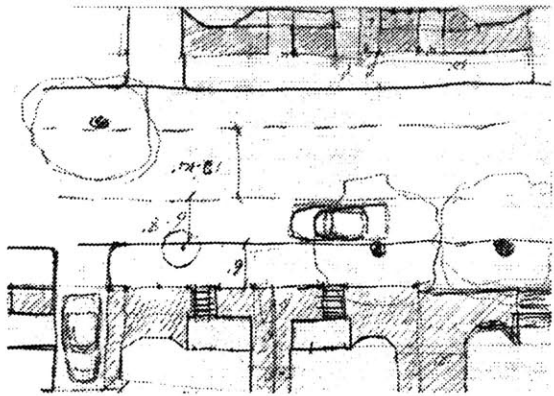
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3) Contextual

Figures 45-47 diagram and illustrate the typical housing type in Somerville. The density of building creates a micro-range of public to private outdoor spaces and forces the limited space to carry the large burden of privacy. The primacy of the symbol of house is very strong despite the density. Figure 48 illustrates the power of the house symbol.



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Contextual references

There are also a number of instances of especially newer housing which subordinate the house symbol to the image of collective and to the livelihood of the street. The non-residential aspects of the area of the site offer two levels of reference.

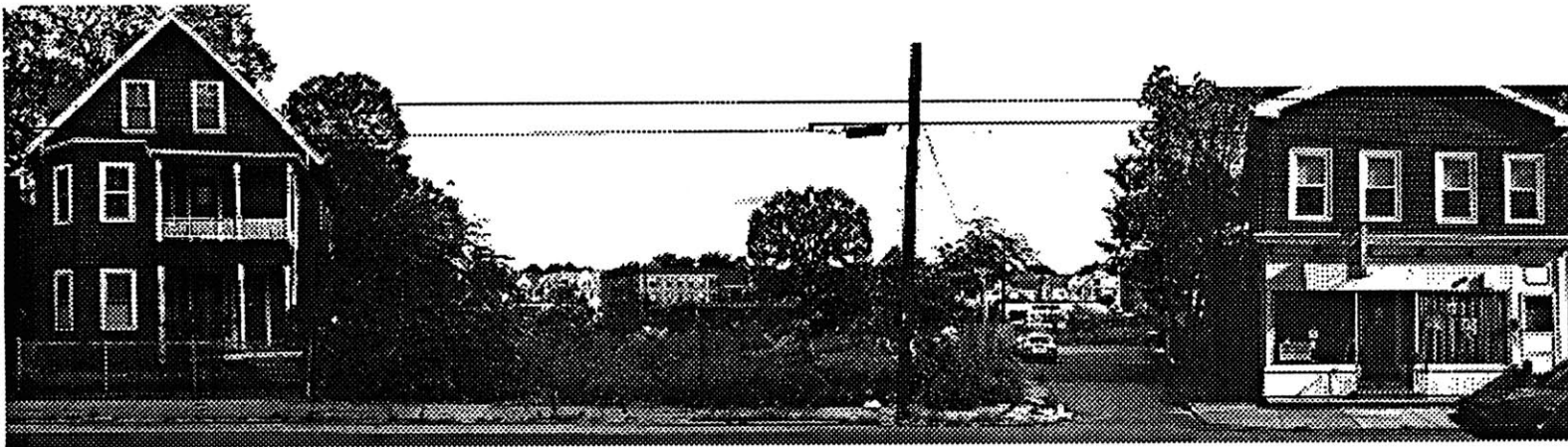
The industrial vocabulary is a strong part of Somerville and is often mixed bluntly with the residential. There is also an opportunity to both accept the strong presence and to use it as a unifier. Especially in this case, the train tracks cut through a neighborhood and the potential to connect the two sides is strong and can be strengthened even more by giving that connection definition through the train's vocabulary: The negative image of the train can be used to identify the positive connection.



50



51



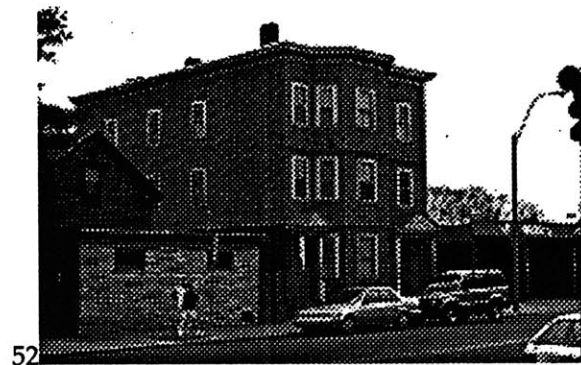
PROJECT

PROJECT

SUBURBAN CITY

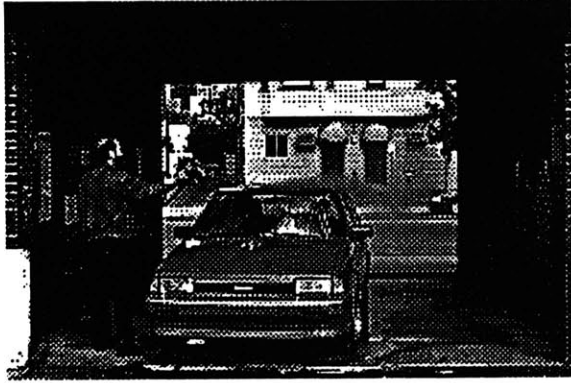
The project consists of a pedestrian path which both connects two parts of a neighborhood and brings those parts together in a local center which, along with the activity of included residences, promotes the identity of the community. The community in this case is defined by a walking distance radius, thus creating an environment inductive to personal contact rather than the impersonal environment created by the automobile. The main focus of the project is the path running between two major streets and the activity on it. Two types of activity are promoted. Through pedestrian traffic, including commuters walking to the subway and bus stations and the daily activity of both immediate residents and those living on the immediate periphery of the site. The daily activity of local residents is supported by both specific needs--ie convenience store, café, laundry-mat--and more general, cultural uses--swimming pool, athletics rooms, day care, library, meeting hall.

The housing reflects both the existing diversity of family types and the general trend of the changing family structure. Thus there are four types of units included in the twelve total units.

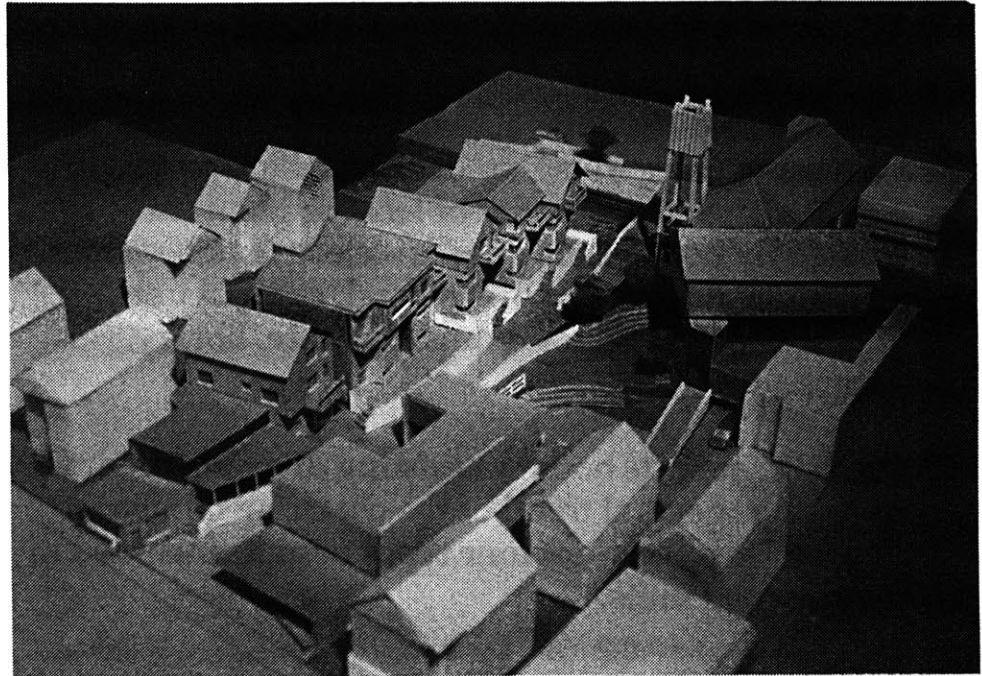


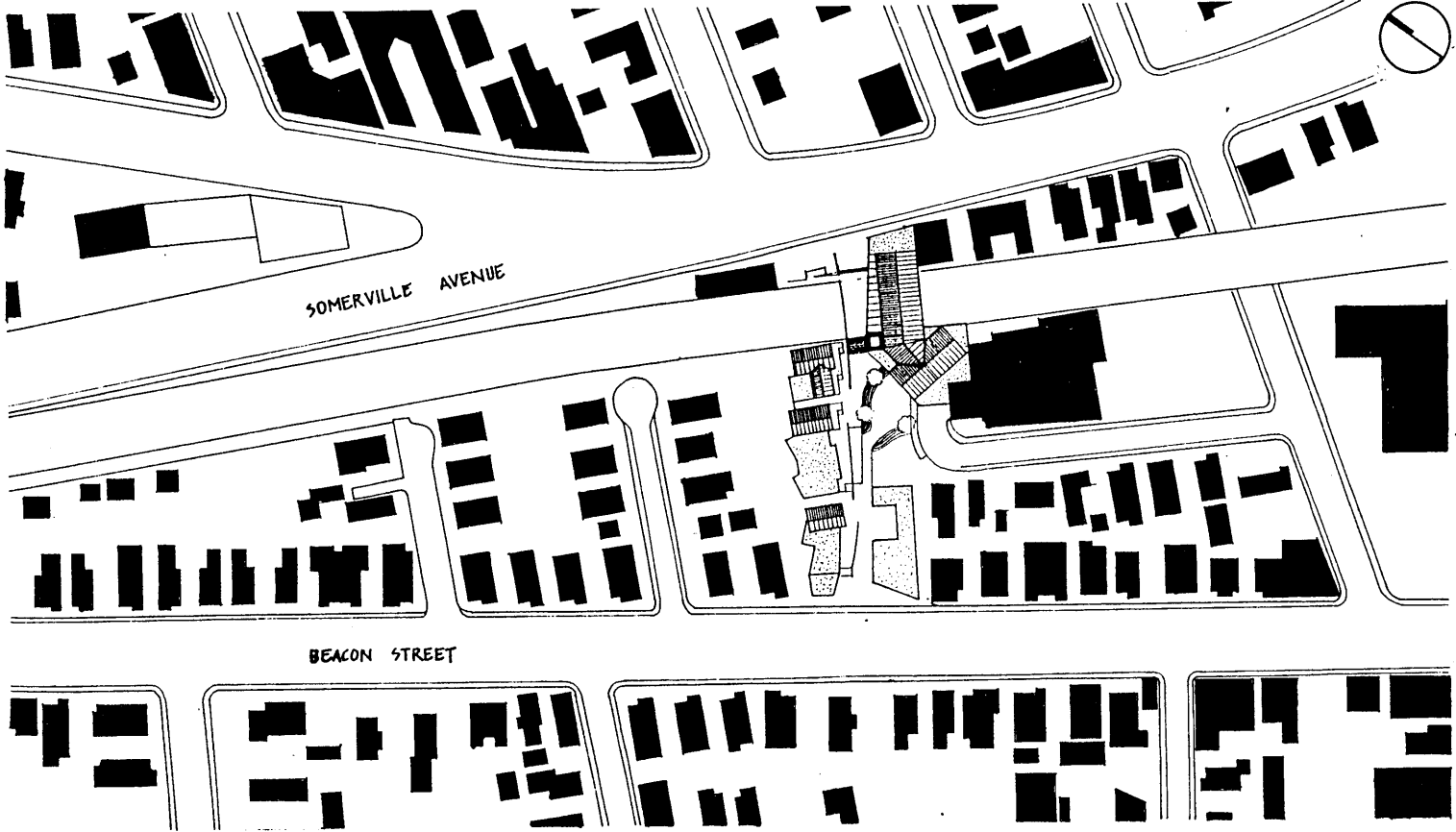
1) Urban Scale

The entrances to the path at each of the main streets is an important part of the existing physical character. On the Beacon Street side (south) a residential character predominates and the project reflects that by stepping down towards the street and creating an entrance which continues the strong street frontage and at the same time remains public. The character of the Somerville side is more industrial and less removed from the car (See also pages 44-45)



53

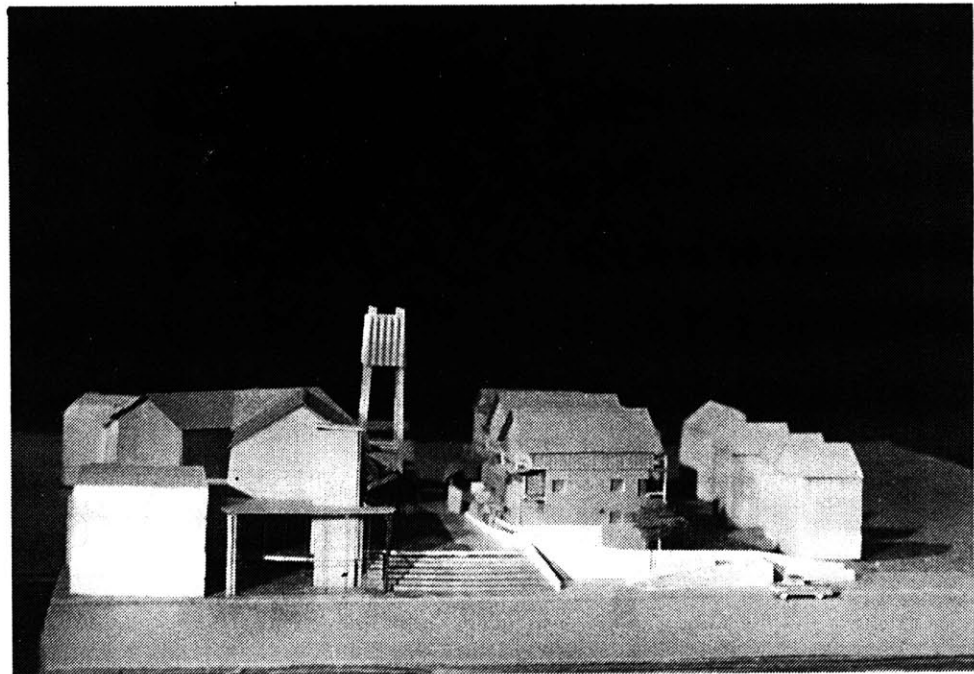


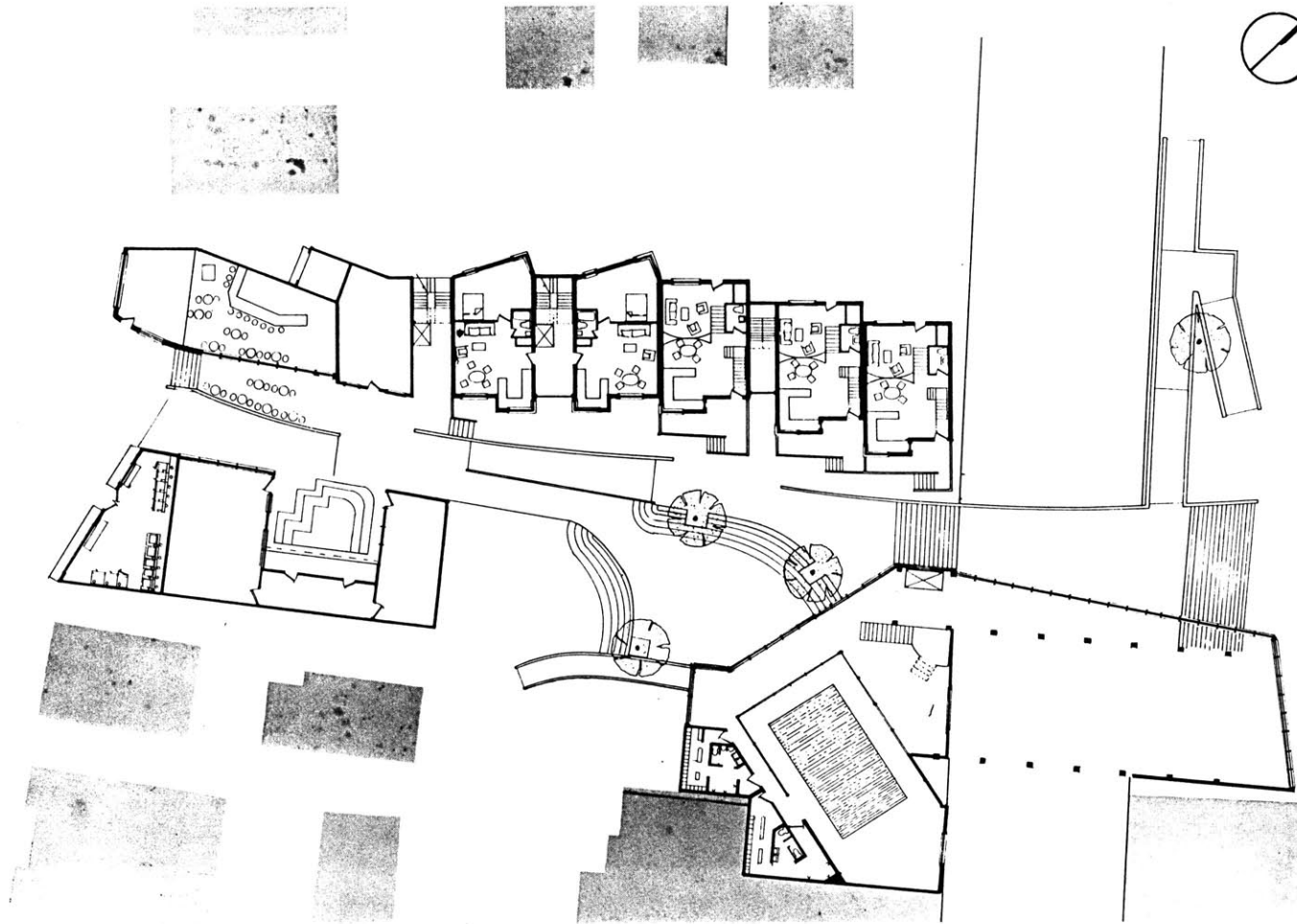


2) Neighborhood Scale

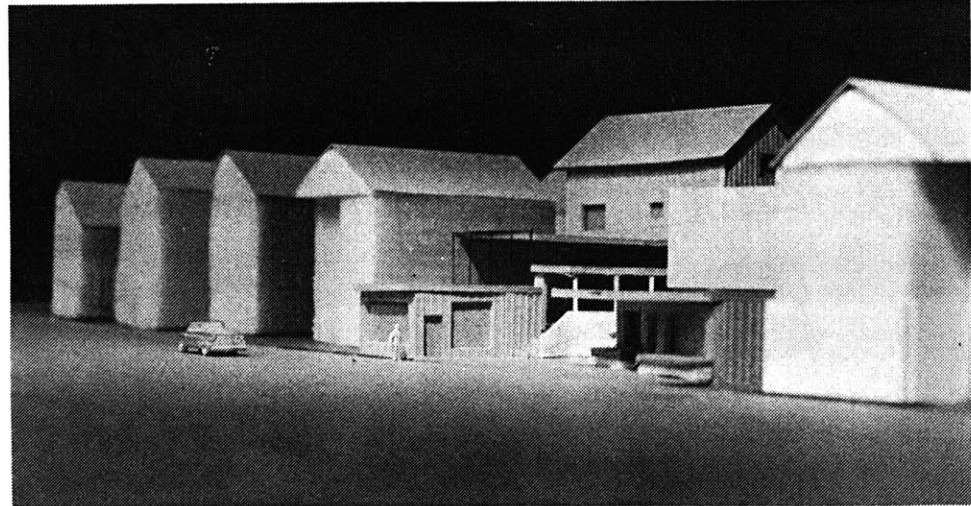
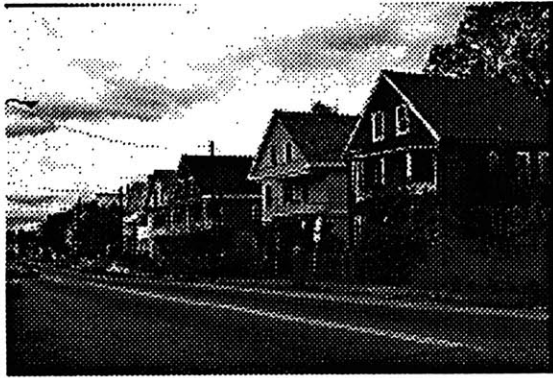
At the local level, the housing has the role of both providing for a diversity of family types and promoting the interdependence of those families with each other and with the rest of the community. There are four unit types in the project:

- a) Two-floor, three bedroom for small family.
- b) Flat, two bedroom for single parent or childless couple.
- c) Flat one bedroom for single or couple.
- d) Flat four bedroom cooperative apartment.

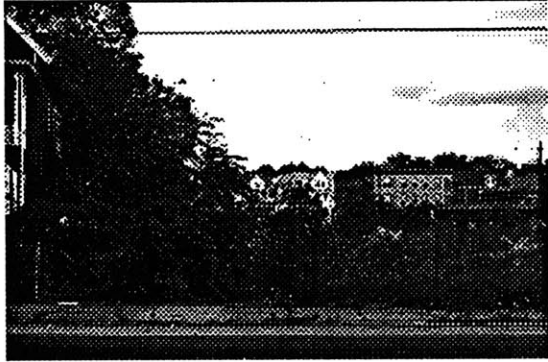




Beacon Street Elevation



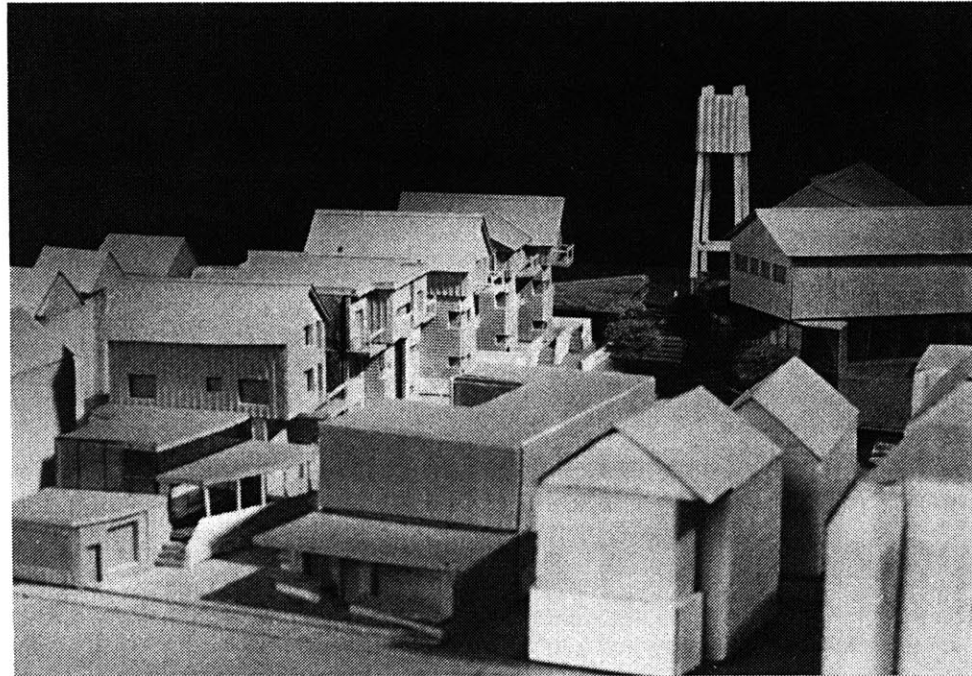




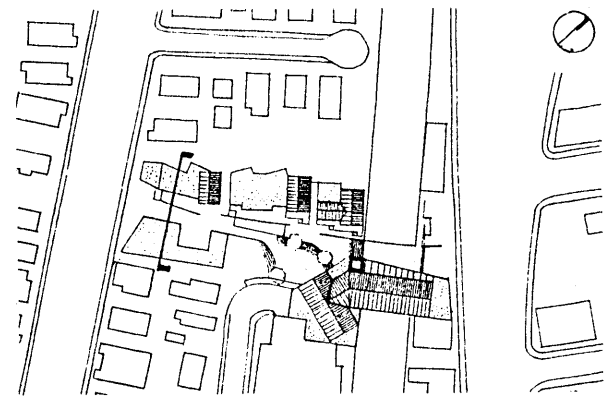
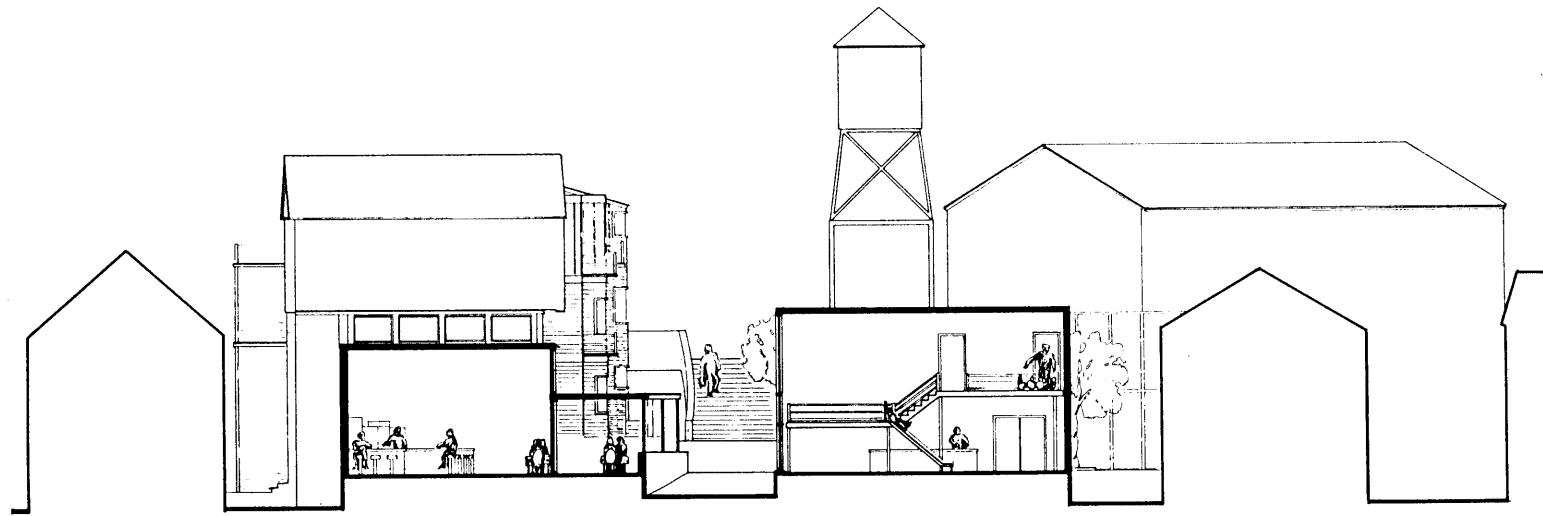
56

Sections Through Site

The coffee shop and the laundry-mat at the Beacon Street entrance serve to indicate that the path is a public way; the life of the coffee shop and laundry-mat activates the entrance and the street at the same time. The day care, across from the coffee shop and behind the laundry-mat acts as a transition from the active uses to the residential. The day care is at the center of the Beacon Street side of the site and places the children in the midst of the activity; both protecting and adding life.



Section A-A



Sections Through Site



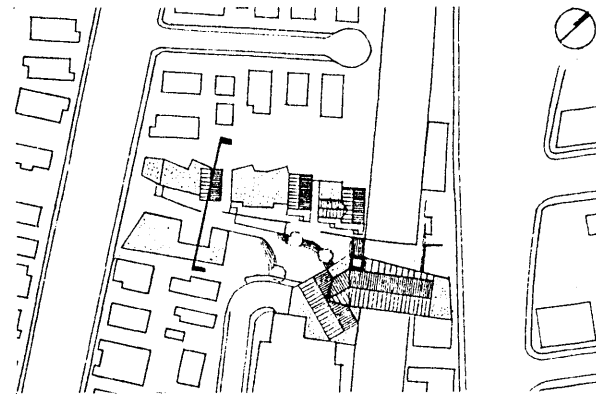
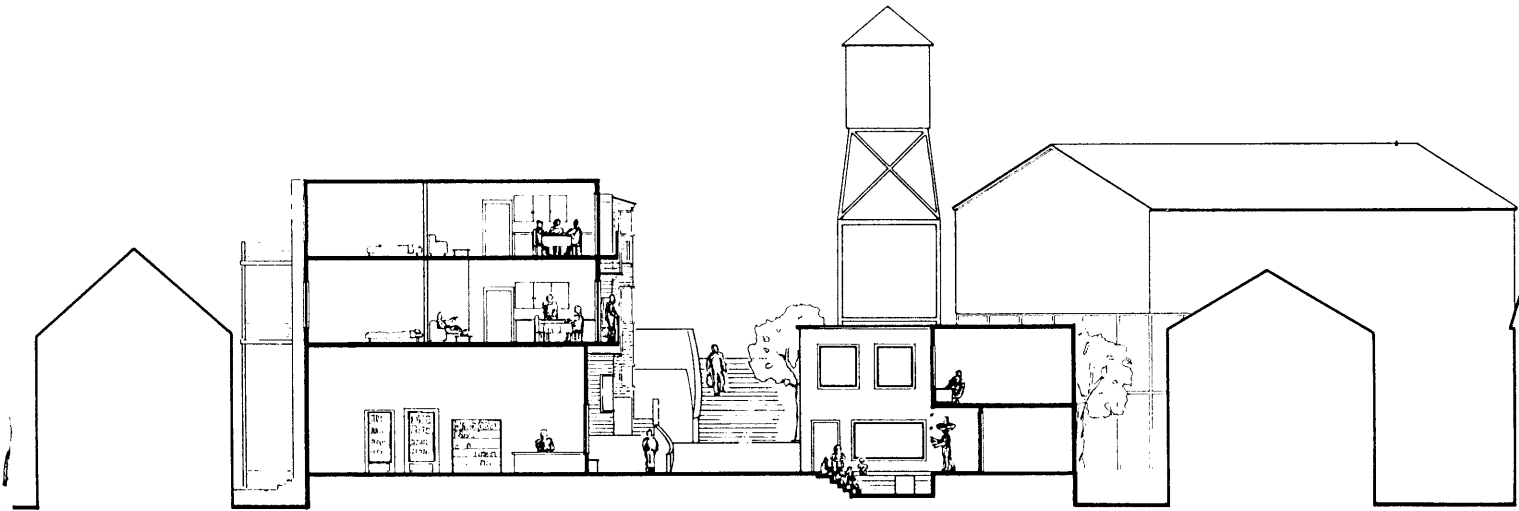
57

The small grocery store serves as another transition for the housing. It becomes a meeting place for the local residents and is slightly less obviously public. In the vocabulary of a corner store, the shop is part of the (type c) apartments above.

The small performance and play area for the day care serves as a focus for the pair of apartments and the grocery store.



Section B-B



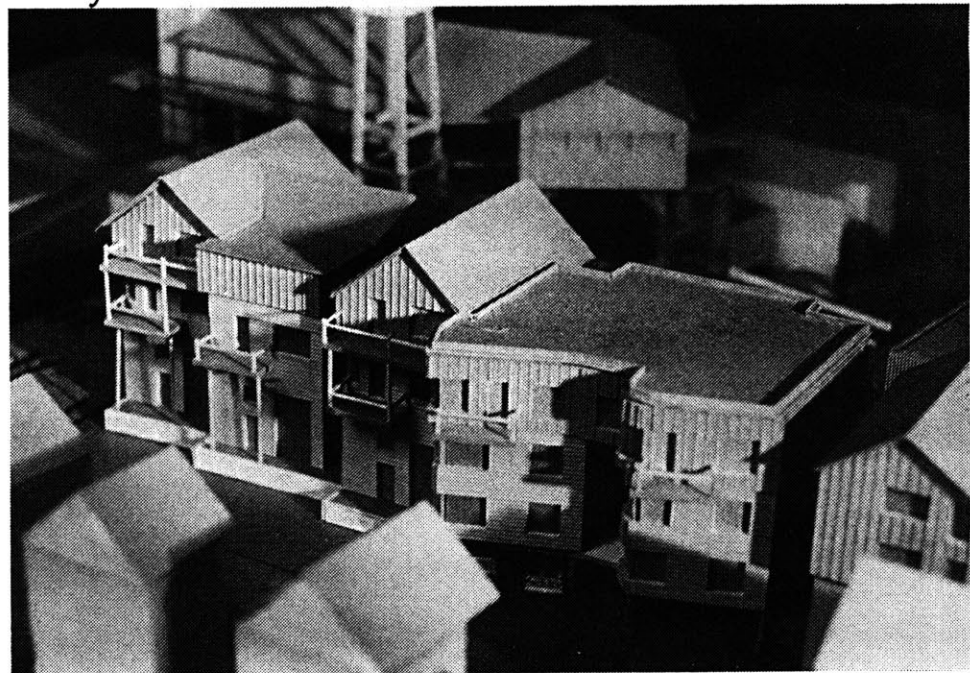
Sections Through Site



58

The single and cooperative apartments (types c and d) are grouped together to form a single identity, but within the same vocabulary as the family apartments so that there is also an identity to the entirety.

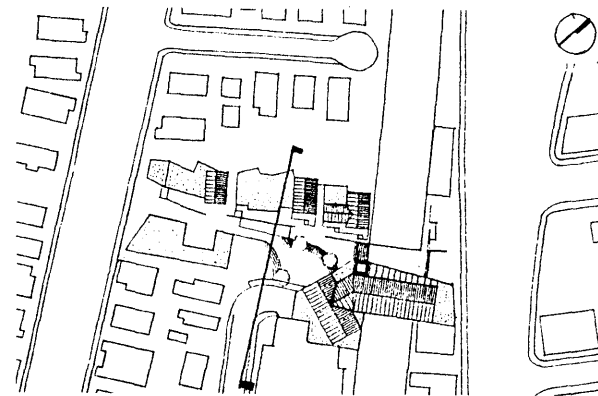
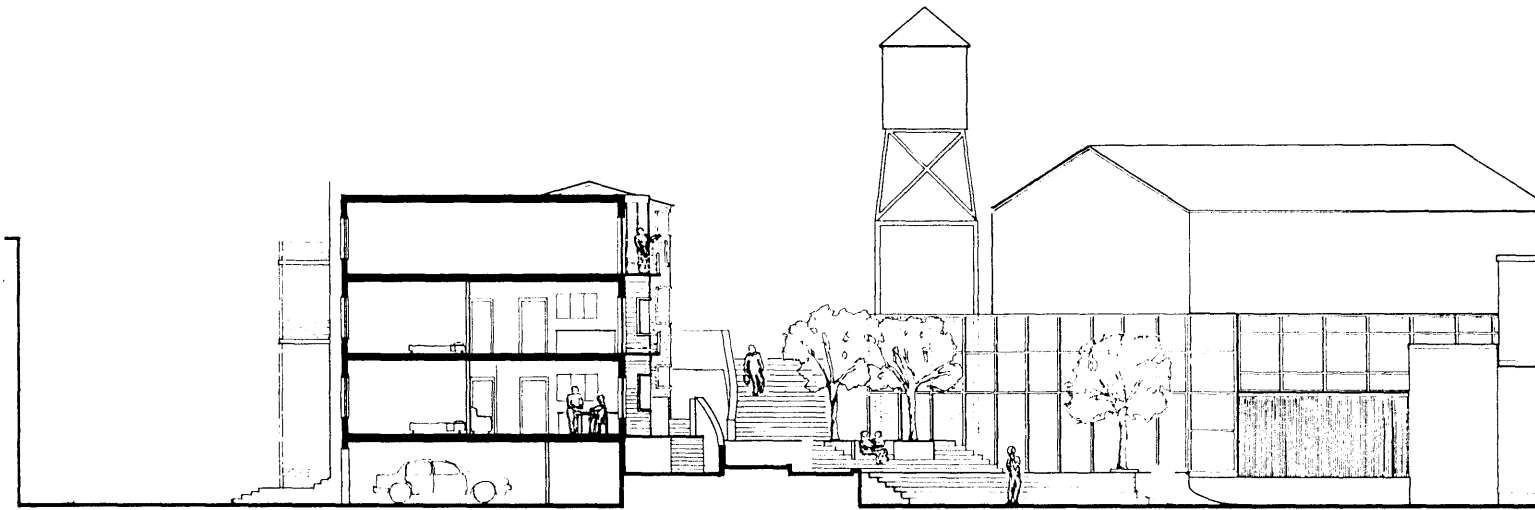
The units are laid out so that the most active spaces, namely the kitchen, are closest to the *street* and the quiet, private places, the bedrooms, face the rear. Balconies connect both to the *street* at the front and to the rear backyards.



Section C-C

PROJECT

SUBURBAN CITY



Sections Through Site



The front stoops of all the units form a layer between the *street* and the entrances to the apartments. They act as both a transition and place which is private but directly connected to the public territory.

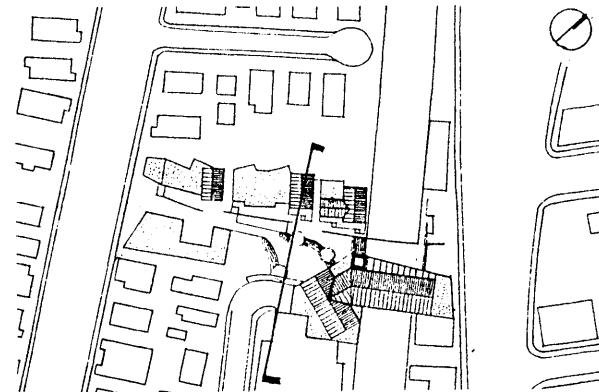
The unit type (a) also connects to the *street* through the activity of the kitchen and connects to the rear yard by a level change at the living room. This also allows flexibility within a more complicated family structure.



Section D-D

PROJECT

SUBURBAN CITY



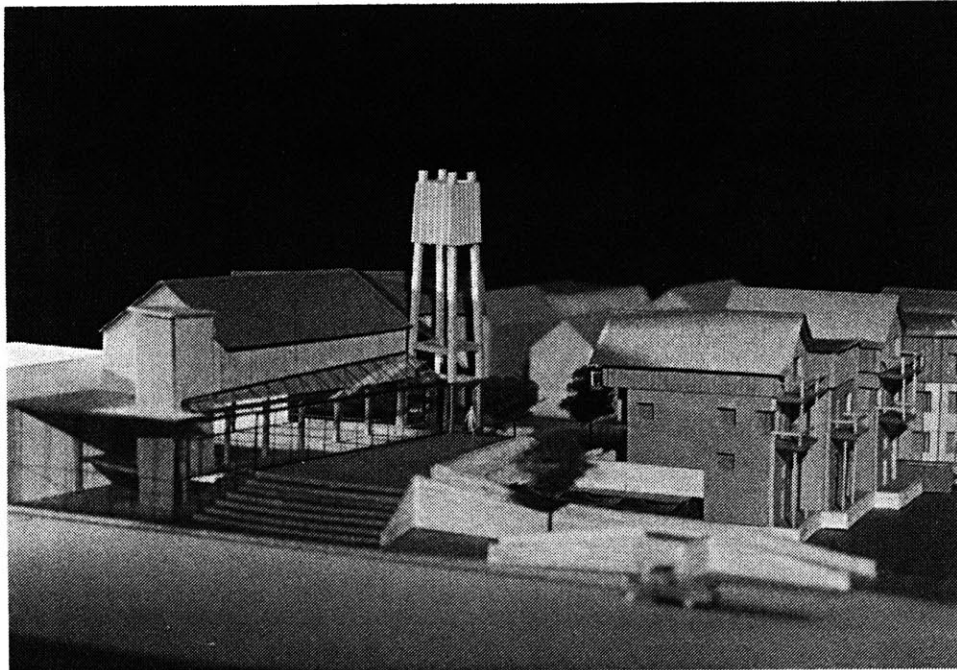
View of Community Center and Pool

The Community center consists of a pool facing the housing and the open space, a library and small art gallery facing Somerville Ave (north), community meeting hall above the pool and various multi-use rooms for classes, workshops, aerobics, weightlifting, etc. The library faces the train overpass and presents a very open and public face to the neighborhood; the clock tower standing above as a marker. The complex addresses the busy side of the site by attracting users from outside the neighborhood.



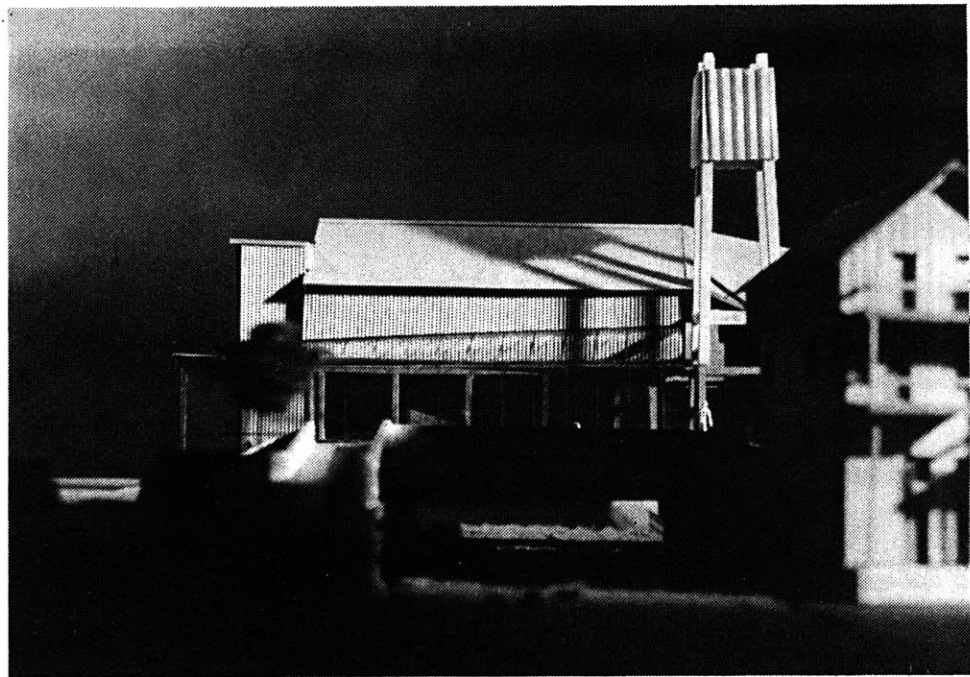
View of Library at Somerville Ave

The proposal gives an understanding that the space of the project is both a path through and a destination and since that destination is a place, there is some local sense of ownership and responsibility. At the same time, the site dictates a very public side which is addressed by the open character of the library.



View of Library from Train Tracks

The industrial vocabulary is used to denote that the building is public. The superstructure is reminiscent of the train yards and large civic projects and instills the project with a greater sense of connection to the larger community, ie the city or the state.



View of Community Center, Library and Backyards

The integration of the civic with the residential is crucial because it connects the residents with their community in a very tangible way and gives the possibility to create a stronger emotional connection to the community.



FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Implications for future development lie in the potential of looking at the project as a prototype for small community developments. The generalization is that there are a number of similar sites which have a potential for strong community identity. Small centers could be developed, not to replace the larger commercial developments, but to supplement them on the local scale. The local use of these centers is extremely important, for it is the local contact within a community that the project and its hypothetical prototypes promote.



1) Land Use and Development

The position the project takes on the use and reuse of land suggests that there are positive ways to build at higher density of building. The consequence of the typical suburban development is twofold: First, the land is so subdivided that there is no possibility for communal or real public space other than the street; Second, the pattern of development becomes homogenous and there is no chance for the establishment of neighborhood identities. The proposal projects a reuse of existing land in suburban and urban areas towards strengthening existing neighborhood identities. The implications for new development are higher density and greater hierarchy in scale of centers, from neighborhood to regional.

2) Housing Types

There is clearly a need to accommodate a more and more specific household type. Flexibility is the obvious answer, but the project suggests the possibility that if community can help in the support of less independent households, then the spiraling need to specialize housing would be diminished. Community can be strengthened through its physical environment; the physical environment must accommodate flexibility and support.



PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS

1. Blake, God's Own Junkyard #91
2. Boston, North End
3. Somerville, MA
4. Framingham, MA
5. Somerville House (Drawn by Author)
6. Somerville backyard
7. Owens, Suburbia
8. House in Somerville
9. Owens, Suburbia
10. House in Vermont
11. Owens, Suburbia
12. Between Houses, Somerville
13. Car, Vermont
14. House, Somerville
15. Owens, Suburbia
16. Houses, Somerville
17. House, Somerville
18. Corner store, Somerville
19. Route 9, Framingham
20. Fairchild Aerial Surveys
from: Tunnard et al, Man-Made America
21. Route 9, Framingham
22. Route 9 Framingham
23. Boston
24. Housing project, Somerville
25. House, Somerville
26. T. West, J. Leavitt: First Place Entry,
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27. Baldwin Hills Village
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28. B. Burnham, W.C. Miller, V. Cartwright:
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29. Store, Somerville
30. Sketches
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33. Community Center in Norway
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35. Burnet Town Center, Texas L.W. Speck, Architect
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36. Community Center, Germany
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39. "
40. "
41. Community Center, Cincinnati, Wollen Associates
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42. Same as 33
43. Same as 35
44. Roxbury YMCA, Boston T.A.C, Arch, L. Reens, Photo
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45. Somerville Houses
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47. Beacon Street, Somerville
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51. Housing project, Somerville

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