

Project Brief - June 2014

Untapped Density: Site Design and the Proliferation of Multifamily Housing



Sustainable Cities Initiative



THE ISSUE

Suburban multifamily housing is one of the fastest growing housing markets in the country and could help to achieve smart growth.

THE RESEARCH

This paper focuses on understanding the roots of suburban multifamily site design and development by comparing specific regulation, culture, and practices in Oregon and Arizona.

THE IMPLICATIONS

Current planning and development should to take advantage of this growing housing trend to create more livable, less congested, and multi-modal suburban communities.

Image by flickr.com/photos/sfbike/

The Issue

Images of stereotypical suburbia don't typically include multifamily housing, yet this type of development is rapidly growing. Currently, 25% of suburban housing units is an alternative to the single-family home. Suburban multifamily housing is typically 20 to 30 units per acre, primarily rental property, and provides an existing and widespread model for bringing density into suburbia and achieving smart growth goals. In fact, density exists in the suburbs and is growing, making the important question: how do we implement density?

Implementing density revolves around appropriate site design. Due to codes, market demand, and economic realities, suburban multifamily housing typically springs up as garden apartments, elderly housing, and mixed use lifestyle centers. Current trends are to place these types of multifamily housing in detached and enclaved designs similar to single-family units. This approach removes the multifamily units from access to adequate transportation infrastructure, commercial activity, and adjacent uses. If planned and designed differently, this housing type could connect increased suburban density to the parts of a community that make it vibrant: transportation, commercial activity, and public spaces.

The Research

This paper focuses on the roots of suburban multifamily site design: regulation, development practices, and design culture. These roots shape the current pattern of suburban multifamily development while creating barriers to more integrated and connected site approaches. Current planning, development, and design practices should change to take advantage of the growing suburban multifamily development market.

The research is based on three case study sites of recent suburban multifamily housing in Oregon and Arizona. The case studies included a resident survey to gather demographic and transportation-related questions; graphic analysis of the physical site designs; and interviews with planners, developers, and designers. In total, responses represented hundreds of suburban multifamily projects in over 25 jurisdictions.



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More about the Research

This research shows that our assumptions about suburban travel behavior could be misguided. The paper shows that, in commuting to work, suburban multifamily residents are more than three times more likely than single family residents to walk or bike, four times more likely to use transit, and twice as likely to carpool – numbers comparable to urbanites. Suburban multifamily residents were also highly likely to use alternative transportation for other trips. For example, 61% of respondents walked and/or biked to local stores, restaurants, or services and 74% said they would be amenable to walking and/or biking if local stores, restaurants, or services were easier to get to. Survey respondents identified ease and safety of trips as the greatest obstacle to walking and/or biking. However, level of connectivity was the driver of mode choice. For example, the more connected development case study overwhelmingly reported “no large barriers” to walking or biking, with the weather being the next largest obstacle.

The Implications

Creating more integrated and connected suburban multifamily design will create more livable, less congested, and multi-modal suburban communities. There are currently a number of barriers to increasing connectivity, but developing specific multifamily regulation as well as educating planners, developers, designers, and residents about multifamily housing can effectively promote more connected developments.

Planners and developers must change their understanding of suburban multifamily development. Instead of thinking of these areas as isolated buffers they should be considered critical pieces of larger semi-urban nodes. Also, there are several specific shifts that can enhance suburban multifamily development. Creating multifamily zoning regulation

gives planners a guide and limits liability and professional risk. Streets should be narrow and should be the primary circulation routes through a development, not parking drives. Block sizes should be minimized. Pedestrian infrastructure should be developed to provide connectivity, not routes between cars and front doors.

With these shifts, suburban multifamily housing has the potential to contribute to 5 of the 10 Smart Growth Principles promoted by the Smart Growth Networks. This overlooked housing type can promote mixed use and its residents use non-motorized forms of travel much more frequently than single-family residents. More connected developments may promote walking and biking even more, showing a positive correlation between connectivity and increased physical activity, decreased obesity, and overall positive quality of life.

PROJECT INFORMATION

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