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# SPECULATIVE HOUSING



A Critical and Poignant Alternative

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>page 3</b>
<b>Etymological Research</b>	<b>pages 4 - 6</b>
<b>Thesis/ Architectural Issues/ Research</b>	<b>pages 7 - 9</b>
<b>Site</b>	<b>page 10</b>
<b>Program</b>	<b>page 11</b>
<b>Precedents</b>	<b>pages 12 - 13</b>
<b>Evaluation Criteria</b>	<b>page 13</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>page 14</b>

## Spec Housing: A Critical and Poignant Alternative

The purpose of this thesis is to understand architecture as a semiotic “sign system” with the ability to communicate information through form; constructing a rich, meaningful built environment. A study of the history of this language and the meaning of form within suburban contexts indicates the disassociation between the complexities of the life of the contemporary middle class and the architecture in which they live. The architecture in its current form references lost sensibilities of family, public life, and man’s relationship to nature. Based on traditional notions of a suburban home, a new, more viable architectural form which reflects and engages the needs and ideals within the suburbs of today will be developed in this investigation.

The project will manifest as a duplex in a typical suburban middle class development. Through a tectonic and semantic dissection of a “house,” a new, more accurate representation of suburban life can be developed and conveyed in built form based on innovation and grounded in the familiar.

The expectation of this project is to examine conventional aspects of building as communicative devices, and apply them to architecture in a way that represents a particular social structure and its ideals.



## Etymological Research

The origins of the suburbs were based on the idea of **private** land for the **individual** family **away** from the industrial city. It began as a cultural, **class** movement in the late eighteenth century by the “bourgeois elite” of London, which were experiencing a new form of **family**; “the closed domesticated nuclear family” which was “**closed** in around itself, **separated** from its environment, focused especially on mutual intimacy and on child raising.”<sup>1</sup> Based on this new family type and its **ideals**, a suburban **architectural language** was developed. This language was built on the vision of a **synthesis** of city and the countryside, or **building (object)** in the **garden (landscape)**; and a **separation** of work and residence. The image/form of these suburbs and their homes gained **meaning** through their **occupants** who had a new emotional focus on the **family** and a shared **rejection** of “the profane concerns of the city.” The “characteristic beauties” of suburbs were understood as “distinct from the city” with “intricacy, variety, and play of outline.” The houses were “therefore disposed with that view, and **differed** as much in their disposition from those of a regularly built city.”<sup>2</sup> This concept first manifested itself through John Nash’s designs for the houses of Park Village in Regent’s Park, London (1823) (Fig.1). “Each cottage was self-consciously **different** from its neighbors” through the use of “**eclectic** mixtures of period architecture.”<sup>3</sup> The purpose, or **meaning**, of this suburban language was to create **associations** with these homes to the **picturesque** visions of English gardens and to **communicate** the idea of a life of stability, simplicity, and domesticity in **harmony with nature**. Early developers of the first American suburbs in the mid-nineteenth century borrowed this form/image (Fig. 2) of the detached picturesque suburban villa (private property for a single family) on the basis that it **signified** similar changes and ideals of the Anglo-American middle class **of that time**. The Anglo-American middle class found itself enticed by the “**virtues**” of the detached villa in a picturesque landscaped setting based on **class** and **family values**. As the American suburbs grew, the **borrowed** architectural language of the houses and the European associations it **communicated** seemed less important than a closer **identification** with the **American** families who lived there. **Thus, the language changed.**

The suburban homes of America in the early twentieth century developed new architectural sensibilities, which began to reject “false” and “foolish” combinations of historical styles for “**simple**” and “**honest**” architecture. This **change** reflected the different **views** and **values** of the **natural** world between the European culture and the American culture. **Nature**, in America, was not thought of as “a divine source of inspiration,” but rather meant the opposite of anything that was “contrived or artificial.” “**Organic**” was not thought of as “the hierarchy and interconnectedness of the natural world,” but rather meant, “**appropriate**” in **context**. The **elements** of the typical suburban house did not change, but the **form** did (Fig. 3). The architecture lost its “boxy geometry, ornamentation, and careful separation from its environment”<sup>4</sup> as **object** in the

<sup>1</sup> Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias- The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, Basic Books, Inc. (New York) 1987

<sup>2</sup> Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias- The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, Basic Books, Inc. (New York) 1987

<sup>3</sup> Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias- The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, Basic Books, Inc. (New York) 1987

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home, 1800-1960*, The University of North Carolina Press (Chapel Hill and London)

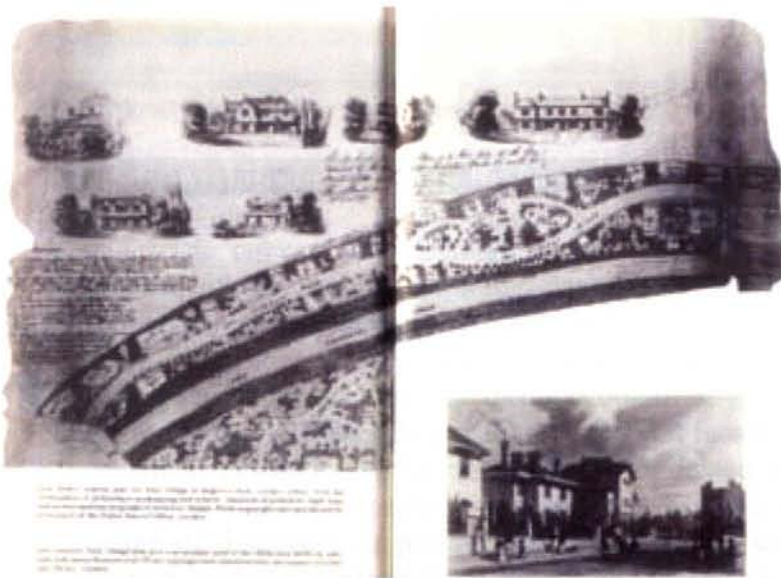
**landscape**, and became more “natural” and “organic” in the American sense through horizontal lines and cheaper, rougher materials; **signifying** a new interpretation of the **relationship** between **man** and **nature**. The new, Americanized versions of the suburban, single family house prospered until the Great Depression and World War II. After the war, “a new vision of the **ideal** home—the ‘Dream House of the Future’”<sup>5</sup> was marketed with the foresight of a building boom (Fig. 4). The immense demand for more suburban homes called for faster, more **efficient** construction and developing methods. The determining factor in creating middle class suburban **architecture** at that time was based on **cost**, measured in time and **money**, rather than earlier **cultural** ideals. **Thus, the language changed.**

**Prefabrication** and **standardization** dictated the new middle class dwellings. The borrowed language from early American suburbs was **abstracted** and used in the mid-twentieth century with the intention of reinforcing the **image** of the domestic family life in harmony with nature. Although still **simple**, “honest” and “organic” architecture was no longer the driving force in design. New, **cheaper** building materials were developed in an effort to **emulate** “natural” ones, and “nature was virtually **abolished** in the endless **spread** of subdivisions” (Fig. 5). Zoning and mathematics **dictated** interior layouts in order to **minimize** materials and space on the basis of **efficiency**, while **infrastructure** overpowered the landscape for the growing **automobile** centered lifestyle. As the mass exodus to the suburbs continued throughout the late twentieth century, suburbs became more **self-sufficient** as jobs became available **outside** the city and **closer** to the middle class home. This “created a new kind of **city**, with **principles** that are directly **opposed** to the true suburb.” The new, decentralized form of **suburbia** was “made possible only through the advanced communications **technology** which has superseded the face-to-face contact of the **traditional** urban concentration.”<sup>6</sup> Changing relationships and changing roles of the American middle class soon followed. No longer exclusively Anglo-American, and with the frequency of non-traditional living situations growing, the identity and life of the middle class became more complicated. **Thus, there is a need to re-evaluate the current suburban architectural language.**

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home, 1800-1960*, The University of North Carolina Press (Chapel Hill and London)

<sup>6</sup> Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias- The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, Basic Books, Inc. (New York) 1987



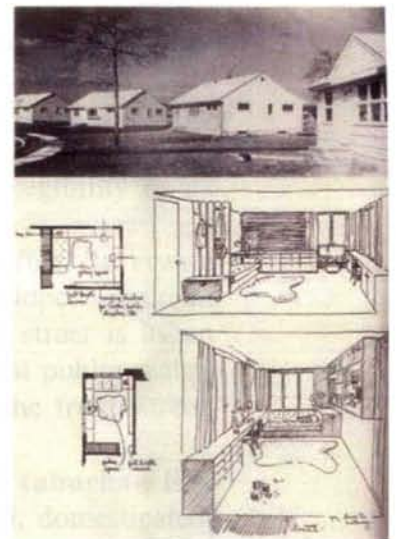
John Nash's Park Village  
(Fig.1)



Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century Detached  
Picturesque House  
(Fig.2)



Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century House  
(Fig.3)



Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Prefabricated House  
(Fig.4)



Levittown (the effects of mass  
produced housing on the  
environment)  
(Fig.5)

The **current** architectural language of the standard suburban spec houses and duplexes of the American middle class “embodies large scale organization and mass production, in its relentless uniformity; its use of a narrow range of designs repeated endlessly without true variation or relief.”<sup>7</sup> It is a hybrid of the post-World War II housing in its production and tectonic qualities, and late nineteenth century suburban housing with its affinity for period architectural facades. It communicates a recognizably superficial aesthetic of the past, but is dominated by an introverted disposition that neglects to support interaction within the community or with nature. Life there is “no voyage of discovery or private exploration of the world’s wonders, natural and man-made; it is cliché conformity as far as the eye can see, with no stimulation of the spirit through quality of the environment.”<sup>8</sup>

**Spec houses and duplexes should re-create a link between building and landscape.** Contemporary attitudes for our natural environment have become more sympathetic and self-conscious as the effects of pollution have become more and more devastatingly apparent. Un-“natural” (in the early twentieth century America sense) materials enforce a contrived, artificial sense of house weakening the legibility of its connection to a natural context.

**Spec houses and duplexes should engage public life in an effort to create community.** The contemporary condition of public life in newly developed suburban neighborhoods is that it is nearly defunct. The understanding of the street is as an extension of the driveway, where parked cars hinder any sort of coherent public realm. Outside activity is pushed to the backyard, and little, if any occur on the front, street, side.

**Spec houses and duplexes should reflect the complexities of suburban life.** Contemporary suburban life can no longer be categorized as the closed, domesticated, Anglo-American nuclear family of the past. It takes on many forms, and each individual family structure is different. Generally, family focus is still the main concern within the suburbs. Therefore, the basic “type” of house is still a legitimate paradigm, but the form in which it takes can begin to signify and give meaning to today’s diverse and intricate suburban world.

As a medium through which to convey meaning, architecture can be very powerful.

*There is no way to separate (architectural) form from meaning; one cannot exist without the other. There can only be different critical assessments of the major ways through which form transmits meaning to the viewer: through empathy, said the nineteenth century, it embodies it;*

<sup>7</sup> Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home, 1800-1960*, The University of North Carolina Press (Chapel Hill and London)

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



*through the recognition of signs, say the linguists, it conveys it. Each side would agree that the relevant functioning agent is the memory: empathy and the identification of signs are both learned responses, the result of specific cultural experiences. The two modes of knowing and of deriving meaning from outside reality complement each other and are both at work in varying degrees in the shaping and perception of all works of art.”*

-Vincent Scully (April 1977)<sup>9</sup>

Using Saussure’s definition of a sign (Fig. 6) as being both signifier (form) and signified (the concept it represents), architecture and its generic elements can be understood as signs, revealing ideological qualities understood in forms and types. Understanding the *relationship* between signifier and signified through Peirce’s three “modes of relationship”<sup>10</sup>:



**Symbolic:** a sign that does not resemble the signified but which is “arbitrary” or purely conventional



**Iconic:** a sign that resembles the signified



**Indexical:** a sign which is directly connected in some way (existentially or causally) to the signified

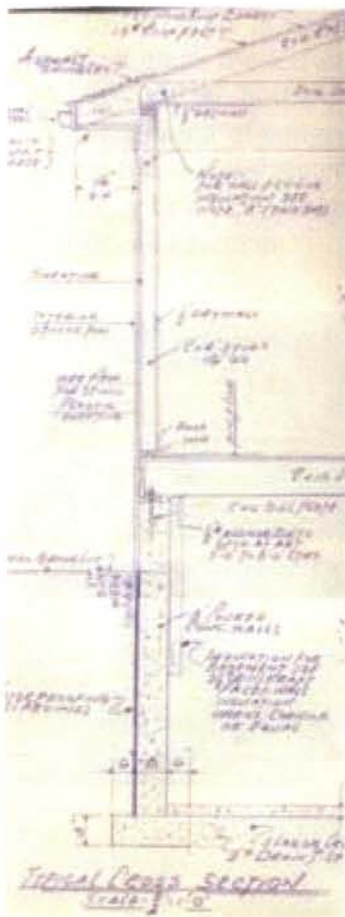
can generate layers of meaning through **specific** design approaches. This project will begin to understand what constitutes the general notions of a conventional “house” through an iconic study of its essential elements. Once abstracted, these elements will be manipulated in the interest of symbolically signifying contemporary suburban life, attitudes, and ideals. This process, as seen in the etymological research, follows the evolution by which the suburban architectural language came to be.

The methodology used will be based on ad hoc sensibilities in an effort to create an environment which will physically exhibit the affinities of the occupants; in combination with the use of conventional elements of “house,” which enforce the concept and coherence of the domestic middle class dwelling. Adhocism is a “democratic mode

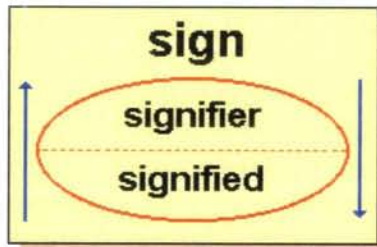
<sup>9</sup> Vincent Scully, Note to the Second Edition *Complexity and Contradiction In Architecture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, The Museum of Modern Art (New York/ Chicago) 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Chandler, Daniel (1994): Semiotics for Beginners [WWW document] URL <http://www.aber.ac.uk/~dgc/semiotic.html> [10/10/99]

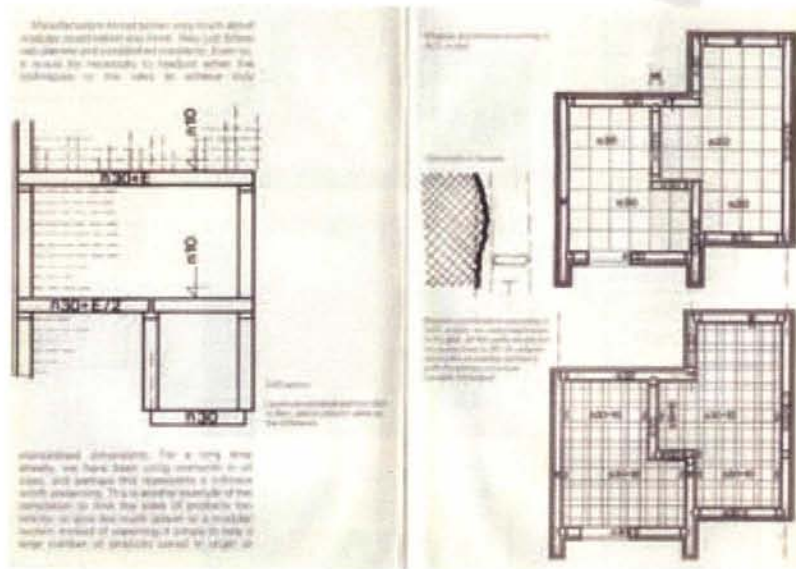
and style” of design “where everyone can create his personal environment out of impersonal subsystems... By realizing his immediate needs, by combining *ad hoc* parts, the individual creates, sustains and transcends himself.”<sup>11</sup> This concept of shaping one’s environment through components that fit within a given system creates an “indexical,” physical, sign that is directly connected to, and reflective of, the individual. The flexibility and relevancy of a system such as this responds to the varying needs, wants, and relationships of the contemporary family. The design of a subsystem and its components will revive “honest” domestic architecture through an understanding of the tectonic by exhibiting the nature of joints and materials. It will create an eclectic aesthetic that draws off the relevancy of the immediate rather than ideals of the past. This method will produce meaning through form signifying and relating to our time, our place, and our ideals in the suburbs.



Typical balloon frame wall section of a spec house



Saussure's Model of a Sign  
Fig. 6



Example of "Ad hoc" system based on modular grid and components.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism*, Secker and Warburg (London), 1972

## Site

The site of the "Evergreen Isle" suburban development in West Seneca, New York, was selected on the basis that it is a typical example of the current conditions of suburbia and the approach taken when designing its physical form. The development consists of seventy-seven lots divided equally; 70' x 125' on the north side and 75' x 145' on the south side along Carla Lane, a newly paved, overwhelmingly straight street. The neighborhood is a mix of single family houses and duplexes set back thirty feet from the street edge. All buildings share a similar architectural language and construction method. They all take shape in one of eight designs (four typical designs for the single houses and four for the duplexes). They are then articulated differently in an effort to distinguish one from another. The landscape is first leveled, and then grass is rolled out over dirt to create lawns after construction is finished. Berms are placed out front which provide a place for self-expression in the "gardens" they create. The street is littered with cars between the hours of six in the evening and eight in the morning, which causes an extreme amount of congestion during that time. In the interest of profit, the buildings are balloon-frame constructed using similar materials, then advertised and sold. Addressing this site with a new design agenda, juxtaposed to the old, will encourage change through a transitional element.



House  
Design 1



Duplex  
Design 1



House  
Design 2



Duplex  
Design 2



House  
Design 3



Duplex  
Design 3



House  
Design 4



Duplex  
Design 4

## Program

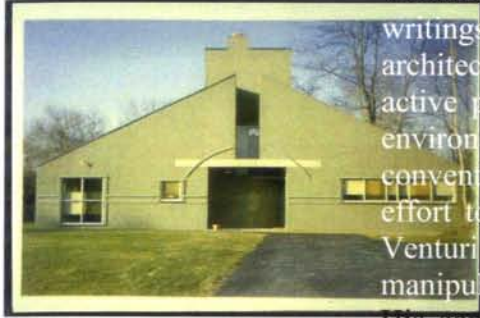
The program of this project, a duplex, was selected on the basis that it reflects the economic and physical constraints of the modern day suburb. No longer does the detached house sit within the confines of the individually owned plot of land. Lines of ownership are blurred, yet the aesthetic of the single-family house is still applied with an ambiguous intent. The program, as follows, will accentuate the shared spaces by being true to the nature of the building.

Total square footage =	17000 square feet (including basement)
Garage =	2 @ 480 square feet
Entry vestibule =	45 square feet
Porch area =	10% of total square footage
	1700 square feet

These will be the only fixed spaces in the duplex, all others will be determined post-inhabitation.

\*Note: utilities will determine placement of amenities, but occupants will determine their overall square footage.

## Precedents



As precedents for a project such as this, Robert Venturi's works stand out as greatly influential. His writings and projects embrace the semiotic qualities in architecture while testing their capabilities to respond as active participants in the growth of society and the built environment. Mother's House, in particular, challenges convention in a subversive, yet sensitive manner in an effort to reinvigorate the symbolic nature of architecture. Venturi understands the generic elements of a house, manipulates them, and creates meaning through their shape. His consciousness of the symbolic nature of **shape** gives him the ability to create hierarchical and ironic meaning in his forms. Venturi recognizes that "identity must come through symbolic treatment of the form of the house."<sup>12</sup>

"The complete opposition between the architect's vision and the means by which people express the reality of their habitation reflects an underlying political power struggle and throws into question the architect's right to impose an exclusive image, especially on a domestic program."<sup>13</sup> This quote by Lucien Kroll questions the role of the architect in society. He suggests an unconventional design mode that is based on "elements, assemblies, and sequences." Through this design method, he creates an alternative to the "homogeneity" of the current suburban landscape, which presently "makes it difficult for the users to add anything of their own" to the architectural forms. In the homogenous landscape, he states, "we lose that rich resource of popular creativity which can transform a space into a place, and give it life."<sup>14</sup> Kroll's design for students' halls of residence for the medical facility of the University of Leuven, Brussels (1970-71) was his first attempt at developing a system based on the modular, which would allow a community to determine its own architectural form. Students would work within a given structure using partitions and choosing windows to define spaces that would adhere to their wishes. This is an example of an indexical signification of inhabitants through form.

Frank O. Gehry in his house in Santa Monica, in 1978, begins to expose and draw off the "terrible irony of



<sup>12</sup> Venturi, Scott-Brown, Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas: Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. (1998)

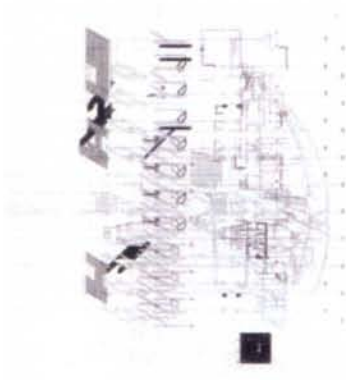
<sup>13</sup> Lucien Kroll, *An Architecture of Complexity*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. (1987)

<sup>14</sup> Lucien Kroll, *An Architecture of Complexity*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. (1987)



our times wherein we can muster forward with incredible technological feats while struggling in our home-building with a primitive craft in serious decline.” His designs and use of cheap, conventional materials in unconventional ways exploit the tectonic nature of buildings as symbolic.

The Morphosis group fuses “complexity and diversity within an ordered framework” to achieve “a dynamic balance with the aim of reflecting the richness of our pluralistic world.”<sup>15</sup> They believe that with a “coherency (order),” which “supports and contributes to idiosyncrasy, an authentic interpretation of our time can be developed through design.”<sup>16</sup>



### Evaluation Criteria

The architectural project should be judged on its ability to communicate a poignant reflection of modern day suburban life regarding sensibilities inherent in middle class culture. The project should also reinforce the notion of house through the use of the ‘types’ generic elements that establish a familiar presence. The design of a viable subsystem and its components as a new way of creating meaningful forms and spaces in contemporary suburbia is the eventual goal of this project. Its success is dependent on the physical manifestation of the system and its flexibility.

<sup>15</sup> Thom Mayne/ Morphosis, *Morphosis: Connected Isolation*, Architectural Monographs no. 23, Academy Editions (London), 1993

<sup>16</sup> Thom Mayne/ Morphosis, *Morphosis: Connected Isolation*, Architectural Monographs no. 23, Academy Editions (London), 1993

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