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Configuring the Residential Fabric [Adding Up and Multiplying Initiatives]

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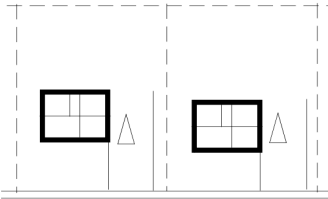
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4. Adding Up and Multiplying Initiatives

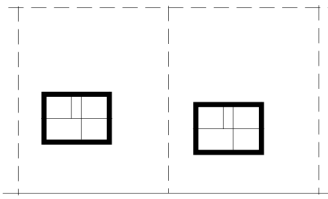
initial structure



Levittown

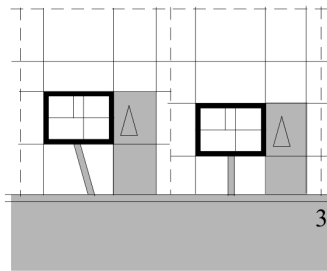
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containment/permeability



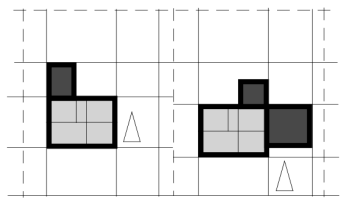
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depth

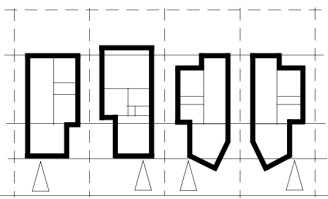


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transformation

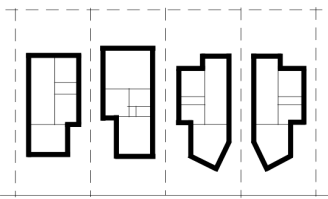


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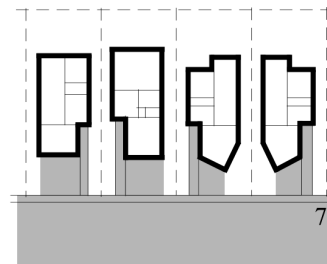


Clayton

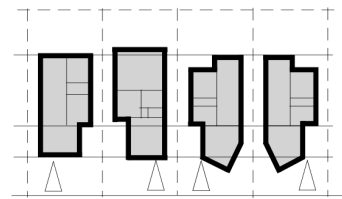
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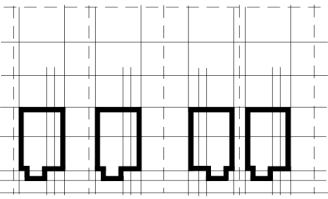
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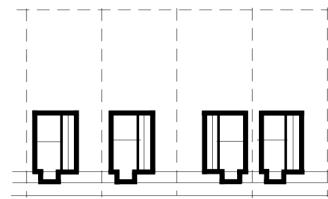


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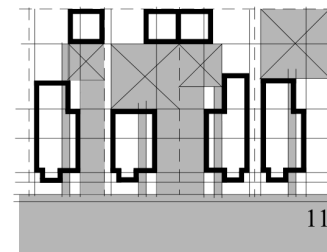


Cambridgeport

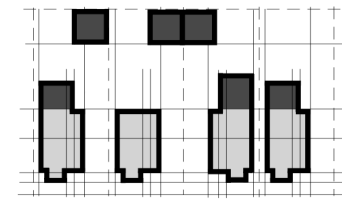
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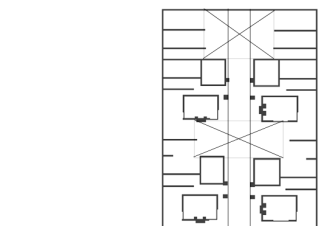
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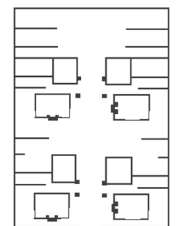


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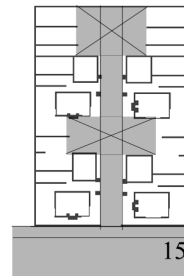


Horatio West

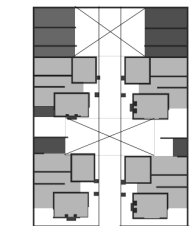
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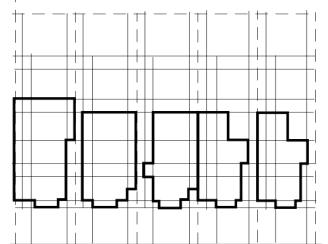
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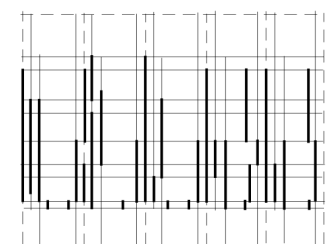


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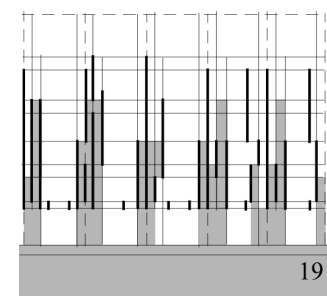


San Francisco

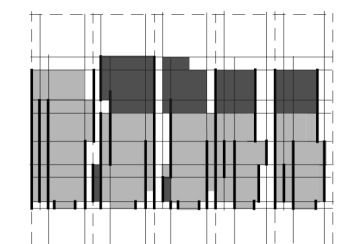
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Forming (or finding) distinct elements and adding them together to make space between is the most simple way of composing places that can afford a complex of uses and understandings (“One plus One Equals More than Two” we called it in the manifesto “Towards Making Places”), that can support both dwelling and outgoing. It provides a variety of conditions to inhabit and allows for resonance among the parts, with layers of suggestion and association—the sense of abundance that a multiplicity of relationships can nourish.

The works of Centerbrook show frequent reliance on taking the components of a project apart and reassembling them as active participants in a community of forms—faux villages, some would carp. These offer a number of places to inhabit which allow the dwellers to choose their circumstance. For denizens of outgoings, the series of shifting perspectives these complexes afford can contribute to the intrigue of speculating about those choices.

Many of the outgoings we most admire are the result of multiple initiatives. The iconic American small town is a place where an ordering frame of streets and lots is filled out with differences, each (or most) reflecting the various ambitions and skills of individual builders and owners. The village-like quality of many projects now hearkens to that simpler world of controlled multiplicity. Where once the architect’s most vaunted goal was imagined to be the integration of all aspects into one controlling image (be it house, office building or community), differences and multiplicity now seem to provide the most potent fuel for the imagination. To sustain interest, though, a diversity of forms must reflect real choices that can be discerned. Otherwise, they result in a chatter of noise as bland and unsatisfying as homogeneity.

The production of housing in the U.S. now offers little room for such diversity of intent and investment of attention (indeed, little room for architects and the cost of imaginative effort). Instead, difference has been simulated as whole tracts of land are developed at once, with the siting of products to be purchased, each separate from the next (“One plus One plus One equals Three Little Ones”). When the ritual of buying is finished, the outgoings that result from these standard developments offer their inhabitants little to be examined that could not be found in a mirror, barely providing the comforts of recognition.

Renee Chow’s work, documenting traditional blocks in San Francisco and imagining a restructuring of suburban sites, suggests that this need not be. It reveals that zones of initiative and types of space, properly placed and considering the whole of the site, can open opportunities for the continuing care and investment of meaning that lead to rich and satisfying places. The architect’s attention must reach beneath the particulars of individual conditions to the underlying structure of the place, opening possibilities for subsequent change and invention.

In a different vein, Richard Shepard showed work that he and students at the University of Miami did in preparing the community for, designing and building a new house in a struggling low-income neighborhood. The outcome of this work was not only the creation of a house but also the construction through process, as well as form, of a mirror on the community, reflecting vital values and showing hope for change with modest means. This work continues initiatives that lie at the core of good outgoings.

Configuring the Residential Fabric

The subject of dwelling for me is not the house, the yard, the neighborhood or even the landscape. Rather, it is how individual actions contribute to the fabric of a place, to the outgoings and continuities that build dwellings in a place.

This analysis of groups of single-family houses (opposite page) shows the way they are configured (or not configured) to provide their occupants with opportunities to adapt space and to create connections, permeability and access among houses. In the suburbs, it is not the single-family house that is the problem but the conceptualization of the house as an object without regard to the social, natural and built

landscape. In the contemporary volumetric suburb, most of the relationships break down at the shells of the houses.”

Built settings that flourish and endure are manifest with the choices of residents and visitors alike. We admire them for the multitude of ways that they support being in a place, not as “inside” versus “outside,” but being in the city, the neighborhood, the street, the room. They connect us to their place through continuities and extensions, without distinct boundaries between buildings or between public and private, and without absolute separation between plots.

—Renee Chow