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Inner Suburban Housing

Kansas City, Missouri

Ken Zuber

Critic: Gordon Ashworth

*"... the early romantic suburb was a middle-class effort to find a private solution for the deprivation and disorder of the befouled metropolis: an effusion of Romantic taste but an evasion of civic responsibility and municipal foresight. . ."*¹

Richard MacCormac

The studio project involved the design of infill housing in a decaying, historic suburban neighborhood located in northeast Kansas City, Missouri. The project was divided into three phases. The first analyzed historical housing philosophy and its influence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second phase studied site amenities and other characteristics including historical background. The third phase was the design of housing responding to influential precedents and to the following objectives; the study of contextualism in a residential setting, the process of infill and transformation to revitalize existing neighborhoods, and the investigation of historic residential vocabularies which respond to contemporary values.

Housing has been and continues to be a major product of the American building industry and has played an important role in shaping the environment as a whole. This is evident when examining the suburban single family housing developments characteristic of the twentieth century. These developments surrounded virtually all urban areas, including Kansas City, and reflect the nineteenth century reaction to the

industrial era. Housing today remains strongly influenced by this reaction and continues to illustrate a separation between home and work life.

The roots of the American suburban dream and the single family dwelling could perhaps be traced to several preceding influences. One influence was the Picturesque tradition, largely shaped in America by Andrew Jackson Downing and Alexander Davis. The creation of the villa by Downing and Davis, responded to the desire of a cultivated country life along with the wish to experience the unspoiled landscape. The villa was conceived as a function of the landscape in which it was situated and could be manipulated as needed to take full advantage of its views of the site. Similarly, the landscape was altered to enhance its natural beauty and magnify the experience of views to and from the villa. For example, the meandering approach to the villa was conceived by Downing to alternately expose and conceal views to the house, heightening the experience of arrival while presenting various aspects of the building to the viewer. In this manner, the Picturesque qualities of the villa were expressed with maximum exposure to the landscape.

In later developments such as Llewellyn Park, New Jersey (1852-69) by Davis, landscaping was often viewed as an integral portion of the "ideal" suburban community. Villas and cottages were dominant housing types, constructed on large lots with

streets following the contour of the landscape. During this time many suburban housing developments enabled residents in almost any city to escape to country life leaving behind noise and congestion.

The formation of suburban areas in Kansas City occurred when rapid railway developments in the 1860's sparked the industrial age. The city turned its back on the river district, the original center of trade, and became a livestock boomtown. The city's geographical location enabled it to develop as a center of trade for the country, shipping manufactured goods to the west, while grain and cattle were shipped to the east.

It was this rapid, unplanned expansion that reduced the desirability of much of the surrounding residential neighborhoods and caused housing suburbs in the 1880's to develop east and south of the city. In 1893, a "City Beautiful" growth plan was developed by George Kessler to control this new suburban expansion. Kessler's plan responded to the natural topography of the area and established an order to the city with parks linked by scenic boulevards. This system, completed in 1915, dramatically changed the character of the city and became one of its most attractive features.

The northern terminus of the park system was North Terrace Park, positioned on the forested bluffs above the Missouri River. This picturesque area attracted many wealthy residents in the 1880's and

was a focus for the city's social elite at the turn of the century. The success of the neighborhood attracted other residents until 1920, when the affluent were attracted to southern suburbs. As a result, the North Terrace Park area began a gradual process of decay resulting in a further loss of popularity. Even though the area retains much of its original character, it is in desperate need of reinforcement to once again regain its vitality.

The design studio project was to play an important role in the revitalization of the North Terrace Park neighborhood filling a void in the suburban fabric with a contextual housing development. The project would perhaps also serve as an impetus for gradual renewal through a future process of infill and transformation. In this manner the area could be sustained and reinforced to regain the vitality that it once had.

The site for the infill project is a city block located where the suburban grid fragments away forming North Terrace Park. Directly north of the site across Gladstone Boulevard, is a Beaux-Arts colonnade positioned to view the Missouri River Valley below and celebrates the grand scale of the park system at its northern terminus. West of the site, across Gladstone Boulevard, the site radically slopes downward to public tennis courts. To the southwest, the skyline of downtown Kansas City can be seen. South and east of the site are a wide cross section of housing types, built in varying styles, from large single

family mansions to low-rise tenements.

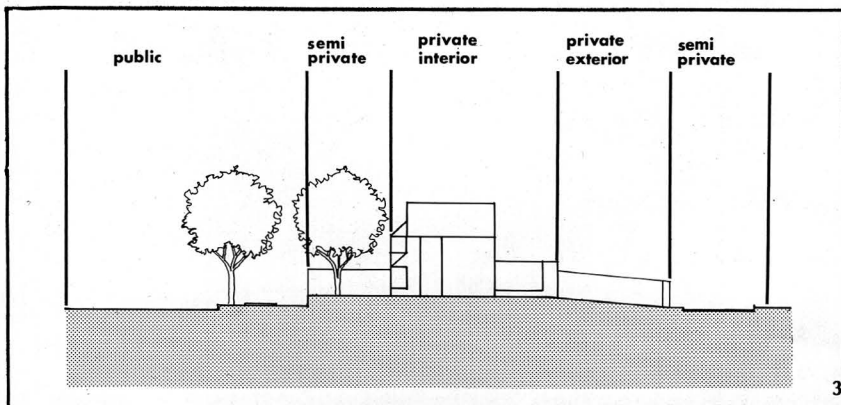
The design of the infill project was based upon a series of conceptual ideas for order and organization. One site organization concept was based upon a central private street allowing parking, auto traffic and garages to remain to the center of the site away from public view. This method of order is common throughout the surrounding context and provides a greater sense of unity and privacy to the housing. The central private street allows the public edges of the site along Benton and Gladstone Boulevards to remain unbroken by driveways. This continuous landscape zone encircling much of the site creates a strong appearance of neighborhood identification and unification.

Another site development concept involved the use of pedestrian pathways to link the infill development with its immediate context. Two pathways connect the new housing with the tennis courts to the west and the existing housing to the east. A singular path leads to picturesque North Terrace Park reflecting the ideas and imagery of Kessler's park system. This path responds to the orthogonal city grid by being formally organized within its boundaries. As the pathway approaches the park it becomes romantic in response to the natural topography as it meanders through its setting. Approaching the city grid and the colonnade, the path again becomes formal reflecting the division be-

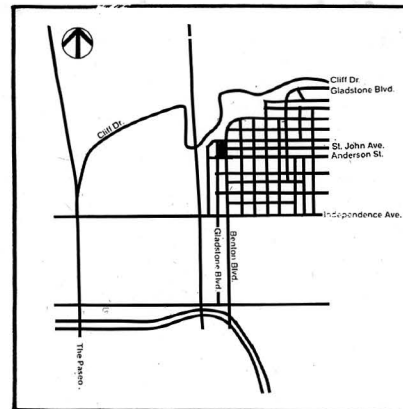
tween the orthogonal organization of the city and the natural qualities of the landscape in the picturesque park.

The design project was composed of two major housing types, single family units and row housing. The single family dwellings, used to maintain a strong sense of identity, have two variations responding to site location. The west facing houses fronting Gladstone Boulevard focus upon the view of the Kansas City skyline and North Terrace Park, while east facing houses fronting Benton Boulevard, turn inward to focus upon their larger individual sites. Each of these two variations of single family housing serve as a basic building form upon which elements could be added to express the owner's individuality. This is similar to the process in which much of the existing context was constructed. For example, a "pattern book builder" would purchase several lots in sequence and build the same basic house on each lot to simplify the construction process. These houses would then possess minor detail variations and adaptations. A similar pattern book methodology would be used in the construction of the development to establish a sense of individuality in each of the units and a feeling of unification in the project.

The organization of both varieties of single family housing and their sites was based upon a public to private hierarchy of spatial order. The integration of this spatial layering

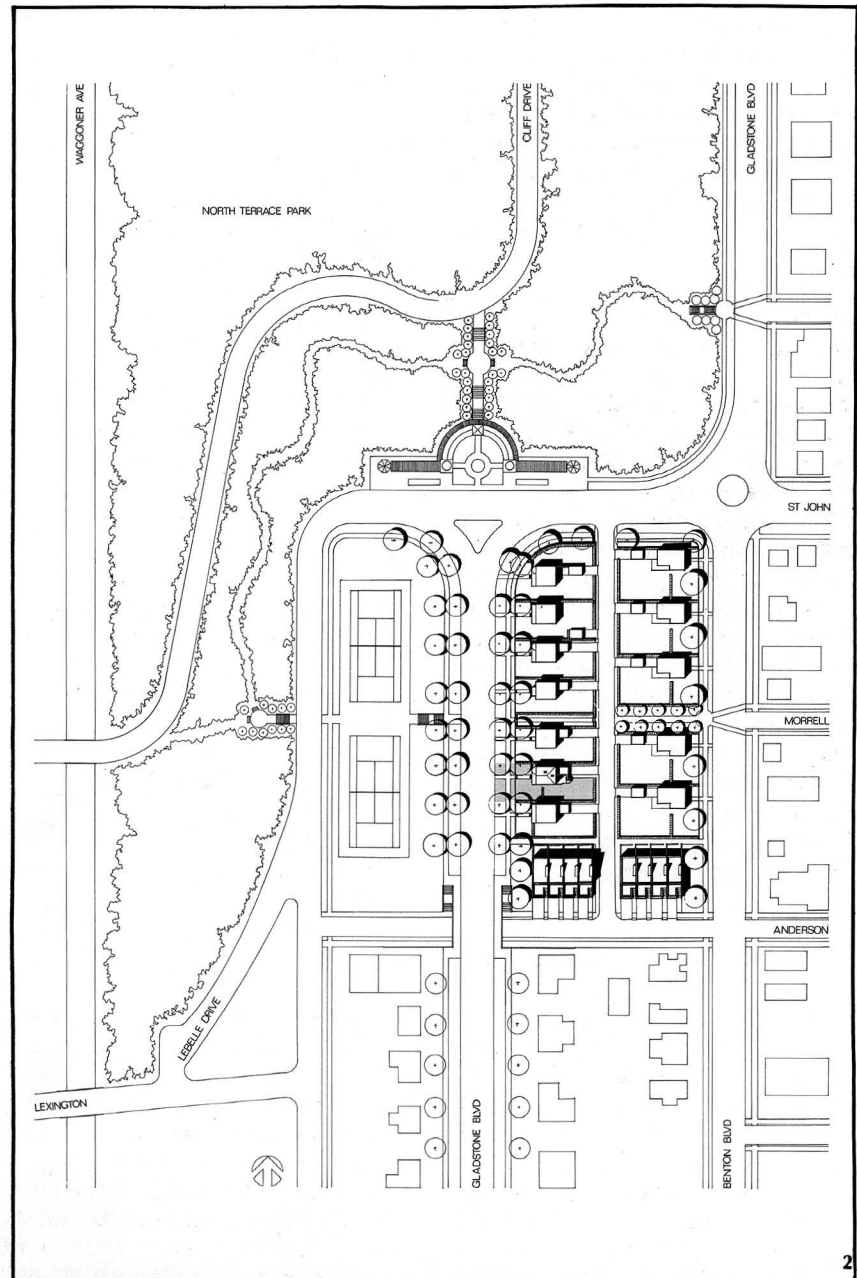


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- 1 Location plan
- 2 Site plan
- 3 Spatial organization illustrating public to private hierarchy



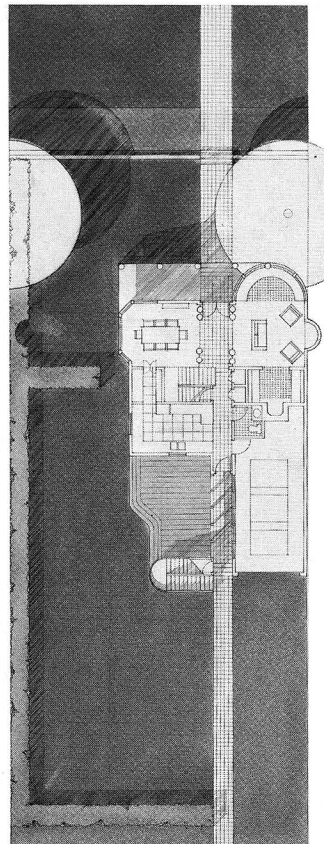
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into the project continued the existing spatial organization of the surrounding context and provided a strong connection to the existing fabric. This spatial hierarchy conveys to the general public the private character of the residential domain. The accompanying diagram expresses this order more succinctly.

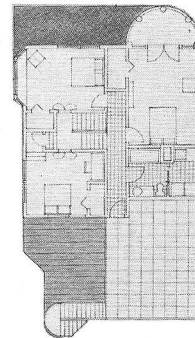
From the two single family housing types included in the design, the west facing variation was chosen for further development. The ideas embodied in these houses were similar to those present in the country villa as they were similarly positioned to make the most of their site and their view into the landscape. The houses were designed in a vernacular style relating to the picturesque qualities of the surrounding context. The composition of the houses plays off of the romantic character and the asymmetrical forms occurring in the neighborhood at the turn of the century.

The west facing houses were organized by a circulation axis which cuts through formal and informal zones. This axis extends from Gladstone Boulevard through the raised yards to the house establishing the public, formal entry sequence. The axis extends from the raised yard into the interior forming an entry space and acts as a living hall between the formal rooms. The circulation space narrows as it continues into the informal interior and exterior side, acting as an informal link from the rear entry to the garage and private street.

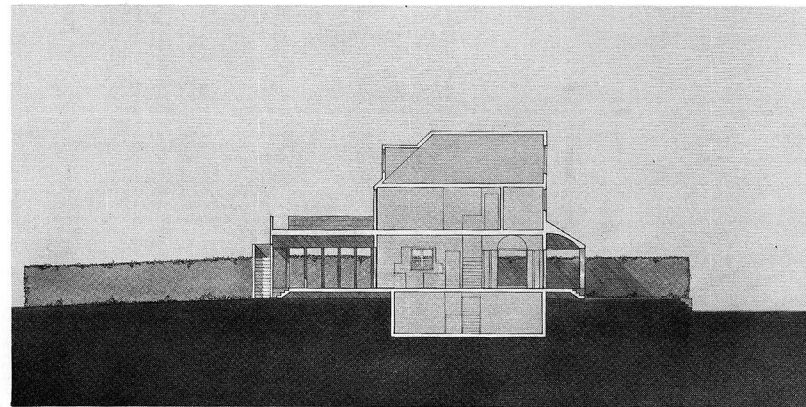
The zero-lot-line placement of the houses to the north side of the lot was used to maximize their south exterior spaces. This space is viewed only by the dwelling to which it belongs. This view creates a spatial extension from the interior to the exterior and occurs in the formal rooms at the front of the house, making them appear larger and more integrated with the site. The living room opens to the public side of the house as a gesture to the street while allowing views of the Kansas City skyline. The



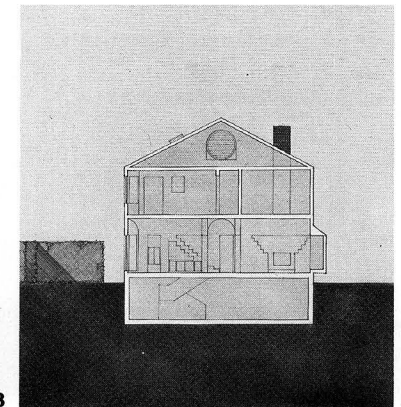
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- 1 First floor plan
- 2 Second floor plan
- 3 Longitudinal section
- 4 Cross section
- 5 West Elevation
- 6 East Elevation
- 7 South Elevation

dining room and two bedrooms on the second story also open to the exterior in a similar manner.

Through the development of the infill housing project it was intended that the existing context would be reinforced and once again regain its vitality. The new housing was intentionally designed to respect the established structure of the neighborhood while also responding to present needs of today's society. Another important objective was the

desire to return to a richer residential vocabulary contrasting the present methodology of residential construction.

NOTES

1. Richard MacCormac, "Housing and the Dilemma of Style," *Architectural Review*, April 1978.

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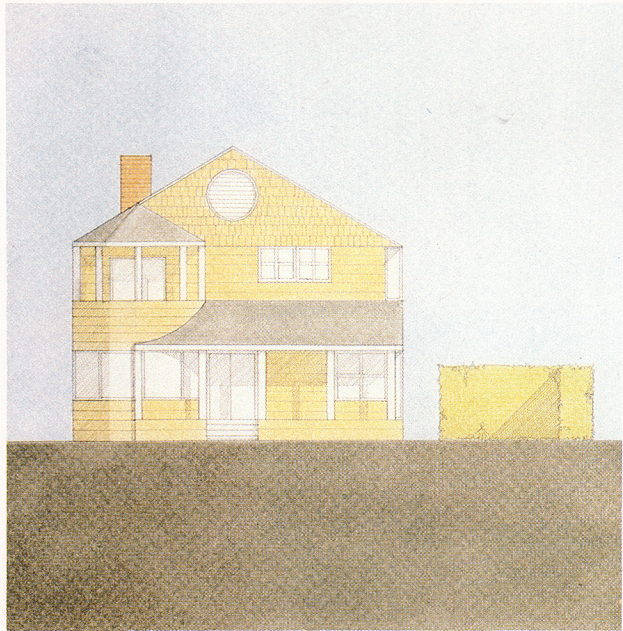
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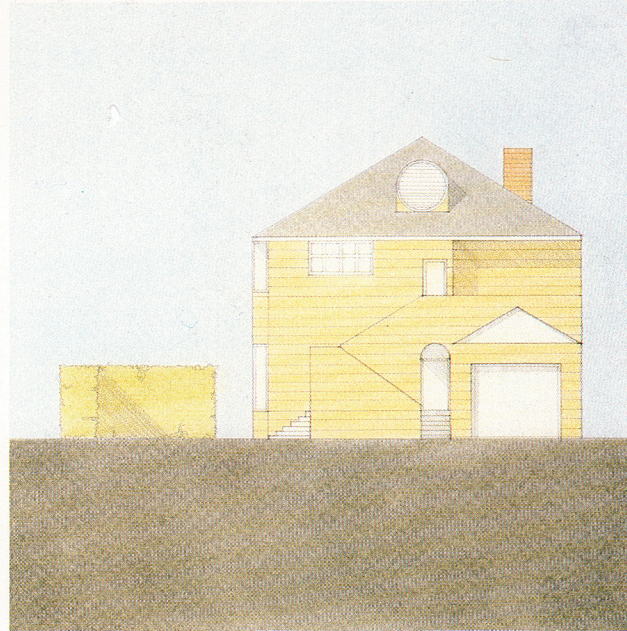
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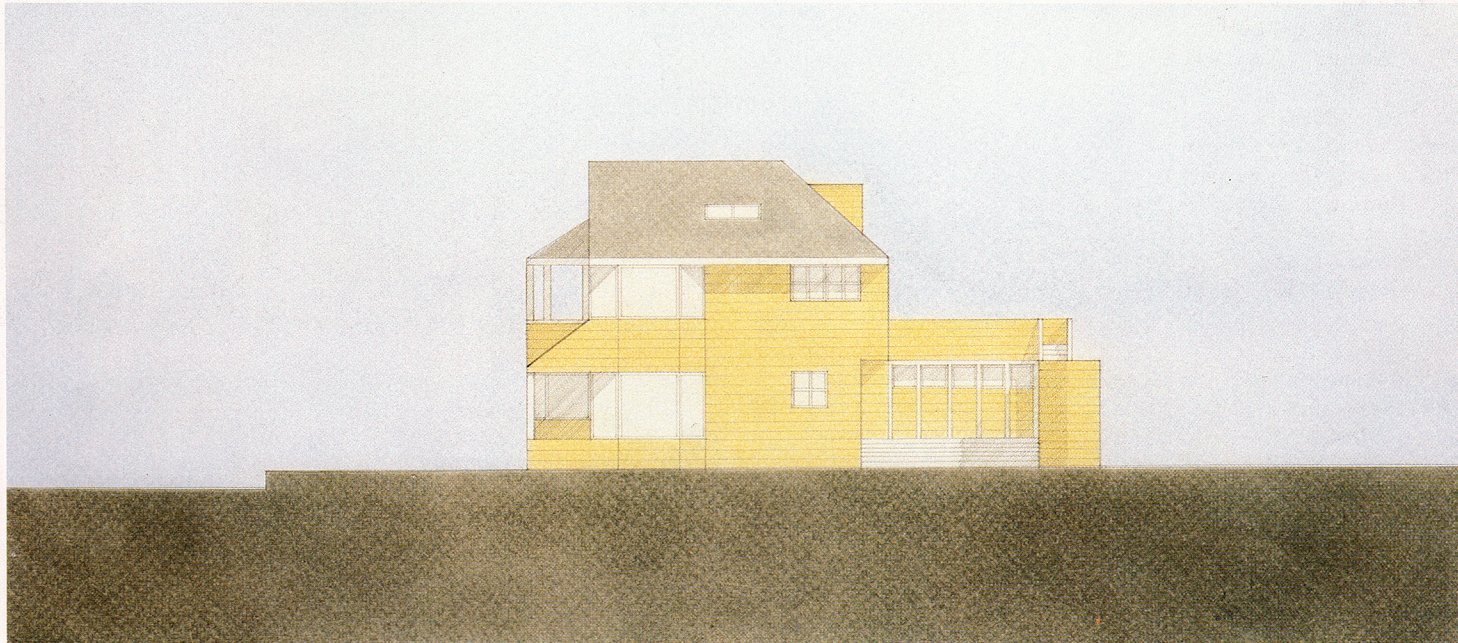
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