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New Suburbanism

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Today's Suburbanism

A close look through contemporary home plan magazines reveals a series of unanticipated oddities and curious conditions. A new room has been added to the traditional set of options. In addition to the media room, living room, family room, dining room, and master bedroom suite, today's suburban home comes complete with a bonus room. If one is supposed to cook in the kitchen, and sleep in the bedroom, of what nature are the activities in the bonus room? Or having exhausted all possible functions and names, have developers and home designers resorted to a catch-all term for undisclosed supplementary gifts to fill their new designer homes? Furthermore, in contrast to highly formalized street facades, conveying the traces of a particular style, the side elevations of these new homes are bizarre, surreal compositions of mismatched windows—the direct result of interior room configurations, driven by packing as many commodity feature-rooms into allowable footprints. Like the surrealist game of exquisite corpse, the modern day suburban home combines contradictory architectural methodologies: formal facade composition with Raum-plan dictates, paying unintentional homage to Lutyens and Loos, simultaneously.

Today, the compact houses of post-war mass production have given way to the mini-mansions of information-age mass customization. The formerly

ubiquitous side yard has been hunted to the point of extinction by 3,000-square foot homes featuring: 3 bedrooms and 3½ baths, master bedroom suites complete with walk-in closets and jacuzzi-filled bathrooms; 2-story foyers and family rooms with home entertainment centers; home offices and breakfast nooks off enormous eat-in gourmet kitchens attached to 3-car garages, all vying for space on narrow strips of land, carved by developers to maximize profit to the street front. Computer-driven shipping and production systems—critical to big-box stores' international inventory systems—enable developers and builders to offer a plethora of options, additions, and decorative palettes to each prospective home buyer from a limited set of plans.

Many suburban development strategies have remained unchanged in the post-war years. Home packages are still sold like new cars with a list of standard features and options at additional costs. Yet the relationship of the spatial assemblage has changed. Options in the 1950s were limited to appliances and special features within a preset architectural plan based on quasi-military efficiencies. Current developments commodify and objectify individual rooms, creating houses through an assemblage of these features and options. The spatial arrangement is a byproduct of the selection of rooms as commodities—in short, organs without a body. Facades

are the visible massing of interior choices, held tentatively together through stylistic appliqué. The end results are suburban developments of instantaneous superficial diversity, the hallmark of a rich history.

The clear-cut distinctions between living and working, public and private life that defined the suburban life of the post-war era are increasingly difficult to maintain with the proliferation of cell phones, PDAs, laptop computers, and cable-modem connections. With a significant percentage of commuters traveling not into cities, but rather to other suburban locations, the new suburban condition is no longer framed by the urban/suburban binary. As a result, contemporary suburban developments have become polycentric and autonomous from urban centers. Moreover, the typical amenities of urban life have been fully reproduced in dispersed and mutated form to support the contemporary suburban condition, resulting in: mega-bookstores, hyper-cappuccino bars, superplex cinemas, outlet malls; the now-ubiquitous market-specific big-box storehouse stores such as Lowe's, Toys r Us, Staples, Office Max, Pep Boys, Circuit City, and Home Depot; and the category killers of Cosco, Walmart, Sam's Club, Target, and Big K.

Critics of today's suburban conditions no longer focus their attention on presumed homogeneity, but rally against sprawl. If growth continues unchecked, the

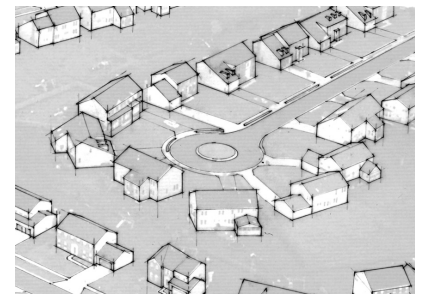


Figure 1

argument goes, untold acres of fertile farmland will be destroyed, paved under by the horizontal expanse of developer homes, commuter roads, drive-through restaurants, and big-box stores. Critical responses to suburbia tend to fall into predictable categories: nostalgic returns to fictionalized nineteenth-century small town settlement patterns (still connected of course by vast roads and highways to the employment locations and consumer needs of the early twenty-first century); calls for limiting growth through zoning or legislation; or in the case of the home builder's associations, extensive and expensive lobbying and public relation efforts to carry on as before.

In each of these responses, little serious attention is paid to the architectural desires contained within the contemporary suburban landscape and to the creative possibilities of working through the conventions of suburban sprawl.



Figure 2

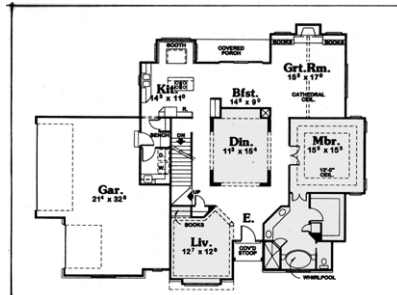


Figure 3

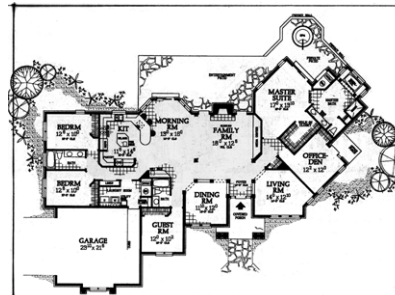


Figure 4



Figure 5

New Suburbanism

What if the popular desires fueling the contemporary suburban culture of mini-mansions and big box stores were creatively reconfigured? (Figures 1 and 2) If the mega-store exists to service and supply the expanding landscape of mini-mansions, then why not combine the two, producing new efficiencies of land-use, shared infrastructure, and reduced transportation while maintaining the desires which feed the popularity of the quotidian suburb? Could the reintroduction of the section to suburbia sponsor new vertical matings, creatively mitigating the redundant horizontal surfaces of suburban sprawl?

In this speculative proposal, entitled New Suburbanism, dwellings migrate to occupy the vast horizontal roofscape of the big boxes. The repetitive system of open span structure with aisles and storage racks in the big-box store below establishes a linear designation

of houses above. Storage structures extrude through the inhabitable roof plane of the big box, delineating property divisions within the alternating pattern of houses and yards above and providing a container for the equipment and commodities of domestic life. In this hybrid of the logic of house and store, the identities of both are maintained, but in an altered form—now cross wired to produce unanticipated social and spatial relationships through their mutual influence.

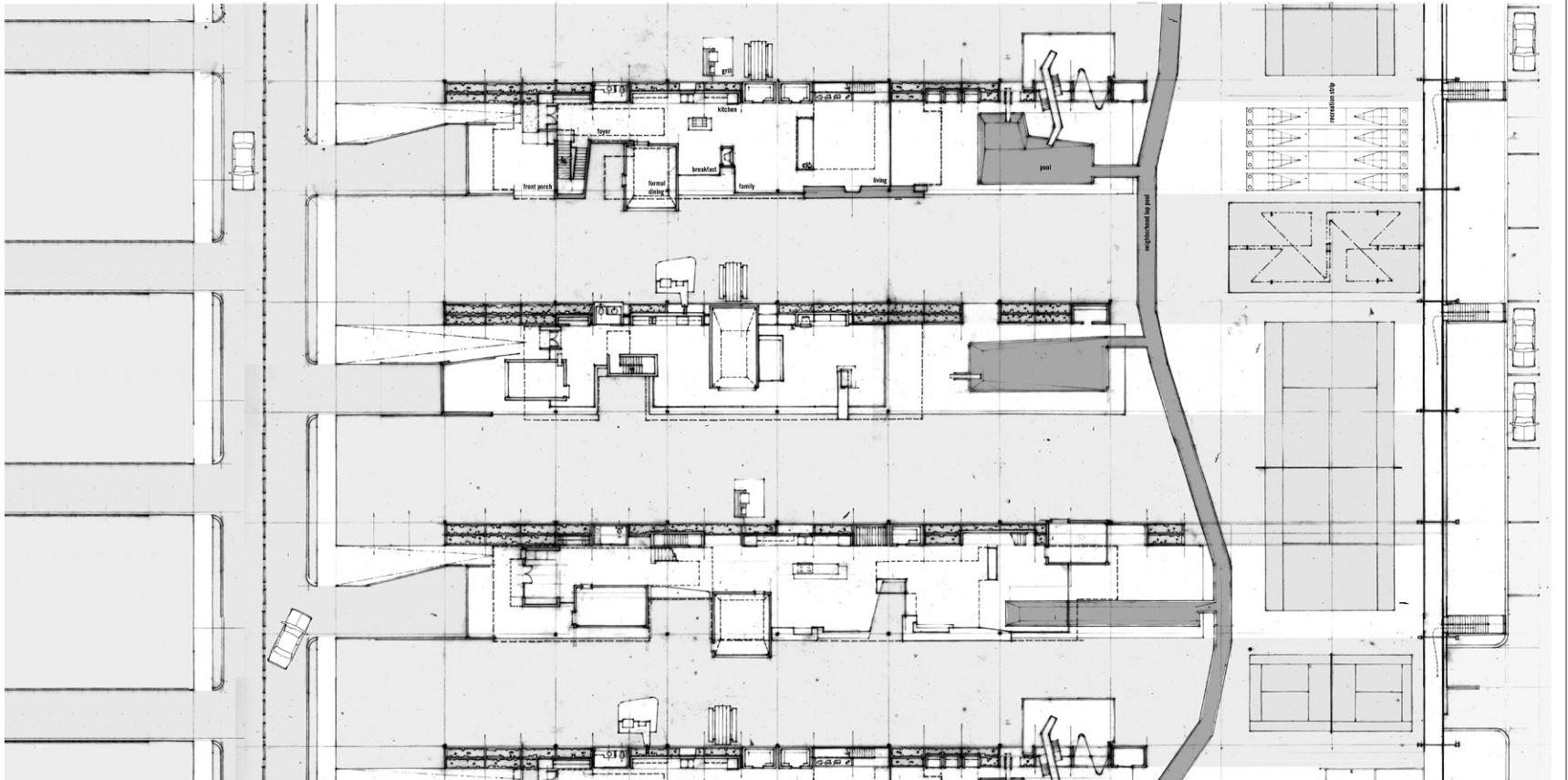
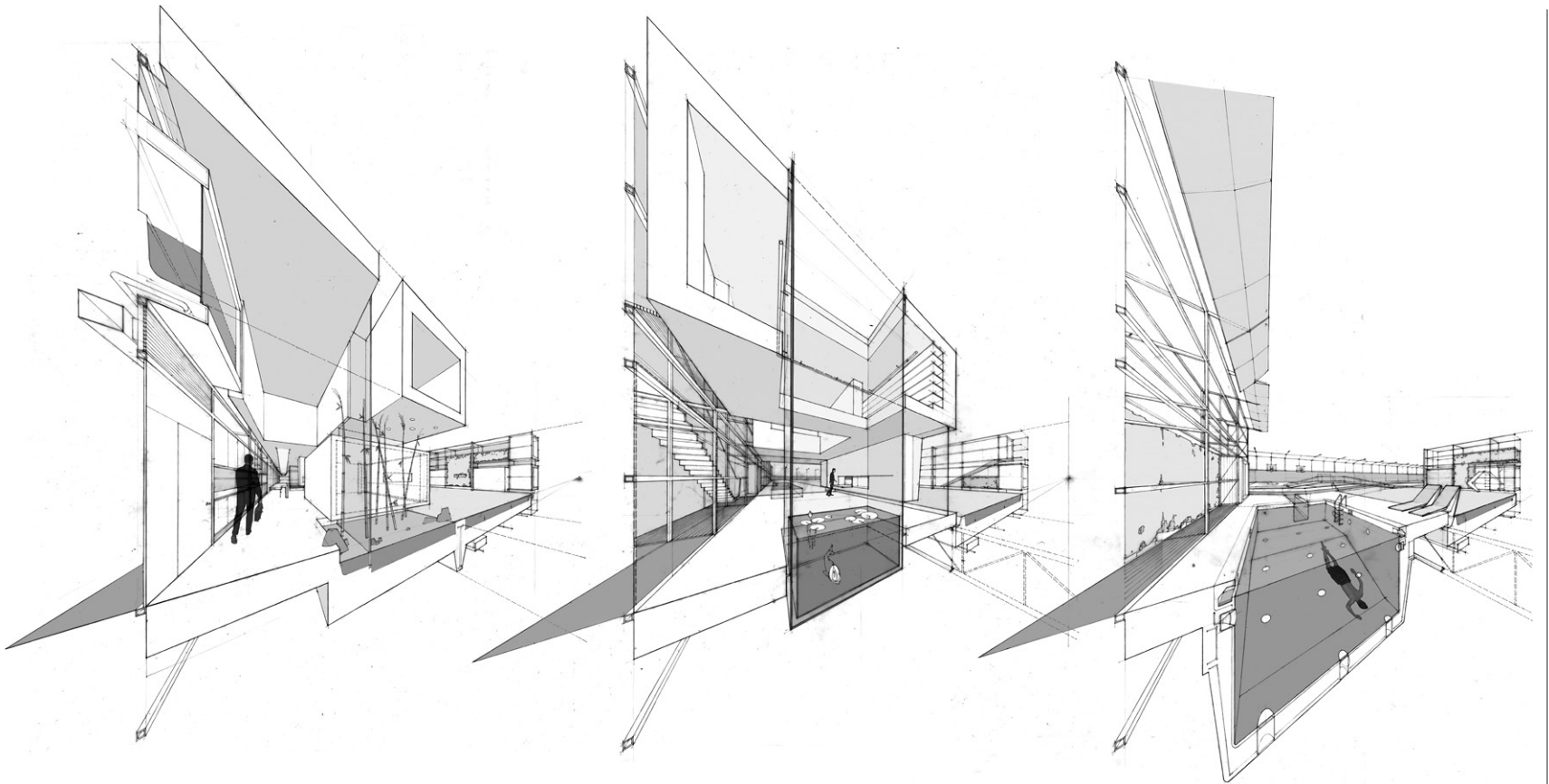
Commodity Homes

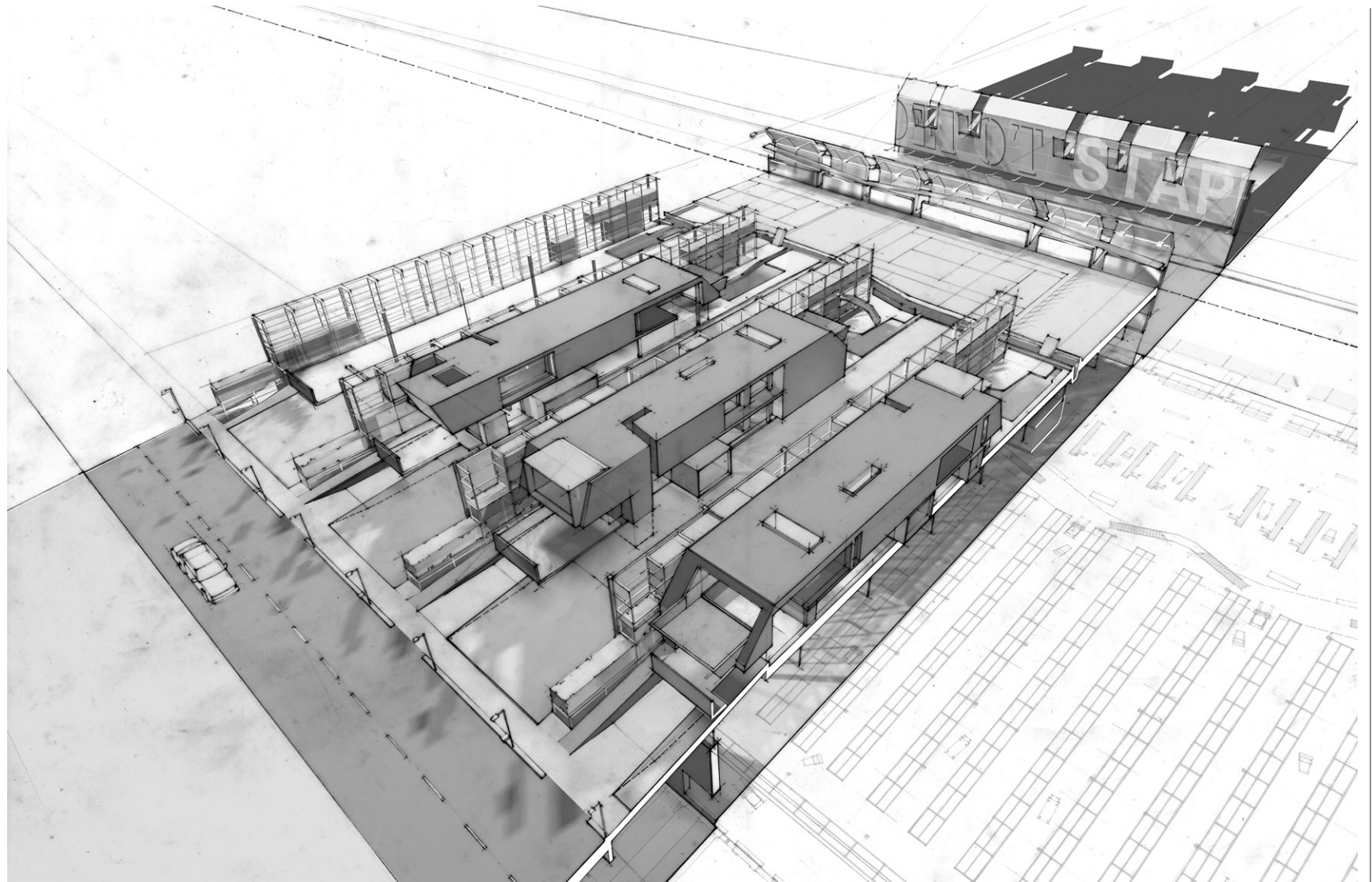
In New Suburbanism, individual houses reformat existing desires—creatively reclaiming the normative suburban spatial logic determined by commodified rooms and features. Developer houses are conceived as an accumulation of figural commodity rooms and open public areas. The commodity rooms—formal living and dining rooms, master bedroom suites, media rooms, bathrooms—are

treated like consumer objects, independent and typically isolated within the house plan. (Figure 3) The more continuous public spaces—kitchen, foyer, breakfast, family—are loosely treated as free plan, a hangover of a modern spatial sensibility. (Figure 4) In the New Suburbanism proposal, the house arrangements are made through exploiting the reciprocal relationship between the figural commodity rooms and the free space of the public programs, initiating a spatial play not achieved in the stilted plans of typical homes. Thus, the object rooms reclaim a spatial imperative, without relinquishing their commodity or figural qualities. The interiors of each can be decorated in any manner desired—Louis XVI, Wallpaper-moderne, or Martha Stewart Anglo-chic—independent of an overall decorating scheme. In one speculative version, on the ground level, the free plan public spaces—living room, kitchen, foyer—are defined in direct relationship to the location of

the commodity rooms and objects—dining room, grand staircase, television cabinet and fireplace. This dialectic relationship allows for multiple versions of the New Suburban house within the given structural system, setting the stage for unprecedented mass customization.

The massive and over-articulated roof is the icon of suburban mini-mansions, allowing double-height cathedral spaces and residual storage, while giving an umbrella of visual coherence after the fact to the commodity rooms assembled below. (Figure 5) In New Suburbanism, the dominant roof mass is conceived from the start as a solid insulating zone, hung from the structural column grid, and cocooning the private commodified bedrooms and suites on the second floor. Punches up into the roof mass from below produce the requisite double-height spaces for cathedral ceilings and grand foyers, while stalactite-like forms drop from





the underside to accommodate storage, fireplaces and staircases on the first floor. A void pushed down through the roof from the top creates an inviolated pool—an interiorized exterior aquarium—consistently filled with rainwater, and thus ideal for supporting small aquatic life. Viewing through the aquarium means looking through the outside from the inside to the inside.

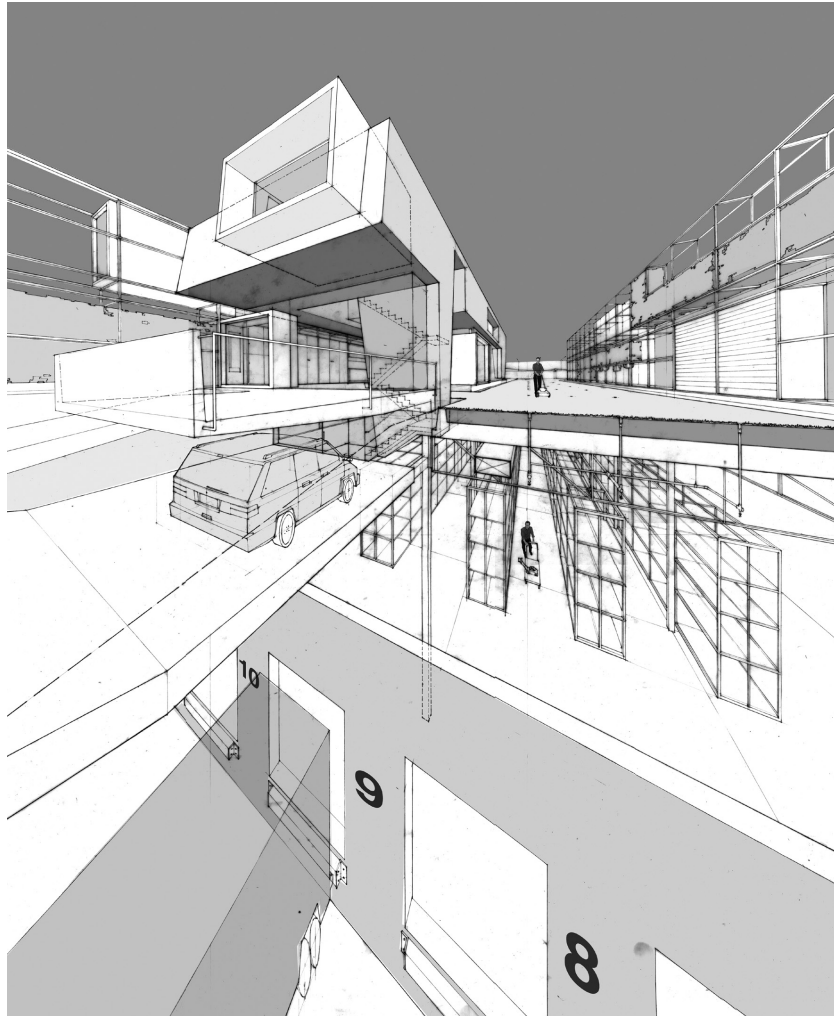
In the exchange between free space and object rooms, the boundary between house and yard fluctuates, producing additional exchanges between interior and exterior spaces of the house. Analogous to the various

decks, porches, and breezeways of the conventional house, these spaces introduce the outside into the house as contained and encapsulated fragments of commodified nature. Furthermore, the linear organizing system of the big box reorients the conventional relationship between the house and yards. The typically minimized no-man's zone of the side yard is here expanded to become the primary exterior space. The conventional distinction between the ornamental front yard and the private rear yard is mitigated in favor of a continuous functional space, paralleling the long side of the house.

Within the rooms of the typical suburban house, commodity equipment and objects determine occupation. In New Suburbanism, the modular big-box storage racks are modified to become infrastructural walls containing all necessary equipment for domestic life—appliances, cabinetry, fixtures—as well as serving as points of connection to utilities. Additionally, the racks provide a training ground for hedges and trees, establishing property divisions and avoiding potential turf wars over territory waged through lawn care techniques. The racks are thus double sided, serving on one side the needs of the house, and on the other housing the

necessary accessories of the neighboring suburban lawn: barbecue grills, water spigots, hose bibs, garden sheds, and playground equipment.

The lawn in New Suburbanism home takes full advantage of the depth of the big-box store. The excess lawn extending beyond the racks (and directly over the check-out counters of the stores below) is the ideal zone for typical suburban recreations like tennis, shuffleboard, volleyball and other community-oriented sports. Private pools for each house are connected through a continuous lap pool, allowing a home owner on a sunny



day to swim around the block. The big-box store's false-front parapet and signage doubles as the high garden wall at the end of the lawn, providing the structure for a continuous running track and series of basketball hoops.

The pool—doubling as the skylight for the big-box space below—is one of a series of sectional matings. The yard is maintained by its proximity to the store. Fire sprinklers double as lawn sprinklers, fertilizer is fed directly through the water supply, and the perpetual waste heat from the superstore ensures that the lawn stays perfectly green year round, winter or summer. Houses tap into the extensive air conditioning and heating systems, cutting down on redundant heat-exchange units. The roof membrane of the big box store folds to create natural grass-covered lawn furniture for pool-side sunbathing.

Big Box Towns

The multifunctional aspect of the big-box construction system—once used only for warehouses and factories, but now adapted to build public libraries, schools, community centers and gas stations—combined with the vast

demand for housing means that the potential for the New Suburbanist coupling is enormous. Following the already existing trend in big box construction, different commercial interests and public services are lined up in long rows. The excessive parking that typically surrounds big-box stores is now just another space under the vast ground/roof-scape. Without the parking moats, the scale of downtown USA is reclaimed—the signage of the big box stores recreating in mutated form the image of main street.

In New Suburbanism, latent desires of suburbia are exploited, lamentable redundancies are absolved, and new sectional matings are established in continued pursuit of the American Dream.

