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(Semi)Urbanism: Creating a new housing typology through slippage

A Need: (Semi)Urbanism – Slippage and the Hybrid

Looking at alternatives to suburban development and traditional stacked-housing, *(semi)urbanism* – suburban ideals within an urban context – seeks to be the hybrid needed to mediate between the centrally-densified core and the sprawling suburb. A new understanding of residential and community design, *(semi)urbanism* strives to meet the perceived needs of the suburban homeowner, by transposing the manner in which these needs are currently being met within a suburban condition, into a more sustainable language. This is achieved by pulling from the memory of the suburbs and setting a new residential typology into a more thoughtful, and dense, urban environment. But how do we shift the perception of the suburban homeowner from the familiarity of sprawl to the unfamiliarity of urban density?

Slippage, a methodology for the transformation and creation of this liminal space, is the act through which one place becomes another – through the sliding, stacking, layering and superimposing of something onto itself – by allowing memories of an older order to create new, mediating spaces. It is this shifting of perceptions that is significant within a suburban context, as it is one that is often paralyzed in stagnant nostalgia, mundane imagination and repetitive neutrality. Yet, it would be ignorant to ignore

suburbia completely, and slippage attempts to allow these specific, meaningful ideals to be the remnants that remain. For while the environmental, socio-economic and architectural concerns of the suburbs have been well documented, it is also evident that many current consumers of sprawl would not be willing, or able, to move into the density of the city without major ‘compromises’ to their current lifestyle or ideals, due to personal finances, marketed nostalgia or perceived suburban amenities. For as Peter Calthorpe states, “I don’t expect people to get out of their car just because environmentally that’s what they think they should be doing”.¹ Similarly we need to accept the fact that sustainable communities must be accessible, ‘easy’, and appealing to the typical suburban dweller in order to gain traction as sustainable alternatives for those who equate success to a sprawling lawn or are unwilling to give up their vehicles. We must, therefore, first understand and sympathize with the suburban homeowner, who currently has few adequate alternatives.

Slippage Meets the Suburbs: Slippage as Concept

Stemming from the notion of suburbia and the need to rethink how we think about it, the conceptual artist or installation is able to shift our understanding from a secure place to a space of the unfamiliar, through the ability to make us question that which we take for granted. Thus, when Gordon Matta-Clark decided to cut a suburban frame house in half, in his 1974 work *Splitting*, possibly the first act of slippage was performed on suburbia. By simply dividing the house in half, through one of Matta-Clark’s now infamous building cuts, tilting it on its foundation and removing the four corners of the top of the

¹ From David Edward’s film *Sprawling From Grace: Driven to Madness*.
<http://sprawlingfromgrace.com> Accessed 2008.

building, the tidy and understood reading of the suburban single-family house was shifted. The security of the family home is now gone. It has been invaded by the stranger and the critic, and the structure is now neither stable nor secure: both physically and psychologically. There is a new imbalance which leads to a shift in the perception of the suburban house, and it is this idealization of the family home that Matta-Clark seeks to undermine through the incisions and destructive acts which he performed on this nostalgic archetype. It is a slippage of sorts that shifts the perception and stereotypes; for it was not just the notion of privacy of which Matta-Clark was critical, as he was also calling for a shift in our understanding of the false senses of security and sentiment which are so engrained in the image of the single-family home.

However, moving from the physical alteration of the suburban house in Matta-Clark's work to its conceptual repositioning, Dan Graham is perhaps the most speculative and theoretical of the conceptual artists to engage with the suburban landscape. Stemming from both a sense of intrigue and criticism, Graham differs from other social commentators in that he seems to seek out moments of beauty and interest from the often dull criticism of suburbia. According to Graham, "Just as Koolhaas writes about the delirious pleasures of the congested modern New York, my suburban models speak of the delirium of the suburbs".² This sense of disorientation is the result of Graham's acts of slippage, most clearly evident in his 1978 piece entitled *Alteration of a Suburban House*. By removing the façade of a modeled suburban home and replacing it with a transparent glass panel, Graham alters not only the physical structure of the house, but also the psyche of both the occupant and the passer-by – now the observer and observed – as he

² Cited in Pamela Johnson, *Dan Graham: Architecture*. London: AA Publications. 1997. p.14.

inverts ideas of privacy and performance. Taking this act further, Graham then bisects the interior of the house with a mirrored surface, parallel to the street. In so doing, the façades of the adjacent houses, identical to the one being acted on, are reflected onto it, thus commenting on the monotony of design and the lack of a perceived sense of individualization. However, the most significant part of this interplay is the dynamic activity that takes place, both in reality and in reflection, between these multiple planes being compressed onto each other, resulting in a slippage through superimposition. Graham ultimately shifts perception by shifting the suburban homeowners' own perceptions of both their person and place, and it is this ability to change how the homeowner sees both themselves and their environment that is the first step in loosening the hold of nostalgia and the idealism of the suburbanite. Yet while this is the act that brings the homeowner psychologically closer an understanding of (semi)urbanism, the physical architecture and urbanism of the residential community must also be transformed through slippage. How then, does the conceptual notion of slippage become a methodology for the making of a (semi)urban architecture?

(Semi)Urbanism as Stacked Suburbia

Multi-unit, stacked housing has quickly become the easy answer to high density urban and sustainable living. However, just as the sprawl of the suburbs leans too far in the direction of generous land use, privatized amenities, and banal design, the apartment or condo tower is not without its own flaws or barriers for many lifestyles. From a lack of storage and outdoor space to noise transmission between units or the lack of a visually independent sense of ownership, the tower is just as static, even if more environmentally

conscious, than its suburban counterpart. So what is the hybridized answer? What is the option for the family of four who respects density *but* also values space? Parking and walkability? Privacy and community?

Moshe Safdie's thesis-project-turned-exhibit for Expo '67, *Habitat*, was an attempt to break up the block-like form of the apartment building and bring to the city some of the amenities of the suburbs. Originally planned to also include mixed-use elements, such as commercial and office space, *Habitat* can be understood to be a *city in a box*, and is evidently a further evolved form of Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation*. Yet despite this unfulfilled goal, Safdie's inaugural housing project was perhaps the first attempt at a (semi)urban residential condition. Built with 354 pre-fab concrete cubes, forming 148 individual units, and stacked in such a way as to allow for light, air, and green roofs from one unit to act as the garden for another, *Habitat* was a primary attempt at the vertical suburb, as opposed to the vertical city of the condo tower or apartment block. Deconstructing and then reconstructing the fragmented condo tower from one mono-box to a fractured montage, Safdie began to explore the art of the hybrid and the belief that, "suburban projects squandered land and resources, while the urban ones lacked privacy and gardens" and "proposed an alternative to both [...] animated by circulation systems such as skywalks, elevators, and stairways, [creating] what Safdie called "three-dimensional communities".³ *Habitat* is thus a testament to the flexibility and creativity to be found in multi-unit housing designs which still allow for a sense of the autonomous house.

³ Donald Albrecht. *Global Citizen: The Architecture of Moshe Safdie*. Crystal Bridges: Museum of American Art. 2010. p.28.

Yet the most relevant precedent for the concept of (semi)urbanism is perhaps the work of Bjarke Ingels, and his architecture practice 'BIG', who have started to embody the idea that there needs to be more than a compromise between urban and suburban, public and private, green and *not green*, through their residential projects. Clearly evident in BIG's project, aptly titled *Mountain Dwelling* – a multi-unit, stacked housing and mixed-use complex – Ingel's understanding of the needs, and his sympathy towards, the ideals of the suburbanite are so clearly evident that he himself refers to the project as *Vertical Suburbia*.⁴ And it is this sensibility that allows BIG to create residential spaces which are appealing and inventive, and that would allow for a suburbanite to more easily consider living at a higher density. For by creating a scissoring parking garage that slopes down to the ground plane on one side while rising on the other, BIG was able to cascade the residential units down its slope, allowing residents to park on the same level as their unit and, in keeping with Safdie's *Habitat*, use the roof of the unit below as the garden for the unit above, complete with a lawn. This results in the ability for one to live on the ninth floor, while still parking outside one's front door, and only having to open the backdoor to let the dog out in the morning. *Mountain's* success is in its ability to still meet many suburban amenities, but in a much denser and more sustainable fashion, through the stacking and shifting of residential units. Suburban ideals slipped into a (semi)urban typology.

And finally, cheeky and fantastical, Sou Fujimoto's *Tokyo Apartments* literally superimposes the archetypal suburban home onto itself, and in doing so changes the urban fabric from one that is understood horizontally into one which is now experienced

⁴ Bjarke Ingels Group. *Yes is More*. Taschen. Hohenzollernring: 2010. p.77.

vertically. Consisting of four dwellings that intersect each other and are accessible through a network of exterior and interior stairs, *Tokyo Apartments* is simultaneously satirical and elegant as it shifts our perception of lateral sprawl. Fujimoto's projects results in a city block becoming a suburban-urban tower, and brings us full circle by blurring the line between (conceptual) art and architecture, in the attempt to create an understanding of the (semi)urban.

The Slippage of (Semi)Urbanism – From the Speculative to the Literal and Back Again

Through the methodology of slippage, at the levels of both literal architecture and speculative art, and through suburbia's ability to act on itself through mediums such as experimental film and architectural intervention, a product must be realized that allows for the former suburbanite to be satisfied within a sustainable density and place of greater architectural imagination. But this first requires for the speculative to be reinstated into the normative practice of residential planning and building. A (semi)urban space can be achieved, and suburban ideals can be met within an urban context. Movement away from a secure place, through the methodology of slippage, can bring about a hybrid rather than a compromise, and superimpositions can allow stacked housing to obtain nearly the same autonomy and appeal as a single-family home, simply in a new language or typology. Density can be done well and the residential unit can be sustainable, practical and architecturally appealing.

This is no longer your grandmother's suburban house.

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