

## Mixing Metabolisms: New People in Aging Sprawl

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**The historically white postwar suburbs of the United States and Canada are now the first destination for new residents from abroad. Because they are relatively safe, affordable, and, as they became ethnic enclaves, culturally familiar, these peripheral communities, have gradually replaced the center city as the desired landing place for new arrivals. Using scholarly and popular literature with empirical field observation, this paper examines a set of aging postwar suburbs in California and one in Arizona to illustrate the largely positive effects of such immigration.**

**In addition to an injection of diverse and energized cultures, the changes can point towards a set of materially strategic options for renewing all aging low density-built environments. Such cultural shifts are an opportunity to imagine a socially healthy, though repurposed, and spatially altered, future for all aging urban peripheries. Finally, regarding the development of a productive architectural and urban discourse on the subject, it is vital to note that the current nascent transformation in aging postwar environments is common to that of many cities and settlements throughout history. More specific to the case of renewal of postwar sprawl with its' increase in the density of social interaction, the current ethnic changes to the settlement pattern often make the largely private built environments of Anglo-American suburbs more "urban" and in the process reveal a more nuanced definition of this term.**

### INTRODUCTION

For at least three decades, a huge demographic and cultural change has taken place in the suburbs of North America. There is an abundance of discussion of how the original culture and form of suburbia can be modified to reconstruct future suburbs, most notably through the work of the Congress of New Urbanism. There is considerably less conversation from architects and urbanists about the innovation new immigrant cultures and their spatial practices have on the shape, space, and character of the metropolitan periphery. After nearly 70 years, what is commonly known as postwar sprawl is at the end of its first material phase of life. Seldom easy, such an infusion of new cultural energy and

related spatial practices can, like all successful settlements over time, force it to transform into a more responsive and interesting place to live.

The newest residents to the suburbs are part of a global transformation that started in the 1960s and accelerated after the end of the Cold War.<sup>1,2</sup> This most recent cohort of immigrants, the largest being from East Asia and Latin America, arrived directly to the metropolitan perimeters of the US and Canada from all parts of the globe.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, the first wave of new residents typically attempts to assimilate and buy into the traditional American suburban dream portrayed in popular media.<sup>4</sup> However, more recently, as the population of new cultures increase in a given community, they have gradually exerted influence on local governments to adjust zoning regulations that match their values and every day needs. This has begun to transform the spatial purpose and patterns as well as practices in the affected communities, originally dominated by the twentieth century European American nuclear family.

In the last two centuries, the North American suburb was an inhabited perimeter designed to be the pastoral opposite of the industrialized city. The separation of domestic life and work, the fabrication of class and racial exclusion, the promotion of better health and the creation of an investment tool for producing family wealth were key drivers to suburbia's common form. Exceedingly popular, postwar suburbia was developed to offer access to this built environment type, to the working class of the era. In part because of its popularity and related populist character, it became the subject of immense criticism for its homogenous culture, its role as an asylum for white Americans attempting to control their relationships to those of other social and ethnic backgrounds, and more recently its part in contributing to global warming. Preserving this pattern of inhabitation increased the amount of power over the value of property and even more importantly the social characteristics of daily life. The recent change in the background of new residents, their cultural values and spatial practices represent a serious challenge to this way of life and self-definition. More broadly, it also represents an evolution of the larger social identities of both the US and Canada and how they correspondingly transform their inhabited environments.



Figure 1. *Typical 5000 s.f.+ that follow post-2010 Development standards in Mission San Jose, Ca.* Image credit: zillow.com/mission-san-jose-fremont-ca/

In North America, California and Arizona have the highest concentration of postwar suburbs that are transforming due to new cultural influence caused by demographic change. More than any state or province, California is currently at the forefront for both formal and informal applications of new zoning regulations, functional repurposing, and spatial adaptation in existing communities. For architects and urban designers, this recent culturally diverse resettlement of postwar sprawl is an opportunity to rediscover the now aging suburbs as a site of spatial experimentation and a place to reimagine community. Ultimately, this new metropolitan redevelopment is most optimistically viewed as not against or replacing the city or suburbs that preceded it, but as a form of emerging built environment that renews an inhabited region through its social and spatial complexity, and new cultural energy making it, in the process, more inclusive and desirable on many levels for many more people.

### DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

The end of the Cold War, roughly 1990, represents the start of the economically and culturally globalized world we inhabit today.<sup>5,6</sup> Increased mobilization between, and awareness of, other parts of the world fueled immigration to more developed nations. For the US and Canada, new arrivals from Asia, the Middle East and Latin America bypassed center cities and landed directly in the suburbs.<sup>7</sup> This complicated the ethnic and social composition of these traditionally white metropolitan territories. Although at a diminished rate in nearly all categories, the 2020 census reflects a continuation of this trend, mapping a continued migration from the metropolitan center to the outskirts, but also an increase of non-white inhabitation in existing suburbs.<sup>8,9</sup>

Since 1990, while overall suburban and exurban population has continued to grow, there has been, as was projected as far back as 2001, a nearly 20 percent drop in the percentage of whites in North America's suburbs.<sup>10,11,12</sup> Nonetheless, there has still been a modest increase in the overall number of European Americans in the suburbs in the last three decades, but the

percentage difference is largely driven by a significant increase of people of African American, Hispanic, and Asian descent in the metropolitan periphery.<sup>13</sup> In this same period, the African American population in suburbs has increased 12 percent.<sup>14</sup> The share of African Americans of the region living in suburban communities increased over 50 percent in some metro areas during this period.<sup>15</sup> Two reasons are cited for this change: first a displacement of low-income African Americans from center cities to lower income aging inner ring suburbs, due to urban gentrification; the second reason is an increase in the number of middle class and upper middle class African Americans settling in more affluent suburbs.<sup>16</sup>

In both cases, spatial practices are not noticeably different from European Americans living in the same type of place. In effect, unlike other newer arrivals moving to the suburbs, this group has been in North America for as long as European colonists, over 400 years. In addition, the horrendous and forced displacement of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean also included the erasure of shared cultural memories and practices. This may be part of the explanation as to why Black and white racial diversity in a suburb tends not to drive spatial change. New spatial patterns in existing suburbs are more often the result of an ethnically specific concentration of relatively newer immigrant groups. When these groups amass enough local political power, they can change zoning ordinances and the spatial patterns that historically reflect the middle class, white, nuclear family.

### THE RISE OF THE ETHNOBURB

In 1997, Wei Li, then an assistant professor of geography at the University of Connecticut, coined the term “ethnoburb” in a paper that examined the growing suburban Chinese population in Los Angeles’s San Gabriel Valley.<sup>17</sup> This launched an arena of social research by many academics that focused on new residents in the aging suburbs of LA and other cities such as San Francisco, Vancouver, Toronto, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. These older inner-ring suburbs offered existing lower cost housing and commercial properties conveniently located near the centers of large metropolitan regions. This generation of immigrants departed their home nations for a variety of reasons, most typically, as has most frequently been the case over history, to create a better life for themselves and their families. As the generations before that arrived in center cities, the transition from one life to another was made easier by landing in a community of people with similar cultural backgrounds, whose social needs, practices, and language were familiar.

Li’s initial study focused on Asian habitation west of Los Angeles, in particular Monterey Park. The aging inner suburb was thick with relatively affordable conveniently located single-family homes. Reinforced by small-scaled informal social and financial networks, the influx of mostly new Asian residents concentrated their real estate transactions in older suburbs west of Downtown LA.<sup>18</sup> Monterey Park is emblematic of this first wave of ethnoburbs that were on one hand characterized by ethnically specific



Figure 2. *Typical renovated home, Westminster, Ca.*  
Image Credit: Lawrence C. Davis

businesses and public celebrations of the new residents, but on the other exhibited little change to the spatial pattern and practices of the former residents and other North American suburbs.<sup>19</sup> Li's research suggests the main factor in the rise of the LA ethnoburb was a desire by Asian residents, as had white Americans, to leave the challenges of the center city and "make it" in the suburbs.<sup>20</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, this initial local Asian migration accelerated by a second wave of newer residents who moved directly to suburbs, like Monterey Park. The image of the suburban way of living was highly valued and embedded in people across the world through television and film, including direct advertising for specific communities like Monterey Park.<sup>21</sup> The media image of the Anglo-American suburb and lifestyle was, and still is, globally powerful. This helped to motivate people to immigrate to the US and Canada and may explain why the image of the Anglo-American suburb persists because it is so valued by this cohort of new Americans. Additional evidence of the popularity of the North American image of suburban life is found in new peripheral development abroad from Ju Jun, "Orange County" north of Beijing to the dozens of Alphaville developments across Brazil. In such post-Cold War peripheral development, American Suburbia is a commodity packaged and sold to those who could afford it.<sup>22,23</sup>

Mission San Jose, of Fremont in the Bay Area and Westminster in Orange County are two California postwar suburbs, demographically dominated by Chinese and Vietnamese respectively, that changed either the residential zoning or existing shared space of their community. In the case of Mission San Jose, affluent Asian residents were attracted to its good schools, access to Silicon Valley jobs and related tech sector investment.<sup>24,25</sup> Over time the Asian community was able to exert enough political power on the local government to change zoning laws to allow a greater Floor Area Ratios (FAR) on residential lots.<sup>26</sup> Low slung 2500 to 3000 square foot single floor ranch homes that

featured a relaxed indoor-outdoor connection between the shared spaces and rear gardens were purchased, torn down, and replaced by larger, loftier homes of up to 5000 square feet. (fig. 1) Disparagingly referred to as "Monster Homes," by those who do not like them, these more extravagant structures contain more formal inward focused interiors, less connected to the now smaller exterior spaces ringing the house. These larger structures mark a change in sensibility from a home "in and of the garden" to one that emphasized the material success of its inhabitants, contributing to a significant transformation of the community's spatial pattern and identity.<sup>27</sup>

Westminster, California also experienced a transition in the residential fabric of its dominant postwar suburban ranch houses. Less affluent than the newer residents of Mission San Jose, Vietnamese immigrants arrived shortly after the end of the Vietnam War. Unlike Mission San Jose, these ranch houses, built in the 1950s and 60s, were not torn down but renovated through smaller additions and the introduction of culturally specific symbolic form. As with the well documented modification of Levittown homes, the original texture is maintained and adapts to new cultures through more subtle changes in space and emblematic southeast Asian roof and garden forms. (fig. 2.)

In Westminster, cultural and spatial changes are not confined to a reconsideration of domestic space. The Asia Garden Mall reinvents the tired typology of the suburban shopping mall as a dynamic multi-functional cultural center.<sup>28</sup> The mall is along an endless suburban commercial strip that like other ethnoburbs is characterized by Vietnamese owned businesses and signage but, like Monterey Park, is no different spatially from other suburban strips that saturate metropolitan North America. The Asia Garden Mall is a creative example of the possible future of public exurban space. It contains small scaled, culturally specific retail, dining, religious, and community event space as well as a functional reconsideration of the most ubiquitous space of postwar suburbia, the parking lot.<sup>29</sup> (fig. 3.) Typically located in the front of the building, the mall's parking area is the site of shared symbols, monuments, and frequent night markets and important festivals such as Lunar New Year.<sup>30</sup> What usually is a deadly no-mans-land, becomes a flexible and valued public space.

While culturally engaged, functionally rich and dynamic, the Asia Garden Mall is still physically isolated from what could be potentially a larger more socially intimate network of space and movement. Like most of the commercial space in Westminster, pedestrians are not connected any better to the larger community than typical postwar suburbs. For that, bicycle paths, sidewalks and shared landscapes are yet to be utilized tools for making connections within, and between, neighborhoods.

As much as Westminster is a pithy example of ethnic transformation of a postwar suburb, it is also typical of the effects of such space and culture on its new arrivals. The scattered scale and faster pace of Orange County make public life and social

interaction more challenging. In particular, the dispersed car-driven world of Southern California offered less socially intimate and more consumptive lifestyles compared to those found in urban or rural Southeast Asia. On the other hand, notably for the young eager to fit in and build an accepted life in their new home, many adapted quickly and embraced this new way of life. In fact, automobiles are a key element in the assimilation of Asian youth. Creative symbols of power, ethnic identity and self-assurance, the customization, and at times illegal racing, of cars is a modern and ethnic version of age-old hot rod cultures found across the United States, especially in the Los Angeles Basin.

A more patchy but socially effective method for enriching connections and developing cultural texture in existing suburbs is found in Riverside, California. In January 2020, the city changed its zoning laws to permit microenterprise home kitchen operations that allow for limited dining, most often placed in backyard patio spaces.<sup>31</sup> (fig.4.) Clandestine at-home restaurants have existed for decades in California and other parts of the United States. Legalizing them solves many problems. Most importantly, it embraces the cultural diversity of a community. In Riverside there are now African American/Caribbean, Asian and Mexican home kitchens. These small-scaled dining spaces are a new frontier for restaurant culture. They can also be a piece of the solution for addressing the challenge of food deserts.<sup>32</sup> Finally, in an era of pandemics, it is easy to imagine at-home restaurants as a key element in making small scaled social bubbles for residential blocks or neighborhoods.

The transformation of space around residential suburban units is important when considering the future quality of existing suburbs. Historically this area is covered in grass and gardens to promote the privacy of the residents. By changing the purpose and material of the suburban green surface and making it more public, the social nature and cultural character of the overall built environment changes. For communities who now have a new cultural identity, the transformation of these outside spaces can better match aspirations of new residents and, in addition, offer a new type of experience for those of all backgrounds who visit or want to live in a unique environment. At the Regional level this has the potential to make a metropolitan area more spatially varied and more competitive relative to other cities that remain trapped in less imaginative patterns that counter dense mixed-use city centers with conventional privatized suburban peripheries.

Many of the informal and stealthy home kitchens of Riverside are run by Mexican American families. It is common to find other functionally spatially inventive examples throughout Hispanic suburban neighborhoods. This is especially true in the Southwest. In such places, social interaction occurs both at the family and neighborhood scale, is highly valued, and encourages alternative ways of using the space around suburban structures.



Figure 3. *Night Market, Asia Garden Mall, Westminster, Ca.*  
Image credit: <https://www.facebook.com/AsianGarden/photos/10153680330302117>.

In Hispanic culture it is more common to see the front yard as a site of social engagement and cultural representation. Maryvale, Arizona was originally a desert Levittown for white retirees moving to the Phoenix area.<sup>33</sup> Today Maryvale is a largely Hispanic neighborhood with familiar challenges associated with low-income communities. Nonetheless, the front yards of the postwar suburban homes are less often a transitional picturesque private garden that frame a picture window of an interior living room but are more commonly used for more communal activities that can connect the front yard space to adjacent sidewalks and streets. The rear yard, originally a private social space is more frequently used for utilitarian purposes, such as outside workshops, food growing or storage.<sup>34</sup>

This pattern can also be found in San Ysidro south of San Diego, a diverse suburb at the border with Tijuana, Mexico, that features many variations to the reconsidered front yard. In addition to a functional alternative to the private garden, the front yard is transformed into a symbolic landscape of cultural identity. Often religious, small monuments and other decorative artifacts represent values that residents are proud to illustrate to others. The front yard fence is also rethought as a highly symbolic surface and/or an improvisational commercial space along the sidewalk where clothing and other items are presented for sale to pedestrians as they pass.

San Ysidro is also the site of one of the most inventive and conscious reconsiderations by architects of an aging suburb transformed by non-white spatial practices. Casa Familiar is a project designed by Estudio Cruz, for a community service organization, that attempts, through a relaxed and informal sensibility, to increase density in suburban sprawl.<sup>35, 36</sup> (fig.5.) By increasing physical density and functional complexity through the addition of both building mass and mixed uses, the ground floor can better activate the surface for multiple uses and cultural readings. Such hybrid occupation of a standard suburban



Figure 4. *The outdoor dining area of Barra de Pan' in Corona, Ca.*  
Image credit: Clay Larsen.

lot increases the amount of social interaction. As a result, the definition of “urbanity” is no longer reliant on traditional compactness but on the amount and character of functional and social interface of a given location. This more liberal and intricate understanding of the term opens the way for suburbs to become urban.

### CONSCIOUSLY MOVING FORWARD

The ethnic suburbs noted in this essay are emblematic of new settlement patterns and related spatial practices that are occurring more frequently in the periphery of North American cities. As old as cities themselves, the history of urban change is littered with examples triggered by the arrival of new residents and circumstance. This makes it easy to argue that such mutation is common and that the most successful and livable cities adapt their built texture to linked and ever shifting social and economic facts. Well known examples include Florence that began as a Roman city, Madrid as a Moorish fortress, and Shanghai as a colonial trade city. All three continue to speak to a complex interaction of cultures over a large span of time. Their capacity to thrive is the result of periodic adjustments to the rules of building that adapt to the values of their transforming populations.

While threatening to those who embrace the original culture of postwar suburbia, as with these older examples, such change also presents an opportunity to transform and rejuvenate a type of aging-built environment that is ripe for reconsideration. Architects, planners, and politicians can read this popular largely unconscious phenomena and intentionally develop strategies for reorganizing the spatial DNA for these existing communities; doing so strengthens the social and economic metabolism of these existing environments in ways that position them for a new and richer second life.

A growing body of conceptual and administrative tools are emerging that encourage these unconscious phenomena. Riverside’s functional rezoning for microenterprise is just one

way to reimagine how diverse cultures reoccupy suburbs. Continued experimentation with accessory dwelling units (ADU’s) is a second strategy that is largely driven by housing affordability but can also accommodate various kinds of culturally diverse family arrangements.<sup>37</sup> Variants of ADU’s could also allow for non-residential live/work activities encouraging functional complexity and an increased density of social interaction.

A third instrument for allowing change and experimentation in changing suburbs is “hyper local zoning.”<sup>38</sup> The practice allows small groups of residents to change zoning of a particular area, as small as four lots. This is usually done to “up-zone” (densify) a given suburban set of tracts occupying a set of lots, a street, or an entire neighborhood. Hyper local zoning begins to address the political challenge of zoning adjustments experienced at the scale of the city, by focusing the negotiation on a smaller group of residents. In this way the smaller groups can create policy in such a way that it suits them best.

Hyper local zoning can open front and rear yards to ADU’s, businesses, restaurants, and other functions that a neighborhood may need. In addition, when lots are bundled together the center of a block can open to create a shared and protected programmed surface and space that can be used for entry courts to auxiliary apartments. They can also offer surface and space for community playgrounds, gardens, smaller scale and much needed functions like small daycares, neighborhood libraries and study centers, small cafes, and other social spaces for residents to gather.

Importantly, hyper local zoning can protect constituents who are in the minority from a change in urban texture that may not illustrate or accommodate their values or way of life. This type of zoning allows a community to truly preserve its social and cultural diversity by responding to both the cultural aspirations of a newer majority and those in the minority. Some will believe the image and space of such policy can lead to an inconsistent neighborhood space and form. However, such messiness in terms of community image can not only speak to social diversity but also functional and social invention that allows for a neighborhood to adapt to all types of change in ways that make it more competitive at a regional, national, or global scale.

### SUMMARY

Demographic change in aging suburbs is a fact that architects, planners, and civic leadership need to view as an opportunity to renew its collective identity through changes in spatial patterns of suburbia. New values and identities are the fuel that drive this change. The number of informal and improvisational transformations of spatial practices in suburbs continues to grow and should be embraced as inspiration for thinking about various possibilities for its’ modification.

For civic leaders and designers of the built environment, there is more than meets the eye in this change. The seemingly unrelated



Figure 5. "Living Rooms at the Border" Casa Familiar Development, Estudio Cruz, San Ysidro, Ca. Image credit www.casafamiliar.org/livingroomsattheborder/

collisions of the historical Anglo-American suburb based on the lawn and house, with new cultures, forms, functions, and spatial practices create a new type of urbanism that is defined not as much by physical density but by functional variety and the concentration of social interaction. Such a less formula driven future suburbia can be a place that addresses more needs for a greater variety of people. This can eventually become a better place where new and engaging and, till now, unimagined personal and shared stories can develop and play out for those who live and work there.

While such change remains threatening to some, existing suburbs that adapt will not only creatively address the identity and meet the needs of their new residents, but more likely make places that attract people from other backgrounds. This allows the community and the larger metropolitan area to not only be more competitive, by adapting to changes in human behavior and harnessing the potential energy and innovation of new residents, but also better speaks to its ethical responsibility of providing places that accommodate and illustrate the values of all residents.

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