



A row of houses in Silver Lake built under the small-lot subdivision ordinance.

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## Radical Remodeling

What comes after the single-family home?

Since the 1920s, the single-family home of California has been, in its most elemental form, a snug, one-story, wood-framed house. But then came the remodels: the replacement windows, home-office additions, and backyard renovations in a continuous loop of demolition, rebuilding, and reinvention. Drive through any community in California, and you'll see it, the basic bungalow—sometimes built more than a century ago and updated in 1961, 1989, 2007, 2015. The home might not impress at first glance, but linger a while and a Frankenstein stitching together of stylistic riffs is revealed. There might be a lattice up at the gable's crux, inspired by a Dutch farmhouse motif; a squared bay on the driveway likely forms a dining room hutch, an interior design feature advertised to middle-class housewives in *Ladies' Home Journal* circa 1910; the perky outdoor furniture from IKEA is Scandinavian modern; and the plaster is a nod to the Spanish tradition. These aesthetic traits are so commonplace in California's suburban neighborhood homes that we barely notice,

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let alone marvel at the melting pot of ideas, concepts, and technologies our homes embody.

Over decades of gradual change, Californians played with the very idea of what a middle-class, single-family home can and should look like. But single-family homes of the twentieth century were not intended as outlets for individuality and creativity. Indeed, quite the opposite was true: most of California's single-family housing stock was built speculatively, or semi-speculatively, by large home-building companies that built hundreds of homes at a time, by the acre, and with generic floor plans. The development company sold empty parcels to new owners. The owners would then peruse a book of architectural plans, choose one (a plan could be purchased anywhere from \$10 to \$15), and the builders would reconfigure the plans to suit the lot, for another \$10.<sup>1</sup> Architectural plans by developer-builder companies such as Pittman Brothers, Marlow-Burns Builders, Kaiser Community Homes, and Kaufman & Broad reveal little customization or personalization except for tweaks required to accommodate the constraints of an individual lot or other site condition. This formulaic model of real estate development generated California's uniform suburbs, which are so often criticized and stylized in movies, literature, and urban studies classes.

A property owner's individual identity could come through in the single family home, but only over time, with each successive paint job, kitchen renovation, or lawn ornament. Customization of the middle-class, single-unit home—like the Southern California-grown phenomenon of custom cars and hot rods—rose from the realm of the weekend tinkerer and the informal economy. These acts of home improvement, like those of the driveway mechanic, freed the suburban home from its generic, mass-produced relentlessness.

Southern California's lax design guidelines in particular made an inexpensive individuality relatively simple to attain. Nonstructural renovations and additions such as wind chimes, flagpoles, new paint, colorful awnings, distinctive window treatments, and lawn ornaments set one home apart from another without much investment of time or capital. Larger-cost items such as pools, landscaping, professional-quality appliances, central heat and air conditioning, additional rooms, and, more recently, energy-saving measures such as insulated windows, new roofing materials, and greywater systems could be worth

the expense because they might add equity and resale value to a home.

From the least expensive of Home Depot terra-cotta accents, to the most lush and ostentatious water-guzzling tropical gardens, basic bungalows helped make legible a frenzied human ecology across California. The carpet of everyday structures that rolls out across California embodies a spirit of individualism built one pink flamingo, planter box, and front-yard fence at a time.

In the twenty-first century, however, California's middle class is shrinking. In 1980, 60 percent of Californians could call themselves "middle-class," those who earn from \$44,000 to \$155,000 a year. That portion of the state's population slipped in 2011 to 49.7 percent<sup>2</sup> and it continues to erode. California has long seen the ticking decline of blue-collar and trade-worker numbers as industries have left the state and the country. But what's more striking about this trend is that even white-collar, middle-class workers—those earning \$150,000 per year, per household—cannot afford homes in many cities in California now. This is not just a problem of stagnating wages, but also stagnating housing: we are not building enough homes. A recent report from the Goldhirsh Foundation noted that Los Angeles, for example, will need a minimum of 500,000 additional units over the next thirty-five years to meet growing housing demands.

In April of 2015, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti pledged to build 100,000 new market-rate or below-market-rate homes by 2021, and he has instructed planning and building agencies to accommodate real estate developers to do so. More than 25,000 building permits have been issued in the city since Mayor Garcetti's decree, and development is up in other California cities as well. But new development models are now taking the place of the stand-alone, single-family home, in part because of scarcity of land. Small-lot subdivisions, townhomes, and high-amenity condominiums are infiltrating a market that has had to adjust to provide affordable and denser housing alternatives in cities that can't continue to develop beyond their exurbs.

Small-lot subdivisions are developed when a single lot zoned for multifamily buildings (apartments and condominiums) or commercial buildings is divided into smaller, individual lots of sellable land. Lots zoned for single-family homes are not allowed to be subdivided. Small-lot developments were intended to promote a different scale of home



Generations of owners have left their mark on this California bungalow.

ownership, physically and financially, by way of infill. They can enable younger home buyers with less personal wealth to enter the housing market and do so in the center of a city. The typical small-lot development features a number of skinny three- or four-story structures with just inches of space between them, set around a common driveway. Developments can be as small as three homes and as large as fifty.

Derek Leavitt, co-owner of Modative, a design-build firm and developer of small-lot projects, sees the emergence of small lots as providing a much needed antidote to the housing gap. “It’s become incredibly expensive to buy a home in LA, and there’s no help for all the people that did everything their parents told them to do—go to college, get a professional job, work your way up, and achieve success—and still they can’t afford a house,” Leavitt says. “Or they buy something way out in the Valley and that poses life quality and traffic problems. Or people just move to Austin, Portland—other cities that offer a life for young professionals, but where they can also afford

homes. So for us, this is personal—we don’t want to see our friends leaving LA.”

Like the cookie-cutter tract developments of the 1940s and 1950s, many small-lot subdivision developments in Los Angeles are designed and built speculatively. But Architect Tracy Stone, who has designed several small-lot projects, points to the urban benefits of the development type, explaining, “It’s a nice development product for a neighborhood, along with apartments and single-family homes. It makes for a permanent resident population, in addition to a temporary population that live in apartments, and then you’ve got ‘eyes on the street’— people have an investment in the neighborhood, and a different price point for entry into homeownership for many people.” Stone adds: “It really has yet to be seen how owners of these developments will personalize them.” She thinks that the small-lot development’s new version of “home sweet home” will take on an owner’s personality in smaller ways at first. New owners have begun to put their individual stamps on the roof decks

that top most of these homes, but they are mostly out of view from neighbors at the street level.

Small lots will provide an updated formal and financial model of living, but with market-rate home prices rising \$120,000 over the last three years to a median price of \$393,000 in California,<sup>3</sup> house buying is surely not a viable solution for all of the home-needy. Much criticism has been waged against small-lot developments from low-income-housing equity groups who see the type replacing desperately needed apartment housing in the region. When they see a clutch of dense homes appear on a lot that had previously been home to fewer people, neighborhood groups aren't happy either. But California is in dire need of more market-rate housing. For Californians wedded to the idea of the bungalow as an icon of California living, the small-lot house might also just look wrong—more vertical than horizontal, each built right up against its neighbor with no yard in front or back, and with a tidy uniformity that seems to discourage the personalization that marked twentieth-century modes housing.

Senior city planner for Los Angeles Jae Kim refers to small-lot development as a “new model—LA’s own brownstone walk-up.” Says Kim, “There’s a growing perception that we need less space at home because we’re going to have better city around us. For LA, there’s some shock value for residents and transplants who thought they could own a house with a yard, and here’s where small lots come in.”

“How will the form be affected as a result of the guidelines we put forth?” asks Kim, rhetorically. “We’re concerned how the actual integrity of the form will affect the neighbors and the built environment,” he says. “It’s always in the back of my mind, what are we going to see, formally as a community? We haven’t had a ‘Case Study’ movement with small lots yet, like we did with single-family homes in the forties and fifties.”

LA’s experimental Case Study houses interrogated, manipulated, and transformed the single-family home in Southern California from a mishmash of borrowed European forms into a modern, streamlined regional type, now emulated across the globe for its clean lines, indoor/outdoor flexibility, and agility in accommodating multiple families and generations. Architects like Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler transformed the model of suburban, single-family homes in California and simultaneously established residential modernism’s immeasurable impact on

mid-to-late twentieth-century design. That design style emerged from the prefab tract home “kit of parts,” zoning laws set forth by municipalities, and the designers’ and owners’ political bent. Today, new trends in the so-called “sharing economy” and small-lot types could blend to produce an emergent model, too—one that offers fundamental cooperative financing in a smaller portioning of land.

Small-lot development by speculative developers is not likely to push new living styles or design methods. But small-lot development in concert with new cooperative concepts by resident-owner groups could provide a next-wave of micro-homesteading. Groups of residents who pool finances for land and home ownership in California could spark development outside the usual mode of developers staking an initial investment for maximum short-term profit, which is how many small-lot developments get built now. In the guidelines and legalities of small-lot regulation that planners such as Jae Kim are developing, a strategy to abate this trend may emerge. Mayors are on board, and the crisis of affordable housing is hot. The time for alternatives is now. In California today, rentable granny flats, home-swapping, and AirBnB are—despite regulatory issues—establishing precedents for reconceptualizing and repackaging space, habitation, and the housing economy.

The emergence of new models in equitable co-housing, shared amenities, and multi-owner group developments are likely to shift design paradigms even further away from purely aesthetic revisions of “home,” to new organizational modes of living. These hybrid housing models are less about formal design trends and more about a spirit of empowerment and co-ownership emerging from the sharing economy.

When the owners of a nine-unit apartment building in the Divisadero neighborhood of San Francisco put their property up for sale in 2012—a move that would displace the group of artists who lived there—residents mobilized to buy the building themselves. They formed a community-development nonprofit group, Neighbors Developing Divisadero, and, with help from a crowdfunding campaign and the San Francisco Community Land Trust, proposed a sustainable mix of uses and housing types within the building that could garner subsidies and tax breaks over time for the potential new owners. The plan included converting existing units into low-income apartments and adding a community gathering space called “The Living Room,” a lively, semipublic



Outside the Eco Village.

space within the apartment building that could host occasional pop-up art exhibitions and performances.

In Southern California, Eco-Village is a cooperative community just west of downtown Los Angeles, where residents have cut away curbs and rerouted neighborhood streets to favor pedestrians over vehicle traffic and to make more room for community gardens. Their ad hoc, take-back-the-neighborhood approach to community living shares aspects of the commune movement of the sixties and seventies. Amenities such as shared bike racks mingle with colorfully painted spiral patterns on the streets, walls, and gates that are peppered throughout the two-block area, where around forty residents live in a variety of redeveloped homes and apartment complexes within the village.

More than a century's worth of California homes now cover the former oil fields of LA, the shrubby foothills above Fresno County, and the sunny hillsides of San Diego, their crazy-quilt layered history and identity on display for all. Our frenzied residential ecology may be set to morph again in

a co-financed, individually owned and built small-lot boom. Kickstarter-funded homesteading, stacked-up mini-homes with their own roof decks, co-owned properties with flexible commons, reoriented lots, new addresses, streets, and small neighborhoods will usher in a new phase of ideation on formal modes of habitation and place-making, calling forth new forms of architectural legibility. Both the spirit of the weekend tinkerer and the cagey developer have their parts to play in this potential model—homegrown in its customization and eager to accommodate the next mixture of ideas, concepts, and technologies that may remodel what we think of as California living. **B**

### Notes

All photographs by the author.

- <sup>1</sup> Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City*, (MIT Press, 2000).
- <sup>2</sup> Public Policy Institute California, 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> Zillow.com real estate tracking, 2015.