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Remaking the American Dream

The Informal and Formal Transformation of Single-Family Housing Cities

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2 THE IDEOLOGY OF SINGLE-FAMILY LIVING

In the early 1980s, the *New York Times* (Geist 1981) detailed the strong opposition to modest changes in single-family housing neighborhoods by quoting a Springdale, Connecticut,¹ resident named Mrs. Green. She criticized her neighbors for adding tenants and rental apartments by subdividing their houses without permits and noted, “They are trying to carve up the American Dream itself—the family home—and I’m going to fight it.” Mrs. Green’s opposition to second units must be understood in the context of the rise of single-family housing as a defining feature of contemporary American urbanism.

Neighborhoods exclusively made up of detached single-family houses, now seemingly ubiquitous in US cities and suburbs, are a relatively new spatial and cultural form. While detached housing had emerged as the preferred suburban ideal in the late nineteenth century, neighborhoods of single-family houses were uncommon and affordable only to affluent families in the early twentieth century (Warner and Whittemore 2012). Studies of land use in prewar US cities show very few neighborhoods of exclusively single-family houses (Bartholomew 1932). Barbara Flint (1977), for example, examined zoning maps from 1910 to 1940 of Los Angeles, Chicago, and St. Louis and found that land use districts allowing only single-family housing were rare in all three jurisdictions. Nonetheless, in the span of a few decades after World War II, single-family dwellings and their neighborhoods became the ideal for successful middle-class living in the US.

The prevalence of detached single-family houses for urban living is unique to US, Australian, and Canadian cities (Hirt 2014). In other parts

of the world, detached single-family dwellings with private yards are typically located in small towns or villages. To the extent that their cities have single-family housing, it is mostly in the form of attached houses with shared side walls that are often called town houses, row houses, or terrace houses. The US, Australia, and Canada are exceptional in having achieved both high urbanization levels and an extraordinary commonness of detached single-family housing—over 63 percent of the housing units in the US, “nearly twice the EU average; almost 76 percent in Australia; and over 55 percent in Canada” (Hirt 2014, 21).

Scholars have described the detached single-family dwellings as “houses for a new world” (B. Lane 2015) that are emblematic of the contemporary American Dream in the US. They suggest that the homes resonate with Americans’ long-standing pastoral ideals and have helped create a unique, anti-urban culture of urbanism (Marx 1964; Rowe 1991). Single-family living is both a goal to aspire to and a symbol of its inhabitants’ social and economic success (Jackson 1985). In the US, land for other uses “may sell for more per acre and the buildings on them may cost more per square foot to occupy, but none is valued socially as highly as the single-family house on its own lot” (Perin 1977, 45).

Gradually, a comprehensive ideology of single-family living has developed in the US. Its subscribers associate values of spatial individualism, egalitarian democracy, and the family with the urban and social form of single-family housing and its communities. Many homeowners believe that their property values are associated with single-family living. They view changes to single-family housing as detrimental to their neighborhoods’ social and physical character and dogmatically oppose even modest reforms like second units. Nonetheless, single-family living’s limitations can push homeowners to modify their houses informally.

THE RISE OF HOMEOWNERSHIP AND SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSING AS THE AMERICAN DREAM

The first explicit reference to the American Dream, as invoked by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book, *The Epic of America*, is an abstract call for a society that recognizes an individual’s capabilities over their stature as the guiding principle for a country with few shared traditions and conventions:

That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (404)

For Adams, material prosperity was not central to the American Dream. His more open call for a national aspiration and moral standard built on Thomas Jefferson's enshrining of the "pursuit of Happiness" as a basic right in the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson and others of the founding generation, however, saw property ownership as a pathway to autonomy, security, and national expansion. Jefferson in particular envisioned land ownership as a means of settling and belonging. His agrarian preferences and advocacy for democratic participation in property ownership inspired architects and planners to imagine new forms of urbanization. For example, the modern master architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1932) acknowledged Jefferson's influence in his proposal for Broadacre City, which he designed with homes on one-acre lots. More pragmatically, the idea of owning a detached single-family house on a modest-sized lot with a private garden emerged as a plausible alternative. It brought together the spatial individualism and economic security that Jefferson advocated with the potential of egalitarian accessibility, becoming entrenched as key to the American Dream.

The federal government took the lead in expanding homeownership, particularly of single-family housing. In 1919, the federal government took over the National Association of Realtors' (then known as the National Association of Real Estate Boards) homeownership campaign, Own Your Own Home (Kiviat 2010). The promotional campaign emphasized owning single-family dwellings as a patriotic duty (Rothstein 2017). Republican Herbert Hoover, first as secretary of commerce (1921–1928) and subsequently as president (1929–1933), actively promoted single-family living and homeownership as part of good citizenship (Hise 1999).²

The public policy push for homeownership showed significant success in the early decades after World War II. The homeownership rate climbed from about 40 percent in 1940 to nearly 63 percent by 1965 (James Jacobs

2015). The apparent success in democratizing homeownership led the US to push the policy globally as both an economic development plan and a strategy to resist the spread of communism (Kwak 2015). Subsequent progress in increasing the homeownership rate in the US was more limited. By 1980, the homeownership rate had inched to almost 65 percent and may have peaked at about 69 percent in 2004 (Nelson 2013). Data from 2019 indicated a homeownership rate of slightly over 64 percent and suggested that it may be plateauing at around the two-thirds mark (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University 2020).

In 1985 *CBS News* and the *New York Times* conducted one of the first national surveys to directly examine the relationship between homeownership and the American Dream (Hanson and White 2011). Seventy-six percent of the survey respondents agreed that homeownership was an essential part of the American Dream. Subsequent surveys and studies showed similar results, and the overwhelming majority of Americans continue to see homeownership as central to the American Dream (Gallagher 2013).³

In the US public's imagination, successful homeownership is usually equated with owning a single-family house.⁴ Although this stylized assumption is not entirely correct, there is some truth to the public perception.⁵ As figure 2.1 shows, in 2013, homeowners lived in around 88 percent of the single-family houses in the US, while renters occupied nearly two-thirds of the multifamily housing stock. Since single-family houses account for about two-thirds of the country's housing stock, the overwhelming majority of homeowners in the US do live in single-family dwellings.

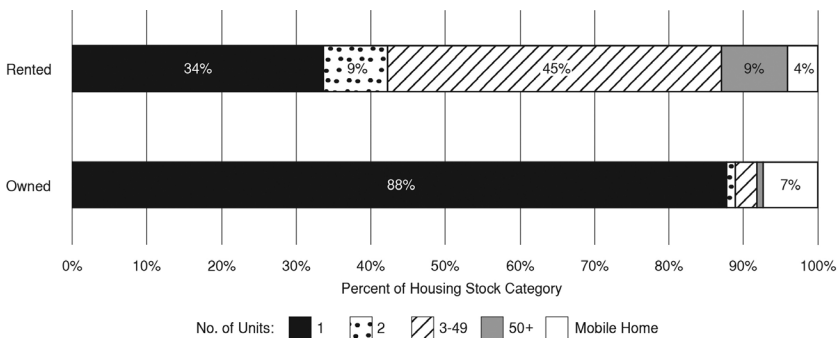


FIGURE 2.1

Relationship between building tenure and type. *Source:* 2013 American Housing Survey (US Census Bureau 2013b). *Graphic:* Jae-Hyeon Park.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EFFORTS IN SUPPORT OF SINGLE-FAMILY LIVING

Single-family dwellings dominate new housing construction in the US. According to Arthur Nelson's (2013) analysis of American Housing Survey data from 1989 to 2009, more than twenty-four million new dwelling units were built in the country, and 85 percent were single-family houses.⁶ Below, I discuss the key contributions of both policy makers and private market actors in manufacturing the supply and demand for single-family living.

Federal Support for Homeownership and Suburban Expansion: The federal government has played a leading role in making homeownership, particularly of single-family houses, affordable through insurance support for mortgage lenders. Its policies helped boost the demand for detached single-family housing in exclusively single-family neighborhoods by explicitly endorsing and supporting these homes as ideal investments for home buyers and the lenders who extend mortgages to them.

The federal government began its large-scale direct intervention in housing markets at the height of the Great Depression, when millions of homeowners were losing their homes to foreclosure. After attempting to stem the tide of foreclosure with ineffective small-scale programs, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC), which was empowered to directly refinance mortgages that were in danger of default or foreclosure, in 1933. The HOLC was empowered to directly refinance mortgages that were in danger of default or foreclosure. The need was enormous, and the scale of the HOLC's loan program was unprecedented. It produced two significant innovations that have shaped US housing through the present day.

First, the HOLC revolutionized mortgage finance. Kenneth Jackson (1985, 196) sums it up well: "The HOLC is important to history because it introduced, perfected, and proved in practice the feasibility of the long-term, self-amortizing mortgage with uniform payments spread over the whole life of the debt." In the 1920s, most mortgages required high down payments and were extended for only five or ten years, after which the buyer was expected to refinance or lose their home to foreclosure. The HOLC's low interest rates, long repayment periods—typically twenty years—and stable payments made buying a home more affordable and more secure than it had been. Second, the HOLC created the first large-scale, standardized methods for appraising mortgages (Jackson 1985).

The Roosevelt administration followed up with the National Housing Act in 1934, which led to the creation of the Federal Housing Administration

(FHA), a successor to the HOLC. The FHA adopted the HOLC's system for appraising lending risk, and it had a tremendous impact on the character and location of postwar American housing. Whereas the HOLC directly extended credit to distressed homeowners facing foreclosure, the FHA provided mortgage insurance to private lenders (Jackson 1985). Roosevelt's administration also adopted the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (popularly known as the GI Bill), which led to the establishment of the Veterans Administration (VA) and guaranteed loans to help returning World War II veterans buy homes. Both the FHA and the VA were pivotal in the development of the modern mortgage industry. Providing government insurance for mortgage lenders helped to make lending less risky and mortgages more readily available.

The FHA's ability to pick and choose which mortgages would receive federal backing gave it incredible power over housing and development. To receive FHA backing, a property had to meet the FHA's housing standards. Those standards, which the agency published in its underwriting manuals, reflected the attitudes and values of the white, male middle class to the wealthy real estate professionals and bankers who wrote them. They favored detached single-family houses over multifamily buildings, new construction instead of rehabilitating existing buildings, suburban development rather than urban, and single-use zoning to create homogenous environments, which the agency considered economically stable. For example, the agency "insisted that any single-family residence it insured could not have facilities that allowed the dwelling to be used as a store, an office, or rental unit" (Jackson 1985, 207–208).

Fiscally, the federal government's support for mortgage interest deduction (MID) allows taxpayers in the US to reduce their taxable income by the amount of interest paid on loans for owner-occupied homes. The deduction subsidizes homeownership and helps make single-family houses more affordable, particularly in cities with expensive housing. Homeowners can deduct interest on mortgage debt up to \$750,000 for a principal home and a secondary home.⁷ Although MID's stated objective is to promote homeownership, it is more likely to help homebuyers borrow more to buy bigger and more expensive houses (Gruber, Jensen, and Kleven 2017; Hilber and Turner 2013).

At the cost of unprecedented sprawl, the federal government used transportation and urbanization policy to encourage single-family living and homeownership through its ambitious road construction program. The

Federal Highway Act of 1956, formally known as the Interstate and Defense Highways Act, significantly increased the supply of land serviced by highways. The act authorized the construction of forty-one thousand miles of freeways, which exponentially opened up inexpensive agricultural land for urbanization, housing construction, and affordable single-family houses (Moudon 1995). State governments decided the location and alignment of new highways (Taylor 2000), and scholars hold them responsible for displacing urban communities of color across the country for their construction (Avila 2014).

Market Actors and the Push for Single-Family Housing: Large-scale builders responded splendidly to the federal financial incentives for building single-family housing communities, particularly after World War II as the highways network expanded (Jackson 1985). The advent of balloon-frame construction allowed them to build housing quickly and at large scale while lowering costs. Builders realized cost savings from assembly-line construction techniques, economies of scale, and mass production methods (Warner and Whittemore 2012). US policy makers regarded such construction best practices as transferable and promoted them in other urbanizing countries struggling to increase their housing supply (Abrams 1964). Builders such as Levitt & Sons in Levittown, New York, and Louis Boyar, Mark Taper, and Ben Weingart in Lakewood, California,⁸ kept their construction costs down through spatial innovations. These changes included building modest-sized single-family houses with simple layouts on small lots, often with unfinished attics, allowing for lower initial costs and opportunities for subsequent additions and expansions, much like incremental development in the Global South (Hayden [1984] 2002; Kelly 1993; Waldie 1996).

Federal agencies and market-based private actors made a significant marketing push to build a culture of homeownership, particularly around single-family housing and its associated lifestyle. The FHA and the VA supported promotional campaigns with posters, booklets, and advertising to encourage single-family living and homeownership (Hise 1999). The National Association of Homebuilders, a federation of state and local associations, coordinated immensely popular homeownership and new housing festivals, including National Home Week (NHW). The association celebrated the first NHW in 1948, with seventy-five participating cities. By its tenth year, 1957, the NHW included ten thousand houses in 185 communities and attracted over ten million visitors (James Jacobs 2015).

Along with regular features on suburban communities in well-known publications like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Business Week*, and *Fortune*, so-called homemaking magazines like *Better Homes & Gardens*, *American Home*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Women's Home Companion*, and *Good Housekeeping* played a pivotal role in influencing domestic life and building a constituency for middle-class living based on single-family housing (D. Harris 2012; James Jacobs 2015). As technology improved, it became easier to publish photographs and graphics in periodicals and for homebuyers to visualize the comforts of single-family life. The circulation of homemaking magazines exploded, and their influence on consumer demand skyrocketed. *Better Homes & Gardens*, for example, had a circulation of almost eight million by the early 1970s (James Jacobs 2015).⁹

Race and Prejudice: The history of federal efforts to support homeownership and the construction of single-family housing in US cities is, in large part, the history of spatial segregation and systemic racism. Both public and private sector actors brought their racial prejudices to the endeavor of remaking the country's housing market.

Notoriously, the FHA's lending standards openly promoted and reinforced racial housing segregation by appraising all-white neighborhoods as "low-risk" areas for investment while labeling mixed-race or Black communities "high-risk" (Rothstein 2017). Irrespective of potential borrowers' income, wealth, and creditworthiness, the FHA refused to provide lenders with mortgage insurance for housing loans within neighborhoods it classified as high risk, which it outlined in red on agency maps (Rothstein 2017). This countrywide practice became known as redlining. It systemically starved Black communities of investment and shifted resources to exclusionary, all-white enclaves. This top-down push for white communities institutionalized federal support for segregation in American cities and suburbs, perpetuated and strengthened existing spatial patterns, and continues to be a defining feature of the national landscape (Massey and Denton 1993; Rugh and Massey 2014).

Local zoning regulations, including explicitly racial ordinances, played a crucial role in institutionalizing such social and spatial discrimination patterns. Racial prejudice often drove interest in zoning regulations (Whittemore 2018). The city of Los Angeles passed "the country's first zoning law in 1908" (M. Weiss 1987, 13). Several other cities followed with zoning regulations. Particularly noteworthy are New York City, which legislated the country's first comprehensive citywide zoning in 1916 to regulate land use and design (Fischler 1998), and Berkeley, California, which, also in 1916,

pioneered the use of exclusive zones for single-family houses as separate and distinct land use districts (M. Weiss 1986).

In 1910, Baltimore, Maryland, introduced the country's first explicit racial segregation-based land use law to prevent people of one race from living in neighborhoods with people of another race (Silver 1997). While Baltimore was the first to introduce racial zoning, it was a widespread practice in the region within a few years.¹⁰ In 1914, Louisville, Kentucky, was zoned to prevent Black owners from buying property in white-majority neighborhoods and vice versa (Toll 1969). Local governments' efforts to implement explicit racial zoning were stalled in 1917 when the business-friendly US Supreme Court—which ruled against minimum wage and labor safety laws in other cases—struck down Louisville's explicit racial zoning for its interference in property rights and the freedom of contract in *Buchanan v. Warley* (Rothstein 2017).

The judicial impediment did not immediately end the practice of race-based zoning. In 1922, for example, local policy makers divided Atlanta, Georgia, into three race-based districts: R-1, white district; R-2, colored district; and undetermined district. When the zoning ordinance was challenged in the courts, the city's attorneys unsuccessfully argued that the law only prohibited living in specific neighborhoods and was not an infringement on the right to buy property (Rothstein 2017). In 1924, Richmond, Virginia, which had antimiscegenation laws prohibiting interracial marriage, unsuccessfully tried to work around the courts and institute racial zoning by banning people from living in neighborhoods where they could not marry a majority of the residents. Although the city's attorneys argued that Richmond's law, unlike Louisville's, was not about limiting property rights, the Supreme Court rejected their reasoning in 1930 (Rothstein 2017).

After losing the ability to enshrine explicit housing discrimination into public ordinances, private developers and homeowners attempted to preserve their all-white neighborhoods through private contracts. They embraced racially restrictive covenants, clauses in a property's deed forbidding its sale or rental to people of color. Racially restrictive covenants had been introduced in the mid-nineteenth century but gained widespread use in the 1920s and proliferated through the 1940s (Jones-Correa 2000). They helped developers meet their white homebuyers' perceived market demand for segregated neighborhoods and made it easier for white households to access mortgage insurance from the FHA. In 1948, in *Shelley v. Kramer*, the US Supreme Court

ruled racially restrictive covenants were unenforceable. However, the use of discriminatory contracts continued for two more decades until the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968 outlawed them (Brooks and Rose 2013).

The restrictions on governments to institute racial zoning, and the limitations on private developers to impose and enforce racially restrictive covenants, contributed to the rise in popularity of single-family zoning.¹¹ Single-family zoning became the legally acceptable and socially sanctioned approach for sorting and segregating households based on class. It was a convenient proxy for race-based discrimination too (Connerly 2005; Freund 2007).

REDEFINITION OF AMERICAN URBANISM

Several observers note that the lack of medium-density housing—or the missing middle—is a characteristic of contemporary American urbanism (Leinberger 2007; Parolek 2012, 2020). Previously, two-family houses were a regular feature of the late nineteenth-century streetcar suburbs and urban neighborhoods across the country (Warner 1969). They were common in cities and widely known as the duplex in Los Angeles, the double in Indianapolis, and the two-flat in Chicago, but they started becoming rare in new construction after the mid-1930s (Gellen 1985). The FHA discouraged them through its mortgage underwriting requirements by arguing that rental income was unpredictable, and demanded higher insurance rates from homebuyers of two-family houses. Similarly, the once-typical construction of triple-deckers in New England and three-flats in Chicago became uncommon.

Jurisdictions throughout the country also pushed for the end of second units as accessory dwellings. In Washington, DC, for example, Congress approved the District of Columbia Alley Dwelling Act of 1934 to establish a housing authority for removing coach houses built on alleyways by equating them with slums and prohibiting alley habitation (Borchert 1980). Scholars such as James Borchert (1980) and Amy Lavine (2010) argued that these housing policy reforms were primarily motivated by the desire to remove Black residents from Washington, DC's central areas.

The postwar housing construction boom of 1945–1970 dramatically transformed US cities and suburbs. Single-family housing became the dominant urban form. According to James Jacobs (2015), the author of the aptly named *Detached America*, between 1945 and 1970, private builders constructed over thirty-five million housing units, and the overwhelming majority were

detached single-family houses. In contrast, in what scholars have described as the “anti-apartment movement in the US” (Baar 1996), “multifamily construction declined to 7 percent of construction between 1946 and 1956 as the private sector adjusted to the booming FHA-driven market for single-family homes” (Whittemore 2012a, 627). This transformation was not limited to the suburbs or the periphery of US cities. Rather, it was a defining feature of most US cities, many of which grew and developed significantly in the postwar era.

Federal home financing policies, local zoning practices, and racial prejudices prepared Americans to think that their home values depend on neighborhood homogeneity, segregation by race and class, and the absence of other land uses and housing types (Badger 2018). As housing has grown in importance as an asset for most homeowners, mainly through the 1970s, homeowners have become more active and politically organized against changes to their neighborhoods (Fischel 2001). Their interests and concerns about residential property values have expanded beyond the limits of their private lots or property lines (Fennell 2009). While some homeowners claim that they are heroically fighting against elite development interests to protect their communities and the environment (Gendron and Domhoff 2008; Logan and Molotch 1987), others see them as driven by their racial and class prejudices and an antiurban sentiment of “freedom from unwanted social contact and the possibility of social conflict” (Perin 1977, 90).

THE REALITY OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Critics of the American Dream (i.e., single-family housing and its neighborhoods) disapprove of the high environmental and social costs associated with its dominance in the country’s urbanization pattern. They criticize public policy support for sprawl and the ownership of single-family housing in exclusively single-family housing neighborhoods for crowding out other housing options and adversely affecting those who cannot afford it or want alternatives. Single-family living has four key challenges: environmental costs, spatial and social exclusion, affordability, and demographic mismatch. Some of these challenges may motivate and enable policy makers, planners, and residents to reform single-family zoning. Others, particularly the last two, are likely to cause homeowners to consider adding informal second units.

Environmental Costs: Critics of single-family housing find the sprawl associated with these neighborhoods wasteful and indefensible in an era of climate crisis. Their fundamental criticism is that single-family houses are inherently inefficient because of their high consumption of land, building materials, infrastructure, amenities, and other resources (Owen 2009; Peterson, Peterson, and Liu 2013). This contrasts with the claim by cultural historians that the detached single-family house represents a “middle landscape” between the city or urban living and the village or rural living (Marx 1964; Rowe 1991). They suggest that the private gardens of single-family dwellings allowed for living with the natural environment amid the dramatic changes of urbanization. As I elaborate in the next chapter, homeowners in the city of Los Angeles strongly believe that their single-family dwellings and neighborhoods are ecologically and environmentally friendly.

The environmental cost of single-family living keeps growing and will increase exponentially with more sprawl. The average size of a detached single-family house more than doubled during the second half of the twentieth century.¹² Scholars see an environmentally vicious cycle of consumption driven by bigger homes, more sprawl, and more dependence on driving and private transportation (Peterson, Peterson, and Liu 2013). Worse, this ecologically destructive urbanization pattern is enabled by public policies through hidden and perverse subsidies for homeowners and land developers (Blais 2010).

Exclusion: Single-family neighborhoods exacerbate spatial and social exclusion, particularly along the lines of race, class, and gender. First, scholars argue that discrimination and racial exclusion are at the core of single-family living (Hunt and Ramón 2010; Freund 2007; Rothstein 2017). They describe the resulting geography of housing and neighborhoods and the different opportunity structures they created as “American apartheid” (Massey and Denton 1993). In her well-known essay “Whiteness as Property,” Cheryl Harris (1997) argued that the centrality of property ownership in the US is instrumental in producing racial identity and perpetuating racial inequality. Ownership of single-family housing, critics argue, is similar (Schneider 2019; Vallianatos 2018).

Even though the American Dream is theoretically egalitarian and open to everyone, discrimination in mortgage lending ensures that homeownership—and the generational wealth that can come with it—is less accessible to people of color. Once white home buyers found their dream communities,

they worked to maintain neighborhood racial homogeneity directly through outright hostility and violence (Jeannine Bell 2013; Freund 2007; James Jacobs 2015; Loewen 2006). The adverse effects of redlining, mortgage discrimination, violence, and segregation persist in Black neighborhoods across the US. The inequities in private investment have been worsened by disparities in public investment in the same communities. For example, scholars have identified fewer trees and more paved areas in previously redlined Black communities. Consequently, the neighborhoods are hotter than their white counterparts, and residents have more heat-related illnesses (Hoffman, Shandas, and Pendelton 2020). In this context, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014, 2015) denounced the American Dream and its enduring and exacerbating impacts and made a case for reparations.

In *Ghetto*, Mitchell Duneier (2016) reminded readers that Black neighborhoods were formed and persist because of forced confinement. He detailed the role of planning institutions like zoning, racially restrictive covenants, and discrimination in mortgage access in constructing the geography of segregation and confinement. He described racially restrictive covenants as the “invisible wire-fence” of off-limit neighborhoods. Duneier’s scholarship built on Kenneth Clark’s (1965) criticism of “white control” and the “institutionalization of powerlessness” and their roles in the segregation of Black Americans in the classic *Dark Ghetto*.

Second, single-family neighborhoods are designed to exclude tenants, and class-based exclusion drives the differences in residential zoning at different densities. The 1926 US Supreme Court case of *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Company* established the constitutional validity of zoning regulations as the legitimate expansion of the police power of local government to separate housing from potentially polluting industries. Its detailed opinion made the class basis and bias of the institution clear. In the dispute between Euclid, Ohio, a suburb to the east of Cleveland, and Ambler Realty, which was interested in developing its land for industry, the Supreme Court dismissed the company’s claim that the town’s zoning was arbitrary and deprived it of its property rights without due process (Boudreaux 2011). In the ruling, the justices accepted the need for policy makers to distinguish between different housing types in zoning ordinances, such as single-family and multifamily housing. They established as legal doctrine the idea that denser forms of housing, particularly for renters, are inferior to single-family houses, with which they have a parasitical relationship:

With particular reference to apartment houses, it is pointed out that the development of detached house sections is greatly retarded by the coming of apartment houses, which has sometimes resulted in destroying the entire section for private house purposes; that in such sections very often the apartment house is a mere parasite, constructed in order to take advantage of the open spaces and attractive surroundings created by the residential character of the district. (Quoted in Haar 1959, 163)

In the process, the justices reversed on appeal the opinion of the conservative trial judge in the Euclid case, Judge David Westenhaver. In his criticism of zoning's elitism and discriminatory outcomes, Judge Westenhaver noted that "the result to be accomplished is to classify the population and segregate them according to their income and situation in life" (Liebmann 1990, 2).

In a market economy, land prices play a role in segregating households based on their income and wealth. Instead of challenging or mitigating such socially adverse effects, conventional zoning deepens and strengthens market outcomes and social prejudices by mandating maximum density limits, minimum lot sizes, and other subjective housing standards that increase the cost of housing under the rubric of neighborhood character and general welfare. Zoning regulations, particularly single-family zoning, discriminate and "zone out" people in a socially acceptable manner based on their economic class and income (Levine 2006).

Collectively, the empirical evidence examining the relationship between zoning and segregation indicates that spatial separation between households with different incomes is exacerbated by land use regulations, particularly through zoning for low-density, single-family housing (Davidoff 2005; Jar-gowsky 2015; Pendall 2000; Rothwell and Massey 2010). For example, my colleagues Michael Lens and Paavo Monkkonen (2016) found clear evidence of the association between low-density regulations and the segregation of higher-income groups. As they noted, "The relationship between urban form and income segregation is complex, but certain types of urban form, in particular low-density development patterns, can contribute to income segregation. Higher population densities, in contrast, could lead to greater integration if neighborhoods include more multifamily and smaller housing units" (7).

Third, single-family housing and neighborhoods pose a challenge for gender equity. Dolores Hayden, in *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family* ([1984] 2002), comprehensively critiqued the

harmful gender assumptions underlying the design of single-family life. She criticized built environments centered on single-family housing for perpetuating and strengthening gender categories and stereotypes, particularly the expectation that women would forgo paid employment outside the house and instead perform domestic labor as stay-at-home moms taking care of their gender-specific chores. As Hayden noted, “These houses encode Victorian stereotypes about a ‘woman’s place,’ while single-family neighborhoods sustain the separation of the household from the world of jobs and public life. Together, houses and neighborhoods form an architecture of gender unsuited to twenty-first-century life” (29). She argued that the anachronistic housing patterns of single-family living failed to reflect the aspirations of contemporary women or the reality of women-headed households.

Unaffordability: Modest-sized single-family housing, particularly with subsidized land development and postwar construction innovations, was one of the least expensive housing options to build. Contemporary single-family housing, however, is costly and unaffordable to a growing proportion of US households. Progressive legal scholars have optimistically speculated for decades that the US judiciary will eventually agree with Judge Westenhaver’s concerns for fairness and find single-family zoning unconstitutional for its explicit economic discrimination (Babcock 1969; Hagman 1971, 1983; Ziegler 1983). There has been little progress in this regard. However, owing to changes in the economic ability of middle-class Americans to afford single-family houses, as well as demographic shifts in the country, the demand for different forms and configurations of housing is increasing.

First, the US has a “vanishing middle class” with a declining share of national earnings (Temin 2017). Peter Temin defined the middle class as households earning between two-thirds of the median income and twice the median income. Its share of US earnings dropped from 60 percent in 1971 to 40 percent in 2014. Temin discussed many reasons for this change, including new technologies, globalization, the decline in unionization, and harmful public policies, such as low tax rates, racially motivated incarceration policies, and housing markets constrained by single-family zoning.

Second, scholars argue that high housing costs have resulted in declining economic mobility opportunities in the US. They claim that housing costs affect access to labor markets, making it difficult for less skilled workers to move to places where better employment opportunities are inviting but housing costs are exorbitant (Ganong and Shoag 2017; Hsieh and Moretti

2015). Peter Ganong and Daniel Shoag (2017) used state appeals court records to estimate strictness in land use regulations, including single-family zoning, and model their effects on income inequality. They found that income convergence across states and population flows to wealthy places declined sharply between 1980 and 2010. They concluded that “rising housing prices in wealthy areas deter unskilled migration and slow income convergence” (1).

In a similar vein, Chang-Tai Hsieh and Enrico Moretti (2015) used metropolitan-level data from 1964 to 2009 to examine how cities contribute to national growth. They argued that housing supply restrictions in the highly productive cities constrain the mobility of workers and limit their access to the top US cities with higher-paying jobs. They also estimated the adverse effects of the lack of mobility in the labor market on the national economy. They argued that easing regulatory constraints in the housing markets of highly productive cities like New York, San Francisco, and San Jose to the level of the median city would encourage mobility, expand their workforces, and increase US gross domestic product by 9.5 percent or over \$1.5 trillion a year.¹³

Additionally, there is increasing empirical evidence that neighborhoods—their location, services, amenities, and safety—affect residents’ long-term economic mobility (Chetty and Hendren 2015; Chetty, Hendren and Katz 2016; Sampson 2012). Neighborhoods help determine access to schools, one of the main attributes considered by Richard Reeves (2017) in his criticism of “opportunity hoarding” by the US upper-middle class. Reeves identified zoning and its role in limiting access to housing and neighborhoods as one of the primary reasons for constrained opportunities for economic mobility for the vast majority of US households.¹⁴

Demographic Complexity: The originally imagined consumer for detached single-family housing was a nuclear family of two parents (with the mother staying at home) and their two or three children. However, the US’s demographic reality is more complex and changing. The housing market dominated by single-family housing does a poor job of meeting the needs of a growing number of families.

First, the average household size in the US fell from 3.33 in 1960 to 2.62 in 1990 to 2.58 in 2010 before climbing back to 2.62 in 2018 (Pendall et al. 2012; Fry 2019). While the average US household size declined, the average and median sizes of new single-family houses increased. Figure 2.2 illustrates these divergent changes. A key reason behind the fall in household size is

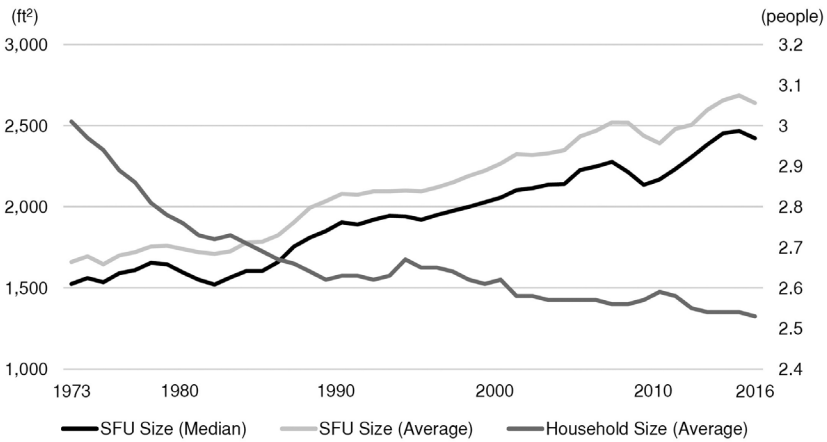


FIGURE 2.2

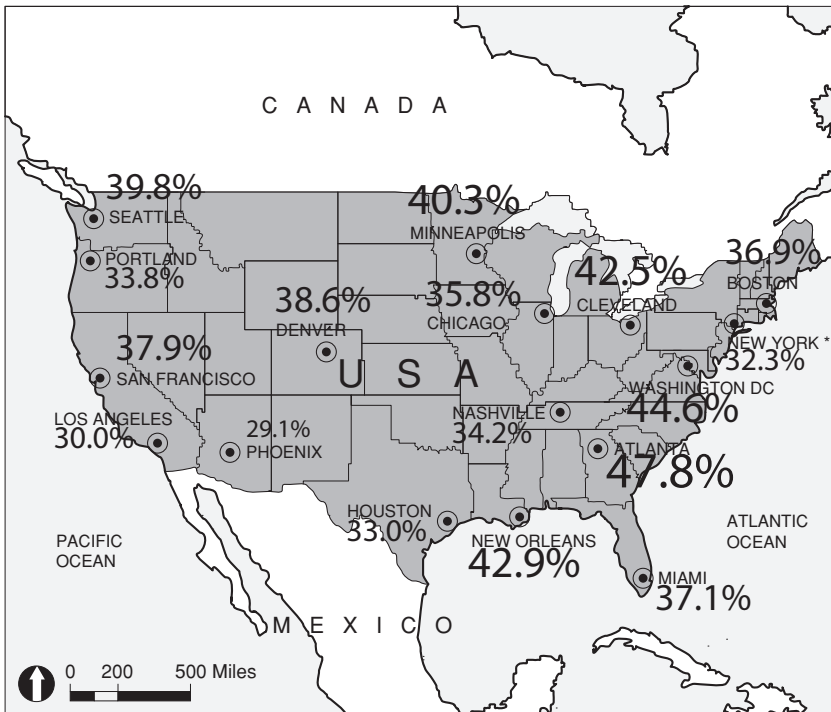
Relationship between US single-family unit (SFU) size and household size. Sources: US Census Bureau 2021a, 2021c. Graphic: Jae-Hyeon Park.

the declining share of nuclear families of two parents with children. In 1950, families of two parents living with their children composed over half of all US households (Lombard 2015). In 2010, only 30 percent of US households lived with their children, and scholars estimated that their share would decline to 27 percent by 2030 due to baby boomers becoming empty nesters (Nelson 2013).

Second, the fall in average household size is partly due to the sharp rise in single-person households, the fastest-growing family form in the US. Demographers estimated that there would be thirty-nine million single-person households by 2025 (Nelson 2006). Sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2012b) discussed this demographic shift extensively in his book *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*. He pointed out that the proportion of US solo households steadily increased from 5 percent of households in 1900 to 9 percent in 1950, to 25 percent in 1990, and 28 percent in 2010. Klinenberg noted the need for appropriately sized and designed housing, as well as neighborhoods with more shared and social infrastructure for solo households, particularly elderly residents. The proportion of single-person households is even higher in cities, where the need for suitable housing is most acute. For example, within the city boundaries of San Francisco, Seattle, Atlanta, and Denver, more than 40 percent of all households are single-person, and almost half of the households in New York City and

Washington, DC, are formed by people living alone. Single-person households are also a significant constituency of metropolitan regions. Figure 2.3 shows the leading urban areas with single-person households in the US.¹⁵

The third significant demographic change is the rise of multigenerational households. According to the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey data from 2009–2011, approximately 4.3 million households, or 5.6 percent, were multigenerational (i.e., consisted of three or more generations living together) (Lofquist 2012). In contrast, only 3.7 percent of US households were multigenerational in 2000. Demographers at the Pew Research Center define multigenerational households more liberally. In addition to families with three generations, they consider families with skipped generations (grandparents and grandchildren) or two generations of adults (parents



* MANHATTAN: 45.6%

FIGURE 2.3

Leading urban areas with one-person households. *Source:* 2014 American Community Survey data (US Census Bureau 2014); based on an illustration by Klinenberg 2012a. Graphic: Jae-Hyeon Park.

or in-laws with adult children twenty-five years old or older) as multigenerational.¹⁶ According to their estimates, fifty-seven million Americans lived in multigenerational households in 2012, sharply doubling from twenty-eight million in 1980 (Fry and Passel 2014). They estimated that multigenerational living is more common among households headed by foreign-born Americans. While 10 percent of households with US-born household heads are multigenerational, 16 percent of households with foreign-born household heads are multigenerational (Fry and Passel 2014).

Finally, Americans are aging and living longer, and single-family houses and neighborhoods poorly address their needs. The share of households headed by someone aged sixty-five years or older is increasing at an accelerated rate. The Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University (2016) estimated that the US population aged sixty-five years and over would rise from forty-eight million in 2015 to seventy-nine million by 2035. As a result, “while today older households represent one-quarter of all households, by 2035 they will account for one-third” (6). Correspondingly, in the US, “the population aged 85 and over [is] projected to grow more than five-fold between 2000 and 2050, from 4 million to 21 million” (Smith, Rayer, and Smith 2008, 290). This growth suggests that the number of households, including persons with disabilities, will increase significantly. Their homes will likely need to transform for aging-in-place, long-term care, and accommodation of caregivers.

As I noted in chapter 1, second units can play a central part in addressing the country’s demographic evolution. They can help accommodate two smaller households on single-family-zoned properties, single-person households, and multigenerational households across two dwellings on the same lot. Scholars from a diverse field of disciplines, including architecture, public policy, urban planning, and gerontology, see the possibility of aging-in-place through second units and caregivers living close by (Chapman and Howe 2001; Cuff, Higgins, and Dahl 2010; Dahl 2010; Folts and Muir 2002; Howe 1990; Liebig, Koenig, and Pynoos 2006; Spevak and Stanton 2019). Research conducted by the AARP suggests that second units are valued in the housing market. Its “consumer preference surveys of seniors indicate that 80 percent or more of older households would like to remain in their current homes,” and “over one-third would consider modifying their home to include an ADU if they needed assistance” (AARP and APA 2000, 9). Even though second units represent a relatively modest change to single-family

zoning and there is a growing market for them, the allure of single-family living is so strong that many homeowners strongly oppose them. And local governments, until recently, rarely permitted them. As a result, most homeowners interested in second units had to forgo them or add them informally.

CONCLUSION

Mrs. Green, the Springdale resident who shared her displeasure about her neighbors' unpermitted second units with the *New York Times* (Geist 1981) and complained about their potential to destroy her American Dream, also noted,

We will fight to maintain the character of the neighborhood. . . . Now we have parking problems, our driveway is frequently blocked, and there are noisy parties at all hours of the night. . . . Apartments bring in a different class of people. They have no stake in the community. . . . This is down zoning, which lessens property values. Once they allow this, they can move on to high rises and, who knows, I could wake up with a factory next door. Apartments are a sign of deterioration. It takes the sparkle out of the American Dream, just knowing there are apartments on the block.

She added, "Now they want to undermine the foundation of the dream itself, the home, by subdividing it. We will fight them to the finish" (Geist 1981).

Like Mrs. Green, many owners of single-family housing oppose second units and other changes to their neighborhoods' social and physical characteristics. They regard any change from single-family zoning a downzoning to less desirable uses. Although zoning reforms to allow second units are likely to increase their property values because of the potential to earn additional rent, many homeowners worry about renters eroding the quality of life in their communities and their property values declining.

For about a century, public policies and private actors have assured homeowners that single-family housing is the cornerstone of their economic success and social order and is nationally significant as a symbol of a unifying American Dream. In particular, the federal government's financial and institutional support played a central role in its material development. Other levels of government and market-based actors actively supported and contributed to the idea of single-family living too. Architects, planners, journalists, and other cultural tastemakers also played a vital role in

influencing the demand for single-family living and gradually constructing the ideology of single-family living.

Racial and class prejudice and exclusion have been central to the growth of single-family living. Single-family neighborhoods developed inequitably along the lines of race, class, and gender. While homeowners resist physical and social changes to their single-family houses and communities, the reality of the American Dream is markedly different for those left out. Single-family living also imposes a steep environmental cost. Carbon pricing policies, which remove hidden public subsidies and shift actual environmental costs to consumers, particularly for transportation and infrastructure, will likely make single-family living less affordable and accessible.

As demand for single-family living diminishes and changes, single-family housing neighborhoods are likely to transform. The addition of second units might be a modest change to single-family houses that becomes increasingly acceptable to economically motivated homeowners, neighbors, and local governments. Meanwhile, as this chapter suggests, the need and market demand for second units persist, and as a result, owners—like Mrs. Green’s neighbors—typically build them without planning permits. An earlier *New York Times* story from the late 1970s on suburbs in the city’s metropolitan region also discussed unpermitted second units: “Legal or Not, Single-Family Homes Adding Apartments” (A. Brooks 1979). It noted how strong demand for housing made it likely that homeowners would continue to add second units on their single-family-zoned lots. The story quoted Paul Davidoff, a pioneer in US planning history (Davidoff, Davidoff, and Gold 1970), admired for his opposition to restrictive zoning in the suburbs. He advocated for more liberal zoning that allowed smaller, affordable homes. Davidoff welcomed the informal supply of housing units and the ingenuity of owners and tenants. He noted, “It’s beautiful. These apartments are a magnificent answer to the tremendous shortage of less expensive housing in the region. They are to everybody’s advantage” (A. Brooks 1979).

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