Sustainable Suburbs
Making it Happen Without the Master Plan

Suburbs are the fastest growing areas of this country. Most construction, a majority of population, and a majority of jobs currently exist in the suburbs. While some changes have occurred since William Levitt first broke ground in Levittown in the late 1940’s, the pattern of suburban development has remained surprisingly constant in the last 60 years with enclaved, auto-oriented, and detached development being the norm. At the same time, sustainability concerns are at an all time high. Global warming continues to affect climates around the world, household consumption of energy continues to rise, and last year we reached record oil prices.

If we are to deal with sustainability concerns, we must directly deal with the way that suburbs are developed in this country. Sustainable development in suburbia is not a new concept. Recent approaches for shifting the nature of suburbia have, however, overwhelmingly focused on large scale, master plans that center around mixed use nodes. While this approach is valid and has been effective, the vast majority of suburbia is not developed as part of a mixed use master plan, but instead consists of smaller, single-use developments that are guided primarily by zoning. If there is to be a true change in the nature of suburbia, it will need to affect this smaller scale of developments.

This research based seminar will investigate current trends in ‘Sustainable Suburbs’ thinking and will evaluate these trends in light of their applicability to typical single-use/non-master planned development. Central to this will be the idea of molding individual developments to contribute to a larger sustainable context. The basic question of the seminar will be to identify what exactly needs to be molded.

Students will choose a sub-topic in the area of sustainable suburbs and will research publications and case studies to become resident experts on that topic. The class will include lectures and discussions revolving around and helping guide the research. The end goal will be to produce a class-wide document on the non-master-planned approaches to sustainable suburbs. This will potentially be developed into a mini-publication.