

From Family Zoning to Family Housing: Courtyard Urbanism for San Francisco

12:00 to 1:00 p.m. | Wednesday, July 29, 2026

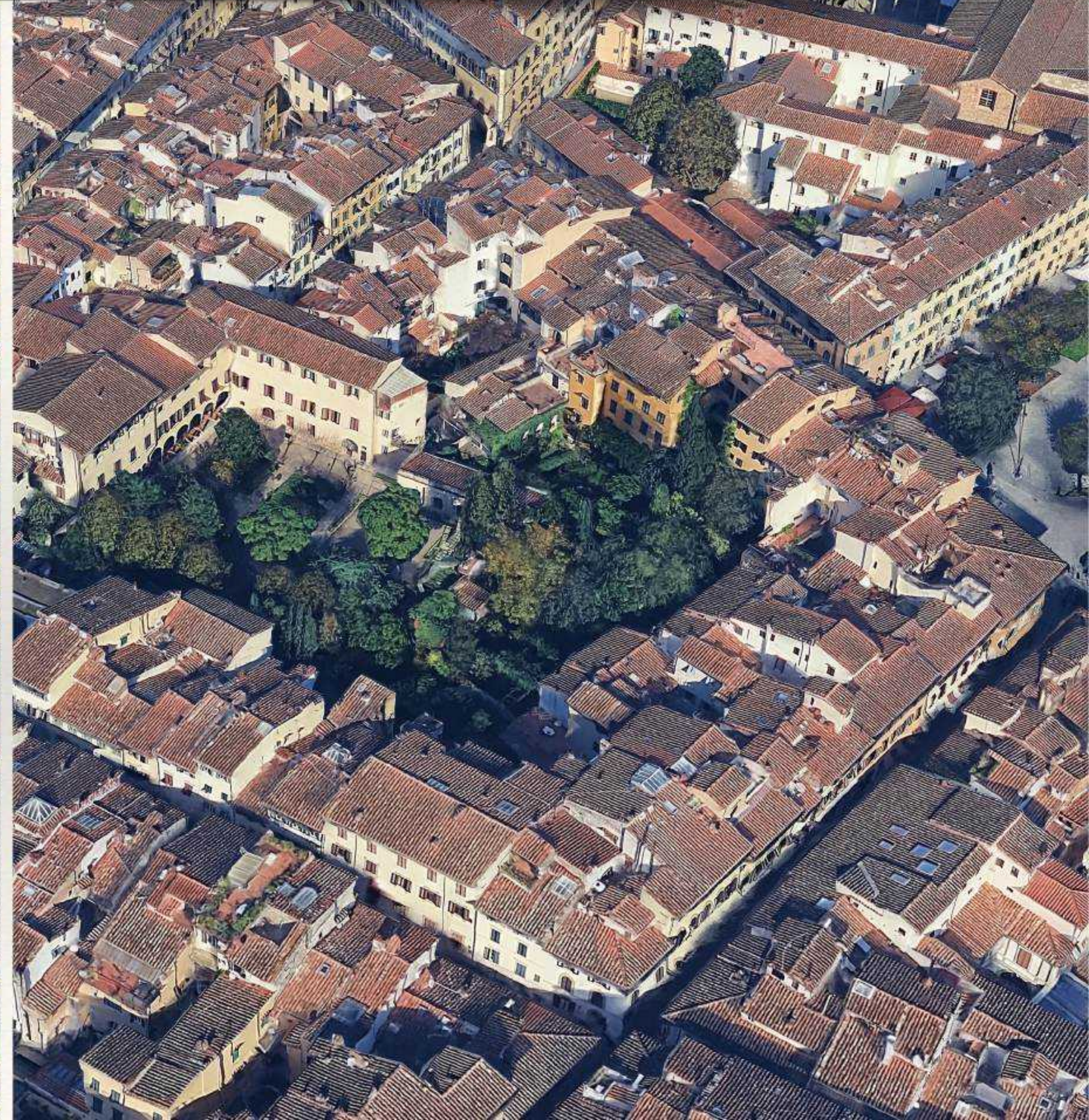
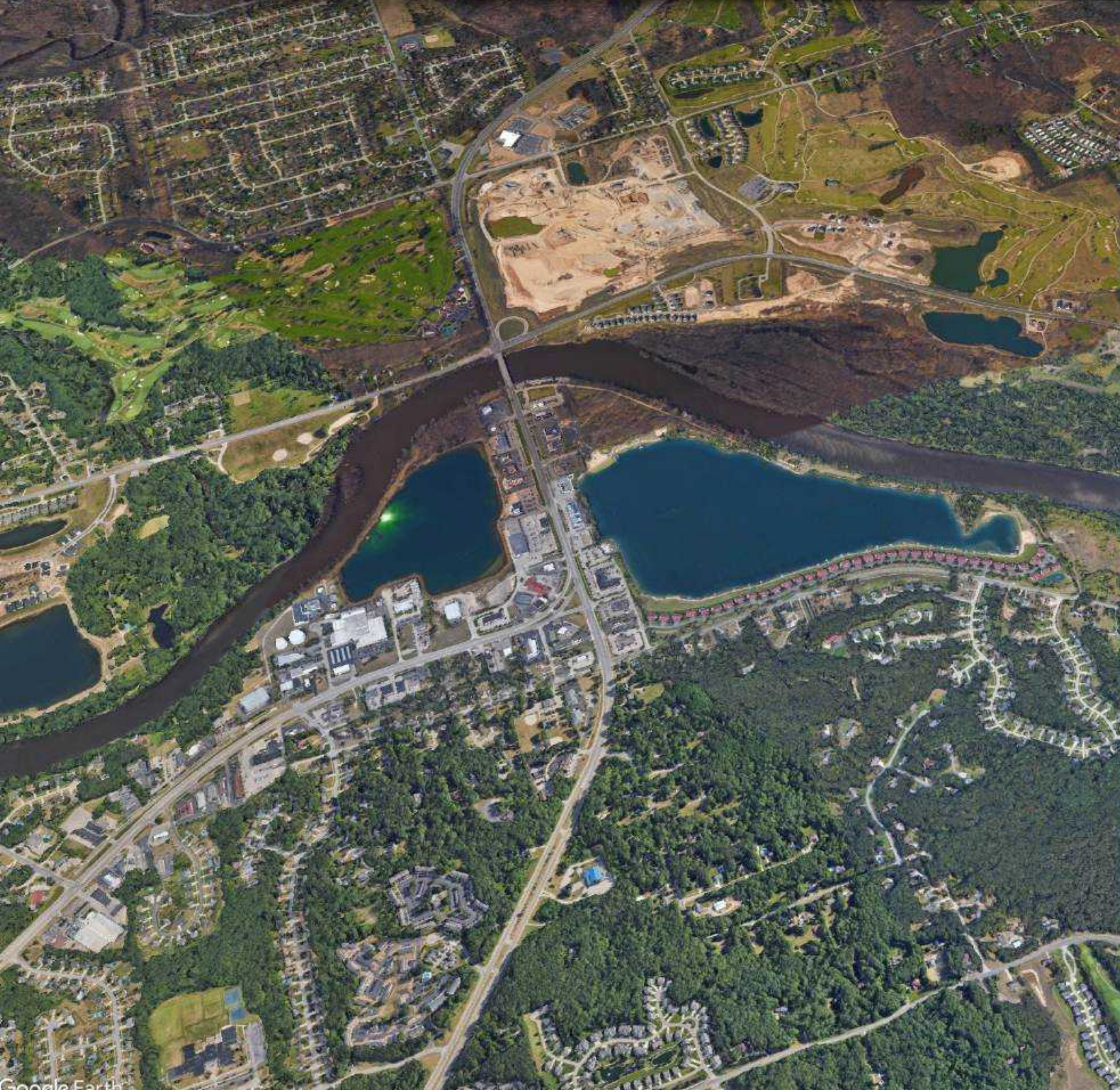
Alicia Pederson, Ph.D.
Founder, Courtyard Urbanist



1. Introduction
3. Courtyard Block Essentials
4. YES, Dense, Mixed-Use Family-Friendly Apartments
5. How To Design Courtyard Blocks in the Bay Area
6. Conclusion and Next Steps



Moving from suburban Michigan to the urban core of Florence transformed my understanding of urban living and family housing





U.S.

America’s Big Cities Are Rapidly Losing Kids

The number of children is falling across the U.S., but the decline is especially pronounced in big metros

🔗 Aa 📄 914 🎧 Listen (1 min) ⋮

By Rachel Louise Ensign and Paul Overberg
July 26, 2026 9:00 pm ET



There Aren’t Many Children in S.F.

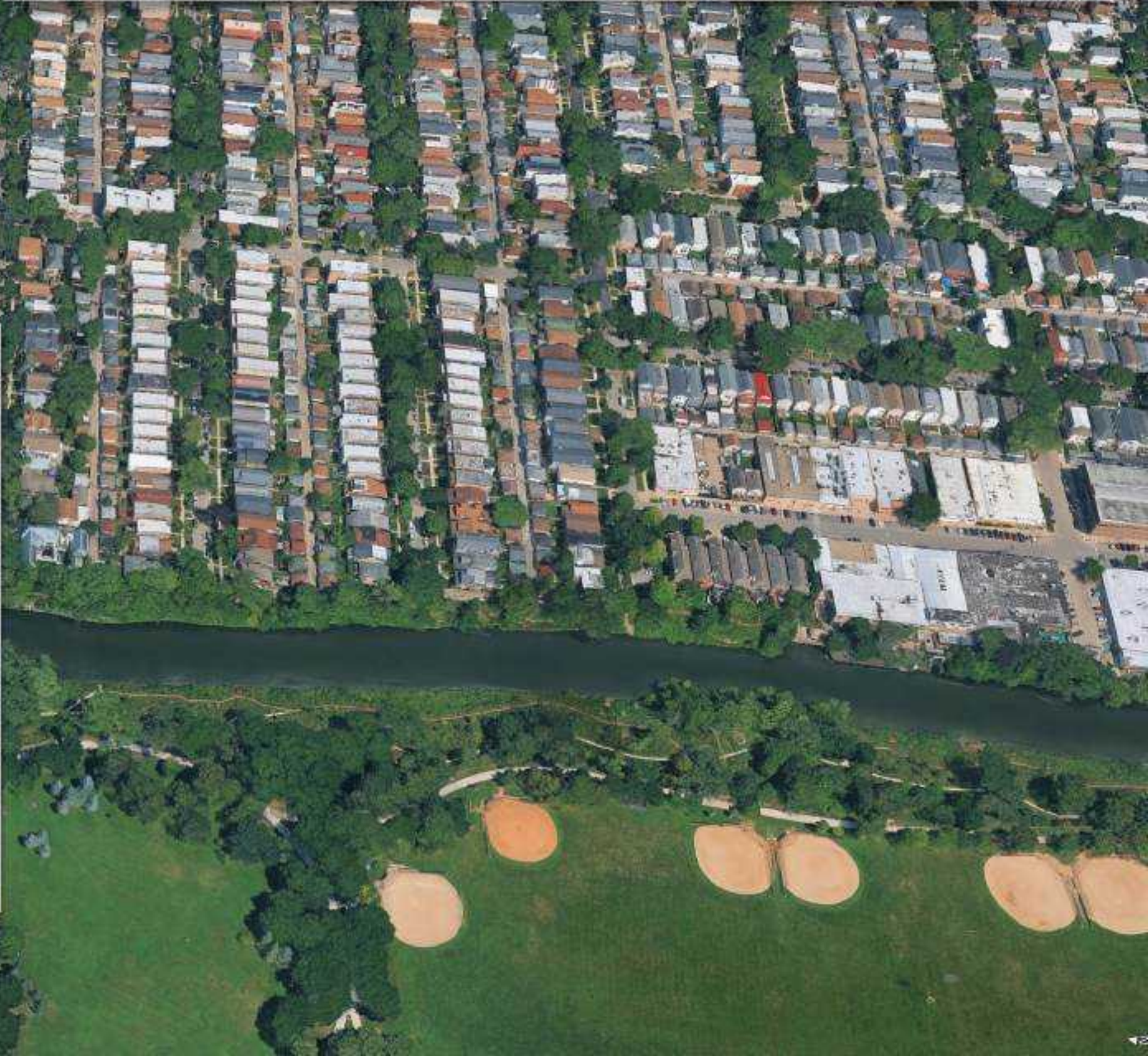
Turns out that San Francisco is not barking mad for dogs. It actually just doesn’t have very many children. San Francisco has the lowest percentage of children of any major city, according to U.S. census data.

About 18 percent of households in San Francisco have children under 19, whereas nationwide the average is 29.4 percent. You might think it has to do with city life, but that isn’t the case. In Los Angeles, 33.4 percent of households have children, and in New York City it’s 30.5 percent. The only other city where fewer than 20 percent of households have kids is Seattle.

But this could change.

Since 2010 there has been a slight increase in the number of children under 5, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The question is whether or not the families of these newborns will stay in San Francisco.

Housing is one factor that might determine whether young families stay.



10 YEAR ANNIVERSARY

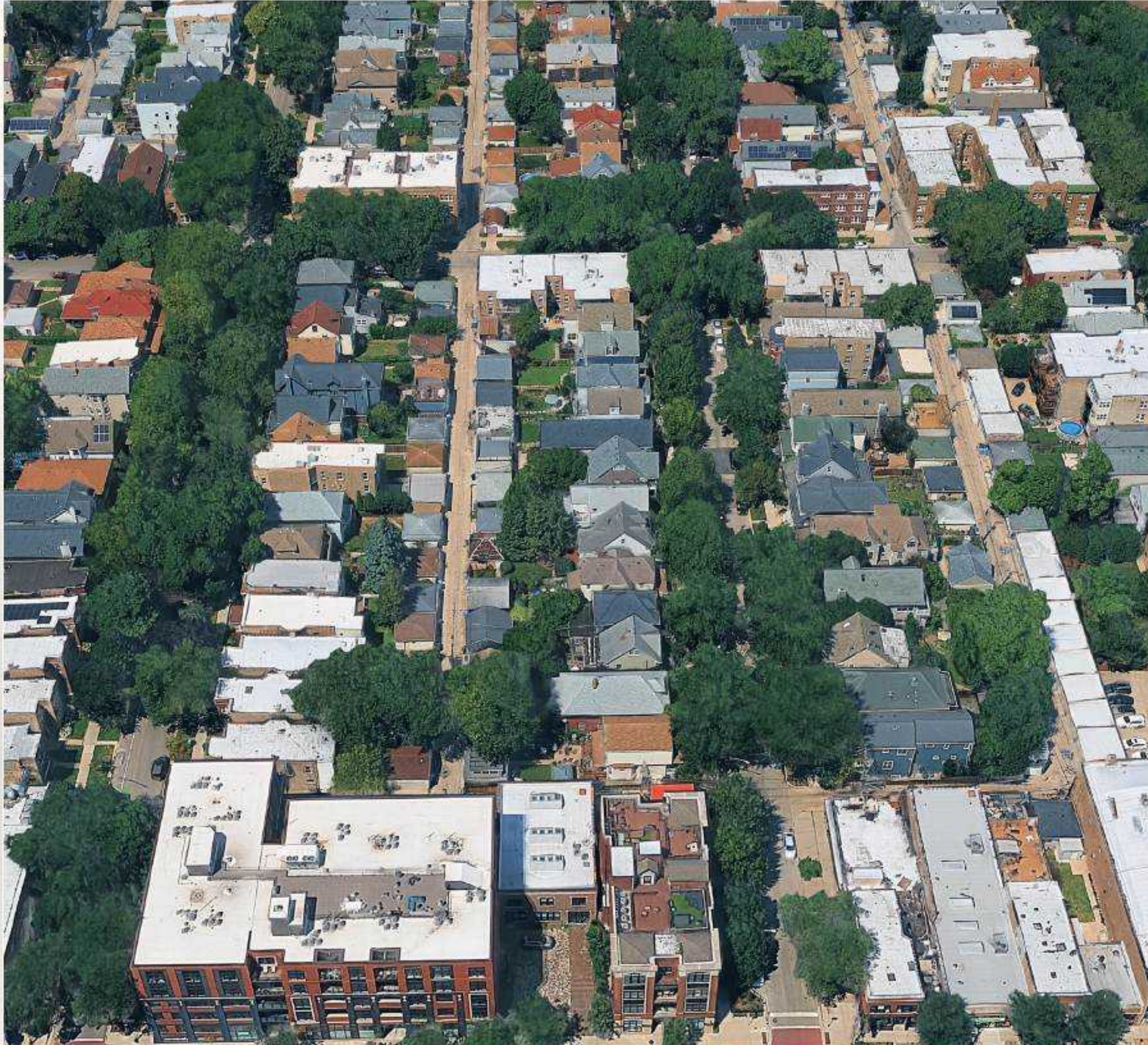
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RESEARCH POLICY ISSUE AREAS NEWS & EVENTS ABOUT

Young families have continued leaving big cities post-pandemic

ANALYSIS | JULY 10, 2024





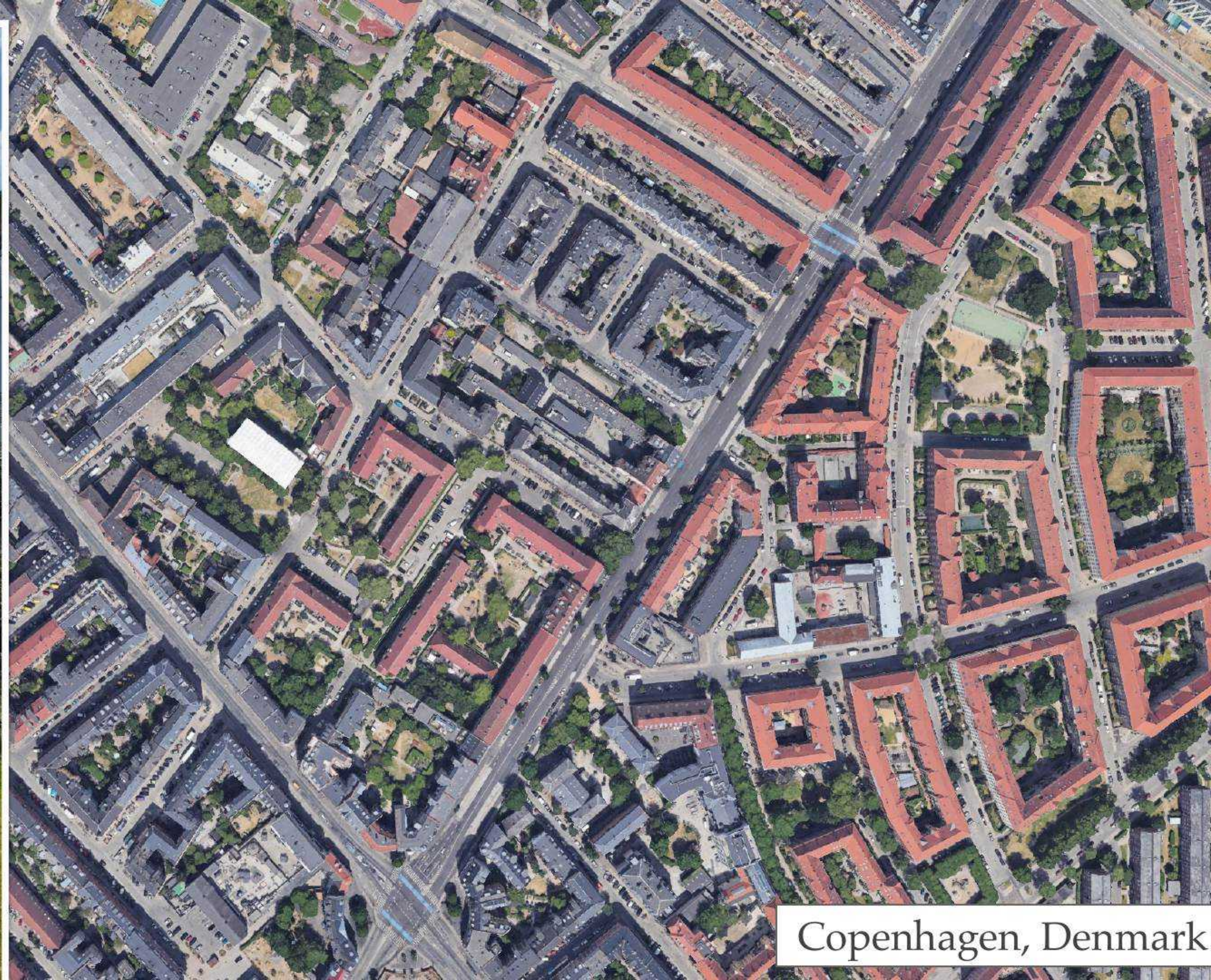
Lincoln Square, Chicago (2.56 sq. mi.)
16,300 people/sq. mile
2,441 commercial sq. ft./acre
Car ownership ~75% of households



Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin (4.23 sq. mi.)
40,200 people/sq. mile (2.5x population density)
6,280 commercial sq. ft./acre (2.6x)
Car ownership ~45% of households (40% lower household car ownership)



Edinburgh, Scotland



Copenhagen, Denmark



Oslo, Norway



Stockholm, Sweden



Jackson Heights, Queens

NORTH AMERICAN GRID

Near North Side, Chicago

39k residents / sq. mi.

Norrebro, Copenhagen

50k residents / sq. mi.

Everywhere they exist, courtyard blocks create:

- density
- green space
- walkability
- income diversity
- family life
- complete lifecycle neighborhoods
- beautiful, sustainable, valuable real estate

How do we bring courtyard urbanism to US cities?

EUROPEAN
PERIMETER BLOCK



OPINION

The courtyard block solution to Chicago's family flight problem

By Alicia

How do flight of families to the European — starting Service in West Law

A recent shows the families it is in a free age-5 pop Cook County to the Group. Y due to lo. However, counties the rate counties ly-friend borhood 2010 anation fe despite; and how losing c The i single-f ing the: types, s demand ing in t millenr out abu ing, cit



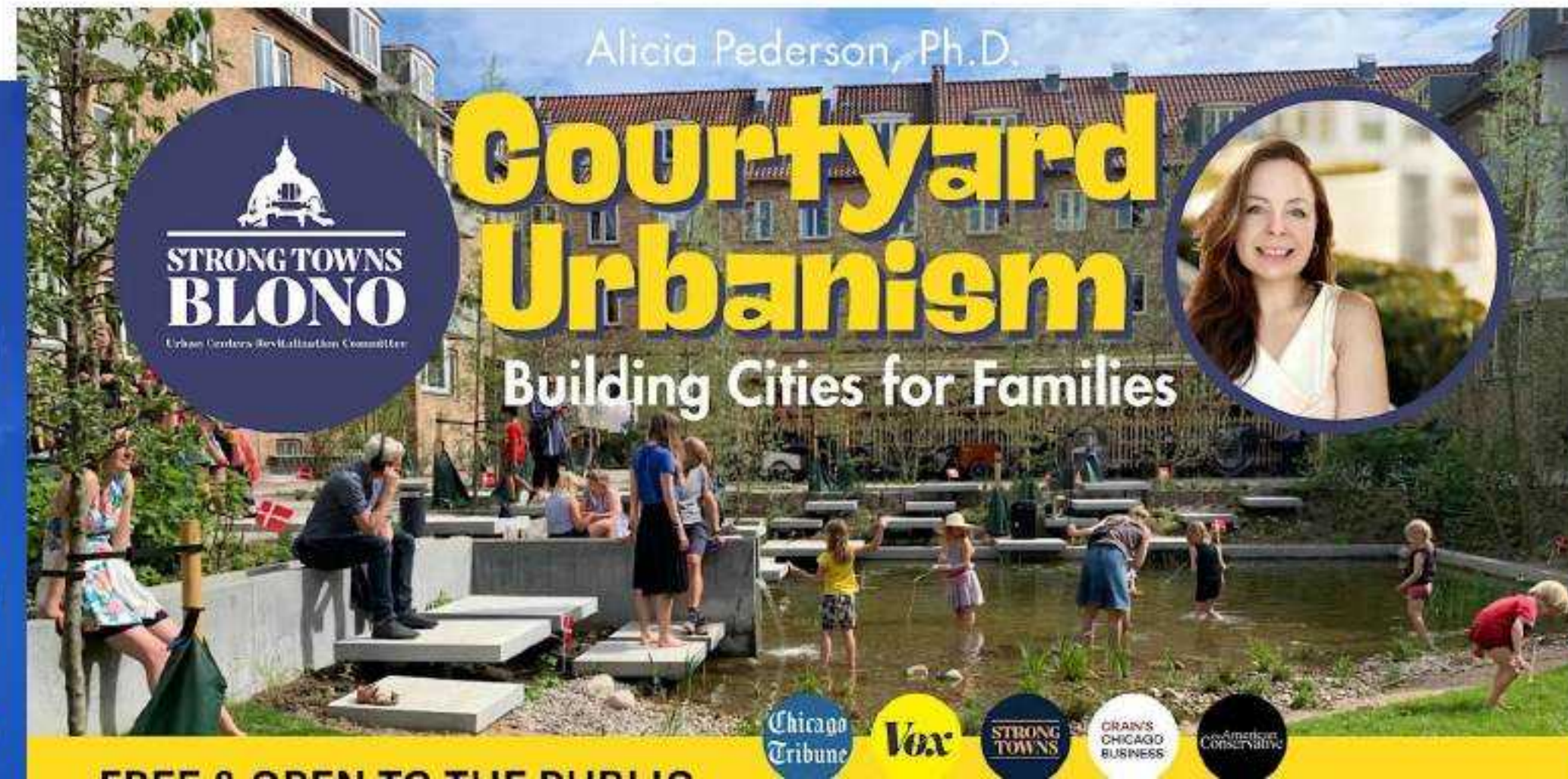
Alicia, Courtyard Urbanist

@UrbanCourtyard

Courtyard Urbanist is a research and development platform dedicated to improving US cities through family-friendly courtyard block design.

Real Estate Chicago courtyardurbanist.com
Joined May 2024

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OPINION

Make no little plans, Justin Ishbia

By Alicia Pederson
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



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FUTURE PERFECT

Can America build beautiful places again?

Ugliness has more to do with the housing crisis than you think.



Courtyard Urbanism charrette (urban design workshop) in Bloomington-Normal, IL



Courtyard Block Essentials

1. Small-lot buildings for fine-grained blocks
2. Wide and Shallow Buildings, no front or side setback
3. Mixed-Use Buildings
4. Unit Diversity



1. Small-Lot Buildings—A courtyard block is not a mega-development!



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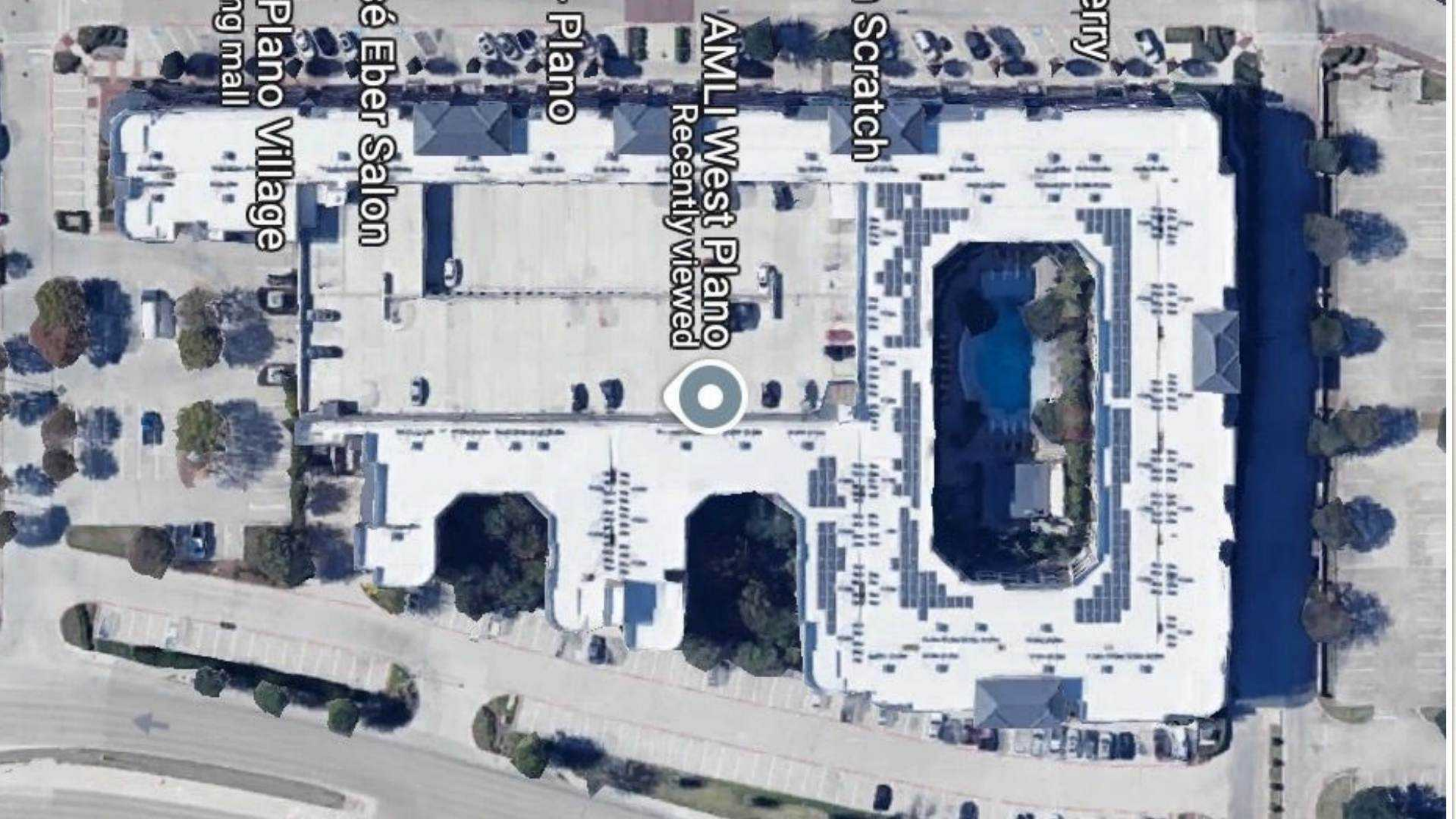
Scratch

Plano

AMLI West Plano
Recently viewed

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Plano Village
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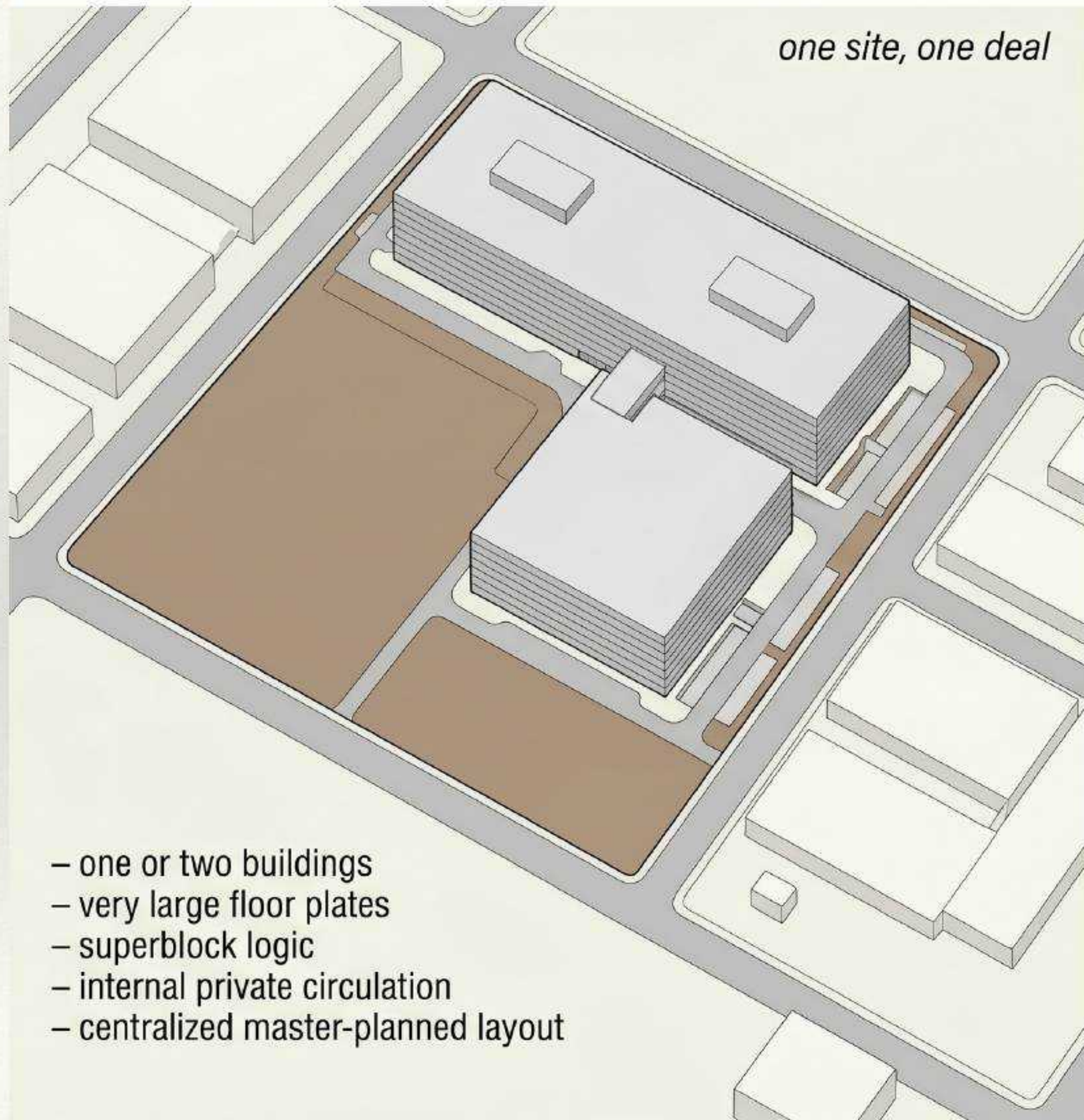
1. Small-Lot Buildings—A courtyard block is not a mega-development!



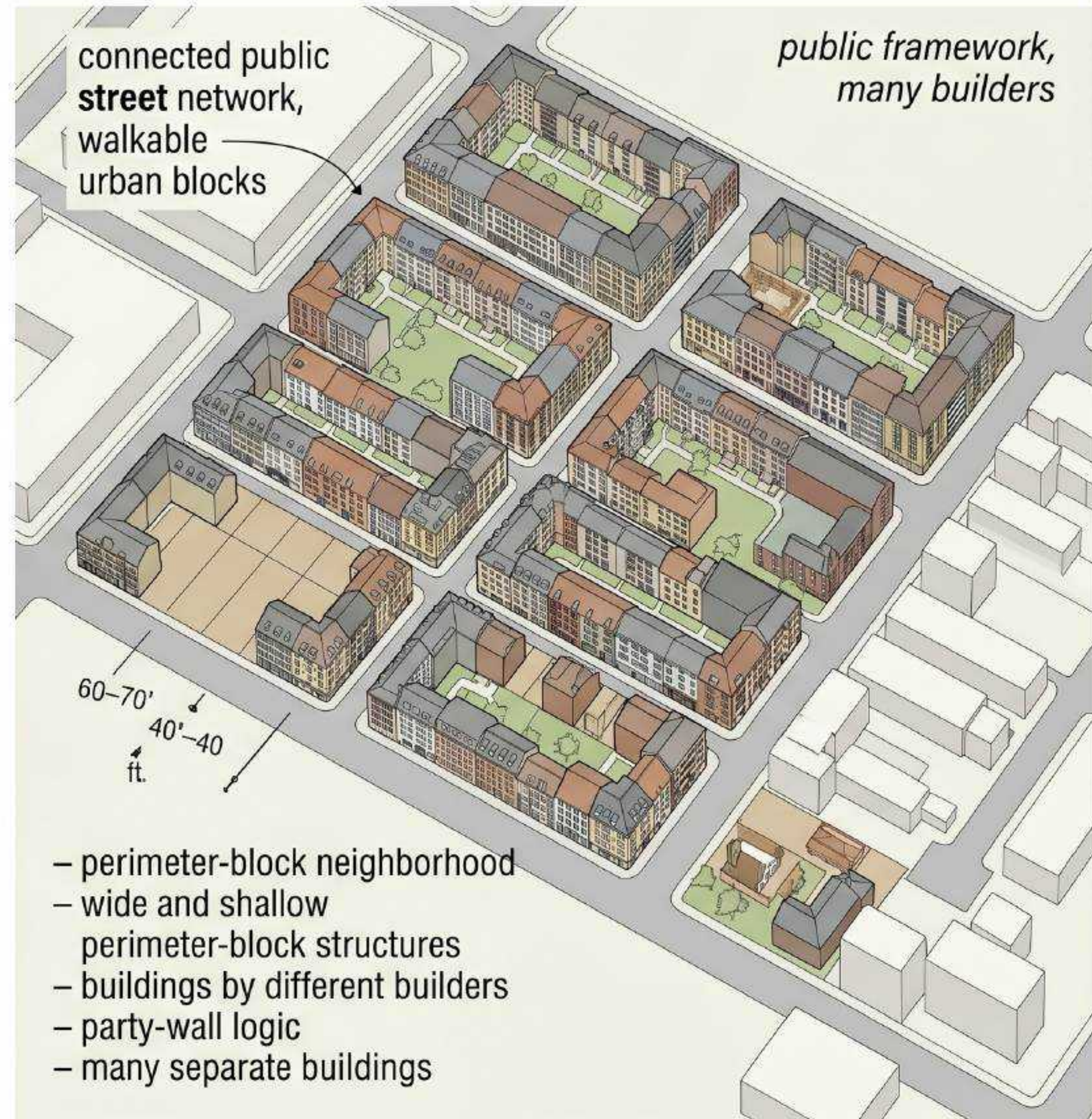
264 units
A mix of studio,
1BD, and 2BDs
includes a gym,
sauna, pet area,
commercial areas,
parking, etc.
this was about a
\$60-70M project.

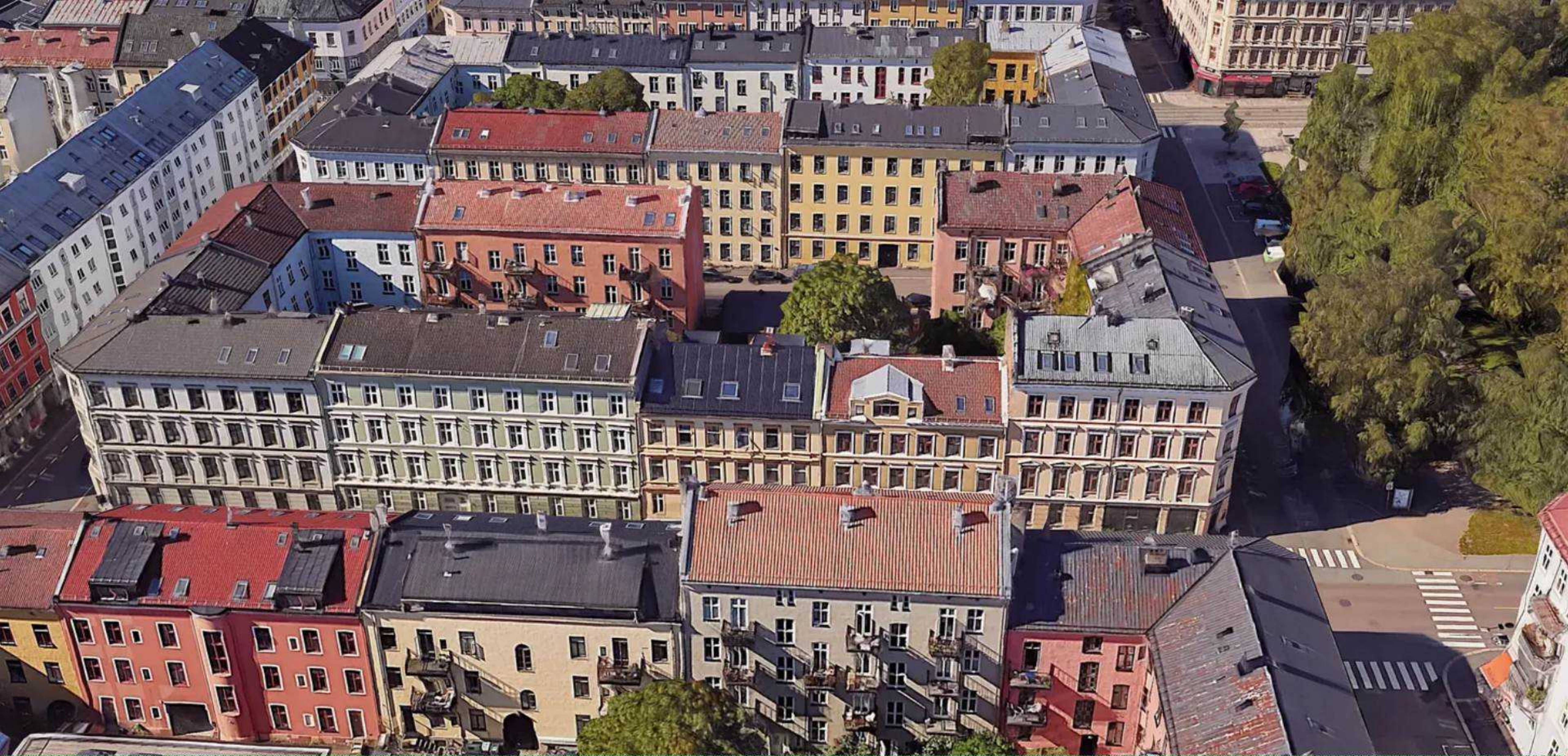
1. Small-Lot Buildings—A courtyard block is not a mega-development!

Single Master Developer



Streets, Blocks, and Many Builders





1. Small-Lot Buildings—A courtyard block is not a mega-development!

Why are small-lot buildings better?

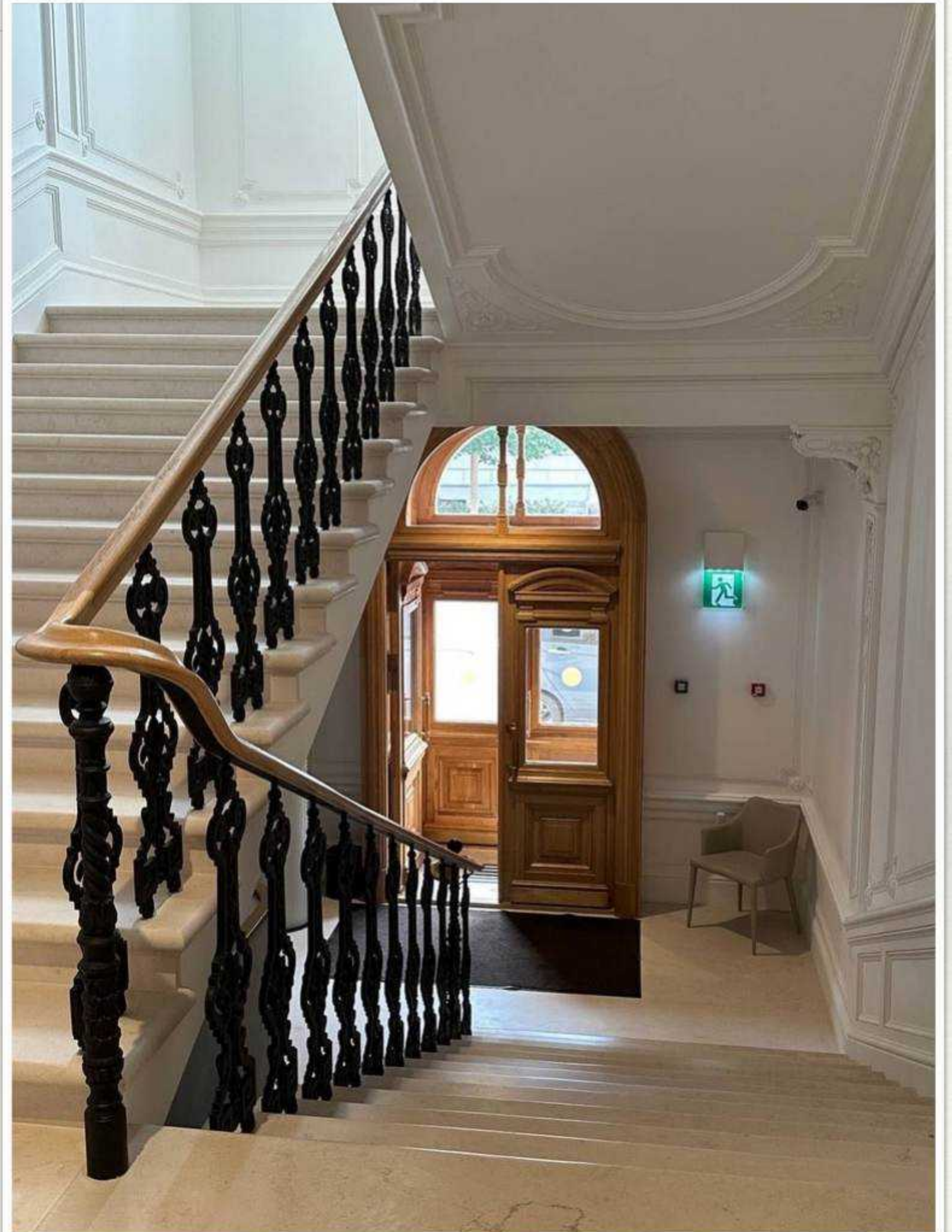
1. Lower Cost, Broader Participation

- The smaller buildings don't require elevators (or only small ones), underground parking, luxury amenities, or the high-cost materials associated with larger developments
- Reduce both upfront and long-term costs, making the resulting units more naturally affordable.
- Open the door to a wider range of builders, including small developers, community groups, and even homeowner-developers.
- Instead of one mega-developer building a \$60-\$70M project, you might have 20 local developers building 20 \$2-3M projects.



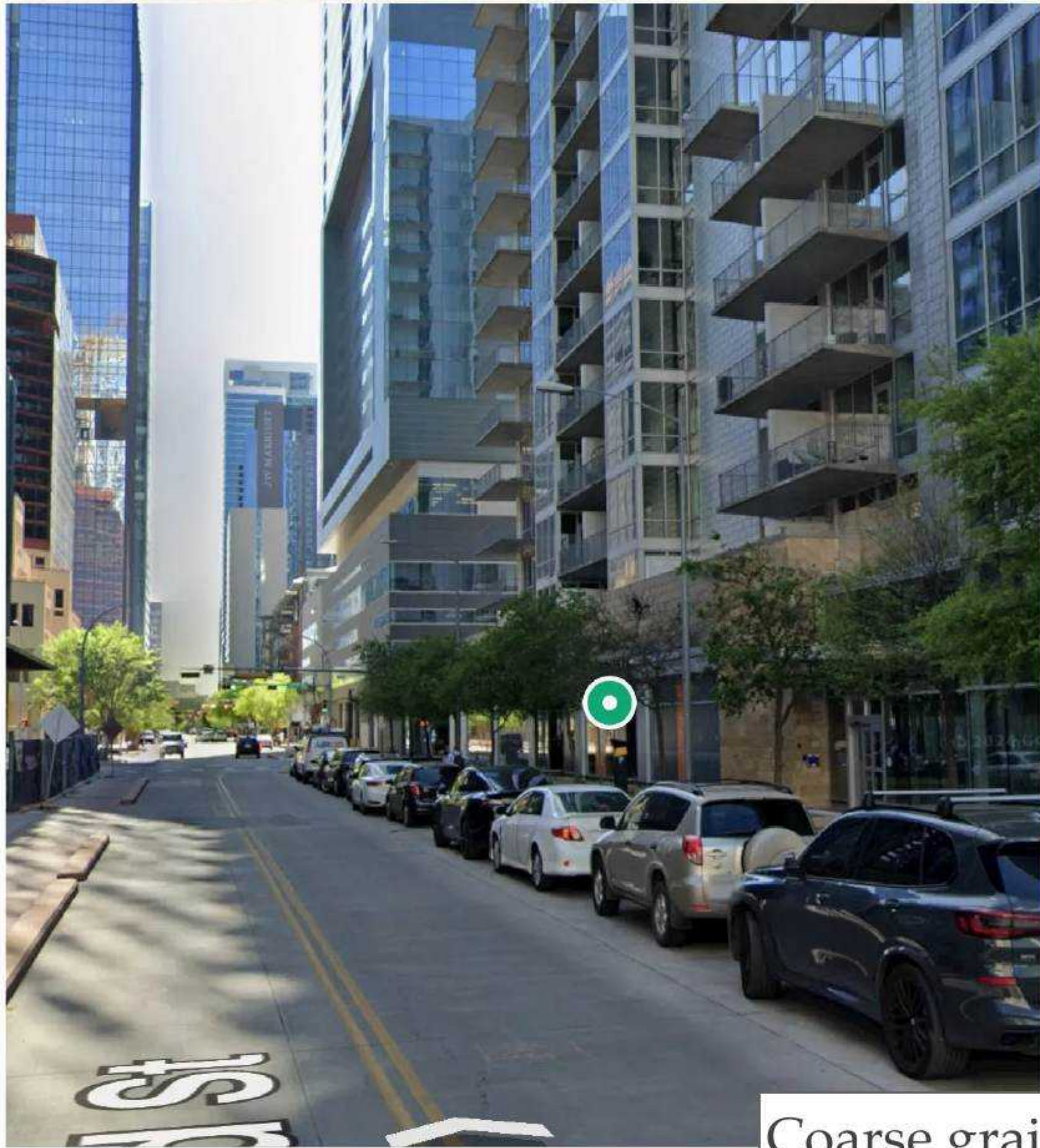
2. Better Social Scale

- Many feel more at ease in smaller buildings shared with a limited number of households
- Residents are more likely to recognize neighbors, built trust.
- Large buildings can feel impersonal and overwhelming



Why are small-lot buildings better?

3. Better Streets & Blocks



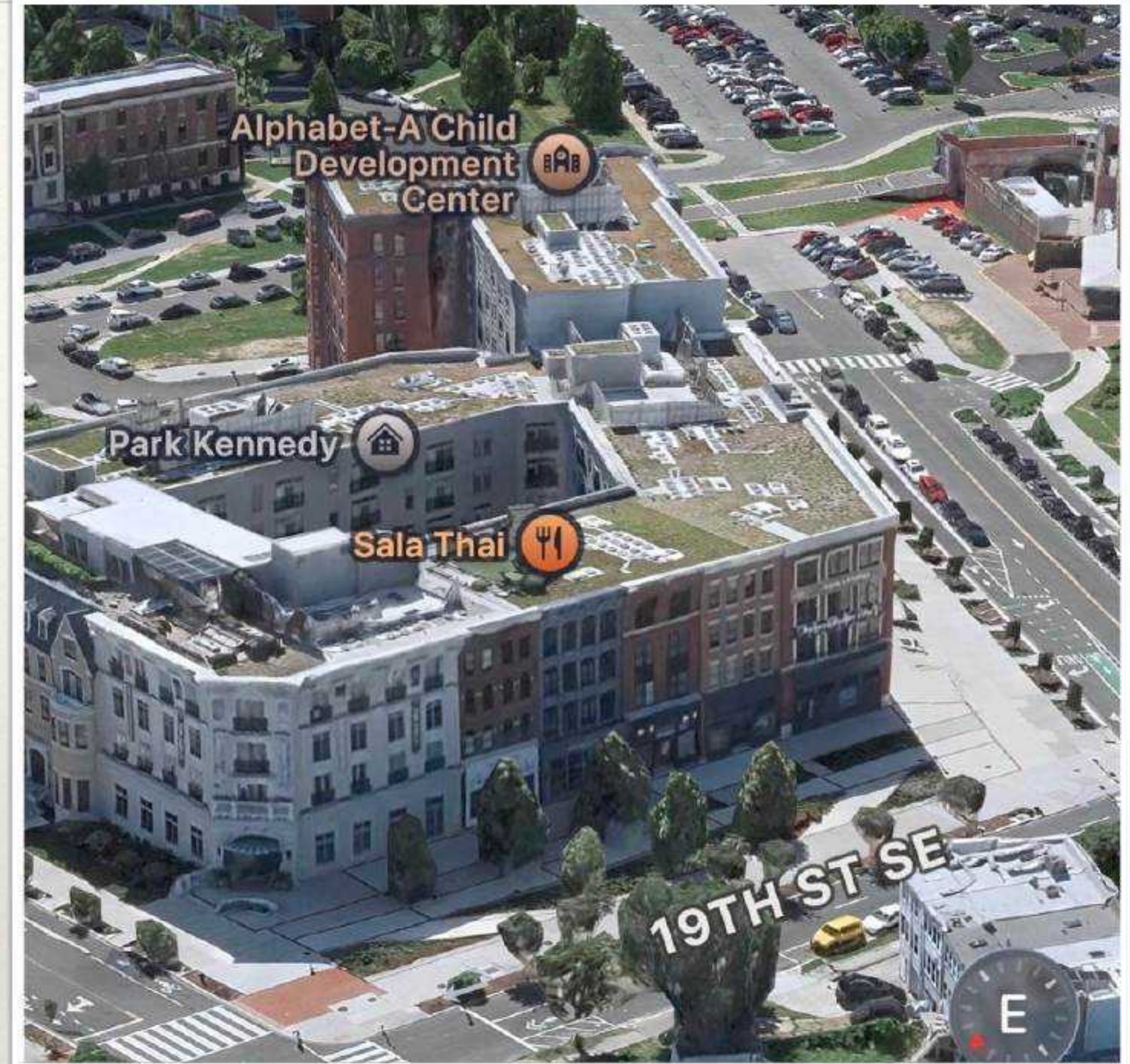
Coarse grain



Fine grain

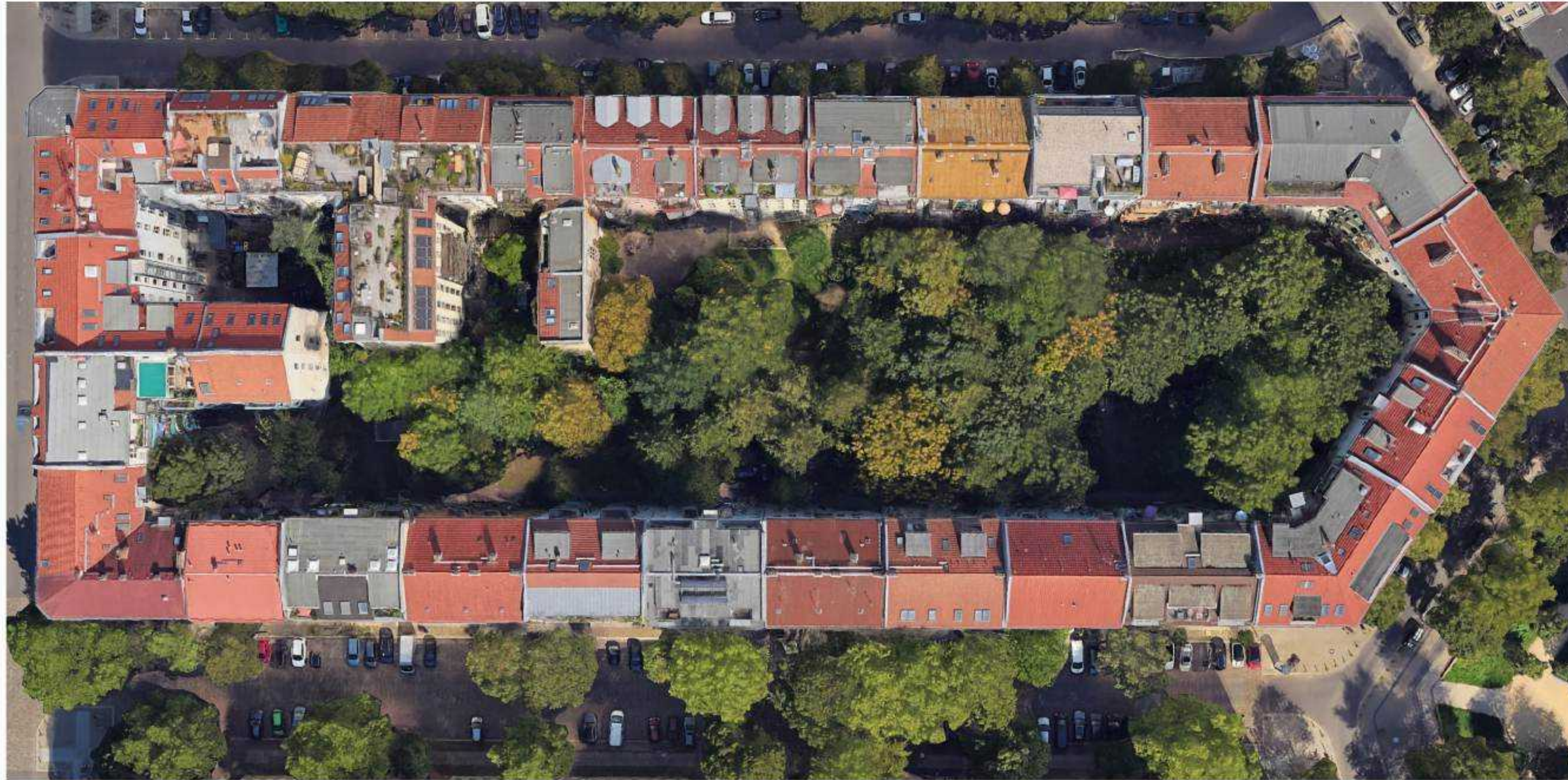
Why are small-lot buildings better?

3. Better Streets & Blocks



Developers often put fine-grained facades on massive buildings because they understand the preference for this aesthetic

2. Wide & Shallow Buildings—No front or side setbacks!



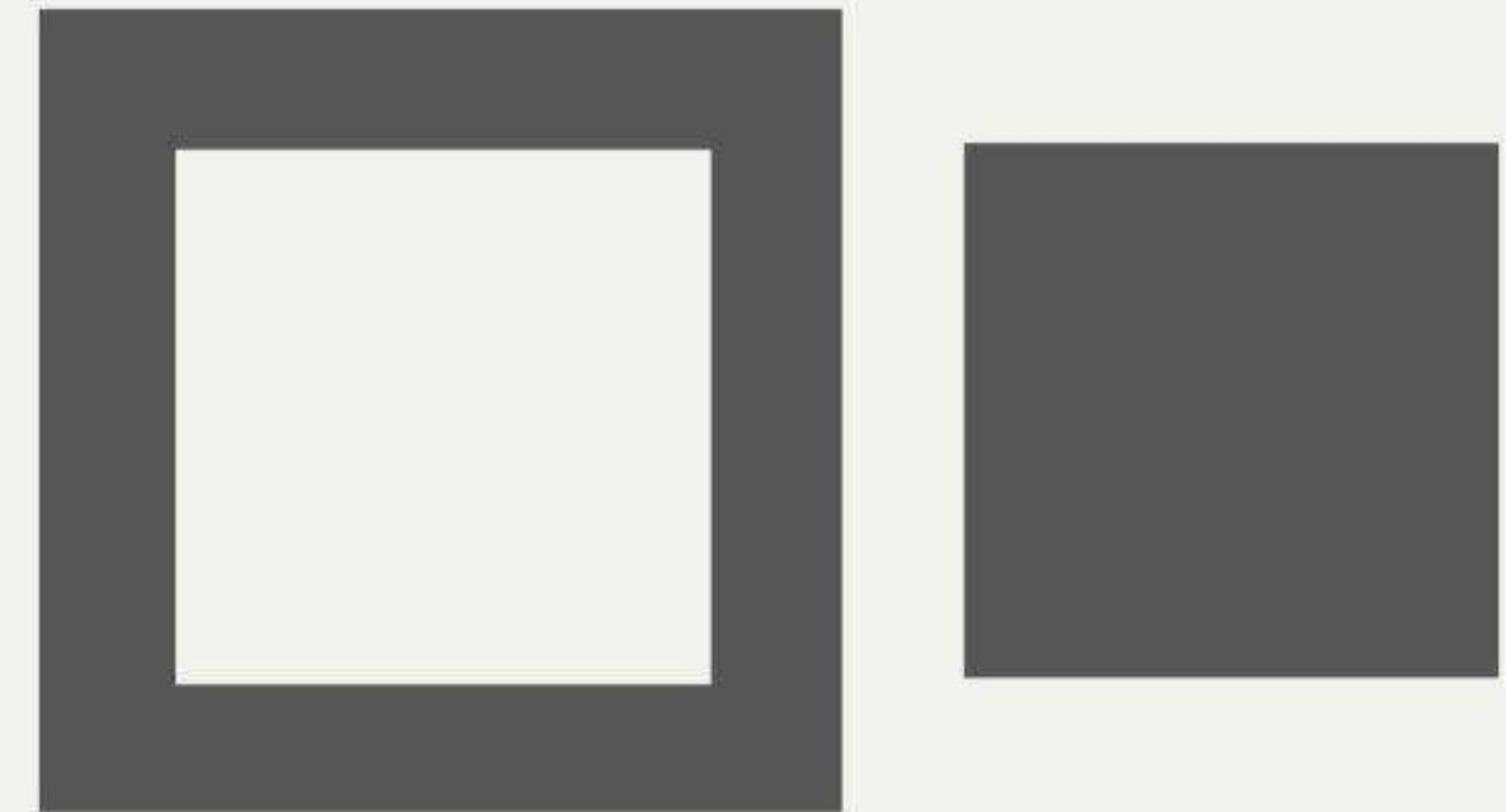
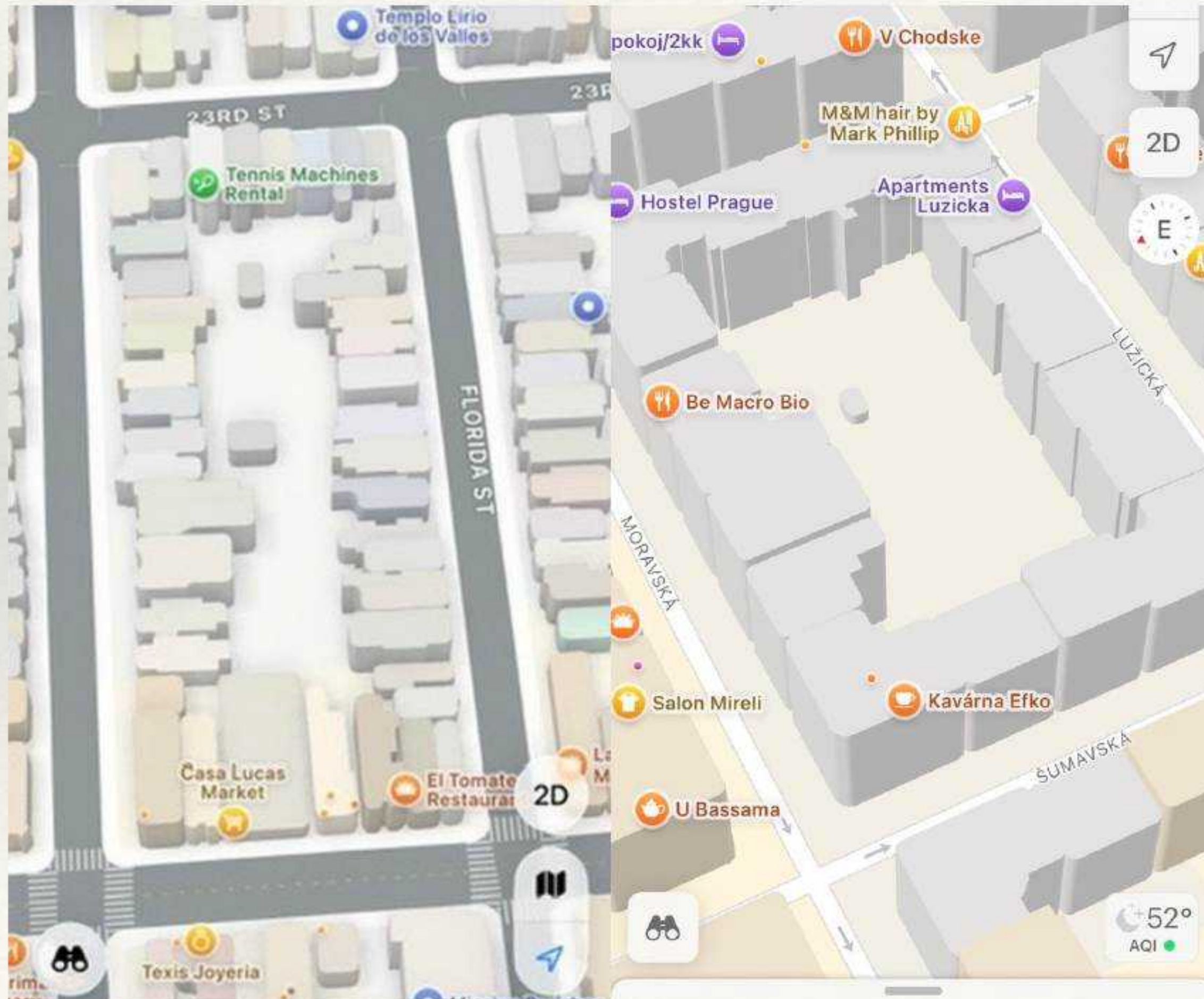
This building form is KEY for two reasons:

1. Creates the perimeter block conditions necessary for a tranquil, private courtyard amenity
2. Creates dual-aspect “lives like a house” units with excellent natural light and ventilation.

Code should require that buildings align at the street, and permit 0' lot line construction, 50-60% lot coverage

2. Wide & Shallow & Tall Buildings—No Front or Side Setbacks!

Creates courtyard amenity while maintaining density



Leslie Martin's diagram explaining the benefit of perimeter planner. The area of the perimeter frame is equal to the area of the square it encloses.

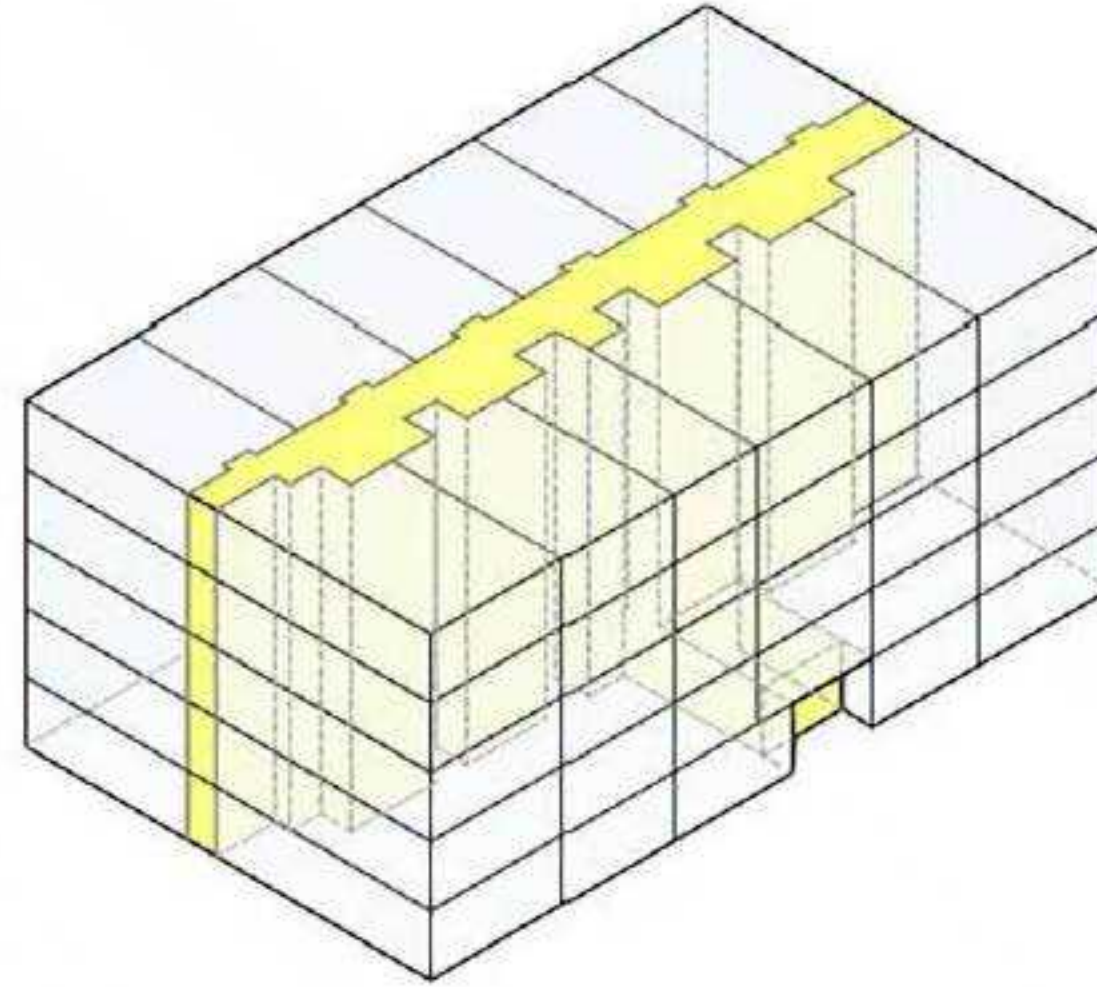
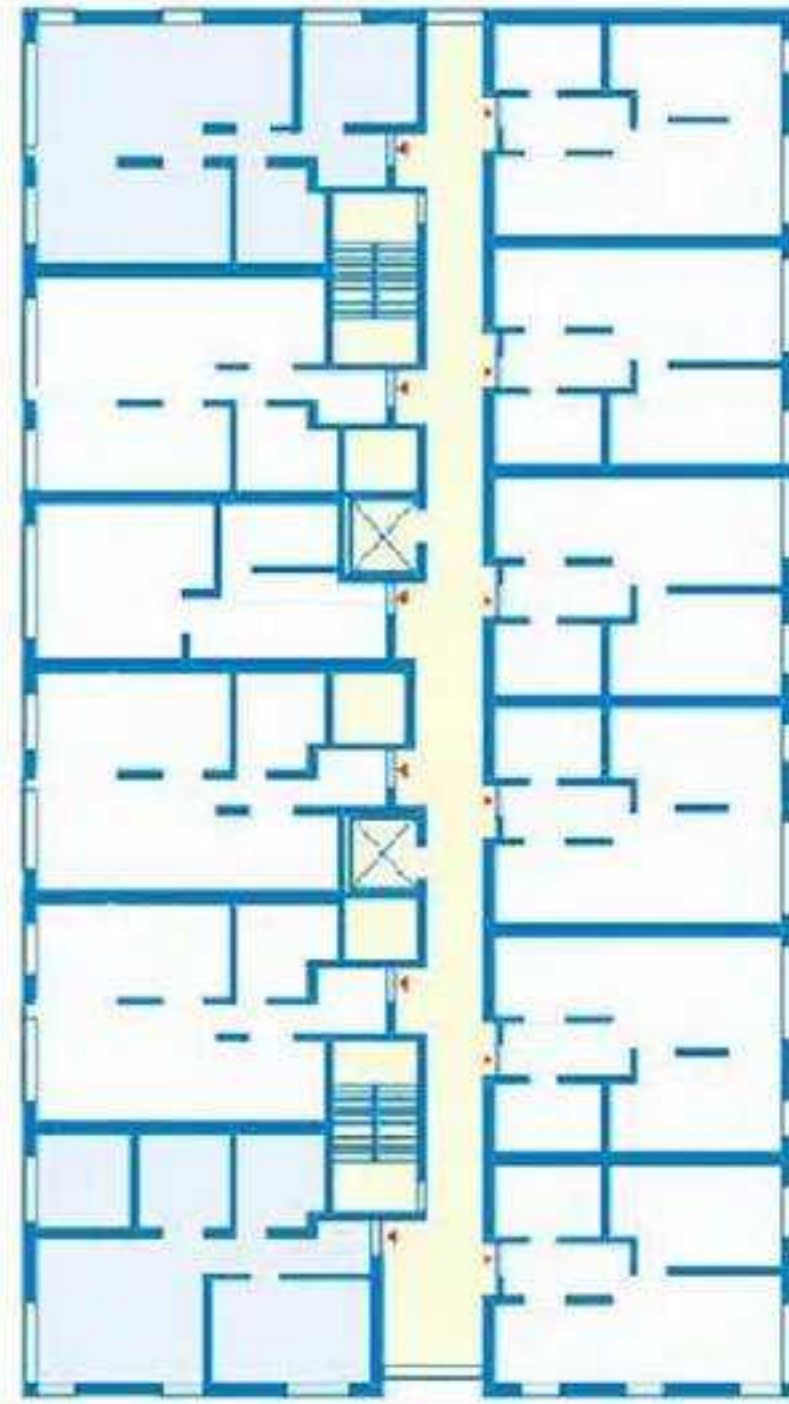
2. Wide & Shallow Buildings— No Front or Side Setbacks!

- A shallow building means some units can be dual-aspect, with a front and a back.
- Front of the house and back “quiet side” of the house



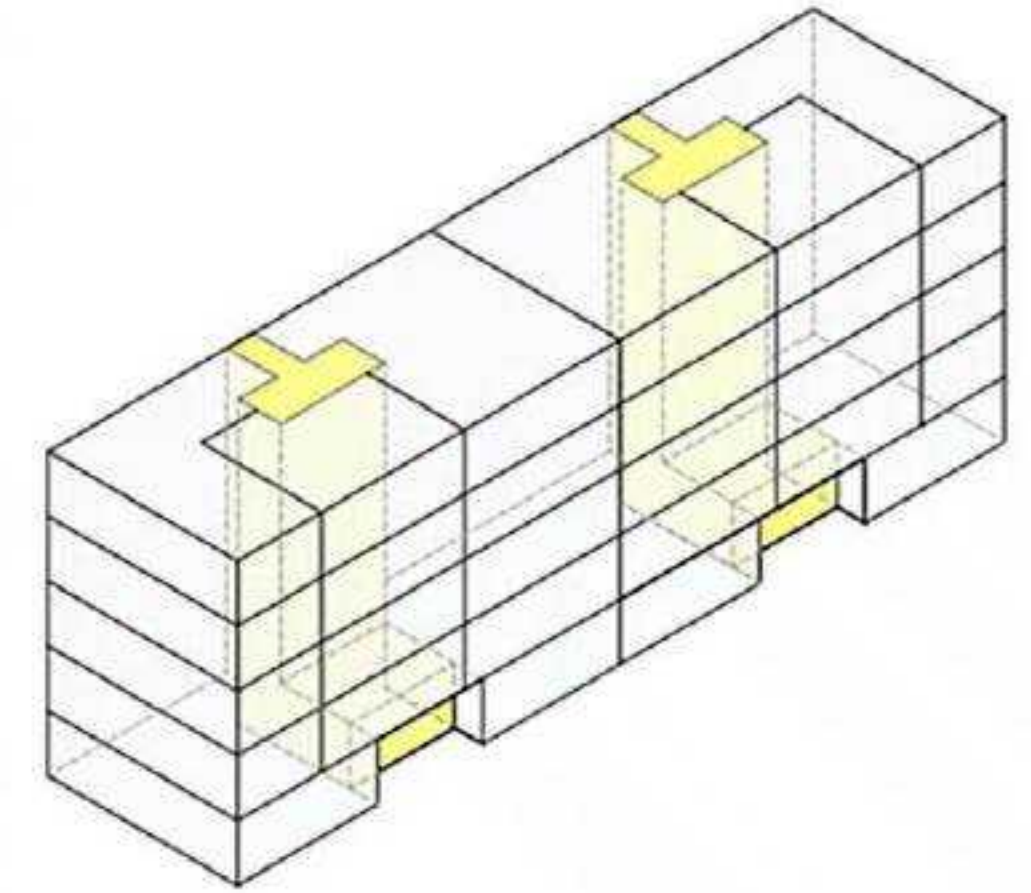
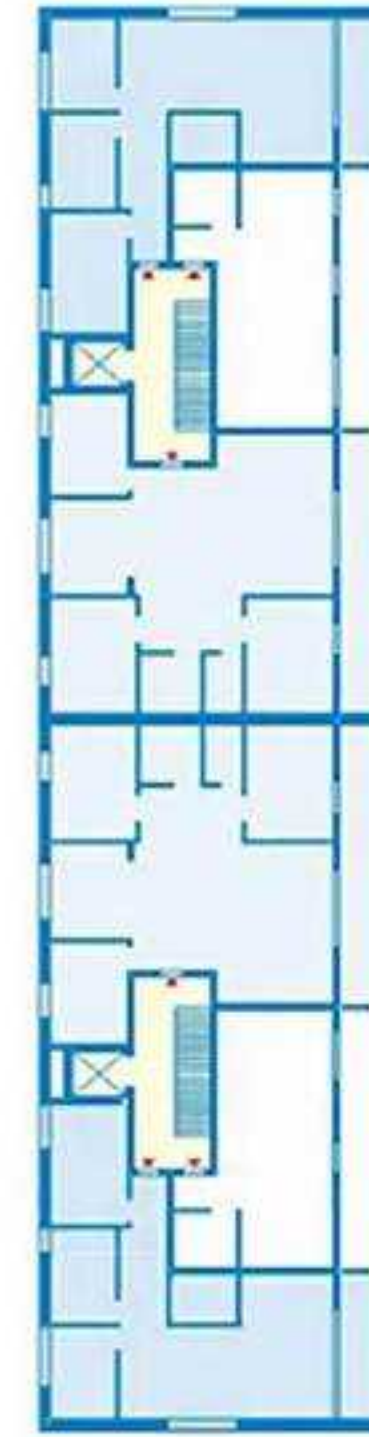
2. Wide & Shallow floorplates are enabled by “point access” or “single stair” buildings

Double Loaded Corridor

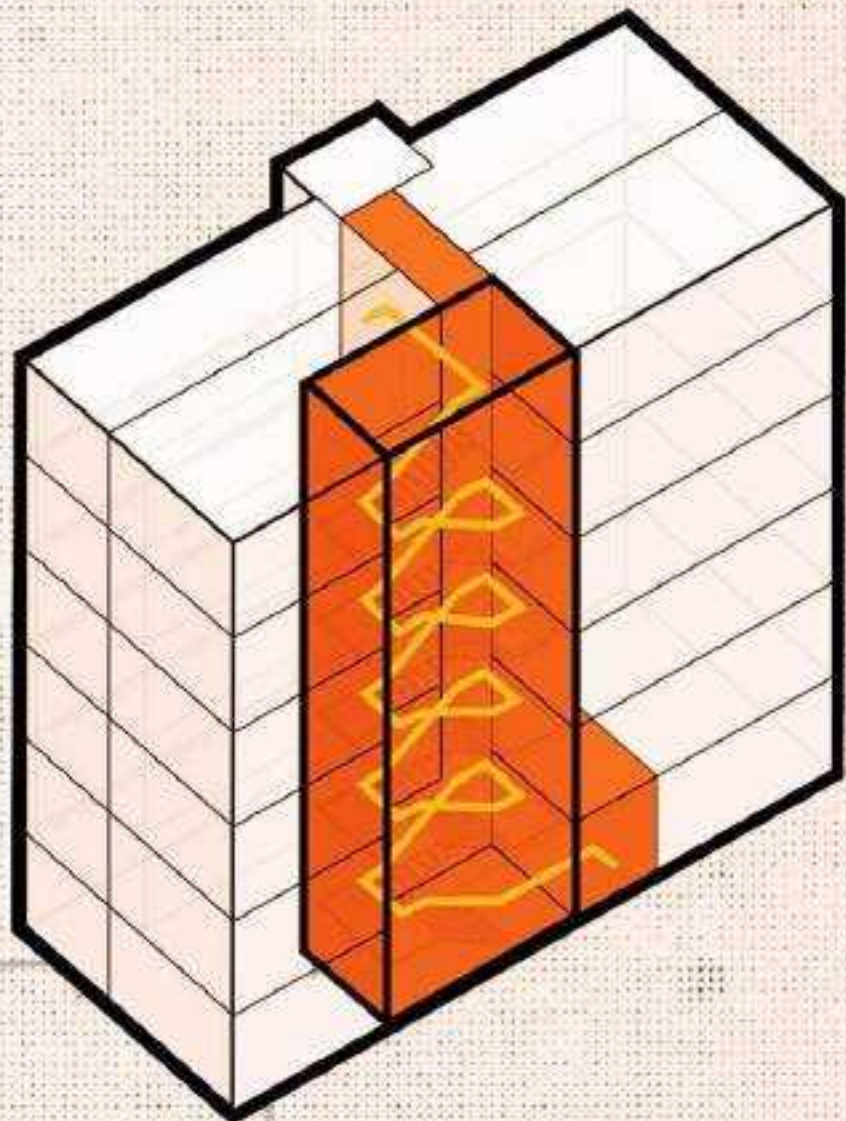


- 87% [Avg.] Efficient Floor Plates
- Primarily Small Units
- No Cross Ventilation
- No Daylight On Multiple Sides Of Units
- Streetside Noise

Point Access Block



- 93% [Avg.] Efficient Floor Plates
- Diversity of Units [1-3 BRs]
- Cross Ventilation For Most Units
- Daylight On Multiple Sides Of Units
- Quiet Side Bedrooms



A wide, shallow room with three large arched windows on the left wall. The windows have decorative stained glass in the lower panes. The ceiling is white with ornate, curved moldings. The floor is made of light-colored wood in a herringbone pattern. An arched doorway on the right leads to another room. A green text box is in the bottom left corner.

2. Wide &
Shallow
Buildings—
No Front or
Side
Setbacks!

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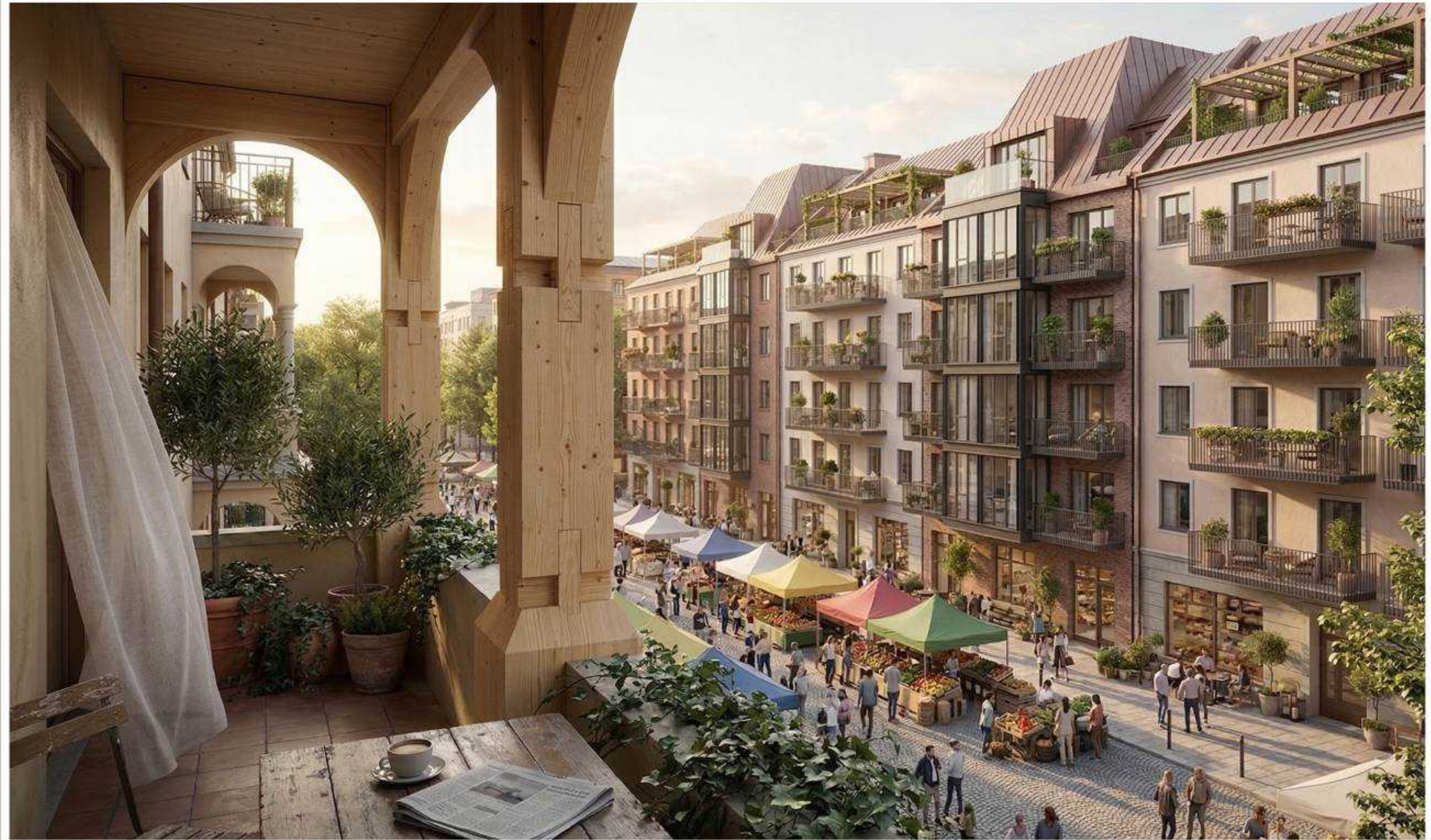
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3. Mixed Use—Maximizing Walkability and Daily Convenience!

Mixed-Use Urbanism

- **What it means:** Mixed-use development brings residential and commercial uses together in the same building, block, or neighborhood.
- **What defines urban life:** People live within easy reach of shops, restaurants, workplaces, schools, services, and social destinations.
- **What distinguishes cities:** This concentration of daily life is one of the fundamental differences between urban neighborhoods and conventional suburbs.
- **What makes walking practical:** Walkability depends on having useful destinations close to home—not simply sidewalks.
- **What supports local business:** Nearby residents provide the regular foot traffic that allows brick-and-mortar shops and neighborhood institutions to thrive.



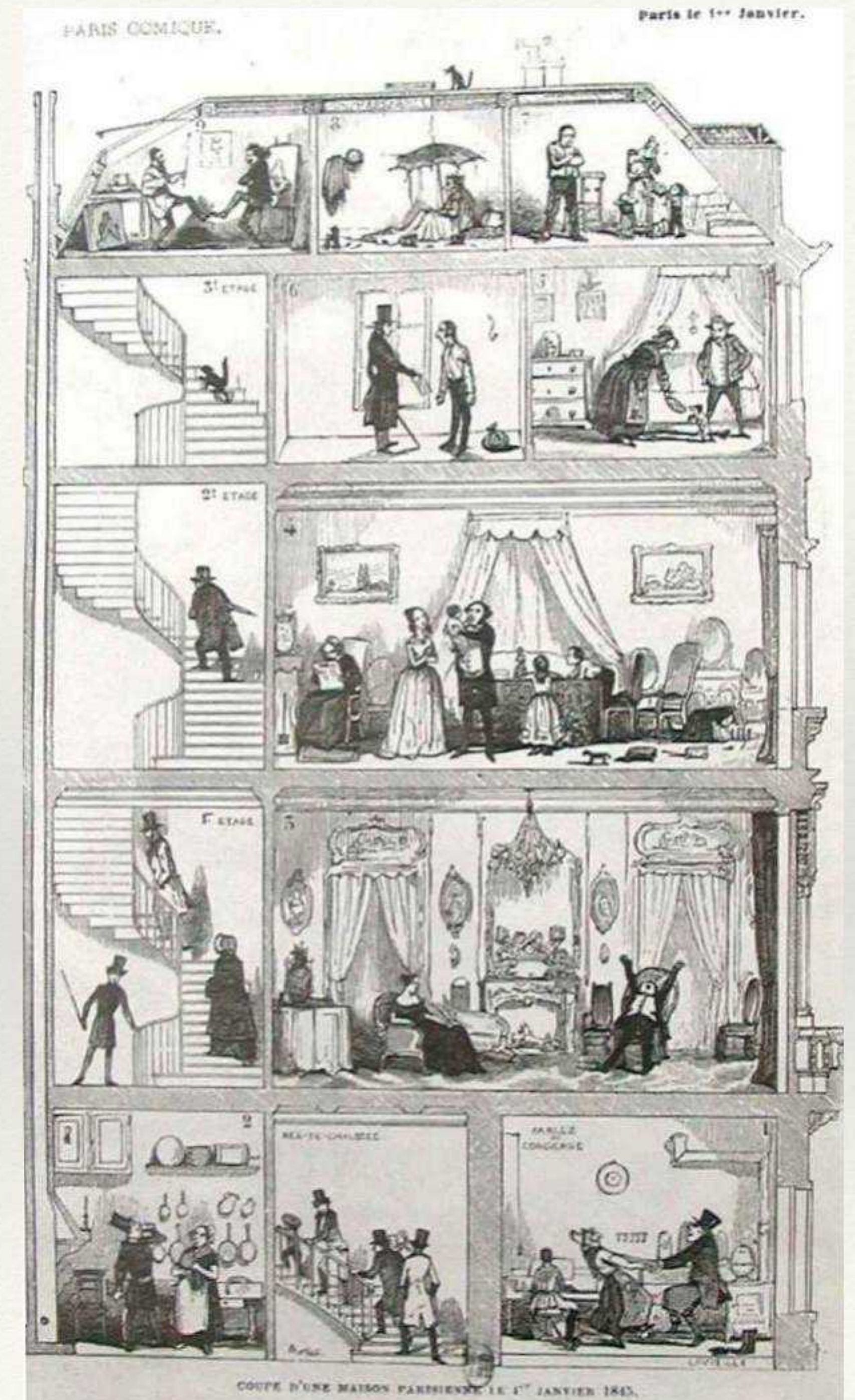
Code should allow flexible ground floor. Office, retail, institutional, ADA, maybe some garage.

ZONE MIXED-USE to
maximize walkability!



4. Unit Diversity!

- A mix of units, from very small to very large, creates room for small households and large households.
- Studio, 1BD, 2BD, 3BD, **4BD+**
- Creates natural demographic diversity without formal subsidy.



4. Unit Diversity!

- Large, family units on lower levels
- Smaller, single aspect units in middle
- Large, penthouse on top (for new elevator buildings)



Yes—dense, mixed-use, family-friendly apartments

1. The Big House with a Yard
2. Urban Conveniences
3. Saving Time and Money
4. Childhood Independence



Value # 1

The Big House with a Yard

Apartment = divided building

Apartments can be owned or leased

Apartments can be very large or very small



To compete with suburbs, some units
need to be very large and very
beautiful



Value # 1

The Big House with a Yard



Families want a house with a YARD.

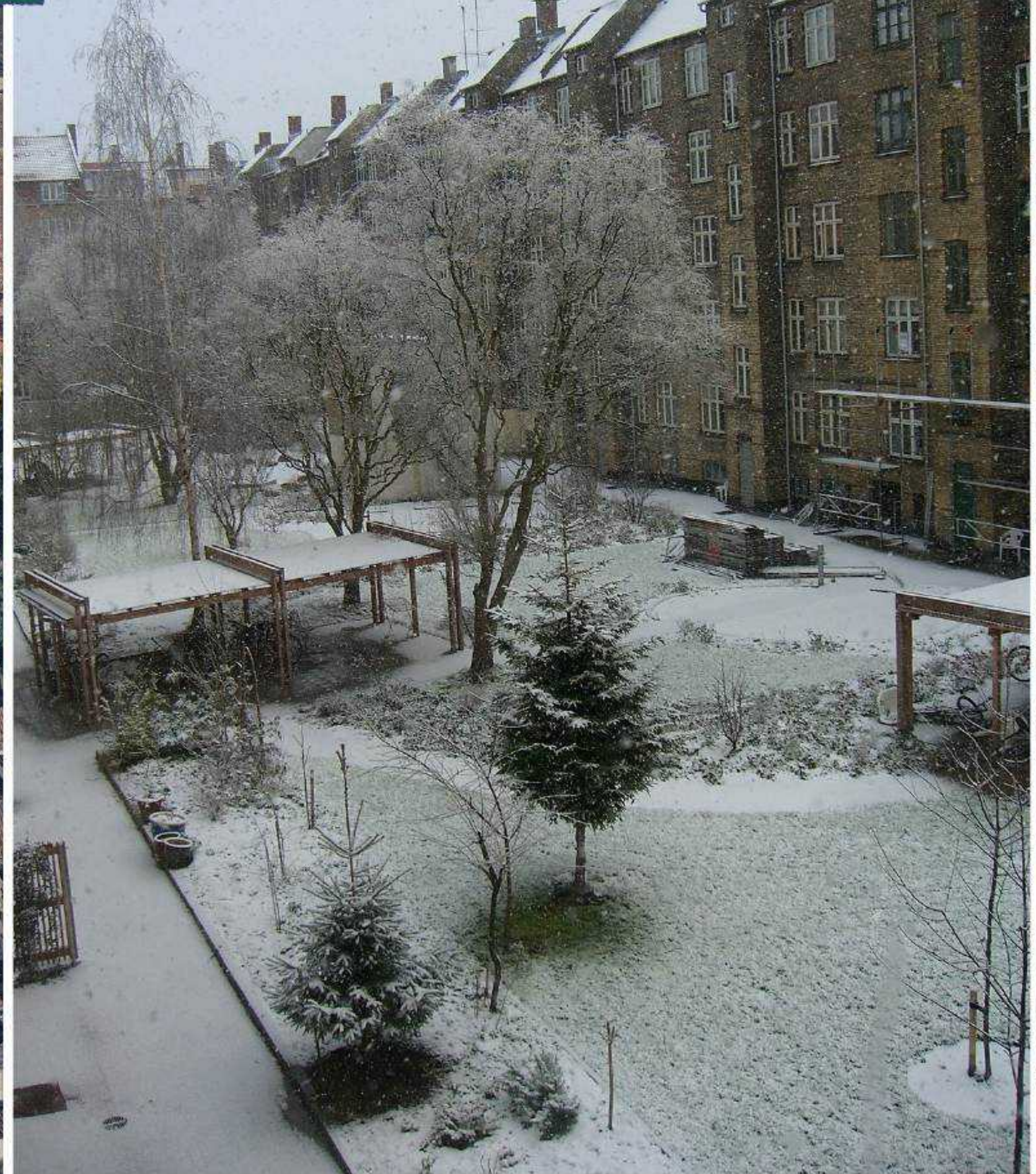
Courtyard blocks create enclosed green space that is quiet, clean, shaded, and safe

Buildings keep strangers out and kids in

Courtyard is visible from a kitchen or bedroom window, making it ideal for parents monitoring small children

Value # 1

The Big House with a Yard



Value # 1

The Big House with a Yard



Value # 1

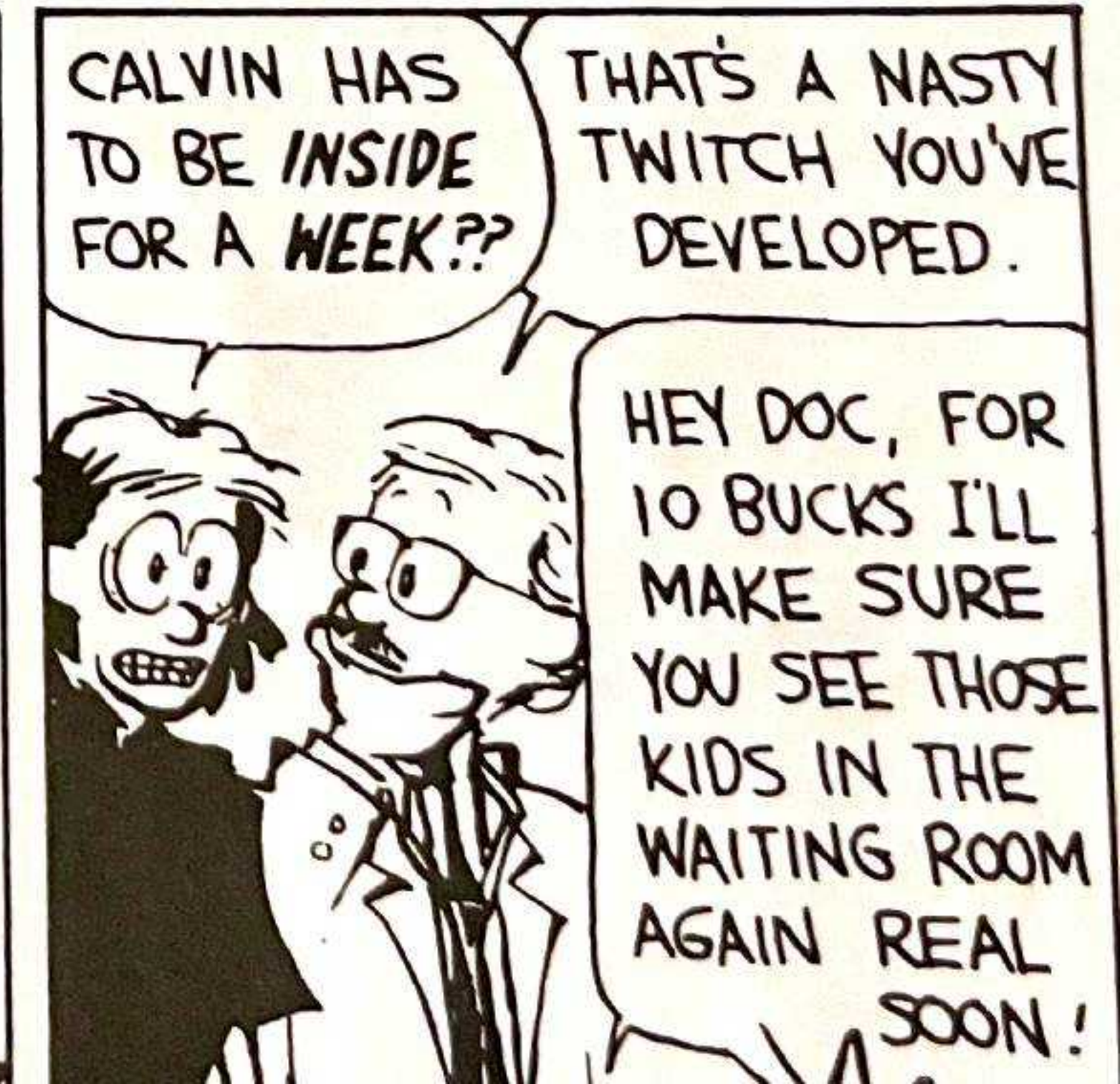
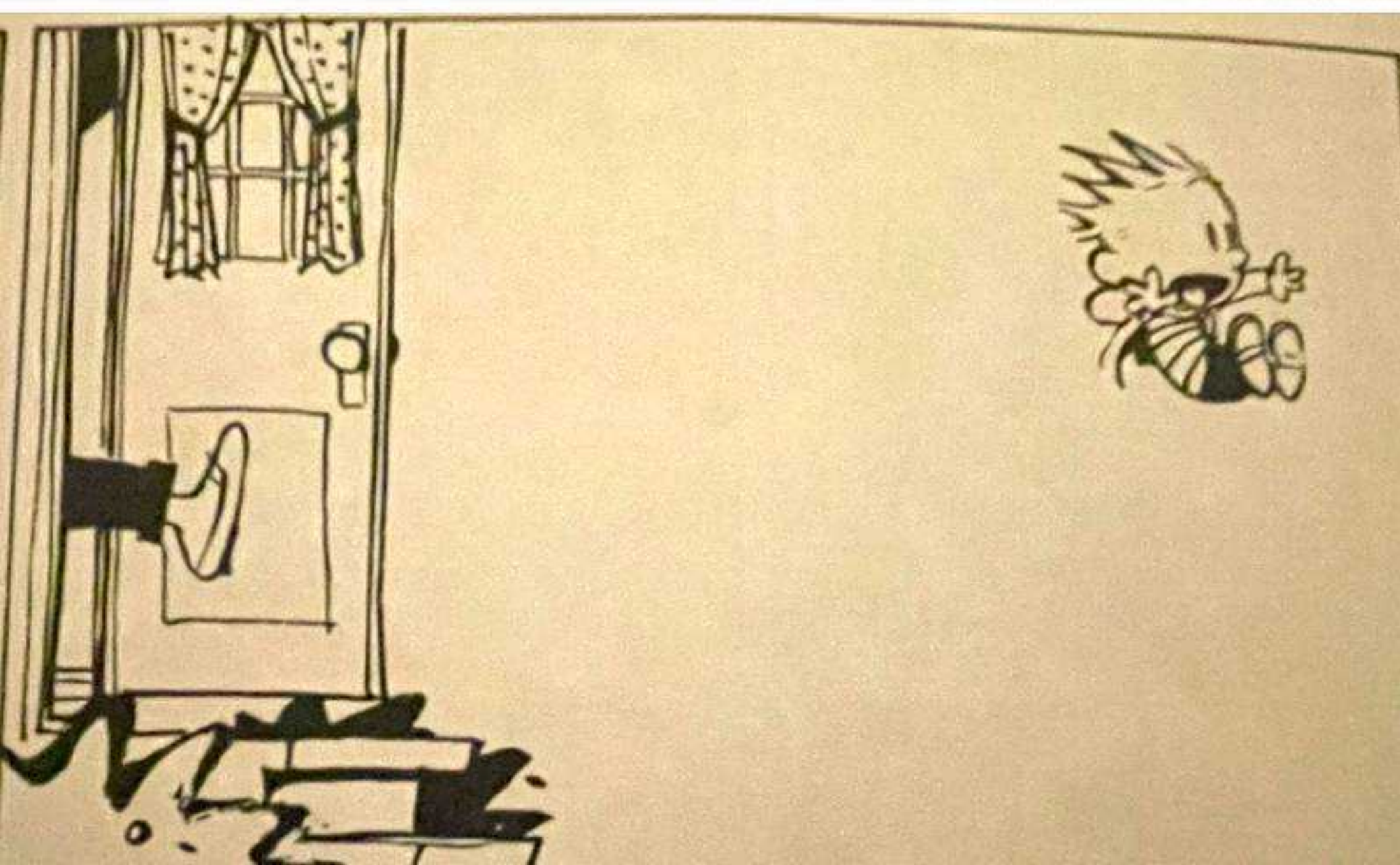
The Big House with a Yard



Value # 1

The Big House with a Yard





off track betting
shop
vintage clothing
shop
children's
clothing store
Bubble tea
Thrift shop
laundromat

Value # 2 Urban Conveniences

bicycle shop
italian takeout
hair salon
shawarma
restaurant
vitamin &
supplement
grocery store

a look at retail abundance on ONE side of a courtyard block

Value # 2 Urban Conveniences

Proximity to
Institutions:
school, church,
government
offices, public
parks, swimming
pools, symphony
orchestra,
museums, etc.



Value # 2 Urban Conveniences



Proximity to
broader social and
economic network



Complete life-cycle cities,
multigenerational cities.

Value # 3 Saving Time & Money

Urban multifamily housing saves families time & money

efficient use of land

Shared walls and heating/cooling systems

No front yard and shared courtyard = more time for other activities



Value # 3
Saving Time & Money

Mixed-use neighborhoods are more walkable.

- Car-light households become feasible
- Savings on gas, insurance, maintenance, and parking



Value # 3 Saving Time & Money

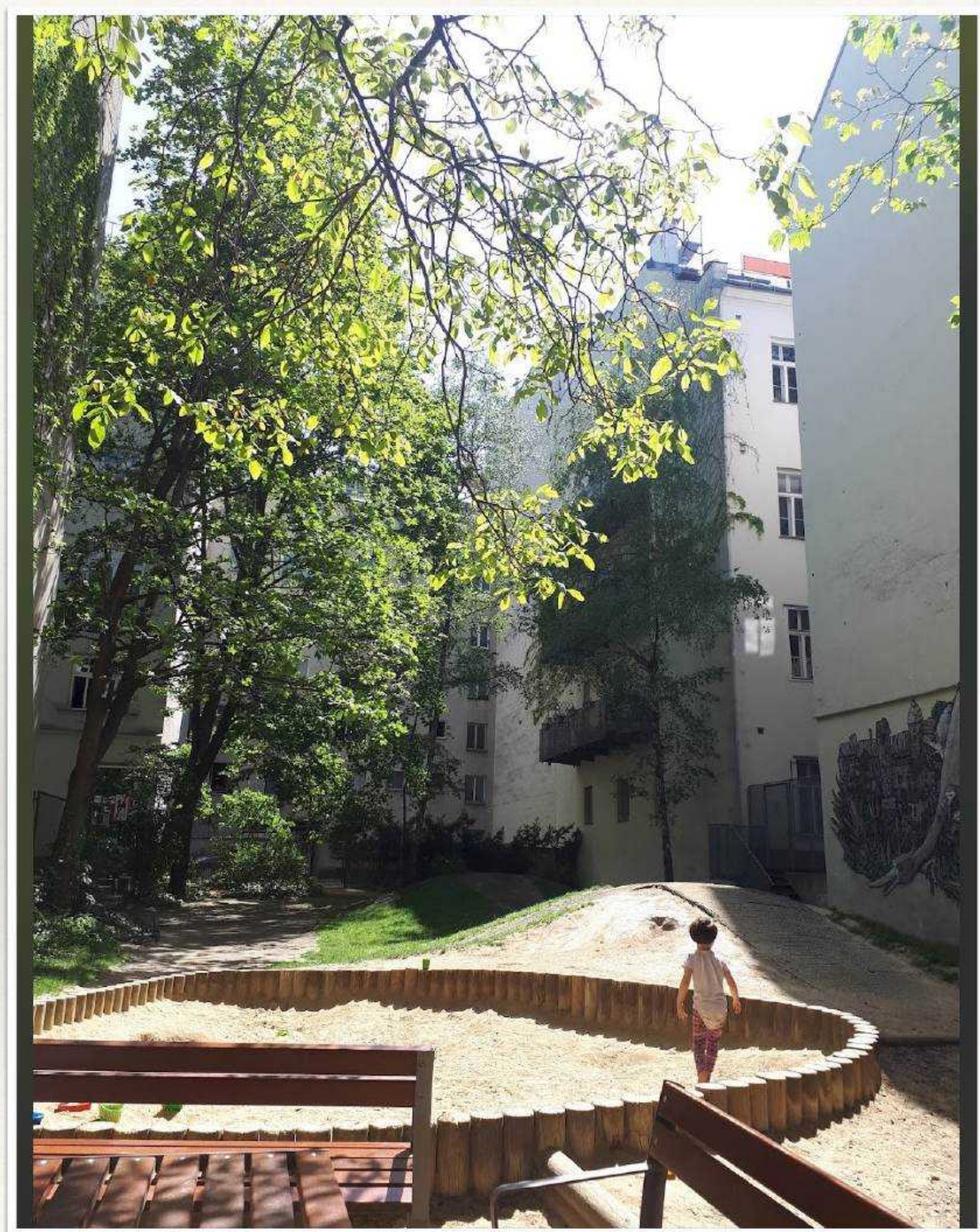
Less time
in the car



Value # 4

Childhood Independence

Courtyard a safe and contained space for young children to play without constant direct supervision



Advantages of a shared courtyard: playmates



Value # 4 Childhood Independence

Cities CAN offer families safe places for children to explore their environment independently

Walkable destinations

Active street life, known neighbors, and more “eyes on the street” means safe public ways

Older children can walk to school, the library, sports practice, or a friend’s house



Families need cities to work for them

1. The House with a Yard
2. Urban Conveniences
3. Saving Time and Money
4. Childhood Independence



How To Courtyard Block in San Francisco

Step 1 – Choose a Pilot Block

pick an underdeveloped site

Example Site: Approximately 0.87 acre,
currently occupied by the Sloat Garden
Center and surface parking.



Step 2 - Design the Block



Courtyard Block design guidelines:

1. Typical building is ~60' wide and 40' deep. **Depth is more important than width.**
2. Place buildings along the block perimeter.
3. Chamfer corners
4. Reduce height when needed to preserve good solar exposure on ground floors of neighboring buildings

Gross floor plate: 37,092 sq. ft.

Six residential floors: $37,092 \times 6 = 222,552$ gross sq. ft.

Residential efficiency: 91.5%

Net residential area: $222,552 \times 91.5\% = 203,635$ sq. ft.

Step 3 – Evaluate & Render the Block

Key metric	Courtyard plan	24-story proposal
Building form	10 point-access buildings, 91.5% residential efficiency	2 high-rise buildings
Height	6 stories	24 stories
Gross floor area	222,250 sq. ft.	467,610 sq. ft.
Total homes	202	682
Density	232 units/acre	784 units/acre
Studios	30 — 15%	427 — 63%
One-bedroom homes	61 — 30%	196 — 29%
Two-bedroom homes	72 — 36%	33 — 5%
Three-bedroom homes	39 — 19%	26 — 4%
Total ground-floor area	37,042 GSF	Approximately 32,000–35,000 GSF



Central question: Can the site function as ten fine-grained buildings around private courtyards while remaining one coordinated, code-compliant development?



Centrum-eiland,
Amsterdam

Example: Lakeshore Plaza Shopping Mall, 1549 Sloat Blvd



Example: Lakeshore Plaza Shopping Mall, 1549 Sloat Blvd



Lakeshore Plaza Courtyard Development

Total gross floor area: 1,417,250 sq. ft.

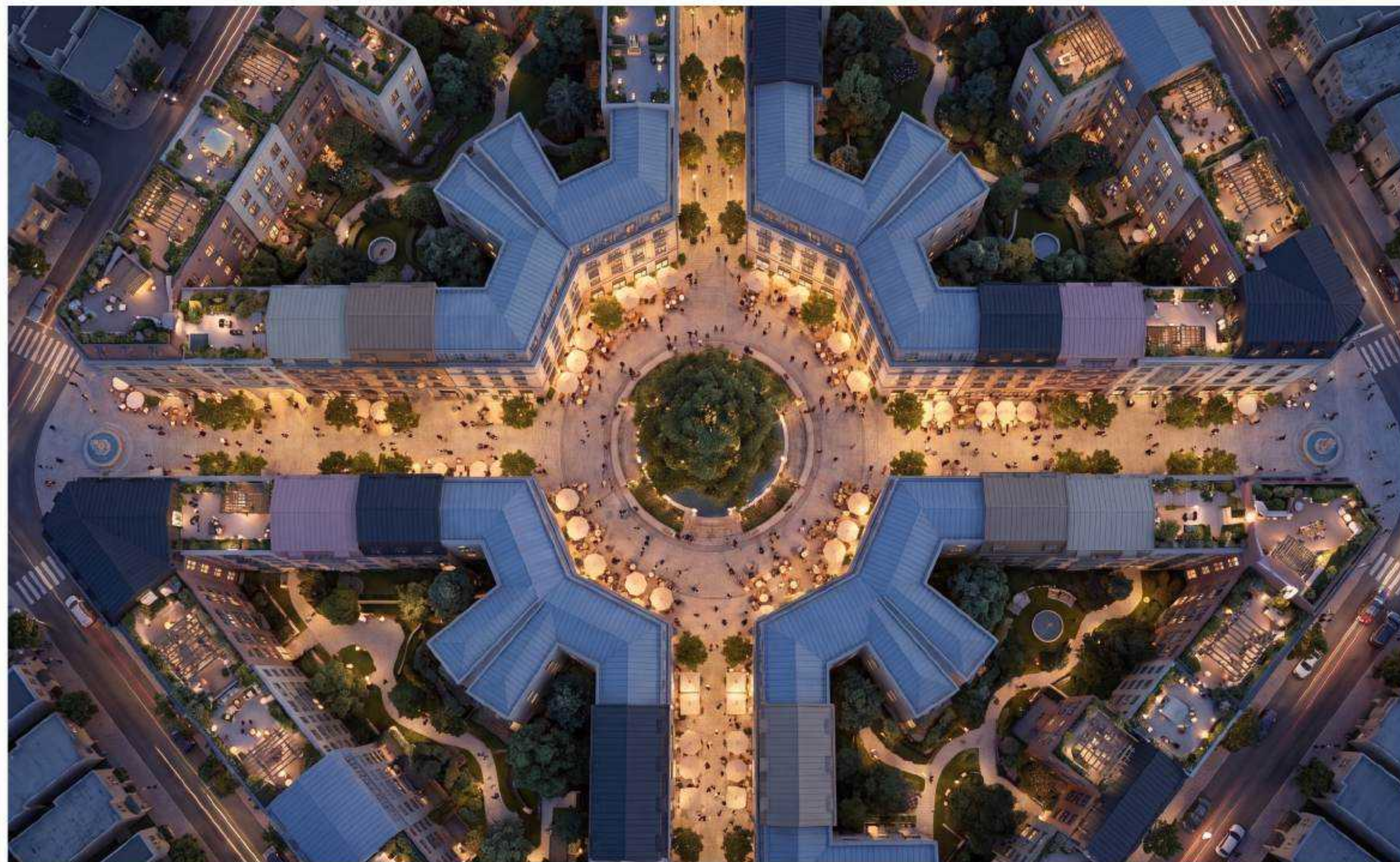
Total gross residential area:
1,240,094 sq. ft.

Residential efficiency: 91.5%

Net residential area:
 $1,240,094 \times 91.5\% = 1,134,686$ sq. ft.

**Ground-floor retail, office, garage
and other uses:**
 $236,208 \times 75\% = 177,156$ sq. ft.

Example: Lakeshore Plaza Shopping Mall, 1549 Sloat Blvd



Illustrative Balanced Unit Mix

Family-sized homes: 793 two-, three-, and four-bedroom units

Share with two or more bedrooms: 65%

Unit Type	Share	Assumed Net Size	Units
Studios	10%	500 sq. ft.	122
One-bedroom	25%	700 sq. ft.	305
Two-bedroom	40%	950 sq. ft.	488
Three-bedroom	20%	1,250 sq. ft.	244
Four-bedroom	5%	1,500 sq. ft.	61
Total	100%	930 sq. ft. average	1,220 units

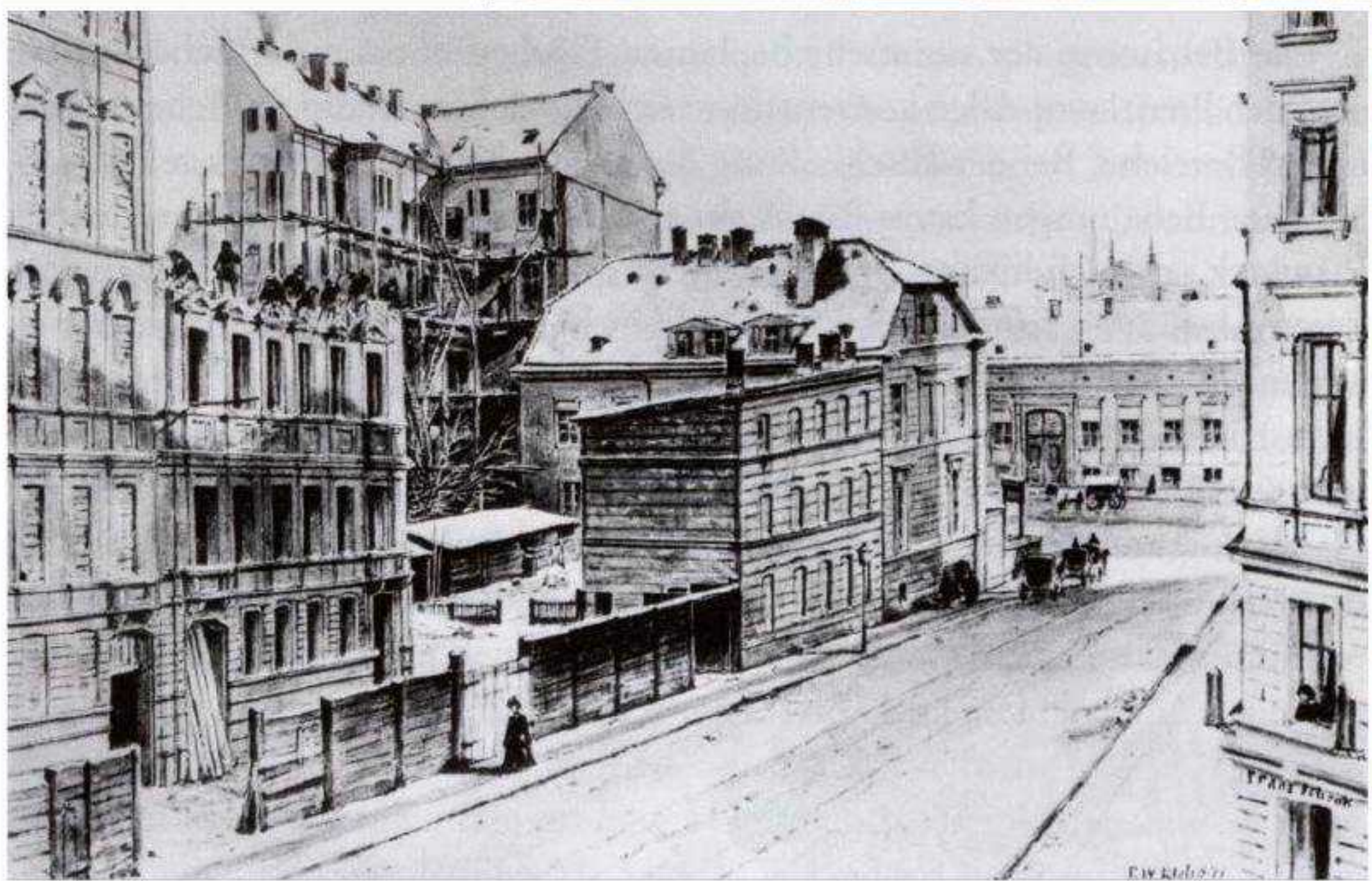
Example: Lakeshore Plaza Shopping Mall, 1549 Sloat Blvd

**Ground-floor retail, office, garage and
other uses:**

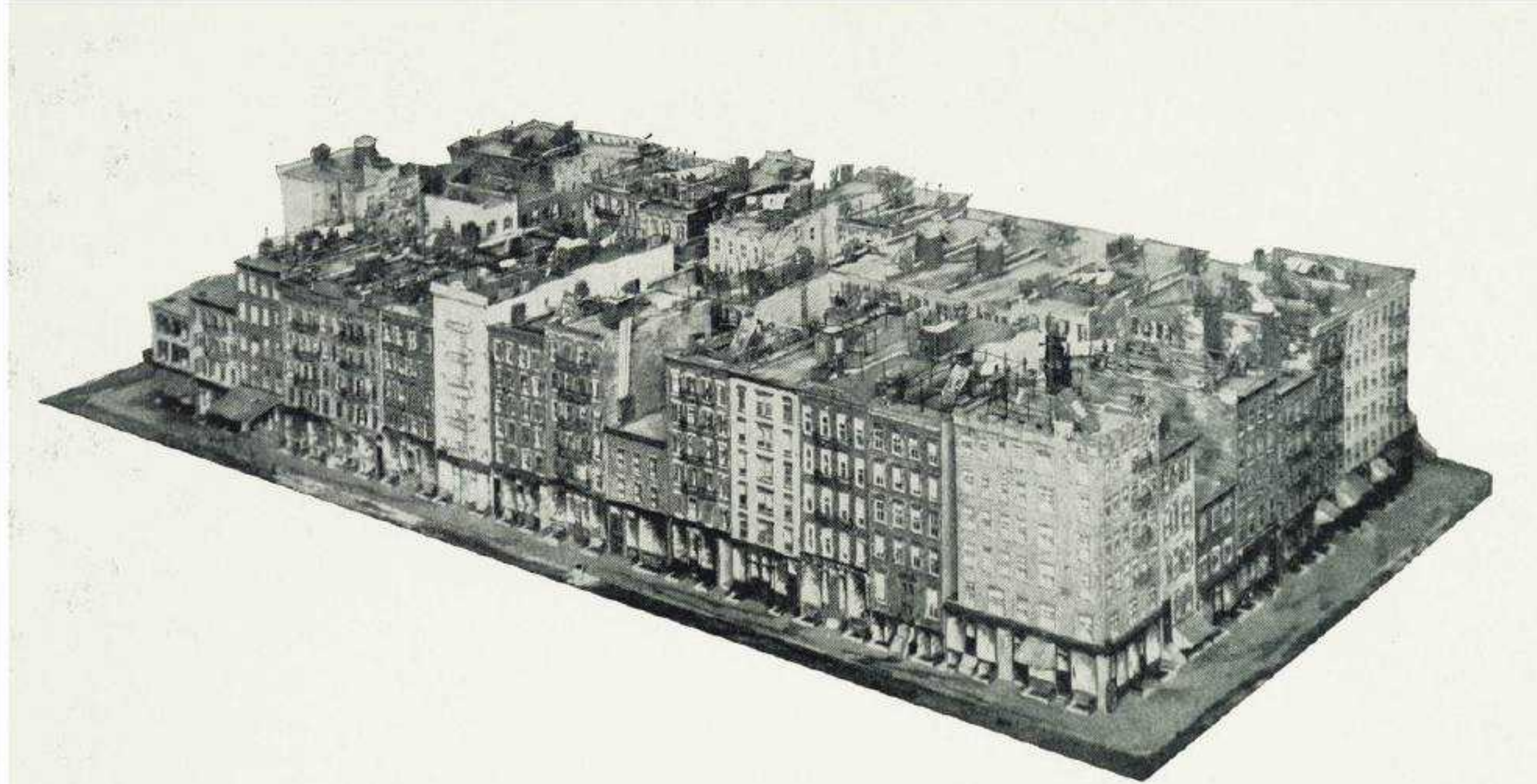
$236,208 \times 75\% = 177,156 \text{ sq. ft.}$



Example: Incremental Infill Development



Example: Incremental Infill Development



MODEL OF BLOCK ON LOWER EAST SIDE
From the Tenement House Exhibition of 1900



Conclusion & Next Steps
We are looking for project partners!
projects@courtyardurbanist.com

