

MoMA project starts rebuilding the American dream, starting in Orange

By Dan Bischoff/The Star-Ledger

If you asked your parents (doesn't matter how old you are) to describe the American dream, they'd sooner or later talk about a house, a yard and a picket fence — a single-family home. George W. Bush, taking a line from Margaret Thatcher, called his administration's easy credit policies "the ownership society," one in which we'd all have the chance to work hard, prosper and buy a home.

And then speculate with it.

Well, here we are, eight years after the increasing value of our houses was supposed to make up for decades of declining wages and growing debt. More than \$7.8 trillion in middle-class home equity was erased by the crash at the end of Bush's two terms, 30 percent of homeowners now owe more than their houses are worth, and many of our suburbs are a checkerboard of occupied and empty houses. And that has made many long-standing critics of the American suburb — who see it as environmentally toxic, energy wasteful and just too expensive (especially because it's paid for by taxing the cities) — call for another major rethink of the way we house our dream.

This summer, the Museum of Modern Art tasked a team of architects from MOS, an innovative New Haven, Conn., architectural firm, to study the reinvention of Orange as a model for saving the suburbs in the wake of the Great Recession. Their study will join the work of four other teams — researching Salem-Keizer, Ore.; Cicero, Ill.; Temple Terrace, Fla.; and Rialto, Calif. — in an exhibition opening in January 2012 titled "Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream."

"We chose a West Transit Village site surrounding Orange train station because it offers the broadest range of possible redevelopment projects," says Hilary Sample, who, with Michael Meredith, is heading the MOS team. The exact boundaries of the MOS study have yet to be set, but the team intends to include an area large enough to include the rail station and Interstate 280, which runs nearby. "The state has promised funds to encourage higher densities within a half-mile radius of light railroad transit stations, and we wanted to be as practical as we could be."

The MOS team will settle for much of the coming season in an apartment in Orange as a base for its study. Barry Bergdoll, MoMA's Philip Johnson chief curator of architecture, conceived "Foreclosed" in conjunction with Columbia University's Reinhold Martin, director of the Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture. Together, with a deep bench of interdisciplinary scholars, they produced a catalogue of today's suburban problems called the Buell Hypothesis, which serves as a framework for all five teams.

And the most striking thing about their diagnosis of the problems facing today's suburbs is their acceptance of post-recession economics as America's new normal — which would mean the suburbs as we know them are unsustainable.

MoMA's Vision Thing

Orange isn't what architects call a "first suburb," a Baby Boomer hatchery built in the immediate postwar period, any more than it's a plastic-and-glue, "built-to-mortgage" McStructure development of the past decade. MOS thinks of it as a historic urban village, rich in architectural keepers.

All four Oranges were considered for the study. Foreclosures were most numerous to the east, in Vailsburg and Irvington, but East Orange and Orange saw clusters in certain neighborhoods; South Orange had fewer, and West Orange very few.

South Orange and West Orange also have the highest number of commuters using public transit for work (largely trains into Manhattan), while East Orange and Orange have the highest poverty rates and demographics most like nearby Newark. Orange, however, has both the mass transit rail lines and the midrange density that could model for many inner-belt suburbs of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic.

"One interesting feature was 280, which is like a sunken slash right through the middle of the neighborhood. We thought that was a challenge, and an opportunity, too," says Sample, adding that bridging the highway could provide new parkland or commercial and residential spaces. "Orange has large, government-owned buildings — and huge parking lots — in the west, 19th- and early 20th-century worker housing around Hampton Terrace, as well as pitched-roof, single-family housing scattered throughout. It really offers a very diverse, very interesting set of possibilities."

Almost from the beginning, MoMA architects have focused on car-driven, low-density housing as both the appeal and the curse of the suburbs. Providing services — sewage, power, garbage collection and on and on — is far more costly amid low-density settlements than it is in cities, for obvious reasons. But people crave air and light, and room to move and play sports.

To Rent or to Own

The most striking assumption made by the Buell Hypothesis and the MOS team is that current economic conditions are not a temporary aberration. This political reality — along with higher gasoline prices, which are a particular threat to boom-era suburbs built outside the urban rings of the 1990s — casts all future suburban growth into doubt.

"The suburbs aren't for everybody, or shouldn't be," says Michael Meredith, Sample's partner in MOS. "Until the collapse of housing values in the Great Recession, a home had always been a good investment, but the economic structure that made that possible is changing.

"American workers have a much more nomadic lifestyle than they did in the '50s and '60s. They don't live in just one home for 30 years anymore. Rent-to-own patterns might serve a lot of people better."

The obvious keys to American housing patterns are the roads — like I-280 — that link city and suburb together. Besides transport, the roads are also the conduits where services are bundled together — power, water, sewage, gas and other utilities are usually clustered along the roadways and branch off to serve businesses or residences. In the past, roads have been the arteries of development, planting towns at crossroads or trans-shipment points.

Challenging cultural assumptions about home ownership and suburban sprawl, and contemplating a potentially different future for housing in a new economic reality, is the ultimate goal of "Foreclosed." So it's obvious, in one sense, what to do.

"One thing we've been thinking about," Sample says, "is saving money on endless infrastructure improvements by reversing the pattern of private and public property. Like, building denser housing and modern transport on a suburb's roads, while turning the private housing and backyard gardens into public parkland."

We've seen reverse patterning a lot lately — after all, what's the High Line Park in Manhattan but an industrial roadway turned into an elevated park, or SoHo but light industrial factories turned into housing? Turning suburban roads into high-density ribbons of midrise development while pruning out houses here and there and keeping the green space intact is radical, but it could work, at least in already-dense inner 'burbs.

The American dream gets more like "Inception" every day.