



Missing middle housing: Thinking big and building small to respond to today's housing crisis, by Daniel Parolek

Washington, DC, Island Press, 2020

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BOOK REVIEW

Missing middle housing: Thinking big and building small to respond to today's housing crisis, by Daniel Parolek, Washington, DC, Island Press, 2020

Single-family homes have dominated new housing construction in the United States for the past several decades. However, a growing number of academics, planning practitioners, and politicians have begun to question both the feasibility and the ethical legitimacy of continuing this trend. Some scholars have called for an end to single family—"R1"—zoning, citing its contribution to ongoing crises of affordability across the country and a slew of negative environmental impacts, not to mention its clear history as a tool for racial exclusion (Manville et al., 2020; Wegmann, 2020). However, others have pointed out that eliminating single family zoning would be a political uphill battle in much of the country (Knaap & Finio, 2020).

Nonetheless, cities like Portland and Minneapolis and the state of California have succeeded in taking the first steps toward building a post-R1 world. As more people and jurisdictions look to follow suit, they must grapple with the question of what to build and how to zone in its stead. This is the contribution of Daniel Parolek's *Missing Middle Housing: Thinking Big and Building Small to Respond to Today's Housing Crisis*. A decade after coining the term *missing middle housing* through his practice at Opticos Design, Parolek has compiled the insights of years of experience and research into a book. It reads as part manifesto, part how-to guide for planning neighborhoods with multi-unit, "house-scale" (p. 11) structures that deliver walkability at attainable prices. With a variety of case studies, vivid illustrations, and detailed sample designs, *Missing Middle Housing* should appeal to broad audience, including planning practitioners, students, and researchers.

Parolek begins by describing exactly what is meant by missing middle housing and why more of it is needed. Chapter 1 lays out recent trends in housing construction, illustrating how historically popular missing middle types, such as duplexes, courtyard apartments, and townhouses, have largely given way to either single-family homes or large multi-unit buildings since the 1990s. He then outlines the locational and design characteristics that define missing middle housing. The second chapter bolsters the arguments of the first. By analyzing demographic trends and prior survey research, Parolek makes a convincing case that there are strong latent preferences for missing middle housing that would turn into actual demand were such options more widely available.

Though most of the book focuses on how smaller multi-unit buildings in walkable locations are "affordable by design" (p. 54), Chapter 3, coauthored with Karen Parolek, describes how missing middle housing types can be constructed with the support of a variety of subsidies. The authors walk through several case studies in which both public and private funds have been used to subsidize the construction of missing middle housing, either for purchase or for rental. This chapter would be especially interesting for nonprofit developers and local policymakers.

Chapter 4 is the most crucial to understanding why missing middle housing has become so difficult to deliver, and I would have liked to see it placed earlier in the book. In it, Parolek reviews the many—*many*—barriers to delivering missing middle housing in the United States, from zoning regulations to neighborhood opposition to difficulties introduced by legal and financial regulations created for a dichotomous, single family–large multifamily world. This review of barriers demonstrates that it has been both intentional action and unintentional path dependence that has led to the current state of affairs. The remainder of the book is spent offering solutions.

Chapters 5 through 7 are the most useful for planners and local leaders looking to promote missing middle types, as they offer sample designs and regulations at multiple scales, alongside case studies with attractive before-and-after photos. To his credit, despite being an unapologetic evangelist for

missing middle housing, Parolek includes cases that are less than glowing success stories. These illuminate some pitfalls that might be avoided in the future, either through actions by individual developers or by making policy changes.

On the issue of making policy or zoning changes, Parolek has words of advice on navigating the contentious politics around increased density. Specifically, he advises that “the terms *density*, *multi-family*, and *upzoning* should be avoided altogether,” and says that advocates should “convey that Missing Middle is primarily about form and scale (house scale) and secondarily about middle income” (p. 227). This focus on form is not just a matter of political expediency for Parolek; throughout the book, he centers design and clearly holds building livable, walkable neighborhoods to be at least as important as delivering affordability. And of course, the two aims need not be at odds. However, advocating for evading public discussions of affordability or density might turn off some readers who are looking to missing middle housing mainly as a means of addressing what the book’s own subtitle deems a “housing crisis.” Nonetheless, *Missing Middle Housing* is certainly the most detailed account to date of the barriers to creating these forms of potentially more affordable housing and to identifying strategies to overcome those hurdles. As such, it provides valuable insights for those readers whose primary concern is affordability.

Missing Middle Housing offers clear arguments for building and redeveloping an array of small, multiunit housing types that have historically lined the streets of many American cities. It makes a valuable contribution to discussions on how to build cities in which single-family homes are less dominant and more people can afford to live in neighborhoods that are walkable and rich in amenities. Concrete examples and compelling visuals render the book attractive to many stakeholders involved in local housing conversations, as well as academics and students.

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