

The Prophet's Fingers



A ROADMAP

*towards the reinstatement of common spaces
stewarded by self-governing communities*

Then a mason came forth and said,
Speak to us of Houses.

And he answered and said:

. . .

Would that I could gather your houses
into my hand, and like a sower scatter
them in forest and meadow.

Would the valleys were your streets,
and the green paths your alleys, that you
might seek one another through vineyards,
and come with the fragrance of the earth
in your garments.

But these things are not yet to be.

In their fear your forefathers gathered
you too near together. And that fear
shall endure a little longer. A little
longer shall your city walls separate your
hearths from your fields.

Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (1923)

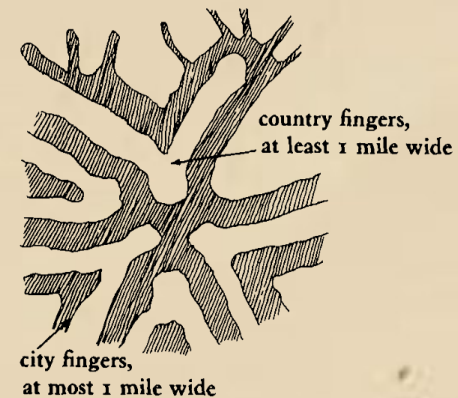
Continuous sprawling urbanization destroys life, and makes cities unbearable. But the sheer size of cities is also valuable and potent.

People feel comfortable when they have access to the countryside, experience of open fields, and agriculture; access to wild plants and birds and animals. For this access, cities must have boundaries with the countryside near every point. At the same time, a city becomes good for life only when it contains a great density of interactions among people and work, and different ways of life. For the sake of this interaction, the city must be continuous—not broken up. In this pattern we shall try to bring these two facts to balance.

... people living in cities need contact with true rural land to maintain their roots with the land that supports them.

Therefore:

Keep interlocking fingers of farmland and urban land, even at the center of the metropolis. The urban fingers should never be more than 1 mile wide, while the farmland fingers should never be less than 1 mile wide.



Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language* (1977)

. . . the dichotomy of the institutional world into private property exchanges in a market setting and government-owned property organized by a public hierarchy. The people of the world were viewed primarily as consumers or voters.

. . . farmer-managed systems are likely to grow more rice, distribute water more equitably, and keep their systems in better repair than government systems. While farmer systems do vary in performance, few perform as poorly as government systems.

. . . Chhatre and Agrawal (2009) focus on factors that affect tradeoffs and synergies between the level of carbon storage in forests and their contributions to livelihoods. They find that larger forests are more effective in enhancing both carbon and livelihoods outcomes, particularly when local communities also have high levels of rule-making autonomy.

Elinor Ostrom, 2009 Nobel Prize Lecture.

Life in the city (and suburb) is made possible by the resources harvested from non-(sub)urban spaces. As sprawl increases the distance between consumers and the resources they depend on, there is a corresponding decrease in the opportunity for consumers to have a hands-on relationship with the sources of the material they depend on.

A world furnishing little opportunity for a symbiotic relationship with a particular place alienates its inhabitants, thus producing behavior which tends towards the extractive rather than the symbiotic.

If we continue to treat the land as an instrument for our enjoyment, and as a source of economic profit, our parks and camps will become more artificial, more plastic, more like Disneyland. And our farms will become more and more like factories.

Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language* (1977), p. 38

Symbiotic relationships imply the opportunity to both give and take. The tourist and miner only take, while the conservationist fights to preserve what is. The steward, however, takes to give and gives to take, collapsing the very distinction between selfishness and selflessness.

A parallel problem is the decline of common spaces, held and stewarded by the group it is common to. Instead, nearly all land is either fully private or managed by governmental bodies.

People will not feel comfortable in their houses unless a group of houses forms a cluster, with the public land between them jointly owned by all the householders.

When houses are arranged on streets, and the streets owned by the town, there is no way in which the land immediately outside the houses can reflect the needs of families and individuals living in those houses. The land will only gradually get shaped to meet their needs if they have direct control over the land and its repair.

Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language* (1977), p. 198

The social fabric of our communities is greatly enriched when we come together, in reasonably sized groups, to give and take from land that we need and that needs us.

Common spaces which are neither private nor managed by a centralized governmental body have the power to bring us together in ways which have been largely forgotten in our times.

The solution to the pervasive (sub)urban alienation from community rooted in a shared relationship with Land is the radical rezoning project identified in pattern 3 of *A Pattern Language*.

But radical rezoning won't happen overnight.

The goal of The Prophet's Fingers (TPF) is to pave the way for widespread adoption of pattern 3 by establishing small-scale precedents for reshaping the surface of planet Earth so as to maximize opportunities to engage in collective land stewardship within the constraints of the dominant paradigms shaping our environments.

We are impatiently awaiting radical rezoning projects which will reshape the surface of planet Earth so that human communities have physical access to land and the opportunity to steward it, replacing the current system, wherein we pay taxes so that bureaucrats can manage, without our direct input, the public land we do have access to.

Top-down governmental policy, however well intended, cannot by itself keep our ecosystems healthy. For people to care about *the* environment, they must have opportunities to care for *an* environment in a hands-on way.

Therefore:

- **Identify spaces, however small, which are good candidates for communally managed plots stewarded by self-governing communities.**
- **Recruit locals and provide educational and material resources relevant to the projects they commit to.**

The following three projects lay the groundwork for broader implementation of the City Country Fingers pattern by establishing small working examples embodying its underlying principle.

- ▶ **1. POWER LINE GARDENS**
- ▶ **2. RECLAIMING ASPHALT**
- ▶ **3. MICRO COURTYARDS**

PILOT PROJECT 1

POWER LINE GARDENS

Coordinating between power companies and the neighbors whose residences abut or are near power lines to manage the growth of the area under the lines through community gardens. Shares of plant stock, produce and, where applicable, animal products are divided among the members of the collective, who together establish protocols for managing those spaces.

PILOT PROJECT 2

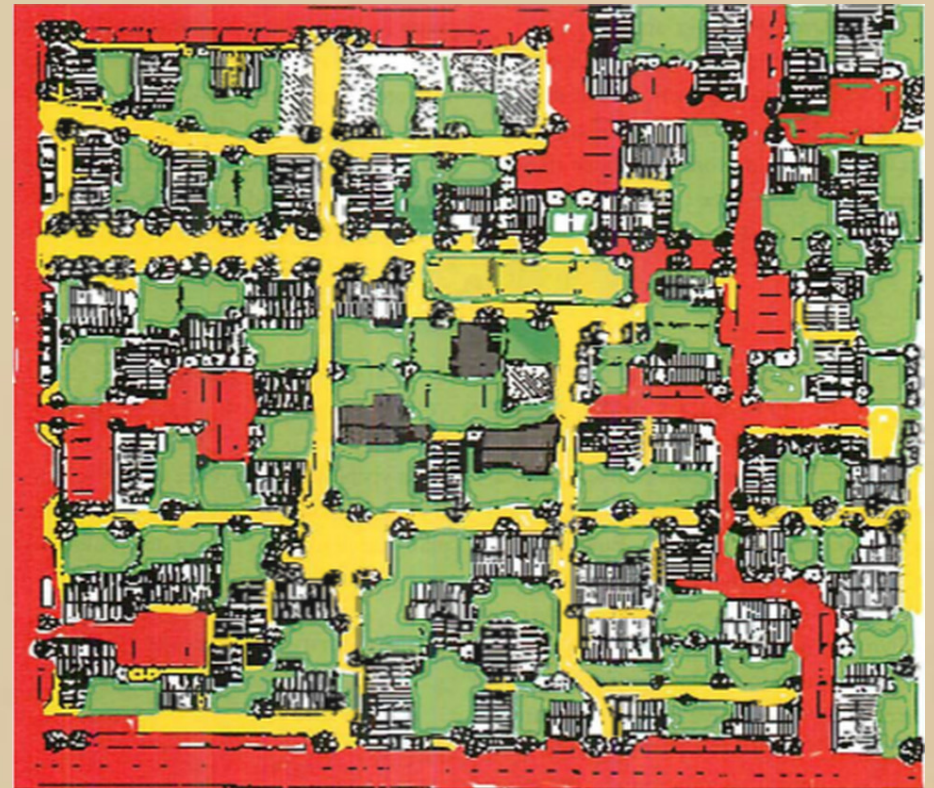
RECLAIMING ASPHALT

Neighborhoods securing code variances to reclaim space from cars for pedestrians, using the process Christopher Alexander lays out in *The Nature of Order*, Book 3, *A Vision of a Living World*.

The neighborhood is mapped in four colors: red for cars, yellow for people on foot, green for gardens and gray for buildings. Variances are then sought step by step to shrink the red and break up its continuity, so that the yellow can grow and the green can take on a coherent shape.



AN UNHEALTHY PATTERN: THE 20TH-CENTURY NORM. *This drawing and the one on the opposite page are drawn to the same scale. The gross quality of this drawing reflects the gross quality of the environment it portrays: a few blocks in a typical 20th-century American city. As in any American neighborhood, there are massive swaths of road cutting through the neighborhood (red); the pedestrian path is minimal, on the thinly drawn discontinuous sidewalks (yellow). The gardens (green) for the most part are wasted as they surround the gray (houses) in areas too small to be used.*



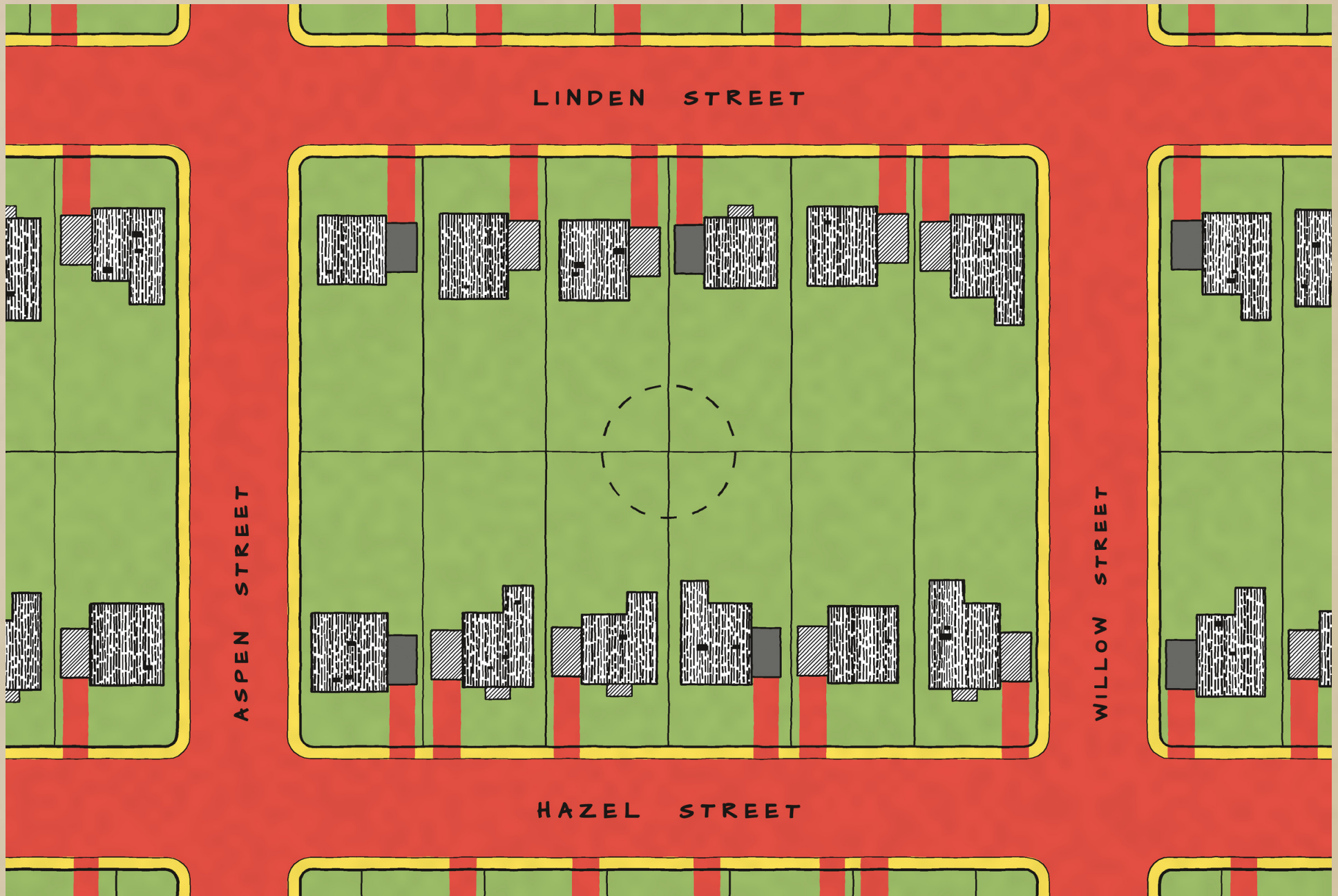
A NEW KIND OF NORM: A HEALTHY PATTERN. *An imaginary neighborhood, about 450 feet by 600 feet, with some 65 houses, and perhaps 200 persons, at a density of about 10 dwellings to the acre. The drawing shows relative amounts of yellow, red, green, and gray which are quite different from the previous plan. There are large amounts of yellow, the green is coherently shaped, the red is minimized and discontinuous. In part, this plan simulates the process generated by the principles defined in the following pages. Christopher Alexander and Saul Pieburdo, Center for Environmental Structure, 1996.*

Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order*, Book 3: *A Vision of a Living World*

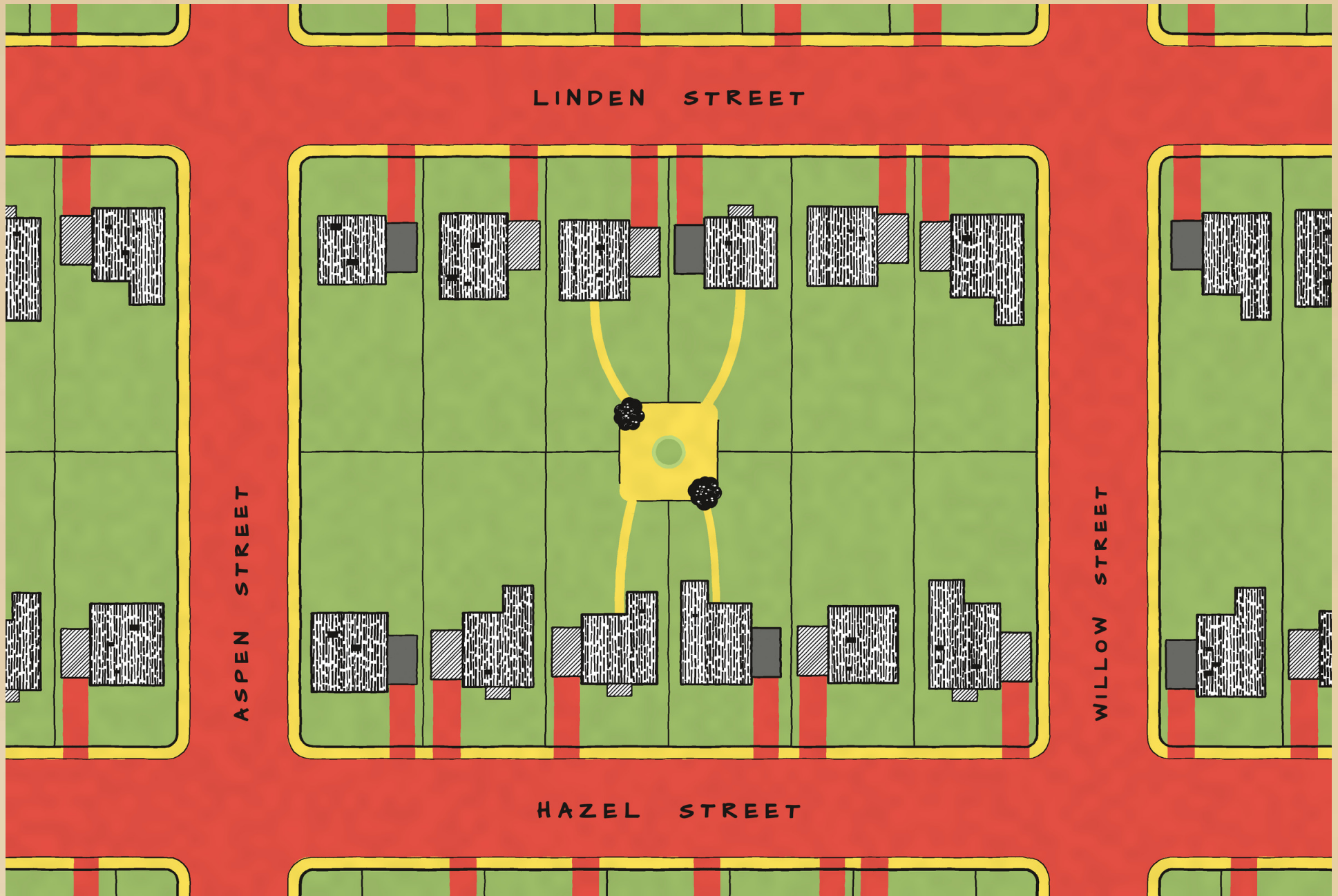
PILOT PROJECT 3

MICRO COURTYARDS

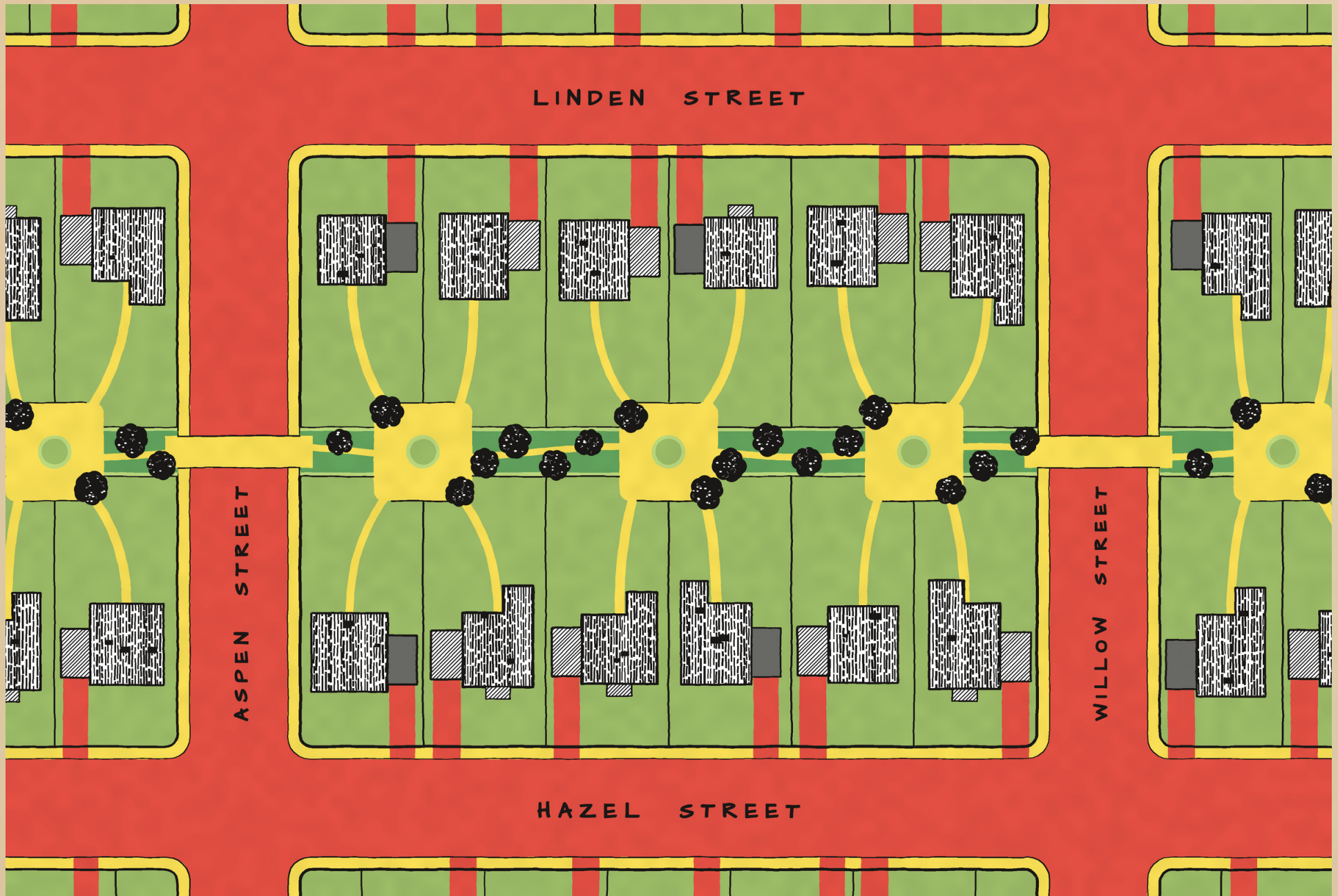
Micro courtyards established where four residential house plots meet, eventually opening into green corridors that serve as rights of way connecting one multi-home micro courtyard to another. Each courtyard is governed by its own members. Where courtyards connect, they form a second level of self-governance for the shared corridor.



1 · TODAY. Four fenced back yards meet at a single corner (circled). Red: cars. Yellow: people on foot. Green: gardens. Black and gray: houses.



2 · A MICRO COURTYARD. *Each of the four plots gives a corner of its back yard to a shared courtyard, reached by a path from each back door.*



3 · COURTYARDS JOINED BY A CORRIDOR. *Courtyards form at more corners, and a planted strip along the rear lot lines joins them into a green corridor and right of way that crosses the streets to the next block.*

We advocate a system of ownership where the deed to one home carries with it part ownership in the cluster to which the home belongs; and ideally, this in turn carries with it part ownership in the neighborhood made up of several clusters. In this way, every owner is automatically a shareholder in several levels of public land. And each level, beginning with the homes in their clusters, is a political unit with the power to control the processes of its own growth and repair.

Under such a system, the housing, whether in low or high density neighborhoods, can gradually find its way toward an abiding expression of the cluster. And the clusters themselves will come to support a quality of neighborhood life that, from our broken down neighborhoods now, we can only dimly perceive.

Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language* (1977), p. 201