

Overview

INCREMENTAL DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE

WHO WE ARE

The Incremental Development Alliance is a national non-profit that aims to grow the ranks of small developers.

Our founders are professionals in the urban development field who were overwhelmed by the number of people looking for the same advice: how do I build a small, multi-unit building? In order to stretch their mentorship and hard-won knowledge to more eager students, they formed the IncDev Alliance and set to work developing training and curriculum for aspiring small developers.

The Alliance part of our name celebrates the many individuals, institutions, foundations, and grassroots groups that are our allies in this work. Our Alliance also includes our participants who are implementers and doers in their own neighborhoods across the continent.

OUR VISION

We envision neighborhoods regenerated by small developers who deeply care about the places where they live and build.

OUR MISSION

- **Resurrect the small scale developer**, who combines local insight and relationships to build human-scale neighborhoods while earning a living.
- **Make walkability legal again** by changing the rulebook in favor of the incremental projects that create great cities.
- **Line our streets with independent businesses** by helping them own buildings that create a long term source of income that grows alongside their neighborhood.
- **Rebuild skills while rebuilding our cities** by learning, elevating, and employing the work of local skilled trades. We need more people with the skills to construct, outfit, maintain, and repair the buildings we love.

WHAT WE DO

We train people to be small developers and help remove barriers to their success. To do this, we:

- **Train** small business owners, neighborhood advocates, design and real estate professionals, builders and others to be small developers;
- **Coach** civic groups and government agencies on how to create a healthy ecosystem for small developers and entrepreneurs; and
- **Connect** a continent of neighborhood level doers through alliances to celebrate success and share field notes.

HOW WE DO IT

- We design and curate training which is published in a range of learning materials.
- We host workshops, in person and online, for groups at various stages of development proficiency.
- We develop custom services for cities or foundations who would like to pilot projects to support small development in a targeted area.
- We speak at conferences and events.
- We support peer-to-peer learning communities for small developers, both online and in person.
- We remain implementers in our own communities, always speaking from experience.

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Why Incremental?

INCREMENTAL DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE

WHAT IS INCREMENTAL DEVELOPMENT?

Today, real estate development mostly happens in big, expensive chunks - picture large scale subdivisions and condo towers. You need to be a professional development firm to be a part of that action. But the neighborhoods we love most were built in little pieces. That's the way great cities work - places are way more loveable and flexible when many people have been a part of building them. That is what we mean by incremental development: city-building in small steps.

We see incremental development as way for anyone and everyone to get involved in building and improving their neighborhood. In an incremental approach, no project is too small and because of that, we can allow our neighborhoods to evolve in a natural, community-led way. Incremental development actually helps neighborhoods become stronger with time by allowing them to mature gradually instead of locking them into boom-and-bust cycles that are common with larger developments.

WHY IS INCREMENTAL DEVELOPMENT SO IMPORTANT?

Incremental development is a common sense, can-do response to three major problems plaguing our cities.

1) The real estate industry is mining the value out of our neighborhoods.

Development should be a regenerative, strengthening force in a neighborhood, but today's real estate industry is largely extractive. The path to real estate ownership is most often through a large and distant financial institution. Unless you are one of the 30% of homeowners or so who have paid off their mortgage, you don't really own your home - some financier in another part of the world does.

EXAMPLES OF INCREMENTAL DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE





On the retail side of the equation, when national or global chains are lining your streets, it's a sign that a lot of the money spent in a place doesn't stay there

The overall effect of this is that, effectively, the most powerful land owners in our hometowns are not at all in touch with the actual land they own.

We envision a world full of thoughtful, local, relationship-driven real estate developers who care about the place where they live and build. We've found that there is actually tremendous demand for that, but the system is designed to achieve other ends, which keeps such small developers from getting shovels in the ground.

2) The development industry operates only at a large-scale.

An individual who is aspiring to become a developer may find they need a team of experts to navigate the regulations, zoning, and financing that would allow one to build anything other than a single-family detached home. Since the process is so complicated, developers often end up building bigger buildings with more units to make up for the time and expense of navigating the regulatory system.

Those bigger buildings have the power to control and monopolize much of the skilled trades labor necessary for projects of all sizes, making it more difficult for small

developers and small trades outfits to compete.

The modern development industry is only viable with economies of scale. They cannot easily operate at the level of lot by lot, thoughtful and community-centered development.

To be clear, the Alliance is not opposed to regulations. We are opposed to arcane and super-sized regulations that create barriers to entry for developers that want to do small scale projects which add real value to their neighborhoods.

3) There is a large and growing mismatch between building stock and housing demand.

The US housing supply is 63% single-family detached dwellings. Our financial and building regulations strongly favor the building of even more single-family detached dwellings. However, as average household sizes continue to shrink and demand for urban living continues to grow, what we desperately need is more quality rental housing assembled into charming, human-scaled neighborhoods.

You can read about the evidence for this at length in the work of Arthur C Nelson or the Brookings Institution. We need a diversity of owner-occupied housing and quality rentals, adjacent to commercial mixed-use buildings.

To do that, we need small developers.

As with most things in life, scale makes all the difference. The small scale developer is limited by their size to a certain scope of project. So instead of meeting rental demand through the creation of extra-large apartment complexes, small developers are more likely to build what is commonly called the "missing middle" - such as duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, live-work buildings, and backyard cottages. Small developers benefit from living or working in their own buildings as well, which fosters accountability.

The demand for "missing middle" housing far outstrips supply in the US, because while these time-honored buildings used to be common, they are rarely built in today's development landscape.

The "missing middle" is a terrific economic proposition for the small developer, but too small for a big development company's business model. No one is coming to save us from the status quo. We've got to do it ourselves.

That's why the Incremental Development Alliance is training people how to become small developers and working with cities and foundations to help create a friendlier regulatory environment for bottom-up building.

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Photos by Johnny Sanphillippo.