



Pocket Neighborhoods: Building Blocks for Resilient Communities

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At the beginning of my book, *Pocket Neighborhoods: Creating Small Scale Community in a Large Scale World*, there is a story about a garden party I attended last summer. It was hosted by a friend in her orchard overlooking a broad valley — 20 guests at a long table dappled with late afternoon August sunlight. It was a beautiful scene. We all knew our host, but many of us did not know one another. At one point during the gathering, she asked that we take turns introducing ourselves and saying a few words. When my turn came, I said my name and that I was just finishing writing a book about

pocket neighborhoods. Of course, the response was, “What is a pocket neighborhood?” Looking down the table, I had a bit of a revelation... I said, “This table is like a city block within a neighborhood. Look where our conversations have been happening before our introductions — one at this end of the table, one at the other, and a third in the middle. These are like three pocket neighborhoods along our block.” I pointed out how conversation happened spontaneously in small groups of people, while communication within large groups required organization.

Then I asked them to imagine themselves as a house — each with a formal façade adorned with a bay window, two-story arched entry, and two garage doors. “Now, turn around ... If we were a typical neighborhood, your facades would be facing the street, while the life of your house would be oriented toward your fenced backyard, kitchen and family room. The street out front would be empty, except for cars.” I continued the analogy, “If we were at a dinner party, there would be no conversation! Each of us have all the privacy in the world, yet no community.” I called them back to face the table. “In a pocket neighborhood, active living spaces of houses face toward a common area shared with nearby neighbors, while quieter, more private spaces are farther back. Living in such a neighborhood, conversation is effortless — like friends around a dinner table.”

Over the last 15 years I’ve been designing and developing [pocket neighborhoods](#) as a typology of housing to counteract the isolating trends of suburban sprawl and urban living. I’ve come to see how these small-scale communities can be building blocks for a more resilient society.

What are Pocket Neighborhoods? Essentially, pocket neighborhoods are small groups of houses or apartments gathered around a shared open space. They might take the form of a garden courtyard, a pedestrian street, a series of joined backyards, or a reclaimed alley. These clusters form at a sub-block scale in a semi-private zone of ownership. Think of them as a neighborhood within a neighborhood.



Pocket neighborhoods exist across all transects — Urban Centers, Urban Neighborhoods, Suburbs, Small Towns and Rural areas. The key idea is that a relatively small number of nearby neighbors share and care for a common space together.



At its core, this is not about aesthetics or style; it's about design that cultivates healthy neighborly connections, while preserving personal privacy.

Passersby on a public street might offer glancing nods to one another; in a pocket neighborhood, nearby neighbors are likely to expand a chance meeting into a chat or an impromptu get-together with order-out pizza. They are more invested because they share the passage of time in the same place. And it is the design of the shared space that makes it easier to happen.

Don't get me wrong — the anonymity of urban living can be freeing, and sometimes nosy neighbors can be annoying. But if you're in down with a broken leg, it won't be your friends across town or family across the country that will walk your dog every day. It will be your caring neighbor next door.

How about a mom who needs help looking after her kids while going for a short errand? Or a neighbor who needs her cat fed while away on vacation? An elderly neighbor who needs help trimming a hedge? In a pocket neighborhood, nearby neighbors are on a first-name basis with one another, the first to notice a need, and the to first call on for assistance. **This is why I believe that pocket neighborhoods are primary building blocks for community resilience. They offer the bonds of small scale community within a large scale world.**



Design Patterns for Pocket Neighborhoods

Pocket neighborhoods will have different qualities and characteristics given their location: an urban apartment building, an infill housing cluster off of a busy street, a cohousing community planned by its residents, or a group of neighbors pulling back their fences to create a commons in their backyards. There are underlying design patterns, however, shared by all pocket neighborhoods.

Clusters of a Dozen Households. A neighborhood might contain several hundred households, but when it comes to pocket neighborhoods, I believe the optimum size is around 8 to 12 households. If a cluster has fewer than 4 households, it loses the sense of being a cluster, and lacks the diversity and activity of a larger group. When the number of households in a cluster grows beyond 12 or 16, neighbors are too far away to easily relate on a daily basis and too many in number to extend care and connection with.

A larger neighborhood of 50 to 60 households might consist of 5 pocket neighborhoods, each with control of its own central common space, and connected by walkways.



Shared Common Space. This is the heart of a pocket neighborhood, what holds it together and what gives it vitality. This space may take the form of a garden courtyard, a playspace at the center of a block, a reclaimed alley, or a community room shared by urban apartment dwellers.

The commons is neither private (home, yard) nor public (a busy street, park), but rather a defined space between the private and public realms. Residents surrounding this space share in its management, care and oversight, thereby enhancing a felt and actual sense of security and identity.

The commons is more than a pretty space to look at. It should foster interaction among surrounding neighbors in the daily flow of life. Consider the approach from the car door to the front door so that residents walk through the commons, and orient the active interior rooms so they look onto the shared space.

Corralling the Car. In America, nearly everyone has a car. But cars don't need to dominate our lives. Start first by locating parking areas to be good neighbors: shield parking areas from the street and the commons. Don't let garage doors greet the guests. Whenever possible, locate parking areas so that residents and guests walk through the shared common area. If cars have access into the commons, be sure they are on pedestrian behavior, as in the design of [woonerfs](#).





Connection and Contribution. With any changes made to home or garden, make the neighborhood a better place from your improvements. Connect and contribute to the fabric of the surrounding houses and streetscape. This is one of those “both/and” conditions — make improvements to serve personal needs and desires, while serving the surrounding community.

Enclosure and Permeability. Enclosed space taken to the extreme is not good, as in gated communities. A shared common space should have appropriate openness or permeability to the surrounding community. A healthy community ‘breathes’ with its surroundings. That said, in a dangerous environment like an urban alley, a gate can offer a level of safety to allow surrounding residents to open to the alley.



Eyes on the Commons. Thanks to Jane Jacobs and Oscar Newman for this one. The first line of defense for personal and community security is a strong network of neighbors who know and care for one another. When the active spaces of the houses look onto the shared common areas, a stranger is noticed. As well, nearby neighbors can see if daily patterns are askew next door or be called upon in an emergency.

Layers of Personal Space. Community can be wonderful, but too much community can be suffocating. On the other hand, with too much privacy, a person can feel cut off from neighbors. Creating multiple ‘layers of personal space’ will help achieve the right balance between privacy and community.



At the transition between the public street and the semi-public commons, create a passage of some sort — a gateway, arbor, or narrowed enclosure of plantings. Between the commons and the front door, create a series of layers — such as a border of shrubs and flowers at the edge of the sidewalk /a low fence /private yard / a covered porch with a low railing and flowerboxes /and then the front door. With this layering, residents will feel comfortable being on the porch — enough enclosure to be private, with enough openness to acknowledge passersby.



Where the space is limited, such as an urban apartment, think of the layer just outside the door as a “soft edge”, and make room for a bench, or table and chairs. Layers of personal space continue on the interior of the homes — locate the more active living spaces toward the shared commons, and the more private, personal spaces toward the back of the house and upstairs. Sometimes, having a secluded garden is just what is needed to recharge a busy life. Locate this space at the rear of the dwelling, or on a roof terrace.

Front Porch. The front porch is a particular ‘layer of personal space’ that needs highlighting. It is perhaps the key element in fostering neighborly connections. It’s placement, size, relation to the interior and the public space, and height of railings is both an art and a science. I wrote more about ‘A Good Porch’ on my [blog](#).



Nested Houses. Having a next-door house or apartment peering into your own can be uncomfortable and claustrophobic. Therefore, design residences with an open side and a closed side so that neighboring homes ‘nest’ together — with no window peering into a neighbor’s living space. The south side of this cottage below opens to its side yard, while the north side of the next house has skylights for daylight, but no windows looking back.



Commons Buildings & Gardens. An advantage of living in a pocket neighborhood is being able to have shared buildings and gardens. The easiest and least expensive amenity is a common tool shed (how many rakes, shovels, hoes and lawn mowers do you need in a close-knit neighborhood?). An outdoor barbecue or picnic shelter is another.



A multipurpose room with a kitchenette, bathroom and storage room can be used to host community potlucks, meetings, exercise groups and movie nights. Larger aggregate communities of several pocket neighborhoods may be able to afford a community kitchen & dining hall, guest apartment, workshop and children’s room. And pocket neighborhoods of any size will enjoy the benefits of a community vegetable garden.



For more information on pocket neighborhoods and examples, visit www.pocket-neighborhoods.net and www.rosschapin.com