

Date: Tue, 1 Jul 2003 12:30:19 -0400
Reply-To: The Practice of New Urbanism <PRO-URB@LISTSERV.UGA.EDU>
Sender: The Practice of New Urbanism <PRO-URB@LISTSERV.UGA.EDU>
From: Andres Duany <andres@DPZ.COM>
Subject: Re: Shared Outdoor Space and Community Life
Comments: To: "CNU@lsv.uky.edu" <CNU@lsv.uky.edu>,
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Dan Solomon <dans@solomonarchitecture.com>,
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To: PRO-URB@LISTSERV.UGA.EDU

Dear Andres,

Thank you for your long and thoughtful response to my request for feedback on my article, "Shared Outdoor Space and Community Life." Sorry to be so long in responding; I've been traveling.

Clare

July 1, 2003

RE: Shared Outdoor Space and Community Life

Dear Clare (Cooper Marcus):

First, let me thank you for taking care to secure a place in American urbanism for semi-public space. It is undoubtedly an important tool in the pursuit of human happiness. I wasn't aware until I read your article in Places 15.2 that you had been dedicated to this campaign for as long as you have.

In response to that article (Shared Outdoor Space and Community Life), and following your request to comment on it, here are my thoughts:

You are not entirely correct in concluding that semi-public space is absent in the practice of the New Urbanism. You grant only one exception of the alley: and attach it to the critique that it really isn't a good enough place for children. Actually, I believe that it is a good place for children - not necessarily when it is an alley (which is an urban place), but when it is a rear lane (which is a rural place). This can be observed in action in our better communities.

Perhaps a rear lane is a good place for children; I haven't seen enough examples to judge. But I stand by my statement that we have to do better by our children than assign them a place to play which they share with cars, power lines, garbage cans, etc. (wasn't it children playing in urban streets and alleys that prompted a movement for housing reform and public playgrounds in the late 19th century?).

And why has NU so universally embraced the alley? To relegate cars, garages, driveways to the rear so that the street is more aesthetically pleasing and driveways do not detract from the walkability of the neighborhood? Frankly, I've never bought that one. Where is the research to support that argument? I live in a neighborhood where every house has a driveway, and the sidewalks are highly used for walking.

Sad to me is that so much NU discussion revolves around cars, streets, parking, etc., and so little around the needs of people/children. Back in the 1960's when conducting case studies of two 221d3 affordable housing schemes, I found that the then HUD Guidelines had 27 pages on parking and just one short paragraph on children's play. Not much has changed...

I must also call to your attention Dan Solomon's beautiful parking courts in San Francisco, and Stef and Liz Polyzoides' 20-year campaign for courtyard apartment buildings, now beautifully executed in several variations. And there are the DPZ walkways and closes in Rosemary Beach and Kentlands; these look similar to your illustrations on pages 35 and 36R. All of these create variations of semi-public space which must be socially similar to your version.

Looking back at the pictures I took when on the tour with you of Rosemary Beach, you're right—there are some attractive small green spaces which are comparable in some ways to the shared outdoor space I describe, but most of the outdoor space there—and at Kentlands—I would describe as “public.” Nothing wrong with that—just that I think we need a better mix.

I have not seen any of the Polyzoides' work, though pictures certainly look handsome. Are these courtyard apartment buildings for families with children? That is who I am principally talking about when urging a careful look at shared outdoor space.

Since receiving your e-mail I have visited two of Don Solomon's recent projects in San Francisco. While the street facades are indeed handsome and contextually appropriate, the parking courts are anything but “beautiful.” To identify a featureless, interior, asphalt parking lot as a “parking/play” court is, in my opinion, insulting to children. If these spaces, the streets and landscaping eventually become vandalized, we have no one to blame but ourselves. With their need to explore, manipulate, be creative—assigning children to a parking lot is unforgivable. I'm not blaming Solomon, but rather the system that permits this to happen. It would not be permissible to design this way in Sweden or Holland, for example. How come the U.S. perceives itself as such a child-oriented culture?

But your contention that these are incidental practices is correct when it comes to the blocks of single-family houses and rowhouses. With these, which are the bread & butter of American residential typologies, the New Urbanism indeed does not allocate to semipublic space the importance that your argument supports. Why?

This is hard to explain, as there is a robust tendency in the New Urbanism to be omnivorous, assimilating to its practice "anything that works well in the long run." The following are some tentative thoughts that may explain this absence.

1. That New Urbanism is a reform movement recoiling from the failures of the 1960s. As such, the first and classic social/spatial critique was Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space*. His strong condemnation of "unassigned space" is something that we have assimilated, perhaps thoughtlessly. We DO try to eliminate such unassigned space wherever possible. You may have noticed that those HOPE VI projects that are exclusively based in New Urbanist practices attempt to eliminate all such unassigned space, allocating it to either private yards or public street space. Reports are that this has worked well to reduce crime, so we feel no pressure to alter the practice in affordable housing layouts.

Housing site planning was indeed strongly influenced in North America by Oscar Newman's "Defensible Space" and in the U.K. by Alice Coleman's "Utopia on Trial." Unfortunately this resulted in many (including NU) throwing the baby out with the bath water. So-called "unassigned space" is/was a problem since it is not clear whether it is public, semi-public, or private, and it is not furnished with clues as to its intended function (e.g., footpaths, seating, play equipment, etc.).

You state that: "We do try to eliminate such unassigned space whenever possible." But if such space is carefully thought through as to its function, designed and detailed accordingly, it is not "unassigned"!

Yes, I have noticed that Hope VI projects based on NU practices have eliminated all such "unassigned space"; I think this is most unfortunate, and the result of "wooly" thinking which apparently goes something like this: "Crime, littering and vandalism occur in these spaces, so let's get rid of the spaces..." This is akin to the argument (which we would laughably dismiss): "Accidents occur on streets, so let's get rid of streets ..." We have continually refined the design of streets and the rules regarding traffic and pedestrian movement so as to minimize accidents. The purpose of my article in *Places* was to highlight the social benefits of these so-called "unassigned spaces" and to offer guidelines (see p. 35) to ensure they are very much "assigned." Crime may have been reduced in Hope VI projects by eliminating such space—badly designed in the first place—but what else has been lost? Places for children to run and play that are not alleys or sidewalks? Settings for community life? Spaces where neighbors can come together to improve their shared environment? (University of Illinois researchers Frances Kuo, William Sullivan and colleagues have found that such activities are the generators of a sense of community in Chicago public housing.)

Oscar Newman—disciple of Alice Coleman in the U.K.—produced a book, *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing* (1985) whose dubious arguments to eliminate "unassigned space" were taken up with enthusiasm by Margaret Thatcher's conservative government—with disastrous results. After a number of well-publicized projects were "purged" of such space, it began to occur to the planners that there might be other ways to deal with crime and vandalism, and that by forcing children out of such space to play on sidewalks beside busy

streets, they had created another unexpected problem. Coleman's proposals were quietly dropped.

Another reason that semipublic space is avoided may derive from the argument by Leon Krier that urban design should concentrate human interaction. (He goes on to suggest that hallways should be eliminated so that pedestrians should be dumped as soon as possible onto the street, where they can interact). American sedentarianism has led us to the conclusion that those few who are "out walking" should tend to meet each other and therefore that all potential social condensers (aka destinations) should be concentrated. It is one of the reasons that rather than dispersing public buildings throughout the community (which would nicely structure the urban fabric), we have a tendency to concentrate commercial and civic uses in one place. This argument is: "If there are twenty people walking around at any one time, let's do it so they have the chance to run into each other." This has yielded monofocal neighborhoods and also the elimination of the semipublic space that may dilute interaction by providing an alternative.

"... The elimination of [the] semipublic space that may dilute interaction by providing an alternative."

I'm sorry Andres (and Leon Krier), but I find this social engineering at its worst. As Mike Brill eloquently argued in his fall 2001 "Places" article, "Problems with Mistaking Community Life for Public Life," many social critics have failed to distinguish between public life and community life (which might also be termed the neighborhood or parochial realm). Concentrating commercial and civic uses may, rightfully, enhance public life. Creating shared outdoor space (as defined in my article) enhances neighborhood life. It is presumptuous to adopt a policy that eliminates the latter because it may "dilute" the former. We need BOTH!

A specific reason that semipublic space within the block is habitually eliminated is that developers want to sell the biggest lot possible to those who do comparison-shopping. If one project sells a 4,000 square foot lot plus some semipublic space, it cannot readily compete with another that sells 6,000 square foot lots and no semipublic space. Not only is the market dumbed-down in this manner but, worse, the real estate appraisal industry is rigorously limited. Their comparison protocols are circumscribed to a set of statistical correlations. These value the size of the lot, period. There are other negative social consequences to this, among them that porches are not permitted to count toward the valuation. Since appraisals are the basis upon which mortgages are calculated, this means that semipublic space and the porch are not "mortgageable" (i.e., you cannot buy those elements at 10% down and a 6% interest rate over 30 years, they must instead be paid the equivalent of cash on the barrelhead). This is a significant problem.

Yet another reason for the elimination of semipublic space within the block is that New Urbanists are in the pursuit to increased density. These days (and for the foreseeable future) density is directly correlated with the

number of cars that can be parked, and this is determined by the parking capacity of the block. Since most real estate financing formulas cannot afford parking below a deck, the best we can do with surface parking lots is to confine them to the inner block (better than sprawled all over the frontages which, as you know, would devastate the walkability of the street). As a result of this, whatever would have been available for semipublic space is usually allocated to center-block parking (remember Solomon's and Polyzoides' types).

Indeed, sometimes with unfortunate results (see above). I do NOT know as much as you about development costs, etc., but is there no way to incorporate parking *and* some shared outdoor space while still maintaining reasonable density? The designers of cohousing seem to manage it.

Then there is an argument that involves the dialectic between front and back yard and the "social contract" that the New Urbanist planner makes with the residents.

As you know, we code many aspects of the building frontage in pursuit of the creation of pedestrian streets. In exchange for this degree of constraint in public we generally allow the backyard to be a place that is self-defined -- we control the front and liberate the back. We think of the back yard as the place where people can be as slovenly as they like: barbecuing disgraceful foodstuffs in their underwear, and having veritable explosions of vulgar toys if they so desire. We have observed that when the back is "semipublic," as with a golf course, this degrades their "rights" to be slobs. We have also found there is a general dislike for greenways and bike trails across their backyards, while there is no objection to having them along their frontages. It seems that the house frontage is resilient enough to accommodate public use while the rear is too soft and vulnerable to do so. There is thus a problem when an unbuffered semipublic space is located in the rear of a dwelling. I have seen this kind of semipublic space in Dutch new towns and find that it severely constrains people's freedom to be themselves.

It is definitely possible to create a private backyard and then the semipublic space beyond, but semipublic space as the sole backyard is not popular enough to be common practice - not even its prototype at Sunnyside Gardens survived.

Read my words! I specifically make the point that the shared outdoor space at the rear **MUST** be buffered—i.e., it will only work if a fence, hedge, mounding, etc., creates a distinction between what is *private* (yard, patio, etc.) and what is *shared*. Nor am I suggesting semi-public space as "the sole backyard." No—that doesn't work ... the whole point of the design guidelines I offer in my article.

A recent study by UC Berkeley graduate students surveyed residents of two suburban developments in Davis, California, with central greenbelts. Overwhelmingly, it was this shared green space which was the prime reason for choosing to buy in these neighborhoods. So I cannot agree with you that there is

“a general dislike for greenways ... across ... backyards.” It all depends on the details!

(Incidentally, re the recent on-line debate on the ills of academia. I don't know where you all went to school. At Berkeley, students do fieldwork in parks, plazas, streets, housing developments, etc., to find out how the real world works, what people do, what they see and prefer.... Get out of your studios and into the streets !!)

And one last thing: in greenfield projects the environmental requirements are becoming so rigid that by the time every species and presumed wetland has been preserved, most of the potential open space has been allocated to "nature" (wherever "nature" happens to be) and it is then used to supply the requisite "open space" of the community.

So, the absence of semipublic space is not a matter of policy; it is arguably not even a matter of carelessness on the part of the New Urbanists, and it is certainly not a matter of undervaluing the role that you have proven that it has, particularly in the lives of children. It is just a matter of being in the crossfire of so many other variables that it hardly comes up for consideration.

I do promise you this: I will propose some inner-block public space in our current projects to see if they survive.

Best,

Andrés Duany

P.S. The houses of American military bases are not subdivided into lots. They therefore lack the coordinates for backyard definition through hedges and fences to create private space. It is all semipublic to the back. These inner block areas seem to be very similar to your definition of shared outdoor space. I have observed that they do not necessarily work as well as you describe, and surmise that this is because there is just too much of it. It seems that shared common space should be a controlled commodity.

EXACTLY! There is no buffer between private and shared outdoor space. THAT is the problem—God is the details!

On a related matter: Have you noticed that Tony Garnier's Cite Industrielle of 1917 does not allocate yards and the design is similar to some of your model blocks? This is an element of his socialist polemic. It is remarkable how often socialist and fascist societies yield the same typologies. I have always observed that urbanism and politics have a looser fit than most intellectuals ascribe to them.

Thanks for this exchange, Andres. I look forward to seeing inner block SHARED (not public—an important distinction, see first page of my article) space in future projects, and offer to do a fair post-occupancy evaluation study when you do!

Best,

Clare Cooper Marcus
Professor Emerita
(UC Berkeley, Architecture and Landscape Architecture)