

Community Connection

The Influence of Surroundings and Public Spaces



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1. Introduction

There has been a lot of research done on the effects surroundings can have on a person's emotions and happiness. Some think that in order for a person to be content with their life and living situation, one must have the opportunity to experience and live in well-designed spaces and buildings. For example, Botton argues how an area and the surroundings of people have a huge effect on their emotions and happiness. He believes that a beautiful space might be needed for people to find their happiness (Botton 2006). On the other hand, some argue it is not about where people live, but about the people they share their lives with and the relationships they build. For instance, Bruhn states "Humans are social beings who require the support and companionship of others throughout their lives" (Bruhn 2005:1). He describes how a sense of community is positively correlated to a personal sense of well-being and how people search for thoughtful and accepting relationships. He goes on further to explain how "there is a basic need to belong, which includes the need for frequent personal contacts and for bonds with others that provide stability and emotional concern" (Bruhn 2005:13). The spaces that people occupy can have a great impact on their happiness, but having a connection and strong relationships within their community is just as important as having a well-designed space.

During the three-week field trip and observations in Metro Manila, it became clear that most of the residents had similar opinions on their living conditions. When asked what they like about where they live and what they would like to see improved, they always gave very similar answers. Most wanted to have room for expansion, a space for commercial use, but most of all, nice public spaces for a meeting point among the adults and a safe place for their children to play. These families saw the value in having a well-designed space that suited their needs. However, a lot of the families were very satisfied with their neighborhoods because of the connections they had with the people in their community not just because of the spaces or buildings. Even the ones that lived in poorly designed neighborhoods said they would be reluctant to leave because of all of the relationships they have made over the years within their community. However, some of the families who lived in much nicer areas were not as content probably due to their lack of connection within their community. A strong connection within a community can be built with the help of well-designed public spaces. These two issues can work together to create a successful neighborhood.

This paper will discuss the type of impact a strong community connection can have on a neighborhood, how well-designed public spaces can support community connection, and the role of architects in achieving it.

2. Strong Community Connection

People's surroundings can have a great impact on the quality of their life. It can greatly affect their emotions and level of happiness. They are more likely to be happy if they are surrounded by or living in a space they find aesthetically pleasing. They are also more prone to happiness with their living conditions and life in general, if they possess a strong community connection within their neighborhood.

2.1 Definition of Community

There is not an exact definition for the term community, Bruhn explains it as a set of relationships between groups of people, usually in a certain area, that go far

beyond just the casual acknowledgement. The group shares similar value, goals, and maybe even a way of life that support each other and “results in a degree of mutual commitment and responsibility...community also implies a degree of constancy in fellowship and belongingness among members. Members choose to associate with, or connect to, each other” (Bruhn 2005:11). Bruhn describes the four aspects of the sense of community as portrayed by McMillan and Chavis in a *Sense of community: A definition and theory*. The first aspect is having a sense of membership or the feeling of being part of a group. The next aspect is influence, meaning that the person believes that as a member of a group he or she can make a difference. The third aspect is the integration and contentment of needs, specifically that a person would be able to help complete the group with the use of their individual abilities and skills. The final aspect is a shared emotional connection, where a person can enjoy the acceptance of other members and feel good about participating in a group (Bruhn 2005:13).

2.2 The Importance of a Community Connection

People who have a strong community connection within their neighborhood tend to lead happier lives. Humans have a desire to feel a sense of belonging, so it makes sense that this community connection could make such a profound difference in someone’s life. A strong community can benefit the individual, but also the community as well as the greater society. For example, in the preface of his book, Bruhn states, “Our connections are what create community. Networks of communities that are interdependent, diverse, and responsive to change, yet cohesive, provide the infrastructure for a healthy society” (Bruhn 2005:ix). A strong community connection can completely change the feeling of a neighborhood. Within a neighborhood, residents share the same experiences and it is a place where the background for people’s life stories are created. Neighborhoods leave a lasting impression on residents about what life is really like and what social problems may exist in a living community (Wilson 2009). Being part of a community is a natural act for humans and is something that has been practiced for generations.

Nowadays, our society is moving at a faster pace, due to busy schedules, advancements in technology, and the frequency at which we change jobs, locations and homes, it is becoming harder and harder to feel any sense of community. When there is a detachment from others, breakdown within a community can occur. This is why it is important to begin the connections within a community early on. It will help ensure that these networks will fully develop and a strong community connection will be formed (Young Foundation 2009). People are more content with their lives when they feel as though they have a purpose and being part of a community can give them that purpose. For instance, the individual's feeling of whether or not he or she is valued, and that his or her protection and safety is provided for is what makes a community important and meaningful (Bruhn 2005:15). The same author also argues that "there is a basic need to belong, which includes the need for frequent personal contacts and for bonds with others that provide stability and emotional concern" (Bruhn 2005:13). If people are given the proper setting, connections can easily be made because people strive for human contact and relationships.

Neighborhoods that have residents with strong social links and who are more likely to get involved in community orientated activities tend to be places that result in higher levels of resident wellbeing (Young Foundation 2009). To help create connections, it is important for a community to offer support for different activities such as, sport clubs, daycare or toddler groups, public transportation, and so on. These factors can help shape how safe, tolerant, and inclusive communities will feel for the residents and will also have a direct impact on local services and issues. For instance, according to the Young Foundation (2009), evidence has shown "how places can spiral into decline if the right mix of social infrastructure and support is not available to support new residents." This can create several long-term social problems for the community and keep it from being a thriving and vibrant neighborhood.

Another benefit of having a strong community connection can be seen when it comes to the security and safety of a neighborhood. Having a strong connection

within a community will make the residents feel safer in their neighborhood. The fear of crime can affect the quality of life in a neighborhood, so it is important to be able to create a safe environment for residents to live in. Obviously people are going to be more pleased with their neighborhoods when they feel safe and know that they don't have to worry about their loved ones. More on the safety and security of a neighborhood will follow in the next section in the design of safe and secure neighborhoods.

3. Well Designed Public Spaces

Having well designed public spaces can help a neighborhood gain the community connection that will make it successful and make its residents happy in a secure and safe neighborhood. There are certain design principles that could be followed to help a neighborhood create this strong community connection.

3.1 Design Safe and Secure Neighborhoods

The safety and security of a community should be thought of when designing a neighborhood. One of the ways this can be done is by designing and planning out where pavements within the neighborhood will be placed. For instance, Jane Jacobs explains how pavements and mixed-use areas contribute to forming trust among the people in a community. People tend to feel safer when there is more movement within their neighborhood. Street safety can be promoted by having pavements that clearly mark a public and private separation along with the protection of the eyes of both those who watch the continual flow of the pedestrians from a nearby building as well as the pedestrians themselves. Pavements help build trust among the community because they are a main contact venue within the area (Jacobs 1961:34-35). A lack of safety or the feeling of being unsafe can harm the growth and strength of a community. In order to create a strong and growing neighborhood, one must feel safe and secure while in the area. When people feel safe they are more relaxed and are able to enjoy more of what their community has to offer. They will be more willing to volunteer and help out in a community that they can trust. Furthermore, Bruhn describes how “a society that is characterized by dense networks of reciprocity and trust is more

efficient and stable...[Trust] is essential to the willingness to cooperate voluntarily and therefore encourages behaviors that facilitate productive social interaction.” This author also highlights that trust within a community is needed before a strong connection between the residents can be formed. When trust wears away or is shattered, the communities will collapse (Bruhn 2005:viii). It is important for trust to be built in the beginning and to be maintained to keep a community connected and the neighborhood successful.

3.1 Green Spaces

Spaces and places can be designed to change a person’s moods and emotions. When most people are asked to picture a ‘happy place’ they almost always come up with an image that relates back to nature. People find being near or surrounded by nature very relaxing and peaceful. Several studies have proven that people living nearby nature, such as trees, show less aggression and less violent behavior and that they are more likely to know, greet, and help their neighbors (Sternberg 2014). Nature has a way of making an area come to life. That is why so many people that live through cold winters seem like completely different people once spring comes around and the flowers are all blooming. Nobody wants to constantly be surrounded by harsh materials and locked up inside day after day. Rooftop gardens are becoming more and more popular in dense cities, so that people can still have access to nature filled spaces. Parks are also a big part of city planning. Everyone, even people who prefer to live in the city, like to experience good public spaces full of life and nature.

3.2 SHEC

The St. Hannibal Empowerment Center, Inc. (SHEC) is an organization that is successfully helping urban poor communities in the Philippines. Its mission is to empower the urban poor and transform urban poor communities in collaboration with local churches while addressing concerns with livelihood, housing, environment and sanitation, health, justice and peace, education, values formation and youth formation (SHEC 2003). SHEC works with the people on creating a safe and secure neighborhood and gives them the knowledge they need to not only

build a successful neighborhood but also to maintain it. By doing this, SHEC has helped build strong community connections within neighborhoods.

4. The Role of Architects

Architects can play a very important role in the building of a strong community connection in a neighborhood. The success of a community can start long before an area is filled with residents with the planning and design process of a neighborhood. An architect is responsible for not only designing housing units, but also creating quality public spaces where most of the community connections will take place in. Architects should design for the people and with the people. For instance, UN-Habitat describes that while planning these ‘Cities for Life,’ one has to rethink “the city from the perspective of the specific needs of people, their life cycles and rhythms, their conceptions of ‘good living’, identity and diversity, plurality and unity, imaginations and dreams, beauty and aesthetic” (UN-Habitat 2014:6). A community has a much better chance of having a strong and successful connection if the area was designed with the people in mind. The residents should also be included in the design and building process to further strengthen the results. Residents will be pleased with the functionality of their neighborhood and how it serves many of their needs. They will be so happy with their community and much more likely to make strong connections with their neighbors. Furthermore, the Young Foundation (2009) explains how “creating new communities involves far more than building homes and roads. It is the residents of a community that bring a place to life and help it to gain its own particular identity.” They believe that not enough is known about how to design, plan, and develop the supports and services needed to help residents come together and work together to create a strong community connection. Architects should definitely take the needs of the people into account while designing for them and include them in the process.

Architects can also work with the people to help create some rules and regulations for the community to follow. Residents can be required to attend classes or seminars that teach them how to be a valued member of their community and

what their community needs to be successful. There can be a required amount of volunteer hours put in from each family every month. This not only helps the whole community, but will make individuals feel part of something and will take more pride in their neighborhood. Since it has been proven that being around nature is good for everyone, a minimum number of plants per each household can also be suggested. In the Philippines, this was shown as a very successful rule in some of the communities. The families took pride in their plants and the neighborhood had so much life to it. They were all very involved in the maintenance of their neighborhood. When people are required to work for something instead of just being handed it they tend to appreciate and value it more.

Architects can suggest an organization like a homeowners association for the neighborhood. The association maintains common elements and enforces rules. They also can create activities for the members of the community to take part in and events that will become community traditions. This can include anything such as, different sport games or zumba classes, seminars, and annual celebrations. Several of the families who were interviewed in the Philippines absolutely loved when their community offered social activities and they always looked forward to them. A lot of the people were more inclined to become a member of the association or volunteer in anyway they could, because they saw the numerous benefits of having a connected community.

The architect should also make sure that there is a solid plan in line for the maintenance of the neighborhood. A neighborhood might start off looking great, but if it is not cared for it can quickly become a place that no one wants to live in. According to the Young Foundation (2009), “The quality of the local environment is a key element in what makes somewhere a good place to live. Whether a place looks clean, tidy and pleasant can affect property prices, economic investment and health, and linked to this, there is evidence that it is a key element in how satisfied people are with their neighbourhood.” There is no point in putting a lot of work

and effort into trying to make a neighborhood successful if it's not going to be maintained.

Conclusion

If architects take the time to create well-designed spaces and work with the people of the community, a successful neighborhood can be created. It will not only meet the needs of the residents, but also give them all of the tools they need to form a strong community connection. Neighborhoods with well-designed spaces help create a safe and secure environment where the community can connect and thrive as one.

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