

# Sense of Community

How it can be achieved?



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## Introduction

In some countries, a big percentage of the population lives in informal settlements, far from having access to their basic needs and putting their lives in danger a lot of times. In Philippines for example, about 34.2% of the population lives below the poverty threshold, and the average household is 5 to 6 members, which makes it a lot of people living in terrible conditions. To overcome this problem, social housing has been built and it has improved a lot of people's lives. Social housing its more than just a shelter for them, it comes with quality of living and opportunities.

There are many different ways of approaching social housing and many different ways for building it. In all the projects that I researched about it Metro Manila some really stood out, which made me wonder why some projects are more successful than others. Between many possible reasons, one caught my interest and I decided to do some research and discover how it can be achieved: the sense of community.

## Literature Review

Many studies have shown that relationships in a community can make a big difference in people's lives, and with this in mind McMillan and Chavis developed a theory and definition for the sense of community in 1986. For them: "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together". (McMillan and Chavis 1986)

McMillan and Chavis proposed that the sense of community is composed by four elements: *membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs and shared emotional connections*.

*Membership* is composed by 5 elements: boundaries, defines who is part of the community and is not necessarily physical. Intimacy, the intimacy with the group brings the feeling of protection. Sense of belonging and identification, make one feel part of the group and identify itself with it. Personal investment, when one works for being part of the group it feels like they earned to be a part of it. Common symbol system, helps to create and maintain the sense of community, people recognize it and can be a type of boundaries.

*Influence* has two definitions that happen concurrently. At one hand it can be to feel part of a group, one has to have some influence on it. At the other hand the group has influences on the individuals. People are more attracted to a community where they have some influence on it and the influence caused by the community brings cohesiveness and some sort of control over the individuals.

*Integration and fulfilment of needs* can be understood as reinforcement, which is one of the most important characteristics of a strong community. When one is achieved members start working together and achieving common needs.

*Shared emotional connections* are when the members have a shared history. It does not have to be an actual history, they can identify with the community. The shared emotion can be achieved by people interacting, shared events, investment and a spiritual bond.

If these five elements work together, sense of community will be created. To illustrate how this can happen, McMillan and Chavis created an example of how

this could happen in a neighbourhood. A community organizer is interested in creating a sense of community in a neighbourhood, so first he starts to talk with people to discover their problems and motivate them to work together to overcome them (integration and fulfilment of needs). One main concern is identified, the security of the neighbourhood. The organizer realizes that they have to work together to resolve the problem. He calls all the neighbours for a reunion (shared event that creates boundaries of belonging too) to discuss about it and find a solution together. Office members are elected and they start to make other reunions to find a solution, and start to know each other more and more at the same time. Neighbours start to take care of each other and calling the police when somebody suspicious is around the neighbourhood (influence). The success of this action is shown and the sense of community grows.

If the sense of community is truly understood, it can provide a base for lawmakers and planners to develop and preserve communities (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Sense of community is something that architects should take into consideration as well, McMillan and Chavis show that Newman (1981) explained that the only way to design housing that will be maintained and will improve the surrounding areas is to understand how communities are formed and work, and Ahlbrandt and Cunningham (1979) show that people will invest and improve more their homes if they live where there is a strong social fabric.

## Design for Sense of Community

After understanding the theory of sense of community, the question is how it can be achieved and maintained?

### **Holistic Approach**

Instead of designing buildings as a singular free standing object, architects should consider all the surroundings in small and bigger scale thinking about how people are going to use the public space. The urbanism in modern architecture was focused in free standing buildings, and the result is cities like Brasilia in Brazil for example.



Figure 1. Brasília

Source:([http://theinformationcompany.net/brazilianconsulateinseattle/wpcontent/uploads/2010/04/brasilia\\_foto.jpg?w=300](http://theinformationcompany.net/brazilianconsulateinseattle/wpcontent/uploads/2010/04/brasilia_foto.jpg?w=300))

Brasilia was planned based on Modernism principles, and the result is a city where the pedestrian is neglected. Is almost impossible to walk anywhere due long distances and no shading devices whatsoever, it is a city with modern buildings and built for cars.

Holistic approach is design taking in consideration the building in itself, the immediate surroundings and the city as well. The building must improve its surroundings and the city in general. *Working with good public spaces, a pedestrian friendly design and security.*

#### *-Pedestrian Friendly Design*

A pedestrian friendly design is one of the most effective ways of building sense of community (SOC), it encourages pedestrian to interact with one another making residents start to know each other.

In this kind of design two elements interfere the most, walkability and location and distance (Handy and Clifton, 2001). Walkability is the quality of the pedestrian ways and distance refers to how much people have to walk to get to main services, as shops, parks or schools. It can be improved by the use of

shading devices as tree or arcades and a good sidewalk where the pedestrian will feel comfortable and not distress by the cars. Attention to small scale is what makes a difference, “the battle for quality is in the small scale”. (Gehl, 2010)

Location and distance is how these services are placed in the neighbourhood, they can increase social interactions when people make daily travels to them. They should be placed where people are more likely to be passing by; this makes the journey more interesting for the pedestrian, when one has experiences along the way (Gehl, 2010). The facades should be open and inviting so the pedestrian feels comfortable to walk by (or in) during day, and more safe during the night, sheltered stores fronts closed add up to the insecurity feeling (Gehl, 2010). To keep them more private if needed, levels or plants can be used instead of sheltered fronts.



Figure 2. Shading device in Madrid.

Source: ([http://edificiosverdes.com.ar/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Fig13MadridIMG\\_6919.jpg](http://edificiosverdes.com.ar/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Fig13MadridIMG_6919.jpg))

### *-Public spaces*

Public spaces should not be underused; meeting places help us to achieve social sustainability and an open democratic society. When planning a public space one should be aware of the size of it. Often planners built public spaces too big with little thought (Gehl, 2010); they have no hierarchy and end up too large for too few visits. These large public spaces often do not work in residential areas because there are no activities happening, it is said something happens because something happens because... (Gehl, 2010) and this works for public spaces. When designing such an important space for the city life, one should value the

surroundings and have in mind that public spaces must be alive; they should have activities happening with room for pedestrians, where people have the opportunity to participate in the urban life. The furniture has to be design to people to communicate, benches in line don't help people to communicate, if they were placed towards each other or were moveable the communication is easier (Gehl, 2010). In Jan Gehl's book, *Cities for People*, he describes the distances that we perceive different amount of details. Our social field of vision, the distance that we can see people in motion, is 100m. Expressions start being recognizable in 25m and conversation is only possible when the person is at least 7m away. These distances should be taken in consideration when planning a meeting space. Small corners can become small public spaces where neighbours can have another chance of social interaction; any possibility is a possibility for people to meet and improve their SOC. Jan Gehl wrote in his book, "These are the exact qualities that can be used to advantage in modern urban planning. Key words for encouraging life in the city are: compact, direct and logical routes; modest space dimensions; and a clear hierarchy where decisions have been made about which spaces are the most important."



Figure 3. Moveable chairs in Gdansk

Source: <http://www.morethangreen.es/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/000.New-public-space-TARG-meglowy-gdansk-gdyby-more-than-green.jpg>

*-Security*

The life in a city is very dependent on the security feeling; it interferes in how people perceive the city. Cities where people feel safe have more street life and public spaces are more used. Designers should worry about how the streets will look like at night and if the illumination is good for pedestrians. Often streets are illuminated for driving cars and the consequence is that people cannot recognize the face and expression of other pedestrians, increasing the feeling of insecurity. To evaluate crime rates one of the best ways is to know how many neighbours know each other's first name (Putnam 1996); therefore the security will be elevated because of the sense of community as well.



Figure 4. Charlottesville illuminated by night.

Source: <http://www.fodors.com/ee/files/slideshows/Charlottesvilles-Historic-Downtown-Mall.jpg>

When the streets are design for people, functional public spaces are created and the community feels safe, they will use the outdoor spaces more and start to meet their neighbours. This first connection is essential to the Sense of community development. When meeting casually, people star to get to know each other and star to build a relationship. The feeling of membership and shared emotional connections stars to grow. When the community it formed, membership, influence and integration and fulfilment of needs star to exist, making people have a strong sense of community.

### **Self-help housing and self-organizing communities**

Self-help-housing and self-organizing communities create a stronger SOC and identity because they share a background and needs. When families work together to construct or organize their communities, it makes them start to know each other and realize that they are stronger together as a community. Communities built like this and with the qualities described earlier are very likely to create a strong SOC.

### **Sense of community importance in social housing**

Sense of community in social housing brings people and families together making them stronger as individuals. It helps them to get new jobs and improve their lives, creates a much more safe and nice environment for everybody and helps them to really change their lives. The neighbourhood will be better maintained as the houses, causing physical attractiveness; public spaces will be used more often and safety with quality of living will be achieved.



Figure 5. Gwad Kalinga Community

Source: <http://gk1world.com/christmas-2012>

### **Factors not related to design**

Other factor that has been proved to be very important to SOC is related to what kind of people is the neighbourhood composed of. Many researches have different conclusions because it really depends on where the research is made, different cultures, and different results. Although some results are quite different, some are very recurrent. The longer people live at the same neighbourhood the more they feel connected to it, ownership too is a characteristic that can make



people feel more comfortable at their community. When the community members have a similar background, for example same nationality or they came from the same informal settlement; they end up having shared values and needs which brings them closer to each other.

### **Results**

Communities that have a strong sense of community will work together and achieve goals. Having a stronger bond with each other helps them to improve their quality of living and accomplish a lot more than they would at their own, communities always benefit from cooperating, especially in social housing where families have so little and struggle with the everyday life.

### **Personal experience**

This is my personal experience, it has not been researched objectively but I think it can be used as a good example of the problem.

I have been able to experience the difference of having a sense of community and not having it this year during my exchange studies in Lund. I live in an accommodation composed of studios flats – no shared kitchen, but we not just don't share a kitchen, we don't share anything because there are no common areas whatsoever. I have not met anybody because they live in the same accommodation as I do, and it took me a year to just see everybody that lives in my hallway. On the other hand, I have made a lot of friends that live in a typical student accommodation, with a nice common area and a shared kitchen, so I got to see how it would be like to live in a place where people are encouraged to meet the other members of the community (student accommodation). They all know each other and help each other as well. Because of this relation, they now have more quality of living than I do living without a sense of community. Whenever somebody does not have lunch they share, or if laundry is forgotten at the washing machine someone will put in the dryer. Expenses that I have to afford by myself they are able share, for example cleaning materials and kitchen utensils. They hold big dinners and parties for everybody, which I could never do since I do not have the space and I have not met a lot of people from my accommodation.

## The Role of Architects

We as architects have the duty to worry about the future of our cities and citizens. Millions of people are now living in precarious conditions where perspectives are very low or inexistent. When designing social housing we should be concerned that with measures such as the creating of a sense of community, we will be giving more independence to citizens to develop by themselves, without the direct help of the government. Actions like a pedestrian friendly design, the concern of creating outdoor spaces where people can meet and interact, developing shared spaces, mix uses and defined boundaries can really make a difference. These communities will have autonomy to really improve the lives of its residents and maintain themselves.

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