Semi-public Spaces and Community

A guideline for enhancing sustainable communities by defining public and private space hierarchy

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1 Introduction

Urban shelter seems to be increasingly important issue in rapidly urbanizing world. Lack of appropriate housing, which is every person's human right, causes quick and thoughtless developments – both formal and informal – which do not include design of public and semi-public spaces for communities and inhabitants. It is not very surprising that projects which were supposed to solve slum issues but do not support sustainable and self-maintaining communities eventually create new problems.

Overcrowded cities lure more and more people who search for better living and work environment. As a result they end up in inhuman conditions, dangerous areas and unsafe communities.

Existing settlements of low income groups struggle with number of problems resulting from insufficient planning and unconscious design. Areas in-between buildings are neglected and leave lots of left over space with no support nor ideas for developing them into advantages. Space that does not belong to anyone diminish connections between inhabitants and causes lack of interest in taking care of it. Lack of responsibility and feeling of belonging decrease safety and may encourage crime. Although governmental development's public spaces are uninviting and often unattractive, private and semi-private areas do not give any better alternative. Common spaces within buildings welcome with dark, gloomy corridors and cold

materials. Space no one takes care of quickly becomes degraded and deteriorating and does not differ much from slum.

I believe that well developed semi-public space can create trusted and safe communities which will maintain sustainable connections within settlement. In this paper I will to discuss what makes a community, what tools can be used to keep a sustainable community and what is semi-public space and how can it be designed to help it self-maintain.

There are many possibilities and potential to improve low income housing by planning solutions for no man's land that cannot be avoided in the design (corners, borders, level differences etc.) and in this paper I will to criticize current situation and suggest some potentialities.

2 Literature Review

Based on chosen literature, this section present and discuss main points of the topic. The definitions of community, sustainable community, semi-public space and borders between degrees of privacy will be stated. This paper won't discuss legal rules and regulations for communities, environmental changes and ecological solutions for sustainable development etc. but influence of spatial planning decisions on community building process.

In his book "Life between buildings" Jan Gehl talks about the role of a designer in creating social structure of planned development. He claims that by physical planning and within limits dependent on region, climate and society, one can influence outdoor activities, how long will they take place and in what extend (Gehl, 2006). Architects planning decisions can create good or bad outdoor conditions for events to happen and can create lively or lifeless spaces. Social interactions are strongly supported by the design and physical framework plays an important role in creating strong community.

Community in general can be understood in terms of a capital. Building a strong and sustainable group demands spending time and effort on developing human and social capital and enhancing the environment around - including natural, physical and economic issues (Roseland, 2005). Community assets consist of space where it's developing and all its values and people who are part of it. People make the biggest power and the human and social capital should play an important role in planning. Human capital consists of every person's abilities, knowledge and

personal health. Although all of these are nonphysical values, they need continuous help and investment from physical facilities as schools, hospitals, etc. Social capital is "the relationship, networks and norms that facilitate collective action" (Roseland, 2005) and refers to bonds and social structures which people create by themselves. To increase social capital it is important to incorporate community activities and partnerships in design, introduce participatory planning, good local governance, well developed and open information system.

According to Mark Roseland strengthening sustainable community consist of six steps or rather constantly developed actions: minimizing the consumption of existing natural environment and sustainable resources management; improving physical infrastructure and facilities which serve the community and people within; increasing economic capital by providing livelihood opportunities and maximizing usage of existing assets to generate income. Actions focused more on people and their skills include: increasing human capital by ensuring adequate health, education and nutrition conditions; multiplying social capital which basically helps the bonds and organizations within community to grow; and finally enhancing cultural capital by respecting traditions, religion and heritage and promoting diversity. Community based on this foundations, with good governance and maintenance may become a sustainable community.

Building community needs an appropriate space for bonding relations. Gehl presents different levels of relationship which are also dependent on privacy level and physical space in which encounter occurs. Close, intimate relationships are established on private grounds, shallow acquaintances happen on public grounds. But there are plenty of levels in-between where people share knowledge, help each other and have common problems and interests. Existing of all these levels of privacy encourage wide scope of possible relations that build community and let people choose what they want to share on what basis.

Different degrees of privacy create a space for various types of activities and relationships. Moving from public to private zones is limited by different rules and borders. Existence of private and semi-private gives a feeling of security and

belonging by separating them from easily accessible public (Gehl, 2006). Defining semi-public space may be harder as it is usually specified by less obvious borders. Semi-public is usually a widely accessible outdoor space which is to some extend more intimate and restricted by less obvious, social boundaries (Fig. 1). In residential areas semi-public is well

Fig. 1 Sketch; "Defensible Space", 1972; O. Newman

visually connected which gives greater feeling of responsibility and control over the space.

Semi-public space, activities and places to stay outside should appear directly in front of the buildings and around entrance spaces. Gehl stresses how important it is to have an easy way in and out of the building. Change of levels, raised entry zone will stop many activities and become an unwanted border. Places to sit, wait and observe in these most obvious spaces, on borders between private and public, create opportunities for spontaneous meetings, watching the neighbourhood for safety or observing other people. In addition, Gehl presents a possible semi-private spaces in-between the buildings (porches, front yards etc.) which make the transition between degrees of privacy smoother and still promote encounters. This smooth connection encourage engaging in the life of neighbourhood without being forced to join the activities straight away. It is important to understand that it is not just the opportunities for activities that matters, but opportunities to observe activities that spark more action to happen.

Charles Correa in his book "Housing and urbanisation" presents housing projects which are built around a *community spine*. The spine is a semi-public zone in the development providing smooth transition from public street level to private housing. Houses around that space are facing the community spine with the living area which is usually
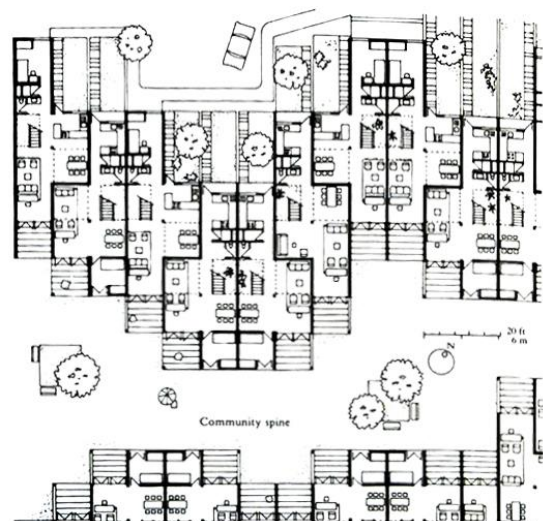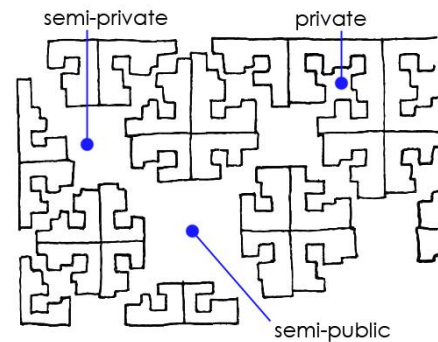

Fig. 2 Previ Housing, Peru; groundfloor; C. Correa

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sheltered by a shading device or porch structure. The spine is oriented in the way that is most beneficial in terms of sun exposure and catching breeze. Examples of Tara Housing (1975-78, Delhi) and Previ Housing (1969-73, Peru, Lima) (Fig. 2) show that semi-public can create also a climatic buffer, humidified zone which provides circulation and refreshment for inhabitants.

Correa's projects deal very often with hierarchy of open spaces within housing clusters. In developments like Belapur Housing (1983-86) from New Bombay he uses sequences of courtyards on different privacy levels to create an appropriate community relations (Fig. 3). The smallest, semi-private courtyards accommodate 7 families on an area of 8x8m which acts as an additional room. Levels of privacy are stressed by possibility of customizing by colours, symbols and other signs of culture. Bigger cluster is formed of 25 families which is later repeated for even bigger community spaces which become semi-public areas. In another project based on the same courtyard arrangement rules he also suggests a solution for left-over plot edges which should be sold separately for individual, independent housing (Titan Township, 1992, Bangalore).

Fig. 3 Scheme of Belapur Housing; C. Correa

In a smaller house scale Correa also graduates privacy creating permeable, sheltered entrance area and inner courtyards which distribute movement to private rooms. The hierarchy and levels of accessibility is very clear and helps a visitor to be guided around the house (House at Koramangala, 1985-88, Bangalore) (Fig. 4).
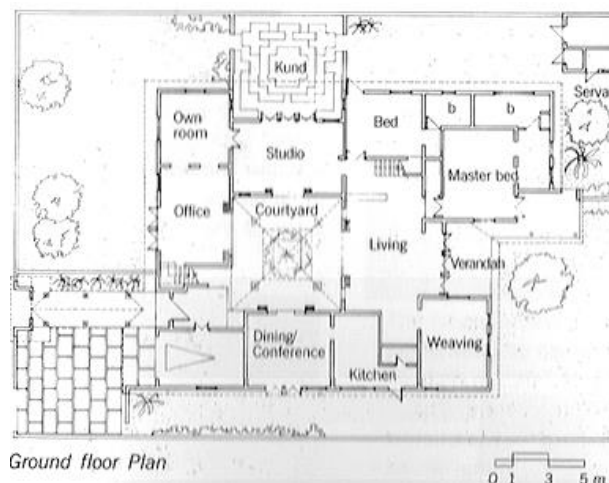

Ground floor Plan

Fig. 4 House at Koramangala; C. Correa; ground floor

The transition between privacy zones is marked by different type of borders and edges. The most basic border known is a wall. Walls and other impermeable surfaces are hard edges, which do not allow contact and interaction. Another example of border is height difference and levels which disturb easy connection, change the view and lessen sound relations. Long distances and higher speeds of

movement inhibit contact as well. High speed can be connected to borders created by different means of transport, road hierarchy but also division between usage zones (communications space, space to rest, space to meet) (Gehl, 2006).

3 Argument, Critique or Discussion

The main problem of public and semi-public spaces is very often lack of maintenance and supervision. Public areas are often left-over spaces that were not included in the planning and no one invested in developing this spots. Even if the community was supplied with all needed facilities, livelihood programmes, adequate housing with good services – without sense of belonging to a place and group it cannot be considered a sustainable community.

Sustainable community is a planned structure which was built to promote equality, diversity and sustainable living, focuses on efficient use of resources, social and human capital support and encourages development and growth. This kind of community assists existing culture, provides affordable housing and enhances economic competitiveness by supplying livelihood possibilities.
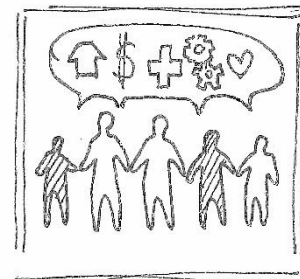
Fig. 5 Sustainable community

As the reviewed literature investigates mostly northern communities, it has to be discussed how the levels of privacy can be defined in the study area in Philippines. According to Gehl semi-public space could be an open front yard of a house, a garden in front of public building, commercial ground floors or accessible courtyard between group of buildings. How can it be transferred to a situation of post disaster and resettlement design in Manila? What is public and what is private? Which spaces are not used, don't belong to anyone and how can it be improved?

Referring to examples of settlements from Manila, it would be hard to call outdoors and spaces in-between the buildings – public. Most neighbourhoods are gated which makes them - in northern understanding - semi-public, as limited group of people can enter it and entering is connected to certain set of rules. For purposes of this study I will try to adapt levels of privacy to Filipino reality.
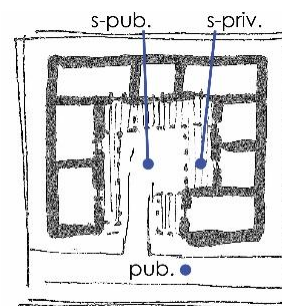
Fig. 6 Semi-public, semi-private

To facilitate the understanding of public and private, I will consider a population of neighbourhood as a wide public. By that means open spaces within neighbourhood can be considered public, which includes roads, squares, parkings,

communal facilities, services and accessible spaces between the buildings. Private areas have the access limited to people owning the space, which includes apartments, offices, service and administrative rooms (Fig. 6). More questionable issue is stating what is semi-public and semi-private and if it even currently exists.

Based on observations from study trip in Manila I would consider corridors leading to private apartments semi-public as they are generally accessible but are strongly controlled by people living at certain level which can make strangers feel uninvited or not comfortable. Another space which suits to definition of semi-public may be the community centre, sport facilities and communal gardens. Again they are generally accessible but are bonded by a set of rules related to opening times, terms of use, expected or unacceptable behaviours etc. Semi-private has always better superintendence and should be easy to control.

From observed examples of settlements it is hard to find a space which is clearly semi-private. The inhabitants are often graduate their own levels of privacy (Fig. 7) by opening or closing their apartment doors or windows and dividing their private space into private and semi-private. Usually bathrooms and sleeping areas stay
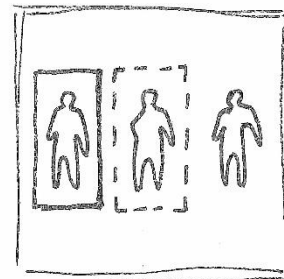
Fig. 7 Borders and privacy

intimate and enclosed but living areas are transformed partly in little sari-sari shops or open space to invite encounters with neighbours. Another example which I could imagine as semi-private would be a private garden with a strict border but visually open and connected to public.

All mentioned semi-, in-between spaces are the anchor points for activities and meetings and make people feel more comfortable, safe and protected. Development of these areas can serve the community to strengthen the bonds. Semi-public should serve as an attractive buffer between public and private which provides safety at the same time. Borders of these spaces should be inviting but stating the rules of accessibility and usage possibilities. Planning should include left-over spaces which should get an identity, connections and become places to stay and take care of. All the foregoing elements encourage meeting, action, building of community and feeling of belonging.

In next section I will develop concepts and design criteria which will help to achieve successful and attractive semi-public that enhance connectivity within community and diminish no one's left-over spaces.

4 Urban Shelter Design - Guideline

In this section I develop ideas, rules and design criteria for designing successful semi-public spaces in urban settlements for low-income groups that will help creating sustainable community within the neighbourhoods.

Clarify the size, purpose and opportunities of the space!

The first and very important guideline for planning semi-public and public spaces is to state a clear purpose and program for them. Open spaces left for users to develop do not perform well and usually become left-over failures. Designer should imagine activities and possible uses of space and facilitate it with site improvements that will
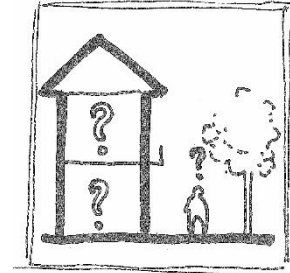
Fig. 8 Clear purpose

encourage this activities. It can be expected that users will customise the space to their needs, change or personalize the space so good design will consider flexibility and space for extensions. The size of open public is also significant – too big squares can become deserted if they won't be divided into rooms of human scale.

Don't neglect left-over spaces!

While dealing with left-over spaces in unprivileged locations as building corners, end of plots, in weak environmental conditions or in close proximity to walls and backsides it is also possible to give those areas a useful purpose. Places which are not located close to building entrances or main connections may very easily be omitted
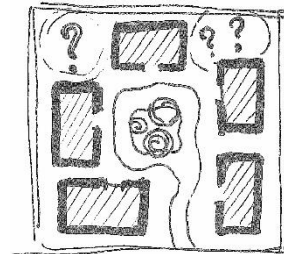
Fig. 9 Left-over spaces

both in design and users. Placing a useful program which is not related to social activities (for example: parking, vegetable gardens or bike rental) will still make people us this places and care for them. Left-over spaces can be also assigned or sold to a specific person/group of people to specify the user and person responsible.

Provide space for activities!

Sometimes the key to successful outdoor space is making people actually go out and stay out. Often times the potential users don't know how they can adapt the space for themselves so it is important to provide places for clearly visible activity use. Places like sport courts, baskets
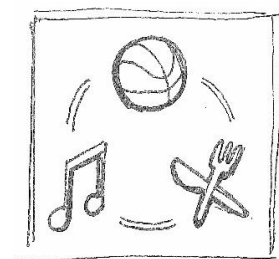
Fig. 10 Activities

to play basketball, barbeque spots, playgrounds or swimming pools will gather users of public space. Existing functions attract other activities and observers, as people are drawn by curiosity and willingness to watch others act. With the possibility to watch others new users will adapt the space for their own activities to stay in a group and by personalizing the space they will maintain it better.

Design places to stay and meet!

A place to stay can be defined by lots of values. It is important to investigate the community and their customs as the traditional behaviours can influence preferred shared space. As mentioned in previous paragraph attractive spaces encourage activities, but also provide shelter from climatic conditions and sitting spots. Places to stay should be well visually connected and therefore safe and inviting. Public space which is promoting unexpected encounters and building new relationships is clearly designated and recognizable.
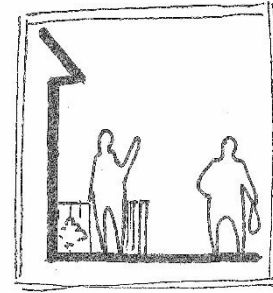
Fig. 11 Spontaneous encounters

Create climate wise pleasant places!

Spaces to rest and meet other people should be planned well according to weather conditions. Depending on a climate different climatic values are considered beneficial. In hot and humid filipino climate ventilation, air circulation and shading provide pleasant environment to stay. Designer should consider directions of sun, wind and breeze and include them in the planning. Spaces giving respite from harsh heat and possibility of rest and refreshment will attract all people.
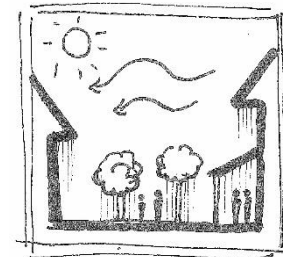
Fig. 12 Considering climate

State borders and edges that promote contact!

Each space which has a specific purpose should be also separated by recognizable borders. They don't have to be solid but understandable for the users. Creating edges of the spaces on different levels of privacy needs proper gradation. Private areas can be isolated by impermeable borders which cut of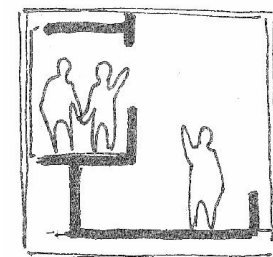f contact. Borders of semi-private make an intimate but visually or functionally connected space – they may be semi permeable, not covered on full height (like lower hedges and fences) or create a

Fig. 13 Soft edges

division by level difference (raised outdoor terrace or balcony). Borders of semi-public spaces are the most important and meaningful. Creating edges that promote contact but target specific user without placing physical border may be challenging. Soft edges may be achieved by changing surface material, slightly raising the level, guarding the space by surrounding buildings, gradating access to a place, increasing distance from main traffic and by turning the space backwards to the public. Well bordered spaces are open but safe.

Increase safety by visual connections!

With permeable and approachable borders comes better connectivity. While designing connections and semi-public spaces it is important to consider visual connectivity with main movement flows, other public spaces and nodes. Wider openings, corridors leading the sight, providing activities on different levels, opening the ground floor and
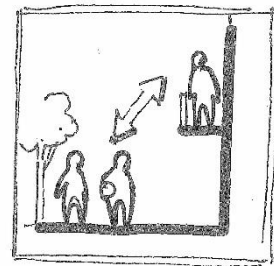
Fig. 14 Visual connections

providing human scale public space make it easier for the user to locate themselves and move through the space of different levels of privacy. People are always willing to watch others and are more willing to join when they see the action. Visual connectivity will attract more users and make the space safer by providing informal surveillance. Being watched may prevent crime, violent behaviours and hooliganism.

Make the place unique!

Last but not least it is very important to give the place identity. Designed area except of having stated program, luring people and activities – should be visually pleasant and attractive. Understanding the traditions and aesthetics of the users should pay a big role in the design. Project can include local materials, art and craftsmanship, it can allow
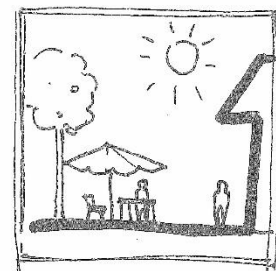
Fig. 15 Unique spaces

for participatory customisation, extensions and personal input. Each development has a specific atmosphere, characteristics and architecture features and while designing respective public spaces designer should consider making the space unique and recognizable.

The guidelines above can be used as set of issues, questions and problems to keep in mind and consider while designing public and shared spaces in all kinds of housing developments which accommodate different communities. Well solved space can contribute to the good level and conditions of life of the residents, can help to build a sustainable community and improve maintenance and safety of the development. Pleasant, liveable environment and well-being of inhabitants prove the quality of the project.

By using the potential of left-over spaces and developing semi-public areas in low income housing developments the situation of rapidly urbanizing countries can be improved. It needs simple means and conscious planning to supply communities with appropriate conditions and help them reach the better living they dream about.

5 The Role of Architects and Urban Planners

Based on observations, experience and literature I came to a conclusion that very often insufficient and unsuccessful design is caused by lack of research, understanding and communication between the designer and beneficiaries. The main role of an architect is to design for people and with people. From history we can observe that applying northern solutions to solve problems of southern communities is destined to fail (Jenkins, 2007). Creating sustainable community which will profit from the project require deep and serious understanding of community needs, culture and social relations. The first and very important task for an architect is to investigate all relevant issues, including site conditions, community situations and history, preferably cultural background and future expectations. These findings should be considered throughout whole design process and be supported by architect's technology and sustainability knowledge and other observed experiences.

After understanding the basic foundation of the project, one of the most important task of an architect is to design effective communication between people, community or future beneficiaries and designers, developers or government. It is already widely understood that participatory planning is very important for success of most developments. Through responsible and inclusive coordination of the whole process architect can achieve prosperous solutions and can educate future users. This way of increasing human capital serves creating sustainable community.

Architects and planners should be aware of problems listed in the guideline and consider them in their design of settlements. This ensures conscious and thoughtful planning which considers the users and good maintenance.

Last but not least, architect should be critical towards his work, adapt, change and improve by including information and newest knowledge. Architect should plan long term, overlooking in the future and working towards creating better lives and opportunities for people.

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