CAN DESIGN FACILITATE COMMUNITY?

R. Ozaki
Imperial College Business School
Imperial College, London
England

A. Schram
Department of Architecture, Building and Planning
Eindhoven University of Technology
Holland

ABSTRACT

Housing developments consist of a variety of building elements, objects and open spaces. Design of such features can facilitate encounters among people and convey messages about the behavior appropriate to particular space. This paper investigates how design of blocks of flats can facilitate a sense of community among residents in urban housing developments, based on a small-scale exploratory study of two housing schemes in Canary Wharf, London, UK. Community has traditionally been characterized as being bound to place, holding shared values and being tight-knitted, thus evoking a feeling of nostalgia in our modern society which is full of uncertainty and insecurity. Today, community takes new forms: it is based on people's cultural attachments, rather than their innate social orders. Community is now more heterogeneous and is 'occasional' in nature. Our conclusions are that the physical design of the building can promote the sense of community and communal activities among residents. We also emphasize that community is sought by most of our respondents 'on selective terms', and as such, design also needs to reflect residents' diverse perceptions of community.

Key words: Housing Design, Spatial Features, Sense of Community.

Introduction

Today, community still carries a nostalgic connotation which promotes ties among people. We now live in globalised society that is highly fluid and mobile. For that reason, contemporary middle-class people who (want to) live in a big city seek neighborhoods that afford a community feel which responds to their desire for cohesion, stability and security. Although contemporary residents living in inner-city areas may have escaped the boredom of the rigid (suburban) life forms experienced in childhood, they worry about the lack of structure in their lives [1]. The existence of local shops and cafés where people can meet up, gives inner-city residents the illusion of living in a small community. People's longing for community may be the result of living in an increasingly uncertain world. Bauman [2] calls for our attention to the fluid and fragmented contemporary social bonds, which he thinks contribute to individualization. But how can the idea of community serve both social bonds and individuality? In this paper, we consider how a sense of community can be facilitated by housing design, using a small empirical study.

Discourse of Community

Community is a small group of people who distinguish themselves from others and protects itself through physical distance, keeping outsiders outside [3]. Community embraces cohesion, common bonds and togetherness on the one hand, and a geographical location on the other [4]. The loss of community became an issue as urbanization progressed in the nineteenth century. Tönnies [5] pointed to a profound change in social life: from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. Some saw this change as the erosion of community and the end of tradition, resulting from modernization [6&7]. For Simmel [8], modern city life produced greater freedom in a positive sense, but also resulted in more neutral and rational relationships between people who increasingly were strangers to one another. He argued that the predominant psychology of the urbanite was radically different from that of the villager. In the city, things like punctuality and social/psychological distance became important and were accompanied by blasé attitudes, artificiality and individual behavior. City life did not provide connectedness or strong ties, but offered other possibilities, such as individual freedom and adventure. The relative rationality and anonymity enabled exaggerated manifestations of individuality through 'typical metropolitan caprices'.

In contemporary urbanization and individualization, the idea of community maintains its attraction. As society becomes more rationally organized, an intense desire emerges for the relative peace and warmth perceived to characterize the traditional

community [3]. A concept of community has therefore been utilized in an attempt to create social cohesion and harmony in urban areas in the course of radical changes in urbanization, currently especially in urban regeneration programs. Also in past urban design, whether in the form of garden villages or satellite towns, the idea of community has been persistent. It presumes direct contact and physical presence in the same geographical space, with traditional values and shared histories [9] and community has acquired an almost religious aura in urban planning [10]. Nostalgia is a selective recollection of the past – either individual or collective – and confirms a negative view of the present, sustained by a favorable depiction of the past [4]. The notion of community is described in such terms as 'participatory planning' and 'community development'. In the UK, for example, the concept of community has been central to urban policy for the last few decades [11]. The popularity of the notion coheres with the positive character of being a bonding collective; whose members have common values and interdependency.

Recent literature has added wider perspectives to this view of community, stressing that the contemporary community is a social collective of great diversity and difference with struggles over ethnic and cultural identities [12]. It claims that we should embrace the heterogeneity that exists within groups. In today's community, cultural meanings are fluid and social relations constantly reconfigure. So, what we have to acknowledge is the dynamic nature of community: not only a common language and a background of implicit practices and understanding, but also the diversity and marginalization that simultaneously occur in the community and the activities people take part in [12]. Many of new forms of community are based on cultural attachments, rather than on people's innate social orders and association with particular geographically defined places [13]. These new forms of community are constantly re-invented and re-grouped, and are less closed than the solid composition of the traditional village in which strangers were not easily included [14]. The new form of 'light sociality' with an occasional nature distinguishes itself from the traditional concept through its position that community ties are decreasingly organized within a place. These ties form social networks that can go beyond geographical boundaries, owing much to the advancement of telecommunication and greater mobility. Such networks are more than just personal networks; community is 'imagined' with the process of bonding and dividing, such as a 'we' vs. 'they' division [4]. So, the questions we ask are: (a) how community is perceived by inner-city residents in today's fluid society and (b) can it be facilitated and maintained by housing design?

Spatial Design

Space is defined by a variety of building elements and objects. It is what people feel, sense and perceive through a variety of means. It has both quantifiable features (e.g. distance) and non-quantifiable features (e.g. the feelings induced by a dark

atmosphere). Based on Hall's [15] proxemic framework, we identify three categories of spatial features: fixed-, semi-fixed- and non-fixed-feature spaces. Fixed-feature space is defined by permanent elements such as walls and doors that define whether we are in one room as opposed to another, whether we can move (directly or indirectly) from one room to another. The way spaces are interconnected in the layouts of buildings or towns by fixed-feature elements is not only material manifestations, but also shapes human behavior. It is through the presence or absence of these connections that we experience the built environment. Semi-fixed-feature space is defined by semi-permanent objects, such as plants or furniture, and may be perceived differently in different contexts [15]. These objects may be arranged in such a way that they facilitate encounters among people (socio-petal arrangements, e.g. cafés), minimize them (socio-fugal arrangements, e.g. airport departure lounges), or convey messages about the behavior appropriate to the space (e.g. magazines on coffee tables). Non-fixed-feature space, also called informal space, is defined by human beings' perceived boundaries of space in experiencing spaces and encountering others, and is defined by human behavior. Non-fixed feature elements are non-physical 'behavior protocols' [16], which co-function with the fixed features and semi-fixed features, ultimately affecting human use of space. These behavioral cues include activities, clothing and language used in a setting [17]. In conveying messages to people about appropriate behavior, the combination of these three types of features forms the visual spatial world of human beings, which is composed both of two-dimensional images and knowledge of the environment [15].

This framework of space incorporates an understanding that there are relationships between spatial features and human behaviors in all kinds of environments. The relationships between various features of space and human behavior have been illustrated in numerous empirical studies in a variety of settings, such as in factories [18] and houses [19]. Thus, the assumption would be that design facilitates a sense of community by offering spaces that encourage communication among residents, render certain activities and offer non-physical behavior protocols.

Methodology

To understand how housing design creates a sense of community and attractive places to live, we conducted an empirical study within a wider project examining residents' experience of living in converted buildings. In the 1980s, the Isle of Dogs, and Canary Wharf in particular, underwent major conversion of old industrial stock into residential use before loft living in the UK became a specific lifestyle in the 1990s [20]. With the increasing popularity of conversion for residential use, following the success in Clerkenwell, an area of London's City Fringe, large-scale conversion projects began on the Isle of Dogs with a number of former warehouses and factories converted for residential use.

We studied two residential developments in Canary Wharf (Figure 1). They were chosen because one is the earliest residential developments in the area and has been a landmark, and the other is the biggest conversion project on the Isle. The residents associations of both two sites were contacted and initial discussions were conducted with association members to collect information on typical residents, length of residence, facilities and community activities. Following this, residents were approached to become interviewees. Fifteen residents (both owner occupiers and renting tenants) agreed to be interviewed: eight from Site 1 and seven from Site 2. The interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were carried out in the interviewees' homes. One of the authors stayed on the sites for a few weeks to observe how spatial features were perceived and used by their residents.
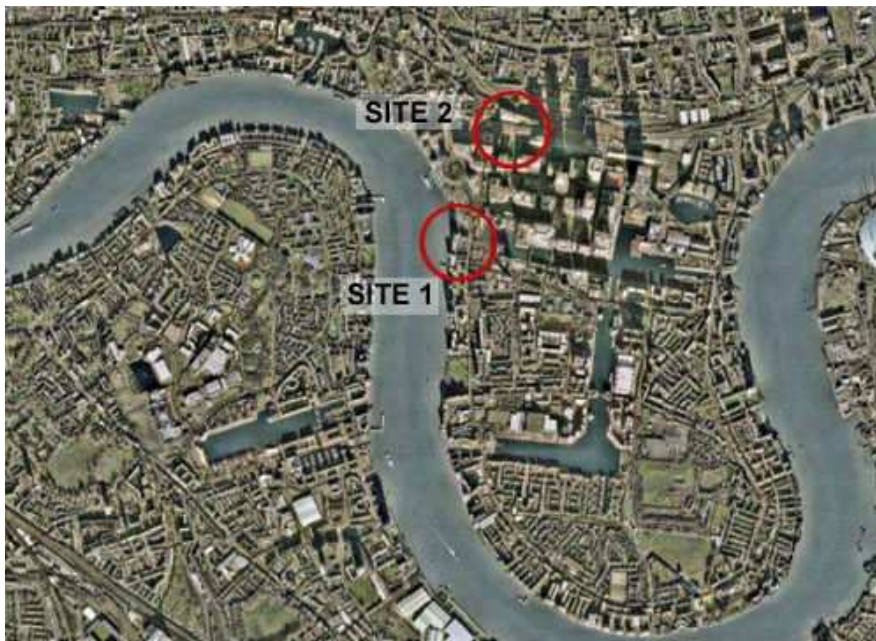

Figure 1 : Canary Wharf – Sites 1 and 2

We used a semi-structured interview method with open-ended questions to allow interviewees responses to be free-ranging within our framework. The questions asked included: histories of residences, reasons for choosing the particular residential location, experiences of living in the area, and routine activities. In investigating the meaning of community, it is important to look at the research questions from a phenomenological viewpoint. For this reason, we focused on the everyday aspects of residents' practice and experience in relation to the design of their living spaces.

Lengths of occupancy ranged from two to five years among our interviewees. All the interviewees were well-educated and most had professional jobs in the private sector: for example, in finance, IT, management, marketing, and law. Three worked in the

creative industries (music and design) and there was one public sector professional (education). All the interviewees were singles or couples without dependent children. The ages of our participants' ranged from 25 to 64; and 8 out of 15 were male. The majority was British, but just less than half were foreigners, mostly European. Interviewees' profiles are presented in Table 1.

Housing Design

The two sites have different design: one is gated with many facilities for residents to use, and the other has commercial establishments on the ground floor with secure entrances for residents. The first development (Site 1, Figure 2) consists of two buildings: one a converted four-storey factory building and the other a new-build 19-storey building, situated on the edge of the Canary Wharf business district alongside the River Thames. This development has a gate and a 24-hour concierge service, a conference room that residents can use for a variety of activities, such as wine tastings, table-tennis tournaments, etc., a gym and a swimming pool. It has a private garden with a tennis court and a barbecue pitch. Behind the concierge desk is the only lift hall in the building, with three residential lifts and one lift for the use of building employees.

Figure 2 : Site 1

The second development (Site 2, Figure 3) is a huge 200-year-old warehouse with five storeys, situated by a dock, in the middle of the Canary Wharf area. It combines housing with commercial and cultural venues, including a museum at one end of the warehouse and restaurants, bars and shops on the ground floor of the building. In summer, there are tables and chairs on the pavement in front of the building, and the site becomes a visitor and tourist attraction. Flats are situated above these establishments and overlook their outside spaces. The development has five secure entrances for residents and a concierge service in the main entrance, but does not have communal facilities for residents such as a conference room. Behind the building, there is a commercial complex that holds a cinema and a gym.

Figure 3 : Site 2

<u>Residents' Perceptions of Housing Design and the Sense of Community</u>

This section explores residents' perceptions and experiences of community in relation to spatial characteristics of the buildings they live in, to understand how design facilitates the sense of community.

A number of the interviewees say they enjoy occasional get-togethers with other residents, and frequently use the communal spaces on the site. They appear to like to appreciate the facilities they have and participate in community activities:

> 'People are very friendly, well, most of them… If you sit in the Jacuzzi or in the sauna with others, you get to talk to them. Most of them are friendly. Also, we do barbecue with friends, but sometimes we share the place with other people from the building towards the end of it. Of course, there are people who keep distance, but most of them are friendly. Some go to the Yoga class downstairs [held weekly in the conference room]. That is a very useful room. You can play table tennis there. We have a table tennis competition and I took part in it. Also, the year before, there was a Christmas party at the reception – Kevin [manager of the building] organised it… We have only one lift hall, so you naturally meet people and get to know them. It is nice.' (BB, male, 28, Site 1)

It is clear that the fixed and semi-fixed features of the building on Site 1, such as the single lift hall, conference room and barbecue area, facilitate the interactions between residents, also providing non-fixed features as behavioral protocols that encourage interactions among them.

However, community is 'voluntary', different from traditional village communities. As Savage et al. [13] find in their study of local belonging, residents' relationships with their neighbors are organized around an 'ethic of respectful distance'. Spatial features, such as a conference room (a fixed feature), the existence of a table for table

tennis (a semi-fixed feature) and the fact that some people practice Yoga wearing certain clothes (non-fixed features), 'suggest' certain behaviors and activities to take place, but do not force those behaviors and activities upon people. One respondent is confident about exercising the right not to participate or not to appropriate the provided facilities:

'I think in the long, bigger floors lower down the building, you do get a sense that people do know each other and do more things… They use the gardens and they would use the barbeque area, for example. They use the conference room quite a lot for wine tasting. So I think it's just that we tend not to participate in that sort of thing really. We're not really looking to socialize.' (ME, female, 44, Site 1)

People are also selective in their perceptions of who is included and who is excluded, and these perceptions relate closely to spatial features:

'There's a nice little community here, we know enough people in this building, probably know maybe 12-15 flats, so there's always friends nearby … Really, we don't really mix with the people down the road, we just don't know anybody down the Island, I know there's council flats, and to be honest, we don't know anybody down the Island.' (SL, female, 25, Site 1)

'There's a gate and security guard 24 hours. .... It's not that people here try quite hard not to be friendly, but you get the feeling that you would, you know, if you didn't have some security.' (PW, female, 53, Site 1)

Community with this perception of 'us vs. them' therefore materialises in the spatial arrangement. Apart from the use of shared areas and the desire to have 'nice and friendly' people around, it is clear that the presence of a gate (a fixed feature) and of porters and security guards (a non-fixed feature) provide a physical boundary from the outside world to protect their community, as were traditional village communities.

There are people who enjoy a community feel by observing people outside. Site 2's restaurants and bars have tables and chairs outside (a semi-fixed feature) and flats above have large windows looking over the terraces (a fixed feature). This design makes it possible for residents to watch what is going on and feel part of it without actually participating. The residents appreciate the freedom of not having to participate in neighborhood activities or interact with neighbors; some are satisfied with just watching the people in their neighborhood, rather than being physically among them:

'Every human being creates their own environment, sometimes we don't do it deliberately, but I think we create our environment with a sense of peace. It's very important, and the idea of being connected to everything but being essentially yourself is incredibly important. So creating my own peace and spirituality

separate from the outside world but I am still part of it. Because we're not on an island, we are part of everything, but we don't have to be touching all the time and be aware of it. We can simply be, I mean, I think some of us, we can be observers. I think human beings can be observers as well as participators. I think to create your own sense of peace in an urban environment is an essential thing.' (NT, male, 44, Site 2)

This quote suggests that some people, while keeping a connection with community on their living environment, also keep a distance from it. Participating in community activities is not necessarily part of their urban lives, but they like the idea that community is existing at their doorstep. The design of their housing development makes such connectivity possible. In the next quote, the role of observer is expressed even more firmly, with community distantly felt through watching people through the window. Here, she does not participate in the community although still feeling she is part of it:

'I don't want to live in an ivory tower, and the thing is that I'm here for days as my husband is away working, and I don't feel lonely because we've got a lovely view with people moving and enjoying themselves and just the sound of other people and it's extremely pleasant, cosy. You feel part of the party without having to make boring small talk or buy drinks.' (JC, female, 59, Site 2)

Community therefore involves feelings of ambivalence, representing concurrent needs for both bonds with, and distance from, others in the neighborhood:

'…I don't know all my neighbours but my understanding is that there are ex-pats here, so there's people that are working a lot... So I don't get a strong sense of community, and I guess I'm not necessarily looking for that. But I must say, while I do not need to hang out with these people every day, I wish at least every couple of months there were a meeting... to catch up with things. I wish occasionally somebody would organise a tenants' party downstairs in Belluga Café [a café on the ground floor of the building], you know, come down and have a glass of wine with your neighbours.' (GM, female, 50, Site 2)

This quote suggests that the design of Site 2 building promotes observation, but not connection among residents, as it has no communal fixed features where residents can get together without making effort, as in the case of Site 1. What Site 2 has commercial establishments, and as the use of these facilities does cost and involves and more planning, this may hinder residents' gatherings.

Conclusion

Contemporary urban community holds a paradox that people want to be part of a community, while needing the freedom to be distant from it: a desire for a 'light' form of local social interactions. The building on Site 2 does not have communal spaces as does Site 1. The conference room of Site 1 is used for a wide range of activities and residents are all invited to these events (with an option of not attending). While Site 2 is good for observing and feeling part of the community without being there, it does not provide a physical opportunity to organize any events, except for commercial establishments such as bars downstairs. It is clear that design can facilitate the sense of community by offering appropriate fixed, semi-fixed and non-fixed features. But this alone is not enough. What design should do is also to reflect how residents feel about community, accommodating their needs, such as physically participating or keeping a distance, psychologically feeling connected and being able to observe, in various spatial features of residential buildings.

This was a small, exploratory study and the views represented in the paper are limited. In order to understand the role of design in generating a sense of community, we need to continue investigating how people feel about community to understand diverse perceptions among residents, and what fixed, semi-fixed and non-fixed features can offer to create the sense of community that serves residents' different needs, whether they prefer full participation or light association. Design has the power to facilitate the sense of community, but it has to reflect people's desires for both a community and urban freedom.

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