

Questions & Answers with Ross Chapin on Pocket Neighborhoods

Just what are Pocket Neighborhoods?

Pocket neighborhoods are clustered groups of neighboring houses or apartments gathered around a shared open space — which can be courtyard, a lively pedestrian street, or even conjoined backyards — that provides a clear sense of territory and joint stewardship.

How is a Pocket Neighborhood different than a regular neighborhood?

A pocket neighborhood is *not* the wider neighborhood of several hundred households connected by an impersonal network of roads, but a close knit realm of a dozen or so neighbors who interact on a daily basis around a shared garden, quiet street or alley — a kind of secret garden, or secluded *neighborhood within a neighborhood*.

What kinds of people are attracted to live in a pocket neighborhood?

Anyone who wants to live in a close, tight-knit neighborhood. Although not for everyone, an ever-growing segment of the population wants a stronger sense of community. For them, pocket neighborhoods offer a longed-for alternative.

Why are pocket neighborhoods so good for children?

Children need increasingly larger zones of play as they grow up. A baby explores the room their parent occupies, while an older sibling is free to play in the next room, or in the back yard. At some point, though, a child's desire to explore the world beyond the front gate is blocked by the real and perceived "stranger danger" and traffic. Children are then chauffeured to friends' houses and organized activities until they can drive on their own. Too often, children feel painfully isolated and lack access to safe, unplanned play.

Pocket neighborhoods provide a protected, traffic-free environment for a child's widening horizon — a place for unplanned play alone and with other children, and a place to have relationships with caring adults other than parents. This matches their growing curiosity, need for increased responsibilities and maturing social skills.

Why is shared outdoor space so important?

The shared outdoor space at the center of a cluster of homes is a key element of a pocket neighborhood. Residents surrounding this common space take part in its care and oversight, thereby enhancing a real sense of security and identity.

During the daily flow of life through this commons space, nearby neighbors offer 'nodding hellos,' or stop for a chat on the porch. These casual conversations can eventually grow to caring relationships and a meaningful sense of community — all fostered by the simple fact of shared space.

Community sounds good, but does it come at the expense of privacy?

While there are many examples and kinds of pocket neighborhoods, privacy is an essential ingredient that allows residents to have a positive experience of community. In a classic pocket neighborhood, there are several increasingly private ‘layers of personal space’ between the shared commons and the front door.

To ensure privacy between neighbors, the cottages ‘nest’ together: the ‘open’ side of one house faces the ‘closed’ side of the next. You could say the houses are spooning! The open side has large windows facing its side yard (which extends to the face of neighboring house), while the closed side has high windows and skylights. The result is that neighbors do not peer into one another’s world.

What are these design principles?

Successful pocket neighborhoods start with the central idea of a limited number of dwellings gathered around a shared commons. As the number grows larger than 8 or 12 homes, new clusters form around separate shared commons. Multiple pocket neighborhood clusters can form a larger community. These communities are not isolated to themselves, like a gated community, but connect and contribute to the character and life of the surrounding neighborhood.

Why are Pocket Neighborhoods important now?

The fabric of social health in our society has been fraying, in part because many people lack networks of social support. Pocket neighborhoods help mend this broken web of belonging, care and support. The protected setting encourages informal interaction among neighbors, laying the ground for caring relationships. An elderly neighbor may need assistance trimming a hedge. Another needs help looking after the kids while going for a short errand, or feeding a cat while away on vacation. Neighbors become what they used to be, the ones most available to respond to daily needs. They are also the ones to hear a story, admire a newly planted garden bed, or reminisce about old times. All of these encounters strengthen webs of support and friendship, which are the basis for healthy, livable communities.

Is zoning an issue for pocket neighborhoods?

Most towns and cities have zoning regulations that limit housing to detached, single family homes on large private lots with a street out front. Forward-thinking planners are seeing pocket neighborhoods as a way to increase housing options and limit sprawl, while preserving the character of existing neighborhoods. The zoning section of this website has more information about this.