Sense of community

Now we will talk briefly about sense of community – and again naturally we will emphasize the perspectives of physical environment and planning and design.

Does sense of community (yhteisöllisyys) sound a bit like a concept from 1970's to you? To me it does a bit. Many of us are somewhat critical towards sense of community in the modern world that has moved beyond the limits of local communities. Social networks are not any more as bounded to physical places than before because virtual social life has become so important.

However, this does not mean that the presence of local communities in neighbourhoods is not beneficial for us or that physical environment plays no role here. I think we may have missed the importance sense of community still plays today. Especially the theme is relevant in Finland where lonelyness is a serious societal challenge.

When we think about the role of physical environment in supporting social interaction, the starting point is that we cannot think that physical environment as such would CREATE sense of community. It can provide possibilities for it and encourage or hinder social interaction. So I am flagging here for probabilistic or possibilistic approach rather than deterministic view.

Concepts

Sense of community	the sense that one is part of a mutually supportive network of relationships
Neigbbouring	the activities engaged in by neighbors and the relationships these generates among them

When you think about the social life in urban environment, there are for sure a lot of approaches and concepts to work with.

The most important ones in environmental psychology are two concepts: sense of community and neighbouring. Sense on community refers to the feeling that you are part of a network of social relationships that is mutually supportive.

Neighbouring, on its part, means the more practical level of social life, like the common activities engaged by people and the relationships these activities generates. In addition to these two key concepts, there are many other relevant concepts like neighbourhood attachment and the notion of weak and strong social ties.

Sense of community

Membership

Influence

Sense of community

Fulfillment of needs

Shared emotional connections

McMillan and Chavis (1986)

According to a well cited definition by McMillan and Chavis the sense of community is composed of four elements: First comes MEMBERSHIP –the feeling that you belongs to the community. Second: INFLUENCE – the ability to influence the group. This should work both ways, from the group to the members and vice versa. Third: FULFILMENT OF NEEDS – which means the feeling that members are awarded and some needs are satisfied by being a member of the community
Fourth: SHARED EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS – the common history of members in a community.

You can think to what degree these four elements are dependent on the actual face-to-face interaction and how physical environment can support these elements. Some of the elements are clearly such that do not demand any place-based, direct interaction.

The hierarchy of urb an communities
Kusenbach (2008)
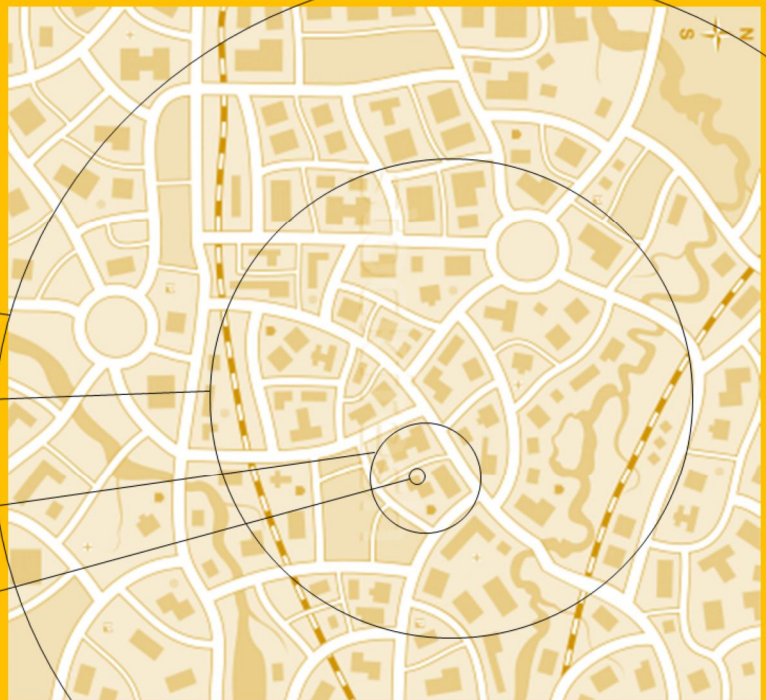
Enclaves
Comfort, belonging

Walking distance neighbourhoods
Familiarity

Street blocks
Tolerance, responsibility

Microsettings
Trust, dependency

Another way to classify various levels of sense of community is the hierarchical model by Kusenbach (2008). Here we can look at different levels of intimacy in relation to various geographical scales. This hierarchy starts from microsettings where trust and dependency may characterize sense on community up to larger areas where sense of community appears as best as feelings of comfort and belonging.

Local neighbourhoods do not need to be and cannot provide the context for deep affective bonds. The value of local communities is rather in the lighter forms of social interaction that the proximity can provide. These lighter forms of sociality are called weak social ties. They mean spontaneous meetings, interaction without obligations and normative demands. This kind of social interaction promotes our wellbeing. Urban planners can provide possibilities for exactly this kind of sociality. For example, the work of the famous Danish architect Jan Gehl is very much based on the promotion of weak social ties.

Balancing privacy and sense of community
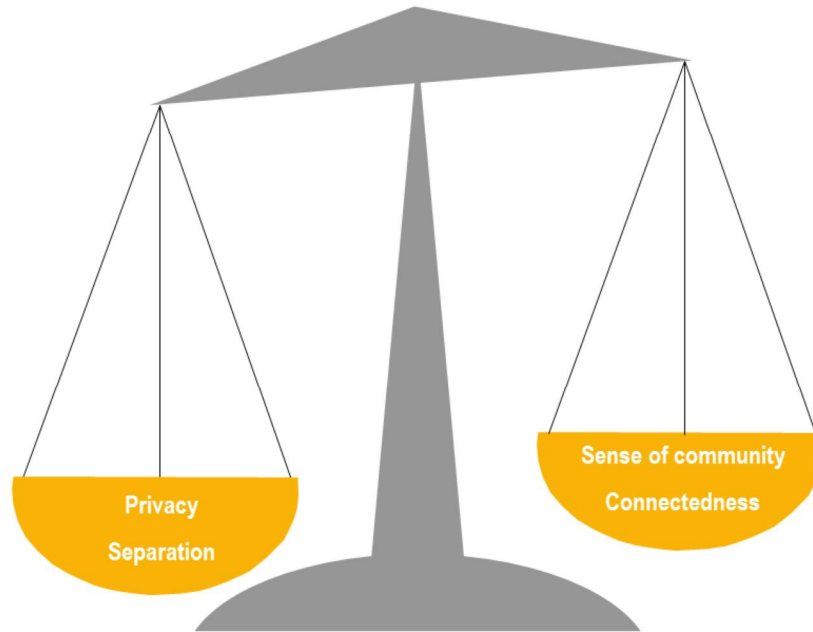
When thinking about our social life, you shoud remember that there is a basic principle in psychology: the balance between privacy and the sense of community. We all have a basic need for social life and motivation to maintain sense of community. Simultaneously, our privacy has to be safeguarded.

Here a keyword is control! Everyday life with strong sense of community promotes wellbeing IF it is voluntary and suitable type and level.

You should be able to control, when you need privacy and when social life. In fact we constantly balance with these two basic needs our daily life. High quality environment can help this balancing in all levels, at home, in schools, work places, neighbourhoods and so on.

Proxemics

Hall, 1963
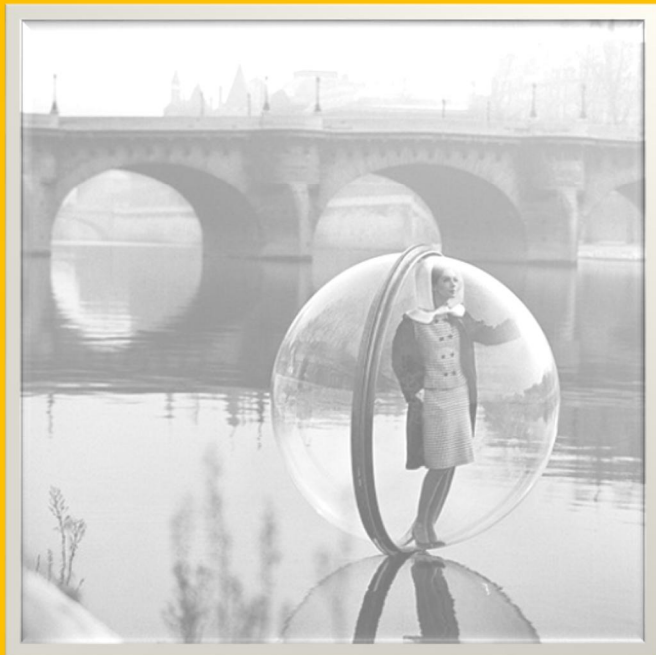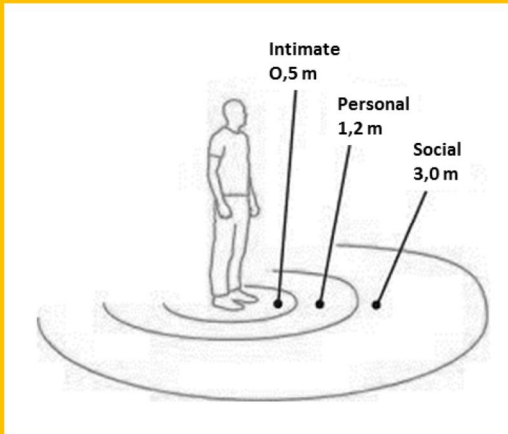
One more old idea: Already in 1960's an antropologist called Edward Hall studied something that was called Proxemics. It refers to the study of human use of space and how that varies in different cultures.

You have your own invisible boundaries, your personal bubble, which is called your personal space. It is the distance you feel comfortable to keep to other bodies. For each of us, the size of this personal space varies and it also varies in different cultures. If you violate this seemingly invisible space it feels negative. People who stand within a smaller distance than your personal bubble tend to make us feel uncomfortable. We only people who are very close to enter our intimate space. If two people are communicating who do not know each other well they most likely communicate in the social space which is about 3 meters from each other.

Proxemics varies by culture, gender, social setting and the individual's preference. It is important to take this into account especially in interior design, but perhaps also in urban planning.

Density & sense of community

Forms of social interaction:
- **Sozializing**
  - Visiting
  - Parties
  - Sports
  - Going to Sauna
  - etc
- **Shared responsibility**
  - Waste management
  - Roads
  - Sharing devices
  - Etc.
- **Helping**
  - Gardening
  - Farming
  - Borrowing
  - Transportation
  - etc.

Conflicts:
- **Noise**
- **Dogs**
- **Snow**
- **Road management**
- **Building projects**
- **Borders**
- **Social control**
- **Different lifestyles**
- **Smells**
- **Etc.**

I have only one research project where I have specifically studied sense of community. This was one of my early research projects in the 1990's.

In this case the especially densely built rural villages were studied in various parts of the country. Surprisingly enough, there are quite a few traditional, densely built villages in Finland. I studied the human aspects in these villages and asked inhabitants about neighbourning.

I interviewed people living in these villages and asked questions about neighbourning, for example about conflicts and various forms of social interaction.
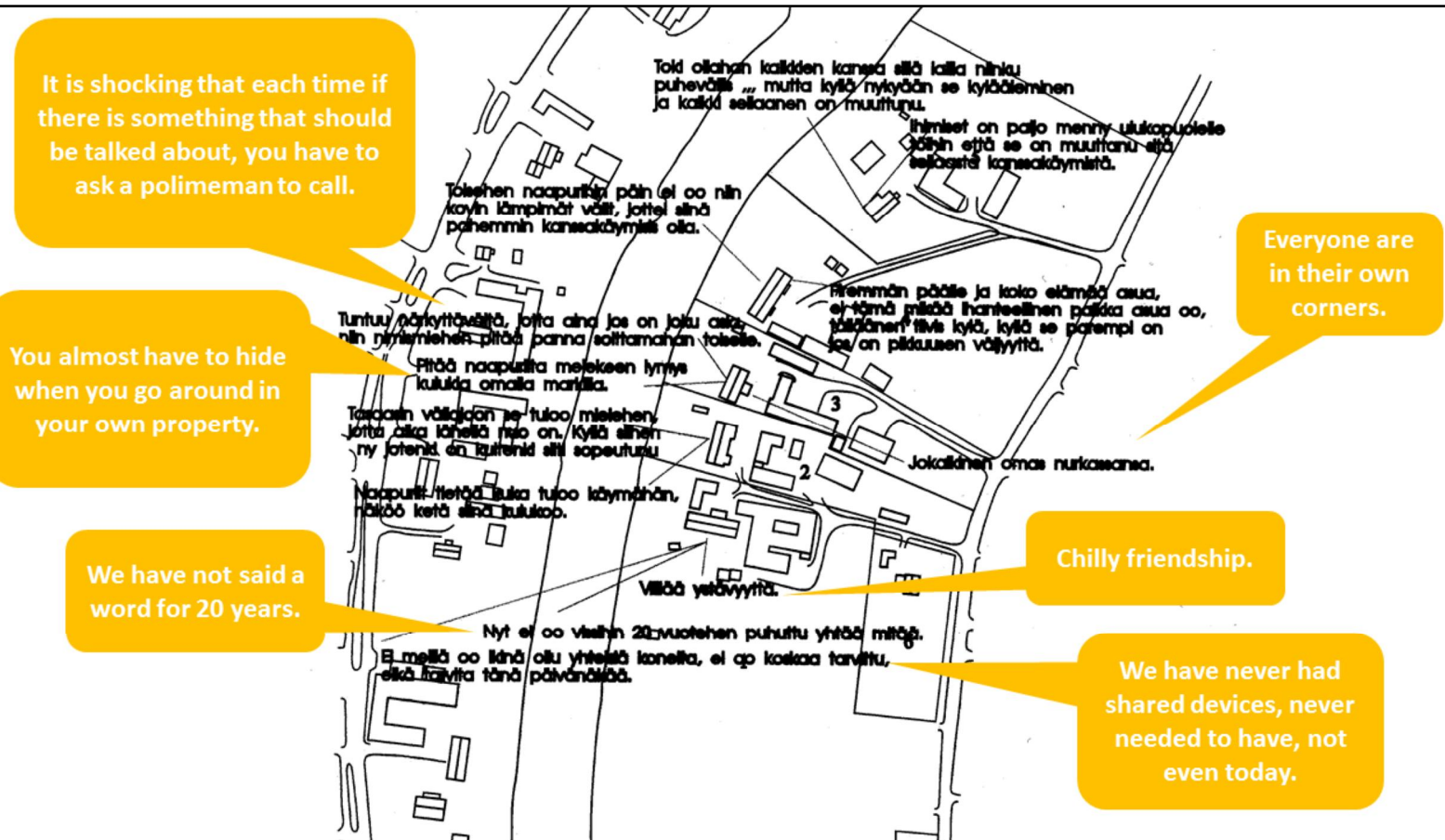
I am afraid that the results were not very positive. There were some villages with very serious social conflicts. As you can see from this picture, inhabitants here said for example that they have not said a word to their neighbor for 20 years. One man even said that "the hate is inherited in blood".

Still, there was another village really close by that was built about as densely than this village. And there everything was fine: the neighbours had positive sense of community. One lady said that "Whether you are happy or sad, we share our feelings".

I had hard time how to interpret these findings. As we talked in the beginning, clearly there was no deterministic association between physical environment and sense of community. The only theory that I could find in the research literature was the so called density-intensity- hypothesis. According to it, density intensifies both positive and negative feelings between people. It also intensifies the social processes, whether positive or negative. So perhaps in this case the problematic village had faced some social conflicts already generations ago and years just intensified them. The other village had somehow avoided all that and on the contrary had been able to create a positive cycle.

New urbanism & sense of community

Seaside, Florida

Kentlands, Maryland

There have been some attempts to really improve the sense of community of an urban environment. Perhaps among the best known is New Urbanism that advocates the mixed land uses, high densities, walkability and connectivity, adequate public transit, good access to open spaces and community and social facilities. It is assumed that stronger sense of community can develop. This is promoted for example by design solutions like front yards and porches.

Some empirical studies really confirm that New Urbanism can foster sense of community but the evidence is not conclusive. What is good though, that at least the design principles are tested empirically and feedback gathered systematically.

New urban activities and the new sense of communtiy?

Finally:

If I compare the situation about ten years ago, I see a clear difference with today. In 2005 I visited the Finnish housing exhibition in Oulu. I started to pay attention to the phenemenon that the core activities of urban environment like going to movies, visit a swimming hall or eating out in a restaurant where moved to private spaces. The homes had spa units, home theathes, utility rooms and gourmet kitchen – no need go away from home any more! We can just barrigate ourselves to our own castles.

Now I think the situation has changed: suddenly there are many urban saunas in Helsinki, common laundly rooms exist again, all movie theathes did not dissapear and new cafes and restaurant open up all the time. So, is their hope for a new sense of community? What do you think?