To Rally Discussion

Dear Clare (Cooper Marcus):

First, let me thank you for taking care to secure a place in American urbanism for semipublic space. It is undoubtedly an important tool in the pursuit of human happiness. I wasn't aware until I read your article in *Places* 15.2 that you had been dedicated to this campaign for as long as you have. In response to that article ("Shared Outdoor Space and Community Life"), and following your request to comment on it, here are my thoughts:

You are not entirely correct in concluding that semipublic space is absent in the practice of New Urbanism. You grant only one exception of the alley, and attach it to the critique that it really isn't a good enough place for children. Actually, I believe that it is a good place for children—not necessarily when it is an alley (which is an urban place), but when it is a rear lane (which is a rural place). This can be observed in action in our better communities.

I must also call to your attention Dan Solomon's beautiful parking courts in San Francisco, and Stef Polyzoides and Liz Moule's twenty-year campaign for courtyard apartment buildings, now beautifully executed in several variations. There are also the DPZ walkways and closes in Rosemary Beach and Kentlands; these look similar to your illustrations on pages 35 and 36R. All of these create variations of semi-public space which must be socially similar to your version.

But your contention that these are incidental practices is correct when it comes to the blocks of single-family houses and rowhouses. With these, which are the bread and butter of American residential typologies, the New Urbanism indeed does not allocate to semipublic space the importance that your argument supports. Why?

The main courtyard at Moule & Polyzoides's Harper Courtyard apartment building. Photo courtesy Moule & Polyzoides Architects

This is hard to explain, as there is a robust tendency in the New Urbanism to be omnivorous, assimilating to its practice "anything that works well in the long run." The following are some tentative thoughts that may explain this absence.

First, hat New Urbanism is a reform movement recoiling from the failures of the 1960s. As such, the first and classic social/spatial critique was Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space*. His strong condemnation of "unassigned space" is something that we have assimilated, perhaps thoughtlessly. We *do* try to eliminate such unassigned space wherever possible. You may have noticed that those HOPE VI projects that are exclusively based in New Urbanist practices attempt to eliminate all such unassigned space, allocating it to either private yards or public street space. Reports are that this has worked well to reduce crime, so we feel no pressure to alter the practice in affordable housing layouts.

Another reason that semipublic space is avoided may derive from the argument by Leon Krier that urban design should concentrate human interaction. (He goes on to suggest that hallways should be eliminated so that pedestrians should be dumped as soon as possible onto the street, where they can interact). American sedentarism has led us to the conclusion that those few who are "out walking" should tend to meet each other, and therefore that all potential social condensers (AKA destinations) should be concentrated.

It is one of the reasons that rather than dispersing public buildings throughout the community (which would nicely structure the urban fabric), we have a tendency to concentrate commercial and civic uses in one place. This argument is: "If there are twenty people walking around at any one time, let 's do it so they have the chance to run into each other." This has yielded monofocal neighborhoods and also the elimination of the semipublic space that may dilute interaction by providing an alternative.

A specific reason that semipublic space within the block is habitually eliminated is that developers want to sell the biggest lot possible to those who do comparison shopping. If one project sells a 4,000-sq.ft. lot plus some semipublic space, it cannot readily compete with another that sells 6,000-sq.ft. lots and no semipublic space. Not only is the market dumbed down in this manner, but, worse, the real estate appraisal industry is rigorously limited.

Their comparison protocols are circumscribed to a set of statistical correlations. These value the size of the lot—period. There are other negative social consequences to this, among them that porches are not permitted to count toward the valuation. Since appraisals are the basis upon which mortgages are calculated, this means that semipublic space and the porch are not "mortgageable" (i.e., you cannot buy those elements at 10 percent down and a 6 percent interest rate over thirty years; they must instead be paid for with the equivalent of cash on the barrelhead). This is a significant problem.

Yet another reason for the elimination of semipublic space within the block is that New Urbanists are in pursuit of increased density. These days (and for the foreseeable future) density is directly correlated with the number of cars that can be parked, and this is determined by the parking capacity of the block. Since most real estate financing formulas cannot afford parking below a deck, the best we can do with surface parking lots is to confine them to the inner block (better than sprawled all over the frontages which, as you know, would devastate the walkability of the street). As a result, whatever would have been available for semipublic space is usually allocated to center-block parking (remember Solomon's and Moule and Polyzoides's types).

Then there is an argument that involves the dialectic between front and back yard and the "social contract" that the New Urbanist planner makes with the residents.

As you know, we code many aspects of the building frontage in pursuit of the creation of pedestrian streets. In exchange for this degree of constraint in public, we generally allow the back yard to be a place that is self-defined—we control the front and liberate the back. We think of the back yard as the place where people can be as slovenly as they like: barbecuing disgraceful foodstuffs in their underwear, and having veritable explosions of vulgar toys if they so desire. We have observed that when the back is semipublic, as with a golf course, this degrades their "rights" to be slobs. We have also found there is a general dislike for greenways and bike trails across their backyards, while there is no objection to having them along their frontages. It seems that the house frontage is resilient enough to accommodate public use while the rear is too soft and vulnerable to do so. There is thus a problem when an unbuffered semipublic space is located in the rear of a dwelling. I have seen this kind of semipublic space in Dutch new towns and find that it severely constrains people's freedom to be themselves.

It is definitely possible to create a private backyard and then the semipublic space beyond, but semipublic space as the sole back yard is not popular enough to be common practice. Not even its prototype at Sunnyside Gardens survived.

And one last thing: in greenfield projects the environmental requirements are becoming so rigid that by the time every species and presumed wetland has been preserved, most of the potential open space has been allocated to "nature" (wherever "nature" happens to be), and it is then used to supply the requisite "open space" of the community.

So, the absence of semipublic space is not a matter of policy; it is arguably not even a matter of carelessness on the part of the New Urbanists; and it is certainly not a matter of undervaluing the role that you have proven that it has, particularly in the lives of children. It is just a matter of being in the crossfire of so many other variables that it hardly comes up for consideration.

I do promise you this: I will propose some inner-block public space in our current projects to see if they survive.

Best,
Andrés Duany

P.S. The houses of American military bases are not subdivided into lots. They therefore lack the coordinates for backyard definition through hedges and fences to create private space. It is all semipublic in the back. These inner block areas seem to be very similar to your definition of shared outdoor space. I have observed that they do not necessarily work as well as you describe, and surmise that this is because there is just too much of it. It seems that shared common space should be a controlled commodity.