

Script Courtyard Homes/Pocket Neighborhoods

“Designing Better Places” title slide

Graphic illustration of single-family neighborhood

When we think of a single-family home, we tend to imagine a house surrounded by a yard on all sides facing a street, with a driveway running alongside the house or perhaps an alley in the back. When we think of a neighborhood, we imagine several blocks of the same pattern—homes in a row, surrounded by a yard, each one with its own driveway, with a street in front. In our daily life we may not have much contact with our neighbors, other than a wave as we get into or out of our cars.

Children on grass with dog

There are other ways to create a neighborhood, however. One variation involves building small clusters of homes or cottages around a shared open space or courtyard. The homes face this open space—or “commons”—rather than the street...

Homes facing common green

...and are built near one another. This is part of a conscious effort to promote a close-knit sense of community with more opportunities to get to know one another.

Homes with gardens, walkway

One term used to describe this arrangement is “pocket neighborhood.” While the homes tend to be smaller in these neighborhoods, that is not a requirement. Pocket neighborhoods typically include four to 12 homes clustered around a commons—a scale that fosters interaction among its residents. Larger developments may have multiple pocket neighborhoods linked by walkways. Careful design of the homes and site ensure privacy is maintained so residents have a positive experience of community.

Homes facing courtyard; bench

Privacy between neighbors is protected by having ‘open’ and ‘closed’ sides on each house. 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 ‘open’ side of one house faces the ‘closed’ side of the next. The result is that neighbors are not peering into one another’s world.

People socializing outside

Homes may be located on separate lots, or on commonly-owned land. Residents may share use, and maintenance expense, of common facilities such as parking and storage areas. It is possible, but not essential, for pocket neighborhoods to have a common activity building.

Homes with gardens

Some garden space is shared instead of being duplicated for each house, so less land is needed.

Aerial view of courtyard homes

Vehicle parking is also clustered together in surface parking areas or in garages. The parking is located so residents walk from their cars through the commons to their front door, which not only increases opportunities to mingle with neighbors but brings more activity to the commons. In colder climates some people may want to have an attached garage; these are located to the rear and accessed from an alleyway lane.

These neighborhoods lend themselves to infill development. They can be a kind of secluded “neighborhood within a neighborhood.”

People visiting outside on walkway

This approach to infill development can preserve the character and scale of an existing neighborhood, while offering a wider range of housing options and affordability. It can also be an organizing pattern for larger new residential developments.

Home with garden and wood fence

One feature is the several “layers of personal space” that become increasingly private from the shared commons to the front door. For example, next to the sidewalk is a border of plantings and a low fence with a swinging gate; then the private front yard; then the frame of the covered porch with a low railing and flower boxes; then the porch itself, which is large enough to be an outdoor room. In this way it is possible to interact with your neighbors when you want to, and yet maintain privacy.

People socializing outside

These courtyard homes or pocket neighborhoods can provide a place for seniors wanting to downsize from a large home and yard, as well as first-time homeowners or those who merely want to have more interaction with their neighbors.

Pocket Neighborhoods book

Architect Ross Chapin has written a book on this subject. He states, “Pocket Neighborhoods can help mend the web of belonging, care and support needed in a frayed world. Humans are social animals. We’re gregarious. We like to live around others. Pocket Neighborhoods are primary building blocks for community resilience, where being a good neighbor happens naturally.” For more information, visit the website <http://www.pocket-neighborhoods.net/>