

Good developments come in small packages

Affordability, Architecture, Building, Community, Economy, New Urban News, Review, urban design

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Pocket Neighborhoods Creating Small-Scale Community in a Large-Scale World

By Ross Chapin

Taunton Press, 2011, 224 pp., \$30 hardcover

For the past couple of years, I'd had it in the back of my mind to explore Ross Chapin's cottage courts and write an article about them. His clusters of usually eight to 12 modest-sized houses, organized around a shared green space, looked immensely appealing every time I saw them pictured in magazines.

And then Pocket Neighborhoods arrived, causing me to realize that Chapin does more than design congenial little collections of houses. He understands — and explains with great clarity — their place in the social, historical, and metropolitan scheme of things. He possesses a Christopher Alexander-like ability to show how all the pieces of a house and a neighborhood can fit together, composing a profoundly satisfying environment.

This beautifully illustrated hardcover, bargain-priced at \$30, is going to be extremely popular among new urbanists. In the introduction, Chapin, who grew up in a shingled bungalow in St. Paul, Minnesota, and now lives in the tiny town of Langley, on Whidbey Island north of Seattle, tells how, as a young architect, he focused on "designing individual homes fitted to the clients' particular needs and their sites.

"Yet no matter how well designed these homes may have been, I was left with the nagging feeling that I wasn't able to address the needs and desires of living in a community," Chapin writes. "Nearly all the neighborhoods I worked in were merely collections of individual houses ... with little real connection among neighbors."

Eventually he met developer Jim Soules, who set him on a course of designing clusters of cottages — mini-communities tucked into their larger neighborhoods. He and Soules were onto something: "pocket neighborhoods" which "can help mend the web of belonging, care, and support needed in a frayed world." They found there was a market waiting: people who desired simplicity in a home, who "wanted to live in a ground-based single-family neighborhood, without the long to-do lists that come with family-sized houses."

In Pocket Neighborhoods, Chapin explains the techniques that have made his cottages successful — from entry porches designed for function and security, to ceilings nine feet and higher, abundant natural light, and exploitation of the usefulness of every niche and nook. It's not just the cottage itself that matters; it's how the dwelling meshes into a setting both friendly and protective.

"In our pocket neighborhoods," he says, "we work to create five additional layers of personal space between the courtyard and the front door: a border of perennial plantings at the edge of the sidewalk; a low fence; the private front yard; the frame of the covered porch with a low,

'perchable' railing and a band of flowerboxes; and the porch itself. These occur within a span of about 18 ft."

Cottages that 'spoon'

"To ensure privacy between cottages, the houses 'nest' together: the 'open' side of one house faces the 'closed' side of the next," Chapin notes. "You could say the houses are spooning. The open side has large windows facing its side yard (which extends to the face of the neighboring house), whereas the closed side has high windows and skylights."

He escorts readers through his projects. On a hilly site in Redmond, Washington, cottages of about 1,000 sq. ft. were built around an open lawn. It was impossible to provide automobile access to all the houses, Chapin acknowledges, "but we saw this as a selling point rather than a shortcoming."

Residents would have to walk a short distance between their homes and their cars. One resident observed that without cars, large blank garage doors, or traffic noise in front of her house, "I'm much more likely to talk with my neighbor across the way."

The Redmond development, Conover Commons, includes a commons building, which does much to bring the residents together. "It doesn't need to be an architectural masterpiece, but location is important," developer Soules advises. It should be positioned where people walk by daily. This ensures that the commons building will be used and that residents will have the opportunity to form a close-knit community. The commons building is seen as "an extension of everyone's living room: a larger space to gather for family events and neighborhood get-togethers."

In addition to photos, drawings, house plans, and site plans, the text is interspersed with pages of "design keys": succinct summaries of the principles that Chapin sees as essential to making a pocket neighborhood work well. One chapter, "New Urban Pocket Neighborhoods," presents new urbanist mini-neighborhoods organized around shared landscapes, including the Wellington neighborhood in Breckenridge, Colorado (designed by Wolff + Lyon Architects); New Town at St. Charles, Missouri; and The Waters, outside Montgomery, Alabama.

The initial response of new urbanists to the book has been highly favorable, for Chapin is presenting something weightier than cute cottages around greens, or the virtues of the "small is beautiful" movement. He is presenting a component of urbanism that's smaller than the 5-minute-walk neighborhood — and potentially important. This increment of urbanism — the semi-private realm of a cluster of homes, as Portland architect-planner Laurence Qamar calls it — merits close attention.

Among the benefits that could be delivered by this form of development are housing for modest-income people; lower infrastructure costs; greater community interaction; neighborly support for those who need it; and better options for single parents and aging baby boomers. For some people — perhaps many — a pocket neighborhood would be more gratifying than a house along a street.

In the early chapters, Chapin introduces readers to the historical antecedents of today's pocket neighborhoods: among them, Dutch hofjes (small groups of apartments clustered around courtyards or gardens); 19th-century workingmen's cottages in New York; the Garden City movement; early 20th-century bungalow courts; "walk streets" like those in Manhattan Beach, California; and

summer places like Oak Bluff's on Martha's Vineyard. He emphasizes the pocket neighborhoods' removal from the dangers and disruptions of vehicular traffic, and in a tangent, he looks at woonerfs, lanes, and even the traffic engineering philosophy of the late Hans Monderman.

Toward the end of the book, Chapin shows how pocket neighborhoods can be used in co-housing developments, existing communities, and other situations. By the final chapter, the reader has a nuanced understanding of why cottage courts and their many cousins make sense, how they're organized, and where they came from — all without ever feeling that it was a burden to learn these things. *Pocket Neighborhoods* is quite an accomplishment.

Posted by Robert Steuteville on 19 Apr 2011