

**TOWARDS 10-STAR  
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# Pocket Neighbourhoods

Close-knit community, increased sociability, playmates aplenty – the benefits of pocket neighbourhoods are many.

WORDS Paul Downton

**BETWEEN THE STANDALONE PRIVACY OF** a dwelling on its own block and the communal aspirations of co-housing lies a balance that more and more people are seeking.

The movement towards co-housing, intentional communities and more neighbourly development has been happening for decades – it is no accident that the scale of the tribe, the village and the neighbourhood are so similar.

“Pocket neighbourhood” is a term coined by US architect Ross Chapin to describe a style of development that taps into that deep-felt need for community. These developments can be in urban, suburban or rural areas but they all echo a pattern of life common to traditional communities around the world: Chapin calls them “neighbourhoods within neighbourhoods”.

Pocket neighbourhoods of around a dozen households provide a sense of territory and can form the building blocks of much larger communities. Instead of living alone or being confined in a single house, a larger, shared backyard becomes part of a home domain that includes friends and neighbours.

Chapin describes “shared outdoor space” as a key element of a pocket neighbourhood. “It is neither private (home, yard) nor public (a busy street, park), but rather a defined space between the private and public realms.” Such

spaces foster interaction and lubricate the mechanisms of friendship.

We’ve been conditioned to treat streets as what sustainability researcher Jeff Kenworthy calls “traffic sewers” – instead of places where walking is pleasant and kids can play. Pocket neighbourhoods accommodate cars but have a core area where the individual homes face onto a shared, car-free space.

Pocket neighbourhoods put people back in touch with each other, providing opportunities you don’t get in conventional developments. If you’ve got kids, they can spill out of your house and meet other children in a central lawn, garden or safe play area, without having to cross roads to get there.

Creating a community of buildings has less to do with individual building designs than how the different buildings relate to each other.

Think in terms of buildings in a similar way to people. If you had a room of a dozen people and lined them up against the wall, the social interactions would be very different from having them all sit around a table. Similarly, when planning site layouts you can line up all the buildings in regimented conformity, or place them lightly around a central space so that each has its own place and privacy whilst enjoying a shared outlook on pleasant and functional landscaped space.

Details count. Consider: porches can be







The ideal size for a pocket neighbourhood, according to Ross Chapin Architects, is between eight and 12 households. "If a cluster has fewer than four households, it loses the sense of being a cluster, and lacks the diversity and activity of a larger group. When the number of households in a cluster grows beyond 12 or 16, some neighbours are too far away to be neighbourly, and group decision-making becomes more unwieldy." For more information see [www.pocket-neighborhoods.net](http://www.pocket-neighborhoods.net) and Ross' book, *Pocket Neighborhoods*.



Neighbours enjoy the central lawn at Conover Commons Cottages, Redmond, Washington, USA. This pocket neighbourhood has 12 houses, each under 95 square metres. It was developed as part of the City of Redmond's Innovative Housing Ordinance by Ross Chapin Architects and the Cottage Company. [www.rosschapin.com](http://www.rosschapin.com); [www.cottagecompany.com](http://www.cottagecompany.com)  
 Photo courtesy Ross Chapin.





Greenwood Avenue Cottages pocket neighbourhood consists of eight small houses. It is built in the City of Shoreline, Washington, USA. [www.rosschapin.com](http://www.rosschapin.com); [www.cottagecompany.com](http://www.cottagecompany.com) Photo courtesy Ross Chapin.

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aesthetic add-ons or authentic spaces between the public and the private; fences can be barriers that rise above eye-height or polite demarcations of boundaries that facilitate neighbourly interaction; the view from a room can be a window onto meaningless space, or be designed to embrace the life of the world outside.

If you've got a six foot fence out the front and you can't see the street and people in the street can't see you, you're isolated. We know about backyards sealed off from each other, where children hear each other playing but they can't see each other – compare that to fencing where they see one another and say hello, do you want to come over and play? Small differences in our built environment can make a big difference to social relationships.

The principles that guide the design of pocket neighbourhoods can be applied to retrofitting. There are examples of people tearing down suburban backyard fences to create shared space and community gardens – without changing any property lines.

The technology of sustainable living includes things like solar panels and compost bins but social behaviour determines how they will be used. Just as the same hammer can be used by a carpenter to hammer nails or an angry child to smash crockery, so the choices we make determine whether our use of tools is sustainable or not. No amount of technology can sustain a community that doesn't understand or support it. The core of sustainability is social.

When the Christchurch earthquakes destroyed buildings and infrastructure people discovered that the bottom line for surviving is to be part of a community. As we plunge

deeper into an uncertain future that reliance on community will increase.

Pocket neighbourhoods are the missing link between the local scale of home and neighbour and the larger world of the city and planet. They are like traditional villages, providing environments in which people can acknowledge their interdependence without sacrificing individuality.

The great philosopher of cities, Lewis Mumford, was a strong advocate for a vision of cities built around the human scale of community and half a century ago he made the prescient observation that "... the entire planet is becoming a village; and as a result, the smallest neighbourhood or precinct must be planned as a working model of the larger world."

If every small neighbourhood were such a model for the world they would provide counter-balances to the excesses of industrial society and move our cities towards community sustainability.

Paul's practice, Ecopolis Architects, specialises in ecological architecture and his Christie Walk project in Adelaide is recognised internationally as a leading example of sustainable urbanism. He was editor of the last two editions of the best-selling *Your Home Technical Manual* and is one of its primary authors. Over the past twenty years Paul has earned a reputation as one of the world's leaders in ecocity and green design. Paul spoke at TEDxEQCh, a one-day event held in Christchurch in May to provide inspiration to directly impact the future of the city. His TED talk can be viewed on YouTube ([youtu.be/57tfv7Za3zk](https://youtu.be/57tfv7Za3zk)) [www.ecopolis.com.au](http://www.ecopolis.com.au)



#### FURTHER READING

*Pocket Neighborhoods: Creating Small-Scale Community in a Large-Scale World*, written by architect Ross Chapin, chose Paul Downton's Christie Walk in Adelaide as an International illustration of a pocket neighbourhood development. *Pocket Neighborhoods* is published by The Taunton Press, 2011. [www.pocket-neighborhoods.net](http://www.pocket-neighborhoods.net)