

Pocket Neighborhoods

By Randall Arendt

Within an urban context, developers in the 1870s created remarkable pocket neighborhoods with alley-loaded homes facing onto walkways (instead of streets for vehicular traffic) in Louisville KY and Brooklyn NY. Although the Louisville example (Fig. 8-18) was designed for upscale living, at Cobble Hill in Brooklyn Alfred Tredway White, a Unitarian deacon and housing reformer, built two rows of 15 dwellings (plus two more at each end) just 11 feet wide, in three-story structures, specifically for workingmen and their families.. Called Warren Place Mews, its rear lanes are currently landscaped with shade trees and used as informal sitting areas, while the garden in the center is formally landscaped with shrubs and fountains bordered with footpaths providing front door access to each home (Chapin, 2011).

The pocket neighborhood form reappeared on the West Coast 40 years later, continuing as multi-family worker housing with very small cottages, and often called “bungalow courts”.. Rediscovered and restored by local architects 20 years ago, the 1915 Pine Street Cottages in Seattle inspired the region’s planning community to adopt new single-family land-use codes meeting the state’s Growth Management Act’s objectives. These codes have allowed innovative single-family infill developments that serve as models for alternative housing types. It is important to note that this approach, as commonly practiced in western Washington, does not require re-zoning for each project, since the cottage court neighborhood type is typically classified as a conditional use, providing another code option for single-family detached living.

All of the examples below were built in single-family zones under *innovative conditional use codes* allowing medium density, provided that each home is limited in finished floorspace, is not taller than 1 ½ stories, and is grouped around a common green/garden courtyard with detached garages on the site perimeter. Garden courts are the type of pocket neighborhood most focused on in this chapter, where the common ground is a central green, as illustrated in Figures 9-2 and 9-3.



Figures 9-2: Although homes are typically spaced very closely with minimal sideyards, their occupants enjoy pleasant views from their front windows and porches into the common, as shown in this sketch and photo of Conover Commons in Redmond WA. The courtyard is approximately 130 feet long and 50 feet wide, with 70 feet between housefronts: a perfect “outdoor room”. Source: The Cottage Company and Ross Chapin - both

The defining space of a pocket neighborhood is a middle ground between the private realm of the house, the semi-public space of the front porch, and the public realm of the street or municipal park. “In our pocket neighborhoods,” Chapin 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.” The trick is to arrange everything so residents can easily see into the common areas from their homes, but that others cannot see into their rooms, including next door neighbors.

Chapin believes that “Humans are gregarious by nature and, given the opportunity, will socialize. We also need some degree of personal space. Good design can achieve a balance between the two.” (Chapin, 2011) Because of its location and design, the shared open space fosters casual interaction among neighbors which, in time, may grow into deeper long-term friendships”. The key is an attractive, relaxing social space through which one walks every day, a place where people can hang out casually on benches or toss frisbies for their children or dogs.

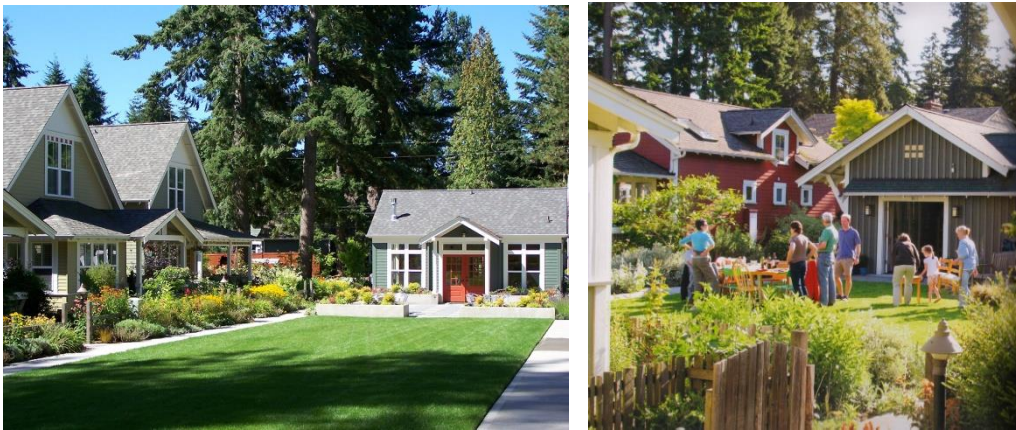


Figure 9-3: The community greens enclosed by homes at Danielson Grove (top) and Greenwood Avenue Cottages (in Kirkland and Shoreline WA respectively) are well-suited and right-sized for enjoying outdoor meals with neighbors, and kids frolicking with each other and pets. At Danielson, the courtyard measures about 40 by 140 feet, with approximately 60 feet between opposing front porches. Source: The Cottage Company and Ross Chapin - both

For the optimum number of social interactions to occur, the best range in size is said to be between five and 16 homes, with the 8-12 range considered ideal. This range has ancient origins in human settlement design. At Chysauster, a 2000-year old Iron Age hamlet in Cornwall, eight stone dwellings described by English heritage as “courtyard houses” are arranged in pairs along a street, each with its own garden plot. (www.englishheritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/chysauster-ancient-village). The earliest intact settlement in Britain exists at the opposite end of the UK, at Skara Brae in the Orkney Islands, where ten clustered stone dwellings were discovered in 1850. Recent studies estimate it dates from about 3000 BC, during the Neolithic period (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skara_Brae)]. Christopher Alexander incorporated this concept in *A Pattern Language*, where he noted that “*People will not feel comfortable in their houses unless a group of houses forms a cluster, with the public land between them jointly owned by all the householders. Therefore arrange houses to form very rough, but identifiable clusters of 8 to 12 households around some common land and paths. Arrange the clusters so that anyone can walk through them, without feeling like a trespasser.*” (Alexander, 1977).

Home sizes in most pocket neighborhoods tend to be modest, typically ranging from 900 to 1800 sq. ft, sufficient for couples or small families. Parcel sizes depend on the number of homes, and can vary from less than an acre to several acres. At Greenwood Avenue in Shoreline WA, for example, eight cottages and a common houses were built around a compact central green, achieving a density of about 11.5 du/ac on a ¾-acre parcel that had formerly been two adjoining flag-lots behind two lots with full street

frontage (see Figure 9-4). The relatively high densities achievable in pocket neighborhoods reduce the amount of runoff per dwelling, a primary goal of watershed planning.

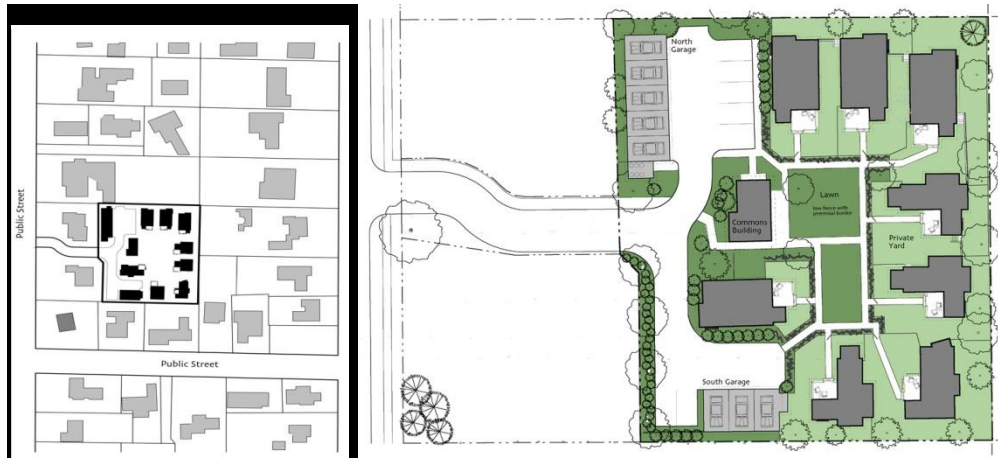


Figure 9-4: Site plan of the Greenwood Avenue Cottages (right), a compact neighborhood occupying a ¾-acre site within a conventional neighborhood in Shoreline, WA, within its context of surrounding houselots (left). Source: The Cottage Company and Ross Chapin - both

House prices in pocket neighborhoods can vary from affordable housing to upscale homes, as evidenced by the contrasting case examples (in Chapter 20) of the Poplar Gardens community cohousing in Boulder CO and the Chico Beach Cottages along the waterfront in Silverdale WA. At the Cottages on Greene, located one block from the main street of East Greenwich, RI, five deed-restricted affordable units were incorporated into a mixed-income neighborhood of 15 dwellings in 2011, the first bungalow court to be built in New England (Fig. 9-5). The neighborhood appears at first glance to consist entirely of single-family homes, but clever architectural designing of two duplexes and one three-family residence enables them to blend in completely. Altogether, the 15 units sit on 39,000 SF (0.895 acre), creating a density of 16.75 units/acre. Value was generated through careful attention to detail, and maintaining that value was key to building support in this upscale neighborhood. Neighbors generally welcomed the proposal also because it replaced a nonconforming auto repair garage with a softer transition to main street businesses nearby. According to architect Donald Powers, “The cottages fill an unmet need for a smaller dwelling type, with access to both private and communal open space, which expresses the familiar image of a small house rather than the more institutional image of an apartment building or a townhouse.”

[http://www.cnu.org/resources/projects/cottages-greene-](http://www.cnu.org/resources/projects/cottages-greene/)



Fig. 9-5: One notable aspect of the Cottages on Greene infill project in East Greenwich RI is its “greenway street” that restores a pedestrian link in the town’s street grid. The end buildings are two-family dwellings, with one unit facing the greenway street and the other facing Greene Street, maintaining the impression that all the homes are single-family. Source: Union Studio. Photo RA

The “pocket” nature of these embedded neighborhoods can be easily seen in the upper left quadrant of Fig 9-6 from Black Diamond WA, where homes facing onto a small internal green are served by alleys behind conventional lots which front onto subdivision streets and form the outer edge of the pocket neighborhood. Pedestrian connections, shown by colored dots, link the two together and enable residents to walk across the larger neighborhood independently of the street system.



Figure 9-6: A pocket neighborhood (in the upper left corner above) nests within a larger conventional pattern of streets and blocks in this early sketch for a major development in Black Diamond WA, demonstrating how this concept can be employed to increase design diversity in standard new urban neighborhoods. This is accomplished by designing the alleys to serve homes fronting onto streets and also those fronting onto internal greens. Source: Lauri Fehlberg and Yarrow Bay Holdings

As defined by Chapin, pocket neighborhoods characterize the 1927 plan for Radburn in Fairlawn NJ and the 1975 plan for Village Homes in Davis CA (both described in Chapter 20). In Radburn, homes are alley-loaded and face each other across footpaths leading to the long central green, while at Village Homes the houses back up to small neighborhood greens through which run footpaths leading to a multiplicity of parks and garden areas.

Pocket neighborhoods and community greens help reduce suburban sprawl by making urban living more inviting and enjoyable, particularly for families with children. Neighbors tend to know one another and look out for each other, improving public safety. As Chapin states, if you are six and your parents are alright with your venturing beyond the garden gate into the space just beyond it, you probably live in a pocket neighborhood.

Essential Design Keys for Pocket Neighborhoods *(sidebar by Ross Chapin)*

Pocket neighborhoods, which provide well-defined personal space fostering a strong sense of community, utilize the following key elements:

Layering from Public to Private. Residents and visitors enter the semi-public common green through “implied gates” — near the mailbox kiosk or the parking areas. This shared garden is edged with a perennial border and a low split-cedar fence or low hedge, and the porch edge is defined by a railing built

at a height right for perching. These elements define personal territory and reduce feelings of exposure when using porches and the common area. The layout of cottage interiors continue to “protect” personal territory by placing public areas in front and private areas in back and above.

Nested Houses. To ensure privacy between cottages, the houses ‘nest’ together: the ‘open’ side of one house (with more windows) faces the ‘closed’ side of the next, with a double-sized yard on one side and none on the opposite. The closed sides have high windowsills and skylights ensure privacy.

Eyes on the Commons. The first line of defense for personal security is a strong network of neighbors who know and care for one another. Because the houses look onto shared common areas, strangers are often more readily noticed. Also, neighbors can easily notice- if daily patterns are irregular and notify emergency services if they notice something amiss.

Corralling the Car. To reduce car dominance, parking is screened from the street and located away from the cottages so residents must walk through the commons to their front doors, creating opportunities for neighborly interactions.

The Commons. The focal point is the central green, bounded by footpaths, with housefronts directly abutting it on all sides. The workshop space (for small projects) is located to one side, with a roof terrace for small parties. Shared garden tools are stored in the toolshed.

Cottage Scale. Cottages are built at 1-1/2 story height to reduce negative impacts on the surrounding neighborhood

Individuality. Each cottage is similar to its neighbors but unique. Each household creates its own garden landscape with great variations in style and plant materials.

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Porch Rooms. Porches should be large enough to function as rooms overlooking the central green, with off-center front doors, so traffic patterns do not bisect the porch.

Living Large in a Small House. A small house can feel and function like a larger one, when there is ample light and adequate storage space. Nine-foot and higher ceilings with large windows and skylights fill rooms with light, creating a perceived sense of larger space. There is ample storage with walk-in closets, built-in shelves and attics.