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Commentary

## Community and Privacy in a Hyper-Connected World

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### Abstract

Christopher Alexander and Serge Chermayeff co-authored *Community and Privacy: Toward a New Architecture of Humanism* in 1963. This seminal contribution has largely been forgotten. Today, a human-centred framework is rarely discussed by researchers and practitioners, neither from a theoretical nor a pragmatic perspective. Nonetheless, some fundamental principles defined in that book 60 years ago are pertinent today in our hyper-connected world, and they have been illustrated by the need for human-centred housing during the recent Covid-19 pandemic. This commentary explains the spatial organization of domestic architecture that can support and sustain choices about private and public life in a world of global networks, intrusions of social media, and increasing video surveillance that challenge our autonomy and privacy.

### Keywords

boundaries; global network society; housing design; private-public interfaces; transition spaces

### Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “Assessing the Complex Contributions of Christopher Alexander” edited by Michael W. Mehaffy (Sustasis Foundation) and Tigran Haas (KTH Royal Institute of Technology).

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In *Community and Privacy*, Chermayeff and Alexander (1963) proposed constructing built environments, especially residential buildings, with a spatial organization that enables the regulation of access between private and public areas by the mediating effects of transition spaces. This problematic was also addressed in *A Pattern Language* by Alexander et al. (1977); they described the functions and challenged the removal of transition spaces between public and private domains in contemporary residential neighbourhoods. This common trend in built environments is the manifestation of radical social changes that have supported individualism but also impacted personal privacy and communal life.

Sixty years later, I argue that the concern of Chermayeff and Alexander (1963) has largely been forgotten even though it is highly relevant in a global network society. Given that face-to-face personal contact is increasingly replaced by virtual reality, and communication with audio-visual devices are championed by social media around the world, I posit that the need to nurture personal relations and regulate unwanted real or virtual

contacts is crucial for physical and mental health, and community well-being, in a hyper-connected world.

Our capacity to regulate interpersonal contact is not an easy task in a global network society. This regulation involves the capacity to control social contacts and physically withdraw to a personal space that can be appropriated psychologically and physically as explained in Hartig and Lawrence (2003). This is one inherent quality that the architecture and interior design of all housing should enable, whereas I think it has been devalued, or ignored, by too many professionals in the built environment sector (Lawrence, 1987); for example, transition spaces, such as the porch that shelters the front door of a housing unit, and the entrance hall or lobby beyond the front door, have often been deleted so there is no space between outdoors and indoors, or public and private domains. Thus, a reduced capacity to maintain our homes as the ultimate refuge between us and others in a stressful hyper-connected world has been compromised by the design of housing (Lawrence, 1987). Consequently, our autonomy has been challenged because it is increasingly difficult to control acoustic and visual privacy and

interpersonal contact at the border between the public and private domains of our daily lives.

Autonomy and responsibility are two fundamental human-centred principles that should be included in reflections about the pertinence of community and privacy in a hyper-connected world. Although individuals and groups are never independent and disconnected from their *milieu de vie*, their right to make choices is crucial in the context of increasing diversity and heterogeneity about the way we live. My interpretation of autonomy refutes claims of neoliberal ideology about individual liberty that overrides personal and shared responsibilities about our relations with others and our shared habitat (Lawrence, 2021). When these responsibilities, grounded in shared ethical principles and moral values, are agreed collectively, then community bonding and collective projects can be nurtured and sustained.

Unfortunately, the demise of shared collective spaces between public and private domains is a well-known trend supported by modern architecture that has counteracted the ability of individuals and groups to regulate interpersonal contact with others, especially friends, neighbours, and strangers (Lawrence, 1989). This has led to the many undefined and unused spaces in residential areas that remain devoid of meanings and daily functions. Notably, Jane Jacobs (1961), like Chermayeff and Alexander, also questioned this trend six decades ago in her criticisms of modern urban planning. I explained in Lawrence (1996) that this longstanding trend can be related to numerous reasons, including an incomplete understanding of the multidimensional nature of boundaries, especially how they can enable and support, or counteract and compromise, individual autonomy and shared responsibility in our daily lives.

Boundaries between public and private domains should be interpreted according to combinations of architectural/physical, behavioural/psychological, conceptual/cognitive, and legal/administrative constructs that change over time (Lawrence, 1996). Human-made boundaries are one way of expressing differences between groups of people, attributing different meanings to their activities, and separating the spaces in which they occur. Buildings shelter people and their private activities while demarcating them from the public domain. However, a restricted focus on architectural and urban design will not account for the multidimensional nature of boundaries between public and private domains. These characteristics should be complemented by others including cultural predispositions that prescribe behavioural rules and social conventions, as well as legal and administrative frameworks that delimit the roles and responsibilities of individuals and groups in public and private spaces (Lawrence, 1996). The multidimensional nature of boundaries I proposed has been illustrated by the diversity of national responses that were meant to regulate interpersonal contact after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (Lawrence, 2020).

Research on housing and health over a century has confirmed that the incidence and transmission of infectious diseases are correlated with core indicators of housing quality. Notably, the incidence and transmission of the Covid-19 after the World Health Organization declared the pandemic on 11 March 2020 confirms interdisciplinary research about housing conditions that influence health; the main housing variables are housing size (e.g., floor area, or number of rooms), occupancy conditions (number of persons per room), and indoor air quality including natural ventilation (World Health Organization, 2018). Housing size and occupancy conditions influence the capacity of rooms to accommodate diverse activities, the nature of personal space indoors, and the ability of residents to control interpersonal contact indoors. In addition, housing cost (interpreted as a cost/quality ratio related to household income) and location (e.g., geographical and the social status of the neighbourhood) do influence residential satisfaction and quality of life (World Health Organization, 2018).

Social research since 2020 in Switzerland, for example, found that a large majority of the Swiss population have spent more time indoors after the declaration of the pandemic; housing has accommodated a larger number of functions including study, and work-related activities, that did not occur inside housing units before 2020 (Pagani et al., 2021). This research also concluded that when daily extra-domestic activities are transferred from elsewhere to indoors then a lack of indoor space for these activities threatens residential privacy and can become a source of stress for all members of households. Today, we know that behavioural, biological, cultural, economic, social, physical, and political factors need to be considered as a web of interconnected variables if a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional nature of housing is to guide individual/private and societal/public measures to counteract public health risks. More transdisciplinary and collaborative research contributions are necessary: A triad of interrelated variables defined by interdisciplinary knowledge and professional know-how, multi-level governance, and behavioural and cultural characteristics of residents provides a transdisciplinary framework for policy definition and implementation to improve “the residential context of health” by public authorities (Hartig & Lawrence, 2003).

Global challenges such as the case of Covid-19 illustrate the pertinence of a public debate about the regulation of private lives. This recalls the concern expressed by Chermayeff and Alexander 60 years ago about how the spatial organization of buildings influences and perhaps helps reduce conflicts between individual/private autonomy and social/public responsibility. Their architectural interpretation included thresholds and transitions that can serve as boundary markers that regulate interconnections between public and private spaces. However, we have learned since then that an enlarged transdisciplinary interpretation is necessary and can build on research about the multidimensional nature of

boundaries. In sum, fundamental principles defined in *Community and Privacy* are pertinent and omnipresent. They include the conflicts and tensions between individual liberty, collective responsibility, and public commitment to resolving persistent problems and emergent global challenges (Lawrence, 2021). The interrelations between public and private, personal and communal, local and global are omnipresent not only in architecture and urban planning but many other constituents of our being in the world. Notably, these crucial subjects are inherent in public debates about the contribution of built environments to enable effective societal responses to global challenges, including mitigating infectious diseases, adapting effectively to climate deregulation and extreme weather events, promoting and sustaining affordable housing, and enabling food sovereignty (Lawrence, 2021). Today, housing, building, and urban planning have become complicated technical processes that have commodified our habitat and much of our daily activities. In contrast, innovative research and practice confirm that built environments can be the catalyst and setting for innovative responses to societal challenges particularly at the city and community level. There is an urgent need for a new mission and communal sense of purpose that upholds a humanistic perspective of human habitats grounded in ecological and ethical responsibility and just moral values.

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#### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

#### About the Author



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