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# Reinterpreting Private Open Space

Tim Pharoah looks at the amount and the forms it could take

**'G**o outside and play', my mother would say to my brother and me when she needed less bother. We grew up in a house with a rear garden big enough even for quite boisterous games. Interaction with the children next door, however, required an invitation; there was no place for the informal meeting of neighbours, except the narrow pavement outside. After we left home, our parents grew older in a property increasingly ill-matched to their changing needs. Eventually the garden became a burden and saw little activity. The house was in a typical suburb of detached and semi-detached houses, all privately owned, and all with fairly large front and rear gardens.

This personal reflection introduces three themes:

1. Private garden space is valuable for parents and children, offering security from traffic
2. The absence of communal space can limit neighbourly interaction
3. Housing to cater for different and changing requirements.

Getting the right amount and type of open space in housing is important because it is a key determinant not only of local amenity, but also of the efficiency and sustainability of the wider urban area. In much of the UK, there is a legacy of housing with private open space that meets the needs of some people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time. It has also resulted in needlessly low housing densities, which have a negative impact on accessibility and infrastructure costs.

This article questions the suitability of historic and contemporary housing forms in terms of private open space provision.

1 Arabia, Helsinki:  
semi-private space with  
play area

It looks at the benefits and disbenefits of private open space, and how these depend on the manner and quality of provision, and then considers alternatives to conventional practice.

## THE PRIVATE SPACE EQUATION

It is worth considering some of the urban design considerations that influence the manner and extent of private open space provision in housing. First is the issue of who is going to live in a development. How likely are they to need open space, now or in the future? Does it need to be individual space, or can it be shared? Will residents needs and wants change? Will they be able and willing to maintain the space in good order? How will the type of tenure affect the answers to these questions, and could the tenure change over time, as has happened with Right to Buy and buy-to-let properties?

Second, there is pressure for housing to be provided at higher densities. How can the need for density and open space be reconciled?

Third is the knotty issue of parking. Private off-street parking means less open space, or a smaller building footprint. In most of continental Europe, putting



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**Open space that is for the exclusive use of individual households is in many cases underused or uncared for, [and] becomes an eyesore for neighbours and has a negative impact on value**

parking underground is a common solution. Why is this so rare in Britain?

Fourth, there is the issue of cost and price. The less open space provided, the more housing units can be fitted onto a given site, and the lower the unit costs. On the other hand, the more open space that is included, the better the housing quality (... discuss!) and the higher the price that can be realised. Identifying the optimum point where these two variables intersect is a key task for developers. The designer must seek answers to all of these questions in order to come up with housing schemes that are successful for both providers and occupiers.

Perhaps, given the complexity of the design process, it is unsurprising that house builders so often have opted for standard solutions that pay little attention to context. Common deficiencies in the way that open space is provided in Britain's housing stock include:

- A uniformity of provision which does not respond to diverse needs and tastes across a scheme or a neighbourhood
- Poor design
- Inefficient layouts and therefore needlessly low densities
- A rigid distinction between private and public space, resulting in a lack of flexibility in the use of space
- Parking which occupies or degrades garden or other open space
- Flats built with little or no private outdoor space.

#### THE PROS AND CONS OF PRIVATE OPEN SPACE

Space is needed between buildings to allow for light and air, and to facilitate movement. Theoretically, streets can serve these basic functions, without the need for off-street open space (1:1 plot ratio). But on-plot open space in addition supplies some

combination of the following amenities:

- Room for grass, greenery and cultivation
- Play and leisure space that is secure
- Separating living room windows from the street
- A visual setting for buildings, and
- Storage for cars and bikes.

People with young children will almost always value access to space outside their homes. On the other hand, not everyone wants or needs their own private open space, so uniform provision will lead to inefficient use of space. Elderly or infirm people may need to avoid the burden of maintaining open space; students and bachelors for example may spend so little time at home that it hardly matters; and, many people do not like or have no time for gardening.

People's needs and preferences vary, and they change as they move through the different stages of life. Open space that is for the exclusive use of individual households (the quintessentially English suburban model) is therefore in many cases underused or uncared for, in which case it becomes an eyesore for neighbours and has a negative impact on value.

Private open space (whether communal or individual) must also be seen in terms of the impact on the community, and the wider city. Wasted land, whether by poor design, underuse or misuse, reduces housing densities and compactness, which in turn impacts negatively on accessibility and sustainable transport choices.

#### THE CASE FOR COMMUNAL SPACE

The relationship between public and private space is crucial. Streets traditionally were, and should again become, places for social interaction and sojourn, what *Manual for Streets* calls the 'place' function. This can be achieved by reducing the dominance of moving and parked vehicles, and by designing the street to be attractive to people on foot. If streets become more social spaces again, this can reduce the need for private open space. Conventionally, private open space has

- 2 Tooting, London: useless private communal space  
 3 Crown Street, Glasgow  
 4 Französisches Viertel, Tübingen, Germany: generous balconies plus communal space

taken the form of private gardens or (in apartment schemes) private communal space, but especially in recent decades, attractive schemes in continental Europe demonstrate the benefits of more flexible semi-private communal spaces.

The benefit to be derived from communal private open space depends crucially on its design and relationship with the dwellings. Open space that merely serves to separate buildings to minimise overlooking can often have no other useful function, and is merely a maintenance burden. Often the only activity seen in poorly designed communal spaces is lawn mowing!

Well-designed communal space, however, can radically improve the quality of local life, offering an informal opportunity for the different generations of residents to mingle. By reducing the potential for under-used private gardens, communal areas can also achieve higher densities without loss of amenity.

### THE DESIGN RESPONSE TO VARYING NEEDS

A single solution cannot satisfy everybody. Crucially, in terms of space efficiency, the same is true of private parking space, which also interacts with private space provision. A variety of provision is therefore needed, and within each neighbourhood. It should not be necessary for households to relocate away from family and friends, or schools or workplaces, in order to find a home with outdoor space that fits their needs.

So for the benefit of individual households and the community more widely, the housing stock should be planned to provide a variety of combinations of housing and open space types, and managed so that people can move easily between these different types as their needs and preferences change.

For infill and brownfield housing (around two thirds of all new housing), the aim should be to identify housing types that are demanded but missing from the locality, and to design new housing that will correct the balance. In large urban extensions or free-standing developments, variety is needed within the scheme.

### ALTERNATIVES TO HOUSE AND GARDEN

Open space implies green space. But if we instead think of 'open area', this introduces other forms that may suit some residents better. Thus we have seen the rise of the patio, the terrace (putting a flat roof to productive use), and the balcony. These private open areas can satisfy some of the purposes for which gardens are provided. In Britain balconies have tended to be rather mean affairs – too small to make apartment living acceptable for larger households. (Developers make the calculation: can the higher build cost be recouped in a higher selling price?) In the rest of Europe and Scandinavia, however, there are new developments with really useful balconies, and with communal space at ground level, thus combining high density with high amenity. An example is the Französisches Viertel, Tübingen, in southern Germany.

Housing can incorporate both communal and individual private space within the same block, allowing for social interaction between neighbours as well as the option of secure and private activities within the curtilage of the home. Crown Street in Glasgow includes perimeter block housing which encloses both communal private space and individual private gardens. This is achieved by locating parking within the street space outside the block. In the Arabia development, Helsinki, the communal space is semi-private (or semi-public) with a secure play area included.

The role of the street can be reinterpreted from highway to social space, provided that levels of traffic and parking are minimal, and that drivers are treated, and must behave, as guests. This was the principal idea behind the Dutch Woonerf (the HomeZone being our nearest equivalent), a concept now half a century old. Even so, there are precious few good examples, probably because of the unwillingness to tackle the thorny issue of parking. The Vauban scheme in Freiburg is a well-known exception, where the streets become a semi-private realm and are adopted as communal meeting and play space. This is achieved by removing parking from the street and concentrating



5 Vauban, Freiburg in Bresgau: street adopted as play space

it in a remote multi-storey garage. Not only does this clear the streets of cars, it also encourages the use of other modes, since these are more easily accessible to the home.

### CONCLUSION

The answers and possibilities raised here are as diverse as the populations, areas and legal and cultural contexts in which housing designers and developers are working.

The individual private garden is a popular feature of British housing, and provides for individual private activities. The ubiquity of the house and garden typology results, however, in a lack of housing choice, inefficient use of space, and needlessly low densities. This has a negative impact on the achievement of compact and sustainable city forms. People's needs and preferences change as they go through life and each locality ideally should provide a range of types of open space provision. Similarly, the provision of dedicated off-street parking spaces for every dwelling locks in the spaces, regardless of whether the occupier owns a car. For the future, housing design should incorporate more communal provision of both parking and open space, which may be private or public, or semi-private. The removal of parking (to remote sites or underground) also allows much greater flexibility in reconciling high density with high amenity.

For future housing, urban designers should pay attention to the context – socio-economic and demographic characteristics and tenure of the likely occupiers – and aim for diversity in the allocation of space. There is scope too for exciting and innovative approaches, including borrowing from other countries. I for one would welcome a wider choice... my garden is too big! ●

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