Community Support and Neighbourhood Size

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Summary

This paper is a commentary on previous material on neighbourhoods. Its specific focus is a consideration of architectural aspects of the physical environment inhabited by clients. The paper challenges some of the assumptions of the neighbourhood care perspective and, with reference to three examples, discusses the question of an optimum size for a neighbourhood.

Résumé

Ce texte est un commentaire sur le débat touchant au quartier. Il traite d'aspects architecturaux de l'environnement physique habité par des "clients". L'article remet en discussion quelques présupposés de l'approche de prise en charge par quartier et, par référence à trois exemples, affronte la question de la taille optimale d'un quartier.

1. Background

In his paper, Baldwin (1987) highlights the need for a definition of the neighbourhood as a means to clarify areas of activity of community support groups. He is right to do so; to co-ordinate such activities requires definable boundaries, and preferably a sense of belonging for those who live and work there.

Neighbourhoods exist for a variety of geographic, social, economic, educational and (originally) feudal causes; in old-established communities, they can provide a ready-made boundary of activity for social relationships and for community workers. But can neighbourhoods be created artificially?

2. Historical Development of Neighbourhood Concept

In recent town-planning history, one can go back further than the sources quoted by Baldwin. A starting point might be Howard (1882) who formulated ideas leading to the garden city in 1902; in his proposals, new towns of 30000 people would be divided into six wards, each with its own school. The use of the primary school as a measure of viable size was given again by Mumford (1938) who suggested that: "A neighbourhood should be an area within the scope and interest of a pre-adolescent child". Mumford also warned, however, that suburbs which began their existence with visible marks of unity, would eventually be swallowed up in "the spreading mass of the city".

A description of neighbourhoods coming "in and out of fashion" is given by Frank Shaffer (1970). For example, in Cumbernauld, in Scotland, designated as a New Town in 1955, the neighbourhood idea was abandoned for the greater viability of community services in the centre of this high density plan. This approach was repeated later in the New Town of Skelmersdale, in Lancashire, UK. Shaffer commented that neighbourhoods have varied from 3000 to 10000 population, and that success or failure in social terms certainly does not seem to depend on size.

In most new housing in England, there is a grouping on a much smaller scale, related to servicing. In particular, service vehicles and refuse collection, and the hierarchy of access roads should be planned to avoid the perils of motor traffic outside the front door. Thus the smallest group of dwellings may be a mere dozen. Two examples with which I have been involved as an architect will illustrate this.

3.   Examples of Local Dwellings

Chorley, Lancashire, UK was designated a part of, (but not really absorbed into) Central Lancashire New Town. This was never really intended to be a new town at all (the designated area included three existing towns, Preston, Chorley, and Leyland). There is a long 'tree' of groupings; the largest (Astley Park) site of 285 dwellings was composed of 18 'courts' or closes of about 15 dwellings each (see Fig. 1). This small group does make an effective mini-community. The social functions, however, will continue to depend on the viability of the District, in this case Chorley, (not the small group, nor the artificially imposed New Town structure planned for 430000). Growth will occur on a District rather than on a regional scale.

The second example is at Martlesham, Suffolk, England, where more than a thousand houses were built in an enterprising development by a public company. This so-called village was planned as a series of 'hamlets', separated by green landscaped spaces. In many of the hamlets (of 30 to 40 houses), there is again a sub-group of closes which could form a smaller community (see Fig. 2 and 3). It is the larger community, however, in this case the new village, together with the former old village, with a combined population of 3029 (electoral roll 1986) which provides the viability and a range of social services for the parish as a whole, which has an area of 2530 acres.

Fig. 1   Astley Park Site D1: 285 dwellings completed 1980 for Central Lancashire Development Corporation, at
          Chorley, Lancs.

          Une partie de la résidence d'Astley Park: 285 unités d'habitation terminées en 1980. Central Lancashire
          Development Corporation, Chorley, Lancs.

Astley Park, near Chorley, a New Town site for Central Lancashire Development Corporation. 285 dwellings in two and three storey houses and flats. The architects were also responsible for the landscaping throughout the project.

Martlesham Heath Village in Suffolk, one of a number of hamlets designed for Gransford Property Trust Plc, in a new village of 1,000 houses. These 15 houses were completed in 1985. The architects were also responsible for the design of one other hamlet, and for the planning and landscaping of a third.

Fig. 2   A hamlet in Martlesham Heath Village, Suffolk (Culpin Partnership).
         Un hameau du village de Martlesham Heath, Suffolk (en collaboration avec Culpin).
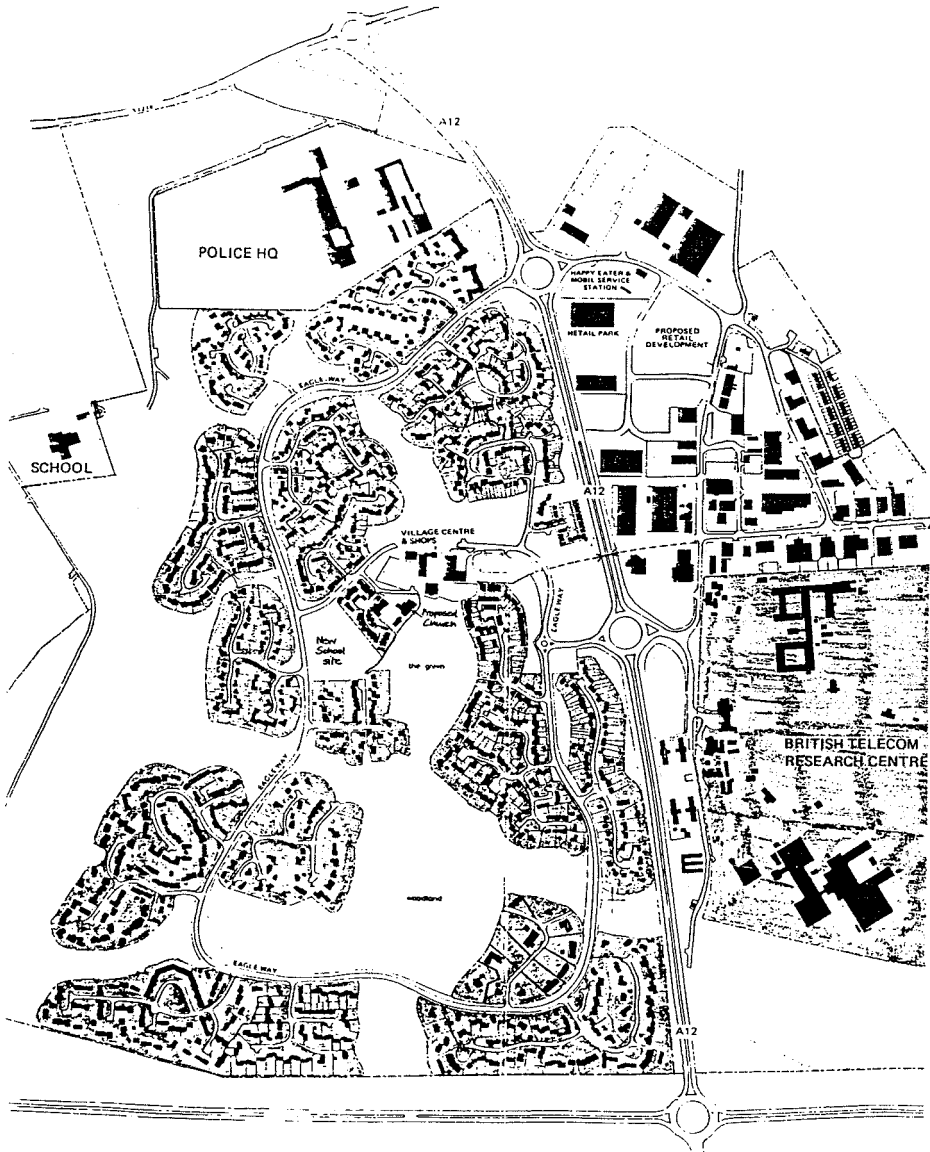
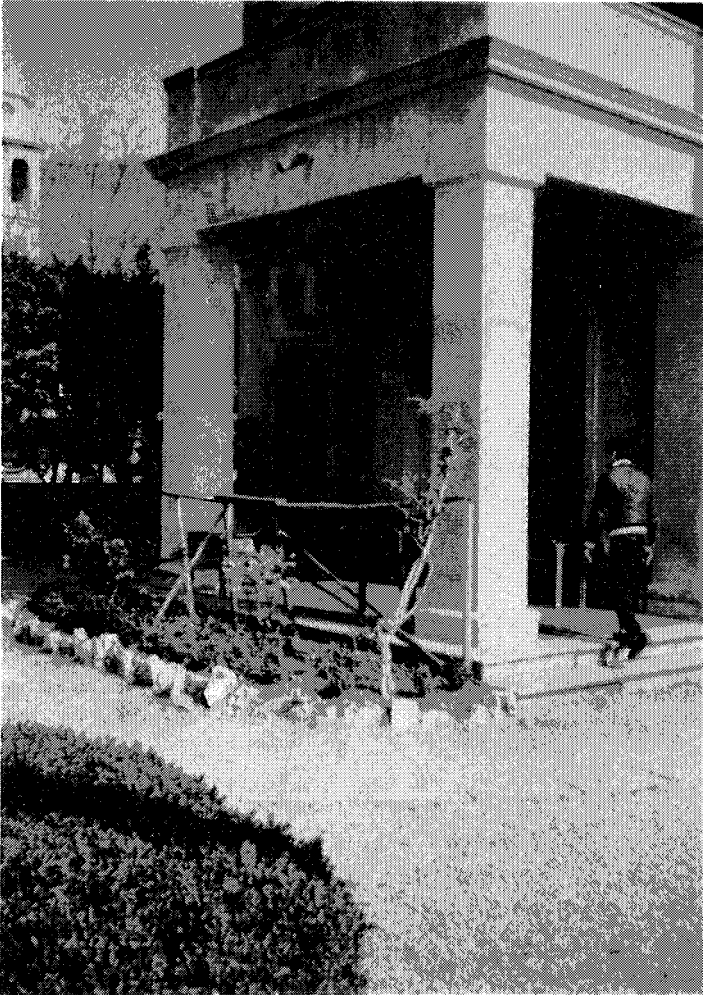Fig. 3   Martlesham Heath, Suffolk

Fig. 4   Mental Health Centre at Barcola, Trieste
          Le centre psychosocial de Barcola, Trieste

In his 1987 paper, Baldwin recommended the development of Neighbourhood
Resources Directories and Neighbourhood Workers Directories. A lively community
is likely to have one already; Martlesham is no exception and it lists six pages of
community services. It is clearly an excellent starting point for social workers, who
may wish to produce their own also, of limited circulation as Baldwin has suggested.

A third example is located in Trieste, Italy (Fig. 4). The suburb of Barcola func-
tions as a well-defined community and also has accepted the integration of a Mental
Health Centre which is open 'round the clock' and runs on truly open lines, under the
direction of G. Dell'Acqua. The MHC, facing the main street, is an accepted part of
community life, and this is helped by a sense of Barcola as a defined place. The
Triestina USL District, with a population of around a quarter-million (which includes

the city of Trieste), is divided into seven areas, of which Barcola is one. In Barcola in 1985, there were a total of 727 psychiatric calls; this is clearly a busy Centre (Dell'Acqua, 1988).

4.   Neighbourhood Definitions

These three examples help towards a definition of an optimum size for a neighbourhood, if only as Baldwin says, by defining what it is not. It should be above a minimum size, and perhaps the relationship of a population needed for a primary school is right. It must be said, however, that there are many contributory factors, and size should not just be for the convenience of any one user or worker group. Also, where available, an existing pattern is better than an imposed one, even though it is in the nature of society to keep changing its boundaries.

5.   Design Responsibility

Finally, I must comment on Baldwin's views on design responsibility. He says that few designers choose to live and work in the environments they have created and many decisions about final design or materials have been dictated by cost considerations. These are two different matters. On the first point, this contains a popular fallacy; most architects would prefer to live in dwellings of their own design, and some succeed. Similarly, most would prefer to work in environments of their own creation.

6.   Cost

On the matter of cost, a designer would be at fault if he or she did not take this factor into consideration; it is often the client who imposes an unrealistic budget on new development, seeking immediate financial return rather than long-term gain. But a cost limitation can impose a discipline which is of benefit to a project, for example in placing a limit on the variety of materials to be used, thus giving a natural unity to a group of buildings which can be the first visual step in creating a neighbourhood.

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