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Sharing in a Setting



Sach apartments. Photos and graphic courtesy Renee Y. Chow.

A community is defined by what its individual participants share — an interaction, an identity, an everyday way of living. We measure the place of a community through the propensity of its setting to support and promote this sharing. A funda-

mental task of residential design is to build this propensity explicitly in the architecture.

Settings can support sharing through an infrastructure of services and spaces that residents hold and use in common. Sharing also can be promoted through the collective use of a type. While it is rare to find a setting that totally excludes these ways of sharing, the degree to which infrastructure or type is emphasized has consequences for the form of a setting.

In a setting dominated by infrastructural sharing, common spaces and facilities are designed, owned and maintained for collective use. These can include streets, sidewalks, recreational centers, golf courses, courtyards or shared entries to residences. Since sharing is not dependent upon the form of the individual unit, dwellings can be independent of each other within the hierarchy of the common framework.

Although every community shares some infrastructure — at a minimum, residents share a road and land subdivisions — some communities are explicitly built around extensive systems of common spaces. One example of an infrastructure rich community with hierarchic common spaces is

Radburn, New Jersey. Radburn residents share two independent networks, vehicular and pedestrian, that give access to a town center, recreational spaces, common facilities and private homes. The houses are arranged between pedestrian walkways and vehicular culs-de-sac that are shared by six to twelve residences. Despite the constraining size of the houses, residents choose to stay in Radburn because of its sense of community.¹ One remembers Radburn for its infrastructure, not its houses.

When type is emphasized, the setting is characterized by the repetitive assemblage of a pattern. By “type,” I mean a complex weaving of dwelling patterns — ways of living, of articulating forms, of sequencing spaces and of building. Sharing is developed on a unit-by-unit basis, typically house by house, each of which is built as a variation on the collective understanding.² Because this sharing is based on the agreements of participants to follow the type, the setting is dependent upon the relationship between the individual dwellings.

A good example of sharing through type is found in Charleston, South Carolina. One well-known characteristic of Charleston is the arrangement of houses along the northern property line of each lot. This frees the space south of each house for uses like gardens or yards. The north wall of each house is predominantly solid, building the southern edge of the neighbor’s yard. Other characteristics of this type include the way of connecting house to yard and yard to street, and of separating the porch from the street (through the form of doorways).

Describing a type this rich is problematic. Its description is never complete, nor fully accurate, since it is only through the variations that the type is

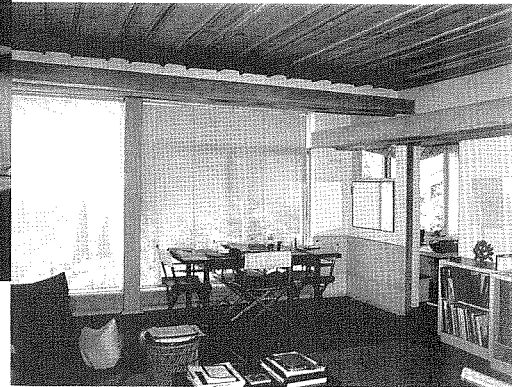
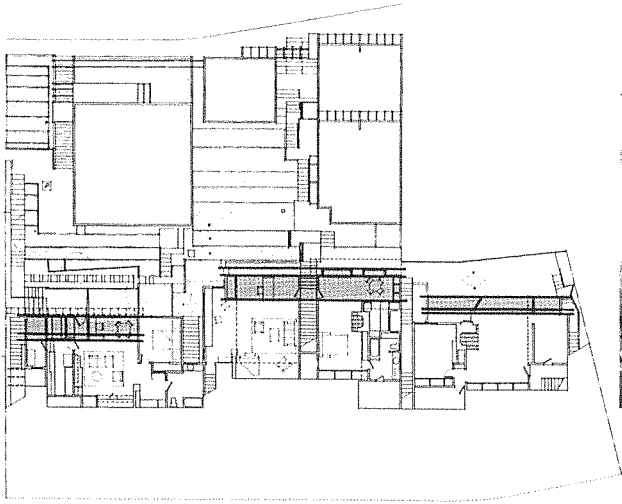


Diagram and views of four-foot space in the Sach Apartments.

known.³ One remembers Charleston for its houses and its gardens, each house uniquely perceived but contributing to the community of the place.

But, are type and infrastructure sufficient to build a setting for a community? By themselves, they do not promote sharing as a connection of residents to their setting. While architectural elements like windows and doors provide access to a dwelling, a connection requires something more, a territory that links that dwelling with its setting. When this territory becomes a place that each resident inhabits, the presence of the individuals and their differences are shared.

An example of this territorial sharing can be found in the Sach Apartments, designed by Rudolph M. Schindler. Located on a hillside between two streets in Los Angeles, the Sach Apartments are accessed by public footpaths that climb between streets. Entries to the residences occur at different levels along the footpaths. Central to the site and parallel with the hill is a small path used by the residents to access common garden, laundry and storage facilities.

All the residences are oriented toward the light and view of the other side of the valley. Bearing walls extend perpendicular to the hill, reinforcing this orientation. Household activities are layered in this structure — some occur in the darker, cave-like places against the hill, some in the diffuse

light of the mid-zone. Typically, at the very edge, in the direct light, there is a four-foot zone that is structured by walls, overhead light troughs and outdoor porches.

The four-foot dimension is key. In contemporary houses, it is rare to find an unprogrammed, interior space. This four-foot territory cannot hold the major activities of dwelling, such as preparing food, entertaining or sleeping, but it can accommodate personal activities, such as writing, reading, informal dining and working.

The specific activity is selected by and unique for each household. When residents occupy these territories, they overlook the community paths and gardens. The Sach Apartments are a reminder that support for this sharing is most effective when territories connect adjacent activities, both indoors and out, not just attached to houses.

In territorial sharing, it is the habitation, the particular ways in which people live, that builds the setting for community. Individual territories, such as bay windows, porches, stoops and steps, are connectors. When territorial sharing is structured across a setting, like the four-foot zone of the Sach Apartments, community is promoted. Rather than separating public and private, indoor and out, or individual and community, the task is to design a setting for one that is the setting for sharing.

Notes

1. This conclusion is based upon interviews with residents conducted by the author in 1991.
2. N. John Habraken, *The Appearance of the Form* (Cambridge, MA: Awater Press, 1985). This book thoroughly describes typological sharing.
3. Ibid.