

Connecting scale levels and cohousing

Introduction to 'Designing for cohousing, a manual in 17 chapters'

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Blind to the tree structure

Our country, like all countries, is subdivided. In the Netherlands in provinces, in which we see cities, that are divided into districts, which consist of neighborhoods, in which we can again distinguish streets. The built environment has the structure of a tree, and it has been like that for centuries. But we are so used to this, that we do not realize how essential this structure is to our existence. We seem to be blind to it.

Imagine

That is why I propose an experiment: imagine that the tree structure was missing, that our houses were placed in the public domain of the entire country. Then we had no neighbors or fellow townspeople, but only fellow countrymen. It is hard to imagine what that would look like spatially, but we may imagine what it is like when we think of an on line meeting with a group of seventeen million neighbors... What does this mean for our identity? Would we still know who we are? Take any trait: think, for example, "I can cook well" or "I'm funny" or "I have a special hobby", it doesn't matter. What would be left of your identity if you were depending for feedback on such a large group? And suppose you wanted to say something ... then you were one of the seventeen million who says something! You would be neglectable.

From this experiment we can conclude that for the identity of the individual, or for the members of a household, a small scale social level is essential, and in the context of the tree structure of the built environment, we can think here of a small square, a little street, or a residential courtyard, in which there is a "we", in which an individual, or household, is recognizable and can come into its own.



Little street

Now we also want to know how our small scale level relates to the larger whole. Who "we" are is part of our identity, and that is why our small scale level needs a context in which our "we" can come into its own. Let's say the neighborhood.

It will be clear, this neighborhood also needs a context, a district, which again requires a context ... This way, the tree structure can slowly emerge from our blindness, as a succession of spatial levels with a social meaning, a structure essential to our identity.

Missing links

Our blindness to the essence of the tree structure has had major consequences for the design of the built environment, especially in the area between the home and the neighborhood. Streets often fail to serve as a spatial context with a social meaning, because the scale that is too big for individuals or households, and they lack qualities that can invite to mutual contacts. An extreme example are modernist-inspired suburbs, where streets have merged into the functional access structure of residential buildings, leading through no man's land.

The connecting scale levels between the home and the neighborhood are not flawed here, they are like 'missing links', so individuals and households remain isolated as they are too small to come into their own in the higher scale levels.



No man's land

Reclaiming the outside world

When the 'missing links' are put back into place, individuals and households may feel more confident about their identity, and more connected and part of the bigger whole of society. This can be the start of residents reclaiming the outside world, which may even lead to a more responsible way of treating the planet.

Designing for cohousing

In the essay 'designing for cohousing, a manual' I show how lower scale levels can connect individuals and households with the neighborhood in various ways, by designing six projects for 'cohousing', different both in appearance and in lifestyles. In the essay I not only show the results, but also the design process, in which an urban planner, future residents and an architect work together.



One of the courtyards designed by the author. Illustration by Thomas Fell Rubio

See: '**Designing for cohousing, a manual in 17 chapters**' on academia.edu

https://www.academia.edu/45374508/Designing_cohousing_A_manual_in_17_chapters

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