

4 Architectural Designs That Help Build Close-Knit Communities, According to Experts

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NOV 18, 2022



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Have you ever lived in an apartment building that felt a bit sterile? Maybe you were surrounded by dozens of people, yet you never spoke to them. Everyone marched home to their respective apartments, and there was no chance to interact with them.

Similarly, you may have lived in a neighborhood of single-family homes, each with a garage occupying the front, cutting it off from passing human-to-human interaction. You parked your car in the garage, walked in through the house, and never had the opportunity to say hello to a neighbor.

If you're one of the lucky ones, you lived in a neighborhood with homes that all faced inward toward a green space that residents used for picnics and dog walks. Maybe you were in a high-rise with a multi-use space on the first floor, including a bookstore, a coffee shop, and a bar. Random run-ins with the same people day after day in these "third spaces" led to friendships (or at least acquaintances) — people you looked forward to chatting with who became part of your community.

In all of these places, the architecture and landscape of the neighborhood determined its ability to build community. The presence — or lack thereof — of a transition point between public and private spaces determined whether you'd be able to foster a sense of community.

"Architecture, by its very nature, has a profound impact on how we live and how we interact with one another," explains James J. Szymanski, AIA NCARB LEED AP and principal with The Architectural Team. "It provides the framework for how we live and how we go about our everyday activities. This framework is the basis for our communities."

Can you build community in any neighborhood? Sure. But if you're lacking the types of spaces that encourage people to interact with each other throughout their daily errands and routines, you could be fighting an uphill battle.

Carolyn Kiernat, AIA and principal with Page & Turnbull, says that one architectural style isn't necessarily a surefire answer to building a community, but rather it's about design that is focused on people and their interactions.

"Creating architecture that invites community is more about thoughtful and careful design that is human-centric and less about a particular architectural style," she says. "It's about designing at a scale that people feel comfortable around, with an activated ground floor, windows, eyes on the street, and proximity to others."

This can look different in cities and suburbs, but at its core, it's all about inviting humans to say hello and form bonds with other humans. That could occur on front porches, in green spaces, on cul-de-sacs, and more. Ahead, find four ways that design can build community in neighborhoods, according to experts.



Credit: Getty Images | Thomas Barwick

“Random acts of gathering” happen in parks and cafes.

Cities can get a reputation for being concrete jungles, but at their best, urban areas foster community that isn’t possible anywhere else — all thanks to the ability for impromptu interactions. “Implementing slow streets, sidewalks, and areas for communities to interact — places that encourage ‘random acts of gathering’ such as porches, parks, cafes — allow a diverse spectrum of people to connect,” explains Kiernat.

Particularly in high-density urban areas, a building’s relationship to community starts at its very foundation — how it’s shaped and oriented on its site.

“The building site offers visual connections to adjacent streets, or to a waterfront or green space, which creates a sense of being part of the surrounding community, rather than being cut off from it,” says Szymanski. He explains that, even in urban areas where space may be at a premium, there should be green space for gathering, relaxation, recreation.



Credit: Bernadette Gatsby/Unsplash

Row houses are close-knit in more ways than one.

Alex Abarbanel-Grossman, director at C.C. Sullivan, found his community within a neighborhood of row houses. He explains that he loves living in a row house because it encourages neighborliness, but also provides the balance of privacy and determining when you want to have those community interactions.

“You can be in your own world inside, and then come out onto the stoop and be just a few feet away from dozens of neighbors and all kinds of street activity,” says Abarbanel-Grossman. Because of the density possible with single and multi-family row houses, particularly when they’re concentrated all within neighborhood blocks, there’s always someone around — yet you can shut out the world when you crave quiet.

“There’s no way not to get to know the people around you — and since the houses are connected, in a sense you are literally all holding each other up, which is a nice thought.”



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Culs-de-sac foster neighborly interactions.

Some people view the 'burbs as the ideal community, with children playing in each other's front yards. Others see the isolation and car-centric culture of the suburbs and run the other way. But it's practically undeniable that the cul-de-sac has fostered a sense of closeness with neighbors — think of it as truly living with your village. That's the experience that Kiernat had in her cul-de-sac.

"I lived on a cul-de-sac and I remember it being a great place for kids because the traffic was light and the neighbors were close. Culs-de-sac can be magical places that encourage smaller communities to develop within larger neighborhoods," she says.



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The front porch is a symbol of community.

“A porch is a soft space, a semi-private space between the public street and the privacy of the home,” Kiernat says. “It is a place where we connect with our neighbors, talk from a distance, welcome up but not always in, and a place where we can also sit passively and observe.”

From row houses to farmhouses to the warm and welcoming facades of Craftsman houses, the front porch consistently breeds community and creativity — all with the buffer of a space that lets neighbors in without letting them *in*.

“The front porch not only serves the functional purpose of a protected entrance to the home, but it also provides a sense of ownership,” Szymanski explains. “It provides a meeting spot, a reason for a pedestrian to pause and say hello to a neighbor, and additionally it can provide ‘eyes on the street’ making the neighborhood a safer pedestrian environment.”

Even in areas where a true front porch isn’t possible, a stoop will do the trick. In a multi-building affordable housing campus in South Boston that Szymanski’s firm is working on, he explains, “In this project, which holds hundreds of homes, we designed several of the buildings as townhome structures with stoops and other mid-rise buildings with direct entry ground floor

units." The result is a neighborly, community-oriented space, where residents can interact with each other, without having to set a date and invite guests in. It all occurs within that semi-private space.

Kiernat underscores the most important point in using architecture, both private and public, to build community: "Bring back the places where we interact with our neighbors, engage with our community, and watch our world go by."