

Research on the Relationship between the Accessibility to the Public Space of Communities and the Sense of Community

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Abstract: This paper mainly pays attention to the physical and psychological accessibility to the public space of three different types of communities in Shanghai, which are the Lilong area around Hefei Road, the worker housing around Sujiatun Road and the superblocs around Liyuan Road. After the investigation of the three areas, the physical accessibility of the three communities would be analyzed from two aspects: the physical structure and the boundaries. After the interview with the residents living here, the psychological accessibility which is more closely connected to the sense of community would be summarized and analyzed to the three communities respectively. And then a good community example—Hearthstone Cohousing Community would be given as the comparison. Finally, based on the analysis above, the relationship between the accessibility to the public space and the sense of community would be preliminarily concluded. And also some suggestions would be given to help enhance the sense of community.

Keywords: Sense of Community Physical Accessibility Psychological Accessibility

1. Introduction

Sense of community (or psychological sense of community) is a concept which focuses on the experience of community rather than its structure, formation, setting, or other features. Sarason summed up sense of community as “the sense that one was part of a readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend and as a result of which one did not experience sustained feelings of loneliness” (Sarason, 1974) . Actually, citizen participation in community organizations has been viewed as a major method for getting strong sense of community through improving the quality of the physical environment, enhancing services, preventing crime, and improving social conditions (e.g., Ahlbrandt & Cunningham, 1979; Churchman, 1987; Florin,1989). And citizen participation is mainly done in public space. Consequently, the accessibility for citizens to public space of communities is considered as an important factor in the formation of sense of community. That’s the reason why this paper focuses on the physical and psychological accessibility to the public space of three types of communities based on our investigation.

2. Physical Accessibility

2.1 Physical Structure

From the layout map, it is easy to be found that these three communities have their special distinguishing features. Lilong area (Hefei Road area) is a small scale community with narrow lanes through it. The Worker Housing area (Sujiatun Road area) has a bigger scale with mostly multi-storey buildings in it. And the Superblock area(Liyuan Road area) has a huge scale with high-rise housing in it. (Figure 1)



Lilong Housing Worker Housing Superblock
 Figure 1. The Layout of Three Different Types of Communities (Source: <http://map.baidu.com>)

In Lilong, the public space and living space is mixed together, and people can go inside randomly. So activities occur freely outside and inside the area. In the Worker Housing Sujiatun Road area, public space is along the street, so it has high accessibility. Activities mostly happen along the street in the greenery. And in the Superblock area, the public space is inside the community and available only for residents, so it has low accessibility for people outside. Activities show an intensive aggregation in the middle courtyard. (Table 1)

Table 1. Physical Accessibility Comparison of Three Types of Communities

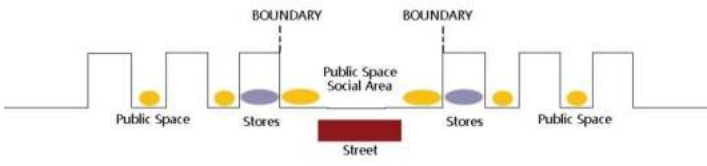

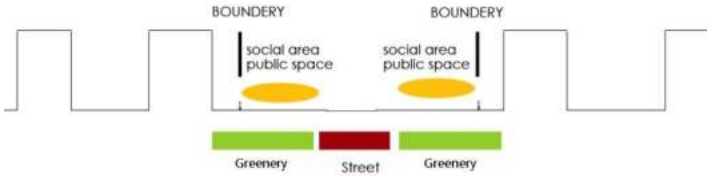

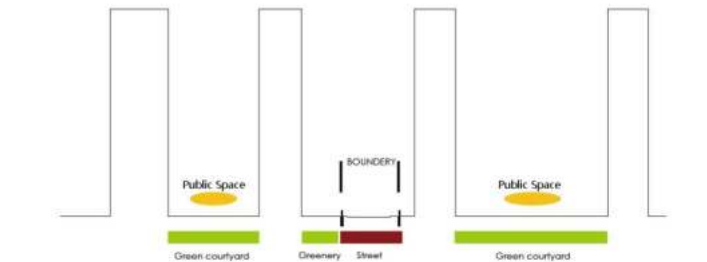

Site	Lilong Housing Hefei Road Area	Worker Housing Sujiatun Road Area	Superblock Liyuan Road Area
Physical Accessibility Street Greenery Buildings Flow of People(inside) Flow of People(outside)			
Activity Spots Street Greenery & Public Buildings Activity Spot			



2.2 Boundary

In Lilong, no specific boundaries exist. No walls, no fences, just these stores around this area working as boundaries. Entrances spread along the street. So it is kind of totally open. In Sujiatun Road Area, fences and greenery are boundaries. The greenery working as public space is outside the fence facing to social people. In the meantime, the fences separate living space of the community from the social public space outside. So the life in the community is comparatively private. In the Superblock, fences as boundaries keep the greenery totally inside like walls. These boundaries separate people and activities inside from outside, which makes it a relatively closed community. (Table 2)

Table 2. Boundaries of Three Types of Communities

Site	Boundary Schematic Diagram	Boundary Forms
Lilong Housing		 <p style="text-align: center;">Stores</p>
Worker Housing		 <p style="text-align: center;">Fence and Greenery</p>
Super-block		 <p style="text-align: center;">Fence</p>

3. Psychological Accessibility

Psychological accessibility is different from physical accessibility in these three communities. It is more about how people feel when they get into this place. As to how you get here, easily or hard, that doesn't matter so much. So psychological accessibility is more closely connected to the sense of community. Here, we have interviewed a few people who were opportunely in the public space when we were doing the investigation. And the information has been summarized in the table below. (Table 3)

Table 3. Interview Information Summary

Site	Main types of users	Frequency of utilization	Activities	Users' living place	Neighbor relationship
Lilong Housing	The old The mid-aged The young Children	often	Social and Private	around inside	familiar
Worker Housing	Old people	often	Social	inside nearby far away	Not too familiar
Super-block	Old people Children	often	Social	inside	not familiar

As we take the “neighbor relationship” as an important factor of the sense of community, we could preliminarily recognize that the sense of community in Lilong and the Worker Housing is stronger than that in the Superblock.

3.1 Lilong Housing

The Lilong itself is a very special kind of community. Here, the narrow lanes work as public and semi-public space. It doesn't have clear borders between public space and private space. Because of the incapacious living space and some kind of tradition, residents here always do private things in public space, such as doing the laundry and having dinner. To people living here, the second they step outside their houses, they get into the public space. Because of the small space scale, they can easily talk with each other even just stretching heads outside the windows, therefore making them more familiar and more intimate. Most of them have been living here for a long time. And thanks to the longtime brotherly communication, they almost know everyone living around this place. Somehow they get closely bound up with each other, and in this way the strong sense of community comes up.

To the people living outside, because the Lilong doesn't have boundaries like walls and fences, so it does have high physical accessibility, which means people can go inside randomly. But the thing is,

when you go into a Lilong house-block, you would have a strong feeling that you don't belong here. Even though the lanes inside are public space, it has a more private feeling, which makes Lilong space not so welcoming to people outside. Even if you are a new renter living here, you will find it very hard to integrate into the original residents. So the Lilong has high physical accessibility but low psychological accessibility to people living outside. This also reflects the strong sense of community in Lilong, which is some kind of exclusive and which is spontaneously formed not depending on physical boundary.

But on the other side, boundaries really can support the safety of a community. The sense of safety which is affected by the many strangers coming and going in the lanes is a big problem existed in the Lilong space.

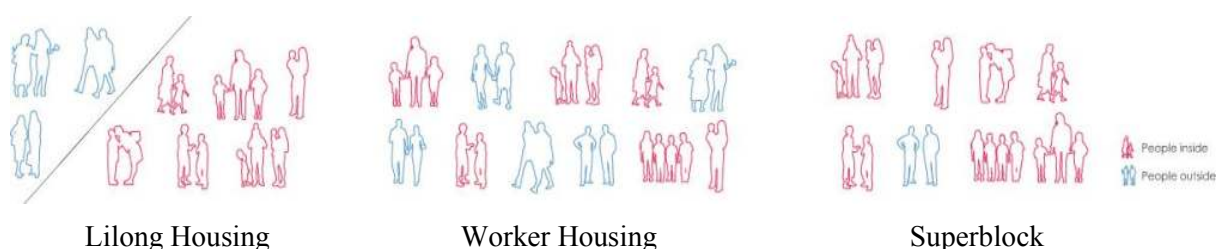


Figure 2. People Mixing in Three Kinds of Public Space

3.2 Worker Housing

In Sujiatun Road area, the public space is along the street around the community. It has high physical accessibility to both the residents here and people living outside. This dynamic space which offers enough room for social meeting, is more welcoming than Lilong and the Superblock. It welcomes to different meetings with friends and strangers. Thus the public space in Sujiatun area has both high physical and high psychological accessibility.

But here comes the question. More welcoming, more strangers. Does it lead to less sense of community? Actually, these “strangers” are mostly from the communities nearby. They gather together sharing the public space to chat, to play cards, to do exercise and so on. People from different communities mix together harmoniously here. In this way, the sense of community goes outside one community and expands to more house-blocks, which consequently forms the sense of “big community”.

Since the fences separate the living space inside from the outside public space, this Sujiatun area somehow creates a big sense of community while still preserving privacy. And because of the boundary, it has a good sense of safety too.

3.3 Superblock

The Superblock has very firm boundaries, which proclaims that it is totally not welcoming to the outside people. So the public space inside has both low physical and low psychological accessibility to the people outside. Even if boundaries sometimes can support the sense of community, it obviously doesn't work here. According to our investigation, most residents here are not familiar with their neighbors and they can hardly recognize each other. The sense of community here is very weak. Some old people moving out from Lilong to this Superblock express that they miss their old life in Lilong very much.

What makes this community get so little cohesion? The sense of belonging is a main problem. Originally, McMillan and Chavis identified one element of sense of belonging as “expectation of belonging”(McMillan & Chavis, 1986). At this time, that concept seems best described as the “faith that I will belong.” Acceptance remains unchanged. These two elements emphasize the two points of reference that are constant in sense of community theory—the member and the community. In Lilong, the moment the residents step into the lanes, they get a strong sense of belonging thinking that they have already reached their homes. However, in the Superblock, only when they get into their houses, can they feel the sense of belonging and relax themselves.

The scale is also a factor which influences the sense of community. Compared with Lilong, all these narrow lanes and small houses, such tall buildings in the Superblock seem like huge living machines. People here get very weak sense of presence. The Superblock gives much attention to the community itself instead of the members living in it. (Figure 3)

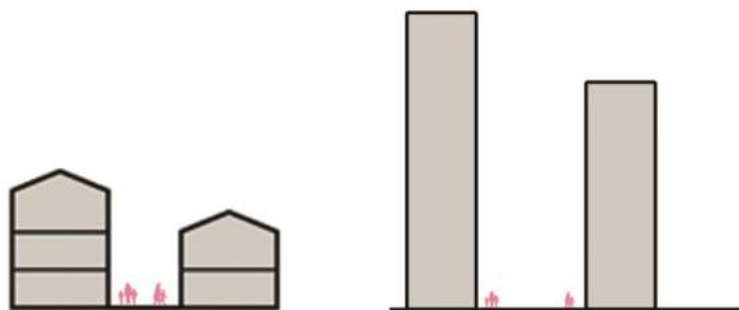


Figure 3. People's Sense of Presence

4. A Good Community Example—Hearthstone Cohousing Community

Hearthstone Cohousing Community has six characteristics. Firstly, all the community members participate in the community design, sharing their requirements. Secondly, neighboring building layout should reflect the sense of community, including household orientation, the setting of the pedestrian space, etc. Thirdly, the public facilities such as public kitchen, dining room, activity room, etc. should be free for every household with the management and use. Fourthly, Community residents

jointly maintain the community property, and hold regular meetings to make decisions for community development. Fifthly, there is no hierarchy in the social structure and decision-making principles. Lastly, every member should make a contribution in the collective labor showing that you are part of the community.

In the three kinds of communities we have mentioned above, Hearthstone Community is more like the Lilong. They both get small scale and some lanes. But the lanes of Hearthstone Community is much wider than that of Lilong. And Hearthstone doesn't have many stores around it. The walls of the houses form the boundaries of the community, which makes it have a good sense of safety. Residents here design this community and protect it together, and thus they get a very strong sense of belonging. Public space in the community which has high accessibility is open and welcoming to social people. All these elements set up a strong sense of community and make this community a practical reference case of the concept "Utopia". (Figure 4)



Figure 4. Hearthstone Cohousing Community (Source: <http://www.hearthstonecohousing.com>)

5. Conclusion

The sense of community is actually very complicated and has many influence factors. The accessibility to the public space is just one factor but gets some certain importance to it. The physical accessibility to the public space is mainly related to the physical structure and boundaries of the community. However, the psychological accessibility is more about people's feelings when they are in it. To people living outside the community, the psychological accessibility is mainly reflected by whether the public space is welcoming to them or not. And to people living inside, namely the residents, the psychological accessibility is more about the safety, the sense of belonging, and the sense of presence, etc.

From our investigation, Lilong Housing, Worker Housing and the Superblock all have their specific characteristics in sense of community. The Lilong has a strong sense of community, and meanwhile it has low psychological accessibility to the people outside (not welcoming). Therefore, the sense of community of Lilong is exclusive to some extent, and it is the sense of community in a small scale. The Worker Housing (Sujiatun area), its public space has high physical and psychological accessibility

to both the residents and people living outside. It somehow forms a great sense of community in a big scale, expanding the sense of community to more house-blocks. That is the most precious spirit of the Sujiatun community. As to the Superblock, a good sense of community is really hard to form according to its current situation. Maybe the managers of the community could hold some different kinds of activities for the residents to take part in. In this way, residents may communicate more with each other, and be familiar with each other little by little. It is time for the Superblock to put more attention to the members in the community emotionally, rather than just be a living machine providing them with living space.

To form a good sense of community, it is better that the scale of the community is well controlled from the sight of human scale. Boundaries can exist to keep the community safe and enjoying privacy. But the forms of the boundaries could be abundant and interesting, like fences, greenery, shops, not have to be cold walls. High accessibility to the public place makes contribution to form a great sense of community which breaks out the limit of community unit. The greenery ,some of which combine with pedestrian trails, some of which work as physical locations for social contacts and public events ,and some of which connect people to parks and playgrounds, promote good community identity and a neighborhood sense of community. Local authorities should take some measures to maintain the safety and good environment both in and outside the community. In the meantime, they could summarize and spread the good experience to more communities. This should cover not just green space or the outdoor public space but also public facilities such as shops, pubs and community centers. This information could then be used to inform planning decisions and public spending decisions.

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