Between Public and Private:
An Approach to Urban Living

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Thank you...

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Edward Hopper, "Nighthawks" (from John Canaday,
1980)
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The city provides work as well as housing to a great number of individuals, couples and families who are dependent on the urban environment for employment or education. Unfortunately urban living in today's cities has become disconnected. The dwelling is not a part of the surrounding community but rather a island in an anonymous environment. As a result, urban communities have deteriorated and become a transient location for people who move on after a short period of time. The community no longer has the commonality of understanding needed for a functioning living environment.

To revitalize the city and make it more attractive to a larger variety of people there needs to be a more connected community which provides opportunities to encounter the life and activity in the public realm. There also needs to be a more secluded realm which makes life in the city not only a public experience but also provides the opportunity to retreat from it.

This thesis concentrates on creating the connection between the public and the private realm. In addition it addresses the connection to a community courtyard within an urban city block. Exploring these issues in architectural form is an attempt to address the problem. The thesis provides a proposal for an alternative urban living environment which does not represent a complete solution but an investigation of the elements crucial to an urban living environment.
Between Public and Private

Life in an urban environment involves more than housing. The housing unit itself is a subordinate element. Urban Living is about occupying the city and the relationship between public and private space. This includes movement and connection. Urban living in this thesis focuses primarily on the connection between the private living spaces and the most public urban space, the street and the most public community space, the courtyard. Between public and private is defined not only by the physical spaces between but also visual connections and movement from one condition to another. It becomes a "condition" which changes with scale and specific relationship. What might be public compared to one space may become private compared to another. It exists on all levels from the urban scale to details such as doors and windows. "Between" represents the overlap of two conditions and influences them by establishing their relationship. This may occur by providing a zone which can be used by both sides in different ways.

Street scene at Martina Franca (from Rudofsky, 1964)
Osaka, Japan (from Rudofsky, 1964)
Giovanni Mansueti, "Miracle of the Cross" (from Rudofsky, 1964)
Public Space in the City

Throughout history public space has been a means of communication between members of society. The public plaza and the market place both serve the need to gather, to celebrate or to purchase goods. However, public space is not only the formal square or market. It includes foremost the street which is primarily perceived as a means of transportation but actually serves as a connector within society. The street reflects all facets of society and situations. It is a place where you meet people of your neighborhood by accident, not by appointment. It is the setting for serendipitous interaction of people, a sequence of observing and being observed. In essence it is the instrument for creating unpursued human interaction. In this role the street is vital to the existence of urban life.

Before the age of the automobile and the television people were forced to use the street as a means of participating in society as well as getting from one

Gustave Doré, "A City Thoroughfare" (from Broadbent, 1990)
location to another. The form of transportation used to be primarily on foot which is at considerably lower speed than today's mass transit or the automobile and therefore fostered more interaction. Unfortunately the pedestrian in the street has been replaced by the automobile. Activities such as shopping are not done at smaller community stores but at supermarkets, where buying in bulk requires a car and is disconnected from the neighborhood. A similar condition of this kind is the mall, a replacement of the shopping street. It offers a concentration of shops which is not readily available in the city at such proximity and with controlled climate. However, it is disjointed from the urban life by lacking connection to a residential environment.

The pedestrian walking in the street and being exposed to others from different backgrounds is disappearing. As a result communities are becoming disconnected, through the lack of social interaction.
Cathedral at Bologna (from Rudofsky, 1964)
The Site

Within this project the site plays a particular role in that it provides a setting for an exploration rather than the driving force which the design is derived with. To explore the idea of urban living, a site which supported a community was needed. The North End in Boston provides such an urban community which includes a mix of residential and commercial uses. The site is presently a vacant half block used for parking. The other half consists of typical North End four story brick town houses. Typically these are built on at a 20 foot module. Often the first floor is commercial use and the floors above residential. Access is located along the party wall of the house, which services all units within the building. Buildings are typically row houses facing the street at the front and an alley in the back. They have flat roofs which are used by the residents.

The North End provides a lot of accidental small scale urban spaces such as openings between row houses. They make for a richer environment by opening
up a view into the spaces within the block and becoming a small place of inhabitation along the path. However, they are not used to their full extent. Most of them are unclaimed alleys and leftover, unused spaces.

San Juan, Puerto Rico contains environments similar to those in the North End on a similar scale. However they are more often claimed by residents, which makes them attractive to the pedestrian and enriches the environment. Building on the existing conditions in the

Map of Boston
North End and understanding references such as San Juan, the proposal can maintain the scale and the character of the site as well as provide a stronger framework for the community.
Program

Program:
- 46 residential units
- several existing shops
- day care facilities
- elderly housing
- cafe / restaurant
- laundry room
- interior courtyard
- public square adjacent to the cafe

The program does not necessarily include all uses, it addresses the ones important to establishing the
communal framework.

To still provide a private environment but integrate mixed use within the courtyard the whole project is divided into two parts:

The residential, comprised mostly of duplexes and the elderly housing grouped around one section of the courtyard

The public, which mixes housing, laundry facilities, commercial, day care and restaurant grouped around the more public side of the courtyard.
The mixing of uses provides for a more varied and intermixed living environment. These uses can take advantage of the courtyards in cases such as day care, the laundry room or the cafe and therefore encourage interaction.

In order to maintain the character of the neighborhood and to create an urban edge to give the street definition and enclosure, the edge of the block is maintained on the original street pattern. At one corner it opens up to create a public space with a visual link to the courtyard. Directly adjacent to it is the cafe which would occupy part of it as an outdoor seating area during the warmer seasons. The units are located in row house like arrangements which are separated by party walls and entry zones. Movement into the units occurs from the street edge through these zones which also engage the courtyard and allow views into it. Roof terraces are located on the top of the buildings to provide a different kind of outdoor space which
overlooks the street or the courtyard. The courtyard itself is a controlled space which is physically only accessible through the entry zone. It provides a controlled space available to the residents within the block.

The larger elements which the design focuses on are the edges which exist between public and private on the site scale. Besides the overall design organization these elements are the focus of this thesis and will be described individually.
Street Edge

Courtyard Edge

Courtyard

Existing Street Edge

Modified Courtyard Edge
Fourth Floor
Palladio’s theatre uses the street as a permanent stage set
Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza (from Rudofsky, 1964)
The Street Edge

In a community the street is the center of public life. It is the fabric of the community. Neighbors meet, going to work or shopping. It becomes the common ground within the larger community.

The living unit can contribute to public life by establishing a connection between its occupants and the street. The formal interpretation of this connection is the edge or enclosure which has to be permeable. Its treatment is a critical factor in encouraging as well as controlling the interaction between public and private.

In addition to being the public domain the space above the street, next to the units on the upper floors, also becomes visually inhabitable. It can be used by adjacent units to visually extend the living space into the street. By providing this option the quality of the living space is increased.

Use along the edge is an important factor in the interaction. The most public and active spaces within a living unit are located at the street edge to develop
animation along it and to foster connection. The kitchen displays activity and is therefore more compatible with the street. It also enables the closure to be more open due to the fact that active areas do not require as much control of privacy as other spaces.

The materials used for the closure represent different degrees of privacy and flexibility. The edge directly adjacent to the public sidewalk therefore uses a hard material such as concrete and stucco with openings punched through it. When there is less need for privacy the materials change to corrugated metal and glass which allow for more openness and flexibility.

In the street elevation the enclosure is divided into three zones which all relate to different zones within the street.

The first floor responds to its proximity to the sidewalk which is a highly public area. In order to create interaction the enclosure is heavy with punched openings and the same uses associated with them as on
upper floors. In addition the living unit is elevated two feet above the sidewalk to separate the unit from the sidewalk and to let the residents overlook the street rather than be overlooked by it.

In the middle zone the unit is more open to the street. It provides small balconies and engages the space by projecting out into the street in form of a window seat. Lighter materials such as corrugated metal and glass are used. Similar to the lower floor there is still some need for control of privacy due to the narrowness of the street which brings the neighbor across the street closer to the unit.
Finally the upper zone requires the least provisions for privacy. It overlooks the street as well as the neighbors across the street. This allows for more glass and openness not permitted in the lower areas. The balconies become larger due to the enclosure moving back, away from the edge.

In all cases there are devices to control privacy and light such as screens which slide open and shut to facilitate the adjustment to more or less privacy.
Study models
Early elevation study
Section through courtyard
Street elevation
Street elevation
Balcony facing onto the courtyard in the "Casa Blanca", in San Juan
Courtyard Edge

The Casa Blanca, Ponce de Leon's former residence in San Juan, Puerto Rico includes a space which is part of the grounds and publicly accessible, but is surrounded and enclosed by private houses which make up its edge. For the residents of these adjacent spaces the park is not directly accessible but still becomes part of the usable space by extending into it with balconies, windows and roof terraces. This expansion of the living unit into the public space is a controllable element which lets spaces be used in different ways by different people at the same time.

The courtyard edge enables the units to visually inhabit the courtyard but still maintain privacy. To accomplish this the enclosure uses large glass doors which open up to allow light, air, view and inhabitation across it. There is a distinction vertically between heavier and lighter enclosure responding to the need for privacy. However it is not as distinctive as the street edge due to the less public condition of the courtyard.

View into a courtyard in Milan, Italy (from Zucchi, 1989)
On the first floor there is even a direct connection to the units via terraces which enable the resident to access the courtyard directly.

On the lower three floors the balconies are projected out beyond the unit to define the edges. On the upper levels the balconies step back to allow for more light, and openness.

View from the courtyard showing units and stairway
Study of section through residential courtyard
Section through courtyard edge showing balconies and terraces
Study models
Early study of space within the courtyard

Courtyard at the "Casa Blanca" in San Juan, Puerto Rico
Through different cultures and times courtyards have played a role in living environments. An example is the courtyard in architecture of Spanish origin. San Juan, Puerto Rico is made up of dense city blocks which are punctured by small private courtyards. Often the courtyard becomes the heart of the house as the public space within it. Gabriel Garcia Marquez uses the courtyard as the setting in two of his books, "One hundred years of solitude" and "Love in the Time of Cholera". He describes them as being surrounded by private spaces and so becoming the public space within the house. The courtyard occupies a territory between public and private by being private in relation to the outside street, but public to the rooms surrounding it. It is to the rooms what the street is to the house.

In places such as San Juan the courtyard is linked to the street by small view openings into it which let the pedestrian catch a small frame of it from the street. These views act as bridges between the street and the
Early sketch studying the courtyard with the spaces adjacent to it. It shows the view openings which visually connect the street and the courtyard.

house and make the walk along the street edge interesting and almost mysterious. These bridges make the pedestrian aware of the life behind the walls and make the edge inhabited. This inhabitation is not literal but rather visual and makes the urban edge a changing experience by presenting a compressed window into the life of the residents beyond it.

The design tries to create some of these qualities and adjusts them to a multistory, multifamily condition. To compensate for the mixed use, the courtyard is divided into two sections, one more private, the other more public.

On the first floor on the public side the courtyard is faced by several community services such as a laundry
room, a day care facility and a cafe. The difference in height to the terraces of the first floor units is increased to provide more privacy. Most of the ground is paved. Planting around the edges and a large pool of water occupy one corner. In this particular location there is a break in the building mass which allows for visual access but limits it physically by extending the water into the public place beyond that opening. The water congregates in this pool after being channelled through the residential courtyard along gardens located within.

The residential side of the courtyard is faced only by residential units. The ground is elevated in relation to the public side and is not paved but planted. Within it there are small garden parcels which can be used by residents.

Studies of the courtyard configuration
Study of the courtyard and the linked openings
Study of the courtyard configuration
Entry signifies the passage from the public to the private realm as well as from the street to the living unit. In a multiunit setting the entry is often disconnected from the public space by internalizing access into the building and closing it off from the street. Typically stairs and access are separated from the street by a doorway and there is no connection to the outside. Light and view are shut out and make the access a dark space which discourages communication. The transition between public and private becomes compressed and disjointed from the urban community by being visually separated from the street.

An entry which accomplishes a connection between the units and the public realm must act as an internal street to the units which are accessed through it. It must become an intermediate level of privacy which is used by the residents in the building. The units are reached through a space which is linked to the two major public areas adjacent to the living unit, the street and the...
courtyard. At the same time as it connects the unit to these spaces, it allows for a visual link between the street and the courtyard which lets the pedestrian sense the different levels of privacy within a block.

Located beyond the door on the street side is a multistory space overlooked by balconies which form of the entries to the upper units. The openness allows for an understanding of the space as well as a sense of sound throughout the height of the building. The transparent enclosure lets this space be associated with the street moving into the building and then becoming more confined and private. It heightens the sense of communal entry and visually connects the individual entrances to the street.

This entry zone is similar to the street in many ways. It is a public realm within its context of adjacent spaces. However, within the entry there is a much smaller dimension between the entries to the units and the opportunity to move up within the space. As a result the
treatment of the unit enclosure is different than the street edge. Where the stairs and the elevator move up, the enclosure is more solid, using materials such as concrete, whereas enclosure facing the multistory space is lighter and more transparent. Similar to the street, the transparency changes according to the use within the unit. As a result the kitchen and circulation spaces tend to have openings into the entry space.

A similar space on a larger scale can be found in one of Otto Steidle's housing development in Berlin where windows of living units open onto a linear interior courtyard which also houses access for the building.

By cutting through the row houses, the entry space accesses units on both sides and opens out onto the street as well as onto the courtyard. A large portion of these openings is glazed to establish a view through the building. The pedestrian passing by on the street will then notice a framed view of the courtyard beyond the entries. The entry to the unit itself is located on an
elevated level which is reached by steps indicating a change in privacy as one approaches it. At the opening to the courtyard the stairs and the elevator move up to the other entries. The landing of the stairs extends out to the courtyard indicating a connection to it.

Toward the upper units the stairs bypass the individual entries to remove them from the traffic area and to give them more privacy. As traffic decreases moving up, the enclosure becomes lighter as less privacy is required.
Entry showing the kitchen window below and the popped out window seat. The column acts as structure for but also as a marker for the entrance.
Elevation
Studies of entry zone
Early sketch of the view into the entry
Linkages
The entry into the unit is a transition between public and private, which occurs between the larger entry zone and the unit. This space is part of either zone. It is also an intermediate stopping between the unit and the public zone. In response to the change in privacy the materials change. The wall material changes from concrete to wood panels, a warmer more intimate material which encourages inhabitation. There is a bench which further distinguishes the entry zone as a place of activity and inhabitation rather than merely one of transition. To make the stoop part of the larger entry zone but to give it a smaller, more intimate scale part of the entry is covered by a glass canopy which permits light to move through it but lowers the scale of the entrance. Similarly the floor slab is interrupted by wood planks, which define a territory as an extension of the unit into the entry zone.
Stoop on the third floor
The kitchen is the most public and active part of a living unit making it the public realm within the private. It is a location which is vital to every unit. The kitchen is an obvious location for observing the street due to its active character. It can take the role of being the link between the unit and the street. To encourage this link the windows facing on to the street are large to allow a view out, but also operable to allow air through which carries sound and smell and can act as a non visual link.
Wartburg, Germany
Window seat

On the upper floors of the duplex units the bedrooms face onto the street directly abutting the public realm. The window seat acts as a buffer between the public and private. By projecting out into the street it engages it and allows a view along the it. A similar reference which already exists on the site is the bay window. Within the window seat it there is the possibility of using it as a bench or a desk, allowing for different activities. However, these are public within the private bedroom. Visually it distinguishes itself from the facade through different materials. The space within it as well as the individuality of the form is distinguished by an individual roof form, capping it and relating it back to the larger roof spanning across several buildings. Using all these devices the window seat becomes smaller public space within the bedroom or within the street.
Balconies and Terraces

On the courtyard side the units extend out visually by using larger window openings which allow for more light and view. The size of the openings changes according to the need for privacy related to the use of the spaces beyond it. Beyond the windows, balconies become the extension of the unit. The railings take on the form of shelves which allow for placement of pots or other items. The facade becomes a reflection of the residents occupying the units. On the ground floor the terraces access the courtyard directly but are separated by a ground wall which defines the territory of privacy within the courtyard.
Conclusion

Looking back, the issue of transition between public and private seems even more complex than initially expected. It is closely linked to the functioning of a community and extends from the urban scale to the detail. The connection between the public and the private realm is not only important in a residential environment but also in a commercial one.

The thesis is an attempt to address one small section of the issue. By concentrating on a specific site which already supports a community, there is a base to work from. However, the issue becomes even more crucial in urban environments in which the fabric has already been depleted or completely destroyed. The city is a vital part to society combining living and working and must take on the responsibility of making direct communication among members of society possible. This can only occur if this communication is encouraged between different zones of urban living and requires a diversity in form as well as use.

The exploration in the North End investigated different scales on the site level as well as small pieces within the living units. What clearly has become apparent is that the crucial factor needed for interaction is the edge which can either separate or connect. The thesis attempts to reconnect a living environment to the public realm by modifying the edges and providing connectors or linkages. The form they take may only be applicable to this specific site or a residential environment. However, the intentions stay the same regardless of scale and use.
The following boards were used for an ACSA housing competition which the thesis was entered in.
All photos taken by the author unless otherwise noted.
Bibliography


