



ROSS CHAPIN Foreword by SARAH SUSANKA, author of *The Not So Big House*

# POCKET NEIGHBORHOODS

CREATING SMALL-SCALE COMMUNITY IN A LARGE-SCALE WORLD



## LIVING IN A LARGE-SCALE WORLD

Why pocket neighborhoods? Why now? The American Dream of owning a single-family home with a private yard and a garage seems to be what most people strive for. It is certainly what is being sold. Yet demographics and family structures have changed significantly since this version of the dream was awakened. We're living in a larger scale world than our grandparents, with more—or certainly different—stresses and pressures. Understanding how we arrived at where we are now will help us find ways to meet our deeper needs and desires.

### The Lure of Privacy

Houses are typically marketed on their virtues of curb appeal, size, privacy, and personal amenities. Realtors list an impressive two-story brick-faced portico, three-car garage, and a bathroom with every bedroom. A media room and backyard barbeque round out the amenities, making the home a self-reliant hub of family life.

Once new homeowners move in, however, it may take some time for them to meet their neighbors. The street out front is less likely to be a place to chat with a neighbor than a space to come and go through by car. Most activities happen in the privacy of the home and backyard, while the world beyond the front door is left vacant.

*In many housing developments, the street is less likely to be a place to meet with neighbors than a space to come and go through by car. Family life is focused inside and in the walled backyard.*

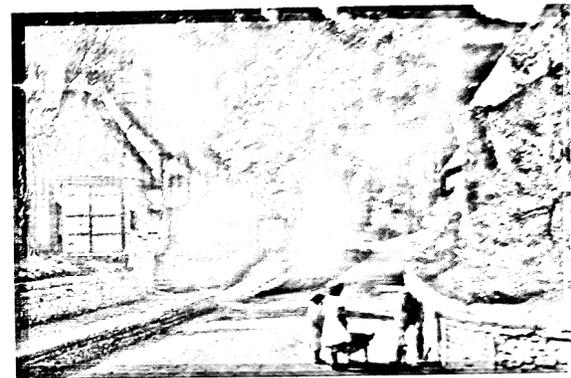
Looking at this in terms of scale, the small-scale levels of room, house, and backyard get a lot of attention, while the next-level scale of the street and block get little use. This means fewer opportunities to share a favorite recipe, tell about the trip to the lake, or discuss the upcoming mayor's election. Without daily relationships, nearby neighbors are less likely to call on one another to look after a child while going out for groceries, or check in on an elderly neighbor when the curtains haven't opened by 10 a.m. When this critical level of scale is weak or undefined, the vitality and resilience of a community are diminished.

### The Scale of Community and the American Dream

Let's face it: Humans are gregarious. We like to live around others. For thousands of years our ancestors lived in clusters, barrios, hamlets, neighborhoods, and villages. Many lived their whole lives within a small circle of where they were born.

For much of human history, walking distance defined the scale of community. Most of one's daily relationships in life took place, by circumstance, within an area defined by the distance a person could easily walk. Horses and wagons expanded the circle, but still, the scale of community was closely knit and tied to place. When Henry Ford took the Model T to the masses and a vast highway network unfurled across the American continent, proximity released its hold on close relationships, and the walk-circle community quietly disbanded. Work and friendships were just as likely to be found at distances measured in miles rather than blocks. Bell's telephone "miraculously" eliminated the bounds of distance all together. These technologies changed the scale of community as had never happened in all of history.

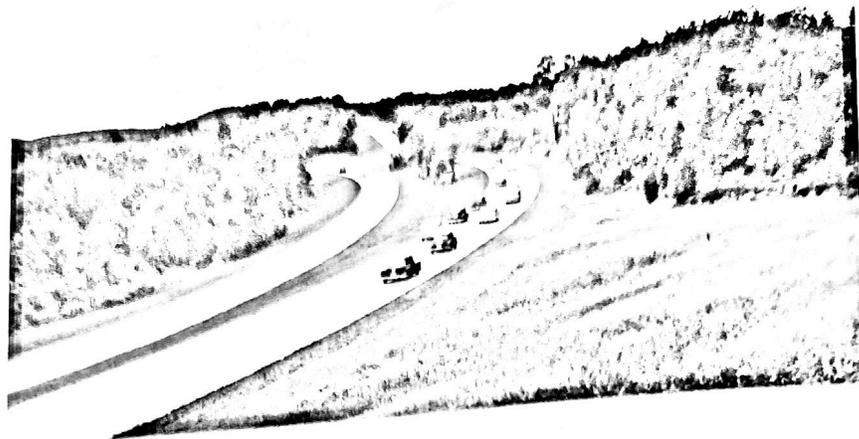
The automobile and cheap, endless oil opened up "broad acres" of land, and a new American Dream took root, giving millions of people access to single-family home ownership. Fathers had well-paying work in the city, while mothers and children had a wholesome life in the suburbs. Or so the story goes.



“For much of human history, walking distance defined the scale of community.”

Right: The automobile and a national highway network allowed the scale of community to expand to distances measured in miles rather than blocks.

Facing page: Pocket neighborhoods can restore the scale of community to a circle of support and belonging shared by nearby neighbors.



### Stresses on the Family

Houses inched up in size over the years, even as family size diminished. And households became increasingly private and self-reliant. Subdivision developments were built hundreds of houses at a time. So-called neighborhoods were merely the byproduct of houses in close proximity. Unfortunately, development overshot the desire for privacy, leaving many people marooned on their own little islands in a sea of houses.

Evidence of isolation is clear. Grown children often settle in regions far from their parents. Young families, with little or no network of support, struggle with keeping up with mortgage or rental payments, commuting, arranging childcare, chauffeuring kids to after-school activities, monitoring Internet activity, shopping, preparing meals, and caring for a sick child. Families are not the only groups who are vulnerable. Some people find themselves single, by choice or circumstance, in the same predicament. Elderly people often face retirement alone, with limited resources or support networks. For many, the stress of being helpless in a large-scale world is overwhelming.

### Restoring Small-Scale Communities

Pocket neighborhoods can help mend the web of belonging, care, and support needed in a frayed world. Here, nearby neighbors can respond to daily needs in a way that friends across town and family across the country cannot. An elderly neighbor may need assistance trimming a hedge. Another neighbor needs help looking after the kids while going for a short errand, or feeding the cats while away on vacation. Impromptu encounters have neighbors chatting about the garden, the latest news, or reminiscing about old times. In time, these simple meetings may grow into caring relationships, offering friendship as well as support at a challenging time. These are the advantages of living in a small-scale community.