

## +++ Building types and neighbourliness

### ++ Leon Festinger and "propinquity"

Leon Festinger is best known for his work that coined the term "cognitive dissonance".

Cognitive dissonance is the mental discomfort that results from holding two conflicting beliefs, values, or attitudes. People tend to seek consistency in their [attitudes](#) and [perceptions](#), so this conflict causes unpleasant feelings of unease or discomfort.

[What Is Cognitive Dissonance?](#)

Earlier, in 1950, Festinger, had worked on how neighbours get to know each other. The research was described in an excellent book, [Social Pressures in Informal Groups: A Study of Human Factors in Housing](#) by Festinger, Schacter and Beck. This showed how neighbours became friends by being in close propinquity. Wikipedia says

Festinger, Stanley Schachter, and Kurt Back examined the choice of friends among college students living in married student housing at MIT. The team showed that the formation of ties was predicted by [propinquity](#), the physical proximity between where students lived, and not just by similar tastes or beliefs as conventional wisdom assumed. In other words, people simply tend to befriend their neighbors.

[Leon Festinger, Wikipedia](#)

Festinger's propinquity is not just based on physical proximity but also the frequency of interaction. For example in multi storey buildings, interactions happen more frequently between neighbours along a corridor than those immediately above or below. The same floor neighbours have higher propinquity to each other.

On the buildings that were studied, close propinquity meant residents were more likely to become friends. This report studied a residents who had many similar characteristics - Many were young men who were veterans of the Korean War. with their young families The dwellings were low-rise and showed that the influence of spatial layout could strongly influence friendships and neighbourliness.

However, the research showed that propinquity was a much stronger force in friendship formation than beliefs or political attitudes. The dwellings were low-rise and showed that the influence of spatial layout could strongly influence friendships and neighbourliness.

My experience ( I worked in a school of architecture for a decade and have fought planners for much longer) is that few (if any) architects or planners are aware of this important work.

### ++ A wave and a smile away

I was describing Festinger's work to a friend along with my own experience of getting to know neighbours, particularly on one housing development. I was describing how we got to know our neighbours that we could see from our kitchen sink. The path passing by was not too near as to

make their presence intrusive but near enough for recognition. This friend coined the phrase "a wave and a smile away" to describe the arrangement. Although, one possibility among others (many people want to hide from neighbours), it encapsulates some of the spirit of Festingers's propinquity.

## **++ Oscar Newman and defensible space and high rise buildings**

In his book [Defensible Space; Crime Prevention Through Urban Design](#), Oscar Newman, described how residents controlled crime in their neighbourhoods through natural surveillance. Low natural surveillance led to higher crime rates.

He categorised the space in developments as being "public", "semi public", "semi private" and "private" with increasing levels of surveillance. A major thoroughfare would be classified as public. A back garden as private. A front garden where others could come and approach the front door would be semi-private. Residents had full control over their private spaces, some control over their semi-private and semi-public spaces but no control over the public spaces. Wikipedia summarises:

The book [Defensible Space] contains a study from New York that pointed out that higher crime rate existed in high-rise [housing projects](#) than in low-rise complexes. This, he concluded, was because residents felt no control or personal responsibility for an area occupied by so many people. Throughout his study, Newman focused on explaining his ideas on [social control](#), [crime prevention](#), and public health in relation to [community design](#).

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defensible\\_space\\_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defensible_space_theory)

Newman noted a differences between high-rise buildings for low-income families and those for high-income residents because high incomes bring additional security services:

Most of us have seen high-rise apartments occupied by middle-income people that function very well. Why then do they not work for low-income families? Middle-income apartment buildings have funds available for doormen, porters, elevator operators, and resident superintendents to watch over and maintain the common public areas, but in high-rise public housing, there are barely enough funds for 9-to-5 non-resident maintenance men, let alone for security personnel, elevator operators, or porters.

Not surprisingly, therefore, it is within these interior and exterior common public areas that most crime in public housing takes place.

Creating Defensible Space, Oscar Newman, 1996

## **++ Margaret Thatcher**

In 1987, Margaret Thatcher [told](#) the Conservative Party Conference:

Too often, the planners cut the heart out of our cities. They swept aside the familiar city centres that had grown up over the centuries. They replaced them with a wedge of tower blocks and linking expressways, interspersed with token patches of grass and a few windswept piazzas, where pedestrians fear to tread.

The planners didn't think: "Are we breaking the pattern of people's lives. Are we cutting them off from their friends, their neighbours?"

They didn't wonder: "Are we uprooting whole communities?"

They didn't ask "Can children still play safely in the street?"

They didn't consider any of these things. Nor did they consult the police about how to design an estate in which people could walk safe from muggers and vandals. They simply set the municipal bulldozer to work.

What folly, what incredible folly.

Both Conservatives and Labour share the blame for tower blocks, Conservative Home

(Carole said "My husband and I lived in a high-rise tower block with our firstborn baby. We didn't know any neighbours. Subsequently We have lived in normal houses and have got to know neighbours")

## **++ The Matthew Carmona survey**

Professor Matthew Carmona of the Bartlett School, UCL, did a survey after the Covid Pandemic, of how residents coped in different types of housing. He found

Access to private open space from the home was the strongest home design-based predictor of comfort. Households with a private garden or terrace space were the most comfortable, followed by those with a private balcony or shared garden.

He also found:

that houses were more comfortable than flats, with apartment blocks – more prevalent in the social sector – becoming progressively less comfortable and offering a lower sense of community the higher they were off the ground

And:

Households with a private garden or terrace space were the most comfortable, followed by those with a private balcony or shared garden. Households with no access to any sort of private open space were considerably less comfortable.

[Home Comforts: Stress Testing Our Homes and Neighbourhoods During the Covid-19 Lockdown](#)

## **++ My summary for high buildings:**

Festinger: Friends are made by meeting often and informally. (Difficult in high-buildings.)

Newman: High buildings can create the conditions for crime.

Thatcher: Planning "a wedge of tower blocks" was folly.

Carmona: Many residents stuck in high buildings don't like them. They want gardens.

Personal note:

Some people, like me, aren't suitable to look after gardens properly but I still like to look out on one. For a garden outside my window, I might need some help - but not coercion.

I once attended a course on journalism given by the broadcaster, Laurie Mayer. He had made a telling report, "Albert's begonias", about a man who had created a lovely bed of begonias outside the block of flats he lived in. Unreasonable and officiously the local council had made him remove them to be replaced by badly cut grass.

It's a question of getting rights, and rules and their reasonable application right.

## **++ Gardens or high rise?**

At opposite ends of the spectrum for less prestigious housing are the post war prefabs and the high rise blocks built in the 1960s and 1970s. The prefabs were sited at ground level and had gardens. The high rise blocks had flats piled on each other with no gardens. From a prefab window it was possible to see neighbours, a wave and a smile away, from a high rise block it was not.

Prefabs were built as temporary housing after the second world war. They used the industrial capacity left at the end of the war to prefabricate simple homes to specifications set by the Ministry of Works. They were two bedroomed single storey dwellings on individual plots, leaving a some space for gardens. Their layout was not designed for mass car ownership. Accounts of prefab living on the Prefab Museum speak of a sense of community.

(See *Prefabs with gardens* in the *Appendix: Housing and Planning*.)



In 1966 Prime Minister Harold Wilson, [set a target of 500,000 houses a year](#). Many of these homes that were built were 'system' built tower block. These became a disaster partly because of poor

construction but were low in Festinger's propinquity so neighbours didn't easily get to know each other.

[A recent episode of Radio 4's Today](#) programme (26August 29023) was guest edited by some residents from the Dove Street Estate, in Bristol.



**Dove Street Flats, Dove Street, Bristol**

Stephen Richards, <https://www.geograph.org.uk/profile/34784>

They have been working hard to create a sense of community on the estate. One of the residents thought the architect of the scheme must have hated people. These residents have had some success in creating a sense of community but said "we have become friends because the architecture was so awful".

But to the architect these buildings may have looked beautiful. See the *Appendix, Beauty and produce in building*.

## **++ The book Prefabs by Elisabeth Blanchet and Sonia Zhuravlyova**

The excellent book [Prefabs](#) contains an account of moving from a post-war prefab to a high-rise flat by Sarah Drinkwater:

When I was 12, the council built an 11-storey block of flats and four blocks of maisonettes nearby. My family was offered a two-storey, three-bedroom maisonette, and my brother and I were excited to each be getting our own bedroom. My aunt, uncle and cousin were offered a two-bedroom flat in the big block, and they were not happy at all. This was in



about 1967. People were not used to living in high-rise flats yet. Although there was green space round the new blocks, we no longer had a garden and really missed that. At the prefab, we had trees and flowerbeds at the front and a lawn, vegetable garden and two sheds at the back.

In our early years in the new home we had some of our old neighbours, who had moved to the same estate. Somehow, probably because of the layout of the new estate and the lack of gardens, there wasn't the same sense of community. We didn't mix much; we came home from work or school and shut the door.

My aunt and uncle hated living in a high-rise block. Eventually they managed to raise money to buy a place and moved away. We all remember the prefabs as our best and most wonderful homes. I still dream about it.

Prefab to high-rise, by Sarah Drinkwater, East Acton

In [Prefabs](#) by Elisabeth Blanchet and Sonia Zhuravlyova

Let's repeat Sarah's last sentence about prefab living: "I still dream about it". Screw you Corbusier and your followers for all the unhappiness you have caused. (See *Appendix. Visions of planners and architects.*)

(See *The system built tower blocks disaster* in the *Appendix: Building types and neighbourliness.*)



## **++ Designing for neighbourliness and security**

The layout and form of housing influences how people can get to know each other as Festinger and Newman have shown: They have shown this conclusively for their examples. Their examples were for specific groups: young student families studying at MIT and poorer urban New Yorkers. To these groups, neighbourliness and defensible space are important. To the Daily Mail journalist (I have more-friends-on-Facebook) or to someone with an elevated social status like Eileen Gray with a large well-defended house, these considerations are of much less importance.

In designing most housing schemes the ideas of Festinger, Newman and Hall are guides. It is still possible to use their insights and reject Alice Coleman's extreme position "These are the blocks that breed anti-social people", which leaves demolition as the only option. Even Newman thought that Coleman placed too much emphasis on spatial aspects, sidelining other issues – such as the quality of management and maintenance of the buildings.

## **++ The role of management**

Inadequate management can ruin good housing. In 2003 Guardian Columnist Amielia Hill, in [describing the decline of council housing](#), used the Manor estate in Sheffield as an example:

'Twenty years ago, the Manor was considered the crème de la crème of housing estates,' said Law. 'Now you can walk round and take your pick of the empty houses, if you can crowbar off the boards from the windows. The council has let this area die.'

Failures of management have contributed to declines in many public housing schemes. This is not a refutation of the work of Festinger, Newman and Hall. It is a recognition that the configuration of the spaces we live in is just one factor in forming and maintaining human relationships.

## **++ Who wants friends and neighbours?**

### **Some depend on neighbours:**

My grandma lived in a Victorian house in Bristol but had a holiday chalet by the sea.

Aged 90 she swam in the sea... she knew everyone. Her neighbours watched for her curtains to open in the morning and came knocking the day they remained closed.

I believe she died because she couldn't face the loneliness and struggle she faced back in Bristol.  
(Comment by Esther Dent Dodsworth)

### **Some aren't bothered about neighbours:**

I know more about the 668 'friends' I have on Facebook than I do my neighbours.

(Daily Mail journalist)

### **Eileen Gray's house hid her from neighbours:**



By Tangopaso (Own work) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Eileen Gray's maid lived in a small room in the basement.

### **Some want to avoid 'Neighbours from hell':**

They aren't just the neighbours from hell, they are quite deliberately making your life a living hell. Maybe they're shouting lewd comments when you leave the house, pumping up their music on purpose after you've told them you have an exam, or accidentally-on-purpose throwing all their litter onto your lawn?  
(themix.org)

Although the housing types and their layout will be a matter for the Greater York Development Corporation (guided by an Institute of Low Carbon Living), this appendix suggests that low rise housing, many with gardens, are an important ingredient.