# Maximum Privacy within the Minimum Space:
# A Probe into the Utilization of Residential Space in Urban Sri Lanka

## Anuththaradevi Widyalankara
### (Department of History - University of Colombo, Sri Lanka)

*In an urban setting that encompasses a mass collection of diverse communities in a restricted space, privacy becomes an issue of urban living concerns. The accumulation of people into urban centers has generated complex points of contention stretching from socio cultural chaos to varieties of disturbances. These concerns have influenced the present day urban dweller to adopt a new pattern of 'dwelling life' and develop a town culture within the urban entity. Architectural language which speaks to the essence of the built environment through various physical strategies has undergone some fundamental changes. The character of the built form in the urban setting has changed towards maximizing the 'private space' of citizens. This study explores the different strategies resorted to by urban dwellers to maximize their privacy within the minimum dwelling space. It relies on the example of Colombo which is the commercial hub and the nucleus of the largest metropolitan space for its study and analysis. The present study is focused on three basic factors; inhibitions and withdrawal, the importance of the rear space of a house and the eco-conscious distribution of internal space. The findings reveal many sub factors, such as defensive, territorial, personal and psychological needs that contribute to the maximizing of 'urban privacy'.*

*Keywords: housing design, architecture, space, privacy*

## Introduction

Privacy is anessential of people who live in a community. It personifies the ability of a person in controlling access to, and from another. Humans are inherently inclined to seek that privacy in most environments. Privacy as a utilitarian abstract constitutes the emotional and physical desire of individuals to be secluded from engaging with environments and physical settings. Deasy (1985: 11-12) states that privacy reflects the feeling of personal space which is used by people in relating to others: personal distance, social distance and territoriality. The concept of the *genre de vie*, developed by Max Sorre (1962: 14-18) speaks of the cultural, spiritual, material and social aspects that affect the house and settlement that highlight five aspects that are directly influenced by the built form . They are specified as some basic needs, family, and position of women, privacy and social intercourse. Thus privacy has a major role in a house and it assumes a greater importance in the case of urban houses.

As claimed by Altman, "privacy is an interpersonal boundary control process, designed to pace and regulate interaction with others to the shifting permeability of a cell membrane, sometimes becoming merely accessible to outside inputs and sometimes closing off the outside environment" (Altman, 1975:7). Increasing social contacts that seem to be invasive compels the individual to be increasingly protective of the individual territory of privacy. The importance of privacy with regard to a personal dwelling place is determined by the effect it has in allowing the psychological reassurance of privacy sought by the occupant. This has been emphasized by Alexander and Chermayeff in 1963 (1963: 18-23). According to their classification privacy has more emphasis on seclusion and avoidance of interaction, where people try to isolate themselves from contacting with others. As has been identified by H.M. Proshansky (1970: 5-8), there are three different types of privacy; actual privacy, psychological privacy, symbolic privacy. Actual privacy refers to the degree

of privacy a person can really possess whereas the psychological privacy means the degree of privacy a person can feel in that situation. When there is a lack of actual privacy, one can use a symbolic way to achieve the required level of privacy, but desired psychological privacy would then not be there.

The notion of personal space in the residential domain is always generated from the yearning for privacy. In the urban habitat, privacy is achieved mainly through demarcation of territory because of the urban attitude towards individualization. Individualism is a phenomenon imposed by the West on the living culture of Sri Lanka which emphasized more on a communitarian social ethos. In the urban context however individualism has acquired a greater significance in Sri Lanka. The concept of individualism provides the urban population with a personal identification of their own house which is emphasized through numerous architectural imprints and implications. In fact, the later sections of this paper will give many examples of Sri Lankan urban houses which prove the changes made to establish privacy.

## Maximum Privacy Vs Minimum space
## Introverted House

In an urban setting that encompasses a mass collection of diverse communities in a restricted space, privacy becomes a primary issue of concern in urban living. The accumulation of people in urban centers has generated complex points of contention such as crowded housing, pollution, health issues and chaotic socio cultural disturbances. These concerns have compelled the present day urban dwellers to adopt a new pattern of 'dwelling life' and develop a town culture within the urban entity.

Consequently, the architectural language which speaks of the essence of the built environment through various physical strategies has undergone some fundamental changes. The character of the built form in the urban setting has changed towards maximizing the 'private space' of citizens. One such strategic measure adopted is of applying the 'introverted' appearance to the entire built setting. This constitutes an effective means of maintaining privacy among the urban. The Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist, Carl Gustav Jung (1989, first published 1961) who developed a personality typology that became popular, has explained the relationship between the introverted house and the self-centered behavior of the dweller in responding to the outside world. His theoretical interpretation begins with the clarification of introversion and extroversion. Introvert is a person whose interest is generally directed inward towards his own feelings and a world of thoughts and fantasies in contrast to an extravert whose attention is directed towards other people and the outside world. According to Jung, the introvert is somewhat more self-sufficient than the extrovert. The typical introvert is shy, contemplative and reserved and tends to have difficulty adjusting to social situations.

The user's motivation on the functional determinations of the introvert house is more important. With reference to Sri Lankan urban dwellings, the spatial limit and the location of the site can be identified as the decisive factor in the urban context. The urban house therefore constitutes factors such as building setting, three dimensional compositions, and the plan form. As mentioned earlier privacy in the current urban context is achieved mainly through the demarcation of the dwelling space. This could be termed as territorial privacy. Altman (Altman & Haythom, 1967: 180-183) defines territorial behavior as one of several mechanisms used to close or open the self to social contact. Effective use of territorial behavior correlates with individual and group viability (Altman & Haythom, 1967: 174-176; Sundstrom & Altman, 1974: 118-120) Territorial behavior involves personalization of or marking of a place or object and communication that it is "owned" by

a person or group. Defensive responses may sometimes occur when territorial boundaries are violated (Altman, 1975: 24).

Most urban houses in Sri Lanka arebuilt in clusters. The enclosed compounds are accessed through a gateway. Their privacy and territories express a social distance and not a personal distance with boundaries around the compound surrounded by high walls, fences and blank walls. Single houses usually have protective hedges that demarcate the boundaries of their gardens. These barriers serve as `symbols that reflect the social character of the owner. For instance most urban houses in Sri Lanka have large blank walls enclosing the sites with one or two relatively small accesses facilities in the shape of gates and doorways. They constitute an identifiable element in relation to the neighbourhood. In fact, the limited residential area that is usually confined to a small plot of land, the boundary wall becomes an essential factor for security and autarky of the dweller in the urban setting. The psychological need of the resident to be secluded from the contesting environments is also achieved through this architectural device. This practice is to be found in the internal spatial organization as well. The visitors' area and the gathering space are rather small in the houses of this type. It is an indirect demonstration of the reluctant attitude towards outsiders.

As has been defined by Altman (1975 : 34), primary territories serve as extensions of the owners sense of identity; thus the markers include important, personally meaningful symbols reflecting the owner's personal style and decorative tastes (e.g. nameplates, art objects, and flower gardens). In urban settlements, the fence, landscape settings, hedges and the colour of the house are personal symbols of identity of the owner and are indicative of territoriality. These symbolic barriers are tokens and expressions that represent feelings of territorial security and perceptions of territorial command. In addition houses categorized as real estate developments such as exclusive settlements usually install locks, alarm systems or position guards for security.

The seclusion and the alertness of the 'fortress type' of the introverted house makes the resident absolutely secured in, the residential domain. The most significant architectural trend in urban houses at present is of constructing the house as a hidden object, wherein one cannot identify the location of the house at first sight. To some it may appear as a prison. An example is the house known as 'Hammenhiel' which is located in a semi-urban area, relatively far from metropolitan Colombo. It has been designed by a reputed architect. The name is that of the old Dutch fort in Jaffna. This nomenclature neatly fits with its architectural design. The entire house is encircled by a massive wall of considerable height. It has some small openings as was the case with fortresses of antiquity. The main entrance was not open directly to the façade but presents a rather introverted appearance (see figure 3). Another example is that of a house designed by the world renowned Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa for a famous designer of Baiks. The three dimensional composition usually appears as a chunky solid mass with negligible projections or receding with no attention to the context. In this type the solids overwhelmingly dominate the voids, reducing the sensation of a prison (see pictures, 1, 2, and 3). Norberg-Schultz (1971) makes some critical observations on the house that conveys the notion of a prison. He says, "a house not to become a prison it must have openings into the world beyond that connects this inner world with the outer" (1971:25). What he means is incorporating the 'outside' within and creating a 'livable space' inside the abode. Void spaces that are open to the sky are commonly utilized in such situations.
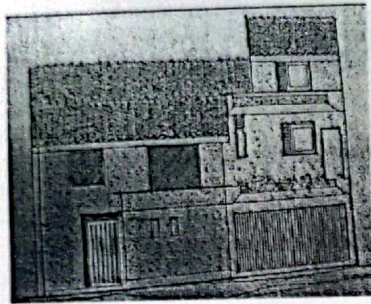
Picture 1
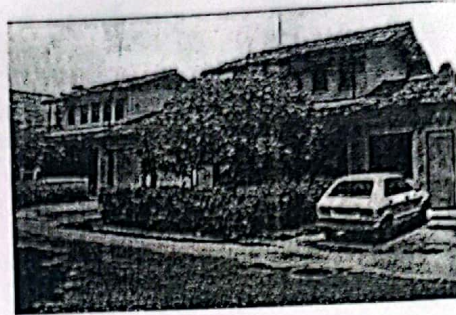


Picture 2
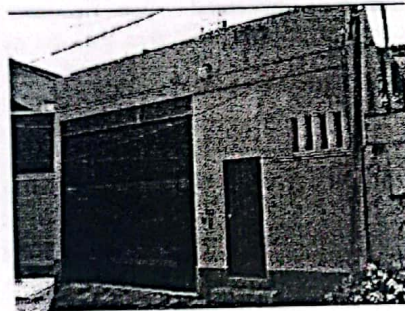


Picture 3

## Communication between Internal-External spaces

Another strategy to intensify privacy within the minimum urban space can be seen in the communication between the internal and external spaces. The house plan plays a major role in this instance where it attempts to form a barrier between these two spatial identifications. Separation of public and private domains within the interior spaces are clear but not rigid and yet preserving a high level of privacy in relation to the outside world. The spaces are not self-centered or self-contained. They do configure around a common void, probably a courtyard sharing its boundaries. It thus produces a mosaic of internalized gardens. The courtyards evoke a feeling of enclosure surrounded by built spaces. The wide stretch of gardens existing at the rear of the site is a common feature in this type. Though the rear is identified by the presence of the rear space the form seems to turn its back on society. In such situations, the interior of the abode conveys a homely feeling with the addition of a variety of architectural features. Internal courtyards, non-demarcated open spaces and double-high roofs facilitate the perception of enormous living space within the house. To a certain extent these features can be viewed as a characteristic trait of an introverted person. The usual behavioral pattern of an introverted person is to escape from the crowd and prevent contacts with the public. The introvert tends to find comfort in a limited space of his own 'territory'. In the Urban context the internal spatial arrangement of such inward-looking houses facilitate the introverted resident to create a more conducive space for living.

## A 'Productive' Rear Space

The rear space in urban houses plays a significant role in maximizing privacy of the occupant. A complex series of problems arose as a consequence of the rapid pace of urbanization. The burgeoning of shanty housing, low levels of sanitation, crime and environmental pollution were issues that compelled the construction of houses to be subject to urban planning and regulation.

Housing construction within the urban territory became a highly regulated activity. This made the architects, the creators of built environments to wade through a stringent process wherein the first step was to study the urban setting in which he/she was commissioned to design the house. They had to tackle two crucial issues; one was to arrive at the best possible way of locating the rear space of an urban abode. Next was to convert the rear space into a productive space where it could improve ventilation, lighting, and the provision of garden necessities. The rear space is the space associated with the rear of a building. More precisely it is the space between the building and the 'rear' boundary of the site.

Although the front boundary is clearly defined in almost all instances, the perception of the rear could be construed according to two factors; the geometry of the site and the orientation of the site. In extreme cases where the geometry of the site does not allow the rear space to be allocated at the 'rear', it is not easy to identify a clear 'rear space. In some cases where the orientation of the site does not allow comfortable living conditions, the rear of the building may not be considered as the obvious "rear" relative to the boundary of the front. The diagram below helps us to understand the difference between these two changes.
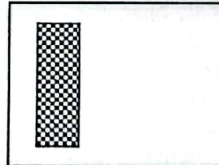
Rear boundary
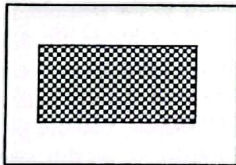
Rear Boundary

Front boundary
Figure 1

Entrance/Front boundary
Figure 2

In the traditional context the rear side of the house was totally a 'regime of women folk' to engage in their household activities such as preparing and preserving food, washing and drying linen etc. Apart from these domestic chores it was also the space for their informal gatherings and the venue for social interactions. In the urban context this traditions were no longer practicable. Instead the rear space became an important area to optimize the private space of the urban house.

The present urban landscape offers variety of ways in utilizing the rear space in order to improve and expand the sense of privacy within the house. In certain instances the rear area is also incorporated with the other spaces devoid of any barriers and thus stretches to either sides of the abode and is converted into a usable area. The rear space sometimes serves as a 'designing tool' thus determining the entire style of the house. The whole design would thereby evolve around the rear space by complementing each other in a subtle manner. The other alternative is to use the rear space to complement the rest of the spaces. As has been exemplified by urban houses, this is achieved in two ways. First is to treat it as an extension of the inner space. The rear space is used to enhance the quality

of the particular space but there is no strong link that extends from the rest of the house to the rear space. Under this specification it is commonly seen that the rear side is being used as an office space or, a reading area. Sometimes it is used as a service yard which is purely reserved for services of the house, such as parking and storage (see picture 4).
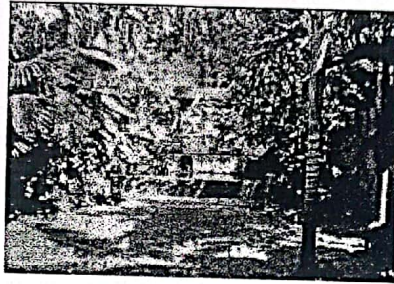


Picture 4

The second is to treat it as a garden or recreational space. Here the rear space is used as a means of visual pleasure that is segregated from the other spaces of the house. Residential areas where there is a linear housing development the rear spaces of all the residences could be combined in order to create a common walk way, park or as a green area but would not act as a community space. This would help enhance the streetscape as well as the quality of life of the residents. This would evoke a sense of a communal life without disrupting the privacy of the occupants. The duality in the planning, the private public, open-close, introverted-extroverted provides a greater value to the house and its occupants. The private zone of the house is open, inviting and porous whereas the public zone is closed, impermeable and exclusive. This is a recurring theme in urban tropical houses. Yet, the openness of the 'purist' model is adapted to the realities of urban life. Duality is a recurring theme in the urban context; it is the adaptation of the openness of an idea house to the reality of urban life (Charoenpong, 1996:146).

## Eco Sensitive Interior

The eco sensitiveness that permeates throughout the residence is a strategy that is used in urban houses to maximize the privacy of the occupant. The internal courtyards play a decisive role in this aspect. In principle the layout is always evocative of the traditional Sri Lankan courtyard in houses that creates a cooler environment within to contend with extreme heat due to the climate. As the house is encircled by a wall to establish the defensive space of the site, it is unavoidable that it generates some degree of heat within the house. Therefore in most case, each of the living spaces in the urban house are designed to capture the changing landscape on each side through deeply recessed openings that form transitory sheltered spaces between the inside and the outside. It thereby reduces the heat within the internal spaces. In most of the double or treble storied housing structures, there is not enough land to provide garden space. The roof gardens are a device that provides eco sensitive sentiments to both the interior and the occupant. This converts the internal courtyard space in to an external courtyard space which in a sense, creates cool external spaces.

While most of the extensive requirements of the urban dwellers are served around a large central courtyard, additional serviceable rooms are located along a smaller courtyard.

both linked by an open corridor. The bathrooms and dressing areas also open onto small landscaped internal or external courtyards. Structured in different directions with volumetric variation and projection, some urban houses are built almost entirely closed in appearance but open in interior. Each of such internal spaces have a unique identity, with open, enclosed and semi-enclosed spaces, constantly changing in relation, as one moves within the house or within each of its rooms. The planning ensures cross ventilation for every space within the house. This aspect along with the creation of the large internal courtyard gardens, the smaller external courtyard spaces and deep recessed windows create a house that is much cooler internally than the exterior making it extremely energy efficient. On the other hand it generates more privacy with a highly eco-sensitive interior.

## Conclusion

The evidence suggests that dwellings in urban Sri Lanka cater to certain necessities of the urban resident within a restricted space. A study of urban elements such as roads and paved areas, density of built-up areas, height and shape of buildings, green areas, water bodies and open areas will make it possible to identify ways in which those physical elements will impact on the lives of urban residents. This brief survey of urban dwellings in the greater metropolitan Colombo has identified the following observations that have been substantiated in the preceding pages.

The first observation is that the limited space for urban construction has sharpened the techniques and devices to create a conducive micro environment within the abode that is in total contrast to the inhospitable macro environment of urban congestion and chaos. The study has further revealed the clear connecting thread that connects privacy, and security to territory. The confined territory compels the maximization of privacy within the limited space while the congested environment makes security to be addressed with equal concern.

Traditional rural houses in Sri Lanka had no clear spatial demarcations that served individual needs. There were re no barriers in the sleeping and dining areas. They were designed communal units for family and kinsmen. The Urban housing today are in clear contrast to that tradition which was observed even by the lower middleclass until the advent of fast paced urbanization, Urbanization has encouraged individualization to a high degree that has made every urban home a confined oasis of urban comfort and seclusion. Every homebuilder now strives to be as innovative as possible in carving out his/her living space. The Urban dwelling in modern urban communities testify to a new life style that has cemented the erosion of community space. The paved walk ways and leisure parks built around water bodies enable the urban dwellers to enjoy a peculiar combination of privacy in the public space.

## References

Aldwin, C.M (1984) Book Reviews. "Are Modern Environment Less Meaningful Than Those in Traditional Cultures?. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 4, pp.177 – 182.

Alexander, C & Chermayeff, S (1963), *Community and Privacy*, New York, Anchor Books

Alexander, C et. al (1977) *A Pattern Language, Towns, Buildings, Construction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press

Altman, I (1975) *The Environment and Social Behavior*, Belmont, California, Wadsworth Publishing

Altman, I & Haythorn, W.W (1967) The Ecology of Isolated Groups, *Behavioral Science*, vol. 12, pp.169-182

Altman, I., & Chemers, M. (1980) *Culture and Environment.* Monterey, CA, Brooks/Cole

Brown, B & Altman, I (1983) "Territoriality, Burglary: Defensible Space and Residential and Environmental Analysis", *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 3, pp.203 -220

Charoenpong, V (1996) "Cubic House" in *Tropical Asian House*, Robert Powell (ed.), London, Thames and Hudson

Deasy,C.M (1985) *Designing Places for People*, New York , Whitney Library for Design

Ellis, P (1984) Book Reviews. "Human Behavior and Environment: Advances in Theory and Research", *Environment and Culture, Journal of Environmental Psychology* vol. 4, pp.81 -95.

Jung, C. G.(1989) (first published 1961), *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, London, Vintage Books Edition

Kent, S. (ed), (1993) *Domestic Architecture and Use of Space*, Cambridge, Cambridge Printing Center

Norberg-Schulz, C (1971) *Existence, Space and Architecture*, London, Studio Vista

Proshansky,H.M. (1970) *Environmental Psychology: Man and his Physical Setting*, New York, Holt Reinhart & Winston of Canada Ltd

Rapoport, A (1969) *House Form and Culture*, London, Prentice Hall International Inc

Rapoport, A (1982) *The Meaning of The Built Environment*, London, Sage Publications

Sorre, M (1962)*The Concept of Genre De Vie*, Wagner & Mikesell, Readings in Cultural Geography.

Sundstrom, E. & Altman, I (1974) "Field Study of Dominance and Territorial Behavior" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 30, pp.115-125