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Why a city block can be one of the loneliest places on earth

By [Eve Andrews \(https://grist.org/author/eve-andrews/\)](https://grist.org/author/eve-andrews/) on Jun 27, 2017

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Recently, a Grist reader wrote to ask Umbra (<https://grist.org/author/ask-umbra>) whether apartment buildings are designed to discourage interactions with neighbors. It struck a chord. (<https://grist.org>)

In the spring, I moved to my first solo apartment in a downtown building, and I have yet to exchange more than a “hello” with the people who live on either side of me. In fact, I’ve never seen the neighbor to my right. The tenant could be a human-sized badger — I have no idea.

Apartment life can be strangely isolating: the intimacy of removing a complete stranger’s underwear from the building washing machine; the awkwardness of silent elevator rides while rubbing elbows with a fellow tenant; the jealous pangs of hurrying alone past a cluster of happy friends sharing pizza on your stoop.



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For being so packed full of life, a modern city block can be one of the loneliest places on earth.

There are those mythical apartment buildings where movie nights and taco bar potlucks are a thing. But those seem like rare and lucky arrangements — to the point where lack of human interaction has been labeled a health crisis. In November, former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy identified social isolation

grist is one of our nation's most pernicious public health menaces (<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/news-events/news/articles/what-are-the-biggest-public-health-challenges-in-the-united-states>), alongside gun violence and opioid addiction. (<https://grist.org>)

Loneliness has significant political implications, too. Apartments make up almost a third (<http://www.nmhc.org/Content.aspx?id=4708#Structures>) of the housing stock in America's largest cities, with half of all of them being home to only a single person.

Imagine a city block full of apartment buildings; if everyone living there retreats into their own little units, rarely speaking to one another, there's no community identity, no shared sense of obligation and purpose. This isn't just a mental exercise — one survey found that the less neighbors socialize with each other (https://www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey/results_matrix.html), the less politically engaged they tend to be.

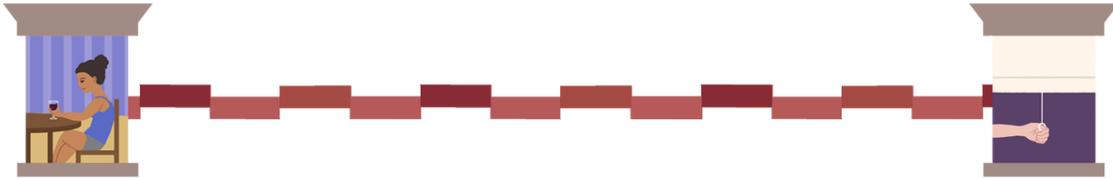
“The self-government functions of streets are all humble, but they are indispensable,” Jane Jacobs writes in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (<http://www.powells.com/book/the-death-and-life-of-great-american-cities-9780679644330/62-0?&PID=25450>), arguing against the type of 1960s-style “urban renewal” that actually made our neighborhoods more unlivable. “In spite of much experiment, planned and unplanned, there exists no substitute for lively streets.”

Jane “eyes on the street” (<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/193660-a-city-street-equipped-to-handle-strangers-and-to-make>) Jacobs would probably have had much to say about our current “eyes on the iPhone” lifestyle, too. Technology's relationship with political engagement is actually pretty complicated (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/04/25/civic-engagement-in-the-digital-age/>), but most of our Facebook feeds are likely more lively than our actual neighborhoods.

Luckily, there's growing awareness of the power of lively streets, along with efforts to get people looking up and talking to their neighbors again. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio's recent \$106 million climate resilience package (<https://grist.org/briefly/new-yorks-new-climate-program-includes-making-friends-seriously-heres-why/>) — specifically intended to address growing

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The rationale: In the face of pressing public threats like climate change, the best and most effective response is a community one. (https://grist.org)

But especially for many young city-dwellers, that sense of community remains elusive. It certainly is for me (I'm working on it (<https://grist.org/guides/umbra-apathy-detox/you-cant-build-community-without-well-your-community/>)) and maybe you. So let's get back to that initial reader question: Are the buildings where so many of us live making us lonely, or is it just us?



As any architect worth her copy of *Le Modulor* can tell you, buildings shape humans and our interactions with one another as much as we shape them.

And yes, experts say the way we build today does not foster strong connections with our neighbors. Famed sustainable architect Sim Van Der Ryn argues in *Design for an Empathic World* (<http://www.powells.com/book/design-for-an-empathic-world-9781610914260/62-1?&PID=25450>) that most buildings in which we live were designed with little thought given to *how* we live.

This approach to architecture is part of a larger cultural obsession with privacy — a concept that is very modern relative to human history, according to Christopher Leinberger, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. Three hundred years ago, residents of Western civilizations tended to cook, socialize, and even sleep in close, unprotected quarters.

“In the 20th century, for the first time in human history, we had the opportunity to build isolated developments in metropolitan areas, and we did it with a vengeance,” Leinberger says. The modern model for the built environment, he adds, is one that is segregated by race, income, and family status.

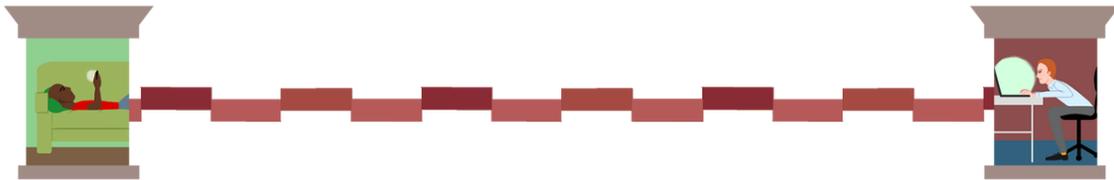
By contrast, the “empathic design” championed by Van Der Ryn means creating a space that attends to a person’s needs, physical and emotional health, and “connection to others.” Empathic buildings have inviting common spaces for residents to interact, and access to green space and the outdoors. They feel integrated with the street and the buildings around them.

I spoke with one architect whose firm designs with community and informal social interactions in mind. Schematic Workshop's Grace Kim describes a successful project as one in which residents are able to see community activity on a daily basis.

"That means having a hierarchy of public to private spaces in the homes — so people can retreat into the privacy of their homes, but have access to community just out their doors or through their kitchen window," Kim says.

When I ask Kim how she became interested in this field, she says, in so many words, that our isolation is killing us. "American society is very insular and nuclear, and it's actually been quite detrimental. I think incidents like Columbine and random shootings, people going postal, are a result of us living so individually and losing our sense of who we are, and of our community."

It is our animal nature to seek solitude. "A human being likes to 'withdraw into his corner,' and it gives him physical pleasure to do so," Gaston Bachelard notes in his landmark philosophical text on the home. But it's also human nature to seek out the company and care of others. We need a built environment that allows both aspects of human nature to thrive.



There are, of course, a million and one ways to design a building, and a million and three ways to meet people. But to begin to understand the impact of the former on the latter, I spoke to two young women who have moved to big cities — Seattle and New York, respectively — and started to establish their lives from the foundation of atypical buildings.

The choice of cities isn't a coincidence; Seattle and New York are two of the most cost-prohibitive urban areas in the country. The affordability of any neighborhood in either city has a "blink-and-you-missed-it" quality, which has the dual effect of pushing out long-term residents and forcing newcomers to cobble together fairly unconventional living situations.

Sarah Berkes' dream, after graduating from the University of Washington in 2015, was to move to New York City and pursue a career in fashion. Berkes, over the phone, is bubbly and energetic — she's the kind of person who appears to be

gnst mattering through a smile 90 percent of the time. Her college graduation gift from her parents was a one-way ticket to New York. In short order, she landed a job and then an apartment at a boarding house for professional women.
(https://gnst.org)

One might hear such a description and think: Really? In 2017? It's reminiscent of New York's legendary Barbizon Hotel, inspiration for the establishment in which Esther Greenwood slowly lost her mind in *The Bell Jar*. But the communal nature of the building — including shared meals — introduced Berkes to “some of her best friends in the city.” It's a setup, she notes, that reminds her of her old sorority house.

It isn't the architectural features of the Webster Apartments that contribute to its Delta Gamma dynamic, so much as the boarding house's emphasis on resident interaction. (Movie nights, happy hours, that sort of thing.) But there's no question that Webster helped ease Berkes' introduction to the city.

“If I just moved here and lived in a traditional apartment, I'd be on my own — like, do I go on Bumble BFF? Do I go outside on the street and try to talk to people? You'd have to go out and join clubs and find people who share interests.” (Which she has — Berkes is part of two running clubs, volunteers for an organization that helps train young girls to run marathons, and was a finalist in the Miss New York USA competition.)

The same kind of organized community is often sold as part of modern “microhousing” developments, which are meant to provide more affordable, super-small (around 200 square-foot) studio apartments. They're commonly found in quickly gentrifying cities. Real estate agents tend to sell them on their fun! dorm-like! amenities: shared kitchens, game rooms, rooftop decks for get-togethers.

“It's meeting a niche for those who don't qualify for affordable housing but can't meet the standard housing prices,” architect Grace Kim says. But, she notes, “most developers are doing it to make the most money possible — it's a very lucrative real estate model. That translates to not wanting to be generous in communal spaces.”

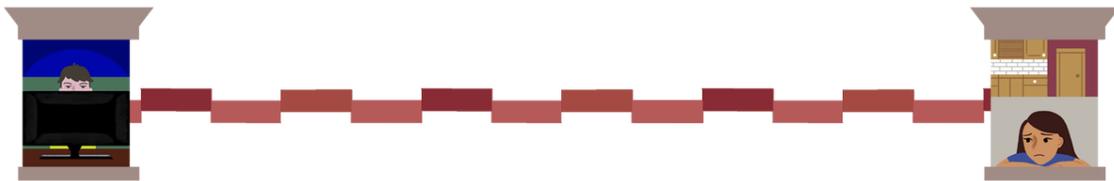
Racine Lemons, a gregarious 26-year-old teacher (and, full disclosure, an acquaintance), moved into one such development in the Belltown neighborhood of Seattle. “I saw my immediate neighbors all the time, but we never talked,” Lemons says. She would meet neighbors on the building patio or roof over the summer but,

gust
time to the time-honored Seattle freeze
(<https://www.theoaklist.com/lifestyle/seattle/how-i-learned-to-love-the-seattle-freeze>) never saw them again during the colder months.
(<https://gust.org>)

All the time she spent alone in her micro-unit, however, motivated Lemons to spend time volunteering with an organization in the neighborhood that works with at-risk seniors.

Lemons has lived in four different homes in Seattle in five years. She blames the city's skyrocketing rents and housing costs on lack of community involvement more than, say, the buildings themselves.

"The rent prices are a huge contribution to why we aren't able to socialize in our community," Lemons says. "I'm getting a new studio now, and I have to pick up more hours at work, which takes time out of how much I want to volunteer or socialize or participate in block parties. I have to work harder to live in the area that I want to live in, and as a result, I'm not contributing to the community."



At this point, we can maybe acknowledge that urban isolation might *not always* be the fault of the building. As Mira Mui, an architect at Schemata Workshop, explains, a conscious designer shouldn't forsake obligations to foster social interaction and community relationships. But it's ultimately the people living *within* that environment that truly make it a community.

"[A] metaphor that I like to use to exemplify the role of building and community are restaurants and food," Mui writes in an email. "In restaurants, the design of the restaurant itself can be a major factor in enhancing or worsening the meal experience — there's no denying that. But if the food is terrible, the restaurant design won't make it a successful. If the food is amazing, the restaurant design could be pretty terrible and it wouldn't really matter. Likewise, buildings can enhance community, but the people themselves will make the community."

And that's where we get to the elephant in the room: Which people are we talking about when it comes to community? The spritely newcomer? Or the community that existed before they got there? Arif Ullah has lived in New York for 30 years, and

grist runs into fellow natives.

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grist.org “In New York, I think we just experience gentrification at a heightened level — so many people want to live here,” Ullah says. “It’s almost like an ‘experience’ destination.”

Ullah is the director of programs of the Citizens Committee for New York City, an organization that provides microfunding for community improvement projects across the city. He grew up as the son of Bangladeshi immigrants in a large apartment complex in Queens. His parents, who live in a rent-controlled apartment, still live in the building — although many neighbors have had to leave due to rising rents.

Ullah contrasts his parents’ building to another in the neighborhood, in which he estimates about 90 percent of the tenants are Bangladeshi. “The building is like a village — people leave their doors open, go into each other’s apartments. There’s a really strong sense of community.”

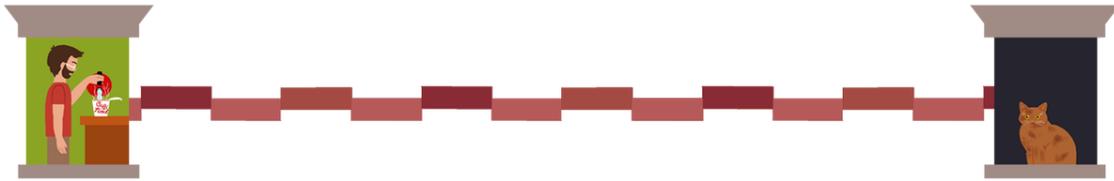
Again, that has nothing to do with the architecture of the building itself — it’s not a particularly “empathic” one. But things like shared ethnicity and culture are powerful ways to create a community within a building that was never designed for one. The impossible-to-keep-up-with cost of living in New York, though, is a significant detriment to the longevity of any such community.

That contributes to a transience, Ullah explains, that ultimately challenges any kind of community cohesion. And that’s not something Facebook can fix. “In many cases, social media can lead to a false sense of community,” leading people to avoid face-to-face interaction, he says. Still, Ullah has seen the value of social media as a powerful organizing tool.

And there are promising signs in New York, Ullah adds, including a big boom in community gardening groups and block associations around the city. They might be intended to do something very basic, like beautify a garden block, but they also become forums through which people can meet, then develop larger civic and political goals.

The potential pitfall, Ullah notes, is when newcomers take on the improvement of a neighborhood in a way that doesn’t take into account the needs or perspectives of those who have already lived there. “The new community that is privileged, usually

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white, are used to access and *having* that privilege. They then take stewardship or gain access to areas that people who have been living there for decades simply didn't think to do.”
(<https://grist.org>)



To get back to the question: You may live in a building that you feel cuts you off from the world, in a city that feels cold to you. The building, however, isn't going to change more quickly than you can. If you feel stifled and isolated, the best solution is to open the door and *go outside*.

It takes a lot less strength, after all, to tear down interpersonal walls than physical ones. I mean, you *could* take on the physical ones, but don't come to me for that security deposit.

Umbra's community-building tips

OK, so now what? How do you go about being a good — or at the very least, engaged — neighbor?

- Preserving affordable housing in your neighborhood is integral to a more civically engaged society. If you want to get more involved in that, *good news!* Affordable housing is featured in Umbra's [Apathy Detox Guide](https://grist.org/guides/umbra-apathy-detox/) (<https://grist.org/guides/umbra-apathy-detox/>) — here's how to get started (<https://grist.org/guides/umbra-apathy-detox/the-rent-is-too-damn-high-and-its-bad-for-the-planet/>).
- Getting to know your neighbors actually does require some planning, energy, and emotional fortitude, but — whoa! — we covered *that* in the Detox Guide, too. Our [primer](https://grist.org/guides/umbra-apathy-detox/you-cant-build-community-without-well-your-community/) (<https://grist.org/guides/umbra-apathy-detox/you-cant-build-community-without-well-your-community/>) includes sex tips (sort of).
- And if you simply need motivation to get up, out the door, and — not to be rude — over yourself, we've got it [right here](https://grist.org/guides/umbra-apathy-detox/still-feel-cynical-and-paralyzed-lets-talk/) (<https://grist.org/guides/umbra-apathy-detox/still-feel-cynical-and-paralyzed-lets-talk/>).

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