

BUILDING

FENCELESS COMMUNITIES

As urbanisation gets even denser on scarce land, can building developments without fences be a new solution? **Remy Guo** from the Centre for Liveable Cities uses examples from Copenhagen and Singapore to suggest how.

In land-scarce Singapore, a growing population over the last decade has created significant land-use pressure. As agencies are actively exploring land-optimising solutions, one key initiative is co-locating amenities.

Most people would relate this with mega-developments like Tampines Town Hub, where public functions such as a library, community club and public sports facilities are housed within one building. Co-location also refers to siting facilities such as childcare centres within park spaces. Another development approach increasingly common in recent years is opening up pockets of greenery within existing neighbourhoods for development.

What does a childcare centre in a park have in common with an eldercare centre within an existing estate? While the decision for locating such amenities may have been spurred on by “picking low-hanging fruits” in terms of available space, this also means a reduction in areas available to the public. While planners generally do due diligence to ensure that new developments are compatible with the existing context, such approaches can still trigger “NIMBY” (not in my backyard) reactions from the community due to perceived disamenities.

Must such developments be a zero-sum game? What if they can retain public spaces, letting us have our cake and eating it too?

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The inviting, inclusive quality of the public space helped reinforce community ownership.

How Copenhagen Removed Fences

Recent urban rejuvenation projects in Copenhagen, Denmark, by the Danish firm Nord Architects provide food for thought on how new developments and public spaces can be integrated through a fenceless approach.

The Guldberg School Yard is a case in point. Nørrebro was among Copenhagen's toughest neighbourhoods. The culturally diverse neighbourhood was a most unlikely place for a fenceless development. The place was the epicentre of the most serious riots in recent Danish history in 2007, when the clearing of squatters sparked four days of violent confrontation between those evicted and the police.

The high-density district also suffered from a shortage of outdoor public spaces and a myriad of socio-spatial issues. The city government's urban rejuvenation programme "New Urban Life around Guldberg Skole" brought

a series of architectural interventions focused on improving integration between developments and public spaces.

Guldberg School Yard was initiated in 2009 as one key project. To address the lack of quality outdoor public spaces within the neighbourhood, the school yard was conceptualised as a multi-functional space, serving as town square, public playground and schoolyard all at once. This helped create a precious multi-functional sliver of urban space. The key lies in the bold, thoughtful treatment of site boundaries. In place of a five-metre high fence enclosing the former school playground, a strip of public benches was built, inviting people to sit and watch children play. The benches also double as bike parking. While there were security concerns due to the schoolyard's openness, the inviting, inclusive quality of the public space helped reinforce community ownership by proving to be an asset for the neighbourhood and, in turn, encouraging public surveillance.

⁰¹ A mix of public and private housing in HDB estates.

⁰² Pockets of green in HDB estates can be well-used by residents for recreational activities.

⁰³ Guldberg School Yard: town square, public playground and school yard in Nørrebro, Copenhagen.

A key enabler was the participatory design process. The community and the school were invited to contribute ideas to shape the public space they wanted, with the architect as facilitator. The co-created design produced a sense of ownership even before the project was implemented, helping to ensure that the spaces would be well-used. Ideas from the community included seemingly whimsical ones like a track that does not touch the ground. This was translated creatively by the architects into tracks that run horizontally and vertically, allowing children to run, bike, skate and climb.

Dialogue between user groups helped shape the implicit rules that allow the space to function. For example, residents understand that they can use the space only after school hours. Such rules are based on mutual understanding and trust, which even extends to how discipline is instilled in students. Children are taught and trusted not to wander beyond the schoolyard, while peer support among the children helps prevent stragglers from wandering beyond the group.



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01 Interactive boundaries at Amager Fælled Skole blur the edges between private and public.



Creating Grey Boundaries

Fenceless developments do not always need to be so radical. Neither does a boundary wall necessarily mean segregating entire developments from the public. Spatial integration is often far more nuanced and involves creative reinterpretation of the relationship between private and public space.

The design for Amager Faelled School Yard exemplifies this approach in redefining boundaries. Situated between forested areas and the city,

the school is at the city edge. Rather than creating a self-contained institution that would cut the community off from the greenery, the school boundary was designed as a series of active spaces where people can sit, play and interact. Different architectural treatments are applied to the low wall around the edge, while niches and terraces allow the entire boundary wall to be used as a parkour course. Play areas are integrated into the edge, inviting the public to enjoy and share the new facilities. The boundary between public and private is effectively blurred.

The school yard was also designed as a lush green sanctuary, in response to students' desire for a "forest school". This gave neighbouring residents a green space accessible to the public after school hours.

The Amager Faelled School Yard, as it is today, is the result of rigorous engagement between the community and the school. Dialogue and interaction began during the design process, before any brick was laid. This enabled different groups to be recognised as "co-owners" of the shared space and helped establish their sustained involvement and interest in the amenities.



The Copenhagen approach: focus on urban life before designing spaces and buildings

It's Not Just About Removing Fences; It's About Contributing to Public Life Through Design

The success of Guldberg and Amager Faelled schoolyards show that removing fences is not means to an end, but it can also help create quality public spaces that are inviting. These are outcomes of the overall Danish architectural policy, which recognises the potential of good design in supporting “opportunities for communities and urban life”.

In an interview with CLC, Tina Saaby, City Architect for Copenhagen, emphasised the importance of outdoor urban life in contributing to Copenhagen being one of the world's most liveable cities. This is how Copenhagen approaches the relationship between urban life and architecture:

We want to focus on city life before designing urban space, and we want to focus on urban space before designing the buildings...It's a little different from how you normally plan the city because you often start with putting buildings on a big model, and then maybe you realise that there is an urban space and you start to plan for that. But often, you do not talk about the urban life, and therefore, you will often discuss it in the end instead of in the beginning.

Copenhagen's approach prioritises the role of buildings in supporting urban life. Developers are expected by city authorities to propose how their developments can contribute to urban life before finalising space and building designs.

This presents a new development paradigm that aligns with decades of well-established discourse on public life and space. Jan Gehl, the prominent Danish urban designer who deeply influenced Copenhagen's current approach to urban planning and design, emphasised the importance of supporting urban life by integrating buildings with their surroundings rather than segregating them, inviting rather than repelling people, opening up to the public realm rather than closing in.

Similarly, American urbanist Jane Jacobs famously advocated the importance of “eyes on the streets” for urban environments, which can only be achieved by allowing opportunities for visual and physical connections between people.



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The Social Dividends of ‘De-Fencing’

The social benefits of fenceless developments are evident, serving as platforms for everyday social interaction. According to Gehl, such casual exchanges, as simple as experiencing other people through visual connections, “represents a particularly colourful and attractive opportunity for stimulation” and is the basis for enriching urban life. Fenceless designs and shared space solutions also contribute towards creating a more inclusive society.

With Singapore society becoming increasingly diverse in recent years due to a widening income gap and influx of foreigners, gated developments – particularly those serving certain target groups such as international schools and luxury condominiums – can only exacerbate perceptions of social divide and exclusion. On the other hand, shared public spaces provide opportunities for different groups to experience each other’s presence in an everyday, casual setting. This offers an undemanding way of facilitating a sense of community.

01 Tina Saaby, City Architect for Copenhagen, shares with CLC the key factors leading to the city’s urban planning successes.



Singapore's public housing estates...present excellent opportunities to create truly inclusive, fenceless communities.

Bringing Down Fences in Singapore

Fenceless building designs and shared space concepts are already being considered to various degrees in Singapore. Initiatives such as the Dual Use Scheme, introduced in 2007 to avail sports facilities in schools for community use, and fenceless private residential estates in Marina South and Kallang Basin are some examples.

The greatest potential, however, is in Singapore's public housing estates which are mostly fenceless environments. Singapore's public housing programme is well-established as a social leveller, providing quality homes for over 80 per cent of the population. In all respects – physical, social and economic – these towns present excellent opportunities to create truly inclusive, fenceless communities.

Nevertheless, pockets of gated developments still exist within public housing towns, mostly public schools and private condominiums, for security concerns. The Copenhagen examples show that operational and security issues in fenceless developments can be addressed through creative architectural solutions. For example, by positioning more private areas like classrooms above ground level, the functionality of such spaces can be maintained while freeing up the ground floor for public use.

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**Making it Work:
From Zero-Sum to Win-Win**

Integrating shared public spaces as part of developments requires everyone’s active involvement, including the private and people sectors, to ensure that all buildings play a role in contributing to urban life. Public sector initiative, in particular, is crucial in getting all stakeholders on board to realise fenceless designs. This can be achieved through public projects that demonstrate the benefits of fencelessness, incentives for private developers to create shared spaces, and urban design guidelines to create a coherent network of public spaces. Khoo Teck Puat Hospital is a good example of a fenceless development with shared community space, with the Yishun Pond as a “green-blue” asset benefiting both hospital users and residents.

It is perhaps timely to look beyond packing urbanisation neatly into big-box developments to overcome land scarcity. Co-location of amenities within a single development needs creative architectural solutions to facilitate synergy and minimise negative impact between multiple functions. Similarly, new developments within public open spaces and existing communities require design interventions by the public sector to enhance the socio-spatial relationships between buildings. By integrating buildings with the neighbourhood through quality fenceless designs and shared spaces, new developments can present fresh opportunities to inject new life into existing communities, and help create an even more liveable city.

- 01 The Guldberg schoolyard has a public ground floor, while the private areas are above.
- 02 The Yishun Pond is a waterfront park created as a result of multi-agency collaboration for the enjoyment of both patients and residents.