

Public/Private

Concerning the Concept of Threshold¹

Riken Yamamoto

In the past, the city was made up of communities, which in turn were made up of families. Some things were definitely public and other things definitely private, and we built our cities with spaces that corresponded to these two classes of things. However, it has been pointed out for a number of years now that such an approach is becoming slightly problematical. I believe that ultimately the problem boils down to the question of what is public and what is private.²

1. Adapted from *Theory of Dwelling* (1993). Unpublished manuscript (excerpted version), translated into English by Hiroshi Watanabe.

2. From a keynote speech by Fumihiko Maki at a symposium organised by the Italian Trade Commission.

We are no longer certain what is public and what is private or, to put it another way, what is privacy and what is community. These questions are not particularly new but are nonetheless difficult to answer clearly. I think the reason we cannot answer them is because they are bound up in ideas. They are bound up in values that are closely tied to space or architecture. That is, the difficulty lies in the fact that the question, "What is public and what is private?" implies a second question, "What is public space and what is private space?" The boundary between those two questions is quite ambiguous.

We believe that words like 'privacy' and 'community', or 'public' and 'private' are abstract concepts of relationships between human beings. We believe that those abstract concepts are only actualized and made manifest when they have been translated into space. That is, when they have been made concrete. Therefore, the difficulty actually exists on two planes, in two layers of meaning. There is the difficulty of evaluating ideas called privacy and community, and then there is the procedural difficulty of translating those ideas into space or architecture.

Concepts such as privacy and community can be discussed as theory. They can also be evaluated as ideas. However, to translate those abstract concepts into space or architecture requires another, separate process: a process involving a theory concerning space, or, a theory for converting abstract concepts into spatial concepts. We do not have a theory. We do not have a clear logic, either. We discuss the idea of community one moment and then, in the next moment, suddenly turn the discussion to apartment buildings with tiled roofs, or traditional wall materials, or the adoption of some European style of apartment building. We do not have a clear process for converting an idea into space or architecture.

The reason we have no qualms about calling an open area that is just a bit spacious a 'plaza', 'common space' or 'public space', or the reason why we matter-of-factly refer to the bedrooms in a house as the 'private quarters' and the living room as the 'public area', is that we have no means of converting schemas of human relationships (or ideas about the way human beings congregate) into spatial schemas. Therefore, such ideas can all too easily be replaced by questions regarding the atmospheric or superficial treatment of architecture.



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3. There may be other methods for conceptually schematising a closed relationship. For example, there are more general methods of schematisation, such as the relationship between the inside of a closed curve and the outside. However, even if we assume a condition in which the enclosed space is completely cut off from the outside space and there is absolutely no communication between the two spaces, it would realistically have little meaning. Or if we try to determine whether the space is closed or open by means of the character of that closed curve itself, that is, the character of the boundary, it would merely be another variation on the abovementioned discussion concerning the material at the boundary. Being closed or open is a question, not of being physically cut off or not, but of the presence or absence of some sort of constraint on communication between the spaces. And that constraint is the “threshold”.

Is there, though, a convenient measure by which we can convert abstract concepts into spatial concepts? The fact that architects have laboured endlessly since the start of the twentieth century, without discovering an effective measure for doing so, may mean we are erring in some way in the way we frame the question. The idea that there is a process for translating something into space, by which we can bridge the gap between ideas and spatial schemas, may itself be wrongheaded.

We talk about public versus private, or about the community, but when we talk about such concepts, are we not already talking about spatial relationships? I suspect that such concepts are impossible to explain except as spatial relationships. It isn't that we first conceive abstract concepts or ideas, such as privacy and community, and then try to translate them into space. Instead, spatial concepts may be implicit in concepts such as privacy and community.

To put it another way, concepts such as public, private and community, which concern the relationship between group and individuals, may be impossible to actualize unless they are translated into space. To translate something into space means to substitute for that something a relationship between spaces. If that is so, then we are indeed able to describe concepts such as public, private and community as relationships in spatial arrangements.

For example, Narifumi Suzuki's view below is a more realistic, that is, more architectural expression of what Maki said in the statement quoted at the outset.

One other thing I felt, having lived in an apartment building, is that an apartment layout is completely cut off from the outdoors. I have often studied the closed or open character of, or communication between inside and outside in, housing, but it is quite frightening to actually live in such housing. I climb stairs but all I see are closed steel doors; I know absolutely nothing about what goes on inside the units. Once I enter a unit and close the door, I am in another, completely isolated world.³

Suzuki's approach is to frame the questions, what is public and what is private, in stark, spatial terms. That is, he uses direct, graphic expressions such as *closed* or *open character*, *inside*, *outside*, and *isolated*. Words such as closed character, open character, inside and outside are words describing space, spatial characteristics or relationships. The expression “closed character” means the “closed character



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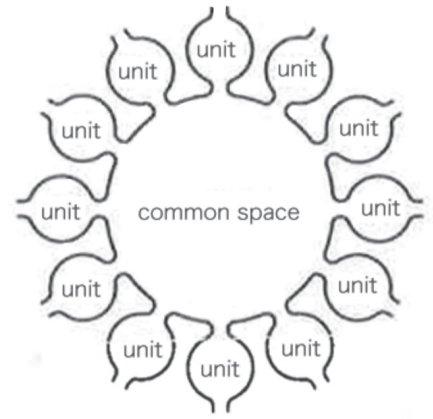


Fig. 1

of space”; by “openness”, we mean the “openness of space”. “Inside” and “outside”, too, mean the inside and outside of a particular space.

It is obvious. Despite that, if we are asked what sort of space is closed or open in character, we cannot say for certain. I believe the central question is a question of spatial arrangement. Being open or closed is more a question of the interrelationship of two spaces, which come into contact with each other, than a question of the material at the boundary between those spaces. Is there a way of describing the relationship between those two spaces (that come into contact in general terms, not as a problem of materials)? If it is possible to describe a closed relationship, or an open relationship, as a spatial relationship, then it should logically be possible to describe such things as public or private in terms of spatial arrangements.

The concept of threshold

Fig. 1 is a schematic of the way units are arranged in the Kumamoto Prefecture Hotakubo Daiichi Public Housing project, completed in 1991. Units for 110 households are arranged around a central open space. There have been other housing projects organised around open spaces, but this is different in that there is no entrance allowing free access to the open space from outside the project. There is a community centre that serves as a gateway but, basically, the central open space can only be accessed through the individual units.

Each of the units arranged around the central open space has two entrances. One is the front door for accessing the unit from outside. The other is an entrance that connects the unit to the central open space. The 110 units are divided into three buildings – an east building, a west building, and a north building – and the buildings are in turn divided into blocks. There are 16 blocks in all, and each block contains five to eight units. Each block has two stairways, one on the front access side and the other on the central open space side. Using these two stairways, anyone living in that block is free to go through his or her unit and on down to the central open space. That is, each unit serves as a gateway to the central open space.

The arrangement is quite closed to the outside world. There is in fact an emergency entrance to one side of the community centre; if it is kept open, then the central open space is open to the outside world. In that case, the housing project is not exactly represented by the schematic; however, conceptually, the spatial



Riken Yamamoto - Hotakobo Housing Kumamoto City, Kumamoto. Photo: Andrew Barrie

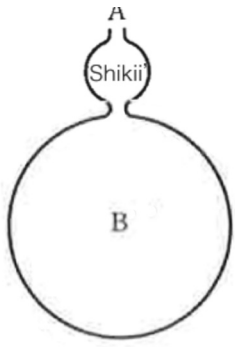


Fig. 2

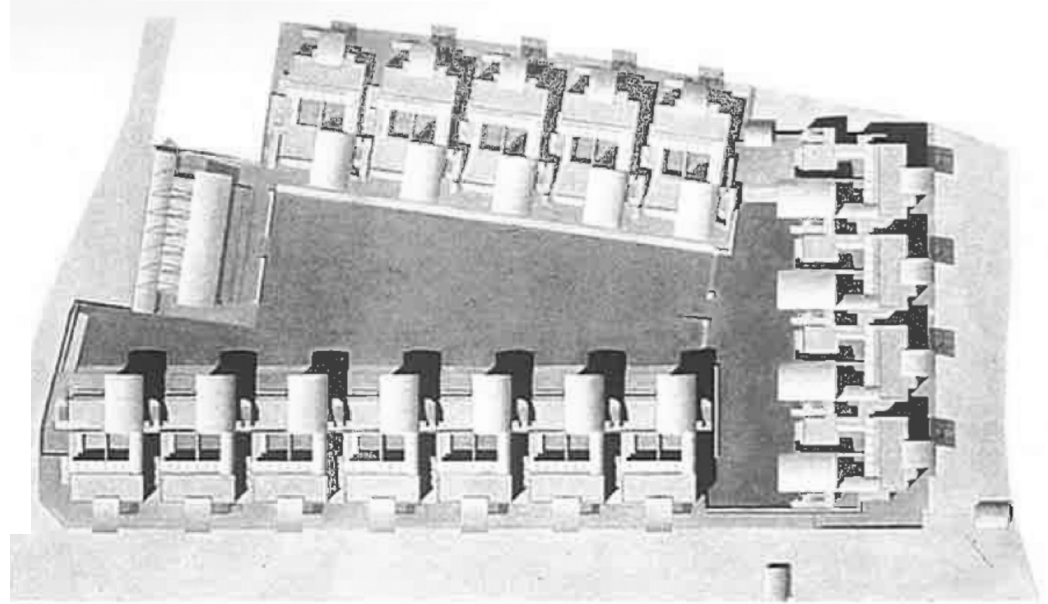


Fig. 3

arrangement is closed to the outside world. “Closed”, here, simply refers to the spatial arrangement. By “the outside world”, I mean the world outside this arrangement – the outside created by this arrangement.

The way the units are arranged – so that the central open space is accessed through the units – creates this closed central open space. That is, the units serve to cut off the central open space from the outside world, or, to connect it to the outside world. The function individual units serve, with respect to the central open space, is that of a “threshold”. Simply put, a threshold is “a spatial device situated between two spaces of different character that separates or connects the two spaces”. It can also be a spatial device, when a space of a certain character is placed inside a space of a different character, to preserve the character of either space (fig. 2 is an abstract schematic of this). To put it another way, a threshold is a device for cutting out a space of character B from a space with the character A. And the relationship of B, cut out by means of the threshold, with respect to A can be called a closed relationship.⁴

The spatial device for communicating with the outside world is the threshold. I believe the space that is protected, so that there is no mutual interference between it and the outside world, the space beyond the threshold, that is, the space whose communication with the outside world is restricted, can be called a private space. If that is so, then “private space” is nothing more than a term used in reference to a certain characteristic of space created by a spatial arrangement. A spatial characteristic is not something created in response to some pre-established relationship concerning, say, the number of persons or the inherent nature of the space itself. Rather, the spatial arrangement itself serves to prescribe human relationships in that arrangement.

Thresholds – devices that create spatial units

I have stated that a threshold serves to cut out a space with the characteristic B from a space with the characteristic A. And I went on to say that the relationship of B to A can be called a “closed relationship”. To put it another way, the threshold cuts out a unit called B from A. The space called B is separated from A as a space that is inherently different in character from the space called A. The threshold can be said to preserve that inherent character. If that inherent character is something that is always maintained, and it is always separated from the outside world by a threshold, then the space with that inherent character can be called an individual spatial unit – an autonomous spatial unit.

That spatial unit can be referred to as, for example, a house. Or the spatial unit may be a much larger community, for example, a village or a collection of houses.

If that unit is called a house, then the space that corresponds to the threshold can be called a “reception room” or “guest room” – that is, a room for maintaining public relationships. A space in the inner recesses of the house, which is used to maintain private relationships, can be called a “family room”. Or, we can, as in the Islamic or Hindu world, call the public spaces “rooms for men” and the private spaces “rooms for women”. A room may be named for the use to which it is put or with respect to a relationship between people. It can vary, depending on region, culture or period. The layout, too, can vary. Nevertheless, we call those spatial arrangements houses and can tell that, though diverse, they all have the same structure, because we can tell that they are all closed spatial units.

The families that live in a house vary widely as well. The reason we call all of them families and can tell that they are similar in organisation is because they all live in spatial units called houses. They are all constrained by spatial units called houses. That is, we can tell that all groups constrained by spatial arrangements called houses are variations of the same group, no matter what sort of group that may be, because all spatial arrangements called houses have the same structure.

The reverse can also be said: the human relationship constrained by the spatial unit created by means of the threshold is called the family. We can say that if we look at it from just the point of view of spatial arrangements. The spatial arrangement created by the threshold constrains and reinforces the relationship called the family. If it is true that the spatial unit constrains the human relationship and forms it into a unit, then that idea applies also to the relationship to a collection of families.

Threshold of a multi-unit housing project

How can we describe a collection of houses as a spatial unit? I believe there are two ways. One is an arrangement that provides a threshold for the collection as a whole. The other is an arrangement in which each housing unit is itself a threshold for the collection as a whole. They are both able to create a closed space. The former is an arrangement that suggests an extremely powerful system of supervision, in which a single threshold controls the entire collection of units (as in the system of feudal communities of the past). By contrast, the closed space created by the latter arrangement is controlled independently by the individual units. It is a collective form with a system of supervision that is the reverse of the former – the collection of units as a whole is controlled by individual units.

The Hotakubo Daiichi Public Housing project uses a system of arrangement in which each unit serves as a threshold. This project has an arrangement – a central open space that is a private space closed by 110 thresholds, and units that are each directly connected to the outside world – that is the complete opposite of the conventional collective method and is intended to organise a collection of 110 units into one larger, complete unit. The relationship inside that complete unit can be called a “community”. That is, the most private space of that larger unit is the central open space which is closed by thresholds; this can be called a “common” space possessed by the 110 units. The relationship established around that “common” space is a community. Conversely, the relationship of that complete larger unit to the outside world is a “public” relationship.

That is one possible way of expressing as a spatial arrangement the relationship called a community, or the relationship called public versus private.