



Local Level

Understanding life in neighbourhoods

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The problem with Home Zones

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We tend to see Home Zones as ‘win-win’ developments because they appeal to a range of residential needs. They seem to make streets safer, more visually appealing and therefore less likely to be unkempt, and they stimulate informal surveillance – ‘eyes on the street.’ From the community development perspective, they can be said to help foster a sense of community and to encourage casual encounters among residents. The process of developing a home zone in itself should be one that engages and involves local people, hence contributing to viable communities. So why aren’t they everywhere? What’s the catch?

To understand the home zones movement we probably need to consider three related social issues: the domination of the car, the diminished significance of neighbourhood social ties, and our uncertainty over the nature of community space.

Cars are designed to go far quicker than humans walk, and we expect them to. The infrastructure of roads that has grown up around the car culture has come to reflect the driver’s low expectations of having anything to do with pedestrians. To appreciate this, try driving at 10 *mph* down a standard highway. It’s very hard to do, for various reasons. Cars and residents are not expected to mix, so one dominates the other. Redressing the balance calls for innovative measures and a significant cultural shift.

Cars are among a range of technologies that help us strengthen our social ties beyond the local. More of us now work remotely, we tend not to shop or take our leisure locally, unless it be privately in front of the television. We travel greater

distances to meet with friends and family. We tend to have fewer strong social ties at neighbourhood level, keeping in touch with a more interest-based network of contacts by telephone and email, and by meeting them outside our neighbourhoods. Most connections with our neighbours are likely to be at our own discretion. This 'diminished need to be neighbourly'¹ doesn't necessarily affect us all, but it contributes to a diminished public realm and profoundly affects those, like older people, and young children and their mothers, for whom the local community context remains vital.

Perhaps we have begun to lose our sense of the seamlessness of different kinds of space. Increasing privatisation of our built environment forces us to distinguish the private from the civic and the public. We usually can tell 'community' space (say, the yard within a housing estate) from public space. But what about the semi-private spaces outside our homes, where casual encounters can take place as people have the protection of the ambiguity of shared space? Somehow the domination of roads has overcome our readiness to assert the importance of community space.

Of course there are issues around the concept of home zones, and these are not trivial. One neighbourhood warden I spoke to observed: "it creates too many blind spots." In Northmoor in Manchester, where I did some research, rat running on the unzoned roads was evident and if you live on one of those streets, it's likely that you're paying the price for improvements elsewhere. And how do we take account of an increase in car ownership as the success of the home zone area is reflected in increased relative wealth?

The issue of displaced traffic is of course massive but it needs to be related to the question of the *definability* of the neighbourhood. Where a neighbourhood is not readily defined by topographical features, a home zone may not be appropriate. So how do we reconcile that with the fact that those who live in an undefined locality will be suffering the consequences?

But perhaps we should regard these problems as less significant than the progress being made overall on *reasserting local social life*. Welcoming streets that can be walked and played in, stimulating casual and informal encounters and therefore contributing to civic life and social capital – those seem to be clear outcomes from home zones and justify the effort. This is why I have been calling for research that offers a before-and-after social network analysis of a home zoned area.

The problem with Home Zones is that they're special. These kinds of neighbourhood should be normal and ubiquitous. The flow between community space and public space should be seamless, legible and familiar. We need to recover a context in which pedestrians and motorists negotiate shared space,

¹ Blokland, T. (2003). *Urban bonds: social relationships in an inner city neighbourhood*. Cambridge, Polity.

revealing neighbourhoods that have a sense of community ownership and civic potential. If you drive into one of these neighbourhoods it should be immediately clear to you that you do so as a guest and there are expectations on you to exercise control. A *renewal.net* document² tells us that typical home zone costs are around £200-300,000 per street. If that's seen as exceptional, perhaps there's a study to be done, which quantifies the costs of vandalism, poor health, loneliness and depression, low sociability among children, constrained play opportunities, stress from danger, pollution and road accidents, low levels of community involvement – just for starters. People who want home zones shouldn't have to make this case: it should be the other way around. People who want to drive all over other people's neighbourhoods should have to justify all the costs implied in that, because the sense of community is fragile and takes a lot of rebuilding.

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Key sources

Home Zones website - <http://www.homezones.org/>

Home Zone news - <http://www.homezonenews.org.uk/>

Neighbourhoods weblog - <http://neighbourhoods.typepad.com/neighbourhoods/>

² *Home zones: solving the problem,*

<http://www.renewal.net/Documents/RNET/Solving%20the%20Problem/Homezones.doc>