

THE COLLECTIVE QUALITY OF PRIVACY IN SEJIMA WING-KITAGATA HOUSING: NEUTRALIZING PERSPECTIVES

CHARIKLEIA PANTELIDOU

lilapante@gmail.com • Department of Architecture, University of Thessaly, Volos, Greece

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Abstract

Amid social and environmental conditions of sharpness and hostility, theory has coped with contemporary needs and desires through schemes far from beliefs of certainty, clarity and autonomy. In such context, collective housing is introduced as an answer to overcrowded and degraded urban environments by suggesting new modes of living and new forms of connection between the private and the public, as well as respective socio-political perspectives. In this paper, we focus on Sejima's wing Kitagata housing in Gifu and investigate the ways in which privacy is constituted as a spatial quality and the meanings provided by. In this sense, we seek an interpretation of collective housing as a field of possible reconsiderations of traditional concepts and also an attempt to theorize their further connotations as regards the relationship between space and the subject.

In specific, Sejima's wing Kitagata apartment building consists a field where the western and eastern traditions about a contradicting or harmonizing theorization of the opposites, respectively, converge to each other. Related to such character is a kind of ambiguity which accompanies this architectural project regarding its exposing or protecting function in relation to privacy. Through analysing the three spatial elements which we believe are central to the maintenance of privacy in this project, that is the open access corridor on the north facade, the closed glazed corridor on the south facade, and the room-like terraces, we find that privacy is constituted as an effect of a designed system of intermediate spaces which instil in it a collective quality. However, the certain character of the relationship between the private and the collective in the project is based on a neutralizing quality which excludes conflict as a transforming condition in relation to spatial dynamics. Such condition is accompanied by respective implications on the political aspect of coexistence in space and housing.

Keywords: collective housing, private space, public space, neutrality, intermediate spaces

Word count: 5633

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, economic crisis, wars, and environmental decay have shaped a state of emergency for the contemporary people, which present schemes reveal inefficient to cope with. The frustration of the Modern vision has been followed by technological quests for new ways of living oriented to a liquid perception of a sharpened reality, while the liberation of contemporary thought from beliefs about a universal harmony and the autonomy of a rational subject formed the theoretical field which accompany the modern condition. In such context, architecture labours to contribute by its own means, sometimes being capable to suggest radical ideas and sometimes absorbed within the existed schemes.

Amid extreme social and environmental conditions, cities are being transformed following the contemporary preference for any kind of groups and collectivities instead of the opposition between the individual and the society (Jameson 1991). Collective space comes at the foreground being conceived on the one hand as an expansion of private space in a framework of life resources saving (Webster 2002), and on the other hand as an alternative to conceptions of public space as a field of domination and exclusion (Madanipour 2003, Amin 2002). New versions of collective housing are introduced in multiple types, forms and meanings, replacing both the traditional family apartment building and the suburban house, seeking ecological sustainability, economic sufficiency and social solidarity through architectural attempts of escaping from hierarchies or from social influence (Lootsma 2009, Ibelings 2009). Complexes of vertical urbanism, green structures, big or middle scale buildings, open settlements with common urban structures identified as co-housing, while also gated communities, articulate today the heterogeneous spectrum of collective housing, towards a modern approach of the collective.

Collective housing, as a sort of private space transformed through qualities related to the social aspects of the human, provides a fruitful field of questioning regarding privateness and publicness as primary life models. In such context, contemporary architecture suggests a wide spectrum of intermediate spaces where private and public space are reconceptualized introducing new qualities of experience and dwelling. Indeed, in today's condition of living in overcrowded urban environments and processes of impoverishment, the renewed problematization of collective housing spatialities becomes of great importance. In this paper we are going to focus on a contemporary example of collective housing, Sejima's wing Kitagata housing in Gifu, in order to investigate the ways that privacy is constituted as a spatial quality and the specific content and meanings it receives as such. In other words we are going to detect the ways which the designer has maintained privacy with, and seek an interpretation of the latter as a spatial quality created by architecture. Notwithstanding, the examination of the ways in which architecture manages privacy is an issue related to the socio-political relationship between space and subject. Considering architecture as a critical field of reality and design as a creative parameter of everyday potentiality, we study collective housing in the perspective of a quest for modes of a better life for all.

2. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF PRIVACY IN COLLECTIVE HOUSING ARCHITECTURE

Architectural modes are not independent from historical condition and everyday living, and the spatial formation of privacy is to a specific measure related to the ways that people perform their living practices and are socially organized. In this sense, the ways that the individual and the collective are each time perceived in relation to each other, is significantly connected to the architectural variations in which the relation of private and public space acquires meaning as antithetic or complementary, aggressive or conciliatory, well defined or fluid. The distinction between the private and public is traced back to the 18th century of the West and is derived from the antithesis between nature and culture and the identification of the private with nature and of

the public with culture (Sennett 1974). Apparently, the specific ways that privacy is conceived and practiced in a given society are meaningful for the latter's attitude towards the public realm.

The suggestions of Modern architecture for collective housing were inspired by the Soviet Constructivism's architectural movement and its social vision. Since the new subject had to dwell new spatial types against the single house and bourgeoisie's bonds to the family, the individual space was minimized in favor to common facilities. However, Modern collective housing, though oriented to mass society, was not indifferent to privacy and the private space seemed to guarantee the individual needs against an urban character of the residence. As a result, Le Corbusier was critiqued for failing to conceive of urbanism in terms of public space, despite his theories on the urbanization of the architectural scale (Hight 2009).

The reaction to Modernism included critique on homogeneity and the loss of privacy in a wide sense (Frampton 2007, Klotz 1988). From the 'psychological stability' of a landscape consisted of high-rise buildings, according to Bakema's considerations, to the integration of the 'streets-in-the-air' in a residential complex, as the Smithsons proposed, privacy was denoted as a spatial quality revalued in convergence with the urban. As long as mass society and technological progress proceed, an extended consumerism audience was needed and socio-political interest was oriented to the equalizing private realm (Kondylis 1991). From Smithson's turn to the 'house of the future' to Krier's reinvention of the traditional city, privacy was intended as a cultural value of public interest. The opening of the private realm to the public might no more be expressed through the glass walls of Mies' houses, but transparency continued to express the abolition of separation between the private and the public realm through new modes and forms. Rossi's reintegration of the corridor typology within collective housing was meant to overcome consumerism and the loss of interpersonal relationships through converging privacy and everyday collective life.

Whereas Phenomenology acknowledges interiority over exteriority and, thus, subjectivity over the external world, Structuralism perceives the subject as part of a signifying unified system where it can nevertheless develop its own identity. The architectural translation of such approach was the consideration of space in terms of structural relations among its elements (Gelernter 1995), which prioritized interstitial areas over private and public space. As Aldo van Eyck highlighted, the very essence of the twin phenomena is in fact complementary, not contradictory (Hale 2000: 157), and the interstitial spaces created through the double entrances towards the private apartments in Hertzberger's residential complex in Kassel brought together spatial qualities both of privacy and collectivity.

While postmodern architecture introduced a hybrid nature of space allowing to simultaneous references to the private and the public, the contemporary approach of collectiveness declares neutrality as a prerequisite for diversity. By the advent of the information era and the domination of a synchronic time over space, space and society were segmented into innumerable pieces and diversity became the dominant concept under architectural creation (Tschumi 1996). In such context privacy is expected to be spatially privileged in contemporary collective housing, as long as diversity highlights reality as a sum of different individual elements. In that sense, it seems that privacy and diversity converge to freedom, the other primary value of today's architecture and the contemporary theory in general. The fact that in contemporary architecture the 'house' is in a way substituted by the 'neighborhood' does not at all contradict the connection of diversity and freedom to privacy, as long as the stated preference to the collective instead of the individual or the public is accompanied by the creation of a secondary reality through marketing and advertising (Ellin 1999). Worth to mention that in other approaches of collective housing, in a world perceived as unstable, dangerous and hostile, privacy is considered to be protected in contemporary exclusive buildings and settlements known as gated communities (Pantelidou 2012), while cohousing settlements are dealing with the symptoms of today societies by enhancing everyday collective life and communal space over privacy (Vestbro 2000).

In the next chapters we are going to investigate the forms and norms of privacy as appeared in Sejima's wing Kitagata apartment building, an architectural project that is shifted between western pursuit of a cultural maintenance of opposition and eastern belief to a natural harmony between opposites.

3. GIFU KITAGATA APARTMENT BUILDING - SEJIMA WING: THE DESIGN OF PRIVACY THROUGH A SYSTEM OF INTERMEDIATE SPACES

In architectural presentations, Gifu Kitagata apartment building is usually mentioned in reference to spatial qualities like transparency, flexibility and thinness, instead of the public-private space relationship. However, this last issue seem to coexist in parallel or under the prevalent design principles of the building. Sejima expresses some thoughts on this:

"I want to make two things. One is a new type of boundary...that we want to make some privacy between public and private space. Usually making privacy means having to make a very thick, hard wall, but I think we are looking for another way ... And then another thing I want is to make a very thin volume, but with such a plan that even if it is thin, people still can't understand what is happening inside" (Zaera 2000:13)

Two things seem to come out: the first one is that privacy is stated as one of the main intentions of the architect, and the second one is that it is considered as a significant result of the primary intentions of the architect which are transparency and thinness. Although this excerpt was included in a discussion about the programmatic or perceptual nature of SANAA's architecture, its importance here is related to the very essence of the maintenance of privacy: it is this possible secondary character of privacy, a kind of side effect of the primary qualities of the building, that results to an ambiguity about whether the building exposes to or protects everyday private life from the public. And in more concrete words, this ambiguity is related to the fact that privacy is not designed as an intended spatial quality in itself, but is treated as a quality aroused from the relationship between the private and the public space and this relationship's design maintenance.

In Gifu three spatial elements compose the relationship between the private and the public space and are central to the maintenance of privacy: the access open corridor on the north facade, the glazed closed corridor on the south facade, and the terraces, room-like voids, piercing the building across the breadth (Figure 1).



Figure 1

3.1 The access corridor

The access corridor on the northern facade connects the urban environment to the building and the apartments, acquiring a public character. Running the full length of the building's northern facade on each

floor, it receives the whole entry-exit function towards and from every single apartment room which becomes the basic dwelling unit of the housing. Since the room instead of the apartment is connected to the access corridor through an opening entrance-exit door, a direct unmediated relationship between the public and the private space is created. This kind of non-mediation has an impact on the semantic definitions both of the room as private space and the corridor as public space.

In the context of a usual housing order, the connection between the private space of the rooms and the public space of the stairs and corridors is mediated from the private unit of the apartment, while literally the stairs and corridors of the housing also constitute private space, a private common-use space being accessible and open to all housing inhabitants, but in no case to the public. In this sense, privateness and publicness as qualities of space are set in proximity with each other, though on the side of privateness, and housing is created as a sort of collective space where privacy is well secured from the urban public. In a quite different way is the relationship between the private and the public space configured in Gifu. An extreme functional and conceptual fragmentation takes place here: the segmentation of the apartments into their unshared units, the rooms, the functional autonomization of the latter, and the independent connection of each of them to the corridor being not a common-use space accessible only to the inhabitants, but a public space freely accessible from the outside, an extended elevated urban street ending up to the homes and pointing out a sharpening antithesis between the private and the public space, but at the same time vent and neutralized. The segmentation of the apartment down to its single cells on the one hand discharges the private identity of the apartment, but on the other hand intensifies the spatial attributes of every cell, their private quality included. At the same time, the access corridor, configured as a continuous united public space, receives the outfall of the privateness of the rooms, becoming a physical field of admission for every single private spatial unit which open up there, pursuing at the public space its completion as private space. In this sense, the unmediated contiguity of the rooms and the corridor results in a smoothing process where both seem to be in a continuous search of identity through reference not to the other but to their connection as a lasting and incomplete process of hetero-definition.

Here, transitional spaces between the private and the public space are redundant, since the peacemaking quality of the supposed semi-private/semi-public spaces is replaced by the directness of the contiguity between the private and the public space and, thus, the transcendence of the danger of being in opposition. Here, it is a sort of opposition acceptance, where the private and the public are conceptually conserved, not a case of emptying signs which become some undefined other, they retain their normal meaning, but are connected architecturally in such an arbitrary mode, that they exist both as such, native and solid, without even contradicting. The private rooms open directly into the public corridor to exit and enter, and this kind of active connection engenders spatiality as an event of use and experience. In this sense the access corridor *and* the opening rooms create an intermediate space where opposition of qualities is taking place as a continuous becoming through 'time, weather and these peoples'. In other words, a spatial encounter is realized here resulting to an intermediate area where the private rooms and the public corridor, whose boundary is physically expressed at the exterior wall, form a reconceptualized version of privacy based both on design and atmosphere.

3.2 The veranda-like glazed corridor

The glazed corridor, a sort of Japanese engawa extended along the entire south facade, creates the effect of transparency and interior-exterior intrusion. Into this sunroom open the bedrooms, while it also receives other basic functional elements of the apartments, such as interior stairs, washbasins or kitchens' extensions, in a way that it is not clear whether this glazed corridor, open to the exterior view space, is included within the

apartment area or makes a distinct area where the apartments are extended. In this sense of ambiguity, the glazed corridor constructs an autonomous space, a buffer zone, which is freely involved both with the exterior and the apartment. Given that the rooms make up the basic units of the apartments in relation to which they enjoy a status of autonomy, the glazed corridor undertakes a uniting function providing a field of collective outlet for the rooms' individuality. Furthermore, the doubled character of the glazed corridor as a zone where interior and exterior mutually penetrate to each other, and where, at the same time, the multiple interiors, the rooms, are coming together to a (private) collective unity, concludes to the creation of an intensively intermediate space where the individuality of the rooms become an affair of the world out there, and the qualities of the interior space become a matter of the exterior space.

The importance of this fact for design and meaning of the private-public relationship in this structure is obvious. As an intensified intermediate space, in the doubled sense as above, the private space of the glazed corridor sustains an additional collective quality in reference to the rooms. But at the same time, since becoming exposed to the public view and, moreover, exhibiting the rooms when the closed doors open, the transparent glazed corridor is also granted qualities of publicness. The way that, as spatial qualities, privateness and publicness converge at the glazed corridor is unique. Nor mixture neither merge or absorption of each other, but an inalienable coexistence of both where, furthermore, each quality is ratified thanks to the other and its correlation to it. The private quality of the glazed corridor, that is the glazed corridor as private space which has an influence on the apartment functions and meanings, would have been unimportant to such tasks if the exterior would have not penetrated to it in order to enrich it with public qualities. In addition, as a space open to the publicness of the exterior and the unstrained common view, would have weakened its public identity if its private character, as a specific corridor space within each apartment, would have not been undeniable. The creation of the intermediate space of the corridor through the maintenance of the opposite qualities is to be explained by highlighting each quality as a continuously processed process within the field that the other one opens, a kind of animated space where different spatial qualities activate each other in order to all be present in space.

A state of ambiguity is also constituted through the placement of the interior stair at the glazed corridor: is it an interior architectural element or does it functionally support the interior being in a way exterior to it? The rational analysis based on the traditional categories of spatial perception would confirm the interior character of the stair. However the fact of its singularity regarding its relationship to the private/public character of the glazed corridor remains. Besides, the stair is exposed in public view in a first plane. This exteriorization of the interior stair, a focal element for the functionality of the interior space, in other words the exteriorization of the functional and structural organization of the interior space, extends the question about the interiority or exteriority of the stair towards the other timeless architectural problem of the intertwining between form and function. The exteriorization of the interior stair through its placement in first plane just in front of the transparent surface and into the intermediate space of the glazed corridor defines it as an element of the exterior view as it is constructed for the gaze of the inhabitant from inside, disturbing the overall image of the city, fracturing the scale and the attitude of the urban figure, adulterating the urban with figures of the private space. At the same time, the diagonal lines of the interior stairs serve as dispersed references of the exterior stairs on the north facade of the building. The diagonal geometry, an element that split the horizontality of the building at the north, is fractured and re-discovered partially in the interior at the south, advocating the intertwining of the interior and the exterior, the mutual ratification of the private and the public. Moreover, at the glazed corridor is also the washbasin placed. The detachment of an object-furniture of the bathroom and its material and functional placement at the intermediate area of the corridor makes the latter, in the analogous measure, an inseparable part of the apartment. However its intermediate quality seems to be enhanced and question the interiority of the apartment, the traditional perception of the apartment as an

interior space, protected and private. Not far from this lies the experience of the building as a view for the gaze of the urban inhabitants. The transparent corridor exposes the movements and activities of the apartment inhabitants to the free view from outside. In a sense, the interior space opens up to the urban, not to be urbanized and public, but to transform the public into a matrix of private fragments and the public idea into an eventual sum of private moments.

3.3 The terraces

The terraces, open rooms freely accessible from the public corridor, extend throughout the building until they reach the glazed corridor on the south side. Across the glazed corridor the terraces are isolated through closed doors, so that privacy is ensured for the rest parts of the apartment. In this sense the terraces construct public areas in sequence with the access corridor, but they are structurally integrated into the apartments though separated from their rest spaces. As parts of the building body, they create holes by removing mass, and provide overall optical communication through the block allowing in this sense the penetration of the urban space into the building and, indeed, the apartments. In sum, these open rooms are spaces of undefined character regarding their private/public quality, where both qualities seem to exist alongside each other. But the most worth to mention is the design mode of such kind of hybridization, the design of both privateness and publicness through boundaries and clearly defined spaces, which however result in unclear spatial qualities. Such absence of clarity opens up a kind of space free to use, to conceive, to sense, to experience, a well limited field of unlimited interpretations. The relationship between the private and the public in these terraces converge to the contemporary theorizations which negate the opposites, though using the vocabulary and the design tools of the traditional spatial identities. In such context privacy seem to be protected as such, though structuring different correlations with the spaces in contiguity. The private space of the apartment is protected from possible physical intrusion through the public terraces and the corridor, but remains exposed to the optical intrusion from the exterior and the city. Besides, while the terraces begin as public spaces in direct sequence with the public corridor, they conclude within the glazed corridor as imbued with private qualities. In this sense, a kind of privacy is channelled from the rooms through the glazed corridor towards the terraces, poured off to the public access corridor and rebound back to the interior. Hence, privacy is created through a system of intermediate spaces as a consequence of the interaction between the private and the public space, which may be foreseen as a possible lived effect of the designed space, but in no case as an intended and designed quality of space. Such kind of privacy as a potentiality in the everyday experience of habitation transforms its traditional meaning as a condition of individual seclusion free from intrusion and far from the public, and corrupts its private purity with public titles.

4. THE BOUNDARY AND THE CONTEXT: NEUTRALIZING THE OPPOSITION

The circling of privacy around the apartment, through the access corridor, the rooms, the glazed corridor, the terraces, and all over again, makes a further parameter as regards the composition of privacy, added to the latter's articulations with the collective space of the neighbourhood on the one hand and with the urban space of the city on the other hand. The way that the connection between the rooms and the access corridor is designed, with continuing opaque doored walls without pipes or small windows does not allow for perception of each room's use, as well as for distinguishing which room belongs to which apartment (Zaera 2000). This way to protect privacy while set in a direct and unmediated relationship to the public corridor, far from using transitional spaces between the private and public space, points out a place where 'peace' is not a matter of a rational encounter at the middle, but it is a matter of neutralizing the boundary, that is to disconnect it from possible semantic connections to the private and the public space. Indeed, the opaque walls here although

being definite in space, are clearly and only structural: they support the doors of entrance and exit from and into the rooms, without revealing anything about the space they include, nor even forming a status of independence from it. Furthermore, since the north side of the building is internal to the community open space at the centre of the Kitagata development and does not face the outer city, the unmediated connection between the public corridor and the apartment rooms seems to be blunted as regards the sharpness of the antithesis between public and private, this being a result of context: the collective space of the courtyard at the middle and its influence on the private-public quality of the corridor and the rooms complex. On the other hand, on the south side, the buffer zone inserted between the rooms and the urban view is not a dead zone but receives basic functions of the apartment. In this sense the inhabitants washing their hands, going upstairs or walking through from one room to another are visible from outside and exposed to the common view. In other words, while the glazed corridor makes a buffer zone, this is not protective for privacy but, in opposite, exposing. So, while privacy seems to be protected on the north side, thanks to the collective space of community at the centre of the development, it is surrendered to the urban life on the south side. This distinction between the maintenance of privacy in relation to a collective public space at North and an urban public space at South, reminds us the different forms of privacy with reference to the neighbourhood and the city, but in Gifu it seems like everything exists with everything, like differences, in all their clarity, are always counterfeited by oppositional injections. So as much as the urban view on the South is manipulated through the mediation of the (private) buffer zone in sequence of the private rooms, so it is that the public corridor on the North is weakened as public space through its integration within the (collective) internal area of the Kitagata development. In other words, a sort of habitalization of the urban and a collectivization of the public seem to discharge entasis and to set privacy in a status of neutralized opposition.

5. CONCLUSION: THE COLLECTIVE QUALITY OF PRIVACY AND SPATIO-POLITICAL EXTENSIONS

Sejima's interest as regards privacy does not end at the configuration of the relationship between inside and outside in general, but concerns the making of the boundary itself, the definition of the spaces. However, while SANAA's methodologies on making the boundary elaborate the opaqueness/transparency effect (Cortes 2008), privacy in Gifu seems to connect with the maintenance of the boundary in another meaning: the boundary does not lie simply between the opposites of the private and the public space, but in a much more subtle way it lies between the multiple tones of the public. In this sense, privacy, as created through the correlation of the three spatial types analyzed above, includes an intermediate quality which transcends the usual understanding of the concept as a pure individual good of a stable status, and becomes a fluid quality which content is transformed in relation to the specific tone of the other condition with which it is related each time. The circling of the privacy amalgam throughout the apartment as described above has no meaning but the creation of a spatial quality through a progressive additioning of experiences provided by the transforming spatiality of the intermediate space system, which results to the corrosion of a pure conception of privacy with collective instillations. Consequently, the boundary between the private and the public as applied between spaces always contains an amount of collective quality. And maybe this is the case why in SANAA's architecture we find so softened boundaries regarding the experience of space and so rigid and clear defined lines as regards design.

In Gifu privacy is of a collective quality and this is achieved through the design both of the boundary and spaces, and their relation to the inhabitants and their movements. Such collectiveness as content of privacy recalls a case where the public holds a constitutional quality for the private and vice versa, while both identities (public and private) co-exist unassimilated. From other positions, we conceptualized such case as 'the-private-within-the-public', drawing on Bakhtinian theory and the concepts of polyphony and carnivalesque. There is, however, a cancelling difference in Gifu for this concept to be applied: 'the-private-within-the-public' introduces conflict as a constitutive parameter for co-existence and demonstrates a confrontational quality for

the architectural and urban space, which seems to be absent from the Gifu building. Here, the intermediate spaces, although sustaining their constitutional qualities of the private and the public as such, neutralize their opposition aired through the boundary. Privacy is being configured according the transforming experience of space constantly incorporating an amount of collectiveness and in this sense opposition is always present in Gifu as a specific condition between spatial qualities, though relieved and discharged by design. In other words, the maintenance of privacy in Gifu does enhance a sense of eventual unpredictable coexistence but it does not demonstrate the confrontational quality which welcomes every kind of intermediate spaces as places of new possibilities. The question aroused is whether it may be that such neutralization of the opposition, which might allow the continuing shifting of the boundary between the existing and the becoming, and a constant process of spatial experience, but on the other hand deprives space from conflict's potentiality, could be sufficient to support a political perspective of collective housing where privacy would have meant individual responsibility towards the other.

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Captions of Visual Material

Figure 1: North facade of the building and open space

https://c1.staticflickr.com/4/3211/2396439428_6b0081196_b.jpg (free use photo)

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