

THE TRADITION AND WISDOM IN URBAN HOUSING-

HIERARCHICAL COMMUNITY HOUSING SPACES IN THE POLS OF AHMEDABAD

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As one walks the Indian city streets, one is engulfed by its eddy of overflowing people, animals, cars, motorbikes and bicycles, all one's senses stimulated by its heated atmosphere of colours, sounds, smells and tastes, blended harmoniously into an energy experienced by many.

The Indian city has such an intense atmosphere. At the same time, in the spaces where its people live, cultivated by a long history and repeatedly woven into its residential spaces, there still survives a hierarchical order. The 'pol' housing of the old city of Ahmedabad is one such extremely interesting example.

Le Corbusier and Louis Khan having built works here, Ahmedabad became the Mecca of modern architecture, while on the other hand, built in the beginning of the 15th century, it also is an old city with a history of nearly 600 years. The street organization is a complex network, broadly divided into three main classifications. 1) Main arterial trunk roads beginning from the various city gates, 2) Roads that divide the urban area into blocks by linking these main roads, 3) Streets that branch off into these urban blocks, sometimes forming cul-de-sacs. Within this classification, the basically residential unit, 'pol' is structured by the third rank of streets.

The 'pol' had a gate at its boundary, all roads within its interior being commonly owned and dividing it into housing clusters to form a residential unit. The word 'pol' originally means 'gate'. Within the pol, the street further branches off into smaller residential cluster units like 'khancho' (meaning 'small open space'), 'khadki' (a house cluster defined by a gate that opens into a common front court) and 'gali' (a narrow lane), the domain of each defined with a gate of its own. Often, at the point of divergence the street narrows, widening into an open courtyard space towards the interior. Further, there are instances of pols containing small pols. Existing large-scale pols contain 20 or so smaller pols. The pols' hierarchical and stratified residential community space organization offers not only the house but well and temple, shrine and community hall, in this way forming a basic unit that supports community life.

The old city centre has the Jammi mosque and the royal tombs, along which lies Manek Chowk, known as the stronghold of the Jain community. It is said that when the city was built, the Jain community, known for its aptitude in trade and finance, was invited to settle here, it now being historically one of the oldest areas. Here very typical pol organization can be seen (diagram). Interestingly, compared to the major Hindu and Islamic areas, a stronger hierarchy can be observed. Killing of life being strictly forbidden by their religion, for protection and to refrain from getting involved in the frequent Hindu-Muslim conflicts around them, the Jains probably had to develop more elaborate spatial stratification. It is impressive to note at the end of a blind alleyway the existence of an entrance to another cul-de-sac known only to the residents, for use as a refuge during emergency. Moreover, within the residential space structure, various spaces like the 'otla' (raised platform before the doorway), 'khadki' (entrance), 'chowk' (courtyard), 'parsal' (front room) and 'ordo' (bedroom) are typically located sequentially from the street so that the further inside one approaches the more strongly private the space becomes.

In this way, within the pol, the street system is in keeping with the cluster unit formation, further creating a hierarchy between public



◆ a housing cluster enclosed by a 'khadki'



◆ pols of Manek Chowk area, Ahmedabad



and private domains, and so forming a series of hierarchical spaces. Within this system, a variety of scales of open spaces are cleverly located, ensuring a safe and pleasant living space.

The elaborate residential environment of the 'pol' is wisdom developed over a long period of time for the co-existence of various communities and religions in high density urban housing. It even has a strong influence on modern residential planning in India.

(English text translated by Vasanti Menon Nii)