Space. It is a key concept in the study of the urban environment. With today’s technology, we can traverse space with ease. We can send e-mails across the globe in seconds. We can catch a flight to anywhere in the world and be there the next day. We can send messages on our cell phones and talk to our friends without saying a word. But as we are getting caught up in our fast-paced and technology-focused lives, are we forgetting to take time and notice the space we occupy and those who share it with us? Perhaps life would be a little better for everyone if we did just that.

City improvement. It is a key element in the study of the urban environment. There are countless articles with numerous credentialed authors’ opinions on the best way to improve various aspects of city functioning. While I am far from achieving any sort of expertise in the area of urbanology, I still hold my own opinion on how we might improve our communities and through them our cities. I may not hold a degree, but I do have the firsthand experience of occupying my own urban space day in and day out. I also have the aid of articles by Jane Jacobs, Sharon Zukin, Ali Madanipour, Mike Davis, and Sherry Arnstein to help support my strategies for improving communities.

Possibly the best way we can improve our urban communities is by simply getting to know and working with one another. After all, doesn’t everyone want to improve the space they occupy? And wouldn’t that only be made easier with the help of the rest of the community?
A first step to improving communities is by making them safer. A first step to getting to know your neighbors is by seeing them in public neighborhood spaces. These steps can be taken together by following Jane Jacobs’ advice in her article, “The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety.” If citizens are in tune with their neighbors and everyone is watching the streets, they will be safer and feel safer for everyone. Once you know your neighbors and they know you, everyone will automatically be looking out for one another. In my opinion, this is the most realistic and thorough form of safety and security that can be found—especially in the close quarters of the urban neighborhood. It is security that is free, comforting, and uses bonds instead of barriers.

In “Fortress L.A.”, Mike Davis talks at length about the barriers many are inclined to use for security. We share the opinion that these barriers do far more harm than good. If you feel the need to put gates and walls and security systems around your urban space, do you really feel safe in your city, or that you live in a good neighborhood? Perhaps you might, if you took the time to know the people sharing it with you. Barriers only shut those people out.

Another way we shut people out and keep ourselves from achieving any form of community togetherness is the privatization of public space. This is one form of social exclusion, which Ali Madanipour defines at length in his article, “Social Exclusion and Space.” Social exclusion is any of the number of ways society excludes some person or group of people from fully participating in the community they are a part of. By privatizing public space, like the park Sharon Zukin writes about in “Whose Culture? Whose City?”, certain members of a community are almost certainly excluded. If they are not explicitly excluded, they will most likely be implicitly excluded. And while
privatization of public place seems to spread like an infectious disease, members of a
community that are striving for unity as a catalyst to improvement should be sure to keep
this privatization in check.

To keep this privatization in check and to be able to accept or reject it, it is
important for members of a community to be actively involved in their local government.
Citizen power in local government will be greatly increased if citizens can work together
(rather than alone) to do what is best for their community. In her article about citizen
participation in government, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” Sherry Arnstein
outlines the various levels at which citizens can be involved in government. She uses a
ladder and its rungs to help illustrate these levels. In many cases, it will take citizens
working together and demanding more actual power to achieve anything meaningful
within their community. This is just one more area where neighborly bonds and
community togetherness will play an important role.

Even before the major steps of attaining governmental power and using
government action to improve your community, there are many other ways that
communities working together can be highly beneficial. You do not have to be on a
development board or get an ordinance passed to make a difference in your community.
Simply joining together to do a neighborhood cleanup, helping out in one family’s time
of need, holding fundraisers for the local school or other public entities, or even creating
neighborhood playgroups for children or recreational youth activities, all make a
humongous difference in the lives of all involved community members.

In brief, if a neighborhood can find it in their selves to get to know one another,
watch out for each other, and, as relationships grow stronger, work together for a better
community, everyone will win. Crime rates will decrease, property value will increase, friendships may be forged, and most importantly, families will feel safer.

I think that the hardest part of all this is simply getting started. But it can all start with one person stopping their neighbor on the sidewalk to say hello and introduce them self. If they do that a few times, it will most likely inspire someone else to do it a few times, and soon a network of responsible citizens will form. This network of citizens could one day make huge changes for the better in their community.