

The Improvement of the Quality of Life in Residential Areas

Matthew Harang

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Despite the fact that the environment has a great impact on the happiness and well-being of individuals, urban planners and designers have not taken much action to shape the environment into communities where people can live comfortably and enjoy the highest possible quality of life.¹ We must accept the fact that inefficient and inadequate planning and design have plagued residential areas for many years and have hindered life from being as pleasant and enjoyable as it can and should be. Just as culture and society are never stagnant, the field of public administration should be constantly changing in order to maintain its effectiveness. In order to reverse the trend of unsuccessful planning and eliminate problems such as sprawling metropolises, we, as urban planners and designers, should reform our practice by incorporating methods and concepts from social sciences such as psychology, behavioral ecology and sociology in order to structure community environments to best suit their residents. In addition, professionals should work with community members in order to serve the area based on the social, economic, political, religious and other cultural desires and concerns of residents. Through reforming the practice of urban planning and design, we can create community-friendly residential areas so that can enjoy a higher quality of life.

Citizen participation and influence on planning decisions must be central to the improvement of the quality of life in residential areas. If planners and designers do not know and understand the needs and aspirations of the people who live in the targeted community, then they can not appropriately plan for the betterment of that community. Terry L. Cooper, a respected author and professor at the University of Southern California, argues that a responsible public administrator² must actively encourage citizens to participate in the decision-making process on

¹See Frick (1986) and Massam (2002) for a complete discussion on the quality of life.

²See Cooper (1998) for a complete discussion on responsible public administration.

issues that effect their communities (Cooper, 1998). Author Cliff Moughtin adds that it is essential for planners and designers to listen to the citizens and take into account their concerns as well as their suggestions. This communication will effectively help to diminish the large gap that currently exists between the individuals who plan and those for whom the plans are made (Moughtin, 1999). As Abraham Wandersman states, professionals do not experience the problems of a community first-hand, so they are not always as well-informed as they should be in order to make the correct decisions. For this reason, he states that the "good intentions of the designer or planner do not necessarily lead to increased habitability" (Wandersman, 1976, p.11). The public's input can help to enlighten the public administrator while the professionals themselves can use their expertise whenever it is needed in dealing with complex or technical issues. In order to improve the quality of life of any neighborhood, both professionals and community members must work hand in hand to ensure that the necessary and appropriate actions are taken.

In planning for the highest possible quality of life, planners must ensure that residents have access to various resources that are essential to life in our capitalistic, postmodern country.³ Without accessibility to businesses and institutions such as hospitals, libraries, schools, parks, religious organizations, retail and grocery stores, residents cannot enjoy the conveniences that are characteristic of a high quality of life nor can they fully participate in our democratic society. For this reason, many planners support an increase in mixed-use communities in which many commercial and social establishments are within walking distance from residences. Author Hildebrand Frey sites the implementation of mixed-use development as essential to creating "a more sustainable conurbation" (Frey, 1999). Furthermore, a recent study showed that most

³See Allmendinger (2001) for more on the changes in planning in these postmodern times.

Americans would like for the government to increase the budget for improving walkability in residential neighborhoods. The same survey also showed that the majority of citizens also favor the improvement of public transportation to decrease automobile dependency (Bailey & Broaddus, 2003). Many people are looking for alternatives to sitting in traffic for hours trying to commute to and from their places of employment. Americans spend too much time on the streets and highways, and sitting in traffic every day can be quite stressful. A report published by the Clinton-Gore Administration states that actions have been taken to begin construction on various public transit systems throughout the country to give citizens an alternative to driving (2000). If we construct public transit systems, such as a light rail or subway, within walking distance of residences, traffic will be reduced and the social ties to the outside social world will be strengthened. The implementation of mixed-use neighborhoods, public transit systems and increased emphasis on walkability will also encourage more interaction among the citizens because neighbors are more likely to encounter each other as they move through the community.

On that same note, planners and residents should also work together to take specific actions aimed at strengthening the social ties within communities. In doing so, we can create pleasant neighborhoods with a higher quality of life. Although many areas in the United States once consisted of small, closely-knit neighborhoods, that former way of life has largely been abandoned in favor of large, disassociated urban and suburban developments.⁴ As author Amitai Etzioni points out, however, the result of the modern cities characterized by sprawling development is that many families and individuals have become isolated from other members of

⁴See Etzioni (1993) and Kuntsler (1993) for a more in depth look at the loss of community.

society (Etzioni, 1993).⁵ Because of this, they lack healthy social connections within a community group, which, as professor Bryan H. Massam states, are essential to the quality of life (Massam, 2002). We must work actively to combat the weakening connections between residents and their communities and society as a whole in order to ensure that residents can lead socially healthy lives.

Because the social environment is vital to the general well-being of humans and growth of individuals, planners must develop various strategies to help strengthen the social fabric of a community. We are a gregarious species who are greatly affected by the reciprocal associations between fellow humans, and we benefit daily from the inter-connectivity of our lives (Wandersman, 1976). Because of the importance of this healthy social interaction, Etzioni proposes that planners and designers should provide spaces in which people can gather and socialize. These areas should be placed in and around the residences to allow for much-needed interaction between community members. Etzioni encourages simple additions such as chairs, tables and other objects around which residents can sit and congregate. In addition, he suggests that planners and architects should provide community game rooms, pool tables, basketball courts, swimming pools, gardens, courtyards or other such attractions to allow for social interactions on a larger scale (Etzioni, 1993).⁶ These changes may be an effective remedy to the problems of isolation and alienation by enhancing the sense of community and belonging. The closer-knit neighborhoods created by these implementations should result in residential areas which are significantly more pleasant.

⁵See Freeman (2001) for a complete discussion on the effects of sprawl on the social ties of a community.

⁶See Pomeranz (1980) for more on the effects of environmental design on human behavior.

The forging of a stronger sense of community can also result in a safer, more secure neighborhood. Safety is a very important factor when measuring the quality of life in any area, and residents tend to feel safer when they are surrounded by people they know and with whom they are acquainted. Furthermore, as Etzioni points out, people who are part of a closely-knit community are more inclined to work together to help patrol their neighborhoods for crime and danger. Etzioni gives examples of some areas which have implemented active neighborhood watch programs consisting of volunteers from the communities. These residents often assist their local authorities in order to keep their residences safe (Etzioni, 1993). Opponents to these groups argue that common citizens may face danger when attempting to fight crime because some of these citizen groups have become overly active in keeping their neighborhoods safe. Many neighborhood watch programs and similar programs, however, have been successful in reducing levels of fear and thus improving the quality of life in communities without putting the civilian volunteers in danger. These programs exemplify means by which community members can actively work to increase the habitability of their neighborhoods.

Urban designers and architects can also alter their building designs and layouts to help with the safety concerns of a community. The physical environment of a community can have a significant impact on the vulnerability of the residents, and professionals often have the power to reduce the probability of crimes such as burglary and drug trafficking. For example, if buildings are laid out so that there are clear views from inside to the surrounding outside spaces, crime rates tend to be lower as do the residents' rates of fear. Also, the altering of circulation patterns to provide for better traffic flow within a neighborhood often results in a drop in crime. Other physical factors, such as blind corners and overgrown shrubs can make a community more susceptible to crime because they can provide hiding places for criminals (Taylor & Harrell,

1996). These features can be easily eliminated and avoided by professionals in order to help prevent crime. It is important that planners and architects keep these factors in mind when designing for any community to ensure that residents can enjoy the high levels of safety that residents desire.

One approach that has proven itself as effective in helping to raise the quality of life in terms of safety as well as other issues is the formation of nonprofit organizations often referred to as Community Development Corporations (CDC's). These groups are often successful in strengthening social bonds of a residential area as well as ensuring that the community's voice is heard by planners and designers. As Etzioni states, these organizations allow community members to fight for the changes that they feel must take place without the interference. Some CDC's, such as the Figueroa Corridor Coalition for Economic Justice, focus on one aspect of community betterment, such as economic growth and development. Other groups, including the Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles have an interest in improving various aspects of the community ranging from social and family life, to environmental concerns to creating more jobs. The mission of these groups should be based on the needs of the residents and should seek to ameliorate the environment as much as possible.

Another movement that has been successful in creating more livable communities is the New Urbanist movement. Since 1993, the Charter of the New Urbanism has worked to eliminate problems such as sprawl and auto-dependency, race and class segregation, the loss of community, and environmental deterioration. To deal with these problems, New Urbanists support the use of mixed-use developments and walkable neighborhoods, public transportation, diversity in neighborhood populations, and citizen participation in both urban and suburban areas. They believe that by restructuring policy and planning practices to deal with those

problems, professionals can then effectively deal with social and economic problems. Members of the Charter of the New Urbanism also understand that in order for citizens to be able to enjoy the highest possible quality of life, inner-cities must be revitalized, and suburbia must be reconfigured (Leccese & McCormick). Many New Urbanists propose that community members will be able to walk through communities of 1/4 mile radius. But, as Etzioni points out, walking a half mile from point A to point B is not always practical. In spite of minor flaws, it is still important for planners and designers to consider the New Urbanist approaches to improving the atmosphere of our communities.

While taking into consideration the societal changes that are taking place, we as planners and developers must understand that creating livable communities that allow for the highest possible quality of life is a very complex task. When shaping residential environments, professionals must consider issues beyond the realm of one-dimensional urban design and planning. We must explore the effects of design, architecture, physical surroundings and social environment on humans in order to understand how to structure healthy neighborhoods. We must actively seek to change our practice for the betterment of individuals and, in turn, of society as a whole.

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