

NEIGHBOURHOODS OR NEIGHBOURHOOD UNITS ?

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The purpose of this article is to suggest that the concept 'neighbourhood unit' has been based upon convenient statistics at the expense of sociological facts. It is maintained that many physical planners have misunderstood the available sociological information and, finding that this does not meet with their requirements, have thrown the baby away with the bathwater.

This applies in particular to those planners who believe that the secret of neighbourliness lies in finding appropriate catchment areas for various primary institutions. It has consequently led them to underestimate the psychological factors.¹ It has caused many planners to think in terms of neighbourhood units rather than neighbourliness, which is rather like confusing houses with homes. As Dennis Chapman has said the neighbourhood unit is 'a concept having administrative convenience rather than a basis in the knowledge of human relations.'² How has this misunderstanding arisen when so many social workers are deeply committed to getting residents actively interested in the life of their locality? This article attempts to unravel some of the difficulties and to put forward some helpful suggestions.

Inter-war housing in Great Britain provided some shocking examples of unimaginative layouts and, consequently, of impoverished social relationships. Miles of ribbon development and acres of one-class housing deserts were the harvest reaped from giving insufficient forethought to housing layout and family selection. Fortunately the Second World War put an end to the sterile arguments as to whether the cause of such aberrations as coals in the bath and pigeons in the bedroom was due to environment or heredity. War-time evacuation drew attention to the slums; by 1944 the climate of opinion was set fair to welcome plans for the rebuilding of Great Britain. But what were the premisses of those responsible for engineering this housing

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development and how did they come to be of that persuasion?

At the time no one influence seemed to be paramount. It was rather the happy confluence of many ideas from related fields. One problem was the size and density of the residential areas. This problem was not a new one; Aristotle mentions it in his *Politics*.³ But there was surprisingly little written on the subject before Ebenezer Howard produced his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* in 1898. In 1909, Raymond Unwin mentioned the benefits to be gained from communal facilities in his book *Town Planning in Practice*, especially in his Chapter XI, 'Of Cooperation in Site Planning and how Common Enjoyment benefits the Individual.' He also showed in *Nothing Gained by Overcrowding* (1918) that good housing took up no more room than bad. The next landmark was the work of Clarence E. Perry in America. As early as 1910 he wrote a book entitled *The Wider Use of School Plant* and this was followed by *Neighbourhood and Community Planning* in 1929, and *Housing for the Machine Age* in 1939.

Perry preached the need for groups of families becoming self-sufficient communities within a city segment and satisfying their daily needs around a conveniently sited community centre, shops and junior school. He was searching for an urban counterpart to the village. Many American city managers with their growing problems of city blight as described by Robert E. Park, Burgess, Zorbaugh and others seized upon Perry's ideas. Such new places as Radburn, Sunnyside and Greenbelt all owed something to his thinking, but his message was never put into practice in this country in the 1930's.

Gradually the aspects of neighbourhood planning were knit together. Howard stressed the population limits to the town or garden city, Unwin its layout, Perry the ecology of services necessary within the city segment, whilst C. H. Cooley developed the concept of primary or face-to-face groups. The somewhat belated acceptance of Cooley's ideas gave prominence to those sociologists who were trying to remedy the evils of poor housing and stunted social relationships by drawing people into the daily life of their local community. Cooley taught that personality was the 'product of association.' Personality was, he believed, developed within the orbit of those small groups in everyday life which gratify a person's ego but which at the same time demand his obedience to local customs and rules of behaviour. Cooley left it to others to consider the link

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between the home and group membership. This sort of study is badly needed in Great Britain if we are to know how large a residential area may become that still fosters those everyday contacts beyond the home which are the very stuff of neighbourliness. This is a very serious gap in our knowledge of community planning.

The characteristically English contribution to residential planning after Howard's pioneer effort may be considered under two counts—housing associations and community centres. Early housing associations, or Public Utilities as they were called, set out to provide good artisan houses. By and large they succeeded; in addition they achieved something very different—namely a considerable amount of spontaneous community action. Much valuable information on how to promote neighbourliness can be gleaned from a study of the varied fortunes of these associations especially from the more recent self-build housing societies. Such studies would show how many people have co-operated almost in spite of themselves. These associations have given their members a measure of direct responsibility over the running of their home area; this has in turn promoted neighbourliness. It is indeed strange that these lessons have been so little applied by municipalities.⁴

Housing associations have never been very widely used in this country; there is more than a grain of truth in the observation that it was the post-war housing shortage that provided the stimulus for these self-build groups. If Great Britain had in the inter-war years fostered housing societies similar to the Swedish Hyresgästernas Sparkasse-och Byggnadsforening i Stockholm (HSB for short) or to the National Federation of Housing Societies of Switzerland, then there would have been less need for the spread of the community centre movement. For these two continental organisations recognised the importance of family participation in the life of the wider community, as did the National Association of Community Centres, and they actively aided their daughter societies to achieve this aim.

This brings us to the second count—community centres. The National Association of Community Centres, founded in 1932, grew partly to meet the social needs of ill-planned housing estates. Its roots go back through the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. to the university settlement movement of the 1880's. The Association saw that community centres must become the focal point of these gawky estates. One publication⁵ describing their work exerted a powerful

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influence. The authors recognised that though there was no ideal size to a community their survey of existing centres suggested an average figure of 2,000 families at a density of 12 families per acre.⁶ In 1943 the Survey Group of the National Council of Social Service advocated 'each neighbourhood unit should be socially balanced containing houses of different sizes and types inhabited by families belonging to different income groups.'⁷ In that report (Page 8) and in a later publication⁸ the National Council of Social Service postulated a neighbourhood population of between 5,000 and 10,000. These publications drew attention to the physical basis of neighbourhoods but they never lost sight of the fact that the main factor was friendliness not size. Quite by chance these figures coincided with the numbers envisaged for the new junior and secondary schools under the 1944 Education Act, and they received additional recognition when they were quoted by Sir Patrick Abercrombie in the County of London Plan⁹ and the Greater London Plan.¹⁰

Soon those figures took on a magical quality. They always seemed to spring to planners' minds when considering how to take advantage of Section 80, of the 1936 Housing Act, of the 1937 Physical Training and Recreational Act, of Further Educational Schemes and even of Health Centres. Neighbourliness it seemed, was to be fixed in the procrustean bed of neighbourhood units. Some questioned whether social activities could really be decided in multiples of 5,000; Professor Fawcett favoured smaller units, 'vills' of 1,200 to 2,500;¹¹ Dennis Chapman talked of irregular precincts and wards.¹² But the larger figure always seemed to carry the day. Thus the architect's residential unit has tended till recently to become the planner's neighbourhood unit and the neighbourhood unit to be made in turn the web of neighbourliness. Yet I suspect that there are more than a few advocates of the multiple of 5,000 school who feel that their hopes have not been fully realised.

At this stage it is worthwhile pausing to analyse the word 'neighbourhood'. It seems to have at least five distinct meanings.¹³

- i. a population aggregate seldom, if ever, in excess of 10,000.
- ii. a social unit made up of an area of houses whose residents are well known to each other. They need not necessarily belong to the same social class.
- iii. a homogeneous social class area composed of people having the same 'life chances.' Their mode of living and patterns

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of expenditure are similar; they need not know each other very well.

- iv. a housing term whereby areas are separated by reference to the type, age and condition of the houses.
- v. a catchment area for such primary institutions as schools and shops.

Possibly this plethora of images may have partially accounted for the ready acceptance of the term 'neighbourhood unit'.

Yet although the meanings shade one into another, it is fair to suggest that the planner thinks mostly in terms of i. and v. above; the architect of iv. and the sociologist of ii. and iii. Discussion becomes unnecessarily confused when these basic definitions are left to the reader's imagination.

If the foregoing is correct then the apparent confluence of ideas from at home and abroad referred to earlier may well have been based partly upon a misunderstanding. Certainly the present lack of understanding between planners and sociologists is due partly to this confusion of terms as well as to the planners' attitude towards the value of the social sciences. Yet, consciously or otherwise, planners have to make sociological value judgments. For instance one needs more than a superficial knowledge of social stratification to pronounce on whether social contacts of parents are indeed bounded by, or even influenced by, the distance their children have to travel to school; or that the proximity of shops and their catchment areas plays a decisive part in delimiting the activities of the family; or that the different income groups expected to live in a mixed housing area will, in fact, satisfy their various wants within the same locations. Yet these are assumptions common to many housing layouts. They appear to gain some support from two sentiments, first, that the mixing of social classes can be facilitated by the peppercorn distribution of various sized houses,¹⁴ and second that the traditional working class culture is dead and therefore the working classes need 'leadership from elsewhere.'¹⁵

Both these sentiments deserve closer scrutiny. The first reflects the heightened community feeling that was undoubtedly fostered by wartime experiences. But it tends to underestimate the strength of the snob element in our culture (especially south of the Trent) that returned at the close of the war. The second rests upon the tacit belief that the distinctive working-class culture prominent in the

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1900's has disappeared. Consequently, the old-styled working-class, now bereft of their old environment, needed a sprinkling of middle-class residents to act as officials in the clubs set up for their common enjoyment in the new areas. In this way the evils of the inter-war housing deserts would be overcome. One can go far in breaking down class attitudes but those attitudes die hard. This has been the experience of several New Towns. Yet why should some of these architecturally satisfying post-war housing schemes fail to be a social success?

One reason may be that these units have been designed on the basis of making certain services an economical proposition (i.e. definition v. above). That definition, however, is not satisfactory to those who think of a neighbourhood as an amalgam of houses, people and activities which together give those residents a feeling of identity (akin to definitions ii. and iii.) This sometimes vaguely-felt group awareness may be facilitated by using the same shops etc., but it goes deeper. It stems from common attitudes and significant commitments such as joining the same church, drama group, hockey club or self-build housing society. It does not matter overmuch where these activities take place, the point is that neighbourliness feeds on deeds not catchment areas. Too many planners stress the form (location of services) and not the substance (activities and relationships). Consequently they underestimate the psychological factors that cement the bonds of community. For those who doubt the strength of this social cement let them recall how these informal groups always come to the fore in times of stress and jubilation as, for example in the air-raids, V.E., V.J. and Coronation Days.

Even if a kindly disposed planner were to accept this as a line of argument he would be justified in asking how to separate the physical from the psychological factors and, most important from his point of view, how to do so quickly. This is a point not fully appreciated by some sociologists who snipe at planners for using crude yardsticks. Whereas sociologists study an existing social framework and seldom have to predict, planners are constantly having to visualise the future in terms of space, time and people. Thus when planners have turned to the available sociological data on integrated communities they have not always found the information set out as they wanted it. In particular there is little reference to the residents' profile of daily contacts and the relation between home and membership of local groups. Sociologists, it seems to them, have been asking the wrong

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questions. Unfortunately, instead of getting sociologists to interpret the data, planners have, all too often, done it themselves.

There have been attempts however, to reconcile the approaches of sociologist and planner. The author, for one, has been privileged to evolve a method in conjunction with a County Planning Office that may prove of interest elsewhere.¹⁶ The purpose of the survey was to try and find ways of charting neighbourhoods in an established part of a city with a view to using that information to help create neighbourhoods on the new housing estates.

The Survey

Preliminary conversations showed that though planners were agreed Cambridge could be divided, as could most other towns, into distinct areas, it was a matter of conjecture as to what that distinctness rested upon and why it was perpetuated. It was therefore suggested that neighbourhoods would appear to be compounded of both physical and psychological criteria. They are an admixture of social and personal valuations superimposed upon fairly clear-cut physical factors. These may be summarised as follows:

- i. *physical factors that must be accepted*; for example, absence of a bridge over a river, a railway embankment, or heavy road traffic day and night.
- ii. *physical factors that can be overcome given the desire to do so*; for example, walking a relatively long way to see friends, bypassing local shops on the way to buy standardised goods in the city centre, or sending the children to other than the local school.
- iii. *type of house and garden*; even the most superficial glance at the exterior of a house allows it to be rated roughly as an upper, middle or lower class dwelling. This, when taken in conjunction with those houses on either side often leads an observer to feel that he can gauge the tone of the area
- iv. *subjective factors that are often amenable to change*; for example, patterns of conspicuous consumption, views on dwelling place (whether to have an old home at a controlled rent near to friends or a more modern house at a higher rent on a housing estate).
- v. *subjective factors that change but slowly* (too slowly for some of those interested in social engineering); for example, social

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class bias, deep rooted sentiments regarding cleanliness, behaviour in public, etc.

As no one knew where the various neighbourhoods began or ended it was decided to select two areas arbitrarily and see how far the physical barriers, items i. and ii. above, were in fact social barriers. By common consent the areas chosen were at widely different points on the social scale.

The two areas were studied under the following heads:

- (1) social facilities and net densities,
- (2) changes of use of properties,
- (3) age, condition and type of house,
- (4) educational patterns,
- (5) work patterns,
- (6) leisure patterns,
- (7) shopping patterns,
- (8) local leaders,
- (9) summary.

The first three sections drew upon information already at the disposal of the County Council; the remainder demanded the employment of sociological concepts. Though incomplete the survey was an attempt to use the work of Kurt Lewin especially his idea of 'life space.' This was attempted in three ways:

- i. by plotting mobility profiles, that is to see how a person moves from the intimacy of his family group to fulfil his obligations in the wider community.
- ii. by making an in-group out-group analysis, that is to chart the informal groups and associations to which he belongs and which he regularly frequents.
- iii. by making a leader-follower analysis, that is to note the key personalities who dominate local activities.

Besides noting the distribution and variety of shops and amenities within each area, it was agreed to concentrate in the first place upon the pressures operating on the children and the attitude of parents to local developments in both areas.

The interviews were carried out in two stages. After preliminary talks with various officials and the boundary of the areas were settled, every resident interviewed was asked, amongst other things, to sketch the boundary of the neighbourhood as he understood it on a fresh

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street map and name the prominent local figures. The second stage included interviewing these nominated people and other officials in the areas as well as headmasters, Youth Employment Officers, shopkeepers, etc., who did not reside in the area but who had dealings with the residents.

Area A covered 80 acres, it had an exclusive residential character, large houses, spacious lawns. It contained 465 people in 86 houses with a density of 5 to 8 persons per acre. Area B with its cemetery, 4 schools, 94 shops, 15 converted workshops, 12 public houses as well as a technical college and public garden had 2,974 residents in 721 houses at a net density of 64 persons per acre (220 per acre in one spot). One surprising feature was that there were relatively twice as many children in the richer area. The explanation probably lies in the 'dregs hypothesis' to be explained later.

By reference to the Borough rating and valuation books it was possible to note major alteration to property between 1934 and 1948. The County Planning Office had records of the applications for change of use since then.

The age and condition survey of housing maps showed that all Area A was grade 1 property (the best); Area B contained grade 1 to grade 5 property (the best and the worst). Thus there was no correlation between grade 1 property and upper class residents; there was a correlation between grades 4 and 5 property and lower class residents.

The study of item 4 proved the most interesting. Each area had its particular problems. Broadly speaking, Area A has been and is a community of the successful composed of members of the academic and business *elites*. The age and condition maps coupled with the interviews showed these *elites* were spread between the very large 1900-1910 houses and the smaller 4-bedroomed 1920-1930 houses. The same problem faced both *elites*—namely how to keep up appearances on a reduced net income. Apart from three changes of use of properties since 1947 all of which were disapproved of by the other residents, the squeeze on income has been met by converting the houses into flats, if convenient, or by sending their children to a local authority school until they are 13 instead of a private school. The local private school now draws 4.4% of its pupils from within Area A instead of 50% pre-war.

Area B had a different set of problems. Its residents were lower middle class including shopkeepers living over their shops and

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artisan families having no strong political affiliations (as opposed to those manifested in the contiguous ward). After several interviews it became obvious that the residents of this area—children especially—were deeply involved in the problem of the double standard. The values taught at school regarding hygiene and conduct often conflicted with what was done in the home. All headmasters and headmistresses interviewed agreed on this point; only one, a relative newcomer to Area B, tried to bridge the problem. The problem was acutest where parents actively resisted the work of the school, and where parents readily accepted the training given at school and tried to force their children on to grammar schools.

Success at school for these children, all too often meant tension in the home and, when linked with a study of the local leaders, led to the conclusion that the youth of the area wanted to settle elsewhere. This was borne out by the Youth Employment Officers. After about 30 interviews it became apparent that the neighbourhood of Area B stretched in all cases beyond the area fixed upon; at the same time five local leaders were constantly mentioned. These people were subsequently interviewed. In the other area there was no clear-cut leadership pattern.

Any community worthy of the name must have either a common way of living or a leader or leaders whose decision and activities are respected and followed. What then was the standing of these people? They were the vicar, the chemist, the secretary of a Beaconsfield club, headmistress of the Junior School, and headmaster of a Secondary School. The Headmaster is a newcomer; the rest are counsellors, friends and officials of associations, not spokesmen of the community. Each, in his or her own way, has a personal following but lacks sufficient interest or dynamic character to bring the area together. So much so that it is many years since a local councillor was nominated from within Area B. Yet though many people have a grouse about the state of the area, no one does anything about it, and because there is no local leadership the more energetic youths go elsewhere. This led to the dregs hypothesis—that the area contains those more elderly people who are vaguely disgruntled but too apathetic to do anything about it. More especially as their own children, if successful, move away from the district.

How do the group attitudes of these two areas fit in with the County Planning Proposals? It is the aim of the plan to remove part of the population in Area B and develop a new shopping centre

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along one of the flank roads near the area. Since much of the property in the area is obsolescent and the younger residents who live in overcrowded conditions have no strong local loyalties, the move should be and is being welcomed. There would however appear to be some reason for thinking that the elderly residents will not wish to change their shopping habits since this will mean walking up to half a mile more each way in some cases.

Area A is scheduled to keep its residential character and be denied to offices. This accords with residents' wishes.

To summarise: Area A is a neighbourhood approximating to iii. above (p. 238) whose solidarity is reinforced since all are striving to keep up appearances on what is to them an inadequate net income; because all adults are subjected to similar deprivations it has led to a strong 'we' feeling. This area, however, according to the textbook, should never be termed a neighbourhood because it has not got its quota of shops, clinics, etc. Yet according to the maps drawn by residents the limits chosen for the survey represented their idea of the neighbourhood except for a small 'dent' on the south east boundary.

Area B, a mixed housing area with all kinds of shops as well as schools and public open spaces on its doorstep, has all the physical requirements of a neighbourhood yet it possesses no cohesion and sure identity. The busy roads together with ineffective local leadership conspire to drain the energetic youth away from the area. Though the residents of Area B were agreed on the foremost members there was no consensus of opinion over the size except that it stretched in varying ways to the south, west and north. Not to the east, significantly, where lay the ward with a strong working class movement.

Another factor thrown up by the survey is the importance of the Local Education Authority in the perpetuation of neighbourhoods. For instance, it is no longer possible for a parent to say 'But I want my child to go this secondary modern not that secondary modern.' This is only allowed if the parent happens to reside in the 'free choice' area between the two catchment areas laid down by the L.E.A. However, this ruling is not inflexible.

These are but examples of the thesis, that the sociologists' idea of a neighbourhood and the planners' neighbourhood unit are not necessarily the same. Other examples are not difficult to find. They illustrate some of the problems facing those planners who wish

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to use sociological data. Perhaps the best service that can be done at this juncture is for planners and social scientists to agree upon the sort of evidence from the social sciences which would be conclusive. Only in this way will it be possible to remove much of the current misunderstanding regarding concepts and so work towards possible methods of effective co-operation between sociologists and planners.

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¹ 'Do we not all know of places where the streets are mean and the outlook bleak, but where the prevailing atmosphere is one of neighbourliness and "joie de vivre"?' E. Sewell Harris: *Community Centres and Associations*. London: National Council of Social Service, 1944, Foreword by Sir Wyndham Deedes, p. 3.

² D. Chapman: *Social Aspects of Town Planning*. A paper read to the Town Planning Summer School, 1952.

³ B. Jowett: *The Politics of Aristotle*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885, Volume I, Book 7, pp. 214-215.

⁴ Such a procedure, it is true, poses many awkward problems for the Housing Authority. But as the author has seen in both in Stockholm and Zurich, those municipalities are saving themselves both time and manpower through getting residents interested in the development of the area at an early stage.

⁵ F. and G. Stephenson: *Community Centres*. London: Housing Centre, 1942.

⁶ F. and G. Stephenson: *Community Centres*. London: Housing Centre, 1942, p. 41.

⁷ Survey Group of National Council of Social Service: *Size and Social Structure of a Town*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1943, pp. 7-9, especially Recommendation 2 on pp. 8-9.

⁸ National Council of Social Service: *Our Neighbourhood*. London, 1950, p. 17.

⁹ J. H. Forshaw and Sir L. P. Abercrombie: *County of London Plan*. London: Macmillan & Co., 1943, pp. 28-29, especially section 106.

¹⁰ Sir L. P. Abercrombie: *Greater London Plan* 1944. London: H.M.S.O., 1945, pp. 113-114, section 282.

¹¹ C. B. Fawcett: *A Residential Unit for Town and Country Planning*. London: University of London Press, 1944, p. 35.

¹² D. Chapman: *Social Aspects of Town Planning*. As above.

¹³ No mention will be made in this article to those areas that may with equal justification be termed neighbourhoods which are formed in and around a person's place of work (insofar as it is physically separated from his home area).

¹⁴ The Bournville Village Trust, considered a mixed community *par excellence*, has unfortunately neither pre-war nor post-war figures to support the contention that a mixture of leased and rented houses, large and small, actively promotes a greater amount of social intercourse either between residents or between social classes than does one-class housing.

¹⁵ National Council of Social Service.: *Our Neighbourhood*. London, 1950, Preface by W. G. S. Adams, p. 3; and 'On the municipal estates there was a tendency for the residents to be drawn exclusively from those groups who do not throw up natural leaders to organise community life.' p. 14.

¹⁶ R. J. Hacon: *Community Patterns in the Borough of Cambridge. A study of two areas*. Manuscript with Cambridgeshire County Planning Office.