

Do Neighbourhoods Still Matter?

On Our Agency and (Possible) Future Paths

TALI HATUKA

In its simplest sense, a neighbourhood refers to people living near a particular place or within a specific range, sharing infrastructure and amenities. This does not imply that neighbourhoods are synonymous with communities, but rather, communities in the plural may be found in a neighbourhood. This straightforward, yet loose, approach is the lens through which we examine neighbourhoods in this issue. It allows us to do two things. First, to expand the neighbourhood category and include the planned neighbourhoods and unplanned informal settlements, and thus enlarge the places discussed beyond the Western context. Second, it helps us to bypass the conceptual question of what a neighbourhood is to the normative questions: Do neighbourhoods matter? And if so, in what way, and for whom? Also facing the future, what is needed to make them more meaningful to us? In that sense, the issue is engaged more in what the neighbourhood is doing for us, people residing in cities worldwide, rather than addressing it as a unit of analysis or representation of social-spatial processes. It looks at the present but aims to draw possible future paths to our daily places of living.

These aims may seem anachronistic to some scholars. Focusing on the scale of the neighbourhood is not evident in the globalized digital age, which is often characterized by enhanced urban densification and growth. In the contemporary era, regions, cities, and neighbourhoods are often viewed as networks of economic, social, and political power

(Hall, 2009; Healey, 2006; Turok, 2009). This approach, enhanced by the digital revolution and the ongoing processes of globalization, challenged the traditional hierarchy of spatial categories. Scholars argue that ‘research needs to break away from the “tyranny” of neighbourhood and consider alternative ways to measure the wider socio-spatial context of people, placing individuals at the centre of the approach’ (Petrović *et al.*, 2020, p. 1103). Advocates of this perspective often adopt a relational approach that perceives places from a ‘non-Euclidean perspective where place boundaries are fluid, and distances are relative’ (Vallée *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, the neighbourhood scale from this point of view may be a trap in analytic research and might lead to ‘inaccurate estimations of the number and types of resources people may have access to in their neighbourhood, and of the magnitude of the social gradient in resource accessibility, what has been called the “constant size neighbourhood trap”’ (Vallée *et al.*, 2015; Vallée *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). As a solution, what many contemporary studies suggest is to ‘have the cake and eat it’: that is to expand the conceptual and theoretical approaches that address neighbourhood, by recognizing a paradoxical pattern in which the formation of regional networks reinforces the dispersion of urban-regional activities while also fostering their concentration in specific locales (Albrechts and Mandelbaum, 2007). This dual approach, that suggests addressing neighbourhood locality but viewing it as part of the wider

Contact: Tali Hatuka ✉ hatuka@tauex.tau.ac.il

network, raises theoretical challenges and is part of a heated ongoing debate in urban studies since the 1990s.

However, during the last decade, with the arrival of new digital platforms in our daily lives, new questions have been raised. Scholars start assessing the way digital platforms alter and/or support social cohesion, health, resilience, and infrastructure. Paradoxically, although digitization was expected to affect distance and thus diminish the role of geography and neighbourhoods, the latter are viewed as having an increasing role in our life. This perception and academic interest were enhanced during COVID-19 during which the role of the locale in supporting people was clearly evident. Numerous studies have shown that neighbourhoods affect individuals' subjective wellbeing, and neighbours are an important source of everyday help and support, even more so in times of crisis (Zangger, 2023). Other studies showed 'how characteristics of social and built environments affect relationships between disaster experiences and perceptions of risk, mental health symptoms, and food or financial insecurities' (Finucane *et al.*, 2022, p. 10). Neighbourhoods, again, became a category that raised intellectual interest.

But what do we know about the daily life of contemporary neighbourhoods? The growing role of digitization processes in our lives, and their role in expanding the geographical boundaries of our daily activities, has dramatically changed our daily conduct. We shop, socially engage, and manage using digital platforms; at the same time, we also constantly engage in marking the boundaries between the members we view as our daily community and the rest. Each of us lives in this local–global environment; the local, perceived as concrete and bounded, and the global, conceived as abstract and boundless. Most of us enjoy this duality of bounded locality and boundless globalism without thinking about this contradiction much. We live it!

My argument in this issue is that within

this duality localism precedes globalism, in times of peace and even more so in times of crisis. The local–global implies that the concrete is close and comprehensible. It is immediate. This results, in the past and continuing today, in multiple efforts and resources to protect the neighbourhood as a significant locale in a boundless global world. Multiple and varied actors are constantly engaging in defining the neighbourhood and using their definitions to design new frameworks of action from below and from above. With the top-down actors, we can name policymakers, urban planners, or even the police. Their motivation for supporting the existence of the neighbourhood unit is the ability to manage its growth and maintain order in the city. With the bottom-up actors, we can find the residents, community leaders, activists, and real-estate developers. Their motivation varies and includes social and cultural ideas or economic incentives.

Do Neighbourhoods Still Matter?

The direct response to the question posed in this issue, *Neighbourhoods: do they still matter?* is yes. It matters to many who maintain it as a meaningful construct to which they refer in multiple ways. But like many constructs, it is dynamic. So, even if we agree it is still relevant, we can ask what does the neighbourhood mean for us today? Where are we heading? What are the neighbourhoods of tomorrow? These are normative questions rather than analytical ones, and this collection is trying to address this from multiple and varied perspectives.

The issue opens with the paper 'Normative Neighbourhoods' by Emily Talen who offers a normative definition of what a neighbourhood should be. For Talen, a neighbourhood has identity, 'a place that functions as its centre, everyday facilities and services, internal and external connectivity, social diversity within it or an openness to its enabling, and a means by which

residents can be involved in its affairs and speak with a collective voice' (Talen, 2024). Talen explains why we should pursue the normative approach to neighbourhoods and suggests that *place*, instead of the sociological categories of class or race, offers opportunities for forming alternative collective identities. Talen calls for not sentimentalizing neighbourhood life but instead 'working towards a more explicit sense of what and where neighbourhoods are'. Viewing the neighbourhood as a normative construct reminds us that neighbourhoods depend on us, the people that act within the neighbourhoods and upon our agency, and thus neighbourhoods are elastic in time and space.

The rest of the papers are organized in two groups. The first group address the varied actors who influence the neighbourhood's character and social dynamics, tracking why and how they act within neighbourhoods. In the second, we focus on neighbourhoods' futures and on the big question: Where are we heading? We are offered some paths – sustainability, community, health, and resilience – to address the wellbeing of residents. Yet, there is much to be done to integrate these ideas into a meaningful framework that would support designers and urban planners in their interventions in existing and new neighbourhoods.

Agency and Its Role Shaping Neighbourhoods

Early twenty-first century residents are not passive actors who automatically follow top-down abstract frameworks that dictate their life paths. Without idealizing the role or power of the resident, it is clear that through our actions we shape our daily life and thus, our neighbourhoods. It is in the scale of the neighbourhood, that people can use 'tactics for their own ends, without any illusions as to their ultimate practical effects. Where dominating powers exploit the order of things, where ideological dis-

course represses or ignores it, tactics fool this order and make it the field of their art' (De Certeau *et al.*, 1980, p. 4). Yet, as Michel De Certeau (1984) explained in his influential book *The Practice of Everyday Life* institutional actors and people are not necessarily in opposition to one another but form a complex entangled set of actions and strategies.

The paper 'Neighbourhoods still Matter Because Housing Market Actors believe that They Matter' by George C. Galster addresses the question of agency from various positions. Galster (2024) is doing two things in his paper. First, he reminds us that the urban neighbourhood is part of a larger economic market and with different market actors – households, owners, developers, and agents, brokers – taking decisions and influencing one another and neighbourhoods. Second, he argues that all these actors believe that the local area in which they live, own property, or try to sell property influences our wellbeing for a number of social-psychological and/or economic reasons. Galster suggests that these beliefs influence our behaviour. Thus, he reaches the conclusion that 'neighbourhood is important because the household and property owner/developer decisionmakers who drive these outcomes in market-dominated economies and the agents that serve and inform them believe and act as if it were important'. So, as long as these beliefs guide us (and he does not recognize a paradigm shift in the horizon), neighbourhoods will still be an important aggregate in the metropolitan city.

A more socio-spatial approach to the active role of different actors in shaping the neighbourhood is presented in the papers by Cristina Mattiucci 'The Agency of Socially-Mixed Neighbourhoods. Insights from the Historic Centre of Naples' and by Colleen Chiu-Shee, 'Rethinking Enclosed Neighbourhoods: Vital Infrastructure for Design Innovation, Civic Engagement, and Biopower in Urban China'. These two related papers, from different cultural and political contexts,

engage with the role of policy in shaping neighbourhoods. They both teach us about the agency and the extent to which the *will* of residents and the *will* of social and political powers are entangled and are always context specific. Copy and paste policies are impossible as the meaning and practices in neighbourhoods differ significantly.

Mattiucci's paper focuses on the city of Naples and explains how the concept of neighbourhood is continuously 'negotiated and redefined through everyday practices of urban interactions' (Mattiucci, 2024). She explains how social diversity shapes the housing situations and economic activities that take place in the central neighbourhoods in the city. In her paper she tells us about the policy initiative of the city council to build a socially inclusive block of flats to keep the heterogeneity of residents in the city centre. She illuminates the coexistence of various inhabitants, social networks and spatial relationships and the way together they represent a unique concept of neighbourhood. This policy, that might fail in other places, 'plays a crucial role in breaking down communication and resource barriers in urban spaces, and in reducing the inequalities between social groups, that are otherwise isolated in homogeneous areas of the city'.

In China, 'Capitalist processes of urbanization and privatization have produced a growing number of enclosed neighbourhoods across the world. Critical scholarship often frames these neighbourhoods as products of an overextended neoliberalism and symbols of the fragmentation, segregation, and hierarchization of both space and society' (Chiu-Shee, 2024). Yet, as Chiu-Shee explains, culture plays a role in the formation of these neighbourhoods' realities, as she writes 'enclosed neighbourhoods have been, and will remain, the everyday environments that shape citizens' behaviours, values, and social relations. They have also served, and will continue to serve, as the vital infrastructure that enables both civic engagement

and biopolitical control – an irony that remains to be resolved'. Here again, the idea of enclosed neighbourhoods, that is often discussed in a pejorative way, in China plays vital roles in (re)shaping everyday environments, driving economic restructuring, transforming governance systems, and facilitating normative transformations in China.

Either way, one of the issues raised in these two papers is the extent to which policies influence neighbours' dynamic and relations. This is the theme of the paper 'Neighbourhoods and Social Cohesion: Why Neighbourhoods Still Matter', by Sebastian Kurtenbach. He analyses the connection between neighbourly relations and social cohesion and the way this affects participation and the involvement of the residents in the locale. Based on a qualitative study in two urban districts in Germany, both characterized by high levels of social segregation and cultural diversity but differ in terms of local social service organizations and urban development, he shows that 'there is a close connection between residents' perceptions of social cohesion and inclination for social participation in the neighbourhood. Local social service organizations and associations can play a critical role in facilitating the social encounters that create such perceptions' (Kurtenbach, 2024). The results support the idea that policy matters, and in contemporary times local neighbourhood initiatives and the development of meeting and community places, can contribute significantly to neighbours' relations and their active involvement in the process of shaping the neighbourhood.

It is not only policymakers, residents, and market-actors who are active in the neighbourhoods but also the powers of force. In any city, there are neighbourhoods where these powers are more active and visible than in others. In her paper 'The Concept of the "Neighbourhood" in Crime and Place Theory and Its Influence on Police Strategy', Hadas Zur reviews the way theories of crime and place conceptualized

the idea of the neighbourhood over the last decades. Using the case of a neighbourhood in Tel Aviv she shows how the diversity of approaches increases the range and areas of police intervention in the neighbourhood and empowers their control and effect on place. This process 'indicates the dominance of physical and microgeographical approaches over sociological approaches' (Zur, 2024). Yet she argues that although the neighbourhood still matters and plays a 'significant reference point in police work' it has many shortcomings, and she offers some paths for rethinking the dynamic of crime in neighbourhoods.

This set of papers on the actors in the neighbourhoods ends with the paper 'The Medium is the Messenger: A Quantitative Study on the Relation between Social Media Services and Neighbourhood Social Interactions' by Jan Üblacker, Simon Liebig, and Hawzheen Hamad. The paper brings back the tension raised in this editorial between the boundless digital world and local concrete daily life in the neighbourhood. More specifically, the paper engages with the role of internet-based social networking services (ISNS) (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter/X) in neighbourhoods. It starts by presenting the debate between scholars who 'argue that ISNS diminish the significance of local physical place and hinder meaningful interactions, especially among neighbours', to the scholars that view 'ISNS as tools that foster new forms of connectiveness and enhance relationships within neighbourhoods by creating opportunities to engage with existing peers' (Üblacker *et al.*, 2024). In a study conducted in two German cities (Essen and Cologne) they show that this debate is not black or white. 'Messenger services and neighbourhood-specific social networks have a positive impact on social interactions within the neighbourhood. However, popular social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter do not significantly affect social interactions within the neighbourhood' (*ibid.*).

In short, they show that neighbourhoods continue to play a crucial role in our social fabric, with messenger services enhancing the convenience of maintaining these local connections. Yet, 'the prerequisites for engaging in the contemporary landscape of neighbourhood interaction' are not equal and should be viewed in the context of digital divides and difference.

(Possible) Future Neighbourhood Paths

This set of papers links global questions and challenges with the neighbourhood scale. Sustainability, health, digitization, and equitable resilience are all big themes that have been addressed on multiple scales. These papers argue that we might gain a lot by addressing them at the local scale. If successful, we might be able also to create some paths to the scale of the city, or the region. What the following papers are trying to do is to use existing studies and findings in order to develop conceptual frameworks to deal with big themes at the neighbourhood level.

In his paper addressing the question of sustainability and power of the community, 'How Learning from Informal Settlements Contributes to the Community Resilience of Neighbourhoods' Jota Samper suggests that in times of an uncertain future plagued by the challenges imposed by climate change, political polarization, and urban conflict, we might want to learn from the informal settlements. He offers 'three important lessons that can be gleaned from informal settlements: incrementality, sustainability, and self-reliance. These characteristics contribute to the resilience of the communities, making informal settlements the predominant neighbourhoods of the twenty-first century' (Samper, 2024). Samper does not romanticize informal dwellers' challenges, but points to the way they establish and build their community resilience. 'These places serve as the bedrock of community existence and are a wellspring of innovation in the face

of scarcity.' With the presence of informal settlements worldwide, Samper suggests that excluding marginalized groups from participation in decision-making would mean that the only space for meaningful citizen action would be outside legal frameworks and institutions.

Sustainability is also a goal that many technological companies put as a primary aim. The use of the term 'smart cities' became common in the first decade of the twenty-first century, especially against the backdrop of digitization in contemporary daily life. However, there is no consensus on the meaning of the term, despite its importance and its contribution to urban development. If we do not know much about smartness and cities, we know even less about digitization processes in the neighbourhoods. In the paper, 'Can Neighbourhoods Save the Smart City?' Alessandro Aurigi suggests that we need to shift our focus from the smart city to the local scale. His paper makes a case for the 'smart neighbourhood not as a plain, pre-determined, functional sub-unit of a centrally controlled and automated smart metropolis, but as a radically divergent – yet necessarily complementary – dimension of it (Aurigi, 2024). Aurigi emphasizes 'the importance of re-combining space, community and technology at the local scale, and discusses how the point is not opposing the smart neighbourhood to the smart city through a simplistic bottom-up vs top-down dualist vision, but rather reflecting on how these dimensions should work together'. For Aurigi design and development strategies should enable local innovation and experimentation, envisioning a grounded, sustainable, and effective smart city.

Digitization also affects contemporary health services: 1. the decentralization of health services from hospitals to the community, which includes outpatient clinics, day hospitals, emergency medicine, information and communication technologies (ICTs); 2. the digitization of health and new health monitoring

tools increase interest in the neighbourhood scale. In the paper 'The Neighbourhood–Health Nexus: Design, Behaviour and Futures', Tali Hatuka, Gal Elhanan and Amitai Bloom, argue that while the medical arguments for policies that support health are maturing, the socio-spatial strategies in urban planning for supporting health in neighbourhoods remain embryonic. What neighbourhood design supports health? What is the reciprocal influence of health-related behaviour and urban design? Responding to these questions they address two bodies of related literature: studies that focus on neighbourhood design and its influence on health, and studies that focus on residents' health-related behaviour. The links between these two bodies serve as a basis to develop a set of guidelines for future and existing neighbourhoods (Hatuka *et al.*, 2024).

The issue ends with the paper 'A Neighbourhood Unit for Equitable Resilience' by Zachary Lamb and Lawrence J. Vale who ask 'how this influential and controversial concept [of the neighbourhood] might be adapted to address today's most vexing urban challenges: climate change hazards and widening inequality' (Lamb and Vale, 2024). Drawing on a diverse array of global case studies, they argue 'that the neighbourhood can be a unit for "equitable resilience", but only if we reconceptualize neighbourhoods in significant ways'. It needs to be more socially and culturally inclusive, to be better linked to analysis and action on wider spatial and political scales, and it must link built environment changes to institutional changes that improve conditions in the domains of livelihoods, environmental safety, governance, and security from displacement. They call on us to see the 'neighbourhood unit for equitable resilience as a meso-scale socio-spatial unit through which disadvantaged people are empowered to link separate interventions in the built environment together and tie local institutional changes to broader scale initiatives to achieve lasting improvements in their liveli-

hoods, environmental, governance, and security conditions’.

These four papers, although focusing on different themes sustainability, digitization, health and equitable resilience are linked. The future of neighbourhoods will be affected by the way scholars will be able to integrate them into a holistic framework, while remembering the role, will and power of residents in activating it, as illustrated by the first set of papers. To be sure, the neighbourhood scale is complex, but at the same time manageable and complete. It can help us to understand and tackle global questions, while also seeing the people. As Aurigi argues, ‘When operating in and through neighbourhoods it becomes somehow impossible to divorce from the immediate social and physical contexts’ (Aurigi, 2024). Cities and neighbourhoods are not data collection units or units of analysis within wider models – they are living places. It is time for developing an updated design and policy framework that would guide us in supporting the present and future normative neighbourhoods.

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