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Neighborhood

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BOOK REVIEW

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What is a neighborhood in the digital age? In the context of contemporary configurations of regions, defined as networks of economic, social and political powers (Hall, 2009; Healey, 2006; Turok, 2009), responding to this question is not easy. The spatial turns of recent decades have heightened the theoretical debate over distinct spatial lexicons, and definitions of territory, place, scale, and network (Jessop et al., 2008). It is argued that social and economic processes occur on a growing geographical scale, beyond that of the city, and are transforming historically separate metropolitan areas into connected, polycentric regions (Burger et al., 2014). Advocates of this approach argue that the traditional, Christallerian central-place conceptualization of urban systems is outdated, and can best be replaced by a network view of urban systems without an urban hierarchy and with a significant degree of spatial integration between different centers (Burger et al., 2014, p. 1921). However, the idea of the network as the organizing logic of contemporary global environments – and for city-regionalism in particular – is questioned by other scholars, who argue that it is too soon to completely abandon the idea of hierarchical system and its development by the nation-state (Jonas & Ward, 2007; Kirby & Abu-Rass, 1999). They propose 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 & Mandelbaum, 2007).

This tension between networks and locales stands at the core of contemporary pandemic crisis. Surely, a global effort was needed to tackle the crisis, but the locale – the physical place that each of us inhabits – had a major impact on how our wellbeing was supported during the pandemic. Neighborhoods in the same city experienced the pandemic differently; parameters such as density, socio-economic status, public amenities and spaces, all played crucial roles in the resilience of neighborhoods. In the pandemic context, neighborhoods did matter. Crises are analyzed on national and city scale, but managed in the local neighborhood. The neighborhood scale is also relevant for present and future challenges such as climate change, food crises, and increasing immigration. True, global knowledge and efforts are required to tackle these challenges, but we should not forget that we experience them locally, at our doorstep. And not only in times of crisis. Many of our daily activities take place locally.

But, even if we agree about the relevance of neighborhoods for tackling contemporary challenges, major methodological issues are at stake. First, as a unit of analysis, ‘neighborhood’ is not easy to define. Urban geographers and planners have not adopted a universally accepted definition of what constitutes an urban neighborhood (Flint, 2009, p. 354). Throughout the 20th century, and into the 21st, scholars have cultivated “a definition of neighborhood based on social demographics, which mostly meant that neighborhoods were defined as census tracts” (Talen, 2018, p. 63). Second, the ambiguity and indeterminacy that surrounds the idea of the neighborhood is often cited as a limiting factor that circumscribes its empirical value for urban analysis (Galster, 2019). Third, there is tension between the geographical and the social aspects of the neighborhood. As a focus of research, the neighborhood has a degree of inherent ambiguity, because it contains both geographic (place-oriented) and social (people-oriented) aspects. Many use the word ‘neighborhood’ interchangeably with ‘community,’ another term that is difficult to pin down (Kenny, 2009, p. 343). Fourth is the multidimensional character of the neighborhood. Neighborhoods are complex organizations, consisting of a series of spatially-based attributes and processes relating to both the built environment, and the economic, social, and cultural characteristics of the population residing there.

In response to these epistemic and methodological challenges, Emily Talen, in her book *Neighborhood*, published in 2019, suggests that we should view neighborhoods as “multiple scales of ecological influence” (Talen, 2018, p. 67). Therefore, instead of considering the methodological limitations as barriers hampering research, Talen suggests to view the neighborhood as a methodological opportunity to engage with both multi-scalar relational geographies and the non-scalar ways that urban inhabitants go about their social, economic, and spatial practices.

Acknowledging both the epistemological and methodological complexity of neighborhoods, Talen calls for reexamining the neighborhood, beyond its role as a geographical signifier, by again making it relevant to our lives. Talen asks if the historical neighborhood could reinvent itself as a relevant and meaningful form of existence in the current day, taking into account e-commerce, which reduces the need for small, local businesses; the social relationships that are formed and maintained on the web, and the increasing prevalence of exclusive, gated communities, among other factors. Despite all these, Talen believes in the potential of neighborhoods, and boldly suggests that academic and planning discourses would do well to deflect the arrows of critics, and focus on the design and management of neighborhoods, including the daily experience of their residents.

Talen lists four main reasons for the importance of everyday neighborhoods in our day. First, is the huge demand and the scarce supply of dwellings in historic neighborhoods remaining in old city centers, which combine the experience of walkability and mixed uses. Second, is the sense of identity that the everyday neighborhood creates for its residents, who reciprocate by caring for it. The neighborhood is not an arbitrary collection of buildings, an abstraction detached from daily existence, but a concrete reality. Third, are the social and economic relationships that emerge from the neighborhood’s high connectivity and the increased success rate of different social frameworks. Fourth, is the way an everyday neighborhood replaces social homogeneity with place-based identity. The diversity thus created reduces social differences and fear of the other. Therefore, Talen considers the everyday neighborhood a tool for social change.

To restore the idea of neighborhoods to the agenda, Talen organized the book in two parts. The first is more epistemological; the second, more polemical. The first part discusses the conceptual history of the neighborhood, from its function in antiquity through its decline in the 20th century and the various attempts to reinvent it. The second part paves the path to future neighborhood development. It covers five debates, focusing on physical design, planning, governance, social relevance, and segregation, as well as the right way to frame the way ahead. She proposes not a strict static paradigm, but rather suggests viewing the neighborhood as an ongoing process of contested development in time and space. Talen argues that these debates represent significant historical discourse and insights: “If we look closely at the main debates [...] we can start to work our way toward a proposal for resolution and a new definition of neighborhood that does not necessarily throw out the historical experience of neighborhood a priori, but at the same time recognizes that the traditional neighborhood needs to be redefined in certain ways” (Talen, 2018, p. 5).

The first debate focuses on design, its role and scope in forming neighborhoods. It revolves around the questions of whether neighborhoods can or should be planned all at once and as complete units; the composition of their streets and its effect on internal and external connectivity. “All of these debates involve the limits and practicalities of neighborhood identity-building and consciousness, which can be thought of as being on a continuum from most extreme (whole units on clean slates) to more subtle (increasing connectivity via interconnecting pathways)” (Talen, 2018, p. 75). The second debate is over planned neighborhoods, and whether they should be the result of deliberative action, either through a physical plan or as a set of orchestrated actions, or a result of spontaneous neighborhood formation. “The emphasis here is on the contrast between planning for a specified end state and ‘neighborhood planning’ as a process with no predetermined outcome, especially in physical terms” (Talen, 2018, p. 122). The third debate concerns the pros and cons of self-determination and local control. “Strong, self-regulated neighborhoods fit well within a self-help

narrative about residents taking control of their own destinies. But the downside, as the debates reveal, is the loss of power and the potential for insularity, which can further deplete power" (Talen, 2018, p. 160). The fourth focuses on the quest to achieve goals for social relationships via the neighborhood. Many experiments have been conducted worldwide, in efforts to achieve desired social outcomes, but found that "form did not necessarily matter for engendering particular kinds of social relationships" (Talen, 2018, p. 180). The fifth debate, which Talen considers the most significant, concerns social segregation. The key question asks if a neighborhood is, by definition, a form of exclusion, and "if neighborhoods weren't identified in the first place, there would be less emphasis on social sorting and who is "in" and "out" of the neighborhood" (Talen, 2018, p. 219).

We agree with Talen's argument that understanding these five debates in the planning discourse uncovers the issues regarding neighborhoods. The debates illuminate the struggle of planners and policy makers engaged in 'the bread and butter' of the profession, that is, housing delivery. But the neighborhood is a spatial framework that goes beyond that need, and helps support wellbeing by providing a holistic approach to the varied daily needs.

That said, we suggest adding the debate over digitization processes and digital differences in neighborhoods. Over the last decade, digitization has massively penetrated neighbourhoods and impacted every dimension in our daily life, i.e. infrastructure (e.g., transportation), management (e.g., local and municipal platforms that provide services and information), and community dynamics. Digitization has created new opportunities to participate in the neighbourhood and allowed new patterns and practices in the virtual sphere, altering (yet not eliminating) the role of physical spaces. Digital infrastructure enables a better flow of services and information, and the focus shifts to the integration of many technologies into one complete system (Cagliioni et al., 2020). However, what is the motivation for these types of development? Does technology support other major challenges such as energy, sustainability, and health? Who prioritizes these technological projects? These questions are part of the ongoing debate over the tension between local and generic technological infrastructures, as well as the way they might harm the quotidian functions of the neighbourhood. In addition, digitization is influencing management, supporting flexible options for participation (Afzalan & Evans-Cowley, 2015; Grotherr et al., 2020; Renyi et al., 2022), enabling more diverse representation (Afzalan & Evans-Cowley, 2015). However, digitization may cause another form of inequality, as residents without digital access, digital knowledge, and/or the will to be active digitally could not participate in local management (Afzalan & Evans-Cowley, 2015). This shift towards digital platforms raises multiple questions: do digital platforms lead to greater and more diverse participation in neighbourhood affairs? Does this process enhance informal bottom-up initiatives? Does it solve issues of inequality? Moreover, digital communications also altered the complex link between the community and the neighbourhood. It is argued that online neighbourhood networks cultivate the neighbourhood community (Robaeyst et al., 2022), creating a new medium of engagement for local issues, providing neighbourly help and support (De Meulenaere et al., 2021), deepening social ties (Nakano & Washizu, 2021), and reinforcing an interplay between digital and face-to-face connections (Gibbons, 2020). However, does the neighbourhood physical space directly relate to the community that evolved in the digital space? Does the idea of community expand beyond the geographical boundaries of the neighbourhood? This complex connection between the online neighbourhood community and the specific physical characteristics of the given neighbourhood has not been thoroughly researched.

In conclusion, Talen is right, neighborhoods matter. Today, more than ever. Sudden crises, ongoing social challenges (i.e., polarization, exclusion, segregation), and uneven digital processes in cities make the neighborhood a critical, spatial organization that serves as a mediator between the physical environment and the social community. Talen's book and her timely call is a much-needed reminder for urban planners engaging with neighborhoods; it offers a good lens for understanding both the past and contemporary debates, as a means to lead us to better futures.

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