Where social meets spatial

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BOOK REVIEW

Where social meets spatial

Social sustainability, climate resilience and community-based urban development, by

Baldwin, C. and King, R., 2018, Abingdon, Routledge
978-1-138-47801-5, Hardback - £45.00

'The physical environment cannot be understood simply by looking at it' (p. 64). This book is a call to policy-makers, planners and designers involved in urban developments to take the social and cultural meanings of the places and spaces they influence more seriously. The messages contained in the book are not only relevant for climate change-aware urban development, but for any planned intervention that has potential to place additional stress on urban infrastructure and populations.

Central to this book is an appreciation of the importance of 'social resources'. The authors assert that when urban developments are designed with the goal of strengthening social resources, users of the built environment will be more likely to connect with places and spaces, and to use these flexibly when their form is changed by an environmental adversity (such as a flood or earthquake).

Social resources are described as comprising three elements: social capital, social cohesion and what the authors refer to as 'pro-community behaviours'. In other words, collective cooperation is essential for climate resilience. Cohesive relationships within and between social networks are essential for collective cooperation to be successful. A community exhibiting strong social resources in these three elements will have higher capacity to adapt to and cope with change, than a community with weak social resources. This is because adaptive capacity relies on community members' abilities to bond together and achieve shared objectives.

The authors draw on two frameworks, 'socially sustainable community framework' (Dempsey et al., 2009) and 'resilient neighbourhood community framework' (Zautra, Hall and Murray, 2008). They then go on to identify socially sustainable behaviours that enable community resilience in a number of case studies of real-life developments and environmental disasters from around the world (Buenos Aires, Argentina; Khulna, Bangladesh; Delhi and Surat, India; Jakarta, Indonesia; Christchurch, New Zealand; Cape Town, South Africa; Yala, Thailand; Belfast, Manchester and southern England, UK; New Orleans and Portland, USA). The stated ultimate objective of the book is to highlight the behavioural and psychological dimensions that developers should promote in built environment constructions.

The conclusion is that developers should provide spatial opportunities to encourage social contact, place attachment, collective action, sense of community, participation in community activities, and a sense of well-being, pride, ownership, safety, place and belonging. To these ends, the book offers practical recommendations and case examples structured by each phase of the urban development process: scheme conception and pre-development; research and community participation; design decisions and implementation; and monitoring and evaluation.

There were five messages that particularly resonated with me and provide the basis for my recommending this book to the broader impact assessment community of practice:

- Design teams need social scientists in order to map social resources and the social and cultural meanings of the pre-and post-development built environment.
- In addition to social resources, there are other factors that affect a community's resilience, such as socio-economic hardship and marginalization. However, where these exist, it is still possible that a community will have strong social resources. Social resource mapping should not only seek to understand needs and vulnerabilities, but how social networks and coping strategies help in generating a livelihood. This in turn requires understanding the spatial and organizational features of a dwelling area that produce social networks. There is a blind spot in community engagement activities when methods are selected that favour groups who have more time to devote to community issues. The capacity to participate tends to be higher amongst middle and upper socio-economic groups.
- When people are displaced from an urban environment, social resources become negatively impacted with detrimental social and health impacts. Resettlement and livelihood restoration plans should seek to transfer networks.
- Length of residence and income equality within a community are determinants of social capital, as these are features that bind people together. In-migration can bring social fragmentation due to lack of bridging capital. Efforts should be devoted to strengthening the social resources of recent migrants and bridging capital of longer-term residents.
- Social resource-aware developments need to provide human visibility and spatial opportunities to bond. 'Public spaces are a key site for the

emergence of resilient behaviours and states of mind' (p. 100). However, 'in all cities, psychological responses to spaces such as feelings of safety, security and sense of belonging can determine the people who populate and use them (p. 95). It is important to understand how 'gendered norms' shape how public space is inhabited and influence access to resources and decision-making powers. Spatial separation of women and men in public spaces can disadvantage women.

This book is recommended reading for developers, and those advising developers, who would like to deepen their understanding of community resilience while being inspired by case studies that show how resilience can be strengthened in practice.

References

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