

In what ways and to what extent does the concept of new urbanism foster Sense of Community?

Introduction

Nowadays, Sense of Community is a powerful force in our culture. Community drives people together for different reasons and for the better or worst. As the population in the United States increases everyday, the near future will witness the creation of hundreds of new communities throughout the country. Some will be planned, and others will not be intended. For planners, the understanding of how communities are formed will enable us to design housing that will be maintained and will provide for better use of surroundings areas and safety from crime. In order to build responsible neighborhoods, towns and cities, it is elementary in understanding the meaning of Sense of Community.

While previous community psychology researches have define Sense of Community based on human relationship, few of them have focused on the relationship of environmental variables to the construct (Plas and Lewis, 1996). In the past two decades, the Congress of the New Urbanism has focused its work and interest in the build environment as a key factor influencing the behavior of the members of a community and indirectly participating to their Sense of Community. This paper will look at how this concept encourages Sense of Community. It will focus on the role played by the physical environment in fostering sense of community. The paper will first present a short chronological overview of the Sense of Community definition brought by the psychology community since 1975 by understanding its meaning and its evolution. Secondly, it will look at how the Congress of New Urbanism justified and grounded their beliefs in the ability of the built environment to create Sense of

Community based on two study that have been done on two well known new urbanist development.

Sense of Community

In the early 1970's the term community psychology sought researchers to begin seriously investigating about factors that were tying people together in neighborhoods. In the 1980's theoreticians went to work on the concept of "sense of community". The psychological sense of community is a concept which was for the first time introduced by Samuel Sarason in his book entitled The Psychology Sense of Community: Prospects for a community psychology. Sarason suggested that this construct include "The perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (Sarason, 1974 cited in Plas & Lewis, 1996).

A couple of years later, Doolittle and MacDonald developed a study which would help them to scale the sense of a community or neighborhood based on behaviors and attitudes. In order to differentiate three scale of sense of community (low, medium, high), Doolittle and MacDonald based their research on five factors: 1) informal interaction; 2) safety; 3) pro-urbanism (privacy); 4) neighboring preference; 5) localism. The result showed that there was an inverse relationship between pro-urbanism and preference for neighboring, a direct relationship for safety and preference for neighboring and finally pro-urbanism decrease as perception of safety increase (Doolittle and MacDonald, 1978).

Furthermore in the evolution of the sense of community definition, the work of Riger and Lavrakas is relevant as it discussed how neighborhood attachment shaped sense of

community. Their work emphasized the role of the social bonding factor and the behavioral rootedness. Using these two factors, Riger and Lavrakas were able to identify distinct groups of citizens: 1) young mobiles (low bonded, low rooted); 2) young participants (high bonded, low rooted); 3) isolated (low bonded, high rooted); 4) established participants (high bonded, high rooted) (Riger and Lavrakas, 1981). The notion of satisfaction as an integral part of the sense of community has been brought up by the work of Ahlbrant and Cunningham, who found that people who were the most committed and satisfied with their neighborhood were more likely to see their neighborhood as a small community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

Nowadays, McMillan and Chavis have offered the most-cited definition of the variable to date (Plas and Lewis, 1996). "Sense of Community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). In general, McMillan and Chavis suggested that their definition could be applied equally about places and people. However, within a certain territorial community, it is the human interaction that creates Sense of Community and not the other way around. Their definition of Sense of Community includes four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and trade and finally shared emotional connection.

Membership

Boundaries, emotional safety, sense of belonging and identification, personal investment and a common symbol system are the four dimensions of membership identified by McMillan and Chavis. Boundaries are marked by language, dress or anything that could indicate who belongs to the community and who does not. Emotional safety refers to security. Sense of identification refers to the sentiment of belonging or being accepted within a

community. The common symbol refers to symbols such as a flag, a national language or an architectural type to which people can related.

Influence

According to McMillan and Chavis, the influence in a community can be bi-directional. Members of a community can feel empowered if they have influence over the community. For that reason, they can be motivated to participate in the community. Also community cohesiveness depends upon the members having some influence over its members. Pressure to conform and group cohesiveness is a good correlation. People like to experience things similarly to other group members (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

Integration and Fulfillment of Needs

According to McMillan and Chavis, reinforcement as a motivator of behavior is a cornerstone in behavioral research and it is obvious that for many groups, to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual group association must be rewarding for its members. Membership can be a reward of integration.

Shared Emotional Connection

Quality of interaction, increased importance of a shared event, investment, honor received from the community and spiritual bond are particular features of shared emotional connection affecting positively Sense of Community.

In 1975, Gusfield's definition of community made the distinction between two major uses of the term community: territorial and relational. Territorial is relative to place while relational related to the quality of human relation without reference to location. Gusfield argued that these two usages are not exclusive. In their definition of Sense of Community, McMillan and Chavis insisted that their definition apply to both territorial communities and to

relational communities (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). As mentioned before, such definition emphasized the role of human relationship as a key element to support Sense of Community: people make the place.

In related work, but with a more pronounced emphasis on the physical, Unger and Wandersman's definition lies in three components: 1) social; 2) cognitive; 3) affective (Unger and Wandersman, 1985). While the first and third components are generally more subject of research, the cognitive component deserves more attention in the sense that for the first time the role of the physical environment in the perception of community is discussed. According to Unger and Wandersman, cognitive mapping of the physical layout of a neighborhood helps individuals determine the degree to which they feel safe in interacting with that particular environment (Plas and Lewis, 1996). As a result, slowly people are realizing that if people can make a place, a place can influence people and therefore it can be an important factor in Sense of Community.

Sense of Community and New Urbanism

The concept of new urbanism has been promoted for the past two decades as an alternative and answer to the problems created by sprawl. These new developments, also called Traditional Neighborhood Developments, are intended to offer a greater diversity of land uses within a walkable community. Sense of community has been often mentioned as an asset of new urbanism. Accordingly, new urbanists assert that the main defect of standard suburban development is not aesthetic or even environmental but is its insidious social effect (Duany and Plater-Zyberk, 1992). This specific asset has generated a fair amount of discussions in the popular press as well as in the professional literature. People are

questioning the theoretical and the empirical basis that lies behind the attempt to promote social interaction and sense of community through the physical design of communities (Talen, 1999). In order to measure the success of new urbanist projects in term of social interaction and sense of community, scholars have come to study some of the earliest developments. They used the concept advocated by the new urbanism to evaluate the success of the creation of a sense of community supported by adequate physical environment. Among others, two well known development will be discussed in this paper: Kentlands, Maryland and Seaside, Florida.

Kentlands

Joongsburg and Kaplan (JK) compared Kentlands with Orchard Village (a conventional development located nearby) to examine the success of the creation of sense of community¹. While they admit that traditional style neighborhood provide interaction and outdoor use, less dependency on automobiles and strong emotional connection, they argue that there is a lack of empirical research supporting the link between new urbanism and sense of community. Their study focused on the role played by the physical environment in fostering sense of community. They conducted the research based on four domains that have been identified in the literature and presented in the first part of the paper and examined each one of them in relation with the physical aspect of neighborhoods.

The first domain is relevant to the concept of *community attachment* while referring to the emotional bonding a resident can have with its neighborhood. This feeling of attachment to a place can be expressed in various ways. According to JK, community attachment should

¹ For this paper, only the results associated with the sense of community for the Kentlands village will be discuss

consist of 1) community satisfaction; 2) sense of connectedness; 3) sense of ownership; 4) long-term integration. Place attachment is a key domain of sense of community as it expresses ways in which one feels at home and belonging to a community (Joongsub and Kaplan, 2004). The second is relevant to the concept of *community identity* that JK defined as the personal or public identification with a community and in which the physical environment plays an important role. According to JK community identity should consist of 1) uniqueness; 2) continuity; 3) significance; 4) compatibility; 5) cohesiveness (Joongsub and Kaplan, 2004). The third is relevant to the concept of social interaction. According to JK community identity should consist of 1) neighboring; 2) community participation; 3) social support (Joongsub and Kaplan, 2004). Finally the fourth is relevant to the concept of pedestrianism. According to JK community identity should consist of 1) walkability; 2) pedestrian propinquity; 3) public transit; 4) pedestrian scale. According to Lund's study, walkability enhances the sense of community in traditional neighborhood (Lund, 2002).

These four domains are interconnected and can create an individual or collective sense of community. This conceptual framework helped JK in the development of the study. Through surveys and interviews, JK questioned residents in their sense of community in respect to these four domains. Overall, the results of the study showed that residents were generally highly satisfied and supportive of their community². Residents were "more strongly identified with their community, found its distinctive physical character more satisfying felt more attached to the community, and had greater appreciation for local services and natural features in their walkable vicinity" (Joongsub and Kaplan, 2004). The study also demonstrated that residents are affected and connected to certain physical features such as the

² JK explain it by the fact that they moved to this specific development seeking for a sense of community

natural environment and the architectural style and overall layout. This sentiment is quite understandable due to the fact that Kentlands is one of the first examples of planned communities that offer a different layout than the conventional one in use since the Second World War.

Kentlands is rich of architecture diversity and offer a fair amount of open spaces. The overall layout of the development include small set backs, narrow street and abundant sidewalks. However, while the residents seem to be attached to the physical characteristic of their community, the study highlighted that among the four domains explained earlier, the social domain has been presented as the weakest. While Kentlands offers a great walkable community with a rich architectural and natural environment from which residents can take advantages, social interaction do not seem to meet the expectation that high density housing or other physical features were promising to support sense of community.

Seaside

Seaside is the first and best known new urbanist project. The 80 acres development originated design as a resort is considered as the driving force the concept of the Congress. It has been designed using a modified grid with different size of streets, alleys and boulevards. A real pedestrian network has been imagined through out the community. Seaside strives to create an architecturally diverse community with mixed uses. In other words, Seaside is a good representation of a new town created similarly as to how towns were developed in the old days. The population abounds in the summer time when during the fall and winter the development is less crowded. While originally, Seaside was designed to accommodate

residents from a variety of economic levels, the success of the development increased the average price of the units and as result became more affordable for higher incomes.

Plas and Lewis (PL) conducted a research study on Seaside in order to investigate the relationship between certain environmentally planned factors and a shared Sense of Community. Such as the Joongsburg and Kaplan with their study on Kentlands, PL's work will bring interesting elements to understand if the new urbanist philosophy constructs sense of community. PL based their research on the McMillan and Chavis definition of sense of community (see previous paragraphs) in addition to Unger and Wandersman's cognitive approach. In addition they hardly considered the architectural details, physical planning layout as part of their study as the Seaside design approach was to create sense of community. They focused on specific elements that were considered by the designer of the town as primary to the success of sense of community. For the environmental factors they took under consideration the following, 1) sandy footpaths; 2) layout of homes; 3) availability, positioning and informal layout of pools, parks and tennis court; 4) location and style of the town's grocery store; 5) position of pavilion; and 6) porches. The results show that a large number of people (66%) were aware that Seaside was a non typical designed development. However most of them did not know in what ways but were relatively conscious that the town philosophy was to bring people together (Plas and Lewis, 1996). They believed that the general layout of the town was to reduce the impact of the automobile in order to provide the opportunity to people to connect and interact as well as they felt that the intent of Seaside was a return to old fashioned neighborhood communities.

To evaluate the sense of community factors, PL encoded reactions leading to demonstrate that a sense of community was present. 72% of the participants of the survey

mentioned the ability of Seaside to make them feel like home or even expressing the feeling that they were belonging to Seaside while in reality their Seaside's house was a second residence. Only 5% declared that their voice of action might have influence in Seaside. Also a fair amount of people mentioned that Seaside responded well to the need of being together, most of the time in family. Finally, there was a clear distinction between town design and emotional connection as well as architecture and the sense of membership. An impressive number of people talked about emotional connections with the development they were living in. Most of them expressed that neighboring was great and social interaction was easy to undertake. 45% made comments that reflected sense of loyalty, membership toward Seaside.

In conclusion, PL suggest that it is possible to plan town environments so as to induce factors associated with the sense of community construct and they believed that their study provided a strong support to the hypothesis that environmental factors may be crucial for the development of sense of community in urban communities (Plat and Lewis, 1996). Elements such as sense of membership, need fulfillment, and shared emotional connection could be found in the interviews that were conducted in the study.

While the paper draws attention to the fact that in Kentlands and Seaside the planning layout of these two developments influence sense of community, Emily Talen, an Assistant Professor in the department of Urban and Regional planning at the University of Illinois, strongly argues that planners need to detach themselves from the idea that physical planning can create a sense of community. She questioned directly the social doctrine of the new urbanism by asking if such doctrine could be integrated in the social science literature which deals with the question of community formation (Talen, 1999). While she presents the new urbanist arguments that sense of community can be directly supported by good architecture,

responsible site design, an appropriate scale, higher density of development, human streetscape and mixed land use, she argue that such doctrine seem to have been derived through an artful, anecdotal process of documenting the perceived correlation between design elements and social engagement (Talen, 1999). Based on an intensive literature research on sense of community, she points out several arguments that flaw the new urbanism doctrine. According to Talen, no empirical evidence exists between neighborhood form and sense of community. While it has been shown that architectural details can enhance residents' interaction, sense of community required the integration of more than this factor as discussed in the first part of this paper. Finally, as explained in the community psychology literature, sense of community is primary based on social interaction and social networking rather than on place factors. Strong Sense of Community can be founds conventional developments therefore the quality of design advocated by the new urbanist is put to the test as such developments emphases private space and minimize public areas. She openly questions under what conditions can Sense of Community be linked to the physical design of communities (Talen, 1999). According to Talen, the new urbanist doctrine does help to create sense of community but rather than being advocated as a variable with its own effect it should be perceived and used as a medium (ibid).

In conclusion, in order to respond to the question "in what ways and to what extent does the concept of new urbanism fosters sense of community," the paper started to review briefly the community psychology literature about the meaning of sense of community. The most cited definition has been written by McMillan and Chavis for whom sense of community was defined based on four components highlighting mainly the notion "people make the

place” and that social interaction and social networking was the foundation of sense of community. Unger and Wandersman’s definition is essential in the sense that it brings on the table a new variable completing McMillan and Chavis definition: the environment as a variable susceptible to influence the behavior of residents. This variable has been used by the new urbanism movement to promote their new philosophy of town planning marketed by the creation of sense of community. Two developments have been discussed in order to compare their success in creating sense of community based on the empirical definition given by the psychology research community. Results shown that in both developments, sense of community were present at different levels but no elements could support that in fact sense of community was resulting of a good and responsible physical layout. As Emily Talen explained it, is quite obvious that the doctrine of new urbanism fosters sense of community at the condition that it is considered as a medium and not as an intersect part of the empirical definition elaborated by the community psychology research.

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