

Workshop: Neighborhood Dynamics, February 11th 2011

On Friday February 11th 2011, the Urban Organization through the Ages project within the larger Late Lessons from Early History initiative at Arizona State University held a workshop to think through a potential symposium and series of publications that would focus on neighborhoods in comparative context. The workshop included the research team at Arizona State as well as a group of invited guests (see list of participants below). Participants were asked to write a short proposal for the future symposium/publication that would provide a useful and novel way to examine neighborhoods across the contemporary world and in comparison with historical and archaeological cases. We had two invited speakers, urban planner Jill Grant of Dalhousie University in Halifax, who gave a talk on February 10th discussing the history of enclosed neighborhoods across time and space. Jan Nijman, urban geographer from the University of Miami, gave a public talk on the Balkanized neighborhoods of Miami on February 11th.

Meeting Notes/Summary:

At the meeting on Feb. 11, the morning discussion revolved around participants' individual proposals for research. A series of themes emerged that were considered particularly salient and thus dominated the discussion. The group was working with the idea that a final written product will be an edited volume or special journal issue that will consist of chapters/articles focused on empirical cases of neighborhoods as well as others that will be thematic in nature. The question was concerned with how to organize the written product. What sort of organizational framework would be most useful for analyzing a vast and disparate group of empirical cases from the past and present?

For now, we agree that neighborhoods are socio-spatial units that transcend familial ties. Sometimes, but not always, they may be units of consumption or units of production. They always include residential uses but sometimes they include more. They suggest some kind of shared identity and social networks that involve interactions beyond those of domesticity, work and governance. But we considered that the concept of "neighborhood" needs to be etymologically explored in significant detail, perhaps making up a chapter or article in any published work. It will be necessary also to think about what neighborhoods are not as much as what they are. While such a text will be a product in the later publications, this etymological work will be done early as a necessary precursor to any research on empirical cases so that researchers are on the same page. Thus a first task will be to draft and agree upon the conceptual approach to neighborhoods through which we can speak with a common definition in mind. It was noted that while we need a common definition, our empirical cases will interrogate that which constitutes

variation, particularly since we are asking not only what neighborhoods are but what they *do* in different contexts. It is the variation ultimately that will help us better understand why and how neighborhoods come to matter more in different places and at different times.

This concern with what neighborhoods do in cities, that is how people act in and through them, what roles they fill, what they produce socially, politically and economically, remains perhaps the most promising question for addressing *why* neighborhoods matter and under what historical conditions they matter. The question is: In what ways do neighborhoods mediate social and/or political life? Intersecting top-down and bottom-up processes that dialectically produce and maintain the socio-spatial unit of different neighborhoods suggest a useful nexus for examination. Such research will ask in each case what sorts of things neighborhoods achieve within their larger municipal contexts and how they go about achieving these things. Whether it is political mobilization around issues of collective consumption, organizing community gardens or even fomenting national revolutions - When do neighborhoods become a visible and important unit of social organization? Some neighborhoods only become cohesive acting units under cases of extreme danger or calamity. Some neighborhoods may exist in name only for administrative purposes – ascribed by the government and with boundaries unknown to locals. In answering what neighborhoods do, research would necessarily address what local practices and processes intersect with other scales of sociopolitical organization such as the city, region, nation and world (i.e. the relationships between top-down and bottom-up processes).

Following on this concern with how neighborhoods mobilize to do certain things, fill certain roles, the group was interested in defining what we mean by spatial production or the production of neighborhoods. Does this represent an interest in neighborhood origins, maintenance, reproduction or transformation? Everyone agreed that all of these dynamics would need to be addressed.

But how might we best examine all of these moments in neighborhood production? Some approaches that may provide a window into the formation, reproduction and transformations as well as the death and re-constitution of neighborhoods could examine historical examples where there has been some kind of important rupture like ecological and political disasters, war, or massive migration. A focus on these kinds of dramatic periods in urban contexts will allow an examination *in relief* of the kinds of socio-political organizing that assemble to manage things like catastrophes or rebuilding, particularly because they compel collective action in ways that may not normally be visible.

And with the focus turned to collective action, the group considered how property titles might be related to such active participation. Is home ownership central to such political action? Certainly, the control of and management of land is another critical governance issue. We should be careful about how we discuss land ownership since we do not wish to cast an overly contemporary concept across

space and time. So we should consider the various ways that people may occupy land.

Along these lines, we discussed how so-called squatter settlements are good examples of where it seems that neighborhoods are formed in the absence of top-down or state authority. We recognized that caution is necessary in such cases where it may not be obvious how states or other top-down processes may determine aspects of locality production. This is because in many cases 'the state' may not be visible even while it is critical to neighborhood organization. Yet, the intersection of bottom-up and top down processes and practices can perhaps be further explored through more comparative research on so-called squatter settlements where people come together necessarily to create urban localities that intersect with other scales of political organization.

As an important product of intersecting urban processes, local political authorities that act at the scale of neighborhoods and interact both with inhabitants and larger scales of urban organization could be a particularly useful focus for analysis. We should therefore consider this level of power production in our comparative studies. Mexican drug cartels, Brazilian *favela* representatives and Egyptian neighborhood organizations often constitute a critical socio-political level of authority that tends to be overlooked. Much like Manuel Castells suggests (specifically in *The City and the Grassroots*, 1984), in some cases collective consumption (the consumption of public goods) may be the organizing principle of political mobilization. This would most clearly be driven by rural to urban migration that is so important to modern globalization processes.

But if collective consumption is key to understanding political mobilization through neighborhoods, we may wonder about what happens in contexts where privatization removes collective consumption from the active political field and places it in the hands of corporations that do not answer to any represented group. Does this privatization mean neighborhoods are less important socio-spatial scales in cities? Does it make neighborhoods irrelevant?

At this point in the discussion, we reflected on our discourse so far. Is political organizing the most important area through which to focus comparative research on neighborhoods? And are we assuming a coherent relationship between the physical spaces of neighborhoods and their social/political dynamics? If we are, then we need to be more specific about that dialectical relationship. And, if social life changes while places do not, how do we understand that? This speaks to the temporality of neighborhoods and the critical dialectics that constitute the production of space (a la Henri Lefebvre). Some neighborhoods in London have existed for 400 years for example. In what ways do such places endure? How do we understand what that means? Is it the spatial that persists in such cases while social character changes? This latter question speaks to the heart of the dialectic between the built environment and social organization. In what ways do they produce each other at the level of neighborhoods?

Ethnicity and boundary-making/marking are also useful loci for research. Segregation and ethnic or racial boundaries might be usefully tracked in the US context through 2010 census data that can identify these social differences at the level of blocks. What kinds of societies/cities produce higher levels of segregation? Research will have to take into account extreme cases of segregation where large populations of servants living in elite neighborhoods would skew the data. The issue of scale becomes critical here: at what level is the population mixing or 'integrated'? At the neighborhood level we may see a mix of incomes, but if we look at how things are patterned within the neighborhood we may find inequality.

From a scalar perspective, comparative research will usefully shed light on questions regarding population thresholds and differing social processes. When does change in scale produce changes in social life? Can we mark those quantitative thresholds with qualitative changes? For both archaeologists and contemporary urban planners the question of scale is particularly important. Is there a relationship between neighborhood size and levels of participation, community solidarity or quality of life for example? If we could predict these relationships we could better understand the past as well as plan for the future.

Conclusions

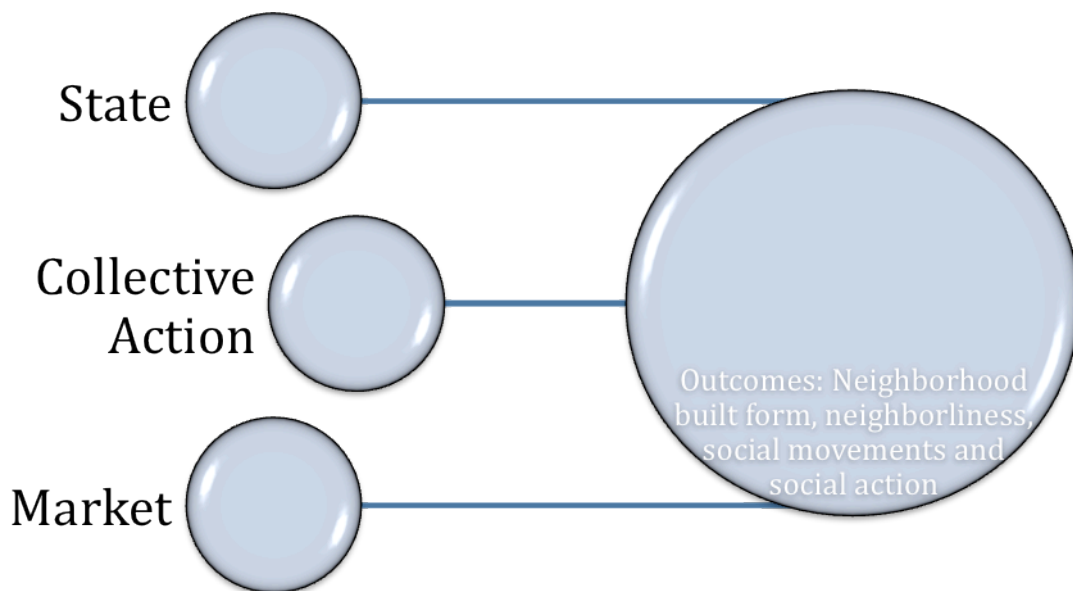
In the last hour of our workshop, the participants agreed that we were circling around a common concern with *processes* and *temporalities* that will allow a series of social phenomena to be studied through neighborhoods (see the two representations below). Participants agreed that a format, which focuses on three temporalities – formation, persistence and disruption – will allow for comparison across governance/collective action, scalar issues, social composition and the built environment. It was suggested that the built environment does not as easily fit this frame so we may need to further consider how we will be thinking about the built environment. Should it be considered in all cases? If archaeologists only have the built environment, should other cases necessarily include some treatment of it so that cases remain comparable?

Thus the workshop determined that *processes of neighborhood production* from origins to maintenance and decay or death will illuminate the ways in which neighborhoods mediate social life across a wide range of important socio-spatial dimensions. And further, we will be able to effectively compare any place and time that provides good data within such a framework. Thus archaeological cases can be brought into comparative frame with modern ones because of a common concern and research language around formation, persistence and disruption. A potential title could be: *The Death and Life of Neighborhoods: Past, present, future.*

	Governance/ Collective Action	Scale/ Size and Function	Social Composition	Built Environment
Formation				
Persistence				
Disruption				

Time/Space Scale ----->

This following diagram activates the more static categories shown above, providing a sense of dynamic relations between processes, thus aiding in analysis.



Next Steps

The team at Arizona State will write a proposal for an international symposium focusing on the approach given in the conclusions above. The hope is to gain outside funding that would allow us to include scholars from all over the world who share our concern with neighborhood/local urban processes and how these mediate social life in cities. The proposal will be sent around to participants for review before sending it to funding agencies.

Workshop Participants

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