Full Length Research Paper

Does public space create social capital?

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During recent years, the concept of social capital has become one of the most popular exports from sociological theory into everyday languages. Social capital has evolved into something of a cure-all for the maladies affecting society in all the countries around the world. The idea of social capital is particularly concerned with the cultivation of good well, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among those that make up a social unit. Most recently, the idea of social capital has been the work of Robert (1993, 2000) who has lunched social capital as a focus for research and policy discussion. Although, scholars concentrate their efforts on the issue of social capital and its impact on societies and nations, this paper examines social capital in relation to other notable contributions from Henri (1991, 1996) who made links among urban life, social fabric, space in time, and social capital. This paper aims to figure out the issues involved in public spaces as representational spaces, and it also shed the light on the role of public spaces in creating social capital. "The city must be a place of transactions, encounters, festivities. Its spaces must not only reflect these functions; they must provide a stage upon which they can be visibly enacted." This paper utilizes content analysis methodology as an approach to analyzing ideas generated in the field of social capital and theories in urban planning.

Key words: Public space, social capital, urban design.

INTRODUCTION

The political discord that exists in some countries and which periodically re-occurs elsewhere has underscored renewed interest in the concept of social capital. While it is relatively easy to define social capital, there is substantial uncertainty on the factors that cultivate and enhance its existence.

In its simplest and most concise (if abstract) form, social capital is the connections between divergent groups in heterogeneous societies that lead to the sustaining operations of a country or society. Moving from this abstraction to a tangible form of social capital is far more difficult. For that reason it sometimes easier to appreciate social capital by its absence and then its presence. For example, diminished levels of social capital are behind the frustrations with achievement agreements regarding the formation of a single or unified country in areas such as Iraq and Israel.

The lack of social capital between majority and minority groups leads to a lack of confidence and acceptance of a representative and trusted government by minorities who in many instances fail to accept the legitimacy or sovereignty of the existing government. In contrast, while there are conflict between minority groups in the United States and Canada, the sovereignty of the national governments is not challenged. That leads some to note that the United States and Canada have high degrees of social capital bonding and binding its minorities to the national story that defines Americans and Canadians. What exactly are the institutions or process that created this social capital and what it is and is not, is somewhat harder to precisely define.

This paper is organized to provide insight into the role of public spaces in the building of social linkages or capital between people. An effort is not made to isolate the existence of social capital; the objective is far less sweeping or dramatic. The goal here is to be sure that students of urban planning do not ignore the value of open space for minimizing social distances between minorities and to underscore the need to consciously design urban places and space that create opportunities for social connections. If the appropriate space is designed and interactions occur, there is a greater probability that connectivity can lead to the bonds that do indeed create social capital for a society or country.

URBAN SPACE, SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The idea that participation in cultural or economic activities can have positive consequences for societal stability can be drawn from Durkheim's work. His discussion of the importance of participation in activities with others as a response to the isolation created by modern society is an indirect reference to the value of social capital. While Durkheim focused on the isolation individuals can experience in modern societies that leads to alienation that leads to destructive tendencies.

There is obvious connection from this line of reasoning to the value of incorporating minorities into mainstream activities to retard isolation and destructive actions that would reduce social cohesion for a society. Isolated individuals gain less from a society's existence and hence have less to lose from its dissolution. As a result, creating avenues and opportunities for activities that span the social boundaries of groups creates the possibility that social capital is built that minimizes disruptive action. From the perspective of social theories Durkheim's work can be seen as the beginning of the focus on social capital.

Seen from Durkheim's paradigm, social capital are socio-cultural bonds that can include the cultivation of good will, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse among minorities and the majority group in a country that make it possible for a nation-state to be recognized as both legitimate and sovereign. These concepts have, most recently, been a focus for Robert Putnam's work that has led to an interest in the ways in which urban space can be organized to facilitate intermingling and minimizing isolation or segregation.[1] Important work on the role of space in the accumulation or building of social capital has also been produced Henri Lefebvre.[2]

Lefebvre argues that city plans exist as representations of space while at the same time urban space itself is constituted by special practices of every day life (1991: 43). Public space is a place for social interaction that facilitates the exchange of words between people not likely to interact relative to their social groups. Planners have to be conscious of the forces that drive groups inward increasing their social isolation and focus on land uses that facilitate interactions between disparate groups. Urban space must become the place where speech becomes a catalyst to reshape social relationships.

Designing urban spaces that encourage social activity establishes an image of collective (and not isolated) social life (beyond the boundaries of one's ethnic, religious, or economic group). Public spaces have the potential to bring people into contact with each other if the space is designed with a focus on beauty and activity. Urban space has to become a place where people enjoy spending their free time and sharing their common interests with others in that space. This interaction gives these public spaces the ethical and aesthetic power to build the social capital that underscores the stability of society, its common threads and interests, without destroying the uniqueness of any group. The issue for urban planners and the focus of this paper is how to design the needed public spaces.

Definitions

The first systematic contemporary analysis of social capital was produced by Pierre Bourdieu, who defined the concept as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual recognition."[3] Robert Putnam argues that physical capital refers to objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals. Social capital refers to connections among individuals that in turn form social networks. Within these networks the critical norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness arise that establish the foundations for a cohesive society. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some call civic virtue.

The difference is that social capital calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations establishing normalized communication and cooperation among people and different groups. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not rich in social capital.[4] The World Bank uses the term social capital to refer to institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions... "social capital is not just the sum of institutions which underpin a society-it is the glue that holds them together (What is Social Capital n/d)." The point in that definition as with the observations made by Bourdieu and Putnam is that social capital is normalized relations that lead to the social institutions that help insure stability in societies with divergent groups. Social capital can be seen to be stock of active connections among people that build trust, an appreciation for different perspectives and needs, and shared values. It is those shared values that bind the members of human networks and communities to a society and make cooperative action possible.

Facilitation of this goal requires a focus on the design of urban space that bridges or incorporates the social space produced by each individual. As social beings individuals produce their own life, consciousness and world that create their personal social space. According to Lefebvre, the social space is produced and reproduced

[1] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 34.
[2] Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 34.

[3] Bourdieu, Pierre. The Forms of Capital. In Richards, John. Ed., Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986, 248.
[4] Putnam, 19

in connection with the forces of production which are not taking over a pre-existing, empty or neutral space, or a space determined solely by geography, climate. An individual's personal space is shaped and determined by the social fabric that plays an important role in drawing the characteristics of the space. The social space contains a great diversity of social objects which facilitate the exchange of material things and information (Lefebvre, 1996). The sociological thought seeks understanding and reconstitution of the integrative urbanism as well as the conditions of practical participation of the people who live in that space.

The importance of social capital

The notion of social capital is a useful way of entering into debates about civic society in relation to space and time, and it is central to the arguments of Robert Putnam and others who want to reclaim public life. It is also now being used by the World Bank with regard to economic and societal development and by management experts as a way of thinking about organizational development.[5] The notion of social capital appeared early in the past century to describe those tangible substances that count the most of the daily lives of people (Hanifan, 1916: 135). Social capital, however, has had a great effect in assisting societies and individuals to reshaping their contemporary lives image to reflect moral harmony that produced from strong social relationships. There are several benefits from a rich reservoir of social capital.

First, social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily. People often will be more successful if they cooperate, with each doing her/his share. But each individual benefits more by avoiding responsibility, hoping that others will do the work for her. Secondly, social capital allows communities to advance. Where people are trusting and trustworthy and where they are subject to repeated interactions with fellow citizens, every day business and social transactions are less costly. Thirdly, social capital widens each group's and each individual's awareness of the many ways in which their interests and intertwined with those of others. Fourthly, those individual who join with others can through their associations become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the needs of others. When people lack connection to others, they are unable to test the veracity of their own views, whether in the give or take of casual conversation or in more formal deliberation. Without such an opportunity, people are more likely to be swayed by their worse impulses.[6]

Public spaces and social capital

Those urban planners and theorists who pointed to the importance of public space to balance the intensity and social isolation of complex urban life where in fact the initial advocates for planners to be at the forefront of the efforts to create social capital. Park advocates in the early 20th century urged that plans for new urban centers direct considerable resources and create public open space. Olmsted is among those who advocated for spaces where "vast numbers of persons [are] brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old ...each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others."[7]

Imaginative civic leaders have long been aware of a link between a city's amenities and the soundness of other aspects of its life. Heckscher (1977) indicates that efforts to restore and dramatize urban centers have almost without exception been accompanied by a feeling for the importance of well-used parks and other outdoor space. McCoffin of San Francisco, Johnson of Cleveland, Lawrence of Pittsburgh, Clark and Dilworth of Philadelphia, La Guaradia and more recently Lindsay in New York and Daley in Chicago were mayors who understood that the vitality of the city was related to parks. They each urged and supported innovative designs for open space so that residents would have opportunities to find and build a sense of unity across age groupings, economic classes, nationality and race.[8]

In today's cities serious efforts to deal with education, housing, jobs, and crime must not diminish the attention directed to a city's open spaces. It may be an oversimplification to say that the best cities have the best parks, yet the most progressive cities in terms of social improvements and economic growth are able to show notable physical improvements of their outdoor domain: Minneapolis, Dallas, Seattle, Atlanta, San Francisco can be named as a few of those that, while dealing with social problems, have created new open spaces.[9] Conversely, when parks are neglected, lack of civic leadership and a diminished quality of urban life can be assumed. The future of cities will be largely determined by the degree to which people develop a positive desire to live in them. Compactness is no longer a necessity; most essential functions can be supplied to a population that is loosely dispersed and relies upon modern technology for transportation and communications; it will be because they enjoy the stimulation and benefits which city life provides.

[5] World Bank. "What is Social Capital?" PovertNet Newsletter 4 (April 30). http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/calendar.htm, Accessed 6 September 2007.

[6] Hanifan, L. Judson. "The rural school community center", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* 67 (May1961), 135.

[7] Olmsted, Frederick Law. "Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report.   Yosemite, California: Yosemite Assn., 1995. A collection of Olmsted's early   reports on his landscape work, 1970." *Frederick Law Olmsted Papers*, located in   the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

[8] Heckscher, 141.

[9] Garvin, Alexander, and Berens, Gayle. *Urban Parks and Open Space*. (Washington DC: The Urban Land Institute. 1997), 57.

Public space and social relationships

What kind of social territory is public space? How do its inhabitants behave? Do they form relationships with one another and, if so, what sorts of relationships? How do they relate to the place itself? What pleasures, if any, do they find in it? In short, what is the "culture" of the public space, or simply, what are some of its important characteristics? There are several different patterns of social relationships that occur in public spaces, and hence planners need to understand each form and create spaces within which type can develop.

Fleeting relationships

Lyn Lofland noted that fleeting relationships are the most representative of public space associational forms. [10] Occurring between or among persons who are personally unknown to one another, they have, as the name implies, a very brief duration. Characteristically, although not necessarily, fleeting relationships involve no spoken exchange and when such exchanges do occur they are by definition brief and likely to be in the form of inquiry/replay. The fleeting character of public space social life may be a function of who is to be found there.

   Typically, in public spaces large number of persons, alone or in small groups, find themselves in correspondence with large numbers of other persons, also alone or in small groups and have to somehow manage that situation by getting through an intersection, choosing a seat, queuing, communicating civil inattention; or territorial defense, and so forth constituting the social interaction.

Routinized relationships

Just as fleeting relationships are especially likely among strangers, routinized relationships are especially likely among categorically known others.[11] Relationships of this sort are what sociologists are often referring to when they reiterate the classic distinction between primary and secondary relationships. Primary relationships are presumed to involve the sharing of personal, biological, often emotional aspects of self; in secondary relationships, only very limited categories of self are brought to participate in the interaction. Among routinized relationships are those who agree as groups and individuals who tend to find a third place a way from home and work place; this third area is usually a public space.[12]

Quasi-primary relationships

Gregory Stone may have first used the term quasi-primary relationship but its was refined by Jacqueline Wiseman in her discussion of the everywhere friend-like linkages that are to be found in secondhand clothing stores. Wiseman notes:

"An emotionally colored relationship of 'transitory sociality,' which takes place in public space. If we substitute the world sociality for sociability so as to eliminate Wiseman's intended connotation of pleasure and enjoy relationships are created by relatively brief encounters between strangers or between those who are categorically known to one another. Among quasi-primary relationships of the emotionally positive sort are those created when actors 'generate sociability':[13] the friendly chat between dog owners during encounters on the street or in the park (Wright, 2000: 18); the exchange of criticisms among pedestrians who have stopped to inspect a large street sculpture (Low et al., 2005: 214) or to watch a street performance (Pickles and Smith 1998: 87)".

Person to place connections

Urban sociologists indicate that there are different ways that public places matter to people. They have a knowledge that pieces of space can matter to people. There is no question about the connections that humans forge between themselves and places are somehow coupled to the connections they forge between themselves and other humans in those places. For example, hangouts and home territories are often densely populated by intimidate-secondary relationships. Provisional formulation of person-to-place connections can be found in memorialized public places, familiarized public places, hangouts public spaces, and home territories.[14]

Representational space and social capital

Imagine Manhattan if public officials in the mid-19th century had chosen not to spend the money needed to acquire and develop one of America's first large public spaces. The New York of today would be without Central Park, an unusually beautiful recreational facility actively used by quarter of a million people on a typical weekend (Garvin and Berens, 1997: 13).

   Now, imagine what life would be like today if cities across the United States had watched New York's rejection of park spending and decided to follow suit.

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[10] Lofland, Lyn. *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory.* (Walter de Gruyter, Inc., New York, 1998), 13.
[11] Lofland, 64.
[12] Lofland, 72.

[13] Wiseman, Jacqueline P., *Stations of the Lost: The treatment of Skid Row Alcoholics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 232.
[14] Lofland, 74.

Most cities would have continued to direct their resources to more pressing needs, such as police protection and public education. The public representational realm would now consist of primarily roads, and highways rather than public space. Most of the public realm, however, consists of parkland that was acquired and developed to be a place of refuge from city life, a recreational resource for large numbers of people (Webb, 1990: 130).

In addition, New York would seem incomplete without Rockefeller Center. Its sunken plaza is a must-see on every visitor's list, whether for a summer lunch beside the Prometheus fountain, or a look at the Christmas tree and the skaters whirling on the ice. New Yorkers go out of their way to walk around it and linger for an outdoor concert. Radio City Music Hall is the grandest theater in America, and the Rainbow Room, high atop the RCA Building, is the epitome of elegance and class (Webb, 1990: 131).

To explain the importance of the representational space, Michael Webb posed the following questions that hold the meaning of social capital in between its metaphoric expression: It is a place in which you want to meet your friends and observe strangers? Is it the first choice for community celebrations? Does it offer a sense of place, a feeling of historical continuity, a vision of what urban life should be? Is it maintained with respect or vandalized; does it serve as oasis or for parking? Ask another question: if not, why not? Actors and decor have changed over the centuries, but the need for stage has remained a constant. [15] Christopher Beem, Mark S. Rosentraub, Robert Putnam, and Michael Webb each have focused on the importance of representational space in creating social capital from different physical and social activity perspectives. Beems argues that the basic premise is that interaction enables people to build communities; to commit themselves to each other; and to knit the social fabric. A sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks can bring great benefits to people. [16] He added that trust between individuals thus becomes trust between strangers and trust of a broad fabric of social institutions; it becomes a shared set of values, virtues, and expectations within society as a whole. Without this interaction, on the other hand, trust decays; at a certain point, this decay begins to manifest itself in serious social problems. The concept of social capital contends that building community and trust requires face-to-face encounters. The novelty and heuristic power of social capital come from two sources. Firstly, the concept focuses attention on the positive consequences of sociability while putting a side its less attractive features. Secondly, it public spaces those have a positive consequences in the representational framework that merge space, time, identity, and common

social interest. [17]

Rosentraub highlights the invisible benefits of sports in urban life. He examines the role of sports in strengthening the social bond within cities, and the role of sports as a remedy to the social segregation that the American cities are suffering from. He argues that, "Sports facilities also have the potential to create important intangible benefits that although more difficult to quantify are nevertheless important. For example, new facilities in downtown areas can create a more positive image that has value in terms of the pride people have in their community or in a central city area" (Rosentraub, 2006). He concluded that sports teams could also create feelings of pleasure for the citizens of a city or region while contributing to the building of a shared and supported regional identity:

When teams are successful, there is a sense of excitement in a community. If a true public benefits were created, then its absence would represent a social loss. In terms of the matrix of intangible benefits, 'social mixing' refers to the role sports teams can assume in attracting people to downtown areas. In regions with high levels of economic class and racial segregation, the attracting of large numbers of people creates opportunities to showcase a city to people who otherwise might not visit a down town areas. This social mixing or the simple attraction of people events in the downtown creates the potential to change the image of a downtown area. [18]

Robert Putnam states that there are benefits associated with social capital. He argues that in high social capital areas public spaces are cleaner; people are friendlier; and the streets are safer. Traditional neighborhood 'risk factors' such as high poverty and residential mobility are not as significant as most people assume. Places have higher crime rates because people do not participate in community organizations; do not supervise younger people; and are not linked through networks of friends (Putnam, 2000: 289).

Michael Webb concludes that public spaces have a family likeness, as in human family, each has a distinctive shape and personality. That is what makes them so rewarding to experience and so difficult to create. For example, vintage squares remind us of an era when good design was instinctive and cities had a rich street life. We can not bring back the past, but we can learn from it (Webb 1990: 121). An old square that is an organic part of its community usually serves present social needs better than a new space ordained by a planner or developer. Cities are learning to preserve, improve and adapt the public spaces they have, rather than opening up more. People have always enjoyed coming together,

[15] Webb, Michael. *A Historical Evolution: The City Square*.(London: Thames and Hudson Limited, 1990), 138.
[16] Beem, Christopher. *The Necessity of Politics: Reclaiming American Public Life*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 145.

[17] Beem, 148.
[18] Rosentraub, Mark S. "Sports Facilities and Urban Redevelopment: Private and Public Benefits and a Prescription for a Healthier Future." *International Journal of Sports and Finance*, 1 No.4 (November 2006), 225.

and this survey celebrates the different ways in which that impulse can be fulfilled. At best, public spaces are micro-cosmos of urban life, offering excitement and repose, markets and public ceremonies; they provide a place to meet friends and watch the world go by (Baker 1999: 435).

In conclusion, Henri Lefebvre states that streets serve as a meeting place. For without them, no other designated encounters are possible (cafes, theaters, halls, parks). These places animate the streets and are served by its animation, or they cease to exist. In the street, a form of spontaneous theater, he became a spectator, and some time a actor. The street is where movement takes place, the interaction without which urban life would not exist, leaving only separation, a forced and fixed segregation. The street is a place to play and learn. The street is disorder. All the elements of urban life, which are fixed and redundant elsewhere, and free to fill the streets and through the streets flow to the centers, where they meet and interact, torn from their fixed abode.[19]

CONCLUSION

Robert Putnam's and Henri Lefebvre's discussion of social capital and the representational space provides crucial insight in the role for urban planners in building social capital and stability for a society. Public space gives the opportunity for people to interact within the spatial environment they belong. This paper examines public space as a catalyst that enables people to build communities; to commit themselves to each other; and to knit the social fabric. This paper suggests that where trust and social networks flourish, individuals, firms, neighborhoods, and even nations prosper economically. Social capital can help to mitigate the insidious effect of socio-economic and socio-cultural advantages. Recent polls in United States measuring quality of life showed that two major elements were critical to a satisfactory quality of life: first of all, low crime and safe streets; and secondly, greenery and public space. This shows how much the American people tend to understand the social and psychological benefits of public space. Finally, without giving special attention to the elements that structure social capital, the erosion of citizenship and decline in social capital will undermine local and regional development efforts and will increase social problems within the city boundaries. There is considerable evidence that communities with a good stock of public spaces and representational space, social capital is more likely to benefit from lower crime figures, better health, higher educational achievement, and better economic growth.

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[19] Lefebvre, Henri. *Writings on Cities*, E. Kofman and E. Lebas trans. and eds., (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996), 67.

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