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REVIEW

Urban livability across disciplinary and professional boundaries

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Abstract
This is an analytical study of the intensely debated concept of urban livability. The paper examines different literature or theoretical streams that contribute to the debate related to the notion of livable cities. It juxtaposes academic constructs from architecture and urban planning fields with the popular culture and web indices that rank cities according to their living standards, services, and international appeal. The study offers a comparative analytical assessment of these diverse approaches and lays out a nuanced understanding of urban livability that draws on the richness and diversity embedded in design, planning, and current ranking tools. The paper ultimately aims to shed light on the configurations, conditions, and processes that may enhance the livability of various urban settings. It integrates such disparate views into an interdisciplinary perspective of urban livability. While the bulk of this paper analyses relates to North American, European, and Australian cities, the concepts discussed pertain to urban livability on a global scale.

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1. Introduction and historical context

Despite its frequent appearance in the educational and professional literature, livability is an ambiguous term that is used differently by various groups in different circumstances. However, the growing attention to the subject and the increasing number of academics and professionals who are engaged in livability issues have brought to the surface a need for a clear understanding of livability, in general, and urban livability, in particular. Livability refers to various constructed views regarding the quality of life in any human living environment. This concept is concerned with optimizing the performance and the integrity of human life (Ellis and Roberts, 2016; Hagerty et al., 2001). Livable environments integrate physical and social well-being parameters to sustain a productive and meaningful human existence; productive in the sense that the social clustering of humans yields considerably more than the sum total of individual productivity, and meaningful in the sense that humans need, by their very nature, to participate in forming successful and self-sustaining social systems (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2015).

Relevant to this study is the characterization of urban livability as a human behavioral function that denotes the interaction between individuals and the environment (Pacione, 1990). In this sense, urban livability is a unique case of livability at large and has strong ties to the notion of urbanity. Historians, urban analysts, and planners have used the terms “urbanity” and “urbanism” interchangeably to denote the culture or way of life of city dwellers. Culture is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary as “the totality of socially transmitted behavioral patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.” Culture provides individuals with a shared identity. Members of different cultural groups take pride in their institutions, behavioral patterns, and beliefs. The city is the ultimate socioeconomic and cultural product of world urbanity. The medieval sentiment, “City air makes one free” (Ellin, 1995) was manifested in creating social, political, and physical configurations that affect the urban structure of modern cities. Medieval cities adapted themselves freely to geographic, economic, and social circumstances that shaped the development of their physical forms. Weber singled out two elements that separated cities from villages, namely, oikos (house) and market (Zijderveld, 1998). He referred to the Renaissance City in Europe as the first true manifestation of urbanity. The Renaissance City, according to Weber, was characterized by a sense of community that was not based upon the solidarity of familial, clannish, and religious ties; the bonds of estate, race, or caste; or the possession of land. This solidarity was borne by the city itself as a socioeconomic and political entity. Therefore, the Renaissance City was first and foremost a rational community of interests (Henderson and Talcott, 2012; Zijderveld, 1998).

Mumford indicated that the subsequent Baroque planning shifted the emphasis from building walkable fine-grained architectural enclosures, which were characteristic of medieval cities, to creating engineered urban environments with wider avenues for wheeled traffic and power display. Baroque rulers depended on heavy military to guard their interests as well as devised city plans and elaborate financial and taxing systems that ensured their control and monopoly of urban resources (Mumford, 1961). Therefore, rational economic interests coupled with equally rational political interests in autonomy from feudal forces laid the foundation for an urban economic and civic culture. Urbanity was a creative force that promoted and helped institutionalize the sciences and the arts, which consequently created a multitude of crafts and professions that shaped the civic identity of the city. Among the most important contributions of urbanity was the creation of an urban class. Unlike the caste or status group, into which an individual was born and out of which would eventually die, such urban class was a relatively open configuration (Henderson and Talcott, 2012; Zijderveld, 1998). In principle, the individual socioeconomic position in the urban class structure was not ascribed, but achieved. A city dweller who successfully engaged in trade and craftsmanship and later in manufacturing and industry would be classified as a member of this urban class, which would then be differentiated into lower-, middle-, and upper-middle classes. The city became the social foundation of culture formation. Private and public spheres were effectively coordinated through intermediary structures, such as professional guilds, vocational associations, and schools, which constituted a concrete societal foundation for the values, norms, and meaning of urbanity (Zijderveld, 1998). The city public places had vital roles in the social dynamics of the urban community by serving as catalysts for the economic and civic culture that emanated from and contributed to urbanity (Benevolo, 1980, 308; 1993; Mumford, 1961).

European cities and their inherent urbanity are crucial to the modernization process by stimulating urban democracy, urban social life, urban economy, arts, sciences, and technology. These cities contained the seeds for the capitalist economy characteristic of modern European and North American cities. The modernization process was accompanied with, or rather caused by the Industrial Revolution and the associated innovations in agriculture, transportation, and manufacturing. The social and spatial ordering of cities has been restructured entirely by the forces of modernity. The symbiotic relationship between private and public spaces in the Renaissance City has been severed. Streets and public spaces no longer act as social organizing elements of urbanity. Zoning has fragmented the modern city