Neighborhood satisfaction in suburban versus traditional environments: An evaluation of contributing characteristics in eight California neighborhoods

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ABSTRACT

We examine characteristics associated with higher levels of neighborhood satisfaction among residents of traditional versus suburban neighborhoods, using an ordered logit model. We find that neighborhood satisfaction is higher among the traditional neighborhood residents, even after controlling for sociodemographics and other characteristics. Differences in the characteristics associated with satisfaction in each group include the perception of liveliness and diversity, contributing significantly only among the segment of the sample living in traditional neighborhoods, and the perception of economic homogeneity, contributing significantly only among the suburban segment. Features such as parking, yards, and school quality do not emerge as important predictors of satisfaction for either group. The most important features for neighborhood satisfaction among both groups are the attractive appearance and perceived safety of neighborhoods, suggesting that any innovative neighborhood designs are most likely to succeed in attracting residents if able to foster these qualities.

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1. Introduction

Many metropolitan areas are struggling to accommodate growing populations while avoiding associated social and environmental problems. Some planners have disparaged suburban built environments for cultivating auto-dependence, disproportionately depleting energy, land, and water resources, and generating social isolation and economic segregation. New Urbanists contend that community designs incorporating features of "traditional" neighborhoods like those built in the U.S. before World War II – with moderate density, a grid-like street pattern, a mix of residential and commercial land uses, distinct centers, and an orientation to walking and transit rather than private automobiles – could help curtail some of these ill effects (Fulton, 1996). The extent to which traditional neighborhood designs necessarily produce better outcomes is still in part an open question (see for instance Ellis, 2002; Lund, 2003; Nasar, 2003; Rodríguez et al., 2006). If they do foster more sustainable living, then there may be justification for policymakers to try to cultivate them. But that leads to a second question: Do people want them?

The answer to this question is also not entirely clear, but it is one that matters for neighborhood design and land use policy in the United States and elsewhere. One reason the answer is complicated is that it is a matter of taste; some people may enjoy living in traditional neighborhoods while others may not. The question then becomes, not whether anyone does, but *who* wants to live in traditional neighborhoods, and how many such people are there? Another reason it is complicated is that residential environments are a bundle of many different components, some of which may matter more than others. This possibility leads to yet another question: Which components matter, and to whom?

This article weighs in on these issues by considering which residential features are important for overall satisfaction with a neighborhood, and whether the set of important factors differs for two groups that we might expect to have different tastes: people currently residing in conventional suburbs versus people currently residing in neighborhoods with more traditional designs. If there are no differences, it suggests that suburbanites would be as content living in traditionally designed neighborhoods, all else equal. On the other hand, if the components contributing to satisfaction differ, then we are interested in whether the components that matter especially to suburbanites are things that could be plausibly incorporated into traditional-type neighborhood designs—or, conversely, whether some traditional-type neighborhood elements that lead to more sustainable outcomes could be incorporated into suburban environments without generating widespread dissatisfaction among those environments' residents.

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To conduct our analysis, we use survey data to compare relative levels of neighborhood satisfaction among residents of four suburban and four traditional neighborhoods in northern California and use an ordered logit model to identify features statistically associated with higher levels of neighborhood satisfaction in each group. We first present a literature review in Section 2; Section 3 describes the data and methods; Section 4 presents results; Section 5 includes discussion and some interpretation of the results; and Section 6 discusses conclusions and their implications for planning practice and research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Residential preferences

Understanding residential preferences, especially neighborhood preferences, is not as simple as observing residential choice for several reasons. First, the choice of any one residential feature is often bundled with other choices, including the consideration of non-residential factors (such as the location of a job or the geography of social ties), as well as the consideration of different dimensions of the residential situation itself (such as housing style, square footage, or school quality). The fact that features are often bundled in certain stereotypical combinations may mask which individual features matter most (Ewing, 1997). In addition, when households make residential choices, they negotiate a market that is at least partially distorted by subsidies, tax incentives, zoning ordinances, and other policies thought to favor suburban built forms (e.g. Mieszkowski and Mills, 1993; Ewing, 1997; Garde, 2006; Levine, 2006). Finally, substantial barriers to moving mean that residential choices are "sticky." A choice made years ago may no longer reflect the chooser's current preferences.

Previous studies have employed a variety of methods to try to capture true preferences. Collectively this research provides strong evidence of American preference for single-family dwelling units, but more mixed evidence on the extent of preference for some of the other attributes that distinguish conventional suburban subdivisions from New Urbanist neighborhood designs. While very high densities are generally unpopular, preference for low versus mid-level density is more evenly split, as is preference for mixed land uses, and there is a clear preference for compact "village" centers over commercial strips (Ewing, 1997). Despite general preference for single-family and low-density dwellings, some studies have found that there is less attachment to concomitant aspects of these built forms, such as the use of private vehicles (Myers and Gearin, 2001). Conversely, at least one study (Walker and Li, 2007) identified complex constellations of preferences, including a segment that was low-density and auto-oriented but favored the local specialty retail configurations generally associated with traditional neighborhoods, a segment that was attracted to transit but clearly suburban-oriented otherwise, and a segment that was mostly urban-oriented but prioritized use of the automobile. Thus, we see both inconsistency and considerable nuance in residential preferences.

Some studies highlight the diversity of preferences, with a number of authors finding that interest in traditionally designed neighborhoods constitutes at least a substantial and growing minority in the United States (e.g. Myers and Gearin, 2001; Garde, 2006; Nelson, 2006; Handy et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2009). However, previous research has not very clearly established who makes up this group. While we might expect residential preferences to vary systematically by sociodemographic profile (due to corresponding differences in experiences, perceptions, and priorities), results are somewhat mixed. Preference for traditional neighborhood design has been associated with being racially white (Handy et al., 2008), younger (Handy et al., 2008), older (Myers and Gearin, 2001), more educated (Morrow-Jones et al., 2004; Handy et al., 2008), without children (Myers and Gearin, 2001; Talen, 2001), and with children (Handy et al., 2008).

Perhaps a better predictor of residential preferences is an individual's current residential location, since it is logical that households would self-select into those settings and also subsequently adapt to them. This phenomenon may explain why some studies find widespread interest in traditional neighborhood designs and others do not. For instance, homeowners were found to pay a premium to live in neighborhoods with New Urbanist features in Portland, OR (Song and Knaap, 2003) and in metropolitan Washington, DC (Tu and Eppli, 1999), where traditional neighborhoods are more prevalent, but Morrow-Jones et al. (2004) found that low-density conventional suburban developments are preferred in low-density metropolitan Columbus, OH. On the other hand, a national survey by the Pew Research Center found that only 52% of respondents were living in their ideal community type (Taylor et al., 2009). A systematic comparison of preferences among those living in different regions or residential settings is needed to help establish if residential locations are well matched to preferences.

2.2. Neighborhood satisfaction

In this study we use reported satisfaction levels in combination with perceptions of the neighborhood environment as a reflection of respondents' preferences. The concept of "satisfaction" is generally defined as the extent to which needs are met, perhaps contrasting with some other types of attitudinal queries that some argue draw more on affective, normative, or conative beliefs (Campbell et al., 1976; Francescato et al., 1987). Because reported levels of satisfaction are inherently arbitrary scales, they are most useful for comparing relative levels across segments of a sample, and for examining what variables are associated with higher satisfaction ratings (Francescato et al., 1987; Francescato, 2002).

Numerous prior studies have examined the determinants of residential satisfaction, considering as potential determinants the attributes of residents' physical, sociocultural, and economic environment; the facilities, services, or other benefits nearby; and attributes of individuals themselves. Clearly, the determinants of satisfaction with one's current situation may differ from the factors driving the decision of whether and where to move. For the purposes of the current study we assume that there is at least some correspondence between these, and that more satisfying residential locations are also more likely to be chosen.

While many studies relating to residential satisfaction have focused on overall residential satisfaction, others have focused on satisfaction with a particular residential realm, such as satisfaction with the housing itself or with the neighborhood or the community itself. Most studies have found these realms to be interrelated, with housing and neighborhood context contributing to overall residential satisfaction, and with housing and neighborhood satisfaction seeming to influence one another, among other contributing factors (Campbell et al., 1976; Lee and Guest, 1983; Gruber and Shelton, 1987; Lu, 1999; Basolo and Strong, 2002; Sirgy and Cornwell, 2002). In this study, we focus on neighborhood-level satisfaction, based on the assumption that neighborhood-level design is what matters most for sustainability and reduced auto-dependence, including street layout, moderate density, and mixed land uses. We posit that better understanding of how residents feel about their neighborhoods – as one slice of their overall residential situation – is useful, but we acknowledge these other aspects likely also contribute to overall residential satisfaction, and correspondingly to residential choice, which is beyond the scope of this article.