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Livability for all? Conceptual limits and practical implications☆

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A B S T R A C T

Livability has risen, alongside sustainability, as a guiding principle for planning and policy. Promoted as the more tangible of the two concepts, livability shapes public perception and infrastructure investments in cities, as well as competition among cities for the attention of the public, investment communities, and potentially fickle and mobile human capital. This paper takes stock of the current discourse on livability, identifies two central elements that have yet to shape the assessments of livability and policies to promote it, and explores strategies for research and practice to transform the livability concept, and with it the places in which the lives and livelihoods of people unfold.

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Introduction

The concept of "livability" has emerged alongside "sustainability" as a buzzword in public discourse and planning. City competitions and awards for both livability and sustainability abound. Governments, the popular press, and academics seem increasingly fixated with the concept of livability and the argument that individuals have a right to "livable" spaces. This notion is nowhere more prevalent than in the context of cities, in part because these are the places where, globally, the majority of people reside, where the bulk of economic activity and consumption takes place, where human impacts on the environment are highly concentrated and, conversely, where environmental impacts on society are most manifest, given the high density and large numbers of people and economic assets at risk.

Planners and policymakers concerned with creating or maintaining livable cities have long invoked "livability" as a guiding principle for the investment and decision-making that shape the urban social, economic, physical and biological environment (Benzeval, Judge, & Whitehead, 1995; Hills, 1995; Pacione, 1982, 2003). Their propositions for the creation of livability presume that livability can be defined by fundamental or immutable characteristics, many of which remain constant through time and across populations. In this paper, we offer a critical consideration of the characteristics of a livable city and explore the extent to which these characteristics would be desirable for many, if not all, individuals across locations. These are the so-called "First Principles" of livability, which are discussed in the second section of this paper.

The notion of a livable city – in the sense of "fit to live in" or "inhabitable" – requires two elements to be, and remain, in synch with each other. One of these concerns the characteristics of the population that demands those goods and services, such as shelter, energy, water and food, waste management and assimilation, health and public safety, education and entertainment, social engagement, economic contributions, creativity, and much more. In short, from this vantage point livability is judged through the lens of the needs and wants of those who do or may live in cities. And since these needs and wants are most apparent in areas and times of deteriorating infrastructures, declining economic prosperity, and rising social discontent, much attention has historically been given to those places where the provision of services has been inadequate (Midgley & Livermore, 1998; Waste, 1998), and where, as a consequence, people have suffered.

A second element of livability comprises the city's environment, as defined by its physical and biological characteristics – the built infrastructures and ecosystems that provide the goods and services on which lives and livelihoods in the city depend. At a minimum, these ecosystem services stem from the green spaces and water bodies in and around cities that generate not only amenities, and through them economic value, but also provide valuable contributions, for example, to local climate regulation, air

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quality, and flood control. Although it is conceivable that high levels of livability can be experienced temporarily while undermining ecosystem structure and function, over the long haul livability is intricately tied to environmental sustainability. The biophysical environment thus establishes the boundary constraints that affect the ability of urban populations to thrive, yet those constraints themselves are shaped in complex ways by the pressures that urban populations exert on infrastructures and ecosystems (Ruth & Coelho, 2007).

In this paper we explore the roles of these two central elements of livability, individually and in their interrelationship, in order to inform assessments or definitions of livability and potential policies to promote it. Given the shortcomings of the currently rather static conceptualizations of livability, we explore strategies for research and practice to enrich and transform the livability concept, and with it the places in which the lives and livelihoods of people unfold. Specifically, since both the social and environmental elements that define livability vary across space and through time, any effort to promote livability must be based on an understanding of underlying geographic and dynamic behaviors of society and its biophysical environment, as well as their interactions.

That such interactions between social and environmental dynamics in the urban realm can play a vital role in defining livability has long been established in the literature. There is extensive empirical evidence, for example, that architecture and planning can shape the economic and social profile of urban environments – from housing tenure and income mix to crime rates and pollution (e.g. Congreve, 2012, pp. 97–110; Helleman & Wassenberg, 2003; Hillier, Burdett, Peponis, & Penn, 1987) – and that, vice versa, changes in the social and environmental conditions affect access to goods and services, including those services that help maintain public health and safety, and thus influence migration decisions, morbidity and mortality rates of the urban population, as well as other demographic outcomes (de Hollander & Staatsen, 2003; Pranav, Blohm, & Ruth, 2011; Ruth, Amato, & Kirshen, 2006). Cities with very different economic and social profiles, and different cultural norms, may place different emphasis on economic efficiency and social welfare in achieving livability, yet may be perceived as ranking similarly with respect to their overall performance (see e.g. Holden & Scerri, 2013).

Following our discussion of "First Principles" of livability, the third section of this paper turns to one component of the human element of livability. Here, we focus on livability from a life course perspective for two main reasons. First, individuals at various stages of the life course will potentially define livability differently, as their needs and preferences vary from those of younger or older age cohorts. Second, and as a corollary, geographic variation in population composition implies that the characteristics of places deemed livable by their inhabitants might also vary across space. Third, these varying preferences over time and space coupled with varying characteristics of space itself, will lead to individuals and households (who are able) sorting themselves according to those values and locations. They will move to the cities that they deem "livable." This is, of course, the logical follow-on from the basic Tiebout, "vote with their feet" model (Tiebout, 1956). Finally, although there are many other social or demographic dimensions we could choose to focus on here (for example social class or race), we select the life course as a typical example of how definitions of livability may vary not only across space but also across population groups. Our goal is to highlight the difficulties inherent in propounding one definition of livability for all and to heighten sensitivity among researchers, planners, and policymakers of the dynamic constraints put on livability by society.

In the fourth section we turn to the environmental element behind livability. Here we concentrate on the challenges associated with maintaining an adequate and reliable supply of goods and services in light of the local and global environmental changes triggered by changes in demographic and economic conditions across space and time. Special attention is given to the dynamic constraints put on livability by society's influence on both local and global climate conditions, and the adaptation needed to ensure livability in the light of increased frequency, severity, and duration of extreme events.

The paper closes with summary remarks on the importance of potentially complex interactions between demographic and environmental changes that affect livability, the empirical and modeling challenges that lie ahead when trying to use "livability" as a guide in long-term planning, investment, and policymaking, and the governance approaches needed to maintain and promote livability.

First principles

Livability is perhaps best understood when juxtaposed against another popular, and similar, concept: sustainability. Sustainability is an elusive concept, hard to grasp by the individual, difficult to operationalize for the planner, and challenging to implement at local scales. It refers to the long run and, by definition, assumes a global perspective because, in an increasingly connected world, adverse impacts on social and environmental issues outside a particular region or time frame of interest will likely come back to haunt the place of concern in the form of unforeseen, often unintended consequences. There are no clear guidelines established by law or practice for sustainability and its implementation, other than broad principles that call, for example, for the use of nonrenewable resources at rates low enough to allow for their eventual replacement through renewable resources, emissions of waste products within environmental assimilation capacities, and social and economic development that is fair and just (Archibugi, Nijkamp, & Soeteman, 1989; Costanza, 1991; Daly, 2011).

Livability, in contrast, is about the "now" or "about to be." It also tends to be about the "here," with standards for livability varying not only from country to country, but from city to city. Livability seems more immediate and tangible, and thus more achievable. Creating livable communities, rather than sustainable ones, also lies within the purview of local agencies, planners, architects, and policy and investment makers, who shape the environment within which people's needs and aspirations unfold. In many instances, laws and regulations exist that help ensure the promotion and maintenance of safe buildings, reliable provision of water and energy, a clean environment, education, jobs, public health, and other elements of a livable city. As a consequence of established mandates, institutions and individuals can, at least in principle, be made responsible and held accountable for their lack of attention to livability.

Once basic needs, such as food, shelter and security are fulfilled, higher-level wants and aspirations move into the forefront of planning and decision making both at the individual and community level (de Hollander & Staatsen, 2003; Maslow, 1968). However, as one moves from basic needs to other determinants of livability, subjective judgments of what constitutes livability are introduced. Recent discussions, particularly in the context of developed countries, have framed the notion of a "livable city" akin to a "desirable city." This shift in emphasis from minimum requirements for livability to lifestyle choices has brought with it a cottage industry of national and international rankings that compare cities on the basis of material wellbeing, as well as social and environmental performance indicators. This shift is also the conceptual crack that allows the bogey of varying preferences to enter: we may agree, globally even, what minimum standards for livability might be, but there will be confusion about what constitutes a *desirable* city.

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