

The Renewed Meaning of Neighbourhoods in a Sustainable City Perspective

by Marco Castrignanò and Alessandra Landi, University of Bologna

Demographic trends seem to outline the growth of cities in the coming years and this growth will inevitably pose problems of eco-compatibility: from the perspective of sustainable urban development, a return to the compact city seems the only route that can be followed. However, reasoning from a perspective of urban intensification means focusing attention on the neighbourhoods, as suggested by leading architects (i.e. R. Burdett and R. Rogers). Sociological literature, recently moving away from other types of problems (poverty, social control, crime), has stressed the centrality of the neighbourhood in the study of urban phenomena, whilst also distancing itself from communitarian rhetoric. We have therefore made reference in particular to the theory of Robert Sampson to identify some important elements of what can be defined as a neighbourhood approach, such as collective efficacy, institutional resources and routine activities. Successively, we have also evidenced how Transition Towns, a cultural and environmental movement, can be read in a neighbourhood perspective and how the literature on resilient communities presents elements of substantial continuity with the neighbourhood approach and potentially constitutes a useful integration and enrichment as it identifies the neighbourhood as a context of analysis to be favoured not only in urban studies but also in the design of sustainable cities.

Urban Growth and Sustainability

The global society of the future is shaping itself more and more inevitably in the form of an urban society: according to the European Environment Agency (2006), about 80% of Europeans will live in urban areas by 2020, with maxima of 90% or more in seven countries; and according to *World Urbanization Prospects*, 75% of global population will concentrate within cities by 2050 (UN, 2008).

The issue of sustainability needs therefore to be addressed in relation to this evident trend: an inevitably growing urban population and its rapid growth rate brings with it problems of environmental compatibility between demographic weight and the amount of natural resources cities consume. There is an actual and developing problem of urban sustainability, in terms of health of environment, quality of life, social cohesion, economic security and sustainable growth. The principal question facing global society going forward is how to combine urban growth with the need for sustainability.

One main aspect of the problem is the *form* of cities. Urban trends of the last thirty years have been characterised by urban sprawl: a low-density urban growth model that expands in an unlimited and continuous way (R.W. Burchell *et al.*, 1998; G. Galster *et al.*, 2000). Sprawl is characterised by the use of land for low-density residential (mainly one and two family homes) and diffuse non-residential (industrial areas, shopping centres, offices, infrastructure) purposes. *Sprawl* and its spread are characterised by negative environmental and socio-economic impacts. Environmentally, sprawl leads to high energy consumption in the one and two family homes that are scattered across the countryside, high levels of CO₂ emissions in the transport of materials used in their construction

and the use of private transport that is intrinsically connected to this particular form of urban development, together with the inefficient use of the land itself. In socio-economic terms there are problems related to traffic congestion, the construction costs of the infrastructure (especially roads) that is necessary to serve these communities, the monetary and “in time” costs intrinsic in commuting, together with the consequent neglect of public transport systems.

To achieve the sustainable city, we therefore need to think about a densification of the urban fabric rather than its dispersion. For example, by discouraging private mobility and the car-oriented lifestyles intrinsically linked to diffuse urban forms, and encouraging public urban transport and the demographic density it depends on.

As R. Burdett suggests, “Mexico City, which extends endlessly in all directions like an oil-spill, has no chance of becoming sustainable. Its overstretched infrastructure - roads, sewers, power lines - can never provide an efficient response to the energy equation. Los Angeles is the same. On the other hand, cities like Hong Kong, New York or Copenhagen, or even a less obvious example like London - which has its peaks and troughs of density - have the spatial DNA to act as sustainable organisms that make the most of their urban assets. Keeping people, facilities and infrastructure closer together is the only way to reduce energy consumption and increase efficiency” (R. Burdett, 2008). We assume compactness as the only eco-compatible urban form for future urban scenario, where compactness is a combination of three elements that are inextricably interrelated: number, density and heterogeneity (L. Wirth, 1938).

The city as an organism and neighbourhoods as its cells

According to Burdett, the sustainable city is an organism, “an entity that lives”, in which people, facilities and infrastructure lie close together¹. The metaphor of a city as a body also evokes the idea of it also having its own soul, its own *mood*: the theme of the city is not just about its compactness and sustainability, a question of eco-compatibility, it also encompasses the classical *urban mood*.

The city is traditionally the place “for meeting people face to face”, it does not work “if you miss the sound of footsteps in the street and the looks necessary to create a sense of safety and viability” (R. Rogers, 2006). This human environment brings us back to classic urban sociologists, who point out that the city is a “mosaic of minor communities,” a collection of places that have their own feelings, traditions and history (R.E. Park, 1952). In putting together the pieces of this mosaic of smaller communities a compact urban form seems to be necessary.

Thinking about smaller communities as cells of the city body, as Jane Jacobs (1969) suggests, is not the legacy of previous living conditions (of the rural environment, for example) but an emergent phenomenon of urban life: these cells (or communities) are the essential and “natural” components of urban living itself. We ought to think of these small communities in terms of recognisable socio-spatial identities, as *neighbourhoods* in the common meaning of the term, and not merely in the political-administrative sense. Our reasoning stems from an ecological understanding of neighbourhood as a combination of social and spatial aspects that plays a fundamental role in enhancing the value of the city as an *organised form of social cohesion*. However, to focus on neighbourhood does not mean to think of it only in terms of the urban village, i.e. as sites of

¹ R. Burdett on sustainable development adds: “ (...) the city has to be designed to adapt to change (...). As urban designers, we have to be clever and think of the city’s metabolism - just like a body” (R. Burdett, 2008).

primary relationships, mutual help and the strong ties of neighbourliness. In fact the urban village idea is, in a sociological perspective, declining. But if we define neighbourhood starting from the identity and the meanings that the inhabitants attribute to that specific place, which constitute a set of self-choices and perceptions, it signifies that people believe in neighbourhood much more than they ever did (R. Sampson, 2012).

Hence, the idea of neighbourhood must free itself from the logic of primary relationships and strong social ties - especially in the current urban context as characterised by increasing individual mobility - to instead focus on social and spatial organisation (S.W. Allard, M.L. Small, 2013).

In this sense the role of *collective efficacy* is significant in understanding neighbourhood: defined as a “linkage of cohesion and mutual trust among residents with shared expectations for intervening in support of neighbourhood social control” (R. Sampson, 2012, p.127). Following Sampson’s perspective, collective efficacy as an instrument of social control is connected to a concept of social organisation that is (much) more than a stock of personal resources: collective efficacy invests the urban space and the people who contribute to its design and organisation. Collective efficacy acts in a specific context, conditioned by factors that are peculiar to each neighbourhood, as shown by Sampson’s research on Chicago and Stockholm.

In Sampson’s reasoning, the heuristic potential of the concept of neighbourhood in urban studies is chiefly related to four interrelated mechanisms, each of which has independent validity.

Links and social interactions are related to the concept of social capital that is generally conceptualized as a resource that is realized through social relationships (R.J. Sampson, J.D. Morenoff, T. Gannon-Rowley, 2002, p. 457) and several studies have highlighted the importance of the density of social ties, of the frequency of social interactions among neighbours, and neighbourhood patterns (ibid.).

Collective efficacy and norms are primarily related to the mutual trust and aspirations shared amongst residents, which enables intervention on behalf of the commons. Collective efficacy, as we have seen, is more than shared capital and implies a dimension of informal social organisation. Every neighbourhood needs certain resources in order to guarantee quality of life to its inhabitants, in terms of services, security, etc.

Institutional resources are both the set of community institutions, such as schools, libraries, family support and recreation centres, etc., and the degree of involvement and use of these institutions.

Routine activities in which the ecological dimension plays a vital role and including, for example: the way in which the patterns of land use and ecological distributions of activities of daily living bring well-being to children (R.J. Sampson, J.D. Morenoff, T. Gannon-Rowley, 2002, p. 458). The location of schools, the presence of a mix of residential and commercial uses and functions (stores, bars), public transportation hubs, large flows of night visitors, for example, are important aspects in the organisation of how and when children come into contact with peers, adults, and non-residents.

The development and success of a neighbourhood, or of a *network* of neighbourhoods, therefore depends to a greater extent on organisations being able to provide those social and public goods on which people agree (and on a continuous re-negotiation between the different components of the neighbourhood itself), rather than on personal ties (R.J. Sampson, 2012).

Neighbourhood approach and the Transition Towns movement: which connection?

The importance of neighbourhoods not only invests the dimensions of security and social control, but also encompasses the current debate about *commons* and the global economic crisis, and reintroduces prior issues like solidarity economies and the limits of private property. Increasing grassroots stakeholders are pushing for the re-evaluation of public goods and for forms of participation and collective decision-making, opposing the logic of privatisation typical of the neo-liberal city (A. Petrillo, 2013). A vital and collectively effective neighbourhood constitutes a fertile context for ever more diffuse collective, sustainable practices and the development of communities. We feel that several sustainable micro-urban experiences, for their mission, goals and practices, reside in Giddens' perspective (1990) of the dialectic weaving between global and local: global structures have serious effects on local actions but at the same time the latter can reproduce or convert global dynamics with significant impacts.

This is the case with Transition Towns initiatives: Transition Towns are experiments in the re-location of resources designed to prepare communities (countries, cities, districts) to tackle the twin challenges of climate change and peak oil through the construction of resilient systems. The movement, born between 2005 and 2007 in the UK, now encompasses thousands of initiatives throughout the world. There is an international network to which the initiatives adhere, to then be applied to the specific local context: the citizens of a locality agree to join together and cooperate in the transition to a de-carbonized and environmentally friendly future, putting in place local practices aimed at environmental, food and energy sustainability, whilst at the same time taking concrete action against distortions of the global system through enhancement of the local area, its people and its resources, with a view to a new way of life in their city and a renewed sociability linked to environmental issues. Cities in Transition promote both sustainable practices on the local level and a moral and cultural renewal of society, unfettered by promises of continued economic growth. This large-scale social experiment has its point of departure in several shared assumptions: 1) if we wait for the governments, it will be too little, too late; 2) if we act as individuals, it will be too little; 3) but if we act as communities, it might just be enough, just in time (www.transitionnetwork.org).

Although the majority of Transition initiatives are located in small towns and villages (G. Seyfang, 2009a, www.transitionnetwork.org), several initiatives are being scaled in urban neighbourhoods, for example Brixton in London, several neighbourhoods in Bristol and the Lama neighbourhood in Bologna (Italy). The need to create more sustainable cities, increases in fuel prices, and the economic crisis have led many people to come together to build more resilient communities, to strengthen their local economies, and to make their lifestyles more sustainable. The projects launched by Transition initiatives cover a wide range of dimensions: food, with projects aimed at the promotion of local food; self-production of energy; projects related to sustainable mobility; and reuse/recycling. Community vegetable gardens and orchards have been created in streets, in schools, in universities, and farmers markets are promoted. In many cases sustainable practices promoted by Transition Towns are already rooted in local traditions. *Walkability* and other sustainable mobility projects have been established in the urban context. Some citizens, often in collaboration with local authorities, make use of energy generated locally through plants (solar, wind, water) built through community investment. Several forms of reciprocal trade and exchange have been developed within Transition Initiatives in order to support local businesses and commercial activities that find themselves competing with the big distribution chains but without the latter's access to advantageous credit. For example, since 2009, a complementary local currency

is in circulation in Brixton, to be used in parallel to sterling. This money can only be used within a network of participating local shops, promoting thereby local production and trade, generating beneficial effects within the community, and consequently reducing the amount of emissions generated by the transport of goods.

Colin Campbell (A. Landi, 2012) stresses the importance of a physically and geographically positioned component to bring people together such that they can share common experiences: for example, traffic problems or recycling represent problems that can lead people to exchange opinions, to seek solutions, or set in motion temporary collective action. As in the case of urban community vegetable gardens, Transition Initiatives and their relocalisation micro-experiments take neighbourhood as an essential spatial element for participation and the creation of social ties. The administrator of *Monteveglia in Transition*² speaks of “relational quality space” in which to inform, share, and take action. That which is important within the Transition Town experience is not so much the aspect of belonging to a movement, but the more practical and pragmatic aspects: the actions and the organisational practices that are found at the local level (in our case in the neighbourhood), the natural milieu for development. In other words, the impact of Transition initiatives is not measured by the number of activists but by the dissemination of good practices at the neighbourhood level, such that the level of collective efficacy³ is improved, which then inevitably influences the resilience of a community.

Neighbourhood and community resilience

In terms of our reasoning it is not so much the large debate around the theme of resilience that is of interest as much as its application and understanding at the socio-spatial community level (M. Castrignanò 2012b). In studies on community resilience, the latter is understood as a geographically confined entity composed of the natural, social, economic and artificial environments that influence each other in complex ways. The first studies on community resilience came from the fields of psychology, psychiatry and human geography (F.H. Norris *et. al.* 2008). In these disciplines, resilience has been investigated with regard to natural risks and disasters, and episodes of mass violence, such as terrorist attacks that affect a community. The favoured references in such studies were originally informal groups, neighbourhoods and formal institutions. Notwithstanding that the local dimension of neighbourhood has been gradually considered too sector-based (for example, B. Pfefferbaum *et al.* 2005) in this work, it is precisely this context scale that is of interest. Together with the local dimension, two other elements overlap with what has been said in terms of collective efficacy, and which characterise the debate on community resilience: these are the reference to the collective dimension and functional expectations. As noted by Brown and Kulig (1996, p.3), People in communities are resilient together, not merely in similar ways. Community resilience is increasingly perceived as a collective capacity for adaptation with respect to environmental disturbances and stresses, as well as political and social stresses. Resilience emerges gradually as an intentional dimension, to be constructed purposefully, designed so as to anticipate and plan for future shocks of diverse types, and to maintain levels of personal and societal functioning (S. Cork,

² Monteveglia is a small town (5.105 inhabitants) near Bologna.

³ For example, the *items* predicted by Sampson can be integrated in his survey scale for collective efficacy, through which he compares the neighbourhoods of Chicago.

2009). In a similar way, collective efficacy can be defined as a bond of cohesion and mutual trust between residents who share expectations for intervention in favour of social control in the neighbourhood (R.J. Sampson, 2012, p. 127). Collective Efficacy regards two basic mechanisms (ibid., p. 152): *social cohesion* (the *collective* part of the concept) and *shared expectations of control* (the *efficacy* part of the concept).

However it is the model presented by Norris *et al.* (2008), in an article that appeared in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*, which may provide further insights in the direction embarked upon. The authors propose a vision of community resilience as a set of skills and strategies with which to cope with disasters⁴. The model proposed by Norris and other scholars starts from a definition that sees resilience as a process that connects a broad range of adaptive skills to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation in the face of disorder. (ibid.). The adaptive skills are resources with dynamic attributes and resilience is a process that anticipates the relationship between the resources (the adaptive skills) and the outcomes (the adaptation). The disorder is represented by an element of tension that threatens the proper functioning of the community and of society in general⁵. The alternative outcome to functional adaptation is continued dysfunction, i.e. an absence of resilience. However, according to the authors (ibid.), resilience does not preclude the existence of dysfunction or disruption. In this model, resilience is therefore born out of a set of resources that are present in the community, and which are interconnected with one another, which belong to four dimensions: (1) economic development; (2) social capital; (3) information and communication; and (4) the competence of the community.

Without entering into the specifics of Norris' model, it is worthwhile to point out how it could be reconciled with the four mechanisms for neighbourhood functioning proposed by Sampson: *links and social interactions; collective efficacy and norms; institutional resources; and routine activities*. In fact, where it deals with the theme of economic development it emphasises the importance of producing resilient communities with a certain amount of varied resources *evoking* the idea of social and functions mixité. In this sense the mixité becomes an important factor for reducing the vulnerability of the neighbourhood and increasing its resilience. Social capital (both *bridging* and *bonding* forms) also promotes resilience.

In the sphere of social capital, authors insert social support, both received and perceived: informal ties (*social embeddedness*); connections between organisation and cooperation; formal ties understood as the active participation of citizens and the leadership, a sense of community; and attachment to a place. In this context, share capital becomes endogenous to neighbourhoods and consists of different dimensions along which the districts are organised (Sampson R.J., Graif C., 2009), namely: *ties and social networks; collective efficacy; involvement in organisations and/or associations; and norms of behaviour*. The four dimensions are often grouped under the heading of social capital whilst the authors speculate that each can have an independent validity and therefore should be assessed separately.

⁴ Their meaning of disaster makes reference to a potential traumatic event that is experienced collectively, is manifested in an acute form and is attributable to natural, technological or human causes (F.H. Norris *et al.*, 2008). This categorisation encompasses hurricanes, nuclear accidents, terrorist incidents, etc., whilst excluding "chronic environmental problems" in which group climate change, problems of scarcity of resources, or land use problems, can all be placed. But as the authors themselves state, as is proposed in the article "it can be extrapolated and applied well to other types of collective stress or adversity". (*ibidem*, p. 128)

⁵ The studies cited as examples by the authors relate in particular to Hurricane Katrina, which hit New Orleans in 2005, and the terrorist attack of September 11 on the World Trade Centre in New York. With regard to these issues, analytical models have been applied to track and measure the relationship between the disturbing elements, their characteristics, the effects of and the collective responses to such events (E. Bromet *et al.* 2000).

The level of *information and communication* predicted by Norris' model could be integrated in a significant way with the mechanism of *routine activities* identified by Sampson.

Information and communication become fundamental when a community find itself confronted by a shock or an external disturbance, both when it is unexpected and similarly when the problems (environmental) are known and expected, as in the case of cities in Transition, which recognise the most pressing and imminent threats in environmental change and peak oil. In the model described here, resources aimed at building resilience are represented by infrastructures, by communication possibilities and skills, by the existence of trusted information sources, by responsible systems of communication, and by the diffusion of memories and stories among individuals. Even in the Transition town model, communication and information represent the basic activities required for creating an initiative and to be developed within the actual local community, because only through these tools is it possible to raise awareness with respect to energy and environmental issues. Places concerned by *routine activities* can become potential disseminators of information and communication promoting collective civic action on the local level. Finally, the level of community skills in the model for resilient communities seems to reflect the concept of collective efficacy, explicitly referencing the work of Sampson.

In the model of community resilience, collective efficacy becomes the key resource that connects the field of social Capital to that of community Competence. In the definition provided by Benight (2004), *collective efficacy* is traceable where a group of very efficacious individuals confront environmental needs and improve their own lives through combined efforts. In his study on the damage suffered as a result of a flood (ibid.), *collective efficacy* (as a perception of inhabitants) represented a useful concept to investigate the recovery of individuals from the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. People united by a high level of perceived *collective efficacy* were less troubled by the loss of their resources than people with a low level of perceived *collective efficacy*.

In reasoning carried out, we have sought to show how, down at the urban level, both the practices and actions promoted by the Transition Towns movement and the model of resilient communities interact with, and profitably integrate with, the neighbourhood approach, placing the focus of attention on the idea of resilient neighbourhoods and sustainable cities as a network of sustainable and resilient neighbourhoods.

References

- Allard, S.W., Small M.L., Reconsidering the Urban Disadvantaged: The Role of Systems, Institutions, and Organizations. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, n. 647, 6-20, 2013.
- Benight, C., Collective Efficacy following a Series of Natural Disasters. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*, 17, 401-420, 2004.
- Bromet, E., Goldgaber D., Carlson G., Panina N., Golovakha E., Gluzman S., *et al.*, Children's well-being 11 years after the Chernobyl catastrophe. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 57, 563-571, 2000.
- Brown, D., Kulig J. The Concept of Resiliency. Theoretical Lessons from Community Research. *Health and Canadian Society*, n. 4, 29-52, 1996.
- Burchell, R. W., *et al.*, *Cost of Sprawl - Revisited*. Washington DC: National Transportation Research Board, National Research Council, 1998.
- Burdett, R., *The versatility of future cities*. London, 29th July 2008, Interview available at www.dac.dk/en/dac-cities/sustainable-cities-2/experts/richard-burdett-the-versatility-of-future-cities/?bbredirect=true, 2008.
- Castrignanò, M., *Comunità, capitale sociale e quartiere*. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2012b.
- EEA (European Environment Agency), *Urban Sprawl in Europe - The Ignored Challenge*. EEA Report 10, 2006.
- Cork S. (ed.), *Brighter Prospects; Enhancing the Resilience of Australia*. Australia 21, 2009.
- Galster, G., *et al.*, Wrestling Sprawl to the Ground: Defining and Measuring an Elusive Concept. *Housing Policy Debate*, n. 12, 2000.
- Giddens, A., *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press and Cambridge: Polity, 1990.
- Jacobs, J., *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. London: Penguin Books, 1969.
- Landi, A. Verso una sociologia della sostenibilità: intervista a Colin Campbell. *Sociologia Urbana e Rurale*, 99, 2012.
- Norris, F.H., Stevens S.P., Pfefferbaum B., Wyche K.F., Pfefferbaum R., Community Resilience as a Metaphor, Theory, Set of Capacities, and Strategy for Disaster Readiness. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, n. 41, 127-150, 2008.
- Park, R.E., *Human Communities, The Collected Papers of R.E. Park*, (eds.) Hughes E.C., Johnson C.S., Masouka J., Redfield R., Wirth L. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1952.
- Petrillo, A., *La comunità dopo la comunità*. (M. Castrignanò, *Comunità, capitale sociale, quartiere*, FrancoAngeli, 2012), *Sociologia Urbana e Rurale*, n. 100, 127-129, 2013.
- Pfefferbaum, B., Reissman D., Pfefferbaum R., Klomp R., Gurwitch, R., Building Resilience to Mass Trauma Events. In L. Doll, S. Bonzo, J. Mercy, D. Sleet (eds.), *Handbook on Injury and Violence Prevention Interventions*. New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2005.
- Rogers, R., *Richard Rogers*. In AA.VV., *Città, Architettura e Società*, Vol. I. Venezia: Marsilio, 2006.
- Sampson, R.J., Morenoff J.D., Gannon-Rowley T., Assessing 'Neighborhood Effects': Social Processes and New Directions in Research, *Annual Review of Sociology*, n. 28, 443-478, 2002.
- Sampson, R.J., Graif, C., Neighborhood Social Capital as Differential Social Organization. *American Behavioral Scientist*, n. 52, 1579-1605, 2009.
- Sampson, R.J., *Great American City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Seyfang, G., Green Shoots of Sustainability, *Permaculture*, n. 62, pp.7-10, 2009a.

UN (United Nations), *World Urbanization Prospects: the 2007 Revision*. New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2008.

Wirth, L., Urbanism as a way of life. *American Journal of Sociology*, n. 44, 1-24, 1938.

www.transitionnetwork.org