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UP 494-AG: *Neighborhood Analysis*

Weekly Reflection #1

* *What is a neighborhood? How should neighborhoods be defined? Why might neighborhoods be important units of analysis for city planners and urbanists?*
* *What characteristics make a neighborhood great?*

I doubt there can be one widely agreed upon definition of neighborhoods. Any previous attempt to do so, in terms of spatial planning and community design, has caused incredibly exploitative outcomes in the name of “safety, health, and order”. When I think of neighborhoods, I envision a spatial unit and an identity. The former describes a section of a larger municipality (or unincorporated area) and comprises of (in theory) a public and private sphere with subtle overlaps. To clarify, homes and private property border streets that connect them to outdoor community spaces, businesses, and institutions (places of worship, schools, government-controlled service providers), which in theory, barring any covenants or *de facto* agreements, are nonexcludable to the public.

The lens I prefer to use in examining neighborhoods involves seeing them as the most direct relation to space that residents have. Someone’s connection to place can resemble shared lived experiences, a mutual investment in civic challenges and opportunities, and, if created authentically, an extension of their family. The worst thing federally supported community and urban improvement programs did was raze long established neighborhoods which, despite their issues, weren’t harming anybody else and took advantage of scarcity by pooling resources and maintaining a real support network. As city leaders feared that the suburbs, where personal connection to neighbors was never the main priority, would take away their city’s profit-making abilities, they opted to destroy long-established communities in exchange for artificially “safe” housing projects. The allure of these was short-lived, as the breakup of communities led to nobody knowing each other and little assurance that help would come if requested. And just a few decades later, cities like Atlanta decided these developments were unconducive and gave a percentage of tenants “housing vouchers” to find alternative housing.

To sum this up, people in power decided to impose their perspective on what a good neighborhood should entail for groups, without the same influence on the city at-large, continuing to break down a significant right to space. And this operating principle, important to call out as being rooted in white supremacy, still warps wide perspective on what a good neighborhood looks like. And unfortunately, planners’ work scope have made them historically complicit in this exploitation. For this reason and population’s most direct geography of interaction, it’s crucial that we look extensively at neighborhoods to understand why previous policies to enhance the quality of life have been ineffective and why we need to reconsider how we work with communities.

As I’ve already said with notable cynicism, I think that trying to qualify a neighborhood as “great”, considering its optics or components, is highly inappropriate. The conditions that APA used are highly subjective and don’t account for things like access to capital and historical trajectories. I see an assumption that neighborhoods have equal capacity to organize, without considering how circumstances make this impossible in many areas. And while Talen earnestly insists that diversity should be a category in measuring a neighborhood’s greatness, doing so would downplay how American society has taught us to fear people who look and live differently than us. I’m not saying this to insist that the neighborhood’s listed aren’t great; from my own research and lived experiences, Downtown Decatur and Greater Belhaven (in Jackson, MS) are two great places. But being able to effectively advocate and work for community improvement requires being sensitive to the fact that great neighborhoods have been destroyed due to the powerful having a different view of what’s great. And we need to see neighborhoods in terms of their human potential, nuances, history, and resilience if we hope to serve society well.

**Note: I know that our earlier conversations and my class contributions might show me to be jaded and pessimistic about what planners and civic leaders can do. A year working at a hugely institutional nonprofit for a Reagan lover can do that. However, what I see as injustice continues to motivate me and that’s what I hope to accomplish by sharing my convictions in a group. If it gets to be too much, please let me know. But I’m also open to being proven wrong on certain things. I just wanted to mention this. I’m really excited to get into the numbers! 😊**