**Class Reflections for UP 494**

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Session Name: *Course Introduction*

Reflection Prompts:

* *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?*

Write-Up:

Before we come to the definition of a neighborhood, it is interesting to notice that like most multifaceted elements whose influence span across multiple disciplines, neighborhoods too, cannot be captured in a single definition. Neighborhood as a spatial and social unit has been used at varying scales and generalizations to understand demographic phenomena. Neighborhoods are particularly interesting because they represent some social homogeneity and are often designed with a unified ideology. People living within a particular neighborhood are bound to that space through the problems they share. This is what makes neighborhoods interesting for public service because it lies between the individual and the city –at an intersection with community – making it sufficiently large and small for leveraging impactful change. Residence and recurring activities unite people in a neighborhood. It accommodates different infrastructure to support the populations that depend on it and is inevitably accompanied by character. It is this character of a neighborhood - that significant degree of personalization of space- that enables people to engage with the cause of the neighborhood. Its inhabitants often define it as their radius of influence, or the area/space adjoining their address that they are actively involved in. Neighborhoods are thus a spatial unit that is small enough to have a distinct character, but large enough to enable social connections – thereby manifesting a domain of communal existence and affecting change.

Neighborhoods are not monoliths, they contain layers of history, culture and environment and are constantly in evolution. As a result of this, any attempt at encapsulating the essence of a neighborhood has met with obsolescence at one point or the other. In Clarence Perry’s definition of a neighborhood, the focus was on creating replicable units of well-designed and self-contained spatial units that do not have to interact with the rest of the city for their functions. Like a fractal, a simple tessellation of these neighborhoods could yield a city. It completely disregarded the inheritance of character that defines a neighborhood or the intricate interconnections that create a wholesome city. The primary values reflected in that definition were reproducibility, uniformity, financial feasibility, efficiency, safety, comfort, isolation, and profitability. Stepping away from Perry’s assembly line neighborhood, we enter a domain of inclusion in neighborhood definitions – one concerned with more identity, liveability and endurance despite shifting cultures. Neighborhood, as we see it now, is an extremely effective unit of information – the source, the medium and the manifestation of urban issues. Neighborhoods have now become the ground zero for competing stories. The further we progress in time, the greater the abstraction of the neighborhood.

What constitutes a great neighborhood is debatable too. In the APA’s Great Neighborhoods initiative, normative ideals of size, center, edges, street patterns and historical circumstance were considered the benchmark of good neighborhoods. It is a retrospective obsession with the physical form of neighborhoods – a history that planners’ find hard to dissociate with – yet one that reflects a clear paradox between good design and inclusivity. Good design has historically resulted in lack of affordability, thereby excluding the possibility of diversity and mix. As of now, neighborhoods are not so much a design problem, but a social one. As more and more neighborhoods get gentrified along the lines of class and race, it becomes imperative to deliberately plan places that foster inclusion, with good design. The information age neighborhood sees itself as a place where the production of information is democratized, in a way that reduces historical barriers of gender, race and other forms of marginalization. The neighborhood is becoming more process-oriented, self-governing, and diverse, building social capital and cohesion through repeated deliberations, and influencing the rest of the city with the uniqueness of their struggles and the successes in their stories. Perhaps, now, as we come to think of what constitutes a great neighborhoods, we have debunked the dichotomy of “good and bad”, “great and not great”.