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Who cares about neighbourhoods?

Ray Forrest

Introduction

It seems somewhat paradoxical that the neighbourhood is such a prominent topic of policy and academic debate. We live in a world where place is seen to be increasingly fluid and permeable and where our social identities and trajectories are apparently being increasingly shaped by the virtual and remote as opposed to the real and the proximate. A pervasive discourse of globalisation, in all its forms and variants, and of informationalism, technological change and postmodern cosmopolitanism might suggest that the neighbourhood is rapidly diminishing in importance in our everyday lives. The dominant image of social life is of fleeting superficiality, electronic networking, borderless communities and of general chaos and disorganisation. We no longer it seems know who we are or indeed, where we are. In an assessment of where sociology is going in the next millenium, Urry (2000) referred to a mobile sociology with central concepts such as fluids, scapes, flows and complexity to accommodate the diverse mobilities of people, objects, images and information. There is, it seems, little room and certainly little intellectual excitement in the stable and familiar notions we tend to associate with ideas of neighbourhood. Yet the idea of neighbourhood, or community, with some kind of implicit or explicit local spatial dimension, retains a powerful imagery and appears to remain an important part of our lived experience. And whatever the conceptual robustness of the term, politicians, policy-makers and many academics continue to use it to refer to something that does matter to us.

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In some cases it is an imagery that evokes a world that has now moved on. Shaw and Shaw (1999), for example, in the context of technological change and computer networks talk of a lack of cohesion in many communities:

> Frequently we have lost the sense of the tight-knit neighbourhood, of the village, of the place where everybody knows each other's name, and where people are often working with their neighbours on projects to improve their community. Many people are yearning for that world to return. (p.318)

The extent to which such harmonious neighbourhoods ever existed is, of course, a matter of debate. In the popular imagination the past is the subject of a selective nostalgia, of golden ages lost through industrialisation and post-industrialisation. But take this quote from a study of gentrifying neighbourhoods in London:

> I love it here. I had a rootless childhood, and I love the very strong sense of community that the children have. It's like a village in the centre of London, it has that kind of support system. And the kids feel they belong here. I love the idea of their friendships carrying on over time . . . I wouldn't move away from here to anywhere else in England. (Tina, 43 years, describing her feelings about Telegraph Hill in 1999, quoted in Butler and Robson 2000)

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For Tina at least, living in one of the so-called global cities at the beginning of the twenty-first century, all the ingredients of neighbourhood evoked by the previous quotation can still be found – a sense of belonging, local friendship, safety and a village-like environment. Moreover, rootlessness is something she associates with her childhood rather than with the contemporary experience of her children.

But the main point of this article is not to argue for the continuing relevance of the local neighbourhood as a source of social identity and meaning – although that is certainly one dimension of it. The more general aim, however, is to reflect on the current revival of interest in community and neighbourhood in much of the western academic and policy literature and to explore some of the different ways in which the idea of the neighbourhood continues to have resonance in the contemporary world. In other words, why should we care about neighbourhood, and in what ways? Inevitably, the article cannot encompass all urban and cultural contexts and is focused mainly on more mature, (post-) industrial cities. It does not claim, for example, to offer an exploration of the conception and role of neighbourhood in the poor but rapidly expanding cities of Africa or southern Asia, where informal structures continue to be significant.

The article approaches the neighbourhood from different angles: as community, as commodity, as a consumption niche and as context. There is, of course, an extensive and long-standing debate about the relationship between neighbourhood and community (see, notably, Blokland 2003). It is unnecessary to pursue these issues in any detail. Besides, the idea of the neighbourhood is a fluid concept and for the purposes of research its definition must vary according to the questions being addressed. For some purposes and in some contexts the neighbourhood may well be an administrative boundary of some kind. The potential impact of school catchment areas on housing market behaviour is one example. In other situations the neighbourhood may be explicitly built into the planning and participation process through its physical design or formal committee structures. For other purposes it is an entity socially constructed over time through the routinised practices of residents. What is unambiguous is that we are referring to some spatial association, but that spatial fix may or may not involve a notion of community.

The article is concerned as much with the ways in which neighbourhoods are packaged and sold as with their social construction over time. In relation to the former it is not clear, for example, how they fall under the following definition offered by Byrne (1999), drawing on Ruth Glass.

> To my mind one of the most useful definitions was that given by Ruth Glass in 1944 when she distinguished between neighbourhoods which were simply people living in an area and experiencing the same things, from "communities" which were conscious of the communality which derived from common spatial experience and were willing to act communally. The parallel with Marx's distinction between class in and for itself is clear. (p.119)

To what extent would we choose to distinguish between the classic sedimented, working-class neighbourhood mobilised in defence of its common interests against the capitalist developer, as opposed to the offensive posture of the gated community of recent origin determined to preserve property values? Both seem to fall within Glass's definition of neighbourhood as community.

It is also impossible to discuss neighbourhoods without some reference to debates around the concept of globalisation. For present purposes it is appropriate to refer to four elements from the extensive literature on the topic that appear to be particularly relevant. First, there is an argument that the economic forces that bear down on residential neighbourhoods and determine their fate in terms of investment or employment are increasingly beyond the boundaries of both the city and the nation–state in which that city is located. Secondly, there is an argument that the influences on our values, lifestyles and general social behaviour are decreasingly ones of co-presence and increasingly remote and electronic. Thirdly, and more prosaically, there is the evident transformation in neighbourhood consumption habits with the replacement of local retail outlets with the ubiquitous McDonald's or equivalent fast-food chain.

Finally, there is a need to consider the continuing relevance of the neighbourhood cross-culturally and to acknowledge the strong

element of ethnocentrism or Eurocentrism in conceptions of the neighbourhood and its role in contemporary urban society. The literature on neighbourhoods derives in the main from US or European studies. The notion of a "lost" community of a previous industrial age forms an important part of the backcloth to debates about community and neighbourhood in European society. There are implicit or explicit assumptions in much of the neighbourhood literature about the erosion of traditional family life and primary kinship networks; assumptions that may need considerable qualification in other cultural contexts.

Neighbourhood revived

In a European context at least we are, it seems, at another peak of interest in neighbourhoods. As suggested earlier, this seems curious, given the dominant discourse of globalisation and post-modernism, but it is bound to these debates in various ways. At the most general level it is a concern with the crumbling social cement of the industrial age and particularly the erosion of religion, trades unions and the family. Just as the urbanisation of the industrial age was seen to be producing a social order in which the traditional ties of community-shared space, close kinship links, shared religious and moral values were being replaced by anonymity, individualism and competition; so too are similar predictions being made about the informational age. Information technology, a new virtuality in social networks and a greater fluidity and superficiality in social contact, are further eroding the residual bonds of spatial proximity and kinship. There is a new crisis of social cohesion. What will bind us together now?

This is where the neighbourhood has re-entered as a potentially important site for rebuilding cohesion from the bottom up with active, empowered citizens practicing mutuality and reciprocity. This also links to a concern with a decline in formal democratic participation. Too many people do not bother to vote any more. Here, the focus on the neighbourhood becomes part of a wider interest in the decline and reproduction of social capital. Drawing particularly on the work of Putnam (1993a, 1993b), policy-makers have become interested in the quality and intensity of local social relations as part of a broader agenda for democratic renewal via the local community. A society in which people are actively engaged as neighbours is, it is argued, also likely to be one in which there is a healthy and vibrant civic culture. This policy interest in social cohesion, social networks, trust and mutuality at the neighbourhood level also derives from a particular concern with concentrations of disadvantage and poverty in metropolitan Europe and North America. Globalisation as a reshaping of labour markets and employment opportunities is accentuating social and income polarisation. This is not necessarily a sharp fission and it takes different forms in different locations and is mediated by local factors (Hill and Fujita 2003). But the direction of change is undeniable leading to an increasing stigmatisation of certain neighbourhoods; neighbourhoods with social norms that diverge from the mainstream and, at the extremes, no-go areas abandoned by residents.

Through a combination of housing opportunities reshaped by privatisation policies, productivist local social policies, weakened bargaining power in the labour market and welfare state retrenchment what used to be known as "the inner city problem" is back with a vengeance. For example, a UK government report argued that there were "several thousand deprived neighbourhoods in England alone" (Social Exclusion Unit 2000, p.20). The report referred to economic ghettoisation, the erosion of social capital and the threat to social cohesion through its disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities and young people. The point is that the neighbourhood, rightly or wrongly has regained the attention of policy-makers for two reasons: firstly, as the basic building block for maintaining social cohesion (associated with the current fashion for communitarian, third way politics) and secondly because of the evident saturation of poverty and disadvantage in certain parts of major cities.

A third factor has been a concern with the declining population of city centres, and particularly the of the flight middle class from them. The evident social malaise of some inner city areas, the threat of violence and rising property theft is part of the explanation, but the long-standing drift to the suburbs and beyond is affecting many US and European cities. The

need for an urban renaissance in which certain lifestyle groups; the suburban urbanites, as some US analysts have referred to them (Lang and Danielsen 1997), prompted a renewed interest in the creation of urban villages and neighbourhood planning. What are the key ingredients of a neighbourhood that will attract certain groups back to the central cities? One response has been a new and pervasive wave of gentrification reshaping city centres and often displacing vulnerable groups to peripheral locations (Smith 2002).

The revival of the neighbourhood is also part of the parallel rise of localism and globalism. McGrew (1992) usefully outlined the bipolarities of globalisation in which, for example, the reassertion of the local is itself part of the process of globalisation. Hence, some would argue, religious fundamentalism, nationalism and the proliferation of new nation–states are all expressions of this search for social identity and social meaning in a world where global capitalism dominates. The neighbourhood sits in a context in which local traditions are being revived and where rootedness has an apparently new value. Thus, amidst the discourse of globalisation there has been something of a revival of ideas of ''local community'' (Etzioni 1993) in which the neighbourhood is seen as the receptacle for many of the informal resources of the third way. As the forces that bear down upon us seem to be increasingly remote, local social interaction and the familiar landmarks of our neighbourhood may take on greater significance. In his discussion of territorial identities Castells (1997) explains the reasons for some of these contradictory views of social change:

> People socialize and interact in their local environment, be it in the village, in the city, or in the suburb, and they build social networks among their neighbours. On the other hand, locally based identities intersect with other sources of meaning and social recognition, in a highly diversified pattern that allows for alternative interpretations. (p.60)

In other words, while the local neighbourhood remains important as a source of social identity, there are many other such sources. This is close to Guest and Wierzbicki's (1999) conception of ''community mediate'', in which urban neighbourhoods continue to perform important but more specialist roles in people's lives in parallel with increased extra-neighbourhood associations. Just as the role of family, work and other aspects of social life are being transformed, so too is the urban neighbourhood.

Now this is all very well but do we really care about neighbourhood these days? Social networks are city-wide, national, international and increasingly, virtual. In the wired neighbourhood of the informational age with ever expanding possibilities for ''indirect socializing'' (Guest and Wierzbicki 1999), where those inhabiting the same geographical space may inhabit quite different social worlds (Graham and Marvin 2001; Reich 1991) what connects people to one another in the same street? The answer may depend on which groups in society are being considered. In the global city of difference and diversity neighbourhood certainly seems to matter, with ethnicity and sexual preference becoming more, rather than less, important features of the urban mosaic – although they are shaped increasingly by the real estate industry and city imagineers. An African quarter, a Little India, a gay community are some of the features essential for a city to take its place in the global order. But this image of the city is itself the product of those who inhabit a social world that may not be the lived experience of the majority. The electronically connected intellectual sipping cappuccino in a waterfront café may have a perspective on the world that is very different from that of the ageing widow or the unemployed youth. The entrenched unemployment experienced by many groups in different parts of the world, combined with rapid demographic ageing points to a world in which the place of residence could be more, rather than less, important as the site for much of everyday life – both from choice and constraint. Our perception of the role of the residential neighbourhood in contemporary society may thus be overly derived from the perspective of the formal world of work.

Neighbourhood as community

There is a close, if ambiguous, relationship between the idea of neighbourhood and that of community (Blokland 2003). This dimension of

the neighbourhood emphasises social interaction, social networks and neighbourliness. How resonant is this dimension with the contemporary world? Issues of neighbourhood cohesion and the implications for patterns of participation, care and supervision are bound up with issues of the quality and strength of the ties between neighbours. What does neighbouring mean? Is it about developing close friendships, borrowing the odd item or the casual hello in the street? Do the very weak ties of casual acquaintanceship matter much in the scheme of things? Drawing on the work of Granovetter (1973), Henning and Lieberg (1996) studied the role of weak ties between neighbours, that is, the "unpretentious everyday contacts in the neighbourhood" (p.6). They stressed the continuing importance of the residential neighbourhood for groups such as children, the elderly and the handicapped, who are likely to spend significantly more time in and around the home than those in full-time or part-time work. Their study also suggested a continuing class dimension in the nature and significance of social networks in terms of strong ties. The local arena plays a more important role for the working class than the middle class. In general, however, people tend to have more strong ties outside their neighbourhood. However, according to Henning and Lieberg, if weaker ties are included the picture changes:

> When mapping people's *weak ties*, our findings from 1993 show that people meet their neighbours and other people in the residential area fairly often but on a more superficial basis. Thus the concept of weak ties becomes important. The number of weak ties in the neighbourhood are three times greater than strong ties if one compares the mean values for the total number of contacts. The significance of weak ties was underlined by the inhabitants who stated that these contacts meant a "feeling of home", "security" and "practical as well as social support". Only 10 per cent stated that these contacts were of little or no importance. (p.22)

They suggest that the neighbourhood is significant partly as an arena for the development and maintenance of weak ties. These kinds of contacts range from a nodding acquaintance to modest levels of practical help. These contacts are, however, not only an important source of general well-being but may provide important bridges between networks of strong ties.

It is also this realm of casual acquaintance and routinised practice which some sociologists have pointed to as being important in providing the ongoing "repair work" for everyday life. In the chaotic and disorganised world in which we all apparently live these dull routines may have greater importance in contemporary urban society than we acknowledge. As Pahl (1991) has commented, "Most people live in narrow *gemeinschaftlich* worlds of neighbourhood and kin. Cosmopolitan intellectuals seem all too ready to forget or to deny the small-scale domesticity of most people's lives" (see footnote, p.346). The point is that it is the neighbourhood that is likely to be the site for this ongoing repair work and normalisation.

Can we have neighbourhoods without neighbours? The issue of whether contemporary city dwellers are less likely to socialise with their neighbours and the extent to which there are differences between social groups has been addressed most systematically by Guest and Wierzbicki (1999). Their evidence is limited to the USA and it should not be assumed that their findings are applicable elsewhere. Nevertheless, their analysis provides a useful and thoughtful corrective to more dramatic assertions about the declining role of neighbourhood. While the data confirm a general decline in neighbouring over three decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s), the decline is not substantial and neighbouring "continues to be an important activity for a sizeable segment of the population" (p.109). The more marked pattern is that extra-local ties are increasing and becoming more dissassociated from forms of local interaction. In other words, people are socialising both in and outside the neighbourhood but they are differentiated activities. Elderly people and those outside the labour force show little change in their pattern of neighbouring and are apparently relatively more dependent on local ties. There is evidence to indicate an increasing distinction between cosmopolitans and locals but it is not a sharp polarisation – even cosmopolitans, it seems, spend time with neighbours. All this is consistent with the view of the neighbourhood as a social arena which continues to perform an important but increasingly specialised role.

Although the level of neighbouring contacts may not have declined substantially the nature and quality of that neighbouring may have

changed. Fukayama's (1999) critique of Putnam's research on associational activity in the USA is relevant here. Taking issue with some of Putnam's research findings, Fukayama argues that it is not the decline in associational activity in the USA which may be a factor in reduced levels of democratic engagement and institutional disillusionment. The key factor is the changing nature of associational activity. Contrary to Putnam's view that Americans are associating less, Fukayama draws on evidence that suggests that associational activity is on the increase, but it is of a qualitatively different kind – typically focused on single issues and often locally based. Activities of this kind, according to Fukayama, have a small radius of trust. Unlike, say, membership of a church or a trade union, these new associational forms bind together small numbers of like-minded people contributing to, and symptomatic of, what Fukayama refers to as the miniaturisation of community and morality. Moreover, these kinds of associational activity such as neighbourhood watch schemes are often provoked by insecurity, fear of crime or falling property values and are rooted in a distrust of wider society.

The idea of the neighbourhood as a community continues to be most typically deployed by academics and policy-makers in relation to poor and disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Such areas tend to be described as either having a strong sense of community (but lacking other essentials, like jobs) or lacking a sense of community through the depletion of their social capital because of high turnover, high crime rates and so forth. As was emphasised earlier, in Europe and North America it is this kind of neighbourhood that absorbs much of the resources and energies of policy-makers. Their revitalisation is seen to be essential for broader social cohesion and neighbourhood-based initiatives have proliferated at both national and pan-European level. It is worth observing in passing, however, that many of the features of such areas which are assumed to be at the roots of their malaise, such as a high turnover of residents or a lack of local social interaction, can be equally evident in middle-class areas (see, for example, Baumgartner 1988).

The issue of turnover and transiency relates to a final observation in relation to the role of the neighbourhood as community. Are we more mobile now than in some previous period in history? If residential stability does matter to the formation of neighbourhood-based social networks (and a number of studies suggest it is a critical factor – see for example, Sampson 1988) then the extent to which we are more or less mobile is of some importance. Solid empirical data on these issues are rather elusive. Moreover, it depends crucially on which cohort is being compared over which time period and in which place. For example, many older people today may have experienced a stability of residence denied to their parents or grandparents. In some cases parents may have been part of a wave of refugees. More generally, in many societies the shift from renting from private landlords to home ownership and public renting contributed to lower levels of mobility. With particular reference to Britain, Phillipson *et al.* (1999) suggested that social change had produced a closer link between people and place at the end of the twentieth century than at the beginning.

Neighbourhood as context

A report by the Department of Health in the UK emphasised the contextual impact of neighbourhoods on health and well-being. In doing so it linked physical well-being to the quality and nature of social interaction in a local area. It claimed that

> Neighbourhoods where people know each other and trust each other and where they have a say in the way the community is run can be a powerful support in coping with the day to day stresses of life which affect health. And having a stake in the local community gives people self-respect and makes them feel better. (quoted in Morrow 1999, p.745)

The neighbourhood as social milieu can therefore have an independent effect on life chances in a variety of ways. Where you live can clearly affect the quality of local services you have access to, your exposure to crime and violence, peer influences and processes of socialisation. Residents of poor neighbourhoods are, for example, less likely to complete school and are more likely to get involved in crime as victims or perpetrators. Thus, what Friedrichs (1996) refers to as the contextual effect of neighbourhoods

may be particularly marked in the most disadvantaged areas. These context effects include the restricted opportunity structure of the neighbourhood (its lack of formal and informal employment opportunities) and the development of deviant social norms – or, at least, social norms outside the mainstream.

The policy agenda has been partly driven by the apparent intensification of these contextual effects when social exclusion coincides with spatial exclusion. This concentration of those with limited economic resources and weak networks of opportunity adds a further layer of spatial exclusion: neighbourhood effects exacerbate further processes of social exclusion occasioned by poverty, unemployment, marital breakdown or ill health and, typically, by a combination of factors. These neighbourhoods are characterised by what Wood (2000) has referred to as ''adverse incorporation'' and Castells (1998) as ''perverse integration'' in which negative forms of social capital develop as ways of coping with an increasingly hostile social and economic environment. There are inevitably complicated causal relationships here and it is exceedingly difficult to distinguish neighbourhood from parental or other individual effects. Moreover, the neighbourhood context may impact on some groups more than others. For example, peer influence may play a much greater part in relation to the socialisation of teenagers than for preschool children where parental influence is more likely to dominate (Ellen and Turner 1997). There is a further complication in relation to causation, which is that the contextual effects of the neighbourhood are likely to be non-linear. In other words, it cannot be assumed that simple indicators of levels of unemployment or lone parenthood are also indicators of the degree to which the neighbourhood exerts an independent effect on life chances or quality of life. As Quercia and Galster (1997) suggest, it is more likely that there are thresholds beyond which the problem of social exclusion or adverse peer influence may become more acute. And Ellen and Turner (1997) explain:

> As long as the incidence of a problem (such as poverty, unemployment, or crime) remains below a certain threshold, it may have little impact on neighbourhood residents. But once the incidence exceeds the threshold, the problem may escalate, changing the circumstances and the behaviour of residents throughout the neighbourhood. (pp. 844–845)

Perhaps the clearest contextual effect of neighbourhood is in relation to stigma and labelling. The social reputation and images of a neighbourhood matter, particularly in relation to employment opportunities. Moreover, these factors may have greater weight in a service sector environment where social skills become primary qualifications for many jobs. Reputations cling to areas and younger people, in particular, may find that being a resident of a neighbourhood with an image of crime and poverty acts to disadvantage them further in the labour market. Byrne (1999) drawing on research in France, the USA and UK argues that ''residence as signified by address operates as a basis for discrimination against them [residents of deprived areas] when they are seeking employment''. He continues, ''They are badged by the space they occupy'' (p.121).

Neighbourhood as commodity

Social and spatial exclusion is on the increase when the residential areas of cities are being reshaped to create less public space and more protected and exclusive enclaves. In the privatised city, safety and security becomes a commodity to be packaged and sold as a neighbourhood type. Some have pointed to these developments as a consequence of the drive for competitive advantage between cities striving to attract footloose capital and tax-paying residents. Hack (1997) describes

> the existence of the ''elite corridors'' that have grown up in many cities, particularly in European and Asian cities. Residential, commercial and business communities are located in these elite corridors. These corridors are shut off from their surroundings. In Manila, gated villages have been created with private streets. The public streets are hopelessly congested, but with a pass to the private villages one can successfully navigate the city. This leads to two cities functionally – the private city and the public city. (p. 7)

It is in the USA where this demand for protected enclaves has become most advanced. In

California, according to Blakely and Snyder (1997), 40 per cent of new homes are behind walls. Behind the security fences and the armed guards the risks and uncertainties which lurk beyond are minimised – in these neighbourhoods, context is assured. Here we have what has been referred to as the "commodification of community" (Guterson, quoted in Lang and Danielsen 1997) in which, in Blakely and Snyder's (1997) categorisation, people are being sold community as lifestyle, prestige or security or some combination of the three. In these kinds of neighbourhoods the inward-looking cohesion of people with similar outlooks, levels of affluence or anxieties may coexist uneasily with their exclusion of the world outside. Formal rules and regulation guarantee conformity and substitute for the informal social controls that may develop over time in a stable neighbourhood. Segregation, therefore, takes many different forms and is not necessarily associated with oppressive exclusion or ethnic self-segregation. A number of commentators (see, for example, Atkinson and Flint 2004) have pointed to the increasing trend for elites to retreat into these defensive, gated communities as indicative of a new and pervasive form of socio-spatial patterning in which the self-segregation of the rich is an increasing feature of the contemporary city. Security guards, CCTV and electronic gates may be most evident in the residential areas of US cities, particularly in the Los Angeles so evocatively captured by Davis (1990) in his account of its oppressive and militaristic architecture. But the physical infrastructure of increasing social and economic polarisation is evident in many major cities.

These divisions are accelerated by the increasing commodification of residential space with the promotion of home ownership by many governments and the retreat from mass public housing. As secondary markets develop, affordability and income determine locational choices to a greater extent than when bureaucratic selection and rationing processes were more important. With the increased dominance of market processes the contours of the housing market more closely mirror the rewards from the labour market. In the major cities there are the residual neighbourhoods of the poor and low paid, a price-stratified home ownership sector for the middle mass and the positional neighbourhoods for the locally affluent and internationally mobile. The consequence is a greater divergence of prices between those parts of the housing market fuelled essentially by the incomes and preferences of those working in the local labour market and the hyperinflating (and sometimes hyperdeflating) enclaves that attract foreign investment, the local super-rich and the cosmopolitan elite. There are globally connected neighbourhoods and locally excluded ones.

Neighbourhood as consumption niche

Pursuing the above themes further, neighbourhoods are now marketed as offering particular attributes for particular subgroups. This "place marketing" of neighbourhoods is considerably enhanced by the technological capacity to capture and process vast databases. There have always been good and bad parts of cities, places to avoid and places to aspire to, but we no longer need to rely on friends, work colleagues or the subjective patter of the real estate agent to draw up our short list of preferred neighbourhoods. In the informational age we can log into our PC and obtain increasingly detailed profiles in an increasingly spatially disaggregated form. In Britain, for example, the website www.upmystreet.co.uk provides neighbourhood profiles for selected postcodes. My neighbourhood is described as Acorn type 19, which is apparently apartments, young professional and couples. I am provided with local crime rates, information on local school performance and recent local voting patterns. I am also told that

> People in Acorn Type 19 are 65 per cent more likely to be vegetarians. They prefer to take their holidays off the beaten track and are keen to keep up with developments in technology. They try to keep healthy through a lower fat diet and exercise. They are not keen on DIY.

They also apparently "have an above average propensity to respond to direct mail and to press advertising but below average interest in television". The fact that this description falls short of my personal profile is beside the point. Such sources of information enable those with choice to make fine-grained decisions about which neighbourhoods are most likely to deliver the

material, cultural and economic capital they seek.

And even if we personally don't care about our neighbourhood, someone else does – estate agents, developers, the manufacturers of consumer durables, the advertising industry and so forth. Whether or not our feelings of social worth or social belonging are rooted in the local neighbourhood or from more spatially diffuse sources, our place of residence conveys something about us and is packaged to appeal to others with a similar lifestyle or social aspirations. Indeed, a neighbourhood where there is limited social interaction, where people keep to themselves and avoid neighbourly contact could be a positive selling point for some. When we use our preference card at the supermarket to collect our bonus points, our checkout slip adds to the cumulative profile of the consumption habits of the people who live in our kind of neighbourhood. We are, increasingly, *where* we live.

As would be expected the classification of neighbourhoods into lifestyle types with associated consumption habits is highly developed in the USA. Claritas Connect "delivers the nation's most important demographic and marketing data companies to your desktop". Data are provided at block group or census tract level and the PRIZM cluster analysis divides US consumers into 66 different segments in 14 different groups. The evocative nicknames include Money and brains, young digerati and bohemian mix in the urban uptown group. The urban core group includes big city blues and city roots. The database description states that it is

> based on the familiar adage: "birds of a feather flock together". When choosing a place to live, people tend to seek out neighborhoods compatible with their lifestyles, where they find others in similar circumstances with similar consumer behavior patterns. Once established, the character of a neighbourhood tends to persist over time, though individual residents come and go. (http://www.claritas.com).

The neighbourhood in the informational age

This "tagging" of neighbourhood attributes is part of a wider and more profound reshaping of the world's major urban agglomerations. For the purposes of this article it is appropriate to simply stress the need to see the neighbourhood, both discursively and materially, as being in the process of transformation rather than being left in the wake of technological change and its social ramifications. The most direct impacts, however, have been seen in concerns about "digital divides" and the widening gap between technology-rich and technology-poor neighbourhoods. The electronically excluded spaces tend to be associated with particular groups in particular parts of cities. The most systematic evidence on this issue has come from the USA where the National Telecommunications and Information Administration has carried out a series of studies on the digital divide (e.g. NTIA 1998). These reports have shown, for example, a growing disparity between Black and Hispanic inner-city areas in terms of their online access and the quality of the connection compared with the adjacent neighbourhoods of white, higher income households. Authors such as Castells (1999) have highlighted the way in which central city neighbourhoods become both globally connected and locally disconnected. In Castells' (1999) terminology the central city contains both increasingly valued and increasingly devalued spaces. The valued spaces form part of a global network, the developmental logic of which may have little to do with its surrounding economic and social hinterland:

> Given that these spaces, these populations, and these institutions have a decreasing relevance for functions valuable to the central city's island of prosperity and innovations, from the point of view of the system logic, there is a self-reinforcing process of spatial marginalisation, social exclusion, and functional devaluation of neglected spaces, which the information highways of the space of flows have bypassed. (p.31).

In a similar vein Graham and Marvin (2001) describe the stark contrasts in infrastructure provision in China's rapidly urbanising Pearl River delta. Massive and rapid investment serves the "needs and spaces" of the powerful while basic infrastructural improvements for the majority lag far behind.

There is another, more positive side to the story – albeit one that is somewhat less convincing. Just as the informational highway can bypass certain neighbourhoods so too can it be

the potential means by which they can escape their stigma and disadvantage. Grassroots community movements have seized on new technology as not only a critical new social divide but as a powerful means by which neighbourhoods with resource-poor social networks can be connected to the world beyond. Shaw and Shaw (1999) offer one view of these possibilities when they refer to the US Federal government's concern for the National Information Infrastructure. Why not extend this concept, they argue, to a "neighbourhood information infrastructure"? Extending the highway metaphor, they continue:

> We must consider the possibility that this technology can help members of a community build up their neighbourhood information infrastructure. Interstate highways would not be very useful if it were not for off-ramps. People need to travel on local byways and between blocks of houses, not just from city to city. In fact, people spend most of their time traveling along their local roadways. (p.323)

There are also other, more far-reaching assessments of the impact of technology on cities and neighbourhoods which focus on the changing relationship between work and residence and changes in the intrinsic nature of work. These discussions are not occurring on the fringes of futurology and are generally more sophisticated than the so far unfulfilled predictions of mass homeworking. Telecommuting has certainly not yet arrived on the scale envisaged by some, and homeworking often involves low pay and low skilled employment. Fukayama (1999) offers a particularly bold and positive version of possible changes and suggests that we have been habituated through industrialisation into a historically peculiar relationship between home and work. He argues that

> it is if anything more natural and more in keeping with the experience of human beings throughout history that home and work should be co-located. It may that technology, which has infinite capabilities of alienating us from our natural desires and inclinations, may in this instance be able to restore something of the wholeness and integration of life that industrialism took away from us. (p.277)

Mitchell (1999) provides in *e-topia* a considerably more detailed discussion of these issues and in a chapter focusing on homes and neighbourhoods examines the implications of technology for, among other things, physical planning and city zoning, residential architecture and the geography and content of primary and secondary relationships. He talks of "a clustering of the new-style live/work dwellings in twenty-four hour neighbourhoods that effectively combine local attractions with global connections" (p.78). A new relationship between home and work could mean suburbs that no longer empty out in the morning and central cities that can retain a larger residential population. Moreover, zoning cities by separating the residential and non-residential in the industrial age is, he argues, increasingly inappropriate in an environment in which much new employment is small scale, high tech and clean. His most interesting observations, however, concern the changing sociology and spatial patterning of social networks. For Mitchell (1999) they simultaneously involve an intensification of remoteness and co-presence:

> In the emergent twenty-four-hour neighbourhoods of the digital electronic era, patterns will be transformed yet again, and the net effect will be complex. Some secondary social relationships will simply be eliminated as electronic systems replace bank tellers, retail clerks, and the like. But others will be regenerated at the neighbourhood level, as social life revitalises: more of the people that you get to know will be nearby residents. And others will be formed and maintained at a distance through combinations of electronic interaction and occasional face-to-face meetings. (p.80)

Mitchell, however, echoes Castells in recognising the downside of these potential transformations. Advances in telecommunications and more efficient transport networks create greater locational freedom for some. The most attractive neighbourhoods in the most attractive cities will become even more sought after. But other neighbourhoods in less attractive locations are more likely to be left behind, reflected in greater divergence in price and investment:

> When it all shakes out, the guiding real estate principle turns out to be this: telecommunications networking can add great value to localities where relatively well-off people would like to live. It can remove constraints that prevented them from doing so in the past. But it doesn't help people who find themselves trapped in marginalised, underserviced areas and are too poor to move. (Mitchell 1999, p.77)

Concluding comments

So, who cares about neighbourhoods and should we? There are evidently longstanding trends associated with the decline of the conventional role and meaning of the neighbourhood as a focal point in our everyday lives. However, there are contemporary factors at work that may be reinforcing as well as reshaping that role. New family forms and the erosion of traditional kinship links, greater spatial mobility and higher participation rates of women in the formal labour market are some of the factors that have reduced the importance of the residential neighbourhood as communally experienced geographical space. In most societies the trend has been for people to spend longer at work in a location that is usually at some distance from their home. Families tend to live further apart and to have social networks that are focused around the workplace or around leisure activities that are not neighbourhood based. Nevertheless, the neighbourhood still retains some of its traditional functions. There are powerful continuities in relation to its role as the domain of casual social interaction, as the place where we spend time with our partner or children and where we may feel most relaxed. We may have spatially diffuse and overlapping social networks, but the neighbourhood remains as a key site for the routines of everyday life which appear to be an important part of our social identity.

From this perspective on the neighbourhood, for elderly people, for children, for home-based workers and for the unemployed, sick or disabled, the neighbourhood clearly has a greater role than for the single, middle-class, professional laptopping to and from the office. For elderly people in particular, the residential neighbourhood retains many of its traditional functions as a place for friendship and social support. We should be wary of adopting a perspective on the neighbourhood which is that of the cosmopolitan intellectual. Most people, most of the time, are locals. Moreover, the rapid ageing of many societies means that a progressively higher proportion of the population are likely to be spending more time in and around the neighbourhood. The elderly of the future are going to be different from the elderly of the past as regards their lifestyle and levels of affluence. Their generally expressed desire is to live independently but in well-serviced neighbourhoods.

The effects of technology and electronic media are also more ambiguous than might be assumed. The dominant image is of local traditions and ties being gradually undermined by the intrusions of the global world via fast-food chains, emails, the Internet and cable television. But the effects of developments in teleshopping, electronic banking and the like could well be to localise and globalise in parallel. As Mitchell suggests, there may be a progressive disintermediation of our secondary relationships whereby our regular face to face contacts could become more localised. More of the people we know could be living locally through a combination of shifts in retail practices and changes in the relationships between home and work. This is inevitably to speculate beyond any strong evidence. If such trends exist they are merely nascent. Nevertheless with greater locational choice, at least for some, we should expect a higher degree of the adjacency and coincidence of residence and workplace. Those with the freedom and skills are likely to spend more time working at home, if not from home. In that sense the separation of home and work, and the separation of neighbours from workplace acquaintances could well diminish rather than increase.

For those with little or no choice neighbourhood matters in a different way. Those without the necessary social and technical skills for the informational age find themselves increasingly disadvantaged – channelled into particular parts of cities. This increasing concentration of the poor produces stigma, negative labelling and neighbourhoods with the kind of social capital which entraps rather than empowers.

And whether we like it or not, indeed whether we talk to our neighbours or not, we live in neighbourhoods subject to increasing classification and digitisation. The technology of the informational age enables a fine-graining of neighbourhood distinction and, if need be, discrimination. The real estate industry, the supermarkets, the purveyors of tailor-made holidays and so on want to know more about where we live, where we want to live and our consumption habits. In an age of direct selling and teleshopping the neighbourhood is set to

become more rather than less important for retailers as a discriminator of lifestyles.

And to return to where we came in, despite its conceptual ambiguities and academic views that a concern with ''neighbourhood'' is something of an anachronism, it remains a major preoccupation of policy-makers and politicians operating at a variety of spatial scales. Whitehead (2003) highlights the appropriation of the term at the international level (the UN Commission on Global Governance) – ''the global village becomes the global neighbourhood as a moral space through which to manage the complex economic, political and ecological problems of the planet'' (p.277) The idea of neighbourhood continues to invoke positive attributes of mutuality, solidarity, connectedness and a sense of shared responsibility and destiny. At the national level in the UK and elsewhere, it is these attributes that underpin the increasing array of neighbourhood labelled initiatives – qualities of neighbourhood to be sustained or revived. A cynical view would be that we have been here before. For example, we had the area-based initiatives of the late 1960s deployed as a policy response to the ravages of deindustrialisation and economic restructuring in many western cities, which were theoretically condemned at the time as ideological smokescreens for powerful structural forces which could not be tackled at that spatial scale. However, there are interesting questions to be explored regarding the re-emergence of ideas of community and neighbourhood in different social, economic and cultural contexts. For example, how do current policy responses and discursive practices around neighbourhoods differ from previous times and why? (See Whitehead 2003, for some interesting theoretical observations on this).

But whatever theoretical conclusions we might come to about if and how we should care about the neighbourhood, there is little to suggest that it will not continue to retain a powerful hold on popular imagination and within political debate. In this context I particularly like Byrne's (2001) observations on popular soap operas that ''the most famous of all Australian soaps [was] not called *Neighbours* for nothing'' (p.85). Moreover, as a focal point for social investigation the neighbourhood (however, defined and operationalised) will continue to be a rich laboratory in which to explore wider processes of fluidity, change and stability.

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