

## Week 1 Reflection

### Prompt

- 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?

### Reflection

When I think of a neighborhood, I imagine a place that's defined by some common characteristic, whether it be a physical landmark or access to public services. Neighborhoods are dynamic spaces that help people craft a sense of identity and belonging. They can encourage community and help people situate themselves in relation to other parts of a city.

Defining a neighborhood is tricky. Because they often lack clear geographic boundaries, neighborhoods are difficult to define physically. Some neighborhoods have historic definitions, for instance, the neighborhood that I live in now, Dunning, is usually defined by the historic boundaries of Chicago's Dunning Hospital that was here for nearly a century. In other cases, I think neighborhoods may be intentionally hard to define. Places that are on the edge of multiple neighborhoods have the ability to pick and choose which one they want to be associated with – typically the neighborhood they deem more socially or economically favorable. Neighborhoods are definitely shaped by power and perception – they aren't neutral spaces that can be easily defined by their proximity to a park, school, or other public service. The question "how should neighborhoods be defined?" is so challenging to answer because neighborhoods are physical places that are inextricably linked to social and economic forces. I think that in order to answer that question, we should also ask "how should we define community?" because neighborhoods and communities seem to be two distinct things that often share the same definition.

Neighborhoods are an important unit of analysis for city planners and urbanists. Since cities are essentially a large network of neighborhoods, neighborhood analysis offers us a more detailed glimpse into the trends and conditions in a city. Because neighborhoods are often economically or socially homogenous, this scale allows planners and urbanists to more accurately compare conditions for different socioeconomic groups. At the same time, neighborhoods can be heterogeneous and studying them closely may help us identify trends that would get overlooked at a more general scale.

I think there's some subjectivity involved in identifying the characteristics that make a neighborhood great. If we're looking at neighborhoods as a physical phenomenon, most planners would probably say that a great neighborhood is walkable, has access to quality public services, and contains a variety of housing types. But, again, I think neighborhoods exist as this kind of physical phenomenon that's directly linked to socioeconomic forces. So, a great neighborhood might be defined by people's socioeconomic expectations, like whether they think they'll see a

return on their investments or whether they think it's a safe place to raise a family. I actually think tying the value of a neighborhood to its physical conditions can be harmful since not all neighborhoods are able to achieve those "great" characteristics. This definition only serves to further divide cities and neighborhoods in a harmful way. I think what really makes a neighborhood great is the ability to foster a sense of belonging and encourage communal care and responsibility. It's difficult to describe how exactly that would manifest physically, but that, to me, is what defines a great neighborhood. And that to me is one big question I have about neighborhood analysis. How can we use data to tell a story about those more intangible characteristics of a neighborhood? Does data analysis reinforce our place-based understandings of what a neighborhood is and what it could be?