

PASCAL International Observatory

Briefing Paper 18

Learning and Place: Profiling Places

John Tibbitt Honorary Senior Research Fellow, University of Glasgow and Vice-chair of PASCAL International Observatory

Executive Summary

The relationship between learning and place extends the understanding of the learning city to a more local level, recognising that just as learning is fundamental to city and regional development, so it is to the character and opportunities that influence the quality of life in neighbourhoods and communities.

This paper is concerned with the complex links between learning and successful neighbourhoods. It summarises some well-known tools for mapping the strengths and weaknesses of communities in terms of both its socio-economic position, the social and cultural facilities it possesses and the feelings of identity and quality of life experienced by community members. It highlights attempts to measure place quality and place value. It stresses the importance of community involvement in assessing place quality. The paper goes on to raise a number of issues about the reliability and validity of the measures employed and the availability of suitable data at local level, and about the processes through which quality assessments are often made.

The paper concludes with the observation that variables concerned with learning are rarely included in these profiling techniques.

Introduction

The relationship between learning and place is one of PASCAL's priority interests. It extends the understanding of the learning city to a more local level, recognising that just as learning is fundamental to city and regional development, so it is to the character and opportunities that influence the quality of life and health and wellbeing of those living in particular neighbourhoods and communities. The relationship can be complex, concerned both with learning *about* places (that is what do we know about factors associated with successful places) and learning *in* places (that is what are the learning opportunities available to those living in a place to enhance their life chances). Both are considered here.

Regional authorities, local government, developers, members of local communities and community workers all have an interest in the quality of places, and need to understand the characteristics of places if developmental actions are to be based on sound evidence, starting from an appreciation of strengths and shortcomings within places. This paper considers a number of current approaches to provide relevant place profiles as a basis for intervention.

The scope of place profiling

Understanding of communities has long been a basic starting point in community work practice. Community profiling involves building a picture of the nature, needs and resources of a community, preferably with the active participation of that community. It is a vital first stage in any community intervention. It establishes a context which is widely shared and is a basic requirement for assessing priorities and potential impacts and for project planning. Developing a community profile involves identifying community issues and attitudes, locating notable features in the area, and assessing social and economic conditions and trends in the community and surrounding area relevant to the project. Preparing a community profile in community work practice is often an iterative process. Some data can be collected in initial project planning, but other important information about the community may only be apparent as the project develops. Information can be collected from primary sources, such as interviews or surveys, and secondary sources, such as relevant local reports and local newspaper articles. Other valuable material will be derived from observation, visits to key locations and local conversations. The scope of the data collection required will of course vary according to the nature and focus of the project. In summary, a typical profile for community intervention is likely to span:

Social and economic	Services and amenities	Issues and attitudes
Demographics	Community services	Identity
Labour force	Land use, open spaces	Perceived quality
Employers	Transport	Issues and problems
Housing	Cultural resources	

Placemaking

But if the approach to profiling communities outlined above is the cornerstone of much of community work practice, others have concentrated on work at the level of the street or particular public space as a means of strengthening them as a community resource. Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces. Placemaking capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, with the intention of creating public spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well-being.

Placemaking draws its inspiration from the ideas developed by researchers such as Jane Jacobs and William H Whyte who emphasised the importance of putting people at the centre of city design and development. Their work is focused on the social and cultural importance of lively neighbourhoods and inviting public spaces. In her now frequently quoted phrase Jacobs (1961) wrote '...there must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to

those we might call the natural proprietors of the street...’, while Whyte (1980) drew out key elements for creating a vibrant social life in public spaces.

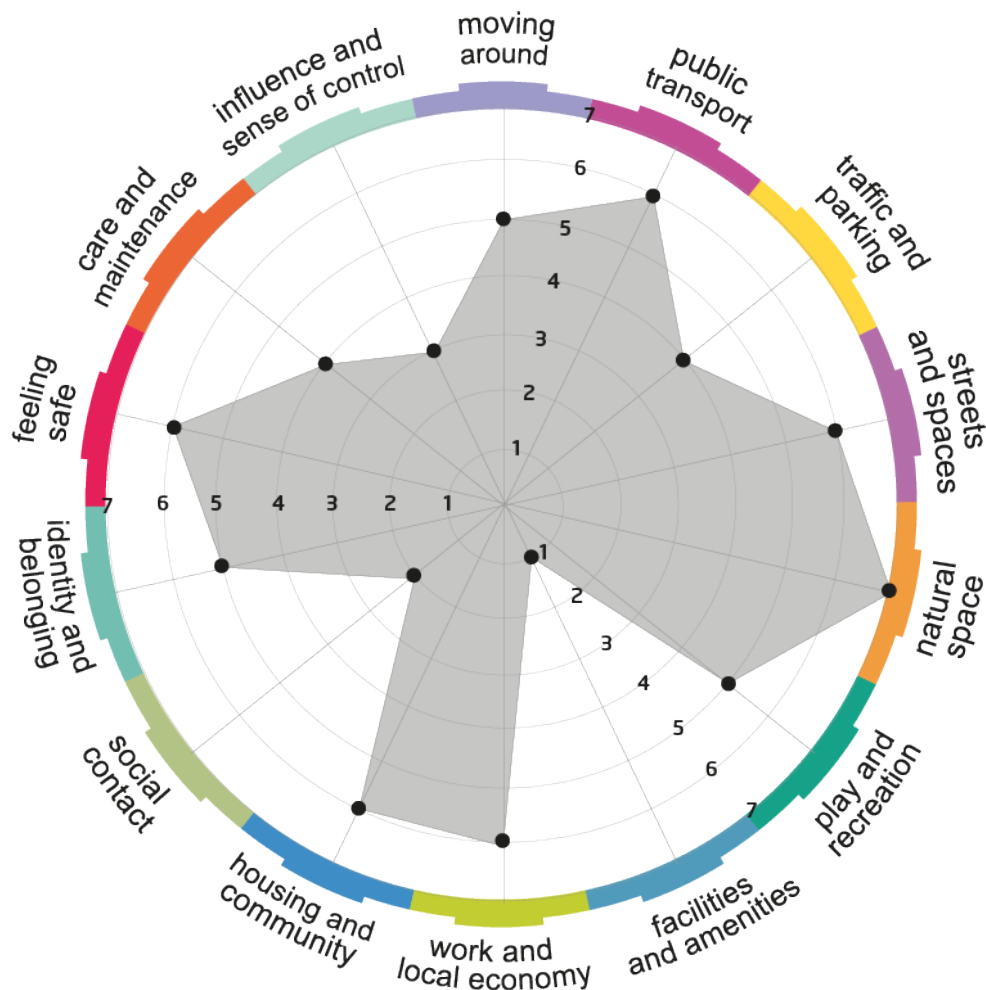
Prompted by the prominent activities of organisations such as *Project for Public Spaces* (PPS), it has been demonstrated how adopting a collaborative community process is a most effective way of for creating and revitalising public space. It is centred around observing, listening to and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular place in order to understand their needs and aspirations for that space and for the community as a whole. This can be the basis of constructing a vision for the place in question, which in turn can lead to an implementation plan.

The term ‘placemaking’ has now come to be used not only by citizens and organisations committed to community-led improvement. It is now frequently used by planners and developers to promote the desirability and quality of their developments. The term is increasingly by design professionals and developers to describe features of the built environment which is not rooted in any way in public participation. As PPS point out, making a place is not the same as constructing a building, designing a plaza or developing a commercial zone. As more professionals come to call their work ‘placemaking’, it is important to preserve the meaning and integrity of the process. It is not only the physical aspects which determine a quality place, it must also serve people as a vital community resource where function trumps form.

Place quality

Placemaking aims to build quality places. But what is known about what constitutes a ‘quality place’?

There some well-known representations of place quality. For example, the *Scottish Place Standard* tool provides a simple framework to structure conversations about place. It allows stakeholders to think about both the physical elements of a place (for example, its buildings, public spaces, and transport links) as well as the social aspects (for example, whether people feel they have a say in decision making). The model contains a number of dimensions which have been shown to be associated with favourable notions of place, and through discussion an agreed assessment is reached, and can be represented in a radar diagram like that below.



Tools such as this rely on consultation with stakeholders based on information available to them. The tool provides prompts for discussions, allowing consideration of all the elements of a place in a methodical way. The tool pinpoints the assets of a place as well as those aspects which a place could improve. These are readily seen in the diagram above.

Other tools, often marketed by commercial companies claim to provide rating scales based on more comprehensive data and may focus on particular aspects of place, depending on the interests of their clients. One such is *Place Score*, an Australia-based company which 'provides proprietary data to government and the property sector to help design places that people want to live in and invest in'. They offer a 'place census' which captures community values and allows identification of those factors of importance to community members. It offers a full demographic analysis that illustrates how different groups are aligned or conflicted. *Place Score* also have a community liveability tool which captures how people rate the lived experience of a place and identifies those aspects which contribute most to that score.

It is difficult to comment on the quality and validity of these measures as details are hidden behind a paywall on the company's website, but they are illustrative of attempts to provide a place profile at any level from city, to district, neighbourhood and street, based on quantified data and analysis.

Place value

An approach which goes beyond this kind of 'mapping' of the characteristics of a place is one which considers the benefits added by particular features of a place. *Place Alliance* have conducted a review of over 270 empirical research studies which comprise an evidence base for linking features of place design with benefits derived by those who live in a place. The evidence base indicates that quality design brings added value with respect to health, social, economic and environmental outcomes. The concept of place value is the sum of these outcomes. The evidence base has been brought together in an open-source website that is continually updated as new studies become available at www.place-value-wiki.net.

As an aid to the application of this research, Place Alliance have developed a place quality 'ladder' which climbs from the qualities of places that should be avoided, because they undermine place value, to specific qualities that should be encouraged because they deliver value. For example, among those features for which there is very strong evidence of a positive value are 'greenness', mixed use, walkability and public transport connectivity. Features for which there is good evidence of value include sense of place, street level activity, attractive and comfortable public spaces and integration of built heritage. Features which the evidence indicates have strong negative value include high car dependence, absence of local green space, too many fast food shops and roads with high traffic volumes.

Issues

The discussion above has illustrated different approaches to profiling places and some of the factors associated with adding value to places. However, there are a number of issues which arise.

An initial step has to be the defining of a place to be profiled in the first place. This requires at least some initial work to clarify the extent to which an urban area can be considered as a place. In the absence of such preparatory information, it becomes possible for developers to arbitrarily define the boundaries of a place often to justify the development which is proposed.

Then there is a concern with the reliability and validity of the data, which is available on which to base profiles, especially at very local levels, and on 'softer' concepts such as sense of place, feelings of identity and belonging, and safety. There are likely to be significant gaps in official data which can undermine the analysis of lifestyles within communities and fail to point to groups in the community whose interests may be in conflict. It will be important to seek new data sources from smart city developments and the adoption of technological innovation.

The process by which place profiles are derived and shared with the community. It is important that members of the community are involved in the identification of perceived needs and the quality of the lived experience in a place. Communities need to be involved too in the process of defining a response to needs identified.

Another concern relates to the process for determining the response to a place profile especially by government agencies. Just as place profiling can identify a range of related factors which relate to the built environment, land use and social variables, so the response must be holistic and comprehensive if real change is to be produced.

Finally, it is striking how little reference is made in these approaches to place profiling to the role of learning by and within places. Such references should embrace both opportunities for formal learning and skills development, and more informal learning about communities, local governance and community organisations. The contribution of learning to place is rarely explored.

In this regard, a significant opportunity to learn and promote learning is to be derived from technological innovation. It has been argued that urban change, driven by a city's desire to become technologically innovative would more fully facilitate active citizenship, social inclusion and learning opportunities if underpinned by broader conceptions of the learning city and the learning community.

Implications

The issues raised above point to a number of steps local government and community organisations should take if they are to undertake valid place profiling as a basis for planning and development policies, enforcing planning conditions on developers and improving the quality of places. Repeated place profiling can provide a basis for assessing progress in meeting objectives from policy initiatives.

Authorities need to put place at the centre of their policy and practice and approach the concept in a holistic and collaborative way if they are to improve place quality and bring the community with them.

References and further reading

Borkowska K. and Osborne M. (2018) Locating the fourth helix: Rethinking the role of civil society in developing smart learning cities. *International Review of Education*, 64(3), pp. 355-372.

Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House

Whyte, W.H. (1980) *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Washington DC, The Conservation Foundation.

For more on place standard go to <https://www.placestandard.scot>

For more on place value and the ladder of place quality go to <http://placealliance.org.uk>

Project for Public Spaces *What is placemaking?* <https://www.pps.org/category/placemaking>

Place Score <http://www.placescore.org>