



Neighborhood Unit and its Conceptualization in the Contemporary Urban Context

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Abstract

The term neighborhood has been frequently referred to in the context of traditional and contemporary residential development. Since the coining of the expression 'neighborhood unit' in 1929 by Clarence A. Perry, it has become a recurring theme in planning our cities. The planning agencies continue to adapt and make modular use of the neighborhood unit when planning new communities. The social and physical connotations of neighborhood must be understood in order to be able to carry forward its essence for the benefit of planned development efforts. The paper in this context brings forth the concept as forwarded by its protagonists, its interpretation at various points of time, and establishes the need to understand its essence in the contemporary urban context.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term neighborhood is often used to describe the sub-divisions of urban or rural settlements. In its purest definition, a neighborhood is the vicinity in which people live. Lewis Mumford presented 'neighborhood' as a 'fact of nature', which comes into existence whenever a group of people share a place. Since the early ages of humanity, for practical, economical, sociological and psychological reasons, people have tended to live close together in sections of an area and form communities. Those sections or neighborhoods have some particular physical or social characteristics that distinguish them from the rest of the settlement. The clustering of these neighborhoods has formed towns, villages, and cities.

The neighborhood as a unit is a ubiquitous phenomenon in every urban and non-urban area. Arnold Whittick (1974) describes neighborhood unit as an integrated, and planned urban area related to the larger community of which it is a part, and consisting of residential districts, a school or schools, shopping facilities, religious buildings, open spaces, and perhaps a degree of service industry.

2. EVOLUTION AND CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD UNIT

The 'neighborhood unit' as a planning concept evolved in response to the degenerated environmental and social conditions fostered as a consequence of industrial revolution in the early 1900s. One of the earliest authors to attempt a definition of the 'neighborhood unit' in fairly specific terms was Clarence Arthur Perry (1872-1944), a New York planner. Perry's neighborhood unit concept began as a means of insulating the community from the ill-effects of burgeoning sea

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of vehicular traffic. However, it evolved to serve a much broader purpose of providing a discernible identity for the concept of the neighborhood, and of offering to designers a framework for disseminating the city into smaller subareas.

While the origin of the concept of the neighborhood unit may be cited at an early date, it was the publication of Clarence A. Perry's memorandum entitled 'The Neighborhood Unit' in the 1929 'Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs', which led to its promotion as a planning tool. Perry's monograph offered in concrete terms a diagrammatic model of the ideal layout for a neighborhood of a specified population size. This model provided specific guidelines for the spatial distribution of residences, community services, streets and businesses.

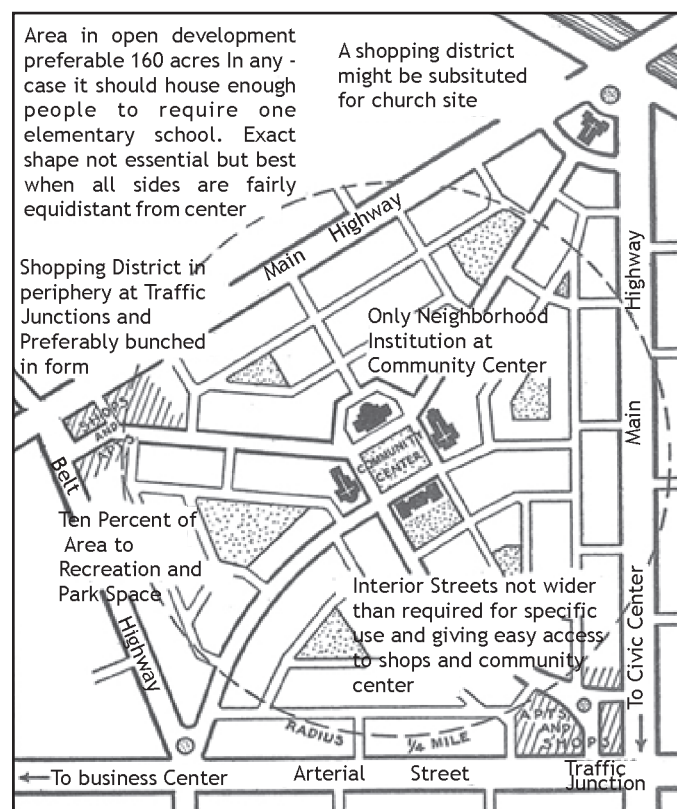
2.1 Clarence A. Perry's Conception of the Neighborhood Unit

Perry described the neighborhood unit as that populated area which would require and support an elementary school with an enrolment of between 1,000 and 1,200 pupils. This would mean a population of between 5,000 and 6,000 people. Developed as a low density dwelling district with a population of 10 families per acre, the neighborhood unit would occupy about 160 acres and have a shape which would render it unnecessary for any child to walk a distance of more than one-quarter mile to school. About 10 percent of the area would be allocated to recreation, and through traffic arteries would be confined to the surrounding streets, internal streets being limited to service access for residents of the neighborhood. The unit would be served by shopping facilities, churches, and a library, and a community center, the latter being located in conjunction with the school (Gallion, 1984).

Perry outlined six basic principles of good neighborhood design. As may be understood, these core principles were organized around several institutional, social and physical design ideals.

- Major arterials and through traffic routes should not pass through residential neighborhoods. Instead these streets should provide boundaries of the neighborhood;
- Interior street patterns should be designed and constructed through

Fig. 1: Clarence A. Perry's Neighborhood Unit of 1929



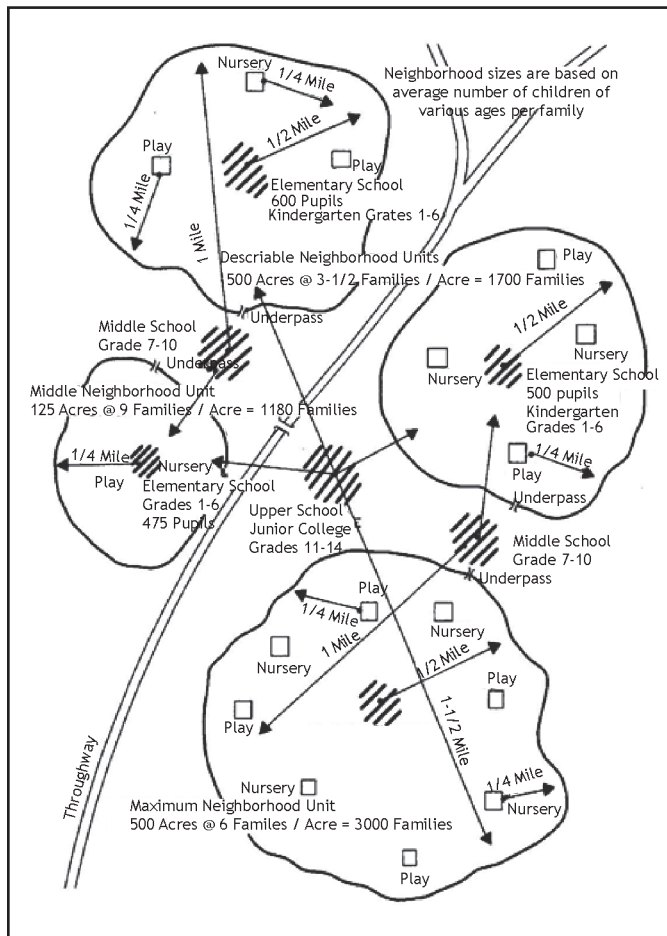


use of cul-de-sacs, curved layout and light duty surfacing so as to encourage a quiet, safe and low volume traffic movement and preservation of the residential atmosphere;

- The population of the neighborhood should be that which is required to support its elementary school;
- The neighborhood focal point should be the elementary school centrally located on a common or green, along with other institutions that have service areas coincident with the neighborhood boundaries;
- The radius of the neighborhood should be a maximum of one quarter mile thus precluding a walk of more than that distance for any elementary school child; and
- Shopping districts should be sited at the edge of neighborhoods preferably at major street intersections.

2.2 Neighborhood Conception by Others

Fig. 2: Engelhardt's Diagram of Neighborhoods



The concept propagated by Clarence A. Perry was carried forward by several others with certain variations or elaborations. For example, N.L. Engelhardt, Jr. presented a comprehensive pattern of the neighborhood units grouped in relation to the various levels of school facilities. He proposed a radius of $\frac{1}{2}$ mile as maximum walking distance to the elementary school. Playgrounds and nursery schools are proposed with a radius of $\frac{1}{4}$ mile walking distance for the families in the neighborhood.

Clarence Stein placed the elementary school at the center of the neighborhood unit and within $\frac{1}{4}$ mile radius of all residents. A small shopping center for daily needs is located near the school. Most residential streets are suggested as cul-de-sac or 'dead-end' roads to eliminate through traffic, and park space flows through the neighborhood in a manner reminiscent of the Radburn Plan. He further expanded the definition of neighborhood center by connecting the neighborhoods together to create towns. The diagram shows the grouping of three

neighborhood units served by a high school and one or two major commercial centers, the radius for walking distance to these facilities being one mile.

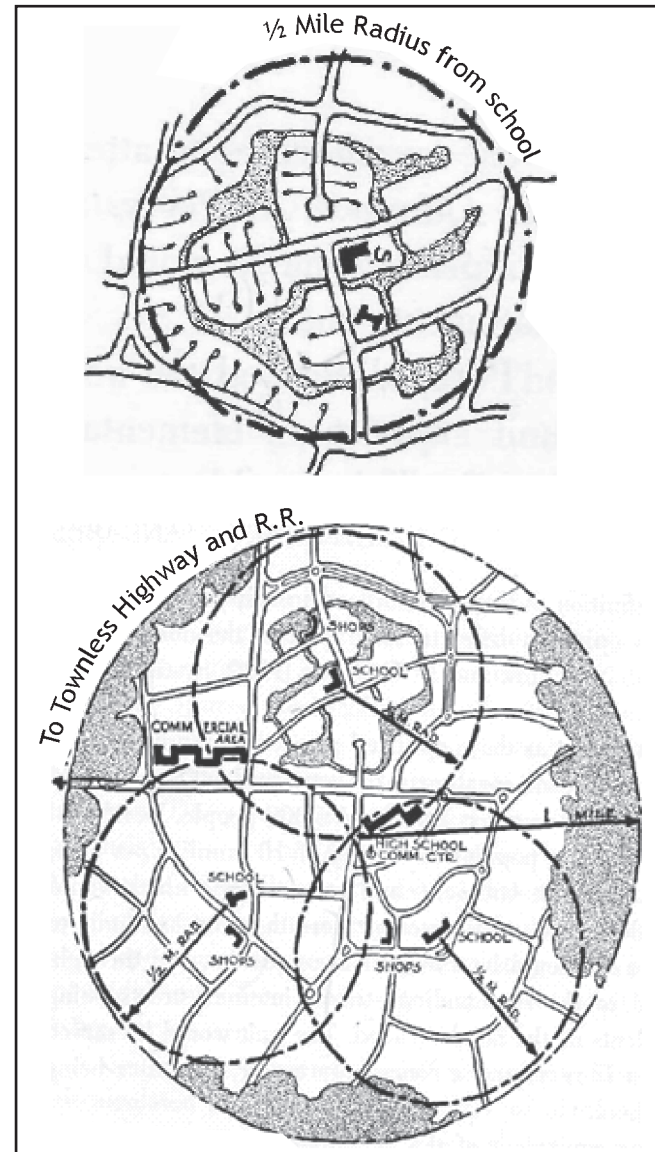
The neighborhood unit has been defined and redefined throughout the planning history. Despite several variations, the principle of neighborhood unit runs through all considerations for social, physical and political organization of the city. It represents a unit of the population with basic common needs for educational, recreational and other service facilities, and it is the standard for these facilities from which the size and design of the neighborhood emerge.

3. IMPACT OF NEIGHBORHOOD CONCEPT ACROSS THE GLOBE

The principles identified by Perry were endorsed by most planning and design organizations in planning and designing neighborhoods. The neighborhood unit has formed the basis of planning and building of most of the first generation British New Towns (1946-1950). The British New Towns Committee in 1946 stated that the neighborhood is a natural and useful conception, but it should not be thought of as a self-contained community of which the inhabitants are more conscious than they are of the town as whole (Gallion, 1984). Perry's principles have been the building blocks of many neighborhoods such as Radburn, New Jersey; Greenbelt, Maryland; Greenhills, Ohio etc.

The neighborhood unit was embraced for its community idealism by many countries, which were exposed to the theorem. These countries have since adopted its purpose of protecting and promoting the public health and of considering the safety and welfare of citizens. The cellular nature of the neighborhood unit allowed it to be utilized as a building block in the development of neighborhood arrays, leading to its systematic modular usage during periods of rapid residential expansion in many countries across the globe. In its report in 1972 on 'A Strategy

Fig. 3: Clarence Stein's 1942 Diagram of Neighborhoods





for Building a better America', the American institute of Architects adopted the neighborhood unit as the recommended growth unit for future urban growth (Gallion, 1984).

The concept of a neighborhood has been subjected to numerous criticisms. Some have opposed the neighborhood with the claim that it leads to a grouping of people that inevitably results in compulsory class distinctions. Some categorize the neighborhood concept as too romanticized and idealistic a delineation to be practical for modern life. At times, a neighborhood is found to be too large to promote social behavior and neighborly relations. The school as focal point has been criticized for being impractical and too child centered whereas community facilities for being inadequate and often far for some residents. The proliferation of small parks and other public spaces necessitates expensive maintenance service. Critics question the utility of Perry's concept of a common meeting area, given the diversity of individuals usually found in an urban area. Critics also question the economic efficiency of the neighborhood unit as a service district for urban services. Also, neighborhood schools would be too small to undertake specialized activities that are economically feasible in large schools.

Despite the various criticisms, neighborhood unit concept has remained an indispensable tool in the city organization and development processes across the globe. However large or small the city may be, there must be a workable unit of human scale with which to weave the urban pattern into a workable whole.

Formulation and advancement of the development and planning agenda of independent India was spearheaded by none other than Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The modernizing aspirations of the Indian elite had substantial influence on the concept of foreign origin being advocated generously in India. To some, neighborhood unit concept was a better fit in India because of its inherent neighborhood tendencies. With the quick employment of neighborhood unit in the iconic projects like Chandigarh, Bhubaneswar and Gandhinagar, it became institutionalized in Indian planning practice. It eventually became the prototype for designing new towns and city extensions. Irrespective of the development agency, the main concept and the basic planning principle dominant in the new towns is the self-contained neighborhood unit.

4. NEIGHBORHOOD IN THE CONTEMPORARY URBAN CONTEXT

The concept of neighborhood unit in traditional built environments and rural settlements constituted a strong sense of attachment, identity, admittance and belonging for inhabitants. The close proximity of most of the community services and businesses to the residences enhanced social interactions. Neighborhood feeling in contemporary urban environments, however, is less dependent on the sharing of common close physical residential environment. Impact of urbanization, rise of mass society, modernization, improved inter connectivity



and the consequent increased socio-spatial mobility in the neighborhood has been highly destructive. Increasing mobility and transportation facilities have opened up new possibilities, thereby disregarding the benefits expected of a neighborhood. Remote activities and changed lifestyles of dwelling occupants thus become the basic factors that shape the social environment (Berk, 2005). This issue causes segregation of the social environment from the immediate physical environment.

It is not misleading to accuse public and private housing initiatives driven by neoliberal or random land use options solely targeting financial viability and profitability of the current status of housing. Most of the current housing approaches concentrate on the physical attributes of single dwelling units and exclude the fact that the dwelling units rarely stand alone in a given physical space. The high-rise settlement blocks with inadequately planned physical environment characterize most of the contemporary developments. This however does not diminish the importance of the neighborhood unit.

4.1 Neighborhood for the Social Well-Being

The immediate housing environment and the neighborhood represent an everyday-landscape, which can either support or limit the physical, mental and social wellbeing of the residents. Neighborhoods have been defined as a physical entity in planning because a neighborhood, which is sound in design and service, is believed to nurture healthier and more socially interactive communities. Such a neighborhood is projected to suffer less from urban problems of crime, ill health, etc. as well as other social, physical and political problems. Such impacts are broadly accepted.

The end objective of most planning programs is to achieve certain social objectives. The primary objectives addressed in planning programs are healthy and secure communities. An effective consideration for the settlements in that case would be to attempt unifying the social and physical environment of residents.

4.2 Neighborhood as a Planning Construct

The neighborhood unit, or some equivalent of this unit, is repeatedly referred to in proposals for urban reorganization. It is often the smallest unit considered by urban and regional planning, reflecting the general belief of planners, and others alike that neighborhoods are the building blocks of the city. Planning has traditionally demanded a decentralized, participatory planning process to successfully address local issues. Neighborhood, as a unit of planning, has always provided means to organize and ensure application of such decentralized planning processes to implement local planning programs and policies at the desirable de-centralized level. It brings comprehensive planning to local levels,



where transportation, housing, public facilities, etc. become interdependent systems rather than separate phenomena.

4.3 Core Concept for Neo-Traditionalism

Influenced by the awakening of neo-traditionalism as paradigm for urban living, 'sense of neighborhood' has become the core concept through which neighborhood attachment and communality is being evaluated (Horn, 2004). As it is being realized that the community is getting lost in the modernist era, several 'community saving and forming' forces are being put to work. Such pro-neighborhood forces include the design ideology of new urbanism; neighborhood renewal strategies; public participation in local area planning and management processes; area sensitive socio-economic inclusion and empowerment strategies; and growing recognition of the role of local-based social and cultural assets.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Neighbourhoods form the urban tissue of the city both physically and socially. The concept of the neighborhood is well established as a basic unit of planning the cities. Further, it is a popular and accepted element of social and physical organization in the minds of most people. Hence the neighborhood has become the symbol and the means to preserve the socio-cultural values of an earlier less hurried way of life in our increasingly complex and fast moving urban centers. This also causes enhancement in the social-cultural bonds that would result as a direct outcome of improvement in physical conditions of a neighborhood.

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