

Learning to Design for Social Sustainability Through the Synthesis of Two Approaches

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Although there is consensus that urban form could contribute to social sustainability, how socially sustainable development may be delivered is not well understood and lack in comprehensive studies. It is unclear whether social impacts of urban development are to be addressed as: (1) a precondition or outcome of environmental and economic sustainability (G.Assefa, 2007); (2) as social outcomes such as equity, poverty reduction and livelihood, or softer issues such as wellbeing and happiness (Elsa Addessi, 2005); or (3) as relations between people taking into account the formal and informal rules which govern the behaviour of organisations and individuals (Ashcroft 2009).

Therefore, clearer directions to deliver physical infrastructure geared for social sustainability is still being explored. Against such a background, this paper synthesises two approaches which explored how the design of urban neighbourhoods could contribute to social sustainability. The first arose from the SUE-MOT (sustainable urban environments: metrics, models and toolkits) project and identified the physical attributes of neighbourhood that may contribute to social capital through a comparison of the academic and practice based literatures. The second piece of research was a 'Learning through action' real-life neighbourhood project for a marginalised community in Sri Lanka, designed with the primary objective of contributing to social sustainability with explorative ideas and design strategies. These top-down and bottom-up approaches to the same problem provide an interesting learning opportunity that contributes to the knowledge base of how urban form may address social sustainability.

This paper will first discuss the findings of the part of the sue-mot project which aimed to operationalise the notion of social capital from a state-of-the-art review. This exercise identified attributes of neighbourhoods by the synthesis of social capital theory, published empirical research on social capital and the built environment and review of urban design guidance through the lens of social capital.

The paper will then discuss the approach of the Learning through Action project to conceive, design and deliver a master plan for social sustainability with a strong emphasis to design for social capital. In the absence of theoretical knowledge which even after ten years of its completion is still emerging, this project interpreted social capital and its relationship to sustainable development through logical interpretation informed by insight and empathy. The discussion that follows brings together the lessons learnt through the theoretical and practical approaches on how to deliver for social sustainability.

Findings from of the comparative literature review

Just as environmental and economic sustainability envisages to improve, protect and mitigate negative consequences of development that may deplete natural, financial and manufactured capitals, social sustainability too envisages to build upon, cultivate and preserve social and human capitals and to mitigate any negative consequences on this important asset, and therefore to deliver development for this objective. Human capital is considered here an attribute of individuals defined by one's skills, qualifications and knowledge while social capital refers to an asset generated by being part of a 'community', such as formal and informal social networks, group membership, trust, reciprocity and civic engagement.

The problem in delivering physical development to achieve this end lies in the difficulties encountered in operationalising the idea. Theory suggests that the structure of social capital is specific to its context and determined by a range of factors, including history and culture, social structure, economic inequalities, social class, ethnicity, and urban design (figure 1). Social capital of a group is manifested in its social relations, formal and informal networks, group membership, trust, reciprocity, civic engagement and the like. However, little is known of the nature of the interactions between the determinants, resultant structures and manifestations of social capital.

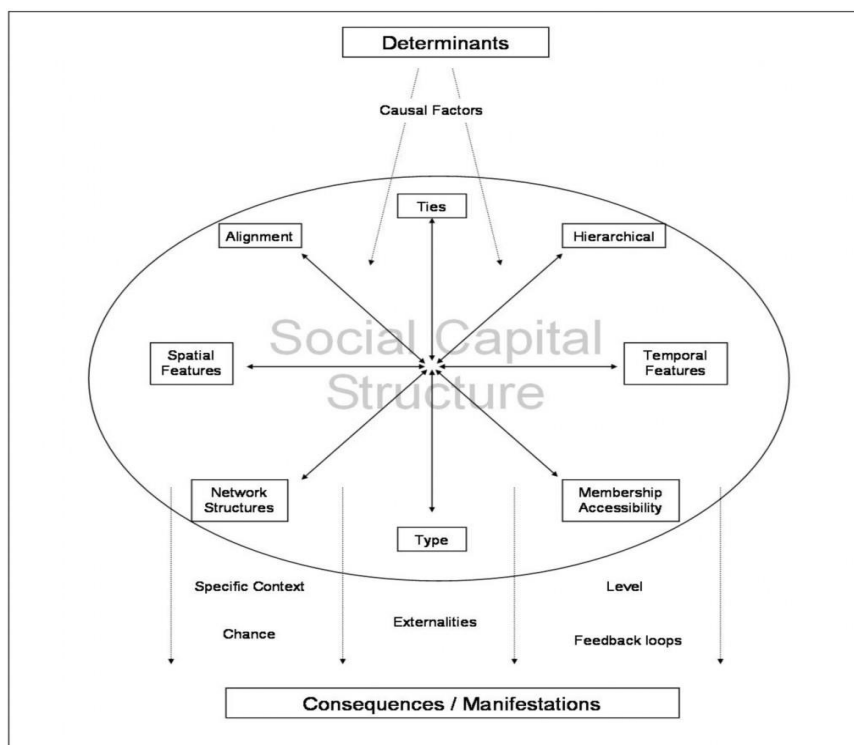


Figure 1 - Conceptualization of social capital simplifying the complexity of the social world into a diagram outlining relationships between determinants, structure (or elements) and consequences.

(Claridge, 2004)

The Sue-mot project sought a practical definition of social capital, drawn from the literature. This was the “intangible assets that develop between groups of individuals such as the goodwill, bond and trust arising from shared commonalities, such as values, outlook on life, attitudes, behaviours, relationships and networks that becomes a resource to serve their common goals and needs”. Arising from this definition we questioned if intangible assets such as goodwill, bond and trust arise from shared commonalities as mentioned above, and whether urban development could support and promote them. Whilst it is argued that urban design can impact on social capital through affording opportunities for social interaction (Claridge, 2004) there is little discussion of which features of urban design would facilitate such shared values, behaviours, networks and relationships. However, if people can be retained in an area for the longer term and if opportunity for face to face interaction is provided, a sense of belonging can be fostered, norms and membership reinforced. Such a sense of belonging can be expected to grow with increased3 reminiscence developed by residing in a place in the longer term and can contribute to trust and reciprocity (Claridge, 2004) . The sue-mot project reviewed selected urban design guidance and published research through this lens and identified twelve physical attributes. These attributes could be translated into development criteria, depending on the locality and emerging issues for a particular place, and have to be interpreted by designers according to local needs.

References

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