



# Community Well-Being in Neighbourhoods: Achieving Community and Open-Minded Space through Engagement in Neighbourhoods

Meg Holden<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article identifies an opportunity to reinvigorate our theoretical understanding of community well-being at the neighbourhood scale as increasing numbers of cities around the world turn their attention to neighbourhood scale redevelopment of model sustainable communities. We identify three primary theoretical axes for this reinvention of the notion of the neighbourhood scale community, all oriented toward a philosophical approach derived from American pragmatism. First is the reorientation of older ideas of the political project of building the Great Society toward an alternative project of building the Great Community, via the work of “commoning,” which respects the value of diversity, democratic participation and communication. Second is the work of not merely placemaking but also politically constituting the public sphere within public spaces at the neighbourhood scale. Third and finally is the reinvention of our theories of social and political engagement in the public sphere as not only serving representative democratic process, nor distinguishing simply between classes of active versus inactive participants in public life, but as identifying the actual regimes of engagement directing and mediating participation in the neighbourhood community sphere.

**Keywords** Community · Public interest · Commons · Community well-being · Neighborhood

## Introduction: Revitalizing Notions of the Neighbourhood as we Redevelop Neighbourhoods

‘Neighbourhood’ is the kind of term, like community, like sustainability, that means many things to many people. In her classic, *The Death and Life of Great American*

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✉ Meg Holden  
meg\_holden@sfu.ca

<sup>1</sup> Urban Studies and Geography, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, Canada

*Cities*, Jane Jacobs (1961: 3–4) sets out to understand “what, if anything, is a city neighborhood, and what jobs, if any, neighborhoods in great cities do.” Quality of life in an urban neighbourhood is recognized as a multidimensional concept reflecting, more than the physical components of a space, also inter-related social, political, and economic opportunity and other dimensions. In addition, environmental components are included in the more expansive definitions, such as that of the urban village. Other points on which different definitions denote a range of perspectives include the question of the relative role of public space compared to private property space; and the role of political development and engaging a diversity of perspectives (El Din et al. 2013). Across different frameworks for understanding what makes a functional neighbourhood, a mix of land uses is the most commonly-held principle.

The notion of the neighbourhood unit was proposed by Clarence Perry (1939) as a way to protect and improve the lives of families and children by organizing what we would now call complete communities within the boundaries set by arterial streets, where increasing traffic was making streets dangerous. The neighbourhood unit was centred on a school, walkable for all in the unit, and had a specified population of 5–9000. The neighbourhood unit was intended to serve all the functions of households, viewed in a traditional kind of way. This reflects a sense of the endurance of the neighbourhood as the scale at which most of us fix our social memory.

This old concept may seem restrictive, but it has seen a resurgence in eourban design and planning at the neighbourhood scale (Pagano 2015; Ecodistricts 2014; Barcelona Urban Ecology Agency 2015; UK Urban Task Force 1999). The resurgence includes new interest in capturing the enduring value of the neighbourhood as we reinvent neighbourhoods in a new, sustainable image.

Embedded within the political, economic, and environmental motivations for new kinds of sustainable urban developments is also a set of cultural arguments and assumptions related to well-being, and how to improve it for urbanites who live, work and visit the neighbourhood. As eourban neighbourhoods pilot new policy and planning approaches and demonstrate leading-edge technologies and forms, with the intention to further spread these across the landscape over time, what exactly are they piloting that impacts well-being in one’s home neighbourhood? Do eourban neighbourhoods make new constructions of human community possible, and facilitate community well-being in ways that other neighbourhoods do not?

Sustainability, or sustainable development, is essentially the delivery of lasting well-being at all scales local to global, recognizing that well-being has intertwined social, economic and ecological components (WCED 1987; Adger and Jordan 2009). In their extreme formulations (Holden et al. 2015, 2017), eourban neighbourhoods intend to offer an alternative to these deficient spaces that move neighbourhoods and society more broadly toward more sustainable development opportunities and patterns. When it comes to technological and design innovations, eourban neighbourhoods stand out from their surrounding cities. Better urban design is considered one key leverage point in planning and urban development efforts to improve the quality of life offered at the neighbourhood scale. Increased physical activity and improved overall health, especially for particular demographic groups, are considered interchangeable desirable outcomes of this work. Other design and implementation features of sustainable neighbourhoods introduce a range of technological changes (toward greater efficiency and less carbon dependency), intended behaviour change (toward less

wasteful and consumptive behaviours), and intended social change (toward more local democratic and ecological responsibility) goals. Success in all these dimensions is a tall order and may contribute strongly to sustainability. It is also important to keep in mind that goals in each of these different areas may conflict, and all of them may conflict with a capitalist profit motive that continues to underlie the majority of eourban developments.

And even if all these advances can be achieved, this kind of success is not enough for sustainability of the neighbourhoods themselves. First, the performance of the technological and design innovations in the neighbourhood depends upon a willingness of people within them to use them as designers intended. Second, eourban neighbourhoods also respond to demands for greater neighbourhood liveability, which may have design and technological aspects but is nevertheless recognized as a valuable goal in and of itself. From a liveability perspective, these neighbourhoods need to appeal to residents, investors, and visitors who have other options. In addition to behaviour change, technological change, and social change goals, these neighbourhoods must manage to facilitate well-being in everyday life if they are to be accepted as new locations and notions of home. The concept of everyday life is an understanding of life that includes the task of acquiring financial competence; social support which may be emotional, spiritual and practical; the necessity of pleasure and play in our lives; and the validation of an individual by having arenas for citizenship, namely the opportunity to speak and be heard (Gilroy and Booth 1999). At the neighbourhood scale, everyday life includes spatial and social envelopes, in the home and in public space, connecting through common activities performed outside the home as well as shared action. These social and physical environments are permeable. That is, changes may be brought about by individual actors, through policy mechanisms interacting with and influencing others, or by some assemblage of both.

Eourban neighbourhoods, then, are at the same time intended to be local instantiations of utopian alternatives to dominant lifestyle patterns and options, and new constructions of the everyday that facilitate and demonstrate appeal in terms of the daily demands of life. At their best, they are sites of attainable “everyday utopias” (Gardiner 2004). At their worst, they represent the disappointment of the betrayal of utopia. Either way, we know very little about the quality of life offered in these alternative neighbourhoods. Are these neighbourhoods set up and positioned in relative opportunity space to serve well-being? Does their service to well-being or happiness come at the expense of their service to utopia (Ahmed 2010)? Alternatively, are they rather simply positioned to allow further capital exploitation under a new, green, banner (Blok 2012)? In order to answer this question, we need to understand what community well-being might resemble in these new, eourban neighbourhoods. We should start by articulating an understanding of what community well-being resembles in neighbourhoods more generally.

Neighbourhood quality of life studies have recently been pursued in terms of the physical attributes of neighbourhood design that facilitate or impede active lifestyles, and mobility in particular, sometimes with reference to particular demographic groups, such as the elderly (Frank et al. 2010), or those with chronic diseases (Diez Roux and Mair 2010; Hirsch et al. 2014). Neighbourhood quality of life studies also have frequent applications to ageing in place, including studies of the importance of social networks and groups at this scale, and the need for fine grained land use mix and small

local shops that cater to the frail elderly and those otherwise confined to their neighbourhood to meet their daily needs (Gilroy 2012; Talen 2008). At the same time, the value of neighbourhood studies has been seized by those who recognize the neighbourhood as a simultaneously spatial and social envelope, encompassing home and the public spaces used on a daily basis, as well as shared social space generated. The neighbourhood also forms a spatial container for social connections through common activities performed outside the home and for local political connections through shared action (Barrington-Leigh 2017). The social and physical environments of neighbourhoods are of permeable extent, identity, and utility, with changes in one brought about by individual actors or through policy mechanisms interacting with and influencing others.

Long-standing critiques of the neighbourhood unit are also relevant here: Herbert Gans (1968), notably, argued that “spatial units” were not a prerequisite for “social units” and that the physical determinism of neighbourhood units was an attempt to force interaction and congeniality upon neighbourhood residents, whereas instead they served as a means of social division, establishing boundaries between what were falsely conceived to be ‘self-contained,’ homogeneous entities. The history of the use of neighbourhood units warns of the risk of return to modernist planning principles and ideals. More recently, Gilroy (2012) warns of the danger of setting unrealistic expectations regarding what can be accomplished at the scale of the neighbourhood, when it comes to certain components of quality of life and well-being such as job provision and match. The experience of Petrescu et al. (2016) in eourban neighbourhood work fuels these warnings with how these efforts can be manipulated and undone by larger scaled political agendas. Generally, a neighbourhood focus can be accused of a self-containment bias.

In the treatment of the necessary dimensions of a revitalized concept of the neighbourhood that we offer here, we share an interest in understanding the significant role that neighbourhood design can play in the quality of life of residents and other neighbourhood participants. Eourban neighbourhood design is associated with a relatively small range of design aesthetics with potential implications for who will feel at home within them, and for the kinds of associations that will form and activities that will take place. We have a more expansive interest, as well, in the role of a range of neighbourhood attributes in terms of the quality of “everyday life” that they offer. And we are interested in those neighbourhoods that are pushing the boundaries of the expectations of everyday life within contemporary cities toward much more sustainable behaviours than we find triggers for in dominant modern society. Namely, neighbourhood life in eourban neighbourhoods is often presented as: locally-contained, valuing lower levels of consumption of certain goods and services, less automobile dependent, less polluting, more receptive of native plants and wildlife, more willing and able to incorporate long-term thinking and planning. The strictly environmental and energy efficiency goals of eourban neighbourhood planning are perhaps the most recognized and well-understood, but these neighbourhoods in fact incorporate an integrative range of goals related to well-being. Eourban neighbourhood planning encompasses a goal of democratic planning and living, popular amongst those who prioritize visioning processes and transition models toward a sustainable future. Full participation of community members in local political as well as economic life is valued. ‘Green niches’, for example, are grassroots innovations, or experiments in

behaviour and social change that begin at a local neighbourhood scale (Seyfang and Smith 2007). The concept of co-housing, to take another example, reformulates the notion of home toward less private space and more shared spaces and group interaction, including group self-governance and decision-making. A deliberative approach to decision making, rule-setting, and conflict resolution is required, and considered to enable behaviour change in an eourban direction (Jarvis 2011).

Diversity is also cited as key to a successful eourban neighbourhood, although the meaning and criteria of this diversity are often less clear. Advocates emphasize the way in which diversity has always been key to cities' economic advantage, as it "underlies the appeal of the urban, it fosters creativity, it can encourage tolerance, and it leads city officials to see the value in previously underappreciated lifestyles" (Fainstein 2005: 13). Related to capturing the value of diversity, a just neighbourhood in principle emphasizes a just distribution of resources, privileges, and damage across the demographic and socioeconomic spectrum. Advocates, theorists, and planners for just sustainability identify a need for equitable protection of all people from environmental harm and access for all people to environmental benefits (Agyeman and Evans 2003). In the context of planning new model eourban neighbourhoods, concern for affordability of housing and lifestyles for different demographic and socioeconomic groups quickly rises to prominence as an equity concern. Affordable and equitably provided health services, transportation, safety, education, food, and other institutions and commodities also are prominent factors. In sum, whereas democratic principles provide the means to operationalize eourbanism in local contexts, diversity principles provide the situational components for constructive work together, and equity principles constitute the ethical imperative of eourbanism (Cuthill 2010).

Taking a community well-being approach, we seek to understand how a revitalized concept of the neighbourhood offers access to understanding our lives as improved by our sustainable choices made within them. In this formulation, these improvements are not simply rational constructs, where success might be dictated by the mastery of particular skills and habits explicitly learned. Instead, they crucially involve an important emotional, relational, familiar element, making the judgment of success in everyday life a task that transcends what can be measured via scientifically rational tools and demands attention to emotionally-based habits, desires and preferences.

This analysis proceeds from an understanding of neighbourhood well-being that understands neighbourhoods as both physical, designed spaces and as webs of primarily social relations through which we accomplish human existence in timeframes from daily to inter-generational time. Households are embedded within neighbourhoods and neighbourhoods are located within certain opportunity structures to provide an analytical focus. We will consider how the full spectrum of possibilities represented by Ferdinand Tönnies's (1887) distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* captures a similar spectrum of possibilities.

The analysis that follows attempts to build upon the roots of the community ideal in American Pragmatic thought. We will consider what threads of older ideas of the Great Community, the public interest, and public space carry through to more contemporary social theory and what we are left with in terms of new aspirations for community well-being at the ideal neighbourhood scale. All of these ideas will be brought to bear upon the question of whether a renewed notion of community interest and community well-being, can be enlivened in new spaces within the sustainable urban neighbourhood.

## The Great Community and the Neocommunity

The classic liberal democratic formulation of the societal ideal, the Great Society, saw the structural unit of the community to be united with community values, and the development of both forms of community as central to the evolution of the Great Society. Translated by American President Lyndon B. Johnson into a package of domestic reforms whose goal was to end poverty and racial discrimination, the notion of the Great Society has long inspired the thought and passion of important public intellectuals. Among these, American Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey emphasized the key connection between the Great Society and what he called the Great Community. Dewey's Great Community could only occur if citizens, experts, and decision-makers had "free and full intercommunication" (Dewey 1927, 211), and an active public life in which to maintain this communication: "The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy" (Dewey 1927, 149). To Dewey, democracy was the most fulsome and valuable ambition of society, and represented a marriage of communitarian and liberal-individualistic ideals, and scientific justifications of the highest and best purpose of society. Moreover, Dewey's ideal of democracy was a participatory ideal, which both created and depended upon a fully informed public, capable of dialogue on all socially important decisions. As such, it was meaningless to speak of a democratic public in the absence of a precondition of community well-being. To Dewey (1927, 142): "Till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse."

The important role of communication in achieving the Great Community is echoed in Habermas's communicative action theory, which itself depends on a Great Community context. In his own reflection related to the need for a Great Community in order to achieve a Great Society, Walter Lippman (1922: 16) points out that the character of communication under conditions of a Great Society cannot be deduced from the character of communication under contemporary conditions (or those of the 1920s):

We do not know how men [sic] would behave in response to the facts of the Great Society. All that we really know is how they behave in response to what can fairly be called a most inadequate picture of the Great Society. No conclusion about man or the Great Society can honestly be made on evidence like that.

Communicative action theory, theories of participatory democracy, and the very goal of a Great Society in and of itself have come under a great deal of criticism. Agonists and postmodern relativists have criticized the ideal based on their granting priority to differences between members of a democratic public, making "free and full intercommunication" both undesirable and oppressive. Similarly, critics of neoliberalism have identified the multiple and unstoppable means by which the drive for capital accumulation affects all societal interactions, making an interaction in which a Great Society was either the goal or the actual outcome inconceivable. From a Foucauldian governmentality perspective, this could be taken as a move toward a soft approach to imposing state power at the scale of the community without this exercise of power being perceived as overtly threatening. Thus, actors favouring state power would naturally seek to promote slippage between structural and social approaches to community well-being because

such slippage would reinforce the role of the state in community. Nikolas Rose (1996: 331) notes how ‘the social’ may give way to ‘the community’ as a new territory for the administration of individual and collective existence:

...it seems as if we are seeing the emergence of a range of rationalities and techniques that seek to govern without governing *society*, to govern through regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors in the context of their particular commitments to families and communities.

Joseph (2002), as another example, borrows from David Harvey and J.K. Gibson-Graham in support of this case for the inevitability of an increasingly globalized capitalist system. She points out that what on the surface are trends toward increasing attention to localism and a community basis in many kinds of products, are not actually the decline of mass production within global capitalism, but just the rise of increased product differentiation. In this drive for differentiated local places and products, localities and non-profit organizations take up a new form of service to global capital by pointing out the gaps into which for-profit production can move next, in the unquestioned and ongoing process of market differentiation and competition. Joseph, along with other critics of neoliberalism, argues for the supplementary role that community-based organizations play in expanding the reach of global capitalism by indicating the frontier that capitalist production has yet to cross. The non-profit and social work that others describe as “community-building,” then, Joseph describes - in Gramscian (Gramsci 1971) terms - as a “hegemonic apparatus, articulating the desire for community with a desire for capitalism” (Joseph 2002: 73).

This is not the only way to view community work in contemporary social theory. The coalescence of a coherent body of critique of neoliberalism, called neocommunitarianism, supports the potential value of striving for the Great Community, if not the Great Society. Neocommunitarians such as Amitai Etzioni (1994) and William Davies (2012) define their logic as an intermingling of calculation and cooperation in social, political and economic decision making, with a flexible, plastic balance in this combination. Hence, stronger, more visible and vocal civil society and other non-marketized community-based organizations hold potential to shift the weighting in decision-making away from dominant market-led and competition-oriented politics, as they create common value out of their differences. For example, as a community group establishes habits of reciprocity, rather than only value-for-value exchange, and habits of seeking surplus generated from common work rather than only the distribution of limited resources, these habits may have lasting impacts on group participants. Over and above the specific value created by the work of the community group may be the value of the habits that this mode of common work instills and reinforces “patterns of social relations that afford participants some degree of autonomy from the market” (Fournier 2013, 449).

Critics may continue to read shifts toward civil society and community-based politics and practices as lighting the way for neoliberalism to seize more real estate in the cracks of social relationships. The question then becomes whether neighbours engaging in non-monetized, local work to improve their public spaces and community amenities are doing the work of the Great Community, building toward that ideal in the sort of way that Dewey envisioned; or if they are, knowingly or unknowingly,

continuing the work of the neoliberal project, doing the work that remains within the uncapitalized domain, but laying the groundwork for further profit making in the future. To the extent that community work sits at this interface between furthering capitalism and a neoliberal governance logic, and offering an alternative, Chatterton (2010, 627) points out that, for the potential within urban community work to “decommodify urban life” to be realized, additional social habits of struggle, organized resistance, and rebellion against the dominant order, will also be needed.

## Placemaking, the Public Interest and Public Space

The disciplines of planning and urban design have seen a resurgence of interest in recent years with the rediscovery of postindustrial cities as desirable, healthy and fulfilling places to live, work and play. The value attributed to such new practices of “placemaking” is in fact the value of public space and associated amenities. Our conception of public space rests on a concept of the public interest and also ties us back in with the notion of community examined above, particularly as this translates to the neighbourhood scale. All of these concepts – placemaking, public space, public interest – are difficult to define categorically. Walter Lippman, in 1922, may have offered the most popular definition of the public interest to date, as: “what men [sic] would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently.” Building upon this political idea, public space associates a political notion of open-mindedness, as per the public interest defined above, with physical space attributes of non-excludability. The notion of placemaking, a term coined by New York-based Project for Public Spaces (PPS) and now in use throughout the urban planning and design professions, ties public space explicitly to community-building. That is, a “placemaking” approach “helps citizens transform their public spaces into vital places that highlight local assets, spur rejuvenation and serve common needs” (Project for Public Spaces 2015). It is through engaging in this process of placemaking, PPS contends, that strong communities are built and maintained.

Where PPS elaborates upon the spatial notion of neighbourhood communities within the public interest, political theorists have developed clearer understandings of the notion’s political dimensions. For all the renewed attention to placemaking, the quality of public space cannot be reduced to questions of physical design alone – it is also the urban civic culture, the community, that needs cultivating in these spaces. Urban public spaces being open to, and actually accommodating, an array of users and uses, in a wide range of time, space and people configurations, are as key to their quality as the material infrastructure of the places. Iris Marion Young (1990) offers the notion of the public sphere, a discursive space, essential to democracy, for mediating between strangers where claims and criticisms can be made and heard by many others. Whereas to an advocacy organization like PPS, the spatial dimensions of space are key to its public nature, Young recognized the need for attention to the ideological and political ideas that may not be overtly visible in public space but may manifest control and oppression just the same. The creation of an open discursive space depends upon work to foreground notions of the public interest, the common good, and community, in contexts of individualism and diversity, asserting the value and possibility of finding common ground in the public spaces of the city.



Doreen Massey (2005) has characterized this kind of open discursive space as having the condition of ‘throwntogetherness’: the opportunity to walk through and get mixed up together in a diversity of people and practices, scheduled routines and surprise novelties, with any conscious response by the people so thrown together only ever contingent. Amin (2008) makes a cogent argument about the need for “conditions of plural and inclusive organization of public space,” public space that is made useful in a wide diversity of “urban-life organizing strategies” so as to permit a wide range of situations to arise, and to permit the formation of constituencies for the space. It is these constituencies, specific to particular public spaces (and, by extension, neighbourhoods), that display the “powerful symbolic and sensory code of public culture” (Amin 2008, 15) and that generate the “urban capacity to negotiate complexity” (Amin 2008, 12). Great public spaces serve these roles while still remaining open to new groups, individuals, and uses, and open in particular to the ongoing prospect of new relationships emerging, surprises, and negotiations. That is, they are non-hierarchical spaces, or spaces that are organized and controlled just enough for people to venture forth into them, but not enough to take away the freedom within for urbanites to enact their right to the collective experience of being human in the city and “a right to change ourselves by changing the city” (Harvey 2008, 23).

Where design-based and political-based approaches to the design of truly public spaces have come together is in concepts like Michael Walzer’s notion of open minded space, Edward Soja’s notion of thirdspace, and what Groth and Corgin (2005) call ‘free zones.’ All of these concepts become particularly operable at the neighbourhood scale. Soja’s notion of thirdspace, as distinct from either public space, open to any and all comers, and private space, restricted to particular uses and users, is as a space ‘in between’ the roles and functions of both of these types of spaces. In practice, thirdspaces have been interpreted as the kinds of spaces that are neither public thoroughfares, free of any restriction, nor private corporate spaces that extract particular kinds of fees for particular kinds of uses (Soja 1996). They are, instead, places where some level of privacy and familiarity can be achieved, but where few or no restrictions are placed on the kinds of ideas that can be expressed, nor any fee for entry or time charge for use. Public libraries, certain sidewalk cafés, and some university campus spaces, serve the role of thirdspace. In defining the notion of open minded space, Walzer proposes three characteristic kinds of spaces: the intimate space of home, the private space of business and industry, and the public space of citizenship and social congregation. While he characterizes intimate spaces as a thing apart, he distinguishes the private spaces of industry as “single minded spaces,” designed and regulated to permit only a single use, usually toward a goal of maximizing efficiency, from public, “open minded spaces,” which are designed and regulated instead to serve a diversity of purposes, according to the wishes of particular users at particular times. Walzer uses “mindedness” as the distinguishing characteristic here, harkening to Young’s ideas about how spaces can imply restrictions on ideas and conversations, for the following reasons:

It’s not only that space serves certain purposes known in advance by its user, but also that its design and character stimulate (or repress) certain qualities of attention, interest, forbearance and receptivity. We act differently in different sorts of space, in part, to be sure, because of what we are doing there, but also

because of what others are doing, because of what it means to be “there,” and because of the look and feel of the space itself. (Walzer 1986, 321)

In this way, Walzer classifies shopping malls, highways, fast food restaurants, motels and airplanes as single-minded space; whereas city squares or piazzas, city streets, sidewalk cafés and pubs, urban hotel public rooms connected to the lobby, and trains as open minded space. While individual tolerances for different levels of ‘edginess’ and spontaneity in public spaces vary, the fact that widely ‘open minded’ public spaces do sometimes exist is itself a strong testament to the powerful draw of community life, even in contemporary cities of diversity, flux, and privatization. It is not the naïve perception of the power-blind that these spaces offer a relaxation of the control of state and capital that we witness in other areas of urban life; it is, instead, giving due credence to the power of the experience of the collective in public space itself as an additional agent of power, acting alongside power’s more often cited modes.

A practical distinction that arises from this classification of private and public spaces is that “open mindedness requires public subsidy” (Walzer 1986, 328), because of the cost of building and maintaining the quality and safety of these spaces as open and inviting of a wide range of leisure and citizenship activities, which the activities themselves do not pay for. Both types of space are necessary for high quality neighbourhood community life. However, the neoliberal critique has clearly identified a decreasing willingness of the public to pay for benefits which do not accrue specifically and individually back to them, squeezing public spaces of their open mindedness in the process (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015). Into this cash-squeezed space, movements to create new forms of low-public subsidy open spaces have begun in numerous cities. Examples range from the spread of intentional eourban communities in cities around the world, to smaller scale community gardens in New York and Hong Kong, to new ‘independent spaces’ in Dublin, ‘social spaces’ in Madrid, and ‘low-cost urbanism’ practices (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015; Fournier 2013; Tonkiss 2013). These community-driven efforts operate largely outside of state subsidy, sometimes entirely outside of the law. They involve varying levels of overt political activity, balanced against more pragmatic concerns to find home, workspace, grow food, and opportunities for creative expression and community sentiment, by pooling resources communally and working in between the cracks of the capitalist city. While the existence of such counter examples is exciting, and should be subject to more study, they should not take away from the need for more concerted attention within mainstream urban development budgets and practices to the value and necessity of open-minded space.

Without specifying either the markers of the right balance between types of space or the specific stakes involved in failing to achieve that balance, Walzer (1986, 323–324) warns: “the reiteration of single-mindedness at one public site after another seems to me something that civilized societies should avoid.” In fact, the mixed-use, urban neighbourhood, with its fine-grained diversity of space, represents a fruitful locus to study the specific quantities and qualities of balance between these three types of space: the intimate, private space of the home, the “single minded space” of privately-owned places of business, and “open minded public spaces” of neighbourhood public spaces and amenities.

## Regimes of Engagement, Communication and Community-Building

Based on this review of the theory related to community and public space, and contemporary shifts in the understanding of these two concepts, we are faced with some limitations and constructive opportunities to support community well-being at the neighbourhood scale. Our understanding of ‘community’ has been badly damaged, compared to historical aspirations for a Great Society, but the prospects for the Great Community are not nil. The case for public space continues to be made loud and clear, but there is reason to doubt whether our planning for and maintenance of truly open-minded space is on steady ground. Taking eourban neighbourhoods as a new frontier in the actual manifestation of urban neighbourhoods explicitly seeking to serve well-being, we can aim to apply an understanding of these limitations and opportunities to the improvement of the outcomes of eourbanism in practice.

At the turn of this century, the ‘commons’ was considered to be a vestige of an earlier time and system of social organization that was “destined to disappear in the face of modernization” (Agrawal 2002, 42). Graham and Marvin (2001) set the tone for the thinking of the day, namely that globalized capitalism in the form of neoliberalism was grossly intensifying the fragmentation of urban landscapes into privatised enclosures of structures, infrastructures, and services. The ultimate conclusion of this process would be the splintering of all common spaces into fragments of their former selves, each dedicated to specific individualized purposes, with specific calculated values. More recently, however, a renewed interest in the continuing relevance of ‘the commons’ has arisen. This interest begins from Elinor Ostrom’s (1990) definitive work on common property resources and moves beyond to consider “the practice of commoning” (Chatterton 2010, 626).

The existence of a commons implies the existence of a community, and this community can only operate effectively according to a common set of practices and common knowledge. Studies of commoning, therefore, investigate how the commons are created and maintained by these actions, knowledges, and relationships, over time, across space, and through conflicts and struggles (Chatterton 2010; Fournier 2013). The work of commoning is work in direct opposition to that of enclosure (Linebaugh 2008), or privatization, which is a necessary act of the capitalist urban development process, itself seeking to “forcibly separate people from whatever access to social wealth they have which is not mediated by competitive markets and money as capital” (de Angelis 2007, 144). As the dynamics of neoliberalism push this act of enclosure into new domains, beyond land and natural resources to intangible intellectual resources, genetic material, and electronic transmission space, the work at hand for commoning expands, too. Commoning work thus becomes a dynamic new set of political activities which expand options for urban life in creative new ways, much more than simply reflecting back upon older ways of managing limited resources communally. Jeffrey et al. (2012, 1263) position the work of commoning as “enclosure’s other” and view it as essential to advancing community work of all kinds: “To the extent the re-thinking of community has installed itself at the heart of international philosophical debates, it is the idea of the “common” or “commons” that has revitalised attempts to examine the nature of collective political projects.”

Accomplishing this work of commoning as a series of locally-scaled collective political projects demands an understanding of engagement at the local scale. Beyond

ideals of communicative action, rejected by agonists and others as dependent upon entirely unrealistic preconditions, community work lacks sound and detailed theory of what constitutes effective interpersonal engagement. For this understanding, we turn to the pragmatic sociology of critique and engagement. The pragmatic sociology of critique and engagement begins from a recognition of a plurality of layers of understanding within the socio-political landscape of liberal democracy. Within these layers, people confront requirements from their peers to give reasons for their different understandings and actions. They are forced to somehow justify the ways in which they fault the conditions in which they live, and when this has a community-building effect, this justification is offered in the form of a kind of engagement in the public sphere. It is in the public sphere, amongst members of one or more social group, that the argument being voiced is determined to be either legitimate or not. Further repetition of the justification and perhaps judgment of the person who first offered it will be made on this basis.

Communities place boundaries on the kinds of justifications that can be offered legitimately in various situations and conditions. For example, where a debate focuses on a contentious issue of caring for the poor, a ‘good’ justification in most cases cannot merely appeal to blatant private interests of the well-off but must respond to an established general interest in common social value. Of course, a range of legitimate justifications can still exist, and these will continue to be disputed in democratic society. Distinct from a Habermasian communicative action approach, the pragmatic approach does not impose a single ideal set of conditions for communicative rationality but pays due attention to the reality of diverse social and political settings, and the material conditions that actors rely on when they form their opinions and arguments. Moreover, a pragmatic approach recognizes that actors engage in a variety of capacities in different issues and debates in the public sphere and may act in a different capacity each time depending on what community membership or perspective takes precedence for them at that point. In essence, there is more to understanding public debates, disagreements, and the engaged work of community building than moving from the specific to the general, from the individual to the collective, or from the emotional to the scientific (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

Different from the conventional understanding of “engagement” in community development and social science circles, typically evoking a specific ideal of participatory democracy by empowered and self-actualizing individuals, “engagement” is understood as a more encompassing set of activities. Still thoroughly integral to the attainment of conditions of democracy, engagement in the pragmatic view “indicates a relation to yourself through the environment, in time, and not only to the present situation ... engaging with an appropriate environment is a condition for enacting a certain beneficial capacity” (Blokker and Brighenti 2011, 12). That is, effective engagement is a relationship between actors and environments, and understanding that engagement demands attention to both. Both actors and environments are constrained in important ways and cannot be persuaded or compelled by theoretical argument about the benefits of democracy to pursue any given course of engagement. These constraints put different arguments into different regimes of engagement – not strictly boxes that cannot be escaped from but “adherences” in every form of engagement, from the most intimate to the most functional (Blokker and Brighenti 2011, 13).

The ways in which people express their disagreements can take the form of different “regimes of engagement.” Thévenot makes the distinction among three such regimes in order to open up reason to hope for change in established routines and practices even in the face of hardened market-driven conditions. The first regime is that which we expect in academic discourse: the rational interplay of ideas amongst educated people, engaging as equals, able to identify with and seek common understanding with an interlocutor. This regime demands Habermasian ideal speech conditions or what Dewey anticipated as a society-wide community of inquirers in his notion of the Great Community. The second regime is the one that is currently dominated by a neoliberal understanding of value and worth. In this regime, individualistic profit-making ‘idea work’ generates value more than other kinds of activities. This is the assumption encountered in many forms of policy and public debate. It is, of course, a regime that is oppressive towards individuals unable to compete on these terms, or unable to express their concerns in terms of neoliberal value, which is the case for most community well-being concerns. The third regime is the regime of family and emotion, where what counts is what can be shown to be felt most deeply by people we care about and identify with. It is often an irrational regime, but in communities full of personal attachments, it is no less a communicative reality than the other two regimes.

Each of these distinct regimes of engagement involves communication or an attempt to make personal concerns common within a group, which is required “to alleviate the tension of living both together and in person” (Blokker and Brighenti 2011, 8). Each involves the composition of a plurality of voices and constructions of the common good, common places, common sites of meaning. And each of the three regimes has its own specific advantages and disadvantages where community building objectives are concerned. The distinction amongst these regimes of engagement serves the important function of revealing the shortcomings of modern constructions of individuals, debates, and publics, including public spaces. Debates are differentially invested with different sets of analytical tools, and if we hope to keep public debate within the realm of the constructive, let alone socially transformative, and avoid settling into the regressive and reactionary, we need to maintain our awareness of the different forms of engagement. We are not all prepared to generalize, to think of ourselves as capable self-maximizing individuals (even in some idealized way), yet in view of the prospective Great Community, we all have the potential to be political actors. People disagree, and it is important to understand the modes and contexts of their disagreements in order to advance objectives of increased engagement in the public sphere, and possibly to arrive at transformative alternatives. In so understanding, we gain the tools to register the value of protecting and reinforcing human and social diversity within our ideals of the Great Community.

## Conclusion

This article has sought reason, in both historical and contemporary social theory, for action to improve community well-being through work at the neighbourhood scale. We began with the observation of renewed efforts in many different parts of

the world, driven by sustainable community development ideals, to generate new and enhanced well-being through ecourban neighbourhood development. We looked back to the Great Society initiative of the 1960s in the United States, and social theory which proposed work toward the Great Community as a bolder democratic agenda. We traced this stance forward to the contemporary convergence of critiques of neoliberalism around a new, neocommunitarian agenda. We looked back to the original work in defense of the value of urban public space of the 1960s and traced the thinking forward to contemporary work in the domain of placemaking, as well as valuing and defending open minded and independent spaces in the city. We considered earlier efforts to define common property resource management, and contemporary movements to think more expansively about the work of ‘urban commoning’ as part of neighbourhood scale community-building and as part of creating an alternative to the dominant modes of neoliberal behaviours in the contemporary city. We examined the political engagement work of community building in the public sphere, moving beyond dissatisfaction with the limitations of a communicative action approach toward a pragmatic approach to engagement more sensitive to the realities and values of social diversity. Resurgence of interest in neocommunitarianism, placemaking and public space, and the commons is being driven by the recognition of threats to non-marketized segments of life by the creep of neoliberalism, and by a sense of increasing ecological crisis. With no sign of our economic and ecological crises letting up, at a global scale, we have every reason to believe that this wave of interest in neighbourhood scale community well-being work will increase. The logic offered in this article can be read as a kind of description of the program of work at hand.

Despite the powerful thrust of the critique of neoliberalism, there remain many spheres of activity in our daily lives which are not colonized by the market (Gibson-Graham 2006). The promising theoretical developments that we have reviewed in this article point to increasing interest in supporting the notion of well-being as central to the work of seeking justice and sustainability in the city, and of the need for neighbourhood-scale efforts in order to advance well-being meaningfully. Sometimes considered as the development of life in common “behind” or “beneath” the public, the urban neighbourhood community may more usefully be considered the core functional social building block of our time. Capitalism depends, now as ever, upon a community “fix” (De Angelis 2012). Taking an interest in the new dynamics of community as this fix sets in provides an opportunity to redirect the current of social theory in the community vein toward more pragmatic and potentially more progressive ends.

Our theories of community well-being in neighbourhoods need not be based on premises of ironing over differences, as implied by the Great Society ideal, nor the physical determinism of certain approaches to placemaking, nor restrictive assumptions of active versus inactive participants in the public sphere. Better results for community well-being, instead, demand recognition of the many, diverse, valuable ways in which people may engage in the neighbourhood community domain, to serve diverse individual and social needs, in a range of forms and orientations of membership and attachment. As a set of complex social processes, habits, and beliefs, community-building requires careful analysis, rather than either romantic attachment or cynical rejection. Efforts to advance our thinking and our actions in the domain of community

well-being at the scale of city neighbourhoods can help better reveal what is going on in the city as urbanites live it.

We have also discussed key dimensions of the enormous difficulty of pursuing meaningful increases to community well-being at this juncture. In losing the thread of the ideal Great Society, and in heading down the path of neoliberal governance and ever-greater enclosures of space and production to capitalist modes, societies have lost the thread of interest in the pursuit of social welfare, writ large. Community work at the neighbourhood scale, as Jeffrey et al. (2012, 1254) put it, “has its own walls” and exclusionary practices. The struggle for the commons itself is not immune to particular forms and politics of enclosure, separation and division – as we see in studies of community gardens and land claims settlements, forming a new commons can in itself provoke new feelings and forms of resistance and enclosure.

At the same time as it may seem like a dampening of ideals to abandon the old pursuit of a single Great Society in favour of a multiform Great Community, this shifting and localizing of terms and concepts within the core notions of well-being does suggest a richer understanding of the mix of intimate, personal, social, cultural, economic, and ecological aspects of any person’s well-being, and this richness of understanding may suggest a more powerful structuring of attempts to improve well-being at the neighbourhood scale. Neighbourhood-scale work to create and maintain the urban commons can, on the one hand, make more obvious the connection between individual work invested and local group benefit captured. On the other hand, this investment of energy in community work at the local scale can create new habits of reciprocity, collective abundance, authentic experience, leisure, preservation, self-care, local political engagement and dialogue, and other values that fall entirely outside the logic of capitalism and may well scale up to larger groups and broader goals.

Pursuit of the Great Community may still lead to narrow exclusionary practices by protective social groups, efforts to create new public spaces may still become collective, private spaces, antagonistic to outside groups and surprise, and authentic engagement may still leave participants misunderstood and misrepresented, at times. The rich diversity of human experience offers no guarantees and moreover, such success as community-building work at the neighbourhood scale is seeing can only be considered contingent, likely fragile. At the same time, neighbourhoods, communities, public spaces, and engagement processes need to be created, and existing positive practices need to be supported and advanced.

The commons represent a space for the work of community well-being, in dire need of greater recognition and greater autonomy. Public spaces need to be created and maintained as open minded spaces, with attention paid to the habits that are created by the act of spending time in these spaces. Engagement needs to be perceived as a necessary and ongoing back-and-forth activity amongst actors and groups with different and sometimes shifting roles and interests in urban public spaces.

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