Reassessing the good city

The notion of the good city conjures up a vision of a utopian place, one where the needs and aspirations of citizens can be met and where the experience of living in the city is positive and beneficial, both to the individual and the community. A place that offers a high quality of life for citizens and provides a context where citizens live healthy, fulfilling lives. The lived reality of most cities is of course often far any utopian ideals, and for some much more dystopian, but undertaking such utopian thinking offers the opportunity both for critique of the present realities and constructive vision of what debatable alternative futures might exist.

Many studies have sought to identify the 'good city' and urban planning has a long tradition of aiming to construct and deliver such liveable places. Urban designers, architects, engineers have all sought to help construct and design the city, geographers amongst other social scientists have focussed on the spatial and social dimensions of living in this constructed space, whilst

The constructed fabric of the city – the objects that make up the physical city and provide the facilities for city living – and which are aligned in different ways to make up the variegation of neighbourhoods that make cities different from each, form what Gandy (2002) termed the 'life support system' of cities. Most attention has been given to this ecosystem, an increasingly complex array of components considered necessary for urban living. And there is widespread recognition that in part the 'good city' is one where this support system is able to adapt to changing pressures and needs. Given the context of expanding populations, increasing urbanisation, climate change and changing demographic structures amongst other pressures, there has been widespread interest in ensuring that these life support systems are able to be resilient so that cities can be maintained as (or if necessary transformed into) sustainable, healthy and liveable places.

Accepting there is a distance between utopia and reality, considerable research effort across many disciplines has been invested in measuring notions of the 'good city', including what have been termed variously liveability and urban quality of life. For the most part this research has focussed on assessing what elements form the basis for positive life chances, with emphasis on access to facilities, services and the components of urban living that are deemed priorities or desirable to make cities or parts thereof attractive places to live, work and play (ie they assess Gandy's life support systems). In turn, urban policy making has been dominated by initiatives and investments which seek to enhance and widen accessibility to such components. Whilst some of the liveable city and quality of life indices have been extended to include sensibilities of diverse groups of ordinary people (Giap et al 2014), other attempts to include more subjectivity and lived experiences have given rise to indices of happiness and life satisfaction.

With expanding forms of 'urban' data, there are new opportunities to extend such measurement approaches, and in particular to explore the interconnections (or lack of them) between the actually existing living experiences and patterns of citizens and their relationships with the life support systems. Such big data offers opportunities to shift the spatial scale of thinking from the city-wide or urban system level to more localised and personalised spaces inhabited by individuals as part of their urban life. And critically, such data also offer the chance to understand more fully the ways in which priorities and aspirations change over time – thus influencing what makes for a good city, and how such a good city in turn provides benefits to individuals in terms of their wellbeing.

The importance of this scalar repositioning has been demonstrated for example by the Covid-19 pandemic reassessment of the value of open space to the mental and physical wellbeing of citizens as they seek to 'escape' from the claustrophobic effects of enforced staying at home. Whilst measures of open public spaces such as parks and commons have been previously assessed as part of urban liveability and have been acknowledged as important to a healthy, sustainable city, the existence of smaller, less formal 'public' spaces that have been valued now by households were often absent from the measurement scales. And in turn, this revaluation of open space has raised deeper questions about the process of densification of cities that has become the accepted planning response to climate change and sustainability.

Research questions

In exploring the notion of a good city, we are exploring ways to focus on how different groups of citizens are able to <u>re-engage</u> with the city in ways that help them to improve their quality of life AND provide opportunities to enhance their lived experiences.

1. How can city living become more fulfilling than a mere existence, offering opportunities to *repair and replenish* as well as sustain and maintain health and wellbeing?
2. What does that mean for different groups who reside in the city and whose life chances and life aspirations vary?
3. What changes are needed in urban policy and planning to enable this transformation?

Research collaboration opportunities

Smart neighbourhoods: join us in deepening our understanding of what characterises a 'smart neighbourhood', what its spatial and social dimensions are, and how neighbourly resource 'needs' and benefits can be effectively communicated to help reduce inequalities?

Local community *quality of life measurement:* developing new ways to use big data and other digital measurement to develop tools to assess community or local quality of life.

Using *digital networks to enhance public spaces* – the current pandemic has altered dramatically our relationships with public spaces in cities, and has generated in turn much debate about how lasting will be such changes. What assistance and reassurance can digital networks offer to make such spaces safe sites of socialisation?