

INDICATORS OF HOUSING QUALITY: SUBJECTIVE VERSUS OBJECTIVE

MAHBUB RAHMAN *

ABSTRACT

Components of housing are only a constituent component of overall satisfaction with the living environment. Satisfaction with the living environment form a part of the satisfaction with life. Attitudes towards these components will be affected by peoples concepts related to other components of life satisfaction; similarly other components of satisfaction with life will be influenced by individual evaluations of the neighbourhood components.

Indices composed of descriptors describing different components of housing should measure the quality of that built environment, thus becoming a part of the design brief. This paper put light on a critical issue related to housing quality indicators, that is which of the indices we should cater for in the design or include in the brief, how and where from to gather these.

INDICATOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD QUALITY

Housing related indicators are determinant and components of wellbeing. Hence searching for good housing indicators is important. A house represents the broad system in which we live. It comprises of elements of satisfaction which lies both in that system and also in the physical system of the dwelling. Success lies on the ability to distinguish between what elements of design itself can feed into overall satisfaction and what elements belong to the process of design, management practices and wider social system. For example: livability, users' participation in design process, one-site designer's office, family type etc. all could contribute towards satisfaction. But these are parts of overall satisfaction, design process, management and social system respectively.

Scientists have paid less effort for systematically characterizing situations or environments. But it is necessary to identify the experience and quality of living. Once these variables are distinguished, efforts to improve and ameliorate conditions can be more effectively planned and evaluated.

Very few researchs outside of public housing on peoples' perception and evaluation of housing quality have been developed. Home has been recognised as an important source of gratification, but the assessments of housing quality by government agencies have been based upon objective measures of housing satisfaction and the contextual social environment have been omitted. Early attempts to develop a scientific index was rather crude by present standard (for example: selecting those which all reasonable persons would regard as significant for the goodness of life). Yet those provided models for other empirical studies that followed. More recent attempts have relied upon

* Lecturer, Dept. of Architecture, BUET, Dhaka.

more sophisticated statistical techniques to generate categories of attributes.

TALE OF TWO INDICES

Concept of quality (of life) suggests a subjective experience, still there are attempts to take an objective approach. In a study described in Krupat and Guild (1980), scores on economic, political, environmental, health and educational and social components were summerized as grades and added to give a total score. But efforts to reduce the multi-dimensional quality of neighbourhoods to a single indicator are misleading. The components itself may not be strongly correlated despite some of those achieving consistent scores across the components. Another question is how to combine and weight the various indices. It might seem difficult to measure and standardize these qualities. Yet they insisted that it would be worth-while to make an effort to include and measure all five components.

It seems that, planning and policy potentials of social indicators have not been fully realized. Hempel and Tucker (1979) identified two reasons behind this as: 1. factors are difficult to separate out into dimensions for which relevant social indicators can be developed; 2. operational concern of many planners has emphasized on objective measures due to the belief that subjective measures are too idiosyncratic to be of use at larger scale planning.

Campbell et al (1976) cast doubt on how well objective measures would reveal the underlying psychological states, or in opposite to this how affectively social indicators can represent the quality. Relative contribution of objective environmental attributes has been investigated where objective variables were found to have considerable effect, though their ability to account for satisfaction was strongly mediated by peoples' subjective assessments.

There is a lack of association between the two measures. Because comparing data at the individual level (subjective data) with that at the aggregate level (objective measures) faces difficulty. Each one's judgement is not of the same object since the knowledge is idiosyncratic. Objects may appear different depending upon the nature of the assessing criteria. For example, either police crime record or perception of security by residents or both can be taken as the indicator of safety in a neighbourhood. This categorization should be decided by the nature of expected outcome since these can mediate or accentuate each other. People like Lynch (1960) primarily focussed on the measurement of spatial images rather than socio-evaluative components.

WHICH INDICES-SUBJECTIVE OR OBJECTIVE?

Historically everybody have placed their reliance on objective measures as it appears self-evident that these conditions are part of the "good life" and can be measured directly. Most of them have acted as if subjective factors are non-existent. They argue that, objective conditions act directly and provide perspective for action and place constraints upon behavioural instances. For example, city size determines the form of urban social interaction in a way that the effects of individual differences, subjective perceptions and personal beliefs are relatively unimportant.

Other objective views minimize the subjective elements as they believe that these can not be assessed reliably or if when measurable, these come out as another dimension shaped by the objective environment. Crowding is one such example which can be interpreted by both types of indices. To somebody, it can be a kind of feeling called crowdedness, yet objectively the degree of crowdedness depends on number of people in an unit area (density).

Supporters of subjective approach argue that if our interest is in how people behave in certain

situation, then their perceptions, cognitions and evaluations determine this most directly. Regardless of the nature of the environment, somebody acts only after considering and evaluating alternatives. This will vary person to person as a function of cognitively mediated appraisal. One man will possess kind of information different from another and will process this information in different ways and will evaluate accordingly. There is actually a great deal of subjectivity in recording objective measures.

Two different kinds of indicators may be most useful in explaining different urban outcomes. For example, perception of safety and rate of crime in an area combine to produce a certain level of utilization of that area which affects both future crimes and future perceptions in an endless feedback loop. A concerned scientist should specify the particular behaviours, and examine the objective characteristics of the neighbourhood that might affect these perceptions and resulting attitude. These two may combine to make a more appropriate index.

Studer and Stea (1966) identified an urgency to evolve an entirely new taxonomy of problem formulation without redefining the terms. According to them, environmental designer's task is to bring the designed setting into equilibrium with biological and non-biological human systems. Form, structure and space, rather than considered as ends in themselves, become the means which may be employed to establish this equilibrium. Accomodation of both objective and subjective requirement of human organisms through the appropriate organisation of relevant variables in the designed environment has been recognised by them.

They farther added that imposed bias by environmental designers place both objective and subjective constraints on environmental decision making which are rarely overcome. Hempel and Tucker (1979) were concerned with environmental planners' inability to relate people's subjective reaction to their own housing situation. Urban renewal programmes are the best examples of these short-sighted efforts of community upgrading which sometimes intensify the very problems they are supposed to alleviate.

Indicators of a neighbourhood environment should be chosen in response to psychological variable as well as others like functional variables. Functional and physical factors, though are important, can not have objective status only. These can be understood in the light of meaning for peoples' lives. This in turn is determined by cultural and social values. Galster and Hesser (1982) identified that objective characters directly determine overall satisfaction with residence and neighbourhood and indirectly through mediations of additional subjective evaluations. For example, attitudes towards the actual size of a room will be influenced by the feeling of the room as a space for the intended function. This feeling may again be generated from and shaped by the cultural norms.

Needs and aspirations perceived by an individual are a complex of both individual characters and cultural norms impinging upon the individual. Michelson (1970) admitted that objective characteristics may not exclusively influence overall residential satisfaction, but can do that indirectly or partially through its effect on individual's subjective assessments of more limited aspects of physical and social environment contributing to satisfaction. Numerous combinations of both orientations have produced many different measures and all these are assumed to tap attitudes towards a neighbourhood equally well. These constitute complementary rather than mutually exclusive and competitive ways of describing the neighbourhood. (1)

SOURCE OF DESCRIPTORS

Most of the scientists have evaluated neighbourhood quality against indicators of quality, descriptors of the setting, or aspects of satisfaction etc. Everybody has emphasized on ensuring adequacy of coverage while judging a neighbourhood. According to them, a large number of indicators describing different components have to be listed so that all possible dimensions are gathered.

Carp (1976) advised to ensure stability and eliminate personal bias in accumulating descriptors. According to him the proper procedure would be to elicit a comprehensive set of items which reflects from a resident's perspective. All such possible facets of residential quality must be included. It should be judged by a large number of adults representing a major portion of the residents. Finally, the overlaps in items should be identified to produce a set of nonredundant dimensions which define the domain by revealing the basic dimensional structure. For example, the basic domain underlying the descriptors airyness, size of the window, amount of opening, stuffyness and location of window can be comfort-ventilation. Identification of this basic domain will save a study from creeping redundancies. He suggested the use of empirical measures for either gathering items or for reducing lists of items into dimensions, but not for the both requirements.

Peterson (1974) and Campbell et al (1976) have insisted on identifying specific sources (components) of satisfaction and dissatisfaction which are attributes of that domain and evaluating the relative contribution of each towards the development of an overall index of quality (or satisfaction) (2). People compare their perceptions of each domain's quality against their standard for that domain to arrive at an evaluation. The belief-affect approach has emphasized on identifying the aspects of the component about which people have beliefs and examining how the evaluation of each belief contributes to the evaluation of the whole. To include a large number of components on which the judgement would be obtained has been a necessary part of these approaches (3).

Zehner (1980) gathered components empirically from the residents and then categorized the responses. But he realized that the resultant indices may or may not reflect the view of the respondents. In a study described by Carp (1976), the inmates of a senior citizens' home produced the items which constituted an open-ended question which was then elicited for a variety of descriptors. No system of categorization was imposed upon the responses. Though it ensured the richness of the data, yet functional redundancies crept in.

Some other studies have used factor analysis to reveal indices (Factors) within the data. Yet Donnelly (1970) has rightly argued that there is more to its (housing satisfaction) investigation and measurement than factor analysis of questionnaire surveys. Factors like freedom of choice and the means to participate play important roles and all such factors should also be catered for. Galster and Hesser (1980) suggested that, given a set of felt needs and aspirations, (then) individual would evaluate his current housing situation with respect to both the dwelling unit and the neighbourhood.

The sources, dimensions or components of the house and the settlement (neighbourhood), against which the satisfaction would be measured, can be gathered in many other ways. Literatures are a good source to build up an inventory, check list table is another one (Kerlinger, 1964). A third choice is making an initial compilation from residents' responses. Combining two or more of these methods might help in developing even a bigger glossary. Another underlying goal should be to ensure that such an inventory has included specific predesired descriptors of one or more components as well.

EPILOGUE

The freedom of choice with respect to where one lives and to adjust the immediate living environment to individual preferences are basic outlets of self-expression which contributes to many aspects of individual happiness. Living environment is a critical area of interaction and is the most familiar environment to people. People will seek that which is satisfying, because generally what is satisfying reinforces those behaviours which lead to the satisfaction (shelly, 1972).

As Burisch (nd) said that at the end of the day, it is the architect who is to decide what to include and what to reject, so he should be well conversant with all the components of the environment he is to design, type of functions to provide and the characteristics of the users. Whatever environment is

evated, let alone it be a neighbourhood, should be legible even to a layman so that he can response to the stimuli produced by the confronted environment in a familiar fashion.

Neither a single category of descriptors can describe the components of an environment, nor any particular set of indicators can measure its quality. Indices ought to be constructed according to the situation considering the space, people, function and purpose.

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