Neighbourhood Satisfaction: Comparative Analysis of Various Approaches

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Abstract

An environment is planned and desiged by the planners and the architects while people extract satisfaction from living in such environment and using the built forms. As such, the purpose of planning and designing would be to satisfy the users. Satisfaction is the resultant effects of several aspects. Therefore, identification of those aspects is a critical and important stage in a design exercise. Over the years, different approaches have been taken for the purpose which evolved in three major models of determining satisfaction. This paper compares the models and looks into the merits and demerits of the normative approach against that of the popular approach. This forms the basis of a model for measuring housing satisfaction developed by the author at the University of Not ting ham in 1987-88. The terms house, home, dwelling unit, residence, neighborhood and community have been used interchangeably in this article.

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INTRODUCTION

Housing is one of the three basic human needs. Moreover, a home is a multi-purpose envelope of many activities, as well as a key factor in economy. It accounts for a large share of wealth and consumption expenditure. In a survey, housing was found at rank four among twelve domains of life satisfaction.[1] It means that It looms large not only in people's budget, but also in their opinion.

Satisfaction with one's own house, or the greater neighbourhood is one of the determinant of the quality of the house form and the settlement pattern. To determine satisfaction objectively, researchers and designers/planners traditionally have taken several approaches. In all these approaches, it has been tried to ascertain or quantify peoples attitude towards certain objective and subjective aspects related directly or indirectly with the neighbourhood. People are, however, subject to many constraints imposed by their environment and constraints which in one way or other they impose upon themselves.

Views differ in the way people interpret the extraction of satisfaction. But all those agree on one point that a single aspect cannot fully determine satisfaction with a house, neighborhood or greater environment, it must always be an accumulation of interactions with several aspects.

01   Classical Models

Research on neighbourhood satisfaction has tended to follow either one of two classic models of determining satisfaction. *Belief-Affect* model proposes that people evaluate their neighbourhood by retrieving their subjective evaluations of a number of its aspects. Afterwards, an overall estimation of satisfaction can be made by summing up the evaluation. In this method, a determination of predictors of satisfaction would require to gather evaluations of a wide variety of neighbourhood aspects. Otherwise, the probability that particular aspects that are shown to be important to overall satisfaction would be included will depend on the researcher's selection criteria, rather than the respondents, belief.

The second classic model is named *Community Approach* since this method regards one's identification with the neighbourhood as an expression of his satisfaction. According to this model, people will be economically and emotionally linked to a neighbourhood only to the extent they like it. Growing reliance on the community facilities and services can also increase commitment to a community. So the degree of involvement or link with the community would be correlated with satisfaction with that community.

Both the classical models rely on human judgements which involve analysis of information available to the assessors at that particular instant. Some critics argue that specific salient or representative bits of information may influence the process of evaluating a complex object. There are some who doubted the existence of the link between beliefs about an object and its evaluation.[2] They proposed that evaluations of objects are processed more quickly than factual belief about objects and that they are processed in separate portion of the cognitive system. Therefore, evaluations should look beyond the recognisable aspects of an object.

02.   The Third Model

According to the third model, the *Availability Approach*, only the factors that define an object may not be used to determine its evaluation. Satisfaction is based on a combination of evaluations of the neighbourhood's actual qualities and more generalised beliefs about the neighborhood. Such beliefs may be popularly shared but not objectively verifiable. This however may influence the interpretation of objective information that is available on the neighbourhood; for example, expectation or possibility of whether: the neighborhood will improve in near future.

Criteria by which the elements of a satisfaction judgement are chosen is different in belief-affect approach than that in the availability model. In the former one, to maximise accuracy, a person has to sample and test a broad range of qualities of the object. The latter model suggests that the elements of satisfaction judgement will only be chosen for their availability in memory. In this case, ability

1.   Campbell,A.; P.E., Converse & William L. Rodgers , Quality of American life-Perceptions, Evaluations and Satisfactions, Russell Sage Foundation, NY, 1976.

2.   Zajonc, R.B: Feeling and Thinking: Preferences need no Inferences; American Psychologist, Vol. 35, 1980, pp 151-175.

to provide an accurate glossary of the full range of neighbourhood qualities is unnecessary. It means that the perceivers will be drawn to rate the specific qualities and as well as more abstract or generalised beliefs. In a sense, the availability model specifies the belief-affect model by caring more about the selection of satisfaction predictors.

The process applied in commitment model is slightly different from those in the other models. According to this model assessment is done indirectly by measuring the degree of one's involvement in a community. It stresses the role of objective processes (having actual ties) in the determination of subjective evaluation. Thus commitment variables are normally offered to explain people's liking of their neighbourhood.

03.   Which Approach?

The three different approaches discussed above were operationalised in a survey-study where all three were found to have several positive aspeccts.[3] However, the findings suggest that these may not be equally useful in predicating satisfaction. In the above study it was found that the belief-affect approach was able to account for variances in residential satisfaction. However, it is difficult to specify the neighbourhood qualities that are more important in creating satisfaction.

Commitment model tries to examine satisfaction indirectly by taking a secondary approach. So deductions from such data may not be always correct. Most of the commitment approach variables were not significantly related to overall neighborhood satisfaction in the above study. It means that the use of certain facilities cannot be translated directly into its liking. For example, considerable involvement and investment commitment in a community may be related to the desire to stay in a place. Thus it ignores the role of choice. Constraint, besides commitment, may force somebody to live in a house which even he might not have liked . Also, people may grow a sense of belonging for the place they used and lived in for a long period even if they initially did not prefer to live there.

Tests have revealed substantial overlap between belief-affect and availability approaches. Never the less, the availability approach cannot fully replace the belief-affect approach in determining housing satisfaction. Availability approach predicts that the most salient general and as well as specific beliefs can be used in predicting satisfaction. Belief-Effect model proposes that people weight their actual experiences against their expectations in evaluating each aspect of a community. The availability approach makes no assumptions about beliefs arising from actually verifiable experience.

Inddeed, beliefs specified under availability approach are often not verifiable. For example, cynicism, future expectation, efficacy fear of crime etc.

So far, in this discussion, it is seen that belief plays a vital role in forming the attitude towards something. As the nature of attitude determines the level of satisfaction, so finding people's beliefs on every aspects, and hence seeking opinion on all the components of a form, is necessary to measure their satisfaction situation. Experiencing the aspect (descriptor) to be rated is not a must in this case, what really matters is the respondents attitude towards that. If the attitude is negative, irrespective of actually experiencing it, or availability of data in favour of it, he is less likely to agree to face it. The belief-affect model ensures that the specific aspects have also been included in the array of descriptors since it tries to accumulate all possible aspects.

The availability approach suggests that overall belief, such as optimism, may influence the utilisation of the specific aspects of a neighbourhood and their interpretation. Satisfaction may be influenced by the efforts to change both more general and more specific available beliefs. Efficacy and optimism need a tangible basis in real improvement. One disadvantage of this model is that no empirical rule exists for a priori selection of predictors of satisfaction. Also, non reliability of self-reporting makes the existence of influential factors questionable. This model, however, reduces the labour of testing by selecting only specific items. It is also effective for testing the psychological process involved in satisfaction evaluation.[4]

04.   Normative Approach

If a designer knew the most significantly contributing factors of the quality of a house, it would be of great relevance to him. Most of such inquisitions have an implicit goal in common: to maximise the goodness of fit between the inhabitants needs and his dwellings, i.e. the individual's wellbeing so far as it is dependent on his physical, habitat.[5] Normative approaches generally assume that the designers can distinguish good from bad in neighbourhoods and can isolate features that are related to overall quality.

However, there are criticisms which raised the basic question of considering a planner's (or designers as such) judgement solely to be congruous with that of his client.[6] As an alternative , he suggested the development of a model for determining residential satisfaction by analysing the relationship between planners and citizens' values. His proposal was for two types of predictors of

3.   Miller, F.D., Tseemberis, S., Tseemberis, G.P., Malia, G.P. & Grega, D. Neighbourhood Satisfaction among Urban Dwellers, Journal of Social Issues, Vol. XXXVI, No. 3, 1980, pp 101-117.

4.   ibid
5.   Burisch, M; Evaluation of Housing Quality; Journal of Consumer Policy, 3.1, 1979, p 69.
6.   Lansing, J.B. & R.W. Marans: Journal of the American Institute of Planners, Vol.. 35, 1966.

neighbourhood quality: planners assessment of special features of the environment and the residents own statements about other features.

There are authors who have cast their doubt on the success of traditional framework of evaluation on criteria set by designers.[7] The greatest portion of man-made environment is controlled not by trained designers, but by human wants, conditioned and fulfilled by those outside the discipline. So according to them, design criteria should also be set or approved by the majority of users.

Expert judgement approach can be criticised on four grounds. First: none was directed towards an exploration of the total domain of residential quality. Thus, these yield a less comprehensive list of potential elements which exposes its inadequacies. Moreover, it does not cater for increasingly talked about issues like symbolic value of them, or how these values are transmitted through the socio-economic scenes etc. Second: the experts tend to differ from each other and there is no basis for determining the superior categorisation. Thirdly: experts and lay-public also do not agree since they do not share the same concepts of environmental quality. Lastly: *personal preferences are unstable which make a decision fixed by experts unrealistic and unwise.*

Though such studies at times could prove useful in gaining insight into peoples needs, yet if the attitudes among the respondents differ too much, it is more likely to yield only an average and genaralised result. Burisch reiterated clearly that normative evaluation is not feasible as peoples perception do not neatly fit into such system.[8] Yet, it sometimes may prove to be a very economical method of evaluating housing quality. However, he agreed that the ultimate selection of descriptors should be based on the investigator's judgement.

Expert oriented approach ignores the importance of choice. Mass housing, which communicates a paternalistic attitude is an example of the worst case. Though the past trend of normative evaluation has been criticised heavily, it has also been agreed that we cannot totally avoid experts' judgement. Burisi further advised not to rely heavily on peoples opinion as it might block innovation in design though well-informed, self-aware people have to decide for themselves what is best for them in the end.[9] Others have also pressed the necessity to go directly to the individual for its own description of quality.[10]

7. Studer, R.G. & Stea D.: Architectural Programming, Environmental Design and Human Behaviour, Journal of Social Issues, Vol. XXII, No. 4, p 128. 1966.
8. Burisch, M. (nd): Expert and Lay Opinion in the Evaluation of Housing, mimeographed lecture note, Deptt. of Psychology, University of Hamburg.
9. Burisch, M: 1979. op. cit.
10. Campbell et al (1976): op. cit.

Conclusion

The above discussions were intended to compare the different approaches used in determining satisfaction with a neighbourhood. After considering the pros and cons of the approaches, it is found that the belief-affect approach is clearer in conception and would also be the easiest to operate and interpret. However, inclusion of some descriptors that are used by the models will be worthwhile (in the sense that it will safeguard against the omission of important descriptors). Such an operation will maximise accuracy and reliability which are the major criteria of a credible study.

Such a study should look towards peoples descriptions or their idea of sources of satisfaction with the house form or neighbourhood or community etc. In this regard, a preliminary survey to determine the particular aspects that would have to be judged should be carried out among a small group of public from all walks of life. Then all those aspects cited by most of the respondents may be included in the final exercise.