

ENACTING NEIGHBORHOOD¹

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Abstract: Defining the concept of neighborhood has long been a goal in urban research. In this paper, I trace the various meanings of neighborhood articulated by scholars, from neighborhood-as-community to functional and demographic typologies, to examinations of the effects of residential environments on human behavior. In identifying the myriad meanings of neighborhood, this paper highlights the contingency and flexibility of the concept. I argue that it is precisely because of its blurriness and flexibility that neighborhood has salience: The concept of neighborhood is primarily a social and political product, created through activism, and through research on sociospatial relations. Rather than seeking a fixed definition that can apply to many circumstances, I argue that research on neighborhoods ought to focus on how neighborhoods are produced socially and, in turn, physically, through cooperation and conflict. I apply this framework of enacting neighborhood to a brief case study of neighborhood conflicts in Athens, Georgia. Keywords: neighborhood, activism, place, urban politics.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars in geography and urban studies more generally have long struggled with defining the concept of *neighborhood* (Park et al., 1967 [1925]; Hunter, 1979; Olson, 1982; Galster, 1986; 2001; Kearns and Parkinson, 2001). Far from having given up on this vague concept, a recent special issue of *Urban Studies* (2001) demonstrates continuing interest among scholars in defining, applying, and investigating the significance of “neighborhood” for individual behavior, health, and life chances (Buck, 2001; Ellaway et al., 2001); in fostering social allegiances, identities, and capital (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Kearns and Parkinson, 2001; Purdue, 2001); in shaping political decisions and structures (Allen and Cars, 2001; Docherty, Goodlad and Paddison, 2001); and as an indicator of urban growth and change (Butler and Robson, 2001; Galster, 2001). Neighborhoods also have an increasingly political meaning and function in the neo-liberal era, in which governments seek solutions to social and economic problems by devolving responsibility to more local areas (Raco, 2000; McCann, 2001; Meegan and Mitchell, 2001; Elwood and Leitner, 2003).

One interest in neighborhood-focused scholarship has been on defining, or measuring, neighborhood, although there has been no easy consensus other than to agree that

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neighborhoods contain residences—or, at least, are the site of social interaction (Hunter, 1979; Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Galster, 1986, 2001). As Galster (2001, p. 2111) pointed out, neighborhood is “a term that is hard to define precisely, but everyone knows it when they see it.” In this paper, however, I draw upon an extensive literature review to argue that we do not know neighborhoods when we see them; we construct them, for purposes of our research or social lives, based on common ideals of what we expect an urban neighborhood to be. The neighborhoods that we define through research or social exchange are always subject to redefinition and contention; they are not self-evident. Drawing on a brief discussion of two cases of neighborhood activism in Athens, Georgia, I suggest that the utility of the concept of “neighborhood” for contemporary urban geography derives from its construction through political strategy and contestation. Neighborhoods are defined and created through social interactions and particular events (often conflicts), and the ideal of neighborhood asserts a role for the “local” in a world increasingly characterized by extra-local interactions and exchanges. In Athens, Georgia, for example, recent land-use conflicts demonstrate that activism around the ideal of neighborhood helps to challenge economic development by posing it against residential uses and experiences of space.

I begin my examination of neighborhood as a concept by tracing the variety of scholarly approaches to studying and defining the term. I then briefly illustrate its strategic use in activism in Athens, and conclude by arguing that the strength of the concept of “neighborhood” for urban research and activism lies not in its specificity—or attempts to standardize its meaning—but in specific instances of neighborhood as contested territory and meaning. This approach demonstrates that local geographic concepts such as “neighborhood” continue to have salience for contemporary urban geography, particularly for understanding how urban residents represent political claims by drawing upon their sociospatial experiences and contexts.

THE IDEA OF NEIGHBORHOOD: SCHOLARLY APPROACHES

Scholars have approached the study of neighborhood from several different perspectives, from viewing it as simple “community” to a causal force in individual life chances, to a lifestyle choice and commodity (Forrest and Kearns, 2001, pp. 2141–2142). In the sections that follow, I outline four themes in research on neighborhoods, which are related to one another: (1) defining “neighborhood”; (2) equating or comparing neighborhood with community; (3) investigating so-called “neighborhood effects,” which posits that individuals’ attitudes and opportunities may be shaped (and often constrained) by the neighborhood culture in which they live; and (4) neighborhood as contested space in urban political arenas. In assessing these approaches to the concept, I emphasize that a neighborhood is a type of place, and, as such, should be studied as a contingent, flexible space that nonetheless has material, experiential salience for people’s lives. Neighborhoods may be like any other type of territorially based social ideal, in that they are socially as well as spatially constituted, and are, as Anderson (1991) suggested in reference to nations, “imagined” by those who share them.

Defining Neighborhood

Forrest and Kearns (2001, p. 2134) defined a neighborhood simply as “overlapping social networks with specific and variable time-geographies.” Their definition stresses variability, a crucial social element, and contingency of space and time. The straightforwardness of their definition, however, belies a history of debate about how to clarify the term. Research on neighborhood as a concept extends back to the industrial urbanization of the late-19th and early 20th centuries, in which scholars examined the effects of urban living on forms of social life and individuals’ connections their communities and society (Tönnies, 1955 [1887]; Durkheim, 1964 [1893]; Simmel, 1971 [1903]). Most American urban scholars today trace the concept of neighborhood as community and as “effect” on individuals to the Chicago School of sociology, which sought to define types of neighborhoods and the cycles of land-use change that fostered neighborhood change over time (Park et al., 1967 [1925]).

In an analysis that recognizes the role of early urban sociology in defining the neighborhood, Hunter (1979) identified three different epistemologies that characterize scholarly approaches to “neighborhood”: “(1) typologies, (2) stages of change, and (3) functions which include economic, administrative, political, and social” (1979, p. 267). Each of these, according to Hunter (1979), corresponds with a strand of research on neighborhoods and draws from the early work of American urban sociology. A typological approach derives from the traditional approach of the early Chicago School of urban sociology: identifying a set of characteristics of people and the physical environment that together constitute a “neighborhood” type. Factors such as ethnicity, income, and housing stock would be included in a typology. This strand of research connects with the “neighborhood effects” literature, which examines the impacts of a neighborhood environment on individual behavior and life-chances. Both Olson (1982) and Galster (1986) suggested that typologies allow scholars to get away from a concern about defining neighborhood generally, and to focus on different types of neighborhoods (or, according to Galster (1986, p. 246), the “degree” of neighborhoodness). A second approach, also associated with the Chicago School, characterizes neighborhoods by “stages,” which assumes a progression of neighborhood use based on a combination of economic growth and movements of people within the urban landscape. Neighborhoods may be “in transition” from one use to another from low-income housing, for example, to a secondary business district, or upscale housing. Research on urban economies and housing markets often relies upon this basic notion of neighborhood change (Hunter, 1979; Harvey, 1989; Smith, 1996). Finally, a functional approach examines neighborhoods based on a wide variety of potential uses it serves, such as an administrative unit for urban services, as an economic area, or as a socially cohesive community. A neighborhood might have a clearly identifiable economic identity, for example, such as a factory district, but its residents might not view it as the basis for a social community. Castells (1977) argued that the main function of urban neighborhoods was social reproduction of the workforce, with the state assuring the provision of services to enable urban living: housing, schools, garbage collection, parks. Neighborhoods in this sense were defined by the collective consumption of such services.

For Hunter, all three of these approaches have utility in understanding the role and features of a neighborhood, but only if they incorporate a neighborhood’s external

context as well as studying internal dynamics (Hunter, 1979). He characterized neighborhood as “a uniquely linked unit of social/spatial organization between the forces and institutions of the larger society and the localized routines of individuals in their everyday lives.” For Hunter, the context of the neighborhood—its linkages with other places, or within places—ought to be part of any analysis of neighborhood. This recognition of the embeddedness, and, therefore, of the multiscalar nature of neighborhoods within a larger set of routines and social, political, and economic forces, is one that echoes the approach of Suttles (1972). He argued that neighborhood can mean the immediate home area, the locality of a few blocks, and/or the entire urban region (Suttles, 1972, cited in Kearns and Parkinson, 2001).

Hunter’s breakdown of neighborhood research into three main categories highlights the contingency of the meaning of neighborhood, depending upon the perspective and agenda of the researcher. Sawicki and Flynn (1996, p. 169), too, suggested that the meaning of neighborhood varies with “the social forces and/or proposed actions being assessed.” According to Galster (1986, p. 243), the difficulties in specifying precise measures of the concept *neighborhood* leaves scholars

impaled on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, views of neighborhood grounded in individual cognition and collective sentiment have had little operational content since they have not been employed in the specification of boundaries. On the other hand, views of neighborhood as defined by clear administrative boundaries have had no necessary correspondence with the perceptual reality of individuals in the given area.

For Galster (1986, 2001), the concept of neighborhood has limited utility for scholarship unless it can be clearly delineated and bounded for additional research, such as predicting change. In seeking a methodology for delineating neighborhood boundaries, however, Galster (1986) assumed that individual behaviors can be aggregated to a group consensus. He suggested that researchers could delineate a neighborhood area through a survey that would gauge the reactions of residents of an area to certain changes, such as accumulation of trash on one’s block, or the movement of minority residents into the area. In his analysis, Galster assumed that individuals could accurately predict their reactions to certain events, absent knowledge of how that event would be situated socially, politically, and economically. Nor would residents know how their neighbors or the media would react to the same event—all factors that might affect the choices and reactions of the residents in the survey. Thus, Galster (1986) seems to suggest a static relationship of individuals to their environment and their social milieu.

In a more recent discussion of neighborhood, Galster (2001, p. 2112) defined neighborhood as “a bundle of spatially based attributes associated with clusters of residences, sometimes in conjunction with other land uses.” Galster’s goal was to suggest that, given a set of attributes—demographic, institutional, topographic, and social—neighborhoods can be measured and identified. However, if an area is missing some attribute, a neighborhood may not exist there. The attributes correlate with and facilitate prediction about residents’ investment decisions in an area (such as purchasing a house, maintaining a house or property, participating in neighborhood associations, and so on). The attributes that affect a resident’s perception of “neighborhood” vary spatially, so neighborhoods

can be *delineated* according to some attributes for the purposes of research on neighborhood change, but those delineations are contingent on that purpose.

Despite acknowledging a role for institutional or social attributes in defining an area as neighborhood, Galster's (1986; 2001) approach focused primarily on individual factors and behaviors in shaping neighborhood character. Yet as Hunter (1979) and the approach of early sociologists (Durkheim, 1964 [1893]; Park et al., 1967 [1925]; Simmel, 1971 [1903]) illustrated, both individual perception and structural processes shape the creation and meaning of neighborhood. Considerable research in geography and other fields has highlighted the fact that individual agency, social structure, and space are dialectically related and mutually constitutive (Pred, 1984, 1986; Massey, 1991, 1994, 1997; Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]; Soja, 1989; Harvey, 1989). For scholars examining neighborhoods, therefore, the meaning and significance of such spaces cannot be analyzed solely through individual action: social structures that create and maintain particular neighborhood circumstances and character are also constitutive of individual behavior and neighborhood meaning.

Given definitions of neighborhoods as sites of daily life and social interaction (Hunter, 1979; Galster 1986, 2001; Forrest and Kearns, 2001), I suggest that neighborhoods are a particular type of place: locations where human activity is centered upon social reproduction (see Castells, 1977, 1983); or daily household activities, social interaction, and engagement with political and economic structures. Neighborhoods derive their meaning or salience from individual and group values and attachments, which develop through daily life habits and interactions. Neighborhoods, like places, are "where everyday life is *situated*" (Merrifield 1993a, p. 522, original emphasis).

If neighborhoods are places, we can examine them as a particular form of that geographic concept. Agnew's (1987, 1989) definition of place as locale (site of daily life), location (a site with connections and relations to broader social, political, and economic processes at varying scales), and sense of place (affective feelings) captures the many facets of neighborhood that other scholars have identified (Part et al., 1967; Hunter, 1979; Galster, 1986, 2001; Forrest and Kearns, 2001). Escobar (2001), writing about place, argued that places are constituted through two processes: political economy and humanistic sense of place. Political economy shapes places through local and global economic processes of capital investment, while sense of place reflects the sentiments people feel about a place, derived from individual experiences, attachments, and social connections. These two processes roughly parallel Agnew's location and sense of place categories, but only implicitly includes locale, as the meeting-point of location and sense of place. Nonetheless, both views capture the combination of economic processes and individual, cognitive attachments in shaping place.

Drawing on Gibson-Graham (1996), Escobar emphasized multiple capitalisms in the role of political economy, including processes at multiple scales. Capitalism generally operates on place through investments (and disinvestments) in the material landscape at particular locations, but different processes—locally based capital and global, flexible capital—foster sometimes conflicting economic priorities. For example, Molotch (1979) and Cox and Mair (1988) pointed to the role of local landowners and developers in shaping and constituting places, including in fostering local political cultures that facilitate capital investments. These local cultures, according to Cox and Mair (1988), connect the needs of capital with the attachments of people to particular places in a shared "local

dependence,” with fixed interests in particular places. Since these processes of political economy and sense of place together produce place, it could also be said that they produce neighborhoods as well, albeit at a particular, locally based scale. Further, place as life-situated means that places, including neighborhoods, can be sites of political and social grievances and contestation (as in Merrifield, 1993b; Mitchell, 1995; Mitchell, 1997; Martin, 2000; McCann, 2001; Purcell, 2001a; 2001b).

The combination of individual or group behavior and attitudes, and broad social, economic, and political processes that all constitute neighborhoods means that they are truly multiscalar. They may be produced through individual perception, as in Galster (1986), or shaped by political and economic structures, as in Molotch (1979). As a result, neighborhoods in research vary in size. In a study of perceptions of neighborhood quality and health, for example, Ellaway et al. (2001) examined four neighborhoods that ranged in population from a little more than 8,000 people to over 40,000. Chicago’s established community areas—spatially delineated areas—have an average population of 40,000 (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997, p. 919). The sheer size of some of these neighborhoods challenges any notion of these spaces as coherent social communities, and yet one strand of research on the idea of neighborhood posits neighborhood and community as synonymous.

Neighborhood as Community

Although definitions of neighborhood include many elements, from residential land use to social networks to multiple scales of interaction, one of the most pervasive meanings of neighborhood in the literature has been the idea of geographically delineated neighborhoods as communities (Park et al., 1967 [1925]; Wellman and Leighton, 1979; Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Raco and Flint, 2001). The neighborhoods that University of Chicago sociologists studied in the first half of the 20th century were places where people lived, worked, and worshipped. Often, at least a quarter of the population of a given neighborhood (as defined by census tracts) was comprised by a single ethnic group (Philpott, 1991). Cox (1982) argued that these early 20th-century neighborhoods were composed of families from common cultural backgrounds, where economic insecurities—particularly in working-class areas—led people to rely upon one another for mutual assistance. These shared bonds and obligations, however, declined as households developed greater economic independence, or, at least, as interactions among households decreased with growing distances traveled to work, greater use of telecommunications, and greater access (and attachments) to people living in other locations.

One connection between neighborhood and community is the association of neighborhood with home. Aitken (2000) linked the conflation of community with the idea that local spaces are connected to home, and thus have a nurturing, familial identity and purpose. Other scholars, too, emphasized the conflation of neighborhood, home-area, family, and nurturing (hooks, 1990; Marouli, 1995; Neuhouser, 1999). These meanings of neighborhood also mark it as gendered, feminine space, where children and mothers create safe, nurturing places where families thrive and come together in communities. This association arises out of a false dichotomy between home (or feminine) space and work (or masculine) space (Acklesberg, 1988; Milroy and Wismer, 1994; Staeheli, 1996). Nonetheless, the equation of neighborhood with community is bound up in this gendered

notion about home (and community) spaces. Indeed, the rise of single-parent families and working mothers have been cited as factors in the decline in neighborhood-based communities (Marouli, 1995; Wellman and Leighton, 1979).

Wellman and Leighton (1979) argued that research on neighborhoods needs to be separated from research on communities precisely because the two are not synonymous. When community and neighborhood are conflated, then scholarship turns to questions focusing on the “loss” of community and therefore a loss of traditional (and gendered) ways of life (as in Tönnies, 1955 [1887]; Park et al., 1967 [1925]). Attention to social networks allows scholars to distinguish communities—which may not be spatially constrained—from neighborhoods, which have common locality as their basis (Wellman and Leighton, 1979). Focusing on spatially delineated communities can obscure social ties at different scales, and different boundaries, than those assumed within a neighborhood focus (geographers have made similar arguments; see Massey, 1997; Raco and Flint, 2001; McCann, 2003). The concern of Wellman and Leighton (1979), as sociologists, is on communities, but their insistence that community and neighborhood be regarded as separate concepts—which may overlap at times—is an important one for geographers as well. Indeed, it requires an examination of the idea of neighborhood as a place, one often constituted as a community but not limited to that meaning.

The *ideal* of neighborhoods as residences of people who share values and lifestyles is a pervasive one, and it is maintained in part through economic structures such as the housing market, which divides housing types by characteristics such as family structure and consumptive lifestyle. These divisions within the housing market foster exclusionary meanings of neighborhood. Aitken (2000, p. 74) argued that people who are motivated to constitute their residential territory as a neighborhood community are also those who will socially exclude others who do not fit their idea of the group. As Forrest and Kearns (2001, p. 2134) pointed out, a “socially cohesive” neighborhood would be one where “people who live in a local area [get] together to promote or defend some common local interest.” But they do not see this defensive characteristic of cohesion as necessarily a good thing, as a city with several socially cohesive neighborhoods might be rather fragmented, if not actively in conflict. Indeed, the economic and social divisions within cities create marginalized populations, excluded from some areas of the city and limited to others (Wacquant, 1999; Madanipour et al., 2000).

Neighborhood definition—the social and physical bounding of a spatially based group—is an important tool for exclusion. While the defining of a neighborhood, or any place, may have a flexibility over time, one goal of neighborhood-community demarcation is in fact to harden, or fix, the boundaries: “the rational logic of community construction seeks to keep borders and boundaries firmly drawn” (Aitken, 2000, p. 74). When neighborhoods have firm social boundaries—whether internally or externally derived—some scholars posit that distinctive cultures arise within such socio-spatially demarcated locations. One theme in research on neighborhoods is the idea that these cultures affect the attitudes, behaviors, and life-chances of individuals in such neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Effects

The “neighborhood effects” literature implicitly assumes some correlation between the neighborhood environment and social outcomes. Researchers working within a

neighborhood effects framework examine the impacts of the social and physical milieus immediate to residential environments upon individual behavior. For example, Buck (2001) found that the life-chances of individuals, as measured by poverty and employment, were associated with neighborhood characteristics. He found that in poor neighborhoods, the chances of an individual finding a job were lower than in nonpoor areas. Similarly, Ellaway et al. (2001) found that neighborhood characteristics affect the perceptions of individual about their own health and about problems and cohesion in the neighborhood. Residents were affected by both the degree of social cohesion and interaction, and by the physical upkeep of the neighborhood.

The neighborhood effects theory builds upon the classic, though severely critiqued, work of Lewis (1961), who argued that a “culture of poverty” restricted the life chances of residents in very poor neighborhoods in Mexico City. More recently, Wilson (1987) suggested that the loss of African American elites and middle class from Black ghettos has left the “truly disadvantaged” behind in neighborhoods with little prospects for good jobs or education. In addition, the structural economic changes that resulted in great losses in manufacturing jobs in many American cities created a severe unemployment crisis (Wilson, 1987). The focus on neighborhoods as a locus of social and economic problems is attractive for policy makers, in part, because of a presumed ability to geographically target solutions such as job creation programs (Forrest and Kearns, 2001). Nonetheless, neighborhood effects alone do not determine individual life chances, and intervening variables such as parent’s education, income, and household tenure play a significant role in life opportunities (Talen, 1999; Buck, 2001; Ellaway et al., 2001; Forrest and Kearns, 2001).

Bauder (2002, p. 89) disputed the assumptions inherent in the neighborhood effects literature, arguing that “a fallacy of the neighbourhood effects literature is to apply supposedly universal norms of childrearing, school performance and labour market success to culturally distinct neighbourhoods.” He argued that researchers in the neighborhood effects tradition apply a behavioral norm to the communities they study, finding aberrations rather than investigating existing cultures in a nonjudgmental framework. Some scholars argue that the structural exclusion of the poor from the rest of society, through segregated housing and job markets, unequal access to transportation, and uneven educational opportunities, are far more powerful forces of exclusion than any extant neighborhood culture (Wacquant, 1999; Madanipour et al., 2000).

Although defining neighborhood, viewing neighborhood as community, and studying neighborhood effects represent different strands of research on the concept, they share common themes of viewing neighborhoods as residential districts with particular features, that residents experience in some way in their daily lives. Despite their particular perspectives, many scholars agree that neighborhoods are not fixed spatially or temporally; they are shaped and created through structural forces, individual and group actions, and as particular research questions demand (Park et al. et al., 1967 [1925]; Suttles, 1972; Hunter, 1979; Wellman and Leighton, 1979; Galster, 1986; 2001; Aitken, 2000; Forrest and Kearns, 2001). As Forrest and Kearns (2001) suggested, neighborhoods continue to be the subjects of public policy debates and programs. I suggest that the salience of neighborhoods derives primarily from the ideal of neighborhood as a social process and community. In fact, neighborhoods are shaped as sites and subjects of political conflict, as they are a basis of contestation in urban politics (Purcell, 1997; McCann,

1999, 2003). In the following section, I examine neighborhoods as sites of social agency and contestation.

NEIGHBORHOODS AS SITES OF POLICY AND CONTESTATION

Neo-liberal forms of governance, which emphasize devolved forms of government and increasingly privatized government functions (Peck, 1995; Elwood and Leitner, 2003), have fostered increased policy decision-making at local levels. One aspect of such local-area involvement is the incorporation of citizen input in planning and public policy at the neighborhood level (McCann, 2001; Raco and Flint, 2001; Meegan and Mitchell, 2001; Docherty, Goodlad, and Paddison, 2001). This local-area approach may obscure macrolevel structural causes for problems, but it also recognizes the microlevel basis on which those problems play out (Meegan and Mitchell, 2001). While neighborhoods are affected and shaped by their political, economic, and social contexts, Meegan and Mitchell (2001, p. 2174) argued that neighborhoods also are shaped by local people and events: “it is crucially important to view neighbourhoods in a city/city-region context and to recognise the importance of neighbourhood agency ... in both the definition of neighbourhood and the ‘up-scaling’ of relationships across and beyond neighbourhoods.” The interconnectedness of neighborhood and broader forces prompted Meegan and Mitchell (2001) to argue that government policies to address exclusion and inequality are appropriately addressed at local areas. Indeed, according to Olson (1982, p. 497), social reformers in the early 20th century “envisioned the urban neighborhood as a vital link in the chain of political units.” Neighborhoods were a basis for social interaction at the time, and the front lines in experiencing social problems that reformers were trying to solve. Early community-based activism, in fact, was premised on the common experiences of people living in proximity to one another.

An enduring form of community activism is that of Saul Alinsky (1946, 1989), who pioneered a confrontational form of working-class community-based activism in Chicago. He argued that neighborhood in a spatial sense was not a basis for activism—instead, he sought coalitions based on common workplace experiences, political marginalization, and ethnicity. Yet, he acknowledged the role of geography in segregating ethnic and racial communities, and in bounding political districts, both of which could be a basis for organizing and activism. Further, the process of identifying a community and reinforcing that identity has a spatial element regardless of whether the community itself is spatially contained. Thus, the process of creating an activist community is a process of production, not unlike the processes that produce space as meaningful places in peoples’ lives. Indeed, Robinson (2001, p. 83) argued that there is a “relationship between space, identity, and political opposition,” in which residents of a community may use their individual and group identifications with self and place to create a shared “oppositional consciousness” that motivates community action. This consciousness can arise from the day-to-day interactions among residents that foster a sense of community and shared concerns or values.³ Forrest and Kearns (2001, p. 2131) even defined “community spirit”

³ I am grateful to a reviewer of this paper for reminding me of the importance of day-to-day interactions for enabling an oppositional consciousness.

as “the capacity to act collectively,” which they linked to social cohesion in neighborhoods.

Local activism need not be spatially constrained in its impacts, according to Jonas (1998). Investigating union activism in Chicago, he connected locally based activism directly with broader political agendas that challenge the global order. In particular, Jonas (1998) argued that activism against global capitalism has been forced to become ever-more local in the neo-liberal era: “the details of geography and place are central to unraveling the local-global paradox of contemporary economic restructuring processes, and to developing counterhegemonic discourses and practices to those of globalizing capital” (1998, p. 346). Although Jonas was writing about unions, he was examining locally based and spatially constrained unions, which have parallels to neighborhood residents, who, when in conflict, are also fighting for a way of life (as they define it) and as spatially constrained and locally produced communities. Escobar (2001), too, saw place and place-based activism as an important political movement, one that challenges the globalism of contemporary capitalism and academic literatures. For Robinson (2001), Jonas (1998), and Escobar (2001), political communities are created and nurtured through interactions in everyday life, be they based in the workplace, home, or neighborhood.

The connections between local activism and global capital are also evident in Mitchell’s (1993) examination of neighborhood development and change in Vancouver. Mitchell noted that in the controversy over “monster houses” constructed by Chinese émigrés in a neighborhood of Vancouver global capital was ironically positioned as antiracist, versus a local coalition of preservationists who were “racist” in their opposition to neighborhood change. She argued that it is important to thoroughly examine conflicts such as these in order to uncover the political economic relationships in neighborhood activism.

Mitchell’s example highlights the shifting and contingent meanings of the “local” in relation to the global economy and political structures. It also challenges the idea that neighborhood equals community, and especially the idea that neighborhoods that are cohesive social communities are good for social relations. Rather than imputing meaning in political debate from sociospatial *location*, therefore, it is crucial to examine the basis of political consensus among actors, and their political *agendas* in conflicts. These agendas may certainly be place-based or place-focused, but location alone does not determine the political and social significance of the conflict.

The locally based activism that can occur in neighborhoods, regardless of the particular motivation or cause, demonstrates the important role of local areas in situating the grievances that form a basis for activism (McCarthy and Zald, 1973, 1977; Traugott, 1978). For example, women in an apartment complex, as residents of the same location, recognize their common frustrations with their landlord and work together to force change in building maintenance (Clark, 1994). Residents of a predominantly African American neighborhood in Lexington, Kentucky, protest when police kill a young man they were serving with a warrant, but the protests extend beyond the killing to address the social inequalities and spatial exclusions faced by residents of the neighborhood (McCann, 1999).

Political agendas and concerns can coalesce in the particular spatial locations of the actors involved in conflicts. Thus, neighborhoods are often formed and constituted through activism, sometimes in response to imposed boundaries or efforts to delineate new boundaries. Robinson (2001) investigated the reaction of residents to a proposed

road in Glasgow that would have severed the connection of one residential district to a local park, further spatially constraining an already economically disadvantaged community. Residents of the area expressed “fears of exclusion and segregation” about the proposed land-use change (Robinson, 2001, p. 101). In that case, a land-use change resulted in a new, more rigid boundary for a neighborhood.

The scale at which neighborhoods are defined can also be the basis of dispute, however, where residents of an area may define their spatial community at a different scale than the perspective of local public officials. McCann (2003) shows how citywide concerns over sprawl and growth in Austin, Texas, were translated into new neighborhood-based planning and zoning programs. The city sought to increase demand for and densities of housing in the urban core by fostering more intensive land uses and revitalizing the landscape. Some residents of the affected neighborhoods resisted the small-area, neighborhood-based focus of planning efforts in favor of larger, regional coalitions of poor and mostly Latino neighborhoods in order to fight what they perceived as White gentrification into their neighborhoods. These residents defined their communities in terms of economic, ethnic, and locational criteria, and their definition of “neighborhood” was at a broader scale than that of the city planners.

The debates over neighborhood meaning are not always about material landscapes or land uses. Indeed, conflicts over neighborhood meanings can arise out of representations of places, such as portrayals of “inner-city” neighborhoods in the media (Burgess, 1985; Beauregard, 1993; Parisi and Holcomb, 1994). Elsewhere, (Martin, 2000) I argued, however, that media representations of neighborhoods are not one-way characterizations. Instead, actions by residents or organizations within a neighborhood may contest and shape the representations of a neighborhood, helping to constitute the place as a site of agency and resistance. Conflicts over ideas and representations of neighborhood, as well as land uses within them, demonstrates the salience of the ideal of neighborhood for people’s lives.

Purcell (2001b, p. 179) argued that a primary grievance of many residents involved in neighborhood-based activism is that they do not experience the ideal neighborhood landscapes that they desire. In his study of voluntary homeowner activism in Los Angeles, Purcell suggested that activism was spurred by a desire to maintain low-density, single-family neighborhoods as an ideal. People are willing to act collectively when their ideals of neighborhoods—or their “spatial vision [s]”—do not match their realities (Purcell, 2001b, p. 178). This willingness to act to protect the ideals and tangible landscapes of neighborhoods, by organizing, protesting, and engaging the local state, therefore, demonstrates the power of the concept of neighborhood for activism.

The many meanings of neighborhood that I have only briefly outlined here reflect the well-recognized and oft-cited difficulty in defining it (Hunter, 1979; Galster, 1986, 2001; Kearns and Parkinson, 2001). Scholars have sought to define neighborhoods based on individual perceptions or behavior (Galster, 1986; Ellaway et al., 2001), or upon the life chances of individuals in particular locations (Wilson, 1987; Buck, 2001). The focus on individuals, however, can obscure the influence and importance of structural factors that shape the economic circumstance of places as well as the people within them (Wilson, 1987; Talen, 1999; Wacquant, 1999). Neighborhoods have a social meaning, developed through interaction as well as through social action (Park et al., 1967 [1925]; Wellman and Leighton, 1979; McCann, 1999).

These multiple meanings could be viewed as a negative, intractable problem, or as a reflection of the utility of the concept of neighborhood because of its malleability and meaning. Kearns and Parkinson (2001) suggested that it is because of the number of ways that neighborhood has meaning that the concept has significance for future research. I argue that it is precisely through the struggles of people in places, and scholars seeking to understand them, that neighborhood retains much of its power as a concept and term. By conceptualizing neighborhood as a sociospatial imaginary that is defined and made coherent through cases of social action, it is possible to examine the particular times and circumstances in which specific neighborhoods are constructed, for particular purposes. In understanding this social production of neighborhoods, political actors and their agendas become important foci for research. In the next section, I use a brief case study of Athens, Georgia, to illustrate the neighborhood ideals of residential use, interpersonal connection, and face-to-face contact among residents that people expressed in their activism in two land-use conflicts.

DEFENDING NEIGHBORHOOD: ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY IN ATHENS, GEORGIA

The City of Athens, Georgia, has a population of 101,489 (according to 2000 U.S. Census data), in a combined city-country incorporated government (amalgamated since 1991) called Athens-Clarke County. The local government is comprised of a ten-member county commission, with a city manager and “weak” mayor system. The mayor chairs the commission meetings, breaks ties on commission votes, and proposes the city budget. The city manager runs the daily business of government and its agencies. The County commission districts include eight geographic districts roughly equal in population, and two overlay districts (each comprising four of the eight geographic districts) (Fig. 1).

The commission districts represent the only formal and political division of the electorate and the county into geographic areas, but they do not match with neighborhoods as defined vernacularly in local culture, or in local homeowners’ associations. Rather, the Commission districts represent amalgamations of smaller neighborhood areas, and, in some cases, neighborhoods are divided among more than one of the geographic districts. Athens does have neighborhood-areas that many residents recognize and refer to in conversation or even the local media, and there are also neighborhood associations—homeowners’ associations, primarily—but these areas have no official imprimaturs as districts in any political sense.

Athens’ land-use pattern is roughly divided into two areas, with a highway bypass, or “loop” road that defines the boundary between “in-town,” the downtown and the immediate surrounding commercial and residential districts, and the outlying areas (“outside the perimeter”), a mix of suburban-style residential developments, commercial strips, and farmland (Fig. 1). The residential areas with the most defined boundaries and names are developer-created subdivisions, both inside and outside of the loop road. The “in-town” areas are perhaps the most loosely defined, and range in age and style from antebellum homes to recent in-fill developments. All of these in-town areas are centered upon commercial nodes, or named for the names of the streets running through them. Many contain high proportions of rental housing (the entire county of Athens-Clarke has over 60% of its occupied housing units as rental). Two of the most well-known in-town areas,

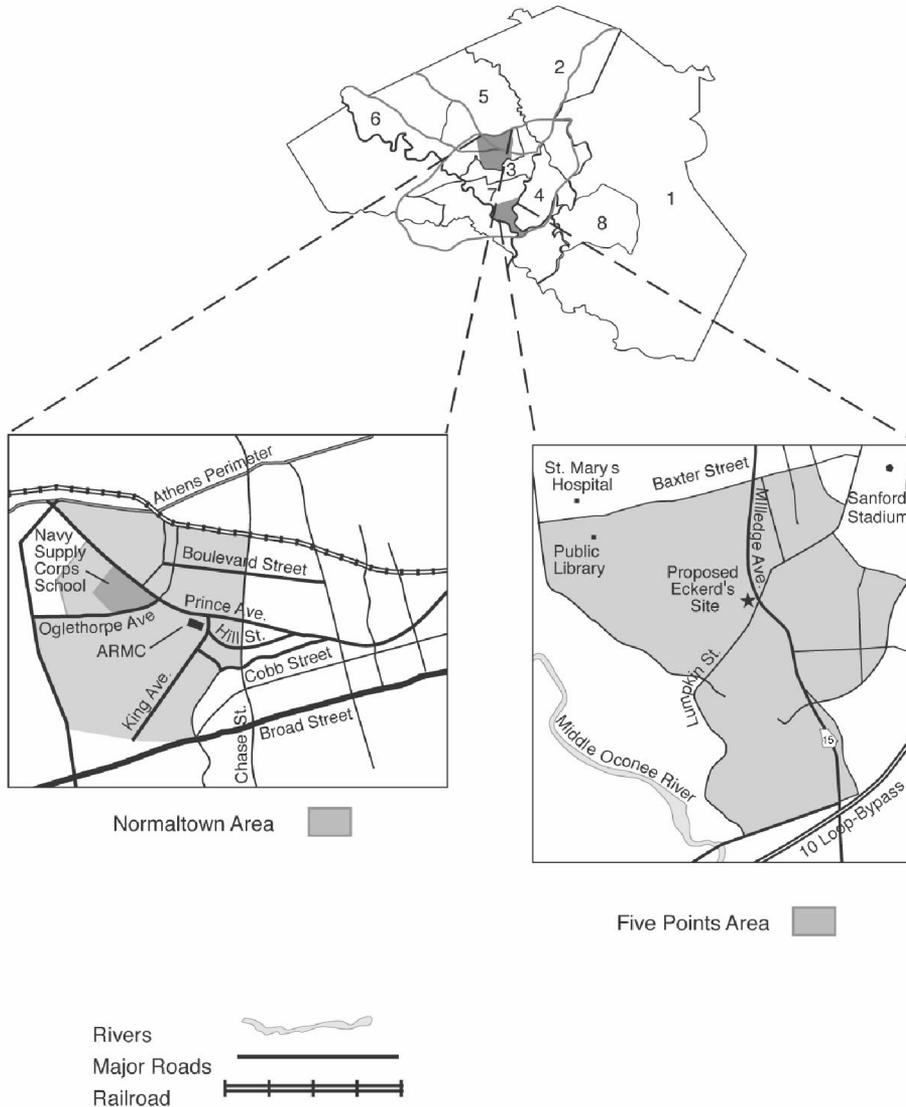


Fig. 1. Five Points and Normaltown in Athens, Georgia. Numbers indicate County Commission districts.

although far from the only neighborhoods, are Five Points and Normaltown (Fig. 1). In the sections that follow, I briefly describe each neighborhood and activism that occurred there to protest land-use changes in Athens. I will then explore the meanings of neighborhood articulated by residents involved on both sides of the disputes, to illustrate the strategic constructions of neighborhood in political activism.

Five Points

Five Points is named for the corners created by three streets, two of them major thoroughfares, that come together to form a commercial node about 1.5 miles south of the downtown core. It was developed primarily in the 1920s and 1930s, with infill development continuing into the 1960s. It is a somewhat sprawling community, extend-

ing one half to one mile in all directions from the Five Points intersection, each sector with its own distinctive character and architectural style. (Outside of about one-half to one mile in any direction, Five Points blurs into other neighborhood districts, but the transformation and boundary is a loose one; the real estate industry in Athens takes great liberties when defining a house as within “Five Points” in sales literature.) The area is close to the campus of the University of Georgia, and is consequently a popular residential area for students and faculty alike. Nonetheless, it is also a popular residential district for nonuniversity affiliated professionals, some of them with long-standing ties to Athens. Five Points has a population of about 7,800 in three census tracts surrounding its commercial node. The population is over 90% White only (U.S. Census, 2000).

In the fall of 1998, a land-use conflict highlighted the cultural and political meaning of the Five Points district. The Eckerd’s Drug store chain, a national company, expressed its intention to buy a hotel located at the main intersection of Five Points, with plans to tear down the hotel and build an Eckerd’s store with a drive-through on the site. The plans became public because of a parking variance request to the County (“Residents: No need for Eckerd’s,” *Athens Banner Herald*, Oct. 18, 1998). Although the variance was later withdrawn (and did not affect the legal ability of Eckerd’s to build on the site), the public notice spurred activism against the store. Many Five Points residents complained in letters to the editor of the daily newspaper that the store would cause traffic problems for the area, threaten two existing drug stores within a block of the hotel location, and harm the small-town feel of the neighborhood (“Eckerd will not enhance community lifestyle,” *Athens Banner Herald*, Oct. 21, 1998; “Readers respond to editorial on Eckerd’s plans,” *Athens Banner Herald*, Oct. 30, 1998). Working through a neighborhood group called “Friends of Five Points,” residents protested Eckerd’s plans by signing petitions, writing letters to local media and Eckerd’s headquarters, and calling their County Commissioners. Many residents also put big blue and white signs in their yards with the word “Eckerd’s” crossed out.

The conflict simmered for several weeks, with letters to the editor about the issue appearing weekly, as well as reports that the County government itself was interested in the same site for a potential new fire station (“Five Points tract eyed for fire station, too,” *Athens Banner Herald*, Oct. 23, 1998). In early December, 1998, Eckerd’s arranged a public meeting to present proposals for an architecturally sensitive design, and to initiate face-to-face dialogue between Eckerd’s representatives and Athens residents (“Residents to speak out on proposed Eckerd,” *Athens Banner Herald*, Dec. 2, 1998). With its efforts to meet with residents in a public forum, Eckerd’s sought to position itself as equally concerned about and interested in the future of Five Points. But residents were not interested in discussing a compromise vision for the neighborhood. Over 600 people attended the meeting, jeering and hissing at Eckerd’s representatives (Five points vs. Eckerd, crowd leaves no doubt about ill feelings,” *Athens Banner Herald*, Dec. 3, 1998). Eckerd’s Vice President of Public Affairs reportedly called the meeting “the biggest turnout of neighbors that I’ve ever seen on any issue” (“Five Points vs. Eckerd,” *Athens Banner Herald*, Dec. 3, 1998). A week later, Eckerd announced that they would not build a store in Five Points.

This case of neighborhood activism demonstrates that residents articulated as well as defended a neighborhood ideal and identity from growth that conflicted with their neighborhood image. In their opposition to Eckerd’s, residents expressed concerns about

traffic use, loss of existing (and locally owned) businesses, and a change in the character of their neighborhood commercial node. Eckerd's sought to accommodate some of these concerns with design changes, acknowledging a physical distinctiveness of the neighborhood. Yet residents continued to challenge the drug store chain on the basis of the existing drug store services and the social network of the local community. Thus, the neighborhood meaning that crystallized in the conflict was one that was based on daily interactions and local consumption in the community, as defined by residents in their activism. A year later, residents of Athens again expressed the value of a neighborhood against a plan for economic growth, illustrating the political construction and deployment of the idea of neighborhood for the defense of residential land uses in Athens.

Normaltown

The Normaltown neighborhood offers a mix of land uses and subdistricts that belies its ordinary, innocuous name. Normaltown is an amalgamation of several small residential neighborhoods, a commercial district, a school for the Navy's Supply Corps, and large regional hospital that sits roughly in the middle of it (Fig. 1). The residential areas that make up the broader Normaltown area are defined by their main streets: Cobbham (Cobb, Hill, and Meigs streets), Boulevard Street, King Avenue, and Oglethorpe Avenue. The total population of the area is 5,847 people, two-thirds of whom self-identified as "White only" in the 2000 U.S. Census.⁴ In addition to the street-named residential districts are the Normaltown commercial district, recognizable due to the presence of Normal Hardware and the Normaltown Café, among other businesses, and the Athens Regional Medical Center (ARMC), a 315-bed hospital serving about 65% of the health care needs of the Northeast Georgia region, with a total population service area of over 400,000 people (ARMC, 1999, p. 2). The former Normal College, an educational institution for women, provided a name for the area and some of its businesses; that facility is now the Navy Supply Corps School.

The Athens Regional Medical Center (ARMC) and its continued growth has long been a source of contention for area residents (interviews with author, Athens, Ga, 2000). In the spring of 1999, the hospital unveiled a 20-year land-use plan that entailed physical expansion of the ARMC site from about 39 acres to over 60 acres. In the first meeting held to present the plan to the public and to solicit public input, residents protested with jeers and shouts not unlike Five Points residents several months earlier ("Residents lash out against ARMC plan," *Athens Banner Herald*, April 22, 1999). In another echo with Five Points, Normaltown residents used yard signs—this time with the phrase "ARMC don't destroy neighborhoods"—to express their opposition to the hospital's growth plan. After many meetings and protests, the hospital's board negotiated and compromised with the resident-group organized to oppose the expansion, the Citizens for Healthy Neighborhoods (CHN). By the fall of 1999, ARMC and CHN had reached a compromise plan that

⁴The Normaltown area is actually somewhat smaller than this figure; the Census Tract boundaries do not match the vernacular neighborhood area. If anything, the smaller Normaltown area likely has an even higher proportion of Whites only.

recognized the needs of the hospital to grow, but sought to minimize the impacts of growth on the surrounding neighborhood.

As in the case of Eckerd's in Five Points, the conflict between ARMC and the CHN spurred citizens to define values of their neighborhood in opposition to commercial space. While residents did not challenge the presence or even the growth of ARMC, they objected to the aesthetics of growth and the size of the expansion into residential areas. In their objections, residents defined the neighborhood in terms of residential uses as well as valued commercial (and health) services. They focused upon the livability of the neighborhood as they sought to redirect the discourse about growth of the hospital to one about the *character* of the area.

Constituting and Deploying the Idea of Neighborhood in Athens

The cases of activism in Five Points in 1998, and Normaltown in 1999, represent an aggressive defining of neighborhood in Athens-Clarke County. In each case, the idea of neighborhood was used strategically in conflicts over land use. Residents portrayed their neighborhoods as sites of single-family homes, social interactions on sidewalks, and small, locally owned businesses. Commercial and institutional growth was to be kept to a minimum. Eckerd's and ARMC, by contrast, sought rhetorically—and materially—include their growth into the meaning of each neighborhood in Athens. Eckerd's stressed physical design and service to the community. ARMC also emphasized service, but to Athens and all of northeast Georgia; shifting the scale of “community,” in effect, from the Normaltown area to the county and its region. Residents, however, continued to insist on the salience of their neighborhoods as distinct physical and social areas. These cases illustrate that neighborhood identities and character were defined and defended through action—and accountings of such action, be they in the popular media, or scholarly research.

These conflicts thus represent the creating and delineating of neighborhoods, as in both cases residents relied upon or created organization—Friends of Five Points and newly formed Citizens for Healthy Neighborhoods—in order to define and defend in-town residential areas. Neighborhood is an ideal that motivates and helps to constitute a group identity for action. As Robinson (2001) and Martin (1999) argued, the concept of “neighborhood” provides a kind of frame, or way of defining a situation, that shapes, guides, and contains a set of grievances for activism.⁵ “Neighborhood” is an idea, and an ideal, that crystallizes and defines a set of concerns for parties in local political disputes.

In interviews with residents who were involved in these growth disputes—a few of whom represented the hospital in its negotiations with CHN—it is apparent that neighborhood does not have a single, clear, unequivocal meaning for residents, even in light of these protests.⁶ Residents had a variety of responses when asked what “neighborhood” means to them. I draw on these reflections to explore the meaning of neighborhood for people active in defending some notion of it, and to demonstrate that neighborhoods are always contingent and produced. The excerpts here offer a preliminary analysis of

⁵For more information on framing as a strategy in activism, see Benford (1997), and Snow and Benford (1988, 1992).

neighborhood as primarily an intangible and imagined product of action, rather than a fixed space.

One of the main elements that residents talked about in defining neighborhood was *people*:

[I]ntegrated by income, age, definitely political views ... People watch out for each other ... people keep their eyes on things. We congregate—have parties [Normaltown resident].

There needs to be a critical mass of people ... who actually know each other ... beyond the fact that they simply live on the same street [Normaltown resident].

People are all stimulating, involved, very diverse. Age range from the late 80s to eight months [in age]. ... All individuals. A very individual neighborhood. [I] can't think of ... a weekend without some group in the neighborhood getting together. My telephone memory dial is organized by going down the street [Normaltown resident].

Eclectic mix of people. A lot of the students love it. They love the musicians and artists and older people [Normaltown resident].

Interaction among people clearly provides an essential element of neighborhood for some residents. A couple of Normaltown residents defined their neighborhood simply as “connected.” Daily, weekly, or even occasional interactions among residents form a basis for a common awareness of one another and the neighborhood, fostering a consciousness that, as Robinson (2001) suggested, can develop into an “oppositional consciousness.” Interview participants did not only focus on people, however, in describing their neighborhoods. They also mentioned the built environment, the natural environment, and a geographical boundedness. For one, it was the mix of people and the built environment: “the relationships they foster, and the sense of community.”

The physical layout of the neighborhood was important for some residents. They identified sidewalks and the ability of residents to, as one Normaltown resident who also mentioned people said, “walk or bike to work, walk kids to school.” Walking distance also defined accessibility for another Normaltown resident: “accessibility to different services.” Another resident (also quoted about people, above) talked of the importance of a sense of “demarcation” of the neighborhood, either by being in between other areas, or because of other features of the built environment: “the houses in my neighborhood *look* the same. There’s a kind of similarity that makes a neighborhood.” This same resident echoed others in citing a pedestrian orientation as a feature of her neighborhood: “for our neighborhood it really is the sidewalks. I mean, enormous amounts of business gets done there.” Again, the role of the neighborhood as a space where people come

⁶ Interviews and focus groups with 19 residents of Athens-Clarke County were conducted by the author in 2000. All interviews were in-depth, qualitative conversations, and focused on the Normaltown and Five Points growth disputes. Participants were either residents involved in the protests, city staff or elected representatives, or hospital board members, and all were White. All were asked to describe the reasons for their involvement in the protests (or in responding to them) and to define what neighborhood means to them.

together—facilitated by the built environment—provides a basis for a common group consciousness.

Trees and green space were mentioned by a few residents, but were not major themes. More frequently, interview participants spoke of a combination of people and a built environment that facilitated interaction. One resident of Five Points elaborated on the importance of a physical environment that generates common sentiments and values among people:

Any kind of common interest is where I'd start ... I think a necessary, but not sufficient criterion would be the common element of physical proximity. You've got an area that folks think of as having sort of a beginning and an end, even if it's very amorphous, sort of squishy ... I don't think you have to be economically or demographically homogeneous, but I do think ... if you have different folks who make up the area, they ought to all value something that's in the area ... Ain't nothing special about a place where everybody's the same ... I guess one of the things ... it's gotta be something that folks have in common that's different from someplace else. Or from everyplace else, not someplace else. Just something that's different from everyplace else [original emphasis].

This Five Points resident contrasted his in-town neighborhood with the many subdivisions in Athens. To him, Five Points is not necessarily unique in that there is no place like it, but it is different in not looking like every other residential district; it is not a subdivision.

Yet not all Athens residents live in the in-town areas. Some of the interview participants live in subdivisions in Athens-Clarke County, and they defined their communities as neighborhoods just as much as Five Points or Normaltown. Five of the 19 interview participants live in suburban or rural Clarke County, and were involved in the Five Points or Normaltown neighborhood conflicts as city staff, hospital board members, or as members of a coalition of Athens' neighborhood associations. The built environment where these participants live might look different from in-town, and there may not be any sidewalks. But these residents view suburban and in-town residential districts alike as "neighborhoods." They define neighborhoods primarily with reference to characteristics such as lifestyle, safety, and shared values in property:

[A neighborhood is a] place where you can go and live what you think is a lifestyle that you and your neighbors want.

A community is a community ... that knows its neighbors, that can walk in a safe street, that can go to a good school, that can feel comfortable and proud of their house and their yard, and a good place to raise a family.

What I value in a neighborhood is that spirit of pride ... watchfulness but not nosiness. Sense of security ... care about homes, yards.

Geographic delineation of an area ... together in a grouping ... related to a geographic feature, like a commercial node ... a focal point ... brings people together.

One resident who had been involved in activism against a development near his own subdivision identified such land-use conflict as a basis for defining a neighborhood:

Two things [constitute a neighborhood]: a subdivision that owns property [and contested] development nearby. People rally around that ... A real neighborhood would consist of several subdivisions.

For this resident, neighborhoods are established through contestation it is the rallying against development that makes a neighborhood salient. Neighborhood for him is not just the residential experience, or the interaction with other people, but some idea that has to be defended against change and difference—such as a new land use nearby.

This perspective on the importance of something to act against demonstrates the importance of action for defining a neighborhood. The threat of change, of shifts in traffic and land values and in the sights, sounds, and built environment within and nearby a residential district are prompts that help to create a neighborhood to defend. Neighborhoods in this definition are not identifiable, delimited spaces. They are not the result of particular neighborly interactions among a group of people. They are not a set of environmental factors that influence individual or group behavior. Instead, they are residential locations with particular characteristics—land uses and landscapes—that residents want to protect from change.

But neighborhoods do not stay unchanged no place does. Places and space are shaped and constituted with societies people and space develop together and produce each other (Pred, 1984, 1986; Massey 1994, 1997; Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]). Some of the residents who act to defend and constitute neighborhoods also recognize the contingency of these residential places. One resident of Normaltown who had also been active politically in Athens-Clarke County remarked:

Neighborhoods evolve ... people move into a new neighborhood, and ... they are young, they have their children, their children grow up, they come back to the old house for a while, and then the parents get feeble and they move out.

In reflecting upon this change, this resident noted that her own neighborhood had gone through the transformation of aging, but that newer generations of young people were recreating the place as they bought property and moved into the area, creating a neighborhood that in some sense was always in flux. The protests in the area over the hospital expansion highlighted the fact that lots of people were in the neighborhood and cared about it, and did not want a change in land use that would affect their lifestyles and experiences of the physical and social spaces of the neighborhood.

The ideal of neighborhood is clearly one that has been acted upon in Athens, at least in Five Points and Normaltown. For residents, the salience of the concept of neighborhood lies in interactions with people, and the land uses and built environments that support such interaction. Athens residents do not live neighborhoods that are defined and delineated as such within the local political framework, and they may not agree as to the boundaries or extent of Normaltown, Five Points, or other residential districts. Yet they recognize these areas as salient when land-uses changes threaten some sense of the coherence and stability of those neighborhoods. Neighborhoods in Athens may exist as “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991) in residents’ minds, but the communities are not

practiced or enacted in any overt political manner until they are threatened with some sort of change.

Neighborhoods in Athens are produced through daily social life, but especially through strategic activism. Five Points, for example, is a commercial node and residential district. But Five Points, the neighborhood, was constituted through the protests against Eckerd's in 1998. Five Points the neighborhood will be constituted and defined in other ways in the future, when residents act around the ideal of the place as neighborhood. Normaltown is also a commercial district in Athens, encompassing several small neighborhood areas that, amalgamated, form Normaltown. The neighborhood as such was constituted through the most recent (1999) protests against the expansion of ARMC, but periodic consultations with the hospital over future construction and land use (which occur from time to time (interviews with author, 2000)) will be a salient reminder and marker of the neighborhood identity. But the idea of Normaltown is as much a construction of this research as it is a product of activism between the Citizens for Healthy Neighborhoods and ARMC: I refer to Normaltown as a name for the district because it captures the entire area around the hospital, but the residents in CHN refer to their neighborhoods in the plural, identifying the area as "a coalition of neighborhoods in Athens Georgia that 'coalesced' in response to [the ARMC] growth plan" (CHN, 2002).

CONCLUSION

The concept of neighborhood has salience when acted upon—when residents seeks to protect or define neighborhoods for some political and social purpose. Scholars doing research on the meaning of neighborhood have sought to define it, as a social community, or by characterizing a neighborhood from a set of typologies; by social, political, and economic functions; or from stages of urban growth (Hunter, 1979). Scholars have also sought to define neighborhoods as a set of physical and social variables that effect individual behavior (Galster, 1986). Rather than trying to define the sociospatial areas that are "neighborhoods" by the activities or social interactions that occur in them, however, I suggest that scholars should focus on the practice of neighborhood: the social and political actions of people that define and constitute neighborhoods. Urban geographers may find reference to and use of the term "neighborhood" most useful in cases when its meaning is contested represented and articulated by people with different perspectives on what the place is and should be in the future. The various strategic meanings portrayed within a conflict highlight the important and negotiated significance of neighborhood.

Neighborhoods may be like nations because they are imagined, shared spaces among a group of people, vague in the absence of the governmental functions that define a state (Anderson, 1991). Given the absence of specific, definable characteristics, therefore, neighborhoods can function as meaningful scholarly and social categories when they are recognized as the flexible, contingent, social and political products that they are. Neighborhoods are elusive and temporary, and it is in their contingency that they have meaning, for social and political action, and for research that examines the significance and importance of space in social life.

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