

THE THIRD FUTURE OF PLACES CONFERENCE

29 June-1 July 2015

Stockholm, SWEDEN

Public Space for Human Flourishing: An Integrated Ecosystem Approach

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Introduction

This paper contends that public space is crucial for human flourishing. People live and grow in their immediate environments, embedded in the larger familial and social contexts and are affected by relations or interactions existing within and between the immediate settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). And creative, green and people-friendly public space can make a big difference to individuals' mindful existence, nurturing resilient families and sustainable communities. Hence people, families and communities are entitled to use spaces for human flourishing. The following first introduces the twin concepts of 'nested ecological systems' and 'human flourishing', followed by an analysis of how public spaces are related to human flourishing within the ecological systems of life. Based on these arguments, this paper argues for people's right to public space for human flourishing and discusses its implications on urban planning standards and design.

Nested Ecological Systems that Affect Human Flourishing

The public realm plays an important role in nurturing the human soul within the ecology of the environment where four nested systems can be identified (op cit., 1977) (Figure 1):

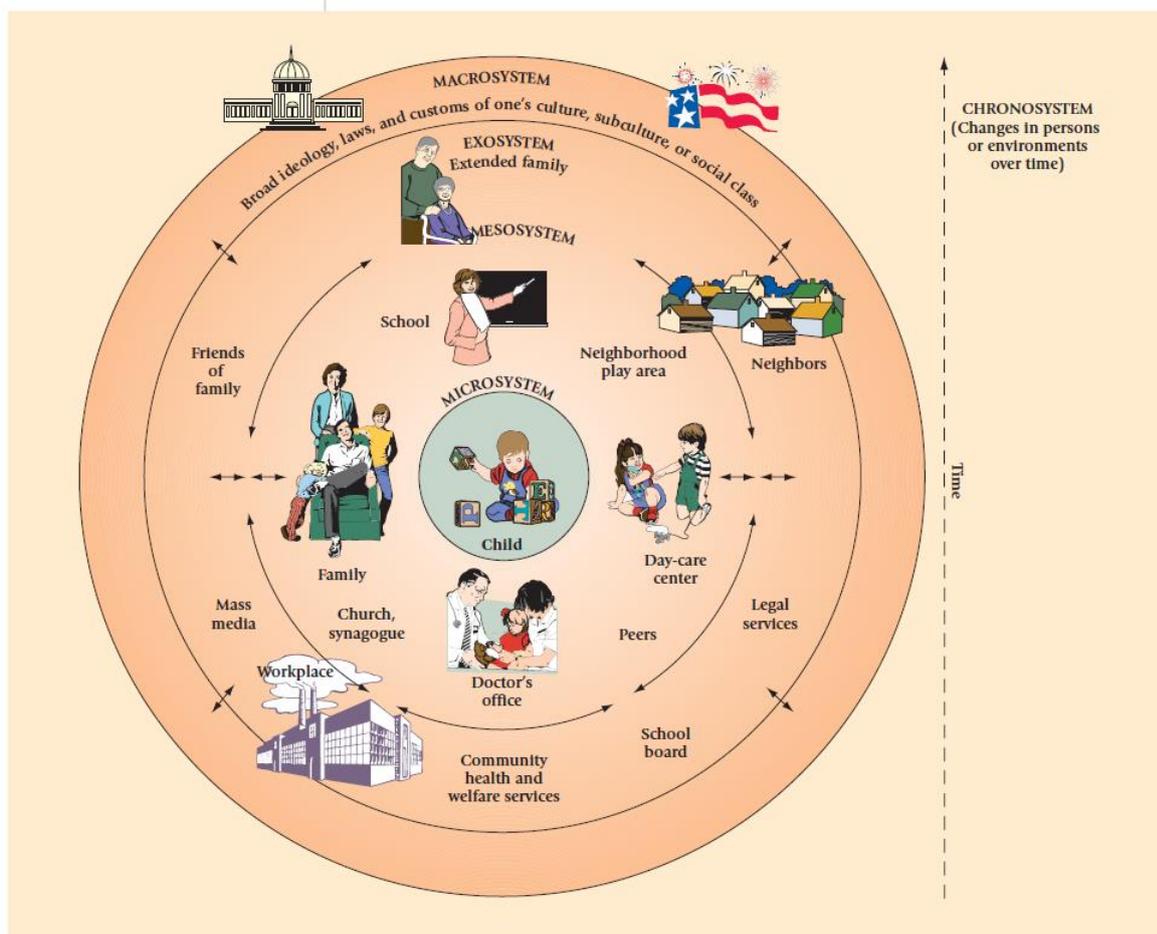
- **Microsystem** 'is the complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing that person. A setting is defined as a place with particular physical features in which the participants engage in particular activities in particular roles for particular periods of time. The factors of place, time, physical features, activity, participant, and role constitute the elements of a setting' (op cit, 1977, p.514).
- **Mesosystem** 'comprises the interrelations among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point in his or her life... a mesosystem is a system of microsystems' (op cit, 1977, p.515).
- **Exosystem** is an extension of the mesosystem 'embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal' (op cit, 1977, p.515). These structures include major 'deliberately structured or spontaneously evolving social institutions' that operate at a concrete local level such as 'the world of work, the neighbourhood, the mass media, local, state and national government agencies, the distribution of goods and services, communication and transport facilities and informal social networks' (op cit., 1977, p.515).

- **Macrosystem** 'refers to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exo-systems are the concrete manifestations. Macrosystems... endow meanings and motivation to particular agencies, social networks, roles, activities and their interrelations' (op cit., 1977, p.515). In other words, the macrosystem somehow determines how a person is treated in a particular setting.

Hence, human flourishing cannot be achieved unless we pay attention to the lives and growth of individuals nested within families, communities and the macro-environment. And we want to argue that the provision and development of appropriate public space is central to this important endeavour.

In the following, we will first explore the concept of human flourishing and argue that human flourishing requires not only subjective efforts but also an objective nourishing environment. Then the importance of the public realm to the flourishing of an individual in the context of his/her family and community is discussed. In the final section, the idea of the right to human flourishing is invoked and its relationship to the production of space discussed to underline the need of place-making public space for human flourishing.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of the environment



Source: Shaffler and Kipp, 2009, p.64.

Achieving Human Flourishing: Subjective Efforts in a Nourishing Environment

According to Rasmussen (1989), Aristotle refers human flourishing to 'the satisfaction of those desires which will lead to and constitute successful human living' (p.90) and we have to 'use our own reasons and intelligence in creating, obtaining, employing, and using the needed goods of life' (p.94). As human beings are social animals (Rasmussen, 1999), human flourishing will only be possible when individual rights is protected in the wider socio-economic and political context (Rasmussen, 1989, p.95).

Rasmussen (1999) characterizes human flourishing in various ways. While human flourishing is individualized and morally diverse and is found in one's own action to actualise one's unique potentialities, it is also an 'inclusive end' that embraces basic goods and needs such as health, friendship and pleasure as well as integrity, temperance, courage, qualities that mean little if human beings are not social animals (op cit., 1999, pp.3, 4, 5, 9, 10 and 12). So human flourishing also depends on the community and culture. As argued by De Ruyter (2004, p.384), flourishing human beings have to be 'authors of their own conception' rather than passive receivers of ideologies implanted into their mind. In other words, the rights to human flourishing require subjective efforts as well as a nurturing objective environment.

If human flourishing concerns the satisfying of body needs, the fulfilment of the mind's desire and the nurturing of interrelationships among unique human beings, then we have to re-examine the lived experiences of our urban lives. We have to remind ourselves that 'every social space is the outcome of a process with many aspects and many contributing currents, signifying and no-signifying, perceived and directly experienced, practical and theoretical, every social space has a history one invariably grounded in nature' (Lefebvre, 1991, p.110). In other words, space is always 'a field of action and a basis of action' (op cit., p.191). And only when it is used, filled with actions by wilful individuals to actualize their potentialities in their nested ecosystem that promotes human flourishing of all, then 'real wealth' is produced (Lefebvre, 1991, p.341).

The awakening to people's right to human flourishing, to a good human life, has a lot of implications on the production of space and hence placemaking and urban planning, an important tool in the modern era to allocate land to different types of uses. If human flourishing has to be a set of highly individualistic self-directed actions that aim at actualizing human beings' differentiated potentialities in order to achieve each and every human being's personal flourishing, these actions are bound to produce uncountable patterns of interactions that will produce numerous spaces of differentiation. So how can we develop public spaces that nourish rich human relationship?

The Importance of Public Space-making for Human Flourishing in an Ecosystem of Life

Our conception of public space-making goes beyond place-making efforts in the public realm of neighbourhoods. What we would like to suggest is a need to systematically 'reframe' the production of public spaces for the needs of individuals nested within their families that in turn are building blocks of a community. These can only be realized through a value transition or a reframing process in the ecosystem of life (Ng, Mak, Wong and Cheung, 2015; Shaffler and Kipp, 2009, p.64).

Public Space to Cultivate Mindfulness

At an individual level, public space is required for people to relax, to enjoy and meditate—this is very important for people’s wellbeing and mental health. In our everyday living, our mind wanders all the time, preventing us to be fully aware of our perceptions, sensations, feelings and thoughts in the here-and-now, very often leading to unhappiness (Killingsworth and Gibert, 2010; Ng et al, 2015, p.59). One way to overcome this is to cultivate mindfulness. Indeed, the practice of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2009) can develop our moment-to-moment awareness and the insight into patterns of thoughts, feelings and interactions with others; thereby skillfully choosing helpful responses rather than automatically reacting (Ng, et al, 2015). Being mindful also helps us understand the transience of all feelings, thoughts and material phenomena, make us less self-centred so that we can appreciate the interconnectedness with other people (op cit., 2015). Being mindful makes us more sensitive to our own and others’ needs and concerns.

In a mixed-income and tenure housing project in South Bronx, New York City, a green living environment is provided to mix private and public green open space, to connect gardens through a series of stairways and to provide rooftop community gardens to encourage residents to spend time outside, to engage and communicate with one another and practise mindfulness¹ (Figure 2). The developer also engaged an NGO to educate and train the residents so that the garden maintained and managed by the local community (see footnote 1). By siting these green spaces with other communal facilities, the design not only promotes physical activeness but also opportunities for residents to meet one another and develop friendship, trust and respect, all important qualities for human flourishing. Hence the public realm is extremely important for the physical and mental well-being of local residents.

Figure 2:



Source: http://www.huduser.org/portal/casestudies/study_10012012_1.html

¹ Information extracted from http://www.huduser.org/portal/casestudies/study_10012012_1.html.

Public Space for Building Resilient Families

Mindful individuals help build more resilient families because of a greater capacity and ability to identify strengths in other family members to reframe issues and problems collectively so that adversities can be seen as opportunities for growth and development. As argued by McQuaide and Ehrenrich (1997), strength involves 'the capacity to cope with difficulties, to maintain functioning in the face of stress, to bounce back in the face of significant trauma, to use external challenges as a stimulus for growth, and to use social supports as a source of resilience' (p. 203). Hence, mindful individuals in a community with good social support such as the project in South Bronx above will help nourish more resilient families.

Healthy public space is therefore indispensable to nurturing healthy families. How can public space meet the socio-economic and environmental needs of families? This is directly related to the 'use values' of public places. Unlike 'exchange values' that is positivist, normative and rationalistic, determined by professional or expert knowledge, 'use values' is empirical, humanistic, emancipatory, closely related to the intrinsic understanding of places and hence offering myriad opportunities to practise creative placemaking (Adhya, 2012, p.218). According to common sense, the nurturing of healthy and resilient families requires the provision of public facilities such as hospitals, schools, swimming pools, recreational facilities, parks, libraries, community halls, sports or indoor sports hall, police station and fire station etc. And as far as possible, these public facilities should be embedded within a network of 'blue' (rivers or streams) and 'green' open spaces along easily accessible transport facilities, with priority given to non-motorized transport such as walking and cycling. Public space can also accommodate private activities such as street markets and shops to promote local economic developments, providing cheaper food, daily necessities, entertainment, employment and a place for families to gather and mingle. Family-oriented and friendly public space is indispensable for building strength-based families (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Family-friendly Public Space



Source: <http://bettercities.net/sites/default/files/familiesenjoyingspace-prov.jpg>.



Source: https://farm8.staticflickr.com/7104/13809799753_f159f8fe69_b.jpg.

In Taiwan, there has been a policy for communities to sponsor the design, planning and management of neighbourhood parks. In Hsinchu City, the owner of a shopping mall practises his corporate social responsibility through sponsoring physically and mentally challenged youths to maintain a neighbouring park. This not only provides this disadvantaged group working opportunities, relieving the burden of their families to a certain extent, the work also provides opportunities for community members to know these challenged youths and appreciate what they have done to the community (Huang, 2014) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Sponsoring the Physically and Mentally Challenged in Maintaining a Park

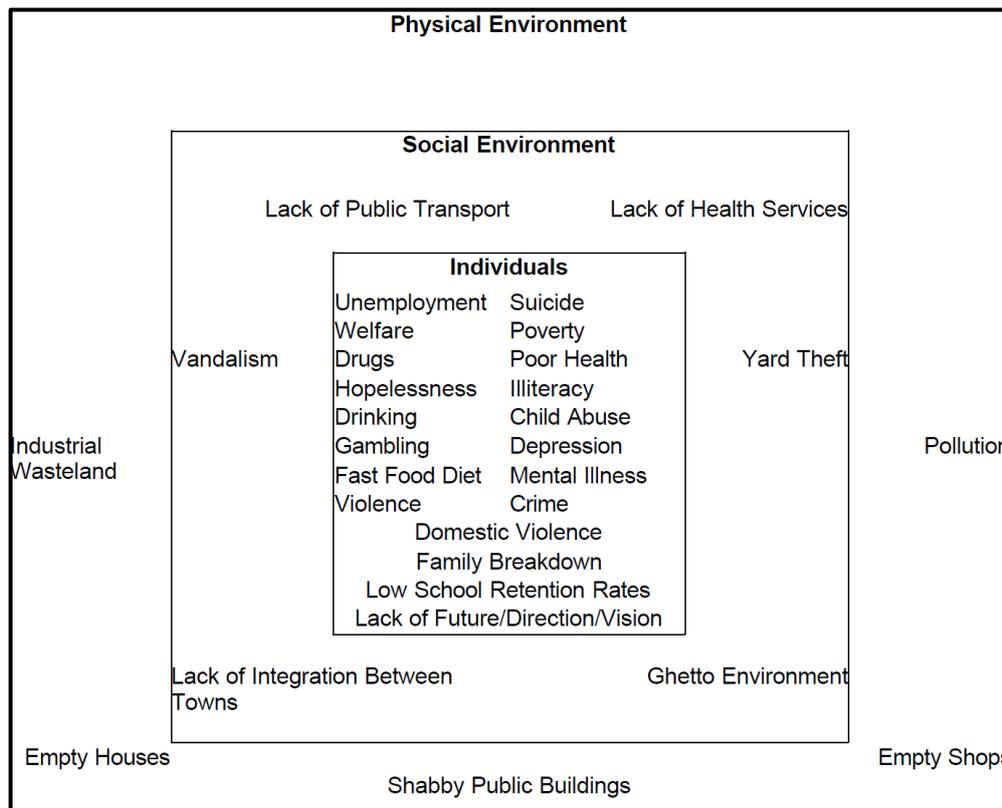


Source: <http://img.chinatimes.com/newsphoto/2014-12-05/656/20141205004528.jpg>.

Public Space for Building Sustainable Communities

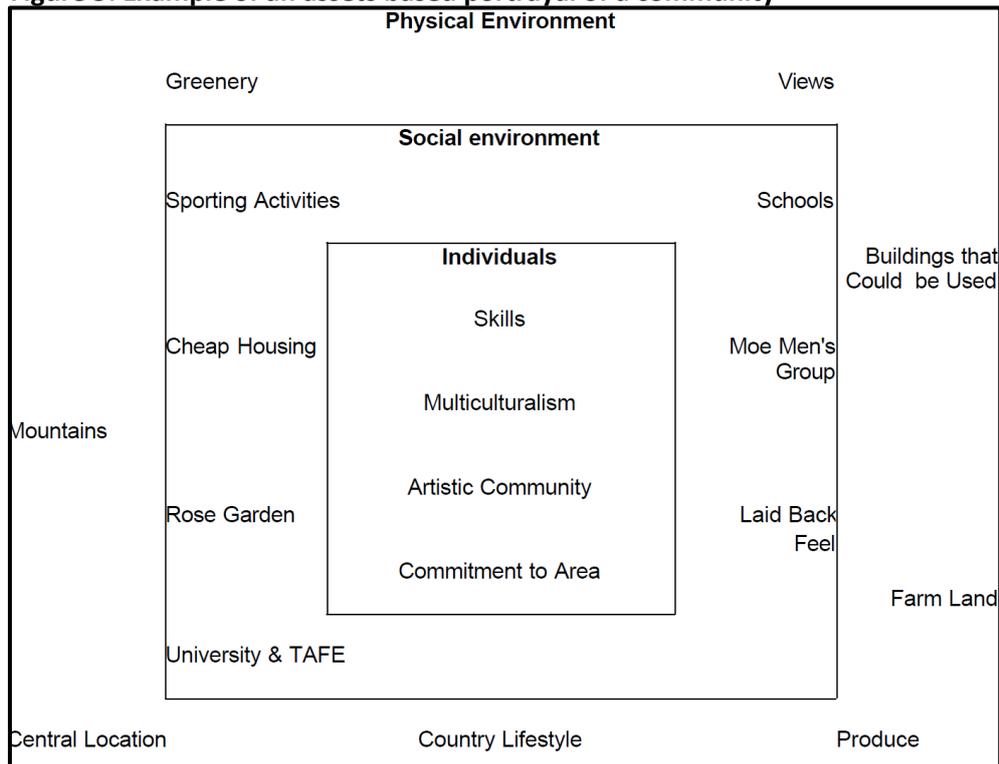
At the community level, the planning process has to refocus from viewing only problems and issues to the making of more creative and sustainable communities based on the strengths and ‘gifts’ of community members (Cameron and Gibson, 2001) (Figures 4 and 5). To nurture human flourishing, environmental and social factors are equally important in the economic development of communities. Figures 6 and 7 capture the key aspects of sustainable development and sustainable communities. As advocated by the Great Transition Initiative and the Earth Charter (Kates et al, 2006 cited in Gasper, 2009, p.27), society needs to change ‘from the values of consumerism... to a focus instead on quality of life; from individualism to human solidarity; and from domination of nature to ecological sensitivity and stewardship’ (Gasper, 2009, p.27). Similarly Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy (2013) advocate taking back the economy so that we can all survive well and equitably together and through the economic surplus we can enrich the healthiness of our society and environment as well as wealth of our future generations. The market, therefore, is not just for blind growth but for encountering others and consuming sustainably. The whole idea is to care for the maintaining, replenishing and growing of our natural and cultural commons (op cit., 2013, Kindle Locations 160-164). This paper argues that it is very important to (re)constitute the public realm based on these important principles of boosting human solidarity, quality of life and ecological stewardship.

Figure 4: Examples of a needs based portrayal of a community



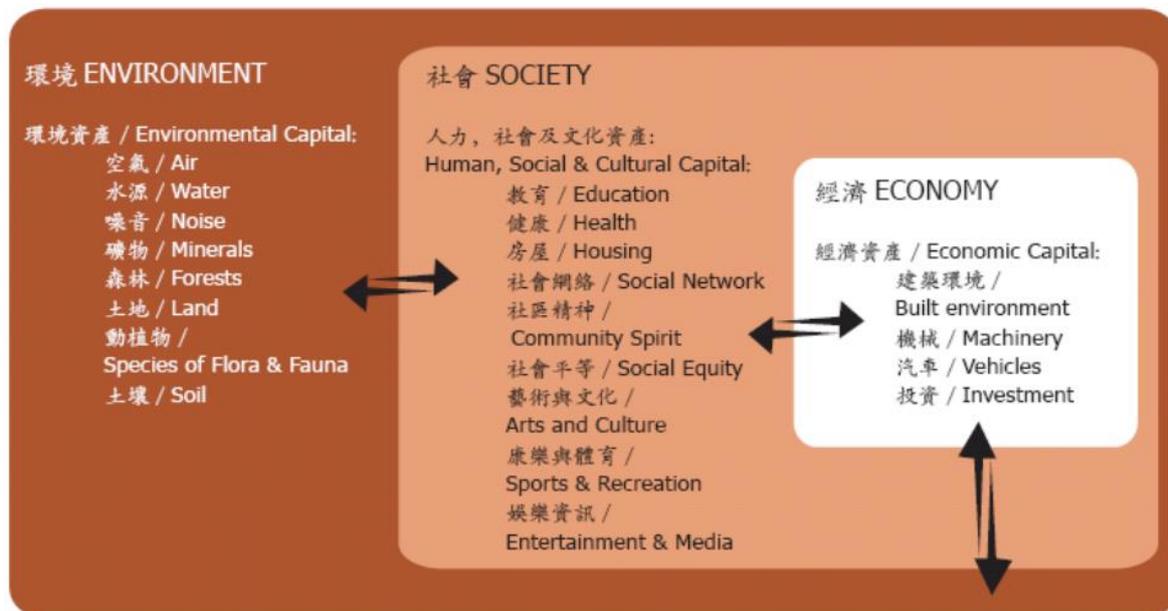
Source: Cameron and Gibson, 2001, p.50.

Figure 5: Example of an assets based portrayal of a community



Source: Cameron and Gibson, 2001, p.51.

Figure 6: Nested Sustainable Development



Source: Ng and Chan, 2005, p.14.

Figure 7: The Egan Wheel: Key Aspects of Sustainable Communities



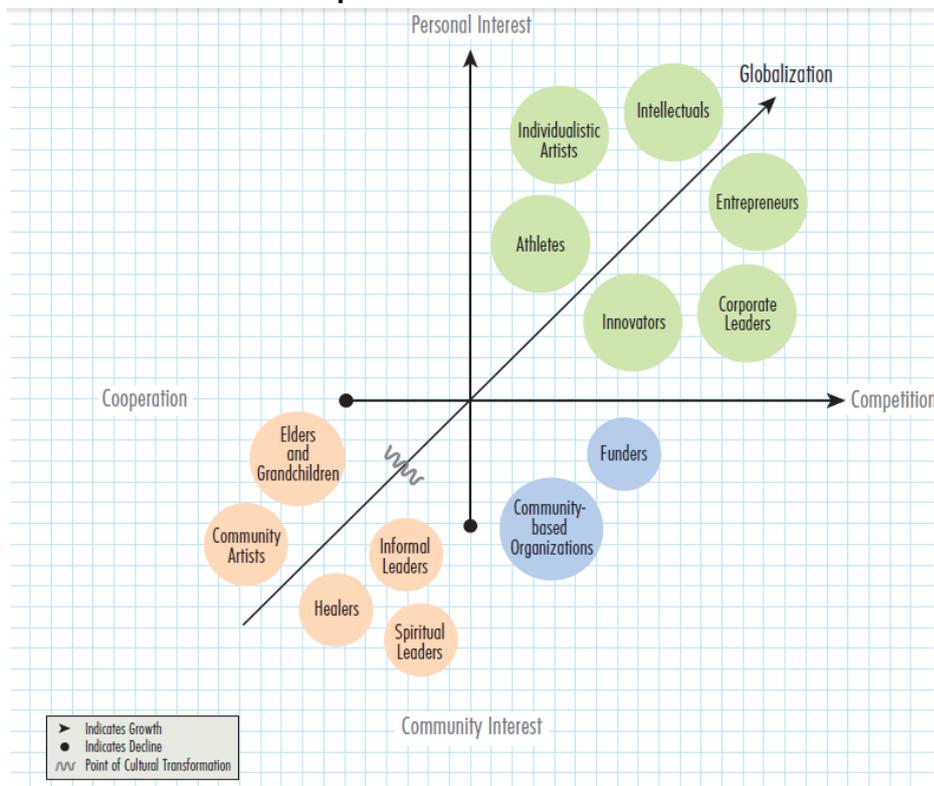
Source: Source: Academy for Sustainable Communities, *Making Places: Creating Sustainable Communities*, <http://www.citized.info/pdf/commarticles/ASC%20MAKING%20PLACES.pdf>, p.7.

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate how we should rebalance the spaces for wealth creation and public services vis-a-vis personal growth and replenishment. And the prime goal of rebalancing spatial allocation for these activities is to nurture the human soul. One effective way to build places for human flourishing is to use place-making techniques to develop public spaces. Place-making involves the planning, design, management and programming of public spaces through community participation and engagement. Socio-economic and cultural activities are organized to ‘capitalize on a local community’s assets, inspiration and potential, ultimately creating good public spaces that promote people’s health, happiness and wellbeing’.²

Besides, these public spaces allow people from all walks of life to come together to meet, share ideas or local knowledge, thus facilitating neighbourhood connections and relationships, as well as the building of social capitals and social network. Figure 10 outlines the important aspects of place-making in building sustainable communities.

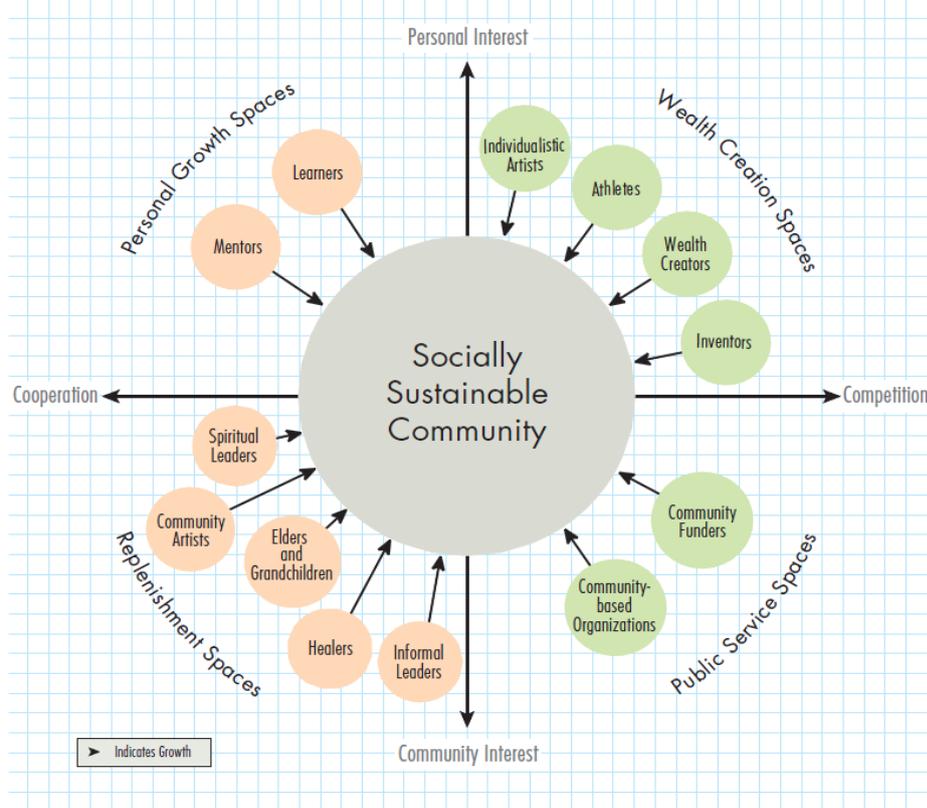
² Source: Project for Public Space, What is Place-making?, from http://www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/, accessed on 20 July 2014.

Figure 8: Imbalanced Distribution of Spaces for Wealth Accumulation vs. Spaces for Growth and Replenishment



Source: Wildflowers Institute, 2005, p.5.

Figure 9: Balances Spaces for Building Socially Sustainable Community



Source: Wildflowers Institute, 2005, p.5.

Figure 10: Place-making



Source: <http://www.pps.org/reference/grplacefeat/>

Place-making practices that aim at building sustainable communities often attract people to mingle and interact in the public realm, the outdoor convivial spaces with free natural sunlight, wind breezes, trees and other green environment. A revisit of the key attributes in sustainable communities in Figure 7 proves that low carbon living is encouraged in the building of sustainable communities: walkable and accessible, environmentally friendly, inclusive, safe and fair, with a vibrant local economy in creatively designed and collectively managed lived urban spaces. All these encourage us to be part of a community rich in socio-economic and environmental capital, rather than just consumers in a growing market.

Our Right to Human Flourishing and Place-making Public Spaces

We have so far tried to explain why public space is important to the flourishing of the human soul at the individual, family and community level. If the functions of public space were so important for human flourishing, people should have a right to a carefully constituted public realm. Nussbaum (1997-8, p.292) defines rights as 'combined capabilities to function in various ways'. Aye Rand argues that 'rights are a moral concept... that preserves and protects individual morality in a social context' (Rand, 1964, p.47, cited in Rasmussen 1989, p.99). Hohfeld (SEP, undated) identifies four incidents of rights. Active rights that include privilege and power such as the privilege of having a nurturing public realm allows me to use it and have power to develop my potential. Passive rights include claim and immunity rights. In other words, my claim over the public realm imposes a duty

on others to respect this right of mine and make the appropriate provision and the public realm should be immunized from vandalism or transformation into spaces for say ‘exchange value’. Of the latter rights, claim right is a positive right, that is, a right that demands the provision by others some service or good. Immunity rights are, however, negative rights, rights not to be interfered. Table 2 below tries to capture the various types of rights for human flourishing in the nested ecological systems.

Table 2: Different Types of Rights to Human Flourishing

	ACTIVE RIGHTS		PASSIVE RIGHTS	
	Privilege	Power	Claim (positive)	Immunity (negative)
Right to individual physical & mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practising mindfulness • Imagining, thinking & reasoning • Loving, caring, grieving, feeling • Having fun 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To reflect critically • To be composed in all situation • To connect with others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic needs • Health and nourishment • Nature and environment • Recreation & enjoyment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free from oppression of all kinds (e.g. Iris M. Young’s five faces of oppression³)
Right to resilient families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strength-based perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To understand & accept • To grow in adversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family-friendly work environment • Family-friendly social amenities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No discrimination
Right to sustainable communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social network & social capital accumulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To protect local economic development • To conserve sense of community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To place making & the development of sustainable communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not to be demolished • Not to be displaced

Source: author.

These ‘rights’ are instrumental for us to think through when public spaces are planned and designed. Lefebvre (1991, p.22) argues that ‘[w]here there is space there is being’. If there were only spaces for exchange values, there could be no space for ‘being’, not to mention human flourishing. As argued by the Wildflowers Institute (2005, p.3) ever since the advent of capitalism, spaces for wealth accumulation and public services as dictated by the state have been growing whereas spaces for personal growth and replenishment have been diminishing. Indeed the growing hegemony of spaces for exchange values is often aided by the state through formal planning and development without the public noticing. No wonder Lefebvre argues that ‘space is a social product’ (1991, p.26), to serve as ‘a tool of thought and of action’, ‘a means of production’, ‘a means of control’, ‘of domination, of power’. Hence, it is important to realize that ‘space is social morphology’ (op cit, p.94) and could possess ‘terrifying hidden power’ (pp.263, 269) behind a cloak of rationality (p.282) such as

³ The five faces of oppression include exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (Young, 1990, pp.39-65).

land use zoning (p.317) that regulates life (p.358). Therefore, spatial practices that homogenise and reduce differences need to be counteracted because this cannot be spaces for human flourishing.

In this paper, we try to argue that we need to realize our right to human flourishing through a right to space. As human flourishing cannot be achieved without a value transition or reframing of the ecosystem that embeds human lives, we have to realize that the production of space for exchange values, for city competition, for economic prosperity is just one part of a much larger ecosystem. Instead of reducing human beings to economically calculating rational beings, we have to constantly remember that our well-being is related to one another in the nested micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems (Shaffler and Kipp, 2009, p.64). 'The Aristotelian holds that money is merely a tool of human functioning and has value in human life only insofar as it subserves these functionings' (Nussbaum, 1992, p.231). Hence, more money is not always better. Indeed, in 'Aristotle's ideal city, fully half of the land is publicly owned, and the rest is 'common in use', meaning its produce can be taken by anyone who is in need' (Nussbaum, 1997-8, p.298). We need to recognize the interconnectedness of our collective existence and restore an ecologically integrated perspective before we can 're-perceive' (Shapiro *et al*, 2006, p.377) what options and possibilities do we have in producing social spaces for human flourishing.

If human flourishing concerns the satisfying of body needs, the fulfilment of the mind's desire and the nurturing of interrelationships among unique human beings, we have to re-examine the lived experiences of our urban lives. We have to remind ourselves that 'every social space is the outcome of a process with many aspects and many contributing currents, signifying and no-signifying, perceived and directly experienced, practical and theoretical, every social space has a history one invariably grounded in nature' (Lefebvre, 1991, p.110). In other words, space is always 'a field of action and a basis of action' (op cit., p.191). And only when it is used, filled with actions by wilful individuals to actualize their potentialities in their nested ecosystem that promotes human flourishing of all, then 'real wealth' is produced (Lefebvre, 1991, p.341).

To realize the rights to human flourishing, the goal of public planning has to focus on the nurturing of people's 'combined capabilities' through plural and local specifications (Nussbaum, 1997-8, p.293). We cannot afford to be contented with the single-minded pursuit of economic growth, the satisfying of basic needs. Instead, we should honour the basic rights of people to co-generate knowledge through their contextual lived experiences, social and spatial practices and have a say in the forms of decision making that affect their flourishing in their uniquely local and diversified ways (Heron and Reason, 1997, p.228). Citizens should be vigilant in practising 'mindfulness' (Kabat-Zinn, 2009), to refuse an automatic adoption of external thoughts, to 're-perceive' real and available options for their well-being (Shapiro *et al*, 2006, p.377). These will have huge implications on our education system, our work ethics and ways we bond with our family members and fellow citizens.

The integrated ecosystem approach to our social space and to our understanding of human flourishing put families in a uniquely important position. As Morse argues (1999, p.290), 'the family does a very important job that no other institution can do' as the family is the nurturing ground for our abilities 'to trust, cooperate, and self-restrain'. 'Without loving

families, no society can long govern itself, for the family teaches the skills of individual self-governance' (op cit., p.290). The question is how to encourage families to adopt 'strength-based' approaches to transform the problems they face into opportunities for growth (Walsh, 2006, pp.xiii, 7). How to leverage community or societal resources to meet the needs of families rather than allowing the shortage of resources within one's family to produce further harm, especially in a hostile capitalist work environment where firms try to make the fewest possible commitments to its workers presenting 'a constant assault on the possibility of happy families' (Marris, 1998, p.17).

The implication of the right to human flourishing in the planning and design of communal space is even more evident. Such space cannot be produced by professionals through centralized institutions. It inevitably involves an ecosystem of actors or interested parties (Lefebvre, 1991, p.419), with a high degree of 'self-management' (p.416) so that spaces can be transformed into 'myriad possibilities' (p.423). Indeed communities in the building of our future cities have to learn the skills of asset-based development. Like families, the focus is to recognise human talents and gifts. Human beings should be inspired to act, to develop their potential, to invoke their self-direction to produce spaces of differences in order for their potentialities to be actualized. It is a co-generation of knowledge about ways of attaining well-being through people's lived experiences and social practices. This sifting and winnowing and sharing of real life experiences will make the localized production of space more inclusive, encompassing, more democratic and just, more accessible for human flourishing (Horsfall and Titchen, 2009, p.158).

Thus, the planning standards and guidelines should provide for every community, every neighbourhood spaces of their own, spaces that they can use and practise collective placemaking. If the rights to human flourishing were realized, everyone will have the opportunity to follow his or her senses to actualize their potentialities to serve one another—the co-produced spatial outcomes will be a lot more uncertain and yet pluralistic, convivial, surprising and sustainable!

Acknowledgement

The work described in this paper was supported by a General Research Fund from the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong (RGC Reference No. : CUHK447713).

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