

Social Infrastructure

Underpinning the success of cities

We build the objects and order the spaces around us – sidewalks, roads, sewers, water lines, buildings, mobile phones, and data lines – to serve our needs. This infrastructure, in turn, profoundly shapes us as individuals and as societies. In fact, it is our social infrastructure, the patterns of our relationships with each other as individuals and as groups, that gives rise to our physical infrastructure. Municipal leaders are well aware of the Canadian infrastructure deficit after years of much-needed warnings. The social infrastructure of our municipalities is equally vital, although it seems to be less prominent in our thinking.

Leadership Opportunity

Why bother about the patterns of our individual and collective relationships? Isn't that a sideline, something to which other sectors should pay attention? On the contrary, these human factors in our community building represents an opportunity for deeper innovation in municipal leadership.

If the people we plan for don't show up or decide to leave, municipalities end up with very expensive surplus infrastructure. Interesting examples of this can be seen in the places where changing labour patterns, natural disasters, or climate shifts lead to depopulation: people move on and leave behind the structures that they built to serve their needs. Now-iconic examples are Detroit and New Orleans in the United States; but, Canadian communities from Saint John, New Brunswick to Prince Rupert, British Columbia have

also faced the challenges of managing population decreases. The most severe category comprises towns and communities that have been abandoned completely, of which there are dozens across Canada.

Social change that is faster than physical change is the dynamic at play in both depopulation and rapid overpopulation, each with attendant difficulties. Even if population numbers are static, changing patterns within cities can create challenges as families shift, people age, interests in downtowns or suburbs respectively lead to new density patterns, and so on. We may want the economic, environmental, and social benefits of higher physical densities closer to downtowns – a reversal of the past decades of suburban flight – but, we will have to live with what we have built in our suburban areas for a long time. If suburbs are deemed to make social development difficult, including long-term negative health effects, it isn't something that can be changed next year or even next decade. The physical and social infrastructures of our communities are in a constant flow of interactions, some beneficial and others detrimental.

Paying Attention to the Social Environment

Municipalities carefully work on trying to re-use, re-purpose, and maintain their physical infrastructure because we can't afford to keep starting over. Our social ecology in villages, towns, cities, and regions must be cared for with even greater vigilance

and understanding. Strong, resilient, meaningful social environments cannot be established or fostered on a whim. Changing a policy here and there or embarking on short-term patchwork interventions will be inadequate where the social fabric is getting thin. Municipal governments have limited powers to act on the many factors that contribute to the growth or decay of social infrastructure; but, what they are able to do should be attended to with care and attention. There is room to increase awareness about how spatial planning, taxation, zoning, and other mechanisms create conditions that allow relational or social assets to grow, rather than decay.

A forthcoming book by Benjamin Barber, *If Mayors Ruled the World*, explores how the persistence of cities has made them key contexts for working out democracy, a concept more grounded than comparatively recent ideas of nations and nation states. He examines the roles of city mayors who are significantly shaping the landscape of their cities well beyond the built environment. Leoluca Orlando, Mayor of Palermo, Italy, took on the organized crime in his city as a means of giving it



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new life and opening up new possibilities. This was a social, not a physical, infrastructure issue that needed attention – one that Orlando took on at the risk of his own life. Such changes are a kind of social terraforming; but, instead of new land being created, space is opened up in the social landscape for democracy, equality, innovation, and freedom. Organized crime had displaced these functions and Palermo could not experience vitality without changing the social architecture of its economic activities.

As writer David Brooks' *The Social Animal*, industrial design company IDEO's Human Centered Design Toolkit, scholar Duncan Watts' *Six Degrees*, and many others have reminded us, we are all deeply woven into the profoundly complex web of social ecosystem. Cities, the physical objects, are the products of those interactions and city building must consider social interactions with great seriousness. Jane Jacobs' persistent presence at the top of the list of books most read by planners must certainly be partly due to her attentiveness to the human factors of streets, neighbourhoods, and cities. She noticed the intricate and vital patterns of human interactions at all scales in the city and the way in which the urban landscape enhanced or detracted from human interaction.

The most profound and powerful long-term innovations in cities will be social. Without people, cities are artifacts, ruins that we can study and excavate – but not something alive. The dynamics of the social landscape are evident in places like Lac-Mégantic, High River, and Slave Lake where rebuilding faces long struggles around issues of what people want and when they want it. Some are ready to build right away; others need more time to sort out what fire and flood have done to them psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally – in addition to the physical aspects of loss and changed fortunes. Such is the landscape of our social infrastructure.

Building Our Social Infrastructure

In addition to what is already done by municipalities, what can be done to

more fully attend to our social infrastructure? How can we avoid a social infrastructure deficit?

First, wherever we are actively and intelligently considering the physical and social infrastructure interactions, we must deepen and extend the habit. Integration of these dynamics is vital. If we make token gestures toward human factors, but don't find new ways to weave them together, we won't be able to reap the collective benefits of getting space, place, and people right. Where winning integration happens through design processes, genuine community engagement, and effective reflection on how physical development processes affect people, we can tell the story and learn from each other about those gains. The same must be true of when we get it wrong – streetscapes that don't lead to better community life, new developments that increase social isolation; and community institutions that get pushed to the margins.

Second, we must make adequate investments in understanding the state of our social infrastructure. Are people thriving? Are they finding their place? Who is? Who isn't? There are massive demographic shifts that will re-write certain aspects of our life together. Municipalities are not the causes of these shifts; but, they are increasingly being asked to work with the consequences. Research is not a trivial function or a luxury. We need to increase the quality and quantity of research that is linked to specific challenges, emerging trends, and possible opportunities. Can we find out sooner what is or is not working? Can we use research to solicit feedback from the people and systems that are essential to our collective quality of life? Innovations in sewer and waterline replacement have been a great help in attending to core city infrastructure needs. What are the social innovations that will offset the isolation, disengagement, and stress that people in our communities experience? We are beginning to see, for example, studies that show how social isolation can lead to health risks that are as significant as smoking, heart disease, and obesity. Cities and communities live with the consequences of such outcomes and are the

contexts where changes to those trends are possible.

Third, there are larger pieces of the social infrastructure to which municipal administrations can attend. In particular, the networks of institutions and organizations in cities must be better understood and more effectively engaged in processes beyond their own preoccupations. We often speak of citizenship in an individual sense – vote, volunteer, support good causes, look after your own property, and so on. But, what does institutional or organizational citizenship look like? Are all of the charities and not-for-profits that compose a significant part of urban landscapes working effectively together? Are the human capital, intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom of this sector being tapped for current and future design and development possibilities? An MIT study that compared the "Rust-belt" cities of Allentown, Pennsylvania and Youngstown, Ohio noted that the patterns of civic connectedness led to very different long-term outcomes when the steel industry collapsed – the social infrastructure was a pivotal influence.¹ In most cases, awareness of long-term structural and planning functions is almost non-existent. This is not about fault finding – it is about missed opportunities to establish practices that are at once more democratic, effective, innovative, and hopeful.

Conclusion

The dynamics at work in our communities can indeed be daunting: school boards and cities that don't talk except when they have to; rapidly shifting family patterns and relationships; immigration that leads to rapid increases in community members unfamiliar with local habits and processes; ongoing sprawl, despite attempts to change the pattern and explore alternatives; faith-based organizations as deep repositories of meaning and culture that have strong neighbourhood presence, but don't interact with planning processes at all; technology-mediated human interactions that aren't translating into stronger social fabric – the list could be multiplied. All of these dy-

namics are part of the social infrastructure of our communities.

What is hopeful is that we don't need to start at the beginning. Our communities are already profoundly social places. What is needed is a more conscious and effective consideration of the social infrastructure that contributes to thriving cities. New relationships can be established at institutional levels or strengthened where they already exist. Supporting institutions and organizations – places where citizenship, service to others, and learning happen – can be queried to see how their work might be en-

hanced by municipal governments. Just as small business has worked to improve its function by advocating for less red-tape, community organizations and institutions can work on finding ways to change the processes that limit their ability to effectively contribute to the city. Some organizations already do this extremely well but there is still a great distance to go. Challenges such as our aging population will put high demands on existing social structures, so that simply maintaining what we have will not be sufficient.²

Without a thriving social infrastructure, the potential of our cities will be

significantly limited. The quality of human interaction in our homes, streets, neighbourhoods, and myriad organizations will, over time, be the feature that determines the long-term viability of the places where we live. Investment of perennially limited municipal resources must reflect strong commitments to not only preserve what we already enjoy, but to extend and deepen it. *MW*

1 <<http://web.mit.edu/ipc/publications/pdf/04-002.pdf>>.

2 <www2.macleans.ca/2013/09/03/the-curse-of-small-families>.

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