Critical Analysis of Urban Livability Measures Based on the Perspective of Placemaking

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Abstract. The livability level of an urban area is a substantial measure of one’s sense of connection to their neighborhood. Urban livability is often measured based on various measurable aspects such as stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education, and infrastructure as stated in EIU’s Global Liveability Ranking. However, these indicators often neglect the nature and processes by which places are made that form people’s sense of place much more than the physical availability of urban amenities. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the critical perspective and contribution that placemaking brings to the measures of urban livability. This theoretical study analyzes key concepts and frameworks from secondary data such as reports and journal papers with the inductive content analysis method. Through the lens of placemaking principles, the gaps in many urban livability measures are identified. It is proposed that urban livability measure should incorporate placemaking principles of being community-driven, local assets, bottom-up, and trans-disciplinary to enhance the human-environment quality of urban livability.

1. Introduction

Urban livability and the ability to measure it are increasingly crucial as it affects people’s quality of life in cities. Well-known indexes have been developed to measure the livability level of a city, such as the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Global Liveability Index (EIU) [1], Mercer’s Quality of Living City Ranking [2], and Monocle’s Quality of Life Survey [3]. However, upon closer inspection, these notable urban livability measures do not include the placemaking concept which is a core issue of the social dimension within urban livability. Therefore, this study aims to highlight the critical perspective offered by the placemaking concept to the measure of urban livability. The following research questions guide the study: (1) How does placemaking offer a critical perspective on the concept and measure of urban livability? (2) How does the placemaking highlight the problem in urban livability measures?

1.1. Urban Livability Concept and Goals

Scholars have agreed on the multi-faceted and contested nature of the concept of livability within the context of urban design and planning [4,5,6]. Its concept is relative to the context of place, time, priorities based on the purpose of such measurements, and the value systems that govern the definer [4]. In this study, the concept being highlighted is the one given by Michael Pacione, where he expounded urban livability as a behavioral paradigm upon the relationship between humans and their interaction...
with the environments rather than an inherent quality of the urban environment itself [4]. It highlights an inherent concern for the social dimension regarding urban quality as distinguished from the environmental dimension [4,6]. Furthermore, urban livability is aimed at achieving a humane quality or the condition being suitable for human living [4]. This fundamental concern with the dynamic human-environment relationship signifies a strong notion of placemaking within the urban livability concept.

1.2. Urban Livability Measures
An urban area requires clear measurements in assessing its livability. Amongst many urban livability measures, some popular annual rankings display the list of liveable cities across the world according to a quantifiable score based on a set of indicators. In this study, three rankings are being investigated in detail, namely the EIU’s Global Liveability Index [1], Mercer’s Quality of Living City Ranking [2], and Monocle’s Quality of Life Survey [3]. These three examples are valid representations of urban livability measures due to their world-wide scope of implementation, well-known reputation within popular media, and their purpose in assisting business decision-makers [6]. Each of the three measurements has different interpretations of livability. Following the multi-interpretative nature of its definitions, the indicators for measuring urban livability becomes dependent upon the specific definition of livability of each measurement, the purpose of such measurements, and the scope of application. What becomes mandatory is the identification of clear causal relationships or interdependencies between the proposed indicators and the goals of the urban assessment [7,8]. Furthermore, the indicators of the urban assessment are developed through multidisciplinary inputs from politics, economics, public policy to urban design and planning sectors disciplines [7]. The perspectives from various disciplines are needed to complement each other’s input due to the complexity in analyzing cities. For instance, the EIU’s Global Liveability Ranking was developed by a group of analyst comprising of expertise from a wide range of disciplines of public policy, economics, finance, international relations, politics and many more [1]. The trans-disciplinary approach is beneficial to the quality of the measurements.

1.3. Placemaking Concept
The concept and definition of placemaking are multidimensional, showing the multi-faceted issues with which it can interact. Inherently, the term concerns the relationship of people, place, and people’s meaning of the place at its core. According to the Project for Public Spaces (PPS), placemaking is defined as the process of shaping public places through the collaborative sharing of values to create meaningful environments for the community [9]. Meaning of place is strengthened through placemaking that connects humans to their environment. Moreover, the placemaking as a concept is tightly connected to the idea of sense of place. The urban phenomenologist, Christian Norberg-Schulz in his book ‘Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture’ (1980) developed the understanding of the sense of place as genius loci that represents the places’ characters and their meanings for people, including both physical and symbolic values in built and natural environments [11,12]. Meanwhile, Edward Relph in his writing on place and placelessness (1976) formulated a sense of place as a spatial and emotional connection between people and their environment [10,13]. By having a strong connection with place, the community fosters a strong sense of identity and sense of place on physical, cultural, and social aspects [9]. Furthermore, placemaking as a process has been well-characterized by being iterative, democratic, ‘bottom-up’, seeking community’s engagement and letting the placemaking strategies being formed by the local community [10]. It is opposed to the ‘top-down’ approaches where stakeholders outside of the community impose policy or strategies on the community with no or minimal engagement with the local people. Furthermore, the quality of being ‘grassroot’ is reinforced by optimizing local assets and wisdom in any urban intervention. In summary, placemaking is founded upon some key principles that contribute to the process. These principles highlight placemaking as being [7,8]:

1. Community-Driven, through developing local community assets and bottom-up
2. Transformative place-focused change, instead of design-focused
3. Trans-disciplinary, with partners across disciplinary
4. Context-specific observations
5. Visionary, coming out of the community’s identity
6. Adaptable and Flexible, where places are created in a short time with continuous refinements
7. Sociable, whereby people may connect
8. Focused on creating destinations, instead of car-centric
9. Function before form
10. Collaborative work by all stakeholders
11. Dynamic, where it continues to evolve according to change

These principles highlight the nature of placemaking as a social process that continually affects changes within a place.

2. Method
This study used a theoretical study as an overarching research methodology. The chosen method is appropriate where new explorations on pre-existing concepts are being analyzed from an unprecedented perspective [14]. The literature review was conducted to identify concept definitions, key themes, and challenges. Data collection was using secondary data sources such as reports and examples collected from precedent research papers from peer-reviewed academic journals to ensure validity and reliability. Analysis of data was conducted using inductive content analysis to see any relational qualities which give reference to hypothesis formulation [15]. It was done by the research peer group containing four people with disciplines from architecture and urban planning with a high agreement rate to ensure the internal reliability of the result and analysis.

3. Result
3.1. Positioning Placemaking within Urban Livability
In this study, placemaking is positioned as a process that is supplementary to the main concept of urban livability. The concept of placemaking is aligned with the nature of urban livability by being grounded on the relationship between humans and the urban environment or the social and behavioral dimension of looking at a place. Moreover, both concepts share the same goal of achieving good quality urban places for suitable human living. A review of the literature indicates that placemaking strategies are often tied to the goal of improving the livability of the place [16,17]. Community-initiated urban development plans such as community gatherings have resulted in stronger social connectedness and attachment which improved in creating a livable neighborhood [17]. Each principle of placemaking such as being place-specific and community-driven contributes to the strengthening of the community’s relationship with the urban place. Therefore, placemaking is the process towards which urban livability can reach the goal of creating meaningful environments for the community.

3.2. Identifying Main Issues in Urban Livability Measurements
Based on the analysis, it is conveyed some main issues regarding the rankings as an urban livability measurement. First, the definition of livability used in the measurement is often too broad and neglects the importance of the human-environment relationship that is integral to the concept of urban livability and placemaking. For example, the EIU’s Global Livability Ranking defines livability as the quality of living conditions with no specific reference to the social dimension of livability [1,2,3]. Second, the indicators and methods of measurements do not include the connection between the community and the urban place but rather objective in terms of the presence of amenities. As an example, Monocle’s Quality of Life Ranking include indicators that count the numbers of hospitals or transportation facility but does not address the qualitative issue of the community [6]. Third, the goal of the assessment does not serve the purpose of the community who is the direct user of the urban place, but rather for business purposes. For instance, the purpose of Mercer’s Quality of Living City Ranking is to inform fair expatriate allowances as part of employment mobility across cities [2].
4. Discussion

4.1. Limitations of Urban Livability Measures from The Perspective of Placemaking Concept
When the limitations of urban livability measures are being assessed according to the key principles of placemaking, it becomes apparent the lack in the human-environment relationship. A general definition of livability used in the rankings will not address the integral social dimension within placemaking. Following the definition of urban livability by Pacione [4], a good urban livability measure should start with a definition that emphasizes the connection between people and the urban environment. Moreover, the indicators used for urban livability measures in this study do not exhibit placemaking qualities. For instance, many indicators did not apply a community-driven approach but relied heavily on ‘top-down’ approaches. The evaluation was done without close engagement with the community itself as an important stakeholder contributing to the livability of the place. Moreover, many assessments on urban livability lean towards the tangible or physical aspects while minimal evaluation of the intangible or relational aspects of a place. It becomes a critical gap since the core of urban livability is people’s behavior towards their environment, not just the availability of social spaces or merely accounting scoring or ranking [18]. The presence of an amenity or organization for civic and social involvement does not equal to the actual building of the community. The sense of place should be nurtured through iterative and continuous feedback from the community’s local wisdom to understand the community’s emotional and spatial connection to their environment [8]. As a consequence, the indicators that are chosen for the measurements fail to address the connection between people and the urban environment. Moreover, the goal of the urban livability rankings is contradicting to the community-focused nature of placemaking, since it is benefitting for strategic financial decision making and not for the improvement of the local community. The result from such urban livability measurements does not improve the local people’s sense of engagement with the urban environment directly, but predominantly advantageous only for people with high socio-economic life standard [6]. This creates an ironic situation, where these people are supposedly the main subject being impacted by the urban quality of a place. Furthermore, the urban livability rankings show a minimal contribution from urban design discipline and predominated by financial, international relations, and public policy sectors. Without neglecting the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach in formulating an index for city’s livability assessment, it is crucial to bring forth aspects of placemaking that are unique to urban design and planning discipline as a supplement to other aspects. An unbalance view into the measure may result in an incomprehensive assessment of urban livability.

4.2. Urban Livability Measure to incorporate Placemaking Principles
From this study, it is argued that the understanding of placemaking is critically needed in developing a community-focused urban livability measure. By considering placemaking as a process with unique sets of principles, a specific indicator may be developed. Each principle of placemaking such as place-focused change, trans-disciplinary, collaborative, bottom-up, and inspired by local assets should be addressed and translated into measurable sets of questions based on qualitative data. The development of placemaking-induced urban livability measures will ensure a better assessment of the community’s engagement to urban place.

5. Conclusion
The assessment of urban livability needs to consider the placemaking concept behind the making of the community. From this study, it is proposed that placemaking is the process towards which urban livability may achieve a good and humane urban quality for living. The understanding of placemaking’s key principles such as community-driven, visionary, sociable, and trans-disciplinary highlight the gaps in urban livability rankings; which are: the low community participation, minimal measure on relational
or intangible aspects, and the minimal contribution from discipline in urban design and planning. The conclusion of this paper is written with the hope that it may be continued by conducting a field study and first-source data collection from a specific case study to implement the placemaking-induced urban livability measure as a topic to be furthered researched.

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