

The neighbourhood unit adequacy: An analysis of the case of Gaza, Palestine



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ABSTRACT

Urban planning in the Gaza Strip faces several challenges as a result of rapid population growth and limited available resources. Planning for housing development in Gaza is based on the neighbourhood unit concept. However, it is not clear to what extent this trend is responsive to local housing needs, and what should be done to improve it. This paper presents the results of a survey of local housing specialists followed by a real-time case study of neighbourhood planning. The study concludes that the use of neighbourhood unit concept as a planning base is appropriate for the Gaza Strip, considering the social context and the limited size of the local housing projects, which requires an incremental development policy. However, several challenges remain, including the absence of a national housing policy and unified legislation, fund shortages, and land limitations. The study recommends to policy makers that adequacy of this social-oriented planning model should be investigated considering the principle of localisation instead of standardisation. This is essential in avoiding the absolute rejection or adoption of this model on the one hand, and in ensuring a subjective process of reinventing rather than mere borrowing on the other one.

1. Introduction

The concept of neighbourhood unit has been commonly implemented in several places since its emergence in the 1920s (Lawhon, 2009). This includes developed and developing countries, where diverse social, economic, and urban contexts could be distinguished. However, the neighbourhood unit concept succeeded to cross national boundaries and spread throughout the world (Lu, 2006). As will be discussed in Section 2 of this study, several early and recent studies have questioned adequacy of this concept in response to the on-going development of urban planning and modern life requirements. This argument is highly dependent on the local conditions of each specific urban context. There are in fact insufficient debates in this regard with reference to the Gaza Strip, Palestine. This is essential given that the neighbourhood unit concept is widely used in Gaza as a planning base of the new mass housing projects (MPWH, 2016).

Thus, this study aims to investigate adequacy of the neighbourhood unit planning method in the Gaza Strip considering the different criticisms found in the literature. It also aims to identify the required interventions in this regard to respond to the challenges that face neighbourhood unit planning considering the Gaza Strip situation. Several aspects are discussed in the context of questioning neighbourhood adequacy to the Gaza Strip and the possible aspects of improvement. This includes neighbourhood social potential, accessibility, traffic and street patterns, services and housing provision. This is investigated

through a survey of local housing specialists followed by a real-time case study of neighbourhood planning. However, it is essential prior to the field study to introduce two topics: the neighbourhood unit as a planning concept, and the reality of housing planning in the Gaza Strip.

2. The neighbourhood unit concept

Planning for housing witnessed significant development at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the Industrial Revolution. The transition from rural to urban life led to the emergence of several planning proposals. These proposals aimed to keep pace with the rapid urbanisation and population growth, and included a variety of planning solutions such as the garden city, super block, and neighbourhood unit. Clarence Perry introduced the neighbourhood unit concept in 1929 as a part of the published Regional Plan of New York (Lawhon, 2009). Perry claimed that this concept boosts the collective social responsibility, which helps in creating a healthy urban and social environment. This offered a practical framework for urban growth that has been widely implemented in the existing and newly established residential areas (Allam, 1991). Furthermore, the uniqueness of each neighbourhood unit helps in the creation of the required visual interest and sense of place (Patricios, 2002).

Although researchers have not agreed upon a single definition of the neighbourhood unit, it can be generally defined as a specific geographic area and functionally as a set of social networks (Schuck & Rosenbaum,

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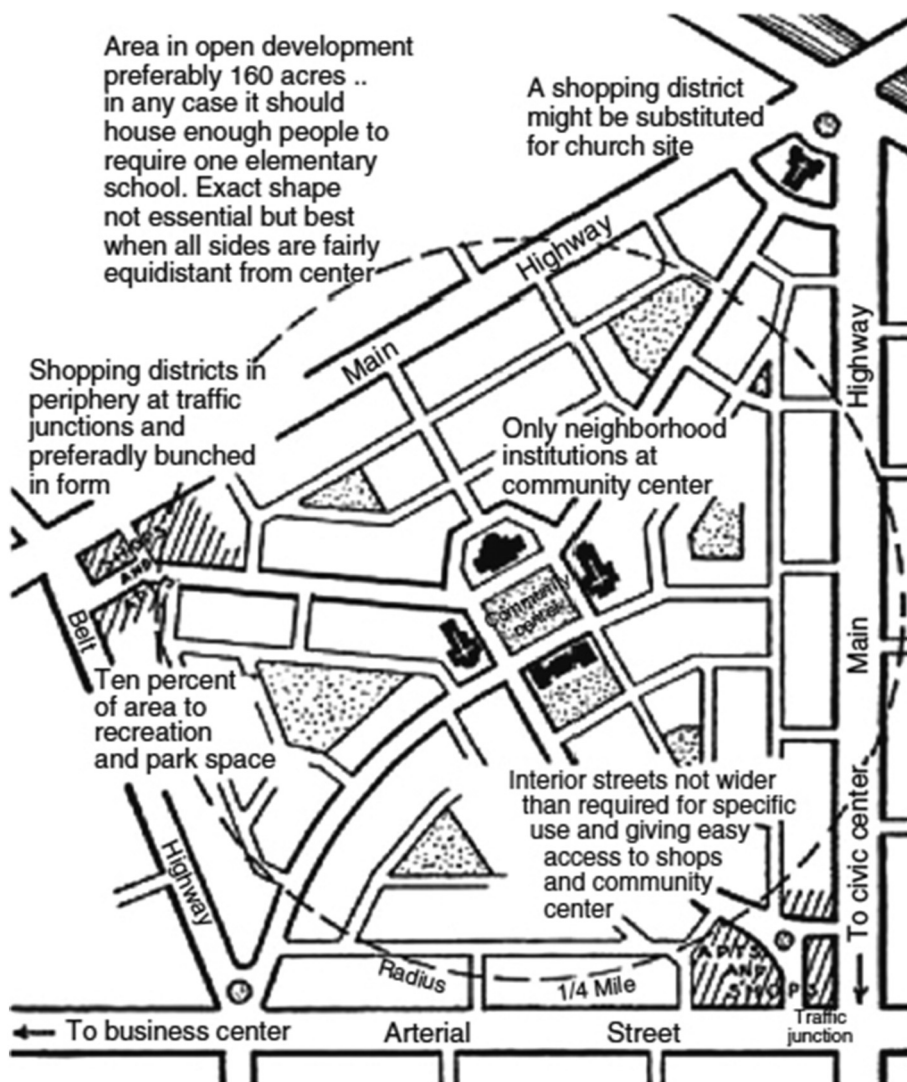


Fig. 1. Clarence Perry's neighbourhood unit (Pinnegar, 2013).

2006). The neighbourhood unit may also be defined as a housing mix that includes the required public services, and is served by a basic school (Allam, 1991). The latter definition shows that the main components of the neighbourhood are: a mix of housing units, public services (schools, commercial units, open spaces, green areas, etc.), utilities and infrastructure elements, and streets including car parks. Perry based his planning of the neighbourhood unit (Fig. 1) on the following principles (Perry, 1929):

- Population size sufficient to establish an elementary school. The suggested figure is 6000 people, which means a residential density of 38 persons/acre (92 persons/ha). Overall, neighbourhood sizing should be large enough to meet the public services cost.
- Centralisation of school and community services. In general, the school is recommended to be within a maximum walking distance of a half mile. Shopping district may be located in neighbourhood periphery.
- Hierarchy of roads to connect housing blocks with each other and with the services in a safe way. The model suggests placing arterial streets along the perimeter to prevent through traffic.
- Provision of sufficient open spaces, not less than 10%.

Following Perry's proposal of the neighbourhood unit as a planning base of the modern city, several planning concepts since the early 20th century have emerged. This includes traditional neighbourhood

development, transit-oriented development, new urbanism, smart growth, and eco-cities, among others. Each concept has its own advantages, where city planning requirements and community socio-economic needs are tackled in a different way, and needless to say, explaining these movements is out of the scope of this study. As for the neighbourhood unit concept, several studies have questioned its adequacy considering the on-going development and growth of our cities. This includes some early studies such as Isaacs (1948), and Banerjee and Baer (1984), and many relatively recent studies such as Qinawi and Abed Elaziz (2007), Lawhon (2009), Hazelzet and Wissink (2012), Wissink and Hazelzet (2012), Bolt and Van Kempen (2013), Byun, Choi, and Choi (2014), Mehaffy, Porta, and Romice (2015), Elshater (2016), and Sharifi (2016).

Isaacs (1948) claimed that the social benefit of neighbourhood unit is overestimated. This takes us back to the origin of the concept, which could be originally found in rural areas prior to its use in cities. Families in such areas possessed many qualities in common, which made them a social group with a high level of cohesion. Implementing this concept in the city to achieve the same social advantage is controversial. This is related in the first place to the concept of the city, which is a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals, where bonds of neighbourliness are likely to be relatively weak (Isaacs, 1948). Thus, it is possible to say that although the concept of neighbourhood unit was initially based on residents' perception of belonging, people's lives today turned out to be different considering

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