Title  Social Sustainability and Local Distinctiveness: Arguments for the Positive Evaluation of Place Centred Awareness

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Abstract

This introductory paper will discuss theoretical and methodological issues arising from a project involved in mapping some of the distinctive and sustainable features of existing communities. By incorporating cognitive perspectives from social anthropology and environmental psychology, the paper will argue for a relationship between social sustainability and the more subjective and cultural aspects of local distinctiveness in relation to housing research. With a critical approach to current thinking on sustainability "indicators", this paper will seek to establish that bioregional and local heritage (social content) provides a new and important emphasis to a field currently dominated by some of the more physical and ecological aspects of environmental design.

Following the Rio summit in 1992 there is renewed interest in research into the measurement of physical factors or "indicators" of social sustainability. In the UK, Agenda 21 has sought practical implementation of global proposals for a sustainable future at local government level. In looking at the internal conditions of social sustainability it is necessary to consider the extent to which meaning and symbolism in the built environment (and in the surrounding landscape) contribute to "wellbeing" and the adoption of more sustainable practice. These, it is hoped, should quantify the potential of a development, building or process to deliver human happiness.

The collaboration between environmentalism, building design, and the general retreat from social intervention in housing theory, has resulted in a rather reductive and one-sided vision of human settlement being accepted as normal, even desirable, in housing and residential development. It is suggested that the adoption of quantitative management "solutions" to what is in essence a reflexive and evolutionary field of social interaction, may simply re-enforce structures and institutions that have played a significant role in creating the current situation.

While "sustainability indicators" and "design specification" clearly have a significant role in the overall housing supply and demand equation, they provide only a partial picture of social needs and may be rather blunt instruments of change. There is the tendency, given the economic forces at play, towards universalising the movement of structures and materials across local and regional cultures, resulting in the breaking-down of local distinctiveness and material culture. This approach is potent in providing a tangible, transferable language for sustainability that is susceptible to reproduction and economic control. The unfortunate downside is the tendency to ignore and undermine the cultural context of place in the development of new sustainable housing.

To balance this view, and building on current literature, this paper will outline arguments for a re-evaluation of how social sustainability can be conceived and researched within building design and community development. Arguing for the interdependence of economic and social factors in the measurement of sustainability, the paper will examine the possible role of subjective 'mental events' such as meaning, boundary, symbolism and local distinctiveness in sustainable design. It is argued that 'intangible resources' have a major contribution to make in the development of sustainable modern housing.

1) Introduction

“Any judgement regarding architectural problems should be made on the basis of a broad understanding of a location, its history and its culture. - local needs demand local solutions.” (O’Reilly, 1999)

The purpose of this paper is to introduce an ongoing research project Social Sustainability and Sense of Place in Northeast Scotland and to provide a review of some current literature and research directions. In addition the paper will set out some of the arguments for a qualitative approach to the areas of social sustainability research planning and practice in relation to the emerging debates surrounding the sustainability in social environments and the use of sustainability indicators to evaluate the built environment.

The central proposal is that the search for sustainability in a community or area begins and ends with people and their everyday experience of ‘place’. The nature and quality of this experience may provide a supportive base from which to investigate the underlying sustainability of a location. It suggests that place is a collective experience made up of many meaningful events and encounters both with the material and social fabric of the world whether this is a natural landscape or highly organised built environment. It is the quality and quantity of these encounters that is effective in supporting and sustaining a meaningful sense of place for residents. For better or worse, In the context of the built environment, this sense of distinctiveness is to a large extent provided by the activities of architects and planners (Munro, 1995).

This approach depends very much on the process of reading a site and the possibility that the landscape (built, natural or otherwise), may provide a framework for the preservation and introduction of interesting features. Cultural authenticity and local distinctiveness offer the prospect of what Ranjit Sabikhi terms ‘the aura of the place’ being essentially human experiences not confined merely to either built forms or natural features but may best be appreciated in the synthesis of both.

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2 Clear insights into many cross cultural issues for spatial construction in architecture.
Sabikhi sees this potential of places to uplift and transform the human spirit as much from the physical properties or ‘energies’ inherent to a place as from the habitual habitation or activity associated with a particular site (Sabikhi, 1999).

If a sense of place can emerge from distinctive spatial elements or qualities associated with a local culture then this may be identified as a powerful means of engagement between people and their environment (England, 1995; Norberg-Shulz, 1980). The purpose of the research being undertaken in Aberdeenshire is to discover if it is possible to identify the qualitative factors stimulating the experience of place reported in these areas. To support this, comparable evidence will be sought across a number of communities from those demonstrating a strong identity to places which might be described as having a crisis of identity or perhaps a negative representation of place.

As a methodology this direction may appear controversial not least because it appears to ignore the wider context of spatial deprivation proceeding from regional and global economic forces. This is a vast subject with an extensive literature but many writers have acknowledged the role of subjective factors in the decision making process. Whether you consider prospective house-buyers hoping to move into a ‘good area’ or politicians and executives presiding over the large-scale movement of people and resources, they are similarly subject to the qualitative nature of spatial experience (Coombes, 1996; Rogerson et al., 1998). In turn these decisions feedback to eventually shape the experience and quality of the built environment. While acknowledging the interplay of economic forces it would be somewhat myopic to suggest that these factors are in some sense dislocated from the decisions of real people, social relations and the interpretation people have of the world around them. Indeed it is precisely because home location is so often a matter of economic necessity that every potential needs to be explored to maximise the sustainability of the social environments affected.

2) Some current directions in social sustainability research

Before going on to describe the current research which is the subject of this paper it may be helpful to review some of the ways in which social sustainability is being thought about both in research and practice. On a spectrum between practical and more theoretical approaches there can be seen a distinction between what might be termed external and internal treatments of the subject. The external perspectives emphasise the role of design and form to determine or enable human potential and corresponds to the wider ecological argument that the built environment should embody a sustainable process in an energy efficient environment. Within this may be found the empiricist view that spatial knowledge is derived more or less from what it can contain rather than from what people are able to bring to and transform within it. The internal perspective allows greater significance to be given to the psychology of place; its history, culture, heritage and memory; for investigating social sustainability (England, 1995; Schama, 1996; Norberg-Shultz, 1980).

The tendency by planners and policy agents to search for and propose objective indicators of social sustainability in order to resolve perceived social problems is frustrated by the complex and multicausal nature of social reality. There are therefore inherent problems in the attempt to transfer methods derived from physical ecology to social issues of sustainability in an urban setting. With the best of intentions such approaches may be detrimental to places as sites of local culture, identity and experience. An index or wish list of specifications becomes an efficient tool for developers and planners to ensure uniformity and the necessity to conform
to regulation and may therefore prevent an intuitive or consensual evaluation of local concerns and distinctive heritage. This does nothing to reverse the assumption that the process of urbanisation and mass communication necessarily implies a successive discontinuity between peoples lifestyle and the places they chose to live (Dunham, 1986).

**Specification indicators and index:** Measurement and performance related activities over housing must be seen within the context of changing property relations in the UK. Alongside the impetus from sustainable development there has been a general deregulation of the housing sector since the early 1980’s. With this comes a consequent reduction in the scope and scale of architectural endeavours to provide formal design solutions to social problems. Subsequent market led management approaches to provide housing resources to the population have replaced earlier design led strategies which had an overt social agenda that featured in the movement towards high rise social housing (Coombs, 1996; Coleman, 1990). Outlined below are some of the approaches that form part of the theoretical foundation for the current prominence of index and indicator solutions within the discourse on social sustainability.

Motivating the emphasis on spatial interpretation in the research is the observation that it may not be possible to produce a universal index of sustainable criteria (and in some respects counterproductive to try). An index that facilitates the mass production of one interpretation of sustainability irrespective of different local culture is neither a contribution to residents’ wellbeing or an imaginative response to the local context of development. On the other hand it may be reasonable and necessary to research methods that can maximise the potential for peoples experience of the built environment irrespective of different material location or cultural context. Such an approach might be implemented to mitigate or enhance the primary action of the wider socio-economic forces previously discussed.

**Formal and design approaches:** Characteristic of many approaches to design and planning is the assumption that mental disposition and behaviour are conditioned by formal qualities in the built environment. In itself this idea carries considerable force since it appears to offer various formula for changing social behaviour through design. Social phenomena can be seen to arise from multiple causes including culture, politics and the economy. The determinist approach loses its way when it emphasises one factor, in this case the formal qualities of the built environment, as a single or dominant cause determining events and behaviour (Frank, 1984). This points to the need for pluralism in the development of sustainable initiatives appropriate to different and evolving circumstances.

Newman’s ‘Defensible Space’ and ‘designing out crime’ emphasises one aspect of social sustainability, security, as a raison-detres for a series of spatial assumptions that have subsequently influenced the aesthetic and layout of modern housing developments (Newman, 1972; Coleman, 1990).

In addition the whole issue of sustainable housing has been distorted by a revision in provider / client relationships that privileges the status of private owner over that of resident or tenant. In this climate greater emphasis has come to be placed on the issue of security and the kinds of design interventions thought likely to improve this for dwelling in the sense of a private residential unit.

Part of any analysis of social sustainability must be the potential of the built environment to foster and sustain social relationships, and it is possible to quote the
track record of established communities without any real understanding of how these relationships come about in the first place. For new development it is particularly helpful to understand the social dynamic by which relations are formed and perpetuated dependent upon the ongoing movement of people through the built environment. Activities in outdoor spaces created between buildings have been considered particularly important and have been classified into three basic categories (necessary, optional and incidental) all having the potential to form the social relations seen as the necessary basis for community (Fleming, 1985; Gehl, 1987). From this perspective it is the arrangement of spatial elements, buildings, paths and green areas that becomes the arbiter of "opportunity" and provides the material context within which social interaction occurs.

Research has highlighted the extent to which the layout of a given development has the potential to either stimulate or inhibit the development of relations between people. So often site plans and layout have been viewed in rather mechanical terms, as a means of maximising the physical potential of the area to be developed (Abu-Ghazzeh, 1999). Again, it is not necessarily the buildings themselves that are determinant of the formation of social relations so much as the ‘arrangement of space that helps to suggest uses of interstitial spaces’. The significant word here is ‘use’ that points to the interpretation of spatial qualities by residents and end users since spatial interpretation / understanding must logically precede a meaningful use of an area. ‘Opportunities to walk around a small group of houses or to sit in small, confined spaces, by contrast [are] significantly related to social interaction and friendship formation. Site design, including the layout of buildings in residential neighbourhoods, has profound effects upon people’s behaviour and communication networks.’ (Abu-Ghazzeh, 1999).

To counter the emphasis on design (technology, materials and innovation), recent research indicates that design solutions to perceived problems in housing layout have overestimated the extent to which they can improve social relations among residents (Abu-Ghazzeh, 1999; Lay, 1992). The user perception of the social environment would seem to be a key factor in this respect with its potential to reveal discontinuity between design intervention and its social outcomes. For residents the ‘use’ of space is an inevitable expression of their ‘perception’ and ‘evaluation’ of its qualities resulting from a far wider set of variables than those available to the designer or planner making predictable outcomes difficult to achieve. Indeed some research suggests that reductionist attempts to introduce schema or themes in residential planning may be counterproductive to the stated aims of facilitating social interaction. (Lay, 1992). These studies underline the message that while innovation in design and technology are essential to the provision of human comfort, their contribution may not function correctly without an ongoing spatial interpretation of local culture and its material and social framework.

**Environmental economics, Choice evaluation, Visual preference:** This area of research has shown considerable scope in its ability to deliver quantifiable economic indicators of environmental improvement with methods grounded in public response to specific issues affecting their use of the environment. A growing trend is the use of technology in the form of computer enhancement and simulation experience to analyse different publics and their affective responses to visual information. Some methods have the disadvantage of removing people from the context of the researchers enquiry, in order to present them with hypothetical scenarios for their evaluation.
Some general points may question the dissociation occurring between subject and object when respondents are asked to choose between elements abstracted out of their urban or natural setting. The movement towards using computer generated environments to elicit choices, however finely rendered must influence the context of the enquiry and the responses. There has been significant progress in the applied business of environmental economics in offering some sense of monetary value to people’s appreciation of their environment.

Questions arise over the extent to which this formula can express the ‘existence value’ for residents of specific local features such as trees, green areas, waterfronts. There is the danger of seeing the environment as a series of parcels, commodified as tradable items, or consumer ‘concepts’ (McBurney, 1990). Choice evaluation shows innovation in developing a direct approach to research method and public participation in planning. As such it can provide a valuable means by which people can engage with aspects of their locality that might otherwise be taken for granted (Davies, 2000). As with so many other approaches in social sustainability the potential problems lie not so much in the method or data, but in the social and political application.

In a paper which examines Human Responses to Vegetation & Landscape Roger Ulrich examines the affective response of people for natural elements and assemblages in the built environment. This research, with other sources (Ulrich et al., 1981; Kaplan, 1983)³, provides evidence for the ability of natural landscape features to condition psychological (and sometimes physiological) states that improve the wellbeing of people and result in modifications in human behaviour (Ulrich, 1986).

Human preference responses to landscape have also been understood in terms of its “fittingness” which brings in more elements of design and layout into the question of affective and aesthetic responses to the built landscape. “Fittingness” is conceived of in terms of whether a structure or assemblage is judged according to its perceived permanence with low values being afforded to perceived temporary structures. This fits with the assertion that what people find satisfactory - conducive to wellbeing - are patterns that are perceived to be continuous within a cultural and aesthetic context. Discontinuity in the landscape may therefore be negatively indicated in terms of its potential for social sustainability (Ulrich, 1986).

**Bioregionalism:** Bioregionalism may be described as combining an ethnographic and ecological approach to the evaluation of human settlement. Its beginnings may be found within many early environmental and social movements and many of its central ideas are set out in the writings of such early Scottish / American environmentalists such as Patrick Geddes and John Muir (Aberley, 1995). In common with the ideas of wider environmental movements the bioregional approach sees no separation between human and natural systems, each being a part of a systematic continuity formed from complex interrelationships of dependence and multiple feedback. At either end of this spatial continuity may be seen a ‘pristine’ wilderness at one end and the modern metropolis at the other.

From this there comes an evolutionary and ecological philosophy of human settlement with particular relevance to the proposed project outlined here. Human settlement is best expressed as continuity and an extension of the landscape

³ (see also - Ulrich, 1984)
forming vital links between people and their environment. Therefore optimum conditions for human settlement can best be achieved by working within the ecosystem or ‘biome’ both at the level of culture and ecology (Stephenson, & Ball, 1998). From this viewpoint, sustainable development requires recognition of threatened imbalance, not only to environmental systems but also, most significantly, extending to inter-human relations of power and authority. Reform is therefore implied in the areas of social justice and democracy particularly in relation to the spatial construction of social and property relations.

The bioregional perspective allows an internal cognitive view of ‘place’ that recognises that spatial ‘memory’ or understanding and the experience of places are inseparable (Schama, 1996; Brody, 1986). Therefore the routes through which space is mediated (via culture), becomes central to the objective of social sustainability. People may be as much a product of their place as place is a consequence of people so that sustainable settlements are a consequence of social relations and shared meanings as much as economic or material systems of exchange. How this relates to the current project is reflected in the proposition that local distinctiveness is the basis for local meaning and culture and therefore becomes fundamental to the form and aesthetic of a sustainable development.

“Common Ground has been exploring and developing a new concept, that of local distinctiveness. It is characterised by elusiveness, it is instantly recognisable yet difficult to describe: It is simple yet may have profound meaning to us. It demands a poetic quest and points up the shortcomings in all those attempts to understand the things around us by compartmentalising them, fragmenting, quantifying, reducing.” (Clifford, & King, 1996).

It follows that a major implication of a bioregional approach to the whole process of development is a fundamental change in the structure of power and authority over spatial representation. Local initiatives and consultation become more significant to planning and development and a vital source from which sustainable housing initiatives might emerge.

Social Sustainability and “Sense of Place” in housing layouts of Northeast Scotland.

3) Project overview

The first section will discuss some of the theoretical issues motivating the research into cognitive mapping and spatial awareness and its relation to the social sustainability of housing and community in Northeast Scotland. The second section sets out the reference framework for key terms and concepts used in the project methodology. It will also discuss the objectives of the research direction and the methodologies that will be applied to achieve this.

The idea that aspects of globalisation imply a specific threat to regional and local structures of community and identity has developed as a general critique of globalisation both as an economic process and as a political ideology. But in order to “think globally and act locally” it is first necessary to be able to provide a relevant representation of what constitutes “the local” in contrast to regional and global cultural referents. It is the assumption that welfare in the local will, by some means, follow from global imperatives that perhaps need to be challenged in different areas of urban research.
This challenge is an inevitable part of cultural reproduction and provides some encouragement to those who take the view that global transfer of form does not necessarily imply the global transfer of meaning or of culture. The search for meaning in the built environment provides many examples of the resilience and adaptively of material culture and its ability to assimilate global forms but with a new contextual understanding (El-Kadi, 1999).

Once again this points to the reduction of form as the decisive factor in providing satisfaction with urban setting to end users since form appears to have a subordinate role in the translation of meaning to and from a given culture. But for this to occur - for local material culture to continue and replenish itself - it is suggested that there needs to be a framework of difference over which values and norms can be contested and settled.

Several studies have revealed how the urban green used and enjoyed by residents differs from the green estate defined by professionals. (Box, & Harrison, 1993).

Again it is not necessarily the form that is of first importance in providing the material structure upon which local distinctiveness depends. The bias towards a set of features which in the minds of planners or architects encompass the essential features of a vernacular architecture may not necessarily represent an authentic version this ‘tradition’ or reflect the richness of the local culture that produced it (Edge, 2000). A conservation approach to architectural heritage may lead us away from a useful appreciation of local distinctiveness. A quota system of features applied piecemeal to any development regardless of context or appropriateness may end up responding to costs as much as a desire to preserve the perceived style or tradition. This suggests the danger of ossification of any vernacular once a received representation of material culture becomes the accepted object of specialist regulation and control.

Interventions affecting the social construction of ‘place’ also occur in a present, a fulcrum between the past and a possible future. The need to maximise potential for a sustainable future has to take account of what has been sustainable up until this present time. In order to think about sustainability it must be recognised in the ordinary, often mundane things that have proved useful and durable options in the everyday lives of people everywhere. In this sense sustainability is an everyday reality in need of respect (re-seeing), rather than a question of new technology or radical departures from the everyday world we know. Concepts such as evolution, adaptation and flexibility can then take on a more practical significance in developing new models for future development.

There is therefore the need to see what constitutes the subjective conditions of a place in order to ensure that development will proceed in an appropriate and sustainable manner. This intuitive proposal nevertheless imposes specific needs upon any research method or process that seeks an appropriate response to the question of people’s satisfaction with the places in which they live. If local distinctiveness and culture is at all important then this aim cannot be undertaken simply through design, regulation and standardisation. It requires insight into what has been sustained and the rejection of such universal formula that contradict the experience of what is sustainable or seeks to represent some contrived definition of what is authentic.
Studies addressing the issues of sustainable development have focused on the ecology of the built environment to demonstrate the advantages of material and design improvements. Renewable resources, energy efficiency and the inherent advantages that may derive from the natural relationship between landscape and layout all contribute to the overall sustainability of a settlement (Brogden, 1995). An understanding of the impacts of development on social context may complement these approaches to reveal the inherently subjective nature of places where people and communities live. Ecological design and renewable resources of themselves may not provide all the answers to sustainable development especially when there exists a heritage of material referents and ‘intangible resources’ that has over time become inherent to a given human settlement (Coombes, 1996; Rogerson et al., 1998). The present study aims at contributing to an emerging discourse of social sustainability that comprehends a relationship between ‘sense of place’ or ‘genius loci’ and subjective social conditions; i.e. ‘quality of life,’ ‘community’ and ‘wellbeing’ sought by planners, architects, and other policy agents within the built environment (Norberg-Shulz, 1980; Schama, 1996; Clifford, & King, 1999; Munro, 1995).

A striking example of where the addition of a distinctive feature to the landscape has helped to galvanise an existing sense of regional and local identity is found in The Angel of The North. This monolithic work of public art by Anthony Gormley was commissioned in 1997 by Gateshead council and implemented in the face of considerable local scepticism. The artist makes explicit the link between material objects and spatial experience:

“I want to make something we can live with and that becomes a reservoir for feelings - feelings that perhaps we hadn’t known about until this thing was there, or feelings that couldn’t arise until it was.” (Gormley, 1998).

Since installation surveys have found that much of this opposition has been transformed into support with many respondents expressing a sense of ownership and identification with the work with a net positive effect for the area. Indeed the somewhat moribund sense of local solidarity, persisting after the departure of local steel industry, seems to have found new confidence in the heroic steel figure rising phoenix like above the post industrial landscape. “On its pithead vantage point, the Angel is in some ways reminiscent of the earliest British monuments, those great prehistoric standing stones. Like them, it seems to guard the landscape and to confer a special quality on the territory it surveys, turning a defunct industrial feature into a sacred site redolent with meaning.” (Anderson, 1998). With an estimated 150,000 viewers each year the Angel works well both as a metaphor for the region and as a factor in its economic rehabilitation. The history of ‘the Angel’ as a material example of local distinctiveness in action shows how additional interest and local features (however abstract) can operate as social content. Such symbols have the power to act on many levels with beneficial results for the regeneration of an area affected by the decline in many of its traditional industries.

4) Some Key Terms

It is necessary to clarify the use of some key terms central to the theoretical basis of the proposed research outlined below. Housing defined as a field of social expertise perhaps suffers from jargon brought to it from many disciplines and it is therefore necessary to be specific about terms that may have a more conventional use in environmental psychology, anthropology and sociology.
**Social sustainability:** Definitions of social sustainability can be problematic. The term suffers from ubiquity as a means of directing attention towards people. Further it hints at a general dissociation between subject and object in much technical discussion of environmental issues. In this sense the term becomes empty of intrinsic meaning without further elaboration and context. A project discussing the relationship between green space and house prices will contrast sharply with a study looking at the effect of green areas on social relations in its construction of both ‘social’ and ‘sustainable.’ Therefore what is implied is often not so much the discovery of relations between people and their environment as upon the specific goals of particular research programs.

The sense in which the term is used for the current research project is one in which is perhaps separated from ‘traditional’ or mainstream environmental concerns of pollution and consumption. Being concerned with the internal construction of ‘place’ within the minds of people suggests the view that place is as much a mental process or ‘event’ as a physical reality. In this respect design and planning might be seen as a part of a process that can only be truly completed through the mental engagement of end users (Sabikhi, 1999). Thus research into social sustainability would benefit from a more formal recognition to the internal dialogue between structure and experience.

**Social content:** This term is used in the project to refer to patterns of socially important ‘artefacts’ and ‘representations’ referred to by Serge Moscovici as being “the result of a constant effort to make usual and actual something that is unfamiliar.” Therefore within the unit of spatial designation ‘place’ may be found varying degrees of content and distribution of socially important ‘artefacts’ and ‘representations’ reflecting “the minds unlimited power to shape reality.” (Moscovici, 1984).

The sense in which ‘social content’ is used for the current research is to describe material objects that have meaning related to the qualitative experience of place witnessed by residents (whether individually or as a group). Their effective influence may act in relative isolation (as with a landmark such as The Angel of The North) or in concert with a variety of other objects contributing to a general sense of identity. The research proposes that in relation to the sustainability of places, the effect of social content is both cumulative and communicable creating a persistent worldview and a meaningful context for identification of places as distinct and meaningful collective experiences. The evidence suggests that awareness and identification of places as ‘home’ extending beyond the boundaries of the private into the public domain of ‘neighbours’ brings an equivalent awareness of ‘others’ who share such identification (England, 1995; Schama, 1996; Clifford, & King, 1996).

**Intangible resources:** Researches and policy agents looking at ways to improve the social and economic prospects for ‘run down’ areas have indicated the importance of social factors in understanding the evolution of dereliction and renewal (Coombes, 1996; & Rogerson et al., 1998). In this discussion intangible resources are similar to social content but usually have a wider context or public part to play in the local culture and economy. Examples might include a local wood, waterfront or recreation area. On the other hand it is important to bear in mind that such resources might have a negative impact examples being boarded up dwellings, accretion of refuse or ponds full of shopping trolleys. So a given area may comprise of a whole range of socially important features such as monuments, footpaths and natural entities all having a supportive role to play in the overall attractiveness of a locality. Geographic and
environmental economic surveys have pointed to the potential such resources have as a necessary focus for urban regeneration. Values invested by people in inanimate objects, assemblages or material conditions may have a profound and far reaching affect upon the potential for regeneration of an area (Rogerson et al., 1998; Box & Harrison, 1993).

5) Project methodology

The objective of the research is to establish the importance of local distinctiveness / sense of place within the general discourse of sustainability through a comparable survey of this factor across several different communities. The criteria of sustainability to be established is the social content of space as a resource for communities rather than the delivery of an index or set of universal social sustainability assessment criteria. The aim is to contribute to the discourse on social sustainability by looking at the social appreciation by people of embedded landscape features that contribute to a holistic identity of places in which it is good to live, work and play. Another issue in current research is the need to account for the relative and reflexive nature of spatial cognition and material culture. The intention is that local planners and policy makers will benefit from contributions towards methodologies capable of interpreting the relationships between ‘community’ (as an interdependent network of sustainable relationships) and local / regional material culture.

The study will involve a comparative survey of four semi-urban community’s peripheral to an urban centre (in this case Aberdeen), as a major source of work and facilities. By choosing communities that have the same regional location the research benefits by removing some, but by no means all, global factors from the analysis of embedded constituents of ‘place’ affecting its sustainability. In order to make a comparable study of old and new topography it will be necessary to look at communities places like Balmedie, Newburgh, Udney Green and Kingswells that exhibit features of local distinctiveness but which have undergone varying degrees of development and transformation.

Balmedie and Kingswells, since alterations to their greenbelt status in 1980, have undergone a rapid expansion in residential development and may now be classified alongside ‘free-standing new Settlements’ that have become significant in Scottish structure plans (Stockdale, & Lloyd, 1998). With such examples it may be possible to contrast the vernacular and pre-war planned communities with the more recent post war development in order to discover any pattern or gradient across the social context of these places. The study will proceed using a structured interview method that will have two components: i) attitude survey and ii) cognitive mapping. The two stages of each interview will provide a socio-economic profile of each respondent, their attitudes and motivations and a cognitive map of locally important features from the point of view of each resident. For each community it will be helpful to triangulate the research questions and resulting data using key informants who are able to assist with the process of cultural translation.

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4 For a good regional introduction to settlement in Aberdeenshire see (Shepherd, 1996).
Background Survey: In order to triangulate survey findings background information on the respondents will be recorded in order to reveal any factors within the sample population that might explain differentials. The factors to be investigated might include (for example) a) Length of time residents have lived in the community. b) Size of population; c) Place of work; d) Family size, etc. This information will be supplied by the general background survey and will provide data that can be used as a baseline for the interpretation by different social groupings of locally distinctive factors.

Mapping survey: A framework GIS map will be used to record the extent and content of place centred awareness for residents living in areas of both old and new topography. With this data it should be possible to show any changes in the content and distribution of ‘social content’ to be identified across the different areas used in the survey.

Responses will be recorded using a large-scale framework map of the area in order to focus the interviews on the respondents immediate environment. This will comprise of an abstract representation of the basic area layout (roads and buildings) in order to standardise the survey for all respondents and give minimal visual cues that might otherwise influence the content and presentation of information offered. Using the GIS framework the map will standardise the process of data collection for each respondent and provide a structure around which people can think about the meaningful content of their area. It will be possible in this way to construct a cognitive map of each respondent’s information that can be aggregated and contrasted to interpret the level and distribution of local knowledge held about tangible and intangible resources identified by residents within each survey area. Associations and patterns found within each data set may then suggest the more sustainable features of the area from the point of view of the initial hypothesis.

The present project limits itself to measuring the subjective content of the topography of place and how this affects the kinds of social activity occurring within the space it occupies. An interview method will be used for the triangulation survey in order to obtain immediate background information from respondents concerning their opinions and activities with the intention that the whole family is included in the survey. This will involve the co-operation of local schools in order to obtain data from local children on comparative usage and perceptions of their locality. The interviews will be designed and structured to investigate their experience of local topographic features and the way in which these relate to local community institutions.

The methodology will resolve around the ability of residents to identify and interpret their own system of locally distinctive features and resources present in their area in order to discover local factors of place sustainability. This is to indicate ways in which new development in a community may affect the local mediation of ‘place’ by residents including their identification with the physical patina of locality, i.e. trees, paths, landmarks, historical association’s, churches, monuments and other topographical features.
6) Conclusion

This paper outlines a project that uses mapping as a direct method to access the structure and content of spatial experience in the minds of people. Such a method may have the potential to develop an effective assessment tool useful in community consultation and planning programs. Mapping a community is a direct and visual method to survey the social content of a place in a way which brings people together and can include every member of the community, especially children, giving access to a holistic vision of place as experienced from every quarter of a community.

The method to be developed in this project is intended for the purpose of facilitating sustainable development by identifying the sustainable themes and components that constitute the subjective context of an area undergoing change. As a spatial assessment exercise it is anticipated that the mapping component will enable people to visualise and recover the different versions of history, heritage and meanings they hold, often unconsciously, about their everyday environment (Clifford & King, 1996).

In the same way that a linear and chronological view of history will tend to distort our view of events by favouring only one version, the same process becomes inevitable with the spatial dimension. So with space it is often the case that a single version of spatial use will be proffered with its own monolithic themes to serve specific interests. Examples may be found in the shopping mall, the theme park, and even those private housing estates that project on behalf of their occupants all the expectation and imagination of a dormitory town. A timely reassessment of how quality in the built environment is evaluated might avoid the consumer parks and e-villages becoming mere blank spaces to those who look on; the terra incognito, lurking at the heart of strategic plans for sustainable development.

This brings us back to the earlier discussion of establishing just these criteria for sustainability in the built environment. By constructing a sustainability index we impose a grid square or checklist set of parameters on places in order to make them more sustainable. Such a system can produce measurable improvements that are seen as transferable between business, social and natural environments. This in itself is perhaps enough to explain the current preoccupation of policy agents and local authorities with producing an index of sustainability explicitly set out as an ‘added value’ integrated business agenda. Once set up it is difficult to see how such a system can respond to different local context and thereby maintain the necessary contact with people's own criteria for what they have found to be sustainable. If, on the other hand, value is really vested in flexibility of response to local interests and in the democracy of local understanding then, such an index can only have detrimental affects by removing validity from local culture and undermining its material reference.

This view banishes any material hierarchy in relation to local construction techniques and material culture. The rusty orange patina of corrugated iron can in this sense be more eloquent in translating an authentic representation of "place" than the mock Tudor façade and neo Georgian terraces encountered in any number of rural developments. Whatever these appendages do for individual dwellings they certainly do not lend authenticity to places however quoted as desirable by developers interpretation of public 'demand' (Ball, 1996). In this sense a recurring process of rebuild and repair occurring throughout the urban and rural landscape

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may exemplify, along with its utility and flexibility, an authentic assemblage of uniquely sustainable features.  

From the review of current directions in social sustainability an emerging discourse concerned with the human context of housing, and its embeddedness within a wide context of cultural associations becomes apparent. The identification and evaluation of intangible resources of place has been outlined as a consistent method in this paper as a necessary complement to the more quantitative and objective index methods of evaluating social sustainability. Such methods have become a distinctive and essentially political feature of local government strategies to deliver sustainable housing policies following the Rio summit of 1982.

In order to integrate sustainable features in new development it is necessary to recognise that all areas have an underlying ‘personality’ which can be invoked to support the cultural aspirations of present and future residents. Further, it is fundamental to the project to outline a method by which spatial qualities can be recognised and drawn out as part of a process rather than as a set of universal and transferable specifications or index of set criteria used to evaluate development.

Intangible resources and social content may be described as both a product and a cause of local distinctiveness in material culture. The fact of distinction within and between dwelling locations can work to provide an engaging and socially stimulating environment in which to live work and play. ‘Place’ can be viewed as a subjective spatial designation resulting from either accumulation or intervention of natural or artificial features acting as quotations that point a wider context of historic and cultural associations. As such they have the potential to become key factors in promoting sustainable interpretations of the built environment for both individuals and social groupings.

Fundamental to sustainable settlement are some general positions on social justice, inclusion and democracy. As with environmentalism, sustainability is a concept that is susceptible to utopian visions of the ideal community or some essentialist aesthetic of how places should appear. The project follows the instinct that retention and inclusion of social content and local distinctiveness in human settlement is essential to maintaining a wide material basis in order to communicate diverse social understandings and cultural forms. It is also about promoting spatial meaning and material culture as it is found, rather than for what it can do in promoting a pre-conceived commercial or political agenda. Whatever the sustainable merits of a site, public participation in all areas of spatial development is necessary to support both individual freedom and community (however constituted) in future human settlement.

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6 The sustainable relationship between the social context of development, its scale and socio-economic autonomy is persuasively set out in (Turner, 1976).
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