

Sustainability and urban regeneration: the community and the city

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Abstract

Successful sustainability requires a re-evaluation of social paradigms. Portsea, in Portsmouth UK, is located in a prime location. It is adjacent to the city's Historic Dockyard, the University, a shopping centre and expensive private sector housing, but it remains socially and physically isolated from the city as a whole. Extensive analysis has shown that, despite apparent pathologies, there is a strong sense of community, as residents take pride in and identify with their neighbourhood. The prospect of additional development and redevelopment in the area suggests that it might lead to another case of gentrification. However, our work in Portsea suggests that apparently deprived districts may be far more "sustainable" than is thought. Policy makers need to tap into this community spirit, to activate it, and to enhance it. It is hoped that this work can contribute to the debate related to social perspectives in historical districts among policy makers, experts, communities, non-governmental organizations, industry, and the general public.

Keywords: community, city, development, sustainability, regeneration.

1 Introduction

In urban regeneration, sustainability is increasingly defined in social as well as environmental terms. However, practitioners and academics appear to distinguish just two types of ideal communities: those, which are successful, despite poor physical surroundings, and those, which are failing, often despite an above average physical environment.



Since the 1960s, the ideal of the successful community in a poor physical environment has been popularised by Jacobs [1] and Gans [2] in the US and Wilmott and Young [3] in the UK. They wrote about “Urban Villages” and the social capital embedded in existing communities, arguing that although the physical environment might be poor, community structures were often robust and worth retaining. This contrasted with the then traditional view that poor environments created poor communities. More recently, architects and urban designers such as Oscar Newman [4] have suggested that communities which suffer from social pathologies may be victims of poor design. They have promoted the re-design of neighbourhoods and urban districts to promote “defensible space”, the growth of community-based management and control, and reterritorialising urban space.

At the same time, a large body of literature suggests that social integration is a cure to some community ills, calling for the construction of new, market rate housing to alter the social mix of an area. A contrasting view holds that some communities, measured in terms of crime, social pathologies, and indices of deprivation, are best broken up or diluted. However, it is not always the case that high levels of crime and poor social indicators mean that a community has broken down.

We show this by assessing the results of a questionnaire and associated research addressed at the residents of Portsea, a socially isolated community in Portsmouth, UK. Although urban growth and change is altering some of the socio-economic characteristics of neighbouring areas, within Portsea there is strong support for maintaining the social and physical fabric of the district, and local residents’ views of what makes a good community appear to be substantially different from those of local government decision makers.

2 Portsea: physical qualities and social characteristics

Portsea has changed significantly since it first became a dockyard in 1194, on the orders of King Richard. It was, and still is, home to the Royal Navy and was once home to heavy industry such as shipbuilding, a busy dockyard and a brewery. Until recently, the navy controlled until recently much of the land in the area. What was left was used for high-density terraced housing which housed the low paid industrial workforce, which worked in the adjacent naval dockyards. As recently as the 1940s, thousands of employees worked in the yards, and many of them lived nearby. Due to heavy bombardment in WW2, many of the early and historic buildings were damaged and then demolished during the post war period.

The area was rebuilt in the 50’s and 60’s, borrowing heavily on the ideals of the Bauhaus and the “Garden City” ideal. However, policies of the time aimed to retain the working class character of the area. Reconstruction led to a “mish-mash” of architectural styles, textures, and materials. Virtually all the new housing was “council”, that is, publicly owned housing. Moreover, redevelopment significantly altered the physical layout of the community. Terrace houses with individual gardens (the traditional form of English housing)



were replaced by flats surrounded by extensive public open space. Traditional streetscapes were destroyed, and buildings set back from roads. Densities were substantially reduced, and industry was banished from the area. Today, the majority of buildings in Portsea are residential, mainly consisting of social housing. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s industry and employment in the dockyards was drastically reduced. More recently redevelopment has occurred in on old naval property nearby. Gunwharf Quays is a new development of housing, shops and entertainment facilities.



Figure 1: Portsea in a postcard from 1906.



Figure 2: Portsea as it is today viewed from the Spinnaker tower.



Figure 3: A typical pub in the Hard.

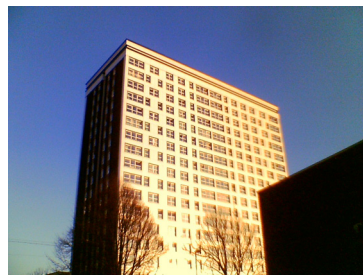


Figure 4: A tower block.



Figure 5: Typical council housing in Portsea.



Figure 6: A model of the Portsea area. The darker blocks denote housing.



Figure 7: A poster of the admiralty-quarter development visualizing how it will look in a few months when the housing is completed.

Portsea is adjacent to the University of Portsmouth, major tourist attractions such as the Historic Dockyard, a new shopping centre and expensive private sector housing. However, it remains socially and physically isolated from the city as a whole. It has one of the highest levels of deprivation in the United Kingdom Indices of Deprivation [5] and National Statistics, Crime Levels [6], despite being central to Portsmouth, and crime levels are several times the city average. Unemployment is quite high and the residential values of flats are less than one-third of the houses and flats in the adjacent new development of Gunwharf Quays, which has created 2,000 jobs. Recently, a new community centre with contemporary design and a wide choice of leisure facilities as well as a small library and a nursery has fulfilled an important role in the social rejuvenation of the area. However, this is still a relatively deprived area, characterized by a high number of people living in social housing, high unemployment rates, and low incomes. The original local employer, the Dockyards, which dominated community life and determined the social structure of the neighbourhood has vanished, undermining much of the rationale behind the original reconstruction of the area, and leaving behind a concentration of low skilled, low waged or unemployed residents. Moreover, the process of

reconstruction destroyed much of the physical fabric of what was one of the oldest settled areas in Portsmouth. Segregation of the community may lead to social exclusion of existing residents as redevelopment in the area takes place, including luxury apartments with more affluent people moving in, while not providing inputs to the wider local community.

The current research was motivated by a desire to assess the views and opinions of the local population about their community as well as how they perceive the current changes in the area and what that might mean for the future.

3 The survey

To gain an understanding of community spirit in the area, we undertook a survey and meetings with several focus groups. As well, we “surveyed” the Portsea area through the eyes of 16 final year undergraduate students taking a course on sustainable design and environmental management. Copies of the survey were left in the leisure centre, and residents were sampled on the streets and open spaces of the neighbourhood as well. The combination of questionnaire and focus group was decided on after the trials of the questionnaire prompted a fair amount of discussion on the limitations of a simple question-answer format. It was felt that the range of likely opinions could not be covered within the limits of a simple question-answer format.

The questionnaire was administered to over one hundred local residents in the area of Portsea, with equal representation from both genders. The questionnaire comprised 23 closed questions divided in eight thematic areas assessing local peoples’ opinion on transport, education and leisure facilities, public spaces, safety, as well as their views on the current development in the area and their perception on how their community will be affected in the future. A five-point scale answer was employed ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” and from “excellent” to “very poor”.

The majority of the interviewees were in the 21-35 age group. A large percentage of the participants were unemployed and many had low skill jobs. The majority had a low level of qualifications and as was indicated in the questionnaire, most have struggled to find a job in the area: 22 % of the people interviewed were unemployed or retired.

The questionnaire included several questions designed to assess resident satisfaction with the area. Residents were asked to assess both the safety and the friendliness of the area. Interestingly, they viewed Portsea as friendly, but also as unsafe (Figure 8). In fact, it has one of the highest crime rates in the city of Portsmouth particularly regarding list crimes.

Moreover, despite the view that Portsea is friendly, only 31 % of respondents felt that Portsea was better than other areas in the Portsmouth (Figure 9).

The questionnaire indicated that overall, people are satisfied with schools and shopping facilities in the area but think that public transport and leisure facilities could be better (although a new community centre was just about to open as the questionnaire was distributed).



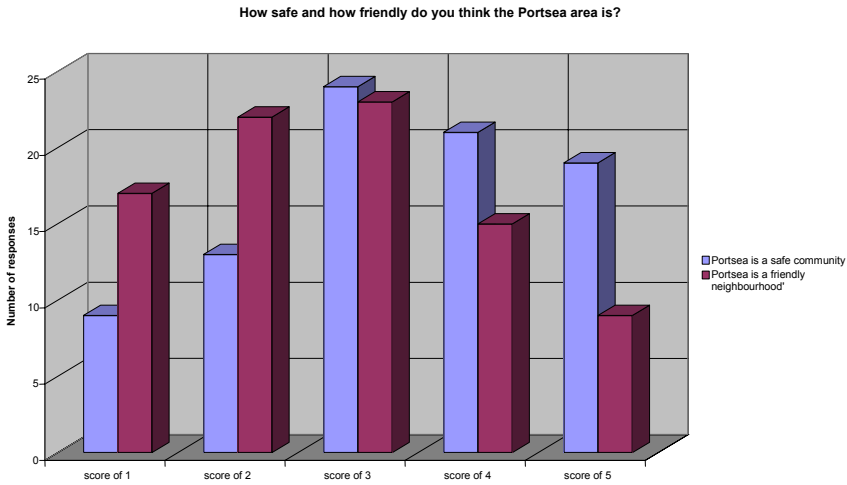


Figure 8: Residents’ view on how safe and how friendly the Portsea are is.

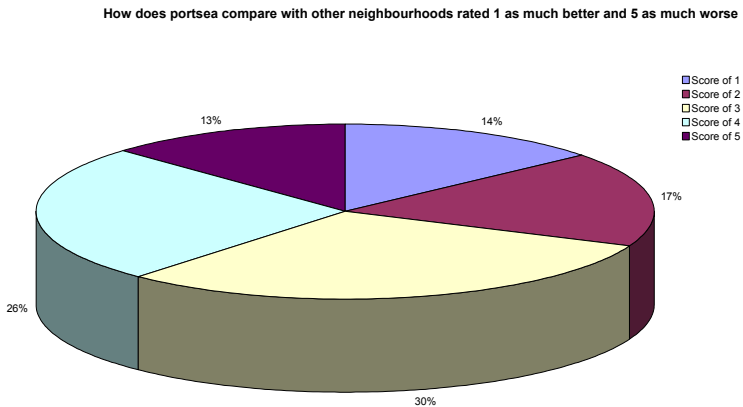


Figure 9: A comparison between Portsea and other neighbourhoods.

It also appears that the built environment has significantly affected the way residents view the neighbourhood, and also significantly affect the way public spaces are used. Figure 10 shows the results of how often people use the open spaces/play areas in Portsea and how do the rate them. Most people only use the open/public spaces occasionally, and view them as being unsatisfactory. The general consensus from the focus groups was that the spaces were adequate. It is apparent from the responses that there is a correlation between the negative opinion and the low rate of usage. Dissatisfaction was attributed to several causes. Almost all respondents thought that most spaces were not designed to welcome people spending time in them. Families and children did not feel safe. There were no places to sit and watch children, the elderly felt excluded due to an absence of benches, it was difficult if not impossible to supervise children from a flat, and there were no designated areas for smaller children to play.

Inadequate lighting was also a factor, followed by the lack of presence of some kind of canopy to protect from weather elements and the lack of a coffee/snack bar.

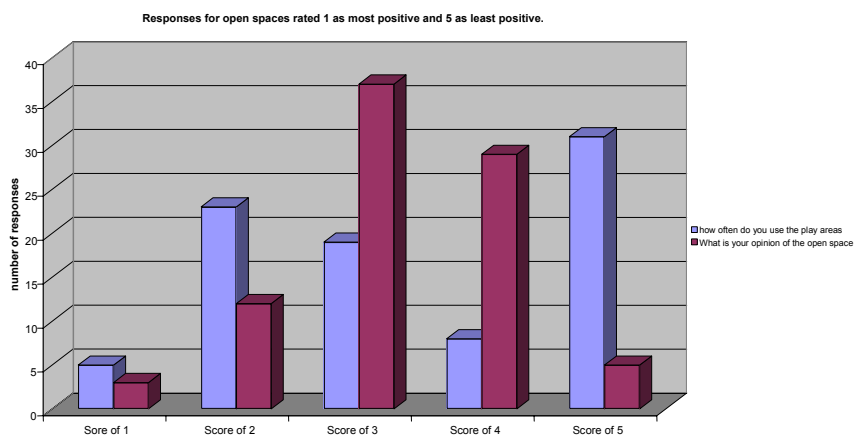


Figure 10: How residents rated the public/open spaces available and the frequency they use them.

The new transformation of an old naval dock and helicopter landing pad into the “trendy” Gunwharf Quays, which comprises a shopping outlet, a range of bars and restaurants and other leisure facilities, and expensive (for the area) accommodation triggered a lot of discussion among respondents. Most people had a very strong opinion about what this new development “should” have contributed to their area and what the reality was (Figure 11). Although the development has generated over 2,000 permanent jobs, it was a common view that developments such as the above should have created more job opportunities for the area and aid in regenerating the whole of Portsea. Going by questionnaire responses and focus group discussions, it seems however, that most residents of Portsea feel that it has only helped to emphasise social exclusion. Many argued that although jobs were created, they were not accessible to local residents, who were not qualified enough (although this may be more myth than reality, since many of the jobs are entry level posts. However, it is very likely that the competition for employment is high, since the area has a large number of full and part time students.)

On the other hand, the new community centre, completed a few months ago symbolises local government commitment to the area. It houses a variety of leisure facilities as well as a library and a nursery. It provides a new and welcomed meeting point for the community and is part of a larger redevelopment project for the area. It is however, quite different from the development in Gunwharf Quays. It is directly related to the community and was designed with the community’s input. More importantly, most interviewees talked with enthusiasm about the project and how more similar projects could really help regenerate the area, suggesting that they would welcome a chance to have a greater say in the organization of their physical environment.

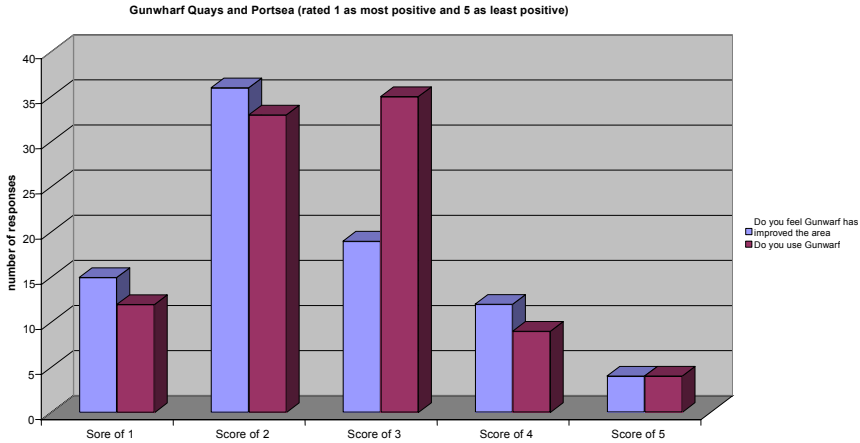


Figure 11: Portsea residents' views on Gunwharf Quays.

4 Discussion

The analysis of the questionnaire indicates that the community of Portsea is satisfied with their neighbourhood, but realizes that there is potential to improve in many areas. In particular, there is concern over the crime rate, and over the environmental quality of the area, particularly as it relates to the physical environment. For example, while Portsea is fortunate enough to have several small parks dotted throughout the area, the perception is that they are not used for safety reasons. From the assessment of the built environment and the results of the focus group it is apparent that respondents do not always find the area to be aesthetically pleasant. Green areas and open spaces are not inadequate but it was widely agreed that lack street furniture and lighting compromise their use by all ages and at all time. Moreover, a large number of derelict and uninhabited buildings do not help improve a built environment, which is landscaped by council terraced houses, and tower blocks.

The focus groups explored in greater detail responses to the built environment, in particular how residents viewed and used public open spaces. This turned out to be an important issue for local residents, generating a great deal of comment and discussion. It became apparent that local residents people felt relatively powerless to influence or control the arrangement of public space. They complained about the lack of gardens, the lack of street furniture, the difficulty of supervising play areas, and poor lighting. Interestingly, despite the area's high crime rate, vandalism is virtually non-existent, and there is little graffiti on inhabited buildings.

Residents expressed not just frustration poor quality of the physical environment, but also at their lack of control in the management process. Extremely low levels of home ownership and the high level of council housing means that most residents have very little control over the area in which they live. They control neither their personal living space nor the broader public

spaces, which make up “their” neighbourhood. Housing is managed by the Portsmouth City Council’s Housing Directorate, and open space is managed by the Parks Directorate or even by the Education Directorate.

A key finding was that although residents were unhappy with the physical environment, they were *not* unhappy with the built environment. Although there was not a question asking about housing satisfaction on the questionnaire, it was not an issue in the focus groups. As noted above, graffiti is almost non-existent in the area. A generation of residents have grown up in dwellings, which are now considered socially unhealthy. Although resistance to living in flats was widespread after 1945, residents of Portsea now take this kind of living for granted. Their taste in housing, their views of what constitutes a “normal” residential environment, have been shaped by their housing experience. However, it was evident from the responses of our students that housing in the area no longer conforms to best practice paradigms, and even among city council planners there are still suggestions that the neighbourhood should be substantially rebuilt. (For an extensive discussion of the broader implications of these changing paradigms, see Douglas [7] or Muthesius’ comprehensive discussion of the utopian design aims of new universities in the 1960s and 1970s and the response of users to those utopian goals (Muthesius [8]).

Residents are twice removed from the management of the area in which they live and in which they are legitimate stakeholders. Because they rent rather than own their housing, they have little say or control over its appearance or management policies: they are supplicants rather than participants in the management process, which is top down, paternalistic, and often condescending in its well meant intentions. They are additionally removed from control because there is little private space in the area. There are relatively few private gardens, and the traditional streetscape does not exist in most of the area. They have no control over building colours, gardens, landscaping, plantings, or street furniture. Again, they are clients rather than decision makers, and decisions are made by an often remote and benevolent city council bureaucracy. This stands out in contrast to neighbourhoods in most British towns and cities, where local residents influence streetscape through their choice of house colours, plantings, and other forms of personal expression (Muthesius [9]). Residents cannot even park their cars outside their flats. Thus, while the area suffers from high social exclusion, it also suffers from a high level of social disengagement. One could argue that residents can express their views through municipal elections. However, their “electoral ward” has three council members who belong to a minority party on the city council, and have little voice in shaping policy. Moreover, in Portsmouth as in most of the UK, respect for local government is limited, and turnout in local elections is low.

At the same time, the views of our students are instructive. They saw the neighbourhood as amorphous, unfriendly, and uncomfortable; open, chaotic, and unlit. They did not like visiting the area, which reflected both their personal living experiences and the things they had heard about the neighbourhood while living in Portsmouth, despite the fact that they work alongside it, and often pass through it on their way to and from University. There are no landmarks, there



are few old buildings, and there is no sense of “place.” Moreover, despite the strong local identity of residents, there is no sense of a district or neighbourhood in the built environment. Portsmouth City Council has invested large sums of money in creating neighbourhood identities in other parts of the city through the use of distinctive streetlights and paving. The area is characterized by what it is not rather than what it is. There are few shops, few pubs, and no restaurants. Despite extensive open space, there are no seating areas. This is not a place to sit and relax or enjoy a meal or a drink. There are no through streets or main pathways with the exception of Queen Street, which far from being a “path” is a heavily trafficked artery which divides the neighbourhood in two and at first glance appears to be lined with derelict buildings or open space.

5 Conclusions

Portsea was first established as a dockyard and is still the home of the Royal Navy. The Portsea area gradually grew up around the dockyard to provide housing, entertainment and other facilities for the dockyard personnel. Today, Portsea is considered amongst the most deprived areas in the south of England although it is adjacent to historical attractions, a university and new shopping and leisure facilities. However, extensive analysis has shown that despite apparent pathologies, there is a strong sense of community. Residents take pride in and identify with their neighbourhood.

Urban regeneration should embrace successful social sustainability. This requires a re-evaluation of social paradigms. Our work in Portsea suggests that apparently deprived districts may be far more “sustainable” than is thought. System built housing, and utopian houses in the sky surrounded by public open space are not always a sign of social decay. Moreover, high levels of crime and poor social indicators do not mean that neighbourhoods lack social capital or “friendliness”. It would be a mistake to destroy the social fabric of the community while redeveloping the built environment. Policy makers need to tap into the community spirit, to activate it, and to enhance it. It is hoped that this work can contribute to the debate related to social perspectives in historical districts among policy makers, experts, communities, non-governmental organizations, industry, and the general public.

Today, Portsea is at a crossroads. The construction of a new shopping district and residential complex on former naval land adjacent to the area, and pressure to construct new market rate housing to meet local demand means that the area could be substantially rebuilt over the next decade. A system-built tower block is approaching the end of its design life span, and its demolition will almost certainly lead to other changes. Already, new market rate housing is being built for sale or rent at far higher prices than local residents can afford. The centrality of the area, its access to good rail and bus services, its closeness to the university, which is a major employer and, thanks to students and staff, a major source of housing demand, all place pressure on the area to change.

However, the city council “owns” the area, and can legitimately claim the right to manage and redevelop Portsea with the needs of the broader civic



community in mind, particularly given its accessibility and its relatively low density, and particularly since the number of people who pass through or near to it is immense, and each visitor is a form of “stake-holder” as well. Moreover, since the area was rebuilt in the 1950s and 1960s, planning and urban design paradigms have changed, and moved away from the Bauhaus ideal. The “city in the park” has been replaced by a desire to recreate traditional busy streets and streetscapes, characterized by a mix of uses and a mix of housing types and social classes. This is perhaps best epitomized by the 1987 Berlin International Building Exhibition (IBA), which can be contrasted with the 1957 IBA. (See, for example, the discussion about the reconstruction of Marzahn, in Berlin, and the influence of the 1987 IBA in Young, [7].) These changes are also reflected in the Portsea area. In the 1980s, new housing construction moved away from flats to terraced houses. However, new construction followed a suburban pattern of clustered housing, surrounded by extensive lawns, and densities remained low. More recently, in the early 2000s, new housing has been built which follows the street line, and abuts right against the pavement.

While there is little doubt that the area must change, and it has already started doing so, we argue that whatever physical changes take place; the social fabric should be preserved. We recognize that in a dynamic and rapidly changing world, the concept of stakeholder is a complex one, and admit that it is difficult to determine who “owns” a neighbourhood. While existing residents may view Portsea as “their” neighbourhood, new residents can make a similar claim, as can those who work nearby, or live there as students. Therefore, perhaps more importantly, we argue that social engagement is an important part of any regeneration process, and should precede any such process. In fact, we argue that social engagement is as important a goal as social inclusion, and that it should be a central part of any reconstruction programme.

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