

Sustainable Urbanism...Sociology and the Social Sphere of Sustainability.

CharacterTowns.org is devoted to the ideas and ideals of sustainable urbanism and especially the social sphere of the sustainability system. Sociology and thereby sociologists have a great deal to add to the urban planning profession and practice. It is a bit bold to presume that cities can be planned and designed without at least a casual knowledge of sociology; a discipline that examines how people interact with each other.

FOUNDERS.

Sociology is a relatively new discipline; like city planning. Of the three acknowledged founders of sociology, Karl Marx was the first; he began publishing books in the 1840s. *Das Kapital* was published in 1867. Max Weber and George Herbert Mead followed at the turn of the century.

Many contemporary writers, who may not call themselves sociologists, address important social aspects of the city: Robert Putnam, Robert K. Merton, Peter Kageyama, David Brooks, the Fallows, Dar Williams and Ray Oldenburg. They and others contribute to an understanding of how individuals and groups define, and are defined by, the city. A sustainable city relies on this understanding.

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ThoughtCo is a premier reference site with a 20+ year focus on expert-created education content providing expert discussion on many subjects, including sociology. They also provide mini-biographies on many of the most important sociological thinkers.

Introduction to Sociology

By

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Sociology, in the broadest sense, is the study of society. Sociology is a very broad discipline that examines how humans interact with each other and how human behavior is shaped by

- social structures (groups, communities, organizations)
- social categories (age, sex, class, race, etc.)
- social institutions (e.g. politics, religion, education)

The basic foundation of sociology is the belief that a person's attitudes, actions, and opportunities are shaped by all of these aspects of society.

The sociological perspective is fourfold:

- Individuals belong to groups.
- Groups influence our behavior.
- Groups take on characteristics that are independent of their members (i.e. the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.)
- Sociologists focus on behavior patterns of groups, such as differences based on sex, race, age, class.

LINK: <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-sociology-3026639>

INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES OR INSTITUTIONS?

City planning is one of the few professions that demands collaboration with other professions and trades. Since cities are an amalgam for systems, structures, natural elements, and people, the experts in many fields must be consulted to get a true sense of the city. Using the ideas of every profession in the city planning, building and managing is important.

SOCIOLOGY AND CITY PLANNING.

Sociologists are in a pivotal position; they deal with people as individuals and groups. A “first principle” question for the sociologist, and the planner: what is the basic unit of society? Is it the individual, the family or another agency? The basic unit has changed over time and different groups in the city have different answers to this question.

Planning neighborhoods, recreation, and health care and education systems depends on knowing who constitutes the constituency and their natural “home base”. Places dominated by strong families will have different needs and strengths than places without a strong family structure. Demographics matter.

Communities of individuals, families or secondary institutional groups are guided by traditions, norms and conventions of their community. Communities also become physically and socially separated. Secondary institutions replace the personal community and provide the emotional structure people need. Secondary institutions filling this role are gathering places such as schools, worship centers, government sponsored community centers, those of non-government organizations [NGOs] and street gangs.

City planners can best solve problems and anticipate situations when they understand the fundamental issues driving the social ecology. Believing that every community is organized in multiple ways, the city must accommodate the needs of individuals and families with systems that support both, and provide the secondary institutions for both to draw upon.

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS.

Public schools, parks, museums and libraries are used by a cross-section of society. Transit systems in small cities and towns need to broaden their appeal with better service to attract commuters, students and shoppers who are not necessarily transit dependent.

Public schools are discussed by Gene Demby in an NPR piece [9.14.15]: “**What We Lose When A Neighborhood School Goes Away**”. It seems the controversy about the historic economic and racial segregation of neighborhood schools can best be addressed by integrating neighborhoods and making every school in the system a great school rather than wrenching a basic institution for every neighborhood...a long process.

Read more at:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/09/14/439450644/what-else-we-lose-when-a-neighborhood-school-goes-away>

Public parks were viewed by Olmsted as a great equalizer; everyone is equal in a public park. A system of public parks co-located with schools, museums and libraries, connected by trails, offers universal access to secondary social institutions.

National Association for Olmsted Parks.

Across the nation, “the Olmsted’s work reflects a vision of American communities and American society still relevant today—a commitment to visually compelling and accessible green space that restores and nurtures the body and spirit of all people, regardless of their economic circumstances.

The Olmsteds believed in the restorative value of landscape and that parks can bring social improvement by promoting a greater sense of community and providing recreational opportunities, especially in urban environments.

LINK: <http://www.olmsted.org/the-olmsted-legacy/about-the-olmsted-legacy>

CONCLUSIONS.

1. City planning requires knowledge and participation from all the city-building professions: planners, urban designers, architects, landscape architects, civil and sanitary engineers, transportation planners and engineers, public administrators, public finance experts, economic development professionals and city managers, among others such as historic preservationists, ecologists and sociologists.
2. Sociology is an important and often neglected discipline in the city planning process; sociologists are critical collaborators in the city planning process.
3. Demographics matter. Determining the basic organizational structure of the constituency is important: individual, family or secondary social institution.
4. City planning is one of the few professions knowledgeable and practiced with collaborative systems that draw upon the expertise of multiple allied professions and the constituents to craft plans to address immediate and long-term issues and opportunities.

READINGS.

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3. ***Community and the Politics of Place***, Daniel Kemmis, The University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.
4. ***Eyes on the Street: The Life of Jane Jacobs***, Robert Kanigel, Robert A. Knopf, New York, 2016.
5. ***For the Love of Cities, The Love Affair Between People and Their Places***, Peter Kageyama, Creative City Productions, 2011.
6. ***Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America***, [James Fallows](#) (Author), [Deborah Fallows](#) (Author), Pantheon Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, NY, 2018.
7. ***Social Entrepreneurship for the 21st Century: Innovation Across the Nonprofit, Private, and Public Sectors***, [Georgia Levenson Keohane](#), The MacGraw-Hill Companies, 2013.
8. ***The Ascent of Man***, J. Bronowski, Little, Brown and Company, 1973.
9. ***The Great Good Places, Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community***, Ray Oldenburg, Marlowe & Company, New York, 336 pages, 1999.
10. ***The Social Contract***, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Barnes & Noble, NY, 157 pages, 2005, originally published 1762.
11. ***The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces***, William H. Whyte (Author, 1917 - 1999), Project for Public Spaces, New York, 1980.
12. ***Triumph of the City, How our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier***, Edward Glaeser, The Penguin Press [USA], London, 2011.
13. ***What I Found in a Thousand Towns, A Traveling Musician's Guide to Rebuilding America's Communities – One Coffee Shop, Dog Run, and Open-Mike at a Time***, Dar Williams, Basic Books, NY, 272 pages, 2017.