

What is Livability?

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Introduction

Livability has emerged as an important concept in the field of planning. Increasingly, policy and community planning efforts at all levels of governance use the term “livability,” often in describing long range goals. Livability is used in wide array of contexts within the field of planning: transportation, community development, resilience, and many other subdisciplines have incorporated livability. It is used in a number of other fields as well, some of which are closely interrelated to planning (e.g., subjective well-being and quality of life research).

Though the term is often used in plans, the concept of livability has several definitions. Attempts to define the term have produced a wide range of themes and properties. However, most invocations of livability are not attempts to define the term. Rather, clues on implicit definitions emerge from the term’s usage. While usages are mutually exclusive or conflicting on occasion, understanding the ways in which livability is used offers insights on what livability means to planners and communities. This study reviewed urban planning journals, professional magazines, and news stories to reveal trends in the usage of livability and efforts to define it. The first part of this brief discusses how the term has been used. The second part of this brief explores the sources of definitions. This brief concludes with further comments on the nature of livability and how it can be more consistently and successfully applied in planning contexts.

History of Livability



As it is used today, livability first made an appearance in the 1950s. The concept of livability took hold as a powerful linguistic tool in Vancouver with The Electors Action Movement (TEAM) (Ley, 1990 & Kaal, 2011). Donald Appleyard's book *Liveable Streets* published in 1981 also brought livability to planners and urban designers, particularly as it related to streetscapes and transportation. Livability usage in planning-related media saw a surge in 1999 with the Gore/Clinton Livability Agenda, a framework for coordinating and adding billions of dollars of funding for "new tools and resources to preserve green space, ease traffic congestion, and pursue regional "smart growth" strategies" (Livability Agenda). The AARP has been developing guidance on livability since their first Community Evaluation Guideline in 2000 and continues to offer tools and guidance to communities around livability. In 2005, the next iteration of AARP's evaluation guide provided their definition of livability that is still nearly identical today. "A livable community is one that has affordable and appropriate housing, supportive community features and services, and adequate mobility options, which together facilitate personal independence and the engagement of residents in civic and social life" (AARP, 2005). In the United States, the concept of livability gained significant traction in 2009 as a set of guiding principles from the new Partnership for Sustainable Communities (PSC), a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (PSC & Gough, 2015). The six Livability Principles developed by PSC were used to evaluate grant applications in the Sustainable Communities program.

Principles of Livability



1. Provide more transportation choices

Develop safe, reliable, and economical transportation choices to decrease household transportation costs, reduce our nation's dependence on foreign oil, improve air quality, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and promote public health.



2. Promote equitable, affordable housing

Expand location- and energy-efficient housing choices for people of all ages, incomes, races, and ethnicities to increase mobility and lower the combined cost of housing and transportation.



3. Enhance economic competitiveness

Improve economic competitiveness through reliable and timely access to employment centers, educational opportunities, services and other basic needs by workers, as well as expanded business access to markets.



4. Support existing communities

Target federal funding toward existing communities—through strategies like transit-oriented, mixed-use development and land recycling—to increase community revitalization and the efficiency of public works investments and safeguard rural landscapes.



5. *Coordinate and leverage federal policies and investment*

Align federal policies and funding to remove barriers to collaboration, leverage funding, and increase the accountability and effectiveness of all levels of government to plan for future growth, including making smart energy choices such as locally generated renewable energy.



6. *Value communities and neighborhoods*

Enhance the unique characteristics of all communities by investing in healthy, safe, and walkable neighborhoods—rural, urban, or suburban.

In describing the state of current practice on livability, Young and Hermanson (2013) found in that the PSC definition had been adopted by a number of community planning organizations and was used in academic research.

Organizations and researchers continue to use the six PSC principles, both explicitly and implicitly. Many of the sources analyzed referred to and often used the definition of livability presented by the federal government suggests that federal policy significantly shapes the discourse on livability.

Purpose

The aim of this review is to examine the trends in usage of the word livability. As it becomes an increasingly popular and important term in planning theory and practice, getting clear on what is meant by livability gains new urgency. As governments adopt goals and performance measures related to livability, it is important to understand the definition of the concept. Without establishing some framework for understanding livability, the term and concept may become empty of meaning. By reviewing the trends of how livability is used, this paper moves towards enabling communities, governments, and planners to have better informed conversations about the concept of livability.

Methods

“... if you think about it, there is no such a thing as livability. Livability is an artificial construct calculated by experts based on normative ideals according to some philosophical system.”

- Okulicz-Kozaryn 2013

To examine definition and usage of the term livability, researchers searched databases including Academic OneFile and Academic Search Premier, and Transportation Research International Documentation (TRID) for mentions of the term ‘livability’. Results were not limited by time period. Several sources that were repeatedly referenced by other sources were retrieved and included. Mentions of livability from other disciplines (biology, queer studies, religion, etc.) were typically excluded unless they had a clear connection to livability in the context of the built environment. Quality of life and psychology studies were initially included, but some sources were removed if they did not relate to planning and the built environment. While quality of life and subjective well-being studies are related to experiences of the built environment, sources that did not make this explicit connection were excluded. Each result was recorded and the definition of livability was identified and summarized from each source when clearly defined. (See Appendix A)

To categorize definitions, researchers studied each definition to construct thematic categories for coding definitions. Each source was coded into a category, determined after source compilation (Table 1). Each source was tagged with one or more categorical features from Table 1.

Code categories have different features. The scope of each category’s conceptual framework ranges from narrow to broad. Categories like federal initiatives or measuring/indices have a concrete, easily identifiable framework while categories like community features and development have a much wider range of possible related concepts. Categories are also either primarily thematic or utilitarian. Categories like housing related to a particular theme while categories like definition/theory and measuring/indices are about the usage and utility of livability. While any of the categories’ scopes or natures could imaginably have the opposite characteristic than described in Table 1 (e.g., specific or utilitarian community features), the assigned characteristics of each category type reflects how the analyzed sources generally employed each.



Table 1 : Categories

Category	Scope	Nature
<i>Community Features</i>	Broad	Thematic
<i>Definition / Theory</i>	Broad	Utilitarian
<i>Demographic</i>	Specific	Thematic
<i>Development</i>	Broad	Thematic
<i>Environment</i>	Specific	Thematic
<i>Federal Initiative</i>	Specific	Utilitarian
<i>Health / Safety</i>	Specific	Thematic
<i>Housing</i>	Specific	Thematic
<i>Measuring / Indices</i>	Specific	Utilitarian
<i>Social Justice / Equity</i>	Specific	Thematic
<i>Transportation</i>	Specific	Thematic

Community Features

Community features included a broad-array of topics. Topics range from specific amenities and designs to more broad overtures of “community livability.” The aim was to capture the emergence of livability as a way to discuss the features that make a community. Intersections with other categories were frequent (e.g., A park is a community feature, but if the source also framed it as an environment issue, it was also assigned an environment tag).

Many sources received a community feature tag with vague reference to elements of livable communities. This was especially common in more general media sources and in sources where livability was not the key feature.

Example - “Elder livability refers to the features of a local community that support older residents who wish to age in place, such as the presence of culturally appropriate services, good transportation options for nondrivers, safe neighborhoods, and affordable housing” (Silverstein, Johns, & Griffin, 2008).

“A livable community is one that is safe and secure, has affordable and appropriate housing and transportation options, and has supportive community features and services”

- Harrell, Lynott, Guzman, & Lampkin 2014

Demographic

Sources that were categorized as demographic related livability to a particular group of individuals. Because of the work of AARP on livability, the most common demographic in the sources reviewed was elderly individuals.

Example – see above

Environment

The environment category captured the livability of natural features as they relate to the built environment. This included, among other topics, parks, green infrastructure, and air quality, so long as there was a direct connection to the built environment (e.g., an automobile-inducing transportation network leading to more vehicle exhaust).

Example – “Livability thus touches on sustainability, quality of life, and place, ‘giving special attention to people and their location.’ “Place,” in turn, reflects the “particular environmental features and socially constructed settings in which people interact with each other and with nature” (Perkins, 2008).

Federal / National initiative

A number of sources centered livability within a federal or national program or initiative. Examples include the Clinton-Gore Livability Agenda, PSC’s Livability Principles. USDOT’s livability funding, and National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Livability and Health Summit.

Example – “This article examines the complementarity of livability and sustainability at a theoretical level but recognizes that linkage in practice is complex. Connection between these concepts is examined through the analysis of comprehensive plans in fourteen jurisdictions in the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where a federally funded regional planning process was initiated to create “livable sustainability” (Gough, 2015).

Health / Safety

Sources that framed health and safety as related to the livability of the built environment were included. Sources that used livability but did not draw a connection to the built environment were not included.



Example – “While the concept of “livable city” is open to debate with regard to definitions and content, four themes are commonly espoused ..: Improvements in life chances through investments in health and education that reach poorer as well as more affluent populations. This includes working towards gender and ethnic equality, and poverty reduction. Meaningful work and livelihood both for the sake of income and also as a source of self-esteem and personal fulfilment. A safe and clean environment for daily living, including environmental justice for the urban poor, who suffer the greatest impacts of environmental degradation” (Douglass, 2002).

Housing

Housing included planning for housing and its impact in the community. Architectural design was often cited as a factor in livability, but this was determined to be outside the scope of livability. Housing often overlapped with development.

Example – “A livable community is one that is safe and secure, has affordable and appropriate housing and transportation options, and offers supportive community” (Harrell, Lynott, & Guzman, 2014).

Measuring / Indices

This category includes any sources that attempted to quantify livability or present it as something quantifiable. This typically took the form of indices and varied from complex transportation and housing demand modeling to weighting performance measures. Many livability indices focused on quality of life matters that, while related to, were not themselves elements of the built environment (e.g., safety, income, education, etc.). Livability indices that included measures of the built environment were included, however.

Example – “livability has come to mean the ability of a centre to maintain and improve its viability and vitality. These two terms mean the capacity of a city centre to attract investment continuously and to remain alive.” “This paper analyses the concept of ‘city-centre livability’ and how it can be measured through a set of KPIs” (Baslas, 2004).

Social Justice / Equity

This category captured equity concerns related to the built environment. Issues like housing design were excluded, but community activism for better community features (e.g., parks, neighborhood amenities, etc.) were included.

Example – “Thus, despite its clear benefits, when treated as a value-added amenity in a sharply class-and-race-divided society, livability operates as a mode of exclusionary development” (Stehlin, 2015).

Transportation

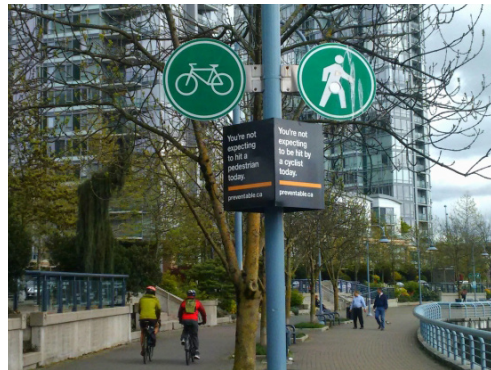
All modes of transportation were included, though references limited to only transportation technology were not (e.g., zero emission buses increasing livability). Transportation sources focused on topics such as transportation funding, land use, congestion, parking, traffic calming, and transportation options.

Example – “From a transportation perspective, well maintained roads and bicycle/ pedestrian lanes and paths are significant. By incorporating all the results from the data collection, a definition has been formulated which focuses on a community having well maintained roads with safe pedestrian/bicycle facilities which benefits the people by providing quick access to services such as jobs, health care, and recreational activities by preserving the culture and sovereignty” (Pokharel, Shinstine, & Ksaibati, 2015).

Definitions / Theory

Sources aiming to define livability or moved to expand or refine its conceptual boundaries were categorized.

Examples (see sidebar)



Findings and Future Work

Of the 237 sources reviewed, 27 offered an attempt to or explicit definition of livability (Figure 1).

While most sources did not aim at defining livability the context of each was categorized. The three most common categories were transportation, followed by development and community features.

Frequency of Categories in Sources

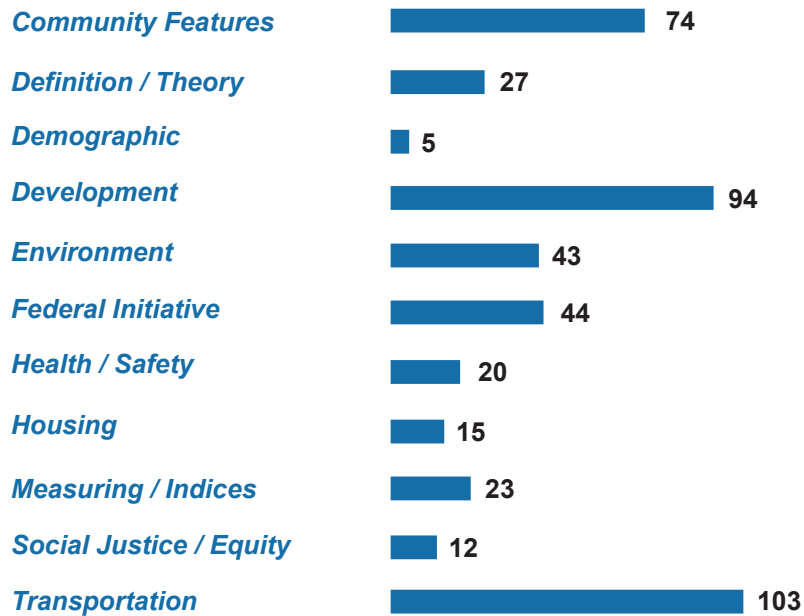


Figure 1: Frequency of livability category in resources. Resources can span multiple categories.

Livability is indeed used in a myriad of ways. Few scholars have attempted to define it. Further research will examine how planning documents (like comprehensive plans and long range transportation plans) use livability and look at similarities and differences.

Livability is frequently used as an umbrella of indicators. However, in many cases, the indicators are chosen first and then gathered under the livability “umbrella” rather than following from a distinct conceptual framework.

There are a number of possible avenues for continuing this work. One possible method may be to look at how local and regional planning policies and documents define and use the term livability.

Livability has been used in a number of different contexts, often similar to the general way in which planning uses the term, furthering ambiguousness of the term, (from the distantly related to traditional planning discourse: biology, religion, gender studies, to more related, survivability to climate change, subjective well-being quality of life research, and engaged citizenry). Indeed, some in planning discourse have explicitly called for broadening livability to questions of the social elements of the community (Kaal, 2011). Acknowledging these calls, this paper centers analysis on livability and the built environment, but explores closely related uses of livability.

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