Where is the 'social' in constructions of 'liveability'? Exploring community, social

interaction and social cohesion in changing urban environments, *Urban Policy and Research*,

(forthcoming)

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Abstract

Ongoing changes in the urban environment have renewed interest in the transformation of cities and suburbs as liveable places. This article examines the limitations inherent in a functional (objective) notion of liveability that commonly underpins government policy directions. Through an examination of key debates in the literature we consider how the delivery of the social (subjective) dimension of liveability, linked to community, social interaction and social cohesion, poses unique challenges for policy makers, urban planners and developers. We argue for a deeper understanding of the social constructs of liveability that acknowledges the complexity of changing urban environments in contemporary society.

Key Words: liveability, community, social interaction, social cohesion, urban change

Introduction

Internationally, managing urban population growth and sustainability is a key challenge for governments at all levels (Gehl 2010). In Australia, the Federal government, through the Department of Infrastructure and Transport (DIT) (2013), has assumed the important role of developing policy to enhance liveability as a way to manage sustainability and preserve functional and strong communities. Part of this process has been working with State, Territory and Local government to encourage investment in urban development and renewal projects, improve spatial planning and increase housing diversity (DIT, 2011). Subsequently, different forms of higher density living options including small lot single dwellings, high-rise apartments, Transport Oriented Developments (TOD's), Master Planned Estates (MPE's) and Master Planned Communities (MPC's) have become more common. These development approaches have not only produced changes in how Australians live but also how they experience their living environment. Consequently, there has been renewed interest in measuring the liveability of suburbs and neighbourhoods (McCrea and Walters 2012) that have been transformed by these developments.

Based on the policy rhetoric (DIT, 2011), creating liveable communities and cities should require careful consideration of the social dimension of urban life as change occurs. However, scholars have identified a lack of focus on this area. For example, work to date has found there is a paucity of research into the social meanings, perceptions and impacts of urban renewal approaches (Burton 2000, Hyra 2012) on existing communities. In addition, Gleeson (2006, p. 44) highlighted the growing inequality linked to urban change which has resulted in unequal access to resources and life chances for many individuals and households (Baum and Gleeson 2010). Given the rapid changes occurring in our cities and suburbs, we argue there is an even more fundamental step to take before we apply this dimension in the research context, that is, to better understand the key constructs that underpin the social

dimension of liveability and how they are reflected in contemporary urban life. This knowledge will allow us to better target research to key issues that are important to residents and to their future liveability. First, this paper provides an overview of liveability discourses and widely-used liveability measures. Second, we analyse three key constructs of the social dimension of liveability regularly cited in definitions and as potential outcomes of urban change: community, social interaction and social cohesion. Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion of the key issues identified and their implications for urban policy and research and the goal of creating liveable cities.

Defining and measuring liveability

Liveability discourses are nothing if not diverse and as Vine (2012) noted, concepts appear to be re-invented with each new generation. Differences in orientation can be seen however, based on 'who' defines the concept and for 'what' purpose. Therefore, it is important to understand the different perspectives of the three main groups utilising this concept: Academics, Policymakers and Private Providers. Their perspectives are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Academic perspective

Academic perspectives of liveability have the greatest variance with significant debate within the literature about the challenges of defining liveability as a generalizable construct. For example, De Chazal (2010, p. 586) argued that "in its simplest sense, liveability can be seen as a pure expression of values or desires" and that the meaning of liveability is "predicated on differing and indeed shifting values" (p.587). This makes liveability to a large extent, undefinable. However, de Chazel also concedes there is a need for working definitions

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applicable to specific circumstances and proposes that liveability can be broadly defined as: "a statement of desires related to the contentment with life in a particular location of an individual or set of individuals" (p.587).

Van Kamp *et al* (2003 cited in de Chazal 2010, p. 595) also suggests that liveability cannot be captured in a single definition and describes the concept in the form of 'desires' represented by 'domains' (e.g., physical environment, personal and community development). Furthermore, Buys *et al* (2013) concluded that what constitutes a liveable place is complex, very personal, and is relative to where people choose to live and how they perceive their environment through their subjective filter. In this sense, liveability reflects what Vine (2012) describes as a theory of everyday or daily life as it focusses attention on the required factors for regular functioning and social use of place. As such it provides both a rationale for improving the city and a framework for understanding daily functioning and how to enhance liveability.

According to de Chazal (2010, p.595) the way forward is to somehow treat these "messy" individual values along with the associated material outcomes "in an organized fashion and set them in a particular context". McCrea and Walters (2012) attempted this, in their study of residents within two suburbs undergoing change, defining 'liveability' as an individual's perspective and their subjective evaluation of the quality of both tangible (e.g., public infrastructure) and intangible (e.g., sense of place) features of place. As such, liveability was seen as "experienced in" the context of the urban environment (i.e., the subjective social environment) as opposed to being "derived from" the urban environment (i.e., the objective physical environment) (McRea and Walters 2012, p. 3).

Ultimately, most academics would agree that 'liveable' is a commonly used term that lacks a single definition due to its "relativistic use as a concept for a range of ideas about place and daily life as well as its appeal to the individual or to a community" (Vine 2012, p.119). This has been one of the major challenges for researchers attempting to develop a more objective and community oriented definition of liveability.

Policy perspective

Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition, liveability as an ideology has grown in importance and liveability agendas are now prominent at state and national government level in Australia and globally (Vine, 2012). Defining liveability for the purposes of research or policy development is even more difficult as it implies a process whereby a city can be transformed over time environmentally, economically and socially. Salvaris (2012) noted that for many countries, including Australia, economic production and growth has been the key indicator of progress often overriding any focus on the social environment and certainly any framework that fully integrates the economic, social, environmental, cultural and democratic dimensions.

However, over the last decade Canada, for example, has moved toward a more equitable, sustainable and comprehensive model of progress (Salvaris 2012). Timmer and Seymoar (2006) described the regional planning process in Vancouver, Canada, as dealing with not only long-term future liveability, but also with people's ongoing satisfaction with their day-to-day experience of living in the region. Their definition encompassed four key components: (1) governance and citizen participation; (2) common values and a sense of identity and place; (3) complete communities, vital downtown core, industrial clusters, and green space; and (4) natural resource flows, green corridors, energy grids, communication, active transportation networks (Timmer and Seymoar 2006).

The Australian Government has also attempted to define liveability, more broadly and comprehensively, in *Our Cities, Our Future* a national urban policy document (DIT 2011, p. xxx):

> Liveable cities should facilitate residents and visitors achieving a wide range of goals such as a high quality of life and health and wellbeing by being equitable, socially inclusive, affordable, accessible, healthy, safe and resilient. They have attractive built and natural environments and provide a diversity of choices and opportunities for people to live their lives, share friendships, and raise their families to their fullest potential.

Thus, from a government and policy perspective, liveability is being used as an all-encompassing term, with common meanings and preferred outcomes for all residents. This is despite the fact that not all citizens have access to the same opportunities. However ultimately, the marketing of 'liveability' and liveable cities is seen as an important component of competitive advantage that can be used to compete for economic gain through investment, tourism and population growth. Hence, governments need to clearly articulate liveability outcomes to show how they measure up to policy promises and how the nation ranks and performs in the global arena.

Private provider perspective

Liveability indices and measures have become 'big business' for many private organisations. Of the wide range of companies that offer services to assess city and country performance, Mercer Consulting, Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) and Monocle Magazine, have emerged as leading providers of liveability indices (Meares and Owens 2012). This information is used by policy makers to identify aspects of a city where improvements can be made, facilitate comparisons between cities and monitor performance of their city over time.

International benchmarking studies are also used to develop and promote a city's image, attract tourists and new residents, in particular highly skilled professionals, as well as investment. All of these outcomes are integral to the growth of key industries in contemporary cities. Thus, in the race to become the most liveable city in the world, indices effectively 'define' what attributes are most important in a city or country and which attributes are important to external stakeholders observing progress and assessing potential.

The EIU World's most liveable city index quantifies the challenges that might be present to an individual's lifestyle in a location and allows for direct comparison between locations by: stability, health care, culture and environment, education and infrastructure. Mercer's Worldwide Quality of Living Survey, is designed to advise governments and major companies on the amount of compensation required to offset expatriates who experience a decline in living conditions in their new host location and looks at ten key categories: political, social and economic environment, socio-cultural environment, health and sanitation, schools and education, public services and transportation, recreation, consumer goods, housing and natural environment. The Monocle's Quality of Life Survey, derives a list of the top 25 most liveable cities in the world using an index of eleven criteria including safety/crime, international connectivity, climate, tolerance, urban design and business conditions (Queensland University of Technology (QUT) 2009, Meares and Owen 2012). However, with its origins in company management and industry performance, city benchmarking takes little, if any, note of the daily lives of local residents (Vine 2012). Ultimately, indices are attractive because they produce objective, quantifiable measures of liveability at a broad population level and place emphasis on factors which governments can influence directly (VCEC 2007, QUT 2009).

Criticisms of Measurement of Liveability

Despite the global focus on measuring liveability there are strong criticisms of both the practice and value of ranking cities. One problem exists in the failure of objective measurement tools to reflect the nuances in how people might describe characteristics of 'a good life' or 'a good community' (Salvaris 2012). As discussed, the lack of a theoretical framework or uniform definition of liveability also makes comparisons difficult. Additionally, the use of a 'one size fits all' methodology (Meares and Owen 2012) fails to highlight intra-city differences, in terms of physical and social structures (e.g., lack of infrastructure and recognition of the needs of vulnerable populations) (Badland et al 2014). Also, most indices are empirical studies used to compare different geographic areas and fail to identify exactly what the various indices measure or what significance they might practically have for urban policy and the planning and development of cities (Woolcock 2009).

Another key issue is that no definitions are provided in this process and each concept examined is reduced to a set of attributes or characteristics (Meares and Own 2012). Furthermore, although international benchmarking surveys can provide useful metrics and indicators for local and central government decision making, these decisions are predicated on a set of preferred or desired outcomes which in turn are based on appropriate data and information on how those outcomes can be reached. As a result the interpretations can be oversimplified and fail to show the reality of how a particular city compares to others, as well as the ways in which it changes over time (Meares and Owen 2012, p. 3).

Importantly, all of these tools take very little, to no account, of the perceptions of day-to-day residents about city life, a critical methodological weakness given these perceptions are essential in assessing any city's performance (Woolcock 2009). At the same time, increasingly, other 'social dimensions' of urban communities are being included in the liveability agenda, such as the diversity of the population and activities that add vibrancy to

places and enrich personal and 'community' experiences. According to DIT (2011) these attributes are seen to imply that a city is active socially (e.g., there is participation in social activities and events by all citizens) and by association, socially cohesive (e.g., there is a high level of trust and empathy among people). However, we argue that the social dimension of liveability is complex, difficult to define and operationalize and as a result is more difficult to measure in terms of liveability policy outcomes. In the next section, we illustrate this point by examining three social constructs: community, social interaction and social cohesion, which have been embedded in various definitions of liveability. All three, are highly complex, constantly in a state of change and therefore, should be problematized, examined and interpreted in vastly different ways to more traditional objective indicators of liveability.

Social Dimensions of Liveability

Community

Generally, discussions of liveability in urban settings have focused on what is contained physically and what can be achieved through intervention in the physical space of a suburb or city. Therefore, governments, planners and designers have largely constructed community in terms of place and the physical organisation and design of space. In this sense, place is the assumed basis for community and is the locale around which social relations and belonging are established and reinforced to form shared values, norms, desires, bonds and history (Entrikin 1991, Etzioni 1996). However, community is not necessarily place-based. Ife and Tesoriero (2006, p. 100) argued that in "contemporary urban and suburban areas community structures are often weak, boundaries are difficult to perceive or non-existent, and people commonly relate to groups and structures substantially removed from their local community." The one exception being those whose resources and/or mobility are limited, such as mothers with young children at home, the aged or people with disabilities. Communities of interest,

affinity and attachment are now seen to be more prevalent and more important than communities of place to people's social wellbeing (Bauman 2001,Williams 2005, Zhang and Lawson 2009).

In Australia, it has been suggested that the decline in place-based communities has been exacerbated due to the country's post-colonialization tradition of individualism, independence and a focus on the nuclear family (Davison 2006). However, society has also experienced increasing social differentiation and segregation, consumerism, and the emergence of a postmodern culture (Brindley 2003), greater physical and social mobility (Simpson 1999, Urry 2000), wider employment, school and residential choice (Jarvis *et al*. 2001) and advances in information and communication technologies (Hampton and Wellman 2001). These changes have not only resulted in more transient social relations (Bauman 2001) but have gradually eroded the geographic basis of community (Rosenblatt *et al.* 2009) traditionally formed through time spent developing meaningful relationships in the local context (Pocock 2003). Thus, Ziller (2004, p. 467) contends "if there is one thing community is not these days, it is a place." If this is the case, what are the implications for planning and delivering more liveable communities?

Walters and Rosenblatt (2008) believed these changes to be a contemporary reconfiguration of the ideal of community and how people engage with community on a daily basis. In their investigations of 'community', in Master Planned Estates (MPE) and Master Planned Communities (MPC), they found the ideal of community was far more important than the reality for most residents (Walters and Rosenblatt 2008, Maller and Nicholls 2014). They concluded that residents had "drawn a sense of ontological security from a symbolic construction of community" (Walters and Rosenblatt 2008, p. 411) in the MPE provided by the developer despite little or no face-to-face interactions with other members of that community. This was seen to offer residents a sense of identity, satisfaction, goodwill,

security and control without threatening their freedom and mobility in the contemporary social mileau (Walters and Rosenblatt 2008, Rosenblatt *et al.* 2009). Thus, for these residents, place based notions of community can be understood as 'imagined' and 'constructed' for residents (Rosenblatt *et al.* 2009).

Similarly, Kennedy and Buys (2010) reported that although residents living in inner-city, high-density dwellings in Brisbane, Australia welcomed the 'sense of community' offered in the broader neighbourhood they did not necessarily seek close, regular contact with other residents in their building. They enjoyed a level of familiarity with the area and people working or living in the area, but were less likely to have strong neighbourhood connections or 'engage' in the community (Buys *et al.* 2013). This suggests that even though people continue to have strong affective ties to their place of residence "they are engaged in a multiplicity of communities across diverse geographies" (Rosenblatt *et al.* 2009, p.132). Therefore, the assumption that face-to-face social interaction in a shared local space/place is essential for creating a sense of community may be a misconception. Alternatively, this view of community could be symptomatic of change in our modern cities which is represented by the "the self-segregation of urban elites into privatised enclaves" (Bannister and Kearns 2013, p. 2703).

At the heart of this change is the scale of economic inequality which is associated with societal levels of anxiety and the need to separate oneself from those that differ in social status and which acts as a barrier to mutual empathy (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Thus, the experience of difference in contemporary urbanity "increasingly finds expression in socio-spatial polarisation revealed in the contrast between localised concentrations of poverty and exclusion and new spaces of affluence and selective inclusion" in our cities (Bannister and Kearns 2013, p. 2704). According to Gleeson (2006, p. 35) in Australia this polarisation is at its worst in the middle and outer suburbs of metropolitan regions, the domain of the

'ordinary' urban citizens. He contends years of policy and planning decisions have resulted in the concentration of lower income households in poorer-serviced suburbs with limited housing options, poor living environments and neglected communities (Gleeson, 2006). These conditions threaten to reduce the life chances of the disadvantaged, the poor and the most vulnerable. As Bannister and Kearns (2013, p. 2707) noted "the interpretation of difference and the realisation of (in)tolerance rests, in part, on the qualities of social interaction which is influenced by the scale and intensity of social and (typically) spatial distance manifest in city living." Social relations provide a clear representation of how community is constructed and enacted within a social setting as they can be "observed in practice" and are "spatially constituted" (Panelli and Welch 2005, p. 1593).

Social Interaction

Meaningful positive social interaction has been identified as the precursor for social connection and the vital ingredient that creates a 'Social City' (Kelly *et al*. 2012). This view also underpins the premise that the built environment can foster community through increased social interaction, which is at the core of the concept of New Urbanism (Dixon and Dupuis 2003). The two prevailing ideas that define New Urbanism are the "development of compact urban form as a means of containing urban sprawl and enhancing 'community' through increased social interaction" (Talen 1999, p. 1361). New Urbanists argue that the problems of urban sprawl and lack of community can be addressed through specific urban design principles such as compact cities (Dixon and Dupuis 2003). Examples of these ideas are expressed in government policies and strategies in Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Europe and the USA (Dixon and Dupuis 2003, Howley *et al.* 2009, McCrea and Walters 2012, Maller and Nicholls 2014).

New Urbanists also contend that the built environment can create a 'sense of community' and that how we 'build' communities (e.g., design and placement of public space) will overcome our current civic deficits, build social capital and revive a community spirit (Dixon and Dupuis 2003). However, while most researchers would agree that physical space plays some role in the formation (or dissolution) of sense of community generally, others have suggested that the role of physical space in the creation of community is largely overplayed (Dixon and Dupuis 2003) and that this goal is usually only achieved via face to face human interaction (Talen 1999). Notably, opportunities for social interaction are a key aspect of creating more liveable cities. These opportunities are believed to not only have psychological and physical benefits for individuals, but to also create a sense of belonging for people and thus may foster a psychological sense of community (Riger and Lavrakas 1981).

Urban planners and designers have attempted to facilitate increased social interaction by constructing a range of settings (e.g., local community hubs) and enhancing the walkability of neighbourhoods (Ziller 2004). However, Ziller (2004, p. 471) noted there was "an undoubtedly unsubstantiated leap implied in planning and design policy discourse from face-to-face contact – at best acquaintanceship – to community engagement and participation." This presumes that objective change in the built environment will result in subjective change to the social environment (i.e., people's attitudes and behaviours). This is not only unrealistic, as Walters and Rosenblatt's (2008) study showed, but a highly mechanistic approach to enhancing social outcomes (Glass 1959). For example, Du Toit *et al*. (2007) explored the impact of walkability in neighbourhoods on a range of health and social outcomes (e.g., social interaction, sense of community and informal social control and social cohesion) and found only a weak association between walkability and sense of community and no associations between walkability and local social interaction, informal social control, or social cohesion. They concluded that "urban form blueprints" appear not to produce

automatically expected social impacts" (2007, p. 1677). Thus, a community's level of sociability may depend on issues beyond the influence of infrastructure and urban form.

Gleeson (2006, p.85) argued that many traditional Australian suburban regions have been neglected for decades and left with degraded or neglected public facilities and infrastructure in striking contrast to new, well-resourced developments whose use is confined to those with the ability to pay. In his view, the urban public realm in general, and the quality and capacity of its social infrastructure has declined markedly with many major developments producing public environments (often heavily commercialised) that welcome an exclusive clientele and that control and prohibit others. In addition, many of the newer styles of residential developments such as MPE's, attract residents who have little interest in meeting new people and interacting thus creating social distance. For Gleeson, the "erosion of the public realm in suburban Australia has greatly reduced the possibilities for mutually enriching social interaction" (2006, p.100). Furthermore, inner city urban areas can have other problems that inhibit social interaction such as "transient populations with little commitment to the locality, cultural conflict and concern for security and personal safety" (Ife and Tesoriero 2006, p.100).

Research on new urban development forms in the inner city shows people's inclination toward forming stronger ties with local residents is limited. Kennedy and Buys (2010) reported that respondents, despite choosing to live in inner-city, high-density buildings, were happy to maintain surface level interactions with neighbours, did not like the idea of sharing any of the communal spaces or facilities with others, and were unlikely to run into friends or acquaintances when shopping in their local areas (Buys *et al*. 2013). In these instances, living in close proximity and having to share facilities may have, for some people at least, heightened their desire for privacy and distance from others. Williams (2005, p. 223) noted that there may indeed be "thresholds at which social interaction is deleteriously

affected by density." In contrast, the view that non-spatial factors are more important in building social relationships has long been widely accepted (Glynn 1986). Much of community research that ties resident interaction and sense of community are more a factor of, for example, homogeneity than urban form and locale. This suggests that difference, or the perception of difference, may be a key factor in low levels of social interaction in communities.

In the United Kingdom, the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) (2009) reported that social interaction can only be effective in improving community relationships if it is meaningful. In this sense, meaningful social interaction must be (1) positive, (2) go beyond a superficial level and be sustained (e.g., conversations go beyond surface friendliness, people exchange personal information or talk about each other's differences and they are sustained and long-term) and (3) take a number of forms (e.g., saying hello, sharing a common background, and networking) (DCLG 2009, p. 9). Such interactions are particularly important for people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds and have been shown to break down stereotypes and reduce prejudice. Thus, greater tolerance of difference is potentially founded on stimulating engagement with others, that is, "meaningful and purposeful social interaction and collective activity" (Bannister and Kearns 2013, p. 2712). According to Bannister and Kearns (2013) this would seem a critical objective for a society that faces greater individualisation, privatism, inequality and diversity. In more heterogeneous communities, meaningful interactions can foster more integrated, resilient and sustainable communities and this can have a positive impact on social cohesion (DCLG 2009).

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion represents a range of positive community related attributes including: common values and civic culture, social order and social control, social solidarity and a shared sense of belonging (Jenks and Jones 2010). As previously discussed, the physical and social setting for creating socially cohesive populations, the community, has been progressively eroded with the emergence of a more fluid, individualised way of life. Social networks are city-wide, national, international and increasingly virtual. Socialising is also becoming more indirect and there are fewer opportunities and less need to connect with people living in the same street, building or neighbourhood (Guest and Wierzbicki 1999).

However, Forrest and Kearns (2001, p. 66) argued that the development of cohesive local ties "may be the product not simply of individual life circumstances, but rather of the fit between characteristics of community members and the environment." In Riger and Lavrakas's (1981) study, attachment to local community settings consisted of two empirically distinct although correlated dimensions, social bonding and behavioural rootedness. That is, people's life circumstances, particularly their stage in the life cycle (e.g., age and presence or absence of children), were seen to play a critical role in determining their degree of attachment to local community settings. In addition, as the forces which bear down upon us seem to be increasingly remote (as well as the potential to change or influence government policy) "local social interaction and the familiar landmarks of the neighbourhood may have the potential to take on greater significance as sources of comfort and security" (Forrest and Kearns 2001, p. 2130). Our daily routines are arguably the "basic building-blocks of not only social cohesion but other key social outcomes such as inclusive communities, for as we regularly experience greater co-operation, we learn tolerance, belonging and build social capital" (Forrest and Kearns 2001, p. 2130). Unfortunately, it is often the case that discussions of social change and transformation overlook the importance of the lived

experiences of everyday routines and the role of relatively mundane activities in enhancing social relationships and social cohesion (Forrest and Kearns 2001).

Inevitably, the problems of cities and particularly the problems of poor people in poor communities in cities are seen to be at the heart of concerns about societal cohesion. Forrest and Kearns (2001) suggested that a city could consist of socially cohesive but increasingly divided neighbourhoods. There may be ethnic or religion-based cohesive communities living side-by-side. In these circumstances, the stronger the ties which bind such communities the greater may be the social, racial or religious conflict between them. Social cohesion at the neighbourhood level is therefore by no means unambiguously a good thing as social bonds can be forged through discrimination and exclusion when one group imposes its' will or value system on another.

A recent study in the United Kingdom by Kearns *et al.* (2014) explored whether social cohesion is undermined by the trend to live amongst those most like ourselves in terms of economic status, within an increasingly unequal society? The study showed that the neighbourhood context in which people live appears to influence their attitudes, mostly through their interaction with individual characteristics and values. Specifically, people with high incomes showed higher support for re-distribution when living in more deprived neighbourhoods while people with low levels of altruism had higher levels of support for re-distribution in high density neighbourhoods. These results would suggest that proximity can help to overcome constrained knowledge about inequality and to some extent alter attitudes (Kearns *et al.* 2014). As Wilkinson and Pickett also noted, when we have little contact with other kinds of people, it is harder to build understanding and trust and this serves "to divide us socially" (2009, p.57).

Gleeson (2004) argued that Australian urban development trends toward more 'exclusive communities', were quietly eroding the possibilities for integrated social development. For example, the practice of developing new private housing in MPE's or MPC's on the basis of selling to one income group, or a cluster of similar income groups, has been seen to entrench the role of place as a source of social status. Developers "appear to have mistaken sameness for social cohesion" (Ziller 2004, p. 470). Once again, the social agenda of such projects which aim to increase liveability through social interaction among like-minded residents and build a sense of community and improve resident cohesion, supposes that attitudes and behaviours can be determined by the arrangement of the physical environment. In contrast, Vinson (2004) found that within the most socially disadvantaged communities in New South Wales and Victoria, Australia, social cohesion buffered the negative influence of factors such as limited education, low income, unemployment, and poor work skills (Vinson 2004). This implies that it is the strong social connections between members of a community that is as important, if not more important, than simply bringing people together in well-designed spaces.

Social cohesion factors, it is argued, contribute to better liveability in terms of individual and collective health both directly and also through associated mechanisms such as collective efficacy, social inclusion and social capital (Kawachi and Berkman 2000, Sampson 2003). However, social cohesion in modern day communities is less likely to occur due to, for example, widening gaps in socio-economic position, broad-based loyalties of residents to external groups, the homogenisation of new residential housing estates, and the anonymity assured (and often sought) by residents in new compact high density developments. As one resident lamented, in McCrea and Walters' (2012, p.13) study of densification and gentrification in a socially diverse suburb, "the wealthy new comers love West End for what it offers, but they'll probably be observers, not participants" in the community. Thus, our

nostalgia for what Hagerman (2007, p.289) described as "landscapes from the pre-modern past" is still strong, but unlikely to be satisfied in the contemporary urban landscape.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has examined the construction of meaning about the social environment that underpins notions of liveability within government policies and planning frameworks. We argue that an oversimplified construction of the social dimension of liveability is often mobilised for the purpose of operationalizing government policy and strategy at the expense of addressing the challenges of social change within cities. This involves moving beyond the limited notion that liveability is related predominantly to the economic and functional aspects of urban space. A more nuanced understanding is required to identify how residents' perceptions and experiences of liveability are shaped by the social environment as well as the urban environment, in which they are located.

To this point, liveability has been largely a process of quantifying attributes to inform and develop government policy and to market cities to internal and external audiences. A key aspect of the current liveability debate focuses on the social health of communities. As we have shown, community is a highly problematic and contested concept in today's world. This is due to the fact that community of 'place' seemingly no longer exists in urban areas as a primary source of identification and social connection for residents. Debates within the literature would suggest that the notion of geographic community is largely irrelevant in contemporary society as people are less geographically dependent for work, education, family, and leisure. However, this ignores the social differences that exist in all cities and those people who have fewer, if any, options to move beyond those spatial boundaries. Ultimately, it is the 'ideal' of community that underpins the notion of liveability within government policy.

This perspective also implies that opportunities for social interaction will create strong community connections and greater social cohesion. While interactions might be accessible and often frequent, research has shown they are not necessarily meaningful (i.e., in-depth, with the potential to create strong friendships, connections and cohesion across different groups). For example, it appears that although residents like the 'idea of community' they practice independence and seem happy to keep a social distance from neighbours favouring informal and infrequent interactions over commitment to ongoing friendships (Rosenblatt *et al*. 2009, Kennedy and Buys 2010). Evidence also suggests that, in some cases, the sameness of our living environments is a barrier to facilitating social interaction and social cohesion. For example, new community configurations (e.g., MPE's and MPC's) have been criticised for being more exclusive than inclusive, in relation to the existing communities surrounding these developments. In particular, they effectively exclude the broader public from accessing "public spaces, facilities and services that are managed privately" (Gleeson 2006, p. 169) as opposed to public provision which offers the potential for inclusive participation and interaction by all.

Equally, the measurement of social liveability indicators such as social interaction and social cohesion is problematic due to the ongoing diffusion of the traditional concept of community. For instance, urban renewal policies favour greater consolidation in living environments. This provides residents with the opportunity, as well as the challenge, of 'proximity' to and association with others. However, research has indicated that residents share a preference for day-to-day informal, non-challenging interactions rather than a deeper desire to bond. We argue that to have a cohesive community it must be based on meaningful, regular social interaction. This is especially important in multicultural societies such as Australia where policy discourses purport to value and celebrate diversity as a key component of liveability. For Gleeson (2006, p. 269) the task ahead is to both "resocialise"

Australia's cities and rebuild the public realm. In his view, this encompasses the need for continuous meaningful human contact at a personal and daily level to "build tolerance and socially representative diversity." By implication, a society lacking social cohesion would be one which "displayed social disorder and conflict, disparate moral values, extreme social inequality, low levels of social interaction between and within communities and low levels of place attachment" (Forrest and Kearns 2001, p. 2128).

There is no doubt that liveability policy that advocates well-designed urban environments can play a powerful role in generating social meaning for the people of a city, providing a range of contexts for social identities in globalized, urbanized societies. However, we argue that contemporary community life and urban social identities are more complex than theories of place based attachment have assumed. As such, physical changes in the living environment do not guarantee the liveability outcomes policy makers claim such as a sense of community, meaningful social interaction or social cohesion for residents. Current models of the urban form may in fact hinder the possibilities of achieving a society that functions well socially, one that is equitable, tolerant and inclusive of all citizens. The challenge is to go beyond the indices and rankings popular with governments at all levels and conceive, measure and interpret the social dimension of liveability in a way that is meaningful to residents in 21st Century urban settings and then express this vision in planning, policy and development outcomes.

In order to align theoretical constructions of liveability with the lived experiences of residents we must have more knowledge of the day-to-day social dimensions of their lives. This will require a paradigm shift to a qualitative understanding and interpretation of these social experiences as described by the residents of our new cities and communities. Existing urban growth regimes have come to depend on liveability as the legitimization strategy for the creative post-industrial sectors that they are convinced are the new basis of future urban

growth. Liveability discourse reflects "contemporary anxieties about urban social-nature (or urban social ecology)" (Hagerman 2007, p. 289). This links to the range of opportunities for social connection assumed to result from the provision of, for example, public leisure spaces, high density private housing, streetscapes, and social infrastructure.

We argue that liveability, as it is currently expressed by government agencies, is oversimplified for the purposes of legitimising and operationalizing government policy and aligning outcomes with popular international indices of liveability. We advocate for a closer focus on how the people who live in and use a space define and assess their own liveability, particularly in relation to social outcomes and meanings. The major task will be bringing people together in non-traditional ways and locales that cannot be managed through urban planning policy or design. Part of this process will be unpacking the taken-for-granted conception of liveability. A starting point might be exploring the potential of other liveability-related measures and processes such as the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. A similar project has been initiated in Australia in the form of the Australian National Development Index. Both models seek to integrate the economic, social, environmental, cultural and democratic dimensions. Importantly, they both involve 'subjective' qualities of society (Salvaris 2012). Nevertheless, while the domains of liveability may be relevant in many settings across the globe, Badland et al (2014) believe the relevance to local policy makers is likely to be enhanced if indicators are tied to measuring the impact of local urban planning policy on liveability informed by local conditions and residents. At this point, it is clear that the practical and operational aspects of the social dimension of liveability are not well explored, clearly defined or well integrated in the policy and practices of urban planning. Changing this situation will be "vital to a critical analysis of the outcomes of planning and redevelopment processes as cities look for 'best practice' to take their city, regions and communities" in to a liveable future (Hagerman 2007, p. 296).

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Table 1: A Typology of Liveability Definitions

Perspective	Key Components	Orientation	Outcomes
Academic	Experience and meaning Theoretical and practical Subjective and objective Individual and group focus	Internal audience Individual Local community	Theory development Improving daily life
Policy Makers	Governance Policy development Subjective and objective Managing sustainability	Internal audience Geographic focus	Creating policy Delivering outcomes Problem solving
Private Provider	Identified indicators Repeated measures Objective	External audience International focus Cities and countries	Ranking performance Attracting people and investment