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Review of Unhealthy Places: The Ecology of Risk in the Urban Landscape

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Once in a while, a book from outside the mainstream of planning provokes us to look anew at our understanding of the urban condition. Unhealthy Places: The Ecology of Risk in the Urban Landscape is such a book. Sociologists Kevin Fitzpatrick and Mark LaGory provide an interesting and stimulating exploration of health and the city that deserves the attention of us all.

While we have vanquished many of the sanitation problems in major cities of the United States that gave rise to planning in the nineteenth century, we are only beginning to understand the effect of environmental hazards and ambient conditions on human health and well-being. The authors combine the "mosaic" framework of landscape ecology with urban and medical sociology to help us understand more about the city as human habitat. The authors make the argument that one's health is most directly influenced by one's geographic place in a metropolitan area. Health, which is defined as the full flowering of human physical and psychological potential, is a result of the effects from hazards to which one is exposed mediated by the resources one can mobilize to protect oneself, both of which are determined in great part by one's place in the city.

Chapter 1, "The Importance of Place," presents this argument in detail, drawing on the work of Wilson (1987, 1996), Massey and Denton (1993), and Beck (1992). As a factor in determining one's physical and psychological health, place (physical territory socially, culturally, economically, politically, and psychologically defined) matters. Place of residence has the most dramatic consequence for individual health and
well-being, shaping the prevalence and incidence of risks for a host of physical and mental health conditions. In U.S. cities, spatial and nonspatial barriers to health and well-being persist because residential space is most fundamentally defined as segregated space. These spaces create a topography of risk and protection that tends to follow the shape and structure of the larger society.

Place of residence structures both “life chance and risk” and “social resources.” Each place we live in has a certain risk (or probability) of hazard (a situation that could lead to damage or harm to a human being or population). Risk might come from the environment (e.g., chemical agents, pollutants, bacteria), from the quality and arrangement of the built form (e.g., building quality, density, landscaping), or from conditions that overload people psychologically (e.g., density or number of people). “Risk spaces” develop out of inequalities of place and class, are not distributed randomly over urban space, and give rise to spatially differentiated health outcomes. Each place is also a “resource space” in which goods and services capable of protecting inhabitants from hazards are distributed. Following Wilson’s (1996) argument, inner-city neighborhoods are less able to respond to hazards because they are socially disorganized. Protection from risk, in terms of availability of health care professionals, community resources, and supportive networks, tends to be inversely related to risk and risk spaces. The greater the spatial segregation in a given city, the more likely those at greatest risk for harm will have the least access to social resources to protect themselves. Inner-city residents thus face an “urban health penalty” (p. 17), which is a result of the hazards to health that are concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods and the constraints to protection that arise from spatial isolation and economic disadvantage.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the relevance of place for people. Chapter 2, “Humans As Spatial Animals,” addresses the role of territoriality in humans, including how the spaces in which we reside affect our thought and action. Chapter 3, “The Ecology of Everyday Urban Life,” describes the micro level of internal building environments and residence and the macro level of the features that differentiate one urban space from another, which together create the varied experiences of urban life. Spatial differentiation of these features influences choice and action with regard to health risks and protection.

Chapters 4 and 5 present a theoretical framework for the ecology of health. Chapter 4, “The Sociology of Health,” reviews four models of health: health beliefs, health lifestyles, risk and protective factors, and psychosocial resources. The authors present a synthetic model of the ecology of health, primarily based on the risk and protective factors model, that serves as the basis of their place-based explanation of health disparities that exist among urban dwellers. Chapter 5, “Cities As Mosaics of Risk and Protective Factors,” describes the urban environment as these factors are spatially differentiated according to concentrations of poverty and segregation by race and class. Chapters 6 and 7 apply the framework to a set of health-related issues for several inner-city populations: the socially disadvantaged, with particular attention to the homeless and racial and ethnic minorities, and the elderly and children.

Finally, chapter 8, “The Ecology of Health Promotion and Service Delivery,” proposes a strategy for health promotion in the inner city. The authors argue that comprehensive community-based approaches to health are likely to be the most successful because these recognize individual choices with regard to risk and protective health behaviors in the context of social and environmental conditions rooted in one’s territorial place in the city. Place-based health care delivery and health promotion strategies can address both socially based and individually based behaviors and serve to strengthen community institutions.

The one concern I had is that because the book presents such a bleak picture of the urban conditions that lead to poor health, a reader with narrow exposure to urban literature might conclude that cities are no place to live and are better off abandoned. Many affluent city residents have taken just such an approach.

The strength of the book comes from its effort to cut across traditional academic and policy boundaries, integrating public health literature with that of landscape ecology, environmental quality and risk, sociological studies of race and class, and spatial differentiation studies in geography. Such a holistic approach is critical to our understanding of the health of urban residents. The authors bring alive the life of the urban inner-city resident with all its hazards and opportunities as these are constrained by the characteristics of place. The book is relevant for planners interested in public health, environmental justice, sustainable cities, and community development. Because its stated purpose is to understand the role that place plays in the health and well-being of urban residents, the book should also be of interest to planners concerned with spatially differentiated phenomena as these affect urban residents. For planners and planning academicians interested in urban sustainability, this book successfully illustrates why “sustainable cities” efforts must include concern with the conditions that promote and support healthy existence for residents. It helps us to understand the full effect of city living on more vulnerable populations so that we might plan for cities that provide a decent quality of life and health for all.
References


