

## CHAPTER 5

### DEFINING BOUNDARIES

The process of identifying the boundaries of a neighborhood depends in part on the definition of the neighborhood that is appropriate to a particular planning initiative or study i.e., social, physical, or political. However, researchers acknowledge that defining neighborhoods in any given case is problematic (Galster, 1986; Chaskin, 1998; Rohe & Gates, 1985; Banerjee & Baer, 1984; Cox, 2000). This is because “neighborhood” does not mean the same thing to people inside and outside of a neighborhood. Barton (2000, p. 3) states “Neighborhood is a loaded concept.” He further states (p. 3) that “[t]o some, particularly children and old people, it appears a self-evident reality, familiar and homely, providing daily needs and a community of shared experience and mutual support.” However, to others, it is a concept that is no longer relevant in contemporary times. Also, different professions and separate literatures describe neighborhoods differently. Furthermore, urban designers, health and social care professionals, banking institutions, etc. recognize different neighborhood constructions. Consequentially, there is no one ideal way of defining a neighborhood and its spatial boundaries. The question therefore is, how then should neighborhoods and their boundaries be defined for the purpose of this thesis.

I present in this chapter an argument that a heuristic approach to defining neighborhood boundaries for the purposes of assessing community sustainability is appropriate given the pragmatic approach to defining neighborhoods in the context of specific planning applications. Section 5.1 therefore discusses the alternative approaches to defining neighborhood boundaries.

#### 5.1 Approaches to Neighborhood Boundary Identification

Planning organizations use one of two strategies to define a neighborhood: (1) adopt pre-defined boundaries, which came into existence at the time of subdivision or were established by forces endogenous or exogenous to the neighborhood or (2) re-define boundaries based on the perceptions and activities of residents and formalize the boundary. It is to be noted however, that both approaches can result in highly variable sets of boundaries, some of which may overlap.

### 5.1.1 Boundaries Defined by Endogenous or Exogenous Groups

Planning organizations sometimes adopt neighborhood boundaries defined by groups endogenous or exogenous to a neighborhood. These groups may define neighborhood as a political, social, or physical unit.

- *Political Neighborhood*: Chaskin (1998, p.4) cites the work of Taub et al. (1977), Florin (1989), and Combs (1984) who describe internal groups that are endogenous organizations that seek to define neighborhood boundaries, relevant to their objectives, to “clarify their constituencies, gain legitimation within the neighborhood, [and] make connections with the broader resources in the cities.” These may be formally constituted neighborhood associations or ad hoc organizations formed to address a specific issue or problem.
- *Social Neighborhood*: Chaskin (p.5) also cites the work of Taub et al. (1977; 1982) stating that social neighborhoods are defined by external entities such as banks and real estate developers that seek to define new markets; government agencies, and private service providers that define neighborhoods for program administration purposes, and researchers who attempt to “aggregate perceptions of local residents and those of agency heads and leaders of community organizations into composite maps” or who use census tracts as “proxies for neighborhoods to facilitate analysis.”
- *Physical Neighborhood*: Physical neighborhoods are defined by government agencies for program administration purposes. They also may be formally defined at the time that subdivision plats or planned unit developments (PUDs) are proposed or approved. In some cases, formal neighborhood associations are established at the time subdivisions are created to provide a governance structure for maintaining infrastructure that is not dedicated to a local government entity. Thus, a political neighborhood may be defined on the basis of physical neighborhood.

According to Taub et al. (1982), although these entities put forward definitive neighborhood boundaries, the boundaries put forward by any two for the same general neighborhood rarely match. Often however, these organizationally defined boundaries agree on the central blocks of a given neighborhood with consensus falling off at the outer edges.

### 5.1.2 Boundaries Defined by Individual Residents

Planners have tried defining neighborhood boundaries by using resident perceptions. However, in most instances, this approach has not been successful in producing a reliable synthetic definition of neighborhood boundaries for planning purposes. The inability to identify neighborhood boundaries correctly based on resident

perceptions has been analyzed by numerous scholars and two obstacles to this approach are most popularly advocated. Firstly, as Chaskin (p. 4) states, “the degree of consensus that can be reached about any particular set of boundaries is questionable” since neighborhood perceptions are likely to vary among different groups within a residential population. Chaskin presents the works of Suttles (1972), Hunter (1974), and Guest & Lee (1983) in stating that residents, especially urban residents, often view themselves as members of more than one community/neighborhood. Some residents may perceive different boundaries of their neighborhood or may see themselves as members of different neighborhoods altogether, based perhaps on distinctions between the boundaries of the physical, social, or functional dimensions of neighborhood. According to Chaskin (p. 3), Lee & Campbell (1990) found that African Americans are likely to stress social dimensions more than whites, hence they delimit a smaller area as their neighborhood. Chaskin cites Guest & Lee (1984) who claim that women, long-term residents, and residents with small children tend to define a smaller neighborhood area, and few don't even tend to think in terms of neighborhood at all.

Secondly, even for individuals, neighborhood may be a nested concept rather than a unitary concept. Thus, resident perceptions result in non-definitive neighborhood boundaries. This approach to boundary identification is of little advantage to a planner except that it provides him with a powerful tool to motivate and/or instill interest, excitement, empowerment and/or responsibility in the local residents towards their neighborhood.

One of the methods that can be employed by planning organizations to define neighborhood boundaries based on the collective perceptions and activities of the residents rather than on the political or programmatic objectives of endogenous or exogenous groups is called cognitive mapping. Chaskin (1998) commends the method of cognitive mapping as described by the works of Downs & Stea (1973), and Gould & White (1974). Individuals are each asked to draw a set of neighborhood boundaries. Each set is comprised of maps drawn each day, as individuals map their choice of mass flows through movement, social interaction, and interpretation of their surroundings. The elements of influence in the construction of these sets of maps include:

- *Physical*

1. the paths through which the individuals choose to move, i.e. the network of streets, roads, walkways, pedestrian paths, etc.
2. the identification of landmarks (Lynch, 1960)
3. unique edge boundaries e.g. rivers, major roads, commercial zones, buffer zones, etc.

- *Social*
  1. unit of linked spaces where various activities occur or which encourage social activities
  2. the unit as a set of social relationships
  3. the unit as a symbolic entity – maybe historical, marked by the presence of certain social groups, etc.
  
- *Functional*
  1. the area's demographics
  2. the presence of major institutions
  3. the perception of safety or danger
  4. the presence of opportunities.

Thus, although planners have used the technologies of cognitive mapping to systematically define neighborhood boundaries based on individual perception, this method is generally not useful for developing a synthetic definition of neighborhood boundaries for planning purposes because of high variation among residents.

### **5.1.3 Selecting an Appropriate Method**

Given the two broad approaches to defining the boundaries of a neighborhood, in this section, I have discussed the alternatives to boundary definition available to a planner under each of the two sets of circumstances:

1. Boundaries have already been defined for use in planning practice: In instances where the boundary may have already been defined by a previous attempt either by endogenous or exogenous groups or using resident perceptions, for use in planning practice, it is feasible to use the boundaries if they are appropriate to the planning tasks/questions for which the assessment of community sustainability is needed.

In instances where multiple boundaries exist, the boundary definition that is most relevant to the planning task/questions for which the sustainability assessment is needed may be adopted.

2. Boundaries have not already been defined or those that have been defined are not relevant to the planning tasks/questions for which the sustainability assessment is needed: There are three options open to the planner when such a situation exists. Each option has distinct advantages and disadvantages associated with it. The planner may (a) attempt to aggregate cognitive maps of residents, (b) use census boundaries, or (c) use subdivision boundaries not currently recognized as neighborhood boundaries. As discussed earlier, the disadvantage with cognitive mapping in that the degree of consensus on the

neighborhood boundary falls off at the edges, although, most of them concur on the central features of the neighborhood. Therefore, aggregating the variable boundaries by different residents is a difficult task. There is no formal methodology to such an aggregation. Generally speaking, based on the different boundaries sets from different maps cognitively mapped by residents, planning organizations develop boundaries, and formalize them after consensus is reached and alterations made during neighborhood meetings. Thus this option may result in non-definitive boundaries.

On the other hand, using census tract boundaries or sub-division boundaries is also not a fall back option. A census tract or subdivision in itself is not socio-intuitive. Therefore, the inherent lack of sociocultural character of a census tract or sub-division boundary may disqualify it as a unit of analysis for the measurement instrument. Only in the unique case will a census tract or subdivision boundary used to define a neighborhood, also reflect its sociocultural and socioeconomic dynamism.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

Thus, it is concluded, after an evaluation of neighborhood boundary identification methods, that to demarcate a neighborhood, planners could adopt either of the two strategies; employ pre-defined boundaries or redefine boundaries using resident perceptions. The instrument can then be applied to the demarcated spatial unit of neighborhood.

It should be noted that this chapter just provides two alternate (and widely practiced) approaches to demarcate and assess our unit of analysis as a whole and distinguish it from its surroundings for the purpose of applying an instrument to it to determine its sustainability in terms of its long-term viability.