**Neighbourhood planning and the impact of place identity on housing development in England**

By Quintin Bradley

Leeds Beckett University

**Corresponding author:**

Dr. Quintin Bradley

Senior Lecturer in Planning & Housing, Leeds Beckett University

The Northern Terrace, Leeds LS2 8AG, United Kingdom

Tel: 44 (0)113 8129164

[q.bradley@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:q.bradley@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the impact of social constructions of place and community identity on plans for house-building. It discusses the policy of neighbourhood planning in England in which statutory powers were devolved to place-based communities in exchange for their support for housing growth. Originating the analytical concept of place identity frames, the paper explores how attachments to place were scripted into planning policy by neighbourhood plans to regulate the size, location and delivery of house-building. The paper argues that analysis of neighbourhood plans can provide a significant insight into the role of place attachment in winning community support for new housing supply.

Key words

Place attachment, house-building, neighbourhood planning, community engagement, participatory planning

Introduction

Place-based values and passions are “the very stuff of participatory community planning” (Manzo & Perkins, 2006: p.343), yet planning scholarship tends to shy away from the emotional realm and planners in practice assert their distance from attachment (Umemoto, 2012). The appeal to place is a recurring theme in community opposition to plans for new house-building, and numerous research studies confirm place attachment and place identity as factors driving environmental activism and community engagement. An analysis of the subjectivities of emplacement and their interpretation and application by local communities can help to deepen understanding of the motivations that drive citizen engagement in planning policy.

This paper discusses representations of place in the policy of neighbourhood planning, introduced in England from 2011 onwards and unusual in its address to the attachments of community belonging. The right to produce a neighbourhood development plan was promoted by government as an opportunity for local people to enhance place identity and to foster a sense of place in exchange for their acquiescence in, and support for, the allocation of land for new house-building (DCLG, 2011). The aim of this paper is to analyse the invocation of place by neighbourhoods and to explore the relationship between place attachment and housing development as expressed in neighbourhood plans. The paper originates the concept of place identity frames to explain how a convincing narrative of place and community was assembled in neighbourhood plan-making, and how this, in turn, shaped planning policy for new housing, and won community support for development. The paper addresses something of a knowledge gap in the literature and seeks to forge links between planning studies and research into place attachment to contribute a new framework of analysis to the discussion of community attitudes to house-building. It begins with a brief review of the literature on emplacement, spatial planning and place-based collective action to present a conceptual framework for its discussion. The next section introduces the policy of neighbourhood planning and sets out the analytical model of place identity frames. Research with neighbourhood plans is then explored to demonstrate how a convincing narrative of place identity was assembled, and how, in turn, this frame was applied as a set of policies regulating housing development. The paper concludes that the framing of place attachment in neighbourhood planning might point the way to new approaches to housing supply that engage communities in needs assessment, planning, design and delivery.

Place attachment and identity

The appeal to place is a recurring theme in community planning but the role of emotion, memory and sense of place in public participation in plan-making has received surprisingly little attention (Beauregard, 2013; Fenster & Misgav, 2014). Community opposition to new house-building has been dismissed as an irrational and selfish refusal to accept change rather than understood as a form of place-protective action (Devine-Wright 2009), yet place attachment has been authoritatively cited as a predictor of environmental action and neighbourhood campaigns (Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Dallago et al., 2009; Mihaylov & Perkins, 2014). Attachment to place provides a counter-narrative to the acronym NIMBY in which the protectionist property claim of “not in my back yard” may articulate instead a discursive construction of the neighbourhood as a field of care (Tuan, 1975; Burningham, 2000; Wolsink, 2006; Devine-Wright, 2013). Environmental discourses and conflictual interpretations of the public good are prominent in the narratives of planning protest and provide the rationale for community opposition to house-building (Ellis, 2004; Ruming, Houston & Amati, 2012). Emotional attachments to place and feelings of neighbourhood belonging appear integral to the notions of citizenship and the new publics expressed in community engagement in plan-making (Cox & McCarthy, 1982; Cook, Taylor & Hurley, 2013; Lake 1993; Matthews, Bramley & Hastings, 2014). The complex emotional interconnections between people and place mean that plans to change a particular environment can be perceived as a threat to personal autonomy or identity. The incursion of new symbolic associations that change the social construction of place, or threaten a sense of self or social identity vested in place have been divined as the motivation behind many place-based campaigns against planning decisions (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004; Hernandez, Martin, Ruiz & Hidalgo, 2010; Lalli, 1992; Long & Perkins, 2007; Scannell & Gifford, 2010b). But strong attachments or identifications with place are not necessarily linked to public objections, and development planning can be perceived as enhancing rather than threatening place meaning and its interconnection with social relations (Devine-Wright, 2013). Community attitudes to house-building, in particular, can be impacted by the type, size, and appearance of the planned development, the social relations in place that it enables, and its relationship to place attachment (French et al., 2014; Lewicka, 2010).

Place attachment is recognised as a multi-dimensional concept comprising emotional, cognitive and behavioural processes related to “the bonding that occurs between people and their meaningful environments” (Scannell & Gifford, 2010a: p.1). In environmental psychology literature these processes have been enumerated respectively as place definition, sense of place, place affect or place bonding, place identity, and place dependence (Altman & Low, 1992; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Ramkissoon, Smith & Weiler, 2013). A distinct but complementary literature on the social relationships of place utilises the concepts of sense of community and neighbourhood belonging (Trenttelman, 2009), and there is now a substantial body of work bringing together the different research protocols so that they express a “spectrum of complementary experiences” of attachment to place and community (Seamon, 2014: p.11).

The concept of place attachment has evolved mainly through positivist research studies based on responses to researcher-defined questions. Human geographers would argue, more critically, that the relationship with place is largely unconscious and is felt “in the bones” (Tuan, 1975: p.165). Emplacement, like embodiment, is a condition of being and space and spatiality are intrinsic to personal and social identity (Seamon, 2014). Place identity expresses some of the sense of inter-relatedness conveyed in this phenomenological understanding of emplacement (Korpela, 1989; Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), and it has been adopted in social identity and identity process theories to signify the continuing and dynamic role of place in the regulation of the self and others (Hauge, 2007; Uzzell, Pol & Badenas, 2002). Physical places, emplaced practices and narratives of place appear to simultaneously shape each other in their influence on subjectivity and social interaction (Di Masso & Dixon, 2015). This connection between place identity and inter-personal relations has been captured in the concept of community identity, a spatially and socially oriented construct that describes emotional connections to the locality and to its cultural context (Puddifoot, 1995, 1996; Long & Perkins, 2007). Community identity encapsulates the attribution of distinctive meaning to place and the association of place with specific behaviours and social relations (Obst, Smith & Zinkiewicz, 2002; Puddifoot, 2003). It transcends the individual responses familiar to the literature of environmental and community psychology and signals, instead, a process of collective identification, in which the passions of place translate into statements of social purpose. The concept of community identity implies a discursive construction through which place meanings acquire symbolic function through social relationships (Dixon & Durrheim 2000; Kyle, Mowen & Tarrant 2004). This collective work of assemblage has been dubbed “place framing” by Martin (2003), and is typically associated with community groups and neighbourhood organisations who integrate the multiple values that residents ascribe to place into a convincing narrative to mobilise collective action.

The impact of narrative and other discourses of place on the spatial practices of development has been the subject of much discussion in planning theory (Pendlebury, 2013; Farhat, 2015). A spectrum of discourse has been posited in planning practice with “lay discourses” of place diverging from the more authorised or expert narratives (Jones, 1995; Parkinson, Scott & Redmond, 2016). Henri Lefebvre’s classification of space into three elements, as conceived, perceived and lived helps to distinguish the processes at play within this spectrum of planning discourse. The role of spatial planning, for Lefebvre (1991: p.17), was to codify space through an association between place and social relations. Planning, he argued, encodes normative prescriptions about how place may be used and what social behaviour and relationships are to be associated with it. It organises the everyday, by subdividing space into accompanying sets of behaviour and values (Elden, 2004; Trudeau, 2006). The purpose of spatial planning in this interpretation is to bring physical form and behavioural norms into common frame (Rabinow, 1995; Moisio & Luukkonen, 2015). The contrary existence of lay discourses that give primacy to place as “directly lived through its associated images and symbols” (Lefebvre 1991: p.39) suggests, in Lefebvre’s spatial dialectic, a conflict over knowledge and power and the role that place plays in the creation, maintenance and transformation of social identity (Beebe, Davis, & Gleadle, 2012). The engagement of neighbourhood groups and community organisations in spatial planning appears through this lens as a political struggle not only over the value and meaning of place but the social relations it prescribes (Bradley 2014; Clark 1994; Mihaylov & Perkins 2015). To explore this in more detail the paper now turns to a discussion of the discourses of place assembled by community organisations in the English policy of neighbourhood planning.

Neighbourhood planning and place attachment

The policy of neighbourhood planning, introduced in England by the Localism Act (2011), provided local communities with an authorised institutional discourse through which the attachments of place might be reconciled with the requirements of development planning, and in particular, with house-building (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015). The government guidance for neighbourhood planning explained:

“People around the country value and love the places they live in. To make sure that you and your neighbour have the community you aspire to, the government has given you new legal powers and new opportunities to preserve what you like and change what you don’t like about the city, town or village you live in” (DCLG 2013: p.4).

Neighbourhood plans, or to give them their full significant title, Neighbourhood Development Plans, were introduced in the context of a chronic mismatch between housing need and housing supply, and were one component in a programme of spatial deregulation that aimed to liberalise access to land for the volume house-builders whose speculative practices dominate the construction industry in England (Archer & Cole, 2014). It was anticipated that the devolution of statutory planning powers to community groups would boost the number of land sites allocated for housing over and above those already apportioned by higher-level plans (Stanier, 2014). In the government rhetoric of localism, neighbourhood planning was also intended to help local people “develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood” (DCLG, 2012, Paragraph 183). The devolution of planning powers was presented as part of a package of Community Rights that enabled citizen’s organisations to deliver co-operative housing schemes and affordable housing trusts, take public assets into local ownership and set up community-run services (DCLG, 2015b). Concerns that neighbourhood planning might result in place-protective policies led government to tightly constrain the planning powers available to community groups (Turley, 2014). Neighbourhood plans had to be in general conformity with the strategic policies drawn up by unitary and district authorities. They had to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development and “plan positively to support local development” especially housing development (DCLG, 2012, Paragraphs 15-16).

By the beginning of 2017, there were over 2000 neighbourhood plans under production and more than 270 approved by referendum, contributing to land use regulation for over 8 million people (Brownill & Bradley, 2017). The geographical spread of neighbourhood plans was particularly uneven and mapped to spatial inequalities only partially off-set by state grants and support from municipal planning authorities. Neighbourhood groups encountered many difficulties in adapting planning policy to effectively represent an attachment to place. Success depended on their ability to marshal the voluntary resources required for the long and complex process of plan-making. While 23 per cent of plans made were in the least affluent neighbourhoods, and urban areas evidenced greater support for growth (Turley, 2014; Wills 2016), the majority of plans came from rural parish councils and market towns under pressure from housing development (Parker & Salter, 2016). Participants demonstrated a strong desire for more control over local decisions and many had been engaged in previous conflicts with the local planning authority and with housing developers (Parker et al., 2014; Bradley, 2015). They appeared determined to adapt development policy to express a collectively-resonating frame of place identity (Parker, Lynn & Wargent, 2015).

The neighbourhood planning process lent itself to the production of a discourse of place and community identity that was assembled from, and tried to synthesise, place attributes identified by residents. A neighbourhood plan could be initiated by a Town or Parish Council or, in urban areas, by a community group establishing a Neighbourhood Forum. These “qualifying bodies” must apply to the local planning authority to be designated as a neighbourhood area. They were responsible for assembling an evidence base from community engagement, and for writing planning policy, and the first step was the definition of a neighbourhood boundary, a task of place definition that entailed the identification of distinctive place characteristics and values (Bradley, 2015). Boundary designation was followed by a programme of consultation events, interactive workshops and surveys that generated a range of place meanings and contributed to the assemblage of a vision and objectives for local development and a set of planning policies grouped under themes that would be used to help determine planning applications (Burton, 2014). The resulting neighbourhood plan went through a statutory consultation process and was formally examined. To win community support, the neighbourhood plan must be approved in a local referendum and receive more than 50 per cent of the vote of those registered and taking part in the ballot (Brownill & Downing, 2013; Sturzacker & Shaw 2015; Bradley & Brownill, 2017).

Neighbourhood plans that have been adopted by popular referendum can, arguably, be read, both as planning policy and as discourses of place attachment. They have been collated from views generated in public engagement, edited and amplified by local residents in neighbourhood working groups, submitted for inspection and consultation, and amended and drafted into planning policy by a neighbourhood steering group, often with assistance from local authority planners or planning consultants (Parker et al., 2014). As development plans they construct an evidence base and rationale for specific planning policy – especially policy on house-building – that is framed by a collective identification of place and community. Neighbourhood plans provide a text through which the social construction of place and community can be read and analysed, and where the influence of place attachment and place identity on planning policy for house-building may be discerned and scrutinised.

### Research methodology

A research methodology of frame analysis, adapted from the concept of place framing developed by Martin (2003), was applied to examine the discursive construction of place identity in neighbourhood plans and its application as an evidence base for policy on housing development. Martin drew on the social movement concept of collective action frames (Benford and Snow, 2000), to explain how organisational discourses are assembled by neighbourhood groups to inspire and legitimise place-protective action. In social movement studies, the technique of frame analysis (Snow et al., 1986) has become a key diagnostic tool for interpreting the discursive assemblage of shared identities that is necessary for groups to mobilise collective action and generate plans for change. Martin’s thesis was limited to a discussion of the place definition work carried out by community activists to build local organisations. Further development of the concept of place frames is required to understand the role of attachment and place identity and how that may impact on planning policy. One approach to this analysis is through the social movement concept of collective identity frames. The notion of collective identity was devised by Alberto Melucci (1995) to call attention to the creative capacity of discourse to produce social identifications. Collective identity frames are emotional and often passionate constructs that are negotiated, elaborated and developed in group relationships and acquire their resonance through widely-shared and familiar symbols, interpretations, and self-definitions (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). They represent an assemblage of three collective identity processes: the demarcation of group boundaries, the production of a repertoire of shared values, and the promotion of collective efficacy or belief in the ability of the group or organisation to bring about change (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Applied to the place-based work of community organisations and their neighbourhood plans, the theory of collective identity broadens Martin’s outline of place framing to include the connections between place and social identity. Collective identity processes can be mapped to the three distinctive elements of place attachment as defined in the environmental psychology literature. They correspond to the boundary work of place definition, the construction of meaning through place dependence and place affect, and the mobilisation of place social bonding or sense of community (Kingston et al., 1999). Place definition entails a characterisation of place as distinct and meaningful. Place dependence and place affect attribute value to place and identify it as serving particular needs. Place social bonding forges connections between people and place and posits a connection to place as community and as a defined set of social relations (Manzo & Perkins, 2006).

The resulting concept of *place identity frames* enables connections to be drawn between place attachment and the practices of identity work diagnosed by social movement theorists. A place identity frame is multi-dimensional in that it does not only assert a common identification of place but forges a connection between place characteristics and social interactions and affiliations, or what Puddifoot (1995) calls a community identity. Those authoring the neighbourhood plan seek to encode place with specific social meanings that legitimise and normalise a defined set of spatial practices. These in turn, provide the rationale for planning policies that seek to determine land use and prescribe the regulation of development planning. Place identity frames are a negotiation rather than a defined agreement, but the requirement to win popular support in a referendum means that a neighbourhood plan must assemble a resonant frame of community identity from the diverse place meanings expressed in consultation and engagement with residents. The process of negotiation that contributed to this assemblage, and an indication of the plurality of voices and place meanings expressed, can be evidenced with reference to the community consultation statements produced to accompany the neighbourhood plan. In urban areas, it can be argued that place identity frames are a project of manufactured unity in which a coherent vision of place is distilled from discordant views, potentially to mobilise a population despite tensions and divisions. In more rural communities, where the voter turnout in neighbourhood plan referenda has been as high as 69 per cent, the place identity frame might serve to amplify a shared sense of place and enhance feelings of belonging and capability. Symbols of place identification can be mobilised to suture conflict, bestow value and civic belonging, invite new beginnings and inspire a sense of collective efficacy (Bradley, 2017).

The aim of the research is to analyse the impact of place identity frames on planning policies specifically for new house-building in neighbourhood development plans. Neighbourhood plans that have devised specific housing development policies can be divided into two groups; those that allocated specific land sites for new house-building and those that attempted to regulate its affordability, residential mix and ownership (Bailey 2015; Bradley & Sparling 2016). A research sample selected to enable scrutiny of both groups includes neighbourhood plans with site specific housing allocations and neighbourhood plans with general policies on housing supply, access, and ownership. The plans selected for analysis here are those with robust housing policies that have withstood formal scrutiny, and sometimes legal challenge, have been examined and approved at referendum and made part of the statutory planning framework. They have been selected from the body of neighbourhood planning policy published from 2012 to the time of writing in early 2017, as those with distinctive planning policies for housing that were, either the first to enact a specific residential regulation or were successfully defended in legal action and written into case law (DLP Planning Consultants, 2014; PAS 2015). The selection of this sample enables examination of the impact of place identity on housing policies that have proved innovative and challenging to the development market. This allows the connections between place attachment and housing regulation to be evidenced vividly in order to illustrate the positive contribution of place identity frames to planning new approaches to housing supply. Place identity frames are evident across the range of published neighbourhood plans and the case studies are intended to provide a framework for further research into the role of place attachment in community planning for housing development.

The results of analysis are presented in the following sections, beginning with a discussion of representations of place identity in neighbourhood plans with specific site allocation policies for new housing. The paper then reviews neighbourhood plans with general housing policies and finally considers the overall impact of place and community identity on the housing supply policies of neighbourhood plans and what conclusions can be drawn for community engagement in planning more generally.

Place identity and the location of new housing

Over half of all neighbourhood plans specified the precise location for new house-building, and overall, neighbourhood planning was lauded by government for increasing the amount of land allocated for new homes (Mountain, 2015). A coherent rationale and robust selection criteria were required to justify the location of sites for new housing in a neighbourhood plan. Decisions were constrained, not only by the supply and viability of land, but by what would be acceptable to local residents, and what could be supported in referendum (Parker, Lynne & Wargent 2015). The choice of sites, and the selection process, had to meet the prescriptions of planning policy and also make sense within the overall frame of place identity expressed by the plan.

One of the first neighbourhood plans, in the Oxfordshire market town of Thame, constructed a frame of place identity to justify the selection of new housing sites in locations that would allow growth to be absorbed without significant disruption. Thame town council was faced with the controversial task of finding the location for 750 new homes. A decision by South Oxfordshire planning authority to concentrate this development in one site proved unpopular and encouraged Thame residents to produce their own housing plans. Through a series of consultation events and working groups, the town council and its planning consultants devised a symbolic frame for site selection that helped make the development more acceptable to local people. In the neighbourhood plan vision statement, the definition of a Thame as a market town was resolved into a set of principles to structure the proposals for development. In this process of “frame amplification” (Snow & McAdam, 2000), a market town was defined as compact; surrounded by countryside; an attraction for visitors and an amenity for its residents. A market town was “highly walkable” so that no-one should live more than 15 minutes’ walk away from the market in the town centre or from the countryside at the edge of town (Thame Town Council, 2012: p.6). The resulting place identity frame gave spatial order to the location of new housing and provided a rationale for the selection of three sites, each within walking distance of the town centre, maintaining a defined boundary with open countryside and mitigating any adverse impacts from unbalanced development. The place identity of a market town provided Thame with a distinctive sense of community purpose that worked to neutralize fears over the expansion of the town through sizeable new residential development. The front cover of the neighbourhood plan depicted a farmers’ street market with the flag of the United Kingdom, the Union Jack, flying overhead. This image conveyed a place firmly fixed in a world of unchanging institutional order, affirming a harmonious relationship between town and countryside (Thame Town Council, 2012). Thame neighbourhood plan was successfully endorsed by residents at referendum in May 2013, giving popular assent to its site allocation policies for new housing. Its place identity provided both a rationalization for the location of new housing and a frame of community identity that allowed growth to be absorbed without significant opposition.

A similar rationale for the allocation of housing sites in the Broughton Astley neighbourhood plan, near Leicester, resulted in legal challenge and a ruling in High Court in 2014. Broughton Astley has a population of around 9,000 people but the neighbourhood plan framed it as “still a large village in character” and selected sites for 400 new homes from a range of possible locations on the specific criteria that they were those closest in walking distance to the village centre. This site allocations strategy was explained as accommodating growth in “a manner that is appropriate to the character of the village and its countryside setting” with walking distance presented as a determinant of village identity (Broughton Astley, 2014: p.8). The neighbourhood plan asserted that decisions over the location of growth and how the village should change were to be made by local people with the clear suggestion that the housing market, or the “uncoordinated and speculative development” of the volume house-builders was out of step with the pace of social relations in village life (Broughton Astley, 2014: p.4) The neighbourhood plan subtitled “our village – our decisions” was agreed in January 2014 after a referendum on a turnout of 38 per cent, with an 89 per cent vote in favour. Prior to the referendum an application by a developer to build 111 homes on a site not selected by the neighbourhood plan was rejected by Harborough District Council, a decision overturned on appeal, but then reinstated by the Secretary of State and endorsed by the High Court. In rejecting the developer’s legal action, Mr Justice Lindbloom stated that the neighbourhood plan “clearly intended to strike the right balance” between rural character and housing growth (Crane v SSCLG 2015, paragraph 42). The place identity of a rural village, despite the urban context and size of the settlement, established spatial norms suited to a rural setting and provided Broughton Astley with its rationale for the location of new homes.

The site allocation policies of the neighbourhood plan for the parish of Tattenhall, a village of around 1000 homes in rural Cheshire, were also the subject of legal action, this time by house-builders Barratt Homes and Wainhomes. The Tattenhall neighbourhood plan allocated sites for new housing but set a limit on the number of homes that could be built in the village. Subtitled “sustainable growth for the whole community” it set out a development strategy that would allow “a vibrant and distinctive village to evolve and expand whilst retaining its unique character” (Tattenhall & District, 2013: p.8). The invocation of community identity was asserted on the first page of the neighbourhood plan with the statement that “the community of Tattenhall has a strong history of taking local decision-making into its own hands” (Tattenhall & District, 2013: p.6). In appealing to a local tradition of autonomous collective action, the parish was at pains to disassociate its neighbourhood plan from accusations of protectionism. While it supported “modest scale development that reinforced local distinctiveness”, the neighbourhood plan maintained that “future growth based on large scale inappropriate development will not be supported by the community” (Tattenhall & District, 2013: p.11). The place identity of Tattenhall was assembled around declarations of local character and heritage and provided the evidence base for a site limit of no more than 30 new homes in the centre of the village. The limit was rationalised through a community identity that positioned Tattenhall residents as the capable guardians of a place distinctiveness threatened by inappropriate speculative house building. The Tattenhall neighbourhood plan was approved at examination and was successful at referendum in September 2013 on a convincing 52 per cent turnout. The application by house-builders Barratt Homes and Wainhomes for a judicial review was dismissed by Mr Justice Supperstone who ruled that the neighbourhood plan had established its case for housing development at a scale that reflected the existing character of the area[[1]](#endnote-1).

In these three cases site allocations strategies for new housing were rationalised through assertions of the specific social relations of place. A community identity frame was assembled to associate place with particular social roles, activities and behaviours that then provided the regulatory criteria for the location of new homes. The definition of a place as a market town yielded a sense of civic purpose founded on traditional roles and relationships that justified the choice of housing sites within a defined boundary. A community identity that defined the pace of life as quintessentially rural enabled residents to plan for housing growth while retaining a village as compact and walkable. Neighbourhoods were framed as having rights and responsibilities to manage growth in harmony with place distinctiveness and heritage, even when that brought them into conflict with the development aspirations of the volume house-builders. The frames constructed in these neighbourhood plans appear not only to address the characteristics of place, but to conjecture a set of social relations – defined as a community identity – that then informed market relations, and enabled decisions on housing development to be popularly agreed and defended.

Place identity and policies for housing supply

The examples above suggest that narratives of place identity in neighbourhood planning can be appropriated from a symbolic register of ‘market town’ or ‘village life’ and expressed as social relationships that in turn provide the rationale for the location, size, and scale of new house-building. These articulations of social identity in place can also be applied to general housing policies that regulate supply, affordability and residential mix. General planning policies in neighbourhood plans appear to stem directly from discursive representations of community aims and objectives that draw on an emplaced social identity. A characterisation of community culture, or, to borrow a phrase from organisational theory, “a way of doing things around here” (Bower, 1966: p.4) is distilled into a spatial code that guides planning policy on housing need, access, delivery, ownership and dwelling type.

The first neighbourhood plan to be approved in England was in the sparsely populated wild landscape of Upper Eden in the North Pennines in 2012 (Sturzaker & Shaw, 2015). It overturned the settlement hierarchy of Eden District Council to allow new affordable self-build housing in small hamlets and remote locations. Upper Eden neighbourhood plan brought together an association of 17 remote parishes and forged a link between a place identity defined as “the most sparse part of the most sparse district” (Upper Eden Community Interest Company, 2012: p.11) and a community identity in which it was expected that local people would “solve their own housing problems” (Upper Eden Community Interest Company, 2012: p.6). The neighbourhood plan lifted planning restrictions to allow building in rural areas on condition that new homes were affordable in perpetuity and reserved for those with a local connection.

‘This policy is intended to help those local people who have access to land or buildings in rural areas and who cannot afford to buy or rent on the open market but who have the means, skills or ability to convert an existing building or build a new house for themselves’ (Upper Eden Community Interest Company 2012: 13).

This liberalizing framework was intended to help upland farms remain viable, and small hamlets survive and grow, and it was framed as enabling a capacity for self-reliance portrayed as an attribute of the harsh natural landscape of the Pennine hills. The Upper Eden neighbourhood plan expressed an independent frontier spirit in its devolution of power to isolated parishes to determine their own rate of housing growth, and it stressed the solidarity and reciprocity of social relationships in a remote setting and the resourcefulness of local people who make the best of limited opportunities without outside aid.

The neighbourhood plan for Frome, a large town in Somerset of 26,000 inhabitants, established policies on housing delivery that stemmed directly from a community identity of active and self-reliant citizenship. Framing the town as “forward looking with a reputation for innovation” (Frome Town Council, 2014: p.10), Frome’s draft neighbourhood plan strongly criticised speculative house-builders who were “essentially creating a new community” and yet made no effort to design and build their new estates in a way that integrated them into “the character, life and vitality of the town” (Frome Town Council, 2014: p.14). Housing policies in the draft plan stipulated that developments of over 100 houses must produce a management plan setting out “how members of that community will interact with each other and the Frome population” (Frome Town Council, 2014: p.14). The neighbourhood plan expressed a keen desire to change the mode of delivery of future development projects to promote an identity of engaged local citizenship through housing policy. In keeping with its frame of self-reliance, the plan stated: “There is strong support for self-build and community-led development and…Such housing is likely to be more sustainable, affordable and community focused than conventional development”. Arguing that the social relations of housing delivery were important for enhancing a strong sense of place and cohesive community relations, the final plan maintained “development is not only needed to provide homes but also to help establish a sense of place and community” (Frome Town Council, 2016: p.16).

The neighbourhood plan for the town of St. Ives, in Cornwall, with a population of 11,000, addressed the problems of housing affordability in a globally recognised holiday destination that receives tens of thousands of visitors every year. The insider / outsider divide often expressed through the cultural claim of community identity (Cohen, 1997), was framed in the St Ives neighbourhood plan to establish the responsibilities of local citizenship. In its introduction to the plan the town council explained that it held “a great responsibility to protect an internationally renowned asset” (St Ives Town Council, 2015: p.12). St Ives “needed to be nurtured, protected and guided into the future” and “the best people to do this are those who live here” (St Ives Town Council, 2015: p.3). This task of stewardship provided the rationale for policy interventions in a local housing market that threatened the physical and social identity of St Ives. The neighbourhood plan asserted that second homes and holiday lets made up 48 per cent of the housing in the town, and that this external demand for housing had driven average house prices up 17 times the average local salary, despite substantial increases in supply. The neighbourhood plan introduced restrictions on all new-build to ensure homes could only be used as the owner’s primary residence and mandated that 40 per cent of all newly developed housing should be affordable and reserved for local people. The policy was approved by the Examiner, and subsequently upheld in the High Court, on the grounds that:

“The restriction of further second homes does in fact contribute to delivering sustainable development” (McCann, 2015: p.30).

The neighbourhood plan argued that the housing market must be regulated to preserve a natural setting of renowned beauty and the social relations of a functioning community.

“A central issue is the need for St Ives area to be a good place to live in order to continue being a good place for people to visit” (St Ives Town Council, 2015: p.12).

The rationale for this housing market intervention was a claim not only to insiders’ knowledge, but to an obligation of residence. It divided the people who live and work in St Ives from those who holiday there, but it also manifested a residential public with a duty of care. It was an act of exclusion that was also creation (Cohen 1985), defining not just a picturesque place identity captured in countless holiday snapshots, but the mundane daily labour of a field of care (Tuan 1975).

Place identity and neighbourhood planning: a discussion

Analysis of neighbourhood plans appears to evidence the assemblage of place identity frames that are amplified into spatial criteria to regulate housing site allocations and provide the rationale for general policies on housing development. The place identity frames invoke the subjectivities of distinctive environments and establish norms of social relations. These spatial norms may be assembled into a community identity through which place is implicitly aligned with an emplaced culture, and a particular public is invoked. Places are rendered as forward-looking or self-reliant, as capable of managing their own affairs, and as holding duties of care and stewardship. This analysis of the framing of community identity in neighbourhood planning has particular relevance to the design of planning policies for housing development. Table 1 demonstrates the direct connection that is forged in the neighbourhood plans studied here between the subjectivities of place and planning objectives for house-building.

Table 1 here

The role of spatial norms in shaping community attitudes to house-building has received little scrutiny in discussions of place attachment. Neighbourhood plans appear to win community support because they resonate with a specific rendering of the subjectivities of place and social identity. They marshal the symbolic representation of an emplaced public, and apply a social construction of community identity as the evidence base and rationale for the regulation of housing supply (Puddifoot, 1995, 2003). The location and size of development, and more broadly the mode of housing delivery, its affordability, residential mix and relation to locally expressed housing need are measured against a collectively assembled image of the cultural relations of place. This nexus of place and social identity is an assemblage from ‘a melee of conflicting interpretations’ (Jones 1995: 48) and its success depends on a convincing representation of insiders and outsiders, with the volume house-builders often appearing as an existential threat to place distinctiveness. The resulting policies enable housing development within a policy framework that seeks to balance the requirement for economic growth with environmental and social priorities in the location, mode of delivery, and affordability of new homes. Attachment to place functions through the ‘social, material and institutional structures of housing’ (Jarvis, 2015: p.210) and development plans for house-building invoke competing claims of citizenship and belonging (Ellis, 2004). This study contributes to the literature on the mobilisation of publics in planning protests, but directs attention perhaps more importantly, to a community planning practice that derives its evidence base and objectives from place as “directly lived through its associated images and symbols” (Lefebvre, 1991: p.39). Neighbourhood planning signals a conflict over the value and meaning of place and over the social relations prescribed by a housing market dominated by speculative building practices. It asserts that the social, material and institutional structures of housing should function through our sense of place and community, and not the other way around.

Conclusion

Neighbourhood planning can provide a significant insight into the role of place attachment in shaping attitudes to housing supply. It suggests that attachments to place can be scripted into spatial practices that then inform development policy. The analysis in this paper has illustrated effective connections made between the subjective experience of place and normative uses of space. It has argued that manifestations of place identity can lead to assertions of emplaced social relations that encode place with spatial practices. The meaning of place may become in these cases intrinsically bonded to specific social relationships expressed through a symbolic frame of community identity. Neighbourhood planning has established an approved planning discourse through which these assertions of place and community identity may potentially be harmonised with development planning policy. Where neighbourhood plans articulate specific housing policies they provide an evidence base and policy context founded on a vision of place and community. The selection of specific sites for housing, the specification of the size of the development, and policies regulating the mode of delivery, its affordability and relation to local need are evaluated and rationalised in reference to this place identity frame. The social construction of place identity in neighbourhood plans suggests the manifestation of specific publics and spatially-fixed cultures that provide the rationale for community attitudes to house-building. The success of neighbourhood plans in winning local support for housing growth points to the importance of the attachments and social identities of place in shaping planning practice. It opens up the possibilities of a new accord between the subjectivities of place and the imperatives of housing supply.

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