

# Review of: "Corralling a Chimera: A Critical Review of the Term Social Infrastructure"

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**Review and commentary:** *Corralling a Chimera: A Critical Review of the Term Social Infrastructure* by Anaya Joshi and Daniel Aldrich

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There is growing interest in the subject of social infrastructure, and its role in the city. Initially, the research on infrastructure focused on physical infrastructure, on the long-term physical assets which make up the mosaic of the city. In this vein, it is architects and planners who have wrestled with how to construct livable and sustainable cities. That work has not always taken into account the more local concerns of people in place, though some planners have been very much concerned with the local outcomes of their decisions. We can go back to the work of Jane Jacobs (1961), who was totally focused on the failings of planning, and how neighborhoods matter for the life of the city.<sup>[1]</sup> In her classic study of New York neighborhoods, Jacobs highlighted the importance of social infrastructure, though she did not use that terminology. Her study, and other work, took up the issue of just how neighborhoods formed spaces within the city, and how they played a role in the wider functioning of the City (Clark, 2021).

Now, Joshi and Aldrich (2022) have published a broad review of social infrastructure which they describe as a subset of the infrastructure sector more generally. For Joshi and Aldrich, social infrastructure includes assets that accommodate social services. Examples include schools, medical services, housing and local government facilities, but also transport and civic and community facilities. It is consistent with an often-used definition of social structure as assets that accommodate social services. Similarly, the New Zealand Social infrastructure website includes a list which emphasizes social facilities and their role (New Zealand Social Infrastructure Fund). Most discussions of social infrastructure distinguish this sector from gray infrastructure – what is more often called the built environment, although clearly the built environment includes the facilities that Joshi and Aldrich view as social infrastructure.

The core of the Joshi and Aldrich review article is their overview and classification of 150 articles which they have organized into five categories -education, health care, housing, transport, and networking spaces. It is quite similar to the New Zealand classification mentioned above, though it is different in the addition of networking spaces. However, Joshi and Aldrich go to some length to emphasize that it is the social which matters in social infrastructure -that it is the interactions between facilities and the community populations which create social infrastructure.

Notably Joshi and Aldrich do suggest that the use of the term social infrastructure better fits with an approach centered on networking spaces. Their inclusion of, and emphasis on networking, has echoes of the ideas and themes of social cohesion and social capital (Forrest and Kearns, 2001). By narrowing the scope of the term (social infrastructure) and better connecting it to the processes which strengthen and maintain social ties, Joshi and Aldrich hope to make the term more useful and more used. Indeed, their focus on how this type of social infrastructure can be used to mitigate the impact of major shocks such as extreme weather events is new, as is the observation on how societies can deal with the challenges of extreme polarization where social infrastructure may provide a road forward. They also draw attention to the work of Klinenberg (2018) who emphasized social infrastructure as physical gathering spaces in which social connections can be formed and democracy can be maintained within a community.

The discussion of networking would be strengthened by recognizing the large previous research literature which has focused on the nature of networking and social connections and social cohesion more generally. This literature, beginning with the classic work of Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) has provided a rich understanding of how cohesion and networking matters. They lay out a convincing argument of how issues of trust, neighboring and association within a network of community members can be an important part of our day to day living. There have been extensive commentaries following those initial papers and they might usefully be explored as part of understanding the role of social infrastructure.

A somewhat related perspective on the nature of social infrastructure and why it matters is taken up by Latham and Layton (2022) in a recent article in *Urban Geography*. They center their argument on the ideas that social infrastructures are places that allow people to gather – places that support community life (Latham and Layton, 2022). It is a very similar argument to the one Jane Jacobs made 60 years ago. The crux of their approach to social infrastructure is not so much to identify and classify, but rather to argue that the core of why social infrastructure matters is that it provides spaces for people to interact. Here their approach is quite like that of Joshi and Aldrich and of course like the arguments of Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2001). Latham and Layton, reiterate the social cohesion issue, just how cities and neighborhoods can be set up to enhance human interaction. Perhaps the issue is not so much the classification of facilities which provide human support, schools, medical care and so on, but rather how the spaces of cities are organized to create wellbeing. In sum, the overarching question is how urban environments might function to connect and sustain individuals and groups.

Despite the wide- ranging discussions of elements of social infrastructure – education, transport, health care and so on, from my perspective it is housing that is central in understanding social infrastructure. The house is at the heart of our interaction with the city as a whole. As King (2022) notes in his study, *What is Housing*, it is all about what the dwelling offers us, and how it shapes us, and conditions our lives. Of course, this is not the first essay to reflect on this. The important and far-ranging discussions in Atkinson and Jacobs (2016), also take up the role of the dwelling in considerable detail. In fact, they specifically address the idea that the home is the main space in which social reproduction occurs—the place in which children are reared and which contains the building blocks of social life, as they put it. Housing research is about the dwelling and living in the dwelling, but it is also about how the house is connected to the larger urban society, how it is a central part of social infrastructure (Clark, 2022)

With the growing interest in the built environment, an interest stimulated by the problems of sustaining cities in a changing 21<sup>st</sup> Century environment, the focus on how we use these cities and our interrelationships within them is of growing importance. Understanding the complex role of social infrastructure is one of the important themes, and the current paper and others discussed in this review are central in the discussion.

## Footnotes

[1] Jane Jacob's classic study of New York neighborhoods is not introduced in either Joshi and Aldrich, or Latham and Layton, but is a central work on the role of neighborhoods and interaction in urban space. It is useful to remind ourselves of its enduring role in how we might create the urban environment and enhance wellbeing.

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