

Editorial

## The Challenges of Social Infrastructure for Urban Planning

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Submitted: 22 November 2022 | Published: 22 December 2022

### Abstract

This editorial addresses social infrastructure in relation to urban planning and localisation, drawing together the themes in this thematic issue on “Localizing Social Infrastructures: Welfare, Equity, and Community.” Having contextualised social infrastructure, we present each of the 12 contributions by theme: (a) the social consequences of the localisation of social infrastructure for individuals, (b) the preconditions for localising social infrastructure in the urban landscape, and (c) the social consequences for the long-term social sustainability of the wider community. We conclude with the openings for future research, such as the need to continue researching localisation (for example, the ways localisations of social infrastructure support, maintain, or hinder inclusion and community-building, and which benefits would come out of using localisation as a strategic planning tool); second, funding (the funding of non-commercial social infrastructure and who would take on the responsibility); and third, situated knowledge (the knowledge needed by planners, architects, social service officials, decision makers, and the like to address and safeguard the importance of social infrastructure in urban development and regeneration processes).

### Keywords

community; localisation; social infrastructure; urban planning; vulnerable groups; welfare

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Localizing Social Infrastructures: Welfare, Equity, and Community” edited by Ebba Högström (Blekinge Institute of Technology), Lina Berglund-Snodgrass (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences), and Maria Fjellfeldt (Dalarna University).

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### 1. Introduction

The American sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2018) may have been the one to set the social infrastructure ball in motion with his book *Palaces for the People*. He was not the first to coin the term, though; there had been others who had taken social infrastructure to heart (Oldenburg, 1989; Putnam, 2000). In recent years there has been an increasing array of engagement from scholars, journalists, and others at conferences and in podcasts, the news media, and policy documents. In the discipline of urban geography things have been particularly lively, exemplified by the recent thematic issue of *Urban Geography* edited by Alan Latham and Jack Layton (2022). What is arguably new—connected to simultaneous social and infrastruc-

tural turns in the social sciences generally and in urban planning specifically—is the combination of something less tangible, the social, with something more tangible, infrastructure. The concept of social infrastructure has a specific (spatial) capacity to bridge the social and infrastructural dimensions of living environments. The elision of infrastructure and social is a clever way of pointing up its systemic features: the assemblages and connections between the various physical, spatial arrangements that support socialisation, cohesion, trust, and co-presence, and the actors and processes that make this happen.

With this thematic issue, our aim is to chart the localisation of social infrastructures from an urban planning perspective. What counts as social infrastructure, however, is not clear-cut, as there are several sometimes

contradictory definitions (see Middleton & Samanani, 2022). Two suggested by Latham and Layton (2022) are useful here, the first being concerned with the infrastructures of social care, where social infrastructure is understood as spaces (e.g., hospitals, schools, care homes, mental health services) that collectively provide care and services for a whole range of people, and the second with the infrastructures of social life, where social infrastructure is understood as “the public and quasi-public spaces and places that support social connection” (Latham & Layton, 2022, p. 661). Inserting these definitions into an urban planning perspective directs focus toward the multitude of actors involved in planning social infrastructure, all with different roles and responsibilities, leaving the localising of social infrastructure a complex fusion of interactions and collaborations. Here, we are particularly concerned with what governance arrangements best facilitate their establishment and long-term maintenance, and what cross-sectorial collaborations that inform such arrangements (Berglund-Snodgrass et al., 2020). We concentrate on the “where”—the effects (or lack) of strategies for localising social infrastructure in urban landscapes—which is a somewhat neglected part of the spatial disciplines (Fjellfeldt et al., 2021). We also ask what different lived experiences are afforded by social infrastructure, and what lessons the urban planning and social work professionals can draw from such inquiries.

## 2. The Contributions

The 12 articles in this thematic issue ask crucial questions about the localisation and social infrastructure nexus. Each proposes a range of productive ways to analytically and empirically engage with the theme of social infrastructure’s localisation in order to address important societal phenomena embracing people, places, policies, and planning. The contributions are sorted by theme: (a) the social consequences of the localisation of social infrastructure for individuals, (b) the preconditions for localising social infrastructure in the urban landscape, and (c) the social consequences for the long-term social sustainability of the wider community.

The first theme—the social consequences of the localisation of social infrastructure for individuals—centres on the everyday effects of the localisation, organisation, and design of social infrastructure on individuals and certain groups (here, vulnerable groups and people living in rural areas). In the first article, Bricocoli et al. (2022) investigate the spatial organisation of social services, which they argue has long been secondary for both urban planning and social welfare policies in Italian cities. A new concept, “WeMi spaces,” which evolved from a reorganisation of the local welfare system of the municipality of Milan, led to innovation in both Milan’s social services and its spaces, where improving access was the key strategy in branching out with a broader arena of users and to discourage stigmatisation. The social con-

sequences for people with intellectual disability living in high-density urban settings is raised by Carnemolla (2022), who discusses how the urban design elements of a high-rise apartment complex influence how people with intellectual disability receive support and participate in the wider community. This lays the ground for urban design recommendations to support safe, efficient, and quality care in high-density urban settings for people with disability, older people, and other community groups who rely on community-care support to live independently at home. Kuoppa and Kymäläinen (2022) analyse the essential factors, challenges, and contradictions in the provision of social infrastructure in suburban contexts and argue that the relationship between users of suburban spaces and street-level workers is significant in the construction of social infrastructures. A topic for further investigation is vulnerable people’s agency in the suburbs. In Rees et al. (2022), digital social infrastructure is shown to help with social connectedness despite not being in the same physical space. They find that social infrastructure is not limited to urban, physical areas, and instead should be conceptualised as a digital, rural social phenomenon too. Stender and Wiell Nordberg (2022) discuss how social connectedness is crucial for people’s wellbeing and sense of community in the last article of the first theme. Using a case study of a disadvantaged housing area in Denmark in Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, three levels of social infrastructure—formal, informal, and digital spaces—are identified. When the formal spaces closed due to the lockdown, residents found innovative ways to socialise. In terms of informal spaces, they impress a message on urban planning and design: Do not forget the overlooked, underappreciated urban spaces because in a crisis like the pandemic they are invaluable in sustaining the social, even if using different infrastructure than the intended first level.

The second theme is the planning perspective, and specifically the preconditions for localising social infrastructure in the urban landscape. Urban planning has undergone major transformations in recent decades, offering both opportunities and challenges in the provision of a range of spaces and facilities for social life in the course of urban (re)development processes. The funding mechanisms, resources, and incentives to develop spaces that cannot be commodities in a “market” is a concern for many authors. Hence the contribution by Fobel (2022), who finds the provision of social infrastructure in peripheral regions is the result of committed individuals, voluntary work, and non-profit actors and the securing of third-party funds at higher levels of government or from foundations or fees. The changing role of student housing as social infrastructure is addressed by Franz and Gruber (2022), who look at the shift from providing student housing as a basic need to providing it as part of the financialised housing market, and by extension the implications for the provision of social spaces for students. They raise important questions about the governance arrangements which best facilitate the provision

of social infrastructure and what the specific responsibilities of public actors should be. Finally, Mager and Wagner (2022) examine how political and social relations are formed, negotiated, and challenged in the development of cultural infrastructure in a German city, concluding that the development project abandoned its discourse of providing spaces for cultural workers for one where it was a motor for urban (re)development.

The third theme looks to the future, focusing on the social consequences of the localisation of social infrastructure for the long-term social sustainability of the wider community. Agervig Carstensen et al. (2022) investigate the planned interventions to improve socio-spatial relations between disadvantaged districts and their more affluent neighbours. This “opening-up strategy” (Agervig Carstensen et al., 2022, p. 487) constructing shared meeting places in disadvantaged districts is designed to promote “publicness” and external relations. However, the authors highlight the risk that the common meeting place strategy will only result in an increase in visitors from outside rather than meaningful contacts between residents in the disadvantaged and more affluent areas, leaving the life chances of the former unchanged. Recent developments in Sweden’s privatised social infrastructure is the subject of Grundström’s (2022) article, demonstrating that in the shared housing complexes the internal social infrastructure has largely replaced residents’ daily use of public space. The conclusion is that planning with specific groups in mind may undermine the development of an urban social life while adding to housing inequality, and the risk is that urban planning may favour privatisation to avoid maintenance costs. Jing (2022) has a different, more tactical approach to social infrastructure in her focus on affordability of streetscapes for residents and visitors in urban areas, and the streetscapes as part of urban development processes. She concludes that the urban design discipline should see social infrastructure as a tool in planning and designing liveable cities. By “thinking with social infrastructure,” Lewis et al. (2022, p. 531) analyse the impact of urban regeneration on older people living in an inner city neighbourhood. The long-term social sustainability of the wider community in view of an “ageing in place” policy and local social infrastructures is investigated, especially in terms of the functional and affective impact on older people. In many respects, older people have been “erased” from the urban renewal discourse by the focus on the needs and lifestyles of incoming groups rather than long-term residents. The authors argue that the affordances of social infrastructure should be foregrounded in any discussion about urban change to ensure new urban spaces will foster social connections for all generations and support older residents’ sense of belonging and inclusion.

### 3. Conclusions

This thematic issue charts the localising of social infrastructure from an urban planning perspective. The 12 arti-

cles outline different ways of dealing with this, whether as an analytical lens or in empirical cases, which, taken together, inspire further research. First, there is a need to continue researching localisation (for example, the ways localisations of social infrastructure support, maintain, or hinder inclusion and community-building, and which benefits would come out of using localisation as a strategic planning tool); second, funding (the funding of non-commercial social infrastructure and who would take on the responsibility); and third, situated knowledge (the knowledge needed by planners, architects, social service officials, decision makers, and the like to address and safeguard the importance of social infrastructure in urban development and regeneration processes). Finally, we hope this thematic issue will inspire further research on the challenges of social infrastructure for urban planning.

### Acknowledgments

This thematic issue was supported by Formas–Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development (Grant No. 2018–00058 and 2018–00192) and Forte–Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (Grant No. 2018–01325). Ebba, Lina, and Maria would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the articles, whose work was important in improving everyone’s work. We wish to thank the contributors for providing such a range of articles and coming together to develop the variety of approaches this topic affords. We are also grateful to everyone who took part in the sessions on social infrastructure we organised at RGS-IBG 2021 and NGM 2022 for their valuable comments and reflections on the topic of this thematic issue.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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