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David P. Varady
University of Cincinnati

RETHINKING NEIGHBORHOODS, by William A.V. Clark, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2024

"Neighborhoods...are core elements of our lived lives" (p. 2).

I found myself in immediate agreement with this opening premise of William A.V. Clark's book: neighborhoods matter. This is something we all, perhaps, can recognize intuitively: whether we greet or pointedly ignore the neighbor next door, walk or fight traffic to school drop-offs, obtain a timely doctor's appointment nearby or halfway across the city, or choose to stay rather than leave when the building next door becomes a construction site – these are all daily manifestations of our neighborhood life. From this simple initial assertion, backed by his commanding knowledge of the field, Clark builds a powerfully grounded and comprehensively detailed case as to why places continue to matter.

The book is divided into three parts: the first explores neighborhoods and their role within the city; the second dives deeply into residential choice, selection, and the socio-economic dimensions of neighborhood life; and the third focuses on neighborhood outcomes – how place influences education, health, and overall well-being. Clark offers a detailed account of how people choose where to live and how those choices shape neighborhood composition, diversity, and class dynamics, touching on immigration flows and the decline of the middle class. These

discussions draw on major studies and debates around various neighborhood-related issues, including nuanced discussions of gentrification, segregation, and housing affordability, as well as the evolving forms of social capital and cohesion. The book includes classic studies as well as recent ones, and as such it is both anthological and up to date, approaching these themes from a social perspective which puts the emphasis on individual behavior and its cumulative effect on urban change.

Clark clearly knows his field and draws on a wealth of studies from a range of disciplines – including behavioral science, psychology, economics, and demography – to make his case. Throughout, he maintains a healthy skepticism and is not easily swayed by established narratives; claims need to be deeply substantiated to merit his endorsement. His arguments are backed up by reams of data, and the book features numerous studies with large datasets and a strong emphasis on quantitative research. Clark is also refreshingly candid in acknowledging when findings prove unconvincing, rather than settling for diluted conclusions.

This abundance of data points out that neighborhoods are significant sources of life satisfaction, connectedness, wellbeing, social cohesion, and health. Difficult or unsafe conditions, by contrast, can create or exacerbate chronic stress. Therefore, a consistent theme in the book is that places deserve investment; as Clark puts it, the focus should be on “bringing quality to the neighborhood, rather than gaining quality by moving from it” (p. 173). While many residents can and do leave disadvantaged areas, this often deepens decline for those who remain. Rather than taking an ideological stance in this long-standing debate, Clark draws on extensive data to examine both those who move and the neighborhoods left behind. He highlights how early-life environments have lasting effects on life outcomes and how place matters profoundly for children and families alike. Although significant causal links remain elusive, Clark acknowledges that research has revealed enough associative evidence between locality and health to warrant serious attention from policymakers.

Throughout the book, Clark challenges simplified explanations of urban dynamics, particularly those that minimize personal agency in household decisions about where to live. He aims to introduce data-based complexity to established stances around resilient inequality and concentrated poverty, questioning knee-jerk narratives of racism, and arguing instead that residential patterns emerge from complex processes shaped by resources, opportunities, and shared preferences. As he notes, people with sufficient means often “move to improve,” seeking neighborhoods that align with common aspirations for safety, schools, and amenities. Clark suggests that residential preferences reflect not only “out-group hostility” but also positive motivations to live near those with similar socioeconomic circumstances. He emphasizes pull factors, such as the desire for better housing and environments, over push factors like avoidance of certain other groups. While acknowledging persistent inequalities, he highlights granular data that reveals a more dynamic and varied pattern of mobility than broad averages suggest.

However, the other side of the coin – the role of institutions and policy – would have merited from more systematic treatment. Neighborhoods are more than just the result of aggregated individual choices – they are also shaped in critical and lasting ways by institutional forces and policy decisions. Indeed, while the book acknowledges the historical impact of top-down planning, it often takes subtle issue with structural views, choosing, rather, to focus on the element of individual choice, thereby adding informed complexity to a contentious debate, but devoting less attention than perhaps warranted to the continuing structural and institutional factors that shape neighborhood life.

A demonstration of such forces can be found in neighbourhoods undergoing advanced regeneration processes, residents of which are often intensely buffeted by various external stakeholders, often far beyond their individual preferences. These regenerating neighborhoods also illustrate other themes discussed in the book such as the role of environmental effects. Sustained and pervasive neighborhood regeneration can be seen as a particular kind of environmental stress – the strain of living with persistent ‘displaceability’ and uncertainty, proximity to continuous construction and the unraveling of community ties – making contemporary regenerating neighborhoods a relevant contemporary case for further study. These changes and processes can affect neighborhoods residents in profound ways, and they deserve attention.

Additionally, Clark’s discussion of social aspects is comprehensive, yet a fuller exploration of physical form could have added another valuable dimension. The book does touch on the built environment, via topics such as access to green space, health impacts and gentrification, but a more systematic analysis, in the same rigorous manner that characterizes the rest of the work, would have further strengthened it. Neighborhoods are, after all, not only social but also spatial entities, and physically can differ quite dramatically from each other. It would have been intriguing to see how design, layout, topography, and location shape neighborhood life.

Reading this book as a planner, I found it broadened my sense of what neighborhood studies can encompass. Urban planning tends to emphasize physical and spatial aspects, but Clark’s work reveals and expands upon social and economic dynamics that shape neighborhood life just as powerfully. For planners, this perspective offers instructive insight into how people make residential choices. For researchers in population studies, sociology, or urban studies, the book maps out key debates and foundational research of the past few decades. Anyone interested in the relationship between individuals and neighborhoods will find it a rich and data-driven resource. And perhaps readers of all stripes will be reminded that the age-old maxim still rings true: place matters.

Shira Lichtenbaum
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem