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New Perspective

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Liveable Streets in the Context of East and West¹: A New Perspective

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Abstract: “Liveability” is commonly treated as a universal concept and cities around the world are being judged in accordance with universal criteria. The aim of this paper is to provide a critique of Western notions of liveability, especially those underpinning international city benchmarking exercises. Despite being represented as universal, performance indicators in these rankings are actually socially-constructed, rely heavily on Western values and standards of living and are inherently biased in favour of Western cities. A city’s liveability is largely judged by quantitative measures that are statistically driven with little scope for comprehending the quality of cities or streets in other ways. This view of liveability pays little attention to the qualitative aspects of the street, particularly the relationship between the street and its users. The paper argues that there is a close relationship between a liveable city and the vitality of its streets, since a city will be liveable only if its streets are liveable. Eastern streets are inclusive, multicultural, socially cohesive, economically-vibrant and full of life. In our view these are qualities that make them more worthy of the term “liveable” than Western streets. Included in the paper is a comparative analysis of Eastern and Western streets to show that the activities and street life that many Western authors aspire to already exists in the East. We believe a new perspective is needed that acknowledges liveability as a relative, even subjective, concept that can only be evaluated using qualitative forms of assessment.

Keywords: Liveability, Liveable Street, Liveable City, East, West

¹. The terms “East” and “West” are historical and linguistic constructs that developed over a long period of time and became connected in a system of representation or discourse. According to Hall, “they represent very complex ideas and have no simple or single meaning.” Within this system the term “West”, regardless of geography, is synonymous with the word “modern” or “developed”, while the word “East” is generally understood to represent all that is opposite (Hall, 1992: 276-77).

Introduction

“LIVEABILITY” IS COMMONLY seen as a universal concept and cities around the world are being judged accordingly by various city benchmarking studies. The term liveability defies simple definition. It is an imprecise and untheorised “meta-concept for environmental quality”, encompassing notions of sustainability, quality of life and well-being, linked with specific strategies for the production and management of “orderly” public spaces (Stevens, 2009: 371; see also Godschalk, 2004). The notion of liveability is frequently equated with sustainable development. In the US the focus is on long-term strategies to improve quality of life, while in the UK it is seen in a narrower sense as the “Cleaner, Safer, Greener” agenda (Massey, 2005: ii). Some scholars refer to Vuchic’s view

of urban liveability as “generally understood to encompass those elements of home, neighbourhood, and metropolitan area that contribute to safety, economic opportunities and welfare, health, convenience, mobility, and recreation” (Vuchic, 1999: 7). But there remains a lack of consensus about the meaning of this ambiguous, contested concept.

In most international benchmarking studies a city’s liveability is largely judged by quantitative measures that are statistically driven with little scope for comprehending the quality of cities in other ways (Woolcock, 2009). This limited view of liveability results in Eastern cities being depicted as “unliveable” in comparison with Western cities and, as a consequence, they appear at the bottom of most city liveability league tables. This paper aims to provide a critique of Western notions of liveability embedded in most city ranking schemes, which typically prioritise visual order and aesthetic quality. We argue that this narrow conception of the term is expert driven, reductionist in nature, quantitatively-based and fails to acknowledge the public’s perceptions of what constitutes a liveable place. Streets are an integral part of any city, and the close relationship between a liveable city and the character of its streets is accepted by many (see Jacobs, 1961; Appleyard, 1981; and Gehl, 1987). Yet most measurements of city liveability pay little attention to the socio-cultural aspects of street life, particularly the relationship between the street and its users, which in non-Western contexts is quite distinctive and perhaps more worthy of the term “liveable” than Western streets. In this paper we use the example of Indian streets to designate the East, and although we acknowledge they cannot fully represent the diverse cultural variations found in all non-Western cities, they do share some common characteristics. A general comparison of Eastern and Western streets is included to show that there already exists in Eastern contexts a particular quality of street life which many in the West yearn for and consider a key attribute of a liveable city.

We believe the definition of liveability prevalent in most city benchmarking studies warrants closer investigation, and in preference to the mainly quantitative approach usually taken, there is a need for an alternative, qualitatively-driven perspective to evaluate the liveability of cities (Woolcock, 2009; see also Rogerson, 1999). This new perspective must place greater emphasis on shared cultural values and more subjective aspects of place satisfaction, focusing on the perceptions of local citizens and the daily life and activities that exist on city streets. We begin with an analysis of city benchmarking exercises to examine some of the issues that arise in liveability league tables.

City Benchmarking Exercises

League tables that claim to measure liveability are part of an emerging phenomenon that is linked to city competitiveness. Originally, the ratings were intended to assist multi-national companies in setting hardship allowances for executives living abroad (Mercer, 2010). But this aim has been expanded and now league tables are also used to help cities improve their competitive position in attracting inward investment. In addition, a city’s position in the rankings is often used for place promotion, to challenge negative stereotypes and inform corporate location decisions (Rogerson, 1999). But many authors have questioned the validity of these performance ratings and point out a paradox in terms of their legitimacy. For example, the *Sydney Morning Herald* stated in March 2008 that there was a mass exodus of people leaving the city’s western suburbs due to excessive commuting times and decreased affordability of houses. However, on the very day when city dwellers were abandoning parts

of the city, Anholt Cities Brand Index ranked Sydney with the highest rating (Woolcock, 2009: 2).

The Economist Intelligence Unit, one of the more prominent analysts, uses liveability as the primary vehicle for ranking cities around the globe. Its aim is to “quantify the challenges that might be presented to an individual’s lifestyle” (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2011). In calculating the liveability of over 140 cities it assesses stability, existing culture and environment, quality of infrastructure, healthcare and education. Their liveability ranking summary, published in February 2011, shows non-Western cities like Colombo, Tehran, Karachi and Dhaka in the bottom ten, while Western cities top the list:

Vancouver (Canada) remains at the top, a position that can only have been cemented by the successful hosting of the 2010 Winter Olympics and Paralympics, which provided a boost to the infrastructure, and culture and environment categories... Harare (Zimbabwe) is the lowest-scoring city at just 37.5%... Despite hopes of elections in 2011, stability and healthcare scores of just 25% and 20.8% respectively highlight a bleak situation (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2011).

Mercer Human Resource Consultants assumes New York as the base city for carrying out their quality of living survey, assigning it a score of 100. It also carries out a world cost of living survey that compares 200 plus cities (Mercer, 2010). Lifestyle magazine, *Monocle*, produces a Most Liveable City Index that lists 25 of the world’s most liveable cities based on quality of life. The European city of Munich topped 2010’s list as the best place to live and work. A glance through *Monocle*’s rankings clearly shows that Western cities top the charts whilst none of the Eastern cities even get a mention (*Monocle*, 2010).

Holloway and Wajzer discuss a number of limitations in benchmarking studies, including the availability and comparability of data, complex scoring procedures that obscure actual findings, the use of averages that do not capture performance highs and lows, and subjectivity in the analysis or interpretation of data. They remind us that “indicators are not a perfect or total measure of performance, so the relationship between indicators and overall city performance is not straightforward, and no direct cause and effect relationship can be attributed” (Holloway and Wajzer, 2008). The City of Melbourne also raises valid concerns:

...many liveability measures and rankings are used for direct comparison of international and domestic cities and regions. The subjective nature of the inclusion of factors relating to liveability, the weighting of these factors, and the vastly different indicators being included, results in different measures, providing different rankings of the liveability of cities. There is a lack of theoretical underpinning for these measures, particularly for composite measures. It is questionable whether any of the above composite measures would be directly relevant for informing public policy. A mix of locally relevant factors could, however, be selected for the purposes of public policy analysis (City of Melbourne cited in Woolcock, 2009:6).

Critics agree that performance league tables may have some value in the context of increasing global competition for measuring the success of a city’s development policies and assisting the decision-making of international companies (Woolcock, 2009). But they do not reflect the views of local citizens or provide any real insight into the satisfaction of residents with

the places where they live. We would argue that despite being represented as universal, the ratings are actually socially-constructed, rely heavily on Western values and standards of living and, thus, are inherently biased in favour of Western cities. The performance indicators they use are narrowly focused on notions of the “good life” accepted by an affluent target audience, while ignoring understandings of liveability recognised by other groups. Thus, despite their increasing popularity, city benchmarking studies are profoundly limited.

It can be inferred from the most prominent league tables that the majority of cities in the East are not performing as well as Western cities and, hence, are not as liveable. These findings add to an existing negative discourse in the West that portrays Eastern cities and their streets as being disorderly, chaotic, unsafe, or unplanned. Thus, a Western author like Harris, describing non-Western cities, claims that “Rapid environmental deterioration, giant traffic jams, violence and crime, urban sprawl eating into the countryside, these are some of the most striking visible features of the growth of large cities in developing countries” (Harris, 1992: x). Moughtin’s comment on the “untidy charm” of Old Delhi is more benign but equally detrimental (Moughtin, 1992: 40), while Cadman and Payne refer to the East as having complexities, contradictions and contrasts between the modern and traditional, formal and informal, or official and unofficial – skyscrapers juxtaposed with roadside stalls, markets, etc., thus emphasising a confused or disorderly environment (Cadman and Payne, 1990: 122).

Since the outcome of most liveability league tables show non-Western cities ranked at the bottom, it may be construed that they are not liveable anymore despite the fact that they emanate from some of the world’s oldest urban civilisations, some as old as 5,000 years in the case of India or China, and where currently the majority of the world’s population lives. This view fails to appreciate that the threshold between the public and private realms in both worlds, which is defined by the tangible physical morphology of the street as well as the human performances that take place within those spaces, is a key distinction in how street space is produced and consumed differently in the East and the West. It also does not acknowledge that public interaction, the rich variety of socio-cultural activities, daily life and culture of the street, is culturally-embedded in a given context and is thus relative in nature.

The OECD’s *Competitive Cities and Climate Change* report points out that lifestyle and the way people move around their cities contributes to CO₂ emissions in the built environment. Western cities that figure as the most liveable in the rankings produce twice as much environmental pollution than many Eastern cities. The OECD makes a case for spatially re-organising urban built form by increasing densities and reducing suburbanisation in an effort to reduce energy consumption. Lack of appropriate density and heavy vehicle dependency in Western cities make them hostile to the environment (Kamal-Chaoui and Roberts, 2009:10). Yet this aspect is neglected by the benchmarking tables; despite rhetoric to the contrary, they do not take into account the relationship between liveability and sustainability when they evaluate city performances.

Clearly the definitions of liveability embedded in current benchmarking studies are an unreliable gauge of the quality of world cities due to the definitions and measurement tools used. What is needed is a more responsive set of indicators that define liveability in terms of the users of cities in specific cultural contexts. In 2008 the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission in Australia defined liveability as reflecting the well-being of a community by creating places where people aspire to live. According to Woolcock, it is not easy to define a liveable city, but one can identify certain elements that contribute to creating

a liveable area (Woolcock, 2009: 4). Idrus-Hadi-Shah-Mohamed links the liveable city to increased vibrancy and congeniality followed by improved quality of life (Idrus-Hadi-Shah-Mohamed, 2008: 3). Both argue for an approach to liveability that emphasises both physical and social infrastructure as markers of the quality of life of communities.

Lennard believes everyone should be able to see and hear each other in a liveable city in contrast to a dead city where people are segregated and isolated. The public realm in a liveable city needs to offer spaces that provide a variety of activities to bring people together. It should be a place of social learning, a view also held by Jane Jacobs who said: “In real life, only from the ordinary adults of the city sidewalks do children learn...the first fundamentals of successful city life” (Jacobs cited in Lennard, 1997:15). We agree with Hahlweg’s view that “every community is a livable community”, so league tables should endeavour to make more visible alternative conceptualisations of liveability (Hahlweg, 1997: 14). The views expressed by many authors highlight the importance of community life and places that facilitate social interaction in the public realm, which is in contrast to the way benchmarking studies define liveability.

Liveability and the Use of Streets in Eastern and Western Cities

Our aim in this section is to show how space is produced, perceived and consumed differently in Eastern and Western cities. Culture holds societies together and is a reflection of shared values, beliefs, knowledge and lifestyles of people. According to Low, every built form reflects the socio-cultural values of a particular society and thus its spatial forms should be seen as an example of living history that has evolved over a period of time (Low, 1993:75). Anderson believes that cultural values and preferences influence the relationship between the user and the surrounding environment, and he cautions us about the likelihood of varied interpretations due to cultural differences. He also points out that we can devalue other cultural patterns of spatial use and dismiss them through a sense of cultural superiority arising out of our own ignorance and naivety (Anderson, 1991: 227). For example, what initially appeared as urban chaos to Singaporean students who were studying the streets of Jalan Petaling in Malaysia as part of an urban mapping exercise was due to the fact that they could not at first understand the local ordering system or their position as outside readers of that spatial culture (Limin, 2001: 70).

The physicality of the city has social consequences. Contemporary urban design theorists often claim that good urban design should aim to create spaces that facilitate human exchange either through chance meetings or planned encounters since these activities transform a neighbourhood into a safe, friendly and liveable environment. Wall and Waterman cite the narrow, winding lanes in medieval European cities as models for pedestrian movement and interaction since “chance meetings and face-to-face contact were unavoidable in these small spaces” (Wall and Waterman, 2010: 57). However, since the eighteenth century the priority in the West has been to beautify urban environments or impose visual order, while neglecting spaces that encourage people to come together (Stevens, 2009). In the nineteenth century many European cities were ruthlessly transformed by replacing the previously haphazard medieval street pattern with wide avenues and boulevards offering grand vistas punctuated by spectacular monuments. The new boulevards made walking in the city easier for the affluent middle classes and provided new ways of consuming the city. But this was not just

an aesthetic strategy as it also facilitated greater control over the “unruly” lower ranks of society (Jayne, 2006: 34).

Traditionally Western streets had massive problems with dirt, overcrowding and filth until urban cleansing and road-paving schemes prepared the way for the introduction of motor vehicles, which since then have increasingly invaded city streets. By the twentieth century many cities in the West became blighted by traffic problems and a monotonous urban landscape characterised by the over-use of modern building materials. Damaging transport policies coupled with an ideology that emphasises architecture as an esoteric art instead of a social one resulted in a physical environment that was inhospitable and meaningless to city inhabitants. This ideology may be traced to leaders of the Modern movement like Le Corbusier who said in 1929: “We must kill off the street ... We shall truly enter into modern town-planning only after we have accepted this preliminary determination” (Le Corbusier quoted in Marshall, 2005:45).

The impact of such views on Western streets was to turn them into channels for carrying traffic and exchanging goods, rather than a forum for communication and personal exchange. According to Wall and Waterman, the emergence of wide-spaced streets in Western cities deterred social interaction as it is impossible for people to make eye contact, thus ruining chances of developing a sense of community. Wide streets that were intended to improve a city’s efficiency instead led to the “death of the street” (Wall and Waterman, 2010). Several authors also describe how the cleansing and ordering of urban spaces were accompanied by efforts to control people’s behaviour. Valentine discusses how Western cities have undergone a “civilising process” resulting in new social codes relating to the consumption of food in public places along with the segregation of food outlets and other commercial premises (Valentine, 1998). Today regulation dominates the public realm in the West with large-scale public surveillance systems (CCTV) in the UK and USA (Norris, McCahill and Wood, 2004) and increasing restrictions on access to public spaces like shopping malls or security guards who discourage non-profitable loitering (Atkinson, 2003).

However, people throughout the world have historically lived on streets which have been simultaneously a place for social interaction and a channel for transport. Mateo-Babiano and Ieda claim that contemporary space utilisation is a consequence and reflection of historical pedestrian culture. They emphasise the need to think about the design of streets in the Asian context as being culturally specific (Mateo-Babiano and Ieda, 2005:4318). Similarly, Edensor argues that Western street regulation is specific to its own particular culture and thus needs to be viewed in that light. These authors suggest that there is a difference between the East and West in terms of perceiving and designing street spaces. Historically, the West segregated spaces horizontally and prescribed a single function to one space. Specific areas were created with distinctive activities, such as commercial, residential, industrial, etc. Rarely did one come across overlapping spaces that would have multiple purposes. Jayne observes that street life in the West is thus very predictable and is marked by deprived sensuality, destruction of cultural diversity and lack of human contact. There is only the occasional street fair or carnival, which he calls “organised dis-order”, to satisfy the Westerner’s fascination for temporary chaos (Jayne, 2006: 163).

In the East, however, “spaces take on a vertical, multi-functional dimension wherein each function is segregated by time” according to Mateo-Babiano and Ieda (2005: 4319). When the British colonised India they found highly dense indigenous urban settlements “in which housing, employment and religious institutions were not separately zoned but interwoven

within a single entity” (Evenson, 1989: 12). Hosagrahar describes historic Delhi as “rich with places for people to meet, mingle, display, observe and command.” The traditional Indian city had its own formal character made up of a dense pattern of winding lanes, passages, bazaars, squares and streets lined with merchants and hawkers, interspersed with courtyard houses, mosques and temples (Hosagrahar, 2005: 47). Threatened by this perceived disorder, British officials, following the principles of science, rationality and universal modernism, set about imposing Western spatial standards on Indian cities. Comprehensive plans were drawn up by British engineers aimed at improving circulation, sanitation and ventilation in cities throughout India. While Patrick Geddes had sympathy for the traditional Indian townscape, and even suggested extending the system of lanes, others like Vaughn Lanchester and E. P. Richards did not hesitate to propose outright demolition (sometimes on the scale of Haussmann’s Paris), segregation of traffic, street widening, and cutting broad thoroughfares through congested areas (Evenson, 1989: Chapter 4).

After independence most of these plans were incomplete and interventions were dispersed unevenly throughout the cities. In addition, local people continually adopted strategies of resistance or contestation in the face of an imposed modernising project by encroaching on public space or building “illegal” constructions (Hosagrahar, 2005: 74). Today in most Indian cities there are many areas that escaped modernisation and conform to traditional notions of spatial form, social function and behaviour, such as the streets described by Edensor in Agra (1998). He observes that Western and Indian streets are produced and consumed differently in terms of the street’s physical structure and the social practices that enliven them. In India the street is a heterotopic site of diverse activities, haphazard features and events, continuous intersecting movements and multi-sensual experiences – “they merge public and private, work and leisure, and holy and profane activities” (Edensor, 1998: 206). Edensor suggests that Western tourists are attracted to India precisely because similar social and sensual qualities got wiped out in the West due to consumer capitalism and over-regulation of the built environment. Such “other” spaces hold a fascination for Westerners craving temporary disorder.

Anderson believes that failure to reposition the role of the street in the West will result in the decay of cities as they are alienating people from their surrounding environment (Anderson, 1991:23). Much can be learned from traditional Eastern streets in improving and enlivening Western public spaces. To illustrate this point, a comparison has been made of the characteristics of streets in the West and East, which in turn dictate the kind of life that exists in these spaces. This comparison is based on work carried out by Appleyard (1981), Gehl (1987), Anderson (1991), Rojek (1995), Edensor (1998), Limin (2001), Jayne (2006) and Mehta (2009).

Table 1: Western and Eastern Streets Compared

Western Streets	Eastern Street (represented by Indian streets)
Apollonian culture, representing structure and order	Dionysian culture, representing sensuality, abandonment and intoxication
Overly regulated, rationalised and orderly	Apparent disorder and uncontrolled social interaction
Lack of diversity of use and social contact	Diverse social activities and use
Horizontal segregation of space	Vertical, multi-functional space segregated by time
Mono-functional spaces	Multilayered spaces
Zoned for formal commerce	Presence of informal providers of services
Street seen as a path for movement	Street seen as a place for facilitating communication among users
Reduced points of entry and exit for rapid and safe, undisrupted movement	Street located within a cellular structure suggesting a labyrinth, with numerous openings and passages
Visual order, aesthetic policing and imposition of design codes	Rarely planned to convey a particular overall impression and not subject to aesthetic control
Emphasis on visuality and a place for gazing	Multi-sensual experience
Controlled social interaction and flow and pace of users	Order determined by negotiation among individuals and limits of adaptability of the space
Lack of sensory experience	Rich and varied smell and soundscape
Monitoring activities through mechanical surveillance	Human surveillance provides automatic sense of security
Linear passage through the street	Rhizomic passage through the street
Static and quiet nature of the street	Animated social life and communication

In the West little importance has been attached to designing streets that allow for life’s ordinary activities. For decades traffic engineers dominated street design with their emphasis on managing traffic movement, divorced from its wider context (Vasconcellos, 2004). In the 1960s several authors voiced concerns about declining streetscapes and encouraged the revitalisation of the public realm to improve the quality of civic life and strengthen communities. One of the first challenges came from Jane Jacobs who launched an attack on technomodernist views of street design and called for the return of life on Western streets. She advocated an intricate mix of different uses on streets to not only make the city safer and more comfortable but, more importantly, liveable. She suggested that diversity of use would encourage activity in an area for longer hours bringing with it human surveillance, heterogeneity and increased contact among people. Jacobs said that “streets and their sidewalks, the main public spaces of the city, are its most vital organs. Sidewalks, their bordering uses, and their users, are active participants in the drama of civilisation...” (Jacobs, 1961: 29-30).

The concept of the “liveable street” was later fully developed by Donald Appleyard, who expressed his concerns about the loss of social life on Western streets as a consequence of

prioritising traffic over peoples' needs. In his famous book, *Livable Streets* (1981), Appleyard introduced the notion of the "ecology of the street" and shifted the focus from traffic to the *impact* of traffic on social interaction and from the street as a place for mobility to the street as sanctuary for residents (Vasconcellos, 2004: 8). He is well known for systematically analysing the relationship between people's social interaction and changing levels of traffic.

These authors argued that liveable streets aid in building desirable communities by striking a balance between traffic and people who are able to live, work and play together in public spaces. Streets should not be seen simply as the public realm's functional corridor, but should strive to cater for the daily needs of individuals using them. These ideas formed a major plank in the UK government's Urban Task Force whose findings stated: "The traditional street plays a key role in the formation of community. It is where people of all ages come together and interact. The re-establishment of the street as an urban focus could make an immediate impact on people's lives" (DETR, 1999: 57). But too often "urban renaissance" schemes and liveability initiatives in the West focus simply on removing nuisances and enhancing the appearance of places to satisfy middle class lifestyles by the inclusion of distinctive urban landscaping, high-quality architectural design, public art and leisure facilities (Lees, 2003). There is an assumption "that certain kinds of orderly appearances invariably mean higher aesthetic quality or an overall increase in quality of life" (Stevens: 2009: 371).

One positive strategy recently adopted in the West to expand and enrich public life on the street is the "shared street". This is not a new concept; before the advent of conventional traffic management it was the basis for street design and practices in both the East and West. In Western Europe experiments with traffic calming and car-free or pedestrian zones were first carried out in the 1950s and 60s, initially focused on the issue of safety. Then in the Netherlands, Joost Vahl and Hans Monderman pioneered the integration of traffic into social space to ensure vitality, a sense of informality and a safe user environment. This resulted in not only fewer accidents, but also an increase in civility, courtesy and communication between street users (Hamilton-Baillie, 2008: 166-67). Dutch *Woonerfs* and Home Zones in the UK have since been effective in regaining the space lost to motor vehicles (Biddulph, 2008). The Naked Street on Exhibition Road in South Kensington, London is one such example that breaks down the overly regulated, automobile-prioritised street and reinstates the importance of social life (Auckland Transport Agency, 2009). These innovations are by no means the norm in the West, but they are a step in the right direction.

In praising the qualities of Eastern streets and suggesting they could serve as useful models for re-imagining Western public space, we are by no means arguing in favour of reinstating some "timeless tradition". All tradition is dynamic and in India and throughout the East customary social practices and local knowledge have continued, but they have been reconstituted to accommodate new conditions. Furthermore, we acknowledge that just as the "East" is not a unified entity, the traditional characteristics of Eastern streets described in this paper are not ubiquitous. Capitalist urbanisation has spread around the globe and transnational ideas about what public space should look like and how streets should function, based on "universal" modernist principles, have been adopted in many cities that previously were categorised as "Eastern". For example, in Hong Kong's central financial district, corporations are now given broad powers to restrict the use of public space supported by the police who place barriers around fountains to prevent people sitting on the edges (Abrahamson, 2004: 28). Street hawking in Mumbai traditionally provided employment for hundreds of thousands of people and still provides essential services to most of the population. Yet

recently street vending has been labelled a “nuisance” or “eyesore” by local citizens’ groups and business associations, and new regulations have been enacted to ban handcarts or establish non-hawking zones (Anjaria, 2006). It is likely that city performance league tables are partly responsible for the circulation of these ideals, which undermine the positive qualities of Eastern streets that we have highlighted in this paper.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that there is a close relationship between a liveable city and the vitality of its streets, since a city will be liveable only if its streets are liveable. But this seems to have been overlooked by popular international liveability indices, which are based on measures ranging from political stability and economic environment to infrastructure, schools, recreation and housing. Although they claim to reveal a city’s “well-being” or “quality of life”, what is demonstrably missing from these exercises are social and cultural measures or a consideration of how a city’s own residents rate its liveability. In selecting indicators, the surveys are overly reliant on easily obtainable and quantifiable environmental or economic data. They also reflect Western notions of ideal living standards and assume that these standards are transparent and universal. So they invariably penalise non-Western cities that have different social conditions, lifestyles and values. Therefore, we believe current ideas about liveability and their use in benchmarking studies are of limited use. A new perspective is needed that accepts liveability as a relative, even subjective, concept that can only be evaluated using qualitative forms of assessment. As Stevens points out, “liveability encompasses a great many different ways that people perceive and use the public realm in their everyday lives” (Stevens, 2009: 388).

Our argument is supported in part by a comparison of the physical attributes and activities undertaken on both Eastern and Western streets to show how space is produced and consumed differently in the East and the West. Various authors have pointed out that Western streets have become overly-regulated and ordered commodified landscapes, marked by erasure of social and sensual diversity, and meant primarily for gazing, consumption or transit. Streets in non-Western cities, on the other hand, are multilayered, sensual, less-regulated, and marked by the existence of a rich diversity of social and economic activity. Eastern streets facilitate uncontrolled social interaction and act as centres of public life; in our view these are qualities that make them more worthy of the term “liveable” than Western streets. Liveability in the East traditionally has been linked to livelihoods, diversity and everyday social engagement, while order and aesthetics take a background position. These are aspirations expressed by many people in the West, but they are not visible in the liveability rankings.

Finally, some critics in the West contend that the concept of “community” is a “totalising construct” with assumptions of unity and harmony that are unrealistic in today’s world. Lees and others argue that this “inclusionary rhetoric” hides the cultural politics of streets and public spaces, in which social encounters are often sites for the enactment of unequal relations of power, repression or conflict (Lees, 2003: 80). In our view there is still value in the concept of liveability and its associated goals of community sociality and well-being, but the term has been co-opted, sanitised and distorted by the discourses of urban competition, marketing and city beautification. In this paper we have suggested there are other, more multifaceted, ways of understanding “liveability” with potentially wider applications. To begin with, this new perspective on liveability prioritises social interaction on the streets, since no vision of

liveability can be complete without a lively, animated public realm. It foregrounds people, their perceptions and involvement, not only in the production of public space, but also in its evaluation. It accommodates diverse, even incompatible, activities and a variety of spontaneous or unfamiliar experiences, which encourage greater tolerance and acceptance of difference. And it encompasses a more complex, flexible form of urban order that embraces innovation and responds readily to change. Above all, this understanding of liveability and, by extension, liveable streets is dynamic and expansive to provide a supportive framework for designing and using public spaces in a variety of cultural contexts.

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I am a registered Architect with the Council of Architecture (COA), India and Lecturer at Lincoln School of Architecture contributing to humanities and design teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I am also a member of the Liveable Cities Research and Consultancy Group at the University of Lincoln which deals with issues related to urban design, development and regeneration, urban conservation, architectural education and participatory design. After five years in Academic administration at COA, New Delhi and having dealt with the assessment and maintenance of minimum standards of architectural education imparted at Schools of Architecture throughout India, I completed my M.Arch from the UK in 2006 and since then have worked on a number of community based participatory design projects in Lincoln, Ely and other parts of the country as part of the Liveable Cities' team. I am also currently pursuing Master of Research course. My skills include architecture, urban and participatory design and proficiency in visualising these schemes portrayed through virtual media.

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