



## Recognition of Social Interactions in Urban Spaces as an Index for Social Sustainability

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Received: 01.02.2015; Accepted: 06.06.2015

**Abstract** .Social debates are like new windows in reaching sustainable development and recently, social sustainability has attracted planners and policymakers' attention as a significant and fundamental part of sustainable development. Social sustainability, in a qualitative concept, includes a wide range of indices and components. In the following research social interactions is being assessed as an index in social sustainability. Accordingly, urban spaces have significant roles in forming correlation and shaping people's relations and they are considered as one of the most significant locations for forming social interactions. By referring to the experts' opinions, the following research tries to study urban space content as a context for social interactions and as a result of its role in realization of social sustainability. The research results suggest that urban spaces are the center for relations and development in cities which have the potential to increase citizens' social interactions level and by the capacity that it has in society dynamicity, it is a solution in accessing sustainability in social arena. This research method is qualitative which is carried out through studying documents, books, professional magazines, related research projects and World Wide Web.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development, social sustainability, social interactions, urban spaces

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Enormous urban society issues on the one hand and global movements on the other, suggest that environmental, social, economic, political, physical and functional developments must happen and progress in a way to guarantee sustainable development and quality settlement and continuity. To put it another way, future generations should be able to grow in an environment-friendly context. Such a view proposed the role and necessity of considering sustainability in development. Accordingly, the initial theory leading urban studies is associated with two concepts of sustainability and being citizen-oriented (social aspect). (Masnavi, 2004) Richard Rogers believes that city builds its own citizens and citizens their own city. By initiating social relations in urban spaces, humans try to meet each other's human and social needs. (Fathi, 2012) Urban spaces are the place for prevalence of society's individuals' social life, which is shaped based on rational intellectual foundations, civil participation of society and social behaviors formed based on human values. This social interaction and public participation could be considered as the main element in urban spaces content which impact human relations and urban activities. (Parsi, 2012)

### 2. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The most common definition for sustainable development is the definition which is proposed by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). This commission has defined sustainable development as a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. According to this definition, any society needs to provide a sort of balance between generations in order to reach sustainability. Social and economic development must be realized in a way that if it, in any time, compromises the future generations' abilities, the impact of economic activities is minimized. If present vital and necessary

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activities compromises the ability of future generations (such as extracting unrenovable minerals), the damages must be fully compensated, hence, sustainable development has a comprehensive concept and it is related to all aspects of human life and implementing sustainable development models require fundamental changes in national and international policies. (Mellatparast, 2009) Urban sustainability concept is considered in various aspects which include natural sustainability, structural sustainability, economic sustainability, political sustainability and social sustainability. What this article focuses on is the urban sustainability from social aspect. The social aspect of sustainable development has been raised in recent decades mostly and this issue is of a great significance to be considered as a growing concern and an integral part of sustainable development concept. (Pacion, 2009) Previous studies on sustainability topics were limited to economic and environmental concepts. However, in recent years, focus on social sustainability as one of the main components of sustainable development has increase and it has turned to an accepted, organizational and institutional policy in sustainable development guidelines. (European Institute of urban Affairs, 2007) Social sustainability reached its today's shape and social popularity in WCED report which was formed in the U.S. In this summit, it was explained that sustainable development requires coordinated focus on social, ecologic and economic situations. (World Commission of Environment and Development, 1987).

### **Social Sustainability**

Social sustainability includes a set of measures and policies which seek to improve life quality and equitable access to rights distribution and proper use and allocations of natural and artificial environments. This implies improvement in local life conditions through decreasing poverty and increasing satisfaction on basic needs. (Pacion, 2009) Generally, social sustainability has been considered in two conceptual aspects: social justice which refers to equitable distribution of resources and avoiding exclusive techniques and lets society individuals participate in society and social, economic and political issues fully, which is closely related to environmental equity. In regard to built environment, social justice refers to considering the nature and size of access to services and facilities which are established in a region. Social sustainability, which is related to the society's capabilities or its realization as a local society, includes its own preservation and reproduction in an acceptable level of performance in social organization and integration of social behavior in a wide range of social environment. Accordingly, social sustainability includes a wide range of social behaviors, the presence of interaction among inhabitants of a neighborhood, participation in local official and nonofficial institutions, relative stability in society and presence of a level of trust in society which forms a positive sense of identity and pride in society. (Dempsey, 2012) Social sustainability is defined under the notion of healthy, productive and coordinated life with the nature. In this definition, life and survival of society is in harmony with preserving environmental quality and economic systems to reach economic systems in reaching the highest levels of satisfaction in life. (GTZ, 2004) In operational level, social sustainability is formed by measures in key subjects (including individuals and societies' social areas for capacity building and developing skills to eradicate environmental and space inequalities). In this definition, social sustainability is associated with principles such as equity and health, emerging issues such as participation, needs, social, economic and environmental capitals and recently concepts such as happiness, welfare and life quality. (Colantonio and Dixon, 2009) Social sustainability is achieved if the work in the society could meet a wide range of human needs, while it is formed naturally and it is able to save its own fertility in a long period of time and provide social equity, human dignity and participation. (Littig and Griebel, 2005)

### **Social Sustainable Development Indices and Criteria**

In sustainable development process, the role of social sustainability is quite significant in realization of the goals. Hence, in strategic goals of sustainable development, themes such as empowerment, increasing freedom of choice, expanding participation, improving life quality, institutional capacity building, social security, accountability and social welfare are widely emphasized. By explaining that the role of cities has grown in sustainable development, Dempsey et al. (2012) categorize social sustainability representative factors in two physical and predominantly physical groups.

**Table 1.** Social Sustainability Representative Factors – Source: Dempsey et al. (2012).

Non-physical Factors	Predominantly Physical Factors
- Education and training	- Urbanity
- Social justice: inter- and intra-generational	- Attractive public realm
- Participation and local democracy	- Decent housing
- Health, quality of life and well-being	- Local environmental quality and amenity
- Social inclusion (and eradication of social exclusion)	- Accessibility (e.g. to local services and facilities/employment/green space)
- Social capital	- Sustainable urban design
- Community	- Neighborhood
- Safety	- Walkable neighborhood: pedestrian friendly
- Mixed tenure	
- Fair distribution of income	
- Social order	
- Social cohesion	
- Community cohesion (i.e. cohesion between and among different groups)	
- Social networks	
- Social interaction	
- Sense of community and belonging	
- Employment	
- Residential stability (vs turnover)	
- Active community organizations	
- Cultural traditions	

Among aforementioned indices and criteria, the following research studies the social interactions index as a non-physical factor in formation of social sustainability.

### Social Interactions

Whenever an action is committed by an individual which is accompanied by a reaction from another individual, a mutual interaction has happened which is usually referred to as a social interaction. In such a case, a social relation has been formed between the two individuals. (Fielding Ogburn and Nimkoff, 2001) There are other definitions proposed for social interaction. For instance, social interaction and initiating relations could be a physical issue, a look, a conversation or connection between individuals which requires defining events and proper activities and as a result the role of people in space and their membership in groups and social networks. (Daneshpur and Charkhchiyan, 2007) According to Maslow's (1954) human needs pyramid; individuals' needs are divided into two groups. The first group includes physical needs which if met, another range of needs are surfaced which refer to the psychological aspect of humans. Accordingly, one of innate needs of humans (including citizens) is the need to initiate social interactions and relations. Accordingly, social interactions and relations are referred to as innate needs and also a tool to satisfy other needs, so that humans could not thrive without initiating social relations. (Rafi'pur, 2003) The simplest element of human common life is the social interaction. Individuals have innate tendency towards initiating social relations and due to the same fact, they provide situations to experience their social relations. (Talebi, 2004) But what is being observed in today's societies in the decrease in individuals' level of relations with each other, so that by increase in the size and realm of cities, speed, and density, civility, citizenship and social relations, as basic urban principles, are weakened. Accordingly, the collective sense of local communities and emotional attachment on one location are disappearing. (Huffman, 2006) Proper knowledge of humans and their relations with other humans could be helpful in forming environment for establishment of interactions and relations. Hence, in this process, by studying human as a social being which maintains various qualitative and quantitative levels of social interactions, cognizing behavioral basis and social occasions and activities with potential capacities become significant for meaningful social interactions and relations. Different individuals have tendency towards various levels of social interaction. Defining proper level of interaction is subjectively derived from people's conversations and objectively from normative stances towards good life. Both are of high value definitions and have social and political orientation. (Lang, 2002)

Observations suggest that social interaction take place in lower levels between various generations. Public spaces enable people from various generations to be together. To put it another way, achieving coherent and consistent social relations and improving interaction and presence in public spaces require development of various socialization patterns which in turn requires a wide range of studies on various fields such as interracial, inter-age, intersexual and interclass interactions. This knowledge on the one hand requires content analysis and proper qualitative and quantitative study of time and location of each aforementioned relation and on the other hand it requires spatial analysis of components of formation of such relations. Below, effective factors on social interactions are briefly pointed out which include a wide range from perceptual and conceptual components to physical objective components: Overcrowding and congestion, norms and social relationships, beliefs and ethics, social classification, and privacy and physical basis.

Table 2 presents profile of main experts with the approach of improving social interactions:

**Table 2.** Experts with the Approach of Improving Social Interactions – Source: Kashaniju, 2010.

Row	Theoretician	Year	Theory Title/Text	Key Concepts
1	Camillo Sitte	1889	Visual beauty in cities	Visual continuity in pedestrian motion
2	Gordon Cullen	1961	Townscape	Considering the pedestrian sequential views in urban space planning
3	Rob Krier	1975	Urban space	Considering physical element and aspects in cities public arenas
4	Aldo Rossi	1982	Urban architecture	Considering physical element and aspects in cities public arenas
5	Christopher Alexander	1987	Urban planning modern theory	Urban spaces gradual growth and non-geometrical order
6	Cliff Martin	1999	Urban planning: streets and squares	Introducing urban planning main elements with an emphasis on the role of streets and squares in city
7	‘Ali Madanipur	2000	Urban space 8planning	Recognizing urban planning based on urban space social-local process
8	Jahanshah Pakzad	2005	Urban spaces planning guide in Iran	Introduction of various urban spaces and explaining design principles of each with a native approach

### Usefulness Reasons of Presence of Social Interactions in Societies

1. Human beings are social and sociable beings who need positive interaction with other humans for their own health and welfare.
2. Richard Cent (1986) claims that “people grow only in confronting the unknown”. The unknown in here refers to all society classes and of course the best place to confront the unknown and differences is the public spaces.
3. William White (1988) believes that increasing private aspects of human life and on the other hand face-to-face relation of citizens is felt more than ever. These spaces lead to increase in humans visiting each other, confronting, challenges among individuals and various groups. In fact, people are considered as audiences and actors of urban spaces scenes.
4. Where people attract people, places in which life is more happening in their public arenas, they become more touristic cities and they could be more useful for economy of that region. (Shaftoe, 2008)
5. A city which has more suitable for events and social interactions has more potential for accumulating various layers of collective memories. This context should have required qualifications from social political and physical and spatial aspects. Factors such as social security, ethnic diversity, historical backgrounds, ceremonies and celebrations introduce social-political potentials and presence of proper, active public spaces and forums and community centers; show the physical-spatial potentials for formation of collective events. (Mirmoqtadai, 2009)
6. Social interaction is necessary for meeting human needs, connection and sense of belonging to a place.

7. Socialization and sociability which help with the personal growth in humans are formed through interacting with others and observing people's activities.
8. Social interaction draws individuals' attitudes with various mental backgrounds and various specifications together.
9. According to Christopher Alexander, occasional nonofficial meetings could help with expanding friendships and daily relations among people. (Lang, 2007)

### **Social Interactions Development and Facilitation**

The interaction between social experiences and behavioral basis specifications is the main topic on social interaction. Physical environment could be considered as an important component in the interaction between humans. Human, as an organized, dynamic and talented system, is able to correct behavior in dealing with environmental changes. Social interaction depends on social role and relations which individual in a group has. Any social interaction has a situation and occurs in certain places and periods of time. Hence, social interactions are limited into local and temporal divisions. Some of these roles occur through face-to-face relations and in larger groups it occurs through conversations, physical appearance and body condition. In any case, location and its properties are significant issues in social interaction process. (Falahat, 2008) after eye contact, using space and territory has the second place in the most universal nonverbal signs. In a study on the effect of various environmental spaces on space, Sommer used social psychological experiment methods and studied the use of human-made environments in the relation between individuals. (Fergus, 2000) Physical environments such as airports waiting halls, open urban spaces and courts apply limitations on behaviors through their certain designs. An official social process such as a due hearing or observing prayers impact the physical design of the place they are observed in, so that a random visitor could easily reconstruct social events which occur in such places through their physical designs of a mosque or a courtroom. Hence, nonverbal behaviors acquire their meaning from the places they occur, to a high extent. Another environmental factor which impacts social interaction is the number of individuals available to contact in a space range. Space vicinity is among the main determinants of immediate relations between individuals; however, presence of a high number of individuals in a small space could lead to congestion psychological perception. According to Altmann, the desirable social contact of individuals is different in various conditions and even various times of the day and individuals use privacy setting mechanisms such as altering physical environment and keep their social contacts at a desirable level. Urban public spaces as a behavioral basis has a great role in meeting individuals' social needs, interaction with other individuals and developing personal and social relations. Considering the fact that social attitudes and relations increase in urban spaces and leisure time, physical environment should be able to provide the context for developing social interactions among individuals. (Falahat, 2008)

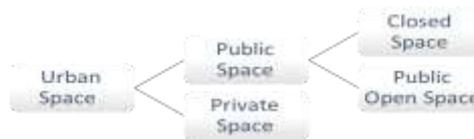
Social relation occurs in space and hence, space includes a set of social relations among certain groups and locations and the type of the relations which are present in a space and their intensity endow meaning to space. (Talebi, 2004) Urban space components are discussed in the following.

### **3. URBAN SPACE**

Colquhoun (1989) defines urban space in two ways: social space and built or artificial space. Social space "is the association of social institutions space" which is studied by sociologists and geographers.

Urban spaces, which include public open space and closed ones (Diagram 1), have had various physical and functional properties in various periods and geographical and cultural contexts and hence various definitions are proposed for them. Sometimes these definitions and approaches are used for extracting various aspects of an urban space suggest two factors of form (physic) and nature (function) of urban spaces. Physic and activity are the same in ancient era, but they are different from late eighteenth century. In this era, city and urban spaces are the center of human thoughts, emotions and feelings and from mid twentieth century to date, urban space concept is different: 'urban space

refers to a setting which includes activities, various cultural, social, administrative and trading buildings and urban elements and components in an elegant, coordinated, ordered and stunning shape with visual values while it has a confining body, physically. To put it another way, urban space is a component of a city which as a public arena is the manifestation of urban activities.’ Accordingly, not all spaces could be considered as urban spaces since urban spaces include communication features and they are a part if the city’s living organism which are in contact with changing social, economic and technical conditions. Otherwise, they are nothing other than cavities among buildings and other urban components. (Fathi, 2012)



**Diagram 1.** Urban Space Subsets – Source: Authors

### Social Interactions in Urban and Socially Sustainable Spaces

Urban spaces are locations which belong to all citizens and they are not unique to physical aspects and in fact they are meaningful by the presence of humans and their activities. (Kashaniju, 2010) and they have been the physical context for people’s social interaction from past to date. Considering the fact that urban space is a space which “is in a form the realization of the social life nature; that is, it is where citizens are present there and it is the scene where the story of social life begins at and lets all people to have access to it and be active in it. The essential condition for a public space to be considered an urban space is that social interaction must happen in it. (Rafi’iyan, 2002) Generally speaking, public spaces are spaces which are shared with strangers and form a space for political, religious, trading, sports and resting activities. (Rahnemai, 2007) Public spaces should properly meet human spiritual needs and provide a desirable level of quality for inhabitants. Ward Thompson considers two main roles for public spaces in cities: 1- the specific and functional role which public space provides a desirable environment for inhabitants and tourists in the city and 2- the ideal role, which role is to put poor and rich, young and old in a common experience to democratize the society. (Thompson, 2001) In public spaces, three distinct groups of human activities including necessary, optional and social activities are determined which are quite important to the quality of the city. In poor quality regions of the city, only necessary activities could be observed; that is, people do what they are forced to do. On the other hand, in high quality urban spaces, not only necessary activities are found but also many favorite optional and social activities could be observed, as well. However, these activities occur in proper situation; that is, if city offers spaces with good quality, people stay longer than needed in such spaces since they perceive such spaces as desirable and satisfactory. (Madanipur, 2008) Matlak believes that the main function of the city is in social activities and abundance of public arenas, since there will be a context provided for showing individuals’ social life and various social groups. (Matlak, 1997) From objective and physical point of view, urban space is a context in which social relations and civil life occurs. Relations which are based on real foundations and turns civil life into real life and leads to formation of memories and turns mind to a place for memories and personal memories turn to collective memories. As Plato says: facilities of a person is limited comparing to their needs and no matter how much effort they put, they can’t reach their needs alone and that is why human’s needs are met in society. (Khatami, 2001, Heshmati, 2011) According to Dr. Lotfi, urban space is a space which its inhabitants could engage in social interactions regardless of their age or gender. (Amiri, 2010) And Camillo Sitte believes that urban spaces are the vital need and the main factor in social life and Shuai believes that urban spaces facilitate social relations and refine social structure. (Behzadfar, 2008) Public places cause occasional interaction between individuals in their daily lives and these confrontations provide a context for people to connect and endow meaning to their daily life. (Khestu and Sa’idi Rezvani, 2010) Public spaces let citizens to come together away from home and work and socialize with each other and some call these places and spaces the “third

location". (Iverson, 2004) People could gather together in such places randomly and without any social or personal commitments. (ODPM, 2002) In her book 'Life and Death of Large American Cities', Jane Jacobs, known journalist and expert in urban issues, emphasizes the role of public urban spaces in forming social interactions. According to her, what sticks in minds more than anything else in a city is the public urban spaces specially streets and sidewalks and increase in interactions and sidewalk security, has a reverse impact of separation and segregation. (Pakzad, 2010) While emphasizing presence in public presence and the necessity of confrontation, she states that: "the moment exciting, useful and meaningful confrontations among citizens turn to personal relations, the city dies." (Shuai, 1996) Public open spaces are of specific significance in citizens' social life and they have the highest potential and actual facilities for presence of citizens and they don't have any time, size and control limitations. (Pakzad, 2005) Public open spaces provide motivation and free choice among future behaviors, movements and discoveries for significant number of people and citizens. (Lynch, 1972) To put it another way, an orderly space which matches itself with behaviors varieties and provides a neutral and inductive context for self-motivated interactions. (Lynch, 1972) In public spaces, it is possible to neglect some social barriers and miscellaneous confrontations occur and individuals meet in a new social environment. (Lynch, 1972) Hence, the main condition for a public space to be considered as an urban space is that social interactions must happen in it. Therefore, those soft and hard-spaces which are not a context for social interactions are not considered as urban spaces. (Pakzad, 2010) According to the studies, the theory which was cited on sustainable development social aspects, meeting needs and improving humans' life quality is among their main principles. Therefore, social sustainability has a close relation with conformity of space with human needs and their personal and social behavioral patterns. (Bazrafkan, 2011) Considering the fact that social sustainability is achieved if a society meets a wide range of human needs and it is formed naturally and it is able to save its own fertility in a long period of time and provide social equity, human dignity and participation. (Littig and Griebel, 2005) hence, considering the aforementioned potentials related to urban spaces, it could be claimed that urban spaces with their social structure and physics present proper context for development in civil society and has a considerable role in social sustainability and as a result reaching urban sustainable development.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In recognition of the interaction concept as a sustainable element in urban spaces, this concept is attached to a set of developments, tendencies and attitudes which are based on collective rationality, democratic beliefs, believing in self, rationality and obeying the rules. To put it another way, if the advancement of urban civilization and urbanization of human society is considered to be attached to the growth of human relations and social interactions during time, since social interactions in their most perfect definition are realized in all aspects in public spaces context in urban spaces, hence urban space could be considered as the place for realization of social interaction and that is how urban space along with being affected by social interactions, affects social interactions and that is why urban space, due to its forming contents, is the symbolic center for suitability of people's values who express their own power and crystalize it in space. This article showed that urban spaces as social capitals with the role they play in forming social interactions and relation, have a specific status in reaching society to sustainability and as a result urban sustainable development. Hence, on this issue, development, protection and improvement of urban spaces condition must be considered by planners, architects, urban planners more than ever and city must be an integrative network of urban spaces.

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