

Neighbourhood Life and its Disappearance in Finnish Suburban Communities

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses long-term changes that have occurred in the neighbourhood life of the old working-class suburbs of Helsinki. The subjects of the paper are several suburban communities that were born in the first decades of the 20th century. Although these communities have maintained their character as small-house areas till present day, they have changed dramatically in many other respects.

Compared to suburbs of today, working-class suburbs of the early 1900s were remarkably self-sufficient communities. Living in the suburbs involved a lot of work both at home and at the vicinity of home, and it also involved local exchange relations and cooperation between neighbours. Moreover, local associations had a central role in providing important services (e.g. road maintenance), and they were also very active in organizing festivities and other leisure activities. All this resulted in strong neighbourhood ties and a strong sense of community. However, these communities were not inward-looking or parochial in their nature. On the contrary, local social networks functioned as intermediaries between local individuals and the wider world.

In the second half of the century this local way of life began to wither rapidly. Due to the growing affluence of the Finnish working-class, local exchange relations and other local arrangements were rendered economically insignificant. At the same time, locally organized cooperation lost its importance as municipal institutions took over functions such as road maintenance and fire prevention. The cultural significance of local associations was diminished when mass media and commercial entertainment replaced locally organized leisure activities.

Because of these and other related societal changes, the scale of social life grew much larger than it had been in the early 1900s. The residents of the old working-class suburbs no longer needed local networks in order to survive or to connect them to the wider world.

Thanks to the new public services, communications technologies, motorways etc, they were now directly connected to the larger networks of the whole metropolitan area. At the same time, the functions that these suburban communities served were reduced to residential functions such as private living, raising children and relaxation. In this way these formerly lively neighbourhoods became islands of tranquillity within a teeming metropolitan area.

Key Words: neighbourhood life, suburbs, Finland