

# Making Neighbor Relations Through Materialities and Senses

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## Abstract

Many scholars have turned to neighboring, or neighbor interactions and practices, as an open-ended process rather than a finished ideal. In doing so, they have disrupted the romanticization of the neighborhood as a community-driven and stable space. Through this lens, the proximity of dwelling is seen just as a possibility for social contact rather than a crucial characteristic of neighbor relations. Amid the rapid transformations in contemporary urban environments, neighbor relations as spatial practices are shaped and mediated by multiple forces. Based on five research cases from Brazil, Denmark, Finland, and Russia, this Special Issue, “Materialities and Senses of Neighboring,” explores how neighbor relations are shaped by material and sensory practices in the context of urban housing and localities. This editorial introduction to this Special Issue of *Space and Culture* highlights the main points of how the foregrounding of material and sensory aspects contributes to the studies of neighbor relations. It then shows how the cross-cutting themes of shared materiality, housing geometry, sensoriality, and imaginaries interplay in the contributors’ articles to develop the overarching idea of the collection.

## Keywords

neighbor relations, built materiality, sensoriality, housing geometry, imaginaries

The idea for this Special Issue stems from *The Layered Cake of Russian-Finnish Neighborness: Everyday Interactions at Different Scales* and *The Big Layered Cake: Toward the Conceptualization of Neighborness*, two collective research projects supported by Kone Foundation, Finland, in 2016–2019 and 2019–2022, respectively. The diversity of case studies that came up in the projects covered a broad range of neighbor relations, including communities, neighboring across national borders, urban neighborhoods and residential neighboring, as well as coexistence of humans and nonhumans. This Special Issue gathers together sociologists and anthropologists—participants and partners of the projects mentioned, as well as invited scholars—to revise neighborhood studies and contribute to the area through the lens of social practice theory by analyzing neighbor experiences through materiality and sensoriality. In our work, we draw on social practice theory’s “material turn” to examine how material environment informs social relations

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(Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2010) and on its “affective turn” to understand how places are felt and geography evolves through lived bodies (Bille & Simonsen, 2021).

Neighbor relations are a poorly defined subject in social science research, which can hardly be characterized as a distinct field. Relations among neighbors have been researched in very different ways by disparate disciplines and analytical perspectives, using diverse scholarly approaches (for the current state of research, see, for example, Martin, 2003; Ruonavaara, 2022). Although highly criticized, the theorization that still dominates this research area is the equating of neighborhood with community as a territorial and social entity. Currently, neighbor studies are in the process of turning away from the community-based approach toward a diverse perspective of multiple forms of togetherness. Global processes such as urbanization, migratory waves and residential mobilities, digitalization and individualization of social life, and “the neoliberal compulsion to privatise everything” (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 46) contribute to the critical changes of communal and neighboring life, and overall neighborhood decline. Over 20 years ago, social scientists already noticed that “place matters less than it once did and local ties play a relatively small part in shaping individuals’ lives” (Crow et al., 2002, p. 128) due to the

[D]ramatic rise in residential and employment mobility, as well as reliance on private transport. Most people no longer live in the same neighborhood as their families, their work colleagues or their friends. Consequently the links between individuals and their neighbors may have become attenuated. (Perren et al., 2004, p. 967)

In today’s urban areas, territorial and housing proximity and coexistence do not necessarily mean closeness and intimacy. As Maxime Felder (2020) shows, even within one individual residential building the social ties between the neighbors can vary between strong, weak, invisible, and nonexistent. Furthermore, qualitative studies emphasize the limits to neighborhood relations, which are partial (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999) and mainly constitute forms of habituated behavior emerging from unexpected situations (Noble, 2013) and occasional activities (Laurier et al., 2002). Besides the fact that neighbor relations are evolving and unpredictable, they are also conflict-driven and full of tensions, confrontations, and struggles. Seen through the lens of contemporary urban studies, neighbor relations cannot be taken as a given with fixed social rules. Therefore, to handle this, they are increasingly mediated by grassroots and institutionalized agencies, as well as digital infrastructures, such as online house chat groups.

Many studies indeed show how neighborhoods are changing while regretting the difficulties that people now have connecting to one another, describing them “living in an accelerating social system of organised loneliness” (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 43) and “bowling alone” (Putnam, 2001). Neighbor relationships are paradoxical from the outset: While we live in close proximity, hearing, smelling, and seeing each other, we pretend not to have such close contact. The tension between proximity and distance is a telling example of how neighbor relations constitute a flexible social practice that is constantly negotiated, an activity for which distancing is fundamental (Gullestad, 1992). Living in physical proximity to other people while trying to maintain certain distance and privacy in our interactions is the predicament of urban life. As Leila Mahmoudi Farahani (2016, p. 373) concludes in her work,

[L]ocal communities are not responsible for providing the highest amount of affective bonds in all levels and among all residents, but to provide a better living situation in the context of neighborhoods.

The value of neighbor relations for a contemporary urban dweller is therefore less about stability, continuity, empathy, and intimacy, and more about quality of life and the possibility of mutually satisfactory and functional contact. They have been built not through the spirit of community, but rather through mundane physical interactions in corridors, hallways, and elevators, as well as

invisibilized communication through noises, smells, and mutual imagination. Instead of lamenting the decline or dissolution of communities as a stable, idealized form of social bonding, referred to as “a community loss in the sociology discourse” (Mahmoudi Farahani, 2016, p. 372), the articles in this issue contribute to the shift of perspective by delving into neighboring as a lived experience, a diverse social practice that is contextual and mediated, in particular, through materiality and sensoriality.

Contemporary neighborhood studies change the lens to focus on micro-practices—individual, intimate, and bodily experiences of neighboring—rather than macro-contexts and forms such as communities and territorial entities. Building on de Certeau’s “view from below” of the urban environment through the process of living with it, the scholarship on neighbor relations moves from explaining the neighborhood as a whole to the micro, mosaic, and detailed view of neighbors’ lived experience. It privileges sensitive ethnographic accounts of the local, the body, the home, the spatial subjectivities, and intimacies of a near-dwelling (cf. Husband et al., 2016; Soja, 1997), thus seeking for different experiences and bases of co-presence in space and conviviality. Embodiment and dwelling, as everyday skillful engagements with the environment, are essential for neighbor relations. Dwelling involves embodiment and the body as constituting an integral part of spatiality (Low, 2003), making space habitable (Simonsen, 2007). The body as a locus for spatial orientation and perception directs perceptions of neighbor relations. The home as a personal space of dwelling is a condition for perceiving and expressing neighbor relations, which also spill over to next-door and next-floor neighbors and to forms of co-presence that constitute particular formations of space, or “a materiality of neighboring” (Painter, 2012). The biographical and affective ties between individual and home are not hermetically sealed within the walls of their house (Husband et al., 2016, p. 2). Cigarette butts or tufts of hair flying from windows and balconies, for example, evoke feelings of hostility, invasion, and attack in a sporadic neighbor war and are thus interpreted as motivators of harm, where materiality is experienced as the main driver in shaping hostility in neighborly relations. Being neighbors does not just mean nodding to each other as you pass by; it can also mean staying “invisible” in domestic space, but still being closely connected in positive or negative ways through shared materiality, sensoriality, and imagination.

In this Special Issue, we address neighboring as a practice shaped by material and sensorial dimensions through different cases in Brazil, Denmark, Finland, and Russia. They focus on the city peripheries where residential neighbor relations revolve around housing, as it is in the articles of Tkach, Chernysheva, and Jensen, or around urban areas, like Tuominen and Machado & Barretti show. Exploring the Special Issue papers, we now turn to four main themes of shared materiality, housing geometry, sensoriality, and imaginaries that each contribute to a more diverse understanding of making neighbor relations. To some extent, each of the five articles develops all these main themes, although some of them are emphasized more strongly by certain authors.

## Shared Materiality

Spatial and physical characteristics, such as geography and topography, have framed neighborhoods as material phenomena in classic research on neighbor relations. Neighbor relations have been understood as materialized in territory and space. The mainstream view on neighbor relations in such studies is that they may occur as nested zones or circles that subdivide the environment around one’s home into sections of distinct spatial, social, and emotional nearness; micro settings, street blocks, and other zones thus entail different practical uses, sentiments, neighborly interactions, and collective representations (Kusenbach, 2008; Laurier et al., 2002).

We argue that neighboring practices are not clearly zoned spatially because multiscaled materiality is embedded in numerous everyday interactions. Neighborhoods’ common areas are continuations of home spaces, localized at the same time in the wider cityscape. At any single

moment, urban residents are active in smaller and larger settings and can switch from one another through shared materiality. In analyzing the “quality” of neighbor relations, Gwen van Eijk (2012, p. 3022) notes that their neighborly or problematic character is attached in the first instance to a shared space (namely, the street, block, shared fence, or roof). Focusing more on practices rather than moralities of neighboring, the authors of this Special Issue show how housing materiality influences and shapes the everyday experiences of neighbors. Shared materiality, such as elevators, corridors, and stairwells, connect fellow-neighbors from a single apartment to a building even if they have never met. It makes their closeness a changing variable, when, for example, residents suffer from a water leak four or five floors higher up the building, or when banging on radiators constitutes an effective neighboring practice to warn apartments around of an emergency, like in one of Olga Tkach’s empirical examples. Also through sounds (Liubov Chernysheva’s article), distant vision (Tina Gudrun Jensen’s article) or smells, neighboring is still present in minute interactions going beyond private/public division. These examples illustrate the materiality of neighboring (Painter, 2012, p. 530) suggesting that being neighbors who are “near-dwelling” constitutes a certain formation in space.

In her article, Tkach shows how adjacent walls and ceilings, corridors, and elevators in the high-rises work both as barriers and as facilitators of communication of the apartment dwellers. The large scale of high-rises legitimizes detachment even between next-door neighbors but shared materiality demands awareness and face-to-face communication even with a neighbor living three floors above. Her research participants tend to describe themselves as introverts, invoking that the buildings and their structures are too big to facilitate personal communication with people living nearby. Yet, they try to negotiate their unavoidable physical proximity to other residents by playing along with it when they felt it useful to do so. Carrying out her research in a similar residential area of St. Petersburg, Chernysheva focused on the issue of circulation of sounds and noises through the shared materiality of high-rise housing and who and how regulates this. She found that nuisance sounds circulate all day long and often evade regulations. This situation prompts the residents to themselves to assume a central role in rendering their homes “private” from invasion of sound. They use shared infrastructure, such as heating systems, to generate defensive sounds, which in turn prompt new sounds and noises. In her article on Danish public housing, Jensen describes how neighbor relations grow out of shared materiality, illustrating neighboring as a mix of embodied immersions spilling from private homes over semi-public spaces such as staircases and balconies. The hybridity of people, physical structures, and material objects thus constitutes social relations between neighbors.

## Housing Geometry

Neighboring has been largely studied in distinctive contexts such as housing projects and high-rises and suburban or disadvantaged areas (Felder, 2020, p. 678). In an attempt to prioritize the vertical dimension of residential sites, critical urbanists point to the fact that throughout their history, classic neighborhood studies almost entirely focused on suburban low-rises and overwhelmingly privileged horizontality (Graham & Hewitt, 2013, p. 73). Starting in the mid-2000s, debates on vertical urban life flourished, and over the last decade, with the contemporary global proliferation of high-rise apartment buildings, they have further intensified. Recent studies on tall (social) housing in Eastern Europe have also helped diversify the previous image of materially horizontal and temporary stable neighbor relations. As researchers, we can now observe a boom of studies of high-rise dwelling worldwide. Yet, regardless of the meaningful attempts to theorize tall buildings as normal places to live albeit with specific features (e.g., Baxter, 2017), they still reflect widespread concerns about the livability of such buildings and the harmful influence of their materiality on dwellers’ mentality (for the most recent example, see Nethercote, 2022). To avoid the pendulum moving too far in the other direction and ignoring the horizontal dimension

of neighbor relations, scholars promote a fully volumetric urbanism “which addresses the ways in which horizontal and vertical extensions, imaginaries, materialities and lived practices intersect and mutually construct each other” (Graham & Hewitt, 2013, p. 74).

The articles in this Special Issue consider both dimensions, seeing verticality and horizontality not as polar opposites, but as scales combined in everyday life, speaking to each other all the time. Igor José de Renó Machado and Fabrício dos Santos Barretti analyze housing geometry as a political question in the case of São Paulo, and focus on top-down influence of verticalization as an urban policy on forms of living in neighborhoods. They show how verticality and horizontality put people in different roles and statuses within the built environment and make them communicate in certain ways. Tkach also analyzes how verticality and horizontality, big and small dimensions of living in high-rise buildings interact and get mutually permeated in residents’ neighboring practices. Situationally, and/or driven by adjacent materiality, the residents communicate with neighbors both horizontally, sharing the same floor and vertically. Neighboring communication of first floor residents, therefore, can extend from next-door neighbors to residents on the 25th floor, creating a lively multidimensional everyday life.

## Sensoriality

Studies on the materiality of living spaces within and beyond dwelling places have illustrated how home and those inhabiting it “transform each other” (Miller, 2001, p. 2). It is through these transformations that people living in close proximity, either by force or by will, recurrently engage in “sensory practices” (Pink, 2012) that involve listening, seeing, touching, smelling, or tasting the relational fabric of their neighborhood. Recent theories of affect have, to a greater degree than before, highlighted the role of the material world and how the material environment is felt (Bille & Simonsen, 2021, p. 301). Affective practices are spatially embedded and felt phenomena that highlight how individuals—as bodily and mental agents—act as carriers of practices (Bille & Simonsen, 2021, p. 299). The sensuous, lived body transforms through the interaction with an environment that it both responds to and actively structures. Furthermore, “atmosphere” emerges as a particular lens for understanding people’s affective engagements with the environment (Böhme, 1993). By being embedded in material worlds, with or without other people present, atmosphere emerges in sociomaterial contexts with affective qualities, potentially surpassed by people’s ability to affect their environment (Bille & Simonsen, 2021, p. 301). Seeing atmosphere as—and not just in—the relation constituted in the affective duality between materiality and somatic and social practice involves bodily practices of affecting and being affected, as well as material qualities that might be affective (Bille & Simonsen, 2021, p. 306). Daily sensorial phenomena of objects radiating into the environment constitute atmosphere, a co-presence of subject and object, of the reality of the perceived and the bodily presence of the perceiver (Böhme, 1993, p. 122). As some of the articles in this Special Issue describe, sensory, affective, and atmospheric practices also contribute to the experience of neighbor relations.

Jensen describes how living close together in a block involves atmospheric emanations between apartments through doors, windows, walls, ceilings, and floors, and hence the crossing of porous and pervasive boundaries that arouse different sensations of invasion, humiliation, and hostility. In that way, atmospheric phenomena such as sounds, smells, fluids, and moving substances between neighboring apartments are experienced as having an agency of their own. In her article, Chernysheva also shows the ways private practices inside apartments travel outside the physical boundaries of walls, ceilings and floors, and invade surrounding private spaces as sounds. Using the concept of “sound politics,” she explores the intertwining of power and sound, showing how sound mediates relations between individuals and the larger social fabric. Both Chernysheva and Jensen analyze how the materiality of buildings produce sounds that in some cases are experienced as nuisance, in others not, and thus highlight that sounds are relational

phenomena (Petersen, 2020). On a broader perspective, Pekka Tuominen explores the affective geography of Helsinki that entails the sensory, affective, and embodied experiences of places, which inspire thinking about other places, other people, and other times. In the case of Kontula, a peripheral area in Eastern Helsinki, Finland, this sensory experience is tied into the habitual life here, realized in encounters reproducing its particular affective atmosphere.

## Imaginaries

As all of the researchers who wrote for this Special Issue found, neighbor relations take the shape of relational imaginaries. This applies especially to the stories of inhabitants of housing blocks, who perceive and imagine each other through walls and distances rather than knowing and recognizing neighbors in person. Yet, by focusing on materially and sensorially shaped micro-practices of neighbor relations, the contributions to this issue do not negate the fact that these types of interactions are spatially grounded. Some of the authors take territorially bounded and topographically assigned areas as sites of research. However, this Special Issue as a whole steps back from any rigid association between neighboring life, physical place and localized community through the concept of the imaginary. As such, it relocates territory and its material attributes, such as housing, into the realm of emotions, affects, symbols, existential experiences, and people's memories, which, as Machado and Barretti show, can also contain potential for localized collective action. This idea emerges from critical urban theory and cultural geography, which emphasizes the subjectivity of spatial experience and awareness of the built environment. It draws from Arjun Appadurai's (2005) concepts of "imaginary landscapes" and Edward Soja's (1996) "thirdspace," which are widely applied to the public realm. The de-spatialized approach to the neighborhood assumes that it can only be "imagined" and thus disembedded from an urban reality (Husband et al., 2016, p. 6), although this has been sparsely addressed in neighborhood studies. In this Special Issue, two articles, focusing on the Brazilian and Finnish contexts, apply it specifically by examining urban peripheries. In the mass media and wider public discourse, they are usually seen as classed and racialized ghetto-like areas of marginality, decay, and scarce infrastructure. However, the "affective geography" (Navaro-Yashin, 2012) of the research participants living there has its own vibrant and meaningful definition entangled in deep layers of sensitive histories, memories, myths, and desires.

In his description of Kontula as a make-believe space and an entanglement of imagination and materiality, Tuominen points that the residents' powerful affective responses are anchored in the history of the area that they share, blending material aspects with memories and immediate sensations. The historical formation of affective atmospheres reflects an incommensurable fit between demonizing accounts by mainstream media and lived realities of the everyday. Tuominen thus illustrates the dynamic movement between making and believing in the dwellers' practices of classification, and bordering in relation to other places, such as downtown. Based on long-term ethnographic data, the author shows how the marginal neighborhood of Kontula is affectively experienced by its inhabitants as the center of the world. Another example of the co-constitution of materiality, memory, and imagination is illustrated in the article by Machado and Barretti on the processes of destruction, eviction, and reconstruction of an old district in the city of São José dos Campos, São Paulo, Brazil. The article explores the relation between the lost materiality of destroyed houses and the nonmateriality of the house memory, inscribed in the neighbor relations, which came to play a key role in the construction of the materiality of the new neighborhood. Thus, the memories of both good and bad neighbor relations related to the destroyed materiality of the old neighborhood were activated in the political struggle and used as a symbolic guide for the reconstruction of the district. Instead of reestablishing the vertical architecture of high-rise buildings, the reconstruction of this materiality produced a horizontal architecture of houses in which it was possible to plant, build, and cultivate former neighbor relations.

The writing of this Special Issue took place during the turbulent and dramatic times of the COVID-19 pandemic and wars in different parts of the world which affected the contributors in many ways. We are grateful that all the authors were able to complete their articles for inclusion in this collection. Although the data analyzed in the articles were collected before these circumstances occurred, working on the Special Issue against this backdrop shed new light on the role of neighboring, togetherness, and conviviality in our lives, as well as their spatial, temporal, material, and sensory mediators.


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