

**Seeking a Path beyond *NIMBY*:
The Evolution of a Pejorative Term and Considerations
for Better Understanding of Local Land-Use Conflicts**

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Introduction

The term *NIMBY* – an acronym for *Not In My Back Yard* – is used widely in published academic literature, professional publications, and in the public vernacular to refer to people who oppose the construction of facilities or developments near their homes. It is suggested that those opposed to new facilities and developments recognise that these facilities are needed for the public good, but oppose their construction simply because they are close to their homes and neighbourhoods and could adversely affect their quality of life. It is often implied these *NIMBY* actions frustrate the provision of services that are essential to the community or the state. As such, so-called *NIMBY* people are implied to be selfish individuals who place the protection of their individual interests above the common good.

Despite the widespread use of the term *NIMBY*, the term is problematic and often complicates efforts to understand complex issues. The term essentially oversimplifies a vast range of concerns and motives for opposing many different types of development. This paper will review the evolution of the use of the term *NIMBY*, as well as describe problems inherent with the use of the term. It will also describe some alternative models in which these issue can be understood, which it is hoped will provide a more complete understanding of complex decision-making processes in local land-use conflicts.

Evolution of ‘*NIMBY*’ Terminology

The term *NIMBY* began appearing in the 1980s in literature originating in the United States. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the term gained acceptance over a number of disciplines, especially in the environmental and urban planning disciplines. Many published studies focused on opposition to the development of undesirable waste infrastructure (such as sewage treatment plants or waste incinerators), energy facilities (such as nuclear power plants), or social facilities (such as prisons, halfway homes, and homes for the mentally ill).

Some scholars looked upon *NIMBY* activities with alarm and warned that local protestors could delay the development of facilities that were critical to the wider community or the state interest. In opposing the development of certain social facilities, such as affordable housing, halfway houses, drug-treatment facilities, and homeless shelters, some scholars suggested that *NIMBY* activities would deprive people of access to these critical services, creating hardships for already vulnerable populations. Within this context, one scholar describes the *NIMBY* issue thus:

In plain language . . . the motivation of residents who want to protect their turf. More formally, *NIMBY* refers to the protectionist attitudes of and oppositional tactics adopted by community groups facing an unwelcome development in their neighborhood. . . residents usually concede that these ‘noxious’ facilities are necessary, but not near their homes, hence the term ‘not in my back yard’ (Dear, 1992, p. 288).

Scholars attempted to undercover the motivations for the *NIMBY* phenomenon. Many sought a universal explanation for the opposition of any unwanted local land use. A pair of scholars distilled the phenomena as:

Strong oppositional behavior, recognized as NIMBY, is a function of: (1) distrust of the project sponsors; (2) limited information about the siting issues; (3) attitudes toward the project that are local and parochial, and which do not consider broader ramifications; (4) an emotional orientation toward the conflict; and (5) a high level of concern about project risks (Craft & Klary, 1991, p. 302-303).

Common themes in the literature in the late 1980s and early 1990s point to *NIMBY* behaviour as being irrational or ignorant, based on an emotional response rather than a logical examination of issues. One common criticism of *NIMBY* behaviour was that the public could not draw a clear distinction between the real risks or impacts associated with new developments, and that the public's assessment of these risks were exaggerated or unfounded (Freudenberg & Pastor, 1992). In this view of *NIMBY*ism, the public was simply 'wrong' about the facts; thus, the appropriate response of professionals was either to educate them or overrule them. Another common theme saw *NIMBY* behaviour as essentially a selfish activity, with residents concerned that unwanted local land uses might reduce property values or negatively affect their quality of life (Freudenberg & Pastor, 1992).

The *NIMBY* term was generally understood to be pejorative. Designating a protest as *NIMBY* had the effect of delegitimizing and invalidating the arguments of those opposing much-needed development, dismissing their contributions as selfish and narrow-minded. Furthermore, critics accused *NIMBY* responses as not being representative of the community as a whole, but rather representing only a vocal minority (Hunter & Leyden, 1995). Others criticized *NIMBY* opponents for relying on support from regional- or national-level nongovernmental organizations and civic groups that could provide organizational and financial resources based on their concerns about general issues such as environmental protection (Frey & Oberholzer-Gee, 1996). These accusations suggested that a small group of *NIMBY* opponents could have the effect of biasing local decision-making processes.

However, by the early 1990s a 'smaller, newer, and less-consolidated' body of literature was emerging that put forth new ideas for understanding *NIMBY*ism and specifically challenging the conventional wisdom that *NIMBY* behaviour was rooted in irrationality and selfishness (Freudenberg & Pastor, 1992, p. 44). Some researchers began to study those involved in local opposition protests more closely and found that the existing explanations for *NIMBY* motivations did not provide a complete picture of what was motivating protesters. In one study, researchers observed:

Indeed there is a vast array of empirical work suggesting that self interest may be only one factor that influences both public opinion and political behavior. In addition to self interest, citizens have been found to be motivated by attitudes such as fairness, sympathy, commitment, citizen duty, morality and long standing ideological beliefs In most instances, discrediting real fears by labeling such concerns as self-interested *NIMBY*ism probably will serve only to strengthen the resolve of opponents (Hunter and Leyden, 1995, p. 613-614).

Scholars also addressed the suggestion that misinformation and lack of information were responsible for *NIMBY* behaviour. One researcher who closely studied a local land-use dispute involving siting of waste facilities found that the public had a solid understanding of the technical details of the proposal, as well as the risks to public health. She found that ‘the public are not information-poor: they can capitalize upon a range of cultural and experiential resources’ (Petts, 1997).

Some researchers began exploring how local-land use conflicts, rather than simply serving to frustrate efforts of the state to provide services for the common good, were, in fact, a critical part of the public policy process. This line of reasoning held that democratic discourse, which might include local opposition to local land use proposals, would ultimately promote better decisions:

Partisanship can play an important role in political debates by sensitizing decision makers to the needs and perspectives of a diverse populace, by contributing instrumental as well as normative knowledge to these debates, and by providing an important check on the claims of state officials (McAvoy, 1998, p. 288).

Researchers noticed that community opposition to unwanted local land uses, such as prisons, highways, and industrial facilities, often served to empower previously marginalized communities (Takahashi and Dear, 1997). These marginalized communities historically had been burdened with a greater share of unwanted land uses than wealthier or more politically powerful communities. This observation led some scholars to conclude that *NIMBY* behaviour was an essential element for promoting equity in the siting of these undesirable facilities and developments. One scholar suggested:

If we want more equitable planning outcomes, particularly when it comes to siting locally unwanted human services, we need to set aside dreams of a rational, *NIMBY*-free society and instead nurture a more partisan – and more evenly contested – local political sphere (Gibson, 2005, p. 399).

One suggestion for overcoming the so-called *NIMBY* ‘problem’ was for developers to make a better effort to engage with the public and to understand better their unique concerns. In particular, it was suggested that those promoting development should set aside their assumptions that local community members would oppose projects merely because of irrational fears or narrow self-interest:

Developers and other industry proponents need to place more emphasis on addressing the concerns that citizens actually express, and less emphasis on the assumption that those who oppose their projects are part of an overarching *NIMBY* syndrome (Hunter & Leyden, 1995, p. 601).

Some individuals even sought to repurpose the word *NIMBY* to reflect a more positive meaning. Anthony Jay’s 2005 book, *Not in Our Backyard: How to Run a Protest Campaign and Save the Neighbourhood*, begins with a frontispiece entitled ‘Proud to be a *NIMBY*’ and describes a *NIMBY* as:

... any citizen, who tries to defend their home and their neighbourhood from plans which would destroy the view, pollute the environment, overload the transport network, upset the ecosystem and knock £50,000 off the value of their house. When it comes to our own back yard, we are all NIMBYs, every NIMBY deserves respect for standing up to corporate and government giants (Jay, 2005, p. 1).

The literature on *NIMBYism* became more conflicted as the phenomenon was explored in greater depth. Criticism of the established literature on *NIMBYism* often focused on the liberal and ill-defined use of the term, and the problems impossibility of developing a universal explanation for *NIMBYism*:

The problem with the use of *NIMBY* is that rarely is it defined the same way by different researchers. In fact, it is sometime used as a catchall term to label the opposition – or worse, to imply that citizens have illegitimate or irrational selfish (or narrow) reasons for opposing facilities (Hunter & Leyden, 1995, p. 602).

New Ways of Thinking about *NIMBYism*

Recently, there has been a greater effort to look at the literature more broadly to uncover better explanations for so-called *NIMBY* behaviour. One promising area of research is examining literature describing the concept of place, borrowing research from other disciplines such as environmental psychology and environment-behaviour studies. Patrick Devine-Wright, an academic in the U.K., has worked to connect concepts of place attachment, place identity, and place disruption to the *NIMBY* discussion (Devine-Wright, 2009). The literature describing these concepts is largely found in the environmental psychology literature, and it provides helpful insights for understanding what is described as *NIMBY* behaviour.

Place attachment is described as a 'positive emotional connection with familiar locations such as the home or neighbourhood' (Devine-Wright, 2009, p. 427). The concept of place attachment can describe the process of developing a connection to a specific location. Emotional connections to places are often strengthened over time (Manzo, 2005). Place attachment can involve connections to both spatial and geographic features of spaces, as well as social connections to other people who share those spaces (Manzo, 2005). Manzo and Devine-Wright have just released an edited collected of articles about place attachment (Manzo and Devine-Wright, 2013).

Places that are meaningful to people can be varied and can extend to spaces inside and outside the home, as well as larger spaces such as a neighbourhood, natural landscapes, and an entire city. In some cases, people can develop emotional connections with even the most mundane of locations:

People talked about bathrooms, laundromats, bars, and abandoned factories in ways that suggest there is much more to those places than meets the eye. That these places can heal, provide nurturance, and opportunities for emotional development and self-understanding is evident in the stories presented in this research (Manzo, 2005, p. 82).

Place identity refers to the way in which relationships to places contribute to an individual's identity and self-awareness (Manzo, 2005). People's relationships with places are intertwined with their unique journey in the world. Relationships with places build as people experience important life events within these spaces; thus, these places come to represent people's ever evolving self-identity. Therefore, relationships to places will reflect people's psychological landscapes, contributing to their understanding of themselves, as well as their understanding of the world (Manzo, 2005). Place identity can also overlap with people's senses of political and social identity (Manzo, 2005).

The impacts of change (or proposed change) on places to which people are attached has been described as 'disruption' to place attachment (Brown & Perkins, 1992) or 'threat' to place identity (Bonaiuto, Breakwell, & Cano, 1996). Significant changes or the loss of places to which people are attached can cause significant emotional responses, such as anxiety and loss, which in some cases can amount to a form of psychological trauma (Devine-Wright, 2009; see also, Fullilove, 1996 and Fullilove, 2005). A comprehensive study of forced relocation resulting from urban renewal in the USA has described the experience as 'root shock'. In some cases, a sense of displacement can lead to psychiatric trauma (Fullilove, 1996; Fullilove, 2005).

'Grieving for a Lost Home' was a term coined in the 1960s to describe the grief experienced by residents who were forced to leave their homes in inner city Boston in the 1950s (see Fried 1963; Fried, 2000). The British sociologist, Peter Marris, who lived in Boston in the seventies, writing in *Loss and Change* (1974), argued that:

People cannot reconcile themselves to the loss of familiar attachments in terms of some impersonal utilitarian calculation of the common good. They have to find their own meaning in these changes before they can live with them (1974, p. 156).

The literature described those types of changes as causing 'disruption' to place attachment or 'threat' to place identity include demolition of homes and neighbourhoods, workplace relocation, neighbourhood decline, and ecological change, such as floods or landslides (Devine-Wright, 2009). Often, those changes not only affect the physical character of places, but also disrupt social networks that are sources of support to individuals, particularly in low-income communities (Fried, 2000).

The anxiety caused by disruption to place attachment and threat to place identity can occur both before and after an actual change occurs. As changes to a place are proposed, people can be affected by feelings of anxiety and loss as they imagine and begin to anticipate possible future scenarios of change, sometimes imagining the possibility that they might need to leave an area to which they have a strong sense of attachment (Brown and Perkins, 1992). Following major changes or the actual loss of a place, people

with strong senses of place attachment may feel a profound sense of anxiety, grief, and loss (Fried, 1963; Fried, 2000).

Utilizing the concepts of place attachment and place identity, Patrick Devine-Wright suggests that what many people refer to as *NIMBY* behaviour should be reconsidered as 'place-protective actions' (Devine-Wright, 2009). In this model, individuals who feel strongly attached to places should be expected to take an interest in what is going on locally in their communities. Because of the strong sense of connection that they feel for a place (which may include a sense of comfort for the familiar and a contribution to a sense of self-identity), they are likely to take action to deter unwanted forms of change.

Incorporating New Theories into Practice

How can professionals (and especially planners and those in the land professions) incorporate this new concept of understanding of what may underlie so-called *NIMBY* behaviour into their practices? Perhaps the first place to start is to understand the significant role that place plays in people's lives. It would be wise to acknowledge the psychological aspects of so-called 'NIMBYism' and interpret them as disrupting place attachment and threatening place identity.

Professionals should expect people to have strong emotional connections to their homes and to their communities. Elements of these places that may seem unimportant to an outsider, such as laundromats, bars, and abandoned factories, may have profound significance for people living in those communities.

Second, we need to rethink many of our current models of community engagement. In fact, traditional models of community engagement may exacerbate tensions in communities where change is proposed. Engagement methods that simply involve efforts to inform the public about the details of development plans but do not give residents adequate opportunities to inform those decisions may promote feelings of distrust in the system. Engagement efforts may also collect the views of local residents, but these views may carry very little weight when they are included in the decision-making process. When people become aware that they have little or no actual influence over decision-making processes, they are likely to become even more concerned (Lasker and Guidry, 2009). Overly formal methods of engagement that do not appropriately include local residents are more likely to result in local opposition to projects.

Devine-Wright's recent research proposes a model in which professionals ensure that community engagement strategies include three crucial elements: (1) participation, (2) inclusion, and (3) deliberation. In terms of participation, professionals can use a wide range of mechanisms, such as planning workshops, consensus conferences, task forces, citizens' panels, focus groups, stakeholder dialogues, and New England-style town meetings. Such methods should be appropriately matched to the size and scope of the issue being considered. The process should be inclusionary in that it should substantially engage variety of community voices. To be truly inclusionary, the process must tolerate diverse views and make a genuine effort to include views of those who are often neglected, marginalized, or hard-to-reach. The process must also be deliberative, which means that community members should participate in the consumption and processing of information about proposed development and impacts. A deliberative

process will allow the public to engage significantly with issues considered in proposal, as well as provide the opportunity for the public to provide reasoned arguments for preferences about development.

Importantly, as the classic work of Daniel Yankelovich (1991) reveals, community members need opportunities to 'come to public judgement'. This involves much more than simply coming to 'public opinion'. Moving from public opinion to democratic wisdom involves consciousness raising, 'working through' and, finally, resolution. The aim here is not get project approved – exclusively – but to develop *an engaged citizenry*: to support democratic decision making.

Conclusions

So-called *NIMBY* responses can be seen as a *turbulent river* for planning professionals. Its two tributaries are insensitive design and siting, on the one hand, and insensitive community engagement on the other. This paper has explored the deeper meaning of so-called *NIMBY* responses, arguing that they are 'place-protective' behaviours. It has also examined some of the implications for community engagement.

Changing the way we do community engagement can help to reduce some of the 'turbulence' in the river. Providing people with authentic opportunities to participate in decision-making processes on issues that might result in changes to their local communities can reduce conflict and the emergence of so-called *NIMBY* behaviour. However, it's important to note that some level of conflict should be expected when people consider changes in places for which they feel a great deal of attachment. Professionals should endeavor to develop community engagement processes that devote more emphasis to listening to, understanding, validating and addressing community members' concerns. Understanding such concerns can allow professionals to alter plans to make developments more accommodating to community members, perhaps providing for local buy-in to development and thereby potentially reducing conflict. An assumption that those who oppose projects are part of an overarching *NIMBY* syndrome and can be dismissed as irrational or uninformed is counterproductive and may serve only to further exacerbate conflict over local land-use decisions.

The issue of how the design and siting of housing and facilities can be more sensitive to people's attachments to 'home' is the subject of another paper.

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