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Graeme D. Larsen Dr

Ange Lee

Megi Zala

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Sustainable Healthy Communities: The Contested Role of ‘Region’ in the Housing Development Sector

Graeme D. Larsen, g.larsen@ucem.ac.uk
University College of Estate Management

Angela Lee, a.lee@ucem.ac.uk
University College of Estate Management

Megi Zala zalm1@ucem.ac.uk
University College of Estate Management

Abstract

The English housing development sector is frequently described as being in a state of crisis, presenting challenges for a range of stakeholders. The research is tensioned against structural shifts in the housing development sector, with an agglomeration of a handful of large housing developers shaping the narrative, set against the decline of regional SMEs developers. The aim is to unpack the prevailing discourse and the common reductionist metric of ‘units’ built, in order to reintroduce notions of regionalism, place and sustainable healthy community into the debate. Central to this is unpacking what is meant by ‘region’ or ‘regional’. Contemporary perspectives on regionality are critiqued, questioning the criteria by which regions are defined and understood. Methodologically the research considers through a desk study how regional identities are mobilised within various institutional contexts. A central theme that emerges is the importance of regional identity and its complex interplay with changing stakeholder interests. Findings illustrate that regions and identities are shaped by historical and spatial themes, requiring a contextually grounded approach. Such themes are currently missing from much of the debates around housing development, with large national housing developers shaping the rhetoric, often to suit their agendas. The research concludes by proposing that the definition of a region is inherently fluid, shaped by the needs and agendas of those involved in its conceptualisation. This nuanced understanding of regionality challenges the dominant narratives in housing development and underscores the potential of regional SME house builders to contribute to more sustainable and contextually appropriate solutions.

Keywords

development, regions, sustainable

1 Introduction

The English housing development sector is continually referred to as being in a state of crisis. It has changed dramatically since 1980, being reshaped through acquisition, mergers and even bankruptcy. Media commentators, and much of the sector rhetoric, focuses upon the number of extra houses required (typically referred to simply as ‘units’) often quoting the need for 341,000 units per year until 2031 (Financial Times, 2024). Such claims can be critiqued through a range of theoretical,

methodological and practical lenses, typically demonstrating the challenges facing the housing development sector are beyond acontextual numerical metrics. Shelter (2024), a key homeless charity in the UK, champions the reduction of homelessness yet strongly acknowledges the need to build real communities where they are regionally needed and not just ‘units’. The King’s Foundation in the UK (a charitable organisation, established by the then Prince Charles, promoting sustainable development, traditional arts and crafts, heritage preservation, and community well-being) adopts a similar stance. The King’s Foundation’s ‘Building a Legacy Programme’ demonstrates how housing development might be done differently with guiding principles of walkable, mixed-use, sustainable developments. With their partners they focus on building sustainable healthy communities and place not just ‘units’ with examples including recent and on-going developments in Faversham, Poundbury, and Nansledan in England. The dominant rhetoric regarding housing development has focussed upon location, land vale, and an almost dogmatic fixation to meet ‘unit’ numbers. Such metrics don’t privilege healthy sustainable communities for society, and fail to resonate with the ‘think global, act local’ strapline from the seminal United Nations sustainability conference of the 1970s. As such, large national housing developers have shaped the housing discourse playing to their strengths, with the accepted metric of ‘units’, whilst downplaying local and regional community building. National house builders have become so successful that it is now almost impossible hear any other voice in the housing debate. Yet, building ‘units’ is not the same as building sustainable healthy communities for people to thrive. The paper is structured as follows. Initially, the tradition of a *critical perspective* is posited as a theoretical touchpoint informing the nature of the enquiry. This is followed by problematising the notion of region in the current debate surrounding housing development in England. From there, a number of alternative regional conceptualisations are considered. This is followed by a discussion around how such categorisations have, are and may shape the housing development discourse of the future. The summary points towards on-going research whereby the ‘region’ becomes an active variable in trying to meet the housing needs for England in an effort to build sustainable healthy communities for future generations.

2 Theoretical keystones and methodological touchpoints

It is valuable to set out some key theoretical and methodological assumptions shaping the research. Theoretically the research is underpinned by pluralism, the traditions of the critical perspective (cf. Alvesson and Deetz, 1996). The critical perspective is often conceptualised incorrectly as being ‘between’ the objectivist (positivist) perspective and the subjectivist (interpretivist) perspective (Sarantakos, 2013). Of course, the critical perspective is more than simply a middle ground. In essence, a critical perspective accepts the ontology of the positivists, in that there is a ‘real world’ out there but positions that within an epistemological stance more aligned with interpretivism. What that means is our knowledge of the ‘real world’ will always be subjective, so at best it’s an indirect link, humans act as a filter from the ‘research object’. Critical perspectives are often mobilised to recognise, then disrupt, the power dynamics that restrain, control, marginalise or even oppress certain stakeholder groups. Furthermore, it seeks to understand where agency might appear and the different forms it takes. It moves beyond what we often hear ‘should’ happen, seeking instead to access a broader set of realities, often giving a voice to those typically excluded or not represented (Jackson, 1985). So, critical perspectives look to challenge established power structures and seek potential alternative realities and discourse. For those interested, Lincoln et al., (2018) offer much in the way of explanation, whilst evidence of critical perspectives can be found within built environment literatures (cf. Green, 1998, 2002). Much of this thinking provides a useful set of theoretical handrails when looking to understand region and the emerging interests. Methodologically, the work enacts a desk study, drawing upon academic and grey literatures.

3 Problematising the notion of region

The term 'regions and 'regionalism' have become focal at various spatial levels over recent decades (Paasi, 2009). Whilst a region is commonly considered as an area of land that has given features - natural or artificial - its definition can vary in different contexts and be mobilised to suit certain agendas and interested stakeholders. Regions can be specific physical land masses, e.g. Isle of Wight in the UK. Yet, regions are social constructs, for example, a line drawn on a map and defined it as 'a region'. Such regions are contested by different social groups that form around particular interests.

Regions, and their identities and borders, have become increasingly significant in the built environment context, whereby they are often discussed interchangeably at various spatial scales (Paasi, 2009). This is not unique to England; internationally discussions focus on the rise and functioning of economic macro-regions such as what we commonly term Scandinavia or the global north. Returning to England, the discourse has focused on drivers of future regional dynamism (Meijers & Romein, 2003). For some, a region represents a spatial unit between the state and local levels (Scott, 1998). The identity of a region has gained importance in governance, planning and power relations, though the practical implications of this perspective can be unclear (Allen et al., 1998; Paasi, 2010). Generally, this means that 'material' and 'discursive' elements come together in region-building processes. Regions are considered results and expressions of social relations, which may originate from complex institutional contexts located within or outside the regions, at local, regional, national, and global levels. The existence and agency of regions often cause these seemingly distinct scales to merge. Whether or not regional affiliations mobilise people into conflict with their respective state, region resonates with community and identity thus questioning the nuances of national feeling in subtle and distinctive ways (Radcliffe & Westwood, 1996). It is thus argued that trying to have a conversation regarding housing development, house number quotas, or the building of sustainable healthy communities without considering the contested role played by regions would limit any understanding offered. Drawing upon a structured desk study, the next sections unpack some of the different conceptualizations of region by stakeholders with particular interests across the academic, grey and policy literatures, this will start with natural geology of England.

3.1 Regions in terms geological

Geological composition plays a crucial role in shaping regions, influencing material choices, house design, and construction. Natural geology determines landforms, topography, and city expansion, affecting the availability of local building materials, foundation stability, and water management. It also dictates natural hazard risks like earthquakes and landslides, requiring specific building codes. Soil quality impacts urban agriculture and green spaces, while valuable resources like minerals drive economic growth. Geological features influence drainage, erosion, and flooding, as well as building durability and resilience. Understanding a site's geology is essential for safe, cost-effective construction. England's diverse geology, from clay to granite, is well-documented by the British Geological Survey.

3.2 Water

Water significantly impacts the built environment across physical, economic, regulatory, and environmental dimensions. Flooding damages structures, erodes soil, and increases costs, requiring flood-resistant materials and mitigation strategies. Strict zoning laws and wetland preservation regulations add complexity, while climate change exacerbates risks. The UK's Environment Agency oversees flood risk management for 10 river basin districts (RBDs), subdivided into 175 flood risk areas (Environment Agency, 2024). Whereas water supply in England, managed by 17 companies,

operates under separate political and regulatory frameworks, often overlapping with RBDs (Ofwat, 2024). The existence of separate RBDs and water supply companies complicates coordination efforts. Water supply companies must comply with national regulations, their specific license conditions, and RBD management plans. However, the objectives of these regulatory frameworks might not always align, especially when water supply companies are focused on ensuring a reliable water supply, while RBDs prioritise broader environmental and conservation goals. This can create tensions, as water companies might prioritise water extraction to meet demand, while RBD authorities might seek to limit extraction to protect ecosystems. For the general public, this dual system is confusing. Thus, in the context of water management, fragmentation is a key characteristic, whereby the delineation of 'region' impacts heavily.

3.3 Natural climatic regions

Climate and regions have an iterative relationship, and localised regional climates and the built environment only further exaggerate that. For instance, urban areas in hot climates require efficient cooling systems, green spaces, and reflective building materials to combat heat. Conversely, cities in cold climates prioritize insulation and heating infrastructure. Additionally, areas prone to heavy rainfall or flooding need advanced drainage systems and flood defences, while coastal cities must consider rising sea levels. Climate also affects air quality, water availability, and energy consumption, necessitating tailored urban planning and sustainable practices to ensure resilience and quality of life for residents. England is renowned for its variable weather, which fluctuates daily, seasonally, annually, and spatially. The climate in England only marginally impacts house design, such climatic impact is more profound in other countries.

3.4 Architectural regions

Whilst there are no definitive architectural styles of regions in the UK, vernacular architecture has shaped traditional English house construction (Home England, 2024). It is advocated that sustainable development may draw upon localised materials and skills to reduce the environmental impact of new developments. Space restricts each region being separately considered, thus two shall be used for illustrative purposes, which are noticeably different to England's climatic regions. West Midlands: (covering Warwickshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire) the fertile, moisture-rich soils of the West Midlands nurture robust oak trees, contributing to the region's reputation for some of England's most intricately designed timber-framed buildings. Often dubbed the 'black-and-white counties' due to the distinctive appearance of these structures, they are cherished for their architectural charm. However, in other areas of the region, red brick emerges as the prevailing vernacular style (Real Homes, 2024). West Country: (covering Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Cornwall) is among the most diverse of regions in English building history. Unlike the south-east, there was plenty of building stone. Somerset is characterised by its limestone houses in a honey-brown colour. Heading further west, stone reigns supreme. Meanwhile in Cornwall, slate and granite form the main building stones of houses. Moving on, the next section shifts from architecture to the institutional structures humans have put in place around regions, related to governance and planning.

3.5 Governance and planning regions

This section unpacks governance and planning structures in England. Despite a unitary system under a parliamentary democracy, regional governance and decentralisation play key roles (Yamaç, 2021). While central government retains authority, some powers are devolved, making planning and development a regional concern; the governing structure remains complex and challenging to

navigate. England is divided into 9 regions and 48 counties, historically shaped by Anglo-Saxon territories. Though regions mainly serve statistical purposes under the ITL (International Territorial Level) system, counties remain relevant for culture and tourism. Historically, the counties of England were mostly formed as ‘shires’ or divisions of earlier kingdoms which united around the 10th century. Likewise, counties are commonly used for non-administrative purposes, including culture, tourism and sport. Thus, the governing structure of local government in England varies by region. Presently, most areas adopt a two-tier system consisting of county and district councils, which share responsibility for local services. However, London, other metropolitan areas, and certain parts of ‘shire’ England use a single-tier system, where councils handle all services within their jurisdiction. Overall, England is home to 317 local authorities, categorised into five types: county councils, district councils, unitary authorities, metropolitan districts, and London boroughs (Gov.uk, 2004a). However, planning in England operates across three tiers of local government, with 167 county-level and 311 district-level planning authorities in 2024 (Gov.uk, 2024b). County councils oversee Local Plans, planning applications, and enforcement, while district, borough, or city councils handle most planning matters. Some areas have single-tier authorities managing both levels. In London, the Mayor has strategic planning powers, and in national parks, planning is managed by park authorities. Parish and town councils also provide input on local applications. The UK government wants to see planning decisions taken at the lowest level possible and this remains high on the current UK ‘s agenda at the time of writing. Adding to governance complexity, England has 543 parliamentary constituencies (Parliament.uk, 2024a), and since the 1980s, local governance reforms (these can be viewed via [Local government structure and elections - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/structure-and-elections)), including elected mayors, have shaped political representation. Yet irrespective of local governance, whilst the UK government has set a national housing target of delivering 341,000 new homes in England per year by the mid-2020s, it has not set binding local housing targets for local planning authorities (LPAs; Parliament.uk, 2024b). LPAs are mandated to assess and address housing needs within their respective areas and have been provided with the required procedures for LPAs in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF; Parliament.uk, 2024b). For small regional housebuilders, the formal legislative framework offers little clarity. Having explored geology, climate, architectural vernacular, and governance, the next section examines infrastructure’s role in defining regions.

3.6 Regions through infrastructure

Housing development relies on infrastructure, including utilities, communication networks, environmental management, and transport systems. Energy and telecommunications shape construction by enabling renewable energy integration and smart technologies, enhancing sustainability and supporting remote work. Various UK governmental maps can be found via [Public sector telecommunications and digital infrastructure maps interim.pdf](#). As noted earlier, the evolution of ‘infrastructure’ in England has shaped the housing sector. Transport networks influence housing location, property values, and community growth. Proximity to roads and public transit increases desirability and density, though planning must balance costs with connectivity. While transport links support sustainable development, they also pose challenges like noise, air pollution, and visual impacts. Elevated highways can obstruct views, reduce natural light, and cause vibrations, affecting both aesthetics and structural integrity.

4 Discussion

What seems like a simple and clear notion of region has emerged as a rather ‘wicked problem’ (Ackoff, 1979) to deal with when considering how we might build healthy sustainable communities for the future. The conceptualisations of ‘region’ outlined are perhaps just the starting point of the debate.

Each one is in part tensioned against the others, with stakeholders often coagulating around interests to form groups with a clear self-serving agenda. This notion of ‘self-serving’ resonates strongly with the egocentric perspective of sustainability (O’Brien McElwee & Dunning, 2005), where humans view themselves ‘apart’ from nature and that natural resources belong to humans to use as they wish. Hardly a great starting point for a healthy sustainable community.

Regions can be conceptualised and aligned with a range of theoretical constructs. It is perhaps through these constructs that we might gain some critical distance and ‘see’ the quality differently than first thought. Due partly because of the idea of interests and self-serving just mentioned, the ‘region’ could be conceptualised as a form of ‘boundary object’ (Star and Griesemer, 1989). Boundary objects are social constructs, that are flexible enough to adapt to the specific needs and constraints of various groups using them, yet stable enough to retain a consistent identity across different contexts. While loosely defined in general use, they become more clearly structured within individual settings. These objects can be either abstract or tangible, and though they may hold different meanings in different social groups (referred to as ‘plastic’), their structure remains consistent enough to be recognizable across those groups, serving as a means of translation. Managing and creating boundary objects is essential for fostering and maintaining coherence among overlapping social worlds. However, one reported challenge is the ‘hi-jacking’ of boundary objects for self-interest.

It is how we choose to conceptualise ‘regions’ that will eventually lead to alternative outcomes. This is why having a debate and discussion on this issue is important, and even critical if we are to try to create healthy sustainable communities and homes for the future. Regional identity is something many can identify with through cultural traits, rather than something felt and lived by the people who actually live there in the present time. Feeling a sense of belonging to a region or place isn't always straightforward even if people frequently identify with their hometowns. Organisations and individuals do not consciously think about these facts in terms of physical location in their everyday lives. Instead, their sense of identity is often expressed through their daily actions and interactions.

In reality, people move around in space, yet there's often an assumption that cultural markers (practices, values, customs, or artifacts that signify or represent the culture of a particular group or region) and indicators tied to regions form somewhat permanent "cultural structures." These are often seen as more authentic for native residents compared to those who have migrated into an area. As transportation systems and globalisation makes the world more mobile, the relationships between regions and their identities become increasingly complex, recast, challenged and fluid. There's a challenge to both maintain traditional boundaries and practices while adapting to new, interconnected ways of living. With individuals now creating their spatial histories in multiple locations, it raises questions about how these shifting dynamics will affect regional identities when seeking to develop healthy sustainable communities for us to live and thrive in. One approach to understanding this is to distinguish between region as an institutional structure (Passi, 1986) and place as the accumulation of personal spatial experiences over a lifetime. This perspective helps to explain how regions are socially and spatially constructed, so not objectively accessed, whilst remaining relevant even as individuals move away or pass on. Within this interplay between region and place, specific characteristics often become chosen as symbols that define the identity of a region, shaping narratives that are reflected in media and regional planning.

In an attempt to bring the discussion back to the context of housing development in relation to regions as an active variable in the debate, there are a few more useful theoretical touchpoints (for sense making) that can be mobilised. The economic geography literature remains relevant, especially that focused on regional localised learning and embeddedness associated with sustaining a competitive business. Maskell and Malmberg (1999) promoted the concept of localised learning as a central component of regional sustainability, having an iterative relationship with the concept of

embeddedness. The underlying assumption of localised learning is built upon the argument that economic and entrepreneurial activities tend to agglomerate at certain places and lead to patterns of national, regional and rural specialisation. In essence regional firm cannot be competitive in isolation of other regional firms (Green, 2002). Maskell and Malmberg (1999) argue that successful firms are often rooted in their region, with localised capabilities, ‘which are difficult to imitate for outsiders, and which are partly based on intense interaction between a limited number of actors within a regional or national industrial system’. In other words, the concept of regional localised learning extends beyond a single firm, to a regional network of firms working together. In part this is because a firms’ unique capabilities are not actually rooted solely within the firm but are spread across a regional network of relational ties that are almost impossible for an ‘outsider’ to imitate or replicate. Jack and Anderson (2002) contend that embeddedness is a process of becoming part of the very fabric of the region (or sector), through knowing players and rules within specific regions to recognise opportunities. The concept of embeddedness therefore discredits generic and acontextual recipes typically mobilised by national housing developers. Largely, localised learning can be perceived as the process of becoming embedded in local regions. Of course, there are risks associated with becoming overly embedded in a region or regional mindset, which can blinker thinking, leading to close minded and too inward-looking mindsets, as recently evidenced by Boyd and Larsen (2024). Of particular interest when considering such challenges is the manner in which regional firms, working on housing development projects, often seem to oscillate between their client being the demand side (normal understanding of a client) and also the supply side stakeholders of the project also being a form of ‘client’ to them and needing to keep them happy. So, knowing who in the regional network to keep happy and when can become a constant puzzle. Being heavily embedded in a region can mean unique *modus operandi* to fit a regional project, often avoiding conflict and dispute within the close-knit supply chain even to the detriment of the client’s build project (Boyd and Larsen, 2024), that is the ‘power’ of a region. Jack and Anderson (2002) emphasise there is no ideal endpoint for achieving embeddedness in a region, it is never done. Embeddedness is better perhaps understood as an ongoing process, thus aligned with the traditions around the processual school and the seminal works of Andrew Pettigrew (Sminia, 2015) and therefore a becoming ontological perspective (Tsoukas and Chia, 2014). All of this only further emphasise the importance of discourse surrounding how we understand and define ‘region’ or ‘regional’. The very idea of a region is central for creating healthy sustainable communities through development.

5 Summarizing thoughts

Any notion of region mobilised should be critiqued, especially by those stakeholders currently holding the majority of the agency in shaping the discourse regarding housing development (i.e. the large national house builders). The research has demonstrated how ‘region’ can be interpreted very differently and is thus open to manipulation to support certain agendas. Regionalism, as a social construct, refers to the idea that regions are shaped and defined by social, political, and economic forces rather than just natural or geographic entities. Rather, there is an iterative relationship between the natural or geological with the social, political and economic with any understanding mobilised. This means that the identity and boundaries of a region are created through shared social relationships, cultural identities, and collective histories. Political decisions, economic policies, and institutional actions play significant roles in defining and reinforcing these regional identities. Media portrayals and narratives also contribute to how regions are perceived and understood. As a result, regions are dynamic and can evolve over time, reflecting changes in societal values, power dynamics, and economic conditions. This perspective highlights that regions are not fixed but are continually constructed and reconstructed through human interactions and perceptions.

Regionalism, in the context of developing a more sustainable built environment seems paramount. It reinforces that environmental challenges and resources are often best managed at a regional level, where local conditions and needs can be more effectively addressed. By focusing on regions, sustainability efforts can tailor solutions to specific environmental issues such as water scarcity, pollution, and habitat conservation that vary across different geographical areas. Secondly, regionalism promotes collaboration and cooperation among communities, governments, and stakeholders. Cooperation enables the pooling of resources, sharing of knowledge, and joint efforts to tackle environmental problems that transcend political boundaries. Thirdly, regionalism supports the idea of self-sufficiency and resilience. By developing sustainable practices within a region, communities can reduce their dependence on external resources and mitigate the impacts of global environmental challenges such as climate change and resource depletion. Lastly, regionalism encourages a sense of local identity and stewardship over natural resources. When communities feel connected to their local environment and recognise the importance of preserving it for future generations, they are more likely to actively participate in sustainable practices and initiatives. In essence, regionalism in sustainability underscores the interconnectedness between environmental health, social well-being, and economic prosperity at the regional level, fostering holistic approaches to environmental stewardship and resilience. Whilst the research is not seeking to demonise any stakeholder, it is seeking to open up the discussion beyond the discourse typically mobilised by national housing developers (the dominant discourse) and instead create a space to bring in small, grassroots, regional SMEs and their understanding and interpretation of region into the discussion. Having a housing development sector that has a more diverse discourse with small, grassroots regional SME housing developers able to have a greater voice, especially when championing regional sustainability issues, health regional communities, can only be a good thing.

Whether we confirm or refute, regions and regional identities have maintained their significance. They are vital in social and political practices and discourse in the context of the built environment. This importance is driven by the need for orientation points amid complex and abstract processes of globalisation; this often leads to reaffirming old boundaries and creating new ones. Regional identities and affiliations are not always harmonious and can coexist with internal conflicts based on cultural, economic, and political differences. These identities can serve as a form of resistance against global forces, such as capitalism. Since regions and identities are historically and spatially contingent, understanding them requires considering their specific contexts. Comparative analysis of these contextual meanings can help avoid overly broad generalisations. As mentioned earlier, this research forms only a very small part of much larger project, whereby regions are one key variable. That project is engaging with regional stakeholders to create Regional Building Hubs and thus offer a genuine alternative to how we undertaken regional housing development in order to build truly healthy and sustainable communities of the future.

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