

Public spaces, social relations and well-being in East London



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Public spaces, social relations and well-being in East London

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with Wil Gesler and Sarah Curtis



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Executive summary

The rejuvenation of public spaces is a key concern in central government, and there has been considerable emphasis on improving the design and management of public spaces (ODPM, 2002), particularly with the introduction of CAFE Space in 2003, which set out to encourage excellence in green and public spaces (CAFE Space, 2004). Various initiatives aimed at fostering social inclusion have also considered the strategic role of public space. The Department for Communities and Local Government (formerly the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister or ODPM), for example, through its Sustainable Communities and Cleaner, Safer, Greener agendas, is seeking ways to ensure that communities are characterised by streets, parks and public open spaces that are not only clean, safe and attractive, but also sustainable and inclusive, and meet the diverse needs of all users (ODPM, 2002, 2003b, 2003c). However, we need to know more about public spaces as social arenas, about the ways in which spaces are used, and about their potential for enabling contact between different ethnic groups or for enhancing well-being. This report draws on qualitative research conducted in a multi-ethnic part of London to explore such issues in relation to everyday *public open spaces*, from town centre spaces like high streets and markets to parks and residential streets, forecourts and street corners.

The study set out to:

- better understand the significance and value of public spaces as social arenas;
- explore ethnic variation in people's use and understandings of public spaces;
- examine the opportunities afforded by public spaces for social encounters and their potential for enabling contact between different groups;
- consider the importance of public spaces for improving people's sense of well-being.

The study area and research methods

Chapter 1 sets the context and presents the methodological framework. The study was set in the London Borough of Newham, East London. East London contains some of the most deprived areas in the United Kingdom. It is, however, a dynamic, socially and ethnically diverse area.

Following a scoping exercise that gathered information about Newham and its public open spaces, seven discussion groups were conducted to explore people's knowledge, use and understandings of public open spaces in Newham with a variety of interest groups:

- a group campaigning against the redevelopment of a market
- Asian elders using a day centre
- members of a Pakistani cultural forum
- teenage female residents of a housing estate
- refugees and asylum seekers from the former Yugoslavia
- white British older residents who met in a coffee shop
- a health walkers' group.

Six sites were then selected to observe social and other usages of spaces, and to gain a sense of the extent to which they were shared, inclusive spaces. They were: two main streets with a range of shops and services, two parks and two markets. The geographical focus of the study narrowed down further to a mixed (in terms of housing tenures and ethnicity) residential area close to many of the public open spaces discussed and observed. As well as interviews with people working in the area, 24 in-depth interviews were carried out with residents, reflecting a broad cross-section of the local residential population, to explore the significance of public spaces to people's everyday lives, and to consider the social and therapeutic value of these spaces in greater depth. The neighbourhood focus also provided an opportunity to consider the importance of ordinary, less obvious public spaces, like residential streets or small neighbourhood parks, as well as town centre spaces.

Public open spaces as social places

Chapter 2 shows that the social value of public open spaces lay in their contribution to people's attachment to their locality and opportunities for mixing with others, and in people's memories of places. As social arenas, hard spaces such as streets or markets were just as important as green spaces for many people in the study.

Public spaces were rarely discussed in isolation from informants' broader attachments (and non-attachments) to their local area and to other people. Public spaces could be a source of local pride; for example, a market was described as 'a centre point for the whole of the East End [where] people come from all round'. There was often a symbiotic relationship between people's attachments to their area and their experience of public spaces. While commitment to the local area and its people often influenced the use and experience of public open spaces, so, too, were positive perceptions of spaces and the valued opportunities they afforded for casual social encounters – the exchanges at the local market, the hustle and bustle of a shopping street, the brief conversations on residential streets or while jogging in a park – a key element in people's desire to remain in the locality. Noticeably, the few informants who described their experiences of public open spaces, especially at neighbourhood level, in *categorically* negative terms appeared to possess fewer contacts with local people and to be generally less attached to their local area.

A number of prerequisites for social interaction in public open spaces were identified. They included familiarity with spaces, regular use, the endurance of a public space over time and available facilities that gave purpose to a space and enhanced its social vitality. For example, the street outside a local mosque and a small park next to a primary school extended the opportunities for talking to people afforded by these facilities, while regular encounters on residential streets and a small neighbourhood park were seen as providing first steps towards friendship or as '... the beginning of a community'. For some people, a sense that a space offered the freedom to linger was important. A market was appreciated, for example, because of the opportunities it afforded just to mingle with shoppers. The market was an inclusive site of daily routines: while many people visited it for a purpose, others appreciated being able to enter and remain in a space like this without a specific reason.

Ethnicity and inter-ethnic interaction

Chapter 3 looks at the links between ethnicity and the use of public space. Ethnicity was one of the key ways in which people categorised certain public open spaces. For instance, Green Street was known as the 'Asian' street, whereas Queens Market was seen

as a more multicultural area. Some spaces, like a busy shopping street, played a positive role in promoting place identity, a sense of pride, or supporting ethnic-based networks. Unlike Asian people from other age groups, however, many younger Asians did not consider these spaces as important social arenas. The ethnicity of a person is never the only factor influencing how a public space is used; experience is also affected by other factors, in particular age and gender.

Refugee groups' descriptions of ethnically mixed areas in Newham indicated parallel rather than integrative relations between ethnic groups. Nevertheless, while some groups appeared to be organised into separate, self-interested communities, for numerous people, especially younger people, ethnic difference was considered a normal aspect of Newham life and interaction happened effortlessly. People's discussions of public spaces provided an important insight into the complicated and contradictory nature of everyday experiences of ethnicity. While public spaces might be frequented by a range of different groups, this did not necessarily mean that there was any contact between them. Nonetheless, public open spaces provide an important arena where ethnic diversity is routinely negotiated and experienced. Certain places in the study provided opportunities for informal social contact between different ethnic groups: neighbourhood and semi-domestic spaces, where continued and regular use was instrumental in developing good relations between neighbours; a small neighbourhood park adjacent to a primary school, where meetings between parents in the school led to greater shared use of the park – together the school and the park had helped to bring different communities together; and a market that drew both locals and strangers. The bustling, jostling market, which facilitated casual exchange and encouraged encounters between different ethnic groups who would otherwise not come into contact with each other, was generally recognised as a setting for developing tolerance.

However, certain informal rules and boundaries in places can sometimes hinder interaction. The neighbourhood park was a place where people mixed but there were occasions when neighbourhood public spaces could become sites of conflict or racial tension. Some recent refugee arrivals reported that they had experienced prejudice against them that had prompted them to avoid neighbourhood spaces. But more commonly public spaces played a role in fostering inter-ethnic understanding by providing opportunities for people to meet that might not happen in any more organised setting. In order to harness their potential for maintaining and improving inter-ethnic relations, public spaces need to be understood, however, not simply as sites where people, under the right circumstances or with the necessary encouragement, might come together, but as everyday settings where a range of interests and attachments to place are able to converge and evolve.

Well-being

Chapter 4 examines the importance of public spaces for people's health and well-being. It demonstrates that everyday places hold a range of therapeutic functions, both in a direct sense and indirectly, through their role in bringing people together. While some people discussed the benefits of green spaces to well-being – as places to unwind, participate in informal leisure activities, observe others or seek solitude – just as many pointed to streets or markets as places for making them feel good. Here the benefits were more about enjoying the social vibrancy of urban life and seeing other people.

Current policy agendas recognise the role played by the environment in people's health and well-being, but the therapeutic properties of public open spaces are not restricted to design, nature or aesthetics. They include the social elements of spaces, their shared and collective use. But public spaces are more than just containers of human activity, they can

also possess subjective meanings that accumulate over time. Recollections of using a space when growing up, for example, could promote a sense of belonging, or prompt fond family memories. For some people, revisiting such spaces brought solace. Public spaces could also recall other valued places. For example, many Asian elders enjoyed Green Street and Queens Market because these two sites reminded them of their places of birth. It is through these 'comfort zones' that they were also able to negotiate and make sense of the meaning of 'home', which was very much in Newham but was also linked to the Indian subcontinent.

For most people, everyday public spaces provided opportunities for both retreat and for interaction with others. Places of retreat, such as parks, a cemetery, or footpaths that are close to water, provided opportunities for reflection, or the chance to escape from domestic pressures, while places such as markets and neighbourhood spaces where friendships and support networks are made and maintained were also important for well-being. Both fleeting and more meaningful encounters in public spaces could provide sustenance for people's sense of community, raise their spirits, or relieve stress. For some people, just observing others in busy places had restorative effects.

The complaints that people often make about public spaces do not necessarily diminish their positive influence on well-being. Rather, people are more likely to weigh up positive and negative aspects of places that are particularly important in their lives. A middle-aged white British mother, for example, who loved organising children's games in the neighbourhood park, saw the park as key to her physical and mental health even though she believed that the facilities desperately needed improving, something that annoyed her. For the few people who had withdrawn into the private space of their homes and who saw their neighbourhood as having provoked or exacerbated their ill-health, it was not so much the physical characteristics of the public spaces that were the root cause but rather the breakdown or complete absence of relations with local people.

Regeneration and public space consciousness

Chapter 5 presents the case study of Queens Market, Newham's busy and long-established street market. While not everyone (especially younger people) liked the market, it nevertheless encapsulated many of the desirable features of public open spaces discussed by those interviewed or taking part in discussion groups, particularly in relation to social value. It was considered as a place that gave the area its character, creating a sense of local place attachment and identity; it provided an economic function, selling cheap fresh food and 'ethnic' produce; and it served as a vibrant social arena – a site for unexpected encounters or talking to strangers, as well as a place where people felt comfortable to linger. It was seen as a multi-ethnic space, a place of interaction between different communities, and simply as a 'fun' and 'uplifting' place to visit. For some, it was a source of fond memories associated with long-term use. Most people's memories of Queens Market were also of a place that had evolved to reflect the new populations arriving in the borough. The market's accommodation of difference over time was considered integral to its identity by respondents.

Queens Market has become the site of proposed local regeneration. The redevelopment plans have led to increased awareness of the value of such places among local residents and raised questions about how public open spaces are conceived in urban regeneration. There was a general feeling, for example, that the social role of the market had been undervalued in the economic focus of the regeneration scheme. For the supporters, the new, regenerated market would be part of a cleaner, safer and more organised environment; the scheme's opponents, who included both residents and members of a campaign group, feared that the market's unique appeal as a social space, which had

been built up over many years, could be lost. The market campaign group itself was the most multi-ethnic discussion group in the study; threats to a public space had prompted collective action across potential cultural divides and had also raised public space consciousness. It was notable that these perceived threats had increased people's awareness of the market's social value.

Conclusions

The study concludes that people need a variety of public open spaces within a local area to meet a range of everyday needs: spaces to linger as well as spaces of transit; spaces that bring people together as well as spaces of retreat. Green spaces have been a key focus of policy research over recent years. This study indicates that as well as green spaces, the multiple uses and benefits to people's quality of life of hard spaces such as streets or markets need to be more widely recognised. An emphasis on design criteria in public space policy, or on economic benefits in regeneration policy, should not overshadow the important social and therapeutic role of public open space in people's everyday lives. These findings have implications for a number of policy arenas. They include not only the government's Cleaner, Safer, Greener policy, but also the wider Community Cohesion, Sustainable Communities and Choosing Health agendas. For example, for communities to be both sustainable and inclusive, facilities will be needed that encourage the use of public open space and contact between different members of the community. A shift in emphasis in Community Cohesion policies towards recognition of the role of public spaces in providing arenas for positive social relations would also be welcome. Ordinary public spaces can also help to support Choosing Health objectives for encouraging exercise and healthier diets; in Newham, such spaces are important for recreation, while in addition, markets, as sources of healthy, fresh food, are an especially valuable asset, which provide produce at affordable prices in poorer areas.

Public open spaces are a significant resource for both individuals and communities. The research calls for policy approaches in which their social and therapeutic properties are recognised, nurtured and built on.

Introduction

Public spaces are a fundamental feature of cities. They represent sites of sociability and face-to-face interaction, and at the same time their quality is commonly perceived to be a measure of the quality of urban life. Ideally, they are places that are accessible to everybody and where difference is encountered and negotiated (Young, 1990). The rejuvenation of public spaces in city centres and in neighbourhoods has now become a central focus of the government's blueprint for urban renaissance. There has been an increasing concern to improve the design and management of urban spaces and various initiatives aimed at fostering social inclusion have considered the strategic role of public space. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DLGG; formerly the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister or ODPM), for example, through its Sustainable Communities and Cleaner, Safer, Greener agendas, is seeking ways to ensure that communities are characterised by streets, parks and public open spaces that are not only clean, safe and attractive, but also sustainable and inclusive. A concern is how to ensure that public places meet the diverse needs of all users (ODPM, 2002, 2003b, 2003c). However, the evidence base on ways in which different social and cultural groups use public space is thin (Williams and Green, 2001), as is knowledge about the extent to which spaces are shared and may influence social integration, or about the benefits or disadvantages, especially to a sense of well-being, derived from the use of different kinds of public spaces.

This report draws on qualitative research conducted in the London Borough of Newham to investigate people's uses and experiences of everyday public open spaces, from town centre spaces like parks, high streets and markets to neighbourhood spaces like residential streets and forecourts. The work forms part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's research programme on public spaces. The programme is examining how far public spaces are shared places and what the implications may be for neighbourhoods and for those involved in their planning and management. An objective of *Public spaces, social relations and well-being in East London* is to gain a better understanding of some of the ways in which aspects of public space can strengthen and benefit diverse urban neighbourhoods. The principal aim of the study is to understand better the significance of public spaces as social arenas, in particular, to explore:

- social and ethnic variation in use and experience of public spaces;
- opportunities afforded by public spaces for social encounters, and implications for local attachment and social relations;
- the potential of public spaces for enabling contact between different groups and for fostering inter-ethnic understanding;
- the importance of public spaces for enhancing well-being;
- the implications of these findings for policy.

A particular feature of the report is the focus on social interaction. It explores opportunities afforded by public spaces as sites of engagement and casual encounter, and examines also the nature of these interactions, their meaning for individuals, and the kinds of social ties involved.

Research and policy background

Divisions and tensions involving different age, ethnic, interest or other groups can be a feature of some contemporary urban areas. They can range from perceptions of nuisance behaviour by young people commonly cited as a concern across the country in public areas, to more serious problems of inter-ethnic disturbance experienced, for example, in parts of the North of England (Home Office, 2001; Denham Report, 2002). Responses have included Community Facilitation Schemes and strategies connected to the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, where the aim is to involve a broad range of local groups in regeneration activities (ODPM, 2003a). Current neighbourhood policy, for non-regeneration areas as well as regeneration areas, is promoting active communities and civil renewal, including citizen engagement in public services, especially in minority and disadvantaged communities (ODPM, 2005a).

It has recently been argued that public participation in public space development plans can facilitate active citizenship (McInroy and MacDonald, 2005) and the need to explore the influence of more mundane sources of interaction and engagement – including public spaces – on social relations is also gaining recognition. For Walljasper, for example, ‘Public spaces ... are the starting point for all community, commerce and democracy’ (Walljasper, 2005, p 21). Jane Jacobs, in her classic study of American neighbourhood life, has argued that the city streets and their resources are key to a neighbourhood rich in community life (Jacobs, 1961; Cattell, 2004). A series of earlier studies in East London also noted the importance of opportunities for casual interaction afforded through local features such as street markets, residential squares, sitting-out areas and canal-side walks, or journeys on foot to a school or workplace, to perceptions of inclusion and a sense of community (Cattell and Evans, 1999; Cattell, 2001; Cattell and Herring, 2002).

But public open spaces can be contested places, sites of division as well as cohesion, of negative as well as positive engagement. For example, everyday tensions between age groups (see, for example, Swann and Morgan, 2002) are alleged to manifest themselves in fear on the part of older people to use public space in some urban areas (Willets, 2003), while, in the earlier East London studies, perceptions of ‘ownership’ of places and of unequal power relations between different age and interest groups were also apparent. Even neighbourhoods with a strong sense of community can, in any case, have exclusionary tendencies. For Jacobs, again, it was casual contact with people very different from oneself that was essential for integration and ‘exuberant diversity’ (Jacobs, 1961, p 70).

Yet, we may be asking too much of public spaces. It would be erroneous to assume that there are simple relationships between opportunities for interaction and harmonious social relations, naive to expect that exposure to difference will readily generate cultural exchange. Indeed, Ash Amin (2002) argues that urban public spaces may not be the most appropriate locales for generating inter-ethnic understanding. Nevertheless, the light-hearted exchanges that take place in the local arena, its public spaces included, may have potential for fostering tolerant attitudes (Cattell, 2004). If we wish to repair (if indeed repair is needed) what Sennett (2000) calls the collectivity of space, important questions remain. To what extent do the social exchanges that take place in urban spaces involve dissimilar others? What is their relationship to an inclusive sense of community, or to making connections between groups? Additionally, spaces have different characteristics that may attract distinct groups (Williams and Green, 2001; ODPM, 2002). What factors constrain or encourage use? How far might social identities such as ethnicity, age or gender affect use? What sorts of encounter are valued and why? Do certain public spaces encourage interaction with different groups?

Included in the government's response to the House of Commons ODPM Select Committee report (2003) criticising the physical condition of many public spaces is the recognition that public spaces play an important role in encouraging healthy lifestyles and supporting communities by encouraging informal contact (ODPM, 2003c, p 3). For this study, we consider the role of public spaces in fostering what the World Health Organization refers to as 'well-being' or 'positive health': 'a state of physical mental and social well-being' (WHO, 1948, p 100). There is a growing literature on the potential benefits of public spaces to physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Woolley, 2003; Baer and Gesler, 2004; Wakefield and McMullan, 2005). Three elements to these 'therapeutic landscapes' (Gesler, 1992, 2003; Williams, 1999; Curtis, 2004) have been identified: natural and built environments, social environments and symbolic environments. Literature on social environments, for example, emphasises the importance to well-being of the interactions between individuals and groups that may lead to integration (Manning, 1989). It is this aspect in particular that we consider in Newham.

A research focus on 'social ties' as a measure of well-being is also considered here. Although social ties can sometimes have negative effects, they can in some cases be controlling or burdensome, for example – more extensive social ties are generally associated with benefits to the individual in terms of health and well-being. Social ties themselves have been differentiated as bonding (strong) ties, which connect similar people such as family members or members of an ethnic group and involve supportive relationships, and bridging (weak) ties, which connect individuals to dissimilar groups (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). Networks embracing a range of ties with different characteristics appear particularly advantageous for health and quality of life (Cattell, 2003). Are there aspects of public spaces that contribute to generating, maintaining or shaping social networks? Or is it the case that casual interaction in public spaces has more direct salience for well-being?

The study

More incidental places within our neighbourhoods can be important for local life (Woolley, 2003). This study set out to examine some of the ways in which public spaces are used and experienced. It looks at spaces as social arenas, and explores their potential for enabling contact between different ethnic groups and for enhancing individual well-being. The study adopts a broad and fluid definition of public spaces. As a starting point we used the Urban Green Spaces Task Force's working definition of 'public open space', which includes both hard spaces, such as town squares, streets and paved areas, and green places, such as parks and river banks, to which there is public access (DTLR, 2002a). But we also wanted the research to capture the small-scale opportunities for interaction and negotiation in residential streets and neighbourhood spaces, as well as the more obvious, and larger spaces like high streets and public parks. Our approach was further informed through the process of research by our participants' understandings of public space.¹

Chapter 1 sets the context. It introduces the study area and explains the reasons for its selection before presenting the methods used in the research. Chapter 2 details the range of people's positive and negative attachments with their area in order to frame the multiple ways in which people use and experience public open spaces. It also explores the different types of social encounters afforded by public spaces and the prerequisites

¹ Throughout this report, the terms 'public open space', 'public space' and 'space' are used interchangeably for stylistic reasons. Where reference is made to other public spaces, for instance, spaces of association such as community centres, this is made clear.

that people consider important for these to take place. Chapter 3 analyses in depth the relationship between ethnicity and public space. It demonstrates how certain places are 'labelled' in terms of ethnicity and considers how this might affect the use of public space. It then looks at the roles that different public open spaces play in supporting ethnically based networks. Finally, it analyses the interactions and conflicts that occur in spaces, in order to reflect on their potential for fostering tolerance and inter-ethnic understanding. Chapter 4 investigates the links between a range of public spaces and people's sense of well-being and discusses, in particular, people's attachments to the social and symbolic aspects of places. Chapter 5 presents the case study of a market that encapsulates many of the features of public social space valued by respondents, and that is currently the focus of a redevelopment scheme. Implications of the impact of regeneration on public spaces is considered. A final section draws together conclusions from each chapter and indicates key issues for policy makers and practitioners.

Setting the scene

The area of research: the London Borough of Newham

According to government statistics and the popular imagination, East London includes some of the most deprived parts of the UK. It is, however, a dynamic and very diverse area in terms of its history, geography, economic development, housing and ethnic composition.

The London Borough of Newham, which is the fourth most deprived borough in London and 11th most deprived nationally (ODPM, 2004), is a setting that presents a particularly interesting opportunity for examining people's relationships with public space. The decision to focus on Newham was motivated by a number of factors:

- *Newham's high ethnic diversity.* According to the 2001 Census, Newham had the highest non-white population in the UK: 60.6% of its 237,900 residents were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, compared with 7.9% nationally and 28.8% in London. In contrast to neighbouring boroughs such as Tower Hamlets, the minority ethnic composition of Newham is extremely diverse. More than 120 languages are spoken. The principal ethnic groups are: Indian (12.1%); Pakistani (8.4%); Bangladeshi (8.8%); Black African (13.1%); and Black Caribbean (7.3%). These populations include recent refugee and migrant populations, particularly Tamils, Somalis, Afghans, Congolese and people from the former Yugoslavia.
- *Newham's age profile.* The borough possesses one of the youngest populations in Britain, with 39.8% aged under 25 in the 2001 Census, compared with 32.3% in London and 31.1% nationally. In contrast, people aged over 65 constitute 8.5% of the total population (12.4% in London, 15.9% nationally), 74.1% of whom are white.
- *Newham's geography.* There are no large or conspicuous public spaces in the borough such as a metropolitan park (like Victoria Park in neighbouring Tower Hamlets), square or shopping area. Instead, there are numerous small and medium-sized parks spread across the borough and various shopping centres, mainly strung along single streets. While Newham has clear external and internal boundaries (rivers, docks, main roads and railway lines), it has – at least to an outsider – few notable natural or manmade landmarks. Characteristics like these suggested numerous opportunities for selecting settings in which to explore people's experience of a range of everyday public spaces, spaces that may less often be a focus of research but may nonetheless be part of a typical experience of urban living.
- *Newham's housing and regeneration.* Until recently there has been little gentrification of existing housing stock in Newham, especially when compared with parts of Hackney and Tower Hamlets; adjacent boroughs that have experienced a steady influx of more affluent residents over the past two decades. Nevertheless, new housing, primarily aimed at middle-class professionals, has been developed in the south of the borough around the docks. Newham is also currently the setting for a range of ambitious regeneration projects. Most of these are concentrated in what is dubbed 'The Arc of Opportunity', which runs along the western and southern edges of the borough.

Projects include major developments such as the planned facilities for the 2012 Olympic Games and Stratford City (an ambitious redevelopment scheme) but also smaller-scale social renewal programmes like the West Ham and Plaistow New Deal for Communities. New and redesigned public spaces play a key role in these projects. From a policy perspective, therefore, the borough poses some interesting questions about the regeneration of public spaces.

Methods

The research project was conceived as an exploratory study with distinct questions that have been detailed in the Introduction. In summary, its aims were to understand the significance and value of public spaces as social arenas; to explore relationships between public spaces and ethnicity; and to consider the importance of public spaces for social relations, a sense of local attachment and people's well-being. A flexible qualitative approach was adopted, informed largely by ethnographic methods of enquiry. This approach sought to strike a balance between, on the one hand, pursuing the research objectives and, on the other, allowing for additional issues to emerge from the fieldwork and for the views of local people to inform the study's approach. The research consisted of four stages in which the geographical focus on the issues for public spaces in Newham overall was gradually narrowed down to a focus on concerns in a small residential area in the centre of the borough. Each method had a specific research focus, but, with the exception of the initial scoping exercise, all gathered information on several of the key issues the research set out to address.

1. Scoping exercise

Preliminary research consisted of collating information about Newham and its public spaces, attending local council and community organisation meetings and making contacts for discussion groups. This provided an overall understanding of the nature of the spaces in the borough and contrasting views about them. It also alerted the researchers to the policy context and, in particular, plans for the regeneration of public spaces in this part of London.

2. Discussion groups

To explore people's knowledge, use and understandings of public space, seven discussion groups were conducted across the centre and south of the borough with a variety of residents and community activists (42 people in total):

- a group campaigning against the redevelopment of a market
- Asian elders who used a day centre
- members of a Pakistani cultural forum
- teenage female residents of a housing estate
- refugees and asylum seekers from the former Yugoslavia
- white British older residents who met in a coffee shop
- a health walkers' group.

The discussion groups were digitally recorded and transcribed. They identified a variety of public spaces that people use in Newham, and provided information on various ways in which they were used and experienced. Discussions also gave insights into the different ways people *talk* about public open spaces. The term *public space consciousness* has been coined in the report to indicate the varying levels of discussion and understanding of public open space, the circumstances in which this discussion takes

place and the ways in which spaces are represented in the informants' discourses. Public space consciousness is never fixed and may be low where a space is perceived purely in terms of the function it provides (for example, the street as a space of transit), it might increase when a particular space is considered fundamental for a particular activity (social or otherwise), or it might develop further when for some reason this space faces transformation or elimination.

3. Observation of sites

Drawing on the data collected in the first two stages, the research focused on two districts in central Newham with a mixture of population, housing and public spaces to observe social and other uses of public space, to consider social and cultural variation in use and to ascertain the extent to which they were inclusive, shared spaces. Figure 1.1 shows the layout of the area and highlights the spaces examined.

Figure 1.1: General map of Newham

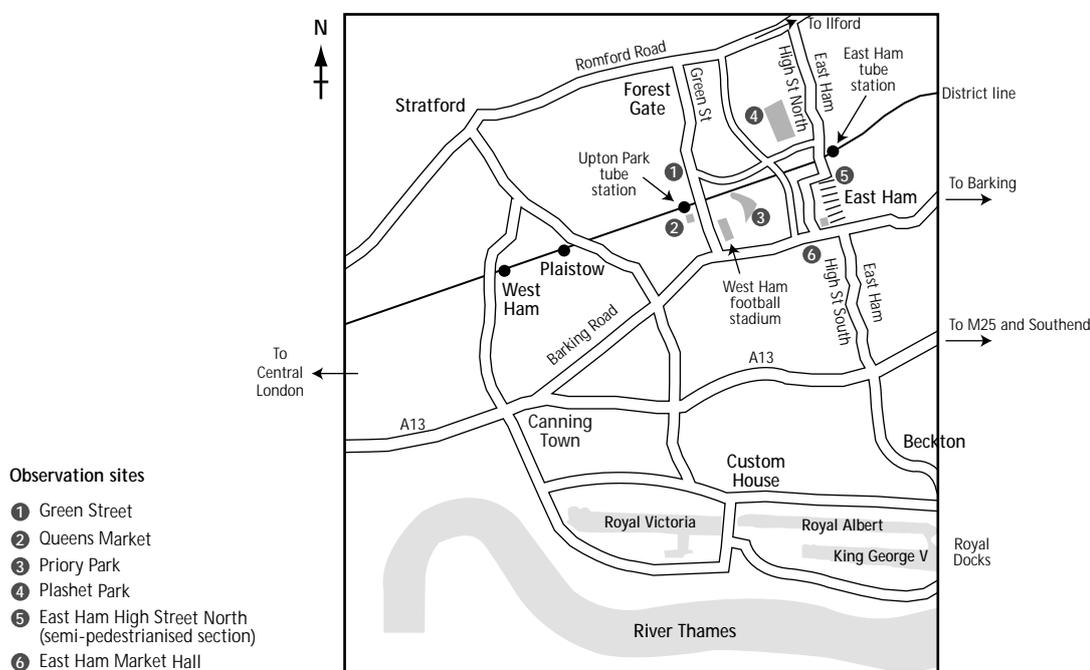
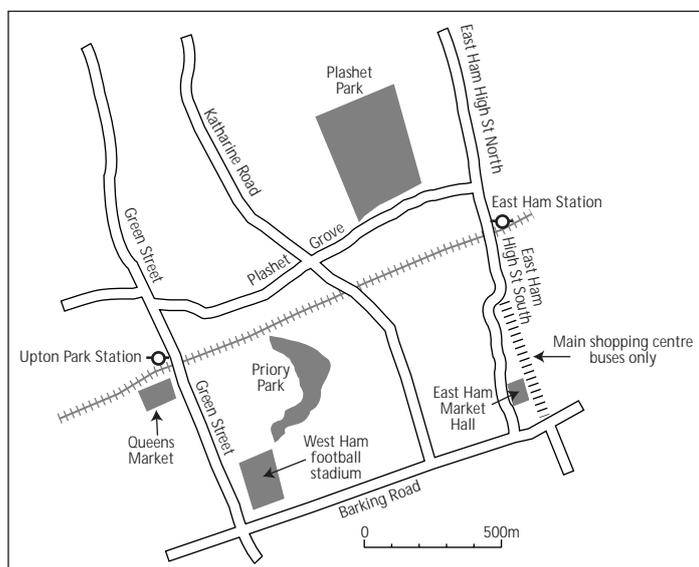


Figure 1.2: Map of case study area



Six sites were selected for observation:

- Two main streets with a range of shops and services:
 - **Green Street:** a busy, heavily trafficked retail and commercial thoroughfare with mainly independent shops (general food stores, jewellers and clothes shops) run by ethnic minorities, primarily Asians;



Photograph 1.1: Green Street

- **East Ham High Street North:** a kilometre to the east of Green Street but running on the same north–south axis; this is a semi-pedestrianised street with major national chain stores. The few independent shops are mainly run by ethnic minorities.



Photograph 1.2: East Ham High Street North

- Two parks:
 - **Plashet Park:** a late 19th-century, medium-sized (18 acres) park situated among terraced housing with a range of facilities (playground, sports courts, café, toilets, bowling green);



Photograph 1.3: Plashet Park

- **Priory Park:** a small neighbourhood park opened in 1991 (eight acres) with a sports court and playground located between a council estate and private terraced housing. It is used primarily as a sports field but is also a space of transit between houses and nearby main streets.



Photograph 1.4: Priory Park

- Two markets:
 - **Queens Market:** a busy, covered (but open-ended with 24-hour access), general market located off Green Street selling food stuffs and household goods, predominantly used by minority ethnic groups (Asian, Black African, Black Caribbean and East European);



Photograph 1.5: Queens Market

- **East Ham Market Hall:** located off East Ham High Street, this market consists of a series of roofed arcades with fixed stalls and kiosks selling a wide range of products, from foodstuffs to clothes and electronic equipment. It is open from 9am to 5pm, Mondays to Saturdays.²



Photograph 1.6: East Ham Market Hall

² Although not technically a 'public *open space*' (being mainly set indoors as well as gated at night), during the day this market nevertheless appeared to function as an extension of the street, a place where people would not only go to shop but also to stroll or to sit down on benches to eat lunch.

Pairings of sites were selected in order to explore the differences and similarities between the use of common types of public open space. Sites were observed at different times of the day and week and observations recorded in field notes. As well as noting the physical appearance of the sites and available facilities, observation focused on usage of the sites and the people using them. Observation provided a 'feel' for the spaces and their context, their atmosphere, social vitality and a sense of their appeal as well as more objective information. Information was gathered on social activities and casual exchanges in public spaces, for example, and, where this was possible, the ethnic make-up of individuals and groups involved. The nature and quality of social interactions in public spaces, and their meaning for individuals, were dimensions that were fully explored in the later interviews.

4. *Interviews in the residential area*

The focus of the study narrowed down further to a residential area in central Newham of approximately 40 hectares in order to conduct interviews with residents. This area was selected because of its proximity to many of the public open spaces covered in discussion groups as well as the observation sites. Moreover, compared with the rest of central Newham, it consisted of a greater mix of private and social housing and a more diverse ethnic composition.

Local interviews provided opportunities to consider the significance of ordinary, less obvious public spaces, like residential streets or small neighbourhood parks, in people's everyday lives. The interviews took a different approach to the discussion groups. Rather than concentrating from the outset on the general topic of public space, the initial focus was on people's experiences of their local neighbourhood (social relations, perceptions of community, daily routines, understandings and encounters with ethnic difference) in order to see the relative importance of public spaces in people's lives. This often led to unprompted discussions about public space within the context of people's social relationships and relationships with their locality. In addition, the interviews examined in depth the contribution made by public spaces and social relations to individual well-being.

At the centre of the area was Priory Park, one of the observation sites. During the discussion groups, few people spoke about parks as places of everyday interaction. The presence of this specific park allowed us to reconsider the role of relatively small green spaces in people's lives. Surrounding the park were three quite distinct residential areas: to the west, a housing association estate that had one of the largest white British populations in central Newham (52%), although the estate had become increasingly mixed over the past decade; to the east, an area of small early 20th-century terraced houses that were mainly privately owned, which had a large Asian population; and to the south, a mixture of social housing and privately owned terraced houses that was not dominated by any particular ethnic group. Located on the eastern edge of the park were a primary school that had opened in 1991 and a community centre that opened in September 2004. The study area was also located in between the two streets and two markets under observation so it was anticipated that some of these spaces would enter unprompted into people's discussions about the area.

Semi-structured interviews lasting between one and two hours were carried out with 24 people reflecting a broad cross-section of the local residential population in terms of ethnicity, age, gender and housing tenure. People were interviewed in various locations that were deemed the most convenient: private homes (nine informants), the primary school (four), the community centre (six), a day centre for older people (four) and a local

café (one). Apart from two cases,³ all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full. In addition, informal interviews were carried out with key workers in the area, including staff at the local school, youth workers and others at the community centre and housing officers. The aim of this was to gain a broader understanding of the place and local public spaces.

³ The recorder was not used at the request of the interviewees.

Social relations in public space

This chapter considers the significance of public spaces as social arenas, a key theme in both the discussion groups and the interviews. The chapter looks at the range of place attachments that frame people's experiences and uses of public spaces, explores the different sorts of social encounters in public open space and where these are likely to occur, and singles out some of the conditions that people regard as important for social interaction in public space. It suggests that the relationship between public spaces and local attachment is dynamic, and that social interaction in public space can play a pivotal role in this relationship. While commitment to the local area and its people often influences the experience of public open spaces, the opportunities for social encounters in public spaces are also often key to people's allegiance to their local area.

Place attachments

Public open spaces were rarely discussed in isolation from informants' broader attachments (and non-attachments) to their local area and its people. People's attachments to place are dynamic (Tuan, 1974; Manzo, 2003). They can be both negative and positive (and often contradictory), unconscious and conscious, and are mediated by people's multiple and evolving social identities, such as age, gender, social class and ethnicity. While some factors, such as Newham's ethnic diversity, will be discussed in greater depth in later chapters, a consideration of some of the key factors emerging from the fieldwork that influence attachments to a locality provides a useful starting point for understanding the complex and often ambivalent role that public open spaces can play in different people's everyday lives. They include:

- *Social networks.* For many people in the study, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or housing tenure, local social networks were a principal source of attachment to place. These varied from intense social ties in a particular neighbourhood space (such as a section of a street) to weaker, less intimate ties that were spread across a wider area. However, some informants complained about the detrimental effects of 'excessive' community relations. A Pakistani teenager explained that when she lived in Bradford her Pakistani neighbours were continually in and out of the house: 'My mum got sick of it so she put the TV right in front of the back door.... That's probably another reason for coming to London: it was so claustrophobic up there!'
- *Continuity in place.* Emotional attachments to place can become consolidated over time. Length of residence can therefore be important. However, this in turn depends on a variety of factors, such as how people perceive and respond to demographic and physical changes in their neighbourhood and whether they are in a position to choose where they live. For example, a Kosovan Albanian had grown increasingly attached to her local area and its amenities since arriving in Newham in 1999, but was growing worried that she would eventually be moved into new temporary accommodation in a different area or even a neighbouring borough. Routines connected with work,

education and leisure that take a person outside the local area could sometimes confine a person's place attachment to the home or limit their use of local public spaces. For example, a member of the health walkers' group had lived in Newham since arriving from the Caribbean during the early 1960s but it was only after she had retired from her job in central London at the end of the 1990s that she started to forge a stronger relationship with her local area and its various public open spaces. In contrast, a white female resident who spent most of the day in the neighbourhood had built up a more intimate relationship with local public spaces and other people.

- *Local resources.* The presence of local facilities were acknowledged, particularly by young people and parents with small children, as a central aspect in allegiances to neighbourhood. A mother, for instance, compared her estate with where she grew up in Leytonstone, a nearby neighbourhood: 'I do love Leytonstone, I love the area where my family is, but again there is nothing over there for the kids, whereas in Newham my kids have got everything on their doorstep. They've got the club, the park, the leisure centre.' Not everybody was satisfied with what was available. A number of teenagers and young adults complained about a lack of night-time entertainment venues in their area.
- *Distinctiveness.* Certain physical and social characteristics, such as the layout of housing, the nearby presence of a premiership football stadium or the ethnic diversity of the residential population could distinguish, either favourably or unfavourably, the area from other places. Certain public spaces – like a local market – were also perceived as unique assets that played a key part in the borough's place identity. A Black African man considered the market as the principal 'landmark' in the local area, while an Indian man in his seventies saw it as a node that attracted shoppers from far and wide: 'It is a centre point for the whole of the East End. People come from all around ... even from Hertfordshire and Essex.'

A few informants singled out negative aspects, such as anti-social behaviour and disorder in outdoor spaces in order to underline their dissatisfaction with the area. Recent research (Félonneau, 2004) has suggested how '*urbanophilia*' (enthusiasm for urban life) and '*urbanophobia*' (antipathy for urban life) can directly influence people's perceptions of disorder and incivilities in their area. A Filipino man interviewed professed to prefer the countryside to the city and dwelt on the presence of groups of youths in local streets, while a white British man who had recently moved from a provincial town was particularly enthusiastic about the diversity of his new area and considered youth-related problems (his house had in fact been pelted with eggs when he first moved in) as something not specific to the city: 'I'm not blaming the area for that because I think you get that anywhere – even in little villages. Kids tend to hang around the town square or the local phone box because they don't have enough to do, I suppose.'

Types of social encounters in public space

A strong feature of both interviews and discussion groups was that informants tended to describe public open spaces in terms of their interaction with other people rather than focusing simply on the places themselves. Their narratives highlighted the importance of the relationship between people and place. Two general types of social interaction in public open spaces were discussed: casual social encounters, such as chance meetings on a street, and organised social events and activities, for instance, a carnival in a park. However, public spaces were not always perceived as social arenas but were also valued for providing opportunities to be alone.

Casual social encounters in public space: routine and serendipitous

The opportunity for informal interaction was one of the most valued aspects of public open spaces. Casual encounters ranged from meetings with friends and neighbours in residential areas to brief exchanges with strangers in markets and shopping streets. Casual social interaction can itself be divided into two types: *routine* encounters and *serendipitous* encounters.

Routine social encounters occurred on a regular basis. These could be pre-arranged and occur in a set place and at a set time. As observed on one of the shopping streets, they could be and often were facilitated by contacts by mobile phone. However, most of the time they were both unorganised and unmediated while being more or less anticipated. These encounters often helped to maintain loose ties between neighbours and familiar strangers but could also provide the first step towards friendships. An Indian woman, for example, described how, over the past decade, she had regularly seen the same person on a local street during her morning walk to work: 'It started with a smile and now in the past couple of months she's started to say "hello", and I say "hello" back.... You get a nice feeling, especially early in the morning when you're grumpy to come to work!'

Serendipitous encounters could sometimes result from both regular and occasional use of spaces. Unexpected meetings were often described with the most enthusiasm, and where these were associated with a particular space so the importance of this space as a social arena was enhanced. For instance, an Indian man in his late sixties enthused about a local market: 'People we haven't seen for a few years suddenly we'll see them in the market. "Hello! Where are you living? Where have you disappeared?" That's the social thing about markets.'

Routine meetings between people are principally seen to take place where people's everyday paths are most likely to cross: semi-domestic spaces (such as forecourts to flats and houses) and residential streets but also local shopping centres. Places located outside the immediate neighbourhood arena that draw a greater number of people, such as a market or a main street, are more likely to also be settings for serendipitous encounters.

Local parks were the settings for both routine and serendipitous encounters. For certain people, especially youths and parents with small children, parks provided informal places for meeting peers. However, with the exception of the small neighbourhood park in the study area, few people in the study actually discussed parks as spaces of casual social interaction. Parks were often associated with organised trips – for instance, a family outing – and tended to be perceived in terms of the facilities on offer and the activities that were conducted in them. It was when parks were used on a frequent basis, as cut-through routes to somewhere else, or for mundane activities like walking a dog, that people were more likely to acknowledge their everyday encounters with others. A white British woman, who had started to jog around a nearby park, had been able to become acquainted with her fellow keep-fit enthusiasts:

'Because you're doing the same thing and you've got a space in common. You might smile the first day you see them and you might the second day as well. And you might both collapse in a heap the third day and say hello and you do get to know people, not on a deep level, but if you saw them down the street you'd say hello. And that's the beginning of a community.'

The woman saw these initial casual encounters as the potential basis for closer relations. The salience of informal exchanges in public space is a running theme throughout this report. Here it is worth noting how the 'street' creeps back into her narrative as a space for future encounters.

Organised activity in public space

Organised social activities can be divided into two main types: *public open-air events*, that might be institutionally organised (such as the borough show) or self-organised (for instance, a community initiative in a rented space); and *organised recreation and pursuits*, which, in Newham, ranged from informal regular activities, such as health walks to more formal team sports, such as Sunday football leagues. Organised encounters were associated primarily with green spaces, and to a lesser extent with main streets.

Compared with the detailed descriptions of people's everyday casual encounters, there was relatively little discussion about organised social activities in public open spaces. This is not to say these were not important for some people. Informants who discussed organised encounters in any detail tended to be 'organisers' rather than 'participants', and would indicate their social benefits for other people. For example, a teaching assistant at a primary school ran after-school football matches in the adjacent small park; these had consolidated relationships between children that had previously been confined within the school gates.

Self-organised community events were attributed far greater social significance than 'institutional' events, such as carnivals and open-air concerts, which were rarely mentioned. The older women in the coffee shop group described the regular fun-days once organised by local church groups on a nearby playing field as an important focal point for local people who otherwise did not have a space of association. These events had assumed greater significance in their memories now that a school had been built on the field.

Organised social activity could also be informal. For instance, members of the health walkers' group underlined how their walks had quickly transformed from a strictly health-oriented activity among strangers into a weekly social occasion. It had also given them the confidence and the stimulus to go for walks in local parks or along footpaths on their own.

Spaces of no encounter

Besides providing opportunities for casual and organised social interaction, public open spaces can also be, intentionally and unintentionally, places where no encounters occur. A number of older informants stressed the importance of seeking quiet spaces. For example, a Black Caribbean female member of the health walkers' group liked to walk along the Green Way (a footpath over a sewage outfall that cuts across the borough) because this provided her with what she termed a 'solitary space' where she could enjoy her own company.

People sometimes curtailed their encounters in public open spaces. A black British woman in the south of the borough explained how she sometimes preferred to drive her car around her local neighbourhood in order to avoid meeting people on the streets. She had got to know so many local residents as a result of her previous job as a community worker that it would always take a long time to reach her chosen destination if she stopped to chat. Other people valued their ability to regulate interactions with neighbours. For example, a young Pakistani mother explained that she could just smile at people on her street if she did not want to stop to talk to them: 'Sometimes it is good to keep a distance. I know they do that as well. It is also nice to know that you can stand and talk to them if ever you wanted to.'

As shall be discussed in Chapter 4, the potential for solitude as well as social connection in public spaces can also be important for people's sense of well-being.

Prerequisites for social interaction in public open space

The social encounters afforded by public spaces varied in importance for different people. One significant mediating factor was a person's age and life stage. For young people, for instance, certain spaces were used to meet with a pre-existent, often small, network of friends. Very little reference was made by young people to casual or organised encounters with other people. Certain types of space were considered more significant by some age groups. Teenagers often spoke about relatively quiet places, such as parks and residential streets with perhaps the odd shop where they could be with their peers. Many adults, on the other hand, were more likely to discuss the social role of busy streets and markets. Regardless of informants' different experiences, a number of general circumstances influenced their use of spaces, such as proximity, while some factors had a more specific influence on social interaction in public spaces. For example:

- *Proximity.* A number of teenagers mentioned local nondescript spaces around their homes, such as a telephone box and street railings that had been transformed into hang-out places, while a frail 70-year-old African Caribbean man underlined the importance of having a market at the bottom of his road because it alleviated his sense of isolation. However, proximity was less important for members of the market campaign group who travelled up to a couple of miles from their different neighbourhoods to visit the market. They were highly committed to the market and appreciated the chances it offered to meet other people; their activities in the campaign also gave them a particular purpose for using the space.
- *Endurance.* Just as length of residence can influence people's attachments to their local area, the continuity of public spaces and common functions over time were widely seen as key to encounters with other people. Regular encounters on residential streets and in a small neighbourhood park, for instance, helped to build an individual sense of community and were perceived as a basis for establishing closer ties. In another example, the long-term use of a local market supported the maintenance of extended family networks and wider ties.
- *Familiarity.* A general sense of familiarity with the surroundings was also a key issue, although this did not necessarily imply knowledge of other users. Indeed, a market and a busy commercial thoroughfare were considered important because they were both familiar spaces of interaction and at the same time places where informants might come into contact with strangers.
- *The freedom to linger.* While the use of public space might involve a particular activity, like shopping, for example, many informants underlined the importance of being able to enter and to remain in spaces without a specific reason. Discussions often emphasised the impromptu and incidental uses of public space; from mothers on a housing estate who sat in front of their houses 'watching the world go by' to Asian elders for whom the local market was a comfortable space to linger: 'We can go to the market when we have nothing else to do. We don't have to decide.'
- *Facilities.* The presence of resources and facilities give purpose to a space and, as Jane Jacobs (1961) noted, can have a direct impact on the social vitality of public spaces. Examples, such as the street corner outside a local mosque and a small park next to a primary school extended the opportunities for social interaction afforded by these facilities. The first example facilitated the maintenance of homogeneous ties; the

second was perceived as a key arena where both parents and children could interact after school. A lack of facilities can sometimes limit the quality of people's encounters. For instance, an Indian woman was enthusiastic about the fact that she frequently bumped into old-time acquaintances on her local busy shopping street but was frustrated that the absence of places to sit down (such as cafés with outdoor tables) meant that her fleeting exchanges could never turn into more meaningful encounters.

- *Supportive physical characteristics.* The physical layout of a space and the surrounding built environment as well as the siting of certain features were sometimes important. For example, a cul-de-sac on a housing estate provided the opportunity for ball games and water fights among children and interaction between neighbours. On the other hand, a member of the health walkers' group who also lived on a cul-de-sac refused to associate her acquaintance with local residents to the design of her street. It was only since she had retired and started to use her locality more that this closer acquaintance had come about.

Lastly, and interestingly, given their prominence in neighbourhood satisfaction surveys, issues such as crime, anti-social behaviour and the poor state of the environment rarely dominated people's discussions in considering influences on their social usage of public spaces. This does not mean that such issues were not considered problems or that public spaces were seen to be free from conflict. The next chapter, for example, will discuss how experiences of racism have restricted some people's use of public spaces. The fear of crime in a few cases could prevent an individual from using a space. A Bosnian Roma member of the refugee group, for example, claimed that she avoided a main street at night because of prostitution and drug dealing. However, this did not prevent her from appreciating the street's vibrant atmosphere during the day (moreover, her allegation was disputed by other members who thought that such activities were not specific to this one street). It is important to stress that people generally provided positive reasons for their interactions in public space and tended not to elaborate on the absence of negative elements, even if these did arise in discussions. Noticeably, the few informants who described their experiences of public open spaces, especially at neighbourhood level, in *categorically* negative terms appeared to possess fewer contacts with local people and to be generally less attached to their local area.

Public spaces as social spaces

This chapter has suggested that the possibilities for social encounters in public open spaces – the exchanges at the local market, the hustle and bustle of a shopping street, the brief conversations on residential streets – were often key to people's attachments to their local area in Newham. For example, members of the Asian elders' group, who had lived in the same part of central Newham since the 1960s, expressed a desire to remain in a familiar space where they maintained everyday contact with friends and neighbours, despite the fact that their children had left the borough and that some of them could afford to move out to more salubrious residential areas.

There was often a symbiotic relationship between people's attachments to their residential area and their experience of public spaces. In other words, while commitment to the local area and its people often influenced the use and experience of public open spaces, so too the opportunities afforded by public spaces could lead to greater allegiance to place and communities. Acknowledging this dynamic relationship and the pivotal role of social encounters within it encourages a more sensitive and less prescriptive understanding of the different roles that public spaces play in people's everyday lives. People's views of public spaces therefore need to be seen in the wider context of their connections to place and other people.

Ethnicity and public space

By the time I arrived it felt as though I had travelled out of London altogether and come to another city; or another continent. The street that ran past Upton Park tube station resembled more closely than seemed possible a Pakistani street bazaar. At first sight the crowds milling along the pavements appeared almost entirely Asian, many of the men in shalwar qamiz beneath tatty Argyle sweaters or bulky down jackets, the women in saris and headscarves.

On this street the world can dine
Here wonders can be seen
And those of us who live here shine
For everything is green.

These two quotations both describe Green Street in central Newham. The first is an extract from *Kandahar cockney* by West London journalist James Fergusson (2004). The book recounts the true story of a young Afghan man, befriended by Fergusson during an assignment to Afghanistan, who, after fleeing to Britain, settles in Newham. Through their burgeoning relationship, the author describes the experience of discovering a part of East London for the first time. The second quotation is a poem by the Black poet Benjamin Zephaniah, who has lived in the north of the borough since the early 1980s. During the course of 2004 and 2005, the verse was regularly displayed on an electronic notice board on Green Street, in between announcements about forthcoming community events, general council information and calls to back the Olympic bid. The two quotes represent very different responses to the multi-ethnic composition of the street: the former relays the exotic allure that the space holds for an outsider, the latter verbalises the terse musings of a Newham resident about an everyday space.

As pointed out at the beginning of this report, Newham has the highest non-white population of any local authority area in Britain and is characterised by a diverse range of ethnic groups that make it distinct from many other areas, though similar to other diverse neighbourhoods in other parts of London and some cities elsewhere in the country. People taking part in the study reflected a broad cross-section of ethnic backgrounds. Most people were either enthusiastic or indifferent about the ethnic composition of the borough, while for a minority this was a cause of frustration or resentment. A young Pakistani man, for instance, was 'irritated' by the lack of communication between different groups. The general sense among many informants was that relations in the borough were generally healthier than elsewhere. The area had not experienced the riots that had occurred in northern England during the summer of 2001, while the British Nationalist Party in Newham was very weak compared, for instance, with the neighbouring borough of Barking and Dagenham. However, despite people's perceptions, the area continues to suffer serious problems. It has some of the highest levels of reported racial harassment in the country (*Guardian*, 2000; Metropolitan Police Authority, 2004). People's discussions of public spaces therefore provide an important insight into the complicated and contradictory nature of everyday experiences of ethnicity.

This chapter starts by looking at how different places are perceived in terms of ethnicity

and how this might affect the usage of public space. It then considers the role that public spaces can play in supporting ethnically based (in particular, Asian) social networks. Finally, it explores how different public spaces are perceived to encourage amiable exchange, or, conversely, to be the sources of conflict and tension. Obviously, culturally mixed public spaces alone cannot be expected to tackle structurally embedded problems of racism or ethnic segregation. Rather, the more pertinent question is how different spaces might be seen to support the routine negotiation of diversity and foster tolerance between different groups.

The ethnic labelling of public spaces

Many public open spaces in Newham are commonly understood and distinguished in terms of ethnicity. This may be due to specific facilities, such as 'ethnic' shops, or to the different users, or it may result from a space being located in a residential area that is considered to be dominated by a particular group. In both the discussions and the interviews, the 'ethnic labelling' of public open spaces often reflected the ways in which people made sense of the cultural diversity of Newham and, at the same time, how they perceived the identities of different places. For this reason, it provides a useful starting point for examining the relationship between ethnicity and public open space.

- Green Street, a busy thoroughfare that runs down the centre of the borough, was commonly described as an 'Asian' street. This was largely due to the high concentration of mainly Asian-owned restaurants and specialist food, jewellery and clothes shops that draw people from across Newham and the rest of London. The street is also situated at the heart of a residential area with one of the highest Asian populations in the borough.⁴ According to one Pakistani informant 'Green Street is like a bazaar. It is never closed.'
- Queens Market, located off Green Street, was instead often dubbed a 'multicultural' space where no single group was seen to dominate. This was reflected in the variety of products and foodstuffs on sale and the people who traded and shopped there. This traditional East End market had become a focal point, initially for various Asian and African Caribbean groups, later Somalis and West Africans, and most recently East Europeans.
- The high street and adjacent market mall in nearby East Ham were regarded as more typically English. Although some remembered the high street as once the undisputed commercial heart of the borough with a range of independent shops, 'Englishness' is now associated more with the national chain shops, the 9am to 6pm opening hours and the less crowded pavements. However, in terms of the users, it was regarded as far more ethnically mixed than Green Street. Meanwhile, the market mall was singled out by various informants of different ethnic backgrounds as the uninteresting opposite to Queens Market. A young Pakistani woman, for instance, commented: 'That's a weird market, and lots of weird stalls that don't interest people. There is one stall that has been there for ages – I think it's for English people – jellied eels and all that stuff that I've never thought of tasting!'
- Parks in Newham were not generally perceived as the domain of any one ethnic group. For example, Plashet Park in East Ham was extremely popular among Asians as a place to play cricket, hockey and football and in the past has been used to hold community events such as a Pakistani sports day. However, it is never described as an

⁴ Asians form 65.5% of the total population of Green Street East ward and 65.6% of Green Street West ward.

'Asian' or 'Pakistani' park. Indeed, when it was not packed with Asian men and youths on Sundays, it was a very mixed space. Unlike streets or markets, parks were not characterised by ethnic facilities. Moreover, people tended to perceive parks (although not necessarily neighbourhood green spaces) in terms of the range of activities they were able to support and their aesthetic qualities rather than in terms of a 'park public'.

Ethnically specific descriptions of spaces reflect the frequency and intensity with which places are used and the varying ways in which ethnicity is understood. Some older white British informants used a few simplistic categories such as 'coloured' and 'Indian' to brand places they rarely visited. Other people provided more detailed ethnic 'maps' that considered national, cultural and religious differences and the extent to which the cultural mix of a place might change over time. For example, an Albanian Kosovan woman described Green Street's sudden transformation during a home match of West Ham United whose stadium is located at the southern end of the street:

'When there is a football match you can only see English people. And sometimes I'm thinking where do these people come from? There's only English people. All the pubs are just full of English people. Asian people can't go in. I don't know why – I'm not drinking or nothing, but I notice. Even in the street: only English. I feel good. I say, OK, at least I've seen English people because there are no English here [normally].'

Ethnic labels hold different meanings for different people. In the case of Green Street, terms such as 'Asian Street' or 'Little India' can play a positive role in expressing place identity and a sense of pride. These same images were used in a negative way by some white British informants in the south of the borough to underline their physical and social detachment from the street. A teenager on a Beckton housing estate insisted: 'The Asians [here] are nice people, but down there [in Green Street] they think they rule the place!' For non-Asian residents who lived locally, Green Street's ethnic composition was discussed in a more matter-of-fact way that reflected their everyday relationship with the street. While some white British informants complained, for instance, about the proliferation of foreign languages, they also talked dispassionately about their frequent visits to the convenience stores, bakers and supermarkets situated around the tube station. One woman, for instance, located 'Little Asia' on a particular section of the street, while the part around the station was considered more mixed.

People can be deterred from visiting neighbourhoods that are thought to be racist or unwelcoming to a particular group. However, the association of public spaces with one or more ethnic groups does not necessarily influence the extent to which places are used but rather reflects people's different relationships with public space and their experience of ethnic difference. Moreover, the common tendency to label places ethnically also underlines how contact with ethnic diversity often occurs foremost in public open space.

The role of public spaces for different ethnic groups

Public open spaces can support activities and provide opportunities for different ethnic groups. During the course of the research, numerous examples arose of public spaces being used in particular ways, from Pakistani and Bangladeshi youths celebrating Eid on Green Street to South Americans fixing a net between two trees and organising games of volleyball in Plashet Park. Many ethnic minority informants recounted how friends and family who had left Newham had led more private lives and made little use of their local public open spaces. An Indian woman explained how relatives who moved out to suburban

Essex did not even use their local park and briefly moved back to Newham because they missed their old support networks and the ethnic-based facilities in the borough.

Public spaces might be used on a temporary and periodic basis, for instance, when parks are a setting for community events. These occasions are important because they can bring members of a group together who might not otherwise remain in regular contact. Other spaces play a more everyday role in people's lives. First-generation Asians described Green Street and Queens Market as places that they felt comfortable to use because there were familiar others, fewer language barriers and direct reminders of their countries of origin. Importantly, both places supplied them with foods and consumables that they would not find elsewhere. A 37-year-old Pakistani resident on a nearby housing estate described how her elderly mother-in-law was particularly attached to Green Street and had built up the confidence to go there on her own. This is one of the reasons why her family had decided not to move to a quieter area in suburban Essex:

'My grandmother said 'Oh, I don't want to go because I've got Green Street round the corner. And there's the Asian centre by the market, and I want to have that there.' Obviously [in Essex] there's all that greenery and you hardly see a person walk down the road. So my husband gave up the idea last year.'

Many younger second- or third-generation Asian interviewees had more functional relationships with Green Street and Queens Market. While they would use the 'ethnic' shops to buy specific items such as Asian ingredients for meals or outfits for special occasions, they did not consider the street or the market as important social arenas in their daily lives. Some informants indicated inter-generational tensions and different attitudes about public open spaces. A young Pakistani mother complained about the 'chauvinistic' behaviour of older Pakistani men who rarely helped her as she negotiated Green Street with her shopping and her child in a pushchair: 'If I'm not going to buy clothes, I'd try to avoid that street. It's too busy first of all. I would say people are very rude such as like the older Asian generation – they don't hold the doors open for you or anything like that.'

Some minority ethnic informants considered Newham as culturally limited compared with the cosmopolitanism of central London. Younger, single Asian informants enjoyed visiting the West End and other places such as the *shisa* bars on Edgware Road, partly as a form of escape from their 'community' but mainly because such places offered opportunities for social encounters and experiences that the local area did not provide.

There is then a need to be careful in describing places as having particular roles for different ethnic communities. Whose community are we looking at in Green Street? While spaces may support activities and social networks for members of groups, the ethnicity of a person is never the only factor influencing how public space is used. Rather, the research highlights how the use and experience of public spaces is also affected by other factors, in particular age and gender.

Spaces of ethnic interaction

Perceptions of good relations between ethnic groups in Newham were raised by many residents as a reason for liking the locality. But while public spaces might be frequented by a range of different groups, this did not necessarily mean that there was any contact between them. The Kosovan and Bosnian group's descriptions of ethnically mixed areas were a result of their accumulated observations as they had (been) moved around and got to know the borough. They indicated parallel rather than integrative relations between ethnic groups. Interaction depended not only on opportunities for encounter

but on the propensity of people to mix with others. While some groups appeared to be organised into separate, self-interested communities, for numerous people – especially younger people – ethnic difference was considered a normal aspect of Newham life and interaction happened effortlessly. The questions that need to be asked, therefore, are first, whether there are public open spaces where interaction between different groups is seen to occur and, second, why they might be important to some people.

During the discussion groups and interviews, two very different kinds of public open space were principally mentioned in connection with mixing with different groups: first, a bustling market that drew people from across the borough and beyond and second, the neighbourhood spaces of residential areas.

Queens Market was considered by many people to be the ‘multicultural heart of the borough’, not simply because of the range of international products and the users it attracted, but because it encouraged casual encounters between different ethnic groups who would otherwise not come into contact. According to a female member of the market campaign group, this applied both to shoppers and traders:

‘Next to the Bengalis selling biscuits is a Jewish guy selling curtains. They would never have met a Jewish bloke.... It’s most unlikely that they’d find themselves in a colleague situation where they can ask questions, they can joke with him.... And he could ask them about their religion. I can’t see another space where that could possibly happen. You could set up a society to bring Jews and Muslims together: he wouldn’t turn up and they wouldn’t turn up, because these sorts of outfits attract special people.’

Such exchanges were seen as part of an everyday urban experience. It is this very ordinariness that was considered the most valued aspect of the market. Unlike the market, Green Street was not described as a place where different groups encountered one another. While for many local people it was a place where they invariably bumped into friends and acquaintances, its crowded pavements, the lack of suitable meeting spaces and the fact that it was primarily a space of transit meant that it was less conducive for engagement between strangers. By contrast, the market, with its wide aisles and unused spaces in between stalls, was crucially a place where people could linger at will. While encounters might not always be meaningful, they were enabled because the market was an inclusive site of daily routines, as a member of the same discussion group pointed out: ‘You don’t have to have a reason. You might just go to have a mosey around. Or right, you might say, “I’m going to buy some fish”. Or, you’re going to have a natter. It’s a very inclusive space. You could be anybody.’

Neighbourhood and semi-domestic spaces, such as residential streets and shared forecourts for houses and flats, played a different role, as they commonly provided the first point of contact with neighbours of different ethnic groups. Echoing a practice once common to the East End, when sitting by the front step was a popular form of sociability, a white British woman had got to know her Asian and African Caribbean neighbours by sitting with her friend out on her front drive. A black British man who lived in a small block of flats had first encountered his white neighbours on the green space in front of the block. A Pakistani woman, who thought it simpler and safer to stay with one’s ethnic or religious group, nevertheless suggested that her habitual use of neighbourhood spaces over time was an instrumental factor in good relations with her largely white neighbours. Many informants of all ethnicities commented on how the exchange of food was an important means for establishing and maintaining ties between different residents. People also indicated the key role that children played in drawing families together, which led to continued contact in local spaces, as a Pakistani mother commented:

It's only because our children have grown up together and we see the same faces. I mean, I would say hello to anyone if I were walking past them everyday. But if you're not having anything to do with one another then I don't think anyone would really bother. I think that is for everyone.'

Some people referred to other neighbourhood spaces that were not located in the immediate vicinity of the home. For instance, an Albanian Kosovan described the local school gates as the only public open place where she could meet and talk to other non-Albanian speaking mothers. Informal games and sports in the neighbourhood park in the interview area were seen by some residents as the principal means of encounter between young people. The local primary school located next to the park was also seen as a fundamental place of interaction. Several informants spoke about how they had first met their neighbours living on the same street in the school. The lobby in particular was a relaxing and welcoming setting where local mothers (and a few fathers) were able to pass the time with other parents. These meetings had led to a greater shared use of the park, in particular during after-school visits to the play area. Together, the school and the park were seen by some people as bringing different communities closer together. According to an Asian youth worker at the new community centre, before the school and park were built, the patch of ground had been a dividing line between the predominantly white housing estate on the west side and the mainly Asian area of privately owned terraced housing opposite, whereas now these facilities provided reasons for contact and exchange across potential cultural divides.

Spaces of tension or no encounters

Some neighbourhood spaces were seen as places of tension and conflict. A 13-year-old Afghan male described how bullying by older white and 'Palestinian' youths had stopped him from using the neighbourhood park in the study area. A white British woman resident on a housing estate who had strong ties with members of her own ethnic group and had good relations with many of her other neighbours admitted that there was still a level of racism on the estate, predominantly among teenagers. Another resident who had experienced racial harassment on the same estate was upset that almost nobody had come forward to offer her solidarity. One person's idea of healthy ethnic relations might be someone else's experience of hell; individuals' experience of the same neighbourhood can be very different. In any case, well-used neighbourhood spaces and a good rapport with one's immediate neighbours is not a guarantee against a person experiencing racism, nor an assurance of interaction across cultures. For instance, a member of the Kosovan and Bosnian discussion group who lived in the south of the borough had got to know her 'very friendly English' neighbours but had experienced problems with local ('black and white') youths who had pelted her house with eggs. She did not experience any such trouble when she lived in the north of the borough where she had very little contact with her neighbours 'because all the people there were refugees and every family lives for itself'.

In neighbourhood spaces there was a much clearer distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' than in places such as the general market and there was sometimes a greater sense of ownership of the space among residents. The perceived intrusion of outsiders could lead to tensions. Many of the people interviewed spoke about an extended 'Palestinian' family who lived in various parts of the borough, including a nearby tower block, and who used the neighbourhood park on a regular basis. While some youths from this group were known to bully local children and dabble in drug dealing, other activities, such as family picnics, which would be seen as normal in another park, instead became a source of conflict over issues such as noise and litter, and represented, for some residents, a threat to their sense of ownership of the space.

The neighbourhood public spaces examined here also tended to be regulated by unofficial rules that were established and enforced by long-term (although not necessarily white) residents. One of the key rules mentioned by a range of people regarded the maintenance of the space between one's front door and the street. An elderly white British woman on the estate complained that 'they' (that is, ethnic others) did not keep their fronts tidy. A Filipino man who took pride in the fact that his garden was probably the best-kept on the whole street, believed some people might not share his enthusiasm for horticulture: '[Asians] are probably not interested in gardens. It's an English thing.... It's probably because they are earning money I suppose. They haven't got time.' These unwritten rules and social norms not only served to maintain a sense of order but were often used to legitimate prejudices against certain groups on cultural rather than racial grounds. The unconscious breaking of rules – the parking of a car in the wrong space, the inattentive disposal of rubbish, the lack of care for a front lawn – could lead to people being ostracised or sometimes harassed.

Public spaces' potential for 'inter-ethnic understanding'

Ash Amin (2002) has argued that public open spaces in cities are unlikely to encourage 'inter-ethnic understanding' because they are not 'spaces of inter-dependence and habitual engagement' (p 12). Rather, he suggests, people are more likely to come to terms with ethnic difference in places of more regular association such as the workplace, schools, youth centres and sports clubs 'where dialogue and "prosaic negotiations" are compulsory' (Amin, 2002, p 12). So, are we expecting too much of public spaces?

For many informants, spaces of association, such as clubs or groups based around communities of interest, do indeed provide key sites of engagement. A day centre was a place where the Albanian and Bosnian women could speak to compatriots but also where they were able to meet and work alongside people of different origins, such as Lithuanians, Pakistanis and Somalis. A Sikh temple off Green Street was used by the market campaign group for its public meetings. This was seen as an open, welcoming space. However, the relationships consolidated between people during these meetings were often initiated in the market itself and later fostered through their collective mobilisation over public space. In fact, the market campaign group was the most multi-ethnic discussion group, consisting of white British, Black Caribbean and Asian informants. It was a mixed group also in terms of gender and, to some extent, age group.

While direct links between public space and 'inter-ethnic understanding' can appear tenuous, therefore, this research suggests nevertheless that there *are* public open spaces, like the market, that people value as arenas of regular engagement between different groups. Thus, public open spaces do have a role to play in assisting the development of inter-ethnic understanding. However, certain informal rules and boundaries in places can sometimes hinder interaction. The neighbourhood park was a place where people mixed but was also a site of tensions and racism. For this reason, the informal after-school football matches in the park involving both boys and girls from different ethnic groups (organised by a teaching assistant and local resident) provided an important chance to build pupils' affective ties with the space and to render cultural differences a normal aspect of local public life. In order to harness their potential for maintaining and improving inter-ethnic relations, public spaces need to be understood not simply as sites where people, under the right circumstances or with the necessary encouragement, might come together but as everyday settings where a range of interests and attachments to place are able to converge and evolve.

Public space and well-being

Well-being is understood as a positive concept; a dimension of a 'social model' of health that locates individual experience within social contexts (Bowling, 1991; Blaxter, 2004). Issues connected to the effects of policy interventions on people's perceptions of their well-being are gaining prominence (see, for example, Dolan, 2005). Much is already known about influences such as the role of social networks, social support, humour and leisure activities as well as job satisfaction on people's quality of life, well-being and perceptions of happiness (see, for example, Diener and Ratz, 2000). Recently, concerted attempts have been made to examine how such questions play out in public space. The ways in which people describe their experiences of public spaces (and other local features and resources) can reveal the contexts in which their well-being is experienced (Ellaway et al, 2001; Airey, 2003).

Recent research, especially in environmental psychology, has tended to underline the restorative qualities of the natural environment over urban settings (see, for instance, Korpela and Hartig, 1996). While the potential benefits of natural elements such as greenery, water and wildlife are indisputable, this emphasis has deflected attention away from people's day-to-day relationships with the built environment and other aspects of urban life. This chapter examines people's narratives about places in Newham, both inside and outside the immediate confines of a 'neighbourhood', in order to consider critically the potential benefits and adverse effects of public space on a sense of well-being, both in a direct sense, and as mediated by social relations.

Everyday places

A wide range of everyday public spaces were described as having an influence on people's well-being, from local streets and footpaths to parks and markets.

Policy directives, such as the Cleaner, Safer, Greener agenda, have stressed the role that green spaces play in delivering physical and mental health benefits. Although numerous informants discussed the general healthy benefits of parks – as places to unwind, participate in informal leisure activities, observe others, seek solitude or simply to walk through – just as many people pointed to streets or markets as therapeutic spaces, albeit for different reasons. Their value lay more in the shared elements of public space, in the social vibrancy of urban life and seeing other people. For older informants especially, they can provide the main daily source of outdoor recreation and can be an enjoyable experience. Various nondescript neighbourhood spaces, often literally outside the front door, were also singled out by people who claimed strong social ties with their immediate surrounding area. For a middle-aged mother on a housing estate, the front drive provided temporary relief to her routine as a place where she could sit down and have a cup of tea with her neighbours.

'When you've got kids you haven't got time to get depressed. If I'm fed up I get my chair, I make myself a cup of tea and I go to sit on the drive ... and within two minutes I'll have 10 kids there talking to each other. That's what it's like living here.'

Places perceived as beneficial to well-being all possess basic properties. First, regardless of whether people are drawn to crowded or empty places, they need to feel comfortable and at ease in them. For example, the multi-ethnic Green Street provided a supportive environment for older Asian people who were not confident speaking English. Second, the area needs to be perceived as a pleasant place to be. People's ideas about what constitutes 'pleasant places' can differ greatly. A Pakistani woman thought Green Street was 'dirty and smelly' but conceded that her mother loved it. Environmental or aesthetic considerations are more likely to be important when they are seen to support activities deemed significant to well-being. For instance, a closed-off area by a pond in West Ham Park was identified by a Black Caribbean man as a peaceful spot for reflection. But litter and noise assume less relevance in descriptions of use and enjoyment of busy urban streets.

The complaints that people often make about public spaces do not necessarily diminish their positive influence on well-being. Rather, people are more likely to weigh up positive and negative aspects of places that are particularly important to their lives. A middle-aged white British mother saw the neighbourhood park as key to her physical and mental health even though she believed more money could be spent on improving facilities: 'I love being in the park.... It pisses me off that the park is in such a state but when you've had a good kick about with the kids it just makes you feel better.'

Informants also emphasised the special or unique elements of everyday spaces that were not always readily perceptible to an outsider and might not necessarily be determined by aesthetic criteria. For instance, a member of the market campaign group claimed that the unattractive physical structure of Queens Market concealed a very special space: 'Regardless of the architecture, the human heart that is beating there and the community that it is stimulating is something very special'.

Places of meaning

Public spaces are not just physical settings for everyday experiences. They also possess a host of subjective meanings that accumulate over time. Memories of favourite places can have an important influence on well-being. Intimate recollections of growing up – for example, a main road that was once a teenage stamping-ground – can create a sense of belonging. People sometimes recalled the shared elements of public space as significant within formative years. For a young Pakistani man, one park remained linked to family trips during childhood and is today the main local place where he goes to find solace:

'When we were kids we used to go to West Ham Park because there was this monkey bridge I liked ... I still go there sometimes on Saturdays for a walk ... I think it's just got that sentimental value of 'I know this place'.... My nan used to always take me there. She passed away and I was really close to her and that place reminds me of her.'

As well as particular people or events, public spaces can also recall other places that are valued by people. For example, many Asian elders enjoyed Green Street and Queens Market because these two sites reminded them of their places of birth. It was through these 'comfort zones' that they were also able to negotiate and make sense of the meaning of 'home', which was very much in Newham but was also linked to the Indian subcontinent.

However, memories of places can also be painful or frustrating as well as consolatory. Visits to places can be a reminder of happier times, as in the case of a young black British man who made solitary trips to a park where he once came with his family or

childhood friends. For elders who have become less mobile with age, certain public spaces, such as shopping streets, can hold poignant memories of times when they were more active and independent.

The extent to which memories of places are therapeutic can depend on how people experience and respond to changes in their local environment. People's relationships with everyday urban spaces are typically ambivalent: they are neither considered entirely healthy nor are they wholly unhealthy. However, attachments to places in the past that have fixed social and ethnic boundaries and are seen to have once held unequivocal benefits to well-being may not stand the test of time. For instance, the group of elderly white women who met weekly in a coffee shop complained that the supportive and social function of the pavements and front porches on their local streets had disappeared as a result of demographic changes in the area and a gradual withdrawal into private life. Other people saw public open spaces as more open and dynamic. Most people's memories of Queens Market were of a place that had evolved to reflect the new populations arriving in the borough. The market's accommodation of difference over time was considered integral to its identity by respondents.

Social environments

For most people, everyday public spaces provide opportunities both as places of interaction and as places of retreat. Public spaces that are able to bring people together and where friendships and support networks are made and maintained are key to a general sense of well-being. Both fleeting and more meaningful encounters in public spaces can provide relief from daily routines, sustenance for people's sense of community, and can alleviate tensions at home or in a neighbourhood. One white British mother described the significant effect a short walk to school can have:

When I'm at home I get really stressed with the kids. I'll leave the house and I'm totally stressed but I'll walk round to school, I see a couple of people [on the way], say hello, they smile, and it just all goes. By the time I go back home, I'm a very chilled, different person.

It was reported that simple gestures such as nods and smiles were often reassuring and could establish the basis for future, closer contact. For a young Pakistani woman whose recent decision to wear a headscarf had led to a number of derogatory comments aimed at her in public, the smiles from familiar strangers not only relieved stress but made her feel comfortable to be herself out in the public eye.

The social encounters in Queens Market made some people feel happy, safe and relaxed, and could raise their spirits. Meanwhile, a Kosovan woman who lived above a shop on Green Street explained how she had 'fallen in love' with the street and described more direct, restorative effects: 'Sometimes when I'm not all right or when I'm down, I sit by the open window and I just look out.' Not everybody enjoyed Green Street's vibrant atmosphere. For instance, a 24-year-old Pakistani man compared his dislike of the street with the therapeutic effects it had for his mother and grandmother and reflected that he might enjoy it in 30 years' time, 'but not at this stage of my life where I want to get away from this business'.

Of all the sites, parks in particular were seen to provide a less intense social environment that did not necessarily involve interaction. A young Pakistani mother appreciated the sense of empathy between different users during her trips to one of the borough's principal parks: 'You see everyone. You see old people, people just taking their dogs for a walk, and everyone is generally giving a little smile to each other.'

However, the more leisurely aspect of parks was also perceived as a source of discomfort by those who enjoyed mingling with people in busy spaces. A white British man remarked:

‘I feel quite happy to go to the market, I don’t feel I’m menacing anybody or that I’m menaced by anybody.... But what’s a man of my age in a park do? All right, if I’m sat, I could be reading a book, but unless I’m doing that, it’s “Oh, what’s he up to?”’

A mediating role for social encounters and social ties in relationships between spaces and well-being is not, of course, unique to public *open* spaces. Closed spaces such as community centres and cafés were additional locales for making supportive friendships, for example. For the Kosovan Albanian refugees dispersed across the whole of Newham, a day centre offered a convenient point of convergence that mitigated their sense of isolation and sustained the bonding ties that are generally beneficial to health. Many older people valued the relations that had been established in the day centres that they visited on a regular basis. As older people become increasingly frail or feel vulnerable, these centres can compensate for a partial withdrawal from neighbourhood spaces, but can also rebuild their confidence towards a return to public open spaces. The Asian elders group spoke enthusiastically about the picnics that their centre had organised in local parks and how they had started to venture out more often on their own.

Places of retreat

As we have already underlined, public spaces not only provide social settings but can also offer chances for people to be alone or, especially in the case of young people, to be with a small group of friends.

Places of retreat can be divided into three basic types:

- *Opportunities for reflection.* For instance, an 84-year-old African Caribbean man paid weekly visits to a nearby cemetery on his electric scooter. This was both a routine for getting out of the house and a space where he could be alone with the memories of his late wife. Environmental and aesthetic considerations were of particular importance in reflective spaces. For instance, some people mentioned the therapeutic effects of water. In an ironic contrast to times when the docks and allied industries were the social and economic lifeblood of Newham, a young Pakistani man sometimes visited the docks to be alone.
- *Opportunities to escape from the pressures of domestic life.* Some of the young people interviewed had carved out highly personalised spaces in the open air in order to create the privacy that they were unable to find at home. Such spaces ranged from the roof of a garden shed used by a 10-year-old boy as a special hideaway, to a secluded spot on a housing estate where a teenager would go to smoke. The temporary escape from domestic space was also extremely important for mothers. In order to take time out for herself, a young Pakistani mother sometimes drove to an out-of-town shopping mall:

Lakeside! That’s a place where I go quite a lot if I feel I need a break. Just to window shop.... Most of the times I go by myself. I leave the little ones with my husband. I went there last Sunday actually. Just the drive down is really nice, you can do 70 mph!... For me, that’s a relaxing day for me.

- *Opportunities to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city.* Opportunities for peace and quiet can change according to the time of day or year. A Pakistani female teenager enjoyed walking down her local high street at night 'when the lamplights are on full beam [and] it is absolutely deserted'. The desire for quiet places can also increase or decrease depending on a person's particular stage in their life. For instance, the same white British mother who valued the meetings made on her short trips to the school was no longer attracted to markets and busy streets because she now became frustrated by the 'pushing and shoving' of the people around her.

Negative aspects of public space: racism and disruptive behaviour

The experience of public space, of course, is not always positive. Two separate issues in particular were seen to have a detrimental impact on well-being in Newham: racism and the congregation of young people in public. Both issues were associated with the neighbourhood spaces around people's homes and not the more populated and mixed spaces such as the high streets and markets where demarcations between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' appeared less rigid.

While many members of minority ethnic groups claimed to feel safe and comfortable in Newham, a few recent arrivals in the area had experienced racism and prejudice against refugees, which they believed had a major impact on their physical and mental health. A Black African woman complained of increased back pains and stress as a result of racial harassment from a neighbour. She explained how she was much happier in her previous home in a mainly white suburb on the outskirts of East London where she had got on well with her neighbours and went out much more often: 'I felt fresh and at the weekend I liked to visit friends or travel into Central London. When you are stressed, you stay at home.' There were places close to her neighbourhood, such as Green Street, that she enjoyed visiting, but trips to these places had become less frequent. The withdrawal into her home had also hampered the possibility of establishing loose ties with local people with whom, she believed, she would otherwise have had contact. As a consequence, this racism had increased her sense of isolation.

The disruptive behaviour of youths who gather in neighbourhood spaces was also a topic of discussion for numerous adults, as well as young people. However, only a few informants actually saw this as having an adverse effect on their well-being. They included people who already held negative views about their area. A 34-year-old Black Caribbean man, who was the most scathing about his neighbourhood and wanted to move out of London, associated his worsening health with the youths hanging about on his street. 'I get [my panic attacks] mostly at home when they're hanging about, talking loudly ... going up and down on their mopeds, hanging out in their back gardens. Obviously I can't get away from them when I'm indoors. No doubt the environment has an effect.'

Other informants who complained about teenagers but who actively used their local spaces tended to have various coping strategies. For instance, many were likely to attempt contact with teenagers and to understand the reasons for their behaviour. A Filipino man, who lived close to a youth centre, claimed to get stressed when crowds hung around outside his house, but he had got to know them and had worked out which ones were the potential 'troublemakers'. White British women involved in interviews mapped out the different parts of their housing estate (from the 'posh road', where children were not allowed to play, to the 'top end', which they considered a trouble spot) to affirm the positive communal aspects of their own street where a degree of errant behaviour among local youths was tolerated. For the few people who had withdrawn into the private space of their homes and who saw their neighbourhood as

having provoked or exacerbated their ill-health, it was not so much the physical characteristics of the public spaces that were the root cause but rather the breakdown or complete absence of relations with local people.

This chapter has suggested that, while public open spaces can also be sites for the playing out of tensions and conflicts, a wide range of everyday spaces was perceived as having a positive influence on well-being in Newham. Some people derived restorative benefits from the opportunities provided by spaces to be alone, but for many others, it was the social value, the shared elements of public open space and its collective use, that were important. The social interactions that took place in public spaces not only gave sustenance to people's sense of community, but were also an important influence on their sense of well-being.

Regeneration and public space: a case study of Queens Market

It is a blustery but sunny Saturday afternoon in early December 2004. Queens Market is packed with people going about their weekend shopping trips. The smells of fish, meat and coriander waft through the air as the solitary cries of traders are drowned out by a multilingual babble. Four Black Caribbean men in their sixties hanging outside a kiosk taunt a fruit and veg trader about West Ham United's latest plight in the Championship. Groups of Asian and African women chat as they rummage through rolls of material on a stall tended by two young white men. In front of the canopy a few people are collecting signatures to 'save Queens Market'. One of them, a middle-aged Asian man, is relaying information in Hindi through a megaphone. Discarded empty boxes are littered around stalls and a number of plastic bags eddy in the aisles. In a quiet square adjoining the market, a few people are milling around a caravan belonging to a property development company. An exhibit has been erected displaying designs for a new complex featuring a superstore, a new market, shops and apartments. Leaflets are being handed out to the few passers-by, asking for their thoughts on the plans. Printed on the front of them are the words: 'The New Queens Market. Towards a Safe, Clean, Vibrant and Lively Shopping and Living Environment.' (Observation field notes, December 2004)

Reflections on a valued public space

Queens Market has operated next to Upton Park railway station in central Newham for just over 100 years. Since 1968, it has been located underneath an open-ended steel structure that also houses a series of permanent shops and kiosks. This busy general street market in Newham captured many of the features of public spaces valued by informants in this study.⁵ First, it was *a source of many people's attachments to their area*. It was deemed to be a key attraction that not only provided cheap fresh food and 'ethnic' produce that was not readily available elsewhere, but also provided the area with much of its character. Second, it was viewed as *a vibrant social arena*. One white British man likened it to a 'Roman forum'. It was a place where people felt comfortable to linger, serving as a setting for unexpected encounters and opportunities to meet new people. An Indian woman recounted how she had met a white British woman at the fabric stall in the market and had invited her to an embroidery class at a nearby day centre. Frequent use of the market had also helped to cement closer social relationships and reinforced a local sense of community.

Third, people's sense of comfort in the market was often tied to their appreciation of it as *a multi-ethnic and multilingual space*. It was a place of interaction not only between people of a particular ethnic group but also between different communities. This was not

⁵ Note: the term 'informants' in this chapter refers to both the discussion groups and the individual interviews but does not include the market campaign discussion group. The campaign is considered separately.

simply because of the diversity of people using the space for the same purpose, but because of the openness of the market itself. According to one Pakistani woman, the market encouraged tolerance of others as well as providing a rare environment where she would find herself speaking to strangers.

'People tolerate each other when they are in the market. You might bump into each other.... It doesn't matter. You move on. In that sense, you get to know people.... We meet different cultures. I might be buying vegetables that I don't know how to cook, and the lady from another part of India will tell me how to cook it. Normally I would never talk, I would never know such things. And you could hear the same story for many market users who go regularly.'

Fourth, the market played *an important role in promoting some people's sense of well-being*. While not catering to people seeking retreat, it acted as a 'fun' and 'uplifting' social environment. It was also often a source of fond memories of growing up. A black British man, who had continually used the market since childhood, recalls it as the place where he had his first experiences of employment and where shopping trips would transform into major social occasions involving members of his extended family:

'You used to play spot the black guy as you'd walk down there.... Once you hit the market you knew that is where you'd see a lot, because that's where you'd know your mums, your aunts and your uncles would go and shop and you'd always be meeting them.... They'd start to socialise there. The market has been there for years and it has been good.'

It also provided respite to those people who felt uncomfortable in some neighbourhood spaces. A 13-year-old Afghan boy who had been bullied by white teenagers in his local park saw the market as a sort of safe haven where the same individuals (who sometimes worked on the stalls) no longer posed a threat.

It must be stressed that not everybody liked Queens Market. Many younger people and children were among its most vociferous critics, variously describing the market as 'rubbish', 'smelly', 'trampy' and 'too noisy'. At the same time, younger people were far less interested in Queens Market as a social space. Their meeting points were often independently established in quieter or underused places. For a 24-year-old white British man, the market had only really been a meaningful place when, as a teenager, he used to hang around there with friends at night. But for others, it was a valued local space.

The proposed redevelopment of Queens Market

While Queens Market has clearly exhibited many of the desirable features of a successful public space, it has nevertheless become the site of a proposed regeneration scheme. The initial designs envisaged the replacement of the existing structure with a new shopping and residential complex fronted by a small plaza. At the centre of the redeveloped site would be a large superstore, flanked by retail units and blocks of flats, while the market area would be relocated into an adjoining space as a small gated market hall. Following consultation with traders, shopkeepers and shoppers in the market as well as local residents and businesses, the developers produced a revised plan that saw the supermarket reduced in size, the number of independent shops increased and a larger open-sided market hall that retained all the stalls currently operating in the market. Further alterations were made in autumn 2005, including the planned relocation of Green Street Library and a service centre into an 'iconic building' that would be built over the market.

The rest of this chapter considers how the proposed redevelopment of Queens Market has raised people's *public space consciousness* in Newham as the site has become a major focus of public debate. It is evident that within this debate the social value of the space has not always been considered as clearly as the economic issues, and there is a danger that this could undermine the potential for successful regeneration of the area.

For the London Borough of Newham and the developers, regeneration aims to improve the quality of the environment, increase the residential mix of the immediate area and provide a greater range of shopping facilities that would enable the area to compete with the new retail developments elsewhere in the borough. For local people, however, there are concerns that the market's unique identity could be undermined.

The outcomes of the regeneration scheme remain to be seen, but the public space consciousness it has created has gained its own momentum. Since early 2004, an umbrella group called Friends of Queens Market (FoQM), consisting of shoppers, traders, community organisations and local political parties, has campaigned to save Queens Market in its current form. Its members have argued that Queens Market is one of the most popular and successful general street markets in London that not only provides an important facility for local multi-ethnic communities, especially people on low incomes, but also attracts customers from across the capital and beyond. The chief worries are that that regeneration could destroy the market's unique appeal and jeopardise the livelihoods of traders and shopkeepers, as well as the low prices of produce on offer.

Conflicting ideas about Queens Market as a public space

The promoters of the redevelopment have recognised the vibrancy and popularity of Queens Market in its particular role as a source of cheap food. However, for the most part, the existing site was negatively portrayed as lacking aesthetic or design value and making bad use of space that could be reorganised more efficiently on a smaller, adjacent site. When the social, as opposed to commercial, aspects of the market were considered, these were invariably negative. It was presented as an unsafe and dirty place where prostitution and petty crime took place. The new market would be part of a cleaner, safer and more organised environment. New public space elements such as a plaza at the front of the development would render the shopping experience more inviting and pleasant (Green Street Community Forum, 2004; LBN, 2004a, 2004b); *Newham Recorder*, 2004; Muir, 2005).

By contrast, members of the public at community forum meetings (Green Street Community Forum, 2004) often spoke about how the market was a source of local pride, while the FoQM campaign group stressed that the market was a unique amenity, both as a shopping centre and as a social place. Most people acknowledged that the market in its current state was run down, but that this did not detract from its success and vitality. Much emphasis was also placed on the multicultural nature of the market.

Most of our interviewees and members of discussion groups who were not members of the campaign group spoke warmly of their experience of the market and the social opportunities it had afforded over a relatively long period of time. They thought that the general conditions in the current market needed to be improved but were critical about the plans to redevelop the site around a superstore. White British respondents on a nearby housing estate empathised with the plight of the traders, many of whom lived on the same estate. Others believed the regeneration scheme would remove a part of the local area's history and destroy a fundamental social space. A black British man who had used the market continuously since childhood commented that Newham would lose a 'landmark':

'I don't think they should get rid of it because it is tradition, it's been there for so long. People gather there, it's like a communities place – like "I'll meet you at the market" ... "I'll meet you at Queens Market at the first fruit stall down". It's like a landmark or traditional kind of place, and to take that away, I think you're taking a bit of history away.'

A young Pakistani woman talked about how she thought the proposed redevelopment would affect her grandmother, whose strong attachment to the place had been gradually built up over the years: 'I know my nan would be really upset ... because she's been going there since she's been living in the country ... she's met a lot of her friends there.... You always see people standing and chatting rather than shopping. My nan would definitely miss it.'

Even among those who disliked the current market, and would have welcomed a local superstore, there were many who criticised the regeneration plans, largely because they appreciated the market's advantages as a social resource for other people and also recognised its fragility. The white British man who used to meet friends there at night thought the current market was 'nasty' but was firmly against the redevelopment plans because it was 'the only East London market left'. Similarly, a 22-year-old Pakistani man drew parallels between the current scheme and the recent regeneration of nearby Rathbone Market in Canning Town,⁶ which some people thought had led to this market's shrinkage:

'I don't like the place, but I do understand why people are upset, that it's not going to be there in a couple of years' time.... There was a market in Canning Town as well, it wasn't as big as Queens Market, I mean it has just gone now, it's been taken apart.'

Redevelopment of a retail site – destruction of a social space?

Queens Market was seen by many of those taking part in the study, members of discussion groups and interviewees alike, as a flexible, multilayered space that accommodates a range of attachments, from those who view the market as part of a Cockney East End tradition to those who celebrate it as a space of ethnic diversity. Regardless of its actual physical state, no other space in the local area appeared to play such a valued social and cultural role for so many people. In contrast, promoters of the redevelopment tended to be highly critical of the market; it was not consonant with their vision of regeneration. But what, it could be asked, would a redeveloped market mean for the current usage and users of the market? Would, for instance, the anticipated arrival of a superstore and more affluent residents in the new flats transform the collective perception of it as an inclusive site? How far would the new complex encourage lingering, or tolerate democratic dissent, like the protesters against the redevelopment who set up their makeshift stall in the market?

Such questions go to the very heart of *public space*, and it is to be hoped that regeneration agencies will consider these issues when planning changes that will affect public spaces. More generally, the planned redevelopment raised some key issues about the role of public open space in urban regeneration. First, some of the reported statements made by the London Borough of Newham and its partners about the current market site and noted earlier could be seen to reflect an understanding of public spaces that underplays the role of spaces as everyday social or cultural arenas. There is a danger that the economic focus of regeneration can undermine the social value of public open

⁶ A series of events and new uses for Rathbone Market, such as a farmers' market, aim to rejuvenate the space.

spaces, in particular, the part they play in creating people's sense of attachment to a place and their potential, or actual, contribution to community cohesion and inter-ethnic relations.

Second, discussions on regeneration in central and local government as well as the media are typically dominated by architectural and design prescriptions about what constitutes good-quality public space. Consequently, there has been a tendency to overlook the important role that 'unexceptional' public open spaces play in people's everyday lives and their sense of community. While the growing concern for urban design has not automatically led to better-designed urban environments – as the recent report by Rogers and Urban Task Force (2005) has noted – current debates risk countenancing the redevelopment of those places deemed to be 'substandard'. Of all the spaces discussed in this part of Newham, the current market appeared to provide the widest range of social benefits. As numerous informants indicated, the undistinguished shell surrounding Queens Market had done nothing to hinder the hive of activity that took place underneath.

Conclusions and policy implications

This study has considered some of the ways in which public open spaces are understood, used and experienced by a range of people in a multi-ethnic area of East London. In particular, it has explored the social value of spaces, and their potential role in contributing to community cohesion and to individual well-being. As well as green spaces, the research embraced everyday kinds of public open spaces not usually considered in research or policy categorisations of public space. For many informants, it emerged that hard spaces such as shopping and residential streets, markets, street corners and forecourts were equally important in their social lives as local parks, if not more so.

The study also considered the different ways in which informants talk about their relationship with public open spaces. Some people spoke more fluently about their local area than individual spaces, while others were particularly conscious of the social and therapeutic aspects of certain places. A group of older women reflected on the community function that an apparently nondescript playing field had served prior to being built on. Another group had begun to reconsider their relationship with their local green spaces after participating in health walks along footpaths and in parks. The term *public space consciousness* has been used in this report to indicate the varying levels of discussion about public open space and the circumstances under which this takes place. This concept is not meant to legitimate the views of one person over another, nor does it imply that spaces discussed in less detail are not important for people. Rather, it underlines the need for a greater awareness of the contexts in which public spaces are experienced and valued, and demonstrates that people may discuss their relationships with spaces in connection with other valued aspects of their lives, including attachment to the neighbourhood, everyday activities in the locality and relationships with other people.

Recent debates about public space in the policy arena and the media have been framed around the need to reverse the 'decline' of public space and the importance of delivering high-quality urban design. As pointed out, this has tended to disregard the role that 'unexceptional' spaces play in people's everyday lives. By emphasising the *social and therapeutic aspects* of public space, this report calls for a more sensitive and less prescriptive approach to understanding people's relationship with public spaces, and presents a challenge to the nature of current debates.

The report noted the importance of public space to people's attachment to their area. While acknowledging the dynamics of this relationship, the study, by highlighting the part played by forms of social engagement within it, indicates a clear, if indirect, role for familiar space and adjacent facilities in helping to create 'sustainable communities', or as the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) categorise it, places where people want to stay (ODPM, 2003b). Indeed, the salience to everyday lives of opportunities for social interaction, for bumping into people we know or chatting to those we don't in public open spaces, is an issue that 'community'-related policies might usefully address. Taking the Home Office Community Cohesion agenda, or the DCLG's Sustainable Communities programme as examples, the point is suggestive of a need for a

shift in emphasis away from issues of anti-social behaviour and towards the promotion of positive social relations, in the first case, and from physical aspects of neighbourhoods, particularly housing issues, in the second. A development in Barking, London, part of the new Thames Gateway development, has faced criticism for its lack of facilities such as shops, a school, a playground or even a letter box (see, for example, Gilligan, 2006) – the kinds of facilities that, as we have shown, encourage use of public open space and contact between different members of the community.

The study has identified a range of characteristics of public spaces that people value, but rather than offer a definition of an ‘ideal’ model of public open space, it suggests instead that people will need a variety of public spaces within a local area to meet a range of everyday needs. This will include spaces to linger as well as spaces of transit; spaces that bring people together as well as spaces of retreat. A cul-de-sac in a housing estate in the residential area offered opportunities for informal social occasions, from street games among children to the gathering of parents on front drives, while on another estate in the south of the borough, a phone box became a meeting place and local landmark for teenage residents. Meanwhile, the use of a park as a cut-through route could provide momentary relief from crowds and traffic. A general market, on the other hand, functioned as a sort of unregulated but safe ‘hang-out’ space for many people. Of course, this is not to say that all parks or all markets provide the same benefits. For example, according to the few informants who commented on it (but also in light of the observation), East Ham Market Mall was not a place where people would pass much time (apart, perhaps, from in the small cafeteria on site). While it was generally seen as a cleaner and tidier space than Queens Market, it was perceived by some people to lack the atmosphere and attractions of that market.

We noted also the value placed on spaces providing opportunities for different types of encounters – both casual and organised, routine or serendipitous. While encounters can occur in green spaces (and green spaces have been a key focus of policy research over recent years), this study indicates that the multiple uses and benefits of hard spaces such as streets or markets need to be more widely recognised.

In considering relationships between ethnicity and public spaces, the study illustrated ways in which spaces support ethnic-based networks or promote a sense of pride and identity. It also examined how spaces are perceived as sites where different groups mingle. Public spaces can be sites of conflict as well as cohesion, but they do provide an important arena where ethnic diversity is negotiated and experienced on an everyday basis. In the research, we found that certain places – the Queens Market and neighbourhood spaces – were valued because they provided opportunities for unstructured interaction between different ethnic groups. Indeed, most people’s memories of Queens Market were of a place that had evolved to reflect the new populations arriving in the borough. The market’s accommodation of difference over time was considered integral to its identity by respondents. There was a general sense that having these spaces of regular contact, rather than more formally organised occasions for engagement (such as multicultural events in parks) – which do not attract everyone – were more important settings for developing tolerance and ‘inter-ethnic understanding’.

In order to harness their potential for maintaining and improving inter-ethnic relations, public spaces need to be understood not simply as sites where people, under the right circumstances or with the necessary encouragement, might come together, but as everyday settings where a range of interests and attachments to place are able to converge and evolve. Nevertheless, while relationships between community integration and public open spaces are not reducible to simple mechanisms, consideration of social processes involved in the development of inter-ethnic understanding can illuminate the indirect role played by such spaces. The continuity of social relations over time – and the

endurance of the spaces that support them – is pivotal here. For example, positive perceptions of public spaces such as shopping streets could contribute to people's decisions to stay in the area, while long-term residence and regular interaction in neighbourhood spaces were seen as having a positive influence on inter-ethnic relations and attitudes to difference among varied groups of neighbours in Newham. A very different example is provided by the collective mobilisation of users of a public space in response to the proposed redevelopment of Queens Market. Relationships that were initiated in the market itself were often consolidated between people during campaign meetings. In fact, the market campaign group was the most multi-ethnic discussion group in the study, consisting of white British, Black Caribbean and Asian men and women of different ages, showing how threats to a public space can prompt collective action across potential cultural divides and raise public space consciousness. Current government neighbourhood policy set out in *Citizen engagement and public services: why neighbourhoods matter* (ODPM, 2005a) involves the promotion of opportunities for effective neighbourhood action and citizen engagement in public services, conditions that are seen as particularly important in minority and disadvantaged communities (ODPM, 2005a, pp 7 and 9). In this study, rather than formal participation, it was grass-roots activity in response to a perceived threat to a valued local resource that successfully brought members of different communities closer together as engaged citizens.

The study also explored the direct and indirect impact of public spaces on people's sense of well-being. From the research it emerged that no single public space was preferred for enhancing well-being, and indeed different spaces could serve differing individual needs for either retreat or engagement. Current government agendas, such as the Cleaner, Safer, Greener policy, recognise the role that local places play for people's well-being and quality of life. The focus of attention is on the healthy benefits of green spaces, on the one hand, and the need to combat negative aspects such as anti-social behaviour and litter, on the other. The impact of these two issues on the quality of life is undeniable. However, the therapeutic properties of public spaces are not reducible to a set of design-based, natural or aesthetic criteria. One can design a public space to the highest standards and provide top-quality facilities in order to create the potential for well-being to be experienced without delivering the social benefits a space can provide; ultimately, it is what goes on within a space that is important. Social exchanges in public spaces, for example, can provide relief from daily routines, sustenance for people's sense of community, opportunities for making or sustaining friendships, and can generally raise people's spirits. But public spaces are more than just simply containers of human activity. Rather, they possess subjective meanings that accumulate over time; memories too can have an important influence on well-being.

The Department of Health's current Choosing Health programme seeks to encourage the adoption of healthy lifestyles. Priorities for action include measures to increase exercise and encourage healthier diets (Department of Health, 2004, 2005). Targeted groups include children, young people and older people. The study has noted that ordinary public spaces such as streets and markets can provide the main daily source of outdoor recreation for older people especially. Street markets are a valuable resource for additional reasons. Markets in poor areas selling good, fresh and cheap food could have an important contribution to make in achieving government aims to reduce the health gap between deprived and better-off groups and areas. More generally, the study has also highlighted some of the influences or motivators on people's use of public space. They include available facilities such as a school next to a small neighbourhood park, for example, or the opportunities spaces provide to meet people's needs for both social interaction and retreat. Specific initiatives or facilities that successfully encouraged use included a health walkers' group whose participants gained the confidence and stimulus to go for walks in parks or along footpaths on their own, while regular visits to a day

centre had helped more vulnerable older people to rebuild their confidence towards a return to public spaces from which they had partially withdrawn.

Of all the places examined, Queens Market appeared to provide the widest range of benefits for many of our informants. The site was valued not only as a source of cheap food but also as the setting for an array of social encounters and networks. Nor was it simply a 'multicultural' market but, crucially, a site of interaction between different ethnic groups. Some people also commented on how visits to the bustling market were enjoyable and raised their spirits. The proposed redevelopment of Queens Market accentuated people's reflections on what the market meant as a public space. It also raised some serious questions about how existing public spaces are conceived in urban regeneration projects. While informants elaborated on the multiple social benefits afforded by the market, the promoters of redevelopment focused their attention on economic and design issues.

The Quality of Life Capital approach provides a useful framework for evaluating the benefits afforded by public open spaces. According to this approach, 'it is the *benefits* people get from the environment, the economy and society that matter and should be managed' (Countryside Agency, 2001, p 1). Benefits can be maintained by not interfering with particular linchpins that make spaces function (keeping local food shops open, for example) or making sure that any change that reduces them is offset by some other change that delivers similar benefits. A report on *Improving urban parks, play areas and green spaces* (DTLR, 2002b) suggested that local authorities should adopt the Quality of Life Capital approach when evaluating green spaces. In the light of the redevelopment of our case study market, this framework might also be usefully extended to include all public open spaces. The 'power of well-being', introduced in the 2001 Local Government Act, could, we believe, also be more widely utilised by local authorities in relation to public open spaces. This power enables councils to take action that will contribute to the social, environmental or economic well-being of people living or working in their area beyond their normal statutory duties (ODPM, 2005b). The research suggests that an emphasis on the economic and commercial benefits of public space regeneration should not be to the detriment of other considerations. In particular, it calls for an approach in which the existing and potential social and therapeutic properties of public open space are more widely recognised, nurtured and developed.

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