

Public spaces and social relations in East London

The liveability of public spaces is a key policy concern. This report draws on qualitative research in a multi-ethnic area of East London to look at how public spaces are experienced. The study examined the role of public spaces as social arenas, and their potential for enabling social contact between different ethnic groups and enhancing individual well-being. As well as green spaces, spaces not usually highlighted in research or policy were considered. The study, by Nick Dines, Vicky Cattell and colleagues at Queen Mary, University of London, found that:

- The social value of public spaces lay in opportunities for mixing with others and developing local attachment, and in people's memories of places. The possibilities for casual social encounters were a key element in people's commitment to their area, while memories of familiar places created a sense of belonging or safety.
- Public spaces provided an important arena for experiencing ethnic diversity on an everyday basis. Though there could also be tensions at times, certain places in Newham were valued for providing opportunities for social contact between different ethnic groups.
- Everyday places had therapeutic functions. Some people discussed the benefits of green spaces as places to unwind, enjoy leisure activities, observe others, seek solitude or appreciate the natural environment. But just as many pointed to streets or markets as places that made them feel good; the benefits came more from enjoying the vibrancy of urban life and seeing others.
- Newham's street market exemplified many of these beneficial characteristics. Its proposed redevelopment had increased local residents' awareness of the value of such places.
- The researchers conclude that:
 - the many uses and benefits of spaces such as streets and markets need wider policy recognition;
 - an emphasis on design criteria in public space policy, or on economic benefits in regeneration policy, should not overshadow the social and therapeutic value of public spaces;
 - the findings have implications for the wider 'Community Cohesion', 'Sustainable Communities' and 'Choosing Health' policy agendas.



Background

How important are public open spaces for everyday lives? Rejuvenation of public spaces is a key concern in the Government's 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' policy agenda, with particular emphasis on improving the design and management of spaces. However, do public spaces have implications for social relations, community cohesion and our sense of well-being? This qualitative study was set in Newham, a London borough characterised by a diverse range of ethnic groups. To explore the social value of public spaces in greater depth, the research used discussion groups with residents and community activists, observation of key sites (two markets, two parks and two main shopping streets) and in-depth interviews in a mixed residential part of Newham.

Public open spaces as social spaces

Differing levels of commitment to the local area often influenced people's experience of public spaces. Positive perceptions of public spaces and the opportunities they afforded for casual social encounters – exchanges at the local market, the hustle and bustle of shopping streets, conversations on residential streets or while jogging in the park – were often a key element in people's attachment to the locality and an influence on their desire to stay. The few people who described their experiences of public spaces in *categorically* negative terms appeared to have fewer contacts with local people and generally less attachment to their local area.

- Different types of encounters were valued – casual or organised, serendipitous or routine. Routine encounters were most common in neighbourhood spaces such as house or block forecourts, residential streets, parks and local shopping centres. Places drawing greater numbers of people, such as markets or main shopping streets, were more often the settings for unexpected, serendipitous encounters.
- Pre-requisites for social interaction in public spaces included familiarity, regular use, a space's endurance over time, and available facilities giving purpose to a space and enhancing 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. Regular encounters on residential streets and in a small neighbourhood park were seen as first steps towards friendship or as "...the beginning of a community". For some people, the sense of a space offering the freedom to linger was important. They appreciated the opportunities afforded by some spaces, like a busy market, for mingling or being there without a specific purpose.

For many people, 'hard' spaces such as streets or markets were as, or more, important as social places than green spaces.

Ethnicity and public space

Local people often used ethnic labels to describe places, because of facilities such as 'ethnic' shops, the perceived predominance of particular ethnicities among users of the space, or a space being in a residential area considered to be dominated by a particular group.

- **Green Street**, a busy central thoroughfare, was commonly described as an 'Asian' street. The **High Street**, with its national chain stores, and the adjacent market in nearby East Ham were regarded as more typically 'English'. **Queens Market**, was dubbed 'multicultural', with no group seen as dominant.
- People recognised that a place's cultural mix could change at times, but were sometimes surprised by this. An Albanian Kosovan woman described Green Street's sudden transformation during a West Ham home match: "I'm thinking, where do these [English] people come from?!".
- **Parks** in Newham were not generally perceived as the domain of any one ethnic group.

Certain spaces played a positive role in promoting identity or a sense of pride, or supporting ethnic networks. Many first-generation Asians described Green Street and Queens Market shopping areas as places they felt comfortable using because there were people they identified with, few language barriers, and direct reminders of their countries of origin. However, many second- or third-generation Asians did not consider these spaces as important social arenas. Other people indicated inter-generational or inter-gender tensions. A young Pakistani mother, for example, complained about older Pakistani men who rarely helped her as she negotiated Green Street with her shopping and pushchair.

Spaces of ethnic interaction

Public spaces provided an important arena for experiencing ethnic diversity. Certain places provided opportunities for dissimilar people to mix, and were recognised as settings for developing tolerance. For example:

- *Neighbourhood and semi-domestic spaces* such as shared forecourts, and residential streets, most commonly provided the first point of contact between neighbours of different ethnic groups. Continued regular use of these areas was instrumental in developing good relations.

- A neighbourhood park adjacent to a primary school brought groups of people together. While residents saw informal games and sports in the park as a principal means of encounter for young people, meetings between parents in the school lobby led to greater shared use of the park. Together, the school and park were seen as bringing different communities closer.
- A market attracting locals and strangers encouraged casual encounters between different ethnic groups who would otherwise not come into contact. A white British woman who used the market said that this applied to both 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 they’d find themselves in a colleague situation where they can ask questions, they can joke with him... 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 important because they were part of everyday urban experience. However, while many members of ethnic minority groups felt comfortable in Newham, a few recently arrived refugees reported experiencing prejudice. As a result, some of them avoided neighbourhood spaces, though not more populated mixed spaces such as main streets and markets, where they felt more at ease. More commonly, however, public spaces fostered inter-ethnic understanding by providing informal opportunities for people to meet.

Well-being and public space

Current policy agendas recognise the role played by the environment in health and well-being, but the therapeutic properties of public open spaces are not restricted to design, nature or aesthetics. They include social elements through shared and collective use. What goes on in a space is important, but public spaces can also possess subjective meanings that accumulate over time.

Many people felt that public spaces enhanced their well-being. These spaces provided a range of therapeutic functions, both directly and through their role in bringing people together.

- Numerous people discussed the benefits of green spaces as places to unwind, take part in leisure activities, observe others or seek solitude. But just as many pointed to streets or markets as places for making them feel good; for older informants especially, they could be the main daily source of outdoor

recreation. Neighbourhood spaces were also singled out; for a mother on a housing estate, the front drive provided temporary relief to her routine and somewhere to sit down for a cup of tea with her neighbours.

- People’s complaints about public spaces did not necessarily diminish the spaces’ positive influence on well-being – people were more likely to weigh up positive and negative aspects of places that were particularly important to their lives. For example, a mother who organised children’s games in the neighbourhood park saw the park as key to her physical and mental health, even though its facilities desperately needed improving.
- For most people, everyday public spaces provided opportunities for engagement and retreat. Places of retreat such as parks, a cemetery, or footpaths close to water provided opportunities for reflection, the chance to escape the pressures of domestic life, or respite from the city’s hustle and bustle. Places bringing people together, such as shopping areas and markets, and where friendships and support networks were made and maintained were key everyday therapeutic spaces. Fleeting and more meaningful encounters in public spaces were both beneficial in sustaining people’s sense of community, or raising their spirits. A Kosovan woman living above a shop on Green Street described the restorative effects of observing others: “Sometimes when I’m not all right or when I’m down, I sit by the window and I just look out”.

Regeneration and public space consciousness

Queens Market, a busy, long-established street market, had evolved to reflect the new populations arriving in Newham, and exemplified many of the desirable features of public spaces. It was perceived, for example, as:

- a source of many people’s attachment to their area – a key attraction providing the area with character as well as cheap fresh food and ‘ethnic’ produce;
- a vibrant social arena – the setting for unexpected encounters or talking to strangers, a place where people felt comfortable about lingering and visiting for no particular reason;
- a multi-ethnic, multilingual space – a place of interaction between different communities, a setting for developing tolerance;
- a positive influence on well-being – a “fun” and “uplifting” place to visit, or a source of fond memories of growing up; for an Afghan boy, it offered respite from bullying in neighbourhood spaces.

However, many younger people and children criticised the market, describing it as “rubbish” or “smelly”. They were far less interested in it as a social space.

Queens Market is the site of proposed regeneration. The redevelopment plans have become a major focus of local public debate and have raised public space consciousness in Newham.

- The proposers anticipated that regeneration would improve the quality of the environment, increase the residential mix of the immediate area, and provide a greater range of shopping facilities. However, the scheme's opponents, including a local campaign group, feared that the market's unique appeal could be lost. This concern cut across ethnic groups. The campaign group was the most multi-ethnic discussion group in the study; threats to a public space had prompted collective action across potential cultural divides.
- Other residents had mixed views of the regeneration plans, but even those who disliked the market appreciated its advantages as a social resource for other people, and were concerned about the impact of proposed change on the area.

The planned redevelopment raises key issues about the role of public open space in urban regeneration. Firstly, the economic focus of regeneration can undermine the social value of public spaces, including their role in creating people's sense of attachment to a place and their contribution to community cohesion. Secondly, the emphasis on design criteria in policy debates about what constitutes good-quality public space means that the important role played by 'unexceptional' public spaces in people's everyday lives can be overlooked. For example, a white British man insisted that Queens Market's nondescript architecture did not diminish the market's important role in community relations.

Conclusion

People need a variety of public open spaces within their 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 the multiple uses and benefits of hard spaces such as streets and markets also need to be more widely acknowledged. In particular, the research suggests that their importance in providing opportunities for casual social encounters has implications for various policy arenas. These include the Government's 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' policies for public spaces, and the wider 'Community Cohesion' and 'Sustainable Communities' agendas. For communities to be sustainable and inclusive, the use of public spaces and contact between different members of the community need encouragement. A shift of emphasis in 'Community Cohesion' policies towards promoting positive social relations would 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 markets – as providers of cheap, healthy food – are an invaluable asset in poorer areas.

Public spaces are a significant resource for individuals and communities. Policy approaches could recognise and build on their social and therapeutic properties.

About the project

This study is part of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation programme aiming to improve understanding of how people use public spaces. The research involved a scoping exercise to gather information about Newham, seven discussion groups, observation of six sites, in-depth interviews with 24 people in a small residential area, and interviews with key people working in the area. The informants reflected a broad cross-section of ethnic backgrounds.

For further information

The full report, **Public spaces, social relations and well-being in East London** by Nick Dines and Vicky Cattell with Wil Gesler and Sarah Curtis, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Public Spaces series.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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