

walking voices

neighbourhoods described by first generation migrants

Questions

This research project investigated how people who had moved to the UK from abroad experienced outdoor places. We were interested in different perceptions and uses of neighbourhood spaces in culturally diverse communities.

- How important is the public realm in helping newcomers to Britain feel settled, and supporting their participation in the local community?
- How do experiences of migration relate to individual and community values for public space, and how might understanding these inform priorities for urban neighbourhoods?

Method

The project worked with eleven participants who were born in a range of countries in Asia, the Middle East and the Caribbean, both male and female, with a range of ages. They differed in aspects of employment, level of community and religious involvement, and whether they were settled long term or planning to return to their home country. All lived in the same neighbourhood in Sheffield. The participants were loaned mini-disk recorders for a three month period spanning late summer to early winter 2006. Their brief was to regularly record live commentaries during walks or journeys, talking about observations, thoughts and choices prompted by the changing scene. Researchers also interviewed a wide range of individuals, groups and community organisations about their experiences of the neighbourhood, outdoor activities and patterns of movement. Extracts from the on-site recordings were broadcast by BBC Radio Sheffield.

Research Group

The researchers were Clare Rishbeth and Mark Powell, Department of Landscape, University of Sheffield. It was supported by training from BBC Radio Sheffield, and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant ref: RES-000-22-1797). We would like to thank our participants for their enthusiasm, hospitality and honesty.



"If it's walking distance, the weather is good, it's well lit, you know, you feel safe going there". Thelma, from Jamacia



Summary of findings

Our research showed evidence of open space used as meeting and observation points, and activities defined by gender, age and social roles as well as by cultural background. People adapt and occupy space according to their own preferences; the use of space can be overlapping and concurrent between different communities. The ethnic diversity of the area was generally conceived positively by participants, but they were also concerned about the lack of facilities compared to more affluent areas of the city. The ability to make choices and withdraw temporarily from the immediate neighbourhood was important.



The public realm provides opportunities to gain knowledge and skills.

New immigrants need to learn to negotiate their local area. New skills are learnt mostly within ethnic groups, but specific points of 'overlap' can provide cross-cultural skill learning (allotments, libraries, playgrounds, and sports facilities). Learning the common culture of everyday life is also important for new arrivals: how to use public transport, safe topics of conversation, where to buy certain goods. Spending time in the public realm is crucial as it is possible to learn by casual observation of other people. Newcomers gradually become more skilled in reading and interpreting their environment, and feel more confident in public dealings.



The ability to engage with a place and communities in a way that provides continuity of personal identity is important.

Participants in our study were active in making connections between their new city and their home countries, and this helped them feel grounded. They made connections through their social networks, finding resonances in the landscape, or by recreating familiar ways to relax. These action and meanings are highly personal, and are often allied with an ambition to make the best of life circumstances.



The **overlapping use of public space** by different ethnic communities offers the opportunity for gradual informal contact and gives a visual shared recognition to the diversity of a neighbourhood.

Frequent use of parks, streets, bus stops, shops and public buildings can support individual relationships, and provides opportunities over time for acquaintances to strengthen to friendships. For this to happen, public spaces need to be safe and attractive to use, with attention paid to details of comfortable group seating, public toilets and consistency of maintenance.

"I can see families hanging out together in the front of their yard and I can see young children and parents counselling their children. It's quite a homely friendly community, quite a number of activities on the street. Youths are playing ball, just getting together and chilling out in the evening" Lola from Jamaica

Acceptable **behaviour** within the public realm is culturally defined and as such can present misunderstandings (and occasionally conflict) between different communities.

Men from some cultural backgrounds are used to meeting in groups outside of the home (women's space), and often appropriate street spaces for socialising. This can sometimes be construed as threatening by others. Differing perceptions of litter, noise, queuing or acceptable use of street space can exacerbate or reinforce ethnic stereotypes.



*"Socialise is like you socialise back home. Place where everybody meets and everybody sits down, have a talk".
Abdullah, from The Yemen.*



The **community identity** as defined within an ethnic group, and as within a multicultural neighbourhood were both important.

The 'critical mass' of one's own ethnic community was seen as crucial in providing support, resources and social contact. But the mix of nationalities was also often cited as a positive characteristic, and local businesses tended to engage 'cross-communities' to provide a shared resource. Many participants recognised that even if they moved out of this neighbourhood to a more affluent area, they would want to maintain contact with this located community. Some did not want to risk lessening community bonds and their sense of belonging.



The ability to make **choices** about when to engage with their own ethnic group and when to retreat was valued by many.

The residential density of specific ethnic communities meant that for many being outdoors entailed awareness and response to a known public gaze. For some of the participants, the expected interactions with their own community meant that the public realm embodied not only aspect of friendship but also of obligation. It was important to them that they could go somewhere where they were less readily recognised, outside of the immediate neighbourhood.



A need to address **inequality** in provision of public services.

Though living in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood was highly valued, the low socio-economic status of the area meant that residents were (often reluctantly) attracted to move out to find better quality housing, schools and public facilities. Education and a safe environment for children were 'push' factors to more affluent but less diverse neighbourhoods. There were also frustrations on a smaller scale: lack of provision of cash points, supermarkets and poor maintenance of the streetscape.

"The crime has gone down... the reason, new people arriving, and the council trying to do bit work now, they trying to make the area safe, but the landscape, people like myself, want to see a nice field, nice trees, we haven't got that"
Osman from Somalia



Suggested directions from research to practice

- Design for flexible and overlapping uses of spaces.
- Validate socialising in public space by creating and maintaining high quality seating areas where people already congregate and at points of common access.
- Promote the cultural and entrepreneurial resources of ethnically diverse neighbourhoods.
- Identify and implement strategies to increase permeability at a city-wide level: encouraging flow of business, residence, recreational and social networks.
- The "cleaner, safer, greener" agenda for neighbourhoods needs to prioritise areas of disadvantage to help decouple the relationship between being a member of an ethnic community and experience of environmental degradation.

Contact Information

Clare Rishbeth, Department of Landscape, University of Sheffield, S10 2TN
Tel: 0114 222 0606 email: c.rishbeth@sheffield.ac.uk
www.walkingvoices.group.shef.ac.uk

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