

Mingling, observing, and lingering: Everyday public spaces and their implications for well-being and social relations

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Abstract

The rejuvenation of public spaces is a key policy concern in the UK. Drawing on a wide literature and on qualitative research located in a multi-ethnic area of East London, this paper explores their relationship to well-being and social relations. It demonstrates that ordinary spaces are a significant resource for both individuals and communities. The beneficial properties of public spaces are not reducible to natural or aesthetic criteria, however. Social interaction in spaces can provide relief from daily routines, sustenance for people's sense of community, opportunities for sustaining bonding ties or making bridges, and can influence tolerance and raise people's spirits. They also possess subjective meanings that accumulate over time and can contribute to meeting diverse needs. Different users of public spaces attain a sense of well-being for different reasons: the paper calls for policy approaches in which the social and therapeutic properties of a range of everyday spaces are more widely recognised and nurtured.

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Introduction

This paper explores interconnections between public open spaces, social relations, and people's sense of well-being. Public spaces¹ are a funda-

mental 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

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¹We are conforming to common parlance in speaking of public spaces, but at the same time are treating particular areas, such as parks, streets, and markets, as places in the sense used by

(footnote continued)

humanist geographers. Whereas 'spaces are bounded settings in which social relations and identity are constituted', place 'was seen as more subjectively defined, existential and particular' (Duncan, 2000, p. 582; see also Tuan, 1974).

in city centres and in neighbourhoods has become a key concern in the British Government's plans for urban renaissance, where the emphasis is on improving their design, management, and environmental quality (see [CABE Space, 2004](#); [ODPM, 2003a](#)). Various initiatives aimed at fostering social inclusion and community cohesion have also considered the strategic role of public space ([ODPM, 2002, 2003a, b](#)). It is acknowledged also that public spaces can play a role in encouraging healthy lifestyles or benefiting emotional health ([DTLR, 2002](#)), while an overall policy concern is that public places meet the diverse needs of users. We need to deepen our understanding about ways in which public spaces are used by different social and cultural groups (see e.g. [Williams and Green, 2001](#)), the extent to which spaces are shared and may influence community cohesion, and about the meanings that people attach to places and what the implications may be for health and well-being. However, there may be tensions between different goals that arise from particular concrete concerns and political agendas. Young, for example, talks about the inherent element of risk at the heart of an ideal notion of public space: "Because by definition a public space is a place accessible to anyone...in entering the public one always risks encountering those who are different, those who identify with different groups and have different opinions of different forms of life" ([Young, 1995, p. 268](#)).

The renewed focus on public space has been accompanied by discourse on the need to reverse the decline of public space as well as halt what is perceived as deterioration in more generalised features of urban life. There has been a tendency for area regeneration schemes for example to adopt a 'deficit model' of urban neighbourhoods ([Whitley and Prince, 2005](#)); negative labelling of poor, inner city areas has a long history and bears comparison to pathologising notions of 'underclass' (see e.g. [MacGregor and Pimlott, 1990](#)). On another level, as [Fyfe et al](#) note, the incivility rather than the civility of urban life has come to dominate policy and research agendas. Increasingly, they suggest, 'the difference and diversity of urban life [for example] are viewed as threatening rather than enriching' ([Fyfe et al., 2006, p. 854](#)). There is a danger that policy and academic approaches with too narrow a focus on negativities, may, as [Whyte](#) once argued when taking to task the 'social disorganisation' school of Chicagoan sociology ([Whyte, 1995](#)), obscure much that is positive and valuable in

community and urban life. There is a need to explore relationships between public spaces, social relations and well-being that are not predicated upon a presumed decline of public space but rather on positive forms of social engagement in urban areas, and to consider sites of association, to use [Amin's](#) phrase, as 'sites of civic promise' ([Amin, 2006, p. 1020](#)).

Amongst questions frequently addressed in the literature on social inequalities in health are those centred around the difference that places can make, independently of, or in interaction with, the characteristics (including class, income or ethnic group) of those living there ([Curtis, 2004](#); [MacIntyre et al., 2002](#)). One strand of this work has sought to disentangle the effects of different neighbourhood features—such as those relating to local services and the physical and social environment—on health or health-related behaviours ([Ellen et al., 2001](#); [MacIntyre and Ellaway, 2003](#); [Parkes and Kearns, 2006](#)). Issues connected to the causal pathways that influence people's subjective perceptions of their well-being (as opposed to objective measures of health, illness and disease) and underlying influences on them are now gaining prominence across academic disciplines, while the search for policy solutions to boost well-being has become a cross-party political imperative ([Walker, 2007](#); [Bunting, 2007](#)). 'Well-being', has been described as 'positive health', or 'a state of physical mental and social well-being' ([WHO, 1948, p. 100](#)). It is understood as a dimension of a 'social model' of health which locates individual experience within social contexts and is concerned especially with people's interpretation of them. The concept enables a focus on what promotes and protects health, rather than on what causes illness ([Blaxter, 1990](#); [Bowling, 1991](#); [Gattrell et al., 2000](#)). Research has demonstrated diverse influences such as the role of social networks; social support; humour and leisure activities; associational participation and processes of community empowerment (see, for example, [Diener and Ratz, 2000](#); [Layard, 2005](#)). Well-being has been conceptualised by ecopsychologists as a healthy balance between met and unmet needs; they include social and emotional needs and needs for self-actualisation ([Pickering, 2001](#)). To positive psychologists it also involves feeling good, not only about ourselves, but about our social relationships, within families, between peers, and in communities ([Keyes, 2002](#)). Similarly [Layard](#), drawing on Enlightenment principles of 'the common good'

and fellow feeling for others, advocates a concept of happiness which stresses our social being (Layard, 2005). As such, it lends itself to research which seeks to embrace positive aspects of local and community life.

It may be a somewhat slippery concept, but well-being, on the one hand, and physical and mental 'health' on the other, need not be seen as distinct entities, but as parts of a continuum. Happiness and a sense of well-being have been shown to result in increased longevity and more robust immune systems, and can have biological or physiological effects which, for example, lower risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes (Layard, 2005; Steptoe et al., 2005).

Recently, concerted attempts have been made to examine how some of these issues play out in public space. Social and physical environments do not exist independently of each other; any environment is the result of continuing interactions (Yen and Syme, 1999). Work in Environmental psychology which focuses on mechanisms involved in stress recovery and positive mood change for example has identified restorative benefits of places in such 'community' features as place identity, a sense of attachment and residential satisfaction (Korpela and Hartig, 1996; Korpela et al., 2001). The ways in which people describe their experiences of local features and resources, including public spaces, can reveal the contexts in which their well-being is experienced (Ellaway et al., 2001; Airey, 2003). A growing literature on the potential benefits of public spaces to physical, mental, and emotional well-being has employed the idea of 'therapeutic landscapes' to examine a wide range of places perceived to promote well-being and maintain health. It captures both the physical properties of a given space as well as the subjective ways in which people interpret their surrounding environment. While much of the initial focus was on exceptional, healing places, recently research has started to concentrate on the properties of 'ordinary' places, in the built environment as well as in green spaces, and has considered them not solely in terms of their restorative properties, but for their role in promoting well-being more directly (Gesler, 1992, 2003; Williams, 1999). Three elements to these 'therapeutic landscapes' have been identified: natural and built environments; social environments; and symbolic environments.

Public spaces can be treated as 'locales', settings in which social relations, communities of place and

a sense of place are constituted (Agnew, 1987; Eyles and Litva, 1998). More extensive social ties are generally associated with benefits in terms of health, well-being and quality of life through providing support, conferring esteem, a sense of belonging and identity, or facilitating social integration (Blaxter, 1990; Brown and Harris, 1978; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). They can provide access to 'social capital', involving co-operative social networks, reciprocal aid, trust, participation and perceptions of safety (see e.g. Kawachi et al., 1997; Hawe and Shiell, 2000). Health enhancing mechanisms may operate in a direct sense or act to buffer adversities. It is self-evident that the poor have generally fewer resources than the more advantaged; social capital therefore, may be an especially valuable asset in protecting their health. Recent work has demonstrated, for example, that contact with friends is more important for the mental health of people living in deprived households than for those who are better off (Stafford et al., 2008). Health researchers are now highlighting the significance of the neighbourhood or community context to the generation of social capital (see e.g. Lomas, 1998; Blaxter and Poland, 2002; Subramanian et al., 2003; Carpiano, 2007). It has been suggested that specific neighbourhood characteristics can influence the amount of social capital within a locality (Gattrell et al., 2000), or the form it takes (Cattell, 2004). Social capital can be derived from 'bonding', supportive, ties between kin or members of an ethnic group, while bridging capital (weak ties) connects individuals to dissimilar groups and additional resources (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). Different kinds of ties are likely to carry different implications for both well-being and for community integration. Strong ties can be beneficial but in some cases can be controlling (Crow, 2003) for example, or may adversely affect health-related behaviours. Bonding ties can also act to "bolster our narrow selves", and re-enforce social divisions (Putnam, 2000, p. 22–23); identifying links between strong bonds and group exclusivity has as long tradition in sociology (Crow, 2003). Nevertheless, social networks embracing a range of ties with different characteristics appear particularly advantageous for well-being (Cattell, 2001). A question explored in this paper is, are there aspects of public spaces which contribute to generating, maintaining or shaping social networks? Or is it the case that casual interaction in public spaces has, in itself, more direct salience for well-being, and for community relations? Goffman's

influential studies of everyday life, for example, were particularly concerned with the significance of fleeting, chance or momentary encounters (Goffman, 1963).

Georg Simmel first emphasised the sociological importance of taken for granted social routines and practices (Wolffe, 1950); it has been suggested that well-being, in the form of ‘ontological security’, a sense of belonging or feeling comfortable with one’s world, is founded on such routines (Saunders, 1986). For Simmel, social relationships and forms of sociation were best understood with reference to their spatial context. He was particularly concerned, for example, with minor, less obvious forms of social interaction taking place in everyday social settings (Lechner, 1991; Featherstone, 1991). Earlier studies explored the effects of more mundane sources of interaction and engagement on social relations. They noted, for example, the importance of opportunities for casual interaction afforded through such local features 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 and Herring, 2002). But public spaces can be contested social arenas, sites of division as well as cohesion, of negative as well as positive engagement, and of unequal power relations (Brewer, 2005; Bridge and Watson, 2002; Keith, 2005). Public space is the focus of different needs, demands and desires. How does this fundamental feature of public space sit alongside its potential for social integration? For Jacobs, it was casual contact with people different from oneself which was essential for integration and ‘exuberant diversity’ (Jacobs, 1961, p. 70). We cannot assume, however, simple causal relationships between opportunities for interaction and harmonious social relations; social interaction is socially constructed as well as socially constrained or facilitated. Public spaces may not, in any case be the most appropriate locales for generating inter-ethnic understanding (Amin, 2002).

An inherent difficulty with the diversity of normative frameworks utilised in these various literatures on public space—community; social cohesion; social integration; social capital, and therapeutic landscapes, for example—concerns the danger that whilst some are likely to be compatible—a sense of place with social capital for example—they may also be conflictual. A desire for community may, or may not be congruous with other ideals, such as the

attainment of social integration or inter-ethnic understanding. A familiar critique of the notion of ‘community’ for example is that it can be based on exclusion, invoked to establish distance from others (Lockwood, 1966; Cohen, 1985), whilst network closure is considered necessary for the trust and reciprocity (Coleman, 1990) which form the basis of social capital as ‘thick trust’. The social cohesion agenda is not unproblematic; there are clear tensions, for example, between the need for stability of the social structure necessary for community sustainability, and the fluidity concomitant with integration (Cattell, 2004). Nevertheless, bridging capital is likely to have a crucial role to play in promoting cohesion within diversity (Alcock, 2003). It might be expected that whether or not these different frameworks come into play will depend on the nature of specific public spaces, as well as characteristics of users such as gender, age, and ethnicity. We would suppose similar variation in effects on well-being. Conradson argues for example that settings are not intrinsically therapeutic, but are experienced in different ways by different people (Conradson, 2005). We anticipate also that different users will attain a sense of well-being from different social and physical phenomena.

Important questions remain. To what extent do the social exchanges which take place in urban spaces involve dissimilar or similar others; what is their relationship to an inclusive sense of community, or to making connections between groups? What sorts of encounters are valued and why? What are the implications for well-being of use of public space in diverse urban areas; can we identify the social processes involved? The literature on neighbourhood effects on health has not yet fully clarified the causal mechanisms that explain how places interact with individual attributes that affect health (Veenstra et al., 2005; Frohlich et al., 2007; Cummins et al., 2007).

The study and its context

This paper examines people’s everyday relationships with mundane public spaces. It draws on qualitative research conducted by the authors to investigate people’s uses and experiences of public open spaces. The work formed part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s research programme on public spaces; a full account of the study is given elsewhere (Dines and Cattell, 2006).

The selected setting, the East London borough of Newham, presented an interesting opportunity for examining people's relationships with public space. For example, the proportion of Newham residents from Black and Minority Ethnic groups (60.6%) is the highest in the United Kingdom. The principal ethnic groups are: Indian (12.1%); Pakistani (8.4%); Bangladeshi (8.8%); Black African (13.1%) and Black Caribbean (7.3%) (ODPM, 2004); the population also includes recent refugee and migrant populations. Additionally, there are no large or conspicuous 'formal' public spaces in the borough, such as large parks, instead, there are numerous small and medium-sized parks and various shopping centres mainly strung along single streets. Characteristics like these suggested opportunities to select settings in which to explore people's experience of a range of everyday public spaces. Finally, the borough poses some interesting questions about the regeneration of public spaces. Newham is currently the setting for a series of major regeneration projects which include the planned facilities for the 2012 Olympic Games but also smaller-scale urban renewal programmes connected to the New Deal for Communities. These have the potential to change the landscape quite radically in some parts of Newham and we were interested to know what the implications might be for existing 'public spaces' that people might value and wish to retain.

Methods

A flexible qualitative research approach was adopted informed largely by ethnographic methods of enquiry, generally recognised as appropriate for exploring processes and meanings that informants attached to the public spaces that they used and the activities they undertook in these places (see e.g. May, 2005; Sanjek, 1990). For Gesler (1991), meaning is critical to understanding the significance of places. There were four stages to the research: a scoping exercise; discussion groups; observation of sites, and in-depth interviews. An aim was to explore links between public spaces and diverse conceptualisations of well-being evident in the literature not only by asking direct questions to informants on these topics, but also, by letting themes emerge from everyday experience, reflecting an holistic, socio-ecological conceptual model of health (Williams, 1998).

The field work was conducted over a 12 month period from 2004 to 2005. 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. To explore people's knowledge, use and understandings of public space, and to draw out the significance of public open spaces for different people, 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). These were digitally recorded and transcribed. The groups comprised:

- Asian elders who used a day center;
- 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 (who organised walks around the local area); and
- a group campaigning against the redevelopment of a local market.

Selection was guided by the research agenda and sought to involve a variety of people and interest groups with a particular emphasis on contrasts of age group and ethnicity. It was not intended, however, that groups would, or could, represent all social categories in the study area. Groups were accessed through direct forms of contact or mediators. None were drawn from statutory organisations, this helped to avoid over-reliance on highly active participants whose life experiences may be unrepresentative of 'typical' local residents. In discussion, 'ice breakers' were used to elicit views on living in the area, and unstructured discussion was then directed towards spaces people frequently used (by themselves and others), spaces they considered important and spaces they regarded as favourite places. Perceptions of the social dimension of public spaces were also explored. Group members acted as translators where this was necessary. Information sheets were used to gather background data on participants.

The discussion groups identified a variety of public spaces in Newham, and provided information on various ways in which these were understood, used and experienced. The term *public space consciousness* was coined in the study to indicate the varying levels of discussion about public open

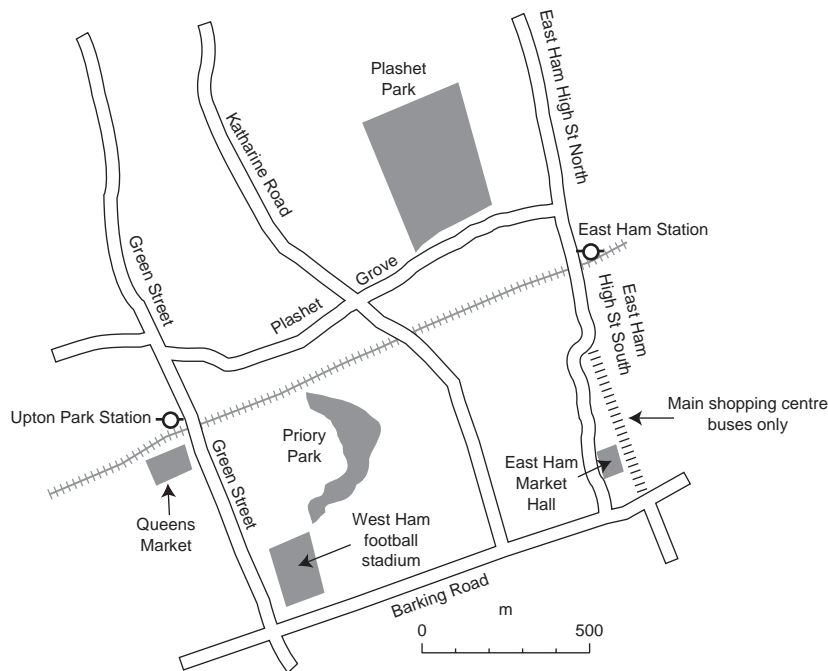


Fig. 1. Map of the case study area.

space, the circumstances under which this takes place and the ways in which spaces are represented in the informants' discourses. This 'consciousness' varies in relation to the functional and symbolic significance of the place in question: it may be low where a space is perceived purely in terms of the function it provides (e.g. the street as a space of transit), it might increase when a particular space is considered salient for a particular activity (social or otherwise); or it might be enhanced when this space for some reason faces transformation or elimination.

Informed by earlier stages, six sites were then selected in central Newham to observe social and other uses of public space, to begin to consider social and cultural variation in use and ascertain the extent to which they were inclusive, shared spaces (Fig. 1). They were, firstly, two main shopping streets: Green Street, a busy, heavily trafficked retail and commercial thoroughfare with mainly independent shops (general food stores, jewellers and clothes shops) run primarily by Asians and East Ham High Street North, a semi-pedestrianised street with major national chain stores. Secondly, two parks: Plashet Park, a medium-sized park situated amongst terraced housing with a range of facilities and Priory Park, a small neighbourhood

park opened in 1991 with a sports court and playground located between a council estate and private terraced housing. This is used also as a space of transit between houses and nearby main streets. Thirdly, two markets were observed: Queens Market, a busy general market selling food stuffs and household goods, predominantly used by minority ethnic groups and East Ham Market Hall, selling a wide range of products.² Sites were observed at different times of the day and week. This observational stage of the study was more limited in scope than the discussion groups and interviews. Its function was to provide background knowledge and also a 'feel' for the spaces, their atmosphere, and a sense of their appeal. The quality of social interactions in public spaces was fully explored in the later interviews.

Finally, the focus of the study narrowed to a small residential area in central Newham in order to examine the value of public open spaces in greater depth and to re-consider the significance of

²Although 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.

less obvious places. Compared with the rest of central Newham, it consisted of a greater mix of private and social housing and a more diverse ethnic composition. At the centre of the area was Priory Park, located on the eastern edge of the park were a primary school and a community centre. The study area was also situated 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.

In addition to informal interviews with key workers in the area, semi-structured, open-ended conversational interviews lasting between one and two hours were carried out with 24 people who knew this particular locality. They reflected a broad cross-section of the local residential population in terms of ethnicity, age, gender and housing tenure. Informants were recruited through gatekeepers and/or participant observation at the local primary school, a day centre for elders, a community centre/youth club and a tenants' association, or through snowballing (see e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Gatekeepers were especially valuable in gaining access to 'harder-to-reach informants'. People were interviewed in various locations that were deemed the most convenient. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full. Exploring Simmelian ideas about social relations taking a spatial form, 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 for people's everyday lives and well-being. This often led to unprompted discussions about public space within the context of people's social relationships and relationships with their locality. We then put a number of specific questions to further explore understandings of well-being conceptualised as grounded in social, physical and symbolic dimensions of spaces, and to draw out people's interpretations of ways by which these influences operate. They included:

How important is it for you to see and meet people when you are out and about? Does this make you feel good or not? Please give an example.

What about the places themselves? Are there places that make you feel good? Are there places where you go to make yourself feel better?

What are your favourite places? Are they local?³

To extract major themes, the first two authors read through the interview and discussion group data, discussed emerging themes with each other and refined them. Feedback was gained during discussion with other members of the team and through regular meetings with a project advisory group made up of people with national and local expertise.

We examine below people's narratives about places, both inside and outside the immediate confines of a 'neighbourhood', in order to critically consider the potential benefits and adverse effects of public space upon well-being, both in a direct sense and as mediated by social relations. Thematic analysis relates broadly to people's attachments to the social and symbolic aspects of places. We look at ways in which people use and derive benefit from a range of public open spaces; examine public spaces as sites of social interaction, and consider implications for community cohesion. A final section draws attention to the significance of bustling urban settings for well-being and inter-ethnic relations.

Everyday places

'Cleaner Safer Greener' agendas acknowledge the role that green spaces play in delivering physical and emotional health benefits (DTLR, 2002). Although numerous informants discussed the benefits of parks to their well-being—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 places which made them feel good. Their value lay more in the shared and social elements of public space. For older informants especially, such spaces could provide the main daily source of outdoor recreation and could be an enjoyable experience. Various nondescript neighbourhood spaces were also singled out by people who claimed strong social ties with their neighbourhood. For a middle-aged mother on a housing estate for example, the front drive provided temporary relief to her routine as a place where she could sit down and have a cup of tea with

³This question was informed by the literature on restorative qualities of favourite places (e.g., reviewed by Korpela and Hartig, 1996; Korpela and Ylen, 2007).

her neighbours. What was essentially part of her private property became a space shared with other people, taking on some attributes of ‘spaces in common’:

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; healing places for example achieve positive or negative reputations because people perceive that they do or do not fulfil basic human needs such as providing security, a feeling of identity, material wants, or aesthetic pleasure (Gesler, 1998, p. 17). Firstly, people need to feel comfortable and at ease in them. Dupois and Thorns use Giddens’ and Saunders’ concept of ‘ontological security’ to understand how a place such as ‘home’ becomes the basis for an individual’s sense of belonging. Ontological security is ‘a sense of feeling at ease, or at home in a world which can appear external and threatening’; it relates to confidence and trust in the world (Dupois and Thorns, 1998, p. 30). Whilst Giddens emphasised the role of the natural environment in the maintenance of this dimension of well-being, for Saunders (1986), the built environment, of familiar streets and neighbourhoods, were key. Here for example, Green Street, a busy shopping street, provided a supportive environment for Asian older people who were not confident speaking English. Secondly, the area needs to be perceived as a pleasant place to be. People’s ideas about what constitutes a ‘pleasant place’ can differ greatly, however. 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. Litter and noise assumed less relevance in descriptions of use and enjoyment of busy urban streets. In common with work by Wakefield and McMullan (2005) we found that despite the problems which people sometimes associate with polluted, run-down or deprived settings, at the same time they recognise beneficial characteristics of the same

places. A middle-aged white British mother saw the neighbourhood park for example, 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.”

Memories of places

Public spaces are not just physical settings for everyday experiences. They also possess a host of subjective meanings that accumulate over time. While research has associated visits to favourite natural places with improved perceived health (Korpela and Ylen, 2007), memories of diverse favourite places also have important implications for 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. Giddens argued that ontological security is a psychological need which is founded on the establishment of trust relationships, particularly in childhood, and that it is closely connected with habit (Giddens, 1990; Dupois and Thorns, 1998). Our respondents sometimes recalled the shared elements of public space as significant during their formative years. For a young Pakistani man, a park is 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.

Giddens (1990) further delineates ontological security as the confidence that human beings have in the

continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of their material and social environments (Dupois and Thorns, 1998, p. 37). We found that whilst certain public spaces were appreciated in themselves, we also found that places in Newham were important for the way they recalled other, more distant places that were valued by our informants. For example, many Asian elders enjoyed Green Street and Queens Market because these two sites reminded them of their places of birth in the Indian sub-continent. 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 their country of origin.

Places of escape

Public spaces can be highly valued for social interaction, but, they also offer chances for people to be alone. For some people certain places provide opportunities for reflection. For instance, an 84-year-old Black 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. Places can also provide the chance 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. Examples included a secluded spot on a housing estate where a teenager would go to smoke. The temporary escape from domestic space was also important for mothers. In order to take time out for herself, a young Pakistani mother drove to an out-of-town shopping mall. She gained enjoyment from both visiting the space and her journey to it:

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.

Finally, and as Simmel recognised (Wolffe, 1950), people sometimes just want 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”.

Places of social interaction

Social dimensions of public spaces were generally perceived as having a positive influence on well-being, but the experience of public space is not always positive. Racism, for example, was an issue associated with the neighbourhood spaces around people’s homes, although generally not with the more populated and mixed spaces such as the high streets and markets where demarcations between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ appeared less rigid. Whilst many members of ethnic minority groups claimed to feel safe and comfortable in Newham, a few recent refugee arrivals in the area experienced problems which they believed had a major impact upon 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, for example. The consequent withdrawal into her home had also curtailed her ability to establish loose ties with local people; racism in public spaces had increased her sense of isolation as well as having a more direct impact on her well-being.

For most people, however, public spaces that brought people together and where friendships and support networks were made and maintained were key to a general sense of well-being. Indeed, informants tended to describe public open spaces in terms of their interaction with other people. Both fleeting and more meaningful encounters in public spaces were beneficial, they could provide relief from daily routines, sustenance for people’s sense of community, and alleviate tensions at home or in a neighbourhood. Echoing the sense of ‘escape’ from the stresses of domestic life already noted above, a white British mother described the significant effect a short walk to school could 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 generally reported that simple gestures such as nods and smiles were often reassuring; could “make you feel good”, 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.

Attachment to a place is considered a basic human need (Eyles and Litva, 1998, p. 284). While differing levels of commitment to the local area influenced people's experience of public open spaces in Newham, positive perceptions of spaces and the 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 whilst jogging in a park—were often a key element in people's attachment to place. Some narratives, alluding to the need for constancy in the social or physical environment, focused on the continuity of casual encounters over time, and acknowledged their salience for a sense of well-being. As an Indian woman who was born and grew up in Newham, said:

Because people have such busy lives now... you have to go out of your way to see other people. But if you see people all around your area, you're seeing them day to day, It makes you feel good because you've known them for a long time.

Routine and regular social encounters often helped to maintain loose ties between neighbours and familiar strangers but could also provide the first step towards friendships. In some cases, connections could take some time to establish. The same woman described how, over the last 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!" Yet, while regular and routine encounters were clearly valued, at the same time, unexpected meetings were often described with particular enthusiasm. Where these were associated with a specific space so its importance as a social arena was enhanced. An Indian man in his late sixties said: "People we haven't seen for a few years suddenly we'll see them in the market... that's the social thing about markets".

For certain people, especially youths and parents with small children, parks provided informal places

for meeting peers or were associated with family trips, and tended to be perceived in terms of the facilities on offer and the activities that were conducted in them. It is when parks were used on a frequent basis, as cut-through routes to somewhere else, or for routine 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 become acquainted with her fellow keep-fit enthusiasts. She saw initial casual encounters as the potential basis for closer relations:

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.

Not unexpectedly, a strong sense of community, living in neighbourhoods where reportedly "everybody knows everybody else" was in itself mentioned by several residents as contributing to their well-being. As a white British man living on a housing association-run estate said: "If I had a problem I could probably knock on any of the doors and they would help me out".

Older people especially, but not exclusively, will need to feel secure enough about their immediate neighbourhood to venture outdoors. Alluding to the importance of 'eyes on the street' (Jacobs, 1961), to his own feelings of safety, a young Caribbean man talked about his elderly neighbour: "She tells me every little thing. What time people go in, come out, who lives there. I think she's lived there for years... you feel safe, you know that if you leave your house it is being watched by someone". Perceptions of neighbourhood safety have in themselves been related to physical and mental health in the research literature (see e.g. Ziersch et al., 2004).

Preceding examples have illustrated some of the pre-requisites deemed necessary for casual social exchanges in public spaces to take place. They include familiarity with spaces, regular use, positive perceptions of the area, feeling comfortable with fellow users, and the endurance of a space over time. Additional influences included available facilities which gave purpose to a space. A small park next to a primary school, for example, extended the opportunities for talking to other parents afforded

by casual meetings in the school lobby. A lack of facilities can sometimes limit the quality of people's encounters; an Indian woman was frustrated by the absence of places to sit down (such as cafés with outdoor tables) on her local busy shopping street, her fleeting exchanges with long-term acquaintances could never turn into more meaningful encounters.

Interestingly, for some people, a sense that a space offered the freedom to tarry was essential. Many informants underlined the importance of being able to enter and remain in a place without a specific purpose. 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'—an activity sometimes described as 'passive recreation' (Woolley, 2003)—to Asian elders for whom the local market was a comfortable space to linger.

Places of inter-ethnic interaction

While public spaces might be frequented by a range of different groups, this did not necessarily mean that there was any contact between them, nor, whether any contact which did take place was harmonious. Also, the same people might have different experiences depending on the setting.

Certain places in the study provided opportunities for informal social contact between different ethnic groups, they included residential streets and forecourts, where continued and regular use was instrumental in developing good relations between neighbours, and a small neighbourhood park where interaction between different groups of parents in the lobby of the adjacent school led to greater shared use of the park. Some newcomers had negative experiences, however. For example, a 13-year-old Afghan boy had been bullied by white teenagers in his local park and avoided it, but saw a market as a sort of safe haven where the same, bullying individuals (who sometimes worked on the stalls) no longer posed a threat.

More commonly, however, public spaces had potential for fostering inter-ethnic understanding by providing opportunities for people to meet which might not happen in a more organised setting. One white British woman who was a regular user of Queens Market believed that it presented unique opportunities for both shoppers and traders:

Next to the Bengalis selling biscuits is a Jewish guy selling curtains. They would never have met

a Jewish bloke [...] those Bengali guys, it's most unlikely that 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 are important and valued because the negotiation of difference forms part of ordinary, everyday urban experience. The Market had operated on the same site for over 100 years, and had evolved to reflect the new populations arriving in the borough. Its accommodation of difference over time was considered integral to its identity by respondents.

Vibrant social arenas, well-being and inter-ethnic understanding

Socially vibrant spaces in the study area played a positive role in promoting place identity, a sense of pride, or supporting ethnic networks (Fig. 2). Many first generation Asian informants described shopping areas Green Street and Queens Market as places that they felt comfortable to use because there were people they identified with, few language barriers and direct reminders of their countries of origin. Not everyone was enthusiastic about the atmosphere of busy places like these. Many younger people and children described the market as "rubbish", "smelly", and "noisy". At the same time, younger people, including second and third generation Asian interviewees, were far less interested in such places as social spaces. As Scopelliti and Giuliani (2004) suggest, the potential for well-being in places can differ according to the lifestage. A 24-year old Pakistani man reflected that he might enjoy Green Street in thirty years time: "but not at this stage of my life where I want to get away from [it]". A few people touched on what Phillips and Smith (2006) refer to as low level incivilities involving encounters with 'rude strangers', the 'pushing and shoving' for example, while a young Pakistani mother complained about the behaviour of older men who rarely helped her as she negotiated Green Street with her shopping and her child in a pushchair. Encounters like these can have as detrimental effect on well-being (see Airey, 2003). Nevertheless, many people in the study gained



Fig. 2. Queens Market.

pleasure from the social vibrancy of Green Street and Queens Market, where casual social exchanges made them feel happy, safe and relaxed, and could raise their spirits. Some simply described them as “fun” or “uplifting” social environments. But it was not always essential for social encounters to take place for people to derive benefit; for some people it was sufficient to be able to observe and feel close to the social activity going on. A Kosovan woman who lived above a shop on Green Street 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.” Kaplan suggests that the importance to well-being of such ‘micro restorative experiences’ lies in their cumulative effects (Kaplan, 2001).

Of all the sites, parks in particular were seen to provide a less intense social environment which did not necessarily involve interaction. However, the more leisurely aspect of parks was also perceived as a source of discomfort by those people who enjoyed mingling with people in busy spaces. It has been noted in other research that people need to feel free from surveillance in a world that may be experienced at times as threatening and uncontrollable (Saunders, 1986; Dupois and Thorns, 1998). Similarly, 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? Alright, if I’m sat, I could be reading a book, but unless I’m doing that it’s: oh, what’s he up to?

Queens Market, a place that attracted both locals and strangers encapsulated many of the features of public spaces valued by informants. It was deemed to be a key attraction that not only provided cheap fresh food and ‘ethnic’ produce but was also a place people felt comfortable to visit alone and which served as a setting for unexpected encounters or meeting new people. Frequent use of the market had helped cement close social relationships and reinforced a local sense of community. A black British man who had grown up in a white majority population in the 1970s, for example, recalled 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. His comments illustrate also how emotional attachment to a place can become consolidated over time: “The market has been there for years and it has been good”. The market also served as a setting for making bridging ties. Indeed, people’s sense of comfort in the market was often tied to their appreciation of it as a multi-ethnic space. 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 her nearby day centre. One Pakistani woman found 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 does not matter. You move on. In that sense, you get to know people... We meet different cultures. I might be buying vegetables that I do not know how to cook, and the lady from another part of India will tell me how to cook it. Normally I would never talk... And you could hear the same story for many market users who go regularly.

High levels of awareness of the value of such spaces had grown partly because the market had become earmarked for development; an issue which had become a major focus of local public debate. Space is invested with historical, social and symbolic meaning for its occupants (Carter et al., 1993). Some of our informants believed the scheme would remove a part of the local area's history and destroy a fundamental social space. Even amongst those who disliked or were ambivalent about the market, there were those who appreciated its advantages as a social resource for other people. 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.

A (multi-ethnic) campaign group was set up to resist the plans. Relationships that were initiated in the market itself were often consolidated between people during campaign meetings (and vice versa). Just as threats to services or other resources can motivate participation in campaigns, re-ignite community spirit or, as Kearns (1998) argues, consolidate resistance, threats to a valued public space had prompted collective action across potential cultural divides and begun to raise class, as well as public space consciousness.

Collective efficacy (using social relations to effect change) can, in itself, be beneficial to health and well-being (Earls and Carlson, 2001).

Conclusions and discussion

A wide range of everyday public open spaces were perceived as having a positive influence on both individual well-being and community life. Some people derived restorative benefits from the opportunities provided by spaces to be alone, but for many others, it was their social value, their shared and collective use which was instrumental both in alleviating stress and for maintaining health and well-being. People will need a variety of spaces within an area to meet a range of everyday needs, spaces to linger as well as spaces of transit; spaces which bring people together and spaces for escape.⁴ 'Cleaner Safer Greener' policies focus on the healthy environmental benefits of green spaces, and the need to combat anti-social behaviour and litter. Whilst the importance of the visual quality, or liveability, of an area to well-being is undeniable (MORI, 2005) the beneficial properties of public spaces are not solely reducible to a set of design-based, natural or aesthetic criteria. Social interaction in public spaces, for example, can provide relief from daily routines, sustenance for people's sense of community, opportunities for sustaining bonding ties or making bridges, and can have a direct influence on well-being by raising people's spirits. Often quite mundane places attain symbolic significance for people through social relations that take place there. But public spaces are more than just simply containers of human activity, they possess subjective meanings that accumulate over time, spaces can contribute to meeting needs for security, identity, and a sense of place. In a wider context, Brown and Perkins (1992) describe how place attachment is developed: "Place attachment involves positively experienced bonds, sometimes occurring without awareness, that are developed over time from the behavioural, affective and cognitive ties between individuals and or groups and the socio-physical environment. These bonds provide a framework for both individual and communal aspects of identity..." (Brown and Perkins, 1992, p. 284).

Yet narratives illustrated the complex and at times contradictory nature of peoples' relationships to public space. For example, whilst some people gain a sense of well-being from a chance to escape from the 'hustle and bustle', others seek out this

⁴A similar term 'places of retreat' has been used to describe one of the developmental needs of adolescents and contrasted with their need for social interaction (Clark and Uzzell, 2002).

characteristic of urban life and value it; routine encounters with familiar others in familiar places can bestow 'feel good' effects, and help maintain a sense of the reliability of persons and things, but unexpected encounters—in places which attract strangers as well as locals—are often experienced as especially cheering. Routine and mundane activities in public space may be reassuringly familiar, and are perceived as beneficial for well-being, but for some people, it is precisely the opportunities they provide to escape from household routines which they seek in public spaces. Interestingly, while people do complain about some features of public spaces (such as untidiness, noise, smelliness, sources of insecurity) these do not necessarily diminish their positive influence, rather, people are more likely to weigh up their positive and negative aspects. The term *public space consciousness* has been used here. It relates to people's awareness of the value of places, to the meanings attached to places, 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. It underlines the need for a greater awareness of the contexts in which public spaces are experienced and valued.

This paper has not attempted to explicitly explore mechanisms involved in relationships between public spaces and well-being or community relations in depth, but has highlighted some of the socio-environmental processes involved. For example, certain spaces were found to support ethnic-based networks or promote a sense of pride or cultural identity, attributes which studies have been found to be protective in relation to stress (Gonzales and Kim, 1997). The continuity of social relations over time—and the endurance of the spaces which support them—is also pivotal. For example, positive perceptions of shopping streets can strengthen motivation to remain in the locality, while long-term residence and regular interaction in neighbourhood spaces were believed to positively influence attitudes to difference. At the same time, regular casual encounters could form a basis for stronger community ties, and by implication, for the genesis of social capital, a resource generally beneficial to well-being which requires stability of the structure of social relations (Coleman, 1990). Sociability alone may not lead to co-operation (see e.g. Peren et al., 2004) but is clearly a necessary pre-condition.

Whilst acknowledging that public space is rarely without tensions, the research has suggested nevertheless that public open spaces not only provide an important arena where ethnic diversity is negotiated and experienced, but that their potential for developing inter-ethnic understanding is significant. Certain busy public open spaces, like a market, were seen to have therapeutic qualities, and for similar reasons. These were places where people felt comfortable to mingle, observe and linger, aspects of cosmopolitan life which participants recounted as enjoyable. Some people acknowledged the potential of such inclusive sites of daily routines for developing tolerance; we suggest there may be implications for health and well-being also. Living in a less tolerant area has been associated with poorer self-rated health (Stafford et al., 2005), while tolerance is an important pre-condition for widening networks and for a more inclusive social capital (Cattell, 2004). Putnam has argued that social capital is harder to build in the presence of diversity (Hallberg and Lund, 2005); this study, located in the most diverse borough in Britain, re-enforces the need for awareness of the contemporaneous and historical context. In relation to political participation, for example, the collective mobilisation of multi-ethnic users of a public space (Queens Market) took place in response to fears that its character as a multi-ethnic space, built up over decades, could be lost.

Reflecting a holistic approach to health embodied in 'Well-being' and 'Therapeutic landscapes', the research has shown that people derive a sense of well-being from diverse sources. Some appreciate a chance for reflection in public spaces, others derive satisfaction from belonging, from perceptions of safety and attachment to place. Consolidation of supportive, bonding ties through interaction in public spaces is important, but so too is the opportunity to make loose, and bridging ties, while some gain benefit simply from the impromptu nods and smiles of other users. Yet others seek out places—including crowded places—where, at ease with their surroundings, they feel free to be themselves. The literatures on well-being, therapeutic landscapes and ontological security tend to privilege people's needs for reliability gained from experiencing the familiar, routine and expected; whilst these are clearly important, there may be a danger in overemphasising continuity of experience at the expense of the unfamiliar and the unexpected. New experiences in vibrant public space can be a source of fun and enjoyment, as well, perhaps of

urban solidarity, or what Amin refers to as ‘an ethic of mutual regard towards those unlike us’ (Amin, 2006, p. 1017). Whilst this study was not able to look at special events in public spaces, such as festivals, Ehrenreich (2007) has argued that traditional collective activities like these have been highly pleasurable for people over the centuries, contributing to the maintenance of physical health as well as assisting recovery from melancholy. Activities like these provide ‘liminal’ spaces, where people feel able to ‘lose themselves’ in communal celebrations, and Jackson’s often cited study (Jackson, 1988) has interpreted carnivals in terms of the opportunities they offer the usual hierarchies to be ignored and for relatively disempowered groups to express their need to resist oppression more assertively.

We noted earlier the diversity of normative frameworks used in academic and policy approaches to public space; whether these are compatible or contradictory will largely depend on the particular context and characteristics of users. For example, whilst opportunities for ‘watching the world go by’ or casual encounters in local neighbourhood streets and small parks can enhance a sense of community and perceptions of safety or bestow immediate ‘feel good’ effects, for some people, those same places can be the source of racism, feeling unsafe, and emotional discomfort. We have not attempted to delineate an ‘ideal model’ of public space; no one public space is likely to be able to meet the need for community, for social cohesion and integration, or for a sense of well-being derived directly from physical features of the urban environment. What is important is that the wider the variety of public spaces and associated facilities within a vicinity, the greater the likelihood that diverse needs may be met.

Policy implications

If Benthamite principles of ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest good’ should be the proper aim of government (Layard, 2005), then what action can be taken to promote well-being, and to ensure that policy interventions solidify links between public spaces and well-being or enhance their potential for social cohesion? We suggest that:

- Debates about public space framed around the need to reverse the “decline” of public space and the importance of high-quality urban design have tended to disregard the role that ‘unexceptional’

spaces play in people’s everyday lives. The economic and commercial focus of regeneration programmes should not overshadow the social and therapeutic value of mundane spaces, nor ignore people’s needs for a degree of constancy in the physical and social environment.

- Strengthened social relations are a relatively minor aspect of ‘Community Cohesion’ or ‘Sustainable Communities’ (ODPM, 2003b) agendas. A policy challenge is to ensure a balance between needs for sustaining homogeneous ties with those for facilitating heterogeneity. For communities to be both sustainable and inclusive, and to realise the beneficial effects of diversity, facilities will be needed that encourage the use of public open space and contact between different members of the community.
- ‘Choosing Health’ seeks to encourage the adoption of healthy lifestyles by promoting exercise and healthier diets (DH, 2004). Ordinary public spaces like streets and markets can provide the main daily source of outdoor recreation for older people especially. Additionally, markets in poor areas selling good, fresh and cheap food have an important contribution to make in achieving government aims to reduce the health gap between deprived and better-off groups and areas.

Overall, this paper calls for an approach in which the existing and potential social and therapeutic properties of public open space are more widely recognised, nurtured, and built upon. The ‘power of well-being’, introduced in the Local Government Act 2001, could be a useful starting point for developing public open space policy. It 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. It marks a shift away from the problems people face towards what can promote positive outcomes (ODPM, 2005; LSE and the Young Foundation, 2006). While we are not suggesting that the influence of public spaces on well-being can be privileged over that of wider structural factors, or that interaction in public spaces alone can be a panacea for negative social attitudes to difference, public open spaces are nevertheless a significant resource for both individuals and communities. Recognising that different users of public spaces will achieve well-being for different reasons carries the strong implication that,

if policies are to be successful in promoting well-being, then policy makers must take into account all potential means of achieving it.

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