

Sitting outside: conviviality, self-care and the design of benches in urban public space

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The urban bench has been romanticised as a location of intimacy and benign social serendipity, and problematised with regard to perceptions of unwelcome loitering. In this paper we explore embodied practices of sitting on benches within an urban context characterised by corporate-led regeneration and impacted by austerity urbanism, imperial history and ongoing racisms. Our schizocartographic methodology enables us to attend to the differentiated and shifting subjectivities and temporalities of bench users, and to emerging counter histories of space. The research is based on the case study of a central square in Woolwich, south-east London. This involved an eclectic combination of methods, including film-making, ethnography and interviews, and a cross-sectoral team of activists, academics and an artist. The paper starts by conceptualising public space with respect to lived experiences of marginalisation, arguing that architectural design is intrinsic to understanding micro-geographies of conviviality and care. The case study material is used first to provide a visual sketch of sitting and watching others in the square and then to address conviviality and the value of visibility and relative proximity in framing a mostly un-panicked multicultural. Third, we discuss agentic, yet critically aware, acts of self-care. Finally, our focus shifts to the design of the benches and the ‘touching experiences’ of bodies sat in various ways, impacted by structural inequalities, yet differentiated by the particularities of individual or collective priorities. In conclusion we argue that attending to the precision of sitting on a bench can illuminate multiple temporalities of urban change in relation to both individual subjectivities and hegemonic structures. Further, the counter histories that emerge can inform policy and practice for inclusive urban design.

Key words public space; architecture; conviviality; care; regeneration; London

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Introduction

What does sitting outside mean for people experiencing marginalisation and exclusion in the city? In what ways is this meaning changed by corporate-led regeneration of urban public spaces, and shaped by urban design? This paper explores these questions, keeping at its heart the urban bench. Benches have been romanticised as sites of benign encounter and contemplation (Wylie 2009), while also problematised as props for ‘loitering’ within broader governmental agendas of surveillance, overt discriminatory regulation, privatisation and sanitisation (Crawford and Lister 2007; Minton 2009). As we will argue, these ideas are not necessarily contradictory: benches may have various contrasting meanings and uses simultaneously, and these will change throughout the day and night as well as over longer periods of time. A multiscalar, spatiotemporal approach is thus crucial in order to understand benches and sitting outside more generally within and against ongoing processes of

economic, cultural and political change in and beyond the city (McFarlane 2016, 230; Peck *et al.* 2013).

The paper uses the case study of a specific London site – Gordon Square, Woolwich – to add to literature that takes seriously ordinary, grounded experiences of corporate-led regeneration and gentrification (e.g. Paton 2014). It draws on an innovative, eclectic set of research methods designed through collaboration between academics, a local anti-hate crime organisation and a documentary filmmaker. The resulting multi-disciplinary, situated, close-up view enables us to provide new insights on how people choose where to sit (and who with); the ergonomics of legs, seat-backs and bags; the process of watching; and the subjective experiences of bench users in relation to weather, noise, smells and other people.

The research took place in the context of regeneration that appears to be in step with wider processes of social cleansing in London (Watt and Minton 2016). Yet, paradoxically, as we shall see, in the specific time-frame of our study, increased experiences of respite

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and connectivity were reported by existing residents, particularly those marginalised by unemployment, ill-health, loneliness, over-crowded housing and/or racisms, and affected by the national government's austerity policies that cut public services and benefits. Time and temporality are crucial to understanding this apparent contradiction. Money from corporate development in Woolwich largely financed the recent redesign of the case study site. We suggest that while critical urban studies have correctly revealed the destructive and unjust effects of neoliberal urbanism (Peck *et al.* 2013) especially as austerity policies intensified (Peck 2012), possible temporary advantages of certain aspects of urban regeneration to existing residents have been missed (McGuirk *et al.* 2016), exemplifying a disjuncture between overarching, rhetorical metanarratives and more grounded experiences of change (Linebaugh 2010).

Our paper contributes further by connecting academic debates on the 'publicness' of public space with those relating to geographies of care (Atkinson *et al.* 2011; Lawson 2007) and urban conviviality (Gilroy 2004; Wise and Noble 2016). Recent work on the geographies of care has sought to bridge the divide between an outward-looking care for the wider world beyond the self, and geographical analysis of experiences of care and caring (Lawson 2007). While some have emphasised the historical provision of 'places to sit' in urban green space as intended to 'produce a "kind of regulated, civilised, subjectivity"' (Brown 2013, 17, citing Osborne and Rose 1999, 744), our multiscalar schizocartography (see Methodology) explores the interaction between design of public space and the subjectivities of people who use it. The latter connects in particular to discussions of self-care (Atkinson 2011; Ball and Olmedo 2013). Self-care forms part of Tronto's broad definition of care as

a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Tronto 1998, 15; see also Williams 2017)

While we concur with what Massey and Thrift argue is an 'ambition' in geography 'to move away from spaces viewed as if from on high right into the action and especially into the press of embodiment' (2003, 288), our approach to the relation between self-care and space is not to '[privilege] a logic of individual autonomy and choice' (Atkinson *et al.* 2011, 564). We would rather invoke Ahmed's notion (following Audre Lorde) that 'caring for oneself can be an act of political warfare' (2014) or at least to view self-care as a form of agency that 'is less than resistance but not unaware or uncritical of the social relations of hegemony'

(Atkinson 2011, 625, building on Katz 2004). For those who linger, sitting outside on a bench may be the outcome of marginalisation, an agentic choice for self-care or a mixture of both.

For people experiencing mental ill-health, Duff's research on recovery lists 'spaces of solitude' as one of the potential recovery-enhancing aspects of outside spaces, but also notes that 'select sites of *sociality and social engagement* sustained particular atmospheres of recovery' (2016, 66–7; emphasis added; see also Philo 2005, 589). We argue in the paper that urban conviviality can be part of such productive sociability, in particular when conceived of in the Spanish sense of '*convivencia*', which invokes the interactions of 'practice, effort, negotiation and achievement' (Wise and Noble 2016, 425; see also Gilroy 2004). After all, one of the 'paradoxes of convivial coexistence' is that it is

always enmeshed in, mediated by and shadowed by colonial histories, enduring racisms, variegated and uneven belongings and the entitlements, and moral panics of the day. (Wise and Noble 2016, 430; see also Back 1996)

Conviviality is not necessarily inclusive, it can be otherwise – 'a shared hatred of the latest newcomers' (Back and Sinha 2016, 530). However, for the purposes of this paper, we view conviviality, although within the context of structural oppressions (Nayak 2017, 291), as 'at ease with difference' (Wise and Velayutham 2014, 407). The counter history to racisms is in part, we argue, extending Gilroy's (2004, 167) argument, one in which urban multiculturalism, as experienced through sitting outside, can bring respite, even hope.

Our intervention on benches as sites of conviviality relates to our third major theme: design. Here we build on Wise and Noble's more general insight that

spaces and times of convivial relations rest as much on *material* environs as they do on interpersonal and social relations. The physical organisation of social space, and the ways humans make use of this space, are fundamental to the logic of connection or discrimination. (2016, 427, emphasis added; see also Bowlby 2011, 613)

Conviviality thus needs to be understood with regard to the physical design of urban public space – materiality and form, social functions and atmosphere (Koch and Latham 2011). The sensory assemblages of urban places are convened in part through the 'material affordances of the built environment' (Degen and Rose 2012, 3278), and shape qualities of both sociability and solitude. Design of urban public space (and in some cases specifically the design of benches) can also have intent to repel, as can be traced in ongoing debates regarding hostile architecture and just cities (Low and Iveson 2016; Petty 2016).

This paper starts with a contextualising of the histories and structures of inequality that have shaped

contemporary Woolwich. This is followed by an overview of the research methodology. The discussion of the findings is then presented in four sections. The first of these connects the paper's three themes of conviviality, self-care and design through a series of observations on square users' acts of watching. Conviviality and self-care are each then explored separately before the fourth empirical section, which addresses the processes before, behind and around each individual experience: the priorities and decisions made in the design of urban public space that have hitherto been underexplored in the geographical literature.

Context

Thirty minutes east by light railway from the 'City', London's financial services centre, Woolwich is located on the south bank of the Thames estuary. Woolwich was a key node in London's imperial expansion and trade (Back 1996, 14), a place from which arms were shipped for British colonial conquest and domination. Rapid de-industrialisation from the mid-20th century onwards, and the ceasing of arms manufacture at Woolwich's Royal Arsenal in 1967, were integral to a gradual decline in population in this part of London, as well as increased deprivation. However, Woolwich's population grew from 2000¹ due to better transport links to London, an increased availability of relatively low-cost housing and international migration. The latter is also reflected in ethnic diversification, with just 37 per cent of census respondents identifying as white British in 2011 (compared to 45% for London, as a whole), and significant growth in the number of people with Ghanaian, Nigerian, Nepali or eastern European heritage (Bates 2017, 58).

Racisms and hate crime have historic precedent in Woolwich. Moreover, reporting and commentary on the horrific killing of Private Lee Rigby, which took place in Woolwich in May 2013, contributed to a national anti-Muslim discourse, which has been associated with racist attacks in many parts of the country. Economic inequality is an equally important part of the current conjuncture. Most of Woolwich, including residential areas adjacent to Gordon Square, remained in the top quintile (most deprived) according to England's Indices of Deprivation in 2015.

A major new investment in transport infrastructure – the Crossrail station due to open in 2018 – will link Woolwich to central London at faster speeds than ever. Private developers are renovating former warehouses to provide apartments intended to attract high-earning young adults. Their billboard images convey youthfulness, whiteness, a consumer orientation, speed, sociality and heteronormativity. At the same time these private corporate developments depend on connections with – affordances given by – the local state at multiple

scales. Crucially for our case study, £6.6 million was approved by the Royal Borough of Greenwich and Transport for London in a partnership with private developers to 'redesign' both Gordon Square (Figure 1) and adjacent Beresford Square, commissioning Gustafson Porter, a globally renowned landscape architectural practice. The squares were re-opened in 2011.

Before it was made into a public space in 1928, Woolwich's Gordon Square (official name General Gordon Square) had been an open-topped railway cutting known as the 'smoke hole' that served Woolwich Arsenal Station (Gilbert 2012, 47). If memorialisation is part of the shaping of the urban present (Wilson and Darling 2016, 14), then naming the square after Gordon, who had been born in Woolwich and later became Governor-General of Sudan, emphasised the area's link to British imperialism. Another echo of a military history is the clustering of Nepali migrants in Woolwich, (over 5000 Nepali-born residents registered in the 2011 census), ex-Gurkhas and their wives/widows who were granted the right to settle in the UK in 2009. In 2015 large groups of these residents, mostly older people on low incomes, spent extended periods of time in Gordon Square, especially over the summer months.

We engage with the uneven temporalities at work in these processes through attending to a central irony: Gordon Square was rebuilt as a part of the Royal Borough's 'ongoing programme of major renovation' in Woolwich town centre. Yet, while the broader housing crisis is likely to force increasing numbers out of the area in the future, this paper explores how the 'improved' square and its benches are currently experienced by their users, including low-income residents of Woolwich and visitors from neighbouring areas.

Methodology

The research on which this paper is based can be seen as a kind of schizocartography in process (Richardson 2015). Schizocartography builds on Richardson's reading of psychogeography literature and of Guattari's schizoanalysis, which, Richardson summarises,

challenges dominant powers and offers a process for remodelling their structure, not only to suit heterogeneous voices but also to reflect a history that may be counter to the dominant one. (2015, 188–9)

This framing resonates with Stuart Hall's analytical use of conjuncture (Hall 2011), which similarly conceives of dominant structures as multidimensional and interacting. As with Hall's intellectual project, schizocartography refuses an artificial separation between 'objective' and 'subjective', considering instead the relation between them (Hall 2017, 170). Schizocartography is a methodology for enabling the articulation of counter-

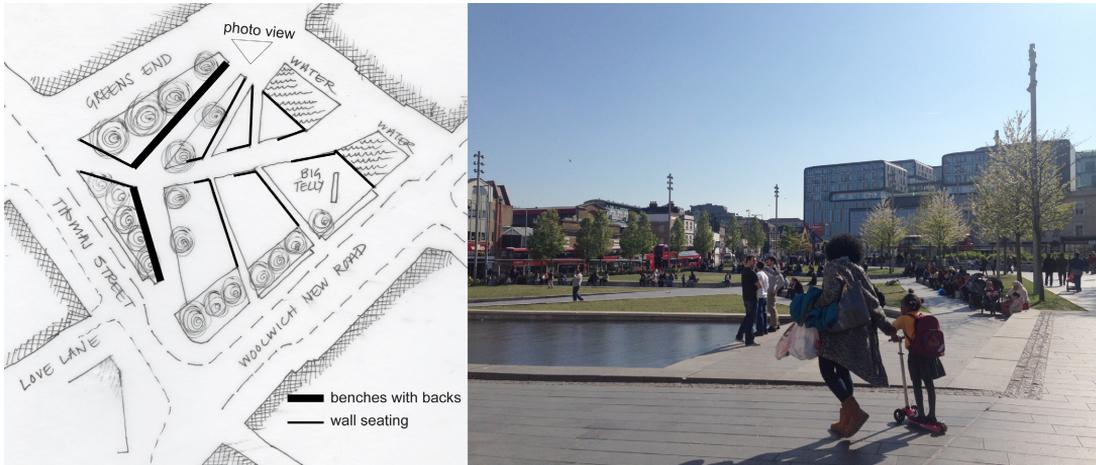


Figure 1 Gordon Square diagram of benches and image

Source: Clare Rishbeth



Figure 2 The act of sitting

Source: Esther Johnson

histories of space. It does not necessarily involve a *dérive* – Debord’s concept for a psychogeographical walk, a kind of research in motion. Schizocartography does, however, entail ‘the presence of the body in space, subjective reactions to place, or a search for something that may reveal “the other” of a place’. Crucially it ‘reclaim[s] the subjectivity of individuals’ in ‘spaces that have been co-opted by various capitalist oriented operations’ and recognises that ‘the individual’s response to a space will not necessarily be the same at a different moment in time or upon another visit’ (Richardson 2015, 182, 186, 188–9). Engagement with individual subjectivities and with individual bodies in space and the sociality between them was enhanced by the central involvement of a film-maker in the research team and the presence of a video camera for part of the fieldwork. Together, these enabled us to engage with the sensuous elements of the square as experienced by bench-users and others, and to connect the contemporary importance of visual culture with the

idea of research as performance (Latham 2003, 2003; Rose 2014, 26).

The project’s 18-minute long documentary film, *Alone together: the social life of benches* (Johnson 2015a), provides urban portraiture of the square, an assemblage of reflections from diverse bench-users, highlighting

themes such as the psychological feeling of being in a space, the rhythm and flow of visitors to a place, the importance of design for everyday street furniture and access to communal outdoor space’ (Johnson 2015b, np)

The paper thus attends to multiple temporalities through setting the often fleeting temporariness of individual experience (Eldridge 2010; Lim 2010; Wilson and Darling 2016) alongside and juxtaposed with longer historical trends and processes.

The research was collaborative, and co-produced, involving academics (from Geography and Landscape Architecture), third-sector colleagues (Greenwich Inclusion Project, The Young Foundation) and the documentary filmmaker, Esther Johnson. Woolwich was one of two London locations, the other a park in Sutton. Samprada Mukhia, a Nepali-speaking female fieldworker (with a background in Law) worked with Jasber Singh from Greenwich Inclusion Project (GRIP), a small activist organisation working against hate crime in the Borough, to undertake ethnographic fieldwork in Gordon Square primarily during daylight hours over a period of five months in spring and summer 2015. The multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral nature of this work was crucial, drawing differently on the expertise within the team as a whole, mutually developing skills in qualitative interviewing, in interpreting local politics and urban change, in analysing the built environment, and in noticing sensory and

temporal dynamics. These shaped the aims, methods and diverse outputs of the project, generating a range of material data: researcher fieldnotes, photographs and on-site drawings (plans and sections), ad-hoc conversations and formally recorded interviews, film rushes and sound files. The majority of ethnographic fieldwork, including 18 days of just being in the square, was undertaken by Mukhia, supported and supplemented by Singh and the authors. Esther Johnson made three day-long visits to interview and photograph film participants, prior to the intensive engagement with the square over two days of filming dawn to night-time.

Engagement with people using the square took a range of forms. Eighteen participants were interviewed, six of them on camera in the square. Each of the latter contributed to varying degrees through mid-edit reviews and feedback at private screenings of the film. Over four months there were a range of on-site informal conversations and interactions with other square users, more than 30 of these being specifically recorded in researcher fieldnotes, as well as a series of six group discussions with older Nepali heritage residents as part of a regular language class at the GRIP premises.

Expert insights into intention and iteration in design and management practice were gained through interviews with two 'town wardens', their manager and the landscape architect of the square. These data were analysed to inform understandings, connections and implications, shaping a rich production of knowledge. This was tested and refined through five extended collaborative workshops, bridging traditional distinctions between academic research and practice, and between social science and the arts.

The next section discusses the dynamics of 'watching', prefiguring and connecting the three subsequent sections on conviviality, self-care and design.

Sitting and watching

When sitting on any of the outer edges of Gordon Square your view takes in a broad panorama. 'A nice viewpoint', states Mel,² who sits here for long afternoons on sunny days, 'like a theatre'. The square is designed for flow, accommodating the network of criss-crossings that connect shops, buses, council houses, the Docklands Light Railway station and all the many directions in which people might move. But it is also designed for sitting and watching. The three-metre drop allows clear sightlines to the water feature (children playing) and the large public television screen (Novak Djokovic playing). Unexpectedly, addressing the dynamics of the 'big telly' within the square is a useful means of exploring how conviviality and self-care are interrelated.

The landscape architects were not briefed on the inclusion of the large screen, which was shoehorned into the nearly completed design on account of the upcoming Olympics. Within urban design discourse, from Whyte (1980) to Gehl (2010), there is a strong emphasis given to the delights of sitting outside combined with 'people watching'. Against this, the increasing encroachment into public spaces of large, constantly broadcasting television screens can be framed as both a reflection and an indictment of contemporary times and new generations: forever plugged in, short attention spans, unable to entertain themselves, a low common denominator. But by careful listening to participants' accounts, we found an alternative practice of collective-private interactions of television watching, one which often enabled conviviality and reduced isolation (Widholm 2016). Maurice is a middle-aged UK-born man of Jamaican parentage, well educated but who now 'knows what it's like not to have a dicky-bird',³ and lives in sheltered accommodation.

Yesterday I was sitting over there and we were watching the tennis and a chap sat down beside me and he said something and I said something and he said something and I said something and we started to talk and then he told me his name and I told him mine and that was that.

Sitting on a bench and telly watching is fundamentally different from doing the same thing from your sofa at home.

Aggie and her adult daughter Lorna bring their garden chairs, position them under a tree in good view of the screen and watch whatever is on. The visuals are important for Lorna, who is profoundly deaf. They sometimes make a special trip for sports events, recalling with great enthusiasm their memories of Murray winning at Wimbledon: 'the atmosphere here was fantastic ... it was actually better than being at Wimbledon ... because you could see everything' (Aggie). Maurice and many others who were interviewed stated quite simply that the 'big screen' makes a difference; that they would visit the square if it wasn't there, but not so frequently, and they wouldn't stay so long. The telly-watching both adds to the interest of their time in the square, and also tacitly legitimises their long-stay presence, not loitering but lingering. It is there to be watched.

The big telly provides a gateway to 'multiple elsewhere's' (Gidley 2013), but this is not at odds with an engaged presence in the square.

Fieldnote [Esther, interview via translator, July]: Vikash likes to go to South London College on a Tuesday to pick up a copy of the free Nepalese newspaper. He likes to read this and sit in a group and watch the big screen on Tuesdays – this is a time that makes him feel, 'at peace'. He likes to see people from all over the world, he finds watching the diversity of people entertaining.

In this weekly ritual, Vikash describes engaging with two forms of media, his own group of friends and the wider flow and mix of people around him; and the combination of foci and activities engenders a feeling of 'peace' – a personal, reflective state. Sitting outside, a field of vision is provisional, shifting. Bench-space allows for both connection and momentary solitude.

Conviviality and perceptions of difference

Maurice comes alone to the square and sits on one of the benches, as he does most days. He wouldn't say that he comes to this place for companionship, but he gets drawn into conversations. 'It's funny, because when you sit here, people come up to you and talk to you, complete strangers. Some time I tell them though [under breath] "fuck off"', but he also recounts amiable interactions, such as when watching a recording of Usain Bolt tear round the 2012 Olympic track on the big telly. 'A girl sat next to me and asked if me if I was Jamaican, and said how she wished she was also Jamaican'.

For those meeting friends in the square, it is a venue for everyday conversations. Overheard conversations ranged from the relative merits of Turkish and Qatar airlines, growing plants from seed and children's birthday celebrations. 'And we come here hanging with friends, chill out and that's it really, in it, that's it really' (Joe, 18 years old).

Home environments, for reasons of size, privacy or flexibility, do not accommodate these groupings; the generosity of the bench space allows appropriation of public space for sort-of private conversations. These can enable bridging across difference. Mel, a self-identified 'Woolwich Albanian' in her twenties, who often spends afternoons in the square with her two well-groomed dogs, recounted how an instinctive friendliness towards these dogs provided her with 'a starting point' and she now feels that within this place she 'has made a lot of friends'.

Difference in Woolwich is interpreted through 'multiplicities, potentials and practices' of social identities (Wilson and Darling 2016, 1): intersections of identity; ethnicity overlaid with length of residence, class and occupations. In the ebb and flow of incidental interactions, convivial behaviours can and do bridge these, reflecting both a 'commonplace diversity' (Wessendorf 2013) and an everyday pragmatism of what it means to live in this area.

Fieldnotes [Ben, July]: While we sat there we witnessed a boy (about fourteen) walking with friends, all black boys in school uniform. He swore as he passed an older white man, in his 60s, who was sitting with other white men of a similar age, all drinking beer from 99p cans. The man shouted after the boy. A couple of minutes later the boys came back and the boy who had shouted apologised and shook hands with

the man. The man accepted the apology, gently tugging the boy's tie and saying 'you can't wear a posh school uniform like this and go around doing things like that'.

The visibility of difference is undeniable, but there are times when it becomes more explicit, a known and knowing 'throwtogetherness' (Massey 2005). Maurice remembered laughing when he saw the array of flags brought to the square by people watching the football World Cup; 'you thought ahh, I didn't know there were Uruguayans in Woolwich'. These kinds of cultural events are talked about by many as bringing people together. But ethnic difference was mostly unremarked on (while acknowledging the limitations of our one season timeframe in building trust for more difficult conversations). Casual descriptions of nationality and colour of skin are used to describe situations and as shorthand for group identities. The 'Nepali elders' (a term used by Greenwich Inclusion Project) have an unusually distinct visual identification due to their numbers, language and clothing. They commonly, though not exclusively, sit in large fluid groupings on the back edge benches of the square. 'Nepalese Isle' Maurice calls it, not unkindly.

It is another 'large group' of bench-users who most clearly exemplify these intersections, and in particular 'how class is lived as a complex structure of feeling with networks of interaction as well as structural dimensions' (Back 2015, 833). They are well known locally; a white multi-generational family group, a mix of parents, grandparents and children who spend long periods of time in the square on a daily basis. Other users of the square reported feeling uneasy around this group, referring to drinking of alcohol, smoking and leaving of rubbish, and recounted some incidental conflicts of a more sustained nature in the case of the male skateboarders. However, this family group, in common with many others, uses Gordon Square as a location for everyday care and sociability, in particular as a place where young children can be cared for while the adults chat. The grandmother, Margaret, in her fifties, also sees the value of the square as a place of 'general mixing' and talks about striking up conversations with people she doesn't know.

Mix with all sorts of people. Like, you get to know different things, it could be something you already know that they said, or you could think 'well, that's something new that I have learnt today'.

She notes how 'the Gurkhas' are also here on a daily basis, and

some talk English, and if they don't you've got someone who does, so you have a good conversation with them ... You get to know lots of things around just by sitting here really.

There are occasional flashes of 'trouble' in Gordon Square, some of which are specifically racially

motivated, an unsurprising co-existence of racism and multiculturalism (Back 1996). However, the thrust of the data, observations and interviews from Gordon Square strongly indicate that the space of the public square has the potential to support a positive experience of ‘unpanicked multiculturalism’ (Noble 2009, 51), mostly through acts of informal conviviality. For some, this allows conversations and learning. For others, it has a symbolic resonance:

This place is absolutely marvellous, I love the multicultural aspect of it because here it really gives you hope for the future. Here is a start for ending all world wars. I’m not saying it is going to happen tomorrow, or even in our generation, but you’ve got to start somewhere haven’t you? (Aggie)

This public presence and visibility of sitting outside has a fundamentally different impact (on both the group itself and the other users of the square) to sitting in a closed-off indoor location. This is explored in the following section as a dimension of self-care.

A site for self-care

Based on a review of geographical studies, Schwanen and Wang found that ‘access to green space . . . usually has a positive effect on well being and mental health . . . especially when woodlands and parks are visited at least once per week’ (2014, 836). These authors rightly attend to time and temporalities, acknowledging, for example, that wellbeing effects may be short in duration or tied to specific time periods (Cragg 2001; Hudson 2015). However, Schwanen and Wang do not explore differences in how the same physical space may be subjectively experienced, the schizocartographies of nature connectedness (Capaldi *et al.* 2014; Richardson 2015). While for some Gordon Square is perceived as a busy town centre square with a few trees in it, for others it can be, at certain times and in particular seasons, a site of peaceful contemplation and getting away from it all. Many refer to it as ‘a park’.

Being in the square with unknown others, watching them and noting the detail of their movement, their lunch, the interaction with their children, the way they smoke or laugh or snooze, this is the essence of what it means to sit on the benches in Gordon Square. A significant minority of visitors spend long periods of time here, regularly up to four hours, and this longevity of engagement is relevant in understanding intersections of solitude and sociability, the importance of a wide and populated field of view, and even the role of the ‘big telly’. In the interviews, participants commonly volunteered understandings of the positive benefits of being outdoors for their own mental wellbeing.

You don’t try and think about any problems or anything. You try and keep your mind occupied by looking around – you

might see somebody running, or playing, or maybe some other bits and pieces . . . and keep your mind clear. (Bobby)

The actions of sitting and watching and the entwinement of watching and thinking, combine for Bobby and others into a calmer way of being.

This deliberate seeking out of space and time to be sometimes alone but alongside others in the green space of the square, and the health effects that may be experienced as a result, can be seen as acts of agency in spite of the context of austerity politics. Power and Bartlett examined how people with learning disabilities ‘self-build’ their own ‘safe havens’. ‘Self-building practices are taken to mean the progressive forms of “agency” deployed . . . to take control of one’s own life’ (Power and Bartlett 2015, 4). The participants in their study often made their safe havens in ‘prosaic, less official public spaces in which individuals occupy and come into contact with others’ (Power and Bartlett 2015, 12; cf. Amin 2002). Temporality was important here too – rather than spaces being inherently inclusionary or exclusionary, participants evoked ‘moments of inclusion’ (Power and Bartlett 2015, 12; emphasis added). Addressing the urban public realm more broadly, this may shape an interpretation of sitting outside as an empowering appropriation, a place characterised both by caring and self-care (Bates *et al.* 2017).

The framing of self-building safe havens is apt for interpreting the actions and values of Aggie and Lorna, the mother and adult daughter who bring their garden chairs to the square a few times each week and enjoyed seeing Murray win at Wimbledon. Unusually among the participants, they referred to having a garden at home, but this was described as a ‘lonely’ place to sit. The pair collaborate on creating what could be seen as a safe haven in the middle of Gordon Square for Lorna, who is profoundly deaf. Aggie discussed a range of contributing factors that she saw as having positive mental health effects: the relaxation of watching the big telly, the amount of ‘space’, the peaceful low-key interaction between people of ‘different cultures’, and the opportunity for Lorna to undertake short independent visits to familiar shops. Aggie had come to know people by sight and would exchange the occasional smile or wave. She felt this was a ‘blessing’ and related to how she felt the square could contribute to peaceful coexistence in the world. This multi-scalar construction of a safe haven resonates with Tronto’s definition of care as agentic, the ‘weaving’ of a ‘complex, life-sustaining web’ (1998, 15).

Mental health and physical health were often discussed in combination and in contrast to an indoor domestic environment. Maurice also visited the square regularly and alluded both to the positive effect on his general wellbeing and on a specific health issue. Being

outside made him feel better, and walking to and beyond the square made him fitter:

It's boring sitting at home: you can only read so much, eat so much, drink so much. And in the end you think is this all there is? I come out basically to see people, people walking about, all walks of life and basically to get a bit of exercise. . .

Bobby, like Maurice, a middle-aged man and frequent visitor to the square, made a direct connection between the atmosphere in the square on the one hand and his mental and physical health on the other.

Being home by myself all day is very depressing . . . I'd rather come out here, spend a couple of hours. That will improve my health condition and makes me feel more happy. I would not go home depending on sleeping tablets to sleep in the night. When my body is more relaxed, I can sleep more comfortable.

While Power and Bartlett's study addressed self-building as an individual (or supported) action, we suggest that the affordances and characteristics of Gordon Square may also be conceived as a *collective* safe-haven for the Nepali elders, 'built' through their own preferences for outdoor places and sociable networks. As Atkinson argues, some writers on self-care 'underplay the role of others . . . [and] an attentive care that may be associative rather than reflexive' (2011, 625).

There's a lot in the heart when I am home alone. I keep thinking about where to go and I feel restless. When I am outside with my friends, talking and laughing, I forget about everything else and feel at peace. (Sarita)

Again this connects conviviality and self-care. Though Sarita and Prithvi chatted about the sadness of not being able to speak English to make friends, they also recognise the value of other forms of connection and the importance of small acts of care for others:

On a day such as this, while roaming around this park, if you see a thousand faces then it is good for you. My ancestors used to say that. It might be so. And if you meet a person who does not look good on the street but you exchange a few words and smile, it feels very good. (Sarita)

The 'big telly' can be significant in this collective process too. Our fieldwork period included the event of the earthquake in Nepal in April 2015. Papastergiadis *et al.* (2013, 338) discuss large urban screens as pivot points 'at which private and public spheres interact and from which the cosmopolitan vision unfolds', and this may be specifically true with regard to news broadcasts. For a week or so, scenes of devastation were a rolling background for the everyday activities of Gordon Square, and a source of transnational emotional connection and information for the Nepali community in Woolwich. Undoubtedly, the role of Gordon Square as a gathering point for the older Nepalis, and as a place in which they are clearly visible as local residents,

was strengthened during this time by the global connections visibly articulated by the news channels on the screen. Gordon Square became a site of caring within the Nepali community, but their presence here also engaged a more structural connection of support from the broader population of Woolwich, a location of empathy that led to fundraising activities and setting up of collection points. It seems reasonable to suggest that these activities were made more likely due to the visible shared experiences and connective resources of Gordon Square. In discussing the functionality and resources of the square, we now consider more closely the role of the design of the square and its benches.

'Touching experiences' of bench design

In the previous three sections we focused on the experiential qualities of everyday appropriations of public space – the gradients of solitude and sociability, the paired dynamics of conviviality and racism, and the ways in which individuals find temporary respite and restoration within the busyness. In this final empirical section, we take a turn towards materiality. The multi-disciplinary methodological approach of this research allows an informed critique of the design of benches.

'Look how long my legs are yeah? For me to sit here I'm practically at a right angle, but up here just nice' (Joe). Joe and Mohsin sit close together, trainer to trainer, on the broad back wall of the granite bench that runs along the eastern edge of Gordon Square. Over the hours they spend there each day they are joined in fluid clusters of friends and acquaintances, gathering round, standing, smoking, drinking, phone checking. The design of the back of the bench is important, a generous 30 cm wide sitting space, which also acts as retaining wall for a large planter of mixed shrubs. A range of people, not only young men, sit 'up' on these back edge benches. It provides a good vantage point and there are other benefits: feet are out of the way of passers-by and it is easier to chat with people standing nearby.

The long granite benches in Gordon Square were intentionally designed by Gustafson Porter to be integral to the infrastructure of the square, accommodating the level change of the terraces, unable to be taken out in response to future management cuts or complaints. The detailing is thoughtful – backs angled at 9°, generous depth, intermittent armrests, kick backs (underhangs which allow feet to recess behind the knees) – all contribute both to accessibility and the comfort of people sitting here for hours at a time. 'I got to say, these seats are good, we cannot do any better than this . . . it's a very solid seat' (Bobby).

Before sitting, individuals make micro-observations to inform the decision of where to sit, weighing up

prospect, shelter and proximity to favourable or undesirable neighbours.

Fieldnotes [Esther, June]: Bobby had chosen a bench on the edge of the square, opposite and with a clear view of the Big Screen ... on the right hand side next to an armrest.

Fieldnotes [Esther, interview with interpretation by Samprada, July]: When choosing a place to sit down he [Vikash] assesses who is sitting where first before choosing where to sit himself. He tries to sit away from drunk people in the square, wherever they are not around, he will go and sit. He dislikes the drinking and noise that these groups make.

So I usually find myself, anyway, sitting near the TV to watch the tennis. I don't like smoking, so the reason I'm sitting here is that I was sitting and a lady came and started smoking so I moved along and another bloke came and started to smoke so I thought let me move over there because I don't like smoking, I have to walk away. I don't like the smell. (Maurice)

Proximity to others is a necessity of urban living (Amin 2012; Sandercock 2003; Wilson and Darling 2016); it is keenly felt and (mostly) valued in Gordon Square. But personal space is also relevant; '[A]n increased awareness of one's body in space and in relation to others is inevitable' (Wilson 2011, 638, on sitting on buses; see also Bissell 2007), so the size of the square and the relatively high number of places to sit is significant. There are options to sit further away from groups or people felt to be intimidating or unpleasant. In discussing urban smoking, Tan describes the 'socio-spatial stratifications of odorous bodies' (2013, 55), resulting in dynamic micro-geographies of negotiation. Prospect refuge theory of landscape preference (Appleton 1975) highlights the importance of 'edge conditions' that allow a view, but also security. In a dense urban context such as Gordon Square, this may be less related to physical protection and more to a socio-sensory response which enables avoidance from irritation triggers such as smoke, loud conversations, swearing or drinking. The visual openness of the square enables this process to largely be conducted discretely; an ethos of civility informs good manners. It is better to seem to randomly choose to sit at a distance than find yourself needing to shift away.

The details of architectural design affect social and physical comfort or discomfort, echoing Pallasmaa's placement of bodies in the city.

[E]very touching experience of architecture is multi-sensory: qualities of space, matter and scale are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle. (2005, 41; cited by Degen 2014, 98)

For the users of the Gordon Square benches, the contact of skin and bench was a regular point of discussion. Margaret is a daily user of the square 'They're hard and painful when you sit on them for a

while, you get a hard bum [laughs]'. The need for shade was a common point even during the mild summer weather of 2015, and highlights the importance of microclimate in shaping the pleasures of sitting outside.

The benches are made of granite, a material chosen for durability and ease of maintenance. Maurice recounted

When they were doing it I had a few arguments with the blokes here ... because in Peckham when they did the square at the same time they put wooden backs ... I would have thought they'd put wooden backs here [too] but the blokes said, 'this is Woolwich mate, you don't wanna put wood down in Woolwich, people come and nick it'.

Though this implies a stigma relating to the need for robust materials, the choice of granite has different connotations to cheap vandal-proof street furniture in metal or recycled plastic, and reflects contemporary sleekness in aspirational urban design, the aesthetics of gentrification. However, this doesn't negate the coldness of touch. 'Cold bums' was an English phrase learnt by a group of Nepali elders during the process of this research. Thermal comfort is noticed by many people sitting on benches, but is especially important to those who sit outside for longer periods of time and on less than sunny days. A regular practice of some of the Nepali women was to either bring cushions from home, or, more commonly, to source some food packaging or newspaper from the market stalls and use this as a protection from the chill. The action of sitting is one that unifies site users, but also differentiates their experience according to the particularities of their own bodies, preferences and priorities (Degen 2014). Limitations and discomforts in the design resolution may be noticed by all square users, but the attention paid by our schizocartographic approach to differentiated embodied subjectivities showed these were more important to 'longer stay' bench sitters, often those marginalised from a wider choice of collective environments of work or leisure.

Benches clearly do not exist in isolation. Gordon Square is council owned, properly 'public space', and is typical of many centrally-located public spaces, with an expensive coordinated system including CCTV surveillance, police patrols, daily cleaning and the near constant presence of town wardens who patrol the square from early morning until six in the evening. 'Responsible drinking' is allowed, littering carries a fine and skateboarding is forbidden but tacitly accommodated around the edges. Since the redevelopment (with associated higher levels of management and surveillance) it is highly likely that some activities and people, particularly those engaged in drug use, have been displaced to lower profile outdoor locations (Bates 2017, 67; and reflecting Minton 2009).

However, many who were in the position to compare the current site with the previous square design said that they now felt *more* able to spend time here. The *Alone together* film gives witness to the mundane inclusivity of presence in the square. Women and elderly people on their own use the square, at least during daytime hours, a common litmus test for a perception of safety (Project for Public Spaces nd). A broad range of people can and do hang out here: men and women who are alcohol dependent, who have mental health issues, who in some cases would not manage or want to conform to the codes of behaviour required of indoor public resources such as libraries. Attending to distinctions between outdoor and indoor public spaces is relevant. Though resources such as libraries are commonly framed as key sites of inclusion (Fincher and Iveson 2008), our findings imply that for some, patterns and preferences of socialising exemplified by the use of Gordon Square are better supported by the flexibility and openness of outdoor locations.

A focus on benches allows the design of the square to be addressed through haptic relationships, corporeal understandings that frame the 'right to pause'. In our conclusion we revisit these connections; how a perception of safety and an experience of comfort and conviviality can ease negotiation across difference (Wilson and Darling 2016, 3–4).

Conclusion

Public squares in cities involve micro-climates of association [that] are never singular or fixed, but rather entail multiple connections between past, present and future and are continuously reworked as different rhythms and temporalities converge in urban space. (Pickner 2016, 80, 82)

Through attending to and participating in 'bench conversations', this research has undertaken an embryonic schizocartography of Gordon Square: a positioning of bodies sitting in various ways, a validation of the subjectivity of various moments, and a curating of a conversation between processes of landscape architecture and the daily lives of the square's users. The co-produced nature of the research aided critique and identification of multi-scalar relationships; dynamics of gentrification encompassing top-down corporate-led regeneration and the individual micro-spaces of sitting, smoking and chatting on granite benches.

The choice to sit on a bench for longer periods can be circumscribed by outcomes of marginalisation – how hours are passed (time rich, time poor) and the affordances or limitations of a home environment as commonly shaped by income and health. But our fieldwork suggests a more complex dynamic that evokes dimensions of care, self-care and the relevance of being present in the messy interactions afforded by a busy

civic place. We extend Massey and Thrift's framing of 'the press of embodiment' as a means of approaching 'the relationship between self-care and space' (2003, 288), proposing that the nature of sitting outside in a public space is both deeply personal, 'touching experiences' of a body seeking a place to pause, and a tacit claiming of belonging within a collective context. The act of caring for oneself becomes tangible through a sequence of seat choices: sitting further away from noise or cigarettes, positioned alongside family or friends, related to provisions of shade, back support or sightlines. Such mundane choices shape an act of 'occupation', not necessarily one of resistance or outrage, but conceivably an agentic act, although in the context of structural inequalities, to find a moment of self-care, even a desire for being among others. A comfortable bench, in a safe and interesting location, potentially affords one facet of living in the world 'as well as possible' (Tronto 1998, 15). Within a context of health inequalities and longstanding pressures on social care, sharply felt in 'deprived' locations such as Woolwich, we suggest that this relationship between 'self-building of moments of inclusion' (Power and Bartlett 2015, 12) and architectural practice may shape some specificity into the means by which caring is 'designed into being' (Bates *et al.* 2017, 97).

Bench-sitting is not sentimentally divorced from negotiations of equity and uneven belongings. In this paper we have addressed the dynamics of interaction: not merely sitting but also watching, questioning, reading, friend-making, parenting. What does a focus on sitting still (or still-ish) add to understandings of conviviality within a site shaped by corporate-led regeneration, gentrification, marks of imperial history and ongoing racisms? Conviviality should not be framed to be easy, but it may be broadly 'at ease' – specifically with difference (Wise and Velayutham 2014, 167), and it is productive to probe deeper into this notion of ease within urban outdoor environments. The observant viewfinder of the film rests on the seated against a twitchy backdrop of passers-through. Yet the square is not merely a functional interchange but a valued place, due in most part to the acts of people staying put. Conversations are longer (between those sitting) or fleeting (seated to passers-by), nods and acknowledgements not necessarily needing a common language beyond the ability to 'exchange a few words and smile' (Sarita). Even those who perceive their sitting as solitary loosely expect unexpected interactions 'because when you sit here people come up to you' (Maurice). Mostly these are 'starting points' (Mel) without longevity, but seemingly cumulative, 'you get to know lots of things around just by sitting here really' (Margaret). So Wilson and Darling's proposal of 'the city as a site where strangers can mingle without the desire for homogeneity or idealised notions of

community' (2016, 3) is refined, sharpened here to a micro scale and the presence of people choosing to sit in relative proximity. Wilson (2016) argues that encounter fundamentally has the potential to surprise, disrupt and *make a difference* to people. By attending to the voices of bench-sitters, we have articulated this difference through narratives of care, humour, companionship, irritation, peacefulness and belonging. A bench here functions not as a still point, but a mundane nexus of un-panicked multiculturalism (Noble 2009).

A paper about benches cannot be purely about sitting still. The communal context defies this, always requiring a return not only to the interaction between individual bodies and 'everyone else', but also to the multiple temporalities and subjectivities of urban publics. Even as corporate developers seek high rent-payers to increase their profits in the longer term, for now, during the early years of redevelopment, Woolwich centre continues to be used by all, including people who are likely to be pushed out later by the pincer movement of gentrification, spiralling housing costs and benefit cuts (Peck *et al.* 2013; Watt and Minton 2016). As such, our findings have implications for policy and public space practice (Bynon and Rishbeth 2016). Public space design that facilitates a mix of activities, comfortable for longer-stay users and accommodating a flow for those 'just pausing', can provide a broadly inclusive place within an urban locality. Choice of where to sit is important in supporting a personal agency, easing the mostly unspoken practicalities and challenges of proximity to unknown others. We suggest that lived negotiations of care and conviviality are not only shaped by these 'material affordances of the built environment' (Degen and Rose 2012, 3278) but importantly enable 'counter-memories that challenge normative narratives' (Wilson and Darling 2016, 6). Temporal imprints of these become part of the materiality of the square, noted by contrasting the 2015 film stills with the publicity images taken immediately after the redesigned square's completion in 2011: worn grass, the mark of a beer can and the scuff of a skateboard. The act of designing, the top-down architecture of care, is partial. The square is never seen in the purity of the proposed masterplan but re-encountered, re-evaluated, re-purposed on each day and on each visit, a co-production of place: designed, managed and inhabited.

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Notes

- 1 For example, the population of Woolwich's Riverside ward grew by 50 per cent between 2001 and 2011 (Bates 2017, 58).
- 2 All participants' names are pseudonyms.
- 3 'Not a dicky-bird' is colloquial English and in this context means having no possessions.

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