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**Everyday public spaces
in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood:
contextualised convivialities and
boundary-crossing urban design**

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This PhD is dedicated to my late dad, Zlatko Vodicka.

Abstract

Everyday public spaces in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood: contextualised convivialities and boundary-crossing urban design

This thesis aims to deepen understandings of the everyday use of public open spaces through the lens of conviviality and in relation to urban design. The research is located in the Fir Vale neighbourhood of Sheffield (England), which can be described as superdiverse and in which the challenge of developing intercultural relationships between its residents has been made more complex by ‘headline hungry’ media stirring up controversy around the use of public spaces.

In order to develop a rich understanding of these spaces, the research adopted an engaged, responsive approach, drawing on ethnography, and used a range of observations, interviews and creative group activities. The latter were developed in collaboration with local organisations in order to meet the researcher’s ethical commitment to sharing benefits with participants during the research process.

A range of local public open spaces were explored, providing rich insights into the use of urban green spaces and streets as well as the ways in which they are perceived by diverse residents. The data revealed highly nuanced and complex dynamics of convivial interactions. Although tensions were apparent, the predominantly negative narrative surrounding this neighbourhood and its public spaces was challenged by this research. In combination with insights from agonistic pluralism and urbanism (Mouffe 2005; Mostafavi 2017), these findings provoked an understanding of conviviality in intersection with spatial and temporal entanglements. I discuss the framing of a new construct of ‘contextualised convivialities’ as a way of refining the notion of conviviality, in particular for the applied field of urban design.

The thesis further questions the adequacy of established urban design practice, especially in ethnically diverse areas, and argues for a re-thinking of the role of practitioners. Developing appropriate educational approaches for future, and existing, practitioners plays a crucial role in this proposal for urban design as a boundary-crossing engagement.

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Part I – Defining questions and approaches

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

How people from different cultural backgrounds live together and ‘peaceably’ negotiate the dynamics of everyday life has become increasingly pertinent. In the 21st century, cities with high population churn and on-going histories of migration are commonplace; it is a near universal phenomenon.

However, the experience of migration processes and their impact on urban dwellers are shaped by geographic and historic specificity. In the UK, with its on-going legacy of colonialism, structural racism is still omnipresent (Eddo-Lodge 2017). The tensions between the ‘natives’ and the ‘immigrants’ have been even further exacerbated as a result of the European Union extension in 2004, the government’s austerity policies, the Prime Minister Theresa May’s ‘hostile environment’, the Brexit referendum and the general rise of right-wing populists.

Public open spaces are important settings for everyday city living (Worpole and Knox 2007). The contextual issues referred to above are embedded in the ways in which these spaces are used and perceived. The role of public open spaces within society is significant as well as being multifaceted and complex. While some argue that they can be seen as sites of encounter with the potential to afford understanding of the ‘other’ (Sennett 1991; Dines et al 2006; Sandercock 2003), other researchers have argued that public open spaces have limited potential in supporting intercultural encounters because contact is not meaningful or sustained (Amin 2002; Valentine 2008). A concern of this research, therefore, is to explore the potential of intercultural encounters within public open spaces, with an openness to the notion of positive collective or individual transformation, and a criticality towards the limits of this.

Generally, the concepts of difference and diversity are explored mostly within the disciplines of geography and sociology, while urban design seems largely to take a ‘colour-blind’ approach, which reflects notions of the universality of the pleasures of presence in the public realm. Much established urban design practice, though being supportive of socialising in public open spaces (Carmona et al. 2003; Gehl 2010), fails to understand and acknowledge the many issues related to experiences of public space by people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Rishbeth, Ganji and Vodicka 2018).

The research represented by this thesis is located in a particular neighbourhood of Sheffield in the North of England. Due to its industrial past Sheffield attracted labour migration mostly during the post-war years and these migratory movements were later continued through family and community links. The geographic focus of this research is Fir Vale, an economically deprived neighbourhood in the north-east of Sheffield, which over the last decade has been a location of ongoing arrival and settlement of Roma immigrants from Eastern Europe, adding another community of migrants to the existing, already diverse, communities. Relatively sudden population shifts in specific localities can present a challenge to the development of positive intercultural relationships at the local level (Bailey et al. 2012). The situation in Fir Vale has been made more complex, however, by ‘headline hungry’ local and national media, reflecting in many cases a long held hostility to Roma people (Powell 2014), and stirring up controversy which has often highlighted a perceived anti-social use of public spaces (figure 1.1.).

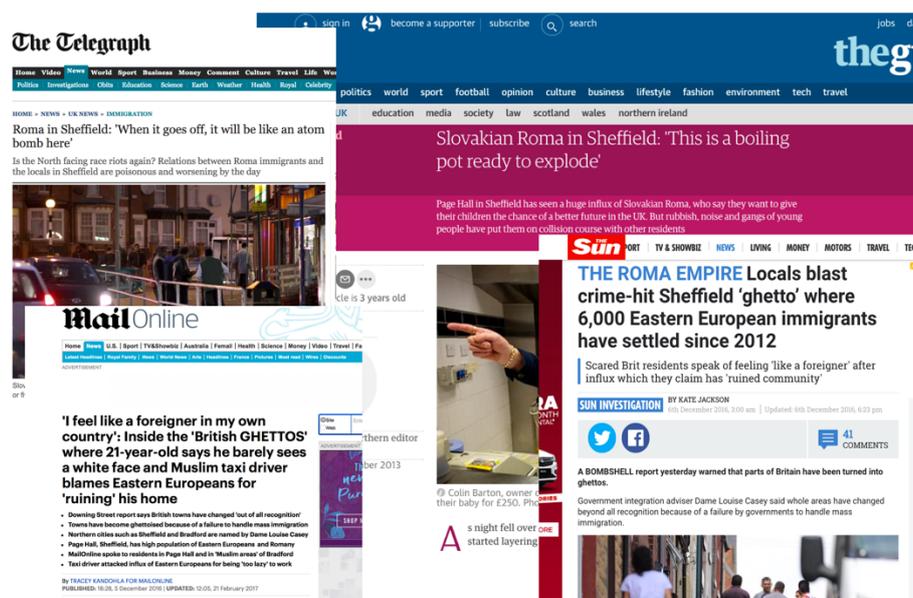


Figure 1.1. Examples of headlines in national media

The added dimension of ‘outside comment’ means that the role and use of public spaces in Fir Vale have been directly problematized in such ways, with the ongoing impact of stigmatizing the entire neighbourhood. It is therefore intended that this ‘ethno-case study’ (Parker-Jenkins 2018) of the particularly rich spatial, social and temporal context of Fir Vale will offer an opportunity to illuminate the issues for urban environments articulated above, and to contribute to academic debates on diversity and encounters in urban spaces. It also provides a chance to question established urban design practice and explore alternative appropriate approaches that are able to engage, and engage ethically, with these contemporary challenges.

This specific nature of the context of Fir Vale necessitated an appropriate approach to research. As will be further elaborated later (in chapter 4 and chapter 8), the approach was also informed by my own understandings of research and its aims which I have called ‘engaged research’. This influenced the methodology of my research, including the methods used. The many methodological and ethical issues within this study became increasingly important from the start of the research process, leading to my decision to focus one of the four main research questions directly on them.

1.2. Research questions

The overarching aim of this thesis is to examine the role of public open spaces on sociability in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods and its implication for urban design practice. This is explored through the following four research questions:

1. How are neighbourhood public open spaces (POS) used and perceived by both the recently arrived Roma population and the more established communities in Fir Vale?
2. What are the relationships between public open spaces (POS) and intercultural encounters in the neighbourhood?
3. What are the issues and challenges of doing ‘engaged research’ in a ‘high-profile’ and ‘over-researched’ context?
4. What recommendations can be made from this research in relation to Urban Design practice?

It is worth noting that, although definitions of public space vary within everyday use and scholarship, including differences between disciplines, in this thesis the term public open space (POS) is used to refer to the outdoor spaces which are freely accessible for public use.

1.3. Personal background/expertise/positionality

My own background is in architecture and urban design. My professional career started in 2004 and, prior to commencing this research, I have worked as a designer in various contexts, on different scales of design intervention and in a range of roles. This has included working in architecture and urban design practices, some conventional, others not, different types of international organisations (United Nations Development Programme, Shelter Centre, Architecture & Développement) as well as working on initiating bottom-up projects with local groups and communities. My personal background has also played a role in my professional development; growing up in a country at war

(former Yugoslavia), including a period of being a refugee, and later living and working as an urban designer in the post-war context of a destroyed and divided city, have informed my professional interests and life choices. My practice has therefore mostly been focused on social aspects of professions related to the urban environment and have often included participatory and co-design ways of working. Together, these experiences have influenced the overall approach to my research and its methodology (as will be further discussed in chapters 4 and 8). The intention was to develop an engaged and responsive type of research appropriate for the particular context of Fir Vale.

One of my reasons for embarking on a PhD was my desire to learn how to embed more research into my practice. This is something I have recognised over the years as being a much needed yet frequently missing aspect of urban design practice. The intention was to explore ways of connecting research knowledge and skills more directly into practice. Another motivation for my research was my particular interest in exploring public space and its relation to cultural and ethnic diversity. This was partly triggered by my lived experience in diverse areas of East London and Sheffield and partly by projects that I had worked on in different contexts: in my home town, a post-war ‘divided city’, in which public space acted as a main point of contact between Croats and Serbs as well as others of mixed heritage who did not wish to identify with one single ethnicity (as in my own case); in a village on a Turkish island, which shared similar issues with my home town, but between local Turks and the returning Greek diaspora; or in a Hungarian village, characterised by a lack of adequate public space, but with many Slovakian commuters moving into the village’s newly built gated communities from the nearby Slovakian capital, Bratislava. In each of these projects, the need to understand the complexities of the specific context, and to find ways of doing so prior to engaging in any urban design related intervention, was crucial. Finally, having lived and worked in Sheffield, an additional reason for engaging in doctoral research was to enable me to expand further my existing professional networks and to develop other practice and/or research based projects.

1.4. Structure of the thesis

My thesis is structured in three main parts:

Part I – Defining questions and approaches

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: The Context of Fir Vale

In this section I introduce the main context of the research, the neighbourhood of Fir Vale. It situates the area within Sheffield and covers a brief history of the neighbourhood and its population. I also provide information on current issues within the area and highlight some of its specificities.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

In this chapter I look into the existing literature related to cultural diversity, conviviality within public space and contemporary approaches within urban design. I also explore relationships between these themes.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter defines my overall methodological approach and its scope and scale. This includes my main ethical considerations as well as an explanation of each method used within my research. The chapter concludes by discussing my analytical approaches and reflecting on some limitations.

Part II – Exploring public open spaces and intercultural encounters

Chapter 5: Public Open Spaces of Fir Vale

I focus on data related to several public open spaces within the neighbourhood. These are explored as a way of addressing my first research question, relating to how the local public spaces are used and perceived. It also sets the scene for addressing the second research question, which considers local public open spaces and their role in sociability and encounter, and which is further explored in chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 6: Contestation of place in Fir Vale

In this chapter I discuss experiential and often contested qualities of local spaces. Most of the contestations are related to different groups socialising in public open spaces and the consequences of this, such as litter, audible issues etc.

Chapter 7: Contextualised Convivialities

This chapter pulls together the findings from my research with theoretical underpinnings and proposes the construct of contextualised convivialities. The construct of contextualised convivialities has been developed by exploring the notion of conviviality through the frame of urban design. I argue that the focus on different typologies of space, with their micro and macro affordances, together with insights from agonistic urbanism, supports the need for a contextualised comprehension of conviviality in pluralistic ways.

Part III – Reflections, implications and conclusion

Chapter 8: Reflective Interlude

I address my third research question in this chapter, which explores the issues and challenges involved in doing ‘engaged research’ in a ‘high-profile’ and ‘over-researched’ context. I also reflect on the

methods used within the research, as well as ethical issues. The chapter concludes with a reflection related to my professional and personal background and its relationship to my doctoral research.

Chapter 9: Implications for practice: urban design as boundary-crossing engagement

In this chapter I address my final research question by discussing the implications for urban design practice, which have emerged from my research focused on public open spaces. I question established understandings of urban design practice and suggest possible projections for future ways of practising, especially in ethnically diverse areas. I argue for expanding the practice of urban design and re-framing it as boundary crossing engagement.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

In this final chapter I summarise the findings of my research in relation to developing theory and their implications for urban design practice, as well as the limitations of the research and proposals for future research. I conclude with some final brief reflections.

Chapter 2

Context

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I will introduce the ‘neighbourhood’ context of my research in terms of its specific location, demographics, and spatial and socio-economic character. The local public open spaces (parks, streets, etc), which are the specific scale of focus of this research, will be introduced, explored and analysed in more detail in chapter 5. This particular neighbourhood seemed to be a relevant context for exploring the role of public open spaces for several reasons. Due to its on-going history of migration it represents a part of the city that can be characterised as superdiverse (Vertovec 2007), similarly to many other areas across the country and beyond. The relatively recent population churn, however, had a particular impact on the ways in which public open spaces have been used in this neighbourhood, creating tensions and controversies that reached the national headlines at one point. According to Flyvbjerg’s (2006) conceptualisation of case study research, these particular features arguably make Fir Vale a simultaneously paradigmatic (highlighting more general characteristics), critical (having a strategic importance) and extreme (atypical and unusual) case study, thus offering a rich learning opportunity.

2.2. Sheffield

My research is situated in a particular neighbourhood in Sheffield, a city located in South Yorkshire in the north of England. The city has a population of over half a million inhabitants according to the 2011 census (Sheffield City Council 2018) with 19.2% of the population being of black or minority ethnic (BME) origin. According to the Fairness Commission Report (Sheffield City Council 2013), Sheffield is one of the most unequal cities in England. Compared to other similar cities (figure 2.1.), the spatial inequalities between the north-east part (amongst the 20% most deprived in the country) and the south-west part of the city (amongst the 20% least deprived in the country) are a significant feature and are distinctive for Sheffield.

This inequality is further exemplified by a research project, which used a local bus route as a lens to explore the stark divide between the average life expectancy in the north-east and the south-west of the city (Sheffield City Council 2013). It takes only about 65 minutes to get from one part of the city to the other on bus route 83, however the average life expectancy drops by about ten years by the time the bus reaches its final destination in the north-east of the city:

“This means that a baby girl born and who lives her life in one part of the city can expect to live, on average, almost 10 years longer than a similar baby girl born and living her life about four miles away, by virtue of nothing more than the socio-economic circumstances and area she was born in to.”

(Sheffield City Council 2013, p. 13)

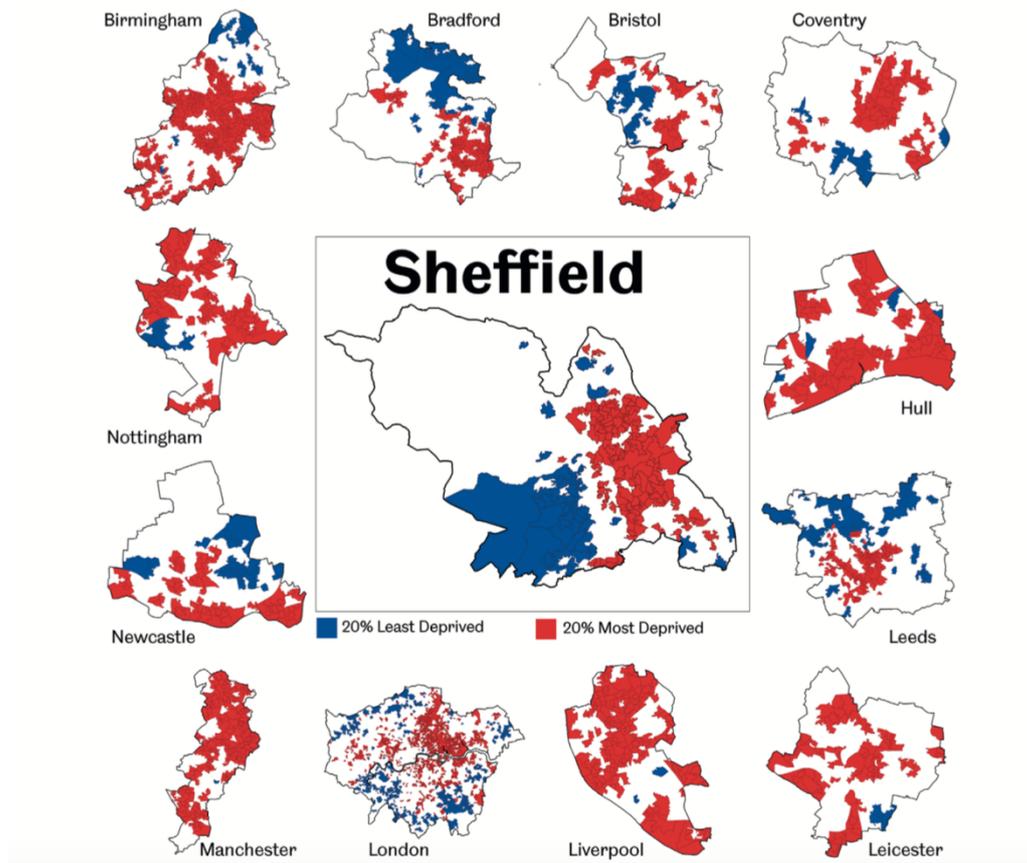


Figure 2.1. Mapping inequality (Sheffield City Council 2013)

It is also important to note that in the area of highest life expectancy the percentage of BME population is 8% whilst in the area with the lowest life expectancy this percentage is about 57% (Sheffield City Council 2013).

2.3. Fir Vale

The focus of this research is the neighbourhood of Fir Vale, which forms part of the Burngreave ward located in the north-east part of the city, about two and a half miles away from the city centre. Burngreave ward has a population of about 27,000 (Office of National Statistics, 2011) with the

percentage of BME population within the ward being 63.5% (Office of National Statistics, 2011). As mentioned above, this is the part of the city that is characterised by high levels of economic deprivation, with the ward being the second most deprived one in Sheffield (Department for Communities and Local Government 2015).

Fir Vale is located in the north part of Burngreave ward. Defining the boundaries of neighbourhoods is always debatable; as thoroughly explored by Jenks and Dempsey (2007, p. 160), the actual term 'neighbourhood' has a "loaded nature" and is open to many interpretations. Taking into account the contested nature of the term, this research understands 'neighbourhood' as a spatial construct closely related to a geographical area. Although this particular understanding is limited (Jenks and Dempsey 2007), it is in line with what has been identified in my fieldwork as the everyday use of the term 'neighbourhood' by local residents.

Even though initially referred to as 'Page Hall' – a name also commonly used by the media – I changed the name to 'Fir Vale' within the first phase of my research. According to the perceptions of local people, the name Page Hall seemed to be too narrowly defined for my research – both in the sense of geographical area (it tends to refer to just a few streets) and in terms of its established wider connotations (and the stigma these bring to it). Fir Vale is also more closely in line with the terminology used in the Burngreave and Fir Vale Masterplan (Sheffield City Council 2005). Even though neighbourhood boundaries are complex and fluid and therefore challenging to define with precision, using the name Fir Vale is therefore more appropriate for this research. Additionally, the use of maps, images and layered descriptions of specific local spaces and their character will aid a better understanding of the specific context of this area as discussed throughout this thesis.

2.3.1. A brief history of the area

The Fir Vale area was agricultural land until the 18th century and it started to develop during Sheffield's industrial revolution throughout the 19th century. The Sheffield Workhouse (today the Northern General Hospital) opened in 1881 and at the same time the residential area around Page Hall Road and Rushby Street started to develop further (figure 2.2.). These narrow fronted terraced houses with an alleyway to the back yard were typical of the time and were built for the local workers, mostly in the steel and cutlery industry. Although many neighbouring areas were redeveloped during the middle of the 20th century, the major residential development of the Fir Vale area occurred in the 1970s when the Wensley Estate in the north part of the area was built. Other changes during the historical development of Fir Vale were naturally related to shifts in its population, with the most significant demographic changes resulting from Sheffield's industrial history. Labour shortages,

especially in the post-war period (Runnymede 2012), were the main causes of immigration to the city and this also influenced Burngreave ward, including Fir Vale.

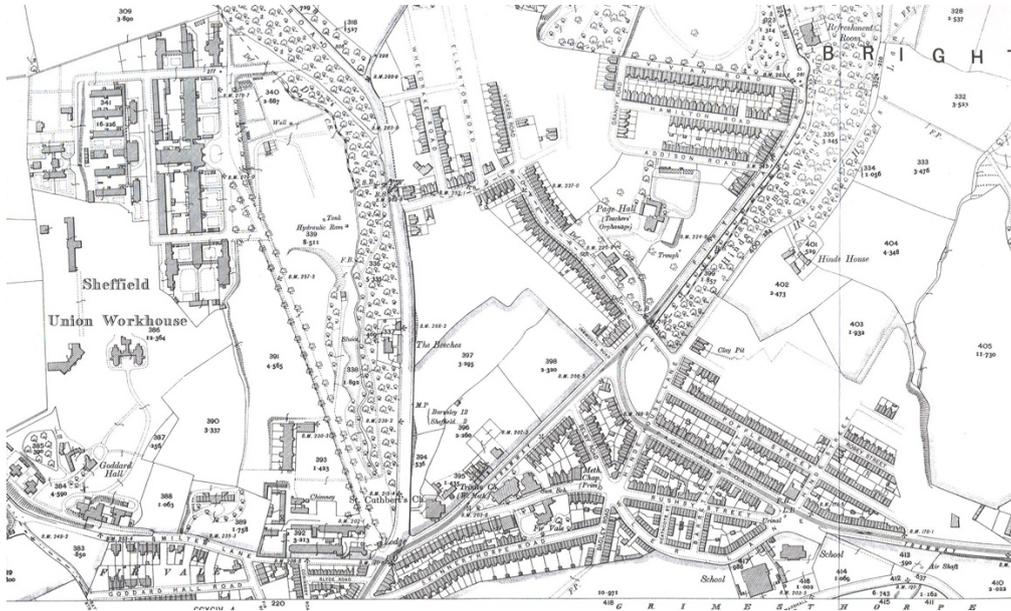


Figure 2.2. Map showing Fir Vale area in the 1905 (Sheffield Archives: OS Map 288/16)

This meant that that the predominantly white working class population of Fir Vale now became more diverse and included people from Bangladeshi, African Caribbean, Yemeni and Somali communities, though the majority were part of the Pakistani community, one of Sheffield’s largest ethnic minorities (Runnymede 2012). According to the Runnymede report (2012), in 2001 less than half of the Pakistani community population was born in Pakistan, demonstrating the long-established nature of the community.

2.3.2. Fir Vale today

In terms of its current population, the area referred to here as Fir Vale has approximately 9,000 residents (according to Annual Population Estimates for England and Wales: Mid-2016 ONS). Although it is still highly ethnically mixed, in the last decade the population has been changing, mostly as a result of a large Roma population from Slovakia moving into the area. According to Payne (2016) the precise number of Roma in the area is hard to define; based on the number of Roma pupils in primary and secondary schools over several years, his working estimate is that there are about 2,500 Roma living the area (Payne 2016). However, Casey’s review (Casey 2016), a

government commissioned review into opportunity and migration in the UK's most isolated and deprived communities, estimates this number to be about 6,000, although this claim is not supported by any official data sources.

According to the the Burngreave and Fir Vale Masterplan (Sheffield City Council 2005), Fir Vale is divided into Fir Vale East, sometimes also referred to as Page Hall, a predominantly residential area with a primary and secondary school, and Fir Vale West, with half of it being the Northern General Hospital site and the other half a mostly residential area (figure 2.3.). Since then there have been no substantial changes within the area in relation to the built environment, apart from relatively recently in 2012 when some of the Skinnerthorpe and Bagley Road terraced houses were demolished and the site occupied by a new primary school which opened in 2014. Although there are a range of shops throughout the area, they are grouped in two main clusters. The first cluster is located in the east, around Page Hall Road, and the second one around Owler Lane, in the west part of Fir Vale.



Figure 2.3. Map showing Fir Vale area and its East and West parts

Both of these include a number of takeaways, diverse grocery and clothes shops, and also some specialist shops such as jewellery shops, a pharmacy, a betting shop etc. There are also several Christian churches and Muslim mosques dispersed around the neighbourhood. In line with Sheffield being one of the greenest cities in the UK, the Fir Vale area also features a significant number of green spaces, with the largest ones being Firth Park, Wincobank Wood and Osgathorpe Park. These

are significant features within the broader resource of public open space in the area, which are explored in more detail in later chapters of this thesis.

In terms of the types of housing, the Fir Vale area has a mixed provision with most of its housing belonging to one of the following types: Victorian and Edwardian semi-detached houses; Victorian and Edwardian terraces; narrow Edwardian terraces; and Post-war terraces and semi-detached houses. Although there are various types of tenure within the area, there is a significant concentration of privately rented houses. Due to the rents in the area being lower than average, it attracts people with lower incomes. This was also one of the main reasons why the Roma population began to move into the area, which then later further attracted other members of the Roma communities to join them. Even back in 2005 in the Burngreave master plan (Sheffield City Council 2005) the housing stock of Fir Vale was described as out-dated and poorly performing, and it has been deteriorating further ever since. This prompted Sheffield City Council to introduce the city's first Selective Licensing scheme in 2014 in Fir Vale. The Scheme requires the landlords to apply for a licence from the council, if they want to rent out a property, and the property needs to be of an appropriate standard. This has been achieved through Compulsory Licensing in one part of the area and as a voluntary scheme in the rest of the area. According to the report, the main aims of the proposal are to "improve the standard of private rented housing; break the cycle of low demand; and reduce anti-social behaviour" (Sheffield City Council 2014).

2.3.3. Representations of the neighbourhood through the media

The changes in demographics have been a source of many tensions in the area over the past years. These were mostly triggered by the ways in which the large numbers and unconventional behaviour of the latest arrivals, the Roma population, were perceived by other residents. Most of these issues were related to the ways in which the Roma community use public spaces, spending significant amounts of time outside and congregating in groups. The tensions were further fuelled by the media, especially by an interview with the local politician and former home secretary, David Blunkett, in November 2013 (Shute 2013). In the interview Blunkett said: "We have got to change the behaviour and the culture of the incoming community, the Roma community, because there's going to be an explosion otherwise" (Pidd 2013). This had a massive impact on the headline-hungry media: "come the end of the week pretty much every media outlet in the country had descended on this working-class suburb of north Sheffield" (Pidd 2013).

According to Richardson (2014), this media coverage was particularly intensive from September 2013 to February 2014. In her research, which involved a search of press reports and political discourse for the terms 'Roma' and 'Sheffield', 89 articles were identified in this relatively short period of time

(Richardson 2014). The best way to summarise the media attention at the time is by using a quote from Richardson herself:

“The stories in the Roma/Sheffield news event in late 2013/early 2014 started with the reporting of community disquiet in Page Hall, Sheffield, about the number and behaviour of Roma in the community. In late October this was followed by news reporting of research (Brown et al., 2013, see Brown et al, this issue) estimating the size of the Roma population in the UK; providing an opportunity for the media panic about a number of issues including the scale of immigration from Europe and ‘other’ cultural behaviour of Roma. The story arc then brought into play political voices from Blunkett and colleagues, but also took in fantasmatic themes such as under-age prostitution and selling babies, in addition to themes of anti-social behaviour and dumping rubbish. These ‘whistle words’ chime with previous research (Richardson, 2006) that found ‘mess’ and ‘cost’ were two key themes that gripped in the media and political debate on Roma and accession from new EU countries ten years ago.”

(Richardson 2014, p. 55)

This summary shows that although what happened in the case of Fir Vale in late 2013 could be seen as nothing particularly new, it did represent yet another display of anti-immigrant discourse. This was supported by politicians as well as local and national media, drawing on selected stories from local people and including claims that were later proved to be false. The situation was further intensified by its being specifically focused on the Roma, one of the most marginalised groups in Europe (as will be further expanded on in the next chapter).

Although the majority of media coverage was negative and inflammatory (Richardson 2014), there were some rare articles, which tried to challenge the ways in which the story was narrated. One of these was by Townsend (2013), writing for the Observer, who argued that there was little to substantiate most of the accusations (i.e. those relating the increase in crime, or even antisocial behaviour, to the Roma population). However, articles such as Townsend’s did not attract much attention and were substantially outnumbered by negative and accusatory articles. Such was the predominant narrative and general context within the neighbourhood in September 2014, when I began working on my research. A google search I conducted of images of Page Hall in 2014 (see figure 2.4.) further demonstrated the interest of the media in the neighbourhood as well as the preoccupation with public space in this narrative. Although interest from the media gradually declined over the years of my fieldwork, articles with sensational headlines still appeared regularly,



Figure 2.4. Images of Page Hall from google
(from 26 October 2014)

albeit at this time primarily in the tabloids. In 2016 Channel 4 made a series of four episodes called *Keeping Up with the Khans*, which focused entirely on people from the area. This nevertheless featured a much more balanced perspective than much of the earlier media coverage.

2.4. Conclusion

When describing the wider context of the research, it is important to explore the character of the Fir Vale neighbourhood. This chapter has started to do this, but the area will be painted in more nuanced and multifaceted ways throughout the thesis, primarily in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

However, it is also important to highlight here the specificities of Fir Vale that distinguishes it from other superdiverse places that have commonly featured in scholarship in this field (which will be referred to further in the literature review in chapter 3), such as Hackney in North London (Wessendorf 2013; Neal et al. 2016) or Walworth Road in South London (Hall 2009). Sheffield, as a ‘second tier’ city in the UK, is clearly different from global hotspots and more ‘cosmopolitan’ cities such as London, and this shapes the ways in which Fir Vale is different from Hackney.

Although one of the most specific and visible characteristics of Fir Vale at the moment is the predominance of the population of Roma origin, another prevailing characteristic is that, compared to other well-researched diverse neighbourhoods in mostly large cities, such as Oud-Berchem in Antwerp (Blommaert 2013) or the London neighbourhoods referred to above, Fir Vale is not going through a process of gentrification; indeed it would be difficult to imagine this happening in the near future. A number of potential reasons for this have been identified in scholarship on gentrification

(Smith 1996; Schlichtman 2017). One of the main reasons is related to size and economic clout; Sheffield is not a global metropolis. In a similar vein, there does not seem to be a large cohort of ‘young professionals’ needing to move into areas of higher deprivation, given that Sheffield is generally a relatively affordable city in comparison to other places, with attractive housing available in other areas. Another possible reason is the geographical position of the neighbourhood of Fir Vale within Sheffield; arguably it could be described as being in a peripheral location with more of a suburban character, unlike some of the neighbourhoods in other cities mentioned above (e.g. Hackney, Oud-Berchem). Its suburban semblance is in fact reinforced by Sheffield’s topography, with its numerous hills leading to a sense of remoteness, even in areas with urban densities of housing such as the terraced streets of Fir Vale. Nevertheless, probably the strongest deterrent of gentrification is the neighbourhood’s stigmatised reputation, arguably, exacerbated by the aforementioned Selective Licensing Scheme.

This chapter has argued that Fir Vale is in some ways similar to areas found in many other cities, but also unique in other ways. This argument has been made mostly by paying attention to the context in relation to statistics, demographics, politics, geography. etc. It is important to bear in mind, however, that many other specificities of Fir Vale also exist, particularly those related to the social and experiential qualities of place that will become apparent throughout this thesis. In the next chapter, this will be further foregrounded by exploring the literature related to ethnographic approaches to understanding places.

A central contribution of this thesis is its rich and multi-layered description of the Fir Vale area and in particular its public spaces, which adds substantive knowledge about this ethnically diverse place and challenges some of the preconceptions and stereotypes that prevail in its depiction. Moreover, this research also argues that it is essential to find ways of exploring and understanding highly specific contexts in appropriate and ethical ways. In this sense, the research is also of wider significance especially given that the process of population diversification is becoming a mundane characteristic of many cities, towns and even rural areas (Catney 2015) each with its own specific characteristics.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This research straddles two broad but interrelated fields of scholarship, namely diversity studies (e.g. Vertovec 2014a) and urban studies (e.g. Hutchison 2010), with a particular focus on public open space. Both fields are complex and interdisciplinary, so the research draws on a range of thematic areas and theories in order to provide a basis for an exploration of my research questions as well as the research methodology adopted to address them. The chapter is structured in three sections addressing literature related to: cultural diversity (3.2.); public space and conviviality (3.3.); and approaches to urban design (3.4.). These three themes are discussed not only in order to provide an overview of the existing scholarship, but also to identify overlaps – both existing and potential connections. Further references to additional literature will be made throughout the thesis as they become relevant in addressing specific topics and concepts emerging from the research process.

3.2. Cultural diversity

The focus of this research is on use of and sociality within the public spaces of a particular neighbourhood in Sheffield, which is a home to a population of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Such diversity is becoming a common characteristic of contemporary society more generally, making societal issues increasingly complex to understand. This diversification is particularly obvious within urban contexts, although it can also be seen in some rural areas, especially those with labour intensive agricultural needs. To describe this dynamic, many academics use the term ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2007), which can be simply defined as ‘diversification of diversity’. Superdiversity is used to describe a situation in which ‘new’ migrants, who may be moving into areas with existing communities with a migration background, are themselves diverse in many ways (ethnicity, gender, age, education, immigration status/rights, even in regards to spatial distribution), and where the complexities of ‘new’ migration surpass those in the ‘old’ post-colonial context. Most importantly, it moves beyond a definitional focus on ethnicity alone. This phenomenon is an inherent part of city living, and therefore the social dimensions of this influence the use of public open spaces and the ways in which they are valued. As superdiversity is both shaping and being shaped by the urban environment, one would expect that urban design practitioners would engage with it as both a key driver and a key context.

Although the term ‘superdiversity’ is widely used and accepted, some question its appropriateness and

adequacy, including Vertovec himself (2013): “...It is hopefully a useful placeholder until we develop more enhanced terms, theories and perspectives with which to depict and interpret the multiple modes and impacts of current forms of societal complexification.” There has indeed been a recent attempt at defining a new term - ‘hyper-diversity’ - which claims “that cities are not only diverse in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms, but that also many differences exist with respect to lifestyles, attitudes and activities” (Tasan-Kok et al. 2013, p. 5). This term has nevertheless not been widely adopted and can be criticised, on the one hand, for its potential relativisation of societal features and, on the other hand, for its possible negative connotations, as “‘hyper-’ can inherently suggest that something is overexcited, out of control and therefore generally negative or undesirable (like hyperactivity or hyperinflation)” as argued by Meissner & Vertovec (2015, p. 545). Back (2015) provides further critique of superdiversity arguing that Vertovec is downplaying the racism which is still present and the possible serious consequences of this:

“...this emphasis on superlative difference feeds the fire of public anxieties of an already panicked debate about immigration. While there is an urgent need to find new ways of notating and representing the cultural kaleidoscope of the migrant city, to do so without paying equal attention to the ways division lines are drawn within urban multiculturalism is profoundly ill-judged. As a consequence, super-diversity as a concept is politically one-dimensional and ultimately culpable in letting the sentiments of anti-immigrant times go unchallenged.” (Back 2015)

This discussion and critique of the concept of superdiversity is included here to situate my use of the term within on-going debates about current concepts and their possible contestations. It is crucial not to oversimplify or directly adapt concepts, such as superdiversity in this case, from other disciplines without critical appraisal. As an urban designer rather than a sociologist, I believe it is possible to argue for superdiversity to be more explicitly foregrounded and engaged with in the field of urban design, while still acknowledging societal complexities and debates (a shift or double-vision that potentially also highlights the bridging of academia and practice as much as defining disciplinary boundaries). In this research, then, the concept of superdiversity is referred to critically as a term related to current societal complexification, which also includes “the ‘dark side’ of cultural difference - as positioned through relations of power, inequality and exclusion, history, resistance, conflict and profound, troubling ambiguity”, as argued for by Alexander et al (2012, p. 4).

Societal dynamics, as discussed and described within academia, are being transferred into action partially through the influence of different legislations and policies. These relatively recent understandings of the complexities of diversity also challenge the appropriateness of longstanding *multicultural* policies, instead informing a different approach based upon *interculturalism* (Cantle 2012). The general argument is that interculturalism is not only more open, inclusive and forward

looking, but also more pro-active and creative:

“Interculturalism is about changing mindsets by creating new opportunities across cultures to support intercultural activity and it’s about thinking, planning and acting interculturally. Perhaps, more importantly still, it is about envisioning the world as we want it to be, rather than be determined by our separate past histories” (Cantle 2012).

Nevertheless, interculturalism as a concept is also open to criticism (Gomasasca 2013; Keval 2014) and can even be appropriated by politicians in unexpected ways, such as by the UKIP leader Farage¹ in February 2015, who, for some reason, understands interculturalism as more in line with his own (far right wing) politics.

As with many policies, the danger is often in how they translate into ‘the real life’ sphere in terms of their actual application. Cultural diversity issues seem particularly sensitive to the notion of spatial distribution, specifically with regard to the scale of the city versus the scale of the neighbourhood. For instance, although the majority of cities can be described as superdiverse in general terms, they at the same time consist of a range of more or less diverse parts and neighbourhoods, in which diversity will be manifested differently. This exemplifies, therefore, the need to explore superdiversity and related policies through the lens of spatial distribution.

Such an argument has also been made by Keith (2005, p. 63):

“The increasingly diverse nature of contemporary cities has to be understood as taking place through this process of staging and place-making of the neighbourhoods of the city. The city is constituted both as a cartography of sites through which communities identify themselves in the migrant metropolis and as spaces that are appropriated in the performance of community-making. Both these forms of spatialization literally take place within specific regimes of national, transnational, and local governance and power that mark their constitution.”

In understanding superdiversity, therefore, it is necessary to overlay it with additional layers such as those of the dynamics of deprivation (i.e. as explained in chapter 2 in relation to Sheffield) and access to civic resources, by which I include access to public open spaces.

While foregrounded in an existing literature base, in this chapter I argue that there is a need to explore these issues further with a particular focus on spatial (and temporal) dimensions. This shapes both a

¹ “Rotherham's doctrine of multiculturalism was fundamentally flawed — it’s time for ‘interculturalism’”
<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/rotherhams-doctrine-of-multiculturalism-was-fundamentally-flawed--its-time-for-interculturalism-10027850.html>

theoretical framing and a methodological approach. For instance, Gidley argues: “An ethnographic approach alert to the sites of interactions and to the spatiality of relations is a suitable method for investigating everyday integration and ‘commonplace diversity’ in the era of super-diversity” (Sigona 2014). My research aims to respond to this argument by focusing on a specific neighbourhood, exploring issues of diversity in relation to the use of public open spaces, and further offering possible recommendations for urban design practice. Such an aim implies the need to drill down to the micro level of everyday public open spaces, including their materiality.

In terms of policies, those relating to diversity in the UK context are most often discussed in relation to community cohesion. Looking at the conceptual development of community cohesion since 2001, when according to Cattle (2016) the term was first coined, it is evident that it is not often used in relation to the spatial dimensions of these issues (Cattle 2016). One important exception to this has been the report by Demos from 2007, *‘Equally spaced? Public space and interaction between diverse communities’* (Lownsborough and Beunderman 2007), which was clearly focused on the spatial notions of interaction. It could be argued, however, that the report has been underappreciated and has lacked influence, as I have found little evidence to prove otherwise. It could be argued that this exemplifies the continuing issue of the lack of cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary collaborations and the necessity to fully integrate these discussions into disciplines related to the built environment, including education, research and practice.

A similar argument could be made about the Council of Europe’s flagship programme Intercultural Cities. Originated in 2004 by the UK think tank Comedia (Wood and Landry 2008), the idea of intercultural cities has played an important role in Europe and indeed has expanded even more widely in recent years. The main policy paradigm of Intercultural Cities is about understanding diversity as a resource and supporting the development of ‘Intercultural City Strategies’ in cities participating in the programme. These strategies include ‘place-making’ as one of the foci, arguing that the city needs to “identify a number of key public spaces and invest in discrete redesign, animation and maintenance to raise levels of usage by all ethnic groups and interaction between them.” (Wood and Landry 2008, p. 325). Although commendable, in practice many questions remain. For instance, what does it consider to be ‘key public spaces’ and, more importantly, how will its goals be achieved and embedded in urban design related practices?

3.2.1. The challenge of the Roma populations as new arrivals

As argued earlier, focusing on the neighbourhood scale is crucial as a way of understanding the nuances of the social dynamics of a specific place within the wider geo-political setting. Fir Vale, as a neighbourhood with a long history of demographic change, has been the location for the arrival of a relatively large number of Roma in the last decade or so, and offers an interesting context in which to

explore how the interrelationships of arriving and settled residents shape, and are shaped by, the use of public open spaces.

The history of the Fir Vale area is not unusual, however, as many other parts of the UK have experienced similar changes relating to migration and diversity, for example in relation to post-colonial migration in the 20th century (as explained in the section on the history of Fir Vale in chapter 2). Migration related changes are manifested through specific forms of spatial distribution and are often substantial in so-called deprived areas. Some argue, for example, that this spatial segregation, intersected with social segregation, directly influenced the race riots in towns in the North of England in 2001 (Cantle 2001). These unrests led to a national report by Cantle (Report of the Community Cohesion Review Team), in which the concept of ‘parallel lives’ was coined (Cantle 2001) and which garnered significant debate in the media. In some ways the latest demographic change in Fir Vale is simply repeating the past by creating a different, still emerging ethnic majority within the area, this time that of the Roma population. However, as argued earlier and as will be discussed further in relation to the Roma themselves, what makes it different this time is the phenomenon of superdiversity, the diversification of diversity.

Although the focus of this research is not specifically on the Roma population, they are undoubtedly particularly visible within the neighbourhood, which makes it important to understand more about them. The Roma are Europe’s fastest-growing ethnic minority (there are about 10-12 million Roma in Europe²), who have throughout history suffered hardship and been subjected to persecutions, segregations and prejudices, which, in different ways, have continued till the present day. Furthermore, the fact that the Roma themselves consist of very diverse groups of people (Klimova 2002) with different geographical, cultural, and dialectical differences and even distinct ethnicities (Sinti, Iberian Kale, Mannush etc.) makes their situation even more complex. As argued by Tremlett (2014, p. 845), “[t]he heterogeneous and hybrid character implied in the term ‘Roma populations’ means a shift is required in research and policy making”.

In the context of Fir Vale, the Roma mostly come from Slovakia and, it seems, specifically from two villages in Eastern Slovakia (Payne, 2016). According to Payne (2016), this is due to ‘push’ factors in the country of origin, such as lack of employment, and ‘pull’ factors in the destination country with its better economic prospects. Further to this, in the case of the Roma, another important reason for emigration from Slovakia has been the desire to escape the open discrimination they have been exposed to in Slovakia, which is still on-going specifically in relation to education and health care, as confirmed by an Amnesty International report (2017). However, the specific reasons for the Roma

² Amnesty International UK - Roma Rights <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/roma-rights-anti-discrimination-europe-violence-eviction-education#.VSezOxPF-ts>

population moving to Sheffield cannot be assumed or easily understood, but are likely to include “Roma Slovak community coherence (families wanting to be near other families)” as argued by Payne (2016, p. 5). During my research the superdiversity of the Roma ‘community’ indeed quickly became apparent. This included varying levels of different language abilities (Romani, Slovak, and English being the most common but not the only ones), employment, education, and lifestyles, which are often also related to their age on arrival and the time spent in Sheffield.

There are two main paradoxes in relation to the Roma, as explained by Orta (2010). Firstly, this extremely marginalised and vulnerable group is at the same time perceived as a threat, and this is fuelled by generalisations and prejudices. Secondly, because of the widespread preconception that they are nomads purely by choice, in most European countries they are discouraged from settling down, whilst at the same time their movement is hindered (see also Commissioner for Human Rights 2012). Scardi calls the latter “one of the most significant paradoxes of our global age” (2010, p 11).

The ‘Roma issue’ is indeed an extremely complex and sensitive one and consists of a wide range of challenges, with the main problems being related to housing, citizenship, healthcare, employment, poverty and education (Sigona 2005). Perceptions of the Roma by the non-Roma public present a serious problem, which is not only exacerbated by the rise of anti-immigrant movements in Europe, but also by the Left, generally supportive of migration and diversity, which either remains silent or struggles to find appropriate ways of addressing the ‘Roma issue’ (especially on the ground, at local levels). There have been several examples of left-wing politicians (such as David Blunkett in Sheffield, the French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, to name a few) creating controversies and heating up the debate, as noted in Rorke’s (2014) article about ‘Roma integration and a normal way of living’.

In the UK and in most European countries, the media contributes significantly to such challenges by generally portraying the Roma in negative ways, which not only further stigmatises an already marginalised community, but also almost creates paranoia in society (Powell, 2014). Van Baar (2011) points out that the Roma are increasingly referred to negatively as a European ‘problem’ and not even as a European ‘minority’ anymore. This clearly illustrates the need to discuss the ‘Roma issue’ with a critical understanding of superdiversity, which includes an acknowledgement of and engagement with the aforementioned idea that societal complexification includes negative aspects such as racism and prejudices, referred to by Alexander et al (2012, p. 4) as “the dark side”.

Issues relating to the Roma population in Fir Vale have been reported not only in the local but also the national media, especially during 2013 and 2014. Richardson (2014) researched press reports and political discourse concerning the issue of the Roma population in the Page Hall area of Sheffield (here referred to as Fir Vale - see chapter 2) over a six-month period from September 2013 to

February 2014. According to this research there was at that time a clear focus on general disquiet in relation to the number and behaviour of Roma people in the neighbourhood, “providing an opportunity for the media panic” (Richardson, 2014, p. 56). Richardson (2014, p. 60) further acknowledged “a failure to secure more responsible reporting” and pointed to the importance of examples of real Roma life stories and images “to ‘bounce’ journalists and politicians into a more positive and nuanced debate”, whilst at the same time remaining aware that this is not an easy task, especially as there are no single community identities (particularly in the UK, which has Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities). This again emphasises the need for more complex understandings of the Roma population, as also argued by Clark (2014). In his Glasgow based ethnographic study of Roma related issues in the neighbourhood of Govanhill, Clark adopts an intersectional approach, where the issues of not only ethnicity but also class and gender are considered. Furthermore he argues that, in order to understand these complexities, it is also necessary to look into the everyday public spaces.

Discussion of issues related to the Roma and use of public spaces is also evident in literature focused on other parts of Europe. For example, according to López Catalán (2012), the Roma ‘problem’ manifests itself in European public outdoor space most commonly as perceived anti-social behaviour (begging and conducting marginal economic activities such as street selling and scrap collection). However, at the same time, public space has also been seen not as part of the ‘problem’ but as part of the solution by some authors. In their report, which was produced with the purpose of recommending new and creative methods of working to address issues related to the Roma, Maya et al (2012) mention ‘urbanism’ in two of their recommendations. Firstly, under ‘Participation of people in question’, they argue that bottom-up projects as part of the ‘process of urbanism’ have proved to have the potential to empower people to improve their lives. Secondly, under ‘Work locally’, they argue that ‘urbanism’, which for them includes environmental quality as well as the care of public space, can be a powerful tool for addressing many concerns but “usually is not considered when discussing ‘social’ policies” (Maya et al. 2012, p. 40).

My research will further explore this relationship between the Roma population, the use of public open spaces and the possible role of urban design. Furthermore, it will achieve this not by focusing only on the Roma, but through the much broader lens of superdiversity and the complex demographic and socio-economic context of Fir Vale.

3.3. Public Space and Conviviality

3.3.1. Conviviality

As discussed in the previous section, diversity is a visible and socially significant feature of the urban

public realm including public open spaces. Bauman argues that “unlike in the past, the reality of living in close proximity with strangers seems to be here to stay, and so it demands that skills in daily coexistence with ways of life other than our own must be worked out or acquired” (2011, p. 37). This also closely relates to Sennett’s argument that “we need to see differences on the streets or in the other people neither as threats nor as sentimental invitations, rather as necessary visions. They are necessary for us to learn how to navigate life with balance, both individually and collectively” (Sennett 1991, p. xiii). What both of these quotes have in common is that living with ‘others’ is inherently a part of urban living and that it requires a level of engagement and learning.

In producing this literature review to inform my research with its focus on social interactions in public open spaces, the theme of conviviality emerged as a suitable framework. Part of its suitability related to its flexibility as a construct; Heil (2014), for example, explores conviviality at different levels, including a basic level of minimal sociality. An additional feature that made it relevant to my study also related to Heil and his suggestion that conviviality is related to a form of cosmopolitanism, which does not “carry the same elitist and normative baggage” (Heil 2014, p. 319) of the concept, but which is indeed more about everyday life and local practices of living.

Conviviality has been thoroughly discussed in the scholarship of geography and sociology as an important quality of human interaction, especially amongst strangers. It is not only interpreted in different ways, but it has also been valued differently in terms of its significance for society, as will be discussed further in the following pages. Some see conviviality as a near-meaningless occurrence (e.g. Valentine 2008). Others see it as increasingly relevant and important (e.g. Fincher and Iveson 2008). Amongst these, there is also a belief that conviviality is a form of encounter that should be further facilitated (e.g. Blommaert 2013). This perspective opens up an opportunity to explore the ways in which design might play a role in such facilitation.

Fincher and Iveson (2008) describe conviviality as “encounters with a certain intent or purpose”. Drawing on Gilroy (2004), they make a distinction between identifications and identities, arguing that shared identifications through shared activities enable conviviality to emerge regardless of community, which is different from the shared identities that characterise ‘community’. They further state that “the concept of conviviality offers an alternative to more communitarian frameworks for approaching urban encounter, such as ‘social cohesion’ and ‘social capital’, both of which tend to privilege lasting relationships and bonds established through shared values” (Fincher and Iveson 2008, p. 155). Therefore, the emphasis here is on the necessity for urban life to afford these temporary identifications with others to occur.

Conviviality is also used by many in an overly positive way in the sense of ‘happy togetherness’ (see Wise and Noble 2016). For Wise and Noble (2016) this understanding may be influenced by the

established meaning of the word in the English language, but they suggest that the Spanish word *convivencia*, as argued by Gilroy (2004), offers a more nuanced and therefore better suited interpretation. This stems from their argument that everyday racism and everyday cosmopolitanism are not mutually exclusive and that therefore *convivencia* seems a more appropriate term as it “emphasises togetherness as lived negotiation, belonging as practice” (Wise and Noble 2016, p. 425).

Blommaert (2013, p. 89) refers to conviviality as a “level of peaceful coexistence”. Although this seems to be close to the notion of ‘happy togetherness’, it also acknowledges inequalities and tensions. He suggests that conviviality is expressed through acts of friendliness and through sharing concerns, which are often portrayed as trivial, as he goes on further to explain:

“We have grown accustomed to seeing such ‘phatic’ activities as essentially meaningless, as things people do just to keep the channels of communication open and clear. I would suggest we see it as very relevant, as a really important structure of social life through which people manage to agree and get on with each other in spite of deep inequalities and bewildering diversity.” (Blommaert 2013, p. 89)

This also resonates with the description of conviviality as being “at ease with difference” (Wise and Velayutham 2014, p. 407).

From all of these formulations of conviviality, it seems clear that, no matter how it is described or defined, it can offer a lens through which to explore and situate the relationships between people, especially in superdiverse urban contexts where the definition of ‘community’ based on single parameters and identities (such as ethnicity) are not adequate. The understanding of conviviality in this research is in line with Heil’s (2014, p. 322) argument that conviviality “encompasses both cooperative and conflictual social situations” as part of everyday living with sustained difference. Understood in this way, conviviality potentially plays a far-ranging role within society. The question that remains is that of the relationship between conviviality and public spaces.

3.3.2. Conviviality within Public Spaces

Public spaces are essential to cities. In his quote referred to earlier in this chapter, Sennett (1991, p. xiii), briefly touched upon their role as important settings for encounters with the other. This role of public spaces is even more strongly stressed by Dines et al: “Public spaces are fundamental features 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.” (Dines et al, 2006, p. 1).

The issues of interaction and encounter in urban settings as understood through the lens of conviviality identified above and in relation to public space have been mostly discussed in the

scholarship of geography and sociology. There seem to be two main, almost opposing stances. One argues that public spaces are important sites of encounter, which have the potential to afford understanding of the 'other' (Sennett 1991; Dines et al 2006; Sandercock 2003). These are mostly underpinned by Allport's (1954) contact theory arguing that being exposed to and in contact with different people can help develop deeper understanding of others and reduce prejudices. The other stance argues that public spaces have limited potential in affording understandings of the other (Amin 2008) and particularly in affecting existing prejudices (Valentine 2008), because the contact is not meaningful.

Amin (2008) goes on to openly question the longstanding position of urbanists who, according to him, "have generally not questioned the assumption that a strong relationship exists between urban public space, civic culture and political formation" (Amin 2008, p. 5). His position is that in today's more complex micro and macro politics, public spaces have arguably become of secondary importance in civic and political formation. This claim is something that will partly be explored by this research.

It is important to make a distinction between different types of public spaces in terms of their character, both in terms of spatial typologies and their location within the city. For instance, Madanipour (2004) talks about two different categories of public spaces: the ones he labels as "central, or major, public spaces of the city, which are used to project a positive image and to create new public displays for the city" (p. 268); and those that he considers to be "marginal public spaces of the city, where the disadvantaged populations live" (p. 269). Madanipour further argues that the relationships afforded by these two types of space are also significantly different in that the 'marginal' spaces are spaces of interpersonal contact whilst the 'central' ones are impersonal. In a similar way Amin (2008) suggests a distinction between "iconic and known spaces of public gathering" (p. 6) and "more peripheral spaces tentatively occupied by subaltern groups and minorities" (p. 6). As already argued here, it is those neighbourhood public spaces that seem crucial to understand with respect to superdiversity, possibly with scope to intervene, and it is for this reason that they have been the focus of my research on everyday sociability and neighbourhood life.

Within superdiverse urban contexts, such as Fir Vale, the most commonly discussed issues with regard to public spaces concern tensions between the existing population and the relative newcomers. Quite often this is manifested in the attachment of blame to the arriving population for breaking the social order of the neighbourhood, with them being characterised as noisy and accused of dominating public spaces (Clark 2014) or, as Wessendorf (2014, p. 8) explains, simply by being "new, visible and disrupting". However, as noted by a longstanding resident (of over forty years) of Fir Vale, referred to in a report by Grayson (2013), similar comments were being made some thirty years previously when the majority of what is now the established community came to the area. In addition, it is also necessary to include other layers of entanglement within this discussion, such as those related to the

fact that often in these areas a high proportion of the population are living in a state of poverty. The interactions of migration, place change and dimensions of deprivation is another argument for a contextualised and situated approach to understanding the complexities of everyday life.

As described earlier, a particular characteristic of Fir Vale is its large Roma population. This literature review has therefore also focused on looking into scholarship, which engages with everyday interactions, possibly convivialities or conflicts, between the Roma and non-Roma populations. The literature seems to be scarce (Simonsen 2008; Cook et al. 2012), especially research which focuses on public space (Brown et al. 2013). One particularly relevant example is the ethnographic study by Clark (2014) about the Govanhill neighbourhood in Glasgow, which was referred to earlier. In the spirit of understanding conviviality as “lived negotiation” (Wise and Noble 2016, p. 425), Clark clearly acknowledges the existing conflict within the neighbourhood and the ever present “stigmatising narratives” (Clark 2014, p. 45), whilst also recognising that they are being “countered by ‘other voices’ and the sometimes less visible and discussed ‘everyday’ intercultural exchanges on the streets, at the bus stops, in the parks, community centres and supermarket queues within Govanhill”. In order to understand the nature of conviviality within the specific context of public space in Fir Vale, I included an exploration within such everyday localities in my study.

In order to summarise this section on conviviality and public space, I refer to a quote from Watson (2006, p. 19), which states that “public space is always in some sense, in a state of emergence, never complete and always contested” and, at the same time, “a site of potentiality, difference, and delightful encounters”. In these ways mundane public spaces are an essential part of urban living that require on-going exploration and creative approaches to research, in particular with regard to the intersection of spatial and social practices.

3.3.3. Specificity when studying public spaces in relation to conviviality

As the focus of this research is on public open spaces, further discussion will be centred on how conviviality is spatialised in these settings. Even though there has been a spatial turn in geography and many social sciences (Withers 2009), there is considerable variation in the ways that the construct of ‘space’ is actually interpreted and used. By this I am neither referring to the seminal discussion of space versus place (as thoroughly discussed by Creswell (2015) and, from an interdisciplinary perspective, by Lamb and Vodicka (2018)), nor to the “distinction of place as location, and the more nuanced notion of place as locale” (Withers 2009, p. 649) but simply to the actual levels of abstraction. For instance, especially when discussing issues of everyday interactions between people, any claim that the research has a spatial focus would benefit from a specific attention to defining spatial attributes. For example, using the term ‘public space’ loosely without even a general explanation of its actual type (i.e. street, square, park) nor context (e.g. location within the city, its

spatial characteristics etc) to use the recent example of Piekut and Valentine (2017), is not only unhelpful in understanding the relation between the encounter and the spatiality, but even opens up a significant opportunity for questioning the value of the research or even misusing the research findings. The authors of this research at least acknowledge some of these limitations: “it could be worth exploring where exactly in the city space inter-ethnic/religious encounters take place - within respondents' neighbourhoods, in wider communities (district or ward level) or in more distant to home locations” (Piekut and Valentine 2017, p. 186).

Nevertheless, as identified by Rishbeth et al (2018) in our meta-synthesis of relatively recent literature within the UK context (covering 24 research papers), there is also a considerable amount of scholarship in which spatial characteristics are more detailed, often also including some reference to different types of public space. The spatial typologies that were commonly featured within these studies were commercial streets, street markets and different types of park. In the literature focused on localities outside the UK context, similar spatial typologies are being explored, for example in Germany (Kuppinger 2014), the Netherlands (Hiebert et al. 2015), Belgium (Blommaert 2013), Australia (Wise and Velayutham 2014). However, other types of public space are also the focus of research such as playgrounds and shared corridors in Singapore (Wise and Velayutham 2014), modernist estates and local squares in the Netherlands (Müller 2011), a public square next to the train station in Italy (Cancellieri and Ostanel 2015). Although in these cases, the types of public space referred to is clearly stated, the level of their description in spatial terms still widely varies and is often not accompanied by any visual support, such as photos or maps. The focus on design related features, such as street furniture, materials, spatial layout, of these spaces is even less common. However, one exception to this can be found in the recent work by Rishbeth and Rogaly (2018) which focused on a particular urban square (in Woolwich, London) and specifically the design of benches within it. Amongst the valuable points made in this research, one particularly relevant claim was that “the space of the public square has the potential to support a positive experience of ‘un-panicked multiculturalism’ (Noble 2009, p. 51), mostly through acts of informal conviviality” (Rishbeth and Rogaly, 2018, p. 7). It will be interesting to compare this analysis within the very different context of my research, which will look at a range of public open spaces within a suburban neighbourhood of a second-tier city.

The research papers explored in Rishbeth et al. (2018) all adopted ethnographic approaches, which, it was argued, allowed more nuanced understandings of conviviality and even had the potential to inform urban design practice. The importance of situated research on diversity and conviviality in relation to specific places is also supported by Hiebert et al (2015, p. 18), who further argue the need for interdisciplinary research which is “exploring connections between the insights of anthropologists, cultural theorists, economists, geographers, linguists, sociologists and of course the field of urban

studies” . Further arguments for situated, interdisciplinary frameworks can also be heard from Blommaert (2103), Gidley (in Sigona 2013) and others. However, it is symptomatic that, in reaching out to other fields, none of them explores the field of urban design as a possible way of engaging on a practical level with some of these issues. In the next section, existing and emerging approaches related to diversity and conviviality within the field of urban design will be explored.

3.4. Urban Design approaches

As argued earlier, there is a dynamic relationship between public open spaces and societal complexities, such as superdiversity. As a profession with the role of intervening in public space, it could be expected that urban design would fully engage with such phenomena. This tends, however, not to be the case. In the following section I discuss some of the limitations of current responses, but also highlight some exceptions that offer possible ways forward.

In order to consider urban design processes in such contexts, I argue that it is important to understand the spatiality of superdiversity in more detail, including how it is manifested on different scales, ranging from its spatial distribution at the larger city scale to the more specific micro scales of specific public spaces. Although it is important to understand superdiversity on all of these scales, the particular focus of this study is on the latter, specifically the peripheral public open spaces of everyday life. Such superdiverse public open spaces are, according to Madanipour (2004), usually located in less affluent parts of the city, as is the case in Fir Vale. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that, especially in larger cities, such areas may be undergoing rapid change, such as through the process of gentrification as argued by Hwang (2015). Thus it is clear that research needs to take into consideration the distinctive socio-economic and political contexts of specific localities.

Beginning with scholarship within the field of urban planning on the larger scale, a key publication that considers diversity related issues is the book *Planning and Diversity in the City* by Fincher and Iveson (2008). Highlighting many important aspects of the planning profession within the context of diversity, the authors propose a framework for planning formed of three social logics: two of these logics are ‘redistribution’ (of resources towards the poor) and ‘recognition’ (of social diversity), claiming that these are based on Lefevbre’s (1996) ‘right to the city’ concept; the third logic is defined as ‘encounter’ (with the city and its other inhabitants). Although these three social logics need to be addressed together in order to bring about change, of particular interest to my study is the focus on encounter. However, Fincher and Iveson’s proposals are mostly based on the work of geographers (especially Amin and Thrift 2002); their focus on planning, however, fails to relate to urban design practice, as also argued by Healey (2010). The work of Talen (2012), on the other hand, does include practical considerations, which are more design focused and which move beyond the planning scale. Nevertheless, this still lacks an in-depth consideration of people’s everyday experiences and offers no

opportunities for their voice to be included in the design process.

Although the focus here is on spatiality and design in relation to the complexities of superdiverse communities, it is crucial to acknowledge that design and its role must be understood in relation to current broader discussions within both scholarship and practice. Discussions about the relationship between the physical environment, sociality and behaviour have been developing and shifting over time. The modernist ideals claiming that physical space can shape and change society have been labelled as physical or architectural determinism (Madanipour 1997). Instead of creating a better society, the modernist approach has been accused of achieving the opposite. One reaction to the modernist movement has been ‘new urbanism’, which argues for more traditional spatial arrangements. Ironically, the movement has been criticised in similar ways to the modernists, namely for spatial determinism through “privileging spatial forms over social processes” (Harvey 1997, p. 2).

This debate relating to physical form and behaviour is still on-going, with a recent significant example referring to the urban riots in London in 2011. In his discussion of these riots, Till (2013, p. 72) counters the “hysterical” argument of architectural determinism, propounded by Space Syntax Network (2011), which blames the spatial characteristics of, in this case, modernist estates for the social unrest and which ignores the political and social. According to Till, this position is then further welcomed by politicians because it offers them a rationale for blaming others (i.e. architects/designers) for social disturbances. He adds:

“Let’s use Georg Simmel to reverse out of this cul-de-sac of architectural determinism: ‘the city is not a spatial entity with sociological consequences, but a sociological entity that is formed spatially’ (Simmel, 1997, p. 143). Space arises out of – or in Lefebvre’s term is produced by – the social, rather than the determinist reverse in which the social arises out of the spatial.” (Till 2013, p. 72).

My stance on this debate is closely related to Till’s, as will be further argued throughout the thesis.

3.4.1. Design for all (or not)

Moving on to a more local urban design scale, mainstream urban design scholarship and practice generally recognises the importance of public spaces as significant settings for social life (Gehl 2010, Carmona et al. 2003). There also seems to be some consensus on the argument for inclusive design which is, as explained by Clarkson and Coleman (2015), sometimes referred to as Universal Design (Mace 1985), design-for-all (EIDD 2004) or Inclusive Design (Imrie & Hall, 2001). Although primarily developed with a desire to accommodate the needs of people with different physical abilities it is also of relevance here. This initially good intention is seen by some as a paradox:

“In this respect, inclusive design approaches seem to face a paradoxical condition. On the one hand, they prescribe to address the needs of the widest possible audience in order to take into account human differences. On the other hand, taking human differences seriously seems to imply that nothing can be designed that meets the needs of everyone, so that “the widest possible audience” may turn out to be severely restricted.” (Bianchin and Heylighen 2018, p. 2)

These issues are, arguably, even more complex when diversity is understood in its broader sense - in relation to people of different age, gender, class, ethnicity and culture. Within established urban design practice, there seem to be a lack of focus on this broader diversity of users, which makes it out of touch with aforementioned societal complexities.

Another common focus in established urban design practice, namely the creation of lively and active public spaces (e.g. Gehl 2010), could also be critiqued. Although such an approach has many positive aspects in particular contexts, the liveliness that is generated is often achieved through activating neglected city centre areas and other streets and squares focused mostly on consumption. The result is that many public spaces are increasingly becoming quasi-public spaces or so called POPS (privately owned public spaces), as discussed thoroughly by Minton (2012). One of the many serious limitations of these types of space is that they are controlled spaces, which, though appearing to be ‘lively’ and even inclusive of diversity, in many ways achieve this appearance by being exclusive and selective in regard to who uses them and how they are used (Low and Smith 2006). In this sense ‘design for all’ becomes ‘design for all (who choose to comply and who can afford it)’.

3.4.2. Insurgent Public Spaces

This concept of liveliness, worthy as it may be in many contexts, can entail other problematic issues, even in spaces that are not overly commercialised, such as in public open spaces in culturally and ethnically diverse parts of the city (Palumbo 2014). Often perceived as crime-ridden, noisy and dirty areas (Palumbo 2014, p. 297), these places are usually either waiting to be regenerated, in ways similar to those mentioned above (Blommaert 2013; Hall 2013) or are simply neglected and left alone (Madanipour 2004). One study of an interesting example of regeneration in the diverse neighbourhood of Berchem in Antwerp showed how a costly urban design project did not merely fail in regard to its main aim of attracting ‘better’ shops to the area, but actually “the renovation of the street, consequently, turned things for the worse in the eyes of those who had campaigned for it” (Blommaert 2013, p. 84). This particular example illustrates the argument that established, mainstream approaches do not work in all contexts (if in any that is), and that other approaches based on contextual understandings and cultural awareness are necessary, especially in ethnically diverse areas.

This could be further supported by arguing that those mainstream approaches, which are based in, and focused on, the global north and westernised neoliberal societies, reflect the prevalent ideology of individualism and consumerism and have contributed to the decline of public life and the free use of public spaces. Ironically, or indeed intentionally, the aim now seems to be to fix this by using approaches based on the same beliefs, cementing neoliberal relations (Harvey 2006). While this may seem to ‘work’ in some contexts (and for some people), it is clearly being questioned through the practice of everyday living by many other people in many other places. According to Hou (2010, p. 2), these everyday appropriated tactics and actions, which he calls insurgent public spaces, “challenge the conventional, codified notion of public and the making of space”, are most often initiated by marginalised and diverse communities. Hou (2010, p. 13) goes on to develop a “typology of actions and practices that shape the different stories of resistance”, in order to further explain their character. These include: appropriating, reclaiming, pluralising, transgressing, uncovering and contesting. As Margaret Crawford puts it, albeit arguably in an overly optimistic fashion: “...activities of everyday spaces may begin to dissolve some of the predictable boundaries of race and class, revealing previously hidden social possibilities that suggest how the trivial and margins might be transformed into a kind of micro politics” (Crawford 1999, p. 356).

It will be interesting to explore how some of these actions and practices might be situated and unfolding within the socio-temporalities of the Fir Vale area.

3.4.3. Other approaches to Urban Design

‘Other ways’ (Awan et al 2011) of practising architecture/urban design have become increasingly ‘visible’ in the last ten years or so. These approaches are hugely disparate in terms of their context, scale, focus and aims, but many are claiming to be challenging the status quo in different ways and to different degrees. Some are referred to as creative/design activism or spatial agency (Hamdi 2004; Hyde 2012; Awan et al. 2011, Laister et al 2014) and are underpinned by theoretical concepts of ‘spatial practice’ (Lefebvre 1991, de Certeau 1984). Others, on the other hand, seem less concerned with a theoretical stance and are perhaps less political in nature. These have been usually referred to as: tactical urbanism (Gadinho et al. 2014; Lydon and Garcia 2015), urban acupuncture (Lerner 2014), DIY urbanism (Oswalt et al 2013; Kee and Miazzo 2014) etc.

All of these approaches include, in one way or another, the participation of users within the process of design. Of course there exists some scepticism and concern about the concept of participation in urban planning generally, and especially within multicultural urban areas, particularly “when the attributes of race and ethnicity are used as fixed identifiers” (Beebejaun 2006, p. 5). Nevertheless, I view this precisely as an argument for greater sensitivity to the concepts of super-diversity and intersectionality. Furthermore, as argued by Sandercock (2003) and Tornaghi and Knierbein (2014), it would appear

that the development of more appropriate approaches to participation and collaboration is a crucial approach to take, within both research and practice. As this research is multidisciplinary in nature, it is also useful to clarify that participation here is not only understood in terms of established, often uncreative ‘consultations’ within the conventional practice of urban planning (Fincher and Iveson 2008, Campbell 2006). On the contrary, it is referring to a process of participation that needs to be re-appropriated; that is, a process which could include not only more creative and appropriate ways of consulting people but also innovative approaches to engaging a wide range of people meaningfully in discussions as well as co-designing, testing and co-making processes. Crucially, such processes should avoid searching for often naïve and perilous consensus making goals; rather, they could be about creating platforms that allow for contested or ‘agonistic pluralism’ (Mouffe 2005) to be developed. Distinguishing between antagonism, in which the opponent is seen as an enemy to be attacked, and agonism, in which the opponent is an adversary whose ideas are challenged but whose existence and right to defend themselves are acknowledged as legitimate, Mouffe (2005) strongly argues for the latter. This approach not only seems to resonate closely with the context of Fir Vale (as described in chapter 2) but has also been explored within participatory urban design. Directly drawing on Mouffe’s (2005) idea of the inevitability of dissensus and its creative potential, Miessen (2010) suggests the need for ‘conflictual participation’, whilst Björgvinsson et al (2012) refer to ‘agonistic participatory design’. Thus, there is an urgent need to explore and improve design processes in creative ways. As Sennett (2012, p X) states: "...urban design is a craft in peril...my hope is that understanding social cooperation can generate new ideas about how cities might become better made."

3.4.4. Role of Urban Design practitioner

"Clearly, the urban designer can no longer treat urban space as a static architectural construction. In addition to having traditional design skills, coupled with a command of social media, the new city designer would benefit from being something of an event programmer, anthropologist, impresario, and facilitator of grassroots design by citizens. Creative rethinking of the regulatory framework for urban activity can be as important in promoting public life as spatial design. The role of the designer in supporting the public realm is now to engage many actors in the creation and activation of urban space." (Southworth 2014, p. 40)

Although there have been different arguments and calls for ‘other’ kinds of architecture and urban design related practice (Awan et al. 2011; Miessen 2016), the above quote explicitly captures the potential issues which still underpin the need for such changes. An important part of this complex role, I would argue, is played by research, both through its critical academic scholarship and through more pragmatic practice-based research (Campkin and Duijzings 2017).

In their recent book on the social (re)production of architecture (understood in a broad sense to include urban design related practice), Petrescu and Trogal (2017, p. 4) argue that “the aspects of architecture that become important are not the ones of form, surface, style, or even structure but rather demand working upon the ecological, economic, collaborative and processual aspects of making space”. In line with the broader understandings of practice referred to above, their proposals include “diversity of means”, which range from curating, art, and activism to pedagogy, therefore questioning “what we call architecture both as discipline and profession” (Petrescu and Trogal 2017, p. 5). It further raises questions about the role of architects and other urban design professionals in contemporary city-making.

A relevant example of how the different roles of urban practitioners and the role of the design process can be played out in reality can be found within the practice of atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa). As self-described by its founders, Petrescu and Petcou (2013, p. 60), it is “a collective platform including architects, artists, urban planners, landscape designers, sociologists, students and residents living in Paris”. The work is underpinned by an understanding of everyday life activities as creative urban practices. Some of their projects include a temporary garden (ECObox project), started in 2001, and the Passage 56 from 2006, which was “a prototype of ‘open-source’ architecture that experiments with forms of collectively produced space and pioneers unusual partnerships between institutions, professionals, local organisations and residents that challenge the current stereotypical models of urban management” (Petrescu and Petcou 2013, p. 60). Both of these projects have been based in culturally diverse parts of Paris. Although focused specifically on the collective appropriation of underused spaces and vacant plots, the tactics used throughout the project have been inspirational. These have included the ways in which the practice is officially registered in order to include non-design participants as members, and how it has tactically avoided urbanistic codes or health and safety regulations. In both of these projects an important part is played by transgression not only of rules but also of the roles of designers and participants and what is seen as a valuable and useful for this research:

“We have transgressed our roles: from merely designers and educators we have become gardeners, social workers and facilitators, at the same time as users have become designers, managers, entrepreneurs and activists. This was a transgression not only of individual roles, but of whole projects, which gradually changed from their focus on gardening to culture, design and politics.” (Petrescu and Petcou 2013, p. 62).

There are other important achievements in the work of aaa. One of them is that the project process allows for the projects to be taken over and later self-managed by participants. This enables a successful, practical and critical take on participation through sharing with users “the knowledge necessary for the appropriation of space, and the conception and management of architecture”

(Petrescu and Petcou 2013, p. 62). It also offers one way of reclaiming the participation process, moving it beyond an uncritical, idealised and often manipulative process, towards one “full of conflicts and contradictions that engage the responsibility of all actors” (Petrescu and Petcou 2013, p. 62).

Within the last decade or so, the work of aaa has been featured widely across the globe within the field of architecture, urban design and planning, influencing not only an alternative scene within these fields but also to a limited extent mainstream, conventional practice. This has been further acknowledged by recognition and awards from different institutions, including receipt of The European Prize for Urban Public Space. This clearly exemplifies the great potential of this type of practice and practitioners. The example of aaa suggests that this is especially the case in culturally and ethnically diverse areas as it enables design to be incorporated with physical improvements and social benefits, allowing for the possible development of civic society as well. There are other recognised examples of similar, yet specific, practices challenging the established boundaries of professions and disciplines, such as the work of Teddy Cruz, Marjetica Potrc, and Jeanne van Heeswijk (Awan et al. 2011, Urbonas et al. 2017).

I will next briefly mention two rare examples of such ‘other’ ways of understanding urban design practice as seen in projects relating to the Roma population. Apart from illustrating some of these alternative approaches to architectural and urban practice, their engagement with the Roma population also makes them particularly pertinent to my own research.

The first example, entitled The Norwegian Roma - Embassy, was organised by a group of architects (FFB) who in 2012, together with Roma organisations and initiatives, created a temporary ‘cultural house’ for the Roma in a public square in Oslo city centre. Over two weeks they hosted a series of events (seminars, language courses, film screenings, food tastings etc.) in order to promote Roma culture to the Norwegian public and to campaign for the creation of a permanent cultural centre. Of particular interest in this approach was the active presence of Roma and their culture in the public space, which at the same time provided the widest possible audience for their campaign. The second example was the project (similarly called The Embassy) by the collective of architects and artists ‘PEROU’ (Pôle d'Exploration des Ressources Urbaines – Centre for the Exploration of Urban Resources) in an informal settlement inhabited by Roma in the south of Paris. The main difference between this project and the ‘Embassy’ in Norway, apart from the project length (the Paris project was active from October 2012 till April 2013 when the settlement was closed down by the French police), was that this one was located in an actual Roma settlement, with the main idea being the creation of a ‘community centre’ for Roma. Those few months of working with the community produced an impressive number of achievements. Apart from creating a physical space (pavilion) and making other valuable physical improvements to this settlement (wood decking for easier access to

the site, benches etc), they managed to organise workshops and festivals and to jointly research and co-produce books (e.g. a trilingual language learning book – the first ever to include French, Romanian and Romani - made together with children), films and other diverse forms of knowledge. But probably the most impressive achievement was the creation of an employment office, which managed to address the real life problems of the Roma, helping 38 people to sort out their legal status and twelve of them to sign proper work contracts.

Although the examples discussed in this section may not seem to be directly relevant to this research, given that, for example, some were only focused on one group/community (as in the projects with the Roma community) and others were focused specifically on urban wasteland spaces (as in the examples from aaa), their significance lies in the fact that they illustrate the understanding of urban design practice underpinning this research – one that goes beyond the established, narrow-minded ‘definitions’ of design, which only concern the production of physical objects by design educated professionals. In other words, the focus on process and on transgressing predefined norms and roles seems to bring about the intended change, as expected by the ‘design’.

These examples also provide a snapshot of the potential of spatial interventions when embracing a “diversity of means” (Petrescu and Trogal 2017, p. 5). In relation to this research, they are significant as they also illustrate attempts to bridge urban design practice, research and education, which is part of the focus of this research. As such, they offer insights into the rationale for the choice of methodology in this research as will be further explained in the following chapter. These examples also illustrate how the role of urban (design) practitioners has been changing. Arguing for a different understanding of the profession and of the role of the practitioner has underpinned this research from the start.

3.5. Summary

This literature review has provided the frame for the research through insights into the challenges of superdiversity and conviviality and particularly the ways in which they are manifested in public open spaces and the implications of this for my own research have been identified throughout the chapter. It has further explored many related issues, including the lack of understanding of these challenges within mainstream urban design. Nevertheless, it also offered some possible trajectories for urban design practitioners through discussing some emerging urban practices and their role within the complex context of contemporary society.

The chapter has demonstrated how bringing concepts from other disciplines (i.e. superdiversity, conviviality) into that of urban design necessitates their critical examination and understanding, in order to avoid oversimplification and possible misuse if transferred naïvely. However, it has also

suggested the potential to expand these concepts further by combining them with more spatially attuned notions. This will be explored further in this research (see chapter 7 on contextualised convivialities).

The review of urban design approaches has also inspired and shaped the overall character of this research. In particular, it has framed the engaged approach to my research that I chose to adopt, including its methodology. This has included not only an increased commitment to the potential of creative ways of engaging with people in the neighbourhood, but also an awareness of the many possible issues in relation to ethical engagement. The next chapter will provide a more detailed description of my research methodology, which will be further reflected on in chapter 8.

Chapter 4

Methodology

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter I explain and justify the methodological approaches to my research. First I define the scope of the research including its focus and participants. I then discuss the main ethical considerations and how these have informed my approach and other decisions I made. The three sets of methods are then described and include: observations, interviews and responsive engaged activities. I conclude by discussing my analytical approach. Although some of the many issues and challenges of working in this particular context are mentioned throughout the chapter, they are reflected upon in more detail in chapter 8. This in particular includes a deep consideration of research ethics as well as the limitations of my research.

4.1.1. Defining scope, scale, approaches and participation

As referred to in chapter 1, this research has been designed to address the following research questions:

1. How are neighbourhood public open spaces (POS) used and perceived by both the recently arrived Roma population and the more established communities in Fir Vale?
2. What are the relationships between public open spaces (POS) and intercultural encounters in the neighbourhood?
3. What are the issues and challenges of doing ‘engaged research’ in a ‘high-profile’ and ‘over-researched’ context?
4. What recommendations can be made from this research in relation to Urban Design practice?

The design of my research has, however, been informed and influenced not only by the research questions, but also by the context of the research, the existing scholarship in related fields, as well as my own positionality. The choice of research methodology is driven by the intention to engage with local people as experts in their own lives. My commitment and approaches to engagement have been directly informed by my own background as an urban designer and my particular understandings of urban design as a highly situated and socially engaged spatial practice (as discussed in chapter 3 and chapter 9). In practice this meant that my approach combined ethnographic and participatory methods

in order to generate qualitative data and produce ‘thick description’ (Ponterotto 2006). Indeed, the research is best described using the hybrid term “ethno-case study”, which Parker-Jenkins (2018, p. 18) defines as “a case study drawing on ethnographic techniques”.

A combination of reasons informed the choice of this particular neighbourhood as a location for my research. Firstly, because in 2014 (when I was writing the research proposal) Fir Vale was highly visible in the media as a site of local tensions, it brought to my attention the significance of local public open spaces. The second reason was that the media interest stimulated my desire to explore what was actually happening in the neighbourhood beyond the hyperbole of media representation. (This was inspired by some of my previous personal and professional experiences, as referred to in chapter 1). Thirdly, this particular local and highly specific superdiverse context provided a suitable opportunity to identify which lessons related to urban design could be learnt from researching in such neighbourhoods.

Another decision made early on was related to the participants’ backgrounds. The main focus of media reports on this neighbourhood had tended to be on the relatively recently arrived Roma population, their presence in the streets and the tensions that appeared to result from this. Potentially this would have offered an excellent opportunity for a more traditional ethnography of a particular community. However, I made the decision instead to focus on understanding the use of local public open spaces in the neighbourhood, which implied that the study should be an ethnography of the place. This was clearly also shaped by the location of the research within the discipline of urban design (albeit enhanced by interdisciplinary perspectives, as discussed in the previous chapter). In addition, although not foregrounded specifically in the research questions, I made the decision to include children and young people as participants in this research. There were two main reasons for this: a) during the initial phase of the research these groups were identified as some of the main users of local public open spaces; and b) an opportunity arose to involve these groups in creative and in some ways educational activities (e.g. the Stagehands project), which was in line with the overall research approach. At a later stage other activities that included these groups were developed together with two local organisations. However, although it was considered at one point, the decision was made not to engage with local schools, as this would have been inconsistent with my commitment as a researcher to providing or at least supporting additional activities for the local population that otherwise would not have taken place, and, in so doing, also supporting local organisations facing funding uncertainties (as will be further explained in the following paragraphs).

The participants in my research therefore consisted of the following: a large number of local residents from a range of backgrounds and age groups; local shopkeepers; and a range of professionals living

and/or working in the neighbourhood (primarily community youth workers, architects/urban designers, religious workers).

Initially, the research drew on co-production (e.g. Durose et al. 2012) and on innovative, participative methods such as those used and developed by Hou (2010, 2013) and Rishbeth (2013) as well as by Sandercock and Attili (2010). Such engagement was intended not only to afford deep reflection, articulation of different ways of experiencing the world, and exploration of complex themes; it was also intended to provide enjoyable and rewarding experiences to participants that were also potentially transformative. This was also shaped by my commitment to ensuring an ethical responsibility towards the participants.

There were a number of justifications for my initial plans to adopt a co-production approach to this research: it seemed to be an appropriate way of addressing the specific research aims and questions related to diversity and public space, particularly in a challenging context such as Fir Vale; it reflected my belief in the importance of including different voices, especially marginalised (less represented) individuals and groups living in the neighbourhood; and it built on my professional background and my commitment to doing participatory (and collaborative) projects focused on enabling engagement between the public and the built environment in creative ways. Furthermore my general methodological approach has been underpinned by constructivist epistemologies, accepting that knowledge is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann 1991); it is also related to a range of similar but differing research approaches, both established and emerging, including community-based participatory research, community-based research, participatory action research, action research or community research (Goodson and Phillimore 2012, Durose et al 2012). During the opening year of the research, however, it became obvious that I needed to adopt a more flexible, open, 'fit for purpose' approach than the more formal approaches referred to above (see chapter 8 for further explanation of this), even though I understood that under some measures of research evaluation, this could undermine the consistency of method of the process, and therefore the rigour.

In the end, my methodology consisted of several methods, all of them qualitative in nature, which could be defined as: different types of observations (4.2.1.); different types of interviews (4.2.3.); and various group activities (4.2.2.), which were my way of addressing my commitment to sharing benefits with participants (Finney and Rishbeth 2006) through their additional educational nature. I argue that the range and flexibility of these methods, permeated by ethical considerations, is a responsive methodology, which is particularly appropriate for 'over-researched' and 'high-profile' contexts (as will be expanded on in chapter 8). For a number of practical reasons (which will also be explained in chapter 8) and because of my heightened theoretical understanding of co-production in

academic research, I later decided not to directly refer to my research as co-produced research, but rather as ‘engaged research using responsive methodology’, which includes participatory methods.

The mixed and evolving use of methods and tools in responsive ways within my research resonates closely with what Richardson (2017) refers to as schizocartography – a methodological approach developed from Guattari’s (2013) “schizoanalytic cartographies”. Richardson argues that schizocartography includes the situated and subjective experience of place “...not only to suit heterogeneous voices but also to reflect a history that may be counter to the dominant one” (Richardson 2015, pp. 188–189).

Of particular relevance for my research is schizocartography’s “...wide-ranging choice of tools that can be used to uncover elements such as social history, creativity, and the alternative voices that become revealed under examination in concrete space” (Richardson 2017 p. 12). Richardson justifies this approach in which the “schizocartographer, as bricoleur” engenders “...a refusal to be limited by what appears to be available on a superficial level if it does not fit the job in front of you. The bricoleur needs to be inventive and open to new ideas, they must be brave and not afraid of failure or rejection, and, most of all, they must see their toolbox as something which is not static or constrained, but is ever-changing in its requirement to serve the purpose it is being assembled for.” (Richardson 2017 p. 13)

I would argue that, in the case of my research, this responsive approach was even more strongly justified as a way of providing ethical coherence with the commitments of my research, including its concern with responding directly to the specific ‘over-researched’ and ‘high-profile’ context of Fir Vale (as will be further elaborated on in chapter 8).

4.1.2. Ethical considerations (Access & Participants)

Gaining access to the field is a challenging but crucial aspect of doing ethnographic based research, especially when the research is also participatory in nature. It is also closely related to another significant issue, namely that of ethics (Darling 2014). According to Feldman et al (2003) gaining access is a complex process of building, preserving but also ending field relationships, which includes many rejections on the way.

In the first phase of my research I managed to gain initial access to the local youth club (run by a city centre based organisation). This was partly unplanned as the opportunity arose through an initial contact via a friend. Two activities were developed in this youth club (to be explained in more detail in 4.2.3.):

- Work Placement – Access to this activity was supported by my successful application for a small amount of funding from the University with a view to developing a project based around the idea of exploring the neighbourhood through the means of participatory photography. The opportunity then arose to connect this to a work placement project for youngsters, which was run by the youth club.
- Stagehands - At the same time an opportunity arose to bring another activity into the youth club through a previous professional relationship. This was a project called ‘Stagehands’, which involved the design and digital fabrication of a public, mobile, multipurpose performance space, and which I ran for the youth club. The project was managed by a social enterprise architecture practice in collaboration with a community fabrication facility.

Although these two projects were seemingly very different, the initial idea was that they could complement each other. For several reasons, neither of the projects went as initially planned, but nevertheless they proved to be beneficial in a number of ways as will be explained later.

Access to the neighbourhood was also gained by approaching another organisation, with which I was planning to develop some collaboration. The main reason for wanting to work with this organisation was their neighbourhood focused, cross-cultural work, which had a much broader scope than the youth organisation. However, this time my experience of gaining access was very different in nature, as it took multiple interview type meetings over several months to be finally allowed to volunteer with them, and later on develop and support various activities.

All research that involves people necessitates a serious consideration of ethics. In the case of research which is not only interpretivist and ethnographic, but also participatory, and situated in a neighbourhood characterised by the complexities described earlier, ethical considerations underpinned every aspect of the research process. This even included my decisions regarding the official ethics approval for the research in accordance with the University of Sheffield ethics procedures. Due to the nature of the research, I decided that a procedure related to the specialist research ethics guidance on participatory action research was the most appropriate approach. This involved phased ethics reviews, with three in total being approved at different stages of the research. The first related to the preliminary stage (gaining access) of my fieldwork (in January 2015); the second one was specifically related to group activities within the youth club (June 2015); and the third one had a broader focus and covered interviews and other participatory activities (June 2016). (The ways, in which the complex ethical issues related to these different stages of my research were addressed, will be explored in detail in chapter 8. This includes issues of access, consent, confidentiality, and anonymity in this particular research context.) Because I was to be working with young people, two of the

organisations I would be working with also applied for Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance for me. In addition, the research group I have been part of at the University of Sheffield (Transnational Urban Outdoors/TUO) acted as an informal ethics board providing a setting for on-going discussions of ethical concerns, which proved to be highly valuable.

Given the profound significance of ethics in this research and its importance for my third research question, I will return to a detailed reflection on ethical considerations in chapter 8.

4.2. Methods

As mentioned earlier, a number of qualitative methods was used in this research, ranging from different types of observations (4.2.1.) and interviews (4.2.2.), to various group activities (4.2.3.).

4.2.1. Observations

Observations are inherently part of ethnographic research (LeCompte and Schensul 2010) and they were a crucial part of my own study, which is focused on understanding how local public spaces are used and what role they play in the life of the neighbourhood.

‘General’ observations

I had planned from the start to visit the neighbourhood regularly as part of my situating process, in order to gain deeper insights into the life of the neighbourhood and particularly the use of local public open spaces, which were the focus of the research. I began my visits six months into my doctoral research and they continued throughout the period of my study, though they varied in frequency and intervals. On most of these numerous visits, observations were made and either typed into my phone at the time or noted down later in my notebook or on a computer. These are referred to here as ‘general observations’ and included observations of the physical environment and the people inhabiting the various neighbourhood spaces and their social interactions. At the beginning of the research these observations were made whilst I was wandering around exploring the different localities of the neighbourhood. Later these explorations became more focused when I started to engage with the staff and visitors at the local youth club, where I spent time and ran activities. These insights from observing local residents were useful in particular as a way of identifying potential points of interest within the neighbourhood, which I could later observe in more depth, including in my ‘structured’ walks’ (see next section).

My fieldwork ‘officially’ finished in November 2016, although my regular visits to the neighbourhood continued beyond that time, mostly because of my volunteer work in one of the local organisations. Therefore, additional observations and notes continued to be made, with the consequent blurring of boundaries between data collection and the write up phase, unlike more traditional approaches to conducting the academic research process (Maxey 1999). These later observations, moreover, also influenced the analytical phase of my research, because it felt unnatural, perhaps even impossible, to ignore the relevance of what I was seeing during that period. Although concerns might be expressed about this approach, I believe that my openness, honesty and reflexivity in relation to this issue helps to address them. This is clearly expressed by Maxey (1999) as well, in relation to similar kinds of research experience:

“If, for example, I had simply accepted the prescribed ‘stages’, I would not have been alerted to the impact of information gathered beyond the fieldwork stage. This information would still have influenced my PhD, even if it was in subconscious ways. Instead of being able to assess this impact openly, it would have remained hidden from both myself and the other individuals concerned. This would, I believe, have had implications for both the ethical and analytical quality of my research.” (Maxey, 1999, p. 203)

‘Structured’ walks

Walking as a way of situating oneself plays an important part in experiencing the city and trying to understand the urban setting and its life. The history of walking in this sense can be traced back to Baudelaire’s *flâneur* in 1863 as well as Debord’s psychogeography (1958) and continues in more recent works by Careri (2001), Middleton (2009, 2010) and Pierce and Lawhon (2015):

“We define observational walking for urban research as a self-conscious, reflective project of wandering around to better understand an area’s physical context, social context, and the spatial practices of its residents. By walking we do not mean just the act of moving through the city on foot but also include related processes of standing, casual interaction, and observation.” (Pierce and Lawhon 2015, p. 656)

Although drawing on these researchers, the decision to specifically use ‘structured’ walks as one of the methods in this research was made mainly for two reasons.

Firstly, it was practical. In order to understand the broader picture of the ways in which public space is used, I believed it was important to try and capture what was happening simultaneously in different local public spaces in this neighbourhood. I decided that the most effective way of achieving this

would be by doing a walk between them. After several pilot walks, the 'general route' was designed incorporating all main spaces of interest. Depending on which particular activities were occurring and therefore the number of different observations to be recorded in situ, the walks took between 1.15min to 2h.

Secondly, walking afforded a different mode of observation, something more tacit and tangential. The complex context of the neighbourhood, as well as the scale and intimacy of some of these spaces, meant that a more static way of observing seemed to be more intrusive. Clearly, the decision to carry out these walks was not made without serious and on-going reflection in relation to various issues, including ethical concerns, which will be discussed in more detail in the Reflective Interlude in chapter 8.

In total, twenty-one of these walks were undertaken during the period from April to November 2016. They were organised in two-hour slots from 8am to 10pm (see Appendix A). The walks were done in each of these slots on a weekday, as well as Saturdays and Sundays (see figure 4.1.). Although the route of the walks was designed in advance, this was not completely rigid as sometimes a slightly different route was taken (see blue dotted line in figure 4.1.). This usually resulted in response to 'apparent busyness' at certain times and in certain places, where there was some flexibility in regard to the route I could take. This 'apparent busyness' refers to the times when particular visual or auditory stimuli attracted my attention sufficiently for me to walk towards them.

The walks were documented through audio recording of my observations while walking or during short breaks in suitable spots, where I would usually sit on a bench or a front garden wall. These observations were mostly focused on describing how some of these spaces were being used at the time, but also sometimes included my own feelings, thoughts and ideas, often surprising ones, that would have been sparked by particular experiences. As such, my approach was closely related to an abductive ethnography, as argued by Bajc (2012, p. 82), which accepts that "our instinctual way of thinking is adapted to the living environment and shaped by our sociological and tacit knowledge".

This more open approach to observation was triggered during my pilot walks, when it started to become apparent to me that walking as a research method was enabling more than a data collection exercise. As argued by Oppezzo and Schwartz (2014), walking supports creativity, though I would add to that by suggesting that it also inspires the researcher to cross over to the reflective, reflexive and analytical aspects of the research as well. It could be argued that this is one example of analytical inspiration as "a leap in perspective that produces a new way of seeing things otherwise on display before our very own eyes" (Gubrium and Holstein 2014, p. 47).

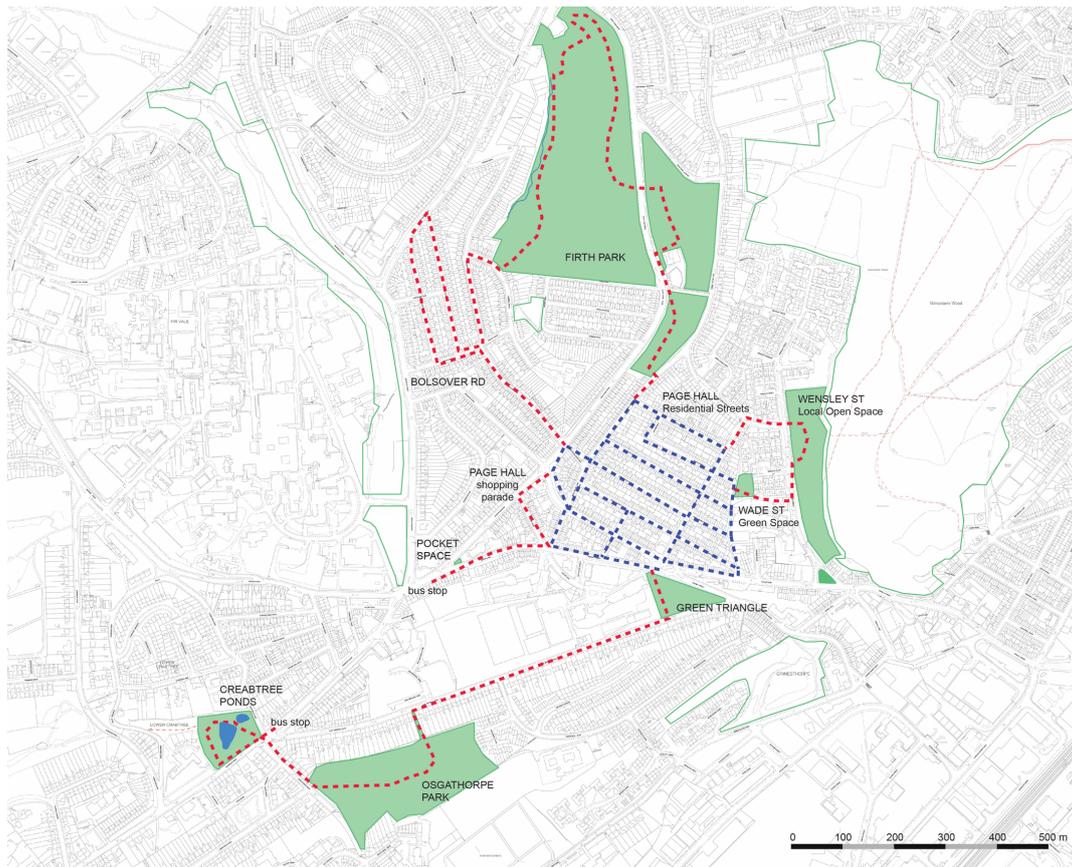


Figure 4.1. Walk route(s) map

For instance, during my walks I was inspired to focus also on observing physical traces, e.g. litter, signs, personal objects. This is a technique sometimes used as part of the urban design process, particularly in the initial phase when information about the area of design interest is gathered in various forms. As such it is also closely related to an ethnographic approach in research. This technique has been used and practised by urban designers such as muf art/architecture and has been inspired by work from many different fields - from Benjamin's 'urban traces' (1968), Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) and his 'desire path', to Perce's *Species of Spaces* (1974). The most relevant and direct example of this approach being used in the field of urban design can be found in Zeisel's book *Inquiry by Design: Tools for Environment-Behavior Research* (1984). With its second edition published in 2006, the book has also influenced a wide range of disciplines, from architecture and design more generally (Cranz 2016), through sociology to geography (Montello and Sutton 2006).

Zeisel (1984) describes a range of 'physical traces to look for', such as: 'by-products of use', 'adaptations of use', 'displays of self', 'public messages' and 'context'. He explains this method of observing physical traces by introducing its main qualities (imageable, unobtrusive, durable and easy) and discussing its pros and cons. By referring to several precedents, Zeisel (1984) argues that

observing physical traces may offer insights not only into how people use certain spaces and what they feel about them, but also about people themselves, their culture and affiliation. Some of his examples also illustrate the limitations of this method by revealing how some traces can be misleading and visually seductive. One way of addressing this, according to Zeisel, is by asking ourselves “what traces are missing?” at the same time as “what traces do I see?” (1984, p. 93).

For example, during my walks I focused on litter as a ‘by-product of use’, or on an old mattress lying in the green areas as an ‘adaptation of use’, after noticing how it was appropriated by youngsters for play etc. Of particular relevance and value to this research was the focus on public messages, which Zeisel (1984) classifies as official, unofficial and ‘illegitimate’. This is also in line with another research approach focused on observing signs, which comes from the field of applied linguistics. Though this discipline appears at first to be very different from my own areas of focus, its relevance becomes clear when we understand that it concerns not only linguistic but also cultural diversity. This specific and relatively new branch of sociolinguistics, referred to as ‘linguistic landscapes’, generally captures and analyses publicly visible written language. Of particular interest for urban design is the work of Jan Blommaert and his understandings of linguistic landscape studies (LLS), as expressed in his book *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes* (2013). Blommaert argues that LLS have great interdisciplinary value specifically in relation to geography, anthropology, sociology and urban studies. I suggest that LLS has the potential to also inform urban design practice, especially in combination with other methods of enquiry (Lamb and Vodicka 2018). The overlap with Zeisel’s (1984) argument that traces include public messages can be found in Blommaert’s (2013) claim that various types of sign actually tell the story of the spaces in which they are found, about the people who made them and about who they are intended to be ‘consumed by’, making them “cultural as well as social (and political) objects” (p.43). Blommaert’s trust in LLS and its value as a method of understanding diverse neighbourhoods made it seem worthy of further critical and cautious exploration:

“Combining my observations with the corpus of linguistic landscape data continually reveals that the signs in my neighbourhood provide a far superior and more accurate diagnostic of changes and transformations in the neighbourhood, compared with field notes or even interviews (let alone statistical surveys and other superficial forms of inquiry).” (Blommaert 2013, p. 16)

It is important to mention here that the need to fully understand signs that are present in public is emphasised by both Zeisel and Blommaert in different ways. Zeisel (1984) refers to the need to be aware of their *context* (a common term in the field of architecture and urban design), whereas Blommaert talks about an understanding of their “situatedness” (2013, p.49). Blommaert indeed goes

further, and, referring to Coupland and Garret (2010), argues that “messages in public space are never neutral and always display connections to social structure, power and hierarchies” (Blommaert 2013, p. 40). When understood in this way, many signs observed in my walks did provide interesting and sometimes complex insights into the neighbourhood, its people and its public space, as will be seen in later chapters.

It could be concluded that, although designed with a specific purpose, my structured walks were still conducted in a responsive way, either when the route was slightly amended or when an additional inspiration kicked in (usually when there was a lack of intense activities to be observed) leading to changes in the character and the focus of the observation. The walks were of course not designed as standard quantifiable surveys. This can be seen as both a limitation of the method (primarily in terms of compromising some level of consistency), but also as an advantage, (allowing for something new, different and creative to be included and further explored) in line with my overall commitment to a responsive methodological approach.

Participation in public activities

Although I was involved in many different activities throughout my fieldwork, some of which I organised myself (see 4.2.2.), in this section the focus is on activities led by others, in which I was primarily a participant. These included spending time once a week as a volunteer in ‘open access’ sessions in the youth club (during spring - summer 2015), several clean-up activities (2016) and a few public meetings and talks (2016), all of which took place in different neighbourhood spaces and were organised by different organisations and groups. Because of the ethnographic nature of my research I argue that such activities are a form of research method, which, though necessitating careful critical consideration of ethical matters, nevertheless provided forums for observation.

Spending time in the youth club was part of my initial fieldwork and was planned as part of my efforts to gain access. This was considered in my first ethics review as noted in 4.1. It enabled me to learn about the neighbourhood and issues of concern to residents as well as providing opportunities to meet potential contacts. (Indeed it also led to an invitation to facilitate some more specific activities as will be described in 4.2.3.) During my volunteering activities I was able to observe interactions and have informal conversations with youth workers and visiting youngsters. Some of these were recorded in my reflective journal and proved most useful in defining future steps in the research. This was also the case with the other activities referred to in this section. All together these activities afforded an intensive and extended embeddedness in the local context, offering new ways of seeing and understanding (Gubrium and Holstein 2014).

4.2.2. Interviews

Interviews are one of the most common methods in qualitative research and are used as a way of understanding people's experiences as expressed in their own words (Kara 2015). In particular, they are usually an integral part of ethnographic research. Different interview formats were used throughout the research process. The main reason for this was my commitment to negotiating the interviews with participants, ensuring that they were convenient for them. For instance, a walking interview was conducted with a dog walker primarily because it was the most appropriate way of doing it for the participant; in fact this also provided an example of how adopting this negotiated approach also brought the benefit of facilitating a more situated and rich way of engaging with neighbourhood spaces. In most of these interviews, photographs of local public spaces were used in order to stimulate conversations. These proved to be both appropriate and useful, supporting Collier and Collier's argument that photographs "can function as starting and reference points for discussions of the familiar or the unknown, and their literal content can almost always be read within and across cultural boundaries" (Collier and Collier, 1986, p. 99). In addition, maps and aerial photographs were used as prompts and were mostly helpful in identifying different places and situating participants' experiences, making data also more specific and authentic. Maps were also used in other activities i.e. as part of the participatory mapping method, as well as being employed as an analytical tool, as will be explained later.

All of the interviews were semi-structured during their first part and usually later developed into an unstructured conversation in the second part, in some cases including discussing the process of my own research. This was in particular the case in the interviews with design professionals, as they were keen to hear some of my own thoughts and initial findings, including other people's comments. In such circumstances, some interesting and relevant comments by participants were shared, whilst of course still maintaining confidentiality. Although this can be seen as a limitation in terms of possibly 'leading' the interviewee (Partington 2001), this was mitigated by the fact that it would only occur during the last part of the interview.

Issues related to these second parts of the interviews are perhaps best discussed in relation to confirmability as one of the four criteria of trustworthiness as argued by Guba (1981). On the one hand they might have undermined confirmability because they included the researcher's preferences. On the other hand, discussing other people's views on the same issues (in this case discussing the same local spaces) with the interviewees, acted as a form of triangulation of the data. Moreover, by being open and reflexive about the possible issues that could be created by this practice and explicitly discussing them here, I am further reinforcing the confirmability of the data.

Finally in relation to this issue, the question of my positionality and responsibility as a researcher also came to the fore when, in the final part of the interviews, some of my own views both as an occasional user of local spaces and as a professional designer were expressed. For instance, it was clear that these professionals expected this from me (as researcher and practising designer), as they also wanted to gain from the conversation and the time they had invested in it. At the same time, for me it was an opportunity to fulfil my commitment to ‘sharing benefits with participants’ and ensuring reciprocity during the process of the research.

Walking interviews

As mentioned earlier, walking or walk-along interviews were another interview format used in this research. This type of interview was included partly in order to offer richer insights into the spatial experiences and understandings of participants (Anderson 2004, Jones et al 2008), especially given that the focus of the research was on perceptions and use of local spaces. It was further hoped that in this particular context it would also prompt some socially related insights, which was important given that issues relating to use of public space seemed particularly significant within this specific neighbourhood. Several attempts were made to conduct walk-along interviews, but in spite of what appeared at the time to be some promising opportunities, only two of these came to fruition. In both of these cases, it was because a walking interview was the most convenient way of talking to these participants. Walking interviews were intended to enable participants to take part in the research without making additional demands beyond their usual activities. One of these walks involved a youth worker on his usual work related walk around the neighbourhood and the other one was with a local dog walker on their daily route. One walking interview was recorded on my phone which was attached to my arm and, for the other one, some notes were made during the walk and the rest of them immediately afterwards. I would argue that these interviews were valuable as they provided an opportunity for more direct comment not only on the specific spaces we were walking through but also on some temporal aspects at that specific time (e.g. other people’s presence, litter, noise etc). These acted as prompts for reaction or reminders of other stories, but also as ways of confirming and expanding on some claims.

Photo stimulated interviews on site

Photo stimulated interviews on site emerged as an appropriate method part way through the fieldwork and indeed played an important role in the research. Initially, a page containing photos of ten local public outdoor spaces together with prompts to stimulate comment was created as one of the group activities (see 4.2.3.); primarily it was intended to be an additional, back-up tool in case other tools were not as successful as anticipated. It was trialled in one of the group sessions and proved to be an

engaging way of facilitating conversations. Later it was further tested as a stimulus when talking to people who were spending time in some of the local public open spaces. This was again greeted with a positive response. For this reason, I was inspired to adopt this method more systematically and purposefully through a series of visits to local public open spaces during spring-summer 2016.

In total, over forty of these in-situ conversations, supported by photos, were conducted in various spaces throughout the neighbourhood. As mentioned above, despite starting with a semi-structured interview approach, asking participants questions about particular local spaces, most often these turned into unstructured interviews, in which participants shared their personal stories. The participants involved in these were very diverse in terms of their background, age, gender and ethnicity. The length of the conversations varied from about 20 minutes to over an hour in some cases when they developed into broader conversations. However most of them lasted around 30 minutes. Sometimes they were conducted with two or three persons together (friends or family members), in which case they often helped each other recognise some of the places from the images on the sheet. Participants also discussed some issues amongst themselves, sometimes agreeing, sometimes disagreeing, and reminding each other about specific places or shared experiences. These conversations were also occasionally interrupted, with participants meeting friends or relatives, total strangers stopping by, or participants running after their children etc.

One of the limitations of this method was that these rich conversations were not audio recorded. Instead, in most cases, notes were taken during the conversation or immediately afterwards. A ‘non-recorded’ approach was developed in order to address the challenges of recruiting participants. Generally the participants were not interested in participating in more formal recorded interviews and at some other pre-organised time and place, whilst they did consent to contributing to my research by having a conversation on site. This way of having conversations while spending time outdoors made participants more approachable and willing to take part. The photos enabled our conversations to cover a range of public open spaces, although not all of the photos were recognised by everyone. Overall, it is a good example of a context-responsive method and the importance of trialling different approaches, as this was originally intended only as a back-up plan, as mentioned earlier.

4.2.3. Responsive and engaged research activities

As discussed earlier, an important aim of this research was to try and use fit for purpose, responsive and engaged methods. One characteristic of this includes an exploration of ways in which the research methods themselves could offer something additional to participants and in some ways benefit them. Another reason for this approach was my commitment to contributing to the wider ‘neighbourhood’ more generally. I achieved this both by offering my time as a volunteer to local organisations and by

facilitating useful and interesting activities for those who needed them (local organisations, groups or individuals), mostly ones which would not have happened otherwise.

These different ways of engaging were underpinned by my experience as an architect and urban designer as well as the pedagogical skills that I had been developing during the period of the research. This had inspired my intention to develop research methods, which drew on my professional knowledge and skills and were responsive to the context. In the following sections I provide an overview of these activities.

Participatory photography activities

During spring – summer 2015 I was involved in volunteering in the local youth club, which consisted mostly of attending once or sometimes twice a week two-hour ‘open-access’ sessions for 13 to 18 years old teenagers. At one point, however, I was also invited to take part in the work placement that was being organised by the youth club for a group of students from the local school who were unable to find other work placements. This was a week long programme in which students were provided with training and some work experience related to a career as a youth worker. As part of the training sessions I planned, in consultation with the organisers, a participatory photography project as an example of one activity, which youth workers can deploy while working with youngsters and which can be tailored to their needs and beneficial in different ways. The plan was to do this through engaging students in a small project, which would involve them in learning about the activity by actually doing it, in other words a form of experiential learning. This decision to focus on participatory photography was also triggered by my original intention to eventually develop a Photovoice project over a period of several weeks as a major part of my research methodology.

Photovoice, also known as participatory photography, is both a community development and participatory action research method (Delgado 2015), which seemed to fit well with my initial intention of conducting co-produced research. Photovoice could also be seen as one form of visual ethnography. According to Pink (2007, p. 7) visual ethnographic approaches aim “to explore how all types of material, intangible, spoken, performed narratives and discourses are interwoven with and made meaningful in relation to social relationships, practices and individual experiences”. This seemed to offer a suitable method for addressing some of my research questions as it also afforded a way of exploring the spatial dimension. Furthermore, as explained by Wang (1999), Photovoice, which is based on critical pedagogy theory together with feminist theory, enables people to record and reflect their concerns (‘listening’), to promote critical dialogue about these issues through discussions of photographs (‘dialogue’) and to reach decision makers (‘action’). Having carried out a literature review of numerous case studies that used Photovoice (Delgado 2015; Gubrium and Harper 2013;

Hou 2013; Purcell 2009; Wang 1999, Wang and Pies 2008) and having participated in a three-day practical training event on Photovoice (at the University of the Arts in London), I was keen to use this opportunity in the youth club as my Photovoice pilot project. Although there are established ways of conducting Photovoice projects, which normally necessitate multiple sessions over several weeks or even months, I was keen to explore ways in which it could be tailored and adjusted for my particular research context.

In accordance with the limitations of this being part of a work placement, in which I was asked to facilitate two three-hour sessions, I planned a project called 'My Street', with the aim of engaging participants in an exploration of their street as a familiar site in their everyday life. During the first session, which was attended by eleven students, an introduction was conducted about Photovoice, its possible application and the aim of having a small exhibition of their work in the youth club to which they could invite their friends, family and teachers. One of the activities in this first session also included small photo tasks within the youth club building. Although some of the students were not really interested in being on the work placement in the first place, all appeared to enjoy these active photography tasks. In general, this first session went well and at the end of the session, students were given a homework task to capture several images of their street on the way back home, which some seemed to be enthusiastic about. On the day of the second session, however, and immediately prior to the start of it, I was informed by a youth worker that there had been 'a situation' within the neighbourhood the previous night, though not many details were known about it; it meant, unfortunately, that they were not expecting many of the students to show up. This turned out to be true, as half an hour later only three students arrived, one of whom had not attended the first session. The general atmosphere was tense and at first it was hard for any of us to focus on the work. One of the students had, however, taken some photos and another had found some interesting photos of the neighbourhood on his phone. This meant that they could be printed out and used for the discussion and towards the end of the session an ad-hoc display was created on the wall for other youngsters, staff and visitors to the youth club to see (figure 4.2.). This outcome suggested that, despite the pilot itself being unsuccessful because of the unforeseen circumstances, the Photovoice project had the potential to be further developed and implemented.

My next attempt at doing participatory photography activities was on a one-day trip to Scarborough organised by the same youth club in July 2015. The main intention here was to provide the youngsters with a short, fun exercise during the trip, which might also trigger their interest in taking part in a Photovoice project back in Sheffield. Taking part in this trip were several groups of youngsters not

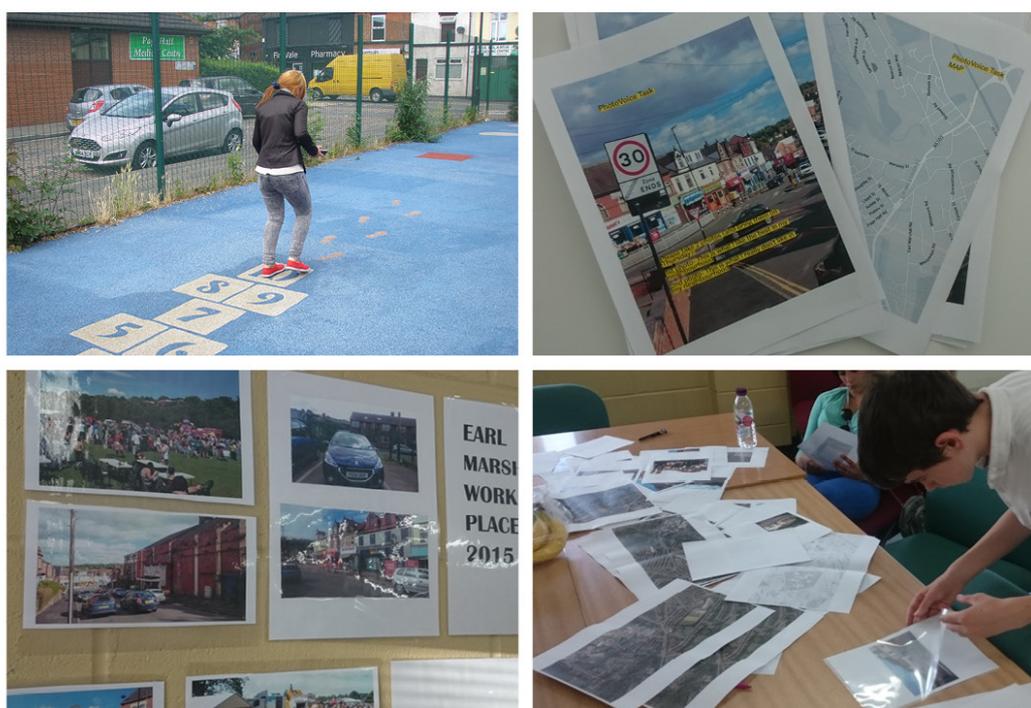


Figure 4.2. Youth club work placement (2015)

only from the youth clubs based in Fir Vale but also from some based in other neighbouring areas and they were all offered a chance to participate. Generally, the overall trip consisted of a number of very different groups, with some larger and more diverse than others. After being introduced to everyone by a youth worker during the bus ride, I had the chance to talk to these groups, explaining what the task consisted of and providing them with one camera per group to share during their day out. Though they were encouraged to use the camera as they wished, the task was to select three photos; an explanation was provided on a small piece of paper to remind them of what they were meant to do. Throughout the day youngsters used their cameras and on the way back returned them to me, with the plan being to have a follow up session back in their youth clubs at a later date. During this process I had short chats with some of them and, although some were clearly uninterested, most seemed to have enjoyed having the camera with them and using it during the day.

Due to the fluid and voluntary use of youth clubs by youngsters, however, follow-up on these activities had very limited success. Only one additional session with three youngsters occurred in one of the youth clubs located in a neighbouring area. During this session, the youngsters were given their printed photos as promised, and they engaged in a discussion of the photos, revealing generally positive reflections on the trip. Some interesting comments were also made in relation to their own neighbourhood and their perceptions and use of spaces and facilities in the Fir Vale area. Plans were

made to continue and develop this into a participatory photography project, together with some other youngsters, which was to be focused on their wider neighbourhood. However, this never happened. Instead, all of the photos from the cameras were shared with a youth worker in case the youngsters came to ask for them, which some of them eventually did.

Although this was another mostly unsuccessful attempt at conducting a Photovoice type exercise and initiating a future project, it still offered some insights into the neighbourhood as well as into the challenges of conducting research of this type.

Workshops on designing/making

Partly due to my previous professional experiences and existing connections, I had the pleasure to be involved in what turned out to be a hugely interesting project called Stagehands³. It was organised by the social enterprise architecture practice Studio Polpo in collaboration with the community fabrication facility Chop Shop. This project was funded by the National Lottery Awards for All programme. The project involved the design and digital fabrication of a public, mobile, multipurpose performance space available for the people of Sheffield to use.

Due to an unexpected set of circumstances, which resulted in the organisers losing their original community partner, an opportunity arose to bring this project to the youth club in Fir Vale, where I had recently started to volunteer. After initial negotiations, it was agreed to hold weekly two-hour sessions with a 'senior' group of local youth (13-18 years of age) from July through to September 2015. The workshops were held as part of the youth club's usual 'open access' sessions, where youngsters would come to spend time socialising, playing games (pool, table tennis, board games etc) and using computers to access social media. These sessions were usually attended by about twenty youngsters, always with more boys than girls. Together with two other architect colleagues, we occupied one corner of the room offering involvement in our project, which consisted of discussing, sketching, and making physical and 3D models, including tutorials in 3D modelling freeware computer software. The youngsters could opt in and out as they wished and the initial response was mixed. Shy at first, eventually most of them took part in some of the activities, which enabled them to influence to different degrees the actual development and design of the set and also to learn, or at least become familiar with, new skills such as design thinking and 3D modelling in particular. There was a regular group of five or six fully engaged youngsters in each of the sessions. These were also the ones that, later in the process, took part in a prototyping workshop related to this project, held, together with youth workers, at a digital fabrication facility in town. The design at the end of the project

³ <https://wearestagehands.wordpress.com>

consisted of several modular perforated blocks that could be arranged in different ways and used for different purposes. For these particular youngsters, however, the greatest motivation was stimulated by the potential of this set to transform into a table tennis table. It was therefore planned to make one of these sets as a mobile set for use anywhere in Sheffield, with an additional set being produced specifically for use in the youth club. Some of the youngsters were present as the set was finally cut out on the CNC router machine at the digital fabrication facility, turning timber sheets into flat pack pieces, and these were then assembled in the youth club. The last session in the youth club consisted of a collaborative building activity, which was a great success (figure 4.3.). The set has since been used regularly by people in the club.

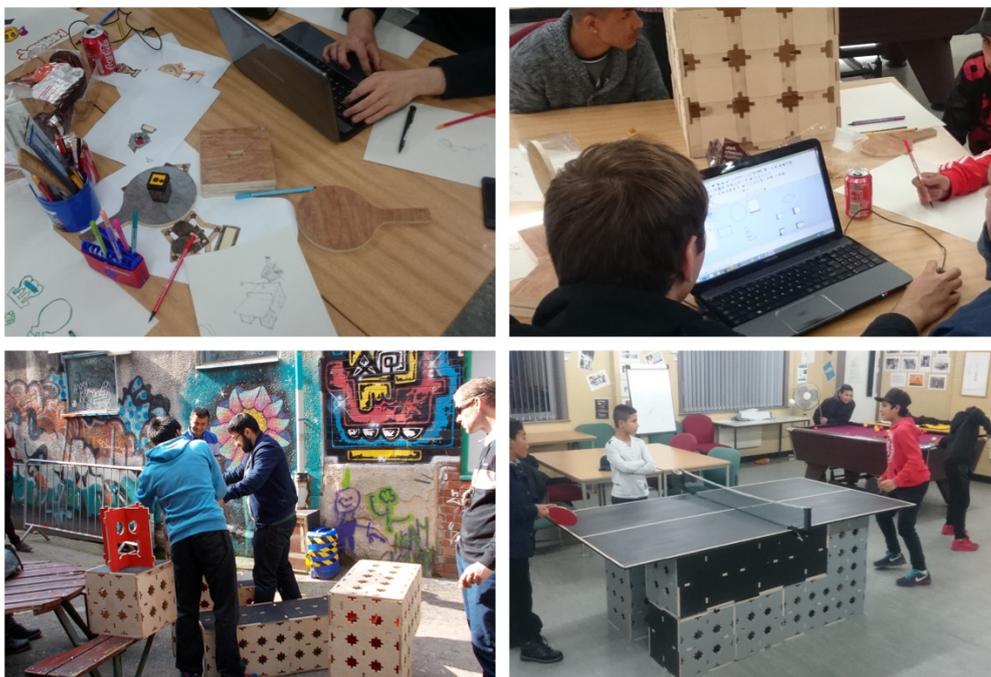


Figure 4.3. Stagehands project - activities and the final set used as table tennis table (2015)

Though these workshops were not designed as research activities with a view to generating data, my intention had been that such activities would contribute to my research in several different ways. Being part of this project gave me further opportunity to become more familiar with the neighbourhood and some of its inhabitants. Some of the discussions with the youngsters were focused on the possibilities for using this ‘performance space’ in different neighbourhood spaces and for different types of occasion. This provided further insights into local spaces and activities and also youngsters’ interests and relationships with others and the ‘neighbourhood’. The majority of the sessions were attended by youngsters from a Roma background as these were the usual attendees at this particular youth club. However, for several weeks, another local youth club run by the same

organisation was being refurbished, which meant that our sessions were also attended by a group of youngsters normally associated with the other club. These were predominantly boys of Asian heritage. Although my focus was mainly on running the workshop activities, it was still a very interesting and valuable experience to be able to observe these newly afforded interactions within the club. It genuinely provided me with an opportunity to gain tacit knowledge about the area and some of its people and social relationships.

By providing additional activities in the neighbourhood that were also interesting, educational and with a practical and explicit outcome (the set of blocks), this project managed to generate some positive impact, as initially intended in this research. The organisation itself was supported in that it was able to offer youngsters additional cutting edge activities run by design professionals; the youngsters who participated in the workshops had the opportunity to experience and learn something new, whilst all of the other visitors to the youth club were also able to benefit from the set of blocks, mostly for playing table tennis.

This project also played an important role in later phases of my research, in particular when I needed to make contact with professionals working in the neighbourhood, as many of them had heard about the project and saw it in a favourable light. It is important to mention that I am by no means claiming all of the credit for this project as it was truly a collaborative endeavour. Nevertheless, my research engagement did provide the opportunity to bring it to this particular neighbourhood and this youth club.

Mapping workshop

In collaboration with youth workers in July 2016, I organised a research workshop in the other youth club run by the same organisation, which in the previous year had been refurbished. As mentioned above, what is distinctive about this youth club is that it is primarily visited by local Asian male youngsters between the ages of 13 to 18. The workshop was part of their usual weekly ‘open-access’ sessions where, as in the other youth club explained in the previous section, they would spend time engaging in various activities, mostly playing various types of games (table tennis, board and computer games).

The session was planned as an additional, drop-in activity, in which youngsters could participate in between other activities. At the very beginning of the session a youth worker introduced me and my work to all of the youngsters and this was followed by my explanation of this particular research activity, its aims and how they would engage with it. They were all also given a project information card. It is worth noting here that most of the youngsters were familiar with me as I had been a guest

there on two other occasions prior to this session and also some of them had taken part in the Stagehands project the summer before.



Figure 4.4. Mapping workshop (2016)

The research activity was envisaged as a mapping focused activity accompanied by photographs of local spaces, both used in line with participatory and collaborative mapping as a research method (Sarkissian et al. 2009, Wood and Glass 2010) and also acting as prompts to facilitate stories about the neighbourhood. It was organised around one big map spread in the middle of a large table (figure 4.4.). The session was recorded on a phone placed on the same table. At the beginning, and every time another person would come to have a look and join in, I briefly made sure that they were comfortable with reading maps. Although I had prepared structured questions, I was at the same time interested in having more unstructured conversations and discussions. This was in fact how the activity developed. After the initial introduction to mapping, I asked the youngsters to identify and map the spaces and facilities they use most and least frequently and also to discuss what might be the reasons for that. This turned into a lively discussion, uncovering interesting stories, including some that provided insights into changes in the neighbourhood. The flow of the workshop was actually interrupted several times for various reasons (others walking in, somebody starting an unrelated conversation etc.); nevertheless, although this was unfortunate in terms of keeping a focus on the research, it in fact kept the atmosphere relaxed and enjoyable, enabling rich data to emerge.

Mixed methods workshops

The final series of workshops took place during the autumn of 2016 and it included working with children of Roma background aged from 7-14. These workshops were developed together with two local organisations, one focused on the whole community and an emerging one being developed by the Roma communities. The main aim was to provide a safe space through additional after school weekly activities for the youngsters. In line with the other activities described above, it was also envisaged that these activities, apart from being fun, would also be educational in some sense. Following discussions with the organisations, it was agreed that the activities could also be related to my research, at least in some way, as long as they were interesting and children would enjoy taking part in them. In accordance with my research as well as my professional skills, it was decided that the focus would be on understanding the neighbourhood and its issues from the children's perspective by means of different visual arts and crafts related activities (figure 4.5.). The first session was planned to focus on maps and mapping as something new yet useful for the children to learn about, which could then be further developed in a range of different ways.



Figure 4.5. Mixed methods workshops (2016)

Due to my previous experiences of working with youngsters in this neighbourhood and my awareness of the fluid nature of their attendance at activities, I prepared my second session with little optimism that they would return and, even if they did, it was hard to predict how many of them would turn up. However, the children did return and indeed six sessions in total were held, even if the numbers

varied. There seemed to be two main reasons for this: one was that they enjoyed the activities; the other was thanks to a local Roma father, who brought his own two children together with their friends and family members.

After two mapping related activities in our third session, we all went for a half-hour walk around the area to test their understanding of maps and to explore the neighbourhood together. Some older girls were also given cameras and asked to take photos of what they really like and dislike, which we would then all look at and discuss later.

In one of the sessions the focus was on developing ideas for the backyard of the organisation, which was intended to be used as a meeting place for all as part of the ‘Common Ground’ project. The children visited the space and were then given faded images of the backyard, which they could use to illustrate, through drawings and words, what they and their friends and families would like to be able to do there. The process also provided an opportunity for interesting discussions that extended beyond the actual backyard space. These images and ideas were also later used to support funding applications for further development of the project (Appendix B).

4.3. Analytical approaches

In line with qualitative interpretivist approaches to research, the analysis of data was designed to occur throughout the research process. Daly argues that “Analysis, at all stages of the project, involves being self-conscious and explicit about the way that we make decisions and give direction to the research process.” (Daly 2007 p. 210). In this sense analysis is a creative, reflexive and iterative process (Berkowitz 1997).

Writing

During my research the practice of writing has been embedded within the analytical process (Gibbs 2008) in several ways. These have included writing field notes, a research journal and memos (Maxwell 1996). In some cases I decided that certain situations needed to be described in greater detail than others (such as a vignette of a stabbing incident) as a way of providing ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1975); in other cases, my writing consisted of thoughts, ideas, further questions and sometimes discussions. Although writing is usually considered as a process within the ‘write-up’ phase of research, I have used it more as a method of enquiry and analysis (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005). Writing drafts relating to, for example, specific situations or possible findings helped me to further develop my ideas and to discover connections; it also supported the construction, synthesis and interpretation of meanings (O’Leary 2010). Furthermore, my writing was regularly discussed in

TUO research group meetings, which supported my analytical and critical thinking about emerging topics, themes, and concepts.

Mapping and diagramming

As an urban designer, mapping and diagramming are common features of my practice and an integral part of my way of thinking; naturally they have played an important role in my research as well. Although the main approach in my research draws on ethnography and, therefore, disciplines such as geography, sociology and anthropology, one of the aims here was to combine research approaches from these fields with tools, methods and skills from my own academic and professional background. This included maps and mapping, which were used in various ways and for various purposes (figure 4.6.). Maps and mapping related activities were helpful, for example, during my fieldwork as tools for collecting data in creative ways, as explained earlier (see 4.2.3.) but maps also played a role in representing some of the initial data, in analysing them and also in representing outcomes and findings. In analytical terms maps were important as they allowed for some useful findings to be unpicked that otherwise would have been hard to identify (e.g. the relations between different spaces and their size, relations between other socio-spatial aspects etc). In this way, my approach was in line with Dovey and Ristic's (2015) understanding of the potential of mapping:

“Our interest lies in understanding the map as a production of spatial knowledge – mapping as process rather than product, means rather than end.” (Dovey and Ristic 2015 p. 3)

Drawing on work by Corner (1999), Dovey and Ristic (2015) further understand mapping as a creative agency and this also resonates with the work of Awan (2017). Nevertheless, it is crucial not to forget that “Maps are sites of contestation that inevitably reflect the interests of those undertaking the mapping” (Dovey and Ristic 2015 p. 11). Recognising the importance of understanding by whom the maps are made, what they aim to represent and, often even more importantly, what they omit, also means that maps are always political (Awan 2017).

Therefore, using maps and mapping brings many ethical dilemmas and in this research a very careful approach was developed. For example, there was regular discussion in my research group to consider whether some of the maps that were useful in the analytical phase would be appropriate as final, publicly available maps, or whether they should be omitted; the main reason for such discussion was often that the maps might contain some sensitive information (e.g. the local drug dealing spots or areas with other anti-social behaviour activities). Another concern related to this issue was that they could possibly be misused and misinterpreted, especially if taken out of the context of this research, as

maps are usually perceived as representing ‘exact’ and ‘precise’ information, particularly in today’s era of big data. Therefore, it is crucial here to emphasise that all of the maps used in this thesis are based on qualitative data and are therefore diagrammatic in nature rather than representing any ‘fixed truths’; they are clearly different from GIS based and big data driven maps.

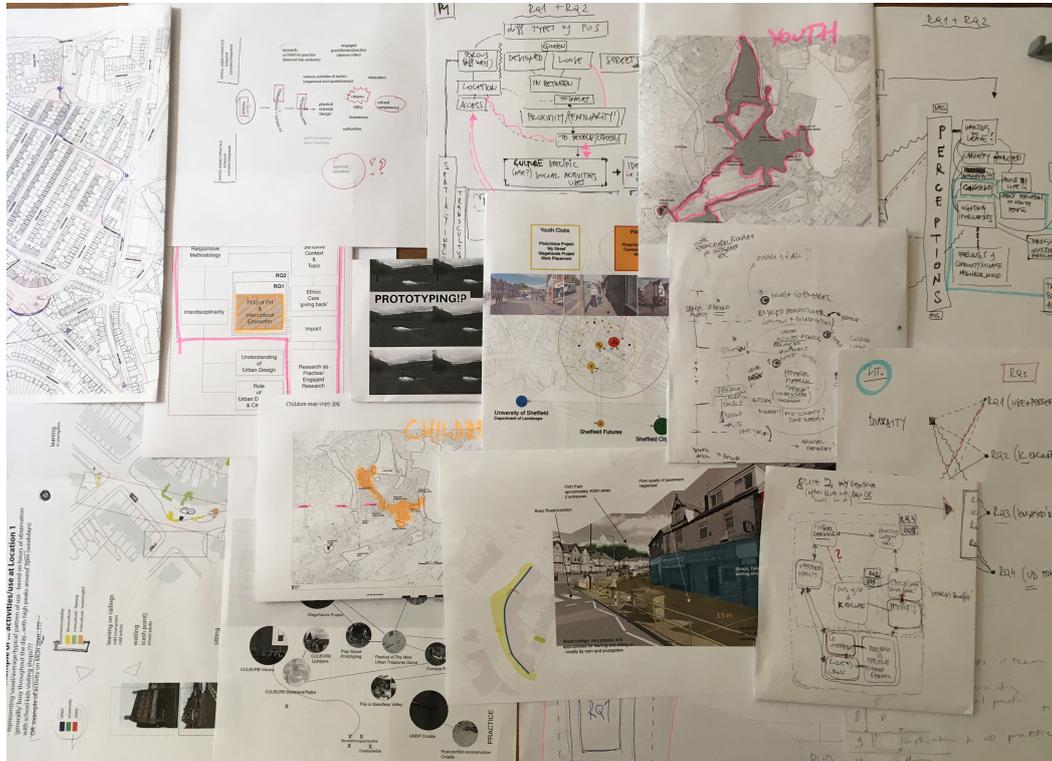


Figure 4.6. Examples of diagrams/maps used for developing and analysing research

As argued by Dovey and Ristic (2015), when understood in terms of knowledge creation, mapping brings together spatial representation and diagrammatic thinking. In my research this has indeed been the case, as the maps used and made were diagrammatic in nature. Nevertheless, other types of diagrams were also regularly used within the research process. This helped in developing and refining ideas, in conceptualising my research, and in communicating ideas and concepts to others (Wang 2007, Buckley and Waring 2013), especially within my research group TUO. With my background in design, the use of diagramming within the research and in my thinking came naturally and was arguably part of my tacit knowledge, a kind of “designerly way of knowing” (Cross, 2006).

Other analytical processes

Other analytical processes have included presenting work in progress or specific aspects of my research on various occasions and in different settings, such as conferences, symposia and talks.

Although this has played an important role during my analytical process, it seems not to be sufficiently acknowledged in research reports, as also argued by Augustine (2014). I further endorse Augustine's (2014) argument that we should recognise that analysis happens sometimes in surprising moments, e.g. after a bike ride on holiday in Augustine's example or, in my case, during some of the walks, as mentioned earlier, or often when running, one of my regular activities:

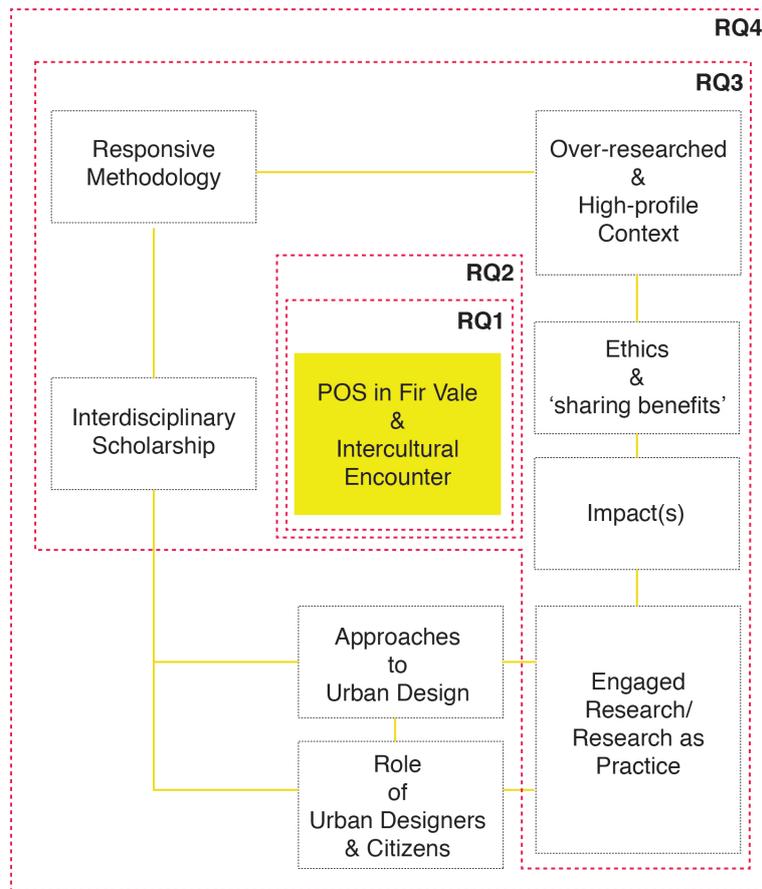
"...analysis occurred constantly and seeped into all aspects of my life. Data analysis was putting different and unrelated data into relation with theory in unplanned and unexpected ways. Analysis was not simply coding data but the intermingling of data and theory after focused reading and copious amounts of writing." (Augustine 2014 p. 752)

4.4. Summary

As explained in the introduction to this chapter and as visually represented in the diagram below (figure 4.7.), my methodological approach has been interrelated with the contextual specificities of Fir Vale, my research questions, my positionality, and existing interdisciplinary scholarship. The methodology was also shaped by particular understandings of urban design (as discussed in chapter 3) and in relation to participatory approaches to urban design practice. The main aim of the diagram, however, is to show more the relationships between the research questions, showing that there are two central questions (RQ1 and RQ2) located within two broader questions, one of them about the broader contextual issues (RQ3) and the other with an applied focus on urban design practice (RQ4).

As also informed by the literature review I adopted a situated ethnographic approach to understanding the spatiality of specific places in this particular neighbourhood and the diversity of uses and people within them. Methods in the research were therefore specifically aimed at understanding the intersection between diversity, conviviality and public open spaces. They were developed to complement each other and created a range of data from a range of sources offering deep insights and the opportunity to construct rich knowledge. The methods were also directly informed by the contextual specificities of Fir Vale, namely its 'over-researched' and 'high-profile' nature. This meant that the methods were responsive and engaged in order to address the ethical issues related to conducting research in such contexts.

After the initial period of my field work I recognised the importance of developing such a responsive methodological approach as a significant aspect of my research and therefore decided to dedicate a specific research question to this (RQ3 What are the issues and challenges of doing 'engaged



RQ1 - How are neighbourhood public open spaces (POS) used and perceived by both the recently arrived Roma population and the more established communities in Fir Vale?
RQ2 - What are the relationships between public open spaces (POS) and intercultural encounters in the neighbourhood?
RQ3 - What are the issues and challenges of doing 'engaged research' in a 'high-profile' and 'over-researched' context?
RQ4 - What recommendations can be made from this research in relation to Urban Design practice?

Figure 4.7. Relationship between research questions

research' in a 'high-profile' and 'over-researched' context?). This provided me with a further opportunity to include additional reflections on the issues and to potentially inform other research adopting similar approaches. This is explored in detail in chapter 8.

The next chapter will introduce the second part of the thesis 'Exploring public open spaces and intercultural encounters of Fir Vale'. This chapter will primarily focus on explorations of the first research question relating to how the local public open spaces in Fir Vale are used and perceived.

PART II – Exploring public open spaces and intercultural encounters

Chapter 5

Public Open Spaces of Fir Vale

5.1. Introduction

Drawing on the overall context of my research, the area of Fir Vale, as previously described in chapter 2, I will focus in this chapter on a number of public open spaces within the neighbourhood. The aim is to examine these local spaces as a way of addressing the first research question, which asks how local public open spaces are used and perceived. It has the additional benefit of setting the scene for addressing the second research question concerning local public open spaces in relation to intercultural encounters. Another purpose of this chapter is to provide a socio-spatial grounding for this research as described by Low (2017, p. 6):

“While early ethnographies relegated space to the description of the material setting, a contemporary ethnography of space and place is process-orientated; person, object and community-based; and allows for multiple forms of agency and political possibilities.”

Being aware of the scholarship on space and place (as explained in my literature review chapter), in this chapter I am using the term ‘space’. This decision was made primarily due to the fact that the word ‘space’ is commonly and naturally used by most of the participants as part of their everyday language. It’s important to note that, the way ‘space’ is used here is closer to the use of the word ‘place’ in most academic discourse, with the associated implications of embedded shared meaning.

There are many varied points of interest in and around Fir Vale, which are integral to the atmosphere and character of this neighbourhood, and which influence the ways in which people move through the area. Some of these also attract ‘visitors’ from outside the neighbourhood (though they generally do not spend time actually using the public outdoor spaces). The impact of these visitors is important primarily in terms of supporting local economies. However, their main influence on public open spaces is most directly related to an increase in adjacent traffic, bringing a localised reduction in the quality of experience for users of the spaces.

The points of interest referred to in the previous paragraph include the following: several schools, churches, mosques, a hospital, the local medical centre, and many retail premises, scattered around and grouped together as shopping parades, which are also home to a number of different organisations. There are many Asian clothes shops around, with new ones being opened regularly, and also several jewellery shops, which together attract many visitors from outside the neighbourhood. A few grocery shops are well known outside the area for having some excellent, specific products, such as their meat or what is apparently ‘the best mango in the city’. Many of these have been mentioned in conversations I have had in the area and are seen as assets to the neighbourhood and valued by many people, although often for different reasons.

These spaces of ‘primary interest’ were identified during the first phase of the research and further explored as the research progressed. Such spaces have been classified as follows: the urban green spaces, the streets and the other relevant sites.. These active neighbourhood spaces together form a network of local public open spaces and in the next chapter they will be explored more holistically in terms of their overlaps and interconnections. Each of these spaces is also visually represented in order to provide additional information about them and to illustrate and help enhance the sense not only of their use/inhabitation but also their materiality and atmosphere (Koch and Latham 2012a).

The location of these ‘primary interest’ spaces can also be seen together on a map (figure 5.1.), which represents the different levels of intensity of people’s activities in each of them. As already explained in the methodology chapter, it is important to emphasise that this map is qualitative in nature and based on observations and conversations with locals, rather than generated by GIS or based on ‘big data’. Although this may have limitations, it was important to visually represent these qualitative findings to support further analyses and discussions.

This chapter consists of three main sections and a conclusion. Each of the three sections includes discussion on several specific spaces of the neighbourhood. These are divided into ‘Description and Use’ which contains data from my observations and some supporting documents, and ‘Perceptions’ which is based on data from interviews and other collaborative activities conducted during the research (as explained in more detail in the methodology chapter 4).

5.2. The Urban Green Spaces

The urban green spaces (as shown in figure 5.1.) are amongst the most common types of public space in Fir Vale. Within this neighbourhood they are, however, differentiated, having a range of forms and typologies, being used in different ways, and playing various roles in terms of social facilitation.

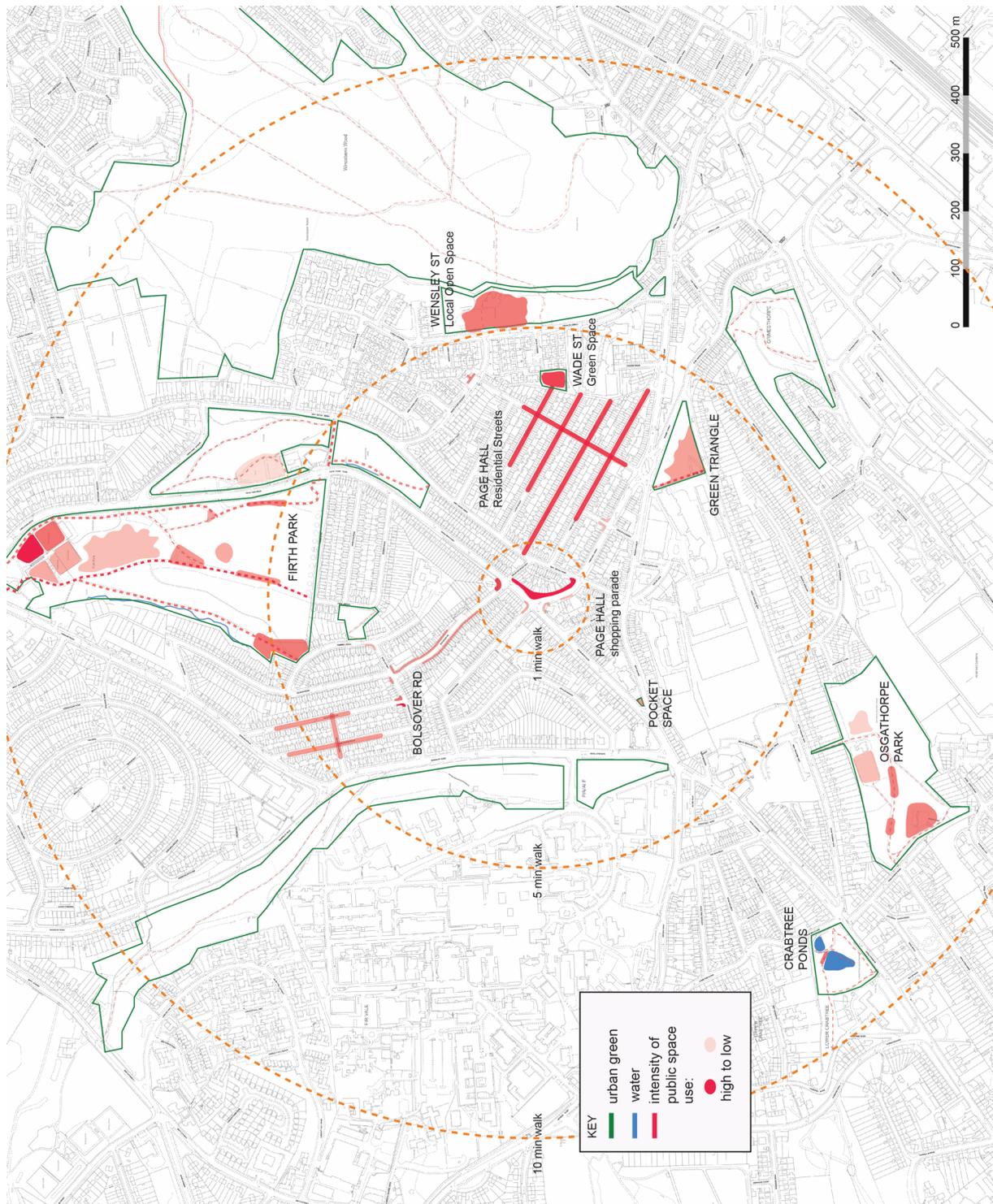


Figure 5.1. Map representing intensity of use of local public open spaces in Fir Vale

5.2.1. Wade Street Green Space

Description and Use

Wade Street Green Space (figure 5.2.) can be briefly described as a pocket park tucked within a residential area. It is located in between residential streets of narrow terraced houses, a relatively small 70s estate and a primary school. It is approximately 40 by 30 metres wide and consists of a grassy slope with several trees. There are three flights of steps and sloping paths. At the bottom there is a hard surfaced flat area partly occupied by a power substation that is railed off by a high fence. This space was redesigned in 2009 as envisaged in the Page Hall Urban Design Framework based on an earlier master plan (Sheffield City Council 2005). As part of this intervention, one of the roads leading to it has also been redesigned into a paved shared surface space ('home zone'), which arguably extends this public space into the street.

This is one of the busiest spaces within the neighbourhood and is usually used by children and teenagers, mostly of Roma origin. It encourages the enjoyment of many different activities, such as sliding down the sloping path (on a bike, scooter, roller skates, skateboards, or trainers with wheels), rolling down the grassy sloping area, or sitting on it, observing games happening in front on the flat surface. These games include football, foot tennis and other improvised games with a ball. Sometimes card games are also played down there with the flat top of a litter bin used as a table. This flat part of the space, together with other hard surface areas around there, are often covered with chalk writings and drawings, including some used for playing hopscotch. Sometimes these are multi-coloured and sometimes the 'chalk' is actually taken from pieces of plasterboard, found as leftovers from building work that is being carried out around the area. Often there are groups of young girls of varied ages playing with dolls and prams and sitting on the steps or on the grass under the tree.

The grass area is often used by groups of young Roma, mostly boys, who arrange old mattresses that are left outside on the streets or in skips and use them to run towards and jump over, doing somersaults over them. It all looks spectacular and enjoyable. Although occurring regularly, these activities seem to be quite temporal and the following day the mattresses would not be there. However, other mattresses would soon (re)appear either here or in other nearby spaces. Occasionally, especially on a warm day, youngsters can be seen engaged in washing a car parked on Wade Street just next to this space, sometimes in smaller and other times in larger groups. On a particularly hot day, they may also be playing in an inflatable pool in nearby back gardens and then come and sit under the tree or run around wet and 'armed' with water pistols.

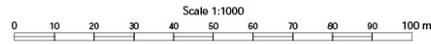


Figure 5.2. Wade Street Green Space - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

Similar to other spaces around there, especially the nearby streets, Wade Street Green Space is not busy during school hours. However, it is also less busy during the summer term break because many of the children, and indeed their whole families, go to visit friends and families in Slovakia.

Adults are regularly present in this space. Some come to bring children to the school and pick them up again because the school's back gate is located in this space. They do not tend to spend much time in the green space itself, however. Nevertheless there are often other local adults who do spend time socialising there, either gathered around the steps or leaning on the walls.

Perceptions

Although one of the busiest spaces in the neighbourhood, many people did not recognise either the name or photos of Wade Street green pocket space. The ones who knew about it were the children and youngsters who use it, locals living in very close proximity or parents that take children to the school there. Some of these parents commented that it would be good to have some benches around there, while others remembered that in fact there used to be some benches there. Apparently, the benches that were located there as part of the original redesign of the space, were removed at the request of the 'community', because they were attracting too many people. A local person that made a comment about this space as being "full of wild kids" was probably part of that 'community'. However, these negative perceptions were clearly in a minority. Youngsters who actually spent time there were mostly pleased with this space because "there's always someone there" and, similarly, because "everyone's there". Two boys suggested to "move that electric station somewhere else" because their balls often end up there and then it is hard, and sometimes impossible, to get them back.

Wade Street green space could arguably be summarised as a successful pocket park, located as it is away from the main roads and in between different types of residential properties and the school, making it therefore highly appropriate for children and youngsters to spend time there. This was exactly the aim of its redesign, although some still see it as problematic because it is too busy. If one was to give priority to these voices, it would be possible to conclude that 'the success' of redesigning this space into an active public area has been too great. However, I suggest that it is important to take into consideration that, since the redesign, there has been a significant change in the local population, particularly in terms of age and cultural background, and that the more negative views may be revealing some anxieties about this. Although it is a positive space in many ways, this space is not influencing much the generally negative public perception of the area and its public open spaces, probably due to its being tucked away from the main roads and being unknown to many.

5.2.2. Wensley Street Local Open Space

Description and Use

Wensley Street Local Open Space (figure 5.3.), as it is officially called on a street sign, is another local green space in the neighbourhood and is approximately 60 by 200 metres. It is located on the edge of a much larger green area, Wincobank Wood, stretching along Wensley Street. Although only about a two-minute walk from Wade Street space and about a five-minute walk from the 'Green Triangle' space (to be described next), it appears as a more isolated space possibly due to the fact that it is framed by a road as well as woods. Opposite this space, there is Wensley Estate, consisting mostly of 'post war terraces and semi-detached houses' (Sheffield City Council 2005) with a network of internal walk-ways. The space contains a designated multifaceted court with no fence around it, for playing football and basketball. Also there are several kinds of benches (some of them under the trees), two types of railings along the road (metal ones and wooden ones), a supporting swing structure with missing swings, and a fully functioning metal slide "sitting" on a small hill. Along Wade Street there is a bus stop with a bench on each side of the road and also some additional benches on the pavement.

The court is regularly used for football and, more rarely, basketball, by very diverse groups, which vary in terms of number, age, gender, and ethnicity. Football is also played on the grass area next to the court when this one is occupied. Several times there was a group of Roma men with children passing a ball, all dressed in Manchester United kit. Mattresses such as the ones already mentioned, are also to be found here and are regularly used for jumping over. Motorbike riding also happens on the grassy area and seems to happen when there are no other people spending time here. Once, I observed two teenagers, one white and the other Asian, taking turns to ride a small loud motorbike over the field and also on the path going further into the woods. On several other occasions, there were many circular traces of motorbikes tyres that had damaged the grass and created mud. This was mentioned several times in conversations regarding different perceptions of this space and it was usually blamed on Roma teenagers. As it is on the edge of Wincobank Wood, it is common to see dog walkers passing through this space going towards, or coming from, the woods. On one occasion I was passing by and witnessed a group of children picking blackberries from the bushes on the edge of the space. As I was watching what they were doing with interest, two of them pulled their hands out and offered me some blackberries because they are "good" and invited me to join them.

As mentioned earlier, there is also a small hill in this park that is regularly used by groups of Muslim women with children. Usually, they sit on blankets on top of the hill while the children are playing around. On one occasion, in June, they were there even when it was already getting quite dark.



Figure 5.3. Wensley Street Local Open Space - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

Muslim women also regularly sit on the benches located next to the pavement, often carrying a few shopping bags, but once I also noticed two having what seemed to be a pleasant chat while sitting on one of the low railings instead. The same hill is also sometimes, albeit at different times, used by mixed groups of male youngsters socialising while drinking and smoking. There is also part of this space in which people leave food leftovers, mostly rice and bread, which then attracts many birds especially when there are no people around.

Specific to this space is the fact that many organised activities also happen here, usually aimed at children and youngsters, and are held during the term break. These range from various sports games to less structured activities for younger children. They are mostly run by different organisations, but sometimes a few of these organisations work together on them. Occasionally this space is also used for wider reaching, cross-generational and cultural activities such as a community fun day held in July 2015 that was supported by various organisations as well as local business owners.

Although most of these activities are advertised in a similar way to those in other parts of the city, such as through local newspapers, schools or banners in the park, apparently what seems to work best in this area is quite specific, as explained by a local youth worker:

“...in this area people would just walk past and see something is happening...and join in...and you know mostly things work here by not like pre-booking...you don't really plan too much in advance...and if we ever want to take kids to the park or similar...for some families it works...to say you know on Saturday afternoon we're planning to do this...but I guess for most families around here...you just knock on the door 10 minutes before and say 'we're going to the park now do you want to come'...and that actually works here...”

[NK, local youth worker, British mixed female]

Perceptions

The majority of youngsters perceived this space as “boring” and “not fun”. Some teenage girls I talked to in another place about this park commented that they “go sometimes there to meet a friend from college...who lives out there...and we just sit on those benches under a tree...or something” because “there’s nowt else to do”. Other youngsters, mostly boys, say they prefer to go and play sport in Firth Park when they can.

A Yemeni man, sitting on a bench with his two-year-old while his five-year-old was running around us with her friend, told me that the best thing about this space is that “it’s just across the road” while pointing at his mug of tea that he had brought from home. He added that he “pops here” as often as he

can, but that his wife does not like this space and prefers to take the girls to Firth Park, but only if she goes with, or meets there, some friends or family.

Most parents complained that the space is not good for children and many mentioned the missing swings. Generally, adults and youngsters felt that the space gives an impression of being uncared for, mostly due to the missing swings, despite the fact that in addition to the slide there are football and basketball facilities there as well as seating areas. One person mentioned that he had heard rumours about “uncivil” activities often happening further into the woods and that that was the main reason why he avoids it.

Although perceived unfavourably by many (even most) people I talked to, the actual level and intensity of everyday use suggests this is a very important local public space accommodating diverse activities and users.

5.2.3. Green Triangle

Description and Use

Compared to other public open spaces in this neighbourhood, the Green Triangle (figure 5.4.) is one of the quieter spaces, although still popular with some local people. This space is located on the southeast side of the Fir Vale area and is triangular in shape with its longest side being about 150 metres long. The ‘green triangle’ is basically a meadow with three large trees at the top and several newly planted young trees along both sides of the roads. It can be described as a ‘leftover’ space from the time when the nearby local school was redeveloped. It is formed by Earl Marshal Road, Rushby Street and the tall school railings on its third side. Rushby Street slopes down from the point where it joins Earl Marshal Road, creating a roundabout at the bottom and also making the whole meadow slope down too. Along the western border of this space is the school railing, partly allowing visual connections with the school yard, and a tarmacked path alongside this railing with some steps at the top. There is also a flat part of the space in the middle of the meadow where food leftovers are regularly left, and these attract many birds. In terms of litter, the meadow does not seem to be littered much in comparison to some other parts of this neighbourhood, and this litter usually collects in specific spots: on the steps at the top and on the pavement in front of the shops on the opposite side of the roundabout.

Though a variety of local people use the pathway alongside the school railings, it is groups of youngsters who most frequently spend time here. These groups differ in age and ethnicity, but mostly seem to consist of Roma boys playing football. There are no specific facilities for this here, however,



Figure 5.4. Green Tringle - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

so they often use tree branches or items of their own clothing to mark out the goals. Improvised cricket games are also played here sometimes, not only by Asian youngsters but also by Roma boys, though generally separately and at different times. Another common activity being practised here is jumping over an old mattress, as happens regularly in other parts of the neighbourhood, as already described. Again this is mostly done by young Roma boys, although groups of girls hang around with them sometimes. These groups of girls are usually very mixed in terms of age, ranging from really young children to older teenagers. They are more likely to sit on the nearby steps or lean on the railings, usually observing activities that are happening; sometimes they can be found there on their own when the boys are not around.

Less often, small groups of older Asian men sit on the wall at the bottom corner of the space immediately next to the school railings, just chatting together. Once, on a warm sunny day, I saw and had a brief chat with a Roma family there. They were sitting on a blanket under the tree and having some drinks and snacks. They said they enjoyed “view...sun...tree...food”. Then they were joined by two young men from the Mormon church who they seemed to know well from earlier. Finally, as elsewhere, there would always be other uses and activities that I was unable to observe myself for various reasons; for example, one local professional told me that he happened to use the space almost every day: “I go for a stroll to that triangle...almost every lunchtime...just go to get some air ...and walk for a bit really”.

Perceptions

The undefined nature and character of this space, a left over from local redevelopment, was reinforced by the fact that some people, including some who pass by it on a daily basis, still took some time to ‘recognise’ it, even when they were shown photographs of it. Showing its location on the map or pointing to it (such as during a workshop with youngsters in a room overlooking the space) proved to be helpful. Another interesting perception of this space is of it “being the space in between the two communities”, predominantly Roma in areas around Page Hall Road and another more mixed but still predominantly Asian population on the south side of it around Earl Marshall Road, as explained by a local female worker. Other residents mostly used words such as “unused”, “leftover”, “grass area next to the school” to describe it, with one local male youth worker referring to it as “that green space with lots of potential”.

A local Asian shop owner explained that it makes him feel uncomfortable to walk down those steps with “many youngsters sitting there” and that in particular his wife avoids it. Almost on the contrary, the local professional mentioned in the previous section, while explaining why he visits it so often,

stated: “it's quite nice and quiet there ...and generally along Earl Marshal Road...unlike all this noise from the ambulances around here [NB referring to his office where the interview took place] ”.

This particular space was also mentioned in discussions in two workshops, one with a group of Roma girls and boys (10-15 years old) and the other with a group of Asian boys (14-20 years old), each also including local youth workers and carers. They had interesting and diverse ideas for improving this space, ranging from having a playground, making a cinema (an outdoor and indoor one), having ‘nicer’ shops that they feel are missing at the moment in the area, having more flowers and colours, having a public toilet, and building a dance hall, to name but a few. The idea that was mentioned by most, however, was to create some kind of allotment, enabling people to grow fruit and vegetables there and perhaps even providing them with an opportunity “to cook some stuff together”. The fact that this space is close to busy roads was not ignored, but it was not seen as an unresolvable obstacle in re-imagining the green triangle.

During the mapping workshop, a local resident, who was a British Asian male and youth worker, shared a story about the green triangle:

“YW: Should I give you a story on that space? Two years ago police wanted to build an outdoor gym there accessible to anyone...for example on that corner there they were going to build pull up bars for people...like the ones they now have in Firth Park...and the whole community was against it...saying it's gonna attract more people to come there and do nothing...but what about the people who are already stood around the area doing nothing...it would have took them...at least some...off the streets...especially the bookies...and they could also be working out...if you know what I mean...I don't know...oh, and the police were going to pay for it and everything...and it never got through...because of 'the community' [NB uses hand gesticulation for inverted commas] ... 'cause they thought we got an unused patch of ground they were gonna go big scale here and have like a proper outdoor functional gym...

LP: Wow, that would've been great really...haven't heard about it...

YW: Yeah, it would've been fantastic...and not only the Roma would have benefited but all of us would have benefited too...well...so that was a few years ago...”

Some others I talked to about this space suggested that the best thing about it was in fact that it is actually “just a big meadow”, making it a flexible space that allows various activities to happen. This also encourages youngsters, the main users, to be creative:

“I've seen lots of kids playing there during summer especially...they get those mattresses...there's also one group of boys that had got their money together and bought a

trampoline ...like a proper trampoline... big one with sides and they would carry it every day to there and then jump about and then carry it home so it didn't get taken...soooo...I think it just shows that there doesn't really need to be anything there really... you know, if you put a playground there they might use it but they might also break it...and...I think it's just too public, too open...you don't want cars going past...yeah...so I think it's too open to really put anything there...but they would still use this space...so it is an important space in that sense...and that's really nice..."

[NT, local resident and community worker, British white female]

5.2.4. Firth Park

Description, Use and Perceptions

Firth Park is located on the northern border of the neighbourhood. It is officially classified in the 'city park' category and described as an 'established visitor destination'⁴. This approximately 36-acre park consists of several quite distinctive areas. For this reason, I am embedding my data on perceptions into my description of the park and the information on how it is used (rather than producing a separate section on perceptions). There are also two aerial maps with images showing the North (figure 5.5a.) and South (figure 5.5b.) parts of the park.

The main entrance to the park is to the north, next to the centre of the Firth Park neighbourhood. This central zone of the Firth Park neighbourhood could be described as an equivalent to the Fir Vale central retail zone. However, it is a larger area and more diverse in terms of offerings. Apart from offering similar kinds of facilities to those in Fir Vale, there are in addition several banks, flower shops, charity shops, a frozen food chain shop, traditional cafes, a bowling centre, arcades, and a library. Within this northern area and close to the shops there is a Children's Centre building with a nursery and a café with a terrace. The surrounding is landscaped and includes several benches. Next to this area is a well-equipped playground with a long stepped seating area on one side overlooking it. Adjacent to the playground there is a bowling green with a pavilion and also sports pitches for basketball and football as well as a cricket cage.

The busiest facility is the children's playground. Apart from the usual playground equipment with a rubber surface around it, there is a grass area with trees and benches spread around. This grass area, inside the playground, is often used for picnics by individual parents, families and different groups of

⁴ <https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/home/parks-sport-recreation/parks-green-spaces>



Figure 5.5a. Firth Park North - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)



Figure 5.5b. Firth Park South - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

parents and carers, with children playing around them. It seems to be a much loved space too. People appreciate its location, lying next to the local shopping area and children's centre, as well as the quality of its main facilities, and in particular the trees. The general atmosphere is also described as "multicultural", "friendly" and "welcoming". The only comments I heard that were less positive were that, because it is so well used, it could be even larger, and that there should be more pedestrian crossings around there and generally around the park. The stepped seating area next to the playground is also busy, mostly with groups of different sizes consisting of teenagers and adults sitting, lingering, chatting, eating etc. The sports pitches are used by similar groups of users, teenage boys and girls and, predominantly, male adults.

These uses all seem to have been the precise intention of the design team led by Sheffield City Council, as described by a Landscape designer:

"...we did a lot of research...meeting various groups through local contacts to identify what the actual needs of the community are, so we ended up with the usual football and basketball type of environment but one thing that came up very strongly was cricket...now most parks in Sheffield don't provide cricket because they don't have the audience...but here because there's a relatively large Asian community...and it's a very big part of their culture so we actually went into loads of effort to put in a high quality practice net...it's not a full pitch it's a practice net...and it's really popular...and that was purely driven by the needs of the community...a specialised part of the community...a focused part of the community...but the other thing that we felt was important is not only to provide a sports area but to provide a setting for spectators or partners...because one of the things I as a designer and my team have identified is ...it's all well and good providing the facilities but actually if you start looking cross gender you might actually find that the activity ...dominating activities it's usually male focused and there's very little uptake with girls and women...and what we have found is by providing a social space...social meeting space...so there's benches, there's little shelter actually, you encourage the women to be part of it as well...they don't necessarily want to take part in it but they certainly want to be present...and there...again that was something we considered...and to make sure that we're actually providing a comfortable environment...we provided trees in there, shade, soft areas, hard areas, high quality materials not just tarmac so on..."

[Landscape designer, British white male]

The rest of the park, about three quarters of it, is a grass field with pathways, several areas with groups of benches, and a few trees. There are also two additional open football courts and recently added pieces of outdoor gym equipment spread around this area, next to the pathways. This part of the park seems to be not as busy, although this perception may be enhanced by its vast size. The football

pitches seem to be regularly used, with a wide range of people also sitting, socialising and sometimes having picnics or even barbecues on the grass field. One particularly popular spot for this is under the big tree in the middle of the field. In this part of the park it is also common to see people running along the pathways and across the field. Dog walkers are also regularly present here, although more frequently during the early mornings.

The outdoor gym equipment seems to be well used, and commented on favourably by diverse sections of the population, although it is sometimes more used for socialising around rather than for actual training. The benches, which are located next to the main pathways, are grouped in several spots and are also usually busy. Talking to people around this area it was obvious that they prefer this part of the park as it feels less busy and “more quiet and beautiful” than other parts of the park. Most of these people were either couples of different backgrounds, elderly friends, groups of Muslim men having a barbecue, or teenage boys and girls. Some of them came here from other parts of the city for a specific reason. One group of men, postgraduate mature students at a local university, came because they had heard that it is a nice park and that barbecues are allowed here. Some teenage girls said they came here to meet a girlfriend they know from college, although they also seemed to know local Roma boys passing by. A couple in their late twenties, originally from Afghanistan, who live a 20-minute walk away from here next to another large park, said they prefer to walk up here because this park “feels safer...and very cosmopolitan...and like in a city to be honest”.

The majority of these people were really happy with this space as it is, but some commented that it would be good to have water fountains around here and quite a few mentioned the lack of toilet facilities (“the nearest one is all the way there in the café”). Funfairs come to this part of the park occasionally, and while some thought it was not an appropriate location for this because it is “loud and annoying”, the others said that although the space totally transforms, it is “not bad having it here sometimes”.

On the eastern side, the park is framed by Firth Park Road, and on its south-eastern end there is another space on the other side of the road. This part is called Ripples in the Pond, which used to be a boating lake but which in 2011 was landscaped into a contemporary wetland area with different types of seating facilities and a basketball hoop. One of its aims, as explained by the same designer as above, was to complement the nearby Clock Tower pavilion, used for various activities including religious services, and the former Library, currently used as an Islamic cultural centre:

“...now that was a derelict boating lake and it was in absolutely awful condition...we were able to come up with a set of design proposals that have met again a number of different users requirements but also brought the area into good use...so we had not only provided the means

by which people would enjoy the space...because it's actually quite remote to the rest of the park...but also to make sure that what we provided was of high enough quality to encourage people in...and with the Clock Tower and Library building there a lot of social activities went on so we actually created things like theatre space, or...obviously seating area...there was the wetland area so we didn't just cover all the water up we actually celebrated it..."

[Landscape designer, British white male]

Although the space has been significantly changed, the perceptions of local people were somewhat different from those of the designer. People commented that "it looks good...but still there is nothing much to do there", that "the surface is very child unfriendly" and that "it just seems isolated over there". My observations also supported the fact that it is not being used much at all. Only a few times did I notice the occasional couple or a group of teenagers there. The most regular users seemed to be a large group of Roma children, accompanied by an adult, while the rest of the adults were attending the church service that takes place once a week in the nearby Clock Tower pavilion.

Although the success of this intervention seems to be limited, according to the designer it probably did manage to change, at least partly, the previous general perception of this space: "*...so there was this negative image of that area...because it's well hidden, dark...I mean it was before...so it was also about turning that perception around..."*

Along the south-western side of the park there is a wooded area on a slope with a pathway through. It leads to another area of the park next to Cammell Road, a part of the neighbourhood of Fir Vale. This space is quite a small grass field, about 30 by 60 metres, with a few benches and a picnic table. Due to its location between residential neighbourhood streets and surrounded by woods, this space does not feel like part of Firth Park; instead it feels like a separate small local neighbourhood park. Although many people walk through this area on their way to the main part of Firth Park and back, the main users here are children, sometimes accompanied by adults, other times not, and teenagers. The intensity of use varies around here, even, for example, on a sunny Saturday afternoon. At times it is very quiet with no one around and, at other times, there are a few couples or small groups of youngsters on benches and around the picnic table. On the other hand, on some sunny Saturday afternoons 'everyone' seems to be here at the same time, including dog walkers having a break on a bench, a large group of children playing football on the field with improvised goals made from wooden sticks and branches, and small groups of adults sitting on the grass watching the game. Occasionally, usually when the space is very busy, some of the activities spill out onto the pavement of Cammell Road too, as witnessed a few times and as evidenced by chalk drawings on the pavement. This area is commented on as 'a park', 'our park' and not really as Firth Park; even when referred to

as such, it was followed by “Oh, you mean *that* Firth Park”. The ideas for improvement were mostly suggesting more chairs and tables, football goals and some lights in the evening.

To conclude this section on Firth Park, it is worth mentioning that, although almost all people I spoke to talked about it in favourable terms, a few did mention that, for them, it is still nowhere near as nice as some parks on the other side of the city.

5.2.5. Osgathorpe Park

Description and Use

Osgathorpe Park (figure 5.6.) is another bordering space located in the south edge of the neighbourhood. Its dimensions are approximately 80 by 300 metres. It is categorised as a ‘local’ park by the authorities and it is generally a relatively busy public space. It is located between Osgathorpe Road and Earl Marshall Road with entrances on both of these roads and there is a main pathway going roughly through the middle of the park with several benches alongside. The topography is interesting as it includes slopes and flat areas. In the southern corner of the park, there is a fenced off designated playground area that also includes several benches and picnic tables. In the middle of the park there is a pavilion primarily used for weekly youth club activities. On the western façade of the pavilion there is a mural and, in front of this, a flat area used as a football pitch. On the other side of the pavilion there is a small climbing rock.

People mostly walk down the main path through the park. Occasionally, some sit and spend time on the benches alongside the path. One of them is a local dog owner who comes here with his dog on a daily basis, albeit at irregular times due to his work obligations. He commented that he does not normally see many other dog walkers in this particular park. The football pitch next to the pavilion seems neglected but it is often used by various groups of youngsters, and sometimes adults, kicking a ball.

The busiest part of the park by far is the playground. Regularly there are children playing, while individuals as well as groups of adults spend time on the benches and picnic tables.

A Latvian woman who has been living in the area only for a few months comes here with her child almost every day and was very pleased with the playground and how “everyone is nice here”. She also liked that there are “people from everywhere” and added how she was surprised that the Russian and Slovak languages are so similar, as she realised by hearing and engaging with parents and children who come here. However, this park is not visited much by groups of Roma children, although the ‘green triangle’ is just a few minute walk from here.



Figure 5.6. Osgathorpe Park - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

On several occasions, there were groups of Asian women with children having a picnic on the grass area close to some trees and a climbing rock. Once I joined an older Asian man on a bench and a young boy in a wheel chair for a chat. They come here regularly because they live nearby and like spending time outside and enjoying the views. Most people coming here are locals, so all three of us were surprised when a man visiting Sheffield from Portugal stopped by to ask us for advice on the most interesting direction for walking to the city centre. We looked confused and suggested that he should take a bus instead, but he explained that he loves long walks across the cities he visits. Occasionally, just outside the park, on Osgathorpe Road, a grocery van stops, with fruit and vegetable crates also arranged on the pavement, and this attracts many, mostly local, Asian residents.

Perceptions

Osgathorpe Park is generally described as “good” and “nice” while some said “it feels friendly”, “it’s very safe”, “beautiful scenery” and “these are great views”. Compared to most other local spaces, there were much fewer contradictory opinions about this park, although some still existed. For example, while a group of Asian youngsters thought the climbing rock was a waste of money, that “something better” could have been done instead, and that locals should have been consulted about it, a Polish father of two girls living very close by said that his girls like that climbing rock and that he thinks it is a “very good thing to be in the park”.

A few people commented that it would be good to have a water fountain or a water tap there especially because there are no shops in close proximity where they could buy water. One parent also commented that it would be nice to have some water features for children to be able to play in, especially on warm days. Others suggested that the football pitch should be improved and that it would be a good idea to add lights so that it could be used in the evening.

5.2.6. Pocket space next to the church and mosque

Description and Use

This spot (figure 5.7.) can genuinely be described as a micro space, with one bench, one bin and a small stone wall which is suitable for sitting on. Some shrubs along the edge can make this ‘park’ feel a bit hidden. It has a very specific location in between the fork of two roads, thus forming a triangular space. This space is in front of the church, and next to the church is a mosque. There is a pedestrian crossing with traffic lights heading towards another shopping parade on the opposite side of the road.



Figure 5.7. Pocket space - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

The people mostly commonly seen using this space are small groups of older Asian men sitting on a bench. Their presence here is related to their visits to the mosque, as they tend to socialise before or after prayers. Sometimes there are Roma women with prams and shopping bags having a break. Once there was an older man lying down on the bench. Only on a few occasions did I notice youngsters here. However, according to the litter that is left regularly and that is often spilling out of the bin, this space must be used by quite a few people, probably in the early morning hours. Most of the litter consists of takeaway boxes (most likely from a few popular takeaways across the road), but also there are beer cans and bottles, many of them of east European brands (probably from the Polish shop opposite).

Perceptions

Some people I talked to were not aware of this space at all, while others thought it is a “nice little space”, and “good to have around there”. One local shop owner said that it was boring and that it would be good to have a ping pong table (a rather unusual suggestion) or something else to do there.

5.2.7. Crabtree Ponds

Description and Use

Probably one of the most unusual and unexpected spaces in the area is Crabtree Ponds. It is a relatively small local nature reserve, covering 1.4 hectares, with a pond in the middle. It is located on the corner of Barnsley Road and Crabtree Close. There are several paths through it, as well as four benches and a boardwalk over the pond. It is managed by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust, which organises regular Community Maintenance days once a month. Also there are other organised walks and bird watching activities occasionally taking place here, making Crabtree Ponds one of the local spaces most visited by people outside the area.

This space usually is not very busy, apart from when Community Maintenance days are held and when groups visit for a walking tour. Most of the time there would be an occasional person or two on the benches and a few people passing by. Occasionally there would be various groups of youngsters socialising on and around the bench. On a few occasions I noticed a group of Asian boys gathered around a bench, playing cards. Once there were three apparently quite drunken white men, sitting on a bench and having a loud conversation. Another time, there were a black boy and girl and a white boy catching fish with fishing nets; they seemed to be having a great time.



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Scale 1:1000
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100 m



Figure 5.8. Crabtree Ponds - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

Although the Wildlife Trust group is trying their best, the space does get littered a great deal, especially the pond, which contains many plastic bottles floating around. To clean this up, a dinghy is necessary, which attracted some local youngsters and encouraged them to join in during one Community Maintenance day.

Perceptions

I talked to some adults about Crabtree Ponds, though not in situ, and they commented that this space was good for bird watching, however, most people were unaware that “anything like that existed around here”. Indeed, I was first introduced to Crabtree Ponds by a group of local teenagers when we talked about their favourite places in the area during my involvement in the work placement at an early stage of my field work. When they showed me some photos of this space, I must admit that I thought at first that they were teasing me, as it did look a bit ‘out of place’. Another group of youngsters, of mixed backgrounds, mentioned that they also like to go to Crabtree Ponds but specifically to catch fish. An Asian couple with two children commented that they went there once but found it “too dark...unwelcoming...and not very child friendly”. A local Asian teenager mentioned hearing “not nice” stories about the place without going into details, though he was unsure of whether the stories were justified or not. A middle aged father, of mixed Arab and Italian origin, sitting on a bench with his young teenage daughter and son, said that this is “absolutely my favourite spot...like a secret place”. His son also found the place to be “interesting...and different...especially this pond”, whereas his daughter thought it was “just so boring”.

5.3. The Streets

As shown on the map (figure 5.1.) some streets in this neighbourhood are also very important spaces for socialising. However, the intensity and type of activity varies as will be further explored in this section, which focuses on three different areas.

5.3.1. Page Hall shopping parade area

Description and Use

It is evident that this is one of the busiest spaces in the neighbourhood and “the heart of Page Hall”, as described by one resident. As shown in more detail on the map (figure 5.9.), this space is formed by the intersection of Firth Park Road (a B class road with five bus services), Page Hall Road (an unclassified road with three bus services) and Idsworth Road (an unclassified road with no bus services). On the eastern side of Page Hall Road and Firth Park Road the pavement widens and is



Scale 1:1000
 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100 m



Figure 5.9. Page Hall shopping parade - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

railed off from the roads by railings and a few bollards. There are two designated crossings across these roads.

Particularly busy and most actively used is the wide pavement area on the eastern side of the roads, on the corner where most of the shops are located. In this space there are several grocery shops, some with fruit and vegetables stocked outside, food takeaways, clothes shops, barbers, a betting shop, a pharmacist, an optician, a solicitor's, a domestic appliances shop, a travel agency and a phone shop. The type of shops in this area, as is the case with some other shops scattered within the neighbourhood, respond to, and cater for, the needs of its diverse local population. Some shops are more focused on one 'community', such as local grocery shops selling products from a particular country (e.g. Polish) or specialised clothes shops (e.g. Asian), while most are more "ecumenical" (Blommaert 2013) in nature, selling in one place a variety of products from a global market. There are other types of shops and services here which are also clearly responding to the local market, such as shops selling used house appliances and offering repairs; migration/legal advice services; phone shops etc. This is all typical of many other diverse neighbourhoods around Sheffield and other cities, exemplifying what Blommaert (2013) refers to as "an infrastructure of superdiversity". However, apart from catering for different ethnicities, what seems specific in this particular neighbourhood is that some shops here also target a specific age group, namely children. For example, although there are no specialised toyshops in the area, many general shops have simple, cheap toys visibly hanging in their windows with sweet vending machines in front of them. This is one of the spatial and practical manifestations of the many children living in the area, and the role of children as important shapers of the life of this neighbourhood.

Another important point to be made here is the apparent success of these shops. This is evident not only in this particular space but also throughout the neighbourhood. Although this neighbourhood is one of the most deprived ones in the country (as explained in chapter 2) there are almost no vacant premises around here and, even when some shops do close, new ones replace them relatively quickly. Furthermore, in the last few years several ground floors have been turned into new shops and some existing ones have undergone major refurbishments and extensions. This is in contrast with some other officially much more affluent areas of Sheffield, in which a relatively high number of long term vacant shops can be seen, for example. This disparity, according to Hall who refers to similar examples from some parts of London, Birmingham and Leicester, raises questions relating to clearly "inadequate policy frameworks", and "contrasting measures of value" (Hall 2009, p. 250) between locals and policy makers, as well as the questioning the appropriateness of "well established paradigms of economic value established by western perspectives" (Hall et al. 2017, p. 1324).

This area is used by a wide range of local people of different ages, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds, primarily for visiting the shops and for simply passing through. Some people also tend to ‘hang out’ here and usually lean on the road railings and sometimes even sit on them and on nearby bollards as well, due to the lack of any seating provision. This form of socialising most often includes the local Roma population, most commonly teenage boys and men, followed by families, women with children and small and large groups of teenage girls. Another group that relatively often spends time here consists of mostly Asian teenage boys. A queue in front of the two cash machines is not an unusual scene here, nor is a number of people waiting at the bus stop on Page Hall Road. Shopkeepers often stand outside their shops, sometimes having a cigarette on their own and sometimes chatting with each other or with people stopping by. There is also a lot of waving, shouting ‘hello’ and chatting to people in cars driving past or stopping nearby.

Children are also regular users of this public space, though compared to many other spaces in the neighbourhood it is less often used specifically for play. But, of course, serendipitous moments happen. Once, while waiting for a bus, I witnessed two young boys of Afro-Caribbean heritage, both sons of a local shop owner, jumping across the puddles and chasing each other around the phone box. On another occasion there were three Roma youngsters playing with a ball while not many people were around. Quite regularly there would be piles of yogurt crates in front of some of these shops with (mostly) youngsters using them to sit on. Mixed groups of school children in their uniforms, some with and some without adult company, regularly visit shops and takeaways after school. Apart from waiting for their friends outside, they rarely tend to linger here for long.

The high visibility of this space also supports purposeful forms of social engagement. Sporadically, the central part of this space is occupied by a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses with a stand stocked with their magazine (in English and Slovak). Once, a white man, who might have been in his thirties, was trying to sell a bike here, which created quite a buzz and a number of interactions amongst people hanging around or walking by. On another occasion, a loud verbal argument between a drunken couple, both white and with a strong Sheffield accent, was observed with interest by others. Some were feeling uncomfortable and looking concerned, while others were clearly enjoying ‘the spectacle’. On a rainy day there are considerably fewer people hanging about than usual, although I have witnessed several times small groups of people still hanging out in the doorway of the bookies, for example, or in the bus shelter, not really waiting for a bus.

Whilst this corner is the busiest public space in this area, on the other side of the roads there are a few additional spots, mostly other street corners, that are also regularly used, albeit less intensively (figure 5.1.). These include the spaces provided by other bus stops used for waiting or for hiding from the

rain, some steps in front of one of the shops, and low walls in front of the other shop that are used for sitting on, waiting, chatting and watching the busy 'life' on the opposite side of the road.

Perceptions

"I go there all the time...and my friends too... some good shops...and love chicken there..."

Although there were some generally positive feelings towards this space, such as this one from a Roma teenage girl, mostly it prompted more negative responses. The usual complaint was that it is "too busy", "crowded", "not nice" etc. Some avoid it; others pass through fairly quickly, as expressed by a white British female resident: *"Go there if I must really...those people there should change behaviour...it's very loud there...and mucky"*.

Similarly, a Polish man in his forties said: *"Hmmm...let me put it this way...it's very rare that I would pass through this place...other than getting out of the car if someone drops me off...Yeah, I wouldn't feel comfortable...80 young people sitting on those rails throwing curses in different languages ...doesn't make you feel particularly comfortable"*.

Although the number of people mentioned here seems, according to my observations of this space, somewhat exaggerated, it expresses this person's strong perceptions and feelings about it, regardless of whether it was based on 'reality'. Potentially it is a reflection of one or more negative experiences and accumulated assumptions. A group of girls that I spoke to in a different place said they tend not to go there, apart from when visiting the hairdresser's. They also shared similar comments about being shouted at, in different languages, by boys in that space. This for them felt more 'annoying' than 'unsafe' and, after some discussion, they agreed that it is "actually not as bad as in Pitsmoor" (another nearby area). This view of the space as not really making them feel unsafe but rather "uncomfortable, annoyed, not nice" has been repeated by many people in the area.

Longer term local residents also expressed nostalgic feelings about this specific area and recalled how it used to be "different"; they mentioned, for example, missing a great sandwich shop, a bank, an arcade and a snooker club on Idsworth Road just opposite (now a furniture shop but originally built as the Page Hall Cinema in the 1920s). Almost all of them felt that it was now "too busy". A newcomer to Sheffield, from Eritrea, commented on this space as being very busy most of the time and how he understands that some people may not like it, but for him personally it is better than having "no one on the streets", because "many people make it feel safer to me...and...really good". Such contrasting views and feelings are also sometimes expressed by the same person. A local shop owner who, the first time we chatted, was generally negative about the changes in the area and particularly about

people spending too much time outside, on another occasion was complaining about “today not a good day...not many people around, it’s very quiet” in terms of his business. Others were concerned about the image and perception of the area that this particular place, with “loads of people” hanging around, creates, feeling that it gives a poor impression to outsiders driving through or travelling on the buses. As exemplified here, the busyness of the space seems to be perceived as important for business and also for the general feeling of safety by some, while others see it as a reason to avoid this space and express generally negative feelings about it, being especially concerned that it may be creating a negative image of the area.

Other reasons for this concern about outsiders’ perception of the area can be found in comments made about the physical appearance of this space, described as looking “shabby”, with “too much rubbish”, and as “just neglected”. When asked about this particular space, some locals compared it with the similar nearby (slightly larger) shopping area (the Firth Park central area, less than a 15 minute walk from there), pointing out how “it is being much better taken care of than this one”. Another resident, a black man in his late twenties, “living all my life on this side of the city”, expressed his deep dissatisfaction with the authorities for “not caring or investing in this part of the city and wanting everyone to go to the city centre...and that side...to spend their money over there”. Looking closely at the existing materiality and physical qualities of this space, it does appear to be quite neglected. The pavement surface is in poor condition, broken up, with quite a few potholes. These are often filled with dirty water and rubbish in them, sometimes turning it all into a kind of mud. The poor condition of the road railings and the disused telephone box, the main purpose of which appears to be to attract litter, also adds to the overall unattractive appearance of the space. Furthermore, most of the concerns expressed here were confirmed by people I talked to who do not live in the neighbourhood.

Alongside these perceptions of the existing use of and issues in this space, various ideas were also expressed about how it could be changed and improved. Some of these ideas were quite controversial, such as a suggestion to decrease the size of the pavement and make the actual roads wider, which would make less room for pedestrians to use and therefore make it less likely for people to spend much time there. With a similar aim, another person expressed his support for the idea of re-surfacing this area with the type of uneven pavement blocks that make it uncomfortable for people to stand on, something they said they had heard of as a future plan for this space (NB this seems to be just a rumour). A similar kind of idea has actually already been ‘prototyped’ here. Annoyed by the regular presence of people hanging outside their premises, a national betting chain took direct action to change this. They started playing, through an outdoor speaker, loud classical music as a way of discouraging people from spending time in front of their shop.

However, the majority of the ideas can be summarised in terms of small changes, such as fixing the pot holes in the pavement, making it cleaner, removing the ‘unused’ telephone box, creating a seating area etc.

“Good shops but it could all be nicer.....just kind of... nicer...maybe some benches, flowers and things...so that everyone...more...other....people...my kids and friends...could sit there and eat takeaway...”

[AI, local resident and business owner, British Asian male]

It is probably not surprising that Page Hall shopping parade, by being one of the busiest spaces of the neighbourhood, is at the same time one of the most contested spaces too. Due to its prominent location within the neighbourhood, it is also a space that people have strong opinions about, as well as a sense of place attachment. This includes an understanding of the importance of this particular space for the neighbourhood, going beyond the local residents’ needs; this is again stimulated by its prominent location and the heightened visibility this entails. The residents would also like to change and improve it and the suggestions they make are revealing in terms of reflecting their own normative values and definitions of quality and social appropriateness in public space.

5.3.2. Page Hall residential streets

Description and Use

This section is about residential streets as actively used public open spaces. It is focused on the area consisting of several residential streets, which form the grid just off Page Hall Road (figure 5.10.). It is located between Wade Street Green Space, the Green Triangle and the Page Hall Road shopping parade area. This part of the neighbourhood is the part most commonly referred to as ‘Page Hall’. It consists of five streets stretching in a west to east direction, with one street cutting through them in the north to south direction. In terms of topography, the terrain slopes from both the north and the west. These streets are predominantly formed by rows of ‘narrow’ terraced houses, whose front doors directly open onto the pavement and with the road running down the middle. The average width of these streets is about 10-12 metres. Hinde Street, stretching in the north to south direction, although of a similar width, is different, as it cuts through the rows of terraced houses and therefore consists mostly of back garden side walls and a few corner houses, of which one is a shop. There used to be another small grocery shop in one of these streets but that was closed recently and is now being reopened as a takeaway. This street also acts as a main pedestrian route.



Figure 5.10. Page Hall residential streets - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

These streets are intensely used for socialising outside (as shown on figure 5.1.) at many times of the day and week. The main users here are children, youngsters and adults of predominantly Roma background, although there are many exceptions to this too. The residents of these streets are mostly Roma but there are people of many different backgrounds living here, for shorter or longer terms, including some long-time residents, mostly elderly white English people. Most of the streets are designated 20mph child safety zones with some traffic calming measures, such as where the roads are made narrower in parts and where there are paved parts on the roads too. The children use these spaces in many different and creative ways. They run around, ride bikes, roll down the roads wearing trainers with wheels, use hoverboards, play ball on the road, play other games, chat, sit on kerbs or doorsteps, eat snacks, buy ice creams from ice cream vans and sweets from the corner shop and from the sweet vending machines outside the shop, and sometimes even sing a little. During school time these streets are not busy at all, but during break time the sound of children's play can still be heard coming from the nearby school yard.

The adults are also regularly present here, mostly in small groups, either as a family with children or a group of neighbours. Usually they socialise in front of someone's house, standing, leaning on cars or walls, or sitting down. A very common sight in this area consists of chairs on the pavement, used by adults for spending time and socialising outside. These are sometimes left outside even when no one is around. It could be argued that this also says something about the social relationships existing in these streets and the general atmosphere of this space. In other words, the chairs are not taken or damaged by anyone. Moreover they confirm the regular presence of adults in these spaces and therefore challenge the perceptions that the streets are just full of "all of these children running around completely unsupervised", as I heard on a number of occasions. On the contrary, a kind of informal network of local adults seems to be present here, and familiarity with neighbours also plays an important role (and not only within Roma communities, as will be further discussed in the next chapter).

Perceptions

As mentioned above, apart from commonly being referred to as 'Page Hall', some also talked about these streets as 'Marrakech', 'the grid' and 'those crowded streets'. Many issues concerning these streets that were identified in my fieldwork related to people complaining about litter and the number of children outside. These were sometimes presented as "concern" about children being unsupervised. When specifically asked, most people, even those complaining, commented that the children's presence does not actually make them feel unsafe. Somewhat different, however, were the comments made about groups of young men hanging out on the street corners. Children themselves generally

liked being outside as “everyone’s there”, although some said that they would rather be in a park but “it’s far away”.

Apart from the litter, noise was an issue mentioned by many, albeit mostly elderly and childless people. Complaints about the noise related mostly to children’s noise, but quite a few locals also complained about the noise coming from ice cream vans that visit these streets very frequently – according to some apparently too frequently, more than allowed by the law. This was then also blamed on the number of children living around here and socialising outside.

Most of the ideas for improvements were therefore focused on making the streets cleaner and quieter. Some elders wished for a park to be inserted “somewhere here”. Also, there was a strong desire from many for “simply moving” these people socialising outside out of there, into some other more appropriate public space. Some even suggested knocking down a few of the houses in order to create that space. On the one hand, this could be considered extreme, lacking recognition of the positive aspects of having lively streets with children playing around. On the other hand, it may seem understandable, with people quickly coming up with ‘solutions’ for an issue that has been bothering them for some time.

5.3.3. Bolsover Road and surroundings

Description and Use

Bolsover Road (figure 5.11.) is another street used actively for socialising, albeit in a slightly different way. This road is located off Firth Park Road and runs in a north-west direction. The road mainly consists of terraced houses with front gardens but there are some other types of housing too, including a block of flats at one corner. The traffic seems to be busier here than in other residential streets, such as those in the Page Hall network. Compared to these streets the intensity of use on Bolsover Road also differs. It is one of the busiest pedestrian arteries in the neighbourhood, used by a wide range of people en route to the Page Hall shops and bus stops and back. Children spend time outside here as well as smaller and larger groups of adults too. The main difference from Page Hall streets is that here children tend to stay off the road and socialise primarily on the pavement and in and around the front gardens. Furthermore adults sit mostly on front garden walls with chairs being used only sporadically, and then they are usually placed inside the front gardens next to the bay windows.

There are several spots along this road that are particularly busy. One of them is the corner of Firth Park Road where there is usually a group of teenagers, mostly boys but sometimes girls too, leaning on the wall, hanging out and looking towards the busy area of the Page Hall shops. The other spot is



Figure 5.11. Bolsover Road and surroundings - photos and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

at the top, on the opposite end, with a good view along the road and a small front garden wall convenient for sitting on. Nearby, there is a small corner shop which also attracts people, encouraging them to meet up and linger outside. This place is usually fairly littered too with people occasionally sweeping in front of their own homes.

Perceptions

Bolsover Road and its surrounding streets are perceived as a much “nicer” area than ‘Page Hall’, not only by non-Roma people but also by some Roma too. Two Roma women were so proud and pleased that after some time their families had managed to move to this part of the neighbourhood. They said it feels “so different” and “more normal”. Initially I was told that the group of Roma living in this part of the neighbourhood comes from a particular ‘better off’ background and village. This was later disputed, however, and the picture turned out to be much more complex, although general perceptions of dislike between Roma people coming from different villages do seem to be present. The ideas proposed for improving this space were related to having less traffic and making the street cleaner.

5.4. Other relevant sites

This section relates to spaces within the neighbourhood, which do not conform directly to my definition or description so far of public open spaces, but which were identified as related spaces. Usually referred to as ‘micro-publics’ (Amin 2002) or ‘parochial realm’ (Wessendorf 2014) these spaces have been recognised as relevant to an understanding of intercultural relationships. I would argue that the following examples from Fir Vale are also significant because they seem to have the potential to influence the interactions that occur beyond their own boundaries and to spill out into public open spaces. As will be seen, these spaces include the school grounds, the youth centre, and the back yard of a local organisation.

5.4.1. The school grounds

A specific focus on the use of school grounds (figure 5.12.) for socialising has not been within the scope of this research, interesting as it may have been. However, the unauthorised use of some of these spaces was mentioned several times during my interviews. One particular example of this was the case with the astro turf football pitches that some youngsters mentioned using, or attempting to use, by entering through the broken fence. Clearly this may be understood from the perspective of ‘breaking and entering’, but, from another perspective, it can instead be interpreted as harmless, simply symptomatic of the need for a conveniently located, good quality space for sport activities.



Figure 5.12. The school grounds (outlined in red) - photo and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)

One local male resident, who grew up in Eastern Europe, also commented about this:

“...when I was growing up my mother would be absolutely thrilled if I was to say ‘mum I’m going to the school ground’...because...there was a fence there...so the cars are not going to knock you down...‘creeps’ are not supposed to come close to the schools because that would raise the alarm of people...many of my friends were already there...so that was probably the best place for you to play...”

[SL, local resident, East European]

The idea that the school grounds are the most appropriate spaces for children and youngsters to spend their free time was also the case in my own experience of growing up in a town in what was then Yugoslavia. Although I am aware that these are different contexts and times and that such ideas may be too radical, especially in the UK context, nevertheless similar proposals have been made in literature. According to Spiegel (2013) for example, school grounds should “be democratic spaces used and enjoyed easily and freely by the communities within which they sit; should not be in the sole control of schools – though their right to use them must be secured”. Clearly, this could not be easily accomplished and there would be many implications to consider, but in principle it could provide much needed, community spaces within the neighbourhood. As Spiegel (2013) argues, “There will of course be many practical issues to resolve. But radical change cannot be secured by first immersing oneself in practical detail. The initial step is to establish a new principle, one that runs counter to our accumulated and unquestioned habits of thought and practice.” This argument may indeed also be applicable to other ideas discussed in this thesis in relation to potential urban design practice (specifically in chapter 9), especially within superdiverse urban contexts.

5.4.2. The youth centre

Another example of ‘other relevant sites’ is the local youth centre. This youth centre is located on Heathcote Street, just off Rushby Street and is run by a city-wide organisation focused on young people. It is an important space in many ways, including as a ‘threshold’ space with activities that also influence the sociability of public open spaces.

At the time when this research was being conducted, most youngsters using this space were members of the local Roma community, whereas nearby there was another youth club run by the same organisation but attended by Asian youngsters, mostly boys. During the summer of 2015, I conducted a series of workshops in the Heathcote Street youth centre (as described in chapter 4) at a time when the other youth club was being refurbished, which meant that occasionally some Asian boys also joined these youth club sessions together with their usual youth workers. At the first combined session, there was clearly an uneasy atmosphere and at first the two groups tended to remain separate. However, the design-focused workshops, organised around a large table, were happening in the same room at the same time as other activities such as ping pong and pool as well as opportunities to use desktop computers for social media etc. The first point of ‘mixing’ actually happened when the youngsters voluntarily decided to take part in the workshop around the large table. This seemed to break the ice and later they also started playing games together. The number of young people attending from both of these groups decreased over the weeks, though this was most likely, according to the youth workers, because of the good weather outside; but the fact that the sessions were mixed could also have influenced this, if the young people felt as if they had lost their own space. Nevertheless, those youngsters who did come to the youth club at that time seemed to get along well. One of the youngsters commented that some of them now say ‘hi’ to each other when they meet on the streets and thought that this was ‘alright’. This example suggests that youth clubs are spaces with the potential to influence sociability, not only indoors but also in outdoor spaces. Similarly, this emerged in relation to other spaces too, as identified, for example, in conversations with a religious group that also ran indoor mixed activities.

5.4.3. The backyard of the community organisation

An important role with the neighbourhood is played by a centrally located community organisation, which acts as a community space. In a similar way to the youth centre, it also influences sociability within public open spaces, albeit arguably in an even broader and more significant way. This is because its focus is not only on youngsters but on communities, groups and individuals of different backgrounds and also because this organisation initiates and hosts various programmes on different



*Figure 5.13. The backyard of the community organisation (outlined in red)
 - photo and aerial map (includes Aerial Digimap © Getmapping Plc)*

topics, including those dealing with issues within the neighbourhood. A particularly relevant feature of this organisation is that it has a good size backyard opening up onto Popple Street (one part of the Page Hall street network). The backyard (figure 5.13.) is partly tarmacked and partly grassed and its area covers approximately 20 by 20 metres. The space is almost perfectly located in that it offers many possibilities for tackling some of the existing issues of public open space use in the area, such as by providing sought-after, additional space for socialising. The potential of this space for greater use has been clearly identified and funding applications for the ‘Common Ground’ project have been made to turn this space into a more prominent community space providing a range of interesting activities aimed at various local inhabitants of different ages, ethnicities, genders and interests. (This will be further explored in chapters 8 and 9.)

5.5. Conclusion

It is evident that there is a wide network of different types of public open spaces within, and around, Fir Vale. Those discussed in this chapter were identified as being the most frequently used. The intensity of use of these spaces varies, as well as the ways in which they are used and the actual users. Overall, most of these spaces are used by a wide range of people, although in some spaces, some groups are more dominant than others. It is also apparent that, although some of the main users of most local public open spaces are children and young people, many adults also use them for socialising. In sum, the most striking aspect of this neighbourhood is the lively use of streets as spaces for socialising.

This chapter has also provided evidence from Fir Vale that is in line with the Lefebvrian argument that space is socially produced. For instance, almost the same kind of streets (in terms of built

environment features) that are present in other parts of Sheffield, or indeed in many other cities and towns across the country, are here used as places for socialising in distinctive and quite intense ways. However, within the wide range of spaces explored here there are also other examples, which support the argument that the physicality and materiality of spaces play a specific role too. One example of this is how the two neighbouring, yet slightly different, types of terraced house streets seem to afford different uses and different levels of sociability.

In Fir Vale there is a wide array of public open spaces, varying in character and quality, and I have described many of them in this chapter. It can be argued that the provision of public open spaces, in particular the urban green ones, does not seem to be a problematic issue in this neighbourhood, unlike in many 'deprived' parts of cities (Wolch et al. 2014). However, some of these spaces, for example the larger good quality urban green spaces, still feel out of reach for some groups (i.e. children, women, elderly), even though most of the spaces are located relatively near to each other (figure 5.1.). This is one of the discrepancies that adds weight to the argument for situated, ethnographic understandings not only of the ways in which the existing population uses local spaces (e.g. see also Rishbeth et al. 2018), but also of the wider complexity of urban conditions. In other words, an established, detached and largely quantitative 'site analysis' focused on the geographical and physical features of the built environment (as is still the predominant approach both in design schools and consequently in practice), which, at best, may include some statistical information about the population, would clearly omit many of important social and temporal nuances within this neighbourhood and its public open spaces. For instance, if focusing only on a map of the area it would be far too easy to make an assumption that there are not only a large quantity and good range of green spaces in the area, but also that they are well distributed around the neighbourhood and therefore easily accessible to all local residents.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to two further issues, which are not related just to the physical features of the local public open spaces described in this chapter. Firstly, it is of note that people's reactions to, and perceptions of, most spaces mentioned in the research often included comments about other people's presence in these spaces and not just the physicality and materiality of the spaces. This will be further explored in the rest of this thesis. Secondly, it is interesting that perceptions often did not seem to correlate with the actual use of the spaces, as was particularly evident in the example of Wensley Street Local Open Space, which was not considered to be attractive by many users, but which nevertheless was used in many ways by a range of people from different backgrounds, often at the same time, and could arguably be portrayed as one of the most inclusive spaces in the area. Generally speaking, while there is a predominantly negative narrative about the Fir Vale neighbourhood and its spaces, which is exacerbated by its portrayal in the media (as discussed in chapter 2), one of the most significant findings from my exploration of how public

open spaces in Fir Vale are used and perceived by locals is that there is clearly a more positive narrative also present, albeit one which is less heard. These ‘two narratives’ are clearly not dichotomous, but exist simultaneously to each other and shape both expectations and limitations of the spaces. It is not that problematic issues do not exist (as I will further explore in the next chapter); rather it reveals how, beyond the sensationalist issues, ordinary, mundane and largely convivial life can be found within these public spaces.

All of these diverse uses, voices and perceptions of public open spaces in Fir Vale are clearly in line with Watson’s (2006, p. 7) argument that “...public space is always, in some sense, in a state of emergence, never complete and always contested, constituted in agonistic relations.” It is precisely these contestations that will be further explored in the next chapter, as they are an integral part of the lived experience of the neighbourhood and are embedded in the complex notions of superdiversity.

Chapter 6

Contestation of place in Fir Vale

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss some of the experiential, and often contested, qualities of local spaces in Fir Vale. As seen in the previous chapter, different types of public open spaces in the area are regularly and intensively used for socialising. Broadly speaking the social use of public open spaces is seen favourably in city contexts, and it is generally promoted as a social benefit in urban design and planning scholarship. In Fir Vale, however, there is a tendency for more mixed views to be expressed, with perceptions of the social use of public spaces being perceived as contested and often problematic.

Clearly, there seems to be a significant gap between the assumptions that can often be found in established urban planning and design practice and the findings of this research project. It is, therefore, crucial to understand the context, in its broad sense, as well as the existing practices of conviviality, which include contestations and tensions (as explored in the literature review in chapter 3).

Most of the contestations emerging in my fieldwork were about the presence of ‘other’ individuals and groups socialising in public open spaces and in particular focused on what was perceived as the consequences of this, such as litter, noise etc. Although the views expressed are often related to the ethnic backgrounds of both the commentators and the users of those spaces, the following discussion will also show how they are shaped by much more complex entanglements of superdiversity, including experiences of multiple deprivation embedded in the neighbourhood.

6.2. Litter, littering and public open spaces

“...just realised now that I haven’t been really commenting today about the litter on the streets...at all...not sure actually if this means that there’s less of it...or I’m just not noticing it anymore...” [researcher / Goran / my audio record - walk, July 2016]

On this particular visit to Fir Vale, I realised with some surprise that litter had not featured in my

observations that day. Since I was regularly confronted by litter on the streets during my visits, I was forced to reflect on whether it was genuinely a low-litter day, or whether I had simply got used to it. On another walk I actually noticed how the absence of litter on that occasion made me appreciate “the everyday beauty” (as I expressed it in my fieldnotes) of the area and feel almost ecstatic. The contrast made me realise just how persistent the presence of litter is in the area, and what difference it really makes to the environment. It does not feel like an over-statement to claim that litter in Fir Vale is endemic.

Whether the ubiquity of litter is something that may negatively and significantly shape the perceptions of people from outside the neighbourhood is something that locals do discuss in my fieldwork.

“...every single person who's coming to visit notices it straight away...the family of my housemate just came around a couple of days ago...from somewhere around Manchester...and they just took a walk around and they were like...hmmm...well I'd say they were shocked...simply!” [SL, local resident, East European]

As briefly mentioned in chapter 2, the abundance of litter on the streets of Fir Vale has also been covered regularly in the media: Richardson (2014) provided an analysis of this for the period between 2013 and 2014; further examples of such articles can be found in the local press throughout 2015 and 2016. At the local public meeting I attended in October 2016 (organised as part of the Festival of Debate) litter was identified as one of seven priorities that needed to be addressed in the area.

Although the images here (figures 6.1. and 6.2.) show equal numbers of examples of fly-tipping and litter, from my observations as well as a range of discussions with local residents I would argue that littering is a more common and ‘immediate’ issue in the neighbourhood than what is commonly termed as fly-tipping. According to the House of Commons (Parliament. House of Commons, 2018), fly-tipping is “the illegal disposal of household, industrial, commercial or other ‘controlled’ waste without a waste management licence”. Though fly-tipping certainly has a powerfully negative visual presence, it tends to be carried out in specific, often hidden, spots, and there are clearer actions at the authority level to address it, such as fines and warning signs. Litter, on the other hand, seems much more prevalent everywhere.

Various spots in the neighbourhood have different degrees of litter presence, with the area in front of the shopping parade on Firth Park Road and the side streets behind Page Hall Road having the most, while local parks are generally the least affected by litter. This seems to be related to the different typology and character of these spaces, the patterns and intensity of their use, and the ways in which

they are managed. Apart from in two local parks (Firth Park and Osgathorpe Park) the amount of litter found in these spaces usually correlates to recent histories of activity. Furthermore, the nature of

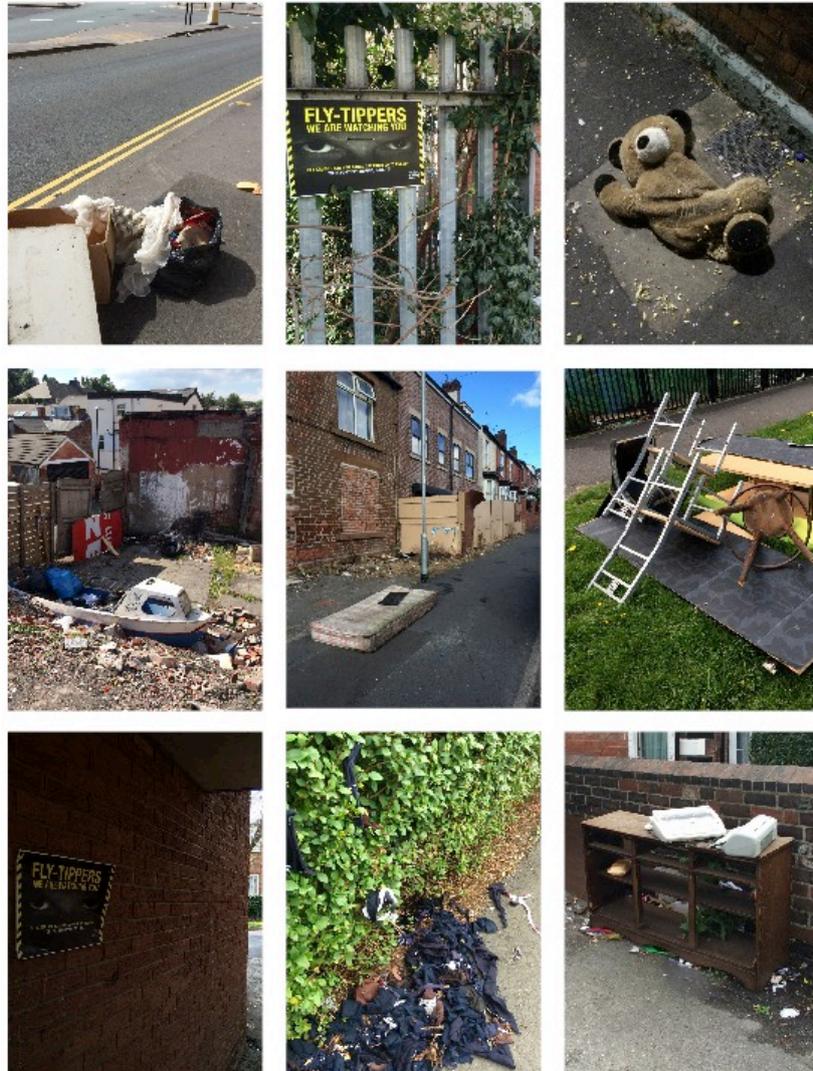


Figure 6.1. Examples of fly-tipping in the area

the litter can reveal what some of those activities were and who was involved in them, in particular in relation to age group. Because of this, my observations of litter sometimes enabled me to identify that places are being regularly used, even when in my observations I rarely saw anyone there. I was then able to check this assumption through later observations and conversations with local people.

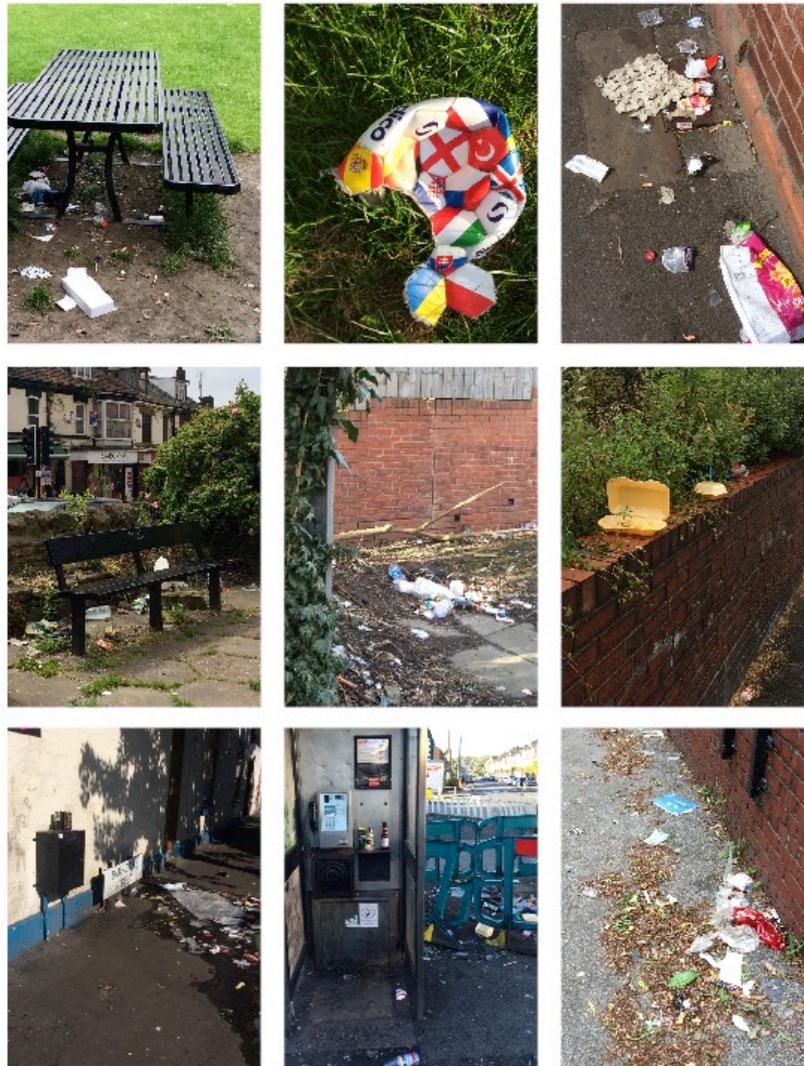


Figure 6.2. Examples of litter in the area

An example of such an observation can be seen in the images (figure 6.2.), in which the litter seems to mostly include small everyday items such as paper, packaging, takeaway boxes, plastic bottles etc. Most of this litter suggests the possibility that it was thrown away by children (sweets and snacks packaging, soft drinks bottles) and this is reinforced by the frequent presence of children outside on the streets. However, many other kinds of litter can be seen there that is not commonly related to children, such as beer cans, spirit bottles, cigarette ends and cigarette boxes etc.

The presence of litter is so embedded in local public spaces that one local resident of over three years (white British), when asked what she finds most challenging in the neighbourhood, echoed my own reflection at the start of this chapter when she said:

“The noise...as you know the litter is there...yes...but you get used to it...and it’s mostly paper sort of stuff anyway...” [JH, local resident, British white female]

Nevertheless, litter is understandably a cause of much concern for local people. Most of the people I have spoken to in the area are annoyed by it they feel, for example, like it is affecting the reputation of the area and are worried about the possible consequences for health, especially regarding children, with one (childless) dog owner also expressing concern for the wellbeing of his dog.

The issues surrounding litter are also a cause of ongoing friction in the area, provoking people to direct blame towards others. Although most people mentioned local authorities when talking about the litter, the comments ranged from it all being the fault of the council, to those saying the council should be doing something about it but at the same time realising it must be challenging for them while dealing with government cuts. Another common response can be summed up in this quote from one of the residents:

“...you can't blame them because they can't clean quick enough ...and shouldn't...really...those people should learn how to behave...”

[MK, local resident, Asian male]

This quote echoes the predominant view of many local, usually non-Roma residents, which is that the litter is the fault entirely of the Roma. The resident who made the following observation may have made some effort to understand the situation, but nevertheless still accused the Roma of being responsible for the litter in the area:

“Ah, one thing I don't like...and again...I'm guessing that it is to do with the Roma...but not sure...there's a lot of very shabby dumping stuff...and litter generally...and I think I've heard this discussion before...and I think a lot of the Roma come from the culture where they don't have rubbish collection...so they just don't understand the concept...and I mean there are roads around here where it just gets to the point where it looks like you're in a Third World country...the whole street is completely strewn, not fly-tipped stuff but sort of domestic stuff...” [TR, local resident, British white male]

This way of blaming the Roma whilst claiming to understand their situation was common, with the most frequently made comments including phrases similar to “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not racist...but...”.

A different position was taken by a person who works in the neighbourhood but who lives in another part of the city. He explained that it is not all necessarily related to a specific community, nor to this specific neighbourhood only:

“ ...it’s happening elsewhere too...I think it’s generally to do with people’s lack of pride...for example when you go pass the McDonalds and you can see somebody is sitting in their car and just throws the bag out of the window...so I don’t think...well...there’s no correlation between that behaviour and the culture where they come from...” [JL, local worker, British white male]

This remark about the litter being a much more general issue is also reflected in the online comments sections of the articles about litter in Fir Vale mentioned earlier in this section. According to a national survey from 2015, as reported in ‘Litter Strategy for England’ by the UK Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs (Great Britain 2017), the litter problem is becoming increasingly, and in the last few years particularly, recognised as a serious problem and has become the focus of many initiatives by local and national organisations and authorities (hence the first ‘Litter Strategy for England’ from 2017). The same report states that 90% of people are saying that littering is a significant issue across the country. The relationship between litter and pride is also acknowledged by Kolodko et al (2016) in their report ‘Using behavioural insights to reduce littering in the UK’.

Although more nuanced understandings of litter issues in Fir Vale do exist (as seen in the previous quote), the predominant views were nevertheless those apportioning blame to a particular ‘community’. It seemed an easy (but possibly too easy) assumption that the main ‘litterers’ in Fir Vale come mostly from the Roma population, as they, including their children, are the most present and visible group, spending much of their time outside. However, the reality seems to be more complex. As one community worker mentioned, he noticed people other than Roma also dropping litter (as I have myself observed several times, just as I have also noticed Roma men going out of their way to throw empty plastic bottles in the bin). According to this community worker, however, people from other ethnic communities seem to be doing this more frequently since the arrival of the Roma, and he suggests that this is because it is easy for them to do it and then blame the Roma, given that it fits well within the existing predominant belief in the area. This is also something that Madanipour (2004, p. 13) identified in some European marginal neighbourhoods, referring to “neglect by one party that triggers neglect by others”. A similar finding about people’s behaviour was also identified in the recent report by the UK Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs (Great Britain 2018), ‘Litter and littering in England 2016 to 2017’.

As referred to briefly above, another concern related to litter is that it is also a health hazard. A particular concern expressed by residents in Fir Vale was that it attracts vermin. Some residents mentioned, however, that this had been an issue even before the Roma community came to the area. Evidence that supports this latter view can be found in the discovery of several spots around the neighbourhood that are used for leaving food left-overs on the ground (mostly bread and rice), which can be related to the Muslim custom of not wasting food (Revilla and Salet 2018). Indeed, I witnessed several times various members of the Asian community leaving food, presumably for the birds (I noticed pigeons and other birds on a number of occasions), and it can plausibly be argued that this activity was also attracting vermin. Similarly, there were other places, where I noticed adults from various backgrounds (predominately white British and some Polish) spending time socialising while drinking alcohol and leaving behind them not only empty cans and bottles but also takeaway left-overs.

Regardless of where the litter is coming from, the problem has also been identified by the local authorities, as illustrated by the awareness-raising posters which have been placed in several places around this part of the city, and the remit of the newly appointed 'community wardens'. The posters can be found not only in the areas/streets mostly populated by Roma, but also on the information boards in other parks, suggesting a broader perception of the authorities regarding where the problem is located.

Overall, the presence of litter does raise tensions in terms of mundane inter-ethnic relations, but it is too simplistic to state that the aggravation is one-directional. My conversations with two Roma women revealed one of them complaining that her English next door neighbours are "dirty, with their back garden full of stuff" and that this was putting her off using her own garden. Interestingly, the other woman involved in that conversation added that her next door neighbours are similar, but that they are actually Roma (albeit originally from another village in Slovakia and thus another Roma community). In contrast, there was also the occasion when two neighbours (middle aged women from different cultural backgrounds/communities) offered each other praise. This occurred when I was going for a walk together with members of a local organisation, and one British woman standing outside her home commented on her neighbour (who was also there), saying "Oh, she's really good...really good...keeps it clean and tidy in front of her door". The neighbour, who was a Roma woman, was clearly very pleased and proud to hear this and, in order to reinforce the point, took us along to see how neat and tidy her back garden was. On a similarly positive note, during an interview with a religious worker (a local resident) who was talking about her Roma neighbours, she commented:

"...so yes, they do a lot of...well you know those big rugs that they have...they're always

cleaning them...always sweeping everywhere...so they do want to keep it tidy...”

[NT, local resident and community worker, British white female]

Although these examples may seem to be making the obvious point that not all Roma are litterers or that not all ‘community members’ are the same, I argue that within this particular context they need to be highlighted and made explicit. Acknowledging and mentioning some of these everyday tactics creates an opportunity to challenge the single sided narrative and established beliefs that are not only prevalent in the media but also embedded in the perceptions of many local residents. The intention here is not to measure or map who is more responsible for the litter, but to explicitly point out that the situation is not as simple as some may see it and as it is portrayed in the media. This again supports the argument for situated research able to depict nuanced notions of experiential quality of life and to support a more strategic practical approach affording a positive change.

Amongst the various workshops I organised for local children and teenagers (as described in chapter 4), one was attended solely by teenage boys of Asian background, one by mostly Roma girls and boys, and one consisted entirely of teenagers but from a range of ethnic/cultural backgrounds. All of the youngsters immediately identified the litter issue as something they did not like, believing that it was one of the main negative characteristics of the area. They also shared their insights into which spots in the neighbourhood have the most and the least litter. When asked about what could be done about it, again in all sessions there was a consensus that the “authority” (or “cleaning company”) should be doing a much better job. However after some discussion, most of the groups would fairly quickly come to the conclusion that people should not be littering in the first place.

At this point of the workshop with teenagers from an Asian background, comments were made that generally suggested that ‘they’ (meaning the Roma) should learn not to drop litter. In each of the other two workshops, someone began at one point to make a comment along the lines of “I never do it...but (s)he does it”, and this led to them accusing each other, albeit in a way that suggested they were teasing one another; indeed it seemed as if they were acknowledging that they themselves and their own peers were part of the problem. The group of teenage Roma girls became quite engaged with the issue and came up with some ideas about how to address it, for example by creating anti-littering posters and by learning more about it in schools; there was even a suggestion that school children could then teach their friends and family about litter related issues.

Clean-up activities and actions of care

The litter issues have actually been the target of many clean-up activities organised by various groups and organisations working in the neighbourhood, such as local community organisations, political

parties, religious groups, land trusts, schools, environmental and waste services providers etc. While participating in some of these public clean ups, both on the streets and in the parks, I was pleasantly surprised by the number of people, including children, who joined us during the activities. However, despite the comments by passers-by being on the whole supportive, more often than not they seemed to be ‘loaded’ in meaning. These comments were noticed not only by myself but also by fellow ‘cleaners’ and often interpreted as being sarcastic. For example, we would hear someone say “it’s great you are doing it...it’s really needed...though it shouldn’t be that dirty in the first place...they shouldn’t be doing it”. When invited by the organisers to join us, the reply would often be something like “But why? I haven’t done it so I’m not cleaning it up”.



Figure 6.3. Some organised clean-up events

One of the most interesting examples of group clean-ups was a programme organised by two local organisations (one of which was the newly established Roma organisation, and the other a well-established neighbourhood focused organisation which supported it). The intention was to use clean-up activities not only as a way of improving the environmental issues but, more importantly, as a way of trying to allay the concerns of the more established communities. The aim was to create a platform for improved dialogue and negotiation regarding local issues and for building trust among different local communities, by showing clearly how the Roma community is fully aware of littering issues and is ready to work on addressing them. The two organisations jointly organised regular clean-ups of the streets and these were open to anyone to join. Although varied in attendance (as they were still building up the necessary momentum), these actions were viewed favourably by many people from other more established communities, including those generally negative towards the Roma population, as I witnessed during public meetings and in some conversations. A similar approach has also been identified in Glasgow by Clark in his ethnographic research in Govanhill; he sees this as “the best” example of necessary community engagement because “it actively challenges one of the most recurrent racialised stereotypes about Roma – that they are ‘dirty’, ‘unclean’ and leave rubbish

everywhere.” (Clark 2014, p. 44).

Apart from these organised collective clean ups, I have also on many occasions observed residents from all backgrounds individually sweeping in front of their own homes, often including the road as well. Cleaning appears to be a very common activity carried out in the public open spaces of this neighbourhood and could also be understood as a visible, collective and individual, action of care (Amin 2012). Nevertheless, as this section has described, everyday littering remains a strong occurrence within the area and its public open spaces and leads to negative feelings and tensions in cross-community relationships. As discussed here, litter is not only a very sensitive issue, but also one which is not straightforward, as also argued by MacGregor and Pardoe (2018) in their research on litter in the Moss Side area of Manchester. They revealed that littering is a “complex, multi-causal problem” (MacGregor and Pardoe, 2018 p. 2), which develops from the entanglements between the declining provision of public services (as a result of austerity measures), the inter-relationships of diverse communities (a high proportion of which consists of a transient population), the reputation of the neighbourhood and the stigma attached to it, and issues of blame, lack of education, contrasting perceptions etc. These entanglements resonate with many of the concerns found in Fir Vale too. However, it seems that litter in Fir Vale has also been simultaneously providing an opportunity, primarily through collective clean-ups and public meetings, for creating visible counter-narratives about the area and for building relationships there.

6.3. Play in the public realm

“...quite confused now...came here ‘expecting’ tensions and ‘heavy’ atmosphere on the streets, but instead greeted with bright sunshine, sounds of playful happy looking children...and birds singing (in less busy streets and in local green spots that is)...feel really good...surprised surely...and probably a bit relieved too...also, this all really reminds me of my childhood, my street...and just growing up in an East European town...” [researcher / Goran / field note, May 2015]

As illustrated in this field note from one of my first visits to Fir Vale, one of the main surprises for me in Fir Vale was the number of children happily running around and socialising outside. Even more surprising was that they were not only to be seen in outdoor spaces designed for such activities, such as different types of parks, but also on the streets. Because of the ‘established’ reputation of the neighbourhood, discovering children playing on the streets on a sunny spring day made me feel excited, but also confused at the same time.

Locations

In terms of actual locations, the busiest places for socialising are the streets with ‘narrow’ terraced houses, especially around Page Hall Road, which are also referred to by locals as ‘the grid’. In these streets children use the whole street for playing, including not only the pavement but the roads too. Other neighbouring residential streets, with wider roads and bigger houses with front gardens, are also used for play, though less so, and not on the roads themselves. Such spaces have been recognised in other studies, such as Play England’s (2009) reference to “doorstep playable spaces”. There are, however, other well used spaces for play, such as the range of green areas described in chapter 5, some of which have been ‘designed’ specifically for play (e.g. Wensley St open space), some ‘designed’ but not necessarily for play as such (e.g. Wade St space), and some undesigned ‘loose spaces’ too (e.g. the Green Triangle between PH Road and Earl Marshall road).

Users

During my many fieldwork visits to Fir Vale, it was clear that outside socialising is practised mostly by children of Roma background, the largest ‘community’ living in the area. However, children from other backgrounds were regularly seen playing outside too, usually separately but alongside the Roma children, though they were sometimes seen to be playing together too. Another group seen to be spending a significant amount of time outside were teenagers. These were sometimes mixing with children playing games, especially the ‘coin’ game, but frequently they were just ‘hanging out’ and not with the children. They also appeared to use a much wider range of local spaces.

Some semblance of territoriality could be discerned at times in specific parts of these local spaces, such as particular street corners or steps, which were more often used by one particular group at a time. Nevertheless, at other times they were used by other groups and in different ways, revealing that lasting ‘territories’ were not being created. For example, a particular street corner overlooking the shopping parade zone, where there is a low wall to sit on, is mostly used by a group of Roma teenage boys simply socialising and observing the busy life of the street opposite; however, sometimes they are joined by Roma teenage girls, who on other occasions can be found there on their own. Mixed groups of children can also be found having a snack there on their way home from school, and these are sometimes joined by one or more adults. Once I also saw a couple of older Asian women with shopping bags there; they looked as if they were having a break or waiting for someone, while a group of Roma children was running about not far from them.

It is this relative fluidity of uses that characterised most of the public space of Fir Vale. It could be explained by the fact that people of many different backgrounds, ages, and genders regularly use

many of the public spaces. The dispersed presence of children playing throughout the area appears particularly to contribute to the relatively welcoming nature of most of the local spaces. This could be argued that this has contributed to the absence of any real ‘no-go zones’ within the neighbourhood. Although spaces are perceived differently by different people, including some spaces described as those “I try to avoid”, in reality none were considered to present serious safety issues.

Issues

“...so let's say play, children's play or not just children's play, play generally...it's about recognising the fact that play is about adventure...it's not about prescribed activity...which unfortunately adults tend to see quite as...so you've actually got to challenge parents' views, carers' views, neighbours' views...”

[Landscape designer, British white male]

This quote from a landscape designer involved in projects within the area highlights and reflects the generally established viewpoint in Fir Vale, namely that the use of streets by children for the purpose of socialising is something abnormal. This was revealed in many conversations. However, as our conversations developed, many older residents remembered how they used to play outside themselves:

“...I think that's part of British culture...working class culture... that's been lost...when I was brought up...and even relatively recently in certain areas, kids played on the streets...”

[TS, local resident, British white male]

Such comments seem to exemplify how British society generally has been changing, with some practices that used to be considered normal now being considered as unusual and ‘out of place’. The comments also raise issues related to culture and social class.

The feeling of being annoyed by Roma children, while accepting that their behaviour is not so unusual, is well captured in the following:

“...it is irritating...they play football opposite my house against the side of the wall...against the gable...but kids have always played football in that place...and I do think it's actually really nice to actually have people out on the street...”

[AT, local resident, British white male]

Such mixed feelings were revealed on numerous occasions. On the one hand, the practice of children regularly spending time outside was perceived by most locals as causing littering issues and too much noise. These perceptions were physically manifested through the many signs around the area forbidding ball games, some of them official looking and others clearly being homemade. The children's presence also raised different concerns amongst residents, which were often framed as concerns about the children's own safety; some were worried that the children were unsupervised and in potential danger from the cars on the street, for example. According to my field notes, at first it also seemed to me that they were unsupervised, but eventually I realised that most of the time they simply outnumbered the adults. Adults were in fact usually present, albeit in different ways. They were often sitting on chairs outside their homes (figure 6.4.), or on small walls, sometimes in the doorways even or actually inside the house but with the doors wide open onto the street. Some would be leaning on cars or leaning out from the first floor windows.

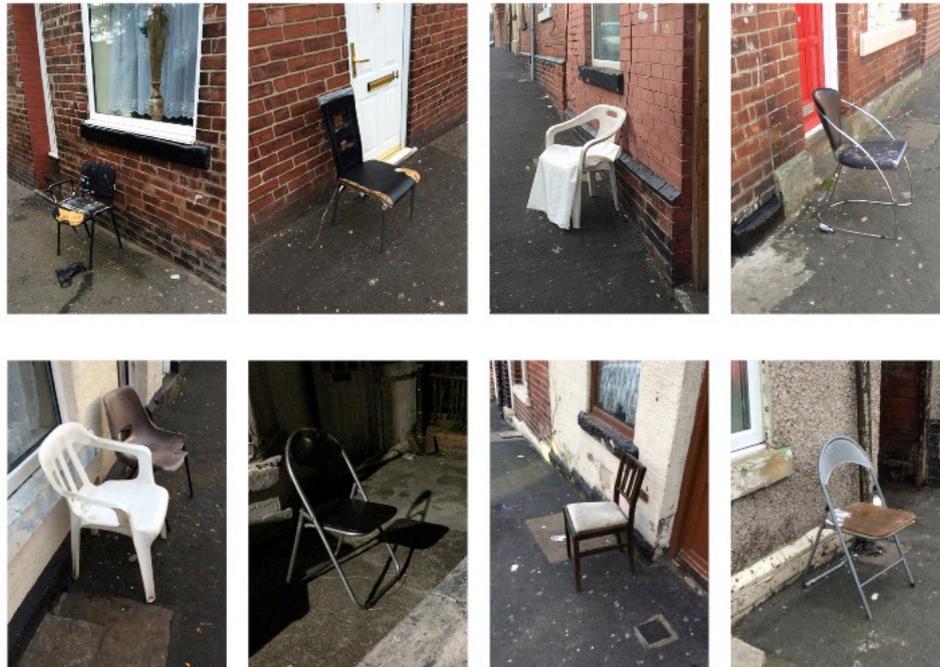


Figure 6.4. Examples of chairs outside homes

On the other hand, there was also some acknowledgment that the regular presence of children in the streets might make them feel safer. Others, even those who were complaining about the children spending time outside, pointed out that they did not feel threatened when they walked past them:

“...oh it definitely doesn't feel unsafe...they're only kids you know...but still...it is annoying...very annoying...” [FK, local resident, British Asian female]

As mentioned earlier, both children and teenagers spend a lot of time outside in public spaces and, although they sometimes mix together when engaged in a particular game, they would mostly spend time separately. This is not unusual, of course, but it does encourage a perception that teenagers are not really playing but loitering; especially when the group consist only of boys, it is perceived negatively. Most often these are Roma boys, although Asian and other sometimes mixed groups of teenagers also tend to hang out in certain places. Some girls, Roma and others, commented that they had had unpleasant experiences with these groups, as they tended to shout out to them while they were passing by. One group of girls seemed to be slightly embarrassed while talking about it, giggling at each other. Some others said that they had never interacted with these groups of boys, but still “wished they weren’t there all the time”.

These specific issues related to teenagers or young adults were also recognised by the same landscape designer referred to above, who suggested that it is important to engage with them:

“...and it’s also about recognising that play is not only for children but actually for teenagers ...teenagers are consistently seen as the problem rather than a part of our community...and it’s something we try very much... to engage with the teenagers...they’re not the easiest group to engage with, however, but that being said it’s also the case where you need to go and talk to them...they won’t come to you...”

[Landscape designer, British white male]

This may suggest the need to provide adequate facilities for these young people. For example, some Asian boys admitted to ‘breaking into’ the school ground to play football on one of the Astro turf pitches. This was corroborated by another interviewee, an adult who knew that this occurred, but who was in fact more annoyed with his friend whose job it was to move them out of the school premises:

“...my friend is kicking out the kids in the evening from the school grounds because they’re playing football...and I’m like...they’re not dealing drugs they’re playing fricking football...what the hell do you want them to do...play Nintendo and start selling drugs...or hang out on the street...like seriously...it’s all beyond me really...I mean you’re literately moaning about the kids being in inappropriate places but then you don’t really provide places for them...” [SL, local resident, East European]

Types of play

During my fieldwork in the neighbourhood, the play activities I identified took on many different forms. Some were the more usual ones, such as playing with a ball or skipping rope, playing hopscotch, riding bikes, scooters and ‘hoverboards’, sliding down the hill wearing roller-skates or trainers with tiny wheels, running around and chasing each other, or playing with prams and dolls. Different types of sporting activities were also practised in various settings, from streets and green fields to purpose made pitches. These included football, basketball, cricket and some hybrid variations too. Some of the most common ways of socialising occurred while sitting on a bench, a curb, a low wall, a step or in the doorways of the houses, where activities usually included playing cards, exchanging stickers or watching others play. Play often included having snacks from corner shops, homemade food or sometimes locally picked blackberries. Occasionally, there was also music coming from a phone or a parked car, or from inside a house. The music occasionally provoked a dance or even a sing-along right there on the street, or next to a bench in a park.

On warm days, water pistols and bottles were regularly used to splash each other. One day a group of children and teenagers collectively turned a group carwash into a form of play.

A range of objects were commonly re-appropriated for play activities in the various public spaces. These included the use of bits of gypsum boards (leftovers from house refurbishments happening in the area) instead of ‘proper’ chalk, for writing and drawing on the floor and walls, the use of walls for ball games or for a ‘coin game’, and the use of the top of the bins or cable boxes for playing cards on. Probably the most resourceful and creative activity was related to using old mattresses, left outside on the streets, as a kind of trampoline to jump over and to make somersaults on (figure 6.5.).



Figure 6.5. Example of play

This was seen very frequently in most of the public spaces and usually involved young Roma boys, although others, including girls, were often seen joining them or at least cheering them on from close by. Other unusual activities included spinning around the scaffolding poles or using a string to connect a bin and a fence in order to make a ‘net’ for a game of foot tennis. However, in my experience, such appropriations were considered as inappropriate by many local residents, even by

one youth worker, although other youth workers saw it in a positive light, claiming that it showed children being creative and that it was an important part of their development.

Apart from these spontaneous or 'free' (Santer et al. 2007), forms of play and sports activities, there were also many facilitated activities within the neighbourhood. These were organised by local youth clubs, cross-sectoral citywide initiatives supporting physical activities, and local religious groups. Some of these were held indoors, some in local green spaces, and a few even out on the streets, such as chalk drawing activities for example.

These facilitated activities also often provided additional education for children; they may also have helped build better relationships between local people and different organisations, and usually included children from various backgrounds.

"...Yes, there were a couple of British guys, Asian guys, some Slovak guys...all secondary school...from year 7...up to I think year 13...yes that works for them...and for us I guess...that's what they like - they just enjoy playing football..."

[NK, local youth worker, British mixed female]

As explained by the same local youth worker, playing games in teams can afford the development of intercultural interactions:

"...games really help to mix them up...so in our kids' group we have lots of different cultures...games really help because they all want to be involved in...we always do team games...so they have to be in the team with someone they wouldn't normally be in...we often do, like, girls' teams and boys' teams so that means that there's a mix of cultures...because if you try to put them in a team they'll just swap but if you put them in boys and girls there's nothing they can really do about it...so games are good because they have to work together..." [NK, local youth worker, British mixed female]

The same worker also described examples of girls from different backgrounds developing a friendship after such activities. In one example, she spoke about some girls who, even though they had been going to the same school for several years, had never socialised prior to taking part in these activities.

However, the impact of these facilitated activities went even further, as it seemed that those which took place outside reassured some of the people who had previously been concerned about children being on the streets, as these activities were organised and supervised by professionals. Arguably, in

this way they also encouraged play to be perceived as a more legitimate activity, even if only when organised by others.

The spontaneous play and sports activities referred to above could also be seen as having multi-layered impact, yet their impact was different in nature to the facilitated activities. One way in which longer term changes were supported by spontaneous play could be considered as trans-culturing or “hybridised practices”, as argued by Wise and Velayutham (2014, p. 420), who suggested that children especially pick up fragments of other cultures easily. These were observed in various activities and games played in the area. One example of this was the wall-coin game, which, though introduced into the area by Roma children and teenagers, was often seen being played by others too. It also seemed to be a game played by all age groups, mostly boys but also some girls. Similarly, in some of the workshops I ran, mostly with Roma children, the love of cricket was expressed several times. This is interesting, as it is not a sport commonly associated with the Roma (or with Eastern Europe for that matter), an assumption also heard from the landscape designer working on Firth Park, who said that they had created a cricket practice cage to cater primarily for the Asian population as they were particularly interested in cricket. Another example of trans-culturing practice could be seen even in the way in which many people spend time on the streets, as it could possibly be due to the influence of the Roma. Probably one of the most unusual scenes, although witnessed only a few times, included a group of older Asian women sitting on the chairs in one of ‘the grid’ streets, while a groups of boys and girls, who appeared to be their grandchildren, played around them.

Apart from trans-cultural practices, however, there is also evidence of trans-culturing in relation to ideas and concepts. One example of this was the belief, mentioned in the previous chapter that schoolyards should be public spaces open for all, as is normally the case in Poland; this was explained to me by a local Polish man.

As mentioned earlier, local residents’ general perception of children’s presence outside is that it is something abnormal, irritating and even problematic. However, at the same time (and sometimes by the same people) there is also some recognition that the presence of children socialising and playing outside can be something positive, though this is less frequently expressed. Only a few locals realised that it can actually create a safe atmosphere in the area. The many beneficial aspects of outdoor ‘free’ or spontaneous play for children were explicitly recognised and mentioned only by a few people, mostly the youth workers. Besides the many arguments for the importance of play published by wider initiatives (e.g. Play England; Play Scotland etc) and a wealth of scholars (e.g. Lester and Russell 2010; Gill 2014; Goodliff et al 2017), outdoor play could also be regarded as based on common sense. It is interesting that in the context of Fir Vale this benefit was not usually acknowledged.

If we focus on these playful uses of local public spaces, Fir Vale, or at least some of its streets, could arguably be described as amongst the most social streets in Sheffield. This is quite a different perspective from that portrayed by the established narratives about the area. One could even argue that, from an urban design perspective, Fir Vale could be seen as an example of a double standard, often reflecting broader prejudices around social class. For instance, across the country and beyond, playing on the street is increasingly high on the agenda, an aim to be achieved through many initiatives (e.g. Children's Play Policy Forum, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), with the aim of making public spaces and streets more child friendly and encouraging outdoor play. Several documents explicitly argue for a better understanding of the role of children within urban planning and design fields, such as the report by Play England (2009) 'Better Places to Play Through Planning', or the supplementary planning guidance 'Shaping neighbourhoods: Play and Informal Recreation' in London (Sanson et al. 2012). The most recent, prominent and global in scope is a report by one of the world's biggest planning and built environment firms, Arup, from 2017. In their report 'Cities Alive: Designing for urban childhood', Arup (2017, p. 5) argues that "challenges, the needs, experiences and views of children should be centre stage" as a "sustainable, successful, healthy city" looks "like a child-friendly city".

However, such positive aspirations tend to be focused on specific areas of our cities, mostly those occupied by more affluent professional families. In others, such as in Fir Vale, they are either not recognised nor acknowledged, and are even considered by many to be 'problematic'. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise, however, given the established overall negative reputation of the area.

Such insights clearly exemplify the importance of trying to uncover and understand, in highly situated and grounded ways, all of the complexities related to the everyday use of public spaces; and this means going beneath the surface, beyond the most obvious and superficial dimensions. These agonistic perspectives need to be recognised and acknowledged as real, and ways of then further engaging with them to directly influence the possible role of urban design practitioners need to be developed. It is crucial to recognise the prevalent issues and people's concerns with them in such local public open spaces, whilst also recognising the positive aspects and the potential of (sometimes the same) activities.

One implication of this could be to position some of the playful, resourceful activities and uses practised by the young residents of Fir Vale as urban design 'prototyping' (to be expanded on in chapter 9) and therefore as an integral part of legitimate urban design practice. It could even be seen as an equally relevant, additional case study to the 41 included in Arup's report (2017), precisely because it is a complex one not without its contestations. In this sense, the example of Fir Vale could be understood as a valuable context to learn lessons from, one that may be useful not only for

exploring other similar so-called 'deprived' neighbourhoods, but even for more affluent ones that are trying to encourage sociality in public spaces. Significantly, this could potentially help fight the existing stigma that is attached to the area.

6.4. Audibility and loitering

Apart from the issues related to litter, other widespread concerns were expressed relating to audible features within the public open spaces. Of course, such concerns are related in part to the previous section, which explored the intense use of public spaces by children and young people. Many locals, mostly non-Roma, commented on the noise that children make. For example, one local resident, commenting on children spending time outside, stated:

"I don't feel negatively about it ...I just wish they'd keep their bloody voices down...just take it down by about 30 decibels and I'll be perfectly happy (laughing out loud)..."

[AT, local resident, British white male]

According to my own observations the level of noise created by children was never extreme. Occasionally I heard them singing but not in an overly loud manner. The loudest noise from children I noticed was in fact coming from the primary school playgrounds during their breaks.

Children were not, however, the only perceived source of noise in the neighbourhood. The traffic noise was also often mentioned as a nuisance, especially in relation to ambulance sirens due to the proximity of the area to the hospital. Some locals were similarly annoyed by loud music coming from passing cars, people revving their cars, and the noise coming from scooters whizzing by.

An often unconsidered source of traffic-related noise is that of ice cream vans. I saw many of these during my fieldwork. A common complaint was that the music they play is too loud and disturbing. This annoyed many people, who argued that there are too many of them, that they visit too often, and that they exceed the number of visits officially allowed, or even visit at prohibited times. This particular annoyance provoked some locals, mostly long term residents of Asian and white background, to take action by organising themselves to report the vans to the authorities.

This may be seen as a trivial issue, in comparison to other perhaps more serious and structural issues within the area. It could, however, also be interpreted as an example of how 'normal' the area and its troubles actually are. Nevertheless, it is still related to the specificities of this particular context in that it is directly influenced by the fact that many children are living in the area, and probably also by the proportion of time children spend outside on the streets.

Other noise related concerns were mostly caused by evening activities in the neighbourhood. In this case, it was adults, usually Roma, who were accused of being outside, and loud, at inappropriate times. One of the major issues raised was the noise coming from next door neighbours, again especially in the evening and during the night. This was manifested in various ways, including loud music, having too many people living together, and even “them” coming in and out of their house at “unusual” times. These comments seemed to be underpinned by the common narrative that “these people don’t know how to behave appropriately” in this country.

Interestingly, I once noticed a handwritten note in the window of one of the houses within ‘the grid’, written in Slovak, which could be roughly translated as “please don’t hang-out in front of our house - the children need to sleep” (based on my own understanding of Slovak as a Slavonic language related to my first language, Croatian-Serbian). The note was clearly aimed at Roma people, but was also likely to have been written by other Roma, given the language used. It also suggested that the group spending time in front of their home were likely to be Roma, given that these would have been the people most likely to understand the note. This note could also be evidence that, of course, not all Roma are the same and that Roma can be annoyed by other Roma.

In relation to audible manifestations, there were two further examples, each interesting in its own way. One concerns a point made by a Yemeni man in his late twenties who had been living in Sheffield for over five years. In conversation with me, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the fact that no Islamic calls for prayer (Adhan) could be heard, neither in the area, nor in the city as a whole. He felt that this lack of a familiar sound represented a lack of his religious rights; interestingly he also added that this sound would help him feel more welcome here, commenting that this was the thing he missed the most about his home country. The other example is the use of sound (classical music in particular) as a tactic for dealing with another high priority concern in the area, that of people loitering in groups. This specific example relates to a betting shop, part of a national chain, playing loud classical music outside through an outdoor speaker in order to disperse groups of teenagers hanging about outside their premises. The use of music in this way has in fact become an established practice in other contexts too (Hirsch 2012).

As described in the previous chapter, groups of people spending time outside on the streets have been perceived by most non-Roma people as problematic in different ways and for different reasons. Nevertheless some have expressed more positive views, especially in relation to children being outside. The most explicit support of this was expressed by an Eritrean man, who pointed out that the presence of many people on the streets was for him “the most positive thing about this neighbourhood”.

Nevertheless, the majority found this type of behaviour unusual and inappropriate. An example of an attempt to impose what was considered to be appropriate behaviour comes from a British Asian landlord, who placed a sign on one of his properties proclaiming that socialising out on the street is “an illegal activity”. He also described to me how he once drove a Roma family in his car around other parts of Sheffield to show them that streets are not used for hanging out in any other area, and especially not in residential ones. According to him it is “unacceptable in this country”. He had placed the sign in an attempt to educate his tenants primarily because of complaints from a next door neighbour, a white British woman. It seemed as if he genuinely felt that he was showing his appreciation for this country and its people and, arguably, even feeling proud of his own ‘integration’. This raises a number of points. For instance, the notion of ‘the good immigrant’ and the perceived need for newcomers to learn and adapt to appropriate ways of behaviour in this country, on the one hand. On the other hand, there is no doubt that influences from other cultures can, and have been, enriching ‘host’ nations in many ways, although it takes time for this to be recognised and appreciated especially whilst the change is actually happening and stirring up tensions.

Issues of quality and maintenance

Many other neighbourhoods, which have some features in common with Fir Vale (experience of population churn and scoring of higher percentile measures of deprivation, for example), have much more problematic access to quality public greenspace (Wolch et al. 2014). In this sense, Fir Vale is fortunate. Some of the public spaces, both those within the area and those nearby, could be described as of good quality (e.g. Firth Park). It is important to acknowledge this as a specific contextual feature of the area, although it must also be acknowledged that some locals still expressed their dissatisfaction. Such criticisms were expressed in different ways, including comments such as: “it all looks neglected”; “needs some TLC”; “they should invest more”; and “why can’t we have a floodlit AstroTurf football pitch?”. Even some negative comments were made about Firth Park, which is generally well loved, e.g. “it’s alright but doesn’t come nowhere near to Endcliffe Park...or other parks on that side of the city”.

All of this could be understood as another form of accumulated dissatisfaction with the area. However, there is also a structural narrative in evidence, as in the common local perception that the area is being generally neglected, primarily by the local authorities, but by extension also by the national government in the minds of some. Such remarks were made by people from various backgrounds, but mostly by the longer term residents, who were not only acutely aware of changes within the area, but also often being better informed about local and national politics. Complaints about street litter not being cleaned up often enough were made by an even wider range of people,

including children. These were aimed either at local authorities or the environmental services, and often at both of them.

6.5. Conclusion

The social practice of regularly spending time and socialising outside is a cause of tensions within the neighbourhood because it is intertwined with other causes of tensions, such as litter and noise in its many forms. It is also of relevance that this area is characterised by multiple levels of deprivation and different forms of inequality, which exacerbates the complexity of tensions in comparison to some other less mixed and often more affluent areas, where similar practices may be considered less unfavourably.

However, at the same time these tensions arguably offer possibilities for people to have convivial interactions and to come together through organising activities in order to address some of the issues, as has been seen in this chapter. These instances of reactive solidarity are most often related to clean-up activities and initiating and participating in public meetings. Some other more unusual examples also exist, such as the annoyed landlord driving people around Sheffield, which can also be seen as a form of conviviality.

Nevertheless, as also seen in the previous chapter, there seem to be overwhelmingly negative perceptions about the use of public spaces in Fir Vale. These are most strongly expressed about spaces such as streets and street corners, which many locals do not consider to be spaces for socialising. Such views were expressed even by people actually using, and arguably enjoying, some of the spaces. The possible reasons for negative perceptions are complex: some are partly fuelled and supported by media coverage, which exacerbates the general stigmatisation of the area; others are rooted in the lived experience of the disturbances some of these activities potentially create (noise, litter, feeling of unease etc). Negative perceptions can also be related to people's own cultural frames; what might be seen as an appropriate behaviour in a particular place in one culture may be perceived otherwise in another culture, as also noted by Clark (2014). The complexity of this is enhanced by trans-culturing practices as well as shifts in these perceptions over time.

However, when my discussions delved deeper, perceptions often changed slightly, in particular in relation to the presence of children in the streets. This would at first be seen overwhelmingly in a negative light by most locals (and even by some youth workers), whilst later in the conversation it might be acknowledged, albeit somewhat reluctantly, as positively related to the general safety of the area, for example. Indeed it was seen by some as a cause and by others as a consequence of safety in

the area. For some locals (mostly older white British and some older Asians), talking about children playing in the streets also brought back their own memories of being young and playing in similar ways, either in this area or in other similar northern working class areas with streets of terraced houses. This exemplifies the ways in which perceptions of such experiences change over time, not only because of personal changes that come naturally with age, but also more general societal changes, such as greater awareness of health and safety issues related to traffic, for example. It should, however, also be noted that many perceptions are also shaped by the lived experience of multiple levels of ‘deprivation’ and the stigma this brings to the neighbourhood. They are therefore also influenced by the media. Moreover they are intertwined with the locals’ own ethnic and cultural backgrounds, which influence, in some ways at least, different understandings of ‘accepted’ behaviours in public.

As demonstrated in this chapter, negative (and positive) perceptions need to be understood as part of the wider context and in relation to the many prevailing dynamics of the area. Detailed fieldwork over an extended period of time can help to uncover specificities that can play an important role in checking assumptions. For instance, it makes a difference if we know who was hanging out on the streets (i.e. youth, adults, only men, children, perceived ethnic group etc), who was commenting on it (i.e. individual, couple, group, as well as their gender, age, ethnicity, years of being a local resident etc), and also where it was all happening (i.e. outside the corner shop, in front of the shopping parade, in one of the green spaces etc).

This understanding of the apparent paradoxes to be found in such neighbourhoods is of particular relevance to practitioners engaging with public spaces in this area and similar areas, as it suggests that they need to be able to deal with both the visible and the hidden complexities of society. Although this may refer to most public spaces, this can become even more relevant in areas characterised by diverse and fluid populations. For instance, as seen in Fir Vale, the ideas and concepts related to the use of public space can be different for different cultures and both reflect and embody the forms of diversity existing and practised in this neighbourhood.

These contested perceptions raise the broader question of why some social practices (e.g. children socialising in the streets) can be perceived as problematic in some areas and by some residents in those areas, and at the same time as a desirable aim in other areas, albeit primarily by professionals. This question clearly highlights the need for professionals to develop agile cultural competency to enable them to see beyond their own educational and cultural frames. Furthermore, it acknowledges the importance of a deeper understanding of context and of the people within that context (as will be discussed in the next chapter). Thus, it is necessary for researchers and urban design practitioners to be able to understand, and to engage with, these multiple, entangled societal complexities.

Chapter 7

Contextualised Convivialities of Public Open Spaces

7.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I bring my research findings together with theoretical insights. This will then inform the development of the construct of contextualised convivialities, which explores notions of conviviality in public open spaces by acknowledging micro and macro spatial affordances through the frame of agonistic urbanism. I also argue for the need to contextualise understandings in pluralistic ways.

7.2. The Construct of ‘Contextualised Convivialities’

In the preceding chapters, I have explored the research findings that highlight the relevance of different typologies of public spaces (in chapter 5) and the main contestations related to their use (in chapter 6). These explored how different types of conviviality can be identified, not only in different places but also amongst and between different age groups. In order to engage with this more deeply, in this chapter I propose and develop the construct of ‘contextualised convivialities’.

‘Contextualised convivialities’ refers to two aspects that have emerged as significant for enabling a more in-depth understanding of the concept of conviviality: 1) the importance of the specific context of the place - which is understood as ranging from the micro scale and the materiality of objects to complex socio-economic and spatio-temporal entanglements; and 2) the acknowledgment of the multiplicity of different types and qualities of conviviality between different people within superdiverse places. Further to this I would also add that these different types and qualities of conviviality have varying significance and impact within, and sometimes in response to, different places/contexts. Accepting and engaging with these nuances seems crucial if the lens of conviviality is to authentically and accurately contribute to understandings of the complexities of everyday living.

One particularly telling illustration of the value of the construct of contextualised convivialities was experienced in one of the corner shops in the middle of the network of residential streets in Fir Vale, which I witnessed on one of my visits to the shop. On that occasion, the shop owner, a British Asian man, allowed a Roma mother to take a bunch of bananas without paying, when she said she would pay for it the following day. Once she had left, the owner told the rest of us in the queue that “that’s

alright...they live across the road...outside a lot'. This brief vignette illustrates the role of the proximity and visibility of outdoor presence, as well as the role of everyday routine, in developing conviviality. It is a specific type and quality of conviviality, one between two adults, two parents, a man and a woman, Asian and Roma as well as shop owner and neighbour. The same type of conviviality is much less likely to occur in one of the shops on the shopping parade just a few minutes walk down the road, or in a supermarket chain, or even in a corner shop in a more affluent neighbourhood where the need for delayed payment would not even exist. In this example, this episode of fleeting conviviality had clearly been underpinned by a prolonged period of repeated encounters between the protagonists. It is important to note that this convivial episode has a practical and positive effect on a person's life. Nevertheless, it is still not really possible to describe it as something more than conviviality, for instance an act of friendship.

In relation to the significance of the wider context, it would be unwise not to recognise the ethnic identities present within this convivial act, as well as the relevance of the context of this particular neighbourhood. To clarify, the example of conviviality in this vignette challenges existing narratives regarding the on-going tensions between people 'belonging' to two specific communities (Asian and Roma, or in this city, the 'established' and the 'newly arrived' communities). However, this conviviality takes on an even greater significance, when we consider that it occurs in this particularly 'challenging' neighbourhood rather than in a different part of Sheffield where tensions are less expected.

In their research on conviviality within a public square in south-east London, Rishbeth and Rogaly (2017) describe sitting outside as a convivial act, which bears some similarity to the interaction in Fir Vale, just described, framed as it is by the environment, by others' perceptions and by the wider context. Furthermore, making reference to Wilson and Darling (2016), they highlight how even just 'sitting outside' may be seen to challenge normative narratives and assumptions. It can indeed be argued that the act of 'sitting outside' has a very different significance if it occurs in Trafalgar Square in central London, Gordon Square in Woolwich (the context of Rishbeth and Rogaly's study) or outside a corner shop in Fir Vale.

A further significant aspect relating to the convivial act witnessed in the corner shop is that not only does it challenge the general narrative about the area, but it also, precisely for that reason, has the potential to be transformative simply by being witnessed by others, namely the people in the shop queue. There is then the potential for this to become even more 'visible': through stories shared amongst friends and families, it may challenge assumptions regarding relationships in the area. Even if some prejudices towards the 'other' (as someone 'belonging' to a different community) in either or both of these individuals (Asian shop owner or Roma woman) were still to exist, which would not be

unusual as claimed by Valentine 2008, I argue that this convivial practice acts as a ‘counterweight’. It is clearly making life a little easier amidst, and in spite of, local tensions and socio-economic complexities.

This is just one example of a certain type of conviviality, one that is fleeting but meaningful, and that matters in terms of mundane benefit, but of course many other types can be found and need to be recognised. It serves to illustrate why a more intricate and situated understanding of conviviality, as argued in the construct of ‘contextualised convivialities’, is helpful in unpicking the complexities of everyday life in specific contexts. The significance of the construct of ‘contextualised convivialities’ is that it allows for multiple readings of interactions within different spaces to be taken into account, in order to provide more nuanced understandings of relationships between people and between people and places. It also allows for the concepts of superdiversity, understood as complexification of society (Vertovec 2007) (albeit through a critical lens as described in the literature review), and *agonistic pluralism*, understood as tensions that support the existence of difference (Mouffe 2005), to be interpreted within a specific place. This enables us firstly to enhance our understanding of conviviality within urban heterogeneity by also incorporating the possibility of tensions. In addition, through being precise about the many convivial interactions in specific places, it also offers for a more relevant analysis of their significance for society.

In terms of its relation to design, the construct of ‘contextualised convivialities’ acknowledges the role of a place, not exclusively its physical features and characteristics, but rather its complex entanglements or ‘throwtogetherness’ as referred to by Massey (2005). Such complexity clearly necessitates broader understandings of, and approaches to, design as well as the type and role of design practitioners (as will be discussed in more detail in chapter 9). Although relevant and applicable to all urban contexts, it seems particularly pertinent to ethnically and culturally diverse areas, often entwined in multiple socio-economic issues. The design of public spaces, therefore, should acknowledge and respond to the existence of contextualised convivialities as part of the process of design interventions.

In order to further illustrate the construct of contextualised convivialities and the complexities of their constituent elements, namely the ‘context’ and the ‘convivialities’, discussion will now focus on the role of, firstly, different locations and scales (7.3.), secondly, non-human micro affordances (7.4.) and, thirdly, various events and incidents (7.5.), in relation to everyday convivialities within public open spaces.

7.3. Scales of public open spaces in relation to contextualised convivialities

Initially presented in chapter 5 in three categories (the green, the streets and other spaces), public open spaces will now be reframed in a way that allows for clearer discussion and understanding of their affordances for sociability. In order to achieve this, I will utilise the construct of contextualised convivialities; developing and critiquing its appropriateness and usefulness.

Through my analysis of Fir Vale's public spaces and their everyday use, it has become apparent that many of these spaces could be broadly understood as 'porous borders', as argued by Sennett (2007). Drawing on examples from nature and the living cell, Sennett makes an argument for cell membrane-like edges that act as porous borders:

“Porosity exists in dialogue with resistance: a dialogue which sometimes means that the cell is open to being inundated, and sometimes is retentive. This dialogue is what the urbanist should want to initiate, rather than imagining that sheer open space - a pure void – counts as porous.” (Sennett 2018, p. 220)

This “urban membrane” (Sennett 2018 p. 221) can be shaped and formed in many different ways. According to Sennett these porous edges have the greatest potential to bring together different people and communities.

Here I explore this in relation to the public open spaces of Fir Vale and their affordances for everyday convivialities. Through my spatial analysis it became evident that all of the most used public open spaces, as identified and explored earlier (in chapter 5), could be understood as spaces containing some level of “membrane conditions” (Sennett 2018). However, as my research had identified spaces that were very different in many ways, it seemed necessary for me to further explore and discuss them by systematising them according to different scales: the scale of the inter-neighbourhood, the scale of the intra-neighbourhood and the street-home scale. Each of these scales includes several different examples of local public spaces with their own spatial, material and temporal qualities, further instantiating the construct of contextualised convivialities.

7.3.1. Inter-neighbourhood porous spaces

The most obvious example of inter-neighbourhood porous spaces is the largest local park, Firth Park, which is located between the two established neighbourhoods of Firth Park (taking its name from the park) and Fir Vale. Apart from the relevance of being nearby, the park is attractive for many because of the variety of activities on offer, its large scale and

generally good appearance and standards of maintenance (as explained in chapter 5). This makes it a truly porous membrane space that is visited by people from both of these areas as well as from further afield.

The park is used for “highly qualified interaction” (Amin 2008) as people meet with their friends and family, often with a specific purpose (i.e. to play sport, visit the playground, have a barbeque etc). This diversity of people attracted by the qualities of the park makes it, according to some users that I talked to, the most “cosmopolitan” space around with “more of a city-centre-like” feel and atmosphere. There are several different zones and spots offering a variety of legitimate uses, so it has become an enjoyable space in which many of the tensions existing in some of the other more local public open spaces are less present. This atmosphere provides a setting for specific types of convivialities, those that appear lighter in nature. During my visits, I observed that the children’s playground acted as the most obvious example of a place containing a wider range of interactions involving, for example, mixed groups of people that come together as part of an organised activity, or people who come regularly so they already “know” other parents, or some who told me that they “do not come often enough” but still recognise others. The general atmosphere seems welcoming and conducive to interaction.

Next to the playground there are some sports pitches, including one for football. These are usually used by groups of friends, but on a number of occasions I witnessed a more inclusive way of forming teams where a few boys would invite other people hanging around nearby to play with them (including myself who, notorious for my lack of talent in football, had to decline the invitation). Some teenage girls, of white English background, also use these sports courts to play sport, often basketball, as well as spending time in other parts of the park. Some come here regularly to meet their friends from college but also to flirt with a group of Roma boys also hanging out in the park. Interestingly, only a few minutes before I saw this, the girls had been complaining to me about “those East Europeans being rude to us in our own country”. It is of interest that I noted this down just a few weeks after the Brexit vote, which revealed that some of the wider national context and its narrative was penetrating this otherwise quite welcoming space.

Another park, Osgathorpe Park, could also be seen as an example of inter-neighbourhood porous space. Like Firth Park it was also positioned in between two ‘neighbourhoods’, but it was seen by many more as a local space and less as a destination type of space. This was possibly due to its somewhat hidden location, smaller size, limited amenities and lower levels of maintenance. Nevertheless, most of the arguments about Firth Park still seem valid for Osgathorpe Park, albeit in a more limited way. For example, some visitors commented that it provided a “nice green setting and views”, as well as some limited sports facilities and a decent children’s playground with picnic

benches. In that sense, like Firth Park, it was a relief space away from some of the everyday tensions of other local spaces and was a setting for some types of convivialities between users, whilst lacking the more open and cosmopolitan feel of the larger park.

As argued earlier, part of the significance of the construct of contextualised convivialities is that it enables us to make distinctions between different types and qualities of convivial interactions. For instance, there is a difference between boys inviting others to play football, parents chit-chatting while their kids play, runners nodding to each other or teenagers flirting. However, the significance of the construct is also related to the specific type of context in which the convivialities occur; the dominant character of these particular examples seemed to be defined by their specific context, namely an inviting, sometimes cosmopolitan, well designed and maintained, special type of place (albeit within the broader context of this part of the city). It could of course also be argued that a particular feature of these spaces was that convivialities could be easily avoided, but when they happened, they were arguably more in line with “happy togetherness” (Wise and Noble 2016). This seemed to be especially the case between parents in the playground.

7.3.2. Intra-neighbourhood porous spaces

The second scale of public open spaces containing ‘membrane conditions’ is that of spaces, which are located within the same neighbourhood but which may be perceived as lying between different communities or different areas within the neighbourhood. One of the characteristics of these intra-neighbourhood porous spaces is that there seems to exist some degree of familiarity between people, but that this appears to exclude rather than to include. In other words, in these spaces people seem to be more attuned to differences in line with existing prejudices than in other more ‘cosmopolitan’ places such as the ones characterised as inter-neighbourhood porous membranes.

There are many possible reasons for this, with one being that there are usually no visitors from outside the neighbourhood. The spaces are primarily used by local people, who are, for that reason, also more aware of the issues and tensions present in their everyday lives. Potentially, then, it is easier to recognise’ and consider people as the ‘other’, as not part of their own (ethnically defined) ‘community’. A further possible reason is that, in the case of Fir Vale, these spaces also lack the qualities of attractive appearance and amenities and have lower levels of maintenance, compared to those of inter-neighbourhood spaces. These features contribute to a general dissatisfaction with local public open spaces, as came out strongly in my conversations with many local residents. Their complaints ranged from there not being much to do there, the spaces looking neglected, to them preferring to go to other places and to avoiding them as they are only used by “other people”. However, my observations, and some of the interviews, showed that there was a notable gap between

the perception and the reality. This was especially evident in the example of Wensley Street Green space, which was generally perceived in an unfavourable light by most of the people I spoke to. However, from my repeated visits I saw that it acts as a busy space, one used by a wide range of people, often alongside or in a close proximity to ‘other’ groups. In other words, although it was perceived as a less favourable and less attractive looking space by many, it still manages to attract diverse users. Even those who told me that they never go because it is ‘not nice’ were regularly seen spending time there. One reason is that, for some, the space is seen as a second best option when the walk to Firth Park or Osgathorpe Park is not possible for some reason. One could argue then that it is popular as it is the closest green space. Another reason for visiting is that regular activities for children and youth, run by various groups and organisations, take place there, especially during the school holidays, making it “look friendly then”, as described by a British Asian mum of two. Although relatively small in size, it offers different, formal and informal, seating areas including one on a small hill. These, especially the hill, could be described as “micro-retreats of nearby quietness”, as argued by Rishbeth et al (2018).

It is clear, as already mentioned, that these spaces, as they are at the moment, are generally not considered favourably. Nevertheless, according to one youth worker, it is this lack of well-maintained equipment that seems to attract especially children and youngsters and provokes them to be creative and do something that is fun for them. Other locals recognise them as spaces with great potential (as argued in chapter 5 in the sections about Wensley Street Green Space and the Green Triangle). The main reasons for this seem to be their location in the neighbourhood and the need for good outdoor spaces. This need can be articulated in both more and less generous ways: by some as their own need, and by others as the need “to move those people away from the streets and the front of my home”.

The level of familiarity in these spaces, albeit limited, has been argued as a hindrance to convivial interactions. However, in some cases it can also have a more positive side. The most obvious examples of this were the organised activities, in which familiarity with local youth workers influenced parents to allow their children to take part in activities held in some of these spaces. This further provided affordances for children to socialise with other children, often from different backgrounds. An important aspect of these spaces is that in spite of, but also because of, some of the issues described, these spaces allowed for another quite specific type of conviviality to be recognised. This could be described as ‘convivially spending time in proximity to others’, a passive form of conviviality. In some other contexts this may not be very significant, or perhaps would not even be considered as conviviality. However, in this particular location it not only shows the acceptance, tolerance and safeness of these places, but it also challenges, again, some of the established narratives about the neighbourhood.

7.3.3. Street-home spaces as porous membranes

“For instance, a street is not a thing nor is it just a collection of discrete things. The buildings, trees, cars, sidewalks, goods, people, signs, etc. all come together to become a street, but it is the connections between them that makes it an assemblage or a place. It is the relations of buildings-sidewalk-roadway; the flows of traffic, people and goods; the interconnections of public to private space, and of this street to the city, that makes it a ‘street’ and distinguishes it from other place assemblages such as parks, plazas, freeways, shopping malls and marketplaces...” (Dovey 2010, p. 16).

(It could also be added here that every street is its own specific assemblage and place distinguished not only from other types of place, such as parks, plazas etc., but from other streets too.)

In previous sections, more formal types of public open spaces were considered, those which attract people to use them because of their purpose, their attractiveness (e.g. pleasant natural environment, the presence of sports facilities etc) and their location between different neighbourhoods and communities. These have been shown to attract a diverse range of people, whilst also providing some affordances for different forms of convivial behaviour between strangers.

Another type of porous membrane space in Fir Vale could be identified on the street-home scale. It has been suggested in the previous chapter that a general perception of streets is of spaces not meant for socialising. This means that, when they are used in this way, it is often considered to be unusual at least, at most problematic and a cause for concern. This is particularly the case in this neighbourhood in relation to noise and loitering (as expanded on in chapter 6). This chapter now turns the focus onto residential streets, in which immediate public space in front of the home is regularly used for socialising. These spaces can be seen as another type of porous membrane space, in this case between the home and the public space.

Context is again important to foreground. In other parts of the city, in which the streets are not used for socialising but rather only for getting into and out of the home, understanding them as porous membranes would arguable make less sense and have less significance. It is certainly the case that they would provide fewer opportunities for possible interaction amongst people. In other words, the argument made earlier relating to the need to understand the difference between the central spaces of cities on the one hand and neighbourhood spaces on the other (Madanipour 2004; Amin 2008) is now extended further to an acknowledgment of the difference not only between different neighbourhoods and different types of spaces within the neighbourhood, but also the difference between quite similar types of spaces within the same neighbourhood (i.e. the street). This is particularly important if the

focus is on understanding sociability within these spaces, as argued in the construct of contextualised convivialities.

These streets of narrow terraced houses, together with the pavement and the road, can be seen to act as a porous membrane especially when some doors are left wide open with a direct view into the front rooms of the homes. When ‘thrown together’ with other elements (blank walls, curbs, parked cars, chairs taken out of the houses etc), the street acts as a space in between these homes, their occupiers and other visitors and passers-by. It could be argued that this is very similar to what Aldo van Eyck was creating in Amsterdam back in the fifties, as described by Sennett (2018), by infusing paved street playgrounds (what he called “urban parks”) within the dense built environment. For example, in these spaces he also placed benches for adult use, with no iron fences or spatial divisions between them. According to Sennett (2018, p. 224) “van Eyck created liminal edges, ‘liminal’ meaning here the experience of a transition even if there is no clear barrier between two states.” What is significant in these particular streets in Fir Vale, however, is that they have been turned into Van Eyck-like spaces without Van Eyck, or any other designer for that matter; instead they have been created solely by local residents themselves, including children. Given that there were differences between nearby streets, however, the materiality and the scale of the space must be considered significant. For instance, this porousness was less evident in the context of other wider streets, in which the road actually acts more as a barrier, ‘dividing’ the sociality and making the street less of a social space.

According to Burrell (2015, p. 155), based on her research in Leicester, these types of houses, described as narrow terraced houses with direct access onto the pavement, seem to be “particularly permeable” In her study, this permeability was seen to present significant issues, with, for example, residents complaining that they were not able to avoid the activities occurring on the streets even from inside the front rooms of their home (Burrell 2015). Mostly in contrast to this, however, my study of Fir Vale showed that many residents of Fir Vale’s terraced houses are actually maintaining, rather than avoiding, the connection with the street, indeed expanding their home towards the outside. This is manifested by them leaving their front doors wide open and taking chairs outside onto the pavement, or by them spending time leaning out onto the windowsill of a top floor window (though this was observed less frequently). This is practised primarily by people from a Roma background, but many examples of other people from different backgrounds doing the same have also been observed. It was noticeable that these actions further increased the chance of convivial interactions, despite the fact that they were seen by some as a cause for tensions.

This is not to say that examples in line with Burrell’s (2015) findings were completely missing from the area, but my own research has not identified them as such; on the contrary, I have witnessed a large number of examples, in which streets are being used in positive ways by local residents. One of

the reasons for this may be the different focus of Burrell's research compared to my research, the former being focused on the home/inside and the latter on public space/outside. Nevertheless, it could be argued that this lends further support to the argument for highly contextualised research, especially when, at first sight, the contexts might seem quite similar in many ways.

It is evident that although the predominant users of streets for socialising are children, youngsters and adults of Roma origin, the everyday nature of this seems to have influenced residents of many other backgrounds and encouraged them too to spend time and socialise outside. However, I have noticed that they tend to remain separate from other groups even though they are in close proximity.

Nevertheless, it still creates a lively, neighbourly atmosphere, especially as the distances between them are only a few meters. To illustrate this further, it is not unusual to see different smaller and larger groups of Roma children and adults socialising throughout these streets, some sitting on chairs, some on curbs, some running around and some playing 'coin game' in front of the wall. At the same time there may be a small group of Asian youngsters leaning on a car and having a chat, whilst an adult white male and his son are sitting in the doorway of their home with loud music coming from inside. Almost opposite them, two black boys may be sharing their bike with a Roma girl and a boy. Occasionally, just a bit further down the road, there can be a group of older Asian women sitting on chairs with what appears to be their grandchildren playing near them. There might also be a man on the corner stopping passers-by and trying to sell them a bike; or an Asian man washing his car with a little boy enviously looking at a group of Roma boys and girls down the road playing with a ball. I have witnessed such scenes frequently in my visits to the neighbourhood.

Although an important characteristic of these spaces tends to be one of conflict and tensions as daily occurrences (as seen in the previous chapter, in particular in the discussion relating to litter and noise), the picture painted above shows that, amidst these tensions, there are also possible invitations for convivialities and sometimes even for more sustained collaboration. To expand on this, the most negative atmospheres I have experienced in these streets have been related to the impact such busyness has had on perceptions of the streets as crowded, noisy, littered places, which are consequently avoided by some local residents. Clearly intensity of use can often be correlated to the amount of litter in the streets and is also one of the main causes of noise. On the other hand, positive atmospheres have been characterised by adults sitting outside on chairs, making children's presence on the streets more 'acceptable', especially for people who do not have a Roma background. Such socialising outside also seems to be encouraging others, not only Roma, to behave similarly and even take chairs out themselves, as in the scenes described above. In some ways this is similar to the examples of conviviality in intra-neighbourhood porous spaces earlier mentioned, although in this case the proximity is even closer, and the regularity of its presence also further afforded different

forms of interaction and sociability amongst adults as well as children. This close proximity enables some of the established barriers to be broken down and caters for a spectrum of convivialities.

In these spaces it is usually the children that start to engage with each other, or even with adults.

There were many occasions, in which (usually) a group of Roma children would start chatting with adults of other ethnicities. These seemed to be adults they already knew in some way or were familiar with as neighbours. One example of this was when I saw children engaged in a friendly chat with an Asian man fixing his car, curious about what he was doing; the man then started to explain to them what he was doing with the car. Another example was some friendly banter by a group of Roma boys and girls, teasing a couple of two obviously drunk white men walking down the street one Sunday morning. Again, they all seemed to be familiar with each other and to enjoy the friendly interaction.

Sometimes, the adults would make friendly gestures too, as when an old Asian man was praising two little Roma girls for saying hello to him, although he did not seem to know them. He clearly felt really pleased and was telling them what good girls they were, and sharing this with me as I passed by.

Another example was of a local middle-aged white man with a baby in a pram, who lived in the area and was clearly familiar with a group of Roma boys and girls. They were playing foot-tennis in the pocket park (Wade Street space) extending from one of the streets, and he asked if he could play too. In order to be able to play, he handed the pram with his baby in it to two girls, who then pushed it up and down while he was enjoying the game. Together with a few other children and youngsters, I was sitting on the small hill cheering the game. It is this kind of intercultural and intergenerational sociability within the public spaces that seem meaningful in many ways and levels. It includes sharing the chance to have fun, as well as demonstrating high levels of trust and mutual care and has the potential to influence children, and possibly others too, in many positive ways. In addition, the fact that this is all happening in this particular neighbourhood, so infamous for many reasons, makes it even more valuable, providing a perhaps 'unexpected' counter-narrative to the established one.

In summary, close proximity combined with repeated and regular presence in these spaces provided a visibility that contributed to a range of varied and sometimes seemingly paradoxical consequences.

On the one hand, it could be seen to have a negative impact on the general perception of these spaces (chapter 6). On the other hand, the impact of these spaces on the practice of everyday living could be seen in a positive light, as they provided affordances for the development of a range of convivial interactions, some of which were intense and highly significant.

This analysis suggests that, without trying to romanticise or to ignore the many structural issues present in the area (as referred to earlier), it is these types of nuanced understandings that need to be noticed and acknowledged, especially by urban design practitioners. Identifying these three types of

porous membrane spaces appears to be of value, as it highlights that we must acknowledge not only that porous membranes are needed to support convivial interactions, but also that these porous membranes can be manifested differently, and at different scales, allowing for different convivialities between different people.

In the case of Fir Vale in this study, the inter-neighbourhood spaces seem to allow people to escape some of the tensions present within more local spaces and create a specific place and atmosphere as a setting for specific convivialities, which are often of a less engaged, more cosmopolitan nature. The intra-neighbourhood spaces seem to include more everyday tensions and have been perceived as less ‘feel-good’ than the inter-neighbourhood spaces explored, but they are still regularly used by many different people. In other words, these specific contexts and their users afforded different types and qualities of convivialities from those found in the inter-neighbourhood spaces. Finally, the more immediate public spaces, seen here as porous membranes between the street and the home, have included yet another range of convivialities, including arguably the most intensely positive and negative ones.

7.4. Non-human micro affordances of the built environment

Another tendency that has become evident from this research concerns the genuine importance of the role of the micro-scale and the effect of its physicality and materiality on everyday sociability. In each of those specific public open spaces that have been explored, besides the wider political and socio-economic issues influencing them and their location within the area, the actual micro non-human objects present within them have also been seen to have an impact on perceptions of the spaces and their use. For this reason, they can be understood as also influencing different convivialities.

In order to understand the relationships between conviviality and objects (either existing, found, appropriated, brought in etc) as part of urban micro spaces, it might be useful to further expand here on the concept of conviviality (as discussed in chapter 3) and to include Illich’s (1973) understandings. Although developed as a critique of more structural issues, including the notion of capitalist production, conviviality for Illich meant “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment” (Illich 1973, p. 11). This view offers a different lens, which is focused on non-human actors as well.

Some of the objects identified in this research were specifically designed and intended for a particular utilitarian use, such as benches for sitting on, outdoor gym equipment for exercising or street railings for providing safety. However, although most of them fulfilled their intended function, some of them were appropriated by locals in many different ways, whilst others were brought in from different

contexts and also used in unusual ways (e.g. the old mattresses). For instance, I have seen that street railings are regularly and intensively used for leaning on, sometimes even for sitting on, by a variety of people. This affects the sociality of the space in different ways. On the one hand it attracts others to come and join them or to do the same next to them, creating a possible setting for convivial interactions. On the other hand, this activity afforded by the street railings can be seen by others as inappropriate, even unsafe, as “some boys climb and sit on top of it which is also very dangerous”, according to one local resident. It is also claimed to be one of the reasons for avoiding this space, since it is perceived as illegitimate use of the railings.

Other objects also contributed in often unpredictable ways, for example, different signs such as posters and notes in the windows. The ways in which these various types of sign and their different purposes are actually influencing the use of these public spaces of everyday life are not simple to understand. This is partly because these signs are often unnoticed or even consciously ignored by some. However, what they do undoubtedly tell us something about are the people who made them and their perspectives, understandings and intentions related to various issues within the neighbourhood, including those related to these public open spaces. These signs are also providing a voice for those people and evidence of their intention to intervene in, influence and shape those spaces and their potential use. According to Blommaert (2013, p. 48.) the signs found in spaces are actually making the space “agentive. This, some argue, could be extended beyond just the signs, as materiality, textures and affordances of various objects are also making the space agentive, as discussed here.

It is also important to situate signs carefully in this very specific context, in order to properly ‘read’ them and to understand their significance and possible power. A multilingual welcoming sign will not have the same meaning and weight in, for example, a tourist information point in the middle of the city, as it would in a culturally diverse neighbourhood where it might be standing next to a ‘hostile’ monolingual one. Here I am referring to a specific example seen in Fir Vale, where welcoming multilingual signs are common in the shop windows, yet where only a few metres down the road on one of the houses there was a monolingual sign in English stating that “running up and down the street is an illegal activity”. This is reminiscent of the proposal that it is necessary to understand the differing value of intercultural encounters in, for example, central cosmopolitan parts of the cities, inner-city residential areas, or in areas going through a period of tension due to the ‘churn’ of new arrivals (Burrell 2015).

Another example of objects influencing public space could be seen in relation to windows facing on to the streets. This is especially the case in the streets of narrow terraced houses with windows (and walls) that are directly adjacent to the pavement. Many of these windows are decorated with vases of flowers and occasionally other ornaments. These are intentionally oriented towards the outside, acting

in a similar way to shop windows displaying goods on a shopping street, for example; instead of trying to sell something, though, they appear to be demonstrating and communicating to others the care that has gone into decorating them. It might be argued that this shows a certain type of care amongst the residents; not only for their home and the impression that others have of it, but also for the public space in front of it, and therefore the wider social sphere of the neighbourhood. These mundane practices influence public open spaces, arguably making them more attractive and friendlier.

Other objects seen in some of the windows and mentioned in conversations are ad-hoc CCTV cameras made of PC webcams. According to the people who have these in their windows, the cameras are demonstrating their commitment to, and care for, the neighbourhood. Another perspective on this could suggest the opposite, namely that this is creating a hostile environment in this public space and therefore has the opposite effect to the one intended. This is just another example of the complex ways in which actions and tensions can be manifested and interpreted in public spaces, even within the micro spaces of a residential street.

During my fieldwork many other examples of the agentic nature of objects and their appropriation by people have been witnessed in different places throughout the neighbourhood. For instance, the outdoor gym equipment in Firth Park is not only used by people from different social milieus but it is also used in different ways and for different purposes. Some people, often teenagers of all backgrounds, would simply sit, lean and stand around it; younger children would use it in playful ways and not only for its intended use; while others, usually but not exclusively teenagers, would use it for serious training. Perhaps what contributed to such appropriations of these objects is the fact that they are spatially distributed around the park and not grouped together as is often the case. This is also further enhanced by its situation in a larger and more open part of the park, which is less formally designed, meaning that each of the pieces of gym equipment does not only encourage use for training or some other creative activity, but is also a convenient and 'legitimate' spot for simply 'hanging out'.

In relation to objects and their influence on the use of space and how this may further influence conviviality, another useful example can be found in the way in which chairs are taken out onto the pavement and used for socialising mostly by Roma adults. It could be simply argued that this is reflective of their culture, in which socialising with families and neighbours outside is a common practice. This does seem to be true but it does not explain fully why just a few streets down the road, also inhabited by people from the same Roma background, the chairs are not in evidence. In order to understand that, it is necessary to consider the specific spatial context, namely that this other street, although still residential, is wider and has larger houses with front gardens. Adults still socialise there, but instead of chairs, small front garden walls are commonly used for sitting on.

As seen in the section on play and sociability in the previous chapter, many other objects have been seen to play a role in creating affordances for the use of public spaces during my time spent in Fir Vale. If they are full height, walls are used for play with either a ball or coins. If they are low ones, they are used for sitting on in the same way as the steps. Bins are used for playing cards on, for fastening a rope on to as a net for foot-tennis, or for standing drinks on. Cars are often used for leaning on whilst socialising; sometimes they are even used by children playing inside them. Tree branches are used to create goals in the same way as some items of clothing are used. Different types of chairs are taken out and used for socialising, either on or around them. Stickers are regularly exchanged in what seems to be a particularly inclusive activity.

A particularly interesting and telling observation concerned a bike, which was owned by black brothers, who were regularly seen sharing it with the other boys and girls in the street, both Roma and white British. This happened sometimes whilst their mother was also standing outside next to Roma adults sitting on chairs they had carried outside, all seemingly friendly, though with limited verbal interaction occurring. This resonates with a comment, made to me by a male Roma youngster, that sometimes “you don’t even need a language to be friendly and nice to each other”. He was talking about his “mum” and their British white neighbour who often share some food they have made with each other so that they can try it.

Although not objects, but definitely non-humans, dogs have also played their role in supporting various convivialities. Mostly avoided by many Asian locals, as confirmed by some of the participants, for others dogs acted as a point of contact. This was not only the case between dog owners themselves, but also for others, often children, who did not own a dog. Of particular interest here is the story of a local white British woman who, during her regular dog walking, happened to get to know, and hence to understand better, some local groups of Roma, mostly young boys, who were usually playing football on the green field she would walk through. When I first observed them, I thought that a group of ‘naughty boys’ were teasing a dog with a ball and annoying the owner, to the extent that I even decided to intervene and ask the owner if she perhaps needed help. As it turned out, this was a regular, friendly activity, which was highly appreciated by all (including the dog, I presume). The owner very much appreciated the fact that her dog was getting a “great run about” and commented on how careful the boys were not to hit the dog by accident. The boys also seemed to be having fun. This small insight shows how overlapping regular uses, in this case including some non-human actors (a dog and a ball), could afford what I would consider to be another episode of specific contextualised conviviality between not necessarily the most expected people (i.e. a group of Roma boys and a white British lady). It also shows that regular and overlapping, or almost overlapping, activities can bring about convivialities of different types and quality.

According to Illich (1973, p. 27): “People need not only to obtain things, they need above all the freedom to make things among which they can live, to give shape to them according to their own tastes, and to put them to use in caring for and about others.”. In this sense, the appropriation of objects by locals could be construed as breaking away from the “status of mere consumers” (1973, p. 27): and, instead, (re)constructing their own conviviality. It could, arguably, be seen in line with Harvey’s understanding of the right to the city as “a right to change ourselves by changing the city” (Harvey 2008, p. 23).

As argued in this section, various objects seem to influence the everyday use of public open spaces and inherently form a part of their particular context. In some cases this influence is manifested through their intentional design and function, in other cases through their appropriation for use in unusual ways, and sometimes it is simply their presence and the meanings embedded within them that further provoke an action, or not. Furthermore, all of this depends on the actual context in which they are located. To summarise, the ways in which the objects are going to influence conviviality and its type and quality are not easy to predict, but they must be carefully considered especially when looking for potential ways of intervening in the (re)design of places. This raises many questions for urban design practice, which will be further discussed in chapter 9.

7.5. Events and incidents

Another important aspect of understanding conviviality is its temporal nature. Conviviality is related to time through facilitated events and activities but also through unplanned incidents, all of which can support encounters and provoke social reactions.

7.5.1. Convivialities of facilitated events and activities

What has been further identified in this research is the potential of public open spaces to provide for a certain kind of conviviality, often more sustained and significant, through various facilitated activities and events. As discussed in the previous chapter, these have included a range of litter pickups and facilitated play and sports activities.

As described in the previous chapter, these activities provide opportunities for many different types of convivialities to occur and develop. Some examples have shown how these can even develop into friendships, especially when they are fun activities for young people of different backgrounds. An important point to be made is that these facilitated activities were often seen to have an impact not only on people directly taking part in them, but also on other residents and other users of these spaces.

Sometimes these activities can also bring tensions. An illustration of this was observed during an ‘arts and crafts’ activity that I co-organised for 10-13 year olds in the back yard of a local organisation, when there was a serious argument between two pairs of girls from different backgrounds. This argument started off by each pair wanting to use the same stickers, but this then turned into a situation, in which they were using inappropriate language to each other, involving ethnic stereotyping and name-calling. The situation was quickly calmed down and controlled. However, this was not the end of the story. Only some twenty minutes later, when the drinks and nibbles were being served by one of these pairs of girls, they decided to look for the other pair of girls in order to make sure that they were also getting their fair share of the soft drinks and nibbles. The other pair’s reaction was one of pleasure but also surprise. In fact, all of them appeared to be slightly embarrassed. It could suggest that, although present even amongst young children, stereotypes are not yet deeply embedded and developed at that age. This emphasises the importance of providing opportunities for youngsters to spend extended periods of time together and get to know each other better.

Several other types of activity also occurred regularly throughout my fieldwork. These included different meetings, which, though not located outdoors themselves, were organised to discuss issues related to local public open spaces. I attended a number of public meetings and debates, which were attended by people from a variety of backgrounds (though some were more diverse than others), as well as usually some local authority representatives, such as council workers, councillors, police staff etc. In some of these meetings, the discussions became heated, with contrasting views being expressed and various accusations being made. Often there were polarised views between the longer standing residents (predominantly, but not exclusively, Asian and white English) and the newcomers (in this case the Roma). Usually, however, these were kept civil and generally concluded with some key points and future steps being identified, although of course some participants were clearly seen to leave still with some reservations. For me these events revealed that residents were interested in attending such meetings and suggested that the local issues that provoked some annoyance amongst them also brought them together and prompted a shared desire for change.

I would still describe most of these interactions as convivialities, even if they consisted of arguments between people. In the events referred to here, they are in line with understandings of conviviality as explicit “lived negotiation”, as argued by Wise and Velayutham (2014, p. 407). Getting people engaged in issues related to public space through these kinds of events and activities might even allow for public spaces to (indirectly) afford civic formation (Amin 2008) through agonistic pluralism (Mouffe 2005).

7.5.2. Temporalities of reactive convivialities

Apart from the day-to-day use of public open spaces and specially organised events, another feature of everyday living involves responding to unplanned incidents of local significance. These may or may not lead to the emergence of reactive convivialities.

One, albeit extreme, example of this was a stabbing incident that happened in front of a corner shop in one of the local streets. It was about midday on a sunny day in spring and one of my first visits to the neighbourhood. As I was walking around, I first heard and later noticed a crowd gathering on a street corner, with smaller groups of people coming to join it. There was also an ambulance and several police cars. As I stopped to look, I heard that a stabbing had occurred between two men in front of the shop, but that neither of them seemed to have suffered any life threatening injuries. As serious as it may have seemed, the reaction of the people that I could hear were measured; I heard people making comments such as “as long as no one is seriously injured” or “good that no children were involved”. What surprised me at that time was that I did not hear any assumptions or accusations regarding who might be to blame, or even people asking which ethnicity or ‘community’ the men involved belonged to. At the time, my first, clearly inappropriate, reaction was to consider how “stabbing brings people together”.

Furthermore, my recollection of this made me later question my supposed open-mindedness, as it seemed as if I was expecting that such accusations would be made. Reflecting on this was valuable, as I realised that these expectations came from my previous experiences of conflict in former Yugoslavia, where it would have been an everyday occurrence to hear such accusations. A significant implication of this for me was that it enabled me to consider how important it is to be aware of the context, which includes the time that something occurs, in order to understand behaviours in local public open spaces. Of course, such accusations might have happened without me hearing them, or indeed later, or in private. However, it could be argued that, even if this were the case, any existing animosities between locals were still contained enough to maintain civility and to feel concern for their fellow humans. In this extreme situation, the local community still showed care for each other regardless of any existing animosities. At a later time in my fieldwork, when I was more familiar with Fir Vale, this would have come as less of a surprise.

This incident brought even more people outside to share information about what had happened, not only with their neighbours but also with passers-by. What was most unexpected was how some lingered for a while afterwards. I was struck by two black women standing on the street, each holding what looked like a glass of rosé wine and the pop music that was audible from their open front door. This scene made this unusual situation feel even stranger, but at the same time it reinforced for me the

warm and welcoming nature of this everyday immediate public space, the street. The unfortunate incident had brought people out, and their show of civility and care for others even created a surprisingly welcoming atmosphere. The warm, sunny weather at that particular time further contributed to this atmosphere.

Conviviality was affected in a different way as a result of an incident in June 2015 when several cars owned by Roma people and registered in Slovakia had been picked up by the police for not having adequate documents. This news spread quickly and the reaction was that, literally overnight, hundreds of Roma drove their cars back to Slovakia, most taking their whole family away for a holiday. In a conversation with a longstanding resident, a white British man, soon after the Roma had left, his comment was that it made some of the residential streets feel in a way more attractive, simply because there were fewer parked cars. At the same time, having fewer children outside created a different atmosphere altogether, with the same local resident commenting “if only it could last”. It was a week or two before the Roma returned and the neighbourhood went back to being as it had been before, albeit with fewer parked cars for some time afterwards. Nevertheless, this incident showed how the drastic change during that time led to an absence of opportunities for conviviality in public open spaces, where significant conviviality is usually afforded.

This incident was also an illustration of the role of transnational related instances in influencing public open spaces. Another example of these transnational instances that I have observed is related to the occasional delivery of different goods by small lorries from Slovakia. These deliveries usually happen in the less busy residential streets of larger terraced houses with front gardens. They quickly attract a lively gathering in and around the front garden with several families observing what is happening and at the same time socialising outside with their children playing around them. Usually people from other parts of the neighbourhood are also seen hurriedly walking towards the lorry. For this reason, these streets tend to look much busier than usual at such times and they turn into a porous membrane space at least for a while. This provokes annoyance amongst some locals, but also, more positively, seems to attract other non-Roma children to join the Roma playing on the pavement.

These instances are similar to the occasional mobile grocery vans, which usually visit the quieter streets of the neighbourhood where there is a majority Asian population. In such areas, fruit and vegetable crates are unloaded onto the pavement, creating a temporary pop-up market and a lively atmosphere on the street. These vans similarly turn the streets into temporary porous membrane-like spaces.

Other times where the everyday sociability of public open spaces is affected is when the ice cream vans arrive. Because of the sustained presence of many children living in the area, many ice cream vans regularly visit the area, especially the grid of streets used most commonly for socialising.

Although some locals are annoyed by these vans, as explained in the previous chapter, their presence provides affordances for convivial interactions. These ice cream vans add colour and sound to the streets, momentarily changing the character of the context. Although the queues are never very long, probably due to the regular frequency of the ice cream vans' visits, the opportunity for socialising whilst queuing is taken up even more intensively, which is reinforced by the fact that usually a diverse clientele is attracted. The ice cream vans thus act as 'contact assets', as argued by Nast and Blokland (2012) and as is also observed by Neal et al. (2018). It is important to recognise context dependency here. Neal et al. examine park locations, which means that the convivial acts played out in their research will have very different significance and potentially also a different impact than in the busy streets of Fir Vale. In addition, the arrival of the ice cream vans also demonstrates how some incidents can act simultaneously in multiple ways: sometimes as a cause of tensions in the community; sometimes as an affordance for sociability, albeit limited, while waiting in queues; and even as a cause for mobilising people to address what is perceived as a problem (as explained in the previous chapter).

The incidents reported in this section have demonstrated how, apart from the need to be aware of range and context when considering convivialities, there is also a need for temporal awareness. Sudden changes or incidents that are time-sensitive should not be ignored, as they can quickly reconfigure the established context in often unexpected ways. Therefore, such temporality also forms an integral part of contextualised convivialities.

To summarise this section, both of the sub-sections (7.5.1. and 7.5.2.) have illustrated how various events and instances facilitate the emergence of new, specific convivialities. Arguably the most interesting characteristic of these is that most of them relate to tensions, albeit in different ways. In this sense they also exemplify constructions of conviviality both as "lived negotiation" (Wise and Velayutham 2014, p 407) and inclusive of agonistic pluralism (Mouffe 2005), as argued in the construct of contextualised convivialities. Moreover, some of these convivialities can also be understood as being of special significance, as they have the potential to develop into something more sustained.

7.6. Contextualised convivialities and its relation to the existing scholarship

The construct of contextualised convivialities has been introduced in this study both in response to the need to address some specificities that were not clear in existing scholarship, and also to cater for the emerging findings from this research, which needed to be framed appropriately and to draw on interdisciplinary theory, including design disciplines. The construct has then been supported and expanded through further deep analysis. Although some of the relevant scholarship on conviviality

and sociability acknowledges the need to contextualise conviviality, this tends not to be highlighted or argued explicitly.

One of the starting points in developing this construct was that, in some of the existing research, as already mentioned in chapter 3, the terminology used to describe not only spatial characteristics but also the wider contextual ones tends to be generic, even vague. For example, reference tends to be made generally to locations such as ‘streets’ or ‘parks’, without providing any more specific information regarding their nature or characteristics (an example of this is Piekut and Valentine 2017). As is evident in my research, the concept of streets and their use and role as spaces for socialising differs significantly even within residential streets in a relatively small neighbourhood, let alone within the broader city context or even between cities, geographies, socio-political systems etc. The same point can also be made about parks. This is an important issue, as without a more nuanced analysis, understandings of the practised conviviality, including its real meaning and significance, may be misinterpreted or even completely lost. For instance, the encounters on some of these streets are not necessarily “incidental” (Valentine 2013) in a context where the streets are used as regularly and intensely for socialising outside as they are in some examples from Fir Vale. This is just one of many examples discussed in this chapter.

In this study, Sennett’s (2018) spatial porous membranes as potential settings for bringing different racial and economic communities together were initially recognised within Fir Vale and then further explored within specific spaces of the neighbourhood. My research showed that these membranes also vary and depend on different scales and other complexities. It also illustrated how these different porous membranes support a range of convivialities that vary in impact and significance. Understood in this way, the construct of contextualised convivialities is clearly of significance to the field.

In relation to Blommaert’s work on the ethnography of superdiversity (2013), the construct of contextualised convivialities resonates with his emphasis on the context, or ‘situatedness’ as he defines it, drawing on complexity theory as a lens to understand the nature of superdiverse contemporary social life. Although Blommaert (2013, p. 89) argues his own understanding of conviviality as “a highly meaningful mode of conduct”, an understanding of different types and qualities of convivialities is missing, a lacuna that can be addressed by the construct of contextualised convivialities as introduced in this study.

In its focus on the spatial and the importance of the context, this construct is in line with Amin’s (2008, p. 7) reference to the importance of “the entanglement between people and the material and visual culture of public space”.

“My argument is that the link between public space and public culture should be traced to the total dynamic—human and non-human—of a public setting, and my thesis is that the collective impulses of public space are the result of pre-cognitive and tacit human response to a condition of ‘situated multiplicity’, the thrown togetherness of bodies, mass and matter, and of many uses and needs in a shared physical space.”

(Amin 2008, p.8)

Amin (2008) also acknowledges that different types of conviviality are afforded in different spaces and that these are influenced by human and non-human entanglements. In this vein, it could be argued that the construct of contextualised convivialities is related to his argument. However, the construct espoused in this study further builds on Amin by arguing that it is important to recognise that a similar episode of interaction/conviviality in a different setting and context can be loaded with very different meanings and significance. An episode that in one setting could be understood as meaningless might, in other setting, be transformative or transgressive.

This also relates to Amin’s other argument, that public spaces have limited potential for civic formation. Although this may be the case in more general terms, it is evident in some examples from Fir Vale, that this is not always the case. This again shows the importance of highly contextualised and situated research and examples from Fir Vale also illustrate what is possibly a new viewpoint, that sees public spaces as potential influencers, in an indirect way, of “civic becoming” (Amin 2008, p. 8), triggered by people’s reactions to tensions and issues related to public spaces. There are many examples of this in Fir Vale, such as the numerous meetings, debates and projects that have been organised with a focus on public space, as discussed in this and the previous chapter.

To summarise, the construct of contextualised convivialities brings together understandings of conviviality as including “both cooperative and conflictual social situations”, as argued by Hiel (2014, p. 322) and supported by others (Wise and Noble 2016, Noble 2009). It further ties this into understandings from Mouffe’s (2005) pluralistic agonism, arguing that tensions can support the existence of difference, with difference becoming ever larger in a superdiverse society (e.g. Bauman 2011, Blommaert 2013), as exemplified by my research in Fir Vale. Moreover, it acknowledges that, if we are to understand the complexities of conviviality, the context is important (e.g. Sennett 2018, Blommaert 2013) and within it the spatial and the material (e.g. Amin 2008) as well as the temporal. Apart from bringing all of these together, however, the construct of contextualised convivialities further adds two important elements: 1) the importance of recognising how different convivialities may have different significance in these different contexts and at different times and therefore arguing for more precise and accurate understandings of conviviality and 2) a proposal for all of this to be

embedded within urban (design) practice, especially where this engages with culturally and ethnically diverse places, as will be further discussed in chapter 9.

7.7. Conclusion

Although an attempt has been made here not only to develop but also to dissect the construct of contextualised convivialities and its relationship to public open spaces by organising it into various sub-themes, as seen in previous sections, it is evident how all of these are interrelated and afford different types of conviviality between different people. In that sense it means that (re)designing spaces to support convivialities, especially those in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, is a complex task and necessitates an approach which differs from other more mainstream, established, conventional ones that are generally practised today.

It can be argued that this research also supports the idea of devising more general principles for urban design practice, where it is focused on supporting conviviality in public open spaces, specifically in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. This was also argued by Rishbeth et al (2018) in our article based on a meta-synthesis of 21 research projects across the UK. The findings from my research in Fir Vale seem to further support the four principles argued in this recent paper (Rishbeth et al 2018, p. 50). These are: maximising straightforward participation; legitimising diversity of activity; designing in micro-retreats of nearby quietness; and addressing structural inequalities of open space provision. However, what this research in Fir Vale also reveals, and argues for, is that these principles always need to be addressed in highly contextualised ways in order to be achieved adequately. Therefore, it acknowledges complexity and the need to find appropriate ways to engage with it. My research is indeed raising further questions related to urban design practice, whilst also offering some proposed ways forward, as will be discussed in chapter 9.

Examples from this research have illustrated the relationships between the context (in its widest meaning) and convivial behaviours of people (in their many forms). The main point to be made here is that it is necessary to understand both of these simultaneously in order to offer deeper insights into convivial behaviour and its relation to the spatial and material. As seen in this chapter, a simple, basic denominator does not exist, and endless combinations of both people and spaces may be influencing convivial exchanges. This is precisely what the construct of ‘contextualised convivialities’ is emphasising and embedding.

It is unwise, therefore, to talk about either convivial behaviour or spaces that support convivial behaviour without explicitly situating both together and unpicking their interdependent meanings. In the same vein, a design intervention may have a huge impact for a certain kind of convivial behaviour

in a certain space and for/amongst certain people, whilst in another context the impact may be very different. This means that an appropriate approach for design (re)intervention should be first to recognise and be aware of these interrelationships and then to find ways of allowing for ethical engagement, if decisions are to be made that are adequate and appropriate in this particular situation.

Several lessons can be learnt from this example of Fir Vale and its public spaces. One of them is that it shows how, in spite of the presence of strong transnational ties for many of the 'communities' here, everyday public open spaces still do play a highly significant role in the life of the neighbourhood. This seems to relate particularly to Fir Vale's diversity in combination with wider cultural, political and socio-economic forces. It is also evident that the public open spaces influence the life of the neighbourhood in both negative ways (through creating many 'real' as well as 'perceived' tensions), and also in positive ways (through acting as settings for learning about and from each other). However, it is still not straightforward, as some of the tensions can act as calls and tools for re/negotiations of differences, potentially leading to positive impact, on personal levels and beyond. Furthermore, some activities and issues can be seen as both positive and negative at the same time, providing affordances for some types of conviviality whilst constraining other types.

This insight further emphasises the need for urban designers to be able to engage in creating new local public open spaces and improving existing ones, especially in culturally and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. The starting point here is the need to understand the existing ways in which these spaces are used, and which of these should be further supported. As is also clear, it is not easy for urban designers to achieve these understandings. However, it is crucial to do so, given that what seems to be established 'good practice' in some settings would not necessarily be acceptable in another setting. Fir Vale also offers examples of this; one of them is the case of the Ripple in the Pond Park, which according to established urban design and landscape principles could be described as a well designed space, but which in reality does not seem to have much of an impact. On the other hand, a successfully re-designed part of Firth Park has managed to create a welcoming environment for the many visitors.

Coming up with specific design recommendations based on general 'best practice' inspired assumptions does not seem to be helpful. Instead, this study argues that developing ways of gaining better understanding of, and then engaging with, these complexities is crucial for urban design practice. This will be further discussed in both chapter 8 and chapter 9. This research demonstrates how many different factors and forces, ranging from location, spatial forms, materialities, temporalities and cultural practices, influence the ways in which public space is used and conviviality is enacted and experienced.

Part III – Reflections, implications and conclusion

Chapter 8

Reflective interlude

8.1. Introduction

“Entering ‘the field’ can be a daunting, demanding and at times bewildering experience, with researchers negotiating a myriad of assumptions, expectations and motivations. Whilst early career researchers and doctoral students may be trained in theories of research practice, research design and ethical conduct, the realities of actually doing research often test the limits of such formal training and knowledge.”

(Darling 2013, p. 201)

In this chapter I will address the third research question “What are the issues and challenges of doing ‘engaged research’ in a ‘high-profile’ and ‘over-researched’ context?”. This first section will explore the meaning of ‘high-profile’ and ‘over-researched context’; the following sections will then discuss other related issues and challenges experienced throughout my research. As will be argued, the responses to this research question are also related to recommendations for urban design practice which I make in the following chapter.

8.2. ‘High-profile’ and ‘over-researched’ context

The development of an ‘engaged’ research approach to this study was informed by aspects of my positionality (as briefly explained in chapter 1) as well as in response to the specific nature of my research focus and its context (aspects of which are explained in both the context chapter 2 and the methodology chapter 4). Related to this, my sensitivity towards these particular issues has also been stimulated by my own experiences within another context which could be described as both ‘over-researched’ and, at times, ‘high profile’ (Vodicka 2018a, Vodicka 2018b); this was the (post-)socialist, (post-)war context of my hometown in Croatia, where I lived, worked (as an urban designer), and also acted myself as a participant in research. All of these shaped me significantly as a person and a professional.

The term ‘high-profile’ relates to the fact that the Fir Vale neighbourhood has attracted significant attention both from the media and politicians in recent years, as described in the context chapter. The

term ‘over-researched’ is gaining increasing prominence within academia (Clark 2008, Sukarieh and Tannock 2013, Neal et al 2016, Taylor Aiken, 2017). Although Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) argue that the problem of over-researched communities in the social sciences is itself not well researched, there are many examples in which the issue has been acknowledged and reported on (see Clark 2008). However, in this particular case, as will be explained, the meaning of ‘over-researched’ takes on even greater significance, as it includes not only academic research but also other types of research conducted by various authorities and organisations as well as by journalists. As discussed by Clark (2008), there are several causes of research fatigue in over-researched contexts. Some of them are related to the problem of research repeatedly being conducted on the same specific topic, which constantly engages with the same people and which can be uninteresting to them. Other causes may relate to the quality, or lack of quality, of the research: for example, researchers may be using uncreative methods or, perhaps even more significantly, participants may perceive the outcomes of the research they have been involved in to have no tangible impact on their own circumstances.

Although the two notions of ‘high-profile’ and ‘over-researched’ may appear to go hand-in-hand in relation to research contexts, this is not necessarily the case. There may be contexts, which are over-researched but not necessarily high profile and vice versa. To clarify, not all over-researched contexts receive the amount of media attention that is being focused on Fir Vale, and they are also not always so closely related to a specific geographical territory as is the case in this relatively small neighbourhood. I therefore argue that, given the confluence of space and time in the neighbourhood in which this research is being conducted, it is a clear example a context which is both ‘high profile’ and ‘over-researched’.

According to Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) one way of addressing issues related to the problem of over-researching and research fatigue is to conduct more engaged participatory types of research. However, such approaches do not come without their own issues. It has been reported, for example, that participants have sometimes felt even more negative towards these new approaches, complaining both of the “‘ignorance’ and ‘missionary attitudes’ of many of the participatory researchers” and of the excessive time demands expected of them when engaging in such research (Sukarieh and Tannock 2013, p. 503). Therefore, in order to avoid the shortcomings that even these participatory and community approaches have, I decided on an approach that includes a range of different responsive methods and, in particular, those that offer possibilities for “sharing benefits” with the participants (Finney and Rishbeth 2006), as explained in the methodology chapter. Instead of focusing only on the final impact of the research and its potential eventually to bring substantial change, my approach was more focused on contributing to the life of the neighbourhood and its people, no matter how minor the scale of this might be, throughout the actual process of the research. This meant providing various

additional activities for locals that otherwise would not have been available to them and that were designed to be at least either enjoyable or pedagogical in nature, and preferably to be both.

The decision to share benefits was, however, not taken indiscriminately throughout the research, but instead was adopted in a responsive way, whenever it was most appropriate. For example, such an approach made more sense when engaging with children and youth than with professional adults. I also adopted other appropriate approaches to my research, in order to avoid over-researching and making excessive demands on people's time; for example, the use of observational methods, which were a central part of this research (though they would not necessarily have been relevant in other research). Such observational methods, however, raised another set of questions for me that were largely ethical in nature, such as the ethnographic gaze (Madden 2017), which will be explored later. In other words, it was essential to consider deeply the ethical issues related to each method. At times these could be addressed by combining different methods, in which the combination ensured an ethical complementarity, i.e. the ethical issues of each were resolved by the other. For example, issues related to over-researching were partly addressed by using other less demanding research methods such as ethnographic observations, whilst issues of 'problematic' observations were, partly, countered by using enjoyable and educational participatory methods in a responsive and sensitive way, as already described.

In addition to the manifestations of the problem of over-researching referred to by Clark (2008), as referred to above, my own experience of conducting research in Fir Vale brought out an additional issue. This concerned the fact that, whilst I was conducting my own research, I continually discovered other different research activities that were happening in the area. For example, I encountered several academic researchers, including PhD students, post-doctoral researchers and even masters students, planning or engaging in research in the area, albeit often focused on different topics and in different fields. In addition, besides such academic research, I also encountered other types of research being conducted by journalists and professionals from local and national authorities. With regard to this particular point, the following short vignette from my research journal briefly exemplifies some of the many dilemmas and challenges of working in this context:

One of the most interesting examples I have experienced was a situation that occurred when I was approached by a person who was doing research in the same neighbourhood, although the research was not academic in nature but rather more service based. I was asked by this person to help with the research, which I felt was impossible as it would have involved me in an endeavour that would have been not only very time consuming but also very rushed due to its tight deadline. The most problematic issue for me, however, was the fact that this research took an approach that was quite different to mine in a number of

ways, but most significantly from an ethical perspective. The dilemma that I faced was the acknowledgement that, on the one hand, this person had already helped me by providing me with some contacts within the neighbourhood, yet on the other hand, that this involvement would have possibly jeopardised the research identity and credibility that I had been committed to developing. Fortunately, the dilemma was addressed for me by the fact that there was not enough time to go through the University's ethical procedures to grant me the necessary clearance to be involved in the research even if I had wished to take part in it.

[researcher/ Goran / research journal, 2016]

This was one example, which showed how academic requirements in relation to ethics can play a direct and valuable role and are an integral aspect of the complex issues and challenges particularly characteristic of doing research in 'high-profile' and 'over researched' contexts. However, as will be argued later in this chapter, the existing ethics procedures occasionally felt inflexible and, at times, even unfit for purpose and almost unethical - or at least not ethical enough (as will be explained further in section 8.4.).

8.3. Reflection on methods

Observations

Because the focus of my research is on understanding how local public open spaces are being used, the use of observation methods was an important and inevitable part of the research. Observational methods are, however, always related to the issue of the ethnographic gaze, which was potentially problematic in this study, conducted as it was in an over-researched and particularly high-profile context.

During my fieldwork, I encountered several issues related to the ethnographic gaze. Right from the start, my intention to observe what was labelled a 'problematic' area could potentially support the existing negative narrative. On the other hand, however, a determination to find positive features in the neighbourhood could not only lead to a misrepresentation in my research, but even create another problematic narrative in which the area would be exoticised or even over-romanticised. However, in considering these potential traps and subjecting them to rigorous thought, I believe that I am already exemplifying one of the ways of addressing concerns related to the ethnographic gaze, namely through critical reflection. Furthermore, as argued by Madden (2017), although criticism of earlier understandings of the ethnographic gaze is necessary, this concept has been changing and evolving:

“While previous ways of seeing in ethnography may discomfort or offend contemporary practitioners, each and every generation of ethnographers has an ethnographic gaze that needs to be developed and reflexively critiqued with the intention of understanding how it is ourselves and our theoretical climates, how it is our own ways of seeing, that produce ethnographic representations.” (Madden 2017, p. 110)

Engaged activities

“Serious engagement with the issues that afflict marginalised and impoverished communities often requires activities other than conducting further research studies on the lives of the marginal and poor.” (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2013, p. 507)

The above quote reflects well my commitment from the start to use appropriate and engaged methods (as described in chapter 4), including activities that were not exclusively research focused and that ranged from design and making activities to mapping games. This same commitment also underpinned my decision to volunteer and to support other existing activities within the neighbourhood, which in themselves created the opportunity for a range of impacts, even if they were often minor.

As explained in chapter 4, the methods I developed can be described as responsive methods, in that they were developed as appropriate responses to particular situations in the research context. One of the problems that highlighted the need for this was my lack of success in managing to undertake the photovoice project as originally intended, despite several attempts. This experience meant that I became even more aware that, for the methods to be appropriate, I would need to develop them during rather than before my fieldwork, once I became more familiar with the neighbourhood and the many issues and challenges in it. I therefore had to constantly re-think my role as a researcher throughout the research process and to explore approaches that would be potentially beneficial to the neighbourhood (e.g. providing additional enjoyable as well as educational activities, or volunteering etc).

Explained in this way, the research experience may be understood to have progressed in a straightforward manner. However this was not the case, as it became ‘messy’ (Clark et al 2007; Cook 2009; Thomas-Hughes 2018) in a number of ways. The constant effort of trying out different methods and activities, whilst “never quite managing to completely pull them off” (as I commented in my research journal) or at least carry them out as I had planned, was a cause of many frustrations and concerns that I would fail to successfully conduct “proper research”. This was, in fact, one of the main

reasons for adding an additional research question, which I am now addressing in this chapter (What are the issues and challenges of doing ‘engaged research’ in a ‘high-profile’ and ‘over-researched’ context?). For me as a doctoral researcher, this was a very positive decision, as it relieved my stress to some extent and even provided me with a new enthusiasm and energy for my research. Furthermore, over the period of the study, I believed more and more strongly that it was a very important question to address in order to inform other research of this type in the future. On reflection, I would argue that engaging in these various activities (instead of one Photovoice project) and using responsive research methods not only allowed me to “share many different benefits” (Finney and Rishbeth 2006) with local residents but also strengthened my research, as it enabled me to engage effectively and appropriately with a more diverse range of people in different settings and therefore to gain richer insights.

Developing and running these various activities brought another form of impact, this time on me, as they helped me to develop as a researcher, in particular as the engaged type of researcher that I had been striving to become. For example, they enhanced my skills in running creative participatory activities with different participants and audiences. Additionally, due to the educational nature of most of these activities, they also helped me to develop as a teacher; I am grateful for the opportunity to experience working with children and young people, as it was also beneficial for my teaching within higher education. Most importantly, they reinforced my understanding that developing such skills is crucial not only for researchers and educators, but also for urban practitioners, as will be further elaborated in chapter 9.

8.4. Reflection on the ethics

Based on my years spent in the neighbourhood, I would describe the people of Fir Vale, particularly those present in public outdoor spaces, as generally welcoming and open for interaction. Indeed from my personal experience, I would argue that they are often more open than many people in other parts of the city, including the neighbourhood in which I live, which, though still ethnically diverse, is also more affluent (and not perceived as challenging to the same extent as Fir Vale). I have not only observed this but actually experienced it myself on numerous occasions in the neighbourhood, such as when I have been invited, often randomly, to take part in various conversations, games, sport activities etc, and when, on several occasions, I have even been offered food. This has ranged from being offered locally grown wild berries by Roma children, who were picking them as I walked past, to being invited to a barbecue meal by a group of Arab students in the park.

When approached to take part in the research, however, the reactions from most locals were relatively negative. The two main reasons they gave for this were boredom with the attention given to the area

and the need to sign an official consent form on paper. I therefore needed to develop another approach, especially with short, informal interviews in public open spaces (e.g, photo stimulated interviews on site, as explained in chapter 4). After exploring options in discussion with my research supervision group (TUO) and gaining ethical approval through the University's ethics procedures, my approach consisted of clearly explaining the research to the participants and providing them with a simple 'info sheet' about it, including an invitation to make contact with me later if needed. This meant that anonymised and informed consent was gained without requiring them to sign anything on paper. It also meant that I would not audio record the conversations in order to keep the experience as informal and natural as possible. My experience with this corresponded directly with the challenges faced by Hall (2009) in her ethnographic research; she also adopted a very similar approach.

Reflecting on this experience, I became aware of another issue of particular relevance to over-researched contexts, namely a procedural one related to university ethics procedures. With an increasing number and range of researchers in the area (as described earlier in 8.1), including masters students, for example, there is a need to reflect on and possibly reconsider the ways in which ethics are handled. A formulaic approach to dealing with issues of consent, as can be encouraged by official procedures and practices, for example, is arguably inappropriate for such over-researched and high profile contexts as Fir Vale. I must emphasise here that I am not suggesting that ethical issues, such as the need for informed consent, should be neglected. But I am suggesting that such 'tick box' approaches in the official process can discourage a deeper and more sensitive consideration of context. Instead there needs to be a commitment to deeper recognition of the particular issues that arise in such over-researched contexts by potential researchers. This would include a continuous critical engagement with the existing procedures rather than simply 'ticking the boxes'.

One of the recommendations emerging from this, then, is the need to enhance personal integrity and responsibility and to continuously re-think critically all approaches that are assumed to be appropriate. I would further argue for supervisors of, especially masters, students to pay particular attention to this issue and to reflect themselves on the impact of sending their students into what might be seen as over-researched areas, even if they would be able to gain ethical clearance via the university's application process.

Although I am not claiming that my own approach is a recipe for conducting research ethically in such contexts (indeed I am arguing that there is no recipe), I have tried to address some of my own concerns in the following ways: my commitment to sharing benefits with participants; long term engagement in the neighbourhood; participation in various local volunteering activities; and constant awareness, debates and reflection, especially within my research group TUO, related to the pervasive and dynamic issues of ethics etc. Furthermore, I have throughout the research process engaged with

relevant debates on such issues; for example, raising the issues in my presentations (e.g. Vodicka 2018a) and speaking on a panel on ‘over-researched places’ at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in 2018 (organised by Cat Button and Gerald Taylor Aiken). I would argue, however, that there are not enough such opportunities to discuss issues related to over-researched contexts (the previous panel on this theme at the RGS-IBG conference, organised by Sarah Neal and Hannah Jones, was held back in 2014); and, where such opportunities for discussion are organised, it tends to be in the disciplines of geography and sociology. It is, however, crucial to raise awareness of ‘over-researching’ across other disciplines, such as within urban design and planning related research practices.

The following example from my research perhaps illustrates more the challenges of attempting to do engaged research within a neighbourhood that is less affluent rather than focusing on its ‘over-researched’ nature; these characteristics nevertheless often seem to be inter-related, as in the case of Fir Vale. At an early stage of this research, I was involved with a local architectural design practice in an application for funding to support the creation of a research base within some premises in the neighbourhood, which could be used flexibly for a range of activities to contribute to engaged research. At the time this was well-intentioned as a strategy to build relationships with other organisations. However, reflecting on this from today’s perspective, I am now aware that this would have possibly not only taken away funding from other more established organisations in the area that also support local jobs, but also aroused suspicion and created additional tensions within the area. In other words, embarking on such a development without first understanding the dynamics within the area would not have been helpful to the neighbourhood. Although with hindsight this seems obvious, such considerations are often overlooked; this can be particularly the case with eager, ambitious, yet often inexperienced researchers and practitioners who have the best intentions to make a difference. This is therefore an important lesson to be shared with and considered by future researchers and practitioners. I am not suggesting that such initiatives should be avoided, as fresh ideas and energy are sometimes necessary in such contexts; the point is that it is essential first to have a deep awareness of the local issues before embarking on such developments and then, if going ahead, to proceed in ways which are locally beneficial rather than potentially detrimental.

Most importantly, this reinforces once again the necessity for constant critical reflection and contextual understanding of existing dynamics, even when we believe our approach is considerate and ethical. This is particularly crucial when working (as researchers, practitioners and/or educators) in over-researched and high profile contexts.

8.5. Researcher's positionality and background(s)

Professional background: designer or not?

My starting point with this research involved engaging with scholarship emanating mostly from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and geography. The purpose of this was to enable me to understand better the social dynamics of ethnically diverse neighbourhoods with a view to relating it directly to public open spaces and, being a designer, to the field of urban design. The key driver of this decision was the lack of significant engagement with these themes within urban design itself, as discussed in the literature review (chapter 3). Throughout my research, however, I experienced shifts in my thinking in relation to specific approaches to doing research in design. As I now reflect on the process, I would argue that during the early stages I was 'seduced' by the work of colleagues from these other disciplines, which offered nuanced understandings of sociability within public spaces.



Figure 8.1. Mapping intercultural encounters in Fir Vale

Indeed my initial interest in and motivation for committing myself to doing a PhD, which was about developing research that would support further development of my practice, appears at that point to have been side-tracked. I must also admit that I even started to question the necessity and adequacy of more design inspired and focused approaches. This was particularly the case when I began to realise that transferring the dynamics and complexities of everyday living into interesting, or even ‘beautiful’ looking, visuals seems to flatten and over-simplify the experience of living in a city. Having originally intended to create such visuals, I made an attempt to do so by producing the map of intercultural encounters seen in figure 8.1. However, though I believe that such maps can be perceived as creative in many ways, I realised that it represents an area of Fir Vale in a way which cannot capture the vibrancy and dynamism of the public open spaces. Instead, it offers a reductive, decontextualised, almost petrified version of the neighbourhood, which distracts from the reality of life there, especially if observed in the absence of any accompanying narrative. As a design tool, this risks misleading the designers and stimulating inappropriate interventions. I therefore decided to limit my use of such visuals when representing the neighbourhood through my qualitative data.

I believe that such issues are a concern and argue that they need to be explored further. Nevertheless, I did find a way of drawing on my design skills, for example when I found myself using maps and drawings as tools during the process of analysing my data (as explained in 4.3. Analytical approaches), building on my visual approaches to learning and understanding. The outcome was that my research maps and diagrams have been used not as a final presentational tool but as an approach taken to analysing data in particular, as well as a way of navigating and communicating the research structure and its development.

Over time, I began to accept the value of my design background, though always with a level of criticality. An early example of this was during my recorded walks, when it became clear that my existing urban design-related ‘knowledge’ was in fact valuable. To clarify, being immersed in the ‘here and now’ often prompted me to notice and reflect not only on social life and its relation to wider socio-economic structural forces, but also on spatial matters, such as scale, materiality, street profiles etc. I also found myself reflecting on different theories and practices in urban design, such as the idea of ‘prototyping’ interventions or of developing play-related initiatives (to be explored further in the next chapter). This made me aware of my own positionality as a designer; I realised that I should not deny this, but rather understand it as an asset that would distinguish my work by enabling me to bring a fresh viewpoint, different from related work in other disciplines. A further distinctive characteristic that stems from my experience of being a designer was that I brought a more applied and practical approach to research, a commitment to the research process being related directly to urban design practice (to be further explored in chapter 9.)

Eventually, then, I found a way of combining my approaches as a designer and a social scientist, enabling me to find a valuable meeting point between the two. I would now argue that the combination of a deep ethnographic approach with design and drawing related methods, as have been used in this research (and as also seen in the work of Suzanne Hall, Clare Rishbeth, Nishat Awan, to name but a few), is an appropriate and powerful approach to conducting research into the everyday complexities of culturally and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. Furthermore, other design related participatory methods used in this research (e.g. participatory photography, designing/making and mapping activities) enabled a more engaged agenda to be realised. For instance, although the Stagehands project could have been more tightly related to my research questions (as explained in the methodology chapter), the decision to teach participants freehand and digital sketching and to include co-designing/making, revealed that the types of skill that design practitioners can bring have great potential in social sciences research.

Personal background

Working in the context of Fir Vale and engaging with many different people, including different age groups, brought some personal opportunities and challenges. During my fieldwork, I found that connecting on a personal level with people from a range of backgrounds played an important role in the research process. These moments of connection were highly varied, but they often intersected with aspects of my own background. My experiences through the years suggest that I appear to others as a white, middle aged, arguably heterosexual, and generally not unusual looking man. However, whilst in Fir Vale, I often felt that an inherently significant characteristic of mine was that of being a foreigner, which becomes most obvious to others when they hear my accent. On many occasions this afforded moments of connection, as people would often be interested in finding out more about where I was from, about my accent, my first name, my surname (although I am Croatian, my surname is actually a common Slovak and Czech surname that the Roma were familiar with), my relationship to Sheffield etc. It also led to conversations on a number of other topics related to Yugoslavia/Croatia: tourism (usually with adult British people and youngsters from different backgrounds); the war in the nineties (again usually with adult British people); shared experiences of living through wartime and sometimes even about being forcefully displaced and a refugee (this time with adults whose background was from other countries that have relatively recently experienced war, such as Yemen, Congo, Eritrea etc); our experiences of communism (with adults from East European countries); and sport (with a wide range of people, especially during the 2016 Olympics). Further examples included having chats about food, music, languages (and their similarities, differences and inter-relationships with their own languages), which often turned out to be interesting and sometimes surprising. One particularly interesting conversation in one of the local shops concerned a song that the Kurdish shop owner was playing. The conversation developed into a spontaneous analysis of the different sounds

and samples used in it; these included parts of a famous Balkan song, well known to me, which was directly inspired by Roma culture and which, in that particular version, was rather unusually being performed as a duet by a Serbian and a Polish singer. The owner seemed genuinely surprised by this information, but also pleased that he had found a new ‘connection’ between himself and his customers, thanks both to his own musical taste and to the phenomenon of worldwide, transcultural exchange.

Although all of this may sound obvious, even trivial, the role of personal qualities and skills is being increasingly recognised within academic research, especially within engaged and/or co-produced types of research (Campbell and Vanderhoven 2016)⁵. This also reminds me of moments in the early stages of my research journey, when I found it encouraging and valuable to hear similar stories from more experienced researchers, as they enabled me to recognise that such experiences are in fact part of the research process. One example of this was a talk by Suzanne Hall that I attended at a very early stage of my research, in which she shared an anecdote about how her research team was struggling to involve one particular shop owner, a crucial representative of the community, in their research, until one of the researchers made a ‘connection’ with that person through their mutual love of football. The integration of my own personal experiences into my research, including my fieldwork, as described in this section, leads me to argue for the importance of sharing rather than trying to suppress them. It is, however, also important to reflect on them and how they impacted on the process of data generation. Interestingly, this aspect of my research also helped me to reconcile one other concern I occasionally had as a researcher, namely that I was a mature student. Although this was for me not a major issue, I nevertheless found it encouraging that my own wide-ranging experiences over the years in fact enriched my research by enabling such moments of connection.

On the other hand, I also experienced some challenging situations on a personal level, some of which related to working with children and youth in particular. Sometimes it involved comments on my looks, age, gesticulations and accent, albeit not necessarily in a purely malicious way. Indeed the nature of such comments tended to be influenced by who was making them. When coming from younger children, for example, they appeared to be light-hearted, probably related to the children’s natural curiosity. When it was coming from teenage boys, however, the comments felt different and often made me feel uncomfortable. On reflection, I found situations, in which I engaged with teenage boys, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds the most challenging of all, though I still managed to cope with them and with some success.

⁵ As explained in chapter 4, although I am not referring to my research as co-production but rather as ‘engaged research’, the many overlaps are obvious and relevant to both; therefore referring to the report ‘Knowledge That Matters: Realising the Potential of Co-Production’ by Campbell and Vanderhoven (2016) is, I believe, appropriate.

One particularly unusual situation occurred when I was accused by a participant of pretending to be Scottish: “Oooh, so you are foreign too - but why then do you pretend so hard to sound Scottish?”. However, as mentioned earlier, my accent was also an advantage, indeed perceived favourably, on many other occasions. All of these are aspects of working with children and youngsters, to which teachers and youth workers must be accustomed; but it was not something I had thought about prior to starting this research. Engaging in this type of research has indeed been a demanding task, both professionally and personally. When undertaking such research, it is necessary to acknowledge and be aware of this, in order to prepare for it as far as possible. Having support from my supervisors, other colleagues, as well as friends, has been crucial in developing my resilience as a researcher and as a person, over the last four years.

8.6. Conducting doctoral research

Looking back at the process of doing this research (see the timeline in figure 8.2.), especially in relation to its engaged nature, I find it useful to reflect on the fact that it is doctoral research. This has brought disadvantages as well as advantages, as will be discussed in this section.

One particular issue that I experienced was related to the absence of funding (apart from a small amount that I accessed from the University to buy cheap cameras for the work placement activities). Not having additional funding to offer to the people, groups and organisations I engaged with could be seen as a disadvantage. This is certainly partly the case; however, for me, the fact that this was doctoral research meant that I could compensate for not being able to access funding by being able to offer my time and skills in different ways. In some cases, the possibility of committing myself to volunteering over a longer period of time proved to be particularly valuable. This may not have been the case if, for instance, the research had been a short-term project that was being managed alongside a full time academic job. It also meant that a slower, more responsive approach was possible, which I would argue was a crucial characteristic of my research. It is possible that having research funding would mean that the overall dynamic would have been very different, probably in both positive and negative ways. For example, on the positive side, although I did have the invaluable support of my supervision group (TUO), I can imagine how having a team of researchers working on the same project and drawing on different research and personal skills as well as diverse backgrounds would have been beneficial.

One of the privileges of doing ‘my own’ research as a doctoral study was that, although I experienced many challenges, such as those described above in relation to conducting some of my research activities, it meant that I was able to be responsive and to learn from the challenges. One of the lessons learnt early on was always to have prepared other alternative activities, sometimes even

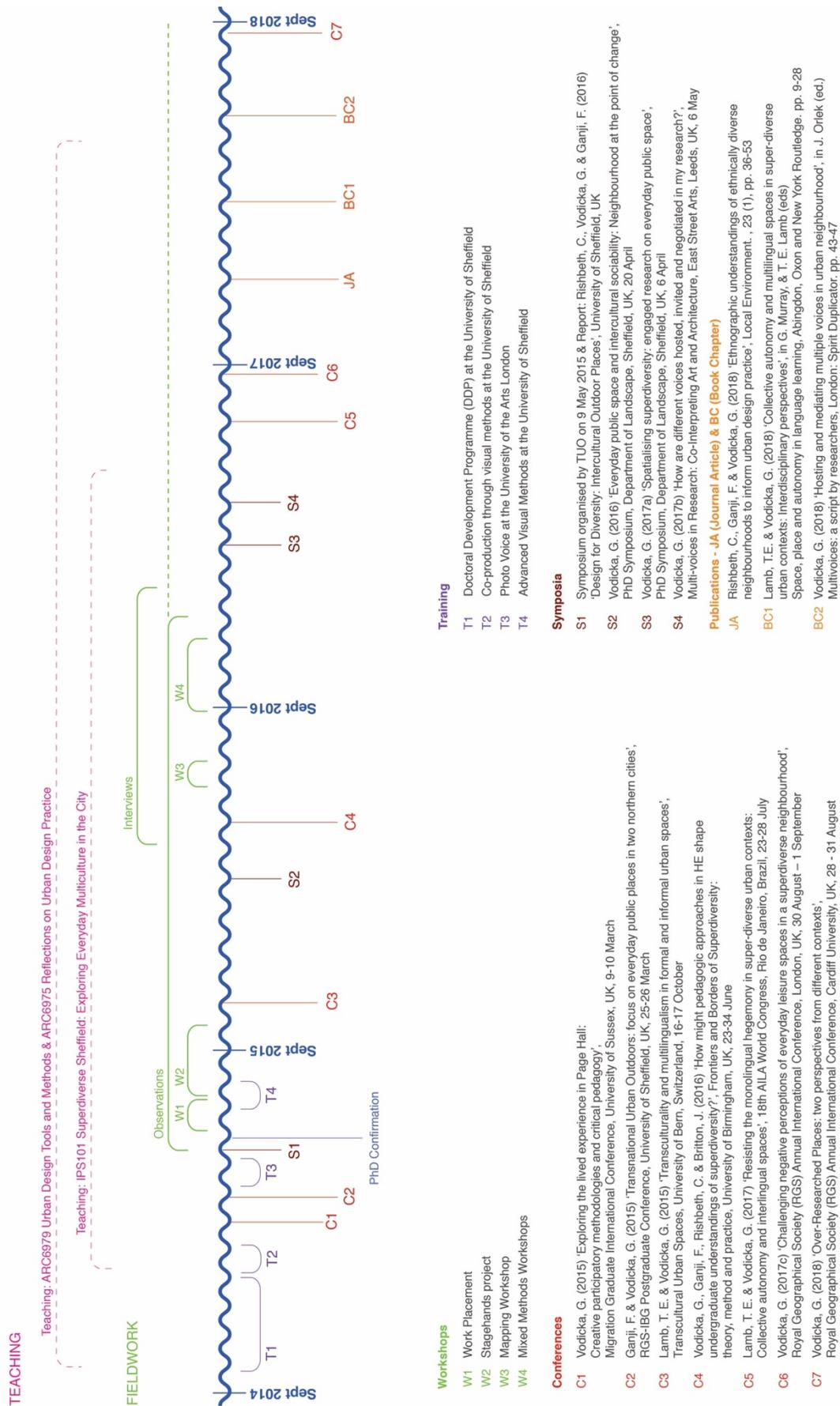


Figure 8.2. Diagram showing PhD process timeline

several (i.e. plan B, C, D etc.), in case things did not go according to plan. Another related lesson was the realisation that sometimes these ‘failures’ were also due to my general commitment to not being a ‘pushy’ researcher in any way. This brought both advantages (acting in a highly ethical manner, or at least striving to do so) and disadvantages (possibly missing out on significant insights). This is a dilemma that I will rightly need to continue to reflect on as a researcher.

As mentioned earlier, over the last few years, thanks to having a relatively flexible diary as a student, I have been able to offer my support in various ways to ‘the neighbourhood’ (its individuals, groups and organisations). Some of these were directly related to my professional skills and some less so. For example, helping out in clean-up activities only required a willingness to spend time on it rather than any special skills, whereas organising participatory design, making and mapping workshops clearly did require specific skills. Other examples of my engagement included: helping a local student with her essay on local community organisations; co-designing a logo for the newly formed Roma United Football Club, which was later printed onto the team kit; and supporting a local organisation with the development and delivery of a ‘Roma Culture and Language Course’, aimed at professionals working with people from Roma communities. In line with this, I was also invited to support the Sheffield Roma Network at the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Migration meeting in the House of Lords in July 2018. A further activity has been the on-going development of the ‘Common Ground’ project, which is aimed at creating a community outdoor space in the backyard of one of the most active local organisations. This has included not only the co-organisation of activities in the space, but also support for funding applications, some of which have been successful.

It is also worth highlighting here that I am both a mature student with years of professional experience, and a relatively local resident (having already lived in Sheffield for several years prior to starting this research), and both of these factors have been significant in enhancing my fieldwork. They enabled me, for example, to build on some of my existing relationships in Sheffield and bring them to Fir Vale with me, as was the case with the designing and making workshops, which were part of the Stagehands project. This particular project turned out to be an example of the ways in which design and making related activities have the capacity to engage youth in out-of-school activities. Although the majority of participants were boys, given that they outnumbered girls in this particular youth club, there were also a number of girls who enjoyed them. A particularly interesting example of this was a 15-year-old Roma girl who approached us to ask if she could use Facebook on our computers, but who ended up immersed for almost two full hours in sketching and designing, using 3D model making software with our help. This felt positive and empowering, especially when at the end she commented “and I’ve always thought I’m rubbish at everything”. Another comment made later by one of the youth workers, that he had never seen her being so focused and interested in anything they had ever done, was also telling. I believe that such moments can be interpreted as

moments of impact, albeit on an individual level, which were in fact side effects of the research process. Indeed, I would argue that my personal and professional experiences enabled me to develop engaged activities, which, even if not always directly related to my research focus, led to a range of impact not only as a result of the research, but throughout the research process itself, as also argued by Campbell and Vanderhoven (2016) and Pain et al (2016).

In summary, the fact that this was a PhD research project provided me with relative freedom to re-define and re-shape my research methods during the process. It was an invaluable opportunity to learn not only different approaches and methods but, perhaps even more importantly, to learn to accept and embrace the uncertainty and messiness of this type of research. Along the way, this has of course been the cause of some frustration and stress, but I was fortunate to have strong support through my supervision. I am able to look back at it all as an inherent part of my development as a researcher (Maxey 1999; Jarvis 2006; Callary et al 2012).

8.7. Conclusion

This research has been seen as an opportunity to explore ways of understanding public space related issues within ethnically diverse neighbourhood and building a bridge to urban design practice. I believe this has been successfully achieved, albeit arguably not in ways that were initially envisaged. However, although my doctoral work has been an exploratory and learning experience, I would argue that it has provided me with much more. For instance, not only have I had the chance to develop as a researcher, I have also had the opportunity to develop as an educator, and to do so in a way that has allowed each of these aspects of my development to complement each other throughout the process. Furthermore, although at times it did not feel this way, my personal motivation for this research to impact my practice has been achieved, as it has led to me re-thinking my own, as well as more widely established, understandings of urban design practice, in which research and pedagogy are embedded at its core (to be further expanded on in chapter 9).

The whole process of my research has undoubtedly been a learning activity, not only developing me as a researcher, but also a better equipped and more experienced professional. Additionally, this research was always envisaged as a way of initiating longer-term and broader engagement with the area and its people, either as a practitioner, researcher or educator or in some combination of all three. This has in fact been developing successfully, mainly through the 'Common Ground', which is partly informed and supported by this research. It will later include further engagement as a practitioner and possibly even as an educator through the development of live design and making studio project with MArch students, though students would be engaged in contributing to, rather than researching on, the neighbourhood. This will be made possible because I have developed relationships and built trust within the neighbourhood over the years and would make sure that student activities were based on local needs as identified through my research and active participation there.

Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of the research, in which I have tried to bridge understandings of intercultural sociability between those found in scholarship from geography and sociology and those in urban design practice, was also planned partly with an eye on the future. This aspect of my research was intended as preparation for possible future collaborative cross-disciplinary or cross-sectoral research projects in other neighbourhoods and cities, which would be supported by appropriate funding and a team of researchers and collaborators.

Overall, I would describe the four years spent working on these projects as the most productive and transformative years of my life, as they have allowed my personal and professional experiences to jointly shape my new found trajectory as a researcher, educator and practitioner.

Chapter 9

Implications for practice: Urban Design as boundary-crossing engagement

9.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the implications for urban design practice that have emerged from this research conducted on public open spaces in Fir Vale. It questions established understandings of urban design practice and offers projections for possible future ways of practising. Although the focus is on appropriate engagement particularly within ethnically diverse, usually less affluent, parts of cities (as exemplified by Fir Vale in Sheffield), I will argue that its implications extend more widely and into a range of contexts. The discussion directly draws on the literature review (chapter 3), the research findings (chapters 5, 6, 7), and the reflective interlude (chapter 8), as well as on my wider engagements during the PhD process (see also figure 8.2. in chapter 8), and my teaching in particular. It is also further underpinned by reflections on my professional experience within the field of the built environment developed over a decade.

Drawing on relational thinking on space, as espoused in the fields of geography, philosophy and sociology (e.g. Massey, Amin, Latour, Deleuze and Guattari), this chapter further explores the ways in which such thinking can be embedded within urban design practice. As also argued by others (e.g. Tornaghi 2014, Udall and Vardy 2017) this entails re-thinking the nature of knowledge in relation to urban design, in other words its epistemology. It raises questions regarding who holds knowledge, where it is located, and what it entails, as well as questions about the recognition, relevance and value of different types of knowledge. As explained in the methodology chapter (chapter 4), this has underpinned the methodological choices in my research from the start. In the same vein, it has influenced my development of the construct of contextualised convivialities, as this construct argues for highly situated and nuance understandings, in this case, of conviviality as a phenomenon crucial for living in increasingly diverse societies.

This is not to say that the role of professional knowledge is not important; it should, however, be supported by other types of knowledge and constructed in more inclusive ways. The argument is not for the role of professionals to be marginalised but to be changed and to become responsive to the complexities of everyday living, especially in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. This chapter also suggests that it should be open to “boundary-crossing” (Rios and Watkins 2015), a proposal, which will be further explored here through consideration of several examples ranging from education through to initiatives beyond the design profession.

As touched upon in the literature review (chapter 3), and as also argued by Tornaghi and Knierbien (2014), the understanding of space within the modernist approach has been focused on the physical and material, with its socio-economic complexities seen as irrelevant and completely ignored. Furthermore, they argue that these:

“...absolute space concepts are still prevalent in theory and practice, and tend to reduce public space to a container (without life and human experience). Such narrow concepts of space are influenced by perceived geometries that can be quantified by measuring and counting. The criticism directed at their proponents emphasises that architects, planners and colleagues from related fields of spatial art implicitly or explicitly disregard social circumstances, political alternatives and cultural values when intervening in public spaces.”

(Tornaghi and Knierbien 2014, p. 5)

On the other hand, whilst this position clearly has strong foundations, it is also possible to find other more optimistic, socially oriented visions of urban design:

“More than simply knowledge about the city, urban design involves the imaginative task of inventing urban futures, a combination of both critical and creative thinking. Urban design is driven by a range of desires for a better future in someone’s terms – for beauty, safety, freedom, pleasure, sustainability, identity, happiness, privacy, status, power.”

(Dovey 2016, p. 6)

Whilst a discussion of the origins of the urban design field and its precise position within scholarship and practice as related to the built environment (see Madanipour 1997, Inam 2011, Cremona 2014) is beyond the scope and focus of this research, the above quote by Dovey (2016) emphasises the broader and more open understanding of urban design as adopted within this thesis.

The implication of this positioning is that the focus here is more on the production of space, including all of the attendant complexities, than on a particular field, such as urban design, as conventionally

defined by problematic sector and discipline framed boundaries. In line with Awan et al's (2011) discussion of Lefebvre's work (1991), the approach here acknowledges the understanding that production of space is not only achieved by professionals. The production of space is embedded in a broad social context, in which social space is perceived as a shared enterprise (including contributions from others, non-professionals); it is dynamic (not about static objects but the "continuous cycle" (Awan et al 2011 p. 29) of people and processes); and it is political (as a space in which people live and which is "charged with the dynamics of power/empowerment, interaction/isolation, control/freedom and so on" (Awan et al 2011 p. 30)).

These understandings informed my initial approach to the research but were also reiterated throughout the research process. The context of my research (the Fir Vale area) actually contributed further insights into a range of re/manifestations of different ways of space production within the neighbourhood, as seen from the many examples in previous chapters. One of the most relevant examples of this is related to what could be described as 'prototyping'. Prototyping is one of the emerging approaches to urban design often referred to as DIY or tactical urbanism (Lydon and Garcia, 2015) and includes piloting and prototyping interventions in public spaces to see how these are going to be accepted, or not, by users. The intention is to avoid investing too much funding into spaces that may prove to be 'unsuccessful' or not used as envisaged by designers. There are a number of examples of how this approach has been applied. One of them is the Market Street Prototyping Festival in San Francisco, which included over twenty selected projects to be made over a three-day festival, of which some were then further selected for a longer incubation period. Other examples from around the world of how these temporary 'pilots' or 'prototypes' are being used to support urban design process include Jan Gehl's world-renowned practice, which is one of the strongest supporters of this approach as seen in some of their reports and publications such as 'Prototyping San Jose' or 'Planning by Doing'. The main aim of prototyping is to foster the creation of appropriate and better places in the longer term.

In this chapter, I argue that many of the everyday spatial practices existing in Fir Vale could be seen, understood and acknowledged as 'pilot' or 'prototyping' activities from which much could be learnt. One important factor to note is the shift in the 'who' of these interventions, as they were not carried out by design professionals but by local people. This provides evidence of how the people of Fir Vale, in this case even children, act as crucial agents in spatial production through their daily use and appropriation of local public spaces; they could, therefore, be considered as urban designers themselves. Understanding the production of space in this sense means that other ways of engaging with it in practice (extending beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries) are also necessary. A socially and critically committed spatial practice is required, which includes an engagement with social, political and urban studies, whilst not losing the design related ways of thinking and working.

In a similar way, but this time approaching from the ‘other side’, the spectrum of academic theory, which is usually less concerned with the practical, there seems to be an increasing recognition of the need to bridge theory and practice when dealing with spatial production, Such recognition is, however, still rare. One example can be seen in the work of the geographers Koch and Latham (2012b, p. 527), who, in a useful critique of a specific public space, acknowledge that transforming public space is complex and uncertain and that “we must continue thinking about public space with reference to political and communicative ideals, but we also need to be attuned to the material and practical affordances they offer”.

Such ideas underpinned the main approach to my research, so that although the primary focus of interest was on exploring public open space and its use, the research process involved engagement not only with research but also with practice. My study has thus been situated precisely in this in-betweenness of practice and theory in relation to spatial production, as manifested in the public spaces of a specific superdiverse neighbourhood. In this way my engaged approach to research also offers an opportunity for a wider discussion on urban design practice, as will be argued further. The research shows the importance of specificities of everyday public spaces for intercultural sociability, as illustrated through the lens of Sennett’s porous membranes (2018). It also acknowledges that these are shaped by complex forces and relationships going beyond the spatial realm, in other words by the context in its broadest meaning. This is one aspect of the construct of contextualised convivialities, which has been introduced earlier; the other aspect concerns the importance of recognising the many different qualities and significance of convivial interactions between people within these spaces.

If it is within this complex setting that urban design practice needs to operate, it clearly reveals many deficiencies in most mainstream ways of designing, exposing them as unfit for purpose (e.g. Awan et al. 201; Minton 2012). It suggests that a much wider reaching, open-minded and considerate approach, with appropriate methods of engagement, is necessary. Amongst other things, the issues discussed above support the importance of ethnographic research in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods as a necessary step in urban design practice, as this develops an understanding of the nuances in the use of public spaces, as argued by Rishbeth et al. (2018) in our meta synthesis of ethnographic research mainly from the disciplines of geography and sociology. The complexity of such contexts also questions the established approaches within design practice which reflect the perceived adequacy of ‘universal design for all’, as also recently argued by Bianchin and Heylighen (2018), (though their work is not specifically focused on cultural and ethnic diversity). One of the main points they make relates to the need for users to participate in the design process in order to achieve just design. However, this clearly opens up the question of finding meaningful engagement processes.

My research has attempted to combine these two arguments, the importance of understandings of use of public spaces for design practice and the necessity for appropriate engagement with many actors within the design process. Although not a design project, the engaged nature of this research can still offer useful insights, especially if research is understood as an integral part of socially engaged urban practice, as will be argued next.

9.2. Boundary-crossing: research and practice

In this thesis, I argue the need for various kinds of boundary-crossing when engaging with local public open spaces. This involves researchers, urban practitioners, organisations, groups etc in transgressing different boundaries and developing greater openness to other ways of seeing the world. This means crossing boundaries, for example, between different types of knowledge, between sectors and disciplines, between practice and research, between education and practice, between organisations, networks, communities etc, and between design as concerned with physical space and design as concerned with people and the socio-political contexts in which they live. This has already been referred to in this thesis and will be further exemplified in this section.

As exemplified in this research, there are several reasons for arguing that research is important for urban design practice and therefore understood here as an integral part of socially engaged urban practice. The research has shown that it is important to try and understand the existing complexities of the context. This means going further than the established site analysis phase of design, primarily by having a much more grounded and situated approach that is underpinned by local knowledge. Without this, design related interventions are often unhelpful and also sometimes exacerbate existing issues or even create new ones (e.g. Blommaert's (2013) example in Antwerp mentioned in chapter 3). Recognising contextualised convivialities is one important step towards identifying possible ways of intervening in public space.

Although similar findings may still have emerged through different, more traditional research methods and been consistent with the claim made regarding the importance of research within practice, in the case of my own study the actual methods used were already based on participatory practice approaches, as explained in the methodology chapter (chapter 4). Some of the methods used, such as collaborative mapping activities with children and youth, were also about co-constructing knowledge; this is seen as one of the operations of spatial agency (Awan et al. 2011. p. 78), in which knowledge is understood as “a product of participative spatial encounters” again further supporting the inter-connections between research and practice. In the same publication Awan et al. (2011) showcase numerous examples, in which research methods have been successfully embedded within

practice in different ways, such as is represented in the work of Marjetica Potrč, Teddy Cruz and atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa), to name but a few.

My research, with its longitudinal engaged approach, has also been directly related to the process of place-making, and therefore practice, through my contribution to the still on-going 'Common Ground' project. This project aims to create a multi-purpose outdoor space in the unused backyard of one of the most active community organisations in the area. Perfectly centrally located within the neighbourhood, next to one of the most used street corners, it offers unlimited opportunities for creating an outdoor community hub and engaging with many of the issues present in the area. Although this is not going to be a public space, it nevertheless has the potential to become a new type of space in the area with an aspiration of becoming an inclusive space, perhaps in line with the Green Backyard in Peterborough, as discussed by Rogaly and Qureshi (2013), or some other examples such as spaces produced by aaa (e.g. ECObox, Passage 56). These types of spaces seem to have much potential for supporting a range of convivialities, especially in diverse neighbourhoods. Furthermore, the conviviality in these cases may be understood both as Illich's initial formulation (1973, p. 11) ("creative intercourse among persons and their environment") and in line with the "convivial turn" (Neal et al. 2013), as discussed in chapter 3. Although not fully public open spaces by definition, they are clearly not related to the so called POPS (as also mentioned in chapter 3); on the contrary, they are directly challenging neoliberal, profit driven local development. As such it is perhaps not surprising that some of them (as in the case of aaa's projects) have been recognised as 'public spaces' and included within the European Prize for Public Space. One way of describing these kinds of spaces could be as "community-organised public space" (Potrc 2017, p. 239), as explained by Potrc in her Soweto project, before going on to add "with all of the challenges that would entail going further". However, there is a need to be careful with these so-called 'self-built' semi-public spaces, as they could easily become exclusive (i.e. only for the group involved in their creation), if not properly set up and developed.

Bearing this in mind, these kinds of space still have the potential of becoming a 'new' type of micro-public (Amin 2008) and as such should be further encouraged within diverse neighbourhoods, as their benefits appear to be multiple. In comparison with 'ordinary' public spaces, these offer more suitable ways of "transgressing long-accumulated attitudes and practices towards the stranger" (Amin 2008, p. 10), and possibly even civic formation. As argued by atelier d'architecture autogérée (2017, p. 161) "to stimulate democratic engagement in the largest number of citizens, we need tools, knowledge, and places for testing new collective practices and initiatives". The challenges of making these remain substantial. The goal of the 'Common Ground' project is to act as a stepping stone towards co-constructing and accumulating knowledge through the project process, which has potential to create additional wider value for the neighbourhood.

At one point it was anticipated that development of this project/space and the activities related to its use would be part of this research in a more conventional way, but due to a range of circumstances, including prolonged and delayed funding applications, this has not been the case. However, this research has been contributing to the development of the space in an on-going way (as explained in chapters 4 and 8), including through the production of various texts and images helping to achieve the necessary funding for it (e.g. see Appendix B). Further contributions of this research have come through running participatory activities to explore possible and preferred uses of this space (as in the case of the workshops with children), as well as through supporting, organising and running some activities within the space as a way of testing the possible uses of it. As referred to above, prototyping as part of project development is often one of the many tactics of socially engaged spatial practice. The work on this particular project exemplifies urban design as a boundary-crossing engagement, as well as the potential role of engaged research and of the researcher as an enabling practitioner, where there is long-term commitment, responsiveness, and readiness to share design-related, and other, skills. As an approach it appears well suited within ‘over-researched’ and ‘high-profile’ areas. My intention is to remain involved in the process of the backyard place-making and, potentially, even to develop a live project with students offering further support and a platform for mutual learning. By so doing, I will ensure that the educational aspect of socially engaged urban practice is incorporated, as will be further discussed later.

9.3. Acknowledging other factors and actors

As argued in the previous chapter, it is crucial that research engagement is conducted in appropriate ways, especially when focusing on cultural diversity issues and when working in ‘high profile’ and ‘over researched’ contexts. If research is understood as an integral part of practice, it could be argued that the case study of this research and the ethics of its engaged process might therefore provide relevant insights for practice too.

Although arguing for an appropriate, ethically driven approach to practice may seem to be common sense, it is not straightforward to achieve. One specific aspect of this is that the urban practitioner needs to engage with a variety of actors and stakeholders who are all responding to a multiplicity of forces. It is important that this is done in an open-minded and sensitive way, allowing for relationships and true collaborations to develop. In this approach, recognising, acknowledging and appreciating the existing work of local actors within this broad notion of spatial production, from individuals to groups and organisations, is an important starting point. However, as exemplified in this research, this can be easier with some than with others. Apart from the need to draw on inter-personal skills, it is also about intention and approach. For instance, one aspect that made a difference

at one point in this research was my clear initial commitment to longer-term engagement, which over time helped build trust.

It is also necessary to try and understand the existing relationships between the various actors involved in shaping the socio-spatial life of the neighbourhood. These may range from close collaborations among some to clear animosities among others. As argued by Koutrolidou (2014, p. 337), based on research in the Hackney area of London, “local relations among groups are affected by several complementary factors that also need consideration - factors such as competitions, discrimination and inequalities, and past histories, among others”. Most of these factors were evident in the Fir Vale area too. One particularly obvious cause of tensions is competition, mostly with regard to funding, for which many local actors have to compete with each other and which is further closely related to competition over services they each may be providing. Over the years, this combination may breed distrust and animosities. The same might be said about the relationships with non-local actors, such as politicians and the representatives of various authorities. In the examples provided, which have been specifically focused on public spaces and their related issues (e.g. littering, loitering), there seems to have been two main causes of irritation according to some local actors. One of them is the perception that some of these non-local professionals tend to take a rushed, ‘quick-fix’ approach to tasks. The other is their apparent sense of superiority, assuming that they have all the right answers whilst ignoring underlying complexities. It is fair to acknowledge that these approaches and most other issues that have been referred to can be explained and understood as consequences of neoliberal austerity measures; however, they should still never be justified (or accepted).

All of the many tensions and conflicts related to public open spaces and their use, together with other macro structural forces that have been discussed, create highly complex conditions for the engagement of urban practitioners. Such practitioners therefore need not only to be aware of these complexities, but also able to approach them in an appropriate manner. Accordingly, this could support the argument for “boundary-crossing practice”, as originally argued by Rios and Watkins (2015, p. 217). In the example discussed by them, urban planners and policy makers in Sacramento, USA, were offered an opportunity to learn from an initiative that was self-organised by Hmong vendors, who were not built environment professionals. Amongst the many ways of exchanging knowledge during the project, Hmong vendors organised “a conference to build solidarity across racial and ethnic farming communities as well as with policy makers” (Rios and Watkins 2015, p. 217). This exemplifies how such broadly defined urban practice, inclusive and appreciative of different actors, can contribute not only to the main aim of making better places, but also through its processes even entail “creating new forms of solidarities and spaces for political action” (Rios and Watkins 2015, p. 217).

In the examples from Fir Vale, various interventions aimed at addressing different existing issues (clean-up and organised sports activities, public meetings, the ‘Common Ground’ project, use of classical music outside shops etc, as referred to in this thesis) provide examples of local practices engaging with public open space. I argue that it is important for urban practitioners to recognise, acknowledge and appreciate such actions, at least as a starting point. Although some of the interventions described are even in conflict with each other, it is exactly this conflict that acts as an invitation for civic engagement in search of change. In this sense, it is argued that these local conditions in Fir Vale represent emerging platforms for agonistic pluralism (Mouffe 2005) and therefore “a crucial setting for promoting democratic values” (Mostafavi 2017, p. 13). This is not to say that no ‘external’ intervention or support is needed, but that what is present could be understood, as argued by Cruz and Forman (2017, p. 185), as offering the potential for, “relevant projects forwarding socioeconomic inclusion”, which, according to them, actually emerges “from sites of scarcity, in the midst of the conflicts between geopolitical borders, natural resources, and marginal communities”. I argue that there is an important role for appropriately informed urban practitioners within such contextual entanglements.

According to Amin, any interventions in public spaces will merely be “tinkering on the edges”, incapable of addressing the wider structural issues that disadvantage communities; in order to “enhance social wellbeing and justice [...] People have to enter into public space as rightful citizens” (2008, p. 23). I would argue, however, that my explorations of the issues surrounding public open spaces have shown that interventions on any scale, if implemented in appropriate and creative ways and if they build on existing practices, could still potentially go beyond such “tinkering”. Furthermore, analysis of my experiences in Fir Vale arguably exemplifies that the tensions present within local public open spaces themselves stimulate the agency of many actors, thereby indirectly making these spaces potential settings for “social agonism and civic formation” (Amin 2008, p. 23.).

Understanding urban design as a boundary-crossing engagement also allows for recognition of some other initiatives identified within the area. The Fir Vale area has a long history of migration and change and there have been significant, often innovative, initiatives, some of which are still active and continuing to develop. One of the historic examples is the work of Chris Searle who was the head teacher of a local school in the 1990s. Inspired by Paolo Freire, arguably one of the most influential educators of the 20th century, Searle developed his own particular approaches to Freirean critical pedagogy. In order to realise his ideas on liberatory education that goes beyond the school, he developed initiatives that included and empowered local communities through enabling them to engage in co-production of stories/knowledge, conflict resolution activities, collaborative activism etc (Davis 2009; Gurnah 2009; Searle 1998). Searle’s goal was to try and create an inclusive curriculum for a “school of the world” that would reflect the lives of the area’s diverse students and communities.

Searle encouraged students to question and critique received wisdom (as represented by the English education system) and in doing so he promoted the voices of the “colonized”, which at the time were rarely heard in British schools (Gurnah 2009). He believed that students are the experts of their own cultures and therefore he enabled the creation of a series of books, which were written by students and their families about themselves and the histories of their communities. These were intended not only to be empowering for the authors, but also to support mutual exchange amongst students of various backgrounds and cultures.

Searle organised many public community-focused events in the school and also enabled local working-class residents (often from black and minority ethnic backgrounds) to become school governors and provide leadership to the school, creating an opportunity for everybody to reflect and to learn from each other. A particularly interesting situation arose in 1993, when the school was in danger of closure and when joint activist action took place, including students, staff and parents together making banners, posters and badges, and organising protests. During this time, strong support came from adult groups in the community and, as a result, the often challenging relations between different ethnic groups began to improve and signs of co-operation started to emerge (Davis 2009). This exemplifies how even the primary school curriculum, if rooted in and engaging with the everyday concerns of its students and their families, may influence the wider social life of the neighbourhood. It therefore has the potential to act as a boundary-crossing engagement not only between different communities, but also between different fields and, arguably, crossing over to urban design practice.

Searle’s work seems to be still remembered and appreciated by some, whilst others have less favourable memories. A former student of black origin, no longer resident in the area, referred to those experiences as empowering, whereas a white British parent of a child who attended the school at that time, although self-proclaimed as a ‘progressive’, had not wanted his child to be part of an “experiment”. It is impossible to know what impact Searle’s work might still have had in this ever-changing neighbourhood; however, my understanding of the context as described throughout this thesis leads me to argue that such kinds of approaches could be beneficial for this neighbourhood at the present time. Indeed, some initiatives in the neighbourhood do exist that at least in some way appear to ‘follow’ the legacy of this approach.

One example of a significant long-standing initiative is that of a local organisation, which was set up several decades ago with a focus on supporting specifically the Pakistani community. From the early days of my research, I spent (and continue to spend) time volunteering in the organisation, learning of the ways in which its experience over the years has developed and enabled them to grow. For instance, the focus of their work has been broadened to include ways of addressing specific challenges

in the area, such as its increasingly diverse population. This has indeed been reflected in the recent change of their name to accommodate these changes (i.e. from the Pakistan Advice and Community Association to Fir Vale Community Hub). A particularly relevant part of their work in the neighbourhood is their direct support, in many ways, of the Roma people. This support involves not only providing various services to individuals, but also helping to set up the Sheffield Roma Network as a key organisation working between the Roma people, other communities and authorities. These two organisations have since been collaborating on a range of issues in the area, for example attempting to address the tensions in public spaces and how these affect inter-community relationships. One initiative supporting this work is the ‘Common Ground’ project, mentioned earlier in this chapter, which is creating a “community-organised public space” (Potre 2017, p. 239). The work of these organisations can be seen as an example of boundary-crossing engagement, not only between different ethnic communities, but also between different areas of work as well as crossing over to urban design practice.

Whilst this example has illustrated the significance of continuous learning and adaptation over decades, it is not intended to devalue the work of other more recent initiatives, projects and organisations. Nevertheless, it highlights how important it is to set up and develop such initiatives in appropriate ways and without exacerbating tensions. Together with other organised practices referred to in previous chapters (e.g. litter-pickings or sports activities), these need to be acknowledged as examples of boundary-crossing engagement directly relevant to urban design practitioners and their work.

9.4. Boundary-crossing in education

As previously discussed, this research argues that understanding local conditions and complexities, especially in ethnically diverse urban areas, is a precondition for any meaningful engagement that is aimed at reshaping public spaces as everyday settings for socialisation. It also argues that the development of such understanding involves a context-responsive approach as well as the necessary set of skills. These include a wide spectrum of tools and methods ranging from different types of situated observations and participatory activities to negotiating skills. Therefore, it is crucial that urban practitioners are not only aware of this, but also equipped for adequate ethical engagement. The role of education for existing and, even more so, future practitioners is undeniable. There are many ways in which this could be achieved as will be discussed next.

Education of urban practitioners

Tornaghi and Knierbein (2014) argue that planning professionals should take inspiration from activists (community workers) and artists engaging in various forms with everyday public space. The reason for their argument is that such forms of engagement seem to represent a means of introducing socio-political dimensions into city making through the creation of inclusive and non-discriminatory processes. This is particularly relevant to the education of urban design/planning professionals. They also believe that special attention should be given to the development of professional skills, which acknowledge and respect cultural differences in urban spaces; this reflects their concerns that, quite often in planning/design education, such professional skills are not given enough attention. This leads them to suggest that planners and designers may learn from Freire's approach of combining social experience (reflection) with an action-based approach (action) to develop praxis. According to Tornaghi and Knierbein (2014), this could contribute to the development of public intervention strategies, creating tools for co-shaping public spaces.

Such an approach is in line with both the overall approach to this research and its recommendations for a pedagogical framework to support urban design as a boundary-crossing engagement. Although this may be crucial in the context of an ever-diversifying society, I would argue that such socially focused and driven pedagogical approaches are not straightforward to implement in the increasingly neoliberal context of higher education. Nonetheless, there are ways of achieving this, as I will demonstrate here by drawing on examples from my own teaching practice over the last four years, developed in parallel to and as part of this research. Furthermore, in many ways these can be described as boundary-crossing engagement.

In relation to the education of future practitioners, I have been involved in teaching on the MA in Urban Design programme at the Sheffield School of Architecture, which offers some insights into ways of approaching this challenge. The programme's focus is on community participation with the aim of exploring the challenges of uneven urban development and of rethinking the role of designers in the city-making process. This approach is, however, not typical of urban design education, which tend to be much more traditional and focused on producing professionals ready for the established market.

One module that I have been teaching (Urban Design Tools and Methods) is focused on exploring different tools and methods for engagement with the city and its residents. This is achieved through learning from the tools and methods used by boundary-crossing design practices from around the world and by involving students in testing and developing such ways of engaging with the people of Sheffield through weekly tasks; in other words, it involves experiential learning of practical skills

(such as different ways of observing, interviewing, mapping, using interactive models for co-designing activities, organising participatory public events in collaboration with local practices and organisations etc).⁶ These are crucial skills for future urban designers to be able to use in their practice, especially when working in challenging areas, as ethnically diverse neighbourhoods often are.

The other module⁷ (Reflections on Urban Design Practice) is aimed at looking at the complexity of conditions that are shaping the practice of urban design through exploration of various non-traditional practices and projects from different contexts. The focus is on recognising and dealing with multiple voices within the design process. It also involves enquiry into unconventional forms of urban development, including collective appropriation and stewardship of land and resources, such as commoning practices and community land trusts, some of which have been initiated by people of migrant background in different contexts. Again, I would propose this as a necessary approach to educating the engaged practitioners of the future. Such practitioners would not be trained to reproduce existing models, which risk exacerbating inequalities and which are mostly inappropriate for engaging with urban heterogeneity; instead they would be prepared to challenge the status-quo of urban design practice by finding more appropriate ways of practising, including in superdiverse neighbourhoods.

As well as acknowledging the engagement of non-professionals in the production of space, as referred to above, it is also important to acknowledge the role of other future professionals in this process as potentially important actors in shaping cities. Although this may be an even more challenging task due to existing disciplinary and sectoral boundaries, it is not an impossible one. One example of this is another module⁸ that I have been involved in teaching (The State of Sheffield: Global Perspectives of Local Issues). This was a cross-disciplinary, faculty-wide module focused on explorations and understandings of everyday multiculturalism within the city and taught to first year students within the Faculty of Social Sciences. Working in groups consisting of peers from different departments in the faculty, the students focused on a particular area of the city with the aim of understanding how people from diverse cultural backgrounds have been shaping, and were shaped by, the city. As revealed in many of their reflective statements, the use of primarily ethnographic methods and the collaboration across disciplines have opened up new perspectives on, as well as interest in, aspects of city making, specifically in relation to the notion of superdiversity (Vodicka et al. 2016). This might be seen as one

⁶ Urban Design Tools and Methods module has been co-developed with Cristina Cerulli, Beatrice De Carli and collaborators as part of the MA in Urban Design programme at the Sheffield School of Architecture, University of Sheffield.

⁷ Reflections on Urban Design Practice module has been co-developed with Cristina Cerulli as part of the MA in Urban Design programme at the Sheffield School of Architecture, University of Sheffield.

⁸ The State of Sheffield: Global Perspectives of Local Issues module consisted of several projects including Superdiverse Sheffield: Exploring Everyday Multiculturalism in the City which was developed by Clare Rishbeth in collaboration with academics from other departments of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Sheffield.

relevant approach for developing cultural competencies, not only amongst future planners and designers, as already mentioned (Rios 2015 and Agyeman and Ericson 2012), but also amongst other possible future actors in the production of space (i.e. in this case future professionals within different social sciences).

Many other forms of engaged teaching exist, for example ‘live projects’, which are of particular relevance for urban practitioners. In ‘live projects’ students find themselves working in the ‘real world’ and become agents working between research, practice and civic life (Cerulli et al. 2011). Live Projects may include design and building work, urban advocacy, community-based design, and various other modes of practice, expanding the meaning and the field of design and therefore acting as a boundary-crossing practice. One example of a ‘live project’, which I co-mentored in 2017⁹, was developed together with the South Yorkshire Housing Association (SYHA). This project involved students in engaging in creative ways with SYHA and other local organisations also working on housing issues, as well as with local residents from different parts of Sheffield. One of the outcomes was a set of publications providing a snapshot of people’s experiences of housing in Sheffield’s six constituencies. These were then delivered to local MPs in the spirit of urban advocacy. It is, however, important not to ignore the many potential challenges that these approaches to education may entail (Cerulli 2017), especially in ‘over-researched’ and/or ‘high-profile’ contexts.

It is also important not to forget existing urban design/planning professionals, as they should also have the opportunity to expand their knowledge and to re-evaluate their own practice. One successful example of how this can be achieved is the Challenging Practice programme run by ‘Architecture Sans Frontières – UK’. This is a charity with the aim of enabling architects and building professionals to gain skills, which can help empower impoverished communities by supporting them to create better living environments. The particular focus of their Challenging Practice, RIBA certified CPD programme, is on ethical engagement of professionals working with vulnerable groups. Although initially focused on working within the so called global South, more recently they have been adapting their approaches for working within many challenging areas of the so called global North as well.

Apart from providing examples of possible educational processes for urban practitioners and other professionals, my teaching on these modules during the process of my PhD has been an invaluable experience, as well as both directly shaping and being shaped by my research. In line with the overall position of this thesis, teaching could therefore be argued as an integral part of socially engaged urban

⁹ ‘The Sheffield Housing Conversations’ live project was co-developed with Tatjana Schneider as part of MA in Architecture programme at the Sheffield School of Architecture, University of Sheffield. For more info see: <http://www.liveprojects.org/2017/the-sheffield-housing-conversations/>

practice (as also argued by Fezer 2016). This argument could be further enhanced if it is acknowledged that one role of the engaged urban practitioner might be to educate other actors in the city-making process.

Education of other actors

Engagement with issues in the built environment in the context of wider societal complexities includes engaging with a diverse range of actors and agents. The approach to urban design practice as argued here acknowledges the need for urban practitioners to be able to offer educational support to some of these actors. However, in contrast to conventional urban design practice, in which urban designers can often view themselves as the expert professionals able to decide autonomously what is needed, in this case the socially driven urban practitioner is aware of the existing situated knowledge of the many actors and is open to sharing and exchanging knowledge.

This means first of all acknowledging the existing knowledge of the other actors, including those actors who may not necessarily be the most obvious ones to contribute to the task. As seen in examples from Fir Vale, apart from different organised groups and organisations, some of the most significant local actors are actually children. All of these actors together are shaping the public space with their own spatial practices, through organised (e.g. litter pick-ups) and spontaneous (e.g. play, hanging-out) actions, including (re)appropriating objects within places in diverse ways (even if these often create tensions). As argued earlier, all of these are important and should be taken into account by urban practitioners, especially if practice is focused on sociability and interactions amongst people; this indeed endorses the significance of the construct of contextualised convivialities. However, in addition to recognising and acknowledging these spatial practices, urban practitioners should be able to intervene in their (re)construction, albeit in ethical and just ways. As seen in some examples from this research, this could range from organising educational activities to community events supporting the process of creation of a new space (i.e. the 'Common Ground' project), all of which involve mutual learning.

Another example of how this exchange and co-construction of knowledge could directly shape the local urban environment might be within the neighbourhood planning process by the current government and its Localism agenda (Buser 2012). The agenda of Localism is loaded with many issues, one of which being the uneven distribution of resources particularly in relation to changing and diverse urban neighbourhoods (Tait and Inch 2016). This often means that the areas which could benefit most from the localised/contextualised planning frameworks are the ones most lacking in resources to actually achieve them (Rabodzeenko and Vodicka 2015). It also again emphasises, however, the potential role of engaged urban practitioners in supporting the local population through

this process; this would involve some of the ways referred to earlier, including different forms of mutual learning, as well as working with them possibly to re-appropriate the process. This is in line with the argument by Rios and Watkins (2015) that planners should learn from, for example, what they call translocal place-making practices, to become more creative in the interpretation of existing planning codes and the development of new, more flexible ones.

It is crucial, however, that any such engagement is carried out considerately and without placing additional pressure and demands on locals. This could be assured through, for instance, accessing collaborative funding by means of applications to different sources, such as governmental funding, lottery grants or even academic research funding bodies in the form of co-produced or participatory action research projects. Other ways might involve supporting learning experiences through cross-sectoral collaborative projects for local professionals and organisations (i.e. Erasmus+, Intercultural Cities platform, URBACT etc).

A highly relevant example of such a project is the Designing Inclusion Erasmus+ programme, which I have been contributing to since October 2017. This project is led by three schools of architecture (Sheffield, Milan, Leuven) and two civil society organisations (Housing Europe and ASF¹⁰ International). It is “a collaborative project addressing the interface between architecture, urban design, urban planning education and the production of inclusive urban spaces for migrants and refugees”¹¹. An interesting and relevant aspect of this programme is that, apart from facilitating knowledge exchange between higher education institutions and civil society organisations, it is also developing a pedagogical framework (including principles, methods and tools) to be an integral part of the urban design and planning curriculum. This will be further supported by a MOOC online course, which will of course be available to all at no cost. My research in this field, together with my previous professional experience and my teaching on the above-mentioned modules, has led to my being invited to contribute to this project.

Therefore, the importance of appropriate education in order to develop the skills needed by the many agents, ranging from practitioners and other professionals to locals (including local professionals and organisations), is undeniable. Some argue that architects/designers are already being ‘equipped’ with most of these skills (Samuel et al. 2015); however, although there are some examples of professional programmes that already address such skills, such as those mentioned earlier, these still seem to be exceptions rather than the rule. Nevertheless, socially motivated and collaborative pedagogical

¹⁰ The acronym ASF originally stands for Architecture Sans Frontières (in English - Architecture Without Borders) but it now seems to be more commonly used as an acronym only, due to the expansion of the organisation’s focus, which now extends beyond architecture to include broader issues related to the built environment.

¹¹ For more info see: <https://www.desinc.org/about>

approaches, as argued for in this chapter, still need to be further understood; they are imbued with many issues of their own, as argued by Cerulli (2017), and this needs to be acknowledged in order to further develop and enhance them to reach their full potential. Further critical development of these pedagogical approaches is a strong recommendation of this thesis. This is because of the significance of such open-minded, collaborative, and wide-reaching (i.e. boundary-crossing) educational practices for the development of urban practitioners capable of engaging with societal complexities such as superdiversity and its spatial manifestations.

9.5. Conclusion

This research questions existing modes of urban design practice and their relevance especially in superdiverse contexts. Different ways of practising are necessary not only in order to engage with the existing complexities of the context in appropriate ways, but also to recognise the potential for enhancing not only the physical qualities of a locality but also its social dimensions and affordances. In this sense it further supports the relevance of urban design as boundary-crossing engagement.

“If we are to move towards more socially just and sustainable urban spaces, culturally sensitive approaches in urban transformations are a fundamental necessity. This means integrating into design (urban and architectural) the notion of casual, fluid and of course incremental production of spaces that respond to peoples’ needs and aspirations, enabling sustained adaptation and fostering dissensus. Indeed, it is the task and power of design to unravel, clarify and negotiate (Boano et al. 2011).” (Frediani and Boano 2012 p. 19)

If the aim is to (re)create inclusive public spaces, able to support convivial behaviour in superdiverse neighbourhoods, it is important to explore the existing and sometimes shifting interactions amongst people in order to gain nuanced understandings of possible issues, challenges and opportunities. As more places are becoming more diverse, this is a timely ambition. However it seems that established urban design practice is still permeated by a preoccupation with either the physical form or formulaic ‘design for all’ approaches. In order to engage appropriately in such contexts, this chapter argues for a significant shift in urban practice. This involves transgressing boundaries in many diverse ways, as explored in this chapter.

One way of addressing this is by recognising the value of learning from approaches from the so-called global South (Hamdi, 2004; Hou 2010; Boano and Talocci 2014; Frediani 2016; Mehta 2019), thereby moving away from ‘westernised’ epistemologies. It is also important not to fall into the trap of ethnic determinism, which is why critical engagement with the concept of superdiversity is necessary. Such diversities and heterogeneities usually mean pluralistic views and desires; it is not only unrealistic to

achieve consensus, but it is also inappropriate in such contexts. Instead, a boundary-crossing approach to urban design which includes recognising, acknowledging and accepting such agonistic views and creating a platform for working with them is necessary, as argued by Mouffe (2005). This is also why the construct of contextualised convivialities is relevant, as an important pointer towards understanding the complexities of peoples' identities, changing perceptions, and behaviours. In line with the argument by Frediani and Boano (2012) of the need for urban design "to unravel, clarify and negotiate", I finish by reiterating the need for close engagement with the process of design, and not only the product of design. As stated by Willcocks (2017, p. 813), "the value of design contributions lies increasingly within processes which help facilitate and advance discourses between competing desirable agendas."

Chapter 10

Conclusion

10.1. Introduction

The research reported in this thesis has explored the use and experiences of local public open spaces in the superdiverse neighbourhood of Fir Vale. This concluding chapter is organised in three parts, the first of which (10.2.) starts with a summary of the findings in relation to developing theory. I then highlight the ways in which the thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge. The second part (10.3.) explores the impact of the research, including ways in which impact has already been an integral part of the research process, and summarise my recommendations for urban design practice informed by the research findings and process. In the final part (10.4), I discuss some of the limitations of the research, before making recommendations for future research and providing some final brief reflections.

10.2. Research findings in relation to developing theory

Use and perception of the public open spaces in Fir Vale

The public open spaces of Fir Vale are being intensely used by the local population. The pervading perception (as portrayed in the media) of these places being used only by Roma, mostly by males and in inappropriate ways, has been challenged by the findings of this situated research. Indeed, the majority of users may be from a Roma background, but they are certainly not all adult males, as many women and children have also been seen socialising outside. In addition, many other local residents of different backgrounds are regularly present in most of the neighbourhood spaces.

One of the main points made in this thesis is that public open spaces play an important role in the life of the neighbourhood; they should not be seen reductively as places that only cause tensions. Of particular significance here are not only the more traditional public spaces, such as parks, but also street spaces including street corners and immediate ‘front of the home’ spaces. It is argued that there is a relatively good network of different public spaces within the area catering for diverse users and uses. However, the perception of these spaces is varied and is influenced not only by their physical qualities and maintenance, but often also by who is using them.

Everyday public open spaces and the activities taking place within them are perceived both negatively

and positively, often simultaneously. It is evident that the spaces, which are perceived as the most 'problematic' by many, are the incidental everyday spaces such as streets, street corners and leftover spaces. This reflects the perception that these spaces are not meant to be used for socialising and that their significant use leads to consequences such as litter and noise. However, even when perceived in a negative light, some also see certain positives, for example when they comment on the relationship between children's presence on the streets and the general feeling of safety.

These agonistic perceptions, especially the negative ones, are in contrast to what is generally found in established urban planning and design scholarship, which often uncritically promotes the social use of public open spaces. This disparity can possibly be attributed to the focus of my research on exploring in depth the context of the neighbourhood and its public open spaces, as well as to the engaged research process. As such it highlights the necessity for deeper understandings of contexts, including the lived experiences. This insight began to shape the development of the construct of contextualised convivialities (as presented in chapter 7). It also strongly emphasized the urgent need for more appropriate education of urban professionals capable of acknowledging and engaging with these contestations.

Overall, the local public open spaces of Fir Vale are lively, regularly used by a wide range of people (of different ages, genders or ethnic backgrounds, not only by Roma) and play an important role in the life of the neighbourhood.

The relationships between public open spaces and intercultural encounters in the neighbourhood

The public open spaces that afforded most interaction between people were those I identified as porous membrane spaces (as discussed in chapter 7). In this particular context three different scales of porous membrane spaces have been defined: inter-neighbourhood ones, intra-neighbourhood ones, and the home-street scale. These scales are framed by the specificities of the context, which is understood as inclusive of a range of qualities from the micro-spatial materialities to the macro socio-economic and political forces. This acknowledges and includes the impact of complex lived experiences of superdiversity, such as multiple deprivation, racial and class stigma, austerity policies, perceived reputation of the area etc.

The particular nature of the interactions in Fir Vale's public open spaces was shaped by these entanglements and this directly influenced the further development of the construct of contextualised convivialities. In line with this construct, the many tensions and agonistic perceptions are seen as an integral part of convivial interactions, directly framing both their qualities and their significance.

What may seem as an irrelevant interaction in one context can be of huge significance and value in another.

In Fir Vale, different types of participative practices have been identified, which act as affordances for diverse convivial interactions amongst local inhabitants. A wide range of such practices have been observed in the area: some are the more expected ones, such as those to be seen in children's playgrounds involving children and parents; others are sports activities on formal pitches, with an open invitation for others to join in the game; there are also other kinds of games, again with others invited to join in, played across the range of local spaces, from small green spaces to residential streets; and organised activities such as litter-picking, where some people spontaneously join in. This directly relates to the principle of "maximising straightforward participation", one of the four principles of enhancing "intercultural connectivity" that were developed by my research group Transnational Urban Outdoors (see paper by Rishbeth, Ganji and Vodicka 2018, p. 50). Although such participative practices are already present within this particular area, my research in Fir Vale supports the argument for creating further socio-spatial settings that allow for creative use of spaces, especially those which encourage others to participate spontaneously. One specific on-going example of such a development is the 'Common Ground' project in the backyard of a local organisation.

Many activities within the area were perceived by locals as being inappropriate such as hanging out in front of the shops and sitting and socialising outside on the street, activities engaged in by both adults and children. As argued by Rishbeth *et al* (2108) it is important to find ways to legitimise a diversity of activities in order to support sociability. Legitimation could arguably happen by designating public open spaces as welcoming spaces for a range of activities, which might then attract a diversity of uses and users, thereby also changing perceptions of the spaces. Nevertheless, some of the activities in Fir Vale have already evolved to become more legitimate, simply as a result of their continuous use. For instance, the regular use of pavements as places to sit outside on chairs, initially practised only by Roma, has made these practices more acceptable over time and even attracted others to do the same. This is a powerful example of 'bottom-up legitimisation', which might be argued as more effective than 'top down' actions. It demonstrates not only how important legitimisation of diversity of uses is, but also that it can occur in different ways, for example by finding ways of encouraging local people to continue to (re)shape their own environment and to build on their everyday practices.

A significant feature of Fir Vale is the existence of so called micro-retreats both within green spaces (some formal and some less formal), and along streets, where individuals or groups could be seen simply hanging-out and observing the world going by (including an interest in other people's activities). The informal micro-retreats were also often located on quiet street corners, opposite or

diagonal to the busy ones (e.g. the shopping parade). Rishbeth *et al* (2018, p. 50) argue for these “micro-retreats of nearby quietness” to be explicitly designed in, as they have the potential to extend the encounter. However, in this particular neighbourhood, this is also closely related to the previous principle relating to perceptions of legitimate uses of public open spaces, as these micro-retreats seem to be perceived as more acceptable and legitimate in more formal public spaces, such as parks, than along unbounded streetscapes, where they are perceived as a nuisance. Therefore, similar to the previous principle, it would be useful to find ways of legitimising quiet spots next to busy spaces, as well as in a range of other places such as residential streets.

Even though Fir Vale area seems to have relatively good provision of green spaces, one of the issues is that some of these are perceived to be of a higher quality than others. For instance, as discussed in chapter 6, the presence of litter in some of the places is a challenge, which can in part be related to the standard of maintenance of the public realm. Apart from green spaces, streets and street corners play an important role in the life of this neighbourhood. Although these are already regularly used for socialising, they could still be re-imagined, improved and most importantly better maintained. Evidence from my research includes many examples of the need to recognise the impact of different forms of structural inequalities, which are embedded in this neighbourhood, such as those related to political and socio-economic issues and stigmatisation by the media. Therefore, further to the argument made by Rishbeth *et al* (2018) about the necessity to address structural inequalities in open space provision, it is evident that in Fir Vale structural inequalities are not only related to the provision of open spaces but also to the levels of their maintenance, which should be comparable to those in other parts of the city.

The issues and challenges of doing ‘engaged research’ in a ‘high-profile’ and ‘over-researched’ context

Many issues and challenges have been experienced and identified during the research, as specifically reflected on in chapter 4 (sections 4.1. and 4.2.) and throughout chapter 8. The first step was recognising the area as both ‘over-researched’ and ‘high-profile’ (as discussed in chapter 8, section 8.2.), which led to the conceptualisation and development of my research approach as “engaged research using responsive methodology”. This included the need to take a holistic approach to ethics, understanding them as not only integral to the research process and to the ways in which methods were used, but also as requiring a dynamic and reflexive approach. For instance, combining different methods ensured an ethical complementarity, meaning that the ethical issues of each method were, arguably, resolved by the other. My engaged approach to research also meant that I was committed to providing benefits to participants throughout the process of the research (Finney and Rishbeth 2006). As a consequence, however, there was not always a clear distinction between research and non-

research activities (Norris 1997). An additional aspect of my engaged and responsive research was that I made a long-term commitment to engagement.

A further relevant issue relates to the importance of acknowledging the significance of the researcher's background and how this is presented, both in terms of personal and professional identities, as these can potentially mitigate but also exacerbate some of the issues and tensions in conducting the research. Overall, the many challenges of conducting engaged research in this type of context are also directly relevant to the practice of urban design, particularly if understood as a boundary-crossing engagement (as argued in chapter 9).

10.2.1. Contribution to knowledge

There are a number of ways, in which this research has made an original contribution to knowledge and these will be presented in this section.

Firstly, the rich depiction in this thesis of the social life of public spaces in Fir Vale, captured within a particular period of the neighbourhood's history, is in itself a significant contribution to knowledge. In providing an opportunity to understand the complex dynamics within Fir Vale, the thesis challenges some of the prevailing negative preconceptions and stigma that are embedded in the ways in which the neighbourhood has been perceived and portrayed during this period.

This research has also contributed to knowledge by developing the construct of contextualised convivialities. This began by engaging with current scholarship on conviviality, primarily found in the fields of geography and sociology, through the lens of urban design and planning. This enabled the further development of the notion of conviviality in two ways. Firstly, drawing on urban design, and with a focus on different typologies of space, the thesis helped to identify the appropriateness of membrane porous spaces (Sennett 2018) for affording conviviality. This was then further developed to include nuances of different scales and locations, micro affordances of the built environment, and events occurring in these spaces, which offered strong support for my argument that there is a need for a deep contextual comprehension of conviviality. Secondly, this was combined with insights from urban planning on agonistic urbanism (Mostafavi 2017), albeit grounded in politics and pluralistic democracy (Mouffe 2005), which further led to a need also to understand conviviality in pluralistic ways. The direct outcome is the construct of contextualised convivialities. As thoroughly explored in chapter 7, one of the main significances of the construct of contextualised convivialities is the recognition of potential values that different convivialities may have in different contexts, which had not been explicitly expressed elsewhere.

Another contribution to knowledge, I would argue, is that the thesis raises the importance of understanding and engaging with issues related to researching not only in ‘over-researched’ but also in ‘high profile’ contexts. This consideration of both ‘over-researched’ and ‘high profile’, including the relationship between the two elements, is little acknowledged in existing scholarship. Furthermore, I would argue that my reflection on the many issues and challenges to be faced when taking an ethical and engaged approach to research specifically in this type of context, as shared in chapter 8, is contributing to knowledge, even if only modestly. These insights may be valuable not only to other researchers, especially inexperienced ones, but also to practitioners as argued in chapter 9.

In direct relation to urban design practice, this research makes a strong case for boundary-crossing engagement (see chapter 9). Related to the construct of contextualised convivialities and the specific considerations of engaging in research and practice in ‘over-researched’ and ‘high profile’ contexts, the thesis offers recommendations for urban design practice. It is argued that this needs to be boundary-crossing practice, enriched by insights from research and practice in other disciplines, as well as by approaches to gaining rich ethnographic understanding of local contexts, which incorporates the voices of local actors. My proposals for urban design practice also draw on my own professional experience as practitioner and educator. The research further supports the findings of my research group (Rishbeth, Ganji and Vodicka 2018, p. 50), which were developed during the period of this research, that acknowledge four principles of public open spaces that enable interaction in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods (i.e. “maximising straightforward participation; legitimising diversity of activity; designing in micro-retreats of nearby quietness; and addressing structural inequalities of open space provision”). The rich and vibrant depiction of the local neighbourhood in this thesis offers many ideas for urban practitioners on how the four principles could be refined and implemented.

My presentations in symposia and conferences (Vodicka 2015, Ganji and Vodicka 2015, Vodicka et al. 2016, Vodicka 2017a, Vodicka 2017b, Vodicka 2018b) as well as publications (Rishbeth et al. 2018, Lamb and Vodicka 2018, Vodicka 2018a) contributed to the development of my research and the quality of the knowledge gained, by enhancing its credibility through peer scrutiny (Shenton 2004). They also contributed to knowledge more generally through engaging with contemporary academic discussions. Of even greater significance is that these presentations and publications included a focus on different aspects of my research (ranging from methodological approaches, HE pedagogy for superdiversity, and exploring the notions of over-researched places, to agonistic experiences of everyday leisure spaces and their design). These were exchanged with interdisciplinary audiences, offering an opportunity for boundary crossing and a re-viewing and re-thinking of knowledge. I am committed to continuing in this vein.

10. 3. The impact of the research, including recommendations for urban design practice

10.3.1. Impact

An integral part of my approach in this study was my commitment to the research being engaged and in some ways sharing benefits with participants (Finney and Rishbeth 2006), not only at the end through its final ‘outputs’, but throughout the entire process of the research. This resonates in some ways with the shifting focus on co-production within academia and the reconsideration of the meaning of impact in research (Facer and Enright 2016). Therefore, it was valuable to draw on scholarship in this area in relation to my own research, as I would argue that engagement and impact complement each other.

Research impacts (or benefits) have been recognised in different ways and have also included different scales, no matter how small or irrelevant some might seem (Pain et al. 2016). For instance, by collaborating with local organisations and providing additional educational and fun design-related activities within the neighbourhood, my research engagement has impacted in different ways on participants, even if perhaps some of the impact was more on a personal/individual level than on the wider level of the neighbourhood. Together with some of my other contributions in this part of Sheffield throughout the course of the research (e.g. contributing to work placement activities, supporting the Sheffield Roma Network in various ways, being involved in development and funding applications for the ‘Common Ground’ project etc), my research activities have had impact on a range of organisations and, therefore, the neighbourhood in general. Although diverse, these manifestations of engagement and impact occurred because of my research, even though at times they were not instrumental in directly addressing my research questions.

Throughout the research, therefore, impact has been understood as occurring during the process and not only as an outcome; along with Pain et al. (2016), drawing on Freire, this makes a case for impact as praxis. As this involves “rejecting the usual separation of theory, empirical research, and social action” (Pain et al. 2016 p. 5), it also directly supports my argument for urban design as boundary-crossing engagement. As explained in chapter 9, this way of practising seems to be highly appropriate for superdiverse contexts, as seen in this case study of Fir Vale as well as other examples referred to throughout the thesis.

Seen in this way, many other impacts are still to be developed in the future, drawing on the relationships built during my research. These include my continuing engagement with the ‘Common Ground’ project, which also includes plans for me to integrate this more tightly with my teaching practice, thereby enhancing the overall impact even further.

10.3.2. Recommendations for Urban Design Practice

The research has strongly argued for the need to re-think the role of urban design practitioners and established urban design modes of practice. This has been inspired by the work of different practices (as explored in chapter 3 and 9) and in particular aaa whose work has also strongly influenced the methodological approach and design of my research. Based on evidence and experience from this research, I am further suggesting that the field of urban design should be understood and further developed as boundary-crossing engagement. This suggests a much wider and open minded approach, which transgresses different boundaries in engagement: between different types of knowledge; between the sectors and disciplines; between the education of professionals and other actors involved in spatial production; between local networks (i.e. schools, organisations, authorities, businesses, groups, individuals, designers); between design as physical/material only and design as socio-political practice; between research and practice.

Implications for practice in relation to education

In relation to education, it is first crucial to acknowledge the limitations of current mainstream urban design practice for dealing adequately with particular concerns and social issues of our times, including increasing diversity in the population. This means that the education of not only future practitioners but also existing ones needs to be re-thought and re-shaped. The process of educating urban design and planning practitioners needs to include a critical examination of existing scholarship and practice and ways in which these may be further exacerbating inequalities. It also needs to be able to meaningfully engage in particular with issues of ethnic and cultural diversity in urban places and therefore develop practitioners' cultural capacities (Agyeman 2012). Furthermore, urban practitioners need to learn to be open to and capable of exchanging and constructing knowledge with others, whilst recognising the pluralistic nature of knowledge. The ways of educating practitioners in this way are neither simple nor easily prescribed, especially within an overly commercialised higher education sector, though some possible approaches have been explored in chapter 9. These include embedding in the urban design and planning curriculum platforms that allow for: genuinely critical discussion, ideally in an interdisciplinary setting, of concepts such as superdiversity and the ways in which it is shaping urban living and the urban environment (e.g. Vodicka et al. 2016); recognising the potential of ethnographic understandings of places to inform practice (e.g. Rishbeth et al. 2018); questioning mainstream profit-led and colour-blind urban design practice; learning from other approaches from around the globe and not only from the so called global North (e.g. Hamdi 2004; Hou 2010); understanding architecture/urban design practice as inherently political (e.g. Till 1998); drawing on students' own lived experiences of difference; learning-by-doing in engaged ways and with others (non-urban design professionals, individuals, groups, organisations, initiatives etc) (e.g. Cerulli et al

2011; Udall and Vardy 2017); developing the necessary skills and tools that facilitate understandings of societal complexities (e.g. including contextualised convivialities) and that support an ethical approach to intervening with them through appropriate approaches to participatory practice (e.g. Cerulli 2017).

In moving towards this, research also plays a significant role, within education and practice, especially if enacted in a boundary-crossing way.

Implications for practice in relation to research

Throughout this thesis I have argued for a blurring of the line between research and practice, as also argued by Pain et al (2016). This has been inspired by the development of my understanding that it is important to engage in research, if we are to be equipped with enough knowledge and awareness to enable us to understand places before we engage in urban design activity in them. Alternatively, it is also possible for research and practice to occur simultaneously. This allows each to feed into the other more directly, as in the example of design related participatory activities, which can be seen as both research, in terms of co-constructing knowledge, and practice, in terms of collaboratively developing designs. Another example would be a prototyping approach (as discussed in chapter 9), which even more obviously blurs the boundaries between research and practice. Moreover, as seen in this thesis, such approaches to research can also act as a catalyst for urban design projects (e.g. the ‘Common Ground’ project). Such complementary approaches to research and practice are particularly appropriate for practising in complex contexts such as the superdiverse neighbourhood of Fir Vale.

10.4. Concluding reflections on research

10.4.1. Limitations

The most appropriate way of describing this research is by adopting the hybrid term ‘ethno-case study’, which, according to Marie Parker-Jenkins (2018, p. 18), means “a case study drawing on ethnographic techniques”. I would, however, in the context of this thesis, qualify this by suggesting that it is an ‘*ethno-case study* with elements of *engaged* research including a *responsive methodology*’ (as discussed in chapter 4). This combination of methods and approaches helps to overcome some of the limitations and challenges related to each of the different components (as discussed in chapter 8).

One of the main limitations of both ethnography and case study is that they are each criticised particularly in relation to generalisability. However, one counter-argument is that the possibility of generalisation has never been claimed by researchers who adopt such approaches (Eckstein 1975).

Better still is the counter-argument by Guba (1981), who argues for transferability rather than validity/generalizability, which he considers to be a positivist stance. According to Guba (1981), the provision of rich contextual information allows others to compare the findings to their own research rather than generalising from them. Discussing the issues as related to case study research, Flyvbjerg (2006) makes a similar argument. One specific example of how this can work can be found in the meta-synthesis of 21 ethno-case studies by Rishbeth et al (2018), which my doctoral research has further tested and extended.

This research produced a wealth of different kinds of rich data. Clearly these had the potential to enhance knowledge in ways beyond the scope of the analysis presented here, if examined through different interpretations, frameworks and analytical lenses. However, given this particular research and its focus, the challenge was to keep analysis of the data within the frame of spatiality and design (as discussed throughout the thesis and in chapter 8).

Another possible limitation, arguably, is the nature of the methodology, which could be described as messy, loosely structured, relatively flexible, agile and evolving, which I have defined as “responsive”. However, I argue that such qualities are indeed a strength of the research, because it was developed dynamically in reaction to the various situations that I met in the course of the study and therefore remained coherent with my argument that appropriate and ethical engagement within such complex contexts necessarily entails being responsive. This approach additionally led to the development of possible trajectories of practice, as well as the argument for urban design as boundary-crossing engagement.

10.4.2. Recommendations for future research

I argue that the construct of contextualised convivialities is a significant one and, as such, should be further explored, tested and fine-tuned by looking into other (very) different contexts. I would hope for this to be done with a specific focus on its possible relevance to design practice, as spatiality is embedded within the very construct itself.

I would also recommend further research specifically on community led public spaces (such as the ‘Common Ground’ project), especially within ethnically diverse urban neighbourhoods, and their role in the emergence of intercultural relationships and civic formation. In addition, it would be useful to explore the potential of other community owned resources, for example, the emerging housing initiatives organised as community land trusts (Wainwright 2017) and, in particular, the role of public open spaces within them, as currently there is a lack of research on these. Community land trusts seem to play an important role in protecting and enhancing diverse communities in the US, whilst also

acting as potential tools to combat gentrification (Choi et al 2018).

As explored in my research, issues of litter and outdoor play in urban public open spaces appear pertinent, especially in relation to superdiversity. Concerns with litter are increasingly on the agenda of authorities and citizen initiatives, albeit in what often seems to be simplistic ways that are potentially exacerbating cross-community tensions, especially in stigmatised urban areas (MacGregor and Pardoe 2018). As has been seen in my research, however, the tensions related to litter also offer possibilities for community building and civic formation. Thus, further research into these issues seems timely and much needed.

As argued in my research, there are different, even opposing, views on outdoor play in the city. What seems to be shaping these conflicting readings of play as either desirable or problematic are the many cultural and class issues that are related to the wider socio-economic and political context. However, most existing urban design and planning approaches appear to ignore these dynamics. Research into the reasons why this is the case and strategies to overcome them would be of value.

Due to the current political context of Brexit Britain, it will be interesting to explore how this might influence the Fir Vale neighbourhood in the future, including the use of public open spaces, as there is a possibility that it could bring about new changes in demographics. For instance, the Roma communities are likely to be facing some serious difficulties, in particular in obtaining the evidence needed to apply for settled status, which may have an impact on their ability to remain in the country. This was the topic under discussion in the round table discussion organised by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Migration, which I attended with a member of the Fir Vale Roma community in the House of Lords in July 2018.

Finally, there is an on-going need for researchers engaged in conducting spatial research with economically disadvantaged and diverse communities to explore critically and expand their research approaches and the relationship to urban design. Integral to research in such contexts is the ethical imperative to conduct it in appropriate, context-responsive ways.

10.4.3. Final brief reflections

One of the ways in which I interpret this research myself is as a preparation for my future work in practice, pedagogy and research. In all of these aspects of my work, I will aim to cross boundaries between the invaluable scholarship on cultural diversity, itself drawing on a wide range of fields and disciplines, and that of urban design. The experience and expertise I have gained through conducting this research has provided me with a firm foundation to do so.

Designing, developing and carrying out this study has already supported some of my achievements, such as obtaining a position as a lecturer in the Sheffield Hallam University School of Architecture, which is focused on expanding architectural/urban design practice and understanding design as a social and political act. I plan to draw on my experiences to develop my profile as a researcher in collaboration with colleagues from Sheffield Hallam University and beyond. Additionally, I aim to enrich my pedagogical practice by embedding what I have learnt from this research. I will have the opportunity to do this through the year-long Masters level design studios (modules integrating research and propositional design), which I will be co-convening – one focused on exploring the potential of public open spaces within community owned land and resources, and the other on designing infrastructures for inclusion. Both of these will include a form of action learning, with students directly collaborating with organisations already working on these issues.

In terms of my practice as an urban designer, my primary engagement will continue to be the 'Common Ground' project in Fir Vale, whilst exploring further opportunities. My commitment to practice focused issues will also expand through my engagement with ASF-UK (which I joined as an associate in summer 2018), where I am particularly interested in developing the Challenging Practice training programme for existing professionals and tying it more closely to notions of design in relation to migration and diversity.

Aiming to combine research and education (of future practitioners through HE and existing practitioners through ASF-UK), whilst being involved in practice will provide me with a strong platform for boundary-crossing and contributing to further development of urban design as socially and politically engaged practice.

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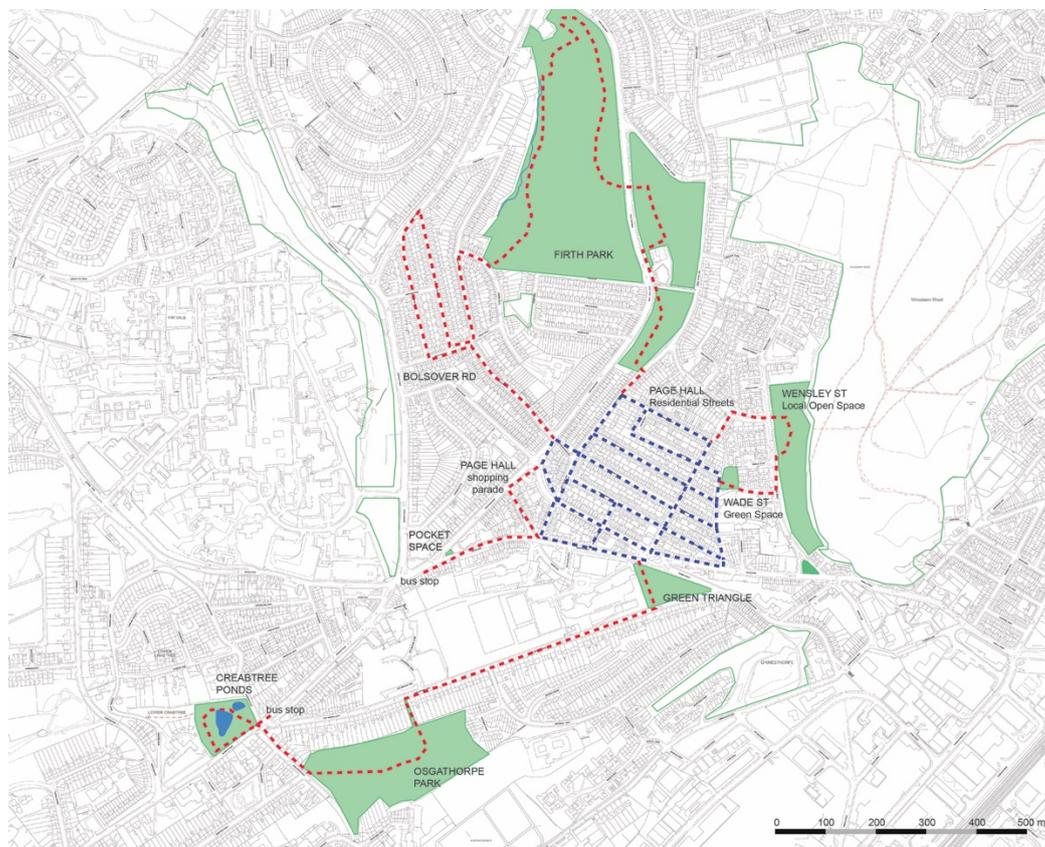
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Appendix A

The schedule of ‘structured walks’ – as explained in chapter 4.

Structured WALKS schedule: April – November 2016			
Time	Weekday	Saturday	Sunday
8-10	W19 (11/10)	W20 (15/10)	W18 (09/10)
10-12	W21 (19/10)	W14 (10/09)	W15 (18/09)
12-14	W9 (25/07)	W5 (04/06)	W4 (15/05)
14-16	W1 (04/04)	W10 (20/08)	W6 (03/07)
16-18	W2 (07/04)	W3 (07/05)	W7 (10/07)
18-20	W11 (26/08)	W8 (16/07)	W17 (02/10)
20-22	W12 (31/08)	W16 (24/09)	W13 (04/09)



Appendix B

We Love Page Hall booklet - brief report on creative workshops with children.

Activities related to production of this booklet were explained in chapter 4.





This document is a short record about a series of workshops conducted during the autumn of 2016 at PACA in Page Hall, Sheffield. The overall aim was to provide a safe space for local children to spend time, have fun and learn something new, interesting and useful. The main focus was on enabling the children to learn new things by connecting them to their own lives in the neighbourhood.

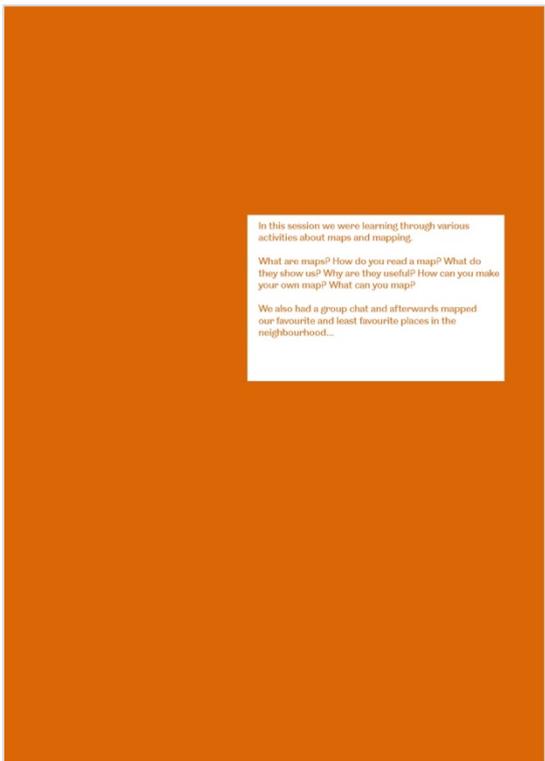
By providing these activities, the intention was also to make it possible for youngsters from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to have new experiences that they would otherwise not be able to access, either due to the cost of admission or the cost of transport to take part in similar activities elsewhere. There were usually 20 to 30 children in each session (7-14 years old).

The workshops were developed by PACA in collaboration with several other organisations (Sheffield Roma Network, University of Sheffield), creating synergy between various projects as an example of best practice of working in this neighbourhood. This is an on-going project and it is connected with several other projects that are currently being developed.

The following pages represent the experiences of staff and children who participated in the activities.

Team:
 Ali Hamed, Julie Blacker - PACA
 Jan Kandrac, Jan Horvath - Sheffield Roma Network
 Goran Vodicka - University of Sheffield

With many thanks to all of our participants!



In this session we were learning through various activities about maps and mapping.

What are maps? How do you read a map? What do they show us? Why are they useful? How can you make your own map? What can you map?

We also had a group chat and afterwards mapped our favourite and least favourite places in the neighbourhood...



Our next session was about exploring our neighbourhood and testing our newly learnt skills of using maps.

It was a very useful experience!

Of course some of us were better at it than others but in the end we all got it really...



In our walk we also learnt how to use cameras and captured the things that annoy us the most. We really don't like the litter on the streets...and some writings on the walls...

Then we had another chat and came up with some ideas about how to keep our neighbourhood clean, such as:

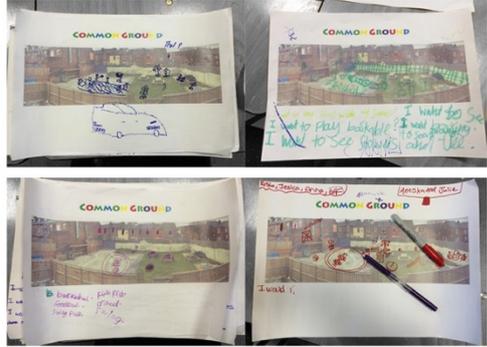
- More bins and street cleaners should do a better job.
- We can do some litter pickings together.
- People should learn not to make litter.
- We could teach our friends and families about it.
- We could also make some posters about it too.

In this session we wanted to help PACA make a great backyard.

We also learnt that common ground means a space for all to enjoy.

We shared some of our ideas of what we like to be able to do there.

We also thought about what our friends and families might want to do too.



We also made some models out of playdough to represent what we think the space should be like. We used different colors to represent different areas like a garden, a play area, and a seating area.





We Love Page Hall.
 We had a great time recording what we think about Page Hall and the things we like about it. We can send them to our friends and families. We want to make some more friends. On this day we had a visit by people from BBC Radio 2. Staff and they recorded what we think about Page Hall activities. We all like them!

