

## The Significance of Urban Greenspaces in Everyday Life

Urban greenspaces are recognised as important assets for supporting and promoting human flourishing in an increasingly urbanised world. Whilst much epidemiological research has shown the various health benefits of urban greenspaces, far less work has focused on personal everyday interactions with, and within, them. By examining the social significance of urban greenspaces, this article shows how they are important resources people use within their everyday to enhance a broadly defined understanding of wellbeing. The insight draws on data from ‘intercept go-along’ interviews with 66 people using greenspaces in one British urban town. Our analysis details how people understood urban greenspaces as ‘pockets’ of social life which afforded temporary escape from urbanism, access to the ‘natural’ world and facilitated largely positive interactions with familiar and unfamiliar greenspace visitors which helped foster a sense of community. Considered against the growing urban population, the structural and interactional conditions of modern Western societies, and rising focus on asset-place-based approaches to address public health concerns, we position urban greenspaces as an important resource for global and local strategies aimed at supporting human flourishing. In making this case, empirical and methodological contributions to the sociology of people-place relationships and research in the built environment are offered.

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Examining everyday practices in urban areas has long been central to sociological analyses of human group life. Robert Park (1915, p. 612) described such areas and the ‘city’ as a ‘mosaic of little worlds’, in which ‘human nature and social processes may be most conveniently and profitably studied’. Within this article, we continue this tradition by examining urban greenspaces<sup>1</sup> in one area of England. We do this by speaking to people about the ways they interacted with, and within, urban parks<sup>2</sup> and illustrate how this provides some important empirical ‘glimpses’ into the personal and social significance visitors attached to using such places. To begin our work in this direction we first consider the genesis of social scientific analyses of urban life, important aspects of modern living with regard to human health, and then position our focus on urban greenspaces within this broad context.

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<sup>1</sup> Urban greenspaces refer to urban land covered by vegetation of any kind, on private and public grounds, irrespective of size and function, and can include small water bodies such as ponds, lakes or streams (‘blue spaces’).

<sup>2</sup> When referring to ‘parks’, we use Natural England’s (2024) definition of Public Parks and Gardens, as ‘area of land normally enclosed, designed, constructed, managed and maintained as a public park or garden.’

## On 'classic' sociological analysis of urban life

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the gradual, and at times more rapid, transition of people living in agrarian 'pre-modern' communities toward dense 'modern' cities organised around industrial capitalism across Western societies stimulated early sociological writings on the effect of such social changes on the human world (for examples see Durkheim, 1893; König, 1987; Marx, 1867; Park, 1915; Park & Burgess, 1925; Simmel, 1903; Tönnies, 1887; Wirth, 1938). Key sociological concepts developed as theorists tried to understand this new urban experience, and its contrast to pre-modern social life, include Durkheim's (1893) description of shifting from 'mechanical' to 'organic' solidarity, Tönnie's (1887) 'Gemeinschaft' to 'Gesellschaft', Weber's (1992) 'traditional-sacred' to 'rational-secular' social 'orders' and Simmel's (1903) discussion of the tension between 'anonymity' and 'community'.

Clearly, then, such social developments were fertile ground for the neophile academic discipline and it appears that the influences of urbanism on social life have long been phenomena of interest for the social scientific study of human worlds across various theoretical perspectives. Following Wirth's (1938) pioneering work, we use 'urbanism' throughout this paper as a heuristic broadly referring to both the materiality of urban environments and the social 'way of life' in cities structured by processes of capitalism, industrialism and globalisation. A common thread through much classic sociology was an interest, and for some a concern, in how urbanism was changing human interactions, social cohesion, and the very fabric of social life, with Wirth (1938, p.20-21) arguing such changes undermined 'the traditional basis of social solidarity'.

Georg Simmel's (1903) essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' is a notable contribution which continues to hold relevance today as researchers and policymakers alike seek to understand how urban living impacts people's everyday lives and, ultimately, their capacity for flourishing, health and wellbeing. Combining sociological, psychological and, to some degree, biological insights, Simmel explored how the 'external stimuli' and 'sensory overload' of the new urban environments caused increased strain on the 'internal' minds of people as they adjusted to a different 'tempo' of social life. Here, the growing urban population, influence of urbanism and associated demographic changes of people and groups increasingly living in close proximity within dense urban areas meant that social life as previously understood was rapidly changing.

Within this context, Simmel (1908) introduced the 'Stranger' as a distinct sociological concept. Here, people came to interact with others ('strangers') in their everyday lives within the new urban environments, but with a level of anonymity not common in pre-modern life. A key feature of this social process is the changing relations of familiarity between persons. Lofland (1973) details this by showing how urban environments may be conceived as a 'world of strangers' wherein everyday life constitutes countless interactions with people who are relatively unfamiliar to us and often such interactions take place in an impersonal manner.

There is, then, a complex interweaving of human interactions, structural, historical and cultural processes that characterise urban life – the ‘city’ becomes a ‘theatre’ of social life in which social actors learn, embody and sometimes reject a range of normative behaviours (Goffman, 1959; Park & Burgess, 1925). Lofland’s (1973) charge that urban areas are a ‘world of strangers’ speaks to what various scholars have highlighted as the increasing social boundaries associated with modern life whereby people learn to be ‘conservative’ and ‘reserved’ in their public interactions within urban areas (Goffman, 1959, 1963; Simmel, 1908; also see Elias, 1939). Alongside work explicating such largely confirmative processes and increasing social boundaries in interactions with others, a parallel focus of work began to highlight that ‘modern’ living arrangements within cities were associated with a breakdown of closely knit communities (Putnam, 2000), subsequently connected to increases in feelings of loneliness, isolation and alienation amongst urban dwellers (Franklin, 2022; Tönnies, 1887).

### **Contemporary analysis of urban life**

The legacy of these macro social processes continues, with more than half of the world population now considered ‘urban dwellers’, which is predicted to increase to 68% by 2050 (United Nations, 2018). This is the context in which the ‘classic’ sociological analysis of people living in urban spaces, and the conditions of modern life related to urbanism, has continued to be a central focus within contemporary social science.

Of note in more recent work, is that of Fitzpatrick and LaGory who show how ‘people-place relationships’ are central to the organising and experience of social life (2003). In this regard, where we live, and the places we frequently interact with, and within, shapes our social biographies (Azarian 2023), our biology (Sudimac et al., 2022) and, as such, are interweaved into how we experience certain spaces as meaningful, as in ‘full of meaning’, and importantly significant in various ways (Low & Fuller, 2017). For the analysis we present here, we take a foundational position from this work – that is, where people are born, grow up and live influences the likelihood of facing forms of avoidable suffering (e.g. poverty, lifestyle and environment diseases, consequences of climate change) and may impinge upon or promote capacities to flourish (e.g. access to education, occupation opportunities, available leisure time, proximity to well-maintained accessible public places).

Given this focus, we have been drawn to consider the connection between people’s health and urbanism. Across academic disciplines, empirical evidence points to the urban environment and associated living conditions representing a unique risk factor to human health, particularly mental health (Manning, 2019). Indeed, Fitzgerald and colleagues (2016, p.142) note how the association between city living and poor mental health is one of the ‘oldest in psychiatric epidemiology’. These concerns for mental life sit alongside the increasing trajectory of health problems associated with reduced physical movement and sedentary lifestyles structured into much of urban living. Explanations for these various health problems associated with urban areas and modern life are, of course, multifactorial, but they are increasingly being understood as linked to social determinants connected to the structural dynamics of urbanism (Marmot et al., 2020; Sell & Williams, 2020; World Health Organisation, 2024).

## **Our research – on the significance of urban greenspaces in everyday life**

Bringing the preceding discussion together, the need for urban areas to support quality of life and human flourishing is outlined as a global research priority for health (World Health Organisation, 2022). In seeking strategies to promote quality of life and human flourishing, important evidence points to the potential of urban greenspaces to deliver environmental, economic, social, health and wellbeing benefits for nature, the climate, and for local and wider communities (for various supporting sources to this claim see Browning et al., 2022; Dickinson et al., 2019; European Environment Agency, 2022; Jimenez et al., 2021; WHO, 2024; Natural England, 2024; Public Health England, 2020; Reyes-Riveros et al., 2021).

Yet, whilst much research has focused on the role of greenspaces in supporting and/or promoting health, relatively little research has explored the social character of urban greenspaces, nor how people use, experience and create meaning toward these spaces in their everyday lives (for some exceptions see Burgess et al. 1998; Dinnie et al., 2013; Irvine et al., 2013; Peterson, 2013). In a recent report assessing the ‘value’ of urban green and blue spaces to people and communities, the World Health Organisation (2023, p.13) noted that *‘the stories that people tell and the connection they have with the green and blue spaces in their neighborhoods need to be heard’*.

Echoing this, a recent overview of the field from leading experts highlights that studies exploring how people use, value and interact with urban greenspaces are ‘sparse, lack coherence, and are typically not driven by the community’ (Hunter et al., 2023, p.736). Thus, when reviewing literature on people’s interactions with, and within, urban greenspaces, we found there was, 1) a distinct under representation of research on this topic generally, 2) few studies that use qualitative methodologies well suited to understand such phenomena, 3) very few studies that were participant-led and provided space for the perspectives of regular users to come forth, and, 4) a lack of sociologically focused explorations specifically.

Therefore, it is within this broad context that we were drawn to understand the significance, if any, of urban greenspaces to people. In doing so, we were afforded some important empirical insights into how people living in one urban area in England used and gave meaning to greenspaces within their everyday life. The findings can help shape decision making about the management and governance of public spaces, extend knowledge on urban greenspaces as well as contribute to future studies of people-place relationships. Before turning to these findings, key parts of our methodological approach are discussed at some length. We feel such is warranted due to the studies contribution to research methodology on people-place interactions and outlining how this can be studied in a rich and meaningful way, which holds implications for future work – a point we return to in our conclusions.

## Methodology

Following Sayer (2011), we hold that the foundation for doing ethical and moral research that 'matters' flows from striving to reduce avoidable human suffering and/or enhancing human flourishing. Such personal and political motivations drew us to study people's interactions with, and within, urban greenspaces. This axiological start point outlines the roots of our work that we approached due to our personal experiential and broad academic knowledge leading us to believe that urban greenspaces *appear* to offer various health and social benefits. We were therefore motivated to add to, and advance, the small amount of existing research that explores how people interact, experience and create meaning when using such spaces in their everyday lives.

The guiding parameters for this research preceded broadly from a social constructionist position and traditions within symbolic interactionism. Azarian's (2023) recent contribution exploring such an approach to the social construction of places as meaningful objects was particularly useful in informing our understanding of the 'people-place relationship'. With that in mind, we were broadly interested in grasping something of how people came to construct, and give meaning to, the world around them. A basic assumption of our work, which flows from such theorising, is that this process of meaning-making, and the formation of emotional place-attachment, occurs through continuous interactional relations over time between people, spaces and the embodiment (or not) of cultural ideas about them.

With our understanding of space being, in important ways, produced by social relational processes, and our aim being to understand how people interact with, and come to give meaning to, urban greenspaces in their everyday lives, a methodological approach that provided room for empirically 'contacting' something of such social processes was required. That this research was supported by a small institutional grant and we were all in full time academic positions with varying teaching and other responsibilities, meant that we had limited time and resources available to us. Our decisions over the methodological approach were influenced by such constraints.

Considering the above, we agreed we needed to, 1) spend time in the spaces to get a 'feel' for the social rhythm of them and, 2) speak with people whilst they used them. Semi-structured 'go-along' interviews were thought to be a valid method to achieve this as they appear to have unique benefits for place-based research. Carpiano (2009) outlines how the method allows researchers to ask questions and observe people to gain insight into experiences, interpretations, and practices in a way which is not 'detached' from the sensory features of a certain environment. Typical methodological approaches also often rely on reflections of experiences, rather than live and in-situ discussion of an experience.

We were also aware of the potential participant selection bias of much research on such topics that seek to understand the views of people via methods, such as surveys, which mostly capture 'active voices' in the local community (Hunter et al., 2023). Therefore, we decided on using what we previously describe as '*intercept* go-along interviews' (Hardwicke et al., 2024), which meant participants were not 'pre-selected' but were approached and

recruited in-situ while using the greenspace. In doing so, we thought we may better capture an array of voices as well as trying to produce interesting data as people went about their lives in an urban greenspace.

We entered into a social space and interacted with people unfamiliar to us. As Lefebvre (1991) convincingly argues – space is socially produced, and is therefore inherently political with power relations shaping who may, or may not, have access. Given that, we acknowledge our place in such power dynamics as white, able-bodied, educated, ostensibly gender normative and broadly ‘middle class’. In that regard, we have always had relatively easy and safe access to public spaces for leisure. We are aware of the growing research showing structural and cultural barriers to accessing such spaces amongst minoritised ethnic groups (Hamza et al., 2024), those living with disability (Wong et al., 2023) and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Ghanem et al., 2024). Our specific, but broadly privileged, backgrounds will have influenced our experiences that we bring into the research and likely shaped social dynamics during the interview process. This must be considered when assessing our knowledge claims and we return to this in our conclusions.

The first and last author both lived in the study setting and regularly used the greenspaces for leisure purposes. In that sense, whilst not part of the formal analysis in this paper, they had experiential knowledge of each location. On the one hand, this has potential to bring depth to the analysis we present by helping conversations flow in relation to local knowledge, specific phenomena in the park and shared commonalities in space use for leisure. While, on the other, we were wary that this might result in us simplistically recreating preconceived ideas and sensibilities drawn from our own use of the spaces. Working to find balance in such a situation is important, but we must acknowledge that tracing and assessing how this might have shaped the work is in (large) part an unknowable process. But with that acceptance in hand, we did regularly reflect on this problem on our own, together, on interview transcripts and, most importantly, with the second author who acted as a ‘critical friend’ throughout the process (see Appleton, 2011). They did not live in the area and had not visited the spaces prior to the research so could help us ‘see’ things, and our own practice, ‘though the eyes’ of a relative outsider.

### *Context of the research*

The study setting was across three major parks within Northampton, a large urban town in the East Midlands, England (Figure 1). In the town, 24 of the Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) are amongst the top 10% most deprived in England and 38 are within the top 20% nationally. Lower-layer Super Output Areas are a geographic hierarchy, which has a mean population of 1,500 people, designed to improve the reporting of small area statistics in England and Wales (NHS, 2023). The 2021 Census estimated that there are close to 234,000 residents in Northampton. Of which, 51% are Female, 15% are disabled under the Equality Act and are ‘limited a little’ (9%) or ‘limited a lot’ (6%) in their day-to-day activities, 21% are from a minoritized ethnic group (Asian ethnicities: 8%, black ethnicities: 8%, mixed

ethnicities: 4%, other ethnicities: 2%, rounded percentages). The majority of the population is aged between 35 to 49 years (21%), 50 to 64 years (18%), and 25 to 34 years (15%).

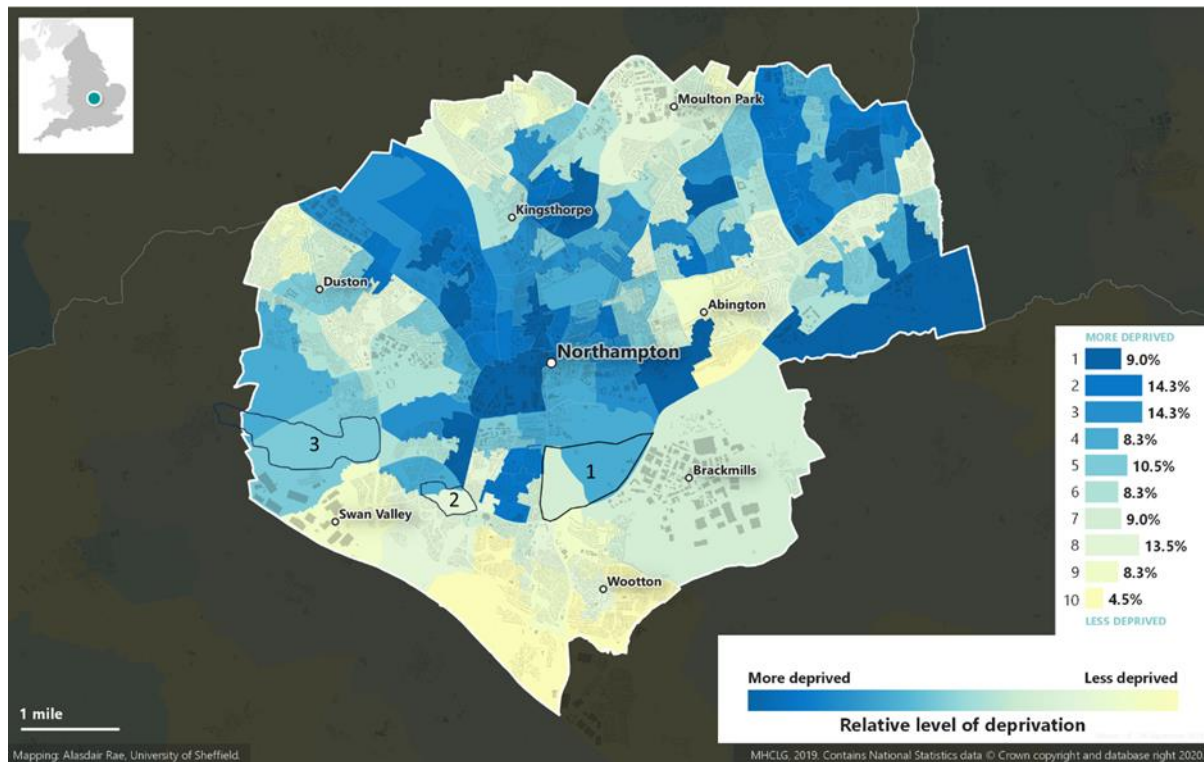


**Figure 1.** Location of 1) Delapre Park, 2) Hunsbury Hill, and 3) Upton Country Park overlaid against the English 2019 Index of multiple deprivation of lower-layer super output areas (LSOA) in Northampton, Northamptonshire, England. Key displays the percentage of LSOAs within each decile of the English 2019 Index of multiple deprivation. Feely used from: <https://research.mysociety.org/sites/imd2019/area/la-northampton-borough-council/lsoa/>

Whilst having broad similarities as ‘urban parks’, there are also important differences between the parks in terms of size, location, amenities and aesthetics which a brief overview is warranted. Delapre Park is a 500-acre space located very close to the town centre, bordered by a university campus, industrial estate, and residential estates. Hunsbury Hill Country Park is 93-acres and located further from the town centre but is bordered by a large residential estate. Both Delapre and Hunsbury Parks are English heritage sites with various historical features that can attract tourists but is more commonly used by locals. Upton Country Park is the furthest from the town centre, being located within new residential and industrial estates on the town’s periphery. Fully opened in 2020, the park is over 313-acres including farmland and provides 2.4 km of paths and cycleways.

These parks were selected as they are defined as ‘Major Parks’ strategically by the local authority because each park receives a high footfall and therefore, they include community amenities, such as a café, toilets, a community centre, car parking, and events. Delapre Park had a 2023 average monthly footfall of 34,232 visits with 67% of visitors travelling zero to three miles to access the park, while Hunsbury Hill and Upton Country Park had 2023 average monthly footfalls of 18,405 (64% of visitors travelling zero to three miles to access the park) and 18,395 visits (70% of visitors traveling zero to three miles to access the park), respectively (Greenspace.ai, Place Informatics Ltd, Altrincham, UK). We provide further detail and audio-visual accounts of each park in Supplementary File 1.

### *Research procedures*

Go-along interviews were conducted across the three urban parks over eight days (six weekdays and two weekend days) during 2022/2023. [First author] and [Third author] were at each park for around three hours on the days of interviews, alternating between AM and PM slots to try capture a range of park visitors. [Second author] joined on two days of data collection. All interviews were semi-structured, which provided the flexibility and opportunity to explore answers and ask follow-up questions.

The interview ‘guide’ broadly focused on park usage and perceived values to self and community (see Supplementary File 1). A conversational approach was taken which leant into the semi-structured design to facilitate flowing discussions focused on key areas of interest. In practical terms, this meant that rather than focusing on the series of questions as a guide from which to ‘conduct’ the interview, they were used as something akin to an aide-mémoire which was flexible to the person(s), flow of the conversation and surroundings during the interview (see Matthews and Smith 2024 for a discussion around such an approach). During the first 16 interviews, we also asked participants for feedback on the method, how comfortable they felt being approached, and ways we may improve our procedures. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive (see below) which gave us confidence to proceed, still tentatively and cautiously, with the project in an ethically sensitive manner.

On the days of data collection, we based ourselves at a fixed location in the greenspaces that was in clear view of the public with signs placed approximately 20 metres from us, informing people they may be approached for research purposes. These locations were chosen for their proximity to entry route footpaths, while having easily viewable pathway options for the public to avoid us should they wish. Any members of public using the space that appeared to meet the inclusion criteria – over 18 years old and have the capacity to provide informed consent – were approached and invited to participate. Our exclusion criteria were: 1) People on a phone call or wearing headphones 2) Cyclists and E-scooter users 3) Runners 4) Groups (>4 people). Furthermore, if we felt we picked up on body language that *clearly* indicated a person did not want to be approached then we did not do so.

Institutional ethical approval prior to starting this project was gained, and we were careful to undertake the research sensitively and ethically. This included being as non-disruptive as possible, approaching people in a friendly, relaxed and nonthreatening way. For example,

making ourselves physically 'small', socially 'open' and inviting people to come to us where possible. We greeted potential participants and introduced the study (humour was often used to aid this interaction e.g. 'I promise I'm not trying to sell you something...'). Moreover, questions were designed as to not cause distress and focused on enhancing participant voices around using their local greenspaces. Potential participants were offered further details and participant information on handouts, allowing them to consider participation and returning later on to participate if they wished.

Each interview started by going back over the research purpose, reminding participants of their right to withdraw, and that all questions were optional, as well as gaining verbal consent. We then walked with the participant(s) whilst conducting the interviews, being led by them in terms of direction and pace. Interviews were recorded using portable Dictaphone devices. All biographical details are modified, or made vague, without losing their broad importance for the analysis and empirical insights. We refer to all participants using pseudonyms.

Across the eight days of data collection, we spent approximately 30 hours in the greenspaces observing, interacting and interviewing. In total, 39 interviews were conducted (33 by the first author, 6 by the second author) with 66 people, including individuals, pairs, and groups (max 4). The third author was present for all data collection, posted at the designated fixed location to help hand out information and conducting manual observations using the Method for Observing Physical Activity and Wellbeing tool (MOHAWk; Benton et al., 2022) of park footfall and researcher assumed demographics to demonstrate the representativeness of our participants compared to other observed park visitors.

Broadly, researcher assumed demographics of the interview sample included 47 women and 17 men, was predominately white and consisted mainly of middle-aged to older adults. To aid interpretation, more specific self-described details from the participants are provided throughout our analysis. A full breakdown of all count data from the manual observations and a descriptive comparison of assumed demographics between participants and park visitors is provided in Supplementary File 1. By way of context, the most recent census data (2021) of the Middle Layer Super Output Areas that the parks were located within had predominant resident demographics of 50.6% - 52.2% female, 79.8% - 84.6% white, and 63.5% - 70.7% aged 16 to 64 years (see <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps/choropleth>).

There were 21 people that either declined or withdrew from the interviews, with an overall 'response rate' of 76% amongst members of the public approached and invited to participate. Whilst these figures do not inform the analysis, we share them to support our suggestion that we found people were mostly responsive to the research when we initially spoke with them, with many being very forthcoming with wanting to participate.

The interviews ranged from 10 to 90 minutes (averaging 30 minutes) and were transcribed verbatim. The variance reflects the flexible approach we took, i.e. some people were short of time and only passing through the space but wanted to participate while others were using the space for leisure and said they enjoyed speaking with us at length. Easy for us to say, and

perhaps misinterpret, we know, but the following extracts from some participants when asked about the method reflects recurrent feedback and we think is useful to share here:

It's really good, nice to walk and talk. There's something about walking that helps you talk and think because you are going forward, not just standing still. I feel freer to talk. Interesting that I've never seen research done like this, so I was curious. And you didn't restrict it, you said, "I'll go wherever you are going." (Sophie)

It's been absolutely lovely, yes. It's a really nice way to do it. I don't want to stand still and talk to you for 20 minutes or do a questionnaire, that's hard work. This, absolute pleasure, we're walking at our speed, going the way we want. You are not affecting our day, you are making it better! (Tom and Sarah)

We have endeavored to outline here a methodological approach which gave space for empirically contacting the social world of the urban greenspaces through means not detached from their sensory environment, and which captured something of people's everyday use of such spaces. In doing so, somewhat unique (to this thematic area of study) data were able to be collected.

### *Analytical process*

Our process of analysing this data was informed by Blumer's classic symbolic interactionist discussion of 'sensitising concepts' (1969). To us, this means that the analysis of our data occurred over a period of time in which there was a recurrent interaction between our tentative interpretations, existing academic ideas and the data. Initial analysis began during data collection via discussions between authors after each interview on topics of apparent interest. After data collection ended, there was a period of familiarisation whereby the first author read through all individual transcripts alongside listening to the audio recordings, and the second and third authors each reading 13 transcripts. Following this, each author coded 13 transcripts, documenting their coded data and grouping these into broad areas which related to the research aims. Regular meetings and conversations were had throughout this process as we discussed initial thoughts and observed patterns across the dataset.

There were several key empirical details that became apparent to all authors following this process which included, but are not limited to, the following:

- References to greenspaces being distinctly different to other urban areas
- These spaces being an 'escape'
- Framing the parks as leisure spaces distinct from work
- An awe and appreciation for nature
- References to taking notice of wildlife
- Social interactions in the spaces
- Amenities and organised events
- Accessibility and safety
- References to sense of community
- Various discussions of perceived benefits for wellbeing from using the spaces

Based on these topics, the first author then conducted a further targeted reading of the literature with a focus on building a coherent analysis. His background as a sociologist, and axiological position outlined above, will have influenced the interpretation and the concepts drawn on when data was put into dialogue with existing theory. Specifically, it became apparent after months of dwelling, revisiting the data, reading and having conversations with colleagues, that drawing on classic urban sociology, and the well-trodden territory of sociological interest in spaces (Fuller & Low, 2017), provided a clear framework to allow an analysis which advanced our understanding of urban greenspaces.

As such, [first author] developed an analytical frame in which this paper could be developed, which was refined through drafting, editing and countless rewrites as he sought to produce an honest, plausible and coherent explanation of the phenomena. This was shared with the second author, whose academic background is in psychology, and third author, a public health academic, at various times for discussion and refinement with both encouraging clarification over the use of concepts and data. This systematic and cyclical process resulted in three broad, but coherent and connected, empirically and theoretically informed findings: 1) Urban greenspaces offering a temporary physical and symbolic 'escape' from urbanism, 2) They were social spaces where interactions and sense of community were facilitated, and 3) People understood them as being a resource for wellbeing. We discuss each finding in turn, sharing with you how the urban greenspaces were significant in the lives of the people we walked and talked with.

### **An 'oasis' to temporarily 'escape' urbanism**

During our chats with park visitors, a recurrent topic across the interviews was the access to the 'natural' world that the urban greenspaces afforded. The access was framed as unique to these parks compared to other urban areas. For example, following a discussion of seeing a swan land in the lake within the park, Sally, in her 40s and walking with her husband, explained, 'you don't get these experiences if you're not in a space like this'. Actively experiencing nature was a draw for most the participants, with the following extract from Jill and Sharon, two retired friends, capturing some of this:

Jill: It's nice to have the sheep here and the lambs.

Sharon: ...I saw some pheasants with their chicks, so that was a bonus. I came yesterday with my son and we walked back by the lakes and even though he's 32 he'd never seen a swan protecting its family before! [Laughter] it was hissing at us! So you do see nature here, it's not just the trees, you do see nature. We obviously see the lambs, we see them grow up don't we? [Turns towards friend]

Some participants suggested the greenspaces provoked a heightened sense of awareness of nature as they, and 'we' during interviews, tuned into the surroundings and 'took notice' of trees, plants, flowers and wildlife. During several of the interviews, participants would stop

and point to views, favorite trees and areas of the parks, or pause allowing us to listen to birds and at times even just ‘smell’ the air.

Such experiences were suggested to have positive wellbeing effects, as a working mum in her mid-30s, Lucy, told us as she walked with her husband and young child:

It makes you feel much better doesn't it? [pause and turns to First Author]... the ‘middle field’... loads of birds and woodpeckers, a really serene place to be... Squirrels, we've seen foxes here, Muntjacs, all kinds...nature is great.

For Tom and Sarah, a local couple in their mid-60s that had been using the park for several years, the access to the natural world led to them using the space even just for fleeting moments:

Tom: If we come on a bad day and it starts to rain then we'll just sit in the car in the car park and still enjoy it and we still go home feeling better than when we came out.

First Author: So even just being in the area then, even from the car park is..  
[Interjection]

Tom: Just to pull up in the car park and sit with the window cracked. If it was lashing down with rain it's still a nice place to come and just watch the world for a few minutes. Still feels better when you go home.

First Author: When you say ‘watching the world’, is there anything specifically that draws you to this area as opposed to going to any other spaces?

Sarah: I think the wildlife and the amount of birds. You go through and you hear birds, try to identify them. And squirrels, we've seen rabbits, deer, we've seen all sorts and it's just a nice place to come. It is very relaxing.

That our participants valued greenspaces in such ways matches important literature documenting the benefits of engagement with nature for peoples' health and wellbeing (Lackey et al., 2021; White et al., 2021). Their thoughts in this regard often centered on the temporary ability to find an ‘oasis’ to ‘escape’ from urbanism. Take the following comments from Sally for example:

I was just saying before we bumped into you, it's hard to believe that the town centre is just there. You just feel you are in the middle of nowhere...You just feel you've had a bit of a break from the world when you come and walk round here and then go back again.

Such findings of ‘escapism’ from urbanism resonates with previous studies of greenspace use in England (Burgess et al., 1998) and Denmark (Peterson, 2013). There are philosophical and theoretical complexities that come with conceptualising and experiencing ‘boundaries’ and distinctions that might be made when considering the rural/urban and natural/built distinctions (see Loughran 2016). While we do not have space here to fully consider such

work, a broad distinction between the 'natural/rural' and 'built/urban' environment is a useful heuristic for framing how our participants made sense of, and attached symbolic meaning to, their use of urban greenspaces.

As foregrounded in our literature review, early sociological theory concerned with the large social shifts from pre-industrial to industrial societies considered the emerging and rapidly growing 'cities' as spaces which symbolised modernity (Du Bois 1899; Simmel, 1903; Tonnies, 1887). Here, traditional social organisation and ties were gradually broken down and re-organised around industrial capitalism. It is suggested that pre-urban life was more attuned to the natural world, less characterised by clear work/leisure distinctions and had a slower 'tempo' of life (Loughran, 2016).

Such macro social processes connect to the way our participants frequently contrasted green and urban space experiences, with many fondly describing 'peaceful' and 'relaxing' greenspace sanctuaries, with local retiree, Rodger, suggesting, 'if you stand still, hardly nothing, beautiful'. This was repeatedly contrasted with less appealing, fast-paced and 'noisy' urban environments where, for working couple in their mid-30s, Lydia and Matt, 'everything is 100 miles per hour'. This speaks to Simmel's (1903) discussion of the psychological conditions of the 'metropolis' in which the 'tempo' of economic, occupational and social life created sensory foundations quite distinct from the 'slower', more habitual, flowing rhythm of rural existence which preceded modernity.

Most participants described how the urban greenspaces enabled detachment from the fast 'tempo' of urban life, allowing them to leave behind urban materiality such as buildings, roads, traffic, shops, pylons and pollution. In 'escaping' urbanism and becoming temporarily immersed within greenspaces, many of the park visitors we spoke to suggested they sought a 'break from life' – being work, chores and other life stressors. For example, Billy, in his mid-40s, uses the park with his family and on his lunch breaks to gain some relaxation from his job suggested:

First Author: What do you think the value of this space to the community is?

Billy: Spaces like this are invaluable, just to allow people a space to breath. You are still in the town here, we're not out in the countryside, we're surrounded by the rest of the town. But when you are here it feels like you've escaped from all that, you are away from all the hustle and bustle of life in the town and the suburbs.

Similar was discussed by Dave, who's in his mid-50s and works full time in a high pace job for an international bank. When not having to be in the office, his local urban greenspace was a valuable resource:

First Author: Is there anything about this space in particular that attracts you to using it or anything you like about it when you do come here?

Dave: Nice and quiet, got the trees, birds. Just a nice, pleasant area to get away from everything.

First Author: When you say get away from everything, what do you mean by that?

Dave: You are stuck in the house, stuck at the computer, working all day, so it's nice to come out, get away from all the work things and get a bit of exercise, bit of fresh air and generally better surroundings instead of looking at a computer screen.

We suggest, then, that the urban greenspaces were, in part, given meaning through the perceived access to the 'natural world' and contrast to dense urban areas which symbolised urbanism for many of the park visitors. This broadly aligns with classic sociological theory focused on the 'construction' of urban places as being symbolic of modernity and processes of urbanism (Du Bois 1899; Simmel, 1903; Tonnies, 1887), and specifically with some more contemporary research on reasons people use urban greenspaces (Dinnie et al., 2013; Peterson, 2013). Moving away from interactions *with* the space, we next consider peoples interactions *within* it.

### **Everyday encounters, social interactions and sense of community in urban greenspaces**

The park visitors we spoke with tended to symbolically frame the greenspaces as distinct from other urban spheres in terms of the encounters and social interactions possible and permissible within them. For example, from using the space alone, or with her husband and child, Lucy, a full-time working parent in her mid-30s, told us how she had 'made some really good friends... seeing the same people over and over again with the same routines'.

These social interactions also included important 'check-in' opportunities amongst people connected around the shared use of the space. As Janet, a retired widow in her early 70s, explained, 'If I go on holiday people will say, when I see them, "I haven't seen you, where have you been? Have you been poorly?"'. Sophie, a regular user of the park as she found it accessible on her mobility scooter for walking her dog and socialising with others, recalled:

One day my car had to go in for a service and so I was in late and, of course, people hadn't seen me and they were like, "Just making sure you are alright because we haven't seen your car" because I'm here every day. Even staff were asking because they haven't seen you, you become a bit of a permanent fixture.

These selected extracts speak to the repeated references from many of the participants to the sociality of the spaces. Greetings (sometimes brief, sometimes longer interactions), smiles or eye contact with other park users were frequent during the go-along interviews, with many participants detailing how they had formed connections with previously unfamiliar others through using the space.

It is useful to consider such findings against urban social theory that suggests dense areas, such as city centers, are characterised by 'reserved' and 'conservative' interactions between unfamiliar others (Elias, 1939; Lofland, 1973; Simmel, 1908). This is encapsulated well by Goffman's (1963) concept of 'civil inattention', being the process whereby public encounters between unfamiliar others is 'performed' by showing brief awareness of each other but then directing attention away in order to maintain social and personal boundaries. Yet, our participants' experiences suggested that such 'civil inattention' was somewhat 'relaxed' or attenuated in the urban greenspaces. This appeared to mean they had an increased opportunity to engage in social interactions between other familiar and unfamiliar park visitors, park staff and volunteers. This, they told us, was a very significant part of the reasons they used the greenspaces. For example, Tom and Sarah commented how 'the staff are absolutely lovely...Always got time to say, "Hello, how are you?"' and other members of the public, 'everybody we see says good morning....It's lovely'.

Across many of the park visitors there were recurrent comments and references to the 'strong community' amongst those that used the spaces and the social fabric of the parks. For example, Ella, a working mum in her late 40s, was using the park with her child on a weekend and explained, 'I think it's the people that make this space, the people are very friendly. I love being here'. The following conversation extract with Sarah also speaks to this:

It is community, very much so. And if you are on your own and you start talking to people, for some people that may be the only person they've spoken to today. Feeling open enough and the ability to just talk to anybody.

The greenspaces were often framed by participants as 'community owned', 'for everybody' and for Richard he positioned his local park as 'the lungs of the community'. Participants frequently made mention to available amenities within the greenspaces, such as a café, refreshments, seating areas and dedicated events as fostering a sense of community. These amenities provided refreshments and toilets, while also creating key social hubs where people chatted and interacted.

For some, this sense of community tied to a feeling of responsibility over the upkeep and maintenance of their local parks. During interviews and while in the space, park users would frequently pick up litter and remove or report fallen branches on paths. One participant recalled using their own resources to trim hedges back after a lack of local council funding.

'Community' is something that is done via ongoing social relations in action. In that sense, it is not some static object, but rather the product of social actions which can range from friendly one-off interactions, altruistic social behaviours and more structured participation in certain social groups over time (Jackson, 2020). Whilst our focus was not explicitly on 'community', this finding came forth across conversations with the participants. Therefore we, tentatively, interpret the findings outlined here as suggesting that the urban parks were a social space in which various social actions and relations over time led to a *sense* of community being referenced to amongst the park visitors we spoke to.

So far we have shown that the participants framed the urban parks as a symbolic and physical 'escape' from urbanism through the access to the 'natural' world they afforded. We then outlined the sociality of the parks, and how the greenspaces possibly played a role in fostering a sense of community amongst the people we spoke to. Considered against the premise that many urban areas and modern life are characterised by 'reserved' and 'conservative' interactions between unfamiliar others (Elias, 1939; Goffman, 1963; Lofland, 1973; Simmel, 1908), we suggest the urban greenspaces, to the people we spoke to at least, outlined a social setting in which friendly interactions between unfamiliar others were perhaps more common and permissible than in other areas of social life. This possibly offered greater opportunities for developing a sense of community in these spaces. Our final section of analysis considers how these preceding discussions interweaved in participants understanding these spaces as being positive for their wellbeing.

### **Urban greenspaces as a resource for wellbeing**

Across our conversations with park visitors, many spoke to various values in using these spaces for promoting, supporting and/or protecting their wellbeing. Cathy, a local in her mid-50s, explained to [First author] how she had been having a difficult time since Covid-19, having to take some time off work with anxiety and continuing to have counselling to support her wellbeing. Now back working full time in her busy job, she uses her local park on her lunch breaks to help de-stress and explained how the space, with its wildlife and natural aesthetics was 'so lovely' and gave her 'peace of mind'. Retiree Tom spoke openly about his experience with depression when he worked locally, commenting on how the greenspace had been his 'happy place' and that he 'would come after work, have a walk round and just decompress from the day'.

Trevor was a parent in his late 30s who was going through various hardship. Whilst walking, he went on to explain to [First author] the following:

Trevor: There's been a lot of stuff the last two years, my partner is currently in hospital and has been for seven months, my daughter, she's had a few life changing things the last couple of years so it's been quite stressful. I've just returned to work after being off for seven months. So it's just good stress relief really, makes me feel better, gives you a bit of a boost, a bit of time to myself to think.

First Author: I'm very sorry to hear those things, it must be very hard. [pause] Do you feel spaces like this provide a good outlet for you?

Trevor: Yes. I live close so it's on my doorstep, it's great because I don't have to travel too far to access it. I just appreciate it being here because I've been cooped up in the house with my daughter for the best part of the last 18 months so it's just nice to get out.

Janet and her husband used to spend their spare time walking in the greenspace together with their dogs. After losing him, she explained how the park continued to play a role in her life as a support system as well as bringing back fond memories of time spent with her loved one. At one point during the interview, [First author] and Janet stopped as a group of rabbits ran across the path. Janet laughed, and recalled how her husband used to turn to her and say 'Must be breeding season' when they saw rabbits together. Such moments were invaluable to Janet, as she explained how they helped her on days she felt low and missed her husband. For Janet, the local park was an important asset to her life:

First Author: How long have you been using this park?

Janet: I'm 70 years old and I've been using this park for years. We've always had a dog so we've always used this park. And [Local park] we used to use as well but that gets waterlogged over there so I tend to use this one because it's such a nice park. They have an organisation where you can go and collect all the rubbish, any litter that's lying about. Yes, really friendly group over here, so that's why I use this park.

First Author: So is that like a community or friends of the park group?

Janet: Friends of the park.

First Author: And is that quite an attraction for using this space?

Janet: Yes. And not only that, I lost my husband nearly three years ago and because he always used to walk over here with the dogs, they were really supportive. The dog walkers were really supportive when I lost him [Long pause]...So that's another side of it, as well as having a nice park because of the friends of the park, you also make friends with other dog walkers that use this park.

Janet was one of many participants to mention the sociality within the park as being a mediating factor for perceived wellbeing benefits. It became apparent across many of the conversations, that the social features of such spaces were frequently referenced as a resource for wellbeing, whether it was socialising with familiar or unfamiliar others. Bethany, one of three on an organised walk with a local women's institute, explained that:

It's a therapy for us, this little walking group. Wherever we walk...It's just therapy...like counselling... It's just the company and we always say hello to everybody, even if they don't want to say hello back. We just try and go round and spread a bit of happiness.

Sophie also found value in the opportunities for socialising with others the park afforded as she shared with us:

First Author: What do you feel you gain from coming here?

Sophie: The main thing is because the dog's sorted and she's happy, but for me wellbeing, absolutely. I unfortunately don't really go anywhere or do anything because I'm restricted [points to electric wheelchair] to so much that I do, so this is

my social. I come out, I usually see people that I see every day, day to day. And it's just nice, it's time to chill and relax. So mental health wise it's massive for me. This is my little sanctuary.

Many participants framed the greenspaces as a resource for their wellbeing. For example, Charlie and Jenny, who were siblings in their early 60s, grew up in the area and were revisiting a park they had many fond memories of. To them, 'This [greenspace] is something that you can use on your own, for your own wellbeing'. Further to this, the spaces were valued as participants spoke to being able to 'clear their head', reflect, relax, and recharge. Regular visitor of the park, Alice, told us as she walked with her friend that, 'If you are stressed about something, once you get outside it seems to melt away... You just feel at peace with the world.' Sally positioned the greenspaces as a space which you can just '...unwind and be mindful without really thinking about it'. Sharon was on a small group health walk and suggested using the spaces even for just 20 minutes 'changes your outlook on everything'.

What was clear, then, across all participants, was that they felt using and engaging with the greenspaces had a positive influence on their wellbeing. Such findings are important, and match the increasing evidence on such an association (Lackey et al., 2021; White et al., 2021; Reyes-Riveros et al., 2021). What our findings add is that there appeared to be an interweaving of the materiality (sensory experiences of, and in, nature) and, importantly, the sociality (meanings attached to use, social interactions and sense of community) of the urban greenspaces which lead to them being perceived as a resource for wellbeing. This complex interplay of relations led to these spaces playing a significant role in many of the participants lives both past and present, through good and bad times, which, for some, resulted in strong emotional attachments to the parks forming. And moreover, beyond just positive influences on wellbeing, parks visitors seemed to value the spaces being a freely available, and mostly accessible, resource allowing empowerment through taking control of their wellbeing within their everyday use of such spaces.

## **Discussion and implications**

Following traditions within symbolic interactionism, we think human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. As Blumer (1969, p.20) captures neatly, 'people live in worlds of objects and are guided in their orientation and action by the meaning of these objects'. In that regard, our participants 'acted' toward urban greenspaces by the meanings ascribed to them as being part of the 'natural' world. This meaning was broadly derived from contrasting such spaces to other areas of urban life, and the symbolism associated with urbanism. Therefore, using the urban greenspaces were symbolically framed by many of our participants as an 'oasis' which offered an 'escape'. Moreover, peoples' interactions with, and within, the space over time further shaped the meaning-making

process as participants spoke to largely positive interactions with familiar and unfamiliar others and a sense of community within the parks. These processes, then, interweaved leading us to a logical proposition that the way people acted toward, and within, the urban greenspaces influenced their interpretation of using the space as being positive for their personal wellbeing.

Given this assessment of our data, it is our contention that the benefits to health, wellbeing and flourishing from using urban greenspaces are, at least in part, mediated by social context and relations. That is to say, urban greenspaces do not hold inherent meaningfulness and thus any affect (positive or negative) on people must be generally and specifically understood through how they come to experience, understand and interpret their use of the space. If this proposition is broadly accepted, then implications for policy, practice, and research flow which we consider here.

### *Implications for policy and practice*

At the international and national government level, urban greenspaces are being positioned as integral assets for tackling health issues (WHO, 2023; European Environment Agency, 2022; Natural England, 2024; Public Health England, 2020; United Nations, 2015). However, governmental and scientific discourse can be largely dominated by considerations for the ‘material’ aspects of greenspaces and their influence on human health (Dinnie et al., 2013; WHO, 2023). Such a focus is at risk of overlooking the ways in which people actually come to use and value urban greenspaces and, importantly, does not account for the complex social relations which may mediate wellbeing and thus may not offer equal benefits across *all* social groups.

This is important when considered against the increasing research focused on social inequalities in use and access to greenspaces (Dai, 2011; Rodriguez-Loureiro et al., 2021; Wang & Lan, 2019). In that regard, our findings suggest that increased research, policy and practice should more explicitly focus on the social aspects of greenspaces, following the World Health Organization’s (2023) call for greater attention to how people use, interact and value urban greenspaces in their everyday lives.

A concern for community cohesion in modern life has characterised much academic, political and popular discourse during the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Giddens, 2023; Putnam, 2000), and this concern echoes early sociological writings on urbanism destabilising social solidarity (Simmel, 1903; Tönnies, 1887; Wirth, 1938). Within this context, urban greenspaces have been, largely anecdotally, described as ‘treasured assets... often central to the lives of their communities’ (DCLG, 2017, p.3) and a ‘social glue’ that brings people and communities together (The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007, p.2). Our findings add some empirical weight to such claims, by showing how urban greenspaces can facilitate a sense of community through being a social space in which people can socialise with familiar others.

But moreover, that they also appear to be a public space in which interactions between unfamiliar others is more permissible than other urban areas which can help foster feelings of belonging. This was a key mediating factor many of our participants attributed to the value of such spaces and subsequent improved subjective wellbeing and thus should be embedded into park management and promotion strategies.

Another key reason we found people appeared to value using their local urban greenspaces, and felt they gained improved wellbeing from doing so, was to both physically and symbolically escape urbanism. As such, this must be taken into consideration in policy development and space management that seeks to develop or enhance urban greenspaces by changing the built environment via path upgrades, amenities, signage and the like. Such decision making must be balanced by seeking to not impinge on the 'natural' environment that appears to be so valued by visitors, echoing an argument we recently made in regard to wayfinding interventions to increase physical activity in an urban park (Hardwicke et al., 2024).

Given the decline in local government funding for public urban greenspaces in England (Smith et al., 2023), and globally (Geary et al., 2021), as well as the threats to public space from commercial development (Haaland & van Den Bosch, 2015), capturing and sharing the ways these spaces matter to people in their everyday lives is an important necessity to inform decision making over resource allocation and space management. Within the UK, though we are sure there are similarities across Western societies, elected local authorities were traditionally responsible for the funding, management and maintenance of public urban parks. But as they are deemed 'non-statutory' services, meaning government investment is discretionary, austerity politics and local authority budget cuts pose threats to their existence and upkeep (Smith, 2021). When taken together, our findings suggest urban parks provide a myriad of positive functions to the people we spoke to and their local community. Continued work in this direction is recommended to support the case that urban greenspaces and parks are important public assets that warrant public investment, and we join (so far largely ignored) calls for a reconsideration of such spaces as 'statutory' services (Barker et al., 2020).

### *Implications for research and future directions*

There is a broad dearth of qualitative research on people's interactions with, and within, urban greenspaces (Hunter et al., 2023). And even less that uses methodological designs capable of capturing in-situ interactional and sensory experiences, being participant-led and otherwise providing glimpses into 'everyday' use of a space. In using 'intercept go-along' interviews, this research has shared the potential utility of an approach that can be used with limited resources and, whilst not 'co-producing' knowledge per se, the approach certainly centres the voices of the community which are often omitted in such research (Hunter et al., 2023).

Such an approach allowed us partial insight to the various personal ways that local urban greenspaces came to form significance to people, and may be a viable and valuable methodology to support research efforts seeking to understand the value of urban greenspaces. Whilst offering useful findings, what we share in this paper are only partial insights as the transient nature of the interaction within our methodology means we sacrificed gaining a detailed understanding of our participants backgrounds. We hope future research can extend, expand and improve on this approach to provide rich descriptions of people's uses of urban greenspaces, and indeed any other public space.

We are also aware that our findings are limited to how people already using urban greenspaces valued and gave meaning to them, and that the 'world' we accessed and interpreted will be shaped by our biographical and academic backgrounds. This must be considered when assessing our claims to knowledge and it is hoped that the growing research on people that may face structural and cultural barriers to urban greenspaces can critique, build on and extend the insights we outline here.

Due to practical reasons of the methodological approach we did not speak with cyclists and E-scooter users, runners and groups (>4 people). Of course, these represent a large proportion of urban greenspace visitors and warrant specific attention in future research to build on the insights outlined in our work. Whilst we expect there to be experiential, cultural and social commonalities across many Western societies, our focus on one area in England means caution must be taken when considering how people interact with and give meaning to urban greenspaces in different socio-spatial contexts. In this regard, research in other locations would help us consider the universality, or not, of these findings.

Finally, our analysis in this paper broadly focuses on the wider social conditions of modern Western societies in which urban greenspaces have come to be so valued for supporting human health and flourishing. In doing so, we have shown the social character of many of the wellbeing benefits associated with using urban greenspaces and the meanings people attached to such spaces within their everyday life. What we do not have space to detail in this paper is a more descriptive discussion of specific features and park designs which may influence visitor experiences. This is something we take up in subsequent work, and outlines an area for future research.

## Conclusions

Urban greenspaces matter to people. They can be important assets to local communities which support peoples wellbeing and flourishing, enable temporary escape from urbanism, provide access to the 'natural' world and facilitate largely positive interactions with familiar and unfamiliar others which can help foster a sense of community. We contend that investment in, and protection of, urban greenspaces as public assets is a vital area for global and local strategies aimed at supporting human flourishing and working towards healthy

(urban) societies for all. By providing empirical glimpses into the significance of urban greenspaces to people and their communities, and theorising the social character of these spaces, we hope this paper contributes to working in such a direction.

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