



The feeling of a place

A psychogeographic exploration in Walworth

About the research

Has a building, place or a public place made you feel excited, interested, melancholic or stressed? Over the spring and early summer 2017 Social Life explored new methods for gauging what people feel about the neighbourhood environments where they live and work. We organised walks and other research – including street interviews and ethnography – to gain a better understanding of narratives and feelings around particular places.

Why it's important

Understanding the emotional and social landscape of an area can help us understand what makes good places. Often there is something approaching consensus about what a good or bad place is. But sometimes the picture is more divergent, with some people seeing it as positive while others view it more negatively

At a time when London is changing so rapidly it is important to understand why people respond well to some places and not to others. Many Londoners report that their city is becoming unfamiliar to them. We need to understand more about why people sometimes feel positive about some new buildings and street layouts, and hostile to others. Often places that seem ordinary and unremarkable for some are cherished dearly by others.



Photo of Spare Street

What we did

Our focus has been on five different but connected places near Elephant and Castle in Southwark. Our office sits at the centre of these, in a corner of Elephant & Castle that is calm and stable, in comparison to the upheaval of construction in other parts of the area. These five sites have acted as connector points for a walk we have facilitated five times with residents and visitors. At each stop we asked the participants a series of questions to capture data on how they felt about each place. We also carried out site-specific street interviews with passers-by at the same locations. In total we gathered data from 101 people, half through walks and half through one-on-one street interviews.

The locations we focused on were:



Pullen's Community Garden



Spare Street



Elephant & Castle roundabout (near Strata Tower)



Newington Green



Walworth Road

Our research into these five locations has given us a rich understanding of how people respond to different environments. Participants, particularly people taking part in our walks, told us that our approach helped them think differently about being present at these places, allowing them to reflect on their emotional response.

The five stops contain different spatial qualities, from low-rise residential areas to areas with tall towers, and green spaces with intricate urban nature to places with no greenery. The different qualities can give an indication of what such characteristics brings to an area and how it impacts on the way places make us feel.

Who we worked with

We have been collaborating with the Canadian Urban Realities Laboratory led by Prof Colin Ellard – specialists in urban environment and neurology. We have drawn on their methods to improve our understanding of the relationship between urban design and human psychology.

Throughout the project we have had conversations with local community groups and residents associations, which has given us invaluable knowledge about the local area and the many interesting initiatives taking place.



Photos from walks (Elephant & Castle and Newington Green) and engagement on Newington Green



Photo from Newington Green

Looking at the data

The data showed interesting patterns in how people react to their surroundings. Overall people's reactions to the different stops were convergent. People's responses to the stops at Pullen's Community Garden and Elephant & Castle were most similar, whereas Newington Green, Spare Street and Walworth Road received more varied responses. The research found that people who have close connections to an area tend to have more positive associations than people who were saw the location for the first time.

The graph below show how each individual stop compared to the overall average, (0) being average, (+) above average and (-) below average. The graphs on page 7 show how the different stops scored according to some of the different parametres, and gives examples of the variations of the scores (see fig. 3 and 4).

The research found that:

- Pullen's community Garden scored most positively across all aspects
- Walworth Road scored second most positive in aspects such as feeling welcome and being interesting, and highest in how excited people felt.
- Spare Street and Newington Green had similar responses in how the locations made people feel. Both scored close to average.
- Elephant & Castle roundabout by Strata Tower scored more negatively across all aspects.

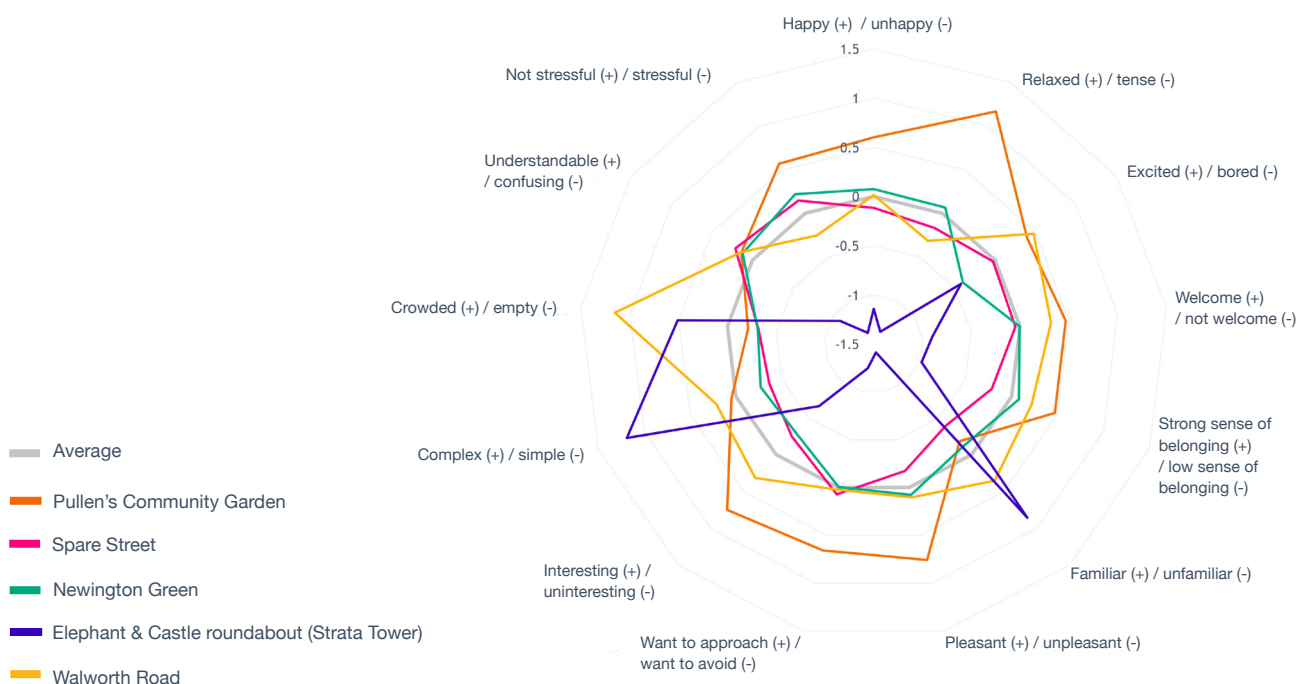


Fig. 1: how the different stops scored compared to the overall average

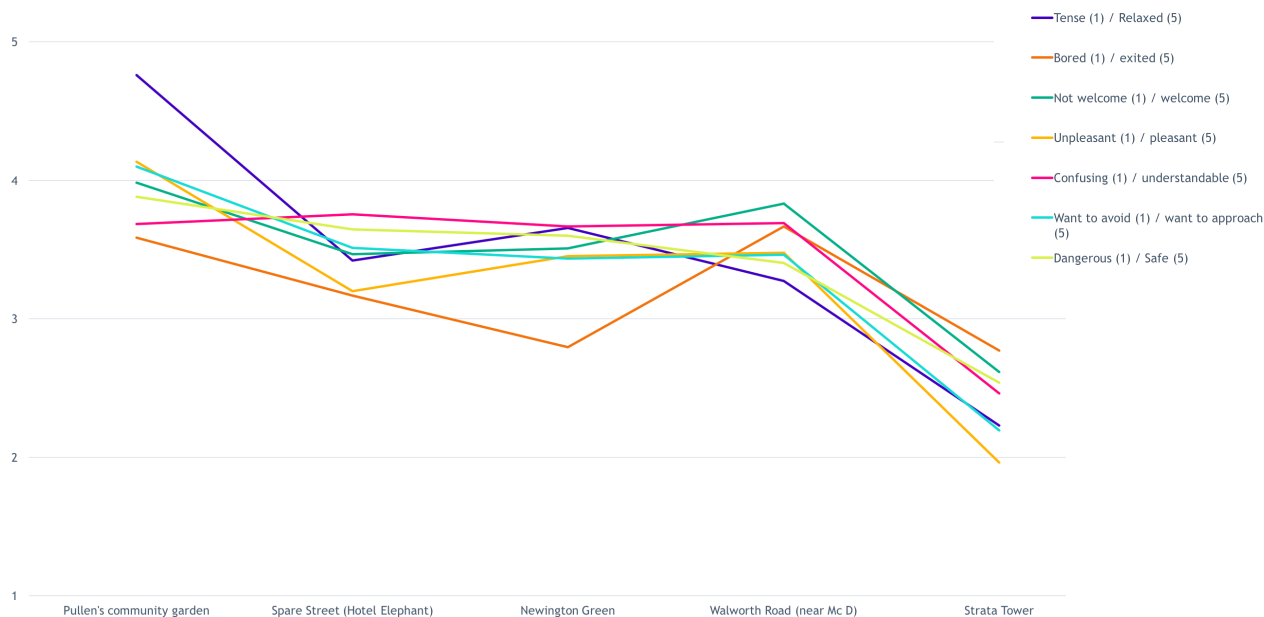


Fig. 2: average score for the different stops for selected aspects

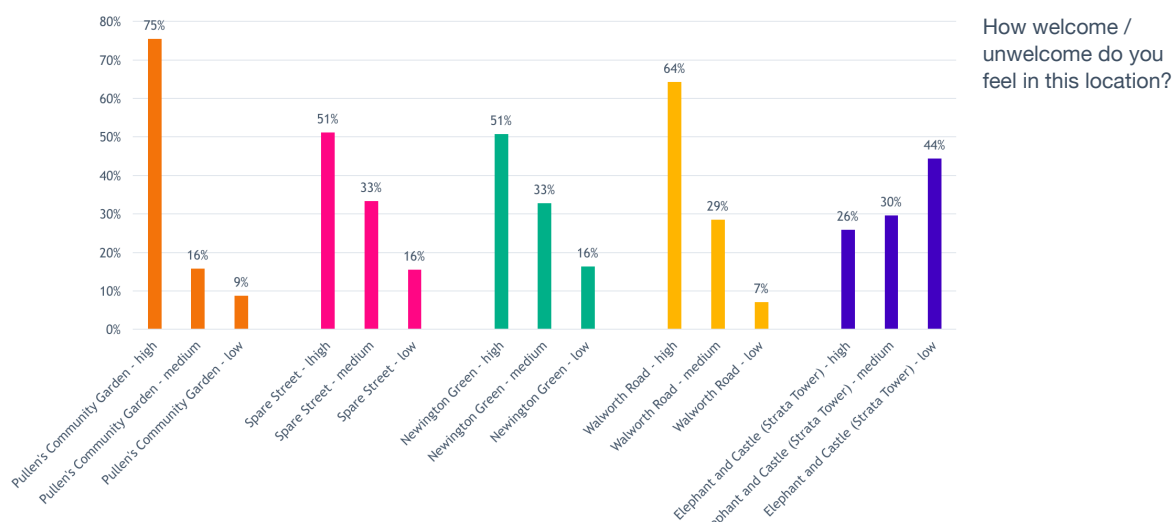


Fig. 3: % of people who thought the location was welcome (high) / unwelcome (low)

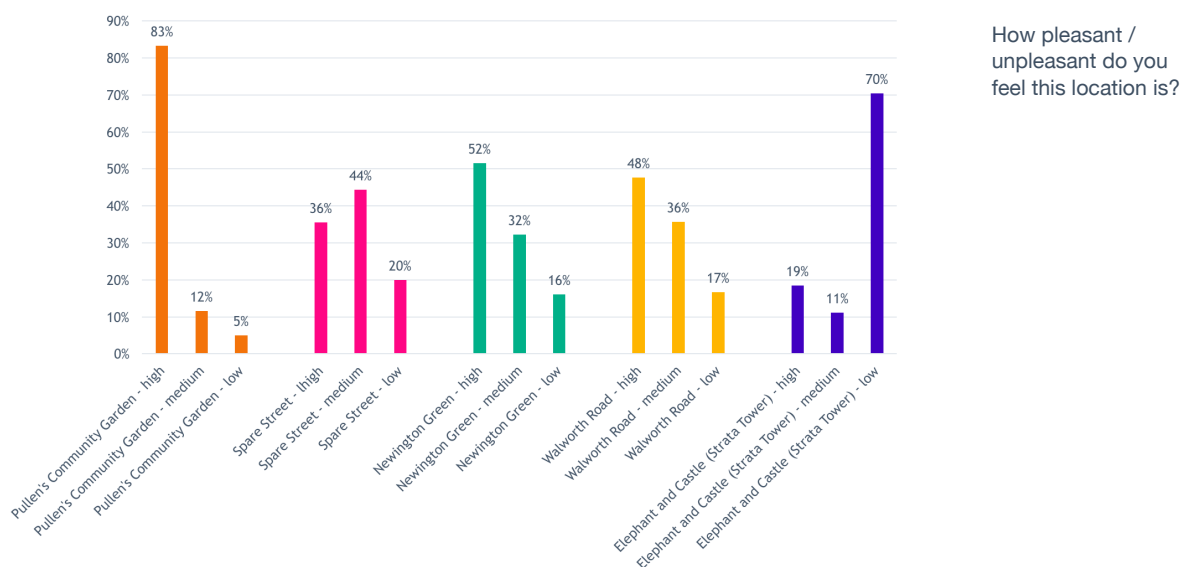


Fig. 4: % of people who thought the location was pleasant (high) / unpleasant (low)

Our five stops



“Although quiet, this place feels lived in. The garden gives a sense of community and collective ownership of a place.”

“There is a sense of calm and peace among a lot of buildings.”

1. Pullen's community garden

The Pullen's Community Garden is a local garden for residents living on the Pullen's Estate. It is a tranquil and green setting made up of raised flower-beds and a small open garden with planters. Local residents enjoy the garden as a place where they get to meet their neighbours and they comment that the nature of the location encourages people stop and talk to each other. The space has emerged organically as residents incrementally add to the flower-beds, and there is a strong sense that it is a cared for and well-used place.

The data found that of all the locations, people reported that the garden was the most relaxing and interesting. Most people felt happy and welcome and it was the location that participants most wanted to approach.

The most common words used to describe the place were:

Community, Peaceful, Quiet, Interesting, Green.



2. Spare Street

Spare Street is a narrow pedestrian-only street enclosed by eight-story residential buildings on one side and railway-arches on the other. The street is the first part of the “Low Line”, a new initiative to develop walking routes along the railways and arches from Camberwell to the river at the Southbank, improving accessibility for both pedestrians and cyclists.

“I love hearing trains go past, so I would be happy here, even though there is not green space.”

“The walls opposite the train track are bare and uninviting.”

The data found that the experiences of surveyed individuals at Spare Street were close to the overall average across the sites in terms of feeling happy, relaxed, welcome, approachable and its sense of belonging. Many liked the “urban feel” of trains, the cafe and creative workspaces, but others commented that the new buildings made the it feel “corporate” and bland. The location scored lower than average in terms of excitement and being interesting.

When describing the location most people mentioned:

Cold, New, Clean, Corporate, Train, Modern.



3. Elephant & Castle roundabout (near Strata Tower)

The Elephant & Castle roundabout is surrounded by a mix of medium and high-rise buildings and shops. The busy traffic junction is one of the main road corridors linking south to north and east to west. Strata Tower, build in 2010, was one of the first new tall towers at Elephant & Castle, which has been designated as a new tall tower hotspot in London.

“At various times in my life, I’ve spent a lot of time waiting for buses here. Not a pleasant part of my day.”

“The diversity and interplay of road network, shops, and magnificent landmark buildings makes this a memorable and highly interesting place.”

The data found that this location was the place which people found most stressful, unpleasant, and confusing. These factors impacted negatively on how welcome people felt at the location, as well as on their levels of happiness. Most saw the location as one to avoid rather than one to approach. People commented on the imposing buildings and the traffic noise as factors which lessened their experience here.

Common descriptor words for this location, included:

Loud, Busy, Noisy, Windy.



4. Newington Green

Newington Green is located in the centre of Newington Estate combining green and paved areas. The estate is made up of low-rise maisonettes and terraced housing.

Local residents enjoy how quiet the area in comparison to surrounding areas, which include major traffic junctions. Local children cite the ball court and play area as their favourite parts of the estate.

“It needs more colours, its a bit bland.”

“Nice area to walk through, always kids playing football which is nice, people come here to meet.”

The data found a connection between people’s familiarity with the location and how the area made them feel. In general, local residents experienced the location more positively, feeling more welcome, more happy, and more relaxed in this place compared to others. First time visitors liked the calm and the greenery, but some described how entering into a residential area made it feel like they were intruding on private space.

When asked to describe the location, most people used:

Community, Green, Local, Family, Open.



5. Walworth Road

For centuries, Walworth Road has been one of the main thoroughfares linking outer London to the centre of the city. Today it consists of a variety of shops, with East Street Market an important focal point.

People liked the variety of shops and the scale of the road. Many commented on the diversity of this location and how this made them feel welcome, diversity was described both in terms of the nature of shops and the people who use the road.

This was also reflected in our research, Walworth Road was considered one of the most welcoming and interesting of all the locations visited. Both local residents and regular visitors tended to be more happy here, finding the place more welcoming, relaxing, exciting and pleasant than people who were less familiar with the location.

The words people were most likely to use to describe this location were:

Interesting, Noisy, Colourful, Diverse, Busy, Local.

“I made friends in shops so that is why I come here all the time. There is a good sense of community.”

“This street is all right, the buildings are not bad. There is a lot of shops, which makes me feel welcome. You can get whatever you want to buy here. It is an interesting place.”



Photos from the top:
 Pullen's Community Garden
 Newington Green
 Spare Street
 Walworth Road
 Elephant & Castle roundabout

Our main takeaways

The following key themes emerged from the walks and resident engagement. Many of our findings reflect and confirm a number of different research projects on this topic.



Being aware of what is there

Most of us forget to stop up and look at what is around us. Throughout the project people told us how taking part made them notice new details and experience their local area in a new way.

So here is an encouragement: when you go for a walk next time, be aware of your sense and what makes you happy in a place – maybe you will learn something new about your neighbourhood!

“This is something that every councillor and officer working in a neighbourhood should do. You think you know your patch, but take the time, stop, think and listen and I guarantee you’ll notice something different.”

(former Hackney Councilor)



History and social life is important for belonging

The hidden history and everyday rituals is what makes a place different from others. This finding is reflected in other research.¹

Many residents have been living in the neighbourhood for a long time and have strong memories of its history, some from when it was built. In our research, many commented on memories from the area as factors which made them feel they belong.



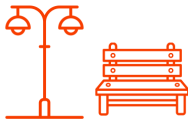
The value of nature

Our research found that people reacted positively to places with nature. People felt happier and more relaxed in locations with greenery.

Research into the importance of nature has shown that urban nature, such as regular trees on streets improve people’s general health perception.² Similarly, there is a relation between access to urban greenspace and mental health and wellbeing.³

Alongside our project Dr Stephen McConnachie researched the value of Nature in Walworth. You can read more about his findings here:

<https://valuingnatureinwalworth.tumblr.com/post/162396425020>



Considering spaces for all abilities

What can seem like a non-stressful location for some can be an impossible challenge to overcome for others. During our walks and street interviews some respondents commented on how a disability or illness impact on their relationship to places. Feeling drained of energy can make a place feel unwelcome. Design plays an important role in making places accessible. It is important to think about physical and psychological obstacles and how these can be overcome.



Visiting vs living in a place

The research showed there was a correlation between people's level of familiarity with a location and how it made them feel. People who reported a high level of familiarity tended to experience the location as more welcoming and pleasant, and tended to be more happy and relaxed.

Familiarity could be knowing the location previously, but for some it meant being familiar with the type of location. Memories from similar topologies made people more likely to understand and like the place and to feel welcome and a strong sense of belonging.

"This place reminds me of where I grew up in Norway as a kid. We used to hang in large groups and people were always yelling at us but it was playground paradise. A new adventure around every corner."

(first time visitor at the Newington Green)



Feeling welcome

Feeling welcome is an important element in liking a place. The researched highlighted that many elements play a part in this:

- Greenery positively impacts on how welcome people feel
- Shops and public facing facilities opens up intimate spaces to outsiders
- Diversity can have a positive impact on feeling welcome. Feeling different from the majority in an area can be a barrier in terms of feeling welcome. On Walworth Road many commented that they felt welcome due to the diversity, both the variety of shops and the people using the street.⁴

"I am mixed race, so I have always been very aware of the places I go. This is an element very important to trigger my sense of belonging, or feeling accepted in a place."

(regular visitor to the area)



The human scale

Locations with tall towers, such as the Elephant and Castle roundabout, made people feel less happy and were seen as less pleasant than places with lower scale houses. Planting and activities on street level helped people feel that the place is more pleasant. Having something to engage with on street level opens up places and can help make places with tall buildings feel more welcoming.⁴



Complexity vs. confusion

Complexity is not the same as a place being confusing. Our research found that people found complex places more interesting as long as they were not confusing. The Walworth Road and Elephant and Castle were both rated above average in complexity. But where people were intrigued by the many impressions from places like the Walworth Road and Pullen's Community Garden, the majority of people wanted to avoid the location near Strata Tower.

"This is one of the most difficult places to navigate in London. I find I can spend a long time trying to get from one side of the roundabout to the other - it's infuriating."

(regular visitor near Strata Tower)



Living with change

Residents commented on the changes taking place. Tall towers are being built in close proximity to the Newington Estate and other lower buildings. For some the towers induced a fear of losing their sense of community, and of people being displaced. They linked this to wider changes in London. Others saw the urban changes as an inevitable part of living in a metropolis.

"Elephant and Castle is going under big change. But all the social housing is going, that's a bad thing. The regeneration is only for people with money."

(Newington Estate resident)

¹ Woodcraft, S., Bacon, N., Caistor-Arendar, L., Hackett, T., (2009) *Design for Social Sustainability*

² Kardan, O. et al. (2015) "Neighborhood greenspace and health in a large urban center"

³ Taylor, M. et al. (2015), "Urban street tree density and antidepressant prescription rates—A cross-sectional study in London, UK"

⁴ See also Neil, S. et al. (2015) "Multiculture and Public Parks: Researching Super-diversity and Attachment in Public Green Space", for how parks work as informal, welcoming and diverse spaces.

⁵ Ellard, C. "Streets with no game", <https://aeon.co/essays/why-boring-streets-make-pedestrians-stressed-and-unhappy>

About Social Life

Social Life is a social enterprise, created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. All our work is about the relationship between people and places.

For more information visit www.social-life.co

This report was written by Emma Nielsen, with input and research support from Nicola Bacon, David Moynigan, Oska Paul and Claire Gordon from Social Life.