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Social interaction and perception of safety
Part of the Urban Design and Mental Health series

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Cathy Russell
Associate
BA(Hons) MA Urban
Design



Amy Sullivan
Design Assistant
BA(Hons)



Humans have evolved to decode the social environment, including facial expressions, body language and speech. Social interaction, ranging from momentary eye contact to long term relationships, is a basic human need. Although often positive, digital communication is rapidly changing these interactions and so designing places for face to face interaction is becoming increasingly important.

Feelings of safety in urban environments are closely related to levels of stimulation and social interaction. Studies have shown that our mental health can be impacted by social interaction and perception of safety in urban environments.

This article discusses the theory and techniques for designing social and safe environments which contribute to good mental health.



Social interaction

Social isolation is increasing, with almost 20 percent of the UK population reporting that they are often or always lonely.¹ Loneliness can be 'seen' in the brain. The ventral striatum, one of the reward centres in the brain, is stimulated by desirables such as food. Lonely people demonstrate less activity in this part of the brain when viewing desirable elements.²

Research by the Journal of Urban Design and Mental Health explores the parallels between solitary confinement in prisons and social isolation in the urban environment.³

Being socially and physically disconnected from others for long periods of time results in a range of mental health problems including hypersensitivity to external stimuli, hallucinations, anxiety, panic attacks, memory deficiencies, concentration issues, paranoia and impulse control.⁴ Loneliness also increases the likelihood of mortality by 26 percent.⁵

Improving neighbourhood walkability and access to amenities such as grocery stores, schools, parks and doctors' surgeries impacts positively on social interaction among older adults.⁶

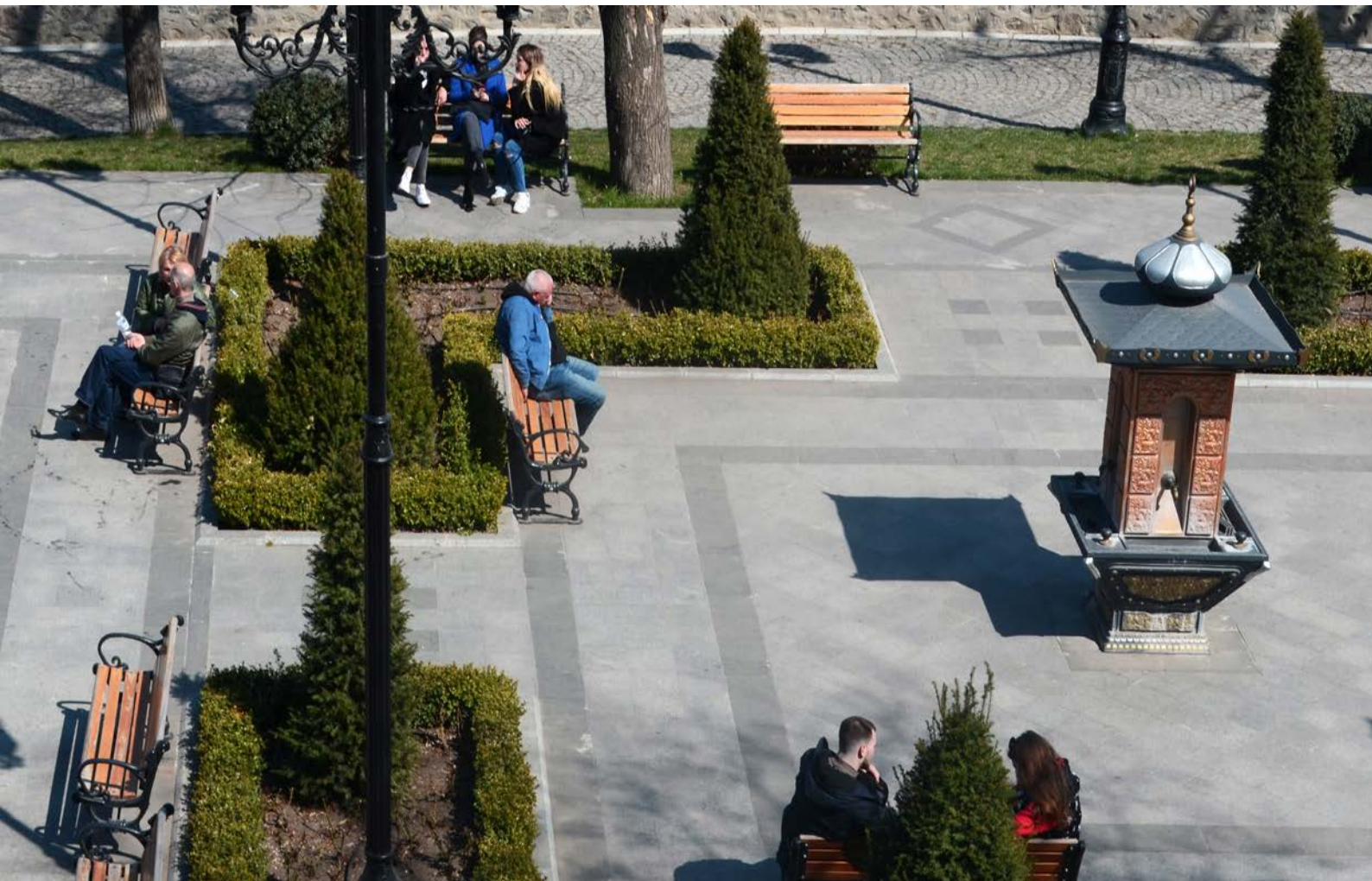
Encouraging people to walk and go outside is more important than ever, with a rising number of goods, services and experiences now obtainable without leaving the house. Providing places of rest is vital when encouraging the elderly to use urban spaces. However, street furniture can become a deterrent if it creates obstacles⁷ and should therefore be carefully integrated with street layouts. Public toilets are also important, especially for the elderly.



Existing spaces can be upgraded with the addition of seating areas, tables, benches, and other features arranged to encourage dialogue and expression between people. Considering the microclimate by providing sheltered spaces or seating in sunny areas will encourage pedestrians to linger and interact. Active façades at street level also facilitate interaction. Mixed use buildings and spaces encourage people from varying walks of life to integrate, leading to social cohesion and a sense of community. Encouraging engagement with heritage can reduce social isolation.⁸

Boundaries between public and private space can encourage people to communicate, even if that is just a glance or a nod.

For example, low walls, fences or hedges onto a residential street can encourage neighbourliness.⁹ Mixed communities can have a positive impact on social cohesion and mental health, particularly if affordable housing is indistinguishable from and integrated with other housing.¹⁰



Safety

Feelings of insecurity in a person's daily life can gradually degrade their mental health. Fear can trigger the fight or flight response, a useful evolutionary function that is often overstimulated in the modern world. Urban living can involve constant low level threats such as fear of attack, of traffic, or of getting lost (particularly for people with dementia), which push the body into this preparation state, leading to stress and low mood in the long term.¹¹ It is important to note that feelings of safety do not always correlate to an area's rates of actual crime and are more closely linked with how people feel in certain locations.¹² Therefore, we should consider safety measures not only with the aim of reducing actual crime but also in relation to how safe people feel.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs describes how safety in urban areas stems not from overt physical measures but from "an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves and enforced by the people themselves."¹³



Jacobs likens animated streets to an intricate ballet and highlights the importance of 'eyes upon the street' and social interaction in cultivating real and perceived safety:

“We nod; we each glance quickly up and down the street then look back to each other and smile. We have done this many a morning for more than ten years, and we both know what it means: All is well.”¹⁴

Design interventions that increase feelings of safety can encourage more people, and different groups of people, to occupy streets and spaces, resulting in increased natural surveillance and greater safety – a virtuous loop. Clever space planning can make a place safer by design, reducing the need for extra measures, like barbed wire, which can look unsightly. For example, if car parks and play areas are overlooked they are less likely to attract antisocial behaviour.

Involving the community in the design of urban spaces helps create a sense of local ownership, which can improve perceptions of area safety and crime rates.¹⁵

General environmental improvements have the potential to reduce fear of crime.¹⁶ Lighting can make streets and spaces feel safer at night. However, potential impacts on residents should be considered as exposure to light at night can upset the body's circadian rhythm and cause loss of sleep, resulting in poor mental health.¹⁷ A range of building functions can ensure a space has natural supervision, day and night. For example, office buildings near to pubs and nightclubs encourage use of the space around the clock.

Leftover pockets of space should be considered an opportunity and, for example, could be repurposed as parks. Land should not be left derelict, where possible. Leftover, unloved spaces can attract antisocial behaviour and increase feelings of insecurity in the surrounding area. Giving this land to the community – for allotments, for example – can be a good solution where there is no budget to redevelop the space. Distinct landmarks and wayfinding cues make urban environments more user friendly by reducing fear of getting lost, which can prevent people from exploring, especially the elderly and people with dementia. For more information on wayfinding and mental health see our previous article, Imageability, Sensory Perception and Place Attachment.

Conclusion

While our culture has evolved rapidly with the rise of urbanisation, our bodies and our instincts are much slower to adapt. High density living amongst large volumes of strangers is not something we have adapted to yet and can, therefore, trigger feelings of insecurity and alienation.¹⁸ We must do our best to counter triggers like this by understanding ourselves and our innate needs.

Where possible, we should strive to create spaces for interaction, turn unused spaces into opportunities, and encourage our stakeholders to consider the urban environment holistically when we add to it. By doing this in all our work, we can slowly create and maintain vibrant cities that are safe by design.

We would love to hear from you if you are interested in collaborating.



research@ryderarchitecture.com

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info@ryderarchitecture.com

www.ryderarchitecture.com

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