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VODICKA, Goran <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7730-3507>> and RISHBETH, Clare

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# Contextualised Convivialities in Superdiverse Neighbourhoods – Methodological Approaches Informed by Urban Design

Goran Vodicka <sup>a</sup> and Clare Rishbeth <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of the Natural and Built Environment, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper positions questions of conviviality as situational as well as relational, and describes and reflects on methods which give due precedence to different spatial scales, materialities and timeframes. In this urban design research project our central question focused on the affordances and value of different local outdoor public spaces for supporting conviviality in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood in Sheffield UK. This neighbourhood had become known for tensions, played out in outdoor public spaces, resulting in part from social dynamics between more recent arrivals and relatively settled communities. We built trust by embedding responsiveness and shared benefit as key ethical commitments in our practice alongside learning about spatial and temporal dimensions of encounter across difference. Building on our urban design professional skills relating to place enquiry and understanding, we tested walking, photography, drawing, making and mapping methods including collaborating with local groups. These allowed us to develop theoretical understandings of conviviality as a pluralistic construct, fundamentally informed, shaped and responsive to the complexities of context – including socio-economic place-based histories, physical environments and ongoing social negotiations.

## KEYWORDS

Methods; migration; participatory; visual; ethics

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we address how researchers from design practice background – specifically a partnership of an urban designer and a landscape architect, both located at the time of this project within a Department of Landscape Architecture – employed skills, knowledges and approaches from our disciplines to understand the relationship between spatial and social dynamics in an urban area with a significant population of migrant communities. In our ongoing research on inclusion, meaning and place we commonly draw on and contribute to geographic and sociological theories and debates. However, in this paper, we discuss how our professional and academic identities and skills

**CONTACT** Goran Vodicka  goran.vodicka@shu.ac.uk  Department of the Natural and Built Environment, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield S1 1WB, UK

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inform some differences in emphasis, and how these informed our methodological design in one extensive research project in a Sheffield neighbourhood (UK).

First, a brief insight into the current ‘state’ of urban design<sup>1</sup> research with regard to ‘everyday forms of cohabitation’ (the focus of this special issue). Urban design is an integrative discipline and professional practice, attending to histories, technologies, visual qualities, economics and regulatory processes as well as social practices and dynamics. One of the key challenges of urban design research is authentic and rigorous analysis of how places are used – acknowledging the relevance of temporal factors across different times of day, week and year. Disciplines allied to urban design approaches have an intrinsic commitment to undertake research that has usable findings for professional practice (Carmona 2016).

Historically, the social life of urban spaces has been discussed as intrinsic to the values and approaches of urban design. It is embedded in the writings of Whyte (1980), Gehl and Gemzoe (1996), Carmona (2003), and developed in practice through initiatives and priorities such as ‘design for all’ (mostly focused on inclusive access across differing physical abilities, [www.designforall.org](http://www.designforall.org)), age-friendly cities (Fitzgerald and Caro 2014) and gender-inclusive design (Sanchez de Madaria and Roberts 2013).

Despite this focus on sociability and benign goodwill towards inclusion, urban design has commonly failed to engage with intercultural dimensions of space, by inequalities of race and class, by disruptions and new imaginings shaped by migration and population churn (Burrell 2016). The city is not evenly accessible and enjoyable for all, and implementing structural change requires decisions and interventions informed by diverse voices and expertise. The profession often fails to acknowledge processes in which urban re-development can lead to displacement and increased racial disparities (Lownsborough and Beunderman 2007; Zavestoski and Agyeman 2015; Gould and Lewis 2016; Rishbeth et al. 2018). Urban Design is predominantly a ‘white’ profession and the charge to address diversity and representation within and without is increasingly urgent, as noted by many within the recent Black Lives Matter debates (BlackSpace Urbanist Collective 2020; Waite 2020). As a minimum, professionals involved with urban public space change need to do more (collectively and individually) to develop intercultural competencies, engage with social dimensions of public space that move beyond the notion of a ‘white norm’, work more explicitly to right historic inequalities in provision, and develop a deeper understanding of experiences of urban spaces by people of colour and migrant communities (Agyeman and Erickson 2012). Research can play an important role in informing all these priorities, and it is time to critique the scope and the methods by which research practice is related to professional practice with respect to intercultural conviviality and cohabitation.

## 2. Introducing the Research Project Which is the Focus of This Paper

The aim of the ‘Fir Vale’ research project – centralised around doctoral research undertaken by Vodicka – was to examine the role and value of public open spaces in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, understanding the intersection between diversity and conviviality, and its implication for urban design practice.<sup>2</sup> The research was framed around four key research questions including: how neighbourhood public open spaces were used and

perceived by both the recently arrived population and the more established communities in the neighbourhood, what was the relationships between public open spaces and intercultural encounters in the neighbourhood, what were the challenges of doing research in this particular context, and how this research could provide recommendations specifically in relation to urban design practice (Vodicka 2018).

In this paper we focus on how methods developed with attention to a range of contexts (and in our case reflecting urban design fields of expertise and processes) can aid a fuller understanding of public open space use and values. We outline how the methodological approaches of this research were informed by three types of ‘context’ – shaped by interactions of the who, what, when and where of our project. We ask how urban design methods can extend intercultural understandings of outdoor conviviality more usually explored in sociological, anthropological and geographical based research.

Ultimately, paying attention to these contexts, and giving due status to their impact on our work, led to theoretical engagement with notions of superdiverse places through the development/construct of ‘contextualised convivialities’.

### 3. The Relevance of ‘Conviviality’ and the Significance of ‘Contextualised Convivialities’

Conviviality has been thoroughly discussed in the scholarship of geography and sociology as an important quality of human interaction (Gilroy 2004; Valentine 2008; Fincher and Iveson 2008; Noble 2009; Blommaert 2013; Wise and Velayutham 2014; Wise and Noble 2016). We identified it as a suitable theoretical lens for our research, in particular responding to its use as a form of cosmopolitanism which does not ‘carry the same elitist and normative baggage’ (Heil 2015: 319) but one which focuses on everyday life and local practices of living.

However, we found that within the literature on conviviality there was a lack of meaningful analysis of how the significance of convivial acts is both embedded and informed by the actual context in which they are enacted. An example of this limitation is that in much of the existing scholarship the terminology used to describe spatial characteristics tends to be generic and vague. Authors often refer to locations such as ‘streets’ or ‘parks’, without providing any specific information regarding their visual qualities, characteristics of use and management, or location within the city (for example, Piekut and Valentine 2017; Cook et. al. 2011). Our experience suggests that while this lack of information could be seen as just a pragmatic choice regarding differing levels of detail, it can lead to a notable underplaying or overstating of convivial acts. In working with and through this emerging focus, a construct of ‘contextualised convivialities’ was developed.

Fundamentally and also intuitively, when examining conviviality as indicative of social relations in urban locations, exchanges have more value and meaning in some contexts compared to others. Convivial exchanges between two people of similar background in their usual or regular place bears very little significance. However, convivial exchanges between two people of different backgrounds (ethnicity, gender, age, status and intersections of these), and especially in a place characterised by tensions between communities, can be highly meaningful, with a potential to even be transformative. We would suggest that this can be the case even in fleeting exchanges, despite them often being critiqued as

lesser (Valentine 2008), and that the meaning can be relevant both to the individuals involved and, if witnessed or re-told, to meaning-making more collectively.

Specificities of place are relevant. While the findings of the research (Vodicka, 2018) are not the focus of this paper, an example is useful in framing the methodological approach. We found that, within the residential areas of a relatively small neighbourhood, the use and value of streets as spaces for socialising differed. Whether these interactions or are perceived as positive social connectivity or as undesirable behaviour can be dependent on both the specific location and the wider neighbourhood context of the activity (as well, of course, as *who* is doing the 'perceiving'). The Fir Vale research recorded instances of unspoken, seemingly uncoordinated benign surveillance of children playing out that could only happen in a street with good visibility where neighbours are largely known, and of short conversations between shopkeepers and shoppers that could only happen in a local corner shop rather than a large supermarket. The difference between sitting outside perceived positively and sitting outside perceived negatively could be a couple of hours, or the height of the wall sat on, or the gender mix of the sitters. Crucially, even just 'sitting outside' in a certain context may be seen to challenge normative narratives and assumptions (Wilson and Darling 2016; Rishbeth and Rogaly 2017).

We argue that encounters can not necessarily be deemed 'incidental' (Valentine 2013: 331) in a context where the streets are used as regularly and intensely for outdoor socialising, as they are in some (but not all) streets in Fir Vale. Without a more nuanced analysis, understandings of the practised conviviality, including its real meaning and significance, may be misinterpreted or even completely lost. The research findings revealed how different factors and forces, ranging from location, spatial forms, materialities, temporalities and cultural practices, influenced the ways in which conviviality is enacted and experienced in public spaces of Fir Vale.

The construct of contextualised convivialities acknowledges that, if we are to understand the complexities of conviviality, the context is important (for example, Blommaert 2013; Sennett 2018) and within it the spatial and the material (for example, Amin 2008) as well as the temporal. It also allows for the concepts of 'superdiversity' (understood as complexification of society, Vertovec 2007, albeit through a critical lens) and 'agonistic pluralism' (understood as tensions that support the existence of difference, Mouffe 2005), to be interpreted within a specific place. The construct of contextualised convivialities aids integration of these different approaches, but also adds the importance of recognising how particular convivialities may have varied significance in different contexts and at different times, especially within culturally and ethnically diverse locations.

The articulating of a contextualised convivialities lens was developed in response to the findings of the socio-spatial analysis of research 'data'. However, it would be misleading to represent this as a purist 'grounded theory' approach (Glaser 1998), as the focus of our findings was shaped by research questions and analytical practices allied to our professional and disciplinary identities, and further informed by our critique of existing literature. And as is often the case with projects using more participatory and ethnographic methodological approaches, this emerging theoretical focus contributed to the continuing adaptation and refining of the project methods. We describe this in more detail in the following sections.

## 4. Challenges for Socio-Spatial Research in Ethnically Diverse Neighbourhoods

In this section, we identify some of the challenges for research practice in superdiverse locations, which we define as areas within the city where migrant and racialised identities interact with complexities of class, legal status and deprivation (Vertovec 2014). We discuss methodological challenges in relation to both more established social research traditions and to specific urban design approaches.

It is important to note that urban design researchers addressing questions of intercultural conviviality (Wessendorf 2016) draw extensively on literature from non-design disciplines, building on and learning from a considerable scholarship focusing on diverse socio-spatial experiences of places (Wessendorf 2014; Neal et al. 2015; Radice 2016; Wise and Noble 2016). At best, this stimulates an inter-disciplinary dialogue, for example, Rishbeth, Ganji and Vodicka synthesising ethnographic research findings to inform urban design practice (2018), and as exemplified by the papers in this special edition. Though there are many overlaps, there are also areas where research conducted within and for urban design will prioritise and have specific expertise in particular dimensions of intercultural sociability.

Given the remit of the profession, a common aim of urban design research is to achieve authentic and rigorous analysis of how places are used and acknowledging the relevance of temporal factors across different times of day, week and year. In recording and reflecting urban sociability, temporal factors are an intrinsic factor, and given sharper focus when viewed in intercultural spaces. Time of day (and light levels) are increasingly important if you have reason to fear racial harassment. Daily and weekly patterns of public space use reflect ethnically diverse leisure cultures – whether participating in informal basketball games, outdoor mingling after evening prayers or early morning tai chi. Responses to seasonality are heightened for people used to different climates. Capturing these by observation methods alone misses some of the stories about why these responses are important, and how they capture, or obscure, various dimensions of transnational and local belongings, and how these connections potentially evolve over years and decades.

One expertise of urban design researchers lies within an understanding of spatial form and qualities, and the relevance for this for patterns of socialising. Typology of urban places, and definitions and nuances within this, is central to an urban design analysis. How these impact experiences and responses (behavioural, perceptual, cultural) is significant – and often at the heart of research questions. In terms of understanding conviviality as contextualised act, specificity is often important: what type of street (function, location, architecturally, demographics) and what type of park (a culturally distinctive lexicography of recreation grounds, heritage parks, pocket parks, playgrounds and nature reserves, the visual qualities of these and levels of maintenance)?

The role of visual research methods (Pink 2007) is important for a profession which foregrounds communication through drawing and mapping. While various forms of mapping and photographic records within the public realm will always raise methodological challenges with regard to rigour, representation and consent, when ethnic and/or racial background is relevant to research questions there is the additional dilemma of how to identify this, how to record it, and how to engage with uncertainty (Ganji

and Rishbeth 2020). A naïve ‘colour-blindness’ is tempting, yet we suggest the comparative ease of ignoring ethnicity and race is one of the factors in the ‘whitewashing’ of the profession and lack of engagement in the fundamental challenges outlined in the introduction. Where there are identified participants within the research (survey respondents, interviewees) self-defined identifiers is the usual approach, though still often requiring researcher grouping at later stages of analysis and dissemination. With observation methods it is a more significant challenge, often relying on a researcher’s longer-term tacit knowledge specific to that location and applied to a person or grouping with regard to intersections of skin tone, dress, activity, social cluster – pragmatic but also problematic

When we wandered through the parks, lingered and looked at the social world, and make field notes about difference and interaction, perhaps we were not being so nuanced and attentive after all, but doing archaic ‘difference work’, reducing people to their visible characteristics, and emphasising/defining (their) difference on this basis. (Neal et al. 2015: 467)

Some developing good practice when precision is desired but not always achievable (for example, detailed site mapping of user activities, such as Ganji and Rishbeth 2020 or Daly 2020) is a double stage of researcher ascribed identification – a broad category (white, non-white) followed by a more detailed category only when more information is available (for example, language overheard, subsequent on-site interaction).

A specific challenge within urban design research is the desire to achieve some form of non-academic impact, which in itself raises important questions of ‘impact for who’? A discipline orientated towards supporting professional education points towards impact as defined by practice focused development and expertise. There is often also a considered awareness of other stakeholders – actors in the urban realm such as local governance, community groups, health bodies, public space planning and management – engaging with these representatives as part of the research process and ensuring pathways to impact at local and national scales (Jones 2014).

Though these form positive steps towards better connections between academic and non-academic bodies (personal and corporate), especially when considering power dynamics and entrenched inequalities relevant to most urban areas with high ethnic diversity we suggest it falls far short of a meaningful ethically driven process. In the research project outlined in this paper, we explore choice of methods and how these evolved during the project. We look specifically at approaches that embed an ethical practice, extending the usual focus of research ethics on consent, anonymity and safety, and foregrounding approaches to address the often extractive nature of research itself. In particular, we focus on how critiquing the relationship between urban design practice and urban design research can lead to more ethical processes for all researchers working in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods.

## 5. Fir Vale Neighbourhood Histories

Before looking at the specifics of the methods, we introduce the location of the research, in particular highlighting the relevance of working in a neighbourhood which was experiencing on-going tensions, commonly framed in relation to ethnic and migration

background, and one which could be described as both ‘over-researched’ and ‘high-profile’. Understanding and responding to these near-histories of ‘outsider gaze’ was fundamental in informing the development of research ethics across the three forms of contextual methods.

The research was located in a suburban (though comparatively high-density) neighbourhood of Sheffield in the north of England. Due to its industrial past, Sheffield attracted labour migration 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. Over the last decade, Fir Vale 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 (primary representation from mid-twentieth century onward of Caribbean, Yemeni and Pakistani heritage families). 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 (Richardson 2014), reflecting in many cases a long-held hostility to Roma people and stirring up controversy which has often highlighted a perceived ‘anti-social’ use of public spaces (Powell 2014).

Within increasingly diverse 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. Often this is manifested in the attachment of blame to the arriving population for breaking the social order of the neighbourhood, with newcomers being characterised as noisy and accused of dominating public spaces (Clark 2014) or, as Wessendorf (2014: 8) explains, simply by being ‘new, visible and disrupting’. However, as noted by a longstanding resident of Fir Vale, referred to in a report by Grayson (2013), similar comments were being made some 30 years previously when the now established community were themselves the new residents. Other key factors to understand are the high proportion of residents living in a state of poverty, the representation of this neighbourhood as an area of multiple deprivation, and the history of top-down initiatives that have promised various ‘improvements’. The interactions of migration, place change and dimensions of deprivation all need to inform a contextualised and situated approach to understanding the complexities (and convivialities) of everyday life.

The wider location of Fir Vale as situated in Sheffield (mid-tier UK city with two universities) means that it was not only high-profile within the national media, but also over-researched. The term over-research is gaining increasing prominence within academia (Clark 2008; Sukarieh and Tannock 2013; Neal et al. 2016) and it is often related to super-diverse contexts. Over-research is often focused on challenges of research fatigue (Clark 2008), and also raises many ethical issues such as creating pressure and nuisance for local people expected to engage with researchers (academic, public sector and NGOs) and the often extractive nature of these exchanges.

Clearly, one ethical approach is to conduct research elsewhere, to simply avoid ‘over-researched’ locations. Yet urban design and planning processes often do engage in these contexts, and often need to do this better. In choosing to conduct research within Fir Vale, we decided to include in our research questions a clear methodological enquiry:

to find ways of researching in those places in more appropriate and ethical ways, conceiving the potential value of ‘slow and careful’ academic research in providing a more careful analysis than shallow and misleading portrayals by the media.

## 6. Context-Responsive Methods

By means of overview and general intentions, the research is best described using the hybrid term ‘ethno-case study’, which Parker-Jenkins (2018: 18) defines as ‘a case study drawing on ethnographic techniques’. Our commitment and approaches to engagement were informed by the potential of urban design to be a highly situated and socially engaged spatial practice. This meant that the approach combined ethnographic and participatory methods (Bergold and Thomas 2012) in order to generate qualitative data, adapting professional skills as research skills, and also conceptualising them as a contribution which could have value to residents. A range of qualitative methods was used in this research, including different types of observations and interviews to engaged activities. The methods used were focused on an integrity of data in terms of an appropriate specificity of form, time, people and context rather than an ambition to achieve a representative sampling. The benefit of a relatively long period of study (three years) allowed for multiple forms of cross-referencing, evolution of methods according to relative successes and failures, and the understanding that any method is seldom just one thing.

In setting and describing our research within the framing of ‘contextual methods’ we attend to each approach in turn and give an account of the decisions (and the evolution of these) which informed our actions, evaluation of the merits and drawbacks of these, and reflection on how these embedded ethical approaches:

- (1) Geographic, spatial and temporal contexts. Here we focus on walking and mapping methods as a means of questioning and evaluating relevance of urban typologies.
- (2) Social, community and organisational contexts. Here we focus on what we learnt from engaging with organisational contexts within the neighbourhood, being responsive to participants (not assuming a specific interest in our research themes), and how this strengthened the research learning but also contributed some positive benefit within the locality.
- (3) The researcher and relational contexts. Here we argue that the researchers themselves inform an additional context within the project location, both embodied (relative to the life history and skills of individuals) and in relation to the project site and participants.

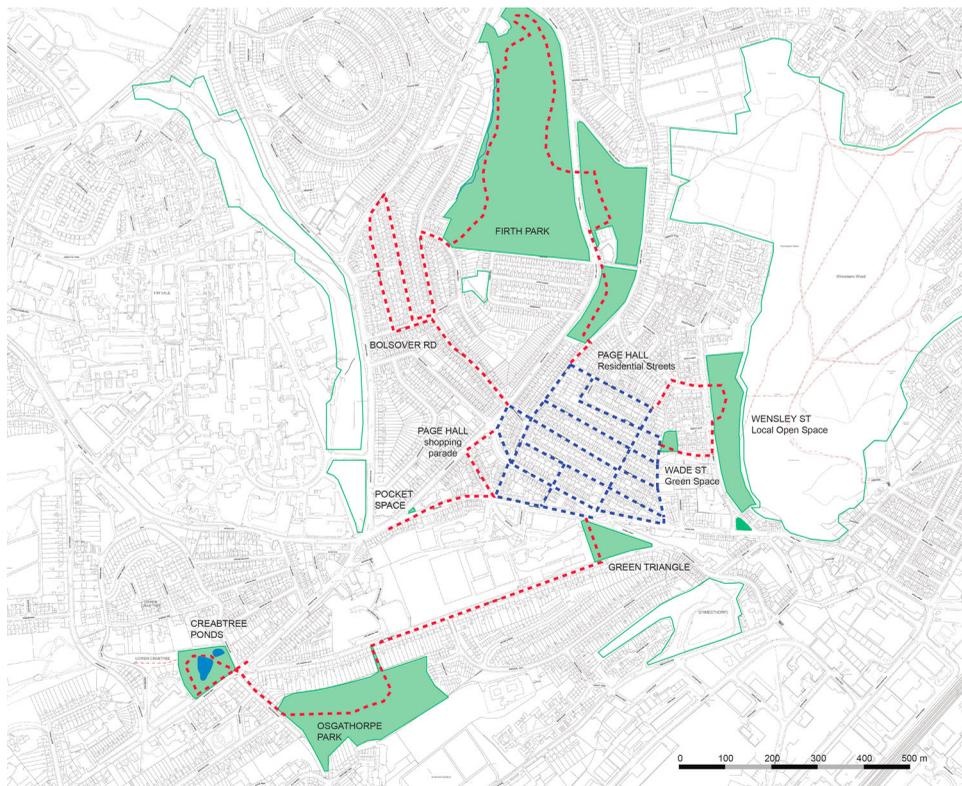
### 6.1. Geographic, Spatial and Temporal Contexts – Walking and Mapping Methods

A range of local public open spaces was recorded over time to give an insight into the use of urban green spaces and streets. These were identified during the first phase of the research and further explored as the research progressed. Initially, these observations were made whilst exploring the specific locations within the neighbourhood, noting

the qualities of physical environment, presence and activities of the people using these and their social interactions. However, we wanted to find a method which allowed us a broader, more connected understanding which captured what was happening simultaneously in different kinds of public spaces across Fir Vale. The initial iterative wanderings became more focused ‘structured walks’, taking the form of consistent route repeated at different times of day, week and year. After several pilot walks, the ‘consistent route’ was decided, incorporating all main public greenspaces and gathering points of interest and a range of varied street typologies. Depending on which particular activities were occurring and therefore the number of different observations to be recorded *in situ*, the walks took between 1.15 min to 2 h. This was conducted a total of 21 times.

A mobile observation method was found to be useful for a range of reasons. The scale and intimacy of some of these spaces meant that walking through or past them was less intrusive (or concerning to residents) than ‘hanging around’ and researcher time was not wasted spending a long time in a very quiet public space – this also felt more safe for a lone researcher. Photographs were generally not taken, again to avoid intrusion, but oral notes made by talking into a phone. The overall period of time (9 months) over which these walks were made was essential in supporting the researcher’s local socio-spatial knowledge (Figure 1).

The use of walking observations produced rich data in terms of temporal qualities of these spaces and extremely detailed understandings of social affordances of slightly



**Figure 1.** Map showing the walking route.

different environments – the relevance of a sun/shade when sitting on grass or the height of front yard walls on neighbourly sociability. Various diagrams, sections and maps were drawn in order to discuss these among the research group.

Walking, *in-situ* and different forms of visual methods (not just mapping) also informed the way that interviews with individuals were integrated into the research. Different interview formats were used throughout the research process including walking interviews, photo stimulated interviews and short *in-situ* conversations. We were guided by a commitment to negotiating the interviews with participants, ensuring a mutual convenience. For instance, a walking interview was conducted with a dog walker primarily because it was time-efficient for the participant, with the additional benefit of facilitating rich narratives around neighbourhood spaces (Powell and Rishbeth 2013). Photo stimulated interviews emerged as an appropriate and engaging method part way through the fieldwork and played an important role in the research, allowing shorter or longer conversations with diverse residents. A page containing photos of ten local public outdoor spaces together with prompts to stimulate comments was initially trialled in one of the youth group sessions and later adopted to use with people encountered around the neighbourhood.

However, despite the relevance of visual methods in urban design practice and research, we felt conflicted about using these as a way of communicating research findings. Although useful during the research process and research group discussions it became apparent that transferring the dynamics and complexities of everyday living into interesting, or even ‘beautiful’ images seemed to flatten and over-simplify the experience of living in Fir Vale. It offered a reductive, almost petrified version of the neighbourhood, which distracted from the reality of life there, especially if observed in the absence of any accompanying narrative. This dilemma was heightened in the case of maps. There was regular discussion in our research group whether some of the maps used in the analytical phase would be appropriate as final, publicly available maps within subsequent publications. There were issues of confidentiality, being mindful that it contained sensitive information (for example, the local drug-dealing spots, anti-social behaviour activities). But another concern was misinterpretation. Maps are usually perceived as representing ‘exact’ and ‘precise’ information, with high potential to be misused and misinterpreted, especially if appropriated out of context.

## **6.2. Social, Community and Organisational Contexts – Engaged Methods**

An important aim of this research was to use engaged methods which were responsive to the life situations of the residents of Fir Vale, not assuming that many individuals would want, or have sufficient capacity, to engage with us purely out of personal interest or altruism. This involved learning and flexibility on our part.

An initial plan for this research was to focus on participatory photography and develop a Photovoice project over a period of several weeks as a major part of research methodology. Photovoice, also known as participatory photography, is both a community development and participatory action research method (Delgado 2015) and seemed to offer a way of exploring the spatial dimension. Wang (1999) advocates the use of Photovoice, a method underpinned by critical pedagogy together with feminist theory, as a means of enabling people to visually record their concerns (‘listening’),

promoting critical dialogue about these issues through discussions of photographs ('dialogue') and potentially reach decision makers ('action'). A number of attempts to initiate Photovoice projects were made (and indeed supported by local organisations) but none of these projects proceeded beyond the initial steps. While Photovoice seemed beneficial in theory, in this context it genuinely seemed to demand too much of participants who had other priorities, were not invested enough in the topic of the research and were possibly not motivated to work collectively in a diverse group.

While participant photography mostly failed as an approach, involvement in a small-scale 'building' initiative – seemingly unconnected with public open space concerns – did allow us to develop meaningful conversations over time with younger residents. Vodicka worked as a team member of a social enterprise architecture practice Studio Polpo to facilitate the design and digital fabrication of a mobile, multipurpose performance space. The project was in collaboration with the local youth club and the end result was available for the public to use.

The workshops were held as part of the youth club's usual 'open access' sessions, where young people would usually socialise, playing games and use computers to access social media. Four two-hour sessions with a group of about twenty 13–18 years olds were run over the summer. These sessions consisted of discussing, sketching and making physical and 3D models, including tutorials in 3D modelling freeware computer software. The eventual design consisted of several modular perforated blocks that could be variously arranged and used for different purposes, with the table tennis arrangement being most popular in the youth group setting.

By providing activities in the neighbourhood that were interesting, educational and had a practical outcome, this mini-project generated some positive impact. The local youth club gained kudos by offering young people activities with novel technologies run by design professionals, the young people directly involved had an enjoyable experience and gained new skills, whilst other members of the youth club benefited from blocks for playing table tennis. These activities turned out to also have benefit for our research. Incidental conversations with the young people, parallel to the making activities, helped us learn more about patterns of daily life in the local area. Loose relationships developed during the 'build' with young people and the youth workers was a meaningful way of gaining trust by demonstrating commitment over time, ultimately leading to the youth workers supporting more research-focused activities, and other local organisations hearing about us and viewing our involvement in a favourable light.

Another research activity was organised in a different youth club context (run by the same organisation). This workshop was part of their weekly 'open-access' sessions and was provided as an additional, drop-in activity. We designed this as a mapping focused activity accompanied by photographs of local spaces, drawing on participatory and collaborative mapping as a research method (Sarkissian et al. 2009; Wood and Glass 2010). A large-scale map of the local area attracted the attention of the young people and prompted lively discussions around stories and social dynamics of neighbourhood places.

The final series of workshops was also collaborative, though this time working with local children. We worked with two local organisations whose remit was to provide a safe space through additional after-school weekly activities for children. Through frequent discussions with these organisations over a long period of time, the involvement

of a research angle was agreed as long as the activities were fun and broadly educational. The focus was on understanding the neighbourhood and its issues from the children's perspective by means of different visual arts and crafts-related activities. These included teaching children about maps and mapping as something new yet useful, making collage postcards of their neighbourhood and even doing one 'Photovoice inspired' group walk. The organisations involved were also keen to develop their backyard into a 'meeting place for all' so one of the sessions prioritised developing a brief and initial ideas for this space, using drawings and words and discussing what they would like to be able to do there. These discussions often extended in topics beyond the actual backyard space.

Sukarieh and Tannock (2013: 507) suggest that one important way to address issues of working in over-researched and less affluent areas is to enable other activities that can be beneficial for the locals: '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'. While it is not feasible for every individual participant over the course of this kind of 'ethno-case study' within a PhD study to receive direct benefit for their time and effort, the duration of the involvement allowed for a longer term commitment to, and reciprocity with, the community as a whole (discussed further in 6.3).

Developing a plurality of methods was also 'responsive' to failure, in this case the lack of interest in the Photovoice project. Despite the value of prior planning (and committing to an expensive training course) developing methods is so often intrinsic and responsive to the process of fieldwork, responding to nuances of given situations, and integral to the process of learning. Ultimately, engaging with a wider range of community-based activities with a range of breadth and depth (instead of one Photovoice project) and using engaged research activities not only enabled opportunities to 'share many different benefits' with residents (Finney and Rishbeth 2006) but also strengthened the research scope, enabling connection with a more diverse range of people in different settings and thereby gaining richer insights.

### ***6.3. The Researcher and Relational Contexts – A Means of Acting Ethically***

The project process taught us that we were not only addressing diversity with regard to outdoor public place, people and temporal factors, but there was also an inherent permeability to commonly accepted definitions of 'who is a participant?', 'what is the site?', 'what is a research outcome?' and 'what is a researcher?'. It is therefore not surprising that an approach to working ethically required a much more integral and ongoing engagement with researcher power dynamics, respect, reciprocity and consent which when went beyond the institutional requirement for ethics review approval. 'Acting ethically' was integral to the research process and to the ways in which methods were used, requiring a dynamic and reflexive approach which was developed, contested and challenged by on and off-field relationships.

We therefore suggest a 'relational' approach to ongoing ethical commitments, not only exploring positionality as a researcher 'in the field', but connections with others 'in the field' and supportive informed others 'off field'. Acknowledging the significance of the researcher's identity (personal and professional) and how this is present in the field is important, as this can mitigate or exacerbate some of the tensions around conducting

the research. Vodicka's personal background of 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 (another over-researched context), have informed both the research practice and the way he was received by Fir Vale residents. He brought to the project competencies and skills developed over many years focused on social aspects of urban design, often included participatory and co-design ways of working. While working in Fir Vale, Vodicka approached and gradually built relationships with third sector groups and voluntary organisations in the area, requiring an openness to their own frameworks of ethics, and what they expected in terms of commitment – a necessary period of earning trust and learning from their local expertise. The broader research team (TUO – Transcultural Urban Outdoors, included both doctoral and staff researchers, Clare Rishbeth, Farnaz Ganji and Cristina Cerulli) regularly met to discuss projects, processes and theories with regard to ongoing research in various locations – and this collective 'off field' context acted as a point of ongoing ethical accountability and also as emotional support in sometimes demanding situations.

The commitment we made was to a generosity of time and of an embodied research presence. Methodologically, this required a joyful messiness of 'what constitutes a research method', an openness towards actions and outputs that could provide some benefits to the people and the neighbourhood, often small or uncertain in scope. Sometimes these reflected Vodicka's professional knowledge and skills as an architect and urban designer, including graphic/digital, making, geographic and collaborative 'expertise', at other times they were just 'mucking in'. Many activities were not purely research-focused but enjoyable and often educational in nature, such as collaborative mapping (with different age groups and appropriately tailored), participatory photography, arts and craft (postcards making, etc.) and various design and making workshops including sketching, 3D design and digital fabrication. Vodicka also volunteered with several local organisations over the project period, supporting activities such as litter-pickups, youth club sessions, mentoring young staff, work-placements and training activities. In terms of more tangible outcomes, this research is currently being used to directly inform an urban strategy for creating a new public space in Fir Vale neighbourhood. Public-facing documents generated alongside the research-focused writing contributed to securing initial funding for this project. These were developed collaboratively with Studio Polpo architecture office and representatives from Sheffield City Council, as part of a wider Public Assets for Community Resilience initiative.

## 7. Conclusion

In this final section, we step back from the details of the research methods used and the specificity of the Fir Vale context, to summarise what we have learnt about approaches to methods for understanding everyday diversity. We give this a dual focus, the potential for urban design practice to 'do better' in terms of a sociological awareness and careful engagement with academic research and researchers, and the potential of academic research to 'do better' at understanding and communicating the relevance of socio-spatial-temporal contexts.

In order to be able to understand and engage in complex urban settings, urban practitioners need to further develop social research skills and understanding how these need to be responsive and ethical. Though academia is far from perfect, some basic principles around these issues are now commonly understood. Established mainstream practice approaches often do not work, especially in ethnically diverse areas (remembering also the predominantly ‘white’ profile of urban design professionals) and we argue that approaches based on contextual understandings and cultural awareness need to become much more embedded into a professional skillset. However, we also need to acknowledge that conducting any social research (academic or initiated by practitioners) on forms of everyday cohabitation in diverse areas – often less affluent areas, over-researched and sometimes with visible tensions present between different groups – can itself contribute to negative outcomes for residents of these areas. Collectively and explicitly, requiring open cross-sector communication at the local scale, we need to develop research approaches which embed practical outcomes and support sharing benefits during the actual process of research, and not only as part of the final research outcome or as a future vague ‘general good’.

We hope that this paper has given some insight and, potentially, inspiration, as to how urban design informed methodological approaches may be adopted by researchers from non-design disciplines, or to underline the value of interdisciplinary collaborations. By drawing on, and often adapting, traditional urban design focused research methods, the Fir Vale research was able to present how residents shaped various ways of everyday cohabitation in an increasingly diverse urban environment (see Vodicka 2018 for a fuller account). In this endeavour, though breadth and depth of scope were both important, the virtue of precision (of form and function, of socio-spatial-temporal factors) was crucial for identifying an appropriate nuance. The research questions were novel, in particular those more closely allied to the role and potential of urban design, but required us to attend to the ethics of conducting research in a non-novel, ‘over-researched’ location, and one where, prior to the start of the research, tensions had been exacerbated by sensationalist narratives.

The approach that we developed (slowly, carefully) was attuned to the specificities of the place and the capacities and interests of potential participants, and also to the specificities of the researcher, recognising that academics are more than the sum of our research training and literature knowledge. In the case of the primary researcher, Vodicka, this required a commitment of authentic presence as a migrant himself, as someone with urban design skills and resources, with experience of teaching, and as someone with time to volunteer. By allowing researchers to be ‘more than researchers’ we also shift expectations of participants allowing them to be ‘more than participants’, developing methods and approaches with a range of interests, engagements and possible ways to gain benefit. We need to engage with ‘relational’ ethical dynamics, keeping ourselves in communication with a wide range of perspectives. Though it is not often termed as such, we might tentatively argue that the research practice itself is ‘convivial’, and that the contextual dimensions of insiders and outsiders within a research situation shapes the meaning of exchanges in ways that can be problematic, but also can be enabling.

In arguing for the importance of contextual convivialities as a frame for understanding intercultural dynamics in urban places, we prioritise specificity of demographics, histories, architectures and local pressures that pertain to individual places and

neighbourhoods. This is not to negate the uses of what might loosely be described as a comparative lens, one which allows analysis to be applied between cities and countries. But in order to do this, we suggest the route is not standardisation (including methodological standardisation) but a shared rigour informed by close attention to social dynamics embedded in mundane spatial practice.

When 'place' (and meanings ascribed to different scales of 'place') is more than just a background description but integral to the analysis, it can fundamentally reframe the value of specific conviviality practices in the public realm. For academics addressing themes of everyday forms of cohabitation, using methodological approaches which seriously engage with spatial and temporal materialities has the genuine potential to deepen our understanding.

## Notes

1. By this term we want to explicitly include the professions of landscape architecture, architecture and urban planning at neighbourhood scales.
2. The research project was conducted 2015–2018, with Vodicka's position funded by a University of Sheffield scholarship.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Goran Vodicka* is a Senior Lecturer in Architecture at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. His research is mainly focused on diversity and equity in public open spaces as well as socially-engaged spatial practice and pedagogy. Recently he was a Research Fellow in 'FESTSPACE: Festivals, Events and Inclusive Public Space', a project funded by HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) exploring sociability in public spaces in five European cities. He is also an Associate of Architecture Sans Frontières-UK (ASF-UK), a non-profit organisation that supports communities and practitioners in codesigning more equitable cities.

*Clare Rishbeth* is a Senior Lecturer in Landscape Architecture at the University of Sheffield, UK who brings a research focus on migration histories and experiential qualities of place to the professional remit of Landscape Architecture practice and education. Her academic research, teaching practice and social values are focused on profiles of marginalisation - shaped by intersections of ethnicity, class and gender - set against the civic ethos of public space. She has led a number of Research Council UK collaborative projects across academia and practice, including focusing on the role of benches in urban spaces to support inclusion (2015) and how refugees and asylum seekers may be supported to use urban greenspace as an integration and wellbeing resource (2017). Clare is currently working on a three year research project within a broad 'Treescapes' series which extends an equity and inclusion focus specifically with young people (2021-2024).

## ORCID

*Goran Vodicka*  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7730-3507>

*Clare Rishbeth*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1648-5183>

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