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Enclosing urban green spaces. The fences of Finsbury Park

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ABSTRACT

Fences are one of the defining features of public parks, particularly in England. In other parts of the world, fences have been removed or lowered to make parks more open and accessible. But many park authorities in England have retained perimeter fencing, as they feel it protects people and environments. In this paper, we evaluate justifications for, and attitudes towards, fences; and evaluate how they affect park users, park activities and park inclusivity. We explore specific issues associated with fencing, but also analyse fences to better understand the parklands they delineate. This is achieved by analysing different types of fencing – perimeter and internal, temporary and permanent – in Finsbury Park, north London. Our research found that the priority for users is upgrading perimeter fencing, rather than removing it. Internal enclosures are not seen as a major problem either, although the temporary barriers erected to secure major events are.

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Introduction

Fences divide spaces and opinions. For some, they are unnecessary barriers that curtail access to open spaces; but for others, they are essential structures that provide protection. Perimeter fences have long played an important role in circumscribing English parklands and these structures have always been contested. In line with calls for greater accessibility and inclusivity, some park fences have been removed or lowered in recent years. But many park users and park authorities want to retain or strengthen perimeter fencing, as they feel it protects people and environments. Given their significance, it is perhaps surprising that fences are not covered more in the literature on city parks and urban green spaces. There are some useful historical analyses, and multiple papers on rural fences, but relatively few papers that explore urban park fences. Our paper aims to rectify that deficiency by identifying different types of park fences and their effects, and by exploring attitudes towards fences erected in and around urban parks.

Fences are usually defined by their material composition and differ from other linear barriers in various ways: for example, they tend to be less permanent and more permeable than walls. Fences are also defined by their functions, which include defining, securing, separating, containing, protecting and screening spaces. These barriers cannot merely be analysed as material structures as they have technological, socio-cultural and biopolitical dimensions. Accordingly,

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in this paper, we adopt a multi-disciplinary perspective by analysing the materiality, aesthetics and temporality of fences, as well as attitudes towards them.

Fences are significant in and of themselves, but they are also useful lenses through which to analyse public spaces more generally. Following Clarkson's (2010) lead, we explore what the fence tells us about the parkland it delineates. We evaluate justifications for, and attitudes towards, fences; and explore the ways they affect park users, park activities and park inclusivity. This is achieved by analysing different types of fencing – perimeter and internal, temporary and permanent – in one park over an extended time period. Finsbury Park in north London was chosen as an appropriate case study as it is enclosed by a perimeter fence and contains multiple fenced sites within its boundaries. Temporary fences are regularly erected here to secure festivals and other temporary fences were also installed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past few years, an official review of the park's boundaries has been undertaken (Sustrans, 2022, 2023). Therefore, Finsbury Park 2018–2023 provided an insightful context through which to explore the significance of park fences.

Fences

When Ai Wei Wei installed security fence-themed artworks across New York City in 2017, one reviewer felt that these pieces 'very much plug into the fabric of New York with an ease I found disturbing' (Farago, cited in Wasserman, 2020, p.268). Fencing is now so ubiquitous it has become almost invisible to users of the built environment (Instone, 1999), and this invisibility extends to the academic literature too. Although the role of fencing in wildlife conservation and ecosystem management is covered well, the way fences affect human behaviours in urban areas is largely ignored by academic researchers.

Fences play a key role in the rigid, overdetermined, unyielding form of cities, which stifles informal social relations (Sendra and Sennett, 2020). These barriers are part of a wider 'splintering' of urban space (Graham & Marvin, 2002): they are key infrastructures in contemporary iterations of securitised, fortified and gated cities (Dorreboom & Barry, 2022). Fences are also fundamental to understanding ownership of, and access to, urban spaces. Capitalist commodification is a process through which value is extracted from resources which used to be available freely, and so 'barriers separating people from previously public resources' have important roles (Klein, 2005, p.195). Fences provide a medium for official and unofficial communication; displaying adverts for real estate companies, but also fly posters and graffiti. Unsanctioned messaging reminds us that fences are not just imposed on citizens, they can be subverted and appropriated too.

There is a prevailing unease about the prevalence of fencing, but commentators also recognise that fences perform positive functions and can be appropriated by citizens for more progressive ends. In line with Sennett's (2019) distinction between porous, interactive borders and hard, limiting boundaries, several authors acknowledge that fences encourage exchange and access, rather than separation and exclusion. For example, in van Holstein (2016) research on a community garden, perimeter fences excluded people but also acted as points of connection between gardeners and passers-by. Fences often act as a boundary, but they can be designed and used in ways that turn them into borders (Instone, 1999). Gallagher (2017, no pages) provides a useful illustration:

> Like the borders of the Boston Public Garden, with its wide sidewalk, low iron fence and mature tree cover, a fringe edge is like an introduction, perhaps even an invitation, to what is inside while providing its own pleasant passing experience.

Fences can connect as well as divide: Christo and Jeanne Claude's 'Running Fence' artwork that traversed 24.5 km of California in 1976 communicated connectivity and exchange, rather than division (van den Brink et al., 2022). This was emphasised by Christo's subsequent

reflections on the project: 'we wanted to link the suburban, urban and highway cultures in California together rather than separate them' (cited in Gupta, 2008, no pages).

Even when fences are installed to defend and exclude, they can act as the focus for creative dissent. During the build-up to the London 2012 Olympic Games, blue fences that restricted access to the main site were adorned with various artworks critiquing the exclusion associated with this mega-project (Gardner, 2013). The most famous of these was the rudimentary viewing platform built by the Office for Subversive Architecture, which allowed people to peer over the fence. During another contested mega-event - the 3rd Summit of the Americas in Quebec City, 2001 - activists built a wooden catapult, wheeled it up to security fences and catapulted teddy bears over the top (Klein, 2005). This playful act referenced and subverted the controversial fortification of the city.

Park fences

Fencing is a defining feature of urban parks, particularly in the UK, where the origins of formal parks are intertwined with fenced enclosures. In medieval England, if forest space was completely enclosed, it became a park and thus the process of *emparking* open space refers to its enclosure and regulation rather than its protection and liberation (Langton, 2014). Although public parks are often regarded as commons, these were traditionally competing entities - creating defined leisure environments meant people could not use common land for everyday subsistence (Standing, 2019). This is exemplified by Gallo's (2022) work on New Orleans. Here, establishing new parks erased commons on the urban periphery, creating a prosperous extension of the city from the agrarian hinterland.

The first parks in the UK were not open to the public – they were hunting grounds with fences deployed to keep deer in and the public out. Paradoxically, public parks were created through a process of *disparking* – 'to divest a park of its private use' by 'throw[ing] parkland open' (Onions, cited in Kullman, 2018, p.27). Creating public parks by opening private estates was supplemented by the transformation of commons into prescribed sites for formalised leisure (Standing, 2019). This latter method was particularly observable in London, where sites of political assembly were tamed by turning them into pioneering parks. For example, Victoria Park (est. 1845) was built on a meeting ground (Bonner's Field), and Kennington Common was enclosed for recreational purposes in 1852 (Taylor, 1995). In 1881, one London-based correspondent expressed concern about the future of common land south of the River Thames: 'Kennington Park and every available space that could be got hold of have been converted into parks. We don't want to see every bit of common enclosed with railings' (cited in Taylor, 1995, p.399). Several years earlier, crowds had torn down railings surrounding Hyde Park, highlighting emerging opposition to barriers that limited public access to open spaces (Awcock, 2019).

In the Twentieth Century, there was a movement to remove railings and integrate parks into the urban landscape (O'Reilly, 2013), and de-railing was accelerated by the melting down of railings to bolster national defences during World War II (Conway, 2000). After the war, there were calls to re-enclose some parks for two main reasons: to protect parks from damage; and to allow parks to be locked at night to protect 'public decency' (Molson cited in Hansard, 1959). Preventing vandalism, reducing anti-social behaviour and improving safety are the main justifications for enclosing parks in the Twenty First Century. However, in many locations - including Finsbury Park - stakeholders remain divided over the need for perimeter fencing: some see fences as ways of protecting users, whereas others campaign to remove restrictive barriers.

Authors who have written about opposition to the introduction of park fencing include Németh (2012), who researched plans to erect a 6-7ft high fence around Philadelphia's National Historical Park. All but 5 of the 300 formal responses to this proposal were negative; people didn't like the idea that freedom was being sacrificed for security (n = 72), while others bemoaned restricted physical access (n = 64) or the visual/aesthetic impact (n = 21). Nemeth's findings neatly

summarise the ways park fences tend to be opposed for symbolic, practical and aesthetic reasons, providing a useful framework for identifying the potential effects of fencing.

In recent years, there have been growing calls to remove park fences. Whereas in the past, this was driven based by aesthetic and town planning principles, recent calls are underpinned by efforts to improve accessibility. Park 'accessibility' usually refers to how easy it is to get in and get around - particularly for people with disabilities - but we should not forget about the need to get out. Barker et al. (2022) interviewed over 100 women and girls in West Yorkshire, and one of their key findings was that 'fences or walls around the edge of parks limit escape and visibility' (p.15). Accordingly, some authorities have started to open up parks. For example, the New York Parks Commissioner introduced a multi-million-dollar *Parks Without Borders* project in 2016. One of the key priorities was removing or lowering fencing - to breathe new life into underused spaces, and to create better sight lines along the edges of parks. This policy reflects Low's (2023) concern about fences in New York City: 'fences act as barriers to park use, restricting access, separating park spaces from neighbourhood spaces, and symbolically encoding the message that the park is unwelcoming' (p.213). Park authorities are also starting to remove perimeter fences in England – albeit for different reasons. Fences and railings tend to restrict active travel through parks and interrupt the interconnectivity of urban green spaces.

Despite various campaigns to remove perimeter fencing, park fences are appreciated by many users, especially where there are concerns about safety. Barker et al. (2019) noted that the erection of boundary fencing enabled communities to reclaim Cross Flatts Park in Leeds. The perimeter fence installed here prevented cars and motorbikes from entering the park, helping to alleviate problems with joyriding and burnt-out vehicles. In these contexts, 'mending fences' is the priority – literally, in terms of providing a more secure perimeter, but also metaphorically; bringing communities together and building trust between different groups.

Fences within parks

Perimeter fencing is often accompanied by enclosures within parks, with children's playgrounds the most obvious examples. Low's (2023) research suggests that 'parents in all the playgrounds preferred high fences' (p.237), as it is easier to supervise children, but fences seem less positive for younger users. Fences contain children, artificially segregating them from other users and other environments. As the play industry acknowledges, they restrict play to determined areas and specialist equipment: 'You are telling them with architecture that this is the area where you are permitted to play' (Playworld, undated, no pages).

Playgrounds are also fenced to keep dogs out, and in recent years, dogs have been separated from other users by installing dog exercise areas in underused parts of parks (Middle, 2020). Other fenced areas include sports facilities: outdoor gyms, tennis/basketball courts, astroturf football pitches and multi-use games areas (MUGAs). MUGAs are sometimes called 'cages' – which highlights why they are regarded as unwelcoming and unsafe by some users, particularly women and girls who like to feel they can escape easily if necessary (Barker et al., 2022).

The prevalence of enclosed playgrounds, dog parks and sports enclosures create parks that feel very compartmentalised to users. With reference to Fort Greene Park in New York City, Velsey (2023) asks:

> How did this romantic Olmsted park, with its winding paths and sloping hills, a 30 acre jewel, get turned into a fussy grid with every area demarcated, every use dictated?

The materials used to enclose space are also significant. Gavriș and Popescu (2021) suggest that parks have become more fragmented as vegetative borders have been replaced by fences and gates which 'divide up space for entertainment' (p.140). The proliferation of fences in the park they studied 'instigated a process of territorial regulation through which delimited areas wait in line for commodification' (p.139). Fences that commodify park space include *temporary*

fences to secure ticketed events (Smith, 2018, 2023). These are now an annual fixture in many large urban parks in England, creating a contemporary equivalent of the medieval 'fence month' when commoners were excluded from forests and open spaces when deer were fawning (Langton, 2014). It is tempting to frame ticketed events and other commercial incursions as the 21st century equivalent of 'enclosures'. This interpretation is problematic not only because of the temporary presence of festival fences, but because many host parks are already enclosed. However, the increasing number of fenced festivals in parks means the notion of *disparking* – divesting a park of its private use –does have renewed significance. During the Coronavirus pandemic, other types of temporary fencing became very prominent within city parks, with popular sites fenced off to prevent gatherings of people. This inverted the status quo: during the pandemic, fences were installed to prevent unofficial festivity, whilst fences to facilitate official festivals were unusually absent.

Just as there has been a move against perimeter fencing, there are now calls to remove internal fences too. Prospect Park in New York City now has an 'open-lawns policy' to 'let it be free' (Velsey, 2023). Rather than installing fences around a playground perimeter, park landscape designers are planting hedges, creating a change in level, or building a low wall. These boundaries facilitate playful experiences rather than restrict them. However, there are instances where internal fences are justified due to their positive effects, such as the exclosures that protect flora and fauna from unnecessary damage: these are one of the most effective tools conservationists have for retaining and enhancing biodiversity (Shrubsole, 2022).

Summary

The material reviewed above highlights the historical evolution and contemporary significance of park fences and indicates why fences are erected in these settings. It also illustrates that there are many different types of park fencing, both in terms of location (internal or perimeter), but also in terms of function (e.g. safety of users, protection of park environments, and paywalls for commercial enterprises). The available literature suggests that fences have intended and unintended consequences, although the effects of - and attitudes towards - fencing have generally been under-researched. Different attitudes tend to reflect wider perspectives: there is a distinction between idealists who prioritise accessibility, and pragmatists who value fences' contribution to parks management. The intention in the remainder of this paper is to explore these issues further by examining the prevalence, variety and effects of park fencing in a significant case study.

Methodology

An in-depth case of one park, Finsbury Park in north London, was undertaken to explore the roles and significance of park fences. This 46 ha park opened to the public in 1869 and its location at the intersection of the inner city Boroughs of Islington, Haringey and Hackney means it serves a very large and highly diverse local population (Haringey, 2020). The need for an accessible park, and ongoing concerns about safety in the area, make this a very suitable context in which to analyse the role of fences. Various qualitative research exercises were conducted between 2018 and 2023 to understand this landscape better. During pilot research in 2018, key stakeholders were interviewed and multiple site visits conducted. Subsequently, twenty-six (weekly) observations were undertaken in Finsbury Park in the period August 2019-March 2020. At the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, these weekly observations were not possible but they resumed in autumn 2020 and continued until December 2023. In total, we conducted over 100 days of observational research, allowing us to talk formally and informally to park users, collect visual evidence (photographs and video), and make audio/written notes about what was happening in and around Finsbury Park.

Observational, visual and conversational research activities in the park were supplemented with formal interviews (30-180 minutes long) conducted online in 2020. Interviewees included representatives from horticultural, arts, activity and sports organisations that occupied fenced enclosures within the park (Edible Landscapes, Furtherfield, Pedal Power, London Heathside) as well as the organisers of events and activities regularly staged in the park (arts and heritage events, parkrun, Latin American festival). We also interviewed prominent members of the Friends of Finsbury Park, and a local councillor who had been responsible for children's services in the area. As our observations and interviews did not directly ascertain the views of younger people, we also organised a focus group with a group of 13-17-year-olds in 2022. To corroborate our research findings with available quantitative evidence, the preliminary findings from the Finsbury Park Boundaries Review were analysed (Sustrans, 2023). This research - conducted by Sustrans on behalf of LB Haringey in 2023 - included community engagement events, plus an online survey of park users completed by over 1000 people, 83% of whom visited Finsbury Park at least once a week (Sustrans, 2023).

Interviewees and focus group attendees were not explicitly asked about fences, and researchers did not deliberately focus on fences during observation exercises. Our focus was park inclusivity, park use and park activities, but fences emerged as a key theme from this research. Therefore, the prominence of fencing in interview responses and observation records can be read as indicative of the significance of fences for this park. We used thematic analysis to analyse the data and identified various categories and sub-themes. Some of the key categories were different types of fencing and we have used these to structure our findings. We also produced a map to illustrate the extent and locations of fencing in Finsbury Park (see Figure 1).

Permanent fences

Perimeter fences

Finsbury Park has been surrounded by a perimeter fence for over 150 years, as gates and fences were erected four years after the park opened to the public in 1869. The original fence was open oak paling (Historic England, undated) but this was expensive to maintain, so it was replaced with timber palisade fencing. The current fence is made up of different materials: most sections comprise wooden panels affixed to concrete posts (See Figure 2), but some sections are railed. The western side of Finsbury Park is bordered by the East Coast Mainline, with steel palisade fences separating the railway from the park (See Figure 1).

The current configuration of fences and gates is currently under review, to address ongoing concerns from park users about safety (Sustrans, 2023) and because of tentative plans to re/move the fence along the Seven Sisters Road as part of plans for a new cycle route. According to a recent scoping report by a national charity dedicated to walking, wheeling and cycling:

> The current boundaries mean there is a defined hard edge to the park, low visibility into and within the park and limited access and exit points. (Sustrans, 2022, p.2)

Sustrans' (2023) review of Finsbury Park's boundaries provides a good overview of how park users feel about the perimeter fence. When people were asked about lowering the boundary fences 15% agreed they should be lowered, but the majority (57%) of respondents disagreed (n = 1,039). Overall, park users were generally 'unsupportive of removing or lowering boundary fences' (Sustrans, 2023, p.15), as it would make the park less secure. Instead, they wanted to see damaged fences repaired and wooden fences replaced with metal railings (Sustrans, 2023).

The idea that enclosing Finsbury Park with a perimeter fence makes the park safer was also the view of most of the people we interviewed. However, park users pointed out that the fence needed to be repaired, or upgraded, if it was to contribute more significantly to safety. There was consensus that the current fence is inadequate because of its rudimentary nature, dilapidated state, and because gates remain open.

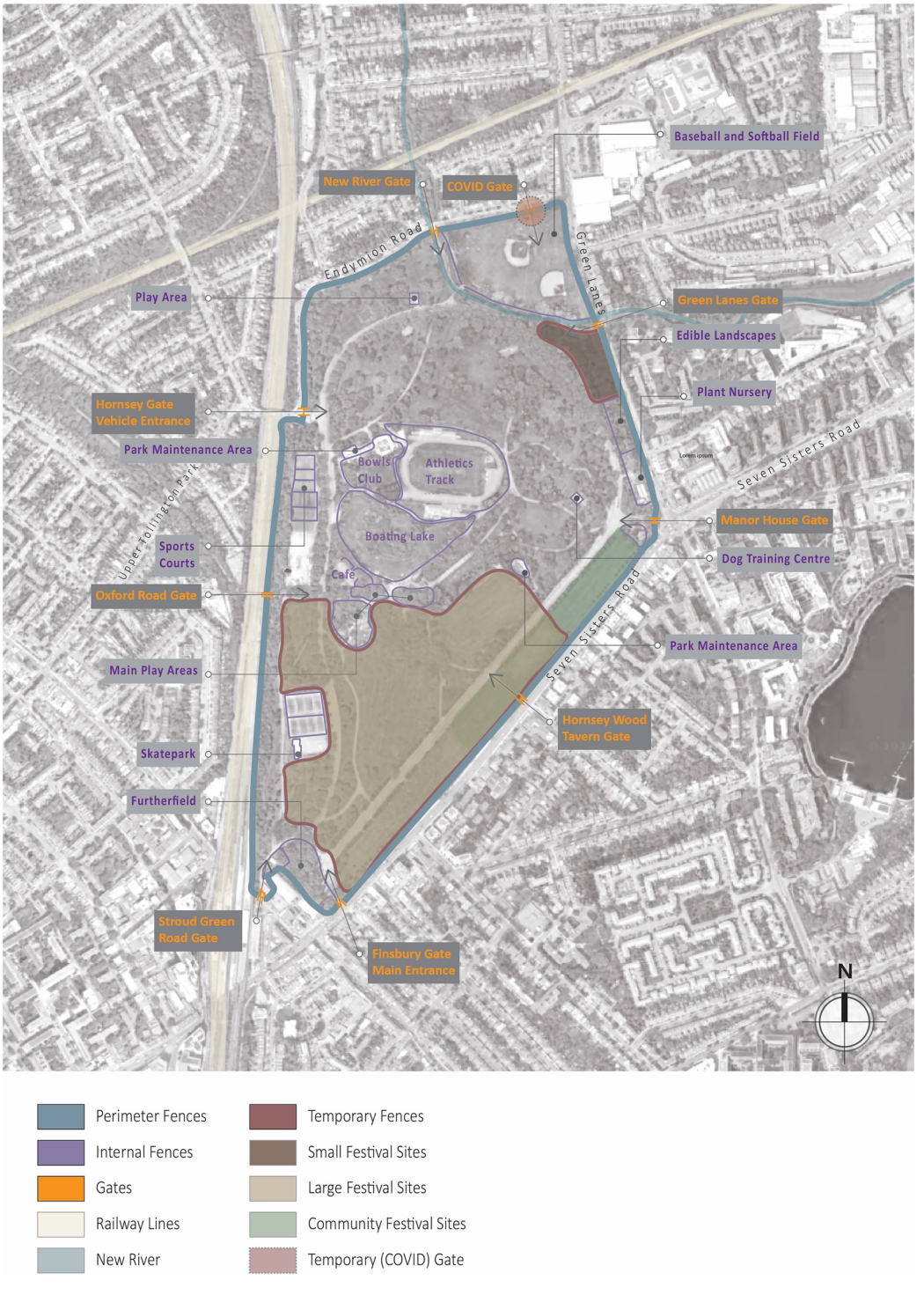

Figure 1. Map of Finsbury Park highlighting permanent and temporary fencing. *Source:* Produced by Didem Ertem.

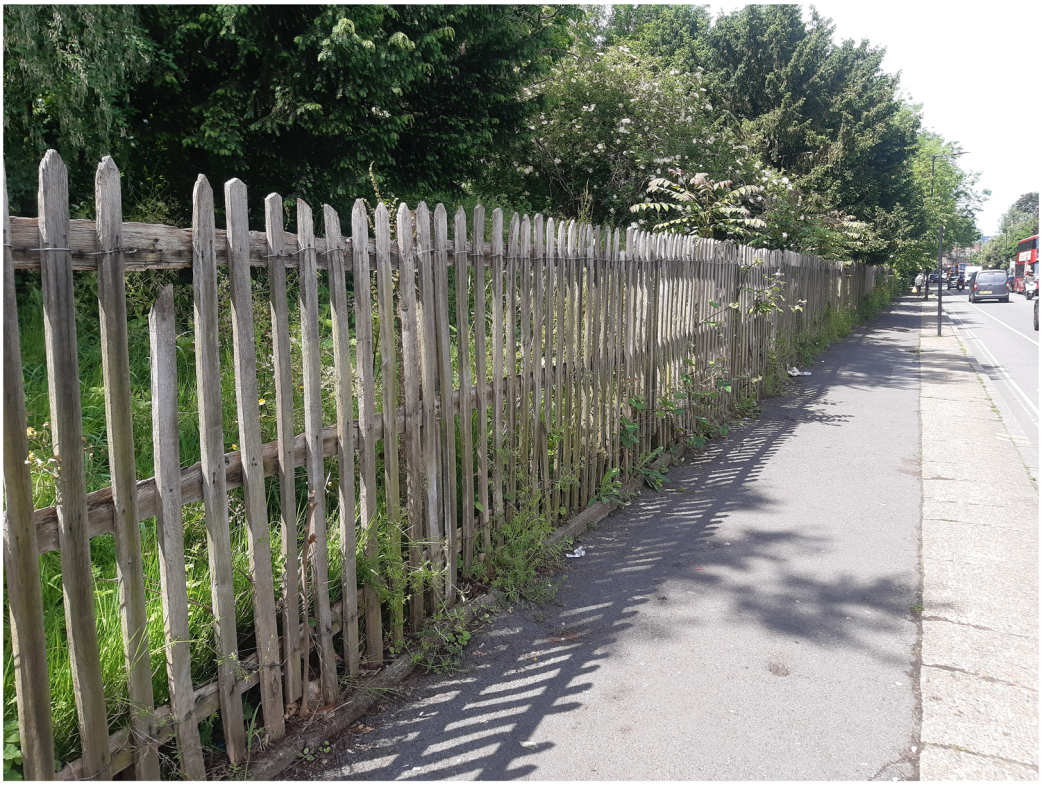

Figure 2. Timber palisade fencing on the eastern perimeter of Finsbury Park. *Source:* Photograph by Andrew Smith.

> I mean there are fences all the way around, but the gates just aren't shut anymore. (Friends of Finsbury Park, 2018)

> They [the fences] are useless. I am sorry, but they are useless. If you go that way, literally in a straight line, you will see that they get torn down in seconds. I mean, it's not going to be this kind of fencing that keeps people out. (Park user, 2023)

One of the reasons parks have perimeter fencing is so they can be locked at certain times (e.g. at night). This prevents damage to the park, ensures parks cannot be used as hiding places, and prevents rough sleeping. However, in their current state, the fences here don't prevent any of these things, mainly because the gates of Finsbury Park are not locked.

The perimeter fence controls where people can gain entry to the park, inadvertently creating areas of sociability and exchange: park entrances become meeting points where people instinctively congregate and interact. This is not necessarily appreciated by users or the local authority that manages Finsbury Park. There have been various efforts to prevent people from gathering near the main entrance (see Figure 1) by removing amenities that encourage people to dwell here. The latest Finsbury Park Management Plan states:

> It is recommended that the benches near to the Finsbury Gate are removed in order to deter their use by the street drinking fraternity and reduce the impact of anti-social behaviour on legitimate park users entering via this gate. (Haringey, 2020, p.46)

This type of defensive or hostile landscape management is the antithesis of inclusive place-making and was opposed by many people and organisations we spoke to. The arts organisation that occupies offices next to Finsbury Gate told us 'we were fiercely against this'. They wanted to engage young people who gathered here rather than disperse them.

Internal fences

Alongside perimeter fencing, Finsbury Park contains multiple fenced enclosures within its boundaries (See Figure 1). The park has always been organised zonally: the original design separated horticultural features (in 2–3 corners of the park) from recreational features (centre of the park) and sporting features (around the edge). During its early years, sheep enclosures featured, but by the mid-20th century, these had been removed. Other fenced areas were added over time, including the athletics track, which was laid out on open parkland in the early 20th century. Internal fences now surround the playgrounds and some of the other sports facilities such as the basketball, volleyball and tennis courts. A plant nursery and a maintenance site are also fenced off, as is the New River that cuts across the northeast corner of the park. There are also lower fences surrounding other sites, such as the boating lake and dog training area. Organisations that are based in the park also occupy enclosed sites: for example, a not-for-profit forest garden (Edible Landscapes) is surrounded by steel palisade fencing (See Figure 3).

> We're based inside the park, in a fenced off area and we educate people about forest garden plants, how to recognise them, how to eat them and how to care for them. We propagate some of the plants and give them away to local community food growing projects and we have weekly volunteering sessions, usually on a Sunday. We open up the gates and members of the public can come in. (Edible Landscapes, 2020)

Some fenced sites, such as the basketball and volleyball courts are surrounded by mesh fencing, with gaps rather than lockable gates used for access. These fences are designed to keep balls in rather than to keep people out. More open enclosures encourage sociability and interactions rather than merely functional use by dedicated users (see Figure 4).

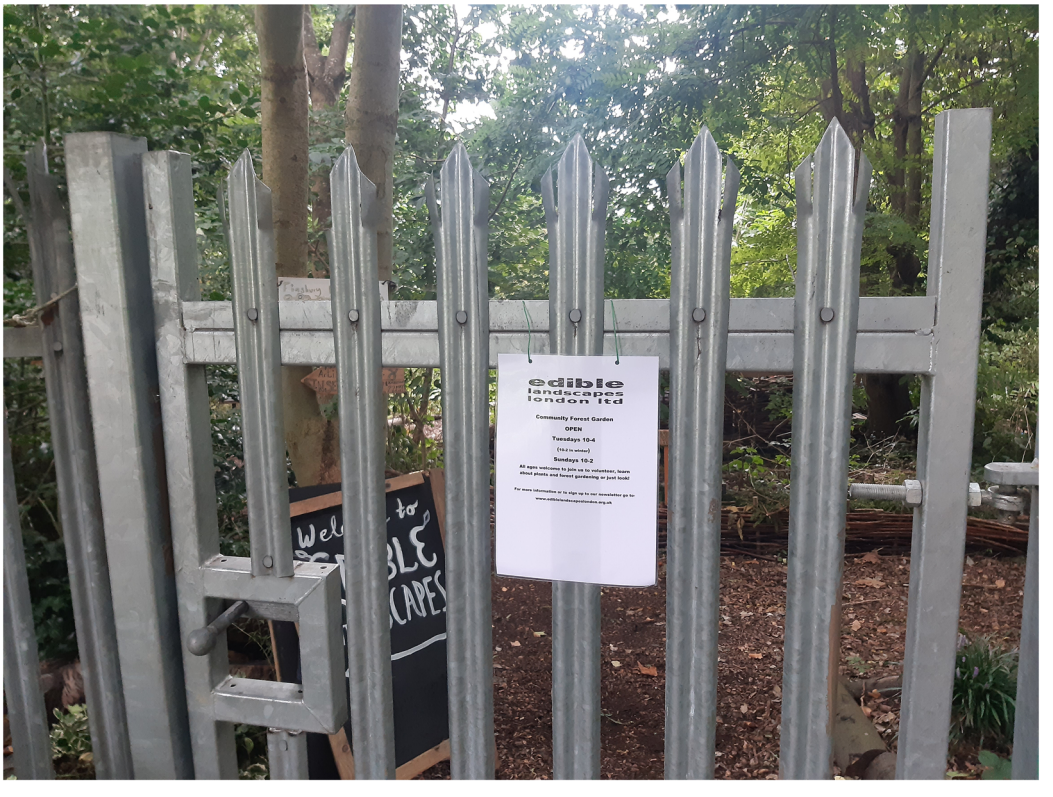

Figure 3. Steel palisade fencing securing the Edible Landscapes site in Finsbury Park. *Source:* Photograph by Andrew Smith.

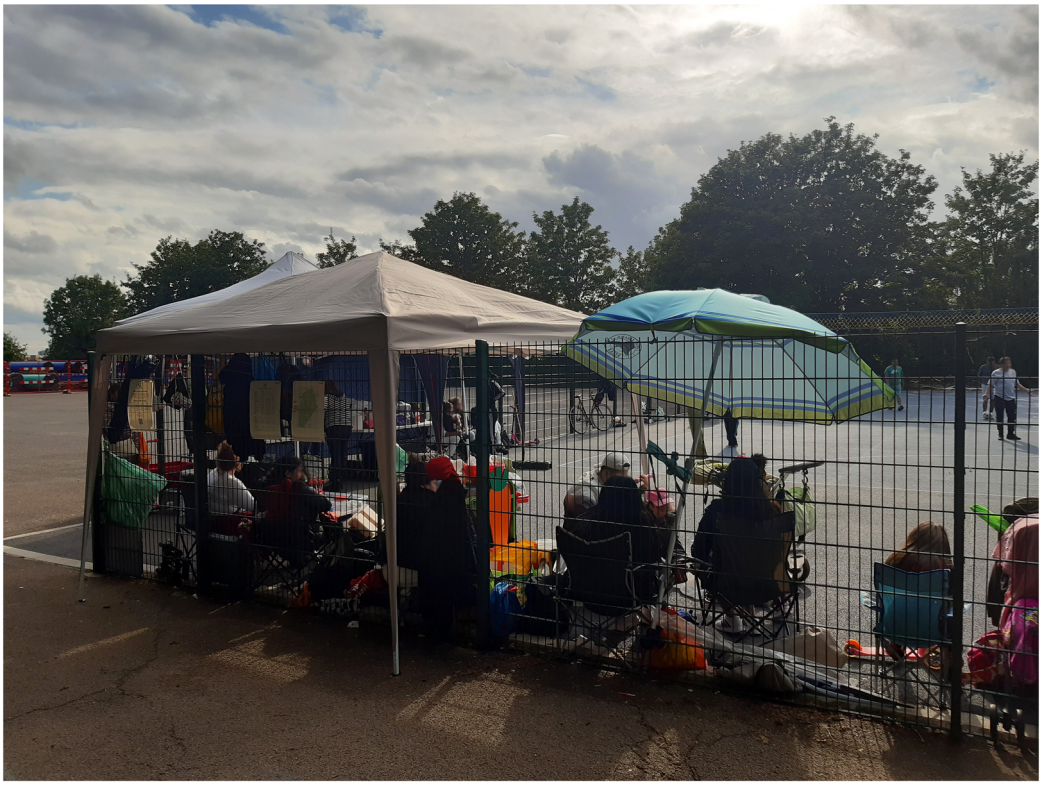

Figure 4. Mesh fencing surrounding the volleyball courts in Finsbury Park. *Source:* Photograph by Andrew Smith.

Other sites are more securely fenced off. The athletics track and Edible Landscapes are locked up and remain inaccessible when they are not being used. The organisations occupying these sites acknowledged that this restricts engagement. For example, Edible Landscapes told us:

> I suppose sharing the site with other organisations would be something that we could consider doing to open it up a bit. But there is limited space and the gateway into our site is quite small. We would be interested, because the site is fenced off and under lock and key, so it means that someone has to be there to open it. What would be nice for us is if we could expand into the park more and take ownership of some different parts of the land that were accessible all of the time. (Edible Landscapes, 2020)

The athletics club based at the track also recognised the limitations imposed by occupying a fenced-off site:

> Having the venue open to the public during the day. That's the biggest improvement that could be made. So, people could come in to use the facility and know we're there, to be fair, because it's locked up when we're not there or one of the other clubs are not there. (London Heathside, 2020)

Nevertheless, these organisations acknowledged that fences were important to secure their venues, and to prevent vandalism. In their view, the problem wasn't the fences, it was the vulnerability of the barriers erected. For example, the athletics track is protected by relatively insecure barriers, such as bow top fences (see Figure 5).

London Heathside told us:

> When we first started, there was a really rubbish fence and Haringey did put up a much bigger fence, but there's one corner where you've just got to walk through a small gap and you're in. We've had a lot of problems with people breaking in. (London Heathside, 2020)

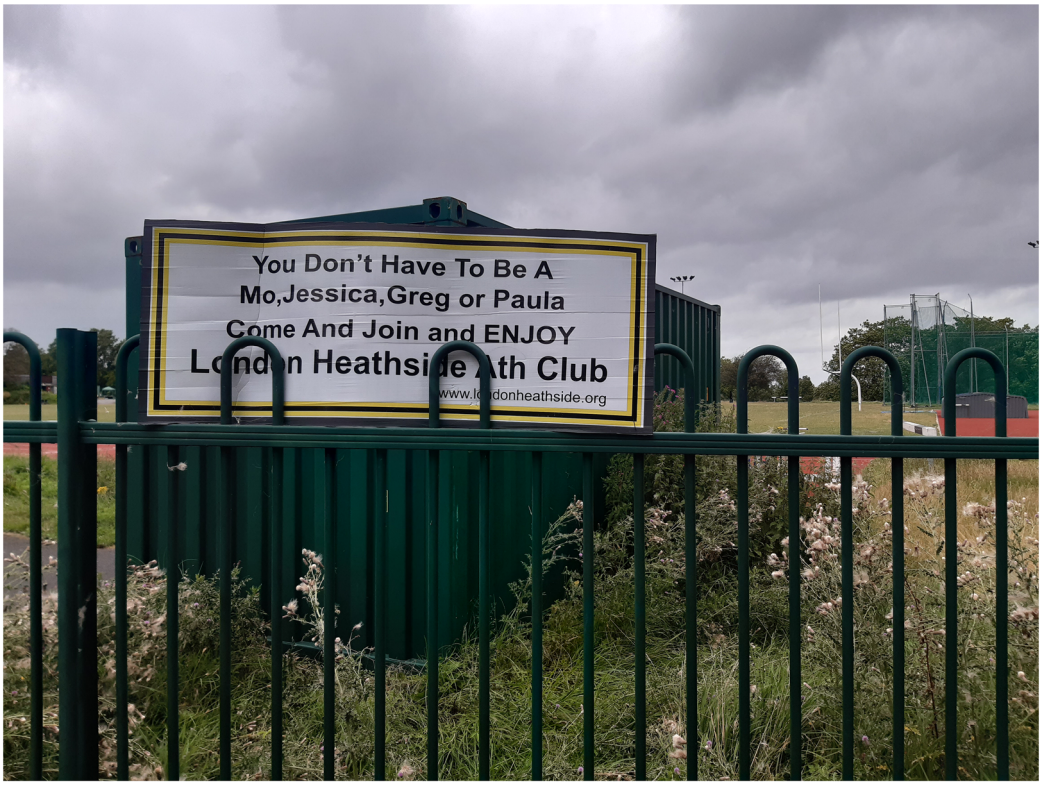

Figure 5. Green bow top fencing surrounding the athletics track in Finsbury Park. *Source:* Photograph by Andrew Smith.

Organisers of other activities in Finsbury Park appreciated the ways their venues were enclosed. This allowed them to manage vulnerable participants. For example, the organisation which runs cycle workshops for people with disabilities told us:

> It makes the support workers feel safe, it makes the families feel safe, and all my trainers feel a lot safer. (Pedal Power, 2020)

The impact of the multiple fenced enclosures in Finsbury Park is softened by the locations of these sites. Fenced areas tend to be situated on the perimeter (See Figure 1) near to entrances which means the expansive, sweeping open spaces envisaged in the original landscape design are largely retained. As one park user told us: 'I barely notice the fences to be honest' (Park user, 2023). The main exception is the athletics track. This fenced-off site, and its co-location with the lake and cafe, reinforces the topography of the park - effectively dividing it in two. One disadvantage of the peripheral locations of fenced enclosures is that they restrict interactions – these fences operate as extensions of the park boundary rather than as sociable borders. The notable exception is the eastern edge of the volleyball courts. Here, open enclosures facilitate, rather than hinder, social interactions and group gatherings (see Figure 4).

To assess parks user' views of internal enclosures, it is also useful to consider the recent boundaries review (Sustrans, 2023): 31% of the 1,032 people who answered the question on internal fence removal agreed that they should be taken away, but 36% disagreed (the remainder neither agreed nor disagreed). This suggests that internal fences are viewed as more expendable than perimeter fences, but are still generally supported.

Temporary fences

Festival fences

Finsbury Park has become a notorious example of a public park that is used to host large-scale events, including the UK's largest urban music festival, Wireless. This notoriety has been fuelled by widespread media coverage of Wireless, and local opposition to staging it (Layton & Latham, 2022). As Figure 1 illustrates, there are two main festival sites: a large one in the south used for major concerts and large music festivals (40-50,000 people), plus a smaller site spanning the carriageway in the north east, for outdoor DJ sets and smaller festivals (up to 10,000 people). The festival schedule varies, but currently music festivals are staged over 4 × 3 day weekends in July and August. To stage these events, 3.4 m steel shield fences (Figure 6) and 4.12 m super fortress fences (Figure 7) are erected. For Wireless, these fences are fortified with other security apparatus (Figure 6) and further rings of HERAS fencing (Figure 7) to prevent unsanctioned entry.

Festival fences are tolerated by some park users but loathed by others. Interviewees tended to view them as 'walls' rather than fences and drew parallels with barriers used in conflict zones or penal institutions.

> They've had people trying to break into the event in the past, and that's now why they have … it's not quite a Berlin Wall, but it has some features of the Berlin Wall in that there is one huge barrier and then a second barrier, so … it's almost like that. There are no machine guns, obviously! (Park user, 2020)

> It's kind of reminiscent of being in some sort of a war-zone or something and having this massive wall built up around you. (Park user, 2020)

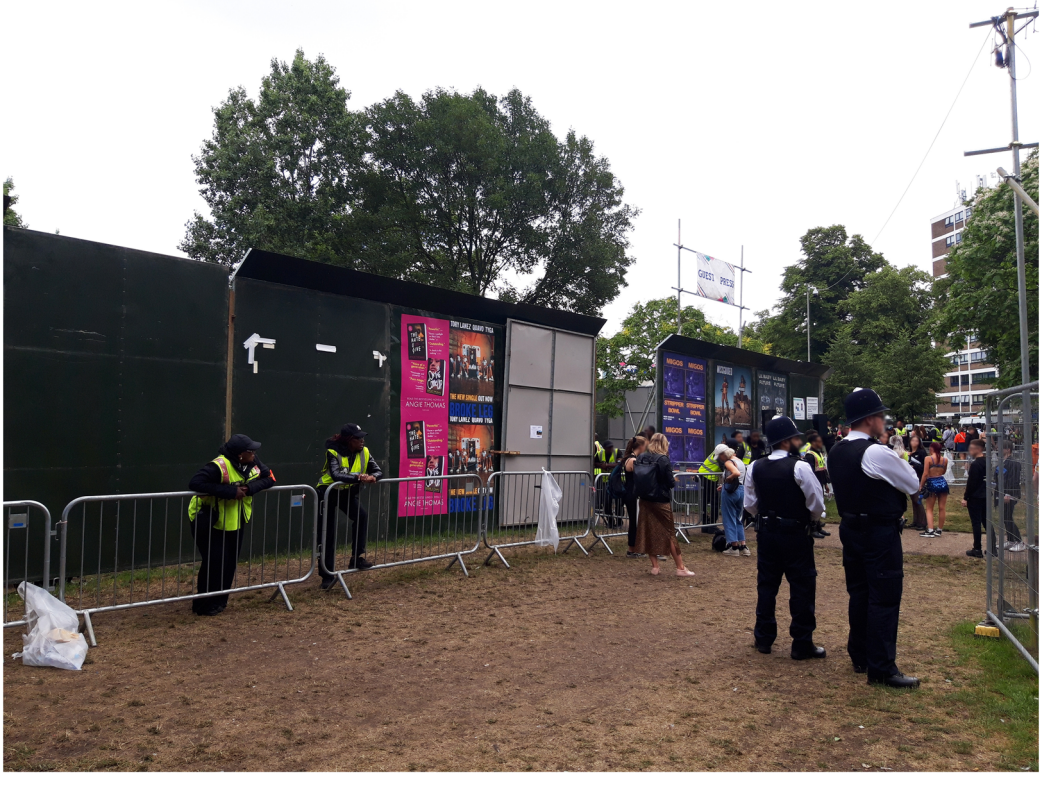

Figure 6. Steel shield and crowd control fences near to the main entrance of the Wireless festival in Finsbury Park. *Source:* Photograph by Andrew Smith.

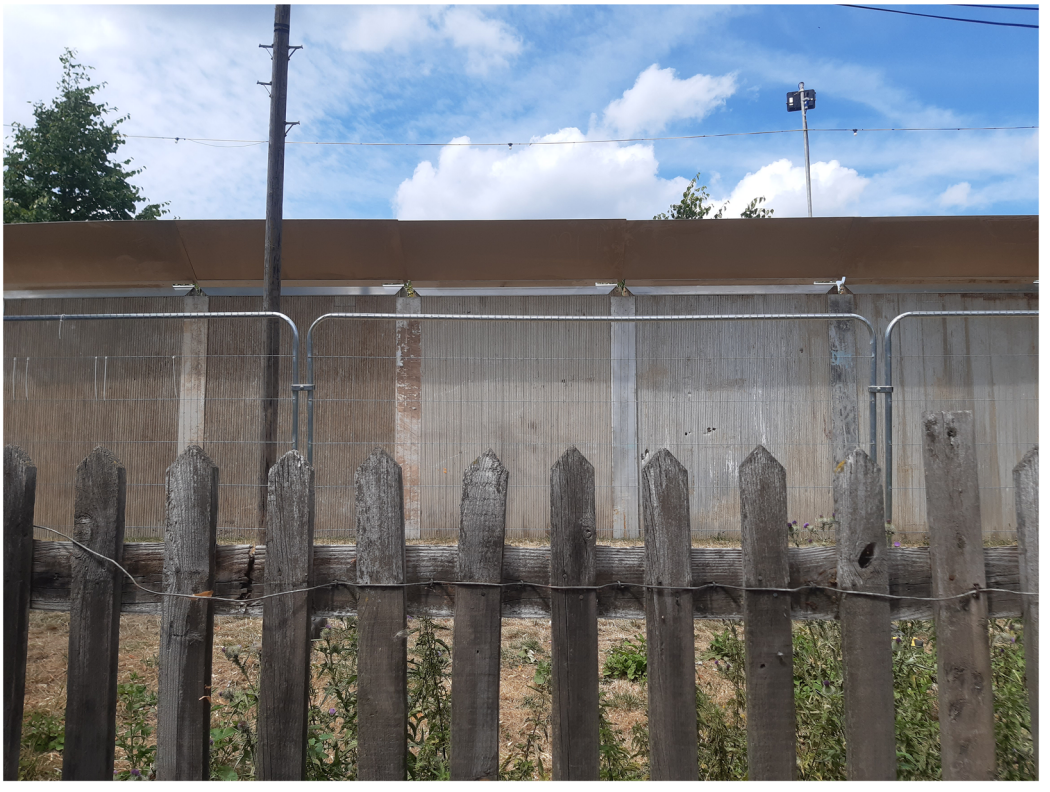

Figure 7. Super fortress, HERAS and timber palisade fences during the Wireless festival in Finsbury Park. *Source:* Photograph by Andrew Smith.

> I hate these millennial music festival fences. I try to avoid them as much as I can. You can't even call them fences; they are enormous walls. It feels like they set up a prison in the middle of the park. They paint them green as well, what a joke! As if the colour is the problem. (Park user, 2023)

Rather than helping to make the park feel more secure, the fortification of Finsbury Park for festivals seems to have the opposite effect – it communicates danger and produces an atmosphere of suspicion:

> They are very foreboding. You come into the park and there's massive steel walls built around these things, creating other spaces around them which feel unsafe (Heritage professional, 2020)

> It becomes a bit like a sort of super secure space. Like a scene out of Children of Men with the big structures and that does have an effect. I understand why you need walls and stuff like that, but they have a very oppressive effect on me. It's just a bit dark. A bit dystopian. (Park user, 2023)

Festival fences have physical impacts, but also symbolic effects. The arts professionals we interviewed regretted the ways they communicated exclusion and undermined efforts to open the park up.

> The huge barriers go up … it's all shut off which is the antithesis of a lot of the work that we were doing as an arts organisation, which was about opening things up to people to access without paying for it. (Arts professional, 2020)

As Figure 1 highlights, the majority of Finsbury Park - and the park's facilities - remain open during fenced festivals. Therefore, although these events can be regarded as a privatisation of public spaces, this is essentially a part-privatisation because of their limited temporal and spatial footprints. However, during Wireless, Finsbury Park's perimeter fences allow security staff to

control who can get near to the festival – generating more comprehensive exclusions. Layers of permanent and temporary fencing combine to prevent those without tickets from using the park. One of the young people we spoke to in the focus group told us:

> They won't let you in because they think you're going to try to get into Wireless. I want to use the basketball court, but I can't because the whole of the park is blocked off because of Wireless. (Focus group participant, 2022)

Temporary fences are not just erected for large-scale music festivals. Other events at a smaller scale are also fenced.

> When I was younger, I quite liked the funfair, but now it has a security fence around it and you cannot go in unless you pay. It's become a very different operation. (Park user, 2020)

The opposition to festival fences in Finsbury Park is part of an ongoing dispute over the use of this park as a venue for major events. There is insufficient space to discuss that dispute here (see Layton & Latham, 2022 for more details), but it is important to note the key role fences play in commodifying Finsbury Park (Smith, 2023). Our research suggests security barriers installed to monetise park space were far more evident than wildlife exclosures- which emphasises the priorities of contemporary park management

COVID-19 fences

Fences erected by event companies were not the only temporary fences erected in Finsbury Park in the period 2018-2023. During the coronavirus pandemic (2020-21), urban parks

Figure 8. Temporary HERAS fences in Finsbury Park during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Source:* Photograph by Andrew Smith.

played an important role as places where people could exercise and spend some time outdoors, away from home. However, parks were also sites of conflict and controversy at this time, as new rules were introduced, including restrictions on meeting up and sitting down. At the height of the pandemic, various facilities were fenced off in Finsbury Park as part of measures to restrict social activities. Temporary (HERAS) fences were erected around the outdoor gym, the adventure play equipment and around the picnic benches beside the café (see Figure 8).

Sites that were already surrounded by fencing, like the children's playground, were locked during the first few months of the pandemic. However, that did not stop families from entering and using the playground, highlighting the way fences can be breached by park users. The courts used for various sports were also closed for several months, but they reopened when lockdown measures eased on 4th July 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic also affected the boundaries and wider accessibility of Finsbury Park. Unlike some London parks, Finsbury Park was never closed during the pandemic, but measures were introduced to ensure it could be accessed safely. The Oxford Road and New River Gates were closed because they were only accessible via narrow passages between fences. The effects of closing the New River Gate – the only entrance at the far north end of the park - were offset by removing a section of fencing to create a temporary entrance by the baseball field (See Figure 9). Park users have long advocated for additional access at this point, and the pandemic provided an opportunity to experiment with a new entrance. At community engagement events organised by Sustrans to discuss the boundaries of Finsbury Park 'Multiple people made comments that it is difficult to access the north end of Finsbury Park' (Sustrans, 2023,

Figure 9. Temporary entrance at the north end of Finsbury Park during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Source:* Photograph by Andrew Smith.

p.16). Of the survey respondents who wanted a new entrance (n = 387), the vast majority wanted to see a new gate near to where the temporary COVID-19 entrance was situated (Sustrans, 2023). This corner of the park is less accessible physically and functionally because it is surrounded by fencing and dominated by a single function – baseball (See Figure 1). When the field is not being used, the site feels unsafe because there is only one route in and out – from inside the park. As one park user told us:

> I think it feels very much like their field. But I wonder if that's just because it's fenced. If it had access, I think it would be safer. Because there'd be more flow through. (Park user, 2023)

Conclusions

This paper examined an everyday landscape feature, illustrated its significance within the context of urban parks and highlighted the way such elements can be used to understand green spaces better. We hope it inspires further analyses of fences, but also of other park features that are neglected and underestimated by researchers such as benches, bins, and signs. City parks are often described as 'open spaces', but the analysis presented here highlights that they are anything but. Indeed, one of our most notable findings was the large volume of fencing erected both inside and around Finsbury Park (see Figure 1). We also recorded an enormous variety of fencing; both in terms of purpose and permanence, but also in relation to the types and materials used (see Figures 2–9).

The perimeter of Finsbury Park is surrounded entirely by fences, railings and gates which limit *where* people can access the park. This perimeter has been maintained for 150 years to deter vandalism and to boost security. Although people can almost always see the park through the perimeter fence, this barrier does separate the park from surrounding neighbourhoods - limiting incidental use and escape routes. The baseball field in the northeast corner highlights an important dilemma: an additional entrance here would make this a less intimidating and more populated space when it is not being used for games, but this site - like others with dedicated uses - requires physical separation to make it fit for its primary purpose. The multiple fenced enclosures within Finsbury Park protect key amenities, but they limit access to a restricted set of dedicated users. This example helps to illustrate the paradoxical effects of fences, which – depending on the context and the users under consideration – can: facilitate and prohibit; exclude and include; protect and intimidate. The beneficiaries tend to be existing, purposeful, official users; with potential, incidental, informal users deterred from using fenced spaces. Our analysis shows that effects are not limited to permanent structures as temporary fences are also regularly installed in the park. This highlights the importance of conducting analyses that capture shifting assemblages of people, atmospheres and apparatus (Sendra & Sennett, 2020).

Our research enhances understanding of attitudes towards park fences, something which has been underexplored in existing literature. Fences invoke negative connotations, but our research suggests that fences are generally tolerated, even appreciated, by park users. Perimeter fencing was generally seen as important, whilst fenced areas inside the park were not considered a problem. Park users didn't seem to notice internal fences, reaffirming the argument that urban fences are relatively invisible in the contemporary era (Instone, 1999). In Finsbury Park, this invisibility is partly a function of the way internal enclosures are located around its edges. It is also because users have become accustomed to fenced areas, which have existed in various forms since Finsbury Park opened to the public in 1869.

Arts, horticulture and sports organisations recognised that occupying fenced enclosures within Finsbury Park restricted the accessibility and visibility of their activities. But they didn't want fences to be lowered or removed: opening these sites more regularly and taking activities into other parts of the park were regarded as more viable ways of enhancing accessibility. Subversion or appropriation can allow users to respond actively to the imposition of fencing (Gardner, 2013;

Klein, 2005), but aside from limited evidence that fences were surmounted, penetrated or torn down, these processes were not particularly significant in Finsbury Park. As notable work by Sennett (and Christo and Jeanne Claude!) emphasises, one potentially positive aspect of fencing is the opportunity to provide sociable sites of connection and exchange, or borders. Apart from the volleyball and basketball courts, and the area near the main gate, this type of effect was also less relevant to Finsbury Park. Internal fences here tend to be integrated into the park perimeter and thus tend to function as boundaries, rather than borders.

The most controversial type of park fences we examined were the security fences erected to host ticketed festivals. These were opposed for several reasons, including their appearance and what they represent, rather than merely their restrictive effects. This reaffirms the findings of Németh's (2012) research in Philadelphia that emphasised the (problematic) symbolic, aesthetic and practical effects of fences. Objections to festival fences in Finsbury Park were not driven by a desire to access the space behind the fence, but by perceptions that the fencing itself looked and felt oppressive. Festival fences were not seen as typical park fences, but as dystopian structures, akin to prison walls. It was the intimidating scale and fortification of these fences, their uncompromising design and other wall-like properties that park users found troubling. Even though these structures were temporary, their dominant presence in open sections of the park was deemed problematic. These fences were also more contested because they constituted pay walls, as well as physical barriers. This sets them apart from other internal fences in Finsbury Park which are generally installed to protect sites, rather than to privilege those willing to pay.

Clarkson (2010) suggests that fences can tell us about the parklands they enclose, and the fences explored in our research highlight some important characteristics of Finsbury Park and its management. The presence of festival fences, and the relative absence of wildlife exclosures, suggest that realising the commercial value of parkland is a bigger priority than ecology. The perimeter fence and the enclosures within the park highlight that worries about violence and vandalism override wider calls for more open, accessible green spaces. In New York City, and other major cities, fencing around and within parks is being removed to enhance accessibility, activation and aesthetics. This is less likely in London's parks where perimeter fences are more established, more prevalent and more appreciated. Here, the priority for users, and other park stakeholders is upgrading fencing, not removing it. In this context, enhanced access is likely to be achieved by widening and proliferating entry points, extending opening hours, bringing activities out of dedicated sites and limiting temporary barriers, rather than by removing or lowering fences.

Research ethics and consent

Written consent was obtained from interviewees who agreed to participate in the research after reading a two-page information sheet about the project. The information sent to participants included details of how data collected would be used, stored and disseminated. Consent was obtained for various dimensions of participation, including permission to record online interviews. Before giving their consent, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and the implications of participating in it.

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Data availability statement

There is no data available.

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