

# Community Connectedness in Fracturing Times

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## What Do We Know So Far?

- Community can be defined through symbolic boundaries, which can be spatial and/or cultural (such as ethnicity or religion). These can be aligned to administrative boundaries, or these borders may cut-across geographical locations.
- Community and place identity can be understood through an intersectional lens, unpacking how spaces overlap with socio-economic status, social class, and other identities to create webs of relationships.
- Housing and labour markets together with planning and housing policies, and economic factors often lead to population groups (by class, ethnicity and especially income) becoming concentrated within certain places.
- Homogeneous spatial communities can be exclusionary for newcomers or outsiders, for example a settled, white, advantaged community may be hostile to in-migrants of a different ethnicity; or a less-advantaged a white population may feel hostile towards in-comers they perceive as competition for scarce resources such as jobs or school places.
- Economically poorer places, often disproportionately impacted by austerity-cuts, have typically seen social infrastructure and public services eroded more than elsewhere. With these changes opportunities for social connectedness are diminished.

## Existing Research

There has been a tendency to separate “communities of place” and “communities of interest”. Such a distinction is unhelpful; at a basic level it ignores that everyone must live somewhere. More importantly, it fails to recognise that identities of place, socio-economic status, and culture, intersect in complex ways. Applying the lens of boundaries, community can be understood as both relational and emotional, highlighting what binds people within the community, or creates perceived boundaries with those not ‘in the community’. New technologies have also changed the nature of spaces where communities form, with hybrid and entirely online communities. Intersectional approaches to understanding identity help us to go beyond simplistic, refined, one-dimensional notions of ‘community’ to explore the dynamism, multi-dimensionality and complexity of boundaries within and between places, off-line and online.

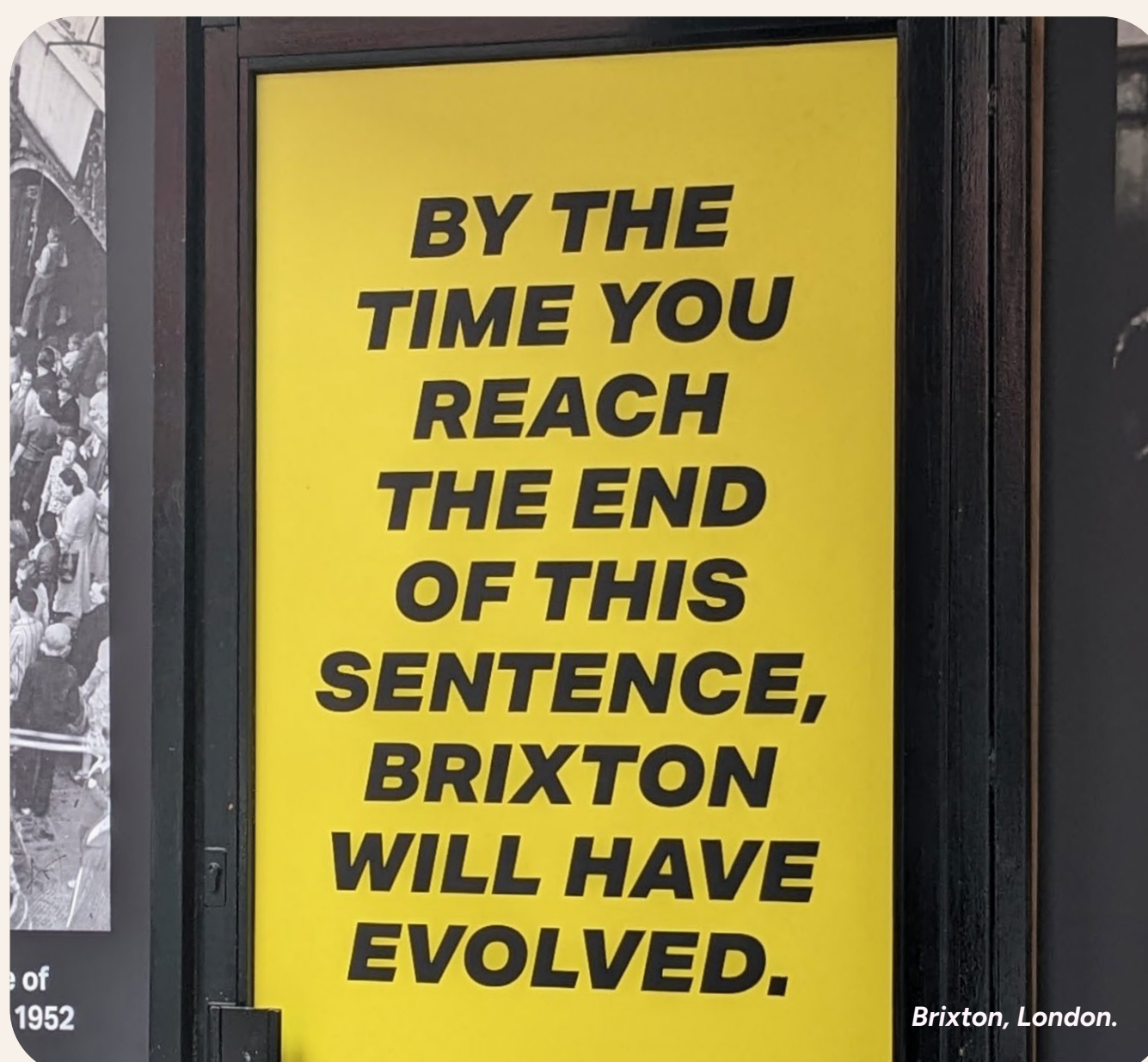
Housing and labour markets, and housing and spatial planning policies have historically tended to group types of housing in certain places. Combined with poverty and economic marginalisation, this creates particular intersections of identity and place. For example, disabled people are disproportionately living in socially-rented housing due to low incomes caused by our disabling society and the labour market barriers many disabled people face. Ethnicity can intersect with this wider context in a complex way, for example historic racism in the allocation of council housing means that communities of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage are more likely

to live in low-cost, poorer quality owner-occupied or privately-rented housing. A desire to live near similar people, or to avoid harassment, or to produce a market large enough for culturally-specific services can also lead to residential co-location – LGBT+ communities have concentrated in places such as Brighton, Hebden Bridge, inner-city Manchester and Brixton for this reason.

We can understand the connections within and between communities through social networks analysis. The inequalities that impact on where people live also reflect patterns of networks and connectedness. Importantly, strong connections within neighbourhoods can create boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. However, strong networks amongst some residents can be portrayed in a negative and stigmatising way. For example, tight networks among minoritised ethnic and migrant residents have been described as insular, without a recognition of the racism and exclusion by other communities. Furthermore, strong social bonds within some communities are often portrayed as poor quality and not useful for social integration and advancement. By contrast, the social bonds of some neighbourhoods, that are implicitly white and more affluent, may be idealised. Such affluent communities can use the social capital, inherent in their networks, to their own advantage, potentially increasing inequalities between communities. Thus, beyond simple notions of social capital, attention is needed to the complexity of intersectionality within social networks.

## What Do We Want To Know?

- How does community, in the sense of feelings of connectedness and belonging, map on to particular geographical places?
- What factors, including socio-economic structures, enable or hinder local connectedness?
- What can be learned by adopting an intersectional lens to understand how factors of age, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality etc. both shape and are shaped by interactions in local places?
- What can public authorities, community organisations, and wider social infrastructure do to meaningfully implement the public equality duty to “promote good relations between people who share protected characteristics”?



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# Community Connectedness and the Economy

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## What Do We Know So Far?

- There is extensive research on the causal relationship between social capital and economic growth. There is some evidence of a positive relationship that at a national level greater social capital can contribute to better economic performance.
- There is less systematic economic evidence on the role the economy plays in shaping social capital and community connectedness. Nonetheless economic geographers have helped show that the processes of de-industrialisation adversely impacted upon social capital in many communities.
- There is some emergent research interest around how contemporary labour market practices (work intensification and extensification, workplace surveillance, employment precarity) can have adverse impacts within and beyond the workplace.
- Changes in commuting patterns and the role of hybrid working are impacting upon workplace and beyond workplace social capital although the scale and direction of changes are not necessarily clear; poorer communities are more likely to be disconnected from areas of employment growth.
- Throughout the analysis it is important to understand differential impacts of the above changes on different groups (by gender, ethnicity, income and disability).

## What Do We Want To Know?

- How do specific workplace practices (including both intensification and extensification), and the use of work-based surveillance and control, impact on social connectedness within and outside the workplace?
- How do new forms of working practice shape community connectedness, for instance the role of hybrid working, and how does the reshaping of commuting patterns, modes and times, impact on social capital formation?
- How do the challenges from a lack of access to jobs locally impact on community connectedness?
- Where is there scope for innovation in labour market and employment practices which can support social capital (including new forms of work place democracy and worker involvement)?
- What roles do firms play directly (as employers, developers, product and service providers) in supporting or undermining community connectedness and social capital?

## Existing Research

Successive studies have explored the relationship between social capital (at national, local and community scales) and economic performance (Bjørnskov 2022). This argument runs that greater trust between people and between people and market institutions (banks, the state, businesses etc.) reduces transaction costs. With lower transaction costs from greater trust, economies perform more efficiently and have higher levels of economic performance.

A recent report by Haldane and Halpern (2025) for Local Trust suggests that increasing social capital, at community, local and national levels could have a significant impact on UK productivity. It provides some concrete recommendations for increasing levels of trust: from increasing the emphasis on citizenship development for young people through to changing the current benefit system to one which promotes and does not destroy trust between citizens.

The relationship between social capital, as a measure of trust, and economic performance is not a simple linear one. In part this is because market making institutions evolve and change relatively slowly – or rather they follow long term paths of development (North 2002). This may explain differences across countries.

In addition, the relationship between social capital and economic performance is one which is contested. Xue et al (2025) find that the existence of a positive relationship is more mixed and unproven. In part this reflects definitional issues (how to measure social capital) but also theoretical differences in the understanding economic performance (Mazzucato 2024). It may also be a problem which is simpler to identify than to fix.

The tendency of much research has been to explore how greater social capital may support increases in economic performance. An alternative and more socially purposeful argument is to consider how economies can support greater social capital and especially community connectedness.

This has been a long interest of research in economic geography and especially the study of de-industrialisation. For places impacted most by de-industrialisation a consequence has been the loss of local economies, the loss of local institutions, often organised around the workplace (such as trade unions but also workplace focused social organisations), and a resultant loss of community connectedness (Pike et al. 2024).



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# Digital Technologies and Community Engagement: Bridging Gaps through Inclusion and Literacy

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## What Do We Know So Far?

- Digital transformation is accelerating in the UK, supported by national public policy.
- Despite high internet access, digital inclusion gaps persist in skills and confidence of using digital technology.
- Community organisations are vital for fostering digital engagement but need support.
- Critical digital literacies are essential for ethical and informed civic participation.
- Digital tools can enhance social ties but risk superficial engagement.

## What Do We Want To Know?

- How can digital tools be used to effectively strengthen social capital and community connectedness?
- What does meaningful digital participation that fosters connectedness look like?
- How can critical digital literacies be effectively advocated for so that people are empowered to navigate digital environments responsibly and ethically?
- How AI can be utilised towards promoting transparency, accountability and public understanding of digital technologies?



Credit: Keira Burton, Pexels

## Existing Research

The UK is undergoing rapid digital transformation, guided by policies such as the Digital Development Strategy (DDS) 2024–2030 and the DSIT Digital Inclusion Action plan (2025). While internet access is widespread, digital inclusion remains a challenge, particularly in terms of skills, confidence, and literacy (Pangrazio and Sefton Green 2021). The concept of critical digital literacies has emerged as a key focus, emphasizing not just technical skills but also the understanding of digital rights, governance, and ethical use.

Digital inclusion is a wider social determinant of health – and partnership working for promoting digital health (Good Things Foundation 2023) shows that Local Authorities, primary care partners and VCSE organisations can benefit from trusted relationships that draw upon the use of and promotion of digital skills.

Digital platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Nextdoor are increasingly used to foster social ties and community

engagement (Proferes et al, 2025). Innovations in AI, AR/VR, and smart city technologies are reshaping how communities interact and participate. However, structural inequalities continue to hinder equitable access to digital tools and services (Holmes & Burgess, 2022).

Community organisations play a crucial role in bridging these gaps, acting as trusted local actors that can support digital initiatives. Yet, they often lack the resources to scale and sustain their efforts (Good Things Foundation 2023). Ethical concerns around AI and data governance further underscore the need for transparency and education.

Overall, digital technologies offer significant potential for enhancing participation and connectedness but must be implemented thoughtfully to avoid reinforcing existing disparities.



Credit: Edmond Dantès, Pexels



Credit: Askar Abayev, Pexels

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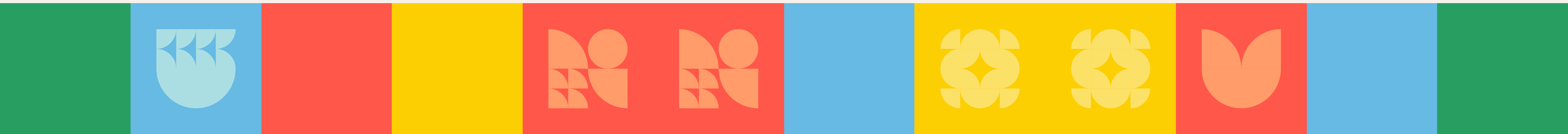


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# Community Connectedness Across the Life Course: Exploring the Role of Meaningful Relationships

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Emily Abbott and Charlotte Miller, Intergenerational England. With support from Campaign to End Loneliness.

## What Do We Know So Far?

- Communities play a vital role in shaping individuals' experiences of relationships, isolation, and loneliness.
- Engagement with different types of communities (home, workplace, school, etc.) varies across the life course and is influenced by life transitions. Feelings of loneliness in one setting can spill over into others.
- Local infrastructure significantly affects social interaction. Older adults are particularly impacted by mobility challenges and neighbourhood design.
- Economic disadvantage is a major driver of loneliness and social isolation. Left behind neighbourhoods often lack quality infrastructure and third spaces that support social interaction.
- Urban design influences opportunities for interaction and feelings of safety. Age-friendly environments (as defined by WHO 2025) are essential for fostering connectedness.
- Participation in community activities enhances wellbeing and fosters social bonds.
- Loneliness is often linked to negative self-perception and social anxiety.

## What Do We Want To Know?

- How can we strengthen the evidence base around the role of intentional intergenerational activity in fostering meaningful connections at the local neighbourhood level?
- What is the longitudinal evidence of the impact of intergenerational practice on enhancing meaningful relationships with self, place and others?
- How can communities develop relational infrastructure in order to benefit from investment in places and spaces to support social connection?
- How can a cross-sector approach to implementation of intergenerational approaches be taken to ensure the integration of key policy areas such as housing, health, care, education and work?

## Existing Research

Social connection is a fundamental pillar for public health, our economic stability, and societal resilience. As emphasised by a recent World Health Organisation (WHO) report and supporting research, the presence of meaningful relationships - defined by trust, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging - is a critical indicator of a community's strength.

However, a growing crisis of social disconnection is evident across the life course. While loneliness has long been identified as a key issue for younger adults and older people, there is now emerging evidence of a significant increase in disconnection among people in mid-life. The ability to form and maintain connections is affected by a complex interplay of individual psychology, environmental factors like safety and infrastructure, and major life transitions.

Research shows the failure to address social disconnection carries significant and measurable costs across multiple sectors. For example, a lack of meaningful social connection can be directly linked to:

- adverse health outcomes - increased physical and mental health problems, placing a heavy burden on health and social care systems
- economic damage - reduced productivity for businesses and negative impacts on the broader economy
- poor educational performance - detrimental effects on learning and achievement.

Fostering social connection, therefore, must be recognised as a vital priority. Investing in initiatives that build meaningful relationships across the life course is essential for creating healthier, more productive, resilient and inclusive communities where people can thrive.

Place-based interventions aimed at reducing loneliness and fostering social connectivity can lever-in local resources and cultural dynamics to promote meaningful social interaction. They include community engagement initiatives, targeted support networks, and community-led projects like gardening and neighbourhood improvement schemes.

A key area for further research is intergenerational interventions. Research (Whear et al, 2023) shows that such activities - ranging from low to high levels of contact - can reduce loneliness, improve mental health, and foster empathy across age groups. Intergroup contact theory underpins many intergenerational programmes, promoting equal status, cooperation, and institutional support to reduce prejudice and build trust.

One example of a UK initiative is Intergenerational Music-Making, which has shown strong outcomes in reducing loneliness and boosting confidence across generations. While there are examples of intergenerational housing in the UK, there are key barriers including cultural preferences for home ownership and limited experiences of communal living. (Wigfield et al., 2023).



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# Deepening Social Infrastructure for Connected Communities

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## What Do We Know So Far?

- Social infrastructure does not have a clearly agreed definition but tends to refer to community spaces which support social connection, and includes facilities like community buildings, libraries, parks and play areas, and faith spaces.
- The evidence base on social infrastructure is developing, and coalesces around five themes: defining, mapping, accessing, valuing and sustaining social infrastructure.
- Research priorities include more comprehensive mapping, ownership and control and understanding the local embeddedness of social infrastructure, as well as questions around communities of identity and social infrastructure, and what 'good social infrastructure' could look like, is needed and should be expected.

## What Do We Want To Know?

- What is the scale, extent, depth and quality of social infrastructure across the country, and how is provision changing over time?
- By examining different models of social infrastructure provision, to what extent and in what ways does ownership and control of social infrastructure matter in terms of resident participation, community power and how communities can be enabled to take action to address disadvantage and improve outcomes?
- What is the value of social infrastructure, in terms of its symbolic meaning for communities, how it may be embedded in making places, upholding pride in place and providing a cohesive and welcoming sense of community, and in terms of social and economic outcomes for communities?
- What is the role of social infrastructure for communities of identity, and how does virtual social infrastructure serve to engender new forms of sociality, community connection, inclusion and exclusion?
- What does good social infrastructure for communities look like, and should be expected, in terms of scale, scope, diverse forms and quality?

## Existing Research

Social infrastructure encompasses 'the public and quasi-public spaces and places that support social connection' (Latham and Layton, 2022: 661; see also Joshi and Aldrich, 2025). While the terminology may be relatively new, it describes something familiar and enduring. It includes things like community buildings and meeting spaces, libraries, youth centres, parks, play areas, faith spaces, sports facilities and social clubs.

Often taken for granted, social infrastructure has found new appreciation in recent years as part of the basic fabric of everyday life. Popularised in Eric Klinenberg's 'Palaces for the People' (2018), and in the UK by organisations like Local Trust and Power to Change, social infrastructure has attracted the attention of policymakers, practitioners, researchers - and even financial institutions as an investable proposition.

Social infrastructure offers something of a promise. Attending to social infrastructure may address concerns around quality of life, social isolation, well-being and community spirit. The idea has tended to escape party political divides. Social infrastructure featured both as part of the 2019-2024 Conservative government's 'Levelling Up' agenda, and in the subsequent Labour government's initiatives on Pride in Place and the Community Wealth Fund, as well as in its broader 10-year infrastructure strategy. It is also reflected in work through devolved administrations, for example the ongoing People and Place review driven by the Department of Communities in Northern Ireland.

Research on social infrastructure has gathered pace in recent years, but the evidence base in the UK

and internationally is still developing. Research and commentary has centred around five inter-related themes:

1. **Defining social infrastructure** – while there is yet no commonly accepted definition of social infrastructure, the literature tends to coalesce around the idea of places and spaces for meeting up and connection (Kelsey and Kenny, 2021).
2. **Mapping social infrastructure** – charting the (uneven) provision of social infrastructure and attempts to track trends in availability.
3. **Accessing social infrastructure** – asking who has access to social infrastructure, and gets to use it, and crucially, who doesn't.
4. **Valuing social infrastructure** – asking how we come to value social infrastructure, in terms either of what it means to residents, or in terms of its outcomes and impact - what difference does or can it make to communities and people's lives. Although beset by gaps in the data, research reports the particular challenges correlated with a lack of social infrastructure, particularly in disadvantaged areas (OCSI/Local Trust, 2019).
5. **Sustaining social infrastructure** – addressing the resourcing, support and future prospects for social infrastructure. It asks how secure or fragile social infrastructure is, and what financial and other resources are needed to support it and enable it to flourish.



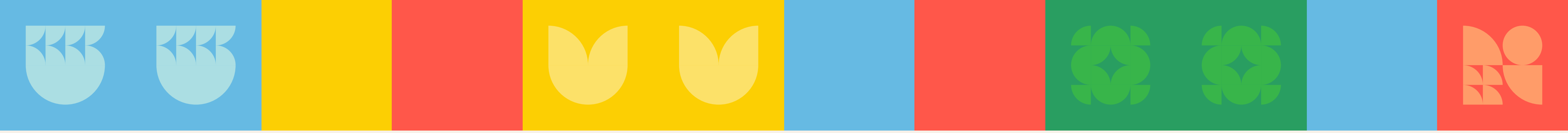
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# Spatial, Environmental, Cultural and Relational aspects of Community Connectedness

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## What Do We Know So Far?

- Cities are complex systems with relations and dependencies that remain largely invisible.
- Contemporary practice emphasizes spatial agency and “caring-with practitioners” who work across multiple roles, co-authoring space and determining what comes to matter.
- Manzini’s (2022) Liveable Proximity demonstrates that functional proximity should generate relational proximity, creating “relational goods” where value arises from relationships rather than transactions.
- Community-Led Housing participants experience significantly less loneliness through ‘a slow build-up of a history of kindness’.
- Relationships between public, private, and community actors are complex and dynamic and oscillate throughout project lifecycles (Gullino et al., 2019).
- Environmental wellbeing requires humans and non-humans thriving within equitable resource distribution and planetary boundaries, with tools that demonstrate commons value beyond capital-centric measures.

## What Do We Want To Know?

- What roles do cultural, physical and natural assets play in supporting community connectedness?
- How can progressive forms of community ownership and governance of physical and cultural assets enable connectedness and ensure long term equitable futures?
- How can we combine physical interventions in built and unbuilt spaces to foster community connectedness while addressing the challenges of the climate emergency (mitigation and adaptation)?
- How can we operationalise local environmental wellbeing where humans and non-humans thrive within an equitable balance of resources in their specific environments?

## Existing Research

Cities are complex systems made of multitudes of relations, dependencies and constraints which are often difficult to see. Calvino’s Invisible Cities (Dobson, 2022) offer a poetic illustration of this through a multitude of fictional cities. Latour elaborates further on invisibility by introducing the idea of ‘plasma’ as a way of describing the unknowable background in which all the partial views, circulations, and fragments of the city exist before they are composed into relationships (Latour, 2005).

Contemporary discourses around intervening in cities have acknowledged the need to work in ways that can support connectedness by moving beyond traditionally defined professional roles (Awan et al., 2011; Schneider & Till, 2009). Multiple roles become ‘co-emergent and mutually constitutive’ across groups, projects and organisation ‘drawing attention to and determining what comes to matter’ (McAndrew et al., 2025).

Relationships between public, private and community based or focused actors are complex and dynamic. For instance a study of partnerships in cultural heritage management and governance found that while public-private partnership, the most documented, are often driven by pragmatic, especially financial, aims. Public-civil and public-private-community partnerships share similar benefits related to participatory governance, inclusivity, and safeguarding heritage as a common good (Žuvela et al., 2023).

At its heart, community connectedness addresses fundamental human needs for belonging and mutual

support. Manzini’s (2022) concept of Liveable Proximity provides a useful framework here, emphasizing that functional proximity—having daily needs within walking distance—should correspond to relational proximity, creating opportunities for people to encounter, support, and care for each other, with physical nearness enabling collaboration and generating “relational goods” where value arises from relationships rather than transactions.

Research on Community-Led Housing demonstrates this powerfully—participants report significantly less loneliness than the general public. This connectedness emerges through ‘a slow build-up of a history of kindness’ achieved through thoughtful and intentional physical design that encourages interaction and organic social processes of mutual support (Hudson et al., 2021).

Recognizing that spatial, material, and temporal contexts fundamentally shape how people connect across difference, the framework of ‘contextualised convivialities’ can help to understand everyday social interactions in ethnically superdiverse neighbourhoods (Vodicka & Rishbeth, 2022).

Environmental concerns link human wellbeing to planetary health through integrated, localised approaches. The climate crisis demands rethinking of how cities are understood, produced and governed. For instance, Powis et al., (2023) argue that architecture is inherently ‘entangled in the causes, conditions and futures of climate breakdown’, requiring radical transformation beyond temporary patching up solutions.



Credit: Cristina Cerulli, Studio Polpo



Credit: Mark Parsons, Sheffield Community Land Trust



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