Held in Common: Place, Environment and the Foundations of Community Connectedness

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The Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness

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Community-led, spatial agency, commons, cultural heritage, environmental wellbeing, non-commercial sharing, regenerative.

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Abstract

This paper examines the growing body of research on how the physical, natural, and cultural dimensions of place shape community connectedness, and identifies a set of key themes and questions for further research.

The built and natural environment is not a passive backdrop to community life: it actively shapes who people encounter, where they gather, what they share, and what they are able to do together. Understanding this requires attending to what is often invisible – informal histories, latent spatial potentials, and the labours of care that sustain community life.

Evidence from community-led housing, non-commercial neighbourhood sharing, urban commons research, and studies of cultural heritage governance demonstrates that progressive forms of community ownership and stewardship of physical and natural assets can generate significant relational goods: trust, belonging, resilience, and mutual support.

Research priorities include: understanding the specific mechanisms through which physical and natural assets support connectedness; exploring how cultural heritage – including contested and intangible heritage – shapes community identity; understanding the relationship between environmental wellbeing and social justice; and developing better methods for capturing the relational and commons-based value of shared assets.

These questions connect closely with all six of the Centre's interdisciplinary research themes and are central to addressing challenges including poverty, social isolation, and the climate emergency.

Introduction

Community does not happen in the abstract. It is made and unmade in specific places – in streets and parks, in community centres and faith spaces, in markets and high streets, in gardens and waterways, in the ruins of industry and the traces of shared histories. The physical, natural, and cultural dimensions of place are not merely a backdrop to community life: they are active constituents of it, shaping who people encounter, how they gather, what they share, what they value, and what they are able to do together. And yet, in much research and policy on community connectedness, this spatial and material dimension remains underexplored, or is treated as a fixed context rather than a dynamic and contested resource.

This position paper examines the evidence base on the relationship between place, environment, cultural heritage, and community connectedness, and identifies key themes and questions for research within Interdisciplinary Research Theme 2 (IRT2) of the Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness. The theme's core research question asks: how is participation and connectedness influenced by the built and natural environment, what role do cultural, physical, and natural assets play in supporting pride, trust, and resilience, how can these be enhanced, and harnessed to combat challenges such as the climate emergency?

Answering this question requires drawing on multiple disciplines – architecture, urban planning, landscape design, environmental science, cultural heritage studies, social geography, sociology, and community development – and working closely with communities and partners who have direct experience of managing, stewarding, and transforming physical and natural assets.

What follows reviews the existing evidence across five interconnected themes: cities as complex

relational systems; spatial agency and the role of practitioners working with communities; the generation of relational goods through proximity and shared space; the governance and ownership of physical and cultural assets; and the relationship between environmental wellbeing and social justice. It then identifies key gaps in current knowledge and the questions that should drive a future research agenda.

What do we know so far?

Research on the relationship between the physical environment and community connectedness has grown significantly in recent years, though it remains fragmented across disciplines and often siloed within particular asset types or policy domains. Drawing together evidence from architecture, urban design, community development, heritage studies, and environmental research, five interconnected themes emerge.

Cities as complex, relational systems

Contemporary urban research has moved away from understanding cities as fixed physical structures towards understanding them as complex, dynamic systems of relationships. Much of what constitutes social life in cities – the dependencies, networks, and exchanges that sustain communities – remains largely invisible. Latour (2005) describes this background as 'plasma': an unknowable medium in which partial connections, material fragments, and social potentials exist before they are composed into visible relationships and what he calls 'matters of concern'. Calvino's Invisible Cities (1972) offers a literary counterpart: a collection of imaginary cities that are — as Calvino reveals — all versions of the same city, Venice, each an attempt to say something true about urban social life by approaching it obliquely, from angles that conventional description cannot reach. Like the plasma Latour describes, what matters most about a city may only become visible through such indirect approaches.

This framing has important methodological and practical implications. Understanding how the built and natural environment supports – or undermines – connectedness requires attending to what is not immediately visible: the informal histories embedded in places, the slow accumulation of trust between neighbours, the latent potential of underused buildings and land, and the often invisible labours of care that sustain community life over time. Standard measures of physical asset provision – numbers of community centres, square metres of green space, heritage designations – capture only part of this picture. They tell us about what exists but not about how it is used, by whom, or what it means.

This challenge is compounded by the fact that the spatial and relational dimensions of community are, as Vodicka and Rishbeth (2022) demonstrate, always contextualised. Their framework of 'contextualised convivialities' shows that spatial, material, and temporal contexts fundamentally shape how people connect across difference in superdiverse neighbourhoods. Conviviality is not an automatic outcome of proximity or diversity: it is produced through specific conditions of space and time, and requires active support. The character of encounters – who is present, what the space affords, what its history carries – shapes what kinds of connection become possible.

These temporal dimensions of community life deserve particular attention. Laurian and Inch (2018) argue that planning – and by extension the governance of built and natural assets – has paid insufficient attention to the multiple and conflicting temporalities through which communities relate to place. Clock time, bureaucratic time, ecological time, and the slower rhythms of neighbourhood life rarely coincide, and the disjunctions between them are not

merely technical inconveniences but political stakes: whose time frames are treated as legitimate, who is made to wait, and who is empowered to slow down or accelerate change shapes the distribution of relational goods and harms across communities. Their concept of 'nowlessness' – the disorientation that results from the erosion of a shared sense of temporal location – resonates directly with the experience of communities subject to rapid or externally imposed change. Focussing on caring practices within the city, Orlek et al. also bring forth new perspectives on temporalities within community life, suggesting how we might rethink embodied practices of care within urban projects over time by both 'starting a dance' and 'sticking with the dance' (2026). Attending to plural temporalities, and to the politics of whose time counts, is an important and underexplored dimension of research on place and connectedness.

Spatial agency and the practitioner who cares-with communities

A growing body of practice-research has explored how professionals working in and around the built environment can move beyond traditional expert roles to become agents of social change. Schneider and Till (2009) introduced the concept of 'spatial agency' to describe practices that go beyond the design of objects towards advocacy, facilitation, and the redistribution of spatial knowledge and decision-making power. Awan, Schneider, and Till (2011) documented a wide range of such practices, in which spatial practitioners, be architects, and communities, develop the capacity to act on and shape their own environments.

More recently, McAndrew et al. (2025) have theorised the figure of the 'caring-with practitioner' whose roles and responsibilities emerge in relation to those of community members, rather than being defined in advance. On this account, professional practice is not simply applied to communities from outside, but is co-emergent with community needs and capacities, 'drawing attention to and determining what comes to matter' in a given place. This reframing challenges the expert-client model that has long dominated built environment professions and points towards more collaborative, relational, and ethically engaged modes of working.

Davis (2022) extends this argument into an explicit philosophy of the caring city, arguing that ethical city-building requires ongoing attention to inequality, exclusion, and the conditions in which residents can flourish together. This connects to a broader turn in design research towards care as a spatial and political practice: one that is concerned not only with the quality of physical environments but with the social processes through which spaces are made, maintained, and made meaningful by the communities who inhabit them. Powis et al. (2023) bring this urgency to a head in the context of climate breakdown, arguing that architecture and the built environment are inherently entangled in the causes, conditions, and futures of the climate crisis – requiring radical transformation in how we think about, produce, and govern the built environment, rather than incremental adjustment.

The caring-with practitioner operates not only in relation to communities but also in dialogue with the wider systems – professional, institutional, and financial – that shape what is possible. The 'caring-with' disposition is not limited to architects and designers: it characterises a wider set of practitioners whose work supports communities to act collectively on their environments. Ferreri (2026) offers a compelling account of how professionals in the social and solidarity economy – lawyers, financial advisors, and cooperative organisers – enact a form of situated, ethically committed practice that works within and against the logics of property and market in order to open space for housing decommodification. Her account of the first cooperative-oriented 'life annuity' mechanism in Catalonia illustrates how careful, relational professional practice – conducted through informal conversations, face-to-face meetings, and long processes of trust-building – can create the conditions for communities to challenge dominant property regimes.

Proximity, encounter and the generation of relational goods

Ezio Manzini's (2022) concept of 'Liveable Proximity' provides a powerful framework for understanding how the spatial organisation of daily life shapes the conditions for community connectedness. Manzini argues that functional proximity – having essential needs within walking distance – should correspond to relational proximity: the regular, unforced encounters with neighbours and fellow community members that generate what he calls 'relational goods'. These are goods whose value arises precisely from the relationships through which they are produced and experienced, rather than from market transactions. They cannot be bought individually; they emerge from collective life, and they depend on the spatial conditions that make encounter and collaboration possible. These ideas find a practical policy expression in Moreno's (2021) concept of the 15-minute city, which argues that structuring urban neighbourhoods so that essential needs are accessible within a short walk or cycle ride can foster both sustainability and social connectedness.

The understanding of relational goods as emerging from collective life rather than market exchange connects to Gibson-Graham's (2006) concept of diverse economies, which draws attention to the vast range of non-capitalist economic practices — gifting, sharing, volunteering, mutual aid — that sustain community life but remain largely invisible within dominant economic frameworks. This argument finds support in a wide body of research on public space, high streets, parks, and local amenities as sites of everyday encounter and community formation. Dobson (2022) shows how community businesses can serve as strategic anchors for high streets, functioning simultaneously as physical, economic, and social hubs: providing spaces for people to meet, skills to be shared, and local identity to be expressed and maintained. The significance of apparently mundane features – a bench, a sheltered corner, a welcoming door – repeatedly emerges in this literature as a reminder that the design of public space is never neutral. As research on social infrastructure has consistently found, access to space matters: who can use it, when, in what ways, and whether it feels genuinely welcoming (Zia et al., 2023).

Important empirical grounding for this argument comes from a major comparative study of non-commercial sharing practices across seven European city neighbourhoods (Keller et al., 2026). Drawing on a survey of over 1,000 residents and 71 expert interviews in Austria, France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom – including Poplar in London – this research offers one of the most detailed accounts to date of how place-based sharing operates at the neighbourhood level. A striking finding is that non-commercial sharing differs fundamentally from its commercial counterpart in motivation, organisation, and social character. Rather than economic benefit or convenience, residents share primarily to maintain and build social relationships, to act on moral commitments such as sustainability, and to access activities and resources they could not otherwise reach. Personal contacts, not digital platforms, are the primary organising medium. This study demonstrates that non-commercial sharing constitutes a form of embedded social capital that both reflects and reinforces local community ties and a sense of belonging at the neighbourhood level.

Equally significant is the finding that sharing activity is strongly correlated with residents' use of neighbourhood infrastructure: the more actively people use public spaces, local associations, community gardens, and district meeting places, the more extensive their sharing networks. The neighbourhood building emerges as the primary spatial unit within which sharing contacts are made, but where there are more diverse opportunities for encounter beyond the home – in shops, markets, festivals, parks, and institutional spaces – sharing is both more frequent and more socially expansive, extending beyond friends and relatives to acquaintances and even strangers. This provides concrete empirical support for Manzini's theoretical argument: it is the diversity and density of spaces for encounter, not proximity alone, that generates relational goods.

One of the most powerful bodies of evidence on this theme comes from research on Community-Led Housing (CLH). Hudson et al. (2021) found that residents in community-led housing schemes reported significantly lower levels of loneliness than the general population. Crucially, they traced this connectedness not to any single design feature but to what participants described as 'a slow build-up of a history of kindness': a process in which intentional physical design – shared spaces, permeable boundaries, opportunities for casual encounter – combined with organic social processes of mutual support to generate a deeply felt sense of belonging over time. This finding challenges purely instrumentalist approaches to design that seek to engineer community outcomes through spatial intervention alone. It suggests instead that the relationship between physical environment and social connectedness is mediated by time, practice, and the gradual accumulation of shared experience.

Historical research corroborates this relational understanding of the architecture of belonging. Ferreri (2023) documents the 'transitional commoning' practised in 1970s London squats as they evolved into housing co-operatives – creating spaces not only for shared residence but for practising collective self-management, solidarity, and the radical reimagining of urban life. These histories, rarely captured in mainstream accounts of urban development, point to a long tradition of community-led spatial practice that prefigures contemporary interest in commons-based approaches to the built environment.

Governing shared assets: partnerships, ownership, and the cultural commons

Questions about who owns, controls, and has access to physical and cultural assets are central to understanding the relationship between place and community connectedness. Research in this area consistently demonstrates the complexity and dynamism of partnerships between public, private, and community actors, and the importance of governance arrangements in shaping whether assets serve as genuine community resources or become subject to marketisation and exclusion.

Gullino et al. (2019) studied the interplay between civic activism and public sector agencies around civic crowdfunding campaigns for urban projects, finding that the relationships between community groups and state actors oscillate throughout project lifecycles: between cooperation, community autonomy, state regulation with community implementation, and at times community opposition. This oscillation reflects genuine tensions of interest, authority, and legitimacy that are rarely resolved once and for all, and that require ongoing negotiation rather than fixed institutional arrangements.

The centrality of physical space to community practice is underscored by the cross-European sharing study by Keller et al. (2026), whose expert interviews consistently identified available, non-commercial space as a prerequisite for other forms of sharing to develop. Across all seven neighbourhood contexts studied – from peripheral social housing estates to socially mixed inner-city quarters – civil society initiatives, housing companies, and municipal actors alike identified space as one of the key resources they provide to enable community life. Importantly, however, the study reveals that the actors who initiate and organise space-based community activity differ significantly by neighbourhood type. In more disadvantaged and peripheral neighbourhoods, sharing tends to follow a top-down logic driven by municipal actors and housing companies, with relatively low levels of bottom-up civic engagement attributed primarily to residents' lack of time and resources. In more socially mixed inner-city neighbourhoods, sharing is more frequently initiated by civil society organisations, which form non-hierarchical alliances with public bodies and housing providers. This distinction – between redistributive sharing organised through institutions and reciprocal sharing generated through resident initiative – has direct implications for how community asset governance should be understood and designed across

different neighbourhood contexts.

A growing body of work has begun to examine how communities can move beyond opposition to marketisation – beyond, in Gutiérrez-Aguilar's (2014) terms, 'the capacity to veto' – towards more durable forms of collective ownership and governance. Ferreri (2026) offers a detailed account of how this can work in practice through her analysis of the first cooperative-oriented equity release mechanism in Catalonia. The case of Marianne, an elderly homeowner who sought to ensure her flat would never return to the private market, illustrates how the socialisation of an individual's property decision – through informal networks, face-to-face conversations, and the mobilisation of cooperative legal and financial expertise – can become the basis for a new territorial model of collective ownership. Ferreri argues that property and territory are mutually constitutive: that repurposing individual property towards collective ends requires simultaneously reimagining the relational geography of a neighbourhood, and that this reimagining is achieved not through grand institutional design but through the patient, distributed labour of care. The concept of 'territories of decommodification' – understood as the social and spatial infrastructure through which communities challenge market logics – offers a productive framework for understanding how community asset governance functions in practice.

In the specific context of cultural heritage, Zuvela et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of partnership models in heritage governance and management across a range of international contexts. They found that while public-private partnerships tend to be driven by pragmatic – especially financial – imperatives, public-civil and public-private-community partnerships share important benefits related to participatory governance, inclusivity, and the framing of heritage as a common good rather than a commodity. This distinction matters because cultural heritage is never simply a fixed legacy to be preserved by experts: it is a living, contested, and negotiated dimension of community identity, through which communities express who they are, what they value, and where they come from.

The political economy of community asset ownership has been significantly shaped by decades of public sector retrenchment and the rise of what Horton and Penny (2023) call 'anti-social infrastructure': processes of disinvestment, privatisation, and financialisation that systematically undermine the physical foundations of community life. In this context, progressive models of community ownership – community land trusts, cooperative housing, community asset transfers – have attracted growing attention both as objects of research and as potential levers of change. Power to Change's research programme has generated important evidence on the economic and social value of community businesses and the significant challenges they face in terms of access to capital, governance capacity, and long-term financial sustainability (Archer et al., 2019; Dobson, 2022). Research on community hubs in England has revealed ongoing struggles with financial security – operating on extremely tight margins, with low reserves – even as the organisations running them remain committed to their communities (Trup et al., 2019).

Across the UK, policy frameworks for community asset ownership vary considerably. Scotland has the most developed legislative framework, particularly through the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the Community Wealth Building Bill (2025). England has invested significantly in the Community Ownership Fund (£150m) and the Community Wealth Fund. Wales is currently examining its community asset framework through a Community Asset Commission. In Northern Ireland, a pilot Community Infrastructure Fund aims to support community buildings and hubs. Each of these policy contexts shapes the opportunities and constraints facing community organisations seeking to own and steward physical assets for long-term community benefit.

Environmental wellbeing, the climate emergency, and social justice

The relationship between physical environment and community connectedness cannot be understood separately from the climate emergency. Environmental conditions – the quality of air and water, access to green and blue infrastructure, exposure to flood risk and heat – shape the health, wellbeing, and resilience of communities in profound ways, and these impacts are distributed deeply unequally. Communities that already face socioeconomic disadvantage are disproportionately exposed to environmental harms: poor air quality, lack of green space, inadequate housing, and vulnerability to climate-related disasters. Addressing community connectedness without attending to these environmental inequalities risks reproducing the very conditions that undermine it.

Dobson and Redman (2025) propose the concept of 'environmental wellbeing' to describe a condition in which humans and non-humans are able to thrive within equitable resource distribution in their specific environments. This draws on environmental justice principles, requiring not only the mitigation of environmental harms but the positive pursuit of conditions that enable all communities to flourish. It resonates with Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics (2017), which reimagines prosperity as meeting human needs within planetary boundaries: ensuring no one falls short on life's essentials while respecting the ecological ceiling that protects Earth's life-supporting systems.

A major challenge in realising environmental wellbeing at the community level is the significant implementation gap between net zero ambitions and delivery on the ground. Zhu et al. (2025) demonstrate in their systematic evidence review on urban retrofit that mainstream planning and development continues to prioritise economic growth and housing production over place adaptation, and that the communities most in need of environmental improvement – those with ageing housing stock, high fuel poverty, and greatest exposure to climate risk – are also least well served by market-led approaches. Their analysis reveals that community-led retrofit initiatives are comparatively less likely to trigger displacement or exacerbate housing precarity, precisely because they prioritise tenure security, affordability, and wellbeing alongside energy efficiency. This evidence supports the case for community ownership and stewardship of physical and natural assets as a mechanism for ensuring that the transition to more sustainable environments is also a just one.

Urban commons initiatives – community gardens, cooperative energy schemes, shared food-growing spaces, tool libraries, repair cafés, and recycling networks – offer practical demonstrations of how environmental sustainability and community connectedness can be pursued together. They are also sites in which alternative forms of value are generated and sustained. Petrescu et al. (2021) use the Community Economy Return on Investment (CEROI) framework to articulate and measure the societal and ecological value generated by such commoning projects, providing a robust alternative accounting that challenges capital-centric notions of value. Their work suggests that the economic case for community-led environmental initiatives is consistently underestimated, because conventional measures fail to capture the relational, ecological, and civic dimensions of what these projects produce.

This points to a broader methodological challenge: the tools and frameworks currently available for assessing the value of physical and natural assets for community wellbeing are inadequate. Social Return on Investment, wellbeing-adjusted measures, and hedonic pricing approaches capture important dimensions of value but struggle to represent the commons-based, relational, and non-market dimensions that community organisations and researchers increasingly recognise as central. Developing better methods for capturing this value – and communicating it to policy makers, funders, and investors – is a priority for the field.

Connections to other interdisciplinary research themes

The physical, natural, and cultural dimensions of place connect IRT2 to all six of the Centre's interdisciplinary research themes. The built and natural environment provides the material substrate within which social infrastructure is developed (IRT1: Social Infrastructure), relationships are formed and sustained across the lifecourse (IRT3: The Lifecourse), and digital technologies mediate engagement with place and community (IRT4: Digital Technologies). The governance of land, buildings, and natural assets is shaped by systems, institutions, and markets (IRT5), while the meanings attached to place – and access to physical and cultural assets – are profoundly inflected by diversity and identity (IRT6: Diversity and Place).

Several specific intersections deserve particular attention. The relationship between physical assets and social infrastructure is intimate: libraries, community centres, parks, and markets are simultaneously physical assets and social resources, and their quality, ownership, and governance shapes their social value in ways that IRT2 and IRT1 will need to investigate jointly. Cultural heritage is rarely straightforwardly shared: whose histories are commemorated, which languages appear in public space, and how the built environment reflects or erases the contributions of diverse communities are live questions in superdiverse UK neighbourhoods that connect IRT2 directly to IRT6. And the capacity of communities to respond to climate change is not only a technical question but a social one: communities with higher levels of connectedness and trust are better placed to mobilise collectively in response to environmental crises, making the relationship between environmental conditions and community resilience a question that IRT2 will pursue in collaboration with all six themes.

What would we like to know?

Despite the substantial body of research reviewed above, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how the physical, natural, and cultural environment shapes community connectedness. Considering the emerging literature and debates in this area, six priority knowledge gaps present themselves as a focus for future research within the Centre.

The mechanisms through which physical assets support connectedness

We know that community ownership of physical assets matters, that green space is associated with wellbeing, and that good design can support social interaction. But we have limited evidence on the specific mechanisms through which physical and natural assets generate relational goods and build long-term community capacity. What is it about particular spaces – their design, their management, their histories, their governance – that enables them to become genuine sites of community? And how do these mechanisms play out differently in different urban, suburban, and rural contexts, and across different demographic communities? Research to date has tended to focus on individual asset types (housing, parks, community buildings) without examining how they interact as systems of place-making. A more integrated, place-based approach is needed.

Non-commercial sharing and neighbourhood type

Keller et al.'s (2026) European comparative study reveals a significant and underexplored

divide in how non-commercial sharing and community-building through space operate across different neighbourhood contexts. In more disadvantaged and peripheral areas – which include communities similar to several of the Centre's Catapult areas – sharing tends to be initiated and organised through institutional actors (municipalities, housing companies, and associations) rather than by residents themselves. This top-down logic reflects real inequalities in the time, resources, and 'idling capacity' available to residents in more deprived communities. In more socially mixed inner-city areas, civil society initiatives play a stronger role, and relationships between community groups and public bodies are more balanced and non-hierarchical. This distinction raises important questions that have direct relevance for the Centre: how can community assets and shared spaces be designed and governed in ways that support the emergence of genuine bottom-up sharing and reciprocity in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods, without reproducing the dependency and sense of institutional control that research in this area consistently identifies? And how do the five Catapult areas – spanning urban, post-industrial, and rural contexts across four UK nations – exemplify or challenge these patterns?

Cultural heritage, identity, and contested belonging

Evidence on cultural heritage and community connectedness is fragmented and often discipline-specific. Heritage studies has developed rich frameworks for understanding how heritage is produced, contested, and made meaningful, but this work has rarely been brought into dialogue with research on community connectedness, social capital, or the lived experience of belonging. We lack integrated frameworks for understanding how heritage – including intangible cultural heritage, oral traditions, and the difficult or contested histories of industrial decline, colonialism, and migration – contributes to or complicates community identity and cohesion, particularly in superdiverse and rapidly changing places. This is a gap that IRT2 can address, working across the five Catapult areas and in close collaboration with IRT6.

Environmental wellbeing and climate adaptation in disadvantaged communities

The relationship between physical environment and community resilience in the context of climate change is poorly evidenced, particularly for communities already facing socioeconomic disadvantage. We understand in principle that environmental degradation undermines community wellbeing, and that disadvantaged communities are disproportionately exposed to environmental harms. But we have limited longitudinal or place-based evidence on how communities are currently adapting to environmental change, what role physical assets and natural infrastructure play in supporting or undermining this capacity, and how communities themselves define and pursue environmental wellbeing. Dobson and Redman's (2025) concept of environmental wellbeing offers a promising starting point, but it requires empirical testing and development through research with communities. Zhu et al.'s (2025) systematic evidence on the implementation gap in urban retrofit further underscores the urgency: without better understanding of how communities in disadvantaged areas experience and lead climate adaptation – and what governance and ownership conditions support them to do so – policy risks reinforcing rather than reducing environmental inequality.

Measuring the relational and commons-based value of shared assets

Existing frameworks for assessing the value of physical and natural assets – social return on investment, wellbeing-adjusted approaches, hedonic pricing – capture important dimensions of value but are poorly equipped to represent the non-market, relational, and commons-based

value that community organisations and researchers increasingly recognise as central. The CEROI framework developed by Petrescu et al. (2021) offers a more holistic approach, but it has not yet been applied or tested at the scale needed to inform national policy and investment decisions. Developing robust methods for measuring and communicating the relational and commons-based value of shared assets is a methodological priority for the field, with direct implications for how public investment in physical and natural assets is justified and evaluated.

Conditions for sustainable community ownership and governance

The conditions under which progressive models of community ownership and governance of physical assets can be sustained over time, and scaled to other contexts, remain poorly understood. Research on Community-Led Housing and community asset transfer provides important starting points, but longitudinal, comparative evidence is needed. What governance arrangements, financing models, and forms of technical support enable community organisations to sustain physical assets over time without becoming either financially precarious or captured by market pressures? And how do the conditions for community asset ownership vary across the four UK nations, given their different legislative and policy frameworks? Ferreri's (2026) account of the 'life annuity' model in Catalonia is instructive here: it demonstrates both the potential of innovative legal and financial mechanisms for building community property in the long term, and the fragility and labour-intensity of the social infrastructure required to make them work.

Temporal justice and the politics of pace in community-led place-making

An important but largely overlooked dimension of the relationship between place and community connectedness concerns time: specifically, the politics of whose temporal rhythms are treated as legitimate in the planning and governance of shared assets. Laurian and Inch (2018) argue that planning routinely subordinates the multiple temporalities of community life – the slow accumulation of trust, the rhythms of care, the long timescales of ecological change – to the faster, more legible rhythms of bureaucratic process, political cycles, and financial return. The result is what they call a 'politics of time' in which communities are made to wait, are accelerated through processes not of their choosing, or find that the futures being planned for them bear little relation to their own temporal horizons.

For research on community connectedness, this points to an underexplored question: how do community organisations experience and navigate the temporal dimensions of asset ownership, governance, and place-making? How can co-design and community development processes be structured to honour the slower rhythms of relational trust-building while remaining responsive to the urgency of the climate and housing crises? And how do different communities – with different capacities, histories, and relationships to institutional time – experience and resist temporal impositions? These questions connect temporal justice to the broader agenda of spatial justice, and to the Centre's commitment to understanding the conditions under which communities can genuinely lead, rather than merely participate in, the shaping of their environments.

Conclusion

The relationship between place, environment, cultural heritage, and community connectedness

is both foundational and underexplored. It is foundational because communities are always communities of place as well as communities of interest or identity – they are made in and through specific physical environments, and the quality, ownership, and governance of those environments shapes what kinds of connection are possible. It is underexplored because the spatial and material dimensions of community life have too often been treated as fixed context rather than as dynamic, contested, and researchable resources.

The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that physical and natural assets generate relational goods – trust, belonging, mutual support, collective capacity – through mechanisms that are complex, place-specific, and temporally extended. They cannot be designed in through technical intervention alone, nor can they be measured through asset inventories or physical indicators alone. Understanding them requires attention to how spaces are used, by whom, over time, and to the often invisible processes of care, negotiation, and collective action through which communities make their environments meaningful. Comparative research across different neighbourhood types makes clear that the conditions under which relational goods are generated vary significantly: between more and less advantaged communities, between urban and rural contexts, and between places with long histories of civic activism and those where institutional actors carry the main burden of community support.

At the same time, the evidence is clear that access to physical, natural, and cultural assets is profoundly unequal, and that this inequality both reflects and reinforces wider socioeconomic disadvantage. Addressing community connectedness requires addressing this inequality – not only by providing more and better physical assets, but by supporting communities to own, govern, and sustain them in ways that serve long-term community benefit rather than short-term market value. This is, at its core, a question about power and democratic participation in the shaping of the built environment.

The climate emergency adds both urgency and complexity to these questions. Environmental degradation and climate vulnerability are not evenly distributed: they fall disproportionately on communities already facing disadvantage. And yet the same communities have often demonstrated remarkable capacity for collective environmental action, through urban commons initiatives, community energy projects, and place-based forms of environmental stewardship. Understanding and supporting this capacity – while ensuring that the burdens of climate adaptation are not placed on those least able to bear them – is one of the most pressing challenges facing research on community connectedness and the built environment.

The research agenda set out in this paper aims to take the investigation of place, environment, and community connectedness several steps further, in ways that can inform policy, practice, and communities themselves.

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