

## **Nearby nature in lockdown: Practices and affordances for leisure in urban green spaces.**

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### **Abstract**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, urban green spaces provided a route to connect with everyday 'nearby natures'. The paper explores the reconfiguration of leisure practices during restrictions, utilising theory on affordances and social practices to explore what people valued in urban green spaces and what can be learnt from a period when relationships with these spaces were in sharp focus. The study participants utilised Mobile Instant Messaging Diaries to present their lived experiences first-hand. Participants developed routines that involved engaging with urban green spaces as part of their daily structure, and this brought practices based around meaningful actions in these spaces to the fore. Urban green spaces became meaningful when they served a purpose, when they built knowledge and skill, and when they supported social needs. During lockdown, a patchwork of urban green spaces became useful. The findings call for more attention to be paid to small pockets of urban green space to afford nature connectivity and to the value of a social practice lens as a tool for providers to explore affordances and exclusions.

**Keywords: nearby nature, urban green space, affordances, social practices, nature connectivity**

## **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown has seen locally accessible urban green spaces emerge as a route to connect with everyday nearby natures. During May 2020, as the first lockdown was under way, 60% of adults in England said that they had spent time outside in green and natural spaces in the previous two weeks. Urban green space (including parks, fields and playgrounds) was the most visited type of space, and 74% of adults reported more time to notice and engage with everyday nature (Natural England, 2020). Ten months later in March 2021, monitoring shows the continued importance of these spaces, with 43% of adults reporting visits to green and natural spaces as even more important to their wellbeing since coronavirus (Natural England, 2021).

Multiple studies argue access to nature benefits mental and physical health (Britton et al., 2020; Hartig et al., 2014; Pretty et al., 2005). With national and international concerns about stress during the crisis (Office for National Statistics, 2020; World Health Organisation, 2020), and an emphasis on outdoor environments as safer than those indoors for minimising risk of transmission, green spaces have played an important role in supporting everyday leisure practices during the pandemic.

Crucially, during national lockdowns in the UK, access to formally managed and honeypot sites such as National Parks, formal gardens, and nature reserves in the wider countryside were limited by travel restrictions, social distancing measures and

advice to avoid public transport. Urban green spaces, near to people's homes, therefore, became important tools for facilitating nature connectivity (Lovell, et al., 2020; Venter et al., 2021).

The UK Government's 25 year Environment Plan (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2018) aims for more people, from all backgrounds, to engage with and spend time in green and blue spaces in their everyday lives, and prioritises urban green spaces as valuable opportunities to reconnect people with nature (also see Glover, 2019). Greener living environments are considered to be beneficial for health and wellbeing, but quality and access is variable (Lovell et al., 2020). Policy agendas seek to increase access for all people, under a green infrastructure framework, which views urban green spaces as part of an integrated network encompassing a broad a range of green spaces of different sizes, types and value. At the same time, the UK has committed to a legally binding target of net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and achievement of this goal assumes significant individual behaviour change towards decreasing travel and low carbon leisure (Committee on Climate Change, 2019).

Based on data collected during the first UK lockdown when leisure became localised, this paper utilises theory on affordances and social practices to draw out insight into what people valued in local urban green spaces, and the actions and engagement that emerged. It also highlights the challenges of negotiating shared urban green space, and the knowledge and skill development required by users to realise potential benefits. The paper therefore reflects on how reconfigurations of practice will continue to alter people's relationship with urban green spaces and the implications for post-pandemic policy and practice, as access to nature is positioned 'front and centre' (Lovell et al., 2020, p.ii) of plans for recovery.

## **Leisure and urban green space**

Urban green spaces are areas within the urban environment comprised largely of vegetation, ranging from private gardens and balconies, to allotments, infrastructural green such as roadside verges, to recreation grounds, fields, or woodlands (Swanwick et al., 2003). As leisure spaces, urban green spaces have been explored in relation to the wellness benefits they offer to those who live nearby. Urban green spaces are considered beneficial to health as spaces which are easily accessible and supportive of a range of physical leisure activities (Pietilä et al., 2015), for social wellbeing through leisure activities such as socialising with others, or feeling part of a community (Peschardt et al., 2012), but also through cultural ecosystem benefits such as feelings of relaxation or inspiration people assign to leisure experiences amongst nature (Edwards et al. 2022).

Work on pocket parks identifies the role accessible urban green spaces can play in filling the need for people's everyday contact with nature (Nordh & Ostby, 2013). Nature connectivity describes a perception of sameness between the self, others, and the natural world (Dutcher et al., 2007) and holds a positive relationship to psychological wellbeing, environmental concern and environmental behaviour (Mayer, 2004; Nisbet et al., 2009). Frequent use of urban green spaces such as access to gardens, proximity to tree cover, or visits to local parks can increase nature connectivity (Nisbet et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2015). It is claimed nearby nature can also buffer against feelings of low social connection (Cartwright et al., 2018) and play an important role in developing a sense of place (Zlender & Gemin, 2020)

These environments found close to home are often referred to as 'mundane' through their positioning as part of the ordinary experiences of everyday life. According to Hollenhorst et al. (2014) local places are often overlooked or are perceived to underperform in favour of more exotic experiences, which can lead to a cycle of limited attachment, disinvestment, and further desire for escapism. Locavism revisits these narratives by embracing slow leisure behaviours which can create community connections to local places 'by going “deeper” not further' (Houge Mackenzie & Goodnow, 2021, p. 66).

Dobson et al. (2021) refer to the 'magic of the mundane' (p. 5) when considering the effects routine or incidental encounters with urban nature can have in enhancing individuals' wellbeing. Even small pieces of urban green spaces have potential to act as restorative environments for local residents (Peschardt et al., 2012; Hadavi et al., 2015). Yet despite the benefits of encounters with nearby nature, research by Nisbet & Zelenski (2011) identifies behavioural avoidance of contact with urban nature and a general disconnect from the potential benefits of these environments. It is important therefore to examine the different values that are placed on urban green spaces and to explore the ways in which they are used as part of mundane engagements with them. This paper utilises theory on affordances and social practices as a framework for this.

### **Affordances, social practices and urban green space**

Affordance theory is commonly applied within environmental psychology as part of studies relating to place attachment or human place bonds. For Kyle et al. (2004), human place bonds comprise of: place identity; the connection between self and environment; place dependence; how well a setting may serve a purpose or desired

experience. The concept of place identity or sense of place has a strong emotional component whilst the concept of place dependence has a strong activity or use dimension (Kyle et al., 2004; Stokowski, 2002).

Belonging to a place provides security and stability, often referred to as rootedness (Tuan, 1980) or insideness (Relph, 1976) capturing the symbolic nexus of meanings, emotions, identities and memories which comprise human place bonds. Place ballet refers to the repeated mobilities which occur as part of everyday time space routines, and bring a profound sense of place (Seamon, 1980). Thus, mundane spaces and the routine interactions with them, can facilitate connections which are meaningful and significant. The very idea of neighbourhood is not inherent in any arrangement of streets, parks or houses, but is rather an ongoing practical and discursive social process (Gieryn, 2000). 'The space most intimately inhabited, traversed and practised is that familiar, often homely space that forms the all too unnoticed backdrop to the unreflexive habits' (Binnie et al., 2007, p. 166).

Places are therefore made as people ascribe qualities to the material and social phenomena gathered there (Gieryn, 2000). Gibson's (1979) theory of affordances focuses on the physical and social function of the environment. Affordance theory states that objects have detectable functions which are perceived in terms of what they afford as opposed to what qualities they have (Clark & Uzzell, 2002). This helps to understand the behaviors the environment supports and positions spaces as opportunities for 'meaningful action' (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2003, p.1484).

Social practices theory places attention on routine social practices that constitute an

individual's everyday existence, whereby the practice itself, as opposed to the individual, or the social structures which surround it, is the focus (Hargreaves, 2011). Reckwitz (2002) defines practices as 'a routinised type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge' (p. 249). Shove et al. (2012) refine this to three elements of social practices: materials, skills, and meaning. Materials refer to the physical properties or things used to perform a practice; skills refer to acquired knowledge and 'the regular skillful performance of human bodies' (Reckwitz, 2002 p. 251); whilst meanings refer to the interpretations and ways of wanting and feeling within a practice. Social practice theory situates human behavior with the wider social environment. It is also important for understanding everyday life as the setting for practices to be created, re-created or repeated and enabling individuals to understand the world around them and their place within it (Hargreaves, 2011; Reckwitz, 2002).

Practice theory and affordance theory can be drawn upon reciprocally to explore human-nature relations in the context of urban green space use. Urban park use is often explored in the context of a park's functions, qualities, and components, and the types of activities and experiences provided. Environmental affordances can be the perceptual foundation for preference judgments about the quality of urban green space (Hadavi et al., 2015). Research by Richardson et al. (2019) found people identify positive attributes of nearby nature in the context of activities they took part in. Nordh & Ostby (2013) identify specific activities and components which supported restorative experiences in urban pocket parks. Thus, previous work has explored the social, physical and emotional affordances of the environment (Hadavi et al., 2015).

Practice theory, however, can account for the meanings which extend beyond these affordances. Users may be motivated by recreational affordance, however, the meaning they derive may relate to the social, identity or spiritual dimensions that enhance their experience beyond the recreational component (Kyle et al., 2004). According to Leposa (2018), the combination of these approaches can show how the affordances of these elements can shape the meaning of practices and how these elements matter through the creation of 'action possibilities' (p. 20). Confinement to nearby urban green spaces through the lockdown restrictions on travel made different practices and different affordances possible. Taking account of these practices and the affordances these spaces provide can help to identify the types of urban green spaces that people want to use, and the meanings they convey (Hadavi et al., 2015).

## **Methodology**

The study was instigated at the start of the first UK lockdown in March 2020 and sought an approach that would capture participant reflections on their practices in urban green spaces as they were lived. Restrictions of the COVID 19 pandemic, however, saw access to people and their everyday experiences for research become increasingly complex and research transitioned to socially distant methods and the digital domain (Lobe, et al., 2020). Therefore, the study looked to the role of mobile instant messaging methods as part of a lay geographies approach (Crouch, 2000; Dashper & Brymer, 2019) to conducting qualitative research. Specifically, mobile instant messaging (MIM) diaries were utilised as a discursive practice to capture qualitative data remotely in the form of text, photographs, video or voice recordings, maps and screenshots shared through WhatsApp. Mobile methods are well established in tourism (Baerenholt et al., 2004; Buscher & Urry 2009) and transport research



(Sheller & Urry, 2006). However, the challenge of physically being with participants in contexts that have a degree of spontaneity and where researcher presence is intrusive has led to the development of alternative methods (Dickinson et al 2013). These include performative methods such as the diary-photograph, diary-interview method (Latham, 2003, Line, Jain and Lyons, 2010). The MIM diaries developed for this study built on these methods to focus in on everyday experiences. The approach not only reconfigures the dynamics of the researcher-subject relationship but also provides intimate access to power and knowledge dynamics in ordinary spaces. In this respect, the lack of direct access to participants was fortuitously overcome.

The methodological advantages of using MIM as digital tools in qualitative research have been rarely acknowledged, despite the familiarity, ease of use and multimedia data they can generate (Kaufmann, et al., 2021; Gibson, 2020). WhatsApp, the most popular mobile instant messenger app is accessed by two billion users on a monthly basis (Statista, 2021) and can support the submission of written entries, voice recordings, videos, photos and location tags. Visualisation is an essential component of mobile methodologies (Murray, 2012) and the visual element of the MIM diaries enabled access to tacit and experiential content researchers were unable to participate in themselves (Milne & Muir, 2020; Pink, 2007). Users could also post on-the-go, and immediacy of communication between the researcher and participant enabled near real time interaction, and the opportunity to seek clarification from the participant, enhancing the validity of the findings as part of an ongoing conversation.

Participants were sent instructions to submit WhatsApp entries reflecting upon their encounters with local spaces and communities over a 2-week period between 9<sup>th</sup> April

and 12th May 2020. Participants were given some suggestions for entries such as the documentation of daily exercise, or face to face encounters within the local community, and examples of topics for reflection such as what spaces are available to use in your local area? And how are you encountering people from your local community? Entries could be submitted as frequently/infrequently as participants wished, though it was suggested participants completed one entry per day, where possible. This approach sought to capture participants lived experiences first-hand, which in turn facilitated the examination of practices described by Kaufmann and Peil (2020) as 'deeply rooted in everyday life' (p. 242).

Twelve participants' completed diaries, of which ten participants used WhatsApp and two participants chose to use email. Research ethics approval was secured prior to data collection. All prospective participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the purpose of the project, what taking part would involve, and how data would be used, stored and shared. Participant agreement forms were completed prior to taking part.

Participants were recruited from the Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole (BCP) and Brighton to Shoreham urban conurbations, both on the south coast of England. Both conurbations provide a range of green spaces within and around the urban setting which include beaches and riverside settings, urban parks and forested areas, alongside smaller pockets of green spaces within neighbourhood settings. Whilst privileged in terms of access to some high quality green spaces within and beyond the urban setting, the conurbations have areas of dense housing with very limited or no garden space and significant areas considered socially disadvantaged according to the

indices of multiple deprivation. The choice of these locations was opportunistically linked to the researchers who lived in the conurbations and were therefore well placed to understand participant comments on locations.

Participants were recruited through existing online groups hosted on Facebook in the two conurbations. The researchers were members of these communities and sought permission from moderators to post messages seeking participants to take part.

Participants therefore self-selected based on their interest in the research topic. There was no incentive for participation and the MIM diary method involved a high degree of commitment from participants. These factors are likely to have affected who participated and the sample may represent individuals who were active in community social media groups at the time and were able to commit the time during lockdown to take on the collection of data on a voluntary basis.

The final sample consisted of 12 participants ranging in age from early twenties to late seventies. Five participants were retired, whilst others were all in work, education, or were full-time parents. Eight participants were women and four were men. Due to the reliance on untrained volunteers creating lay geographies, the usefulness of the data varied, but significant insights were gained from all participants. Entries were diverse, highly personal, and at times intimate. Some participants focused predominantly on activities and places visited, while others were more reflective. Feedback indicated that most participants valued the experience and some sought to continue their own diaries following participation.

Analysis of the data was performed through thematic analysis. Where WhatsApp was used, text entries and photographs were downloaded and collated for each participant, noting any video and audio recordings which were stored alongside. This generated a large volume of material from participants, with one participant's diary leading to over 90 pages of text and photo data. This organisational stage was followed by an initial coding exercise where both authors read and reread transcripts independently and applied process codes to capture action and descriptive codes to summarise the data (Saldana, 2011). Visual data was submitted by all participants and was usually directly captioned or referred to in the longer text entries. Writers on visual methodologies note that analysis of visual content alone is not enough without locating the social, cultural and personal contexts which give it meaning, and the subjective agendas through which they are produced (Pink, 2007, Jupp, 2006). Visual data was subject to coding, using questions proposed by Banks and Zeitlyn (2015) such as what is the image content? when, how and why is it made, and for whom? to guide interrogations of these elements. Visual data was therefore coded alongside the written entries to add validity by offering an additional layer of meaning (Glaw et al., 2017).

Coding lists were initially compiled independently and then shared and compared between authors through an iterative process of critical reflexivity and refinement (Rose & Johnson, 2020) across three separate meetings. This process drew attention to author positionalities in their interpretations and representation of the findings such as their social markers as white, middle-class women, and their own unique experiences and observations of lockdown and the Covid-19 pandemic, in and around their own geographically separate communities. This first meeting reviewed and

interrogated this coding process and resulted in the development of an agreed list of five broad themes. Further read throughs of the transcripts ensued and a second meeting closely scrutinised the legitimacy of connections between codes in the initial data analysis stage (Feredey & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Merging and reframing of two sets of themes produced three overarching themes. A final meeting sought to explore both the outlying and inconsistent data that ran counter to the three themes (Rose & Johnson, 2020). This also identified that the development of knowledge and skills to use urban green spaces was a subtheme and further repositioned the core themes. Figure 1 shows the relationship which emerged between the themes as a result of this process.

## **Findings**

Lockdown restrictions universally interrupted daily life routines. This led to the restructuring of routines that included participants engaging with and (re)discovering urban green spaces. Daily walking or another outdoor activity, such as cycling or jogging, was a commonly discussed, for example 'daily walk as part of a new routine' (P.4) or 'Daily walk... down river, across Adur Recreation ground to Shoreham Beach' (P.8). Many participants identified these as new behaviours, for example, Participant 2 notes '7:30 cycle to start the day / not usual activity'. Urban green spaces provided materials for these repeated and routinised bodily performances that constituted new practices (Reckwitz, 2002).

While the discovery of urban green spaces as part of new localised routines was not surprising, closer engagement with the data provided more insight into practices that has resonance beyond the distinct moment-in-time capture in participants' diaries.

Conceptually the data was organised into three themes: discourses of nature; navigating and negotiating urban green space; and sites for meaningful actions.

### *Discourses of nature*

The findings draw attention to the normative value afforded to nature. Participants accounts demonstrated more time and motivation for spending outdoors in their local area. They spoke of noticing more, of 'walking with no purpose' (P.7), time for taking stock and contemplating, and that they have 'deliberately been more observant' as lockdown had created 'time to dwell' (P.4). Without prompt by researchers or the diary instructions, most participants referred to nature and natural settings. Many of the images and videos participants shared were of material natures; images of flowers, plants and trees, sunrises, and skyscrapers (see figure two), videos and audio recordings of the sound of water in local waterways or coastal areas. Captions documented the scent of the flowers, or hearing the birds singing (P.9) and demonstrated an attention to the sensual affordances of nature.

[Figure 2 around here]

Participants presented this in relation to the contribution contact with nature made to their own physical, psychological and social wellbeing. Participant 2 described a routine woodland walk that provided scenic views and had become 'our favourite destination and also the dog's favourite', while Participant 6 described connecting with nature as a source of comfort in times of difficulty, using her doorstep as a setting for repose.

.. I burst into tears and just went outside and sat on the front doorstep.. I listened to the birds, sat in the sun looking into the blue sky and did some deep breathing.. Knowing that the evidence is that nature is soothing and de-stressing I sat for as long as I could manage. It helped. (P.6).

Participant 9 photographed her home working space, commenting that she had repositioned her desk so she could see the outdoors as she was working, whilst another photographed some roadside vegetation whilst taking the 'scenic route' home (P.10). This reflected wider practices of sharing attractive images on social media. It chimes with media reports about a resurgence of interest in nature during lockdown (BBC, 2020) and a discourse of nature pervaded. However, this discourse did not resonate with all, and several participants did not refer to nature at all, despite living in locations with ready access to urban green space and documenting its use. These participants did not perform a narrative of nature nor overtly instil naturalness with meaning. Other, potentially conflicting, values were present.

### *Navigating and Negotiating Urban Green Space*

In tourism settings, Germann Molz (2010) suggests tourists anticipate daily rhythms of a place which can lead to anxiety of visiting places at the right time. During lockdown these place ballets (Seamon 1980) of everyday spaces brought the complexities of intersecting with other people's life routines to the fore. Regular landscapes became a setting for a 'changing same' (Binnie et al., 2007) where sights were familiar but experienced with a differing perspective.

In many instances, the routines linked to urban green space use during lockdown reflected anticipated crowding associated with the natural rhythms of places. For example, Participant 1 notices the visiting pattern at a local river is different: 'Water sports users launch and land here so seeing it deserted on the water side was strange really.' Participants drew on tacit knowledge of when to visit and some participants developed their routines of using urban green spaces at quieter times. For example, Participant 1 walked every evening while Participant 2 walked, cycle or jogged in the early morning. Visiting once at a later time, Participant 2 wrote 'It was different going out later in the day. More people especially by the river.' This alertness to other users is noted by Participant 6 who describes how her family became 'acutely aware of occasional people we see. Do we know them, do they look friendly, are they going to cross over for us, or do we need to.' This is not a new problem, but one made more obvious during the pandemic.

The availability of space appeared to be felt strongly, and diary entries included assessments of the material provision in urban green spaces such as the width of footpaths, the distribution of passing places, or parking, to accommodate the flow of people.

Went for a long walk in Stamner [an urban fringe park in Brighton] to the downs. Extremely busy, no parking spaces in the virtually all car parks and so many families out. (P.5).

Participant 11 reported being particularly mindful of her dog's needs for space outdoors since it is afraid of other dogs: 'I walked A\*\*\*\* [the dog] out from home as



usual since lockdown. This is not great for him, he's used to Wareham Forest [10 miles east of BCP], often a quiet bridleway alongside the road where there are no other dogs'. For another participant, her disabled daughter's fear of dogs made accessing local spaces as a family feel 'a bit tricky, as there are a lot of dogs out ALL the time at the moment locally' (P.6). Some entries documented overt tensions in people's interactions with non-household members in outdoor spaces. Participant 8 shares several photographs commenting 'Social distance the correct way' or 'Too many sitting around in Buckingham Park'.

Feels like too many people are out and about and I think road traffic has increased. People are being a bit more complacent I think which is disappointing. (P.4)

The noting of who was sharing the space, the number of people around, social distancing, and who was doing what represent what Glover (2021), refers to as the 'more complicated moments of neighbouring' (p. 285), which emerged as a result of the pandemic. According to Binnie et al. (2007), there is a tendency for banal mobility to become sites of contestation and regulation, and conflict commonly occurs between and within recreational groups in shared spaces. These issues were more noticeable in lockdown where the behavior of others caused feelings of fear, and where people were restricted to their local area, and therefore experiencing locally specific issues. Nevertheless, there were many examples of positive comments about low key social interaction with strangers where the socio-material environment of these spaces facilitated this (Glover, 2021).

Plenty of people to talk with either with a dog or a child. Noticed everyone does keep their distance. Noticing that people in general have got time for the time of day with others that is a positivity of this crisis. (P.3).

Great Hengistbury walk with the socialisation of good mornings from everyone as we passed in single file. (P.4).

Whilst the data reports on a unique moment in time, it also reflects the general tensions of using urban green space and concerns about other users, their intentions, and whether these might result in conflict (Santos et al., 2016). Some participant accounts demonstrated the accumulation of new place knowledge and skills to avoid issues highlighting the complexity of navigating and negotiating urban green space more broadly, including the tensions between different users, navigating where to go, when to go, what to avoid, and crucially, what to do. Inevitably some users of urban green space self-exclude, especially those with particular needs or those who are more wary of negative encounters. We see this in the parent of a disabled child who assesses spaces and departs if a point of tension is apparent.

All was fine - but then a couple of dogs were headed our way and [daughter] freaked out., She scrambled on her bottom away and sort of slid and landed in the brown sludge.. She panicked and I got cross with the guy who said what everyone always says.. ‘ they are the friendliest dogs you could meet!’ I said it didn’t matter as she was still terrified of them! He realised from her reaction that it was a big problem for us.. [Daughter] was in tears now and we had to quickly put shoes etc on and head off home. The man called out that he was

sorry he had disturbed us., I smiled feeling quite defeated - saying don't worry - it didn't matter.. When it clearly did. So many times our nice trips end in tears.. Not just because of dogs..sadly (P.6)

Another participant who visited urban green spaces to walk with an anxious dog documented her avoidance of places that were too busy with people or other dogs.

We aimed for a local piece of grass only the size of a large garden but it overlooks Poole Harbour in the distance and is big enough for him to be on the long flexi lead if no other dogs around plus he then does his rolling around on his back which I always think relaxes him and oils his joints! There were 2 other dogs there off lead running around so we didn't go in (P.11)

Through practices such as daily exercise, participants increased understanding of the rhythms, and social realities of urban green spaces which acted to nurture their own sense of place (Wunderlich, 2008). The functions of spaces changed throughout the day, and time-space routines which afforded positive social interactions were learnt, enacted, and repeated, whilst those that were problematic were dismissed. The sharing of space became an important part of the knowledge-building surrounding use of urban green space as the Covid-19 pandemic put negotiating and co-existing with others in the community into the spotlight (Mayers, 2021). In this way, the practices of visiting urban green spaces became routinised ways of coming to understand the world (Reckwitz, 2002). These examples show the development of a place literacy as a practice-based knowledge about the rhythms and flows of urban green spaces, their users, and their capacity to afford human and non-human potentialities. This

demonstrates the potential for social practice theory to provide a new lens to examine urban green space use, through which providers can reflect on the intersection of the material provision, with user skills and meanings, and how this might provide opportunities for some, but prove exclusionary for others.

### *Sites for meaningful actions*

People's time sovereignty (Cass et al., 2004) was altered during lockdown and leisure activities in urban green space became important for the structuring and passing of time. Consistency and repetition in the use of urban green space during lockdown was positive for some: 'Taking pleasure in your surroundings has always been part of my life as a retired person who is out and about in the countryside all the time' (P.4), but less so for others, for example: 'We are fortunate that we have access to river, beach, countryside or town but even these become repetitive in the 1 hr time constraint' (P.8). Participants described participation in a range of activities whilst using urban green spaces to alleviate boredom associated with lockdown. To this end, urban green spaces became spaces for meaningful actions (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2003; 1484); whereby participants pursued activities that achieved a goal or resulted in a tangible output.

Participant 3 indicated her use of urban green space contributed to 'busyness': 'Kept myself busy today cutting the grass and making the back garden look good.' For others, urban green spaces offered the opportunity for the development of leisure for health, which provided a sense of purpose.

a short walk for health reasons yet again tonight. Motivation could be higher - but onward. (P.1)

Creative projects were a focus for some. Participant 8, a keen photographer, described how the restrictions on visiting other destinations forced him to 'look at things differently' in his local area. 'I have rediscovered micro and looking at smaller things, previously I took mainly landscape and seascape' (P.8). Another participant created themes for walks such as spot all the colours of the rainbow in seven days: 'yellow was my rainbow colour today and it is amazing how observant you get to spot the colour' (P.4). Figure 3 shows a photograph taken by a participant as part of a social media project where people painted rocks and left them for others to find. These individual projects provided a focus for accessing urban green spaces and connection to a wider community of users (also see figure 5).

[Figure 3 around here]

[Figure 4 around here]

Further to this, entries also described a renewed sense of interest in the local people and places around them as they began daily walks. For example, Participant 4 'took some photos with a view to finding out more about history in the area.' Two others reflected on their personal histories and connections to their local area.

We have revisited the roads we used to walk a lot down when I was doing local school runs with the buggy. The nursery both the kids went to \*\*\*

primary school and [son] went there for one year before moving full time to a special needs school. The house we nearly bought on the Green.. It has brought back a lot of memories of times we haven't thought about for a long time. Without this time to spend walking around our neighbourhood-we might not have had those conversations. (P.6)

After lunch did a nearly 5 mile walk with dogs. Interesting walked down the road where i lived when i was little. Noticed one house still had old windows. (P.3)

Accounts also showed how participants adapted to the spaces available and looked for different material attributes of urban green spaces to meet their needs, whilst access to their usual leisure spaces and routines were limited. Some talked of (re)discovering places through microadventures, using urban green spaces in a reconceptualisation of adventure from remote and exotic to local and attainable (Houge Mackenzie & Goodnow, 2021). For example, Participant 10 captioned a photo as 'trying out our new cycle path' or as Participant 2 comments:

Up early for a walk / thought we would try Canford Sang<sup>1</sup> never been there before but it is just about possible to do in the time constraints. An interesting place that I didn't know was there prior to this situation.

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<sup>1</sup> SANG stands for Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace created as part of new housing developments in the UK.

Participant 1 photographed a local street he captioned 'The Hill' (see figure 5) which he discovered during lockdown when his usual incline walk became too busy, demonstrating the development of acquired knowledge relevant to the affordance of a space. He described it as: 'New venue to walk instead of [access path] at beach. Found this one nearby which is steep enough to get me into the oxygen dept.'

[Figure 5 near here]

Participants' perspectives zoned in on the offering the local environment provided, reframing urban green spaces previously overlooked, for the material affordances they now required. For example, Participant 11 describes 'trying to visit new roads each day. But focusing on roads with grassy verges for the dog!' so he can roll (see figure 6). She describes 'finding lovely hidden tiny patches of green in alleyways we didn't know were there' (see figure 7). These findings demonstrate that practices were also multispecies (Dashper, 2019), with non-humans playing an important role in the leisure use of urban green spaces and the assessment of their affordances. The role of animals in animating walks or providing shared moments for social connection (also see Mayers, 2021) enhanced individuals' interactions with urban green space.

[Figure 6 near here]

[Figure 7 near here]

According to Kaplan and Kaplan (2003) people are attracted to environments that permit exploration, such as those which provide interesting, safe and diverse routes,

but also those that provide reasons for being outside. This led to a sense of rediscovery of urban green spaces which offer 'action possibilities' (Leposa, 2018 p.20). The restriction of movement and activity imposed by lockdown created disorder in participants' usual leisure time-space routines and mundane mobilities. These disruptions create both insecurity, but also productivity, in the constructing of life worlds differently (Binnie et al., 2007). An interest in the past was a focus for some (also see Gammon & Ramshaw, 2021), whilst for others, creative projects or health and wellbeing pursuits, provide a focus for using these spaces.

From this we can see that many participants felt the need to productively do things in urban green spaces. Participants adapted to the potentialities offered by urban green spaces, part of which was to create a sense of purpose. Urban green spaces became sites of action potential, and skills needed to be developed or re-discovered to enable their use (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2003 p.1484). Though capturing a moment in time, the data highlights that while urban green spaces have some intrinsic value, for many people, though not all, there is a skill to realising the full potential.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has drawn on theories of affordances and social practices to draw out insight into the use and value of urban green spaces during the first UK lockdown.. According to Binnie et al. (2007, 'the perforation of the ordinary by the extraordinary can bring forth transformative or even enchanting moments or situations' (pg. 168). In this case, the 'stay at home' restrictions created space for explorations of urban green spaces and the (re)formation of perspectives and practices attached to these.



Urban green space use in lockdown manifest itself in three ways. First, participants developed a place literacy to understand where they could go and when best to visit to meet their needs. Second, beyond gardens and other private spaces, urban green space was shared with others, and therefore users were required to successfully negotiate use with others whose practices may be different and conflicting. Third, not all, but many participants needed a reason to be in urban green spaces to avoid boredom, and therefore developed skills or interests during lockdown to make visits purposeful.

Our findings bring to the fore aspects of negotiating and navigating urban green spaces that resonate beyond the lockdown experience, and have implications for post-pandemic policy and practice. Findings highlight the importance of making spaces inviting, providing clarity the public can access through signage, and designing welcoming access points to build confidence in users. It also flags the significance of initiatives, such as health walks in the UK, that initiate people into urban green space use and build their skills in using these spaces. Here, social practice theory offers a tool for providers to analyse the use of urban green spaces through the material provision, knowledge of users' skills, and the diverse meanings attached to urban green spaces. This has potential to flag the structural constraints and cultural influences that may exclude some users or afford participation by others. The tensions in lockdown also draw attention to the need to design defensible spaces where there are territorial concerns about who has access, what activities are permitted and who has control (Stodolska et al., 2013). As a result of lockdown conditions, the sharing of space became an important determinant in the selection of space. The concentration of people in urban green spaces added to tensions already present between user groups

(See Santos et al., 2016). In high use areas open vistas, widened paths or alternative routes, so users can see and anticipate actions of others, and take avoidance action may help to meet the demands on use.

Previous work has identified that urban green spaces will not be used if they do not meet the needs and preferences of local people (Hadavi, 2015). This data has shown how 'being' and 'doing' is important in nature-place connectivity. 'Action possibilities' (Leposa, 2018, p.20) help us to think that these spaces become meaningful when they serve a purpose, when they help us to acquire knowledge and skills, and when they support social needs, particularly in challenging times. Nature-place connectivity should be viewed in relation to action potential. Urban green spaces can be planned and managed to actively encourage activities which provide a sense of purpose for users. Examples include providing grassy sites by suitable rivers to encourage swimming or strategically sited cafes that provide focal points for visits. Our participants engaged in social media projects (for example, leaving painted rocks and sharing to a Facebook group) which might be harnessed by managing organisations, such as local authorities, to encourage continued engagement.

Aligning with Kaplan and Kaplan (2003), this research shows that even small pockets of urban green space can afford opportunities for restoration. Even simple spaces, such as back alleys or small pieces of grass had qualities which supported the needs of human and non-human users, yet these were often for short periods, as places to use, for a purpose, and move on from. Participants showed that often very mundane urban green spaces can offer opportunities for (re)discovery, exploration and the reframing of these spaces according to their action potential. A diversity of green spaces became

important as people sought to meet different needs.

To conclude, the findings present a patchwork of urban green spaces becoming useful to those who lived near them, as places to pay attention to, as opposed to passing by. There is scope to develop these everyday practices of engagement as sustainable alternatives to places of national significance, or congested sites in the wider countryside, in providing the benefits of nature connectivity. The potential for significant and long-term material change in working practices through home working may create a further reconfiguration of practices towards short engagements with nearby urban green spaces as part of the breaks in the working day. As such, post pandemic investment should focus on the suburban social infrastructure which enable these affordances (Glover, 2021). Paying attention to the small pockets of urban nature and making sure these permeate the urban fabric rather than being tucked away in more formal spaces (also see Nisbet & Zelenski, 2011) would provide more diversity and access to the types of nature engagements which may be more widely sought in future. If leisure use of these smaller spaces continues, then these spaces will develop new meaning and in turn become better protected.

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