

Nourishing neighbourhoods

An approach to designing
healthy living together



Hawkins\Brown

With

MaxFordham

and the **BBP Research Group** from the **University of Cambridge**

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How should we design neighbourhoods that foster health, wellbeing, and community cohesion?

Executive Summary

'New towns should be designed to support healthy lives and the wellbeing of all residents, in addition to providing the core health infrastructure and recreational facilities outlined in the social infrastructure principle.'

'Neighbourhood design plays a critical role in shaping the daily lives of residents and must therefore be approached with intention and care.'

(New Towns Taskforce: Report to Government, 2025)

Over the past two decades, our understanding of health and wellbeing has deepened, driven by scientific breakthroughs and a growing awareness of how our environments shape our bodies and minds. The global pandemic further underscored the urgency of mental health, social cohesion, and the role that neighbourhoods and cities play in supporting healthier lives.

Despite widespread efforts to define what makes a "healthy neighbourhood," many frameworks offer clarity in terms of the components that make healthy cities (e.g. greenery, water, conviviality), leaving it to designers to define details.

Designers use intuition to make decisions and foster healthy environments. However, designs and spaces function more effectively when their goals, choices, and impacts are clearly defined.

This research bridges that gap. It translates scientific insights into practical design strategies, breaking down complex ideas into clear, implementable steps. It is not a universal formula, nor the only path forward—but it is one way. A way that has helped shape the emerging design of North West Cambridge.

Introduction

Context

The development of a masterplan for the Future Phases of Eddington, North West Cambridge 2024 presents a unique opportunity to explore innovative approaches to design and more closely examine their impact on health and wellbeing.

The University of Cambridge has demonstrated great sustainability ambition with an exemplar 2013 masterplan. The challenge of the new masterplan is to sustain that ambition while incorporating advances in scientific and design thinking over the past decade, such as insights gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic and advanced scholarship on the effects of neighbourhoods and cities on health and wellbeing. This research aims to inform the emerging masterplan by narrowing the gap between the emerging science-based design tools and the intuition-driven design process.

This is particularly relevant in Eddington. Phase 1 has been completed and has largely been a great success. However, it has also highlighted the challenges of encouraging residents, some permanent, some temporary, to engage with the public realm and participate in community life.



Drivers

The increasing proliferation of digital technology has led to a decrease in the time we spend in nature or with other human beings. Both of these activities have a well-documented impact on health and wellbeing.

‘Many studies suggest that having strong social networks (friends who support or help you) or taking part in social activities is associated with a reduced risk of developing cognitive impairment and dementia.’ (Godman, 2023)

In recent years, the UK has seen a reduction in the availability and quality of public space as planners have moved to car-centric urban models and maintenance costs have caused funding priorities to shift. Meanwhile, scholarship suggests that ease of access is key to the use of green space.

‘Research indicates that having natural environments within a 300-meter walking distance significantly increases usage frequency, making distributed green space preferable to a single centralized park (Coombes et al., 2010; Nielsen & Hansen, 2007).’ (Appendix 2, p. 88).

Motivated partly by increasing scholarship on the positive impact of nature on health and wellbeing, current policy acknowledges the need for public realm and stipulates a minimum amount per person that has to accompany proposals for new homes. However, these minimum requirements do not provide designers with sufficient guidance on best practice.

The emerging masterplan, together with this research, investigate what aspects of neighbourhoods and cities draw people out of their homes and into nature, to have a positive effect on our health and wellbeing.

‘Hundreds of studies have shown that settings with a higher proportion of these key restorative ingredients (i.e. fascination, being away, extend and compatibility) will contribute to cognitive and affective restoration. The evidence is particularly strong for exposure to natural environments [...]’ (Roe and McCay, 2021)

The loneliness epidemic: We're more connected than ever - but are we feeling more alone?

Social pain is as real a sensation for us as physical pain, and research has shown loneliness impacts on health in a greater way than smoking or obesity

Rebecca Harris • Monday 30 March 2015 18:03 BST • Comments



Loneliness is now a 'universal health problem' – so why so much stigma?

Cally mother's story features in 'Silent Crisis' documentary

Friday, 20th December 2024 – By Daisy Clague



29 February 2024

Youth mental health in decline: generations differ on causes of apparent crisis, survey finds

How Social Media Affects Mental Health (And How To Cut Back)

Published: Jun 18, 2024, 10:03am

Written By Sarah Hays Coomer

Jessica Lester
FACT Checked | Lead Editor, Future Health

Time spent in nature can boost physical and mental well-being

By Staff Writer • January 2, 2024

► J Educ Health Promot. 2023 Nov 27;12:413. doi: [10.4103/jehp.jehp.447.23](https://doi.org/10.4103/jehp.jehp.447.23)

The hazards of excessive screen time: Impacts on physical health, mental health, and overall well-being

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Abstract

Excessive screen time is a growing concern in modern society, with the proliferation of digital devices contributing to increased sedentary behavior and potential hazards to physical health, mental health, and overall well-being. This article explores the potential health and mood deterioration caused by excess screen time. In particular, the article examines how excessive screen time can affect physical health, mental health, and overall well-being. The physical hazards of excess screen time include eye strain, neck and shoulder pain, and back pain. Mental health hazards include increased levels of depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders. Overall well-being can also be impacted by excessive screen time, particularly when it comes to social relationships and cognitive development. The article concludes by recommending the limitation of screen time, particularly for young people, and the incorporation of physical activity and face-to-face interaction into daily routines.

Screen Time and the Brain

Digital devices can interfere with everything from sleep to creativity

By DEBRA BRADLEY RUDER | June 19, 2019 | Research

Health professionals view social contact as basic human need. Now researchers have tracked neurological basis for it.

Clea Simon | Harvard Correspondent

February 26, 2025 • 5 min read

Relevance

In the last 15 or 20 years, there have been efforts to guide design towards better health and wellbeing outcomes. This has partly been driven by academic advances, particularly in the field of neuroscience, and in understanding how our physiology and psychology react to different stimuli. These efforts provide better-than-ever understanding of the effects of neighbourhoods and cities on our health and wellbeing.

Some studies identify essential elements that must be incorporated into designs for health and well-being, such as greenery, water, or playable areas. (Roe and McCay, 2021)

These studies successfully highlight the links between the greenery, water, sensorial, inclusive and playable aspects of our neighbourhoods, and the quality of the lives we live in them.

However these studies are addressed to city planners, politicians, designers, and even residents. They cover health and wellbeing from a wider perspective rather than drilling down to touch on the common language and tools of design - density, layout, proportion, location and distribution.

Studies often include case studies that may help visualise design solutions. However, as every designer will know, few of these studies dissect the applicability of exemplary methodologies in different contexts.

Other studies define appraisal tools to assess the success in the use of public realm - for example Health Impact Assessments. These are mostly based on post-occupancy

evaluation and/or end-user interviews. Although very useful in understanding the success of a built space, they are not always easily translatable into an emerging design given the particularities of each context.

This research, together with the emerging masterplan, seeks to narrow the gap between design, and our increasing understanding of the connection between neighbourhoods and cities and wellbeing.

Advances in science
(observation)

Frameworks
(definition)

End user interviews
(appraisal)

Closing the gap
(design)

Methodology and background

The process of creating and using cities and neighbourhoods can be described in numerous ways. However, when viewed through a design lens, it arguably involves four key stages:

- understanding of the links between the physical environment and our lives (observation),
- determining the right components and their key characteristics (definition)
- their organisation in a particular arrangement (design)
- evaluation of their success (appraisal).

This research follows the steps between observation and design (described in the previous page) aiming to bridge the gap between the two.

It begins with a literature review to establish a broad understanding of the available tools. From this review, a set of key design themes is distilled, not as a fixed or exhaustive list, but as an initial framework linking our understanding of how neighbourhoods and cities function to design strategies that apply this knowledge. To support this connection, a series of guiding questions was developed to unpack the themes into actionable design moves.

These themes were then examined through selected case studies, highlighting their application across diverse urban contexts.

In parallel, resident interviews were conducted in Eddington to deepen insight into locally relevant concerns and priorities, enriching the thematic analysis with lived experience.

Literature review

The University of Cambridge Building and Behaviour Performance Group (BBP) conducted an analysis of existing scholarship on the relationships between design, health and well-being. The objective was to identify a series of key themes which inform health-oriented design.

‘Health is a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing [...]’ (World Health Organization, 1946)

‘Wellbeing is a multidimensional concept that encompasses physical, mental, and social aspects of human experience. Crucially, it requires more than the simple absence of discomfort or illness.

‘In the context of urban design, fostering well-being means creating environments that support and enhance quality of life, enabling individuals and communities to thrive. Creating ‘enriched’ environments involves actively promoting opportunities for physical health, mental thriving, and social flourishing.’ (Appendix 2, p. 14)

Case studies

The case studies were chosen and analysed by Hawkins\Brown to show how the themes identified in the literature review and resident interviews perform in practice. The analysis examines the ability of landscape and public realm to function as “Third Place” - a role typically filled by cafés or bars in urban contexts, but that requires a different way of thinking in peri-urban settings.

‘Houses alone do not a community make, and the typical subdivision proved hostile to the emergence of any structure or space utilization beyond the uniform houses and streets that characterized it.’ (Oldenburg, 2023)

Traditional third spaces such as cafés, pubs, libraries, and hair salons are decreasingly part of urban design project briefs, particularly in less densely populated peri-urban areas.

Access to landscape, however, is more commonly and precisely stipulated by local policy (see, for example, Cambridge City Council’s Open Space and Recreation Strategy, 2011), and therefore an urban design project requirement. This means it is well-positioned to function as a Third Place.

Resident interviews

During a community engagement event run by the University of Cambridge Estates Division, Hawkins\Brown and Max Fordham conducted a series of resident interviews on preferences and needs regarding the use of public realm. Interviews also explored interest in participating in community events, particularly related to managing the use of public realm.

Interviews aimed to understand the ability and components of place to foster self-determination by conveying a sense of ownership in its use, design, or management.

‘Self-determination theory (SDT) is a broad framework for understanding factors that facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological wellness [...]’

‘Autonomy concerns a sense of initiative and ownership in one’s actions. It is supported by experiences of interest and value and undermined by experiences of being externally controlled...’ (Ryan and Deci, 2020)

Literature review

Design for flourishing

See Appendix 2: Design for Flourishing

The Behaviour and Building Performance (BBP) research group at the University of Cambridge's Department of Architecture was commissioned to compile a literature review examining the 'interconnected physical, social, and cognitive aspects of wellbeing in urban environments.' (Appendix 2, p.18) Drawing on decades of innovative research from the BBP, the Martin Centre, and the wider research community beyond, the insights collated over the following pages represent expertise at the intersection between architecture, the environmental and social sciences, human health, and neuroscience.

This literature review has been the focus of workshops including the BBP group, Max Fordham and Hawkins\Brown. Throughout the workshops, a series of key themes emerged as most relevant to the masterplan design process. The next two pages show a summary of the emergent key themes and relevant quotes of the BBP report linking them to the broader literature review.

These themes are not a checklist for analysing a space, nor should they be considered exhaustive. Instead, they form a flexible approach to inform design thinking. They should be tested and adapted to suit different contexts, with the aim of creating places that nurture individual wellbeing and foster community cohesion.

Introducing the research group

BBP Group

This literature review has been compiled by the Behaviour and Building Performance (BBP) research group at the University of Cambridge's Department of Architecture.

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Focus

The BBP group is an interdisciplinary initiative focused on the complex interrelationships between people and the built environment.

Our expertise spans across various disciplines, including:

- Health and wellbeing in built environments
- Sustainability and energy performance
- Neuroarchitecture and cognitive science
- Urban planning and design
- Environmental psychology

The BBP group's research is globally relevant, with research projects across Europe, Africa, and Asia, while maintaining a strong focus on addressing challenges in the UK context. Our work aligns with several UN Sustainable Development Goals, including health and wellbeing (SDG3), sustainable cities (SDG11), and climate action (SDG13).

By leveraging our diverse expertise and collaborative approach, we aim to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how the built environment can be designed to support human flourishing and sustainable development.

Approach

We believe that the human experience is influenced by the built environment (and vice versa) and that the performance and sustainability of the built environment is dependent on this interaction. Although the context for our research is global –with projects in Europe, Africa, Asia and beyond– it has a direct relevance to the UK. In England alone, more than 10 million people currently live in 'non-decent' homes that present a serious health, safety and environmental risk. From a neurological cognition perspective, our focus on 'neuroarchitecture' reveals how the built environment and cities impinge on our mental well-being. The solutions to such challenges are interdisciplinary and require the consideration of economic, engineering, environmental, and social factors in the design and retrofit of our built environment.

Our projects address the key sustainable development challenges of health and well-being (SDG3), gender equality (SDG5), clean and affordable energy (SDG7), sustainable cities (SDG11), responsible consumption and production (SDG12) and climate action (SDG13).

For example, MindScape is a multidisciplinary network based at Cambridge that is setting the research agenda at the intersection of well-being, education and architecture. For more information visit: <https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/research/networks/mindscape/>

Executive Summary

1.3. Method and approach

Our literature review adopts an integrated framework that examines the interconnected physical, social, and cognitive aspects of well-being in urban environments. This holistic approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to healthy spaces. The review will be structured around these three key dimensions:

- Physical** Exploring the benefits of active use of space and examining how the urban environment impacts physical health and activity.
- Social** Analysing the role of spatial configuration and other architectural mechanisms in fostering social interactions and community cohesion.
- Cognitive** Investigating the interplay between environmental design and cognitive function.

By structuring our literature review according to the approach outlined here, we aim to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based foundation for the Eddington Phase 2 Masterplan. This methodology will ensure that the resulting design strategies are grounded in robust research while remaining flexible and responsive to the specific needs of the Eddington community.

Evidence-Based Evaluation Criteria

To ensure rigour and relevance, we will evaluate the literature using the following criteria:

1. Relevance to urban design and planning practices
2. Methodological robustness of studies
3. Applicability to the Eddington context
4. Alignment with established well-being frameworks (e.g., PERMA, SDT, WELL Building Standard)
5. Potential for practical implementation in the masterplan

Each section of the review will synthesize findings according to these criteria, highlighting key insights and their implications.

Interdisciplinary Synthesis

Given the complex nature of well-being in urban environments, our review will draw from diverse fields including:

- Urban planning and design
- Environmental psychology
- Public health
- Sociology
- Cognitive science

By synthesising insights across these disciplines, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how various elements of the built environment interact to support overall well-being.

From Research to Practice

Throughout the review, we will emphasize the translation of research findings into actionable design strategies. Aside from an overview of the literature, each section will include:

- A. Summary of key research findings
- B. Case studies that exemplify best practice in the topic area
- C. Identification of areas requiring further investigation or pilot studies

Key themes

Key themes distilled through the literature review have been further refined through their translation into design strategies, as demonstrated by the analysis of case studies.

Wellbeing cannot be neatly compartmentalised, and as such, there is an inevitable overlap between some of these themes. This is clearly reflected in both the literature and its source material. Furthermore, some design interventions engage with multiple themes simultaneously.

Nevertheless, the themes have been categorised for practical and communication purposes—in other words, to help organise and convey the information effectively.



Key themes expanded

Page references relate to Appendix 2

Complex & stimulating

Complex, stimulating environments have been found to benefit brain health in a variety of ways.

'[...] complexity challenges the brain to process new spatial information and adapt to varying conditions, which is believed to stimulate neural plasticity.'

(p. 98)

Calming & safe

Confined, cramped spaces have been connected to increased stress responses. In comparison, wide, open spaces have a calming effect and increase perceptions of safety.

'Studies have found that narrow spaces induce greater physiological stress responses, as shown by increased pupil diameter and beta wave activity, compared to the responses observed in wider spaces.'

(p. 73)

Integrating nature

Time in nature provides a multitude of benefits, including improved air quality, encouraging physical activity, and, as indicated in recent studies, mental restoration.

'Studies [...] have documented decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex when subjects view natural scenes, indicating reduced cognitive load and mental fatigue.'

'[...] This neural response pattern suggests that nature provides a unique form of mental restoration unavailable in purely built environments.'

(p. 82)

Active

The impact of even light physical exercise on health has been well documented. This behaviour can be encouraged by introducing dynamic landscapes.

'Walking on stepping stones imitation versus a plain surface increased oxygen consumption by 24% and heart rate by 11.25% when compared to a conventional treadmill at the same speed.'

(p. 37)

Comfortable

In order to provide comfort throughout the seasons and for a variety of users, outdoor environments can be made more comfortable through varied approaches to cover and shelter.

'Thermal comfort is increased when there are more choices with respect to being in cool, shady, breezy spaces, or conversely warm, sunlit, sheltered environments.'

(p. 23)

Places to meet

Outdoor space can provide valuable and much-needed social infrastructure by creating space for people to meet for gardening or other activities.

'[...] community gardens serve as important meeting places, bring diverse groups together, and contribute to the development of social cohesion and connectivity within the community.'

(p. 50)

Space for the unknown

Spontaneity, adaptability, and customisation are all key to long-term flexibility and fostering a sense of community ownership.

'[...] expansion of urban design thinking beyond specific programs to encompass the possibilities of unpredictable forms of inter-cultural encounter and more creative and open forms of action in public space.'

(p. 48)

Further quotes

Page references relate to Appendix 2

Complex & stimulating

‘Spatial complexity refers to the degree of diversity and novelty within an environment’s physical layout. In simple terms, it is the richness of an environment in terms of its spatial features, such as the diversity of architectural elements, the arrangement in open areas, and the changing configurations within a given space. A highly complex spatial environment might include diverse pathways, unexpected turns, and dynamic elements that continuously change over time.

‘[...] neuroimaging studies have shown that diversity in our daily lifestyles can positively affect hippocampal volume, which is a key indicator of cognitive health. Urban-Wojcik et al. (2021) found that greater diversity in daily activities, which often reflects exposure to varied spatial environments, is associated with larger hippocampal volumes in humans. Also, diversity, which is the essence of spatial complexity, was found to be associated with improved cognitive function (Lee et al., 2021).’

(p. 98)

Calming & safe

‘Chronic stress can alter neurotransmitter systems, including serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, leading to mood dysregulation and the development of depressive symptoms (Tafet & Nemeroff, 2016). Additionally, stress can reduce the brain’s ability to generate new neurons in the hippocampus, contributing to persistent depressive states (Levone et al., 2014).

‘Cardiovascular issues are also closely linked to allostatic overload. Elevated stress hormones like cortisol can lead to hypertension, atherosclerosis, and increased risk of heart attacks and strokes (Chu et al., 2024).’

(p. 72)

‘Thigmotaxis, or the ‘wall-hugging’ trait, describes our instinctive preference for edges, and the tendency for people to avoid the centre of an open space, instead seeking safety along the edges (Sussman & Hollander, 2021).

‘Thigmotaxis may be associated with Appleton’s (1975) theory of prospect and refuge; that is, the tendency to prefer to be able to have the ability to easily surveil one’s surroundings (prospect), whilst not being exposed in the open (refuge).’

(p. 52-53)

Integrating nature

‘Exposure to natural environments triggers measurable neurophysiological responses that counteract the detrimental effects of chronic stress.

‘[...] Additionally, time spent in green spaces has been linked to reduced cortisol levels, the primary stress hormone associated with chronic health conditions (Park et al., 2010; Roe et al., 2013). Research consistently demonstrates decreased sympathetic nervous system activity—our “fight-or-flight” response—during nature exposure, accompanied by enhanced parasympathetic activity that promotes rest and recovery (Li et al., 2011; Tsunetsugu et al., 2013).’

(p. 82)

‘Contemporary research in architectural neuroimmunology now provides substantial evidence supporting [the biophilia hypothesis], demonstrating that exposure to natural elements directly influences human physiological processes, stress regulation, and immune function (Browning et al., 2014; Bratman et al., 2019).’

(p. 81)

Active

‘Recent research has revealed that walking as a simple everyday activity can trigger important biological processes in the brain (de Melo Coelho et al., 2013; Khalil, 2025a), and also increase the human brain volume (Cerin et al., 2018; Domingos et al. 2021; Khalil, 2025b), similar to the effect of exercise (Firth et al. 2018). When the design of a city or residential community naturally encourages walking, it has the potential to enhance neurogenesis (the growth of new neurons), improve brain health, and stimulate the production of growth factors essential for neuroplasticity (Khalil, 2024a). Incorporating walkability into master plans is not just an aesthetic choice; it is a strategic public health intervention.

‘[...] When a person engages in a brisk walk or gardening activity for 30 minutes or more (Hutchinson et al., 2019; Khalil, 2025a; Park et al., 2019), their body responds by releasing brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) that plays a central role in brain health by promoting the survival of existing neurons, encouraging the growth of new ones, and strengthening the connections between them (Khalil, 2024; Liu & Nusslock, 2018).’

(p. 96)

Comfortable

‘Daylight is essential for human health, playing a vital role in regulating circadian rhythms that control sleep-wake patterns and hormone release. [...] Disruptions to these rhythms, caused by insufficient daylight exposure during the day and excessive artificial light exposure at night, lead to dysregulation in internal temporal order and melatonin production, which can negatively impact health (Van Bommel & Van Den Beld, 2004; Edwards & Torcellini, 2002).’

(p. 74)

‘The “restorative” use of odours is a concept familiar from environmental psychology studies showing the benefits of exposure to nature.’

(p. 25)

‘Policy-level control of the sound environment remains focused on controlling certain physical quantities - typically the negative effects of excessive noise - lacking a more comprehensive evaluation system (Chen et al, 2024). Simply the presence of green and blue space has been proven to reduce the perception of noise disturbance related stress (Lugten et al, 2018).’

(p. 26)

Places to meet

‘The tendency among some urban planners and developers to ‘optimise’ use of public spaces by creating generic flexible spaces, or planning that prioritises more passive adult-oriented environments, limits opportunities for play, exploration, and creative use of space (Karsten, 2005; Lu & van Ameijde, 2025).

‘This not only overlooks the needs of children, but also limits the types of use, opportunities for play, and active engagement and agency within public space across all age ranges and physical abilities. Supporting play, and active engagement within urban spaces is an important aspect in supporting healthy, connected, vibrant communities (Akpınar, 2019; Bao, Gao, Luo, & Zhou, 2022; Sanchez-Valdivia et al., 2022).’

(p. 49)

Space for the unknown

‘Gradual transitions between private areas, shared spaces, and public zones help create a sense of belonging and safety (Gehl, 2011). When people feel ownership over their surroundings, they use and look after them more, reducing crime and neglect.’

(p. 52)

Case studies

Unpacking the key themes

Page references refer to this document.

Complex & stimulating

Visual interest

Variety and visual dynamism, such as that found in Prinzessinnengarten (p. 29), alongside rich landscapes like those at Nightingale Community Garden (p. 18) and Sowerby Park (p. 25), contribute to visual and cognitive stimulation. Spaces that offer multiple scales and a sense of discovery, as seen in Culpeper Community Garden (p. 22), invite exploration.

Edges and thresholds

Engaging edges, featuring diverse textures and materials, enrich the visual palette of the public realm, exemplified by places like Calthorpe Community Garden (p. 21), Bonnymuir Green Community Trust (p. 23), and Burridge Gardens (p. 20). Visual contact with human activity, particularly through transparent edges as in Accordia (p. 17), also adds layers of interest and further stimulates the mind.

Calming & safe

Proportions

Linear and open environments tend to convey a sense of dynamism, encouraging movement and activity over social interaction. In contrast, spaces that are divided into smaller, more intimate zones provide a sense of calm and invite people to stay. See Accordia (p. 17) and Culpeper Community Garden (p. 22).

Car-free

The absence of vehicular traffic, as observed in the majority of the following case studies, reduces the need for alertness, particularly among younger individuals.

Materiality

Tone, patterns, and visual heterogeneity can contribute to visual stress, particularly among neurodiverse individuals.

Integrating nature

Softscape

The integration of predominantly green elements and softscapes helps bring people closer to nature. Examples Sowerby Park (p. 25).

Planting

Lush, diverse, and multi-scalar planting offers another approach to weaving nature in. This is exemplified by Accordia (p. 17) through its varied landscape, and Freie Mitte (p. 27) through its wild character.

Proximity to homes

Positioning homes directly adjacent to natural features supports integration with nature, as seen in Sowerby Park (p. 25) and Burridge Gardens (p. 20).

Gardening

Gardening initiatives facilitate contact with nature. See Nightingale Community Garden (p. 18), Abbey Gardens (p. 19), Calthorpe Community Garden (p. 21), Himmelbeet Community Garden (p. 28), Prinzessinnengarten (p. 29), and St Mary's Catholic Voluntary Academy (p. 26).

Nature-based solutions

Nature-based play fosters connection with the nature and sustainable play settings. For example, classrooms at St Mary's Catholic Voluntary Academy (p. 26) are oriented towards outdoor spaces with timber play equipment.

Active

Walking

Defined paths and trails promote walking, especially when they are integrated into broader networks. Examples like Sowerby Park (p. 25) and Freie Mitte (p. 27) demonstrate how thoughtful connectivity can encourage pedestrian movement.

Cycling and running

Paths that separate walkers from runners, such as Sowerby Park (p. 25), especially if they are laid out in loose loops, encourage activity.

Incidental exercise and play

At Bonnymuir Green Community Trust (p. 23), St Mary's Catholic Voluntary Academy (p. 26) and Burridge Gardens (p. 20), undulating surfaces, climbing equipment and incidental play encourage physical activity.

Comfortable

Access to natural light

Access to natural light is a fundamental factor in creating comfortable outdoor spaces, Nightingale Community Garden (p. 18), Abbey Gardens (p. 19), Bonnymuir Green Community Trust (p. 23), Sowerby Park (p. 25) and Platt Field Park Market Gardens (p. 25) exemplify how sunlight enhances comfort.

Exposure to wind and rain

These same examples also highlight a potential drawback: excessive openness can leave spaces vulnerable to wind and rain.

To ensure year-round usability, spatial variety is essential. Sites like Calthorpe Community Garden (p. 21), Culpeper Community Garden (p. 22), Freie Mitte (p. 29), and Burridge Gardens (p. 20) demonstrate how tree canopies can offer diverse shading conditions that adapt to seasonal changes.

Shelter

Shelter is another key component. Projects such as Himmelbeet Community Garden (p. 28) and Prinzessinnengarten (p. 29) show how both natural elements and built structures can effectively provide protection.

With places to meet

Communal facilities

Communal facilities, particularly sheltered areas, offer physical focal points where people can gather. Examples include Calthorpe Community Garden (p. 21), Platt Field Park Market Gardens (p. 25), and Himmelbeet Community Garden (p. 28).

Seating

Public seating areas further support informal social contact and encounters. Notable examples are Nightingale Community Garden (p. 18), Culpeper Community Garden (p. 22), Bonnymuir Green Community Trust (p. 23), Prinzessinnengarten (p. 29), Freie Mitte (p. 27) and Burridge Gardens (p. 20).

Activity and events

Programmed activities, such as gardening, play areas, and other interactive features, provide a natural excuse for people to come together, as seen in places like Accordia (p. 17) and Abbey Gardens (p. 19).

History, culture and identity

A shared sense of community history can also act as cultural common ground, fostering connections and encouraging socialisation.

With space for the unknown

Informality

An informal layout and character can foster a sense of ownership by implying that arrangements are flexible, thereby inviting personal contribution and engagement. This is evident in places like Nightingale Community Garden (p. 18), Abbey Gardens (p. 19), and Calthorpe Community Garden (p. 21).

Customisation

Mobile furniture further empowers individuals to tailor spaces to their own needs. Himmelbeet Community Garden (p. 28) and Prinzessinnengarten (p. 29) offer strong examples of how adaptable elements can support user-driven design and interaction.

Selection criteria

Context

Case studies were chosen to reflect suburban and urban settings, newly built environments, and repurposed public realms. The aim is to inform future design and masterplanning efforts in comparable contexts.

Location

To ensure a diverse yet relevant sample, cases span multiple geographic scales: Cambridge, as it is the location of the emerging Eddington masterplan; London, for its wealth of applicable precedents; the UK, to broaden the spectrum of context and approaches; and Europe, to extend the spectrum of comparable approaches beyond national borders.

Spatial characteristics

Selected cases share similarities in scale or offer valuable insights into layout, character, and the use of furniture or structural elements—key aspects for extracting design lessons.

Management

While not a primary selection criterion, management regimes were also taken into consideration. The goal was to gather indicative practices without allowing operational models to dictate the design-focused selection.



>Cambridge

- Accordia
- Nightingale Community Garden

>London

- Abbey Gardens, Stratford
- Burridge Gardens, Clapham
- Calthorpe Community Garden, Camden
- Culpeper Community Garden, Islington

> UK

- Bonnymuir Green Community Trust, Aberdeen
- Platt Field Park Market Gardens, Manchester
- Sowerby Park, Yorkshire
- St Mary's Catholic Voluntary Acacemy, Derby

>Europe

- Freie Mitte, Austria
- Himmelbeet Community Garden, Germany
- Prinzessinnengarten, Germany

Accordia

Cambridge, UK

CB2 8EW

c. 1,000 sqm



100m

Relevance

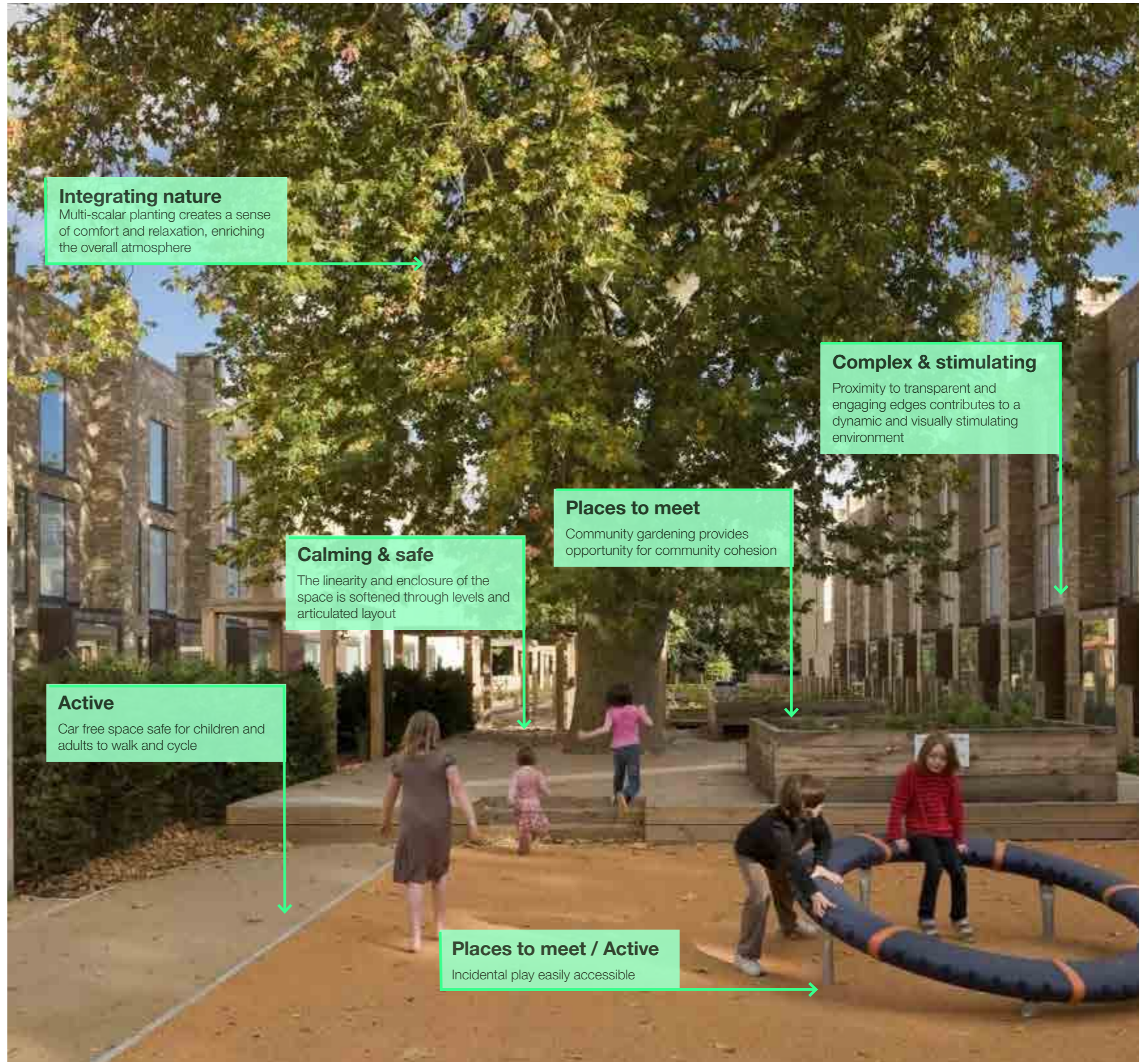
Public realm within a newly built residential development in Cambridge. It features a diverse programme that includes incidental play, planting, communal growing and homes framing its edges.

Conclusions

This space has been thoughtfully designed to accommodate a variety of activities without feeling overcrowded, encouraging people to linger, connect, and play.

Its scale is managed through subtle changes in level and the placement of planting and furniture, which help to soften and break up its linearity.

Play equipment and level shifts also promote movement and exploration, while the absence of vehicles fosters a sense of safety and supports inclusive, intergenerational use.



Integrating nature

Multi-scalar planting creates a sense of comfort and relaxation, enriching the overall atmosphere

Complex & stimulating

Proximity to transparent and engaging edges contributes to a dynamic and visually stimulating environment

Places to meet

Community gardening provides opportunity for community cohesion

Calming & safe

The linearity and enclosure of the space is softened through levels and articulated layout

Active

Car free space safe for children and adults to walk and cycle

Places to meet / Active

Incidental play easily accessible

Nightingale Community Garden

Cambridge, UK

CB1 8SG

c. 600 sqm



100m

Relevance

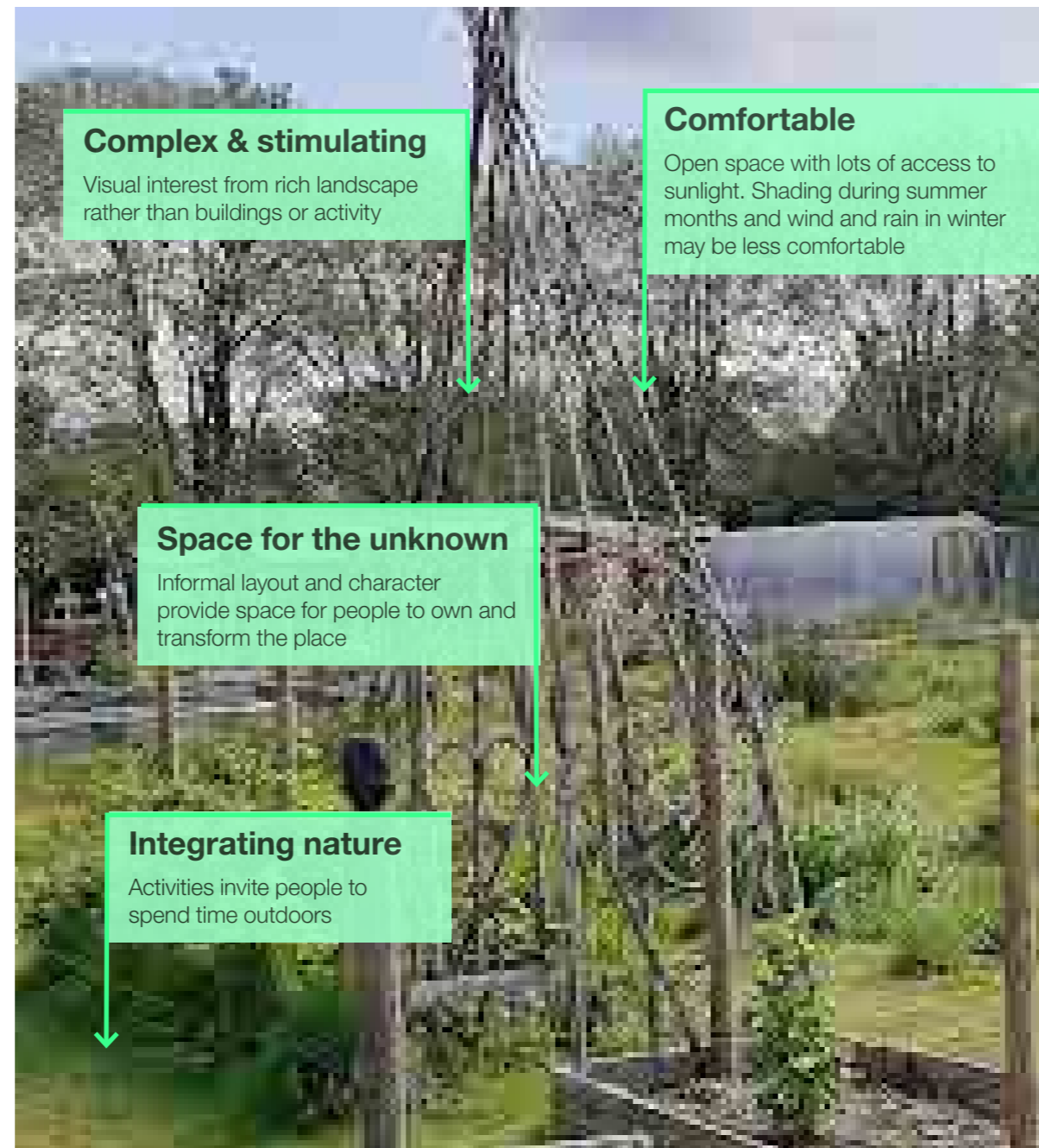
Informal garden with a strong sense of ownership for the community, with spaces to meet and grow.

Origin and management

'We have been successful making applications for funding for the larger changes to the garden, but needed additional funding for everyday expenses like our annual insurance and smaller new projects. In August 2021, we started a Friends Group, which has been great: all welcome to join. It has a Newsletter, which is also available online.' (www.nightingalegarden.org.uk)

Conclusions

The informal character of this space invites contribution and active involvement. Its strong focus on gardening activities draws people outdoors. Casual seating areas encourage visitors to spend time, relax, and connect with others. Set within a park and surrounded by nature, the space draws its visual appeal from the richness of the landscape rather than buildings or activity.

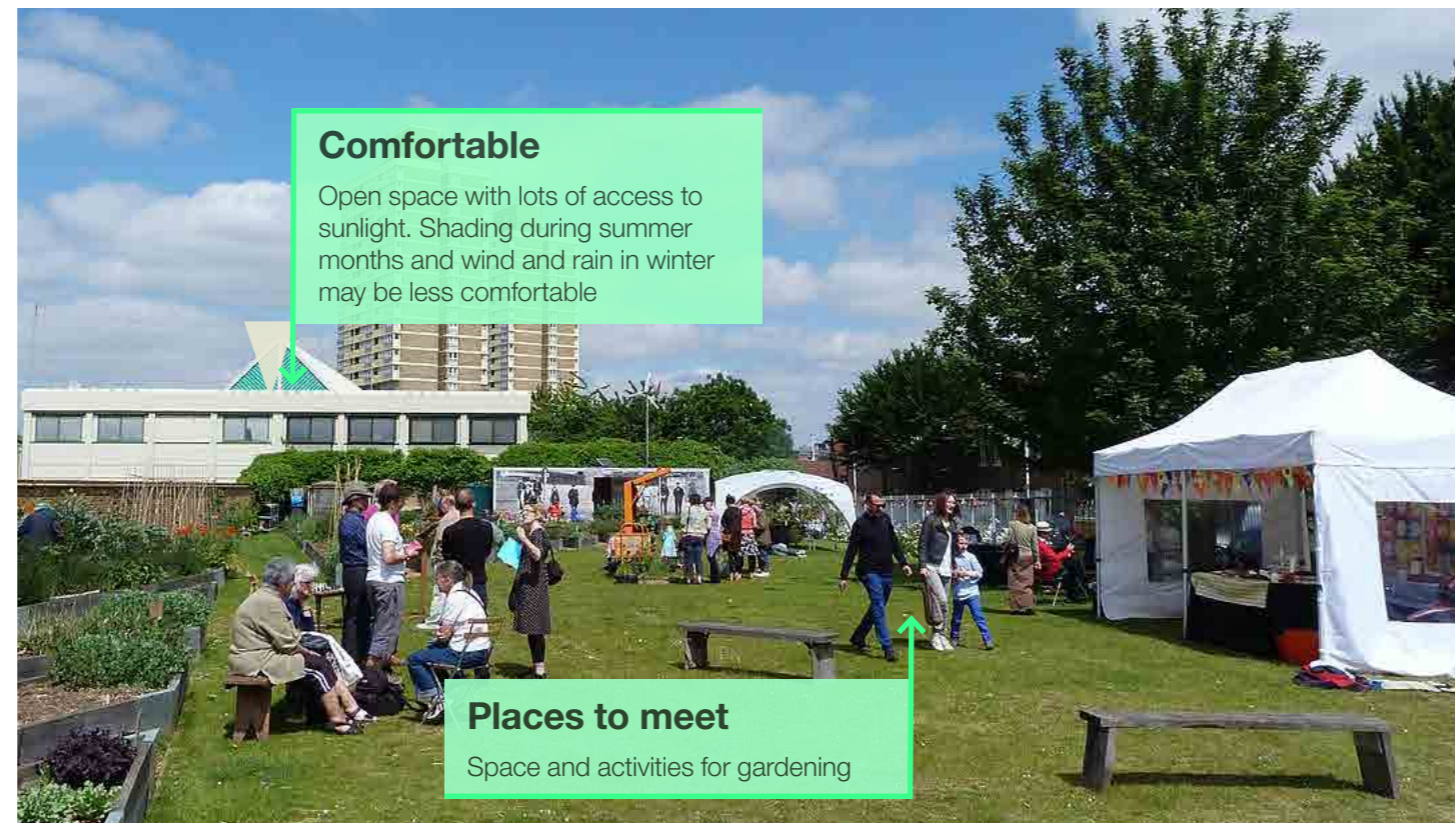


Abbey Gardens

Stratford, London

E15 3NF

c. 1,500 sqm



Comfortable

Open space with lots of access to sunlight. Shading during summer months and wind and rain in winter may be less comfortable

Places to meet

Space and activities for gardening



Places to meet

A place with history provides institutional context for social interaction



Space for the unknown

Informal layout and character provide space for people to own and transform the place

Integrating nature

Activities invite people to spend time outdoors

100m

Relevance

Informal space managed by its community with a sense of history, providing opportunity to engage with gardening and nature.

Origin and management

'We're run by the community working together through the seasons, using the garden as a place to pause, to grow, to meet, to make. Building a beautiful, healthy and sustainable garden that everyone can benefit from.'

(www.abbeygardens.org)

Conclusions

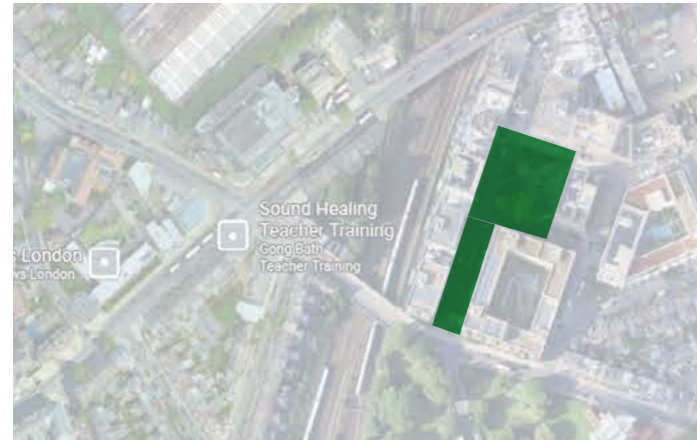
Similarly to the Nightingale Community Garden, the informal character of this space invites contribution and active involvement. Its strong focus on gardening activities also draws people outdoors. Both a sense of history and areas for gardening encourage people to meet.

Burridge Gardens

Clapham, London

SW11 1AY

c. 3,800 Sqm



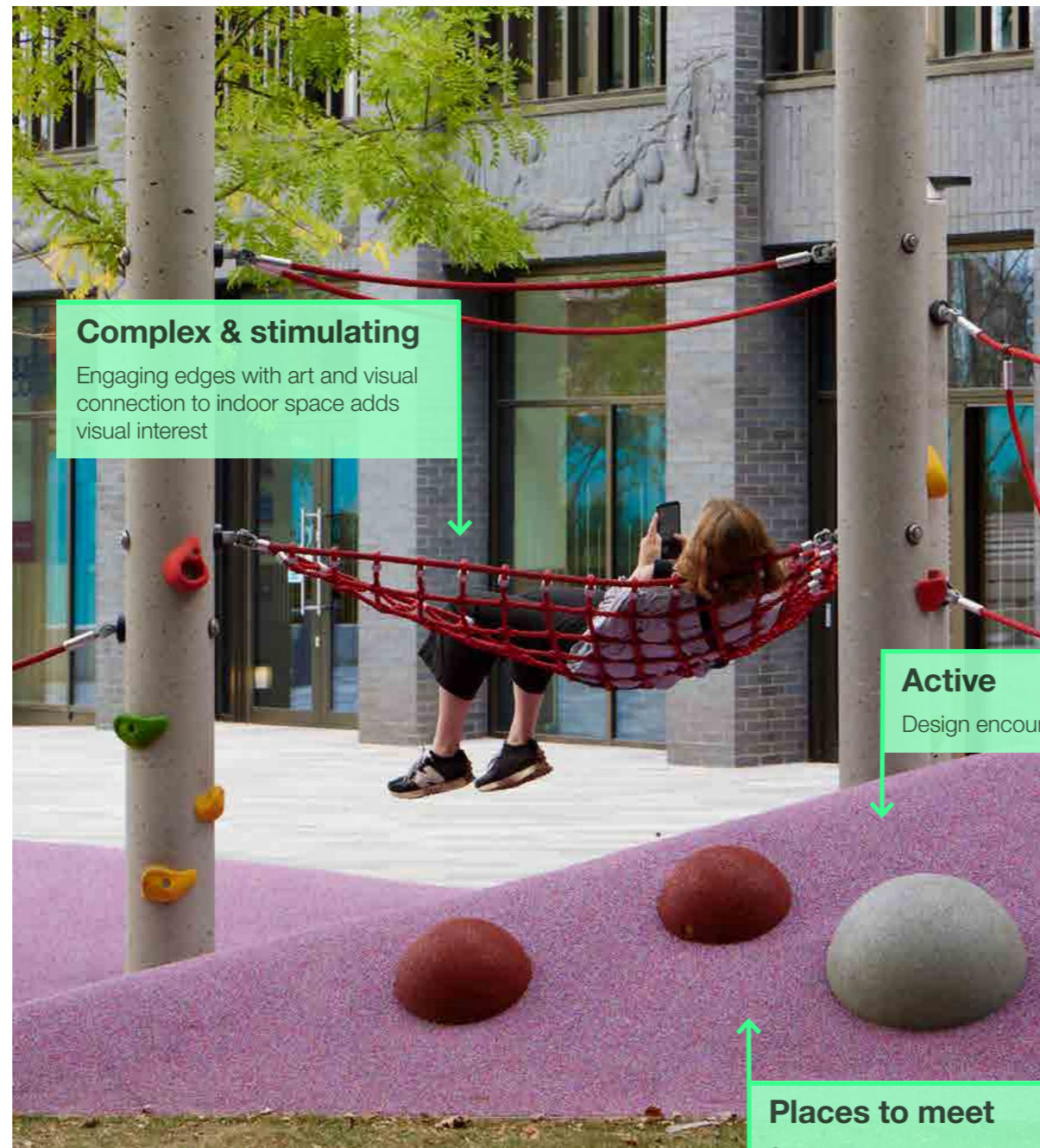
100m

Relevance

Larger open space as part of a residential development with an informal and wild character.

Conclusions

This open space is part of a wider residential development and has been designed to support wellbeing through a variety of thoughtful features. It offers areas to linger and connect with neighbours, opportunities to engage with nature, a mix of sheltered and open zones, and visual richness created by the interplay between the landscape and the surrounding architecture. Equipment and ground undulation foster physical activity.



Complex & stimulating

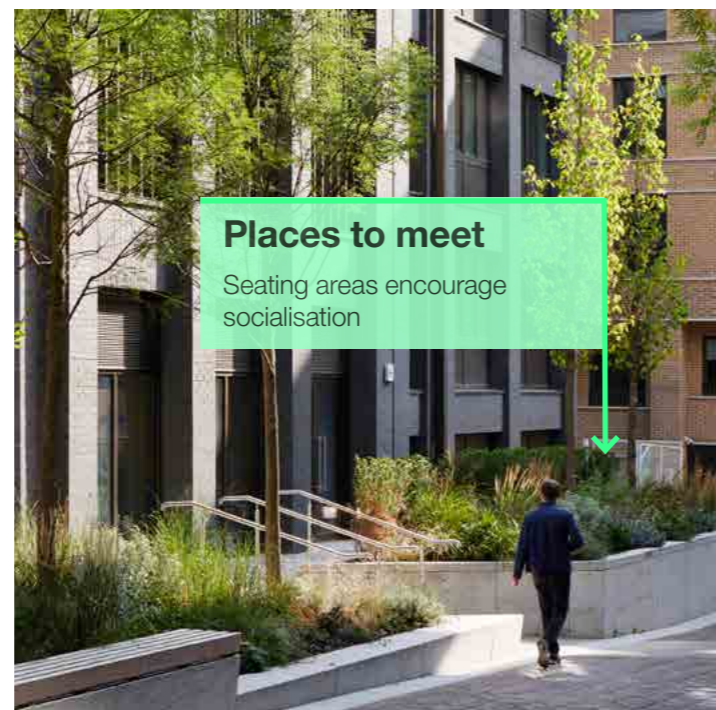
Engaging edges with art and visual connection to indoor space adds visual interest

Active

Design encourages activity

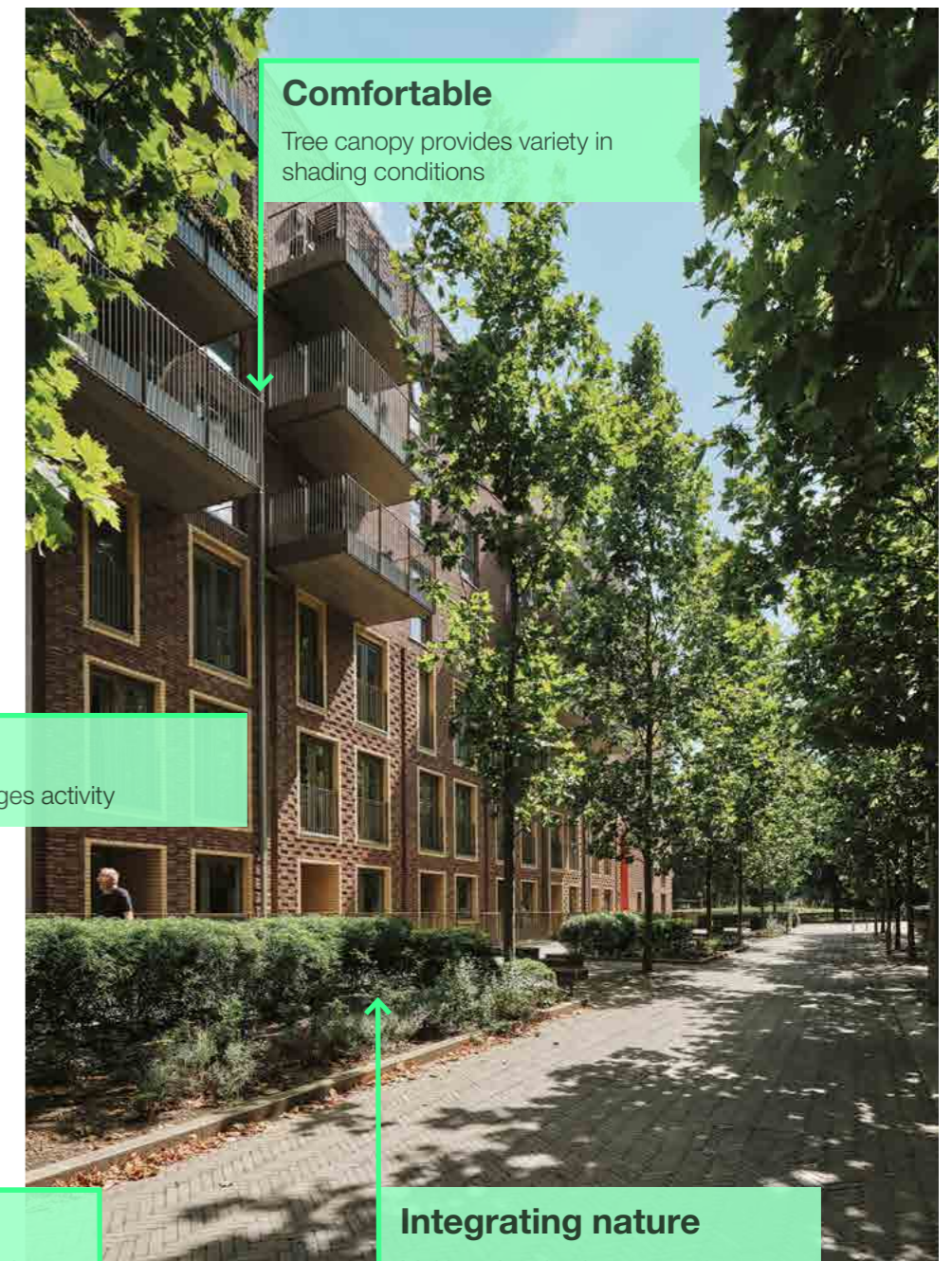
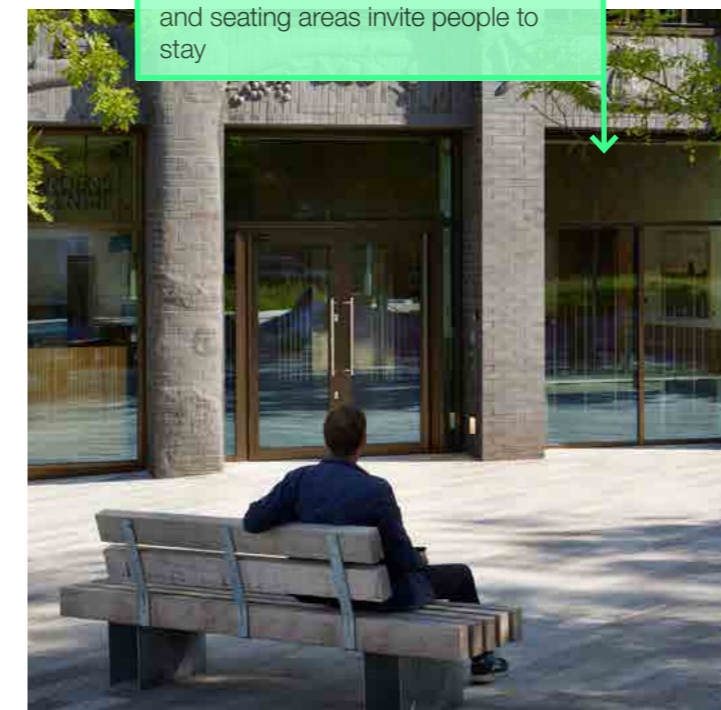
Places to meet

Scale, proportion, access to light and seating areas invite people to stay



Places to meet

Seating areas encourage socialisation

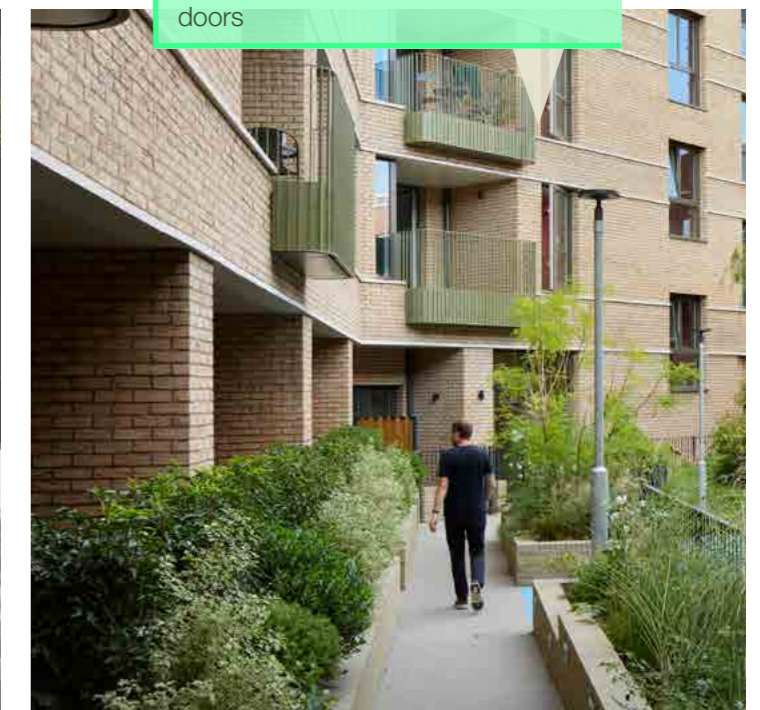


Comfortable

Tree canopy provides variety in shading conditions

Integrating nature

Multi-scalar planting next to front doors



Calthorpe Community Garden

Camden, London

WC1X 8LH

c. 1,200 sqm



100m

Relevance

Informal community garden next to residential uses.

Origin and management

'Calthorpe is a friendly space where everyone is welcome to meet, get active, grow, and feel part of a community. For over 40 years, we've been helping people look after their physical and mental wellbeing while making the neighbourhood greener and more sustainable.

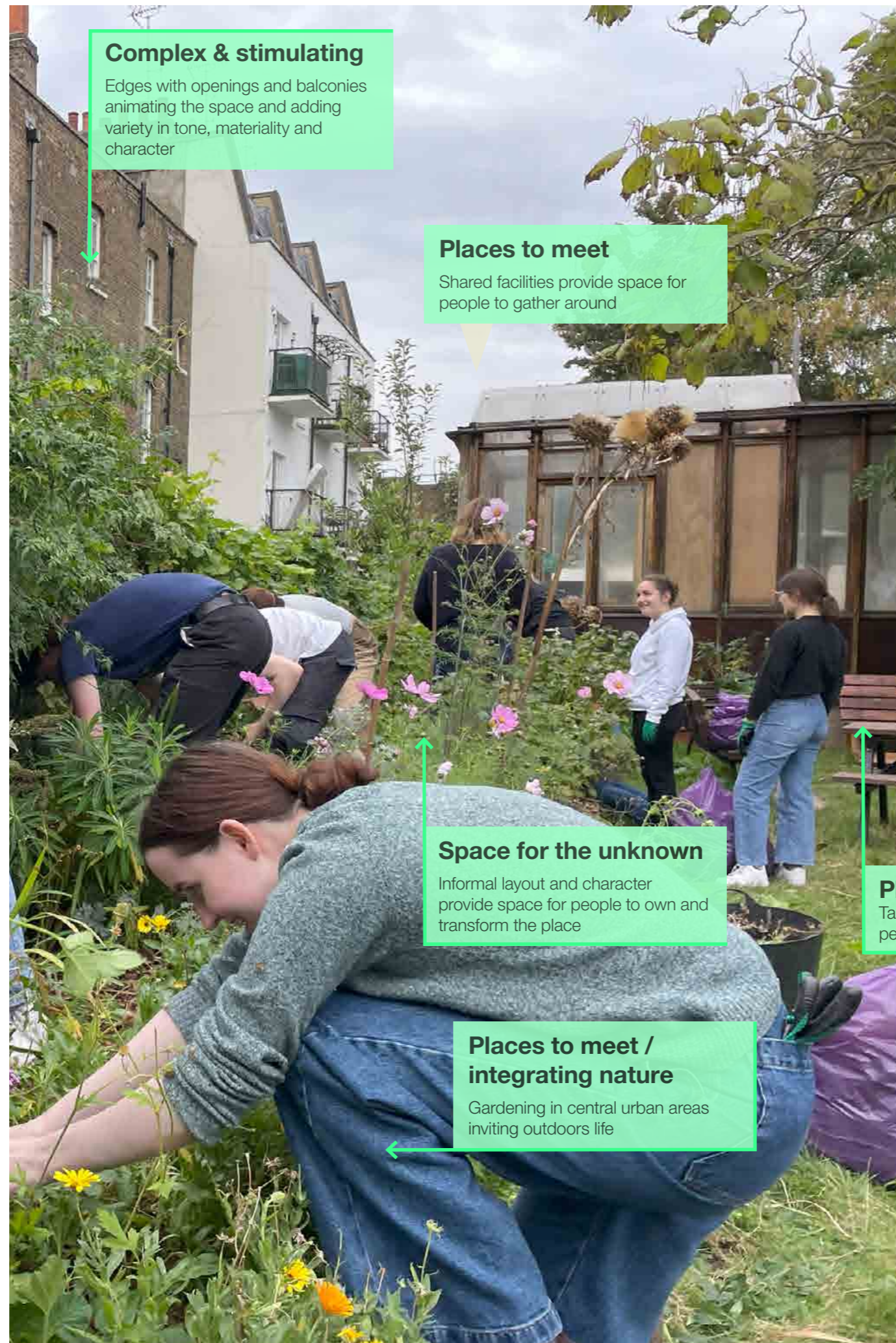
'Open seven days a week, we offer sports, gardening, creative and cultural activities - giving people a chance to connect, learn new skills, and support each other. At Calthorpe, we look after both our community and the environment.' (www.calthorpecommunitygarden.org.uk)

Conclusions

The informal character invites people to meet outdoors. Its proximity to buildings and central location, together with its lush and varied landscape makes it visually stimulating, and its movable furniture adds to the sense of ownership whilst inviting people to linger and meet.

Image credit: Anna Barclay/London Parks & Gardens (bottom right); Calthorpe Community Garden (top right, left)

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Complex & stimulating

Edges with openings and balconies animating the space and adding variety in tone, materiality and character

Places to meet

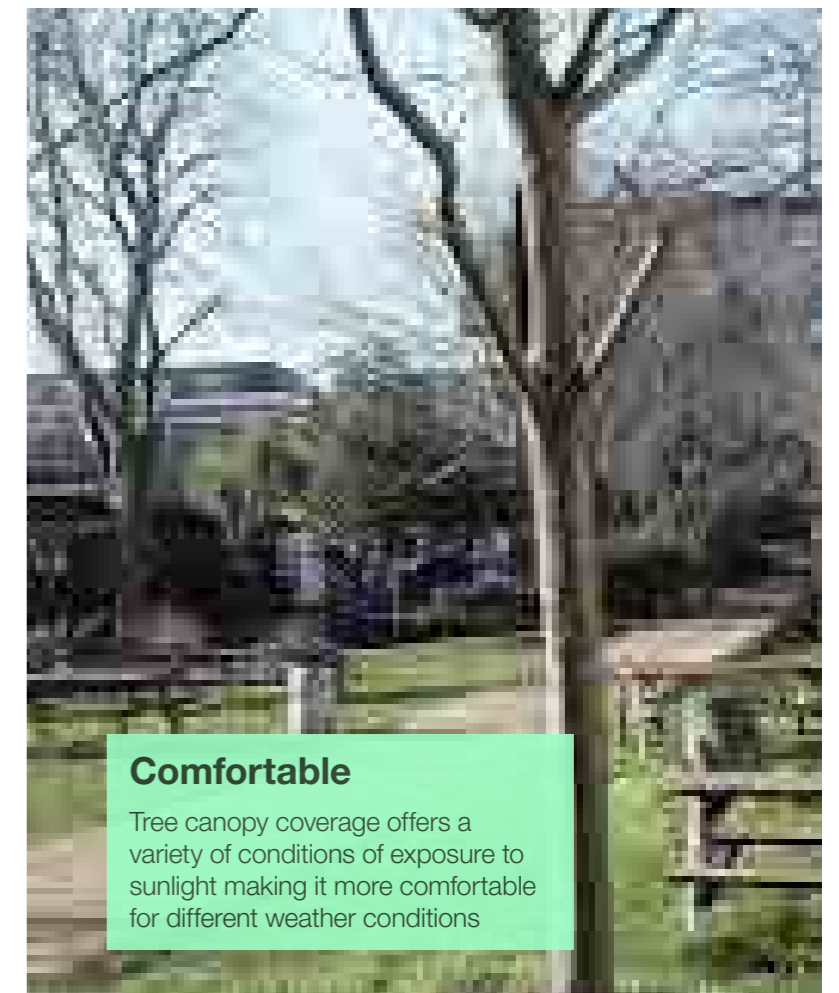
Shared facilities provide space for people to gather around

Space for the unknown

Informal layout and character provide space for people to own and transform the place

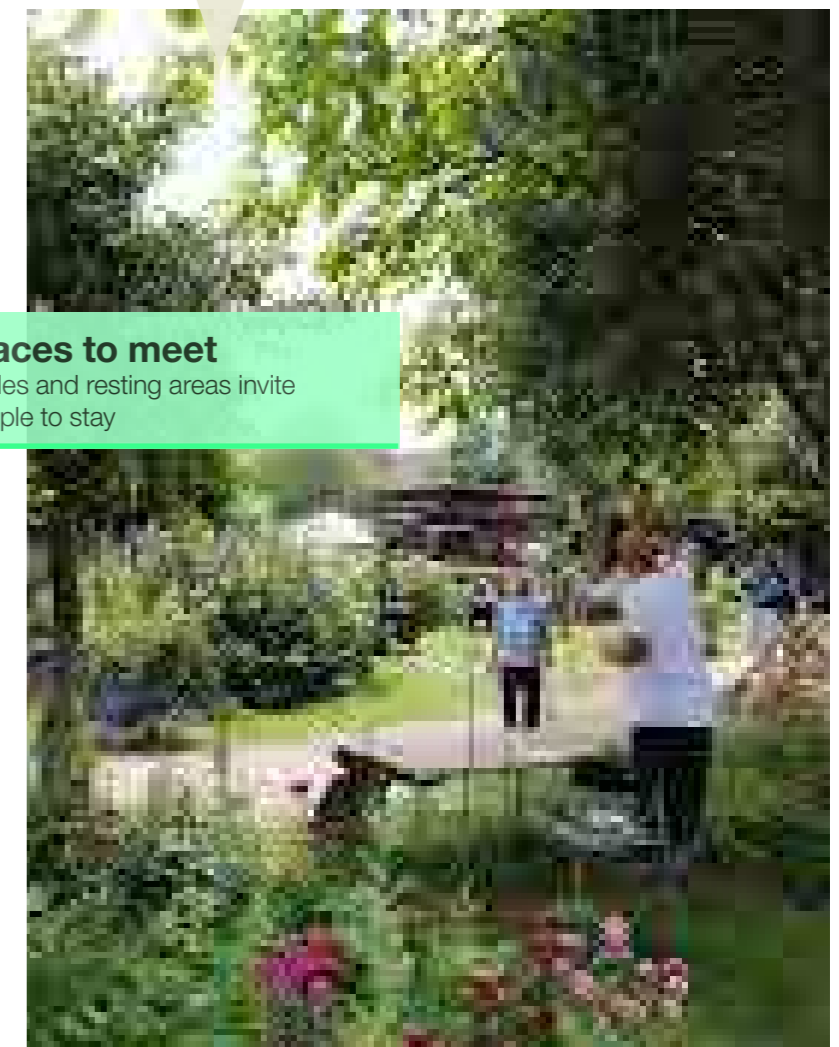
Places to meet / integrating nature

Gardening in central urban areas inviting outdoors life



Comfortable

Tree canopy coverage offers a variety of conditions of exposure to sunlight making it more comfortable for different weather conditions



Places to meet

Tables and resting areas invite people to stay

Culpeper Community Garden

Islington, London

N1 0EJ

c. 1,000 sqm



100m

Relevance

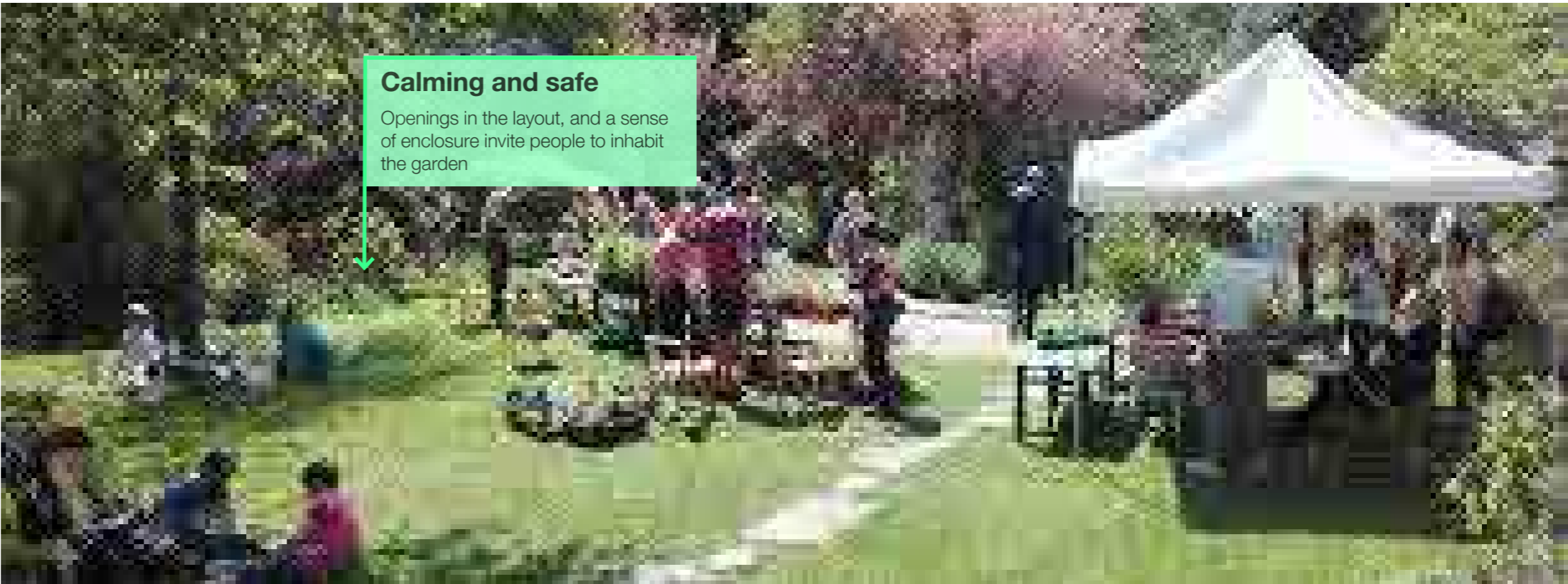
Informal open space next to residential areas.

Origin and management

'Our organic garden comprises a lawn, ponds, rose pergolas, ornamental beds, vegetable plots, seating and a wildlife area. It contains 49 plots including two raised beds for disabled gardeners: these small gardens are for community groups, children, and for people living nearby who do not have gardens. Tending the garden is a communal effort by garden members and volunteers.' (www.culpeper.org.uk)

Conclusions

The informal character invites people to meet outdoors. Its lush and varied landscape, together with the activity of a central location, make it visually stimulating. It offers informal and formal areas for seating facilitating social contact and inviting people to stay.



Bonnymuir Green Community Trust

Aberdeen, UK

AB15 5NQ

c. 1,500 sqm



100m

Relevance

Informal open space run by its community.

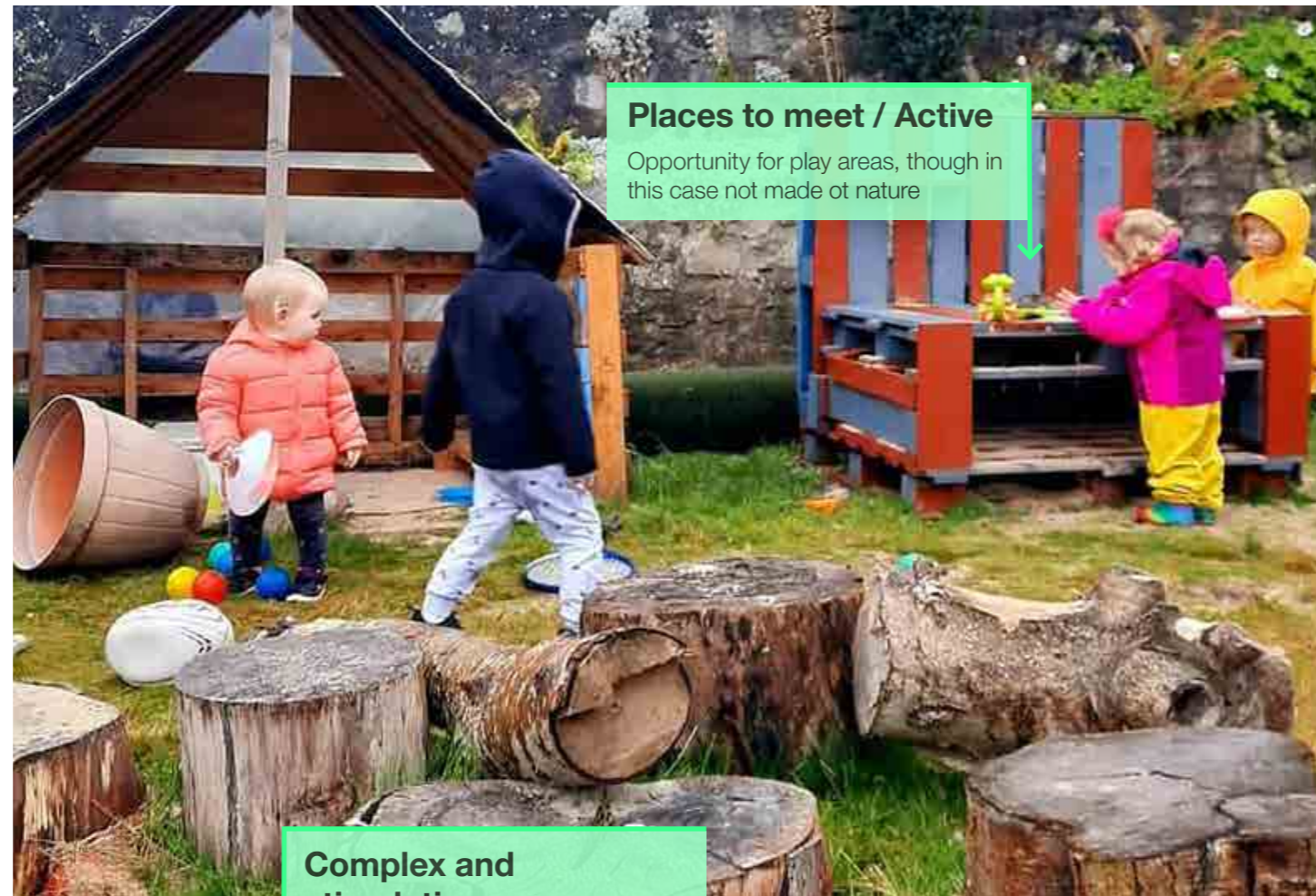
Origin and management

'We have a productive, managed community garden, a social hub and café, which is led, developed and sustained by local volunteers.

'We encourage all members of the public to meet and share in a space that is accessible, providing the community with a mix of educational and social activities, encouraging fun, good health, wellbeing and sustainable living.' (www.bgct.co.uk)

Conclusions

It includes places to meet and play while leaving space for the unknown and for people to take ownership of the spatial arrangement. Its proximity to surrounding buildings adds visual interest, though the edges contribute little to activating the space.



Places to meet / Active

Opportunity for play areas, though in this case not made of nature

Complex and stimulating

Buildings provide visual interest although little activity on the edges

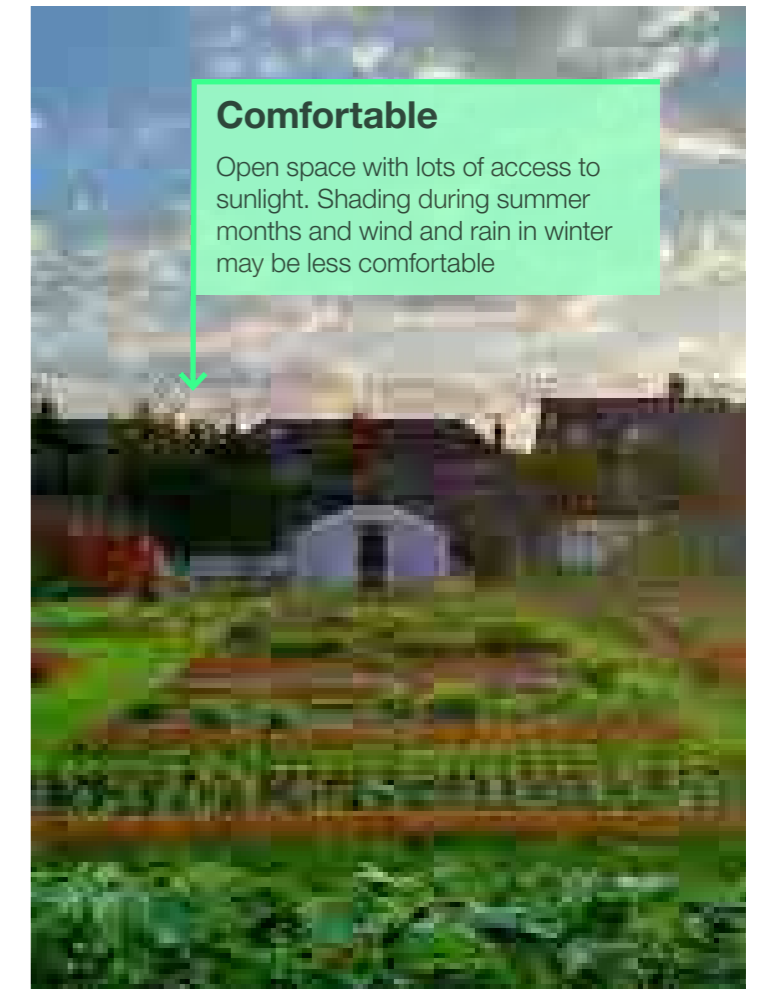


Places to meet

Shared facilities provide space for people to gather around

Space for the unknown

Informal layout and character providing space for people to own and transform the place



Comfortable

Open space with lots of access to sunlight. Shading during summer months and wind and rain in winter may be less comfortable

Platt Fields Market Gardens

Manchester, UK

M14 6LT

c. 4,000 sqm



100m

Relevance

Informal open space designed and run by its community and Manchester Urban Diggers CIC.

Origin and management

'PFMG is a member of the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) network. On this site we produce over 1 tonne of food on just ½ an acre of land annually, in addition to improving the soil health, air quality and biodiversity of the area.

'PFMG is both a community hub and a working market garden. We work with the community and host volunteer days, provide cooked food, facilitate and organise free events, fundraise / promote local community groups, offer a space to hire, and work with local businesses.' (www.wearemud.org)

Conclusions

Situated within a larger park, Platt Fields encourages interaction with nature by including areas for gardening and outdoor activity. The informal arrangement and movable furniture invite active involvement and provide activity and areas for people to meet.

Image credit: Manchester Urban Diggers (MUD) CIC
 Hawkins/Brown © | January 2026 | Nourishing Neighbourhoods



Comfortable
 Open space with lots of access to sunlight. Shading during summer months and wind and rain in winter may be less comfortable

Places to meet
 Seating areas and tables for people to congregate



Places to meet
 Shared facilities provide space for people to gather around

Sowerby Park

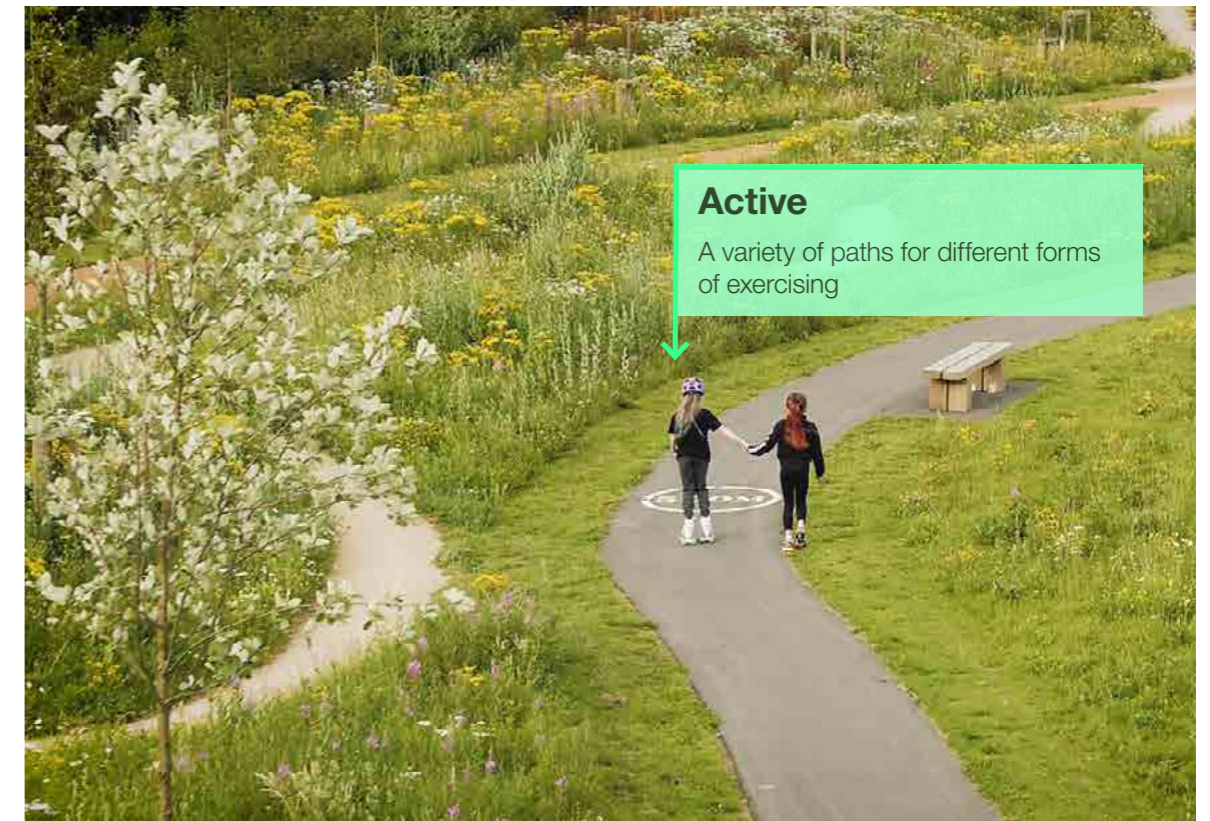
Yorkshire, UK

YO7 1ST

c. 7.5 ha



100m



Relevance

Larger open space with opportunity for activity and walking trails.

Origin and management

'Sowerby Park is a 7.5 hectare green space at the centre of a growing community in North Yorkshire. The project, built over a former landfill site, includes a 1km fitness trail, a sustainable drainage system, space for three high quality sports pitches, bike trails, a BMX park, a new school, and allotments.' (www.re-formlandscape.com)

Conclusions

The large open space and lush landscape provides a number of opportunities to move through and exercise. It brings nature close to homes. Given its size and the linearity of its trail, it offers less opportunity to linger and meet other people.



St Mary's Catholic Voluntary Academy

Derby, UK

DE22 1AU

c. 5 ha



100m

Relevance

Public realm for a through school including gardening and play educational areas.

Takeaways

An open space within the school that integrates areas for play, physical activity, and gardening—promoting healthy lifestyles as part of the educational experience. Its natural character and strong connection to nature, through direct outdoor access, materiality, and visual cues from indoors, enhance the sense of well-being and support a holistic learning environment.



Freie Mitte

Vienna, Austria

1020

c. 5 ha



100m

Relevance

Larger open space as part of a residential development with an informal and wild character.

Origin and management

'In addition to the picnic and kite-flying meadow, residents of the Nordbahnhofviertel now also have access to a new dog zone, a community garden, another children's playground and a bicycle playground.

'Fruit trees are currently being planted in the community garden area so that park visitors will be able to harvest apples and pears here in the future.' (www.gbsterm.at - Translated from German via DeepL)

Conclusions

This newly developed public realm embraces an unusually wild and informal character. While it may require a degree of cultural adjustment from its users, the space offers a compelling setting for transitional phases, enriched by its visual diversity and close connection to nature.



Active

A variety of paths for different needs and forms of active travel

Integrating nature

Wild planting



Active

Nature play areas for different ages

Places to meet

Nature play areas with seating for adults

Comfortable

A mix of areas with and without tree canopy coverage offers a variety of conditions of exposure to sunlight making it more comfortable for different weather conditions. Openness may still result in windy conditions in coldest seasons

Himmelbeet Community Garden

Berlin, Germany

13355

c. 1,200 sqm



100m

Relevance

Informal open space and garden run by its community.

Origin and management

'The Himmelbeet community garden consists of a communally cultivated section and individually rented vegetable beds where regional and old cultivated varieties are grown. People of all ages come together while gardening, upcycling, or cooking together, in workshops on environmental education and nutrition, in the garden café and at cultural events.' (www.berlin.de)

Takeaways

As pocket space in an urban area, Himmelbeet offers gardening and socialisation options. It looks tidy and lush, yet retains a degree of informality that invites involvement. The temporary furniture and structures provide support for seating and sheltering. In spite of being a triangular site, its proportions, variety, and visual interest invite people to linger beyond gardening.

Image credit: Raumstar Architekten

Hawkins\Brown © | January 2026 | Nourishing Neighbourhoods



Comfortable

Open space with lots of access to sunlight. Sheltering structures provide comfort in different seasons



Integrating nature

Opportunities for gardening



Places to meet

Shared facilities provide space for people to gather around

Spaces for the unknown

Informal arrangement and mobile furniture accentuate a sense of ownership

Places to meet

Shared seating areas

Prinzessinnen- garten

Berlin, Germany

12051

c. 1 ha



100m

Relevance

Informal open space and garden run by its community.

Origin and management

'Since 2009, Prinzessinnengarten has been promoting education and participation – initially at Moritzplatz, and since 2020 at the Neuer St. Jacobi Friedhof cemetery in Neukölln. We maintain the site as a green space, garden together and offer workshops on ecological DIY. We also run an open neighbourhood space called studio nagelneu, provide a venue for art and culture in the Kiezkapelle, and operate an environmental education area. Funded projects and gardening and school garden initiatives expand our repertoire. There are also rooms available for hire, guided tours and a garden café serving food and drinks.' (www.prinzessinnengarten-kollektiv.net - Translated from German via DeepL)

Conclusions

The informal open space has distinct character through landscape and offers flexibility in furniture arrangement and use. The inviting atmosphere encourages people to linger, socialise, and unwind, while also providing opportunities for gardening and outdoor activities. The tree canopy adds a layer of shelter, making the space usable across various seasons and weather conditions.



Comfortable

Tree canopy coverage offers a variety of conditions of exposure to sunlight making it more comfortable for different weather conditions

Complex & stimulating / Space for the unknown

A combination of informally arranged places, enclosed between trees and open spaces and configured in different ways, create multiple spatial conditions. Loose furniture also contributes to this while adding a sense of agency

Places to meet

Shared seating areas



Places to meet / Integrating nature

Opportunities for gardening

From key themes to design strategies

Complex & stimulating		Calming & safe		Integrating nature		Active		Comfortable		Places to meet		Space for the unknown	
Co1	Visually engaging Are there interesting shapes and angles that make the space visually engaging?	Ca1	Inviting layout Does the size and shape of the space make people want to walk through it like a corridor, or stay and spend time there?	IN1	Predominant softscape Is most of the space made up of natural elements like grass, plants, or soil rather than hard surfaces?	A1	Walking Are there trails or paths that encourage safe walking?	C1	Access to sunlight How many hours of sunlight do spaces have?	PM1	Seating and gathering Are there obvious places to meet, such as seating, canopies, or other structures?	SU1	Encourage customisation Does the layout encourage user interaction and customisation - for example through layouts that can be used in multiple ways?
Co2	Multi-scalar Are spaces subdivided into smaller and larger areas that feel different in size or use?	Ca2	Car-free Is the space car free? If not, is there sufficient buffer space between cars and usable areas?	IN2	Landscape variety Are there different kinds of plants and trees adding variety and interest?	A2	Prioritising cycling Is cycling more convenient than driving—for example, is it quicker to reach destinations or easier to access roads by bike than by car?	C2	Protected from wind Are there spaces where it is comfortable to sit?	PM2	Proximities Are features for different users—such as cycle parking, seating or other activities areas—grouped to encourage casual interaction?	SU2	Interactive Are there movable furnishings or adaptable features that invite user engagement through reconfiguration?
Co3	Discovery and delight Does the space feel exciting to explore, with new areas or features revealing themselves when moving through it?	Ca3	Calming Does the design avoid stress, for example caused through excessive variety in material palette, tone, textures, patterns or lighting?	IN3	Edible landscapes Are there planting species with fruit or edibles?	A3	Running loops Do trails or paths support running such as those designed as closed loops?	C3	Providing shelter Are there structures or tree canopies providing shelter?	PM3	Communal activity Are there spaces that support communal activities, such as shared gardening or play areas?	SU3	Ownership and management Are there opportunities for the community to manage shared areas?
Co4	Engaging thresholds Do the edges of the space help bring it to life, for example with terraces, balconies, doorways, or windows that invite interaction?	Ca4	Passive surveillance Do windows or terraces allow passive observation of spaces?	IN4	Proximity to nature Are there homes or other uses located close to natural surroundings like trees, parks, or green spaces?	A4	Incidental physical activity Are there design elements that promote casual physical activity, such as undulating surfaces, slopes, stepping stones, or natural climbing features like logs?	C4	Seasonality Are there areas that offer comfortable conditions at different times of the year?	PM4	Engineering serendipity Does the space combine amenities for different users - gardening, playing, exercising?		

Resident interviews

Local resident views

One of the key challenges in developing the emerging masterplan was to accommodate both permanent and transient communities. Of the approximately 3,800 homes included in the masterplan, half are designated for open market sale and are expected to be occupied by long-term residents. The other half are allocated to university staff, primarily Ph.D. and post-doctoral researchers who typically reside on-site for three to five years, forming the transient segment of the community.

With Phase 1 already built and operational, a local community has begun to take shape, bringing with it specific needs and aspirations. Residents are actively engaging with the public realm and its buildings. During a community gardening event hosted by the University of Cambridge, Max Fordham and Hawkins\ Brown conducted a series of interviews with attendees. These conversations explored how residents currently use the public spaces, their preferences, and their interest in future involvement in managing these areas.

The insights gathered from these interviews informed the literature review workshops in which the nine key themes were distilled. The responses on the following pages have been transcribed from interview questionnaires.



Interviews I

* Names have been changed for anonymity

Priya *
25-34 y/o
Children - Yes
Charity sector

Meher *
25-34 y/o
Children - Yes
Software engineer

Bas *
25-34 y/o
Children - No
Scientist

Mary *
65+ y/o
Children - Yes
Retiree

Nabila *
35-44 y/o
Children - Yes
Education sector

What public and/or green spaces in Eddington do you currently use?

Brook Leys pond, walks in the field, market square.

I use the children's playground and cricket pitch behind it.

Open spaces, cafe and courtyards.

Where there are playgrounds it's great to have seats for older carers, nanny, granny, etc. **(these don't answer the ?)**

Hardscape, convenience, cool and breathy **(these don't answer the ?)**

What activities do you usually do in this space?

Walk, play and relax.

Walking and running.

Walk, sit, and read.

Running and kids play.

What is your favourite and least favourite quality (aspect?) of this space?

Benches might not be accessible to all people with different abilities.

Lack of flowers and the kids playground is small.

The balance between hard and soft.

-

No trees, no shade is the least. Elements for play, activity and space for the community the most.

What qualities do you think are important to create a successful public green space?

Community engagement, connection to nature.

A beautiful garden full of greenery and nature.

A rough, natural and meadow character.

Shared responsibility and signs and explanation of what we see.

-

What features would you like to see more of in public green space?

More greenery, more spaces for walks.

Flowers and sitting space.

Gardening and community gardening. Bigger parks.

-

Play areas, modern, and nature looking.

What would your ideal public green space look and feel like?

Kids can play, adults can sit, spacious.

Cosy and pretty.

Use the space as a visitor, help to maintain or manage the space, growing plants.

Free to wander, maybe some seating.

-

How would you like to be involved in future green public spaces?

Use the space as a visitor, part of a 'friends of' group.

Use the space as a visitor, help to maintain or manage the space, growing plants.

Ideally community and self-organised gardening and activities.

Shared responsibility.

Help to maintain or manage the space, part of a 'friends of' group.

How do you think green spaces could better support your community in the future?

-

-

-

-

Hosting activities and events.

Interviews II

* Names have been changed for anonymity

Nitesh *
45-54 y/o
Children - Yes
Entrepreneur

Respondent A
Anonymous

Respondent B
Anonymous

Respondent C
Anonymous

Respondent D
Anonymous

What public and/or green spaces in Eddington do you currently use?

-

Restaurants, pubs, supermarket, playing fields less so because it's all quite empty.

Storeys Field and the surrounding play area, shops, cafe.

Play spaces, meadow area, edible planting.

Play spaces and green areas.

What activities do you usually do in this space?

-

Shopping.

Festivals, Storeys Field's events, play and cafe.

Kids play.

Play.

What is your favourite and least favourite quality of this space?

-

Plenty of amenities is great. But so far a lot of stone and bricks and not much greenery within the development.

Trees and activities at Storeys Field.

Play spaces, wooden play, edible planting.

Playground needs more colour, needs to be more appropriate for younger kids.

What qualities do you think are important to create a successful public green space?

Basic sports next door (a simple net). Next door solutions.

Public amenities and a big central playground where communities can gather.

Cafe's, shops, things to do in the area.

-

Kid friendly areas for all ages.

What features would you like to see more of in public green space?

Enclosed spaces. Space for people to cook and eat.

More landscaping like the Hyatt Courtyard. more play areas with grass and shade from the trees

More nature, trees, less buildings everywhere.

-

Play space with more colour for younger kids.

What would your ideal public green space look and feel like?

Small playgrounds and green spaces. (Eddington has too much concrete).

Play areas for young kids. Maybe some water play.

-

-

Calm, safe.

How would you like to be involved in future green public spaces?

Use the space as a visitor, help to maintain or manage the space, part of a 'friends of' group, growing plants.

-

-

-

-

How do you think green spaces could better support your community in the future?

Shared responsibility.

It would be nice if there is a central park with sport facilities and playground where communities come together.

-

-

-

Other thoughts

Library of things would be great, maybe as a pop up. If the community doesn't own the public realm it's not going to work.

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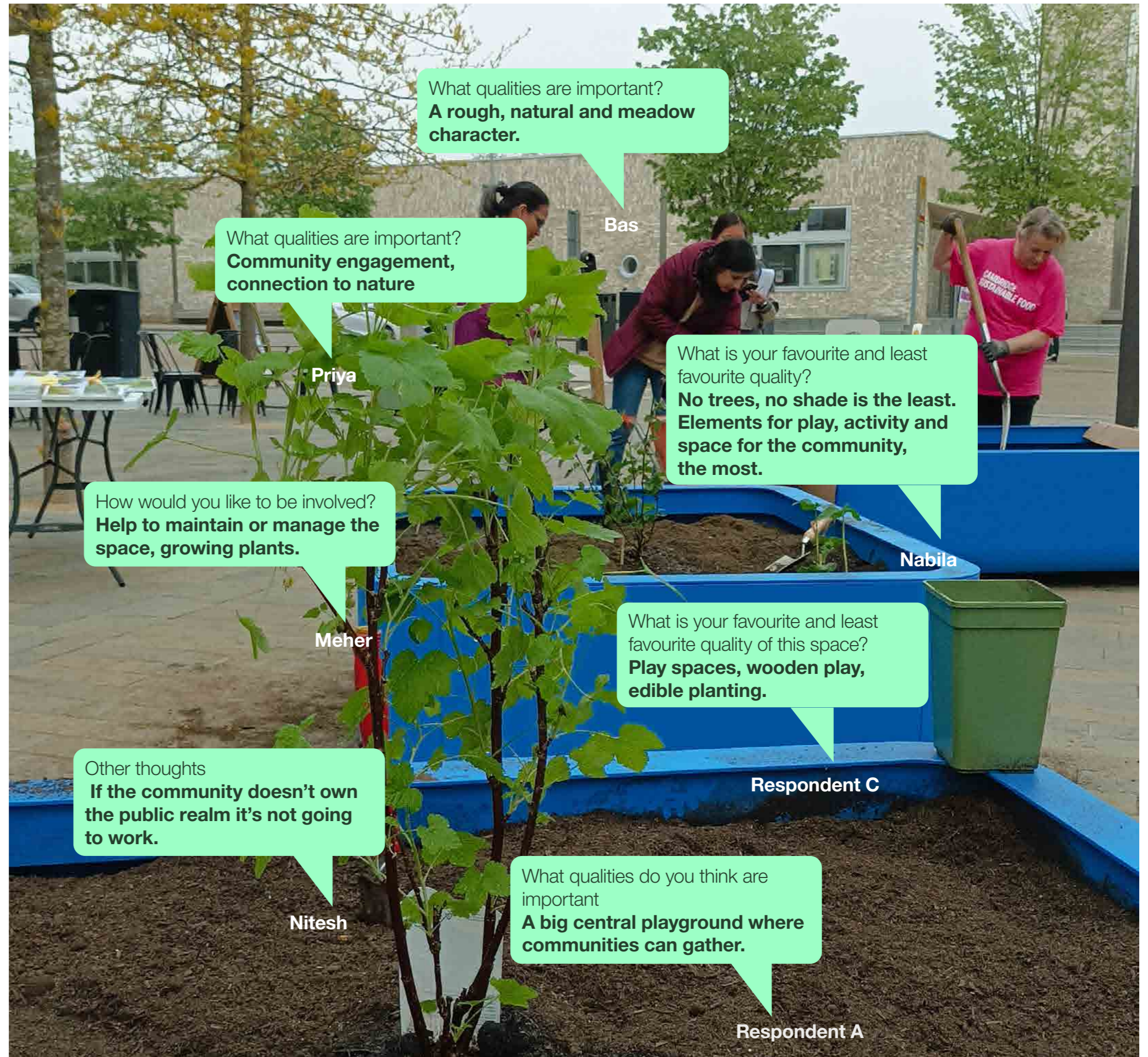
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Key takeaways

Resident interviews reinforced the key insights from the literature review: that contact with nature, opportunities to meet neighbours, play, and active participation are central to the enjoyment of a place.

They also indicated that a degree of facilitation is appreciated in fostering neighbourliness—such as through organised events or supported activities.

Finally, the interviews affirmed the relevance of these observations across both permanent and transient communities. Notably, residents expected to remain on-site for approximately 3 to 5 years showed equal levels of engagement and interest in activities—like gardening—that might initially appear suited to longer-term settlement.



Conclusion

Using the design strategies

This research has distilled key themes and translated them into guiding questions. Inevitably, categorising the bibliography into thematic groups involves a degree of subjectivity—there are many possible ways to “slice the pie.” What matters most is that the themes were selected with a clear purpose, to inform design strategies.

Design strategies, by nature, can sometimes create tension with one another—for example, the contrast between calmness and stimulation. Such tensions should not be seen as flaws; they are intrinsic to design. The designer’s role is to balance these opposing qualities, calibrating each to suit the specific context.

Some strategies are already embedded in our collective understanding of what makes a good place. For instance, the benefits of living close to nature are widely recognised. Others, however, are less familiar such as the sense of agency and belonging that emerges when space is left for the unknown, or the way complexity and stimulation can enhance the brain’s plasticity. All of these strategies are significant, and therefore included.

Crucially, the themes gain meaning only through their materialisation in design strategies. Internal testing during the refinement of the guiding questions showed that they are most effective when paired with diagrams that illustrate potential design responses.

Ultimately, the aim has been to support designers and design stakeholders—such as developing teams or communities—in recognising the impact of intuitive decisions and refining those decisions toward more thoughtful, context-sensitive outcomes.





Impact

Why is this research important?

The built environment can play a crucial role in public health: Designing buildings and spaces that support physical and mental wellbeing can reduce reliance on the NHS and foster a healthier, more resilient society.

Designers can contribute to health outcomes

By integrating health, science, and education in building/ spatial design, designers can help address systemic issues like ageing infrastructure and health inequalities highlighted in Lord Darzi's 2024 report on the state of the NHS (*Darzi, 2024*).

Historical principles still matter

Florence Nightingale's emphasis on hygiene, ventilation, and access to nature remains relevant today, underscoring the need for people-centric environments that promote prevention as well as recovery after illness/medical intervention.

Prevention through design

Thoughtful architectural interventions demonstrate how spaces can support preventative care and mental respite, reducing the need for hospital admissions.

A collective responsibility

Improving population health through the built environment requires collaboration. Architects, planners, developers, and government must design beyond individual buildings to serve broader societal needs. Masterplanning / visioning and new towns will need to embed the principles of prevention and health creation if our society is going to thrive.

People are at the heart of all good design. We have to think about their basic needs, which include but are not limited to:

- Access to clean air, water, and spaces
- Access to nutritious food and the ability to be active
- Agency
- Safe, secure and supportive environments
- A healthcare system that looks after both preventive and reactionary health
- Social connection, purpose and mental wellness

North West Cambridge

Eddington, Cambridge

CB3 1AA

c. 110 ha



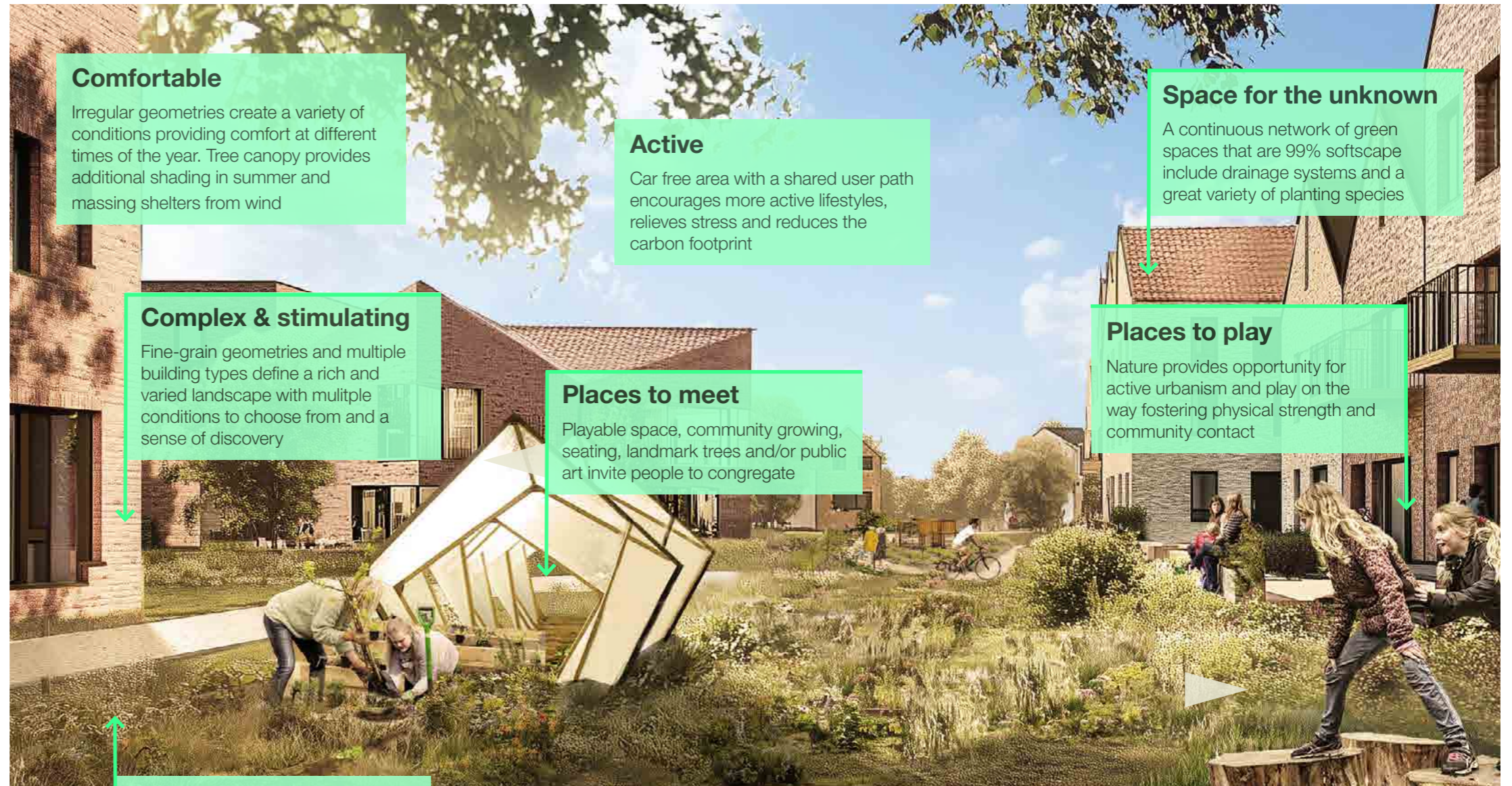
100m

Relevance

Emerging masterplan for North West Cambridge where the principles emerging from this research can be tested.

Conclusions

A diverse collection of spaces that embody the essential ingredients for healthy and sustainable neighbourhoods. These spaces are intimate and inviting, encouraging people to dwell. Their layouts and visual richness create complexity and stimulation. Nature is integrated and brought to residents' doorsteps within safe, car-free environments. The design promotes walking and physical activity in thermally comfortable settings, while offering seating, shelter, and opportunities for social interaction. Play areas, both incidental and equipped, are natural in character, and the overall design leaves room for future communities to take part in the stewardship and management of these spaces, as highlighted in resident interviews.



Comfortable

Irregular geometries create a variety of conditions providing comfort at different times of the year. Tree canopy provides additional shading in summer and massing shelters from wind

Active

Car free area with a shared user path encourages more active lifestyles, relieves stress and reduces the carbon footprint

Space for the unknown

A continuous network of green spaces that are 99% softscape include drainage systems and a great variety of planting species

Complex & stimulating

Fine-grain geometries and multiple building types define a rich and varied landscape with multiple conditions to choose from and a sense of discovery

Places to meet

Playable space, community growing, seating, landmark trees and/or public art invite people to congregate

Places to play

Nature provides opportunity for active urbanism and play on the way fostering physical strength and community contact

Next to nature

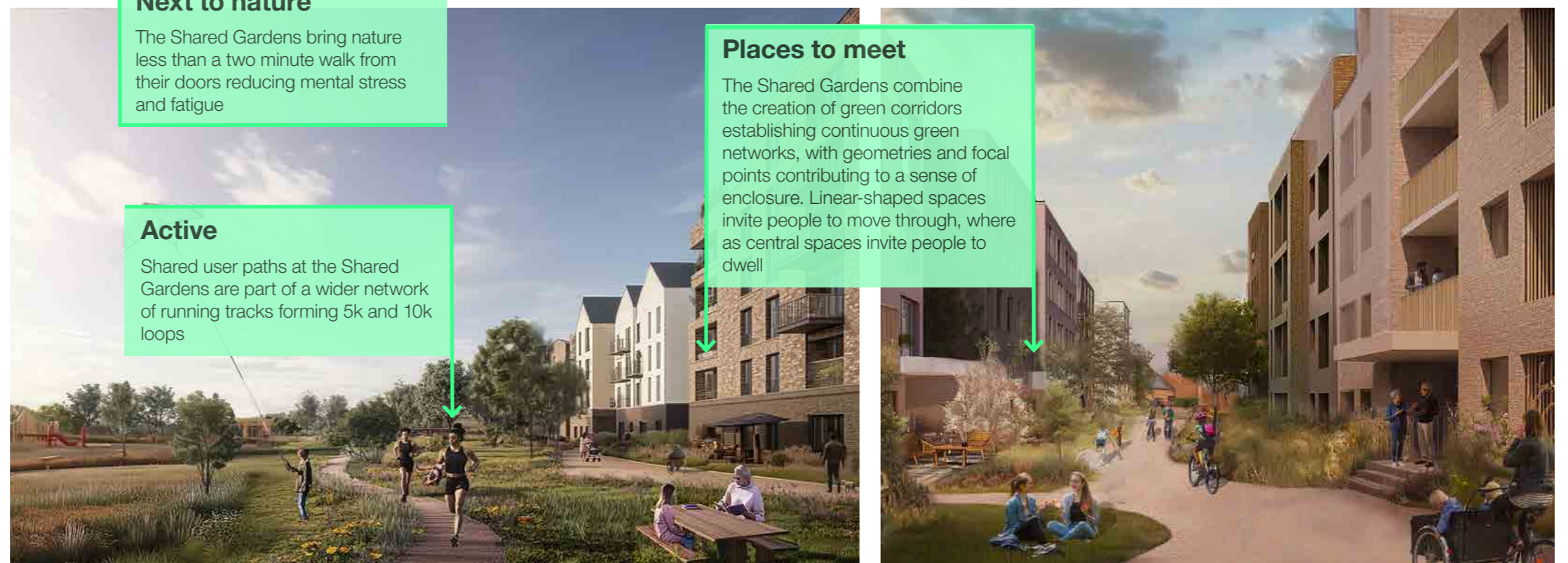
The Shared Gardens bring nature less than a two minute walk from their doors reducing mental stress and fatigue

Places to meet

The Shared Gardens combine the creation of green corridors establishing continuous green networks, with geometries and focal points contributing to a sense of enclosure. Linear-shaped spaces invite people to move through, where as central spaces invite people to dwell

Active

Shared user paths at the Shared Gardens are part of a wider network of running tracks forming 5k and 10k loops



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Appendix

Design for Flourishing
(separate PDF file)

Hawkins\Brown

MAX FORDHAM



London
Manchester
Edinburgh
Dublin
Toronto