

SOCIALLY RESTORATIVE URBANISM

**The theory, process and
practice of Experiemics**



**Kevin Thwaites,
Alice Mathers
and Ian Simkins**

ROUTLEDGE

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Socially Restorative Urbanism

The need for a human-orientated approach to urbanism is well understood, and yet all too often this dimension remains lacking in urban design. In this book the authors argue for and develop socially restorative urbanism – a new conceptual framework laying the foundations for innovative ways of thinking about the relationship between the urban spatial structure and social processes to re-introduce a more explicit people-centred element into urban place-making and its adaptation.

Focusing on this interplay between humans and the built environment, two new concepts are developed: the *transitional edge* – a socio-spatial concept of the urban realm; and *Experiemics* – a participative process that acts to redress imbalances in territorial relationships, defined in terms of the awareness of *mine, theirs, ours* and *yours* (MTOY).

In this way, *Socially Restorative Urbanism* shows how professional practice and community understanding can be brought together in a mutually interdependent and practical way. Its theoretical and practical principles are applicable across a wide range of contexts concerning human benefit through urban environmental change and experience, and it will be of interest to readers in the social sciences and environmental psychology, as well as the spatial planning and design disciplines.

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Alice Mathers is Innovation Manager at the Tinder Foundation and a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Landscape at the University of Sheffield, UK. Her work is driven by an interdisciplinary approach to people–environment interactions, which straddles the academic boundaries of landscape architecture, planning, sociology, disability studies, human geography and environmental psychology. Her doctoral and post-doctoral research with disabled people seeks to challenge current professional and societal constraints that inhibit the involvement of under-represented communities in environmental planning and design, and has received considerable attention from policy-makers and the international academic community.

Ian Simkins is a freelance lecturer and Managing Director of Experiemics Ltd. the consultancy of Experiential Landscape, whose overall strategy is to develop and apply an integrated approach to teaching, research and practice. The work has developed theoretical principles and practical methodologies focused on socially inclusive approaches to landscape and urban design, participative practices and experiential mapping methodologies.

Preface

This book presents socially restorative urbanism as an exploration towards the development of a new disciplinary position which places human experience at the forefront of how the urban places that people occupy are understood and made. It follows and is underpinned by our earlier work in *Experiential Landscape* (Thwaites and Simkins, 2007) and represents the most recent stage of an ongoing journey involving research, teaching and practice onwards to what we might hope to be a growing understanding of the relationship that people have with the routine environments they inhabit and use. Like *Experiential Landscape*, we present this very much in the spirit of ongoing enquiry. We hope that it will provide a platform from which further discussions and avenues of exploration might arise.

The content of this book owes much to opportunities provided by the UK Leverhulme Trust who, through the award of a research grant in 2008, allowed us the time and space to work through some ideas about how we might further develop the ethos of *Experiential Landscape* and some of its methods more effectively for use in practice. At the time we imagined this as a 'toolkit' of methods and procedures that would give practitioners the necessary know-how and practical means with which to empower a larger cross-section of society to express their environmental experiences and influence processes of change to places they use. We decided that the best way to do this would be to work in partnership with some of the most voiceless of the voiceless in society: those who most often have their environmental circumstances imposed upon them by specialist professional processes that can often overshadow the value of authentic lived experience. We felt that if we could develop a participatory toolkit that would not only bring out

the voices of these groups but also make them influential as inclusive partners in the processes of change, then we might have something that would be equally applicable, and effective, for other, perhaps less extremely disenfranchised sections of society. The story behind the development of this process, which has come to be called the *Experiemic Process*, and the huge debt of gratitude that we owe to our participant groups of young children and people with learning disabilities, is told in Part III of the book.

But other, less expected, things occurred along this journey. Our work in *Experiential Landscape* had always highlighted that, echoing the words of E.F Schumacher, 'Small is Beautiful' (Schumacher, 1973). At the level of ordinary lived experience, it is seldom the grand environmental gestures that impact the most, but the small, often almost invisibly small, differences that make the greatest impact on the quality of a day-to-day life. Moreover, it is the experience of having some level of control over these differences that can matter even more and this depends crucially on being able to experience our routine surroundings at a human scale. The impact and perhaps the wider significance of this awareness came into vividly illuminated focus by the work that we did with our participant groups. It is not the experience of participation itself that counts, even in its most well-meaning and empathic form, if all this leads to is the delivery of information back into professional arenas for re-interpretation. While clearly better than nothing at all, in many instances, this simply represents a lesser, but nonetheless equally invidious form of disenfranchisement. Voices may be heard, but control is once again shorn and returned to professionalised processes. Gradually, to greater or lesser extent, society as a whole comes to accept the belief that decisions about the form, fabric and management of our everyday surroundings are almost entirely a matter for professional concern. There are three lessons that we learned from our experiences here that we would like to draw attention to before beginning the book.

One is that we must somehow learn to value more explicitly the social gains implicit in participatory acts. Done well, it is not just about informing better material changes, it is also about recognising and giving value to the gain in self-esteem, self-confidence and environmental competence that participants derive from their experience as inclusive partners in participative activity. Even when little or perhaps no immediate material change results, there are still gains at individual and group levels which raise the sum total of social capital available in localities. Part III will explain this in relation to our learning disability and school children colleagues.

Second is that if small is indeed beautiful, and that if a measure of control must somehow pass back to people, whoever they are and in whatever circumstances they find themselves, then change must be made possible at often very small levels of human scale, and, moreover, it must become possible for such small acts of change to be visible, and be a meaningful and valued part of the public realm: human self-esteem depends on this, at least in part. Working alongside our architectural and urban design colleagues, we believe this requires a radical re-think about the scale of urban place-making and the extent to which this can, once again, be made more time-conscious, bringing it within reach of adaptability and change at local levels under the, at least partial, control of individuals and groups who inhabit and use it. Here, again we realise that participation is not enough: even participation that sets out to empower and transfer decision-making. Control is only effective if the infrastructure is configured in ways amenable to such small and localised acts of adaptation. Simple common sense supports this: many people will happily, and often with impressive levels of ambition, cultivate and manage a front garden, display goods for sale on a streetfront, assemble tables and chairs in a courtyard café, for their own benefit and that of their community, but few would willingly set about such expressive acts within the sort of wide-open, mown grass wilderness spaces typical of many UK 1950s and 1960s housing estates. In simple terms, if a job looks manageable for people, it is likely to get done, if it doesn't, the chances are that nothing will happen, despite the need or desire: it will simply be left as someone else's problem. We will try to demonstrate in what follows that this is as much a matter of urban morphology as it is of citizen participation and empowerment. Our contribution to this is to discuss the importance of what we have called here *transitional edges*. It means, in essence, accepting loose and ambiguous margins at the interface of material form and human occupation as a fundamental component of socially responsive urban environments.

Third, and finally, is perhaps the most challenging lesson of all. This is that the kind of participatory processes and the approach to urban morphology that we have sketched out here cannot be understood as discrete matters: they must, somehow, come to be understood as two mutually supportive elements in an integrated system. The major challenge here as we see it is that of disciplinary divisions. The kind of 'real world' we see here is one in which the physical and spatial infrastructure of the built environment continues to deliver necessary stable structures that can then be occupied and used by people: clearly, we will need appropriately trained and skilled professional agents for this purpose, but of a different kind to the ones separated by

artificial professional and disciplinary boundaries. Equally important, however, is the need for occupiers to be able to express themselves in this process. This is so that their occupation, place-making and subsequent community development is not simply 'accommodated' but becomes an integral part of the way the locality establishes itself, grows, adapts and changes according to prevailing local circumstances to create 'belonging'. In other words, people should be able to have more control over how and what their places 'become' and how that 'becoming' expresses its uniqueness and identity (Figure 0.1).

There is in this an implicit balance of 'top-down' professional planning and design decision-making and 'bottom-up' processes of local empowerment and self-organisation. This is not a question of either one or the other, as is often implied in discourse on these matters, but of a need for mutually accommodating and supportive approaches to both: a closer integration of sociological and psychological issues and the environmental planning and design professions. Achieving this may also require a shift in the focus of attention in relation to urban form



Figure 0.1: The socially restorative urban environment is spatially porous, absorbent of diverse social activity, expressive of human habitation and adaptable to changes in space and time. Cooking in old Delhi, India.

away from the present duality of built form and open space towards a more holistic socio-spatial conception of the interface between material form and processes of human habitation. Collectively, this may imply that progress towards more socially sustainable urban solutions may need modifications to, or even new directions in, our prevailing professional structures.

Acknowledgements

This book brings together a wide range of ideas and experiences drawn from an ongoing process of exploration, through our research, teaching and practice, into the relationships people develop with places they use in the course of everyday life. In many ways it is a collective work which tries to bring thoughts and ideas developed over several years from many places and with many people into a framework for further discussion, research, teaching and practice that we hope will help make the human urban habitat better. We are indebted to our many friends and colleagues who have freely contributed the time, ideas, expertise, wisdom and often extraordinary insight that have made this book possible. We pay particular tribute in this respect to Sergio Porta and Ombretta Romice at the Urban Design Studies Unit, University of Strathclyde, who have been with us every step of the way with boundless and unreserved collaboration, helping to shape our ideas about urban spatial organisation in particular. Especially important in this respect is the Urban Design Studies Unit's work on the formulation of plot-based urbanism, a radical human-orientated approach to urban morphology and an intrinsic influence on many ideas developed in Part I.

From the work with Ombretta and Sergio came the opportunity to develop and convene a symposium for the 'Continuity and Change of Built Environments: Housing, Culture and Space across Lifespans' conference in Daegu, South Korea in October 2011. This provided a valuable chance to bring together some developing ideas about urban spatial order and to have the opportunity to weave these together with the work of our symposium contributors. In this respect, in addition to Ombretta and Sergio, we are especially grateful for the expertise and generosity

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