

NOVELTY AND NOSTALGIA IN URBAN GREENSPACE: REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES

CLARE RISHBETH* & NISSA FINNEY**

**Department of Landscape, Arts Tower, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 2TN, UK.*

E-mail: c.rishbeth@sheffield.ac.uk

***Department of Geography, The University of Liverpool, Liverpool, L69 7ZT, UK.*

E-mail: nissa.finney@liverpool.ac.uk

Received: January 2005; revised July 2005

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates migrants' perceptions and experiences of urban greenspaces. The research used innovative participatory and visual (photography) methods and the 12 week programme included visits to 10 greenspaces in Sheffield. The participants were all asylum seekers and refugees from Asia and Africa. This paper discusses how and why the participants engaged or disengaged with local greenspace in the short and medium term. In particular, the importance of memory and nostalgia in participants' experiences; the significance of plants; the novelty of visiting British 'parks'; and the role of greenspace in enhancing the quality of life of immigrants are explored. The paper concludes that a positive impression of the local environment and meaningful participation in it can be a useful component of integration into a new society. Furthermore, recognition of landscape elements or characteristics can provide a conceptual link between former and new homes. However, for this refugee group many physical and psychological barriers must be overcome if the full benefits of urban public open space are to be realised.

Key words: Public open space, refugees, memory, participatory research, visual methods, Sheffield

INTRODUCTION

Access and use of public open space has been shown to have wide-ranging benefits for human wellbeing. In particular, spaces that are green and represent nature within an urban context are seen as a positive part of the life of many urban dwellers. This benefit is understood to be both physical (providing opportunities for both gentle and energetic exercise) and psychological (reducing stress by providing places of escape and play) (ODPM 2002; Woolley 2003). In looking at these benefits may be realised by different sectors of society, it is important to recognise the specific potential for groups and individuals who may often be disenfranchised from recreational opportunities. This research

considers the experience and possible advantages for asylum seekers and refugees.¹

Most research undertaken regarding refugees and asylum seekers focuses on basic rights, legalities and on experiences of migration, with wider quality of life issues receiving little attention (Stewart 2004). Themes such as leisure and relaxation preferences and healthy living habits of refugees are under-researched by the relevant academic fields. This paper discusses the opportunities of the city environment for refugees and asylum seekers, and explores how urban greenspaces may be accessed and enjoyed as restorative experiences.

Use of urban greenspaces for recreation has the important advantage of being local and free of charge. In and near British cities there are a

range of types of public landscape including municipal parks and playgrounds, overgrown cemeteries, regenerated wasteland, local nature reserves, canal side walks and country parks. How residents of a city chose to use – or not use – these diverse spaces can depend on factors of convenience, need for facilities and, crucially, preferences and perceptions of green space developed through the course of their life experience.

Theories of environmental preference have been developed by cultural geographers and environmental psychologists to explore the link between people, place and constructs of nature (Porteous 1996). The extent to which background and cultural identity shape patterns of visual and experiential preference is fundamental to this enquiry but defies simple resolution. The Kaplans' work (for example, Kaplan & Kaplan 1982) emphasises the importance of the conceptual understandings of landscape, that the 'environment extends beyond the physically present objects to those that are potentially present . . . memories of past experiences, images of distant lands and of not-yet-present futures' (p. 3). The underlying stories, myths and resonances are in part formed by a shared history and are in part personal. Cultural understandings may be shaped by religious or social beliefs and practices, or by the characteristics of the landscape itself (Tuan 1974; Dearden 1989; Gell 1995). The combination of physical and human complexities of urban environments, and the rate of change of these factors prompt further issues regarding the 'place and placeness' of cities (Relph 1976); of how social identity may be understood and addressed, not only in personal responses to places but in the design of the public realm.

The term 'place attachment' (Altman & Low 1992) was coined to describe the strength of association between a person's culture and personal identity and places known to them. Typically, this is demonstrated by long-term connections, for example in agrarian societies and in close knit neighbourhoods where residence spans generations. The importance of childhood memories of experiencing landscape in forming adult preferences is highlighted in this and other studies (Lyons 1983; Ward Thompson 2004). Though this experience may resonate with individuals, it can potentially be used to

imply insular, insider positioning to be of prime importance regarding concern and engagement with locality. Equating belonging and familiarity is problematic in many contexts, but particularly in cities, such as Sheffield, characterised by mobile, transnational populations.

The landscape experience of migrant communities and individuals, and how the physical break with the homeland of childhood may affect relationships to landscapes of the new country is relatively under-researched. The relationship between familiarity and environmental preference is important to address in this context (Riley 1992). The experience of moving from one country, climate and culture to another affects individuals differently. Research has been carried out which looks at the role of the physical environment in culture shock (Churchman & Mitrani 1997), adjustments of leisure patterns (Tirone & Shaw 1997; Stodolska 1998) and the role of objects and homemaking in adjusting and making links with the new culture (Bir 1992; Boym 2001). Though generally not directly connected to the experience of public open space, these studies point to the importance of involvement and embodied experience of physical relocation. The role of environment, and the chance to participate in the life and process of change of a person's immediate location, can be linked to issues of territoriality and representation (Rishbeth 2001).

Studies on differences in environmental preference by ethnicity, and perceptions of the familiar and the exotic, are contradictory (Nasar 1988). The body of literature points to subtle personal distinctions between high/low familiarity being a negative experience ('That's old stuff'/'That's very strange') or a positive one ('There's no place like home'/'That's wonderful'), (Porteous 1996, p. 126). Churchman & Mitrani (1997), in a study of preference of Russian (sic) migrants in Israel found that the number and type of parks were aspects of the homeland neighbourhood environment most strongly missed by migrants. Crucially, this was less strongly experienced by people who had a positive reason for migration. There is also scattered but consistent evidence that immigrants often frame new landscapes as a reminder of past landscapes. Examples of nostalgia being actively triggered by views and

experiences of outdoor landscapes are described in a number of studies across a range of different landscape types (Burgess *et al.* 1988, Wong 1996; Rishbeth 2004).

These themes relate to use of public space and particularly why public space may or may not be used by people from different ethnic backgrounds. There is a body of evidence that suggests that black and Asian communities visit the countryside and urban open spaces less frequently than people from white communities (Morris 2003). Some research has been carried out, mainly in the United States, which supports the recognition of diversity of patterns of use according to ethnic background in local urban parks (Loukaitou-Sideris 1995; Zhang & Gobster 1998). These studies are useful but limited by a tendency to focus on one particular type of landscape, large municipal parks. They also rely primarily on quantitative methods, leading to relatively weak findings with regard to sense of personal identity and affection for place. Burgess *et al.* (1988) provide a more comprehensive insight into the issues in their study of London Parks using focus groups, in which themes of nostalgia for past landscapes and social use of parks emerged as key issues. A study of Independence Park in Philadelphia, also explores issues of interpretation and engagement with an historical landscape by local people from diverse ethnic groups (Low *et al.* 2002). Current research focuses almost exclusively on settled migrant communities, rather than the experience of comparatively isolated and unsettled refugees and asylum seekers.

The paucity of research in this area limits an understanding of meanings associated with landscape and recreation held by refugee migrants, and leads to policies, design and management of public spaces for this (potential) user group based on guesswork. The aim of this research project was to investigate the experience of exploring local urban greenspace by a group of refugee participants. It addressed short- and long-term motivations and barriers to visiting, and examined preferences for differing landscape types. In particular, it hoped to understand how experiential knowledges of landscapes of home and settlement interact, and how refugees make sense of the new environments in the light of their past experiences. In order to achieve this depth of analysis in a

small-scale project, it was decided to utilise qualitative, longitudinal and participatory methodologies. We considered it important that participants from the refugee community, seldom given a public 'voice', were able to represent their own narratives of exploring landscapes.

METHODOLOGY

The project aimed to take an innovative approach to landscape research, and attempted to address some of the limitations of traditional qualitative research techniques such as interviews, focus groups or written accounts. In particular, the methods used give greater priority to experiential and visual forms of enquiry, and achieving a more equal sharing of 'benefit' between participant and researcher. We combined emerging qualitative research methods and ideas, freely adapting these to achieve objectives with regard to the research topic and to respond to the specific nature of the participant group.

The research was developed in close partnership with TIV,² a voluntary sector media training organisation. 'Fieldwork' was conducted by means of a twelve week Open College Network accredited basic photography programme, the subject of which was urban open space. In total there were six participants, all asylum seekers and refugees, and ten sites in Sheffield were visited. Techniques for using the photographic output as part of the research included on-site tasks (such as taking photos to express themes) and workshop-based photo-elicitation activities such as individual and group discussions, producing collages and preparation for a photographic exhibition (Harper 2002; Banks 2001). Participants also took a photo journal of outdoor places they visited independently over the course of a week. Taking photographs was an enjoyable activity for the group and allowed the topics that were explored to be partially participant-directed.

By undertaking visits the group was able to jointly explore a range of open spaces and record their experiences through taking photos. Types of urban greenspace were chosen to differ in terms of their purpose, size, spatial qualities and vegetation types; and included highly managed formal gardens, world plant

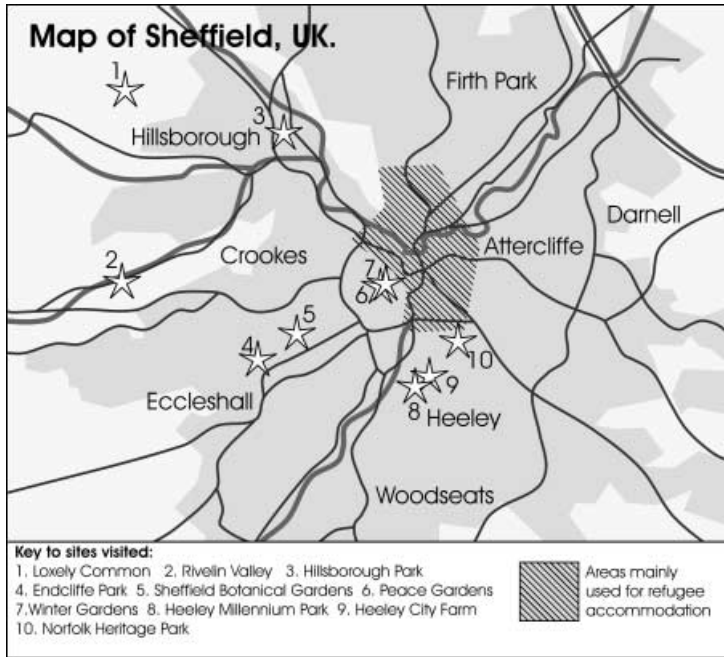


Figure 1. Location of sites.

collections, Victorian heritage parks, semi-natural urban fringe woodland and heathland, a community managed park and urban farm, plus two park-based festivals (Figure 1). As part of the group, researchers were able to observe and discuss immediate reactions with participants (Burgess 1995).

The methodology employed for this project was to a large extent successful. The photography course ensured twelve weeks of contact with participants which was invaluable in building trust and a supportive environment for discussion with this refugee and asylum seeker group. An important principle in developing the methodology was that participants should receive tangible benefit from taking part in the research. The success in retaining all six participants, despite their complex and unstructured life situations, should be noted. The participants benefited not only from the training provision, but also from the enjoyable experience of the park visits and the development of friendly relationships within the project group.

Using photography generated rich research material and to some extent overcame language barriers. However, our collaboration with TIV

was not unproblematic, largely because of our different expectations and definitions of photography training. As a result, the participants did not develop their skills of visually communicating their experiences of landscape as well as we had hoped (for further discussion of dilemmas raised in collaborative landscape research, see Finney & Rishbeth 2006). Nevertheless, this project's focus on visual and experiential qualitative methods gave an insight into a marginalised group's experiences of urban greenspace that would have been impossible with more traditional approaches.

The participants – The six participants (five male, one female) were all asylum seekers or refugees living in Sheffield. They ranged in age from 17 to 45. They were from Afghanistan, Rwanda, Somalia, Zimbabwe and Liberia and have lived in the UK between 6 months and 2 1/2 years. Some had the right of permanent residence (refugee status), others had been granted humanitarian protection with time-limited leave to remain in the UK, and one was appealing against a refusal decision of his asylum application. Mostly they were living in

council flats, were unemployed (either officially or without permission to work) and undertaking English classes. With the exception of the youngest participant, all were separated from other members of their family. The participants seemed to enjoy living in Sheffield, and on a number of occasions volunteered comments on the friendliness of the city. Most had lived elsewhere in the UK for a number of months, and compared Sheffield favourably to these other places.

A limited amount of information was gleaned throughout the project about the home country backgrounds of the participants, and researchers used a final individual interview to confirm and clarify this. The African participants generally had some level of education and spoke English with reasonable proficiency. The two Afghani men had low standards of English and no formal educational background. All had lived in cities for some or most of their lives. However, all were familiar with staying with relatives in rural areas and therefore had common experiences of both urban and rural living and a strong sense of the countryside as a productive landscape. The experience of living in a near continuous war situation in Afghanistan meant that the Afghani participants had been restricted in their use of the public environment both rural and urban.

Analysis and dissemination – The materials used in order to investigate the research themes included participants' photographs, individual and group interviews, and observations made by researchers during the project.³ This material was engaged with reflexively, with the use of NUDIST 6 qualitative analysis software to aid in organising themes. The primary 'public face' output of the research was a touring exhibition that was displayed in public locations in Sheffield and in professional contexts throughout the UK. The exhibition was curated in order to express research findings by combining participants' photographs with quotes from interviews and discussions.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF VISITS TO OPEN SPACES

Analysis of the material initially focused on the group members' immediate reactions to the

open spaces; that which attracted or confused; and which aspects emerged as the focus of photography and discussions. These have been organised into two key themes of 'novelty' and 'nostalgia'.

The general response to the sites was almost entirely positive, yet involvement in the project did not appear to translate into increased use of urban greenspace as a leisure facility by the participants. Therefore it was important to question the findings at a deeper level of longer-term engagement and detachment from greenspace environments. Our understandings of the participants' everyday life priorities, gained through our ongoing contact with the group, proved to be essential in allowing us to set the 'Viewfinder' experience into the wider context of refugee life. Through this process of addressing both the 'hooks' of different types of urban greenspace, and ongoing development of attachment, the research has attempted to identify implications for greenspace design and management, for refugee integration and issues to be addressed in future research.

Novelty – New experiences encountered in the parks surprised participants during the visits. Some of the participants had experienced life in large cities in Africa and had some memories of park space in their childhood, but for others (especially the Afghani) the concept of a park was entirely new. There was little collective understanding of the range of parks and urban green spaces in the UK, or prior understanding of what might be expected of these places. This was especially the case with places that challenged the traditional municipal park image: the city farm, the semi-natural areas or the botanical collections. This element of surprise was usually positive, and the group often expressed delight at what they were learning or experiencing for the first time. The visits contrasted with their fairly routine everyday experiences, and proved to be popular with most participants as relaxing, stimulating and social occasions.

Though the participants found the existence and character of many of the green spaces unexpected, certain items were particularly unusual and provoked amusement. The position of the researchers often became that of cultural interpreters, explaining the purpose or



Figure 2. *Hanging baskets at Heeley City Farm.*

use of specific elements in the parks. Some of these would be considered novel by the designers and most visitors, such as an artificial climbing boulder in the community park, and public artwork such as a carved totem pole. However, some elements which were new to the participants would not normally be seen as unusual within a British context. The concept of providing boxes in trees for birds to live in seemed to simultaneously shock and delight the group and was one memorable moment when the cultural divide between their home countries and the UK was illuminated. Though the group were aware of the purpose of play equipment most had not experienced playing on it before. Once we had assured them that this was allowed they enjoyed the fun of this new opportunity. The collection of hanging baskets in the city farm equally provided them with a source of joy at the beauty of the flowers and was a popular backdrop for photos (Figure 2).

A slightly different aspect of novelty that the visits offered the participants was opportunities to make sense of the city of Sheffield; geographically, historically and culturally. The role of the researchers as 'tour guides' was important in this respect; most of the group seemed to find the potted history given at the beginning of

each site visit interesting. Sites which revealed something of their history through their physical character, for example, mill chases, overgrown quarries and ceremonial gateways, intrigued participants and tended to prompt questions. Participants highlighted the importance of the 'educational value' of visiting parks, valuing the fact that they could learn more about Britain. They also enjoyed views out across Sheffield that allowed them to comprehend a wider impression of the city beyond their normal routes.

This combination of surprise, pleasure and discovering new aspects of life in Sheffield emerged as important benefits of visiting the parks. In contrast to the mundane and dreary qualities of the participants' daily lives, green spaces provide experiences that are visually attractive and encourage a playful, carefree attitude. Surprise expressed by participants seemed not only to relate to the unexpected elements in the park, but in the overall quality of life available to them in the UK. One participant pointed out that the playground was very good because it was important to have things for children, and compared this to his home country of Afghanistan where there was no such provision. Items such as bird boxes, fountains and



Figure 3. *Rivelin Valley: 'It remind me of when I was a little boy and me and my grandfather used to walk in the forest during the rainy season'.*

floral displays were startling to the participants not simply because they didn't know that they existed, but because they pointed to a lifestyle where pleasurable aspects of life are able to be publicly valued and freely shared.

Nostalgia – Participants' first impressions of the sites visited often elicited feelings of nostalgia, as they were reminded of places and times that they had known in the past. Often these reminders combined with a sense of surprise that not all aspects of British environments were unfamiliar to them. Though participants were enthusiastic and seemed happy when talking about these reminders of home, they also occasionally acknowledged that there were more complex emotions of loss raised by these experiences.

Some of the more naturalistic sites reminded participants from Africa of their home countries in terms of their landscape character. One was a highly wooded river valley (Rivelin Valley), which prompted discussion of rivers in rural areas. The other was a high-level common ground (Loxley Common), characterised by heather, birch woodland and large rock boulders

– remnants of quarrying activity now colonised by pioneer vegetation. Both the woodland and the rocks seemed to be significant in prompting detailed memories.

This place remind me of when I live in Sierra Leone . . . It remind me about the forest and the mountain and the rock . . . The bush was so green and the day was foggy you know. It remind me of when I was a little boy and me and my grandfather used to walk in the forest during the rainy season. [This place] surprised me. (Lamin, 30, from Liberia, in Sheffield for six months; Figure 3).

Landscapes and plants became the starting point for stories, small vignettes about home life, family outings, relaxation or leisure activities. 'This is like the road that we walked down to go to our farm' (Lamin, Liberia), 'my country there are lots of big rocks . . . people they used to climb them . . . sit up on them' (Firmina, Rwanda), 'In the village where we used to go at weekends, it was in the foothills of the mountains and we used to go climbing' (Mansoor, Afghanistan). Even the traditionally English activity of bowls in a formal park



Figure 4. 'When I find this I am reminded of my own country', Firmina.

prompted a memory of a game of stones that is played in Somalia. These observations allowed participants to express something about their past experience of normality, and to relate this normality to a British context. This could be with regard to a specific element of the landscape (rocks, trees), to activities or to social use of outdoor space.

Ward Thompson (2004) outlines the importance of childhood experiences of woodland in forming adult appreciation of woodland recreation in a study focused on Scottish adults and memories of Scottish woodlands. The Viewfinder research allows an insight into the question of how *alike* do these woodland environments need to be for nostalgia to play a role in appreciation of place. It suggests that childhood nostalgia for natural environments is not based on an 'exact fit' of memory to current landscape.

In many objective ways – botanically, geographically, culturally – the landscapes of Yorkshire and, for example, Rwanda, are very different. But these places, especially naturalistic environments, are 'open to interpretation'. People bring their own stories, and their analysis of character of place is strongly experiential. A woodland, located in a specific location, with

specific visual characteristics, can be recognised as 'home-like' by people whose home is in many different countries. In this sense, our landscapes are naturally 'multicultural'. This is not to claim that landscapes are interchangeable. It is significant that the two Afghani participants generally did not find links between the comparatively lush environments of lowland Britain and the rugged open spaces of their home country. The memories that they described were more likely to focus on social occasions or outdoor activities.

Participants were delighted on the number of occasions when they found plants from their home country. Though this was sometimes in naturalistic locations (poppies and ferns in woodlands), most significant to the group were visits to the two greenhouse world plant collections in Sheffield, the Botanic Gardens and the Winter Gardens. Multi-sensory experiences of the plants were important.

The smell is very nice . . . I don't know how I can explain it . . . when I found this it reminded me of my home country. It's good, it's nice. (Firmina, 25, from Rwanda, in the UK for two years; Figure 4).

Boym (2001) raises issues of how experiences of nostalgia can be both a looking back (reflective nostalgia) and a means of integrating your past within a new future (restorative nostalgia). Though participants did relay their memories as a simple means of looking back at their past lives, in some cases these feelings were articulated as a means of making sense of their current identity as people from Africa or Asia living in the UK. With regard to the world plant collections, it also placed them in the position of being experts, in contrast to their usual UK experience.

The Botanical Gardens was great. Every student on that course said 'oh yeah, I know this from my country'. That was pleasing, to listen to the British people say 'this is an exotic plant', and I was saying 'no, this is indigenous, it grows in the wild!' That was great. (Tendero, male, age 25 approximately, from Zimbabwe, in the UK for less than one year).

Participants expressed feelings of pride when seeing and talking about plants from their home country, and identified these two gardens as being especially welcoming to them. This expression of the importance of being able to retain their national identity was also supported in the recognition of familiar landscape types. Firmina felt that in visiting Loxley Common with the rocks she could remind herself of what it is like to be in Rwanda, and even expressed a proposal for the future: 'When I want to feel like someone who is in Rwanda I can go there'. These findings suggest that visiting parks and greenspaces and recognising familiar aspects of these can be helpful to refugees in integrating past and present locations and experiences.

ONGOING INDEPENDENT VISITS

Due to the longitudinal nature of the project, we were able to identify the gap between the positive first impressions participants had of visiting a park with the possibility of repeated visits. Through discussion with participants, use of photo journals and post-project interviews, the research aimed to place the 'first impressions' of the staged visits into a wider context of how refugees may or may not visit urban parks and greenspaces on an ongoing basis. Below we

address aspects that engaged participants over time and those which resulted in detachment.

Engagement – Though our participants were diverse in cultural background, levels of confidence, interests and physical abilities, all of them needed to be able to *envisage realistic possibilities of life benefits* in visiting the parks as a prerequisite to returning. Within this statement two key characteristics need to come together: being able to envisage personal benefits to visiting the sites, and the requirement that visiting the sites can be seen as 'realistic'. In this discussion of engagement, we concentrate on factors which positively support repeat visits. Examination of the barriers and what hinders 'realistic access' is presented in the detachment section below.

Opportunities provided by parks attracted participants differently, as with any sector of the population. However, an interest in plants was shared by the group and often provided a focus for photography and discussion. All flowers were admired, especially colourful displays, and particularly when recognised from the home country. Participants talked about enjoyment of the plants as one of their main motivations for re-visiting, and spoke of their wish to bring friends with them to share the experience.

One of the key ways in which some male members of the group used green spaces outside of the Viewfinder project visits was by playing sport. One participant, despite having the weakest language skills of the group, had made a number of friends through informal football matches. This shared activity provided a means of integration with the wider community, and his photo diary showed him visiting the homes of his English friends.

I play football every weekend if it's not raining. With some friends, sometimes up to 40 people, some English, some Arabic people. (Abdul, 40, from Afghanistan, in the UK for 2 1/2 years).

Participants interested in sport expressed general confidence in 'inviting themselves into' sporting activities taking place in parks, such as football and basketball. The chance to make contact with a range of people through informal and free access to outdoor sporting



Figure 5. *Local community festival with Zimbabwean dancers.*

facilities could be one key means of achieving greater integration, especially for male refugees.

Local community festivals were much enjoyed by refugees, and provided a welcome chance for them to be involved in lively, free, communal entertainment. A number of these festivals take place in Sheffield every summer, and often have multicultural displays, dancing and food (Figure 5). Though some participants visited festivals in groups, they also seemed comfortable to go along alone, possibly because there was plenty to engage their interest and they could merge into the crowd.

Participants enjoyed the site visits as part of the project mainly due to the social and relaxed nature of the occasions. These values were strongly expressed by the group as key positive benefits of visiting parks; participants represented parks as providing places of freedom and escape from worries. The social aspects were highly important, both in terms of visiting with friends and having 'private conversations' but also as places to meet people and make new friends.

Rivelin Valley! I really liked it. Especially summer time, it's very, very relaxing walking with people, talking to each other, your private things, like that you know, it's really nice. (Firmina, from Rwanda).

That's the real reason really I want to visit . . . to meet new people, meet new friends you know. (Lamin, from Liberia).

The Peace Gardens, a highly maintained and attractive city centre garden, was identified as being a particularly good place for socialising, and is possibly the only place in Sheffield where refugee and non-refugee communities are seen to fully share a public recreational facility.

One of the reasons why the Peace Gardens is so successful in this respect is that it also meets the requirement of easy access. Participants felt that they were much more likely to visit city centre locations, as they are easy to find and near to their usual routes. In highly managed places such as these gardens and traditional parks participants found it easier to interpret acceptable behaviour. For example, pathways and places to sit were easily identifiable and participants were less worried that they might inadvertently do something wrong. These places also have park staff/wardens and it is probable that this also contributes to a sense of safety. As a result of these factors, participants could realistically imagine being able to go back to the city centre or near-city centre, highly managed locations rather than other sites visited during the project.



Figure 6. *An everyday experience of open space, from Abdul's photo diary.*

Detachment – In many ways participants were detached from the public open spaces in their city and did not use them in the course of their daily lives. Their experience of Sheffield was highly focused on the city centre, and routes taken between home (often in city centre fringe locations), refugee orientated facilities, English classes, religious centres and shopping (Figure 6). Before starting the Viewfinder course most had only visited the two city centre locations (Peace Gardens and Winter Gardens), and the only participant who appeared to regularly visit parks was Abdul due to his football activities. Group members had not visited the countryside except one member who had gone to the Peak District with a voluntary group that organises trips for refugees.

Apart from a couple of reported visits by one of the participants, this pattern of general non-use continued during and immediately after the three months of the Viewfinder project despite participants appearing to enjoy the group visits to parks and seemingly interested in exploring the city in this way. Therefore, it is important to examine possible reasons why the participants chose not to independently visit parks and greenspaces.

Specific characteristics of different types of greenspaces can act as a deterrent to re-visiting. Participants discussed aspects of safety as being of concern particularly in wooded areas or in

places without many other visitors. However, their concerns did not seem to differ or be more strongly held than those likely to be expressed by non-refugee populations. One participant noted that dogs were considered dangerous in her own country, but now she has lived in the UK for two years she has got used to people walking dogs. We did not observe any specific fear of dogs from Muslim participants. Group members mentioned that they generally did not want to visit places when the weather is bad in winter or if they are alone, both for reasons of safety and enjoyment.

I'm always willing to go there but I can't go alone. I'd rather go with somebody . . . you need someone to talk to . . . even if you have a pet it will look better, you know that when you are alone somebody will look, you fool, you crazy. (Lamin, from Liberia).

The lack of a social context for visiting parks hinders greater use of parks and greenspace by the participants. Memories of visiting parks or the countryside at home were always with family or friends. Participants enjoyed the collective nature of the Viewfinder visits and spoke about how enjoyable it was to walk and chat together. However, all but one of the participants lived alone and had come to the UK without any family members, and when talking about their free

time participants rarely mentioned spending time with groups of friends. The ability to organise others and make a specific trip to visit a park is likely to require a high level of motivation and confidence and is a significant barrier for the participants to overcome.

During the project participants were asked about their use of open spaces (parks, 'near home' environments, countryside, etc.) in their home countries, and it was clear that for many of them the idea of specific areas of public amenity greenspace was not common except in large African cities. Visits to the countryside, or recreation in the countryside, were generally within the context of visiting relatives. The concept of recreation in parks, or visiting countryside-like areas for pleasure was alien to most of our participants. Though they seemed to accept it as a positive aspect of British culture, they did not necessarily share some of the more commonly held assumptions regarding motivations for visiting open space. Though they described visiting parks as a relaxing activity, they didn't articulate any health or exercise related reasons for informal recreation akin to the concept of 'stretching your legs'. They could not see why they would go to the countryside without having anyone to visit there, and did not comment on landscape views in general as being 'beautiful'. Occasionally they appeared to be confused about what adults should 'do' in parks, and didn't particularly value simply walking for the sake of it. It is important to note that this agenda is not equally shared by all British citizens, and indeed, the least keen 'walkers' in the group were the two photographic trainers who are Afro-Caribbean British.

The life situations of refugees are highly significant with regard to their pattern of low levels of visiting parks and green spaces. They have limited resources and their everyday priorities are basic needs. In conversations with the group members about their weekends/weeks they often mentioned how busy they were, referring to English classes, shopping and appointments related to housing, job searching and their refugee status. However, alongside these themes were also expressions of boredom and how they feel there is little to do, expressing frustration with sitting at home alone watching television, and how it is difficult to find interesting things to do and to make friends.

Barriers to access appeared to be more related to the confidence and energy of travelling and exploring new places than specifically corresponding to distance or travel costs. However, both these issues were important, and participants found it hard to imagine visiting places that seemed 'far away' to them, such as the urban fringe locations, despite being given information about relatively low cost means of public transport. They found it easier to imagine revisiting places that we could describe as being close to local landmarks or places they often visited, such as the hospital or their church.

One specific aspect of the life situation of refugees which exacerbates their concerns of safety and lack of a social context is a worry of standing out or transgressing boundaries of acceptability. This related to being on one's own, considered unusual not only in their home countries but also in Britain. Even the participant who was in the most secure situation legally (permanent right to remain in the UK) showed us papers to let us know that if he committed a crime he could be deported; this was obviously a cause of concern for him. The more ambiguous urban fringe countryside locations seemed to worry the participants most as they were unsure about the legalities of access and accepted behaviour.

They have so much private land you know ... sometimes I wouldn't know the land demarcation line, sometimes maybe I will just jump into the farm where I am not supposed to go. (Lamin, from Liberia; Figure 7).

The Viewfinder visits largely overcame these fears as sites were visited in groups, transport was arranged, and the researchers were there to give advice regarding usual use of the places. However, though increased familiarity with parks seemed to increase the participant's motivation for visiting greenspaces and raise awareness of opportunities for this type of recreation in Sheffield, it did not materially change their current life situation or their ability to organise and make journeys to non city-centre locations.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The experience of the Viewfinder Project clearly highlights the role that public open



Figure 7. A dry stone wall at Loxley Common.

space can play in providing refugees and asylum seekers with positive experiences of life in the UK. Visiting parks, gardens and urban fringe countryside proved to be a stimulating and enjoyable contrast to many of the participants' everyday routines, and seemed to give them a glimpse of pleasurable aspects of life in the city. For refugees who settle long term in their adopted countries, a sense that the new lifestyle can be rewarding and beneficial to them is vital in enabling them to accept their change of circumstances (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2003). This research supports the notion that a positive impression of the local environment, and participation in its leisure opportunities, can be a useful component of building this acceptance. Visiting a range of types of urban greenspace and participating in different activities gave participants an insight into British culture and a growing awareness of recreational norms. Though overcoming barriers to full participation occurs only over time – through building of confidence, friendship networks and economic stability – occasional or frequent use of public open space can aid integration with non-refugee communities. This can be through shared sporting, recreational or entertainment

facilities. The free-of-charge and easy-to-find nature of these is vital.

The role of the physical environment in culture shock has seldom been addressed in research, though there are common narratives in literature on immigrant experiences that relate how arrival in the UK can be seen as disorientating and bleak.⁴ Many refugees lack confidence to explore a confusing and alien cityscape, which differs in so many respects to their homeland. Within this context of distancing themselves from their environment, the participants on Viewfinder expressed particular surprise and delight when recognising aspects of their home countries in the open spaces visited during the project. Landscape types that are conceived in the UK as 'typically British' may also be seen as 'home-like' to immigrants. It is important, therefore, not to stereotype landscape features or types as emblematic of one particular culture, and to be open to unexpected resonances.

The familiarity of specific plants, nuances of landscape and vegetation types and previous experience of activities provided the participants with glimpses of normality. This 'backwards view' was not merely a pleasant nostalgia;

indeed, memories of home for people caught in forced migration are complex. Some participants expressed these familiarities as a means of providing them with a conceptual link between their homeland and their life in the UK. They suggested that they made them feel proud to be African, and that it could help them remember and show their friends what their homeland is like. It also provided them with a situation where they were knowledgeable and in a position to share that knowledge. At best, this built confidence in their ability to be accepted and contribute to British society. Recognition and familiarity in landscape appears to help migrants conceptualise their position in the new society, a line of enquiry that would benefit from further research.

Several aspects of urban greenspace were particularly important for this participant group and there is much that greenspace providers and refugee support agencies could do to maximise the benefit of existing greenspaces for refugee populations. The diversity of provision and free access are crucial, and the accessibility and cosmopolitan nature of city centre spaces is particularly important. World plant collections, of which there are two excellent examples in Sheffield, can stimulate links between the homeland and the new country. Urban greenspace can also provide great social opportunities for new residents of a city and newly-arrived refugees in the UK would benefit from information about the existence of parks, the cultural idea of parks, and the opportunities that they offer.

Parks and greenspaces are integral and (often) delightful components of the urban public realm. By recognising and enhancing the qualities of these, and by encouraging meaningful participation for all, it is possible to raise the quality of life for all urban dwellers. Ensuring access to enjoyable, healthy and restorative environments can be especially beneficial for sectors of the population who are otherwise limited in their recreational choices, such as asylum seekers and refugees.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to our partners and to all the Viewfinder group members for their contributions to the

project. We are grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council for funding the research. Nissa Finney conducted this research while employed as a research assistant at the Department of Landscape, University of Sheffield.

Notes

1. 'In the UK an asylum seeker means someone who has made a formal application for asylum, and is awaiting a decision about their status. If their application is accepted, they become a refugee. A refugee is a person who has been granted permission to stay in the UK under the terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention because of a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a social group'. Source: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/ican/A2179884>>. Accessed 05/01/05
2. A pseudonym has been used for TIV.
3. The duration of the course allowed for continued discussion and informed consent regarding the use of quotes and photographs both in the exhibition and research publications.
4. A resource directory of refugee stories of migration can be found online at the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR) <www.icar.org.uk>.

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