Environmental Sustainability & Resources Learning Series

4: The Public Realm & Lived Environment

Thursday 8th July at Kelham Island Museum, Sheffield

Local Trust

Background

Over the last year, since COVID became part of our lives, we've come to appreciate the importance of the environment that we live in day to day. The way that public spaces and places are designed and managed is key to how we feel. To improve or protect the spaces around us we need to understand why some things seem to work while others don't. Ultimately; what is a 'good' space?

The event was held at the Kelham Island Museum in Sheffield, and was the fourth in a series of five workshops on various environmental themes.

As well as face-to-face attendees a small number of people watched online.

The workshop was facilitated by Margaret Jackson and Julian Mellor. Local Trust was represented by Gabriel Davies, Lauren Omokheoa, Mike Ball and Huw Davies Bell.

Introductions

Participants gave an outline of their individual 'lived environment' challenges.

- Waqas Arshad (Bradley BL) All land available in Bradley seems to be allocated for 'development'. Keen to do a garden, but land is not available.

- Alison Middleton (Northwood BL) No 'user friendly' spaces to relax in e.g. attractive areas with benches. There is an opportunity to provide improvements via Liverpool FC who have a new base in the area.

- Bob Skipp (Bourham Wood BL) Difficulties in dealing with the Council and the concern that most land seems to be for development

- Arfan Zaman and Kafait Ajmal (Palfrey BL) Keen to improve the lived environment through investing in parks and pocket parks.

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- Mazhar Ellahi (Bradford BL) Have invested in a community garden and also a MUGA. Aim to undertake further environmental improvements in their area.

- George Atzev (Arches BL) Area includes lots of tarmac. Aim is to humanise the public realm.

- Alison Vint (Thurnscoe BL) Aim to enable existing green space to be really attractive and useful to the community.

- Robin Belder (Selby BL) Developing a garden area for schools etc to use.

- Christine Mally and Anna Bradley-Dorman (Ramsey BL) Ramsey is a market town which has lost its connectivity.   Aim to improve the environment of the town to improve the economic development. They have taken on the market charter and want to create a 'market square' to improve the visitor economy and create spaces for places for people to meet.

- Roy Blenkin and Bill Chatt (Barrowcliffe BL) Have invested in environmental improvements including a children's wild flower area and regular clean ups. Working with the Council and housing associations to implement on-going improvements.

- Tom Clements (Birchfield BL) Much of their area is being developed for the Commonwealth Games which has created chaos in the area. (Birchfield BL with Birmingham University has produced a video showing the impact). Pocket parks developed by BL providing play area and open spaces which has brought the community together.

- John O'Shea (Whitley Bay BL) Formerly a very popular holiday destination which had fallen into decay.   Following development in the sea front the area is now 'on the up'.   However the town centre needs to re-energising.

- Freda Eyden and Ralph Rudden (Sale West) Sale West is a well established 70s estate currently being surrounded by extensive housing development. They have invested in pocket parks and local orchards. Want to maximise use of open space and protect existing green space for the community.

- Yvonne Griggs (Birchfield BL) Much of the land is owned by the Council or the housing association.   The challenge is to make green spaces more useable and attractive as well as improve access to a country park.

- Sal Fox (Selby BL) Area incorporates previous industrial land now rich in wildlife. Keen to get a balance in the re-development between a sterile environment and wildlife.

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Analysing the Quality of a Space

Dr James Simpson and Aimee Felstead, Dept of Landscape Architecture, Sheffield University

See Appendix for slide presentation.

Spaces and Places are Important

There is a growing understanding about how the spaces we live in significantly impact our wellbeing i.e. our mental and physical health. Just as 'we are what we eat', 'we are where we inhabit'. The spaces in which we live will have a bigger impact on people's health than doctors.

In the past we've focused on the green elements around us. But there is a growing understanding that hard urban spaces can also have a big impact. So the style and design of architecture and landscape is important – but sometimes it is really difficult to make it happen.

There is often a misconception that good design is something for others, so it can be hard to start discussing it. It's also subjective since we bring our own experience and ideas so there is 'no one size fits all' design solution. Furthermore, developers will have their own objectives which may be different to the community's. So design often has to balance tensions and different needs.

When something is designed, do the designers really understand how to improve the lives of people? And do they use accessible language, or is it pompous and alienating? (See glossary in appendix for commonly used terms)

There are four principles / concepts of good design:

1. Human Scale

Often designers work at huge scale, so it is easy to forget the human scale i.e. how does it relate to the size, viewpoint and senses of an actual person. Designers need to think about what its like to be in and enjoy the place. An environment that has good human scale is likely to be high quality.

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2. 'Space' and 'Place'

- 'Space' is the physical area, defined by its edges and physical characteristics

- 'Place' is the space plus people i.e. the social dimension of space. "It's what people do in a space that turns it into a place."

Spaces may be created at huge expense and, from a distance, look great. But if it is not 'human scale' it will not be a successful place. Rather than impose big expensive design ideas it is better to approach the design of a place from the bottom up and by engaging with the community. (Example: The $250m Little Island, New York)

3. Levels of Control

The built environment is organized by three interwoven principles: Form, Place and Understanding. These work at any scale, from a room in your house to entire neighbourhoods.

- The Form is how the space is put together, the materials used and how the space is organised

- The Place refers to the decisions about who and what can go into or out of the spaces we build and how it is controlled

- 'Understanding' is the cultural dimension of a space and how we use it. For example, the unspoken messages that come from design features, changes in materials or what our senses tell us that in turn that tell us how we're expected to behave. Different people may have different cultural understandings or interpretations of a space and may, therefore, behave in different ways.

(Ref: Habraken J. - 'Form, Place and Understanding')

4. Gradients of Space

Spaces are not islands - instead they interconnect with each other. They are defined spatially but also by what we do in them and how we behave. But often design is done in silos (i.e. each component is designed separately and without much thought about how they join together) so we lose the human experience of living in a space.

We define the thresholds / boundaries between different spaces with things like fences, gates, steps, doors etc. The quality will depend upon how sudden that change is. A good change, or 'gradient', will be stretched out and give a gradual change from one thing to another. Meanwhile a sudden and abrupt change will often lead to a lower quality experience.

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Who has the Influence over Types of Space?

People have different levels of influence over the design of a space and the gradients of change. In your home you'll have lots of influence. But for a public space more people will have a say. Big Local sits in the middle; it can influence how public spaces are designed and managed but it can also get into the semi-private space as well e.g. help tidying up people's gardens.

Other Words to Describe Places

Places can be described as '**Mine, Yours, Theirs, Ours**' (MYTO). These are words of attachment and belonging and help us understand how a place will be used.

- **Mine** - a place which gives you a sense of belonging and attachment

- **Yours** - a place that belongs to someone nearby

- **Theirs** - a place that others control

- **Ours** - a place with a shared interest

For example: This flat is mine. That garden is yours. Everything beyond the fence is theirs. That's our bench in the park.

We often try to exert control to get more of the 'mine' spaces. But a better quality of space will come with more balance and respect for other people's needs and attachments.

If there is no sense of MYTO, spaces can become disorganised and neglected.

Places can be also described using a concept of 'third places' (Oldenburg R):

- **First** place = home (e.g. somewhere that you belong and to which you have strong control and attachment)

- **Second** place = work (e.g. somewhere you spend a lot of time and have some control over, even though it's not actually yours)

- **Third** place = somewhere you don't own or control but to which you have an attachment (e.g. a cafe, church or park). This is where people are likely to meet and interact. It is likely to be neutral and informal.

A well designed neighbourhood will have lots of third places. A weaker one will be dominated by first and second places.

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Questions and Comments

- The relaxation of planning controls (e.g. allowing conversion of office blocks to residential) makes it harder for designers to control the quality of space. The ability for people to personalise their space is lost.

- Some of the examples shown (in the slideshow) will be more expensive than those in Big Local areas. In terms of quality, more space is not always the key, but a small area of threshold space that they can adapt can make a huge difference.

- Have to consider the long term management and costs e.g. of planting a tree and how it is maintained.

- Communities and residents change over the years. You need a robust community in order to get a cohesive development. We don't tend to learn from previous occupants.

- The community should be involved in the design process from day one. We're getting better at it, slowly.

- But where do people park?! A huge challenge! Cars have a very negative impact on the design of public spaces.

- When there is no sense of 'mine yours theirs ours' you end up with a disconnect with the environment. That can result in tipping etc. Clean up groups can start a process of improvement.

- Q: How to influence planners? They won't always agree with a good design approach. A: Working collectively will help and increase the voice to planners.

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Interactive Sessions

Looking at how spaces on Kelham Island have been created and thinking about what makes them work.

Group 1 (walking tour of Kelham Island developments)

The group toured the developments that have emerged in the last 20 years from the old industrial buildings and landscape. Key points:

- Streets and squares need active ground floor uses in the buildings. Cafes and shops have a gradual change from public to private space and encourage browsing and lingering. But offices have a very abrupt change and discourage people from stopping

Offices have replaced more lively uses on the ground floor. There's nowhere to sit. The flats are not personalised. The public space is unused.

- The policies of property management companies can prevent personalisation and inhibit a space becoming a place. Potentially interesting and active uses can be deterred by inflexibility on rents, lease terms and business rates.

- Public spaces with nowhere to sit or linger will become dead - just somewhere to cross as quickly as possible. A seat under a tree can transform a space.

- Even small areas in front of a door can allow for personalisation. The threshold can be defined by planters, or a small raised area e.g. decking

An area for planters helps personalise and reduce the hard transition from public to private space

- Access to garages can dominate a street and prevent personalisation and communal activities. They can't become 'third places' and will lack a sense of MYTO

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- Lockdown encouraged councils to try out road closures and one way systems in order to make neighbourhoods more livable. Short term experiments are a good way of testing improvement measures

- Potentially attractive squares and places can be wrecked by allowing car parking which will dominate and turn 'our' places into 'their' spaces

A temporary road closure outside a pub helps create new public space

- Some people felt the developments were 'hotel environments'. Not enough use made of the river, the canal and some of the old buildings. Lots of 'their' space but not much of 'our' space. Access is limited so it is a sterile environment

- People were sitting next to the river although this was cordoned off. So people want to use the space but there aren't the community areas to do it. The houses were clearly not built for families so not an environment for 'everyone'.

- Liked the the different types of art-work.   Aiming to do this in Selby.

What could be pleasant shared space is in practice dominated by access to garages

- There are lots of 'lost opportunities' that could become neglected.   Perhaps some more human scale in design.

Group 2 (table exercise looking at Kelham Island developments)

Photographs were used to illustrate the points made in the presentation and encourage discussion:

- **Utilities** Is there enough space e.g. for bins? Where do you park? Do you have a shared car park? Design and management is an issue – e.g. who looks after the space? Are there spaces for children to play outside their front door?   Making spaces for ambulances

- How to make improvements retrospectively (making space for utilities including parking)? Doing things in an existing environment brings problems. It is easier to design in new areas,

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although there is always a tension between community needs and developers profit

- Any change will cause tension. People don't always want change. People don't want things imposed on them. 'We all want it improved but don't want it changed'

- People who live around parks don't want benches in it and things that encourage people to linger due to concerns about ASB

- For existing areas – trial ideas and communicate widely e.g. experimenting with blocking cars for a day. Although they can be problematic as they always affect different groups

- Can you 'trial' an idea and event? Anna (Ramsey Big Local) gave the advice that you need to trial things 6 times.   Trick is to inform and involve people. Described the mobile skate parks – generally don't like – but when they see how it works they are ok with it. Make something visible and as friendly and communicate, communicate and communicate!

- There is a clear pedestrian way from Scarborough railway station to the seafront. Designers need to be involved right from the start

- All agreed that **education** of developers and local authorities is needed and felt it would be worthwhile to link with local universities

- Woonerfs and Homezones: It was felt these would be easier to do if designed and managed from the **outset for new developments**.   Need to think on a wide area and how everyone will be impacted. Sometimes it is about slowing traffic down and letting pedestrians have more priority. In Ramsey the accountable body has a

Ground floor units that could provide an interesting lively frontage to the street are instead empty, creating a dead public realm. Management policies and rent levels could be the cause

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'market charter' which means that the road can be closed for 'events'. There is a constant issue with parking, but ultimately; 'do you want the town to thrive'? Anna gave an example of places in Scandinavia where they have reduced/taken away street signs.

- Birchwood BL are hoping to build **40 plus new build houses in Lincoln,** but have the tension of losing open space. Car parking has some dedicated parking and visitor parking. Yvonne also outlined the work she has done to the front garden – and this is now being copied.   So this has influenced 'our' space.

Interesting and lively uses spill out from 'their' space into 'our' space.

Planters and a raised deck create a sense of 'my' space but also give a softer gradient from the public 'our' to the private 'my'. There's even room for cars!

No personalisation of balconies. No sense of 'our' space or of this being a 'third' place. It's just somewhere to put cars.

Neighbouring houses but one with a very hard transition from public to private and the other with a much softer and more gradual transition

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Thurnscoe Community Plaza

Alison Vint, Community Development Officer, Thurnscoe Big Local

Thurnscoe Big Local has focused on lived environment projects including a community plaza and sculpture trail.

If you go back to a place where you grew up, do you recognise it? How have things changed? Who do the streets belong to now? What feelings and memories do you have?

The overall aim is for Thurnscoe to be a 'Better Place to Live.' – a journey travelled by all Big Locals. Thurnscoe was a pit village and its infrastructure was framed by the industry. It was a hard landscape – but it was recognised by people growing up there with an emotional connection and familiarity. Then came the demise of the industry – and the disrepair – and the decline was stark – with facilities being taken away – and then the area felt 'left behind'. When BL came along there had been a history of regeneration programmes but there was never any cohesion to the landscape. Thurnscoe had a sadness to it and it became a little lost.

Thurnscoe BL had done events, play schemes, hanging baskets etc. They had some money for public art and developed a sculpture trail. They purchased six large and medium sculptures and embarked on working with the Council other community groups, shops and the four schools in the area. The sculptures therefore built a momentum and raised the profile of Big Local. Three large sculptures were provided in the centre of the village including the owl sculpture which is now outside the library.

The sculptures built confidence that the BL could do 'bigger things'. Following consultation with the community over legacy, people said there was a need for more things for young people. The transformative power of art helped them think about how they could make a skate park which was a

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great space for everyone. They consulted widely and worked with the young people who wanted the place to 'look great' and were interested in art. And hence the PLAZA project was born.

Implementation of the project involved liaison with various departments at the Council to allow it to happen. Also established Thurnscoe CIO to take the transfer of the asset, and the liabilities.

The Plaza will include a sculpture depicting the life cycle of Thurnscoe.   Aim is for the Plaza to be a contemporary valued space for everyone.

Lessons

- Timescales – you need to be there for the long haul. The hope is to commence building in August

- Costs – the estimates started off at £250k and have now increased to £350k.

- Be prepared to modify the design. They are future proofing with CCTV and aiming to incorporate community wifi. They are also aiming for a pop-up café.

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Designing Healthy Livable Towns and Cities

Zac Tudor, Associate Landscape Architect, Arup

Zac previously worked with Sheffield City Council where he helped build the city's reputation for distinctive high quality public realms.

Sheffield was a city of makers but its wealth declined in the 1980s with the collapse of the steel industry. The city centre was then badly damaged by the building of Meadowhall (a large out-of-town shopping centre three miles from city centre, opened 1990).

Politicians needed to tackle unemployment and the Meadowhall factor. Landscape architects asked to create an identity, look to the future and be distinctive from other cities. Horticulture was the transformational ingredient - used to create public spaces, routes, gateways and the welcome. The process is still underway and is a long way from completion, but it is transformational.

Key features

Aim was for public spaces to be more functional and for the city centre to be more resilient to climate change.

They designed for 100 year events and then added 40% capacity. It was almost impossible to accommodate.

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They pushed the ring road further out (they wanted to stop the domination of the city by cars and reduce the short 10-15 min car journeys). This provided an opportunity to think about place making. Still providing traffic routes but it is more healthy for cyclists and pedestrians.

To address flooding they replaced the traditional drainage systems with a Sustainable Urban Drainage Scheme (SUDS) so now the water run-off goes into the planted areas instead of going straight into the drains.

The planted landscape, which includes low maintenance seasonal plants from spring through to autumn, is now a key part of the infrastructure and much more than just pretty planted spaces. Functions include drainage, cooling the heat island, cleaning atmospheric pollution, carbon capture, treating contaminated water, creating an environment beneficial to health and wellbeing, containment of micro-plastics, and biodiversity. It is a more natural environment in an urban centre.

Information boards help people understand the interventions and the benefits.

Impact

The improvements have provided a catalyst for investment. The project instilled confidence in investors and developers who then started to work with the City to reuse and repurpose commercial buildings including for residential uses; a first for the city. Hence the task became one of place-making. When first done in 2012 there weren't many residents so not much community involvement. Now many blocks are being converted to residential so a community is emerging.

Sheffield's high street is slowly receding from retail so there is a need to reimagine what to do in the streets and the spaces; we can't keep pretending that it will fine. The city centre is being reinvented as a new sustainable community. People never used to live in Sheffield city centre so they are starting with a low base of residential population. Now trying to bring people in to live in the centre

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and kickstart something new. There will be a lot of planting to deal with the pollution etc and to make a more beautiful attractive environment for people to live in.

To create healthy cities, make places that people want to be in and walk in. Research shows how people are walking more and being more active because it is a pleasant place.

It was important to avoid the planting requiring huge amounts of maintenance. The planting includes species which flower from spring to autumn and is cheaper to maintain than when it was just tarmac and drains. Beauty does not have to cost a fortune! It is important to ensure the correct soil types: years of tests and experimentation helped them perfect the soil (70% gravel from quarry waste, 20% green compost, 10% sugar beet washings). Only requires one maintenance visit per year in Feb to cut and remove which allows the process to restart.

Regeneration of Manor Housing Estate

In 2000/01 Zac was asked to help improve the Manor Housing Estate – at the time largest social

housing estate in Europe and still classed as a slum by EU standards. A development officer was engaged through the City Parks Dept and worked with the community for years before anything started changing. The area did suffer from ASB and included massive areas of low value

green open space. It was important from the outset to create a framework about what to do and which areas to retain.

A team worked endlessly with community groups to consult over proposals. The community adopted and became involved in improvements, taking ownership and deciding what they wanted and where.

A green infrastructure approach with SUDS was adopted. Surface and roof water from new houses goes into the parks and there is annual payment from a service charge to pay for park maintenance.

Landscape improvements included robust and vandal proofed landform art .

Eight years later there was still no play equipment. Local children said where play areas should be. Money was raised to install. There has been no vandalism because people owned the space.

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Impacts

- A local community group set up a social enterprise called 'Green Estate' to undertake the maintenance, employing local people. This has become established as a well-known social enterprise in the wider Sheffield area

- House prices were very low but 20 years on they have increased partly due to the improved environment.

Questions and Answers

Q: Will the wildflower and natural planting approach adopted be full of weeds in 10 years?

A: The slides (see appendix) were 6 years on. There are some weeds – no desire or need to remove everything. The main management is just one cut per year with additional walk-throughs in the summer to pull out big weeds. But weeds can't compete once the canopy has closed over. The soil mix is from sustainable sources and importantly has low fertility which stops weeds getting a grip. In any natural planting it is important to start with the soil and work up with the planting. An approach backed up with a lot of research and trials.

Q: Is it practical to get rid of the cars? Easy to say, but how do you deliver or transport large items?

A: No easy answers to practical challenges like moving stuff. Electric cars will answer some questions, but not all. Public transport needs to gear up.

Q: We're not city centre – but we are impacted by developers and decisions over land to develop. How can we change their approach to a greener one?

A: Development pressure is an eternal problem. Designers might suggest higher density in some areas in order to create more green space elsewhere. COVID has provided focus and new

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arguments about the benefit of green space.   Ultimately there is a need for dialogue with the planning authority.

Interactive Exercise

Finally we worked in smaller groups to think about the ways in which we could improve and protect those areas that are important to our own local communities. The aim was to create mood-boards and action plans to take back home.   Participants had brought photographs showing the issues they are dealing with.

Group 1

Focused on Arches Big Local and discussed the journey from vision to reality, talking about the sense of ownership which people could gain from coming together to talk about and implement improvements.

- Spaces for the community to come together, great space for art.

- Adopted the mine, yours, ours, theirs approach.

- Aim to develop collective stewardship

Group 2

Discussed Sale West, issues around Ramsey High street where they aim to develop a side street off for a market, derelict land due for development in Selby, and Birchfield which has been bulldozed down for the Commonwealth Games.

The concept of MYOT was adopted.

Group 3

Focused on Palfrey. They discussed an urban space surrounded by houses which incorporates green space around a MUGA. Dense planting had made the whole area perceived as a problem. They discussed a possible re-design to incorporate routes through, a walking trail, lowering of the perimeter mounds, extending the play area and providing benches.

Group 4

Discussed Ramsey where they are hoping this will be a permanent market space and they want to increase footfall. Need to protect people from traffic, put in more benches, and include planters as buffers. They also have a stream they want to convert into a water feature – so there are possibilities for creating a focus for a seating area.
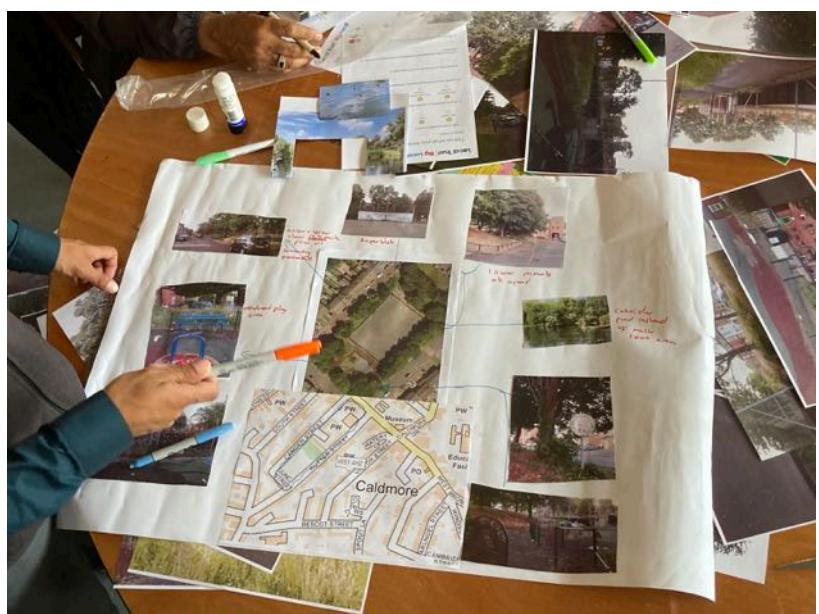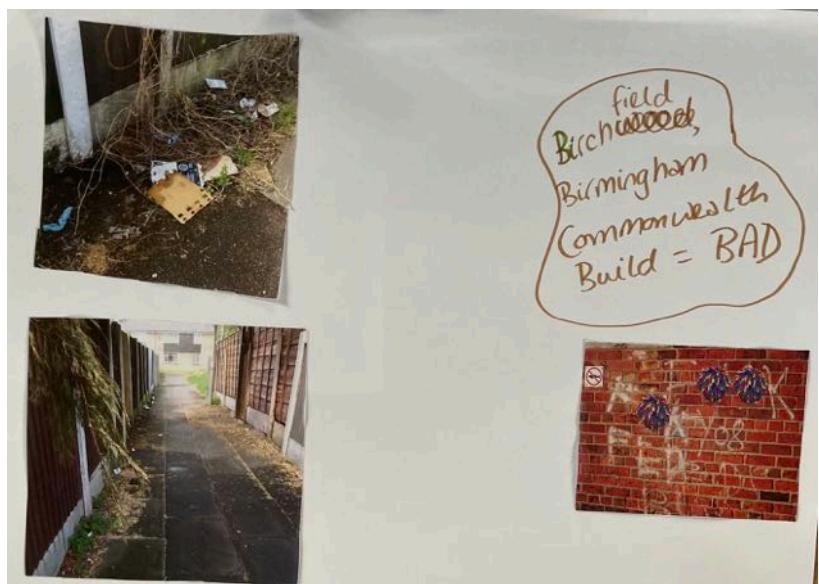
Mood Boards created by the groups

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Appendices

1. Workshop briefing note (distributed to all participants)

2. James Simpson and Aimee Felstead presentation - What we need to think about when analysing and understanding the quality of a space

3. Alison Vint, Thurnscoe Big Local - A Better Place to Live

4. Zac Tudor, Arup - Healthy Livable Towns and Cities

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