Using design to connect us

Hello!

Welcome to the Loneliness Lab network's crowd-sourced guide to tackling loneliness through the built environment.

The Loneliness Lab is a collective of people and organisations working together to design out loneliness from our cities.

We believe the spaces where we live, work and play influence how connected or lonely we feel. We want to reimagine these spaces to foster connection and belonging. Our diverse network of over 800 individuals includes architects, developers, artists, activists, policy makers and community organisations, as well as many people with lived experience of loneliness.
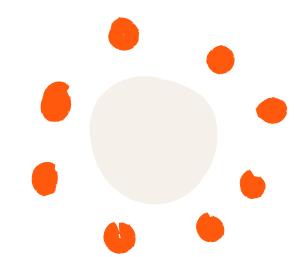
Together we are...

UNDERSTANDING
what's driving loneliness in our cities and urban environments
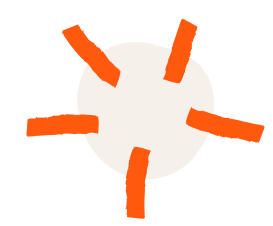
EXPERIMENTING
with ways to create more connection in real spaces and places

INFLUENCING
policy and industry change to make designing out loneliness the new normal

DESIGN TO CONNECT: A COMMUNITY 'LEARN-IN'

Over one week in Autumn 2020, our virtual 'learn-in' brought together over 200 members of our global network to share their learnings and inspire action. From conversational corridors to meaningful masterplans, our network shared their aspirations and examples for designing cities that bring people together, not keep them apart. The insights from these sessions have been used to shape this report. A full list of contributors is included at the end. Full recordings of the Design to Connect sessions can be found on our website.

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The Loneliness Lab was co-founded in 2018 by global property and infrastructure company, Lendlease, and social innovation non-profit, Collectively. Together we share a commitment to making our cities less lonely.

"Lendlease's vision is to create the best places. Following our collective experience of the global coronavirus pandemic, we are asking ourselves how places need to change, to be resilient to future challenges including the risk of prolonged social isolation that can clearly exacerbate what is already an epidemic of loneliness in our cities. Consciously designing our homes, workplaces and public spaces with connectedness in mind is critical to ensure we are creating places that are fit for the future."

–
Paul King
Managing Director, Sustainability and Social Impact, Lendlease Europe

www.lendlease.com

"Now, more than ever, we must design for connection. Decades of designing places for the individual, not the collective, for the car, not the pedestrian, and for financial returns, not social impacts, have increased isolation and loneliness for many people, even before lockdown. Yet when places are well-designed, they foster community, connection, resilience and health. Everyone deserves to live in places like that. We hope by sharing the Loneliness Lab community's learnings, we can reimagine our cities in ways that bring us together."

–
Bethan Harris
Co-CEO,
Collectively

www.collectively.org

collectively

why connection matters

Loneliness is a significant and growing public health issue. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the British Red Cross[1] estimated that 9 million people in the UK often experience loneliness.

Since the pandemic, estimates now show that a third of UK adults often feel alone.[2] Sadly, this trend is repeated across many advanced economies.[3]

Loneliness can be devastating for those who live with it. The impact is not just emotional, research suggests it can be as bad for our health as smoking[4] and can place a huge burden on public and private sector finances.[5] Disconnection is increasingly leading to more fragmented societies, where we have less contact with our neighbours and with people whose views and experiences are different to ours.[6]

Yet our collective experience of lockdown has shown us just how important connection is to our wellbeing and resilience. Stronger real-world social connections are not just a comfort in a crisis, but a genuine lifeline. Research after the 2016 Japanese tsunami showed that individuals' chances of survival correlated closely with how well people knew their neighbours.[7] As we prepare for future pandemics and the impacts of the climate and ecological emergency, strong social connection continues to be critical to our resilience.

© George Krousti

1. Loneliness is part of the human experience

Loneliness is to human contact what hunger is to food. It's our body's way of telling us we need more of something essential. In other words, it's an entirely normal experience that we cannot expect to eradicate.

The problem comes if we feel lonely and can't do anything about it, because of physical isolation, financial hardship, having no-one to relate to or being ashamed to even admit to feeling lonely. Overcoming this stigma and being able to respond to feelings of loneliness are as important as developing new connections.

4 key insights about loneliness

2. Loneliness disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable

Whilst loneliness can affect anyone at any time, certain demographic groups are more at risk of experiencing loneliness. These are often the most disadvantaged or overlooked groups in society, including young people (16-25)[8], older people[9], Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities[10], people with physical disabilities[11], LGBTQI communities, people living in poverty[12], and people living with mental illness.[13]

These groups are particularly badly served by the built environment. Physical disabilities can affect access to public spaces, financial barriers can limit opportunities to connect with others in places like cafés, people from disadvantaged backgrounds may be more likely to live in transient rented accommodation, and people at risk from discrimination may feel unwelcome in places that simply don't seem to be 'for them'.

3. Being comfortable alone is important

Loneliness Lab members, Irene Palacio and Tessa Blencowe, interviewed hundreds of people about loneliness for their powerful 'London is Lonely' art installation[14]. They found that for many, particularly young people, identifying and overcoming loneliness is as much about fully recognising and connecting with their own emotional needs as it is about connecting with other people. Safe, accessible green space provides an important opportunity for personal reflection and wellbeing, as do quiet, private indoor spaces and spaces where people don't feel judged when they are on their own.

## 4. Meaningful, not just many, connections matter

When it comes to tackling loneliness, the quality of relationships matter, not just the quantity.

It's entirely possible to be lonely in a crowd, a family or a social network if, for example, you can't talk about your sexuality or your personal challenges. For young people in particular, loneliness can be caused by not feeling understood.

It can be tempting to try and solve loneliness simply by putting signs on 'chatty benches' encouraging strangers to talk to each other. Such interventions may be useful, but to really tackle loneliness we need to support people to form and maintain 'meaningful' relationships with others.[15]

As well as places to connect with our close friends and family, we need urban environments that foster a greater number of 'weak ties', people you see regularly and trust enough to say hello to. Places that help people connect on a daily basis with their neighbours and colleagues or the local shopkeeper, café owner or concierge are an effective way to increase meaningful relationships.

Dunbar's number. Anthropologist Robert Dunbar's theory suggests 150 is the maximum number of meaningful connections someone can hold, from our closest relationships to our 'weak ties'.[16]

150
Weak ties – meaningful relationships in the community

50
Friends and close colleagues

15
Close friends

5
Closest relationships
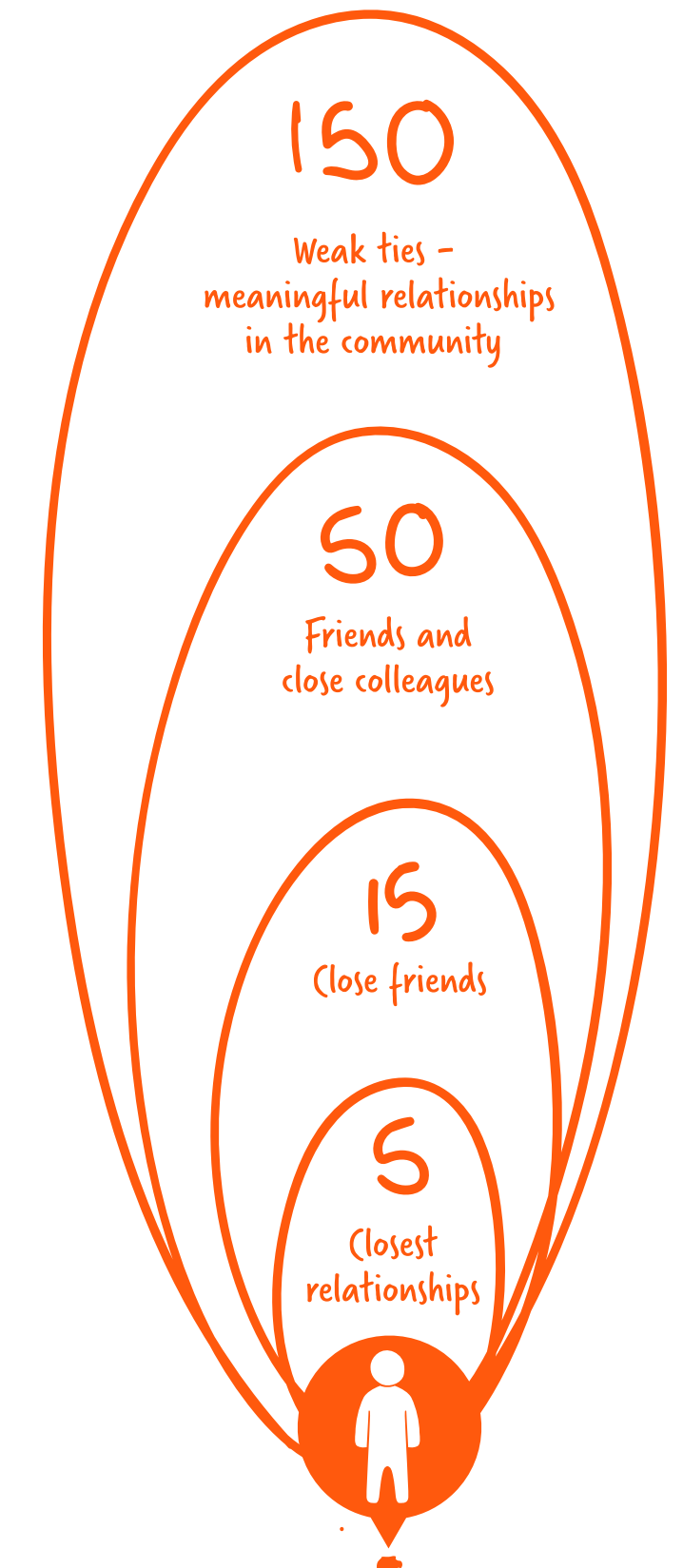
Using design to connect us

The role of the built environment

It's not enough to ask people to be better neighbours, citizens, friends – or to put the burden of tackling loneliness solely on the thousands of civil society organisations who do amazing work to connect the most vulnerable and isolated people in our society.

We need to look at the structural drivers of loneliness and understand how urban design contributes to loneliness and disconnection in the first place.

Research by community member, Erin Peavey, concludes that "clinical care makes up just 10% to 20% of our overall health.[17] The physical environment is an important factor underlying our health ecosystem, influencing how we think, feel, and behave."

This is backed up by The United Nations[18] and the World Health Organisation[19] who argue that housing and neighbourhood design are both critical for our health.
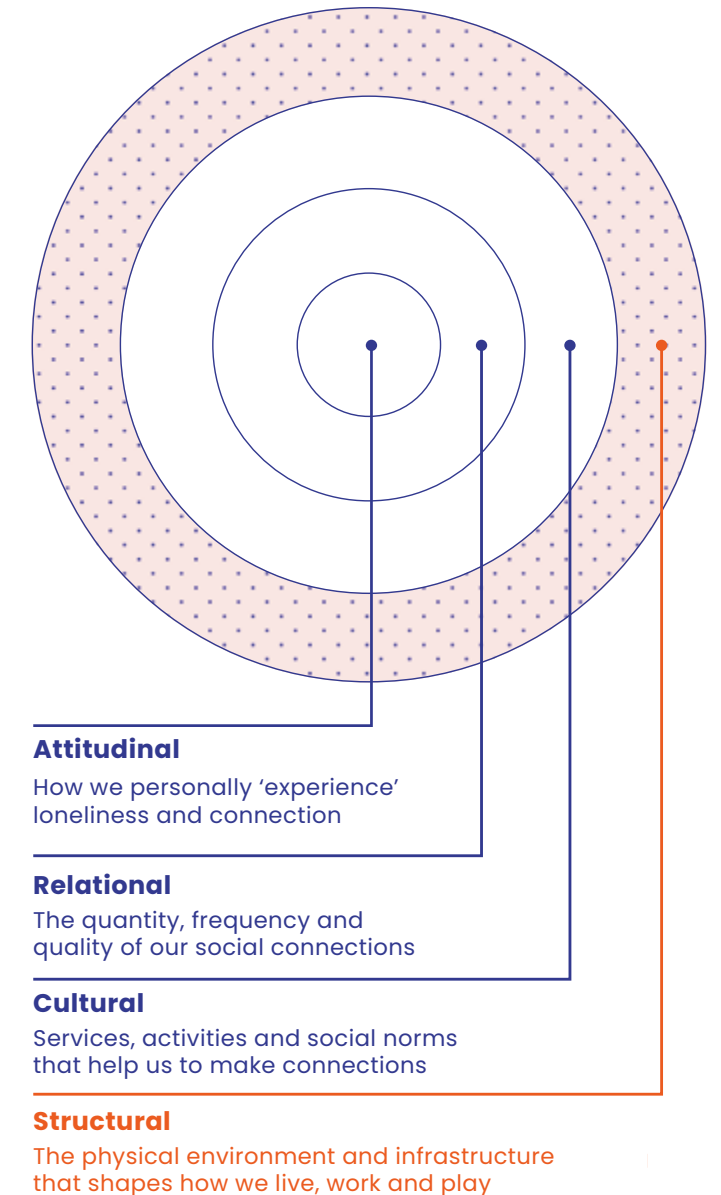
Yet for too long contemporary design and placemaking have deprioritised the need for places to connect people. Design features that have historically brought people together like communal and civic spaces and pedestrianised streets have been overlooked in favour of cars, private ownership, and profits.

During the 2020 national lockdowns we saw stark differences in people's experience, depending where they lived. For some it was balcony bingo, front lawn exercise classes, and a welcome break from the daily commute thanks to home working from the spare room. For others, it was unsafe or overcrowded housing, limited access to safe green spaces, and working in settings often poorly equipped against the virus, or at home, without adequate room or furniture. The pandemic has starkly revealed the vulnerability and isolation caused by a built environment that keeps people away from their neighbours. Everyone should have the right to live, work and play in places that promote good health, wellbeing and connectedness.

Drivers of connection. The structural drivers of loneliness have often been overlooked in the search for solutions, but the physical environment is vital to our health and wellbeing.

Attitudinal
How we personally 'experience' loneliness and connection

Relational
The quantity, frequency and quality of our social connections

Cultural
Services, activities and social norms that help us to make connections

Structural
The physical environment and infrastructure that shapes how we live, work and play

"Design is never neutral. It either supports health or hinders it."

Erin Peavey, HKS

What do we mean by the built environment?

Home
Residential spaces
e.g. apartment
buildings, residential
streets, student
accommodation
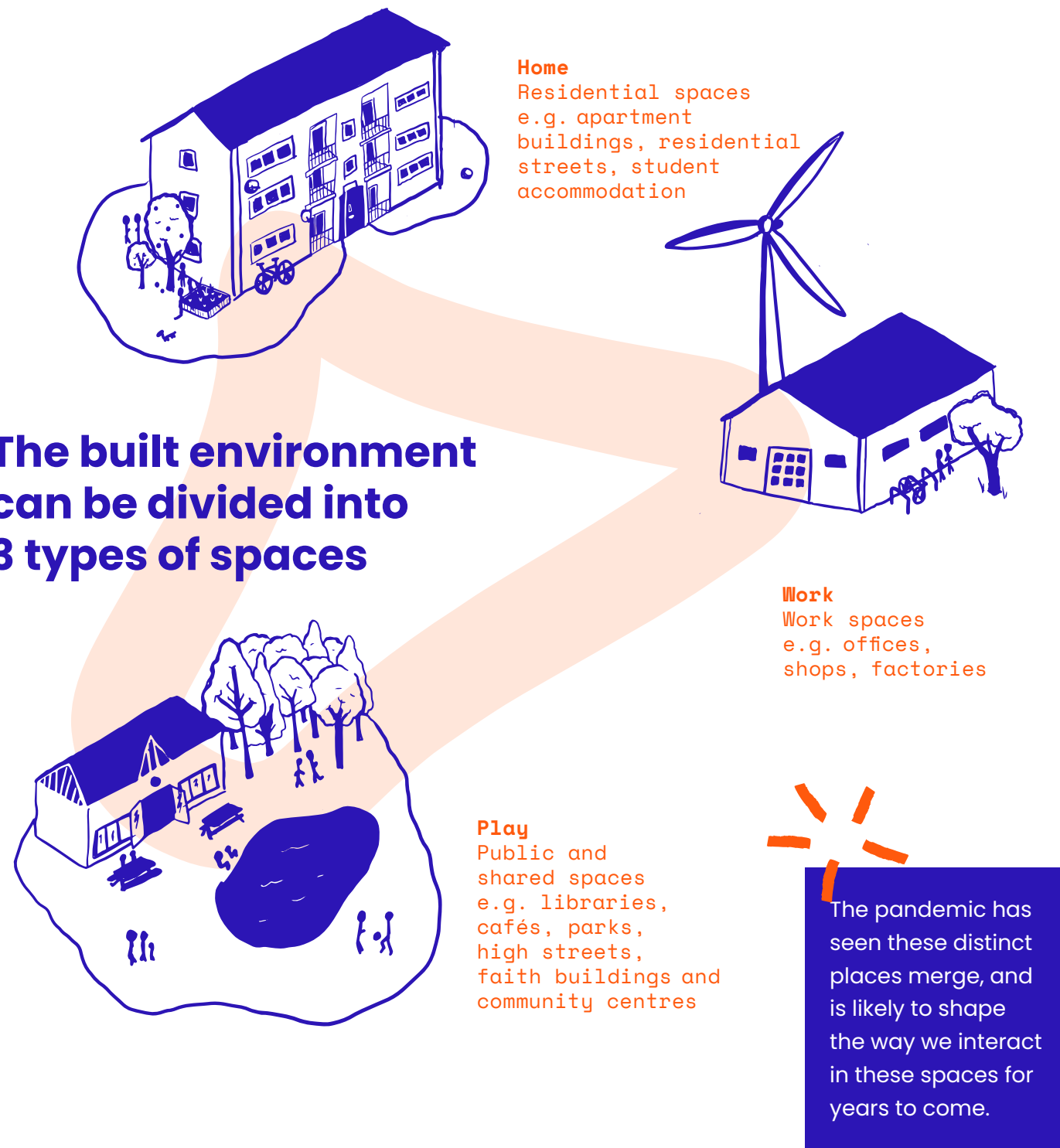
The built environment can be divided into 3 types of spaces

Work
Work spaces
e.g. offices,
shops, factories

Play
Public and
shared spaces
e.g. libraries,
cafés, parks,
high streets,
faith buildings and
community centres

The pandemic has seen these distinct places merge, and is likely to shape the way we interact in these spaces for years to come.

The hardware, software and codes of placemaking

One recurring theme from our community is the importance of addressing the built environment holistically.

Three key components were identified throughout our discussions: the physical environment, the programming and the policy of places. Or to use a popular metaphor: the 'hardware', 'software' and 'codes' of placemaking.

Just like a new smartphone, places are nothing without the programming that brings them to life. And without good places or assets, programmes and services don't work as well as they might.

All too often places can be designed without thinking of long term programming and how places will be resourced over time. Likewise, services to tackle loneliness do not always make the most of underused assets and places in a community. We need to look at both together, as well as set industry standards and policy to ensure we replicate good practice.

The physical environment is the 'hardware' – buildings and spaces such as offices, homes, parks, shops and community centres.

The programming within those environments is the 'software' – activities, events, people and services that help bring people together.

The policies and standards for the built environment are the 'codes' – incentivising developments that bring people together and preventing those that cause isolation and disconnection.

Bringing a building to life: South Gardens, Elephant Park

"It's a great space for growing seeds and harvesting veg and fruits, but most importantly it's a great space for sowing friendships and harvesting a strong, close-knit community."
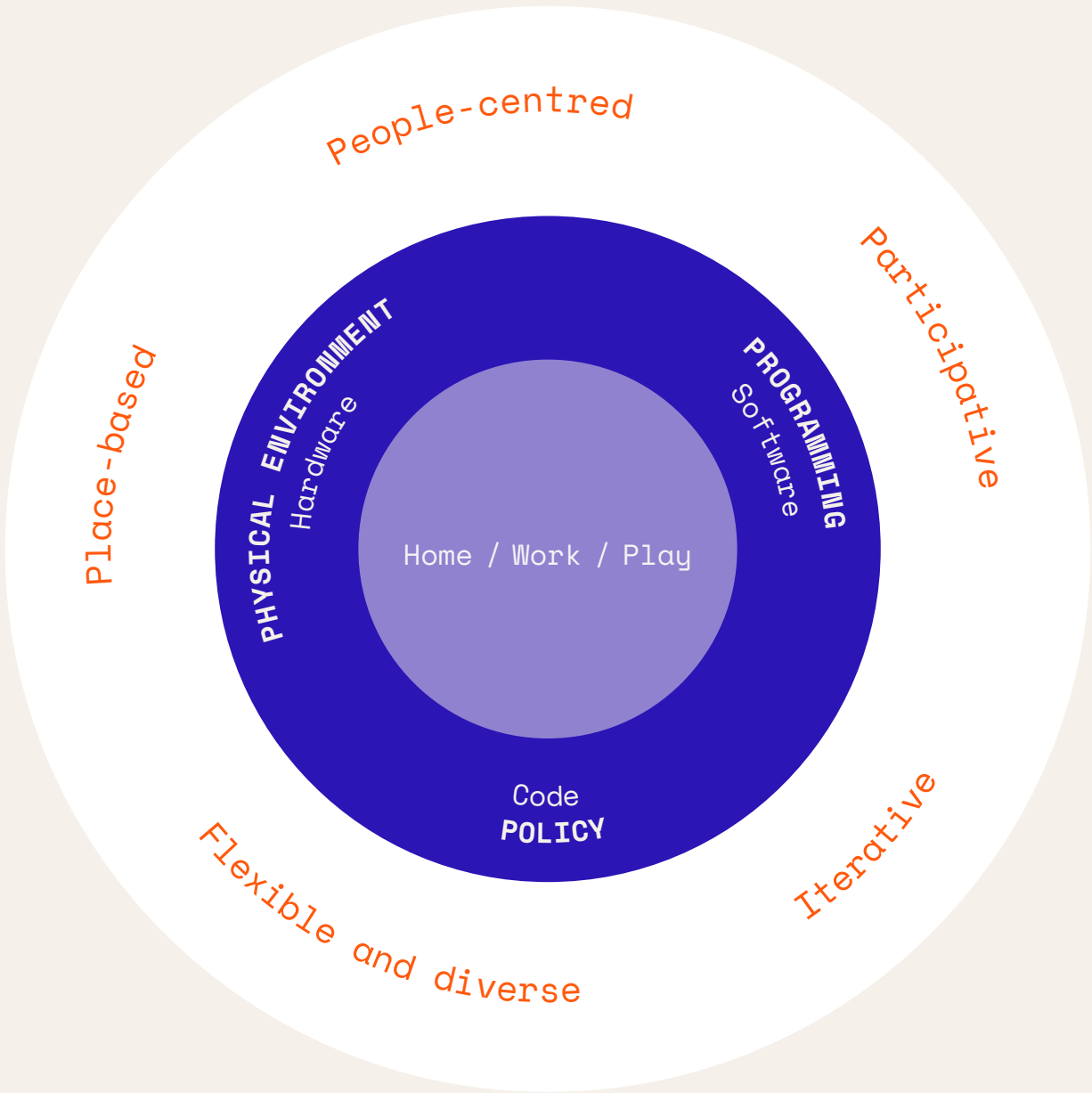
Resident

South Gardens is a new development in Elephant and Castle, South London, designed with plenty of shared spaces to create neighbourly connection.

The roof garden has been particularly successful in fostering a close-knit community of residents, through a strong combination of a good environment (**the 'hardware'**) and good programming (**the 'software'**).

Situated on the top of one of the apartment blocks, the grow garden was originally developed in two parts, with private allotments for dedicated gardeners, and a shared grow space for residents new to gardening or keen simply to see and enjoy what's growing and meet new people in a beautiful setting.

Popular gardening clubs, each with a 'supervisor' nominated by the garden club committee, meet frequently to share tips on growing vegetables, herbs and fruit, and the Building Managers host regular social events in the garden, encouraging children to get involved with the growing.

Strongly supported by a highly engaged Estate Manager, the gardens have changed over time In response to resident feedback. In 2021 all the allotments will become communal and grow food for everyone.

© Lendlease

Conditions for connection

Throughout our conversations with the Lab community, a number of recurring themes have emerged about what it takes to design connected places.

In addition to the three key components outlined above (p.11), throughout our discussions there were five recurring themes, or conditions, our community considered essential in shaping a place that can tackle loneliness and foster connection.

People-centred

Participative

Place-based

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT
Hardware

PROGRAMMING
Software

Home / Work / Play

Code
POLICY

Iterative

Flexible and diverse

Place-based

Every place is unique in both its physical characteristics and its community. The people who live, work and play in a place know best what elements of their built environment help or hinder social connection, so take the lead from them and avoid imposing 'cut and paste' design solutions.

People-centred

Meeting the needs and aspirations of local people should be the primary agenda, not accommodating traffic, reducing budgets, maximising investment returns, or following aesthetic trends. Design should be led by user needs and insights.

Participative

Whether an office, an apartment block or a public park, people need to feel able to shape the spaces around them to suit their needs. Actively building trust, giving permission and creating a sense of belonging are crucial.

Flexible and diverse

People need different things to thrive, and these needs can change over the course of a life, or even throughout the day. Well-designed places must accommodate these very different physical, emotional and cultural needs and aspirations, and consider future, as well as current, residents.

Iterative

Testing, learning from and iterating with the community are the best ways to establish what's needed from a space, who wants to use it, and how needs change over time. Temporary and meanwhile use spaces provide opportunities for advance testing, and post-occupancy surveys deliver meaningful insights on design elements that help or hinder connection over time.

5 design conditions for connected places
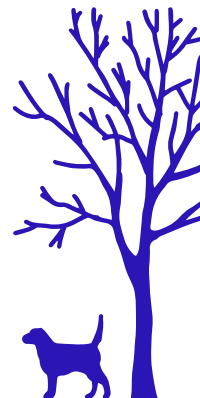
A note about nature

Connecting better with nature, as well as other people, can help tackle loneliness, according to our community. Not only does green space improve our wellbeing but it can be the backdrop for social connection and gathering. Trees provide intimacy and shade and parks are free spaces where everyone should feel welcome.

Home

Residential Spaces

© David Butler

Homes are vital places for connection.

At an individual level, they are a private domain where we can relax and be ourselves with our close family and friends. And at a collective level, they form the meeting points for our most immediate local community of neighbours, 'weak tie' relationships that are the backdrop to our daily lives.

According to the Kings Fund, one third of adults reported mental or physical health difficulties in lockdown as a result of their home conditions. And that's not surprising, given that 800,000 people in the UK are living in overcrowded homes, (a disproportionate amount of whom come from BAME communities), and 4.3m homes in the UK do not currently meet the government's Decent Homes Standard.[20] UCL research identified a link between higher house prices and fewer mental health problems amongst children during lockdown, one reason for which is greater availability of safe spaces to play.[21]

Knowing who lives around us can make us feel safe, secure and build local trust[22], and deliberately planned, shared elements such as communal gardens can foster this connection. Yet 2018 research by Skipton Building Society showed that 68 per cent of people describe their neighbours as "strangers".[23] This is much more likely to be the case for people under 25 than those in older age groups.[24]

The way housing is designed is critical for connection and health. Aston University found that a 'village housing model' for elderly residents delivered a 14.8% reduction in depressive symptoms over 18 months.[25] In contrast, Loneliness Lab members have found many student housing blocks with design features that make it hard for people to socialise and can contribute to poor mental health.[26]

In 2020 we are spending more and more time at, or near, home. With shifts in working practices likely to stick, knowing our neighbours will become more and more important. We all deserve to live in homes that make us healthy and help us stay connected.

WE ASKED OUR COMMUNITY to share their visions for residential spaces that promote connection

"Subtle opportunities to connect with others without this feeling forced."

"People need to be able to plant things, literally and metaphorically. Important to feel ownership over the space and be able to be proactive."

"A fluidity between private and public spaces. To be able to retreat or interact when you need to."

"Limited traffic and safe spaces to gather and play."

"A community not an island. It's important to be integrated with the place around you (i.e. not gated communities)."

"Feeling able to invite people round to your house."

"Pets and children are great levellers and connectors."

"A community that's able to evolve naturally and change with its residents over time."

Home
Design features that connect

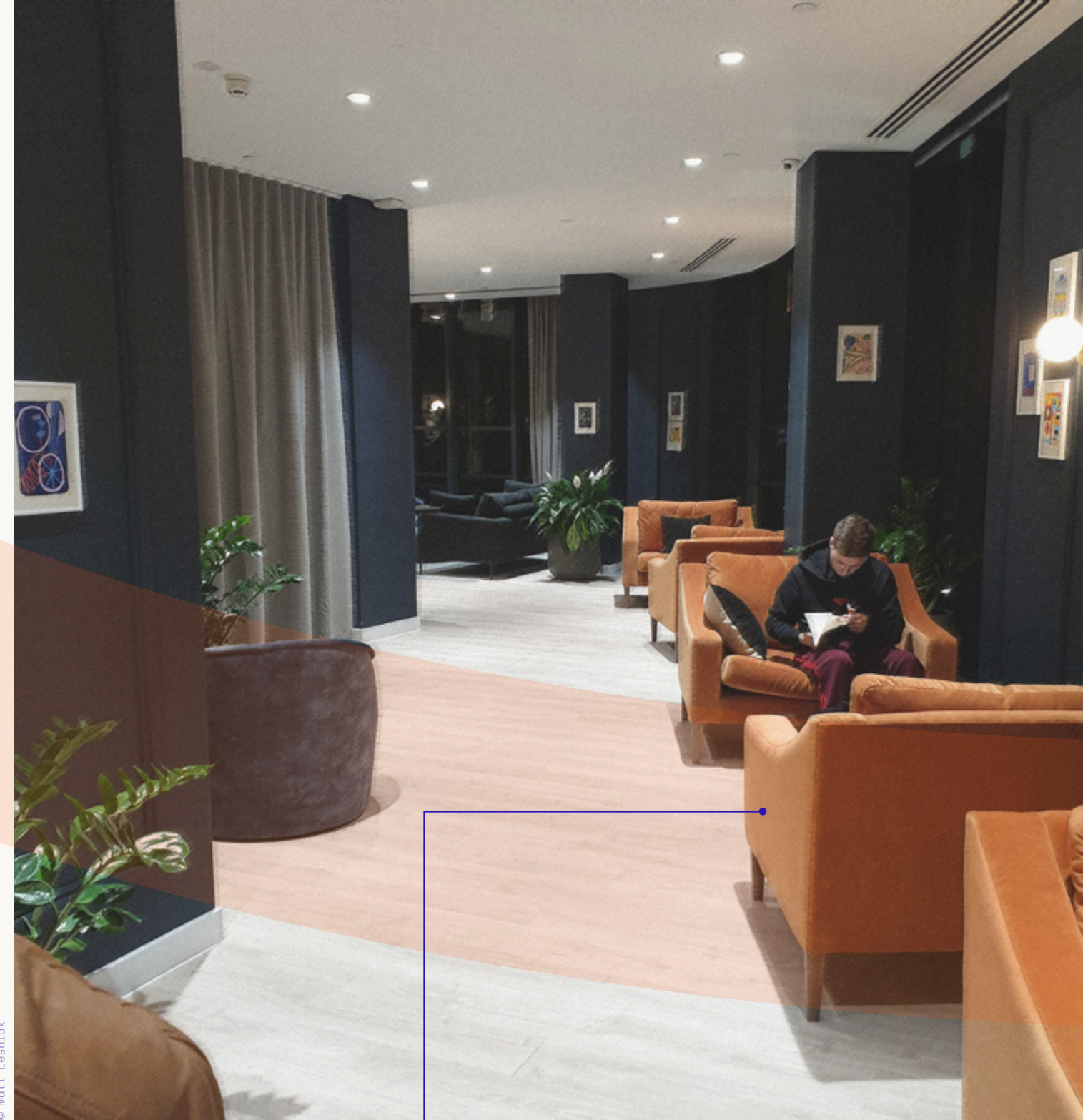Sanford Walk, New Cross, London

© Sandra Tomalka

The Collective, Canary Wharf, London

© Matt Lesniak

Semi-public spaces that residents are able to personalise create opportunities to bump into each other, sit and chat, or garden together.

Paired front doorways and cul-de-sacs allow for smaller, more intimate clusters of neighbours to gather.

Wide corridors enable residents to move through a space without forced or uncomfortable interaction while **intimate nooks** off communal areas facilitate continued chance conversations. **Warm lighting, good soundproofing and comfortable seating** in communal spaces is critical to encourage residents to interact.

The Lane at Marmalade Lane, Cambridge
Mole Architects

© David Butler

Programmed spaces enable integration between residents. Successful intergenerational living spaces welcome young and old, and residents and newcomers alike, through a diverse mix of spaces including workshops, communal kitchens and a craft room.

© Helsingborgshem

Sällbo Co-Living Project, Helsingborg, Sweden

Traffic-free safe spaces encourage play and interaction between children.

Communal gardens and spaces encourage residents to bond over shared interests.

© Jonny Anstead

The Gardens at Marmalade Lane, Cambridge.

Shared community improvement projects encourage residents to connect over a common interest and provide talking points. Residents were given flat pack bird boxes to customise and put up in their front gardens to add more colour and nature to the community and engage young people in improving the area.

© Urban Scale Interventions

Bright Ideas Community Initiative, North Belfast.

Lobbies can be warm and welcoming places to linger, rather than lifeless spaces designed to get you to your own front door as quickly as possible. Spaces for socialising should be porous and flow so that people don't feel uncomfortable walking in on a crowd.

Progressive build-to-rent schemes are embracing lobbies as **resident lounges and co-working spaces**, employing 'hosts' to activate the spaces and welcoming in the wider local community.

Blackhorse Mills, Walthamstow, London
Legal & General, Assael Architecture, and Lister & Lister

Whittington Estate, Camden, London

Sight lines between doorways, floors and balconies build trust and safety by maintaining contact between residents. Private balconies flow into communal terraces with mature trees, with residents encouraged to look after these areas together.

Colli
Poin
Union Wha

Union Wharf, Greenwich, London
Essential Living, Assael Architecture, HTA Design and Woods Bagot

'Soft edges' between public and private spaces enable different degrees of intimacy and cater to a variety of preferences for social connection. Wraparound balconies provide a shared outdoor amenity and secondary route between apartments, making interaction with neighbours more informal and spontaneous, and less intimidating than crossing a dark hallway to knock on a door.

Good storage solutions help people feel comfortable inviting others into their private domain.

© Noshe

R50, Kreuzberg Berlin
Heide & von Beckerath, ifau und Jesko Fezer

© Noshe

R50, Kreuzberg Berlin
Heide & von Beckerath, ifau und Jesko Fezer

© MATTER. SPACE. SOUL

Multi-generational co-living space, design concept
MATTER. SPACE. SOUL

Shared amenities throughout the building, not just at street level, ensure residents connect with each other on every floor.

Meet the experts

The insights in this section were generously shared by Natasha Reid, Petronella Tyson, Shaun Matthews, Anwyn Hocking, Jak Spencer, Stephanie Goldberg and Pauline Martin. Find out more about them on page 51, and connect with them via our website www.lonelinesslab.org/network

Work

Workspaces

We spend a third of our lives at work, and having friends there is important for our wellbeing, and for employee productivity, retention and collaboration.[27]

But even before the pandemic, research showed 3 in 5 people felt lonely at work, and 1.02m office workers in the UK suffered chronic loneliness. Loneliness costs UK employers £2.5 billion a year.[28]

No workplace has been untouched by the pandemic. Hospitality, leisure and retail settings have had to close or significantly reduce their services.

Essential workplaces such as hospitals, food shops and factories have stayed open, albeit with stringent new Covid-secure measures in place. And 2020 has turned the concept of the office workplace on its head.

Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, 68% of British employees never worked from home.

Since the outbreak, one in five of us have made the leap from never working from home to doing so constantly, and a huge number of us now sometimes work from home.

For many, this has been a positive change - a massive 91% say they would like to continue at least some of the time, even after the pandemic ends.[29] A Gallup poll found that remote employees who work at the office one day a week are the happiest.[30]

© Mark Cocksedge

But working from home can be incredibly lonely. Research conducted by the Loneliness Lab in 2019 found that home was the loneliest work location[31] and according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, one third of employees say that feeling lonely whilst working remotely prevents them from doing their work effectively.[32]

The mainstreaming of home-based office work prompts important questions for the future. If solo office work requiring focus and concentration can now best be done from home, how can people stay connected and not feel isolated there? Flexible access to local 'work hubs' through the week, better home working environments and a greater focus from employers on keeping in touch with remote staff are all important. And if we embrace this different way of working, it offers huge potential to create more thriving local neighbourhoods and reduce the impacts of the daily commute.

Back to the office proper, and its primary function will be as a place to meet in person and collaborate. Dedicated spaces for meaningful connection will be more important than ever.

How can we maintain the more authentic colleague connections created by 2020's very visible blurring of work and family life on Zoom? Research shows that conversations away from the office environment lead to better connectedness and more trust[33], so how could we carry that back to our workplace together? And if it's used less for 9-5 desk work, how might the traditional office serve a more integrated and multipurpose role in the community and neighbourhood?

WE ASKED OUR COMMUNITY what they felt made offices more connected places

"A place where everyone feels welcome and able to be their best."

"A place where you can bring your whole self, not just be a person in a suit."

"There's a good mix of spaces from quiet and disconnected through to connected and bustling."

"Joyful - work can and should spark joy."

"Being able to work from, or close to home."

"Lots of nature and light."

"When the first thing you see is a friendly face."

"Somewhere that feels part of the community around us and can be used by the community."

Design features
that connect

© Mark Cocksedge

Reading Room at Fora Borough, London
Basha-Franklin and HASSELL Studio

© Mark Cocksedge

Breakout Space at Fora Borough, London
Basha-Franklin and HASSELL Studio

Zoning an office provides staff with a choice between **team spaces, collaboration spaces, informal conversation areas and quiet retreat areas,** depending on the type of work they want to do.

© Mark Cocksedge

Rooftop Lounge at Fora Borough, London
Basha-Franklin and HASSELL Studio

Spaces that encourage dwell time and chance conversations such as **staircases, tea points** and **informal breakout spaces** provide a welcome opportunity to move away from screens and communicate face to face. These spaces should be at least semi-private to reduce concerns about being overheard or feeling self-conscious.

© Thierry Cardineau

Breakout area, Office Group
Design and Build by Modus Workplace

© Jack Hobhouse

Living Room @ Sayer Street, Elephant Park, London
BD Landscape and Lendlease

Places for shared interests such as bike parking, gyms, bars, meditation spaces and rooftop gardens encourage employees to form friendships beyond their immediate colleagues. Roof gardens are well-loved as a space to retreat, garden at lunchtime and step away from technology.

© Trevor Keeling

Rooftop Garden, Buro Happold, London

Hatcham House, Southwark, London

Permeability between the workspace and the surrounding neighbourhood is important to build local connections and ensure spaces thrive out of office hours. A temporary 'outdoor living room' provides workers with additional meeting space that can also be used by the community and local hospitality businesses, with lighting to enable evening use.

© Hatcham House

Hatcham House, London provides **discounted venue hire** to local groups at the weekend.

Military Coworking Network Hub

© Work Club

Local work 'hubs' near home allow people to reduce commute time, build local social connections and focus better than at home. Work Club - a national platform connecting people to workspaces - set up work hubs for military spouses on British Army bases, bringing together an often transient community and supporting work opportunities.

On-site childcare can humanise workspaces, make them more inclusive for parents, and create links with the local community. Impact Hub Birmingham's Radical Childcare programme not only provides a crêche for co-workers but actively engages children in their mission to create a fairer city.

Radical Childcare Initiative by Birmingham Impact Hub

© Thom Bartley

Interactive technology, innovation room layouts and ground rules to encourage equal participation can narrow the 'body language' gap between remote workers and colleagues working in the office together.

© Basha-Franklin

Design concept of a digital collaboration hub by Basha-Franklin

© Method Products

Locating workspaces within the community, for the community, creates interaction and belonging. Method's South Side Soapbox, an eco factory in the Pullman area of Chicago, was intentionally situated to regenerate the area and create over 100 local jobs with a short commute time.

South Side Soapbox, Pullman, Chicago

Meet the experts

The insights in this section were generously shared by Rachel Edwards, Clare Bailey, Ajay Palekar and Nicola Osbourne. Find out more about them on page 51, and connect with them via our website www.lonelinesslab.org/network

Play

Public and Shared spaces

The public realm has been a place for connection and cultural life for thousands of years.

These spaces - markets, libraries, parks, playgrounds, squares, shops, cafés, places of worship and community centres - play a vital role in bringing people together. During lockdown, local outdoor spaces became an extension of our living rooms, and local high streets provided food and kindness, a lifeline for many neighbourhoods.

But today's public realm remains a contested space, with competing demands from cars, pedestrians and nature, and between commercial interests and civic life. These demands can shut people out of public spaces, both physically and financially, and can limit our ability to connect with each other in them. Responsibility for maintaining our public spaces and the challenge of keeping high streets thriving in a digital world are also critical issues.

For many of us, 2020 brought our work and civic lives much closer to home. The concept of the 'fifteen minute city' with everything you need within a 15 minute walk from home became not just possible, but essential.[34] The pandemic saw some high streets thrive, reclaimed by pedestrians, and as we queued outside shops and banks, we were forced to slow down and reconnect with our surroundings and each other.

Sadly not everyone has access to good neighbourhood facilities or high quality green spaces. But 2020 re-emphasised the vital role these spaces play in our mental and physical wellbeing, and showed us what could be possible.

"It's time to reimagine our whole high street as a community centre."

Emily Georghiou
Centre for Ageing Better

© DEL RIO BANI

WE ASKED OUR COMMUNITY what they felt made public and shared spaces more connected

"Spaces where all generations and backgrounds feel welcome together."

"Playful with plenty of focal points that encourage interaction."

"Accessible to people with specific physical or emotional needs."

"Plenty of variety to choose from, small intimate spaces through to big open spaces."

"Green and beautiful spaces where you want to spend time."

"Places should flow between one another, just like a traditional market."

"The public realm should feel "public" - places should be shaped by the community."

"Places should be thriving and serve multiple purposes throughout the day and week e.g. shop by day, café by night."

"Somewhere you can go alone and not feel the need to talk to others."

"You shouldn't feel you need to spend money to be welcome there."

"Safe from traffic and where pedestrians are prioritised."

"Spaces should be looked after not just with good design but ongoing activation."
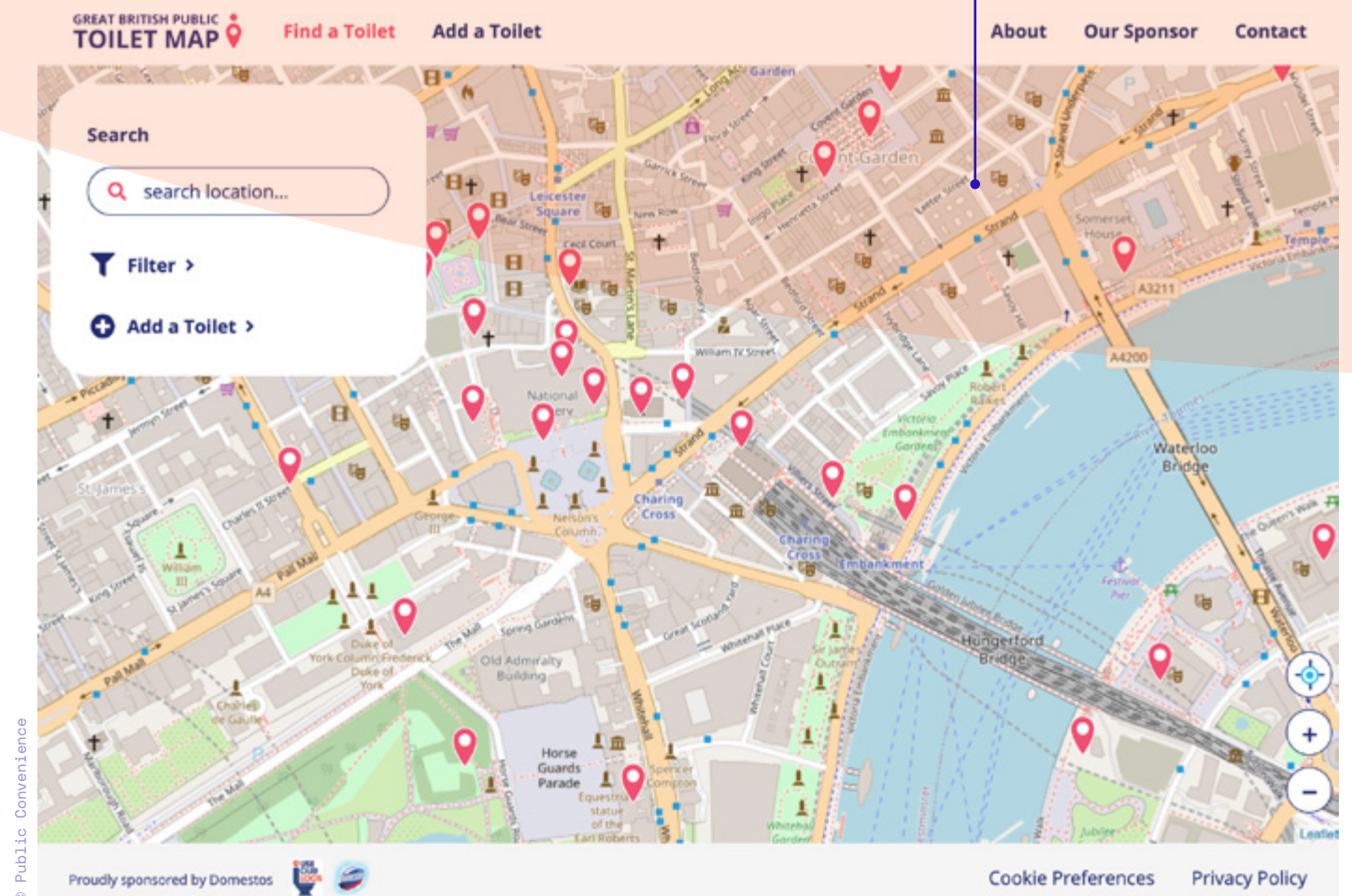
Play
Design features that connect

Central Park Access Map, New York

Accessible wayfinding, paths and amenities ensure spaces and facilities are available to everyone, particularly those with disabilities and those who may struggle to access or feel comfortable using public spaces.

Superblock, Sant Antoni, Barcelona
Leku Studio

Pedestrianised zones make people feel safer and encourage more interaction. During the pandemic, pavements were widened, streets were closed to cars and parking spaces were taken over by outdoor tables.[35] Temporary features such as cycle lanes, play areas, seating areas and planting transformed a highway into a place.

GREAT BRITISH PUBLIC TOILET MAP

Find a Toilet   Add a Toilet

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Search

search location...

Filter >

Add a Toilet >

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Great British Public Toilet Map, London

© DEL RIO BANI

Community-generated art puts local people in charge of design, enabling them to reclaim often unloved places and make them feel safer and more welcoming.

Community Engagement, Her Barking, Barking, London
Street Space

Her Barking, St Awdrys Walk, London
Street Space

Lighting, installations and street furniture bring life and connection to previously underused spaces. Pop-up meeting pods and a colourful light installation are proposals to change the tone of this Derry area synonymous with poor wellbeing. Mental health first aid training is also provided as a condition for subsidised pod rental.

Our Future Foyle, Foyle River, Derry

Our Future Foyle, Foyle River, Derry

Giraffe Playground, Uppsala, Sweden

© Signify

Lighting makes spaces safe and exciting to use at night. Phillips' LED light installation encouraged children to play outdoors 37 per cent longer, reduced their device use and made them feel happier.[36]

Elephant Says Hi!, Elephant and Castle, London

© Elephant Says Hi!

A unifying sense of identity in a place can help bring local businesses and organisations together. Elephant Says Hi! aims to make the Elephant and Castle area more welcoming to both new and existing residents. Over 30 organisations are part of the initiative including retailers, cafés, resident associations and community organisations.

Meanwhile use spaces encourage the community to shape a place, and allow policy makers and developers to learn what's needed in the longer term. MAKE @ Story Garden is a public space for creative collaboration with, and by, the local communities in Somers Town and St Pancras, London. The aim is to build community and creative skills through a programme of arts activities and projects tackling local issues.

© Paul Cochrane

Make @ Story Garden, Somers Town, London
Central Saint Martins, Somers Town Community Association, Camden Council and Lendlease

© Joygun Nehar

Make@ Story Garden, Somers Town, London

The 'Front Room' pop up barge café at Civic Square **invites the local community** to shape an exciting new public space in Birmingham.

© Thom Bartley

The floating "Front Room", Civic Square, Birmingham

Human scale nooks, flexible seating, and intimate areas make large scale public spaces feel inviting, both to people visiting alone or socialising in groups. Moveable furniture gives people a sense of agency over the space and encourages them to make it their own.

© Ben Gilbert

Reading Room, Wellcome Collection, London

© Matt Chisnall

Gillet Square, Dalston, London
Hawkins\Brown

© Hackney Co-operative Development, Gillett Squared and POPUPIP

Pop up Playground Gillet Square, Dalston, London

Establishing governance within a space is important for long term stewardship and activation. The Gillett Square Partnership provides ongoing connection between the community, designers, developers, and the local authority, turning this once-deprived area into a thriving square and market, with an active programme of events evolving the space over time and widening participation.

© Ruth Ward

College Square, Croydon, London
Fiona Hartley and Ellie Fox Johnson

Meet the experts

The insights in this section were was generously shared by Shaparak Rahimini, Lucy Pritchard, Liza Makarov, Simon Redding, Selina Mason, Emily Georghiou, Jak Spencer, Phillippa Bannister and Thomas Bryans. Find out more about them on page 51, and connect with them via our website www.lonelinesslab.org/network

Community in charge
Monkey Park, Chesterfield

Monkey Park is a thriving co-working space and community centre in Brampton, Chesterfield.

It is an excellent example of how a vibrant new place can be prototyped with limited funds, by harnessing the ambition, energy and talents of the community.

Local residents took over the abandoned tile shop on their doorstep, and ever since, the space has been shaped by their evolving needs. The space currently offers a café, a bike maintenance workshop, a crêche, co-working facilities and craft activities.

As a social enterprise, Monkey Park exists explicitly to 'bring people together and support their efforts to change the area', and has created five new part time jobs for local people.

Simon Redding, founder of Monkey Park, says the key to building community in the space is 'trust'. As he says, "If someone has an idea or a suggestion for how to use the space, we hand them a key and let them get on with it."

© Alex Brenner

Making design for connection the new normal

Opportunities for collective action

By sharing the learnings from our community, we hope to inspire each other to create resilient, distinctive and connected local spaces and places - whether that means retrofitting an office to make it more welcoming in a post-COVID era, or reimagining a park so that everyone feels they belong there.

Our community discussions have highlighted key next steps requiring collective action

Grow the evidence base

This document is a snapshot of insights and examples from a number of committed practitioners in the Loneliness Lab network. But research and case studies are still thin on the ground, especially when it comes to assessing the longer term impacts of specific local interventions on loneliness. The evidence base for how the built environment makes a difference to social connection needs dedicated funding, and greater collaboration between the research and practitioner communities. In particular, we need to look more closely at the underrepresented groups currently underserved by our built environment and at risk from loneliness, and at workplaces beyond the office setting.

Develop and embed Design Codes into the planning system

The UK government is currently reviewing the planning system in England, and proposing the creation of National Design Codes to be adapted at local level. While this report contains initial ideas on design principles and features to tackle loneliness, more work is needed to create a set of design guidance to foster connection.

Improve evaluation tools and uptake within the industry

There is a consensus among our network that more tools are needed to measure the impact of built environment interventions on loneliness and connection. We also need greater uptake of post-occupancy surveys, such as the recently published RIBA Social Value Toolkit for Architecture.[37] Only by measuring the impact of interventions can we learn what works, what doesn't, and why, and develop best practice accordingly.

Give power and resources to communities to shape their own places and experiment

During our event series we heard inspiring stories of community groups who have taken over unloved spaces on their doorstep and turned them into valued local assets for often marginalised members of the community. Investment to build the capability of community organisations to identify, secure and manage these spaces, together with early stage funding to develop them, would unlock many more such opportunities. Likewise there is a need for developers and asset owners to free up spaces for experimentation by the community, for example underused office spaces or meanwhile use spaces.

Measure the economic value of connection

Development decisions are very much driven by finances. The high ongoing costs of maintaining and programming a public space are often a reason not to build it in the first place, especially if there is limited consensus on who should pay those costs. Likewise, the social value of design features such as wider corridors and shared gardens are not always visible to investors, whose returns are based on the resale value of private, not shared, space. The more we know about the economic benefits of designing for social connection, the greater the business case will be for including such features in the future.

Race to the top

Just as the built environment industry competes to create the greenest buildings and places, underpinned by rating schemes and with investment driving better performance, so we need to foster the same healthy competition to deliver positive social impact. Private and public sectors must work together to create the most connected and inclusive places, and leave behind outdated approaches that divide communities and alienate people.

What you can do next

Developers

- Mainstream the importance of social connection by **discussing it with customers**, other developers, policy makers and the wider industry.

- Include tackling loneliness and promoting connectedness as part of your **sustainability strategy**.

- Follow the lead of **Lendlease's Euston project** and embed tackling loneliness in everything from design briefs to community initiatives.

- Incorporate **design principles** and features that create connection into your own projects.

- **Listen to your staff** on how to design loneliness out of your core business. Over 30 people at Lendlease, from masterplanners, strategists and development managers, to commercial managers and marketers, are proactively tackling loneliness in their day jobs.

- **Experiment** in meanwhile use spaces. Learn from what works and implement the best approaches in future projects.

- Use **post-occupancy surveys** to find out how existing projects contribute to social connection.

Businesses

- **Start with your staff** - loneliness is bad for productivity, wellbeing, retention and collaboration, and they will know best what would make them feel more connected to their colleagues.

- Work hard to understand how your **core business** contributes to loneliness. A chatty table in your café will have limited impact if your business model is putting locally-owned cafés out of business, or your vending machines are replacing cafés altogether.

- Think about how spaces such as your lobby or meeting rooms could be used by the **local community** outside core business hours.

- **Team up** with other businesses for greater impact. Elephant Says Hi! (p.40) is a great example of local businesses working together to make a whole area more welcoming, a win-win for them and for local people.
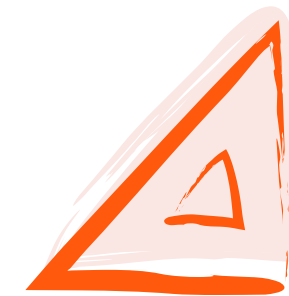
Architects and design studios

- Overcome the stigma and **talk with your clients** about why designing for social connection matters.

- Work with **local partners** so the community is involved in shaping the spaces around them.

- Use the **design principles and features** in this report to reduce loneliness in your projects.

- Evaluate past projects using a **post-occupancy tool** to find out if your designs have led to more connection amongst occupants.

- **Share case studies** and tangible examples of what works, and contribute to the evidence base on how to design loneliness out of our cities.

- **Talk to your teams** about loneliness - everyone has a personal story to share.
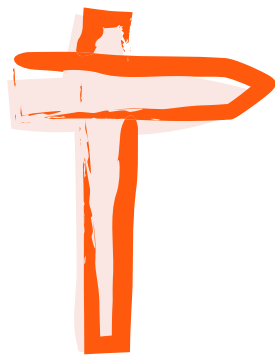
Local authorities

- **Offer spaces and assets to community groups** to prototype ideas for connection, such as a pop-up coworking space. Team up with local businesses and support neighbourhoods to use their underused assets.

- Research how loneliness affects people in your community so you can **address specific demographic needs and challenges**. By doing this, Camden Council identified their area has one of the UK's highest rates of people living alone.

- Ensure staff looking at loneliness and wellbeing work closely with colleagues in **planning and regeneration**. At Southwark Council, both teams sit under one directorate.

- Ensure tackling loneliness is a criterion in **local planning codes** and in your developer and partner selection process.

- Bring local businesses, placemakers, community organisations and citizens together to explore how a **joint approach** to tackling loneliness might work. Bristol One City is a great example of a council mobilising the private sector and community groups behind some of its most complex social challenges.

Community Organisations/ Residents

- Ask the local authority or local businesses if you can take over an **underused or abandoned space**. Monkey Park in Chesterfield (p.44) is an example of an old tile shop turned in to a thriving community hub, cycle project and workspace. Everything about the space has been co-designed with the community, evolving its uses over time.

- Start small on your doorstep. **Bring your neighbours together** for a street party, take over an unloved corner and turn it into a shared garden or create a 'swap box' on the street for people to share things with each other.
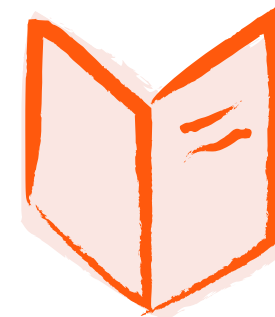
Educators

- Add loneliness to the **curriculum** and encourage students to work on design briefs that tackle loneliness in real spaces and places. London School of Architecture created a series of design guides on how to foster connection as part of their course work.

- Loneliness can be a big issue in **student housing**, so consider bringing your design school together with facilities management to improve living environments on campus.

- Team up with local developers, councils and businesses to **bring student projects to life**. Central Saint Martins are working closely with Camden Council, Somerstown Community Centre and Lendlease to prototype projects at their pop-up maker space (p.41).

Join the
movement

We hope you have been inspired by the pioneering approaches showcased in this report.

Tackling loneliness through the built environment is complex, the work is just beginning and the evidence base is emerging at speed.

Join the Loneliness Lab network to ask questions and share your own insights and activities.

www.lonelinesslab.org/network

# Thank you
to our contributors

We are grateful to the 200+ members of our network who contributed to our Design to Connect series. Particular thanks to the following individuals and organisations who have shared their learnings and insights so generously and helped inspire this document.
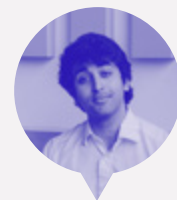
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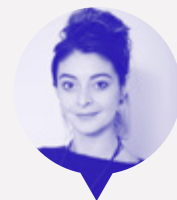
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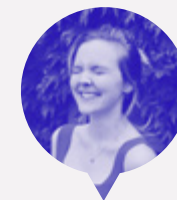
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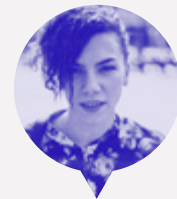**Erin Peavey**
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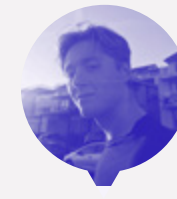HKS

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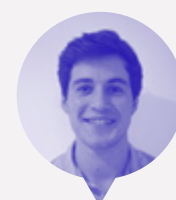**Rachel Edwards**
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