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Social interactions in urban spaces

Jennifer Kent

DECRA and Robinson Fellow, Urbanism Discipline Research Lead, The University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning

jennifer.kent@sydney.edu.au

A sense of support, community and belonging within the places where people live, work and travel, is an influential determinant of mental and physical health. Indeed, internationally well-regarded psychologist, Roger S. Ulrich, once proclaimed "Low social support may be as great a risk factor in mortality as cigarette smoking" (Ulrich, 1999: 42). Belonging fosters perceptions of security, confidence and comfort, which can encourage people to be active in their neighbourhood, as well as socially connected to others.

At the heart of notions such as community, belonging and connection are social interactions. Interactions with other people are the fundamental basis of what it means for us to be social beings. Indeed, they are an innate, biological, need, with both psychological and physical health consequences (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010). Without interaction the regulation of cellular processes deep within the body are disrupted, predisposing us to premature ageing and, ultimately, premature mortality (Wang et al., 2018). This makes sense when we consider that early in our history as a species, we survived and prospered only by banding together — in couples, families and tribes. Interaction was a way to ensure mutual protection and assistance. The pain of isolation, therefore, evolved like any other form of pain — a way to protect us from harm. Too much social isolation feels unpleasant because it is a signal that connections to others are weak and need to be repaired (Cacioppo et al., 2011).

Since the turn of this Century, there has been a general downward trend in the amount of face-to-face and incidental interactions we have, and a shift towards more mediated interactions based on networks (either online or through an organised channel such as a school or workplace) (Patulny and Seaman, 2017). Our social lives are increasingly mediated through technology, and this is a concern for both sociologists and mental health professionals (Grenade and Boldy, 2008). If the only interactions we have are with the like-minded people we choose as our associates, we risk becoming blind to, and intolerant of, diversity, as well as isolated from those around us.

The way urban environments are planned, designed, constructed and managed can be instrumental in supporting social interactions of all kinds (Cohen et al., 2008; Bower et al., 2023). For example, by providing jobs in close proximity to housing, good urban planning can help reduce commute times (Chatterjee et al., 2020; Haffner and Hulse, 2021), providing more opportunities for people to be at home with family. Urban planning also influences, to an extent, housing affordability, enabling family and friends to remain in close proximity (should they choose), rather than having to move away, simply to afford a home (Haffner

and Hulse, 2021). These less-direct impacts of urban form on social interaction are important; however, this paper's focus is specifically on incidental social interactions. This is in recognition of the many and varied ways built environments can promote positive interactions within the immediate community.

The importance of incidental interactions

Social interaction is increasingly linked to organised activities, including work, sport, a child's school, or membership of a common-interest group. Our interactions are often mediated online, and as a result, they do not necessarily occur in the spaces where we physically spend our time (Sabatini and Sarracino, 2019). Incidental interactions are in between these formalised and networked connections. They include the day-to-day meeting and greeting of people who live, work and travel in the same spaces at the same times as us. These interactions may not be with the people we would normally choose to associate with. Indeed, we may not even know them by name, nor speak to them for lengthy periods. Yet history, research, and common sense all tell us that incidental interactions are critical components of the health of communities and individuals within those communities (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). They are small events that enrich connection to place, promote a duty of caring, increase perceptions of safety and belonging, and decrease feelings of loneliness and isolation. It is through these incidental interactions that we learn to cooperate, tolerate and trust relative strangers. If the majority, or all, of our interactions with other people are with those we have met through a common interest or history, we risk becoming blind to diversity. Our ability to appreciate and respect difference is eroded.

Incidental interactions thrive on regular contact. While it might be unusual to simply say hello to a total stranger, this shifts when we see that stranger more regularly. We start to realise that they share something in common with us — even if it is catching the 7:16 AM train, the postcode where we live, the place we buy our coffee, or our morning walking routine. Regular chance meetings make it easier for us to say good morning, make comment on the weather, or simply just nod in greeting. And research unequivocally demonstrates that a community rich in these subtle interactions is more likely to be a healthy one (see, for example, Umberson and Montez, 2010). These are the exchanges that give neighbourhoods the potential to feel safe and welcoming, encouraging people to feel that they belong within it, living lives with coherency and connection.

Interaction in the public realm and the importance of slowing down

Any place in the public realm is capable of hosting informal and unorganised social interactions. Every second, interactions occur in our urban spaces. They happen in children's playgrounds, by park benches, in public squares, on footpaths, at bus stops, around bike racks and in building forecourts. They can be large, such as a town square or train station, or smaller, such as a stairwell or common entry to a building. The more talking points we have, the greater the opportunity for incidental interaction. The more often people's paths cross, the more opportunities there are to acknowledge and build respect for one another.

For many, life occurs at an increasingly fast pace. The first step to an incidental interaction, therefore, might just be a slackening of pace. We need to provide a reason, and a space, for people to shift gears, even for a moment. This might be task-oriented — such as collecting the mail or waiting for a bus. It might also be rather whimsical — such as a work of public art, a body of water, a neighbourhood cat, a tree in full flower or a flock of noisy birds. Once we understand that interactions depend upon personal *de*celeration, or slowing, we realise why public spaces need to be designed to encourage lingering.

The most obvious way to slow the pace of social life is to provide ample places for people to sit. Famous urban designer, William H. Whyte, was an avid supporter of the provision of seating in public places. In lamenting the lack of places to sit in American cities, he once remarked "The human backside is a dimension architects seem to have forgotten." The quote appeared in his iconic and ethnographic film *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Whyte, 1980). In it, he demonstrated the way people merge and linger not in the large and exposed expanses of public square, but in smaller parcels of space throughout the city.

Aside from places to sit, there are a series of other embellishments urban planners and designers can incorporate to encourage lingering in the public realm. First and foremost, public spaces need to be places where people feel safe — this may mean well-lit at night, shaded in the summer months, and sheltered throughout winter. Some spaces should be natural, or at least accommodate and incorporate natural elements. Humans share a degree of fascination and appreciation of nature and flora and fauna are more likely to prompt a casual remark or smile than relatively sterile blocks of concrete or steel (Beery et al., 2017). Providing adequate space for responsible companion animal ownership can also foster incidental interaction and strengthen community ties (Bueker, 2013; Toohey et al., 2013). Street art — formal or informal, large or small — is also a potential point of interaction (Alizadeh et al., 2022). Art in urban space disrupts the monotony of built elements. It implores that we slow down, look up, and perhaps enjoy that moment with the people who happen to be nearby.

Planning for both sharing and privacy

There is a considerable body of research linking low-density development, sometimes labelled "urban sprawl," with poor health (see for example Garden and Jalaludin, 2009). One of the pathways for this link is that the focus on the private realm, lack of diversity of housing types and land uses, as well as car dependency, can undermine social capital by reducing opportunities for social interaction. However, research on the impact of residential density on incidental interactions is mixed. Indeed, there have been several studies demonstrating that social interaction is more common in lower-density suburban areas (see for example the US-based study by Nguyen, 2010). Overall, the research suggests that there is a threshold to be found between high and low densities and social interaction generally. People need opportunities to interact randomly — whether that be in shared driveways, building entry points, or at the mailbox. But they also need to be able to retreat to their private spaces from time to time.

The complex balance between density and interactions highlights the way that, in cities that are growing and densifying, we are increasingly required to share space. Higher-density living in an apartment, for example, replaces a private backyard with public open space. A public transport trip replaces the cocoon of the private car with a communal train, bus or tram. Office workers, at the mercy of employers seeking to minimise spending on office space, are increasingly asked to hot-desk, or share desk space. There are more shared pathways, where cyclists, pedestrians, dog-walkers and pram-pushers vie for space.

While sharing can encourage incidental interactions, unless sharing is balanced with the opportunity to have time out, we risk that interactions may become a source of tension, rather than conviviality. A healthy built environment requires both opportunities for people to interact, as well as chances for people to retreat from the public gaze when needed. Planners and urban designers can do this through proper building design, for example by prioritising visual and acoustic privacy. Transport planners can also incorporate places for silence into everyday environments. For example, most trains servicing urban areas in Australia now have a quiet carriage, where people are discouraged to talk on mobile phones and listen to loud music.

Taking interactions online — what place for the built environment?

The popularity of social media and chat platforms suggests that digital connections now serve as an easy substitute for face-to-face contact. This was confirmed by research from the University of Wollongong (NSW), which used the General Social Survey to show an aggregate decline in face-to-face contact and rise in online contact in Australia (Patulny and Seaman, 2017). This is not necessarily a bad development for social interactions, which can be both initiated and strengthened by online platforms. However, it seems implausible that online interactions, self-selected and moderated by the boundaries of our own digital footprints, can provide the benefits of tangible incidental encounters with the random people around us. If we are looking down at a screen, we are certainly not looking around at the wonderful mess of community that confronts and enfolds us. Surely our ability to relate, appreciate diversity and connect to community is eroded? The question for urban planners and designers, however, is whether there is any role for the built environment in moderating some of the issues that arise as a result of our appreciation of online communication.

Urban planners around the globe assess and approve proposals for broadband infrastructure, just as they do for other major infrastructure projects. Planners have overseen the roll-out of broadband networks, and, together with the politics and business case of the entire operation, planning decisions have had an important role in shaping the way we access the internet. If we can use planning to influence transport networks and design new neighbourhoods, in theory planners can also effect online networks. This raises an interesting question for the intersections between urban planning and mental health — just as we provide quiet gardens and train carriages, could we also provide spaces where access to the internet is limited to essential services? Could planners make spaces where the switched-on and stressed-out population can genuinely find

time out, or genuinely find each other? In reality, urban planners would not dare, or be permitted, to exercise such discretion. This is a stark reminder that, while we often know *how* to plan and construct healthy built environments, the practice of planning is inevitably constrained by politics, individual preferences and the economy (Kent et al., 2017; Kent et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the concept of incidental interactions and demonstrated their importance for healthy communities and individuals. Of course, incidental interactions are not the panacea for a disconnected community, nor can they provide immunity against mental illness. It is hard to imagine, however, that any urban area where it is uncommon to acknowledge, respect and care for the people around you is a welcoming and healthy place.

Incidental interactions need space in which to occur, and these spaces need to be diverse, safe and plentiful. Performing an economic or utilitarian function should not be a prerequisite for a use to claim space in our cities. Spaces of commerce, learning, transport, residential accommodation and service need to be complemented by spaces where use is not so well-defined — where we linger, play, walk, sit, chat, pass through and meet. These are the spaces where "we learn — because we have to — that people of every kind, of every age, of every background deserve our respect" (Mackay, 2014: 49).

As our world and our cities grow, space comes increasingly at a premium. The business of urban development gives rise to a temptation to use every slice of available land for something deemed by the market to be "worthwhile." Concurrently, a growing city, and the dense urban form required to accommodate growth, demands we live in closer proximity to an increasingly diverse array of people. Spaces for interactions are, therefore, more critical than ever. These are the spaces that coax us out of our own lives, and give us a place to learn to get along.

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