The Ballad of Peckham Square:
an ethnography of an inner-city public space

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Dissertation submitted for MSc Social Research Methods
March 2009

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Acknowledgments

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ABSTRACT

The project aims at a broad level to examine the implementation of some social aspects of national and local regeneration agendas guiding the redevelopment of an inner London borough. Specifically, the study looks at the extent to which some of the local authority's stated social and cultural ambitions for the redevelopment of a town centre have been realised. The focus of the study is on Peckham Square in the London Borough of Southwark, a new public space created as a centrepiece to the regeneration project, and asks the questions: what was Peckham Square intended to achieve? What use is made of the square, and how does this relate to the initial vision for the space?

The study uses an ethnographic approach, primarily participant observation, to examine in close detail ways in which people use and interpret the space. The observation of formally organised events as well as general everyday 'vernacular' usage was employed to gather data on spatial and temporal patterns of use and interactions within the square. These are then analysed within the local and national policy contexts, and compared with the vision conceptualised in the original aims of the development.

It was found that the square is a successful community focal point when used as a venue for organised events. However the lack of activity at other times suggests that it has been less successful in creating an everyday social space, and it does not appear to foster a sense of community or conviviality as intended. A comparison with other social spaces in the surrounding area suggests that the layout of the square in

effect "designs out" a style of social life that is highly characteristic of the area, and leads to questioning which publics are served by this public space. Nonetheless, forms of engagement with the space and its features were unexpectedly varied and creative, suggesting that the space lends itself to uses beyond the policy-driven aims relating to "community cohesion", and allows playful and individualistic interpretations and re-creations apparently unanticipated by the square's planners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

This project looks at formal and informal use of a new public square, and the types of activities and interpretations that create this space. These interpretations and re-creations are analysed in relation to the original vision for the square and the social aims it was intended to achieve when it was first designed. The space in question is Peckham Square, which opened in 2000 as the centrepiece to a massive regeneration project in Peckham, in the borough of Southwark in south-east London.

Historical context

Peckham Square is located in Peckham town centre at the junction of its two main shopping streets, occupying the site that was formerly Eagle Wharf, where the Grand Surrey Canal terminated and timber brought by barge from the Thames was unloaded throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. The site remained derelict until the mid 1990s when redevelopment of the area began. A timber business remains adjacent to Peckham Square, and many other relics of Peckham's commercial and industrial past are visible nearby, including several factory buildings, and an eel, pie and mash shop with historical links to the canal backs that onto the square. Peckham was an overnight stop for cattle drovers and their herds going to market in London, commemorated in nearby street names and pub names (Bull Yard, Cow Bridge, The Red

Bull, The Kentish Drovers). Historical associations were also brought to bear in weighty expectations on the square itself from its inception: for example "Peckham Town Square and the new health and fitness centre will revive the 1930's Peckham Experiment in preventative health care" (Southwark Challenge and Southwark Council, 1993, p. 7)[1].

Social and policy context

In 1994 Southwark was awarded £60m of central government Single Regeneration Budget funding to transform its housing stock, the key project being the demolition of the overcrowded and run-down Five Estates area of North Peckham and the building of new homes for most of its 11,000 residents (see map at Appendix 1). The programme was implemented by the Peckham Partnership, a consortium of statutory, voluntary and private sector partners which administered funding totalling almost £300m between 1995-2000 to address other social issues in the area, cohering around nine themes: training and employment, education, housing, crime prevention, town centre, health, safety, management, and community development (Peckham Partnership, 1999).

The social engineering involved in this venture is explicitly stated in the Peckham Partnership's vision of the transformation of the area, which speaks of "producing an educated and qualified healthy population … displaying an increasing ability to initiate programmes and to lead projects" as well as enabling "enhancement of the contribution to society from every individual … harnessing the contributions of the most able"

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[1] The Peckham Experiment was a popular and successful programme to promote healthy living and recreation amongst local working class families; see http://www.thephf.org/phfpeckham.html

(Peckham Partnership, 1999, p. 1). The masterplan for the housing redevelopment speaks of "impenetrable" estates that require "integrating into Peckham" (BTPW Architects and Pollard Thomas and Edwards Architects, 1995, p. 59), while the design guide for the proposed works discusses ways for new buildings to "synthesize the established and proposed social and physical fabric" (Peckham Partnership, 1997, p. 27). Evidently the regeneration of Peckham was intended to transform not only the cultural and physical fabric of the area, but also its residents. Whether accidentally or purposely, the vocabularies of building construction and social reconstruction are strikingly intermingled, implying that people as well as streets and buildings must undergo transformation and integration.

Public space has come under scrutiny within a national policy context in recent years, particularly with regard to regeneration, crime and anti-social behaviour agendas. The quality of public space and the quality of urban life are often now seen as linked, for example: "The quality of our experience of public spaces has a major impact on our lives. It affects our sense of well-being and how we feel about the places where we live" (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2002, p. 11). The same report states various social benefits of good public space, including encouraging a sense of local pride, building community cohesion, creating successful and confident communities, encouraging investment and spending, improving physical and psychological well-being, raising aspirations, and enabling activities that facilitate social contact and new relationships. The government's advisory unit on public space reports similar benefits, listing improved physical and mental health, provision of environments for children to play and learn, reduction of crime and fear of crime, and

the creation of meeting places that can foster social ties, social inclusion and neighbourliness (CABE Space, 2004).

Conversely, a government-commissioned literature review on public space and quality of life found "a relationship between levels of deprivation in an area and the condition of the public realm" (Williams and Green, 2001, p. 11). When Office of National Statistics data rates Peckham as above or well above average on most indicators of deprivation, including income, employment, health, education, housing and services[2], and police statistics show drugs offences, violence and robbery in Peckham to be well above the London average[3], it is unsurprising that much public space in Peckham is damaged and neglected. This then is the social and policy context in which I locate this study.

What is Peckham Square? (part 1)

The design of the square is unconventional. In Zucker's typology it would be classified as an amorphous square – "formless, unorganised, having no specific shape … the proportions of many of its surrounding structures are so heterogeneous, so irregular, even contradictory … that a unified impression cannot result" (1959, p. 16).

The main entrance is through a high arched canopy. Peckham Library, which won the Stirling Prize for architecture in 2000, dominates the east side of the square; Peckham Pulse, a council-owned 'healthy living

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[2] Source: http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/ accessed 01/11/2008.
[3] Source: http://www.met.police.uk/crimefigures/ accessed 01/11/2008.

centre' stands on the opposite side, with Area 10, an alternative arts venue temporarily occupying a large vacant warehouse site behind the library, surrounded by a grassed area. Small shops, flats and a pub back onto two sides of the square; there are numerous metal benches, some trees and shrubs, noticeboards under the arch, and an artwork called 'Elements' across of the centre of the square, comprising four mosaic-covered globes. Photographs in Appendices 2 and 3 show the square's layout in more detail.

The space serves a variety of functions and facilitates various formal and informal activities: a Sunday morning farmers' market; events organised by the council and local groups occur regularly; people sit on the benches during the day to rest, make a phone call or eat; children play on the mosaic globes and climb on benches and railings; drinkers congregate under the arch and outside the library, and the square is a thoroughfare for pedestrians and cyclists.

Peckham Square is a physical space, experienced sensually, and also a symbolic space: its design and features convey specific messages and meanings and enshrine certain social intentions. These are further overlaid by the everyday activities of the square's users which all combine to constitute a space of multiple identities and meanings. The symbolic dimensions that pervade the square present a variety of possible interpretations and shifting, multi-layered and ambiguous statements which I will unpack in this context of plurality and ambiguity. Some specific themes that emerge in this reading of the space are discussed in Section 5, which characterise Peckham Square in alternative but not mutually exclusive ways, including A Work in Progress, A Place of Heritage, A Place of Utopian Visions, A Place for Rest and Play, An

Imagined Space, The Brave New Peckham, The Same Old Peckham, and The New Heart of Peckham.

Search strategy

An eclectic range of resources was needed to bring together relevant literature covering all aspects of the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. Using a wide range of databases with considerable differences in scope and subject coverage also required a flexible search strategy with consideration for differences in terminology and focus. Three separate groups of searches were undertaken. First was a simple search of social science resources for previous studies of Peckham. A second group of searches identified general background material on the Peckham Square development, and retrieved local authority documentation setting out the vision and rationale for the development. Finally I searched for ethnographic and observation-based studies using terms relating to urban public space, regeneration and spatial analysis which I then adapted according to the results retrieved using an iterative process, whereby identifying relevant results would suggest new search terms, which in turn produced more precise results and focused the search more closely. Browsing recent editions of urban studies e-journals proved useful in finding relevant material serendipitously, which again fed into the search process by suggesting more search terms. Searching a specialist library of landscape and urban design resources retrieved a considerable quantity of relevant material not indexed by social science databases and helped develop theoretical links between the design and social aspects of regeneration. Search results cohered into three thematic categories, namely the nature of urban public space, the relationship

between power, regeneration, civic values and public space, and methodological issues, which are considered in turn below.

The nature of urban public space

Along with many other researchers in this area, I adopt Lefebvre's model of urban public space as a conceptual framework for this project. The *Production of Space* (1991) analyses public space in terms of socially produced physical, social and mental dimensions, distinguishing 'conceived' space, officially planned and arranged by the state or its agents from 'lived' space, the physical realm as inhabited and adapted by its citizens. Several studies have set out to examine divergences between conceived spaces and lived experiences in specific social settings. For example, Manzo's study of shopping malls aims "not only to report what designers "intended", theoretically or formally, with mall architecture but to inspect how real persons behave there" (2005, p. 88). Similarly Degen looks at "experiences and practices in public space … that do not fit into the conceived vision of official agents", (2002, p. 868), and Dines also examines the "discontinuities and overlaps between representations and lived experiences" of an Italian city piazza (2002, p. 178).

Whyte (1980) and many subsequent commentators argue that public space is created by human activity: "people make places, more than places make people", according to Worpole and Knox (2007), for example, who term this process the "co-production of public space". Who uses the space, for what, when, with whom and for how long are what gives a space its character, and encourages or discourages use. Whyte's

methodological and conceptual framework have become mainstream thinking within research on public space, although his conclusions have been criticised, particularly his suggestions for deterring 'undesirable' users by encouraging 'desirable' ones and creating 'attractive' new features: Zukin, for instance disparages this strategy as "controlling diversity while re-creating a consumable vision of civility" (1995, p. 30) and holds Whyte responsible for the model of "pacification by cappuccino" in ordering public space, which is discussed further in the following section.

A relatively small group of studies looks closely at how at social interaction shapes the nature of public spaces. Lofland (1989) for example provides some useful organising categories, including the nature of interactions between strangers, the tacit rules that govern these, and approaches to negotiating shared space. Wolfinger (1995) builds on Lofland's work in his study of the 'micro-collaborations' that form the social texture of urban public space, arguing that they demonstrate an instinct towards social cooperation, whereby commonly-held rules and tacit understandings govern interactions between strangers. It should be questioned whether these findings would hold true in highly diverse multicultural populations where multiple (sometimes conflicting) social rules are enacted without there being necessarily a single dominant code, such as the locale in which Peckham Square is located.

Continuing the theme of plurality, the 'public' aspect of public space is examined by Atkinson (2003), who disputes the notion of a single public with unrestricted freedom of access to 'public space' arguing that "There are many publics and their legitimacy may be as much defined by the context of the place as by the social character of these individuals" (2003,

p. 1831). These publics are characterised not only by demographics but also by factors such as their patterns of use of public space, their power as consumers and their social behaviour. Atkinson draws heavily on Zukin's arguments around plurality in urban public culture, as summed up by the title of the first chapter of *The Cultures of Cities* (Zukin, 1995) – "Whose culture? Whose city?" – finding that the notion of public space itself becomes contested and relative when certain publics are excluded. Rios (2008) explores the question of "Who is the public?" at ground level in a study of the regeneration of a station plaza in San Francisco. The study looks at inclusion of "marginalized and non-elite perspectives", in particular those of homeless people and transient populations in nearby temporary accommodation, for whom the plaza was an important social space, and approaches to reconciling their needs and preferences with those of other local groups. Rios argues for a pluralistic model of "the public" that recognises the multiplicity of affiliations, identities, assumptions, perspectives and meanings that groups within even a small localised area will bring to bear on a contested public space, and discusses a model of citizenship and democratic decision-making that can accommodate contrasting and sometimes oppositional viewpoints.

Taking a different approach to the micro-actions and movements that constitute social life in public space, Wunderlich (2008), working within De Certeau's conceptual framework of "perambulatory rhetorics" (2000) describes a very specific form of public spatial practice, namely walking, identifying different modes of walking practices, characterised as purposive, discursive and conceptual. These modes link closely to Gehl's model of necessary, optional and social activity (2001) in distinguishing functional actions from the creative and playful, and show how types of walking relate to the experience, re-creation and co-production of urban

space. Playful relationships with space are enacted through "conceptual walking", which has as its object heightening awareness of place by rendering it strange and interacting with it creatively and reflectively. This model of playful interaction is promoted by the artist Lottie Child, whose urban exploration techniques have been a significant element in the Peckham Space programme of public art in Peckham Square (Peckham Space, 2008) with the aim of exploring new ways to experience the urban environment. The body of literature on play is too great to consider in this review, but a useful introduction was Stevens' *The ludic city* (2007) which argues that the density and diversity of the urban setting lends itself to and is characterised by informal, non-instrumental activity, although generally unanticipated and/or discouraged by planners, designers and managers of public space.

Power, social control and civic values

Stillerman (2006) observes, via Lefebvre, that the production of social space inevitably involves power and social control, from which it can be inferred that any analysis of space must therefore also include an analysis of power. If public or social space is a socially produced entity, created by social processes and activities, then dynamics of power are inescapable. Ethnographic studies of 'what people actually do' in public spaces often focus on issues of marginalisation, fragmentation and breaches of the urban social fabric, as expressed through protest, cultural conflict, and illicit subcultures, for instance. At one end of the spectrum studies such as those by Dines (2002), Saravi (2004) and Stillerman (2006) examine broader social issues as represented in microcosm in specific urban

locations – immigration/citizenship, structural poverty and retail economics in these instances, as enacted in highly contested public squares, residential streets and marketplaces respectively. Other studies have looked at regeneration projects as encapsulating urban tensions within neighbourhoods and the wider city, such as Low's ethnography of plazas in Costa Rica (1996), Degen's examination of 'leisurisation' projects in Manchester and Barcelona (2002) and Sharp's research on community art in Glasgow (2007). Ethnographies of urban conflict and tensions have perhaps been more ready to analyse issues of power than studies of less contested spaces. Stillerman's study (2006) of street markets in the Chilean capital Santiago, for instance, addresses the issue of power struggles over use of public space very directly. His observations focus on institutional power and the dialectic of social control that shapes the city authorities' relations with market traders and street vendors in battles over access to and use of public space between these groups.

Power in Stillerman's study is a hierarchical and finite resource, where more power for those at the top of the hierarchy means less for others lower down. An entirely different conceptualisation informs Degen's study of contested sites within urban regeneration projects (2002), in which power is characterised as a fluid process or ongoing chain of events in a state of constant renegotiation and reshaping. Within this theoretical framework, the regeneration projects in question are presented as a complex iterative relationship and not a one-way process in which regeneration is 'done to' an area. Degen looks at both the discursive realm and the corporeal, focussing in highly embodied detail on the remaking of the sites' "sensescapes" and the "sensuous framing of power" (2002, p. 869). She examines for instance the meaning of the transformation of dark, narrow, dense spaces into light, open and airy

ones, that allow power in the Foucauldian sense of social supervision through visibility to be brought to bear on these spaces in "sensuous ideologies of order, purity and control" (p. 873), highlighting how architectural and landscaping briefs for regeneration schemes can implement social engineering and control agendas. Manzo's study (2005) also examines how social control results, intentionally or otherwise, from the organisation of space and design features in the context of shopping malls. He identifies how specific forms of social control are facilitated by design, including defining appropriate conduct for different areas, encouraging and discouraging certain activities, and security and surveillance functions. He also notes the ways in which the space and its features are subtly reconfigured by the users to reflect their own preferences for cultural familiarity, territoriality, privacy and sharing space with strangers, in both a physical and discursive reconstruction of the space.

Developing similar themes to Degen, Sharp (2007) discusses public art as an agent of regeneration and some aspirations that public art may embody, and exploring in particular why such projects can fail to fulfil expectations. Little social benefit, she argues, will derive from 'community' art projects that ignore wider social processes and issues, "papering over inequalities" (2007, p. 283) instead of actively addressing them. Sharp's study highlights how ill-conceived public art projects can make alienated neighbourhoods feel more alienated still, a point also made by Atkinson (2003) in his analysis of formal and informal modes of regulation of public space. Atkinson uses Zukin's notion of "pacification by cappuccino" to analyse covert or informal forms of regulation that signal who is welcome and unwelcome in public spaces, by creating spaces in which certain 'undesirable' publics will feel uncomfortable –

unintentionally or otherwise. These insights may well become more relevant to Peckham Square when a small community art gallery opens in 2009, intended, according to a Southwark Council spokeswoman, as "a home for creativity, accessible to all" (Parfitt, 2008).

Zukin's (1995) influential commentary dissects how power in public space operates through institutions - city authorities, businesses, interest groups - and through representation – symbols, identities, aesthetics and imagery. Her analysis of the relationships between these two strands produces a theory of public culture that frames urban social life within a very real-world context of economic development, political struggle and cultural diversity, enacted on the contested ground of public space, literally and symbolically. Dines' ethnography (2002) of the Piazza Garibaldi in Naples neatly encapsulates these themes. The focus for the study is a highly contested public space, where a local regeneration programme required an end to the piazza being used as an informal meeting place for large groups of Eastern European, Asian and African immigrants, who the mayoral administration believed created an unfavourable public image for visitors to the city. Dines' analysis centres mainly on the discursive aspect of the power dynamics involved, namely how the battle over the space came to be fought out in the local media and through issues of representation. He compares the discursive creation of the space with usages and interpretations 'on the ground', mapping the physical use of the space and its surroundings by these groups in contrast with the 'conceived' space, in Lefebvre's terminology, planners and administrators. This study has particular pertinence in that the regenerated Piazza Garibaldi was promoted as the new "physical and symbolic heart of Naples" (2002, p. 179), while similar claims were made for Peckham Square as the new heart of Peckham, the word "heart"

recurring throughout the planning documentation and publicity on the development.

The formation of a new civic heart, whether in Naples or Peckham, is never likely to be a straightforward task. The notion of a central public space as a civilising influence in the city has a long history and is fundamental to centuries of European urban planning: Zucker's classic monograph on the town square for instance characterises it as "a gathering place for the people, humanizing them by mutual contact" (1959, p. 1). More recently the influential urban planner Jan Gehl portrays a similarly idealistic vision of urban public space, actively fostering social interaction and enabling a richer, more convivial urban life (2001, 2007). L'Aoustet and Griffet's study of young people's use of an urban park concludes that it has a subtly benign social influence, helping diverse groups in "learning to live together without really realising it" (2004, p. 185) – measured in their study by the extent and nature of interactions between strangers.

The notion that civic virtue and community bonds are born from good public space is comprehensively challenged by Amin (2008), however. His viewpoint emphasises urban complexity and plurality and the wide range of possible responses to public space, arguing for a more nuanced and pragmatic analysis of the synergy between the human, material, temporal and spatial elements of common urban space. Amin's version of urban public space has 'studied trust' as the quality that characterises social life in public spaces: high levels of interaction between strangers are unlikely because strangers are still strangers whatever the quality of the design of the space, but a sense of conviviality and well-being, of feeling unthreatened and stimulated are aims which urban public spaces

can and should achieve, he suggests, more so than promoting collective identity and social cohesion. In a change of emphasis from public space as an enabler of community cohesion, Woolley (2003) observes that anonymity is a valuable function of urban civic spaces, allowing the opportunity to feel alone and free from social ties – a converse aspect of usage of public space for highly individualistic purposes that is remarkably under-explored.

Ethnography and public space

Ethnographic observation focuses on the minutiae of actions and interactions, making it well suited to research questions relating to the use and construction of lived space. Whyte's work on the social life of public space (1980) showed that an empirical methodology of close observation could be an authoritative and revealing means of analysing ways in which such space is used. A number of public plazas and parks in New York were studied by Whyte to look at what 'people actually do' in these spaces, vividly highlighting divergences between the conceived spaces of planners and architects, and the re-constructions of users of the space. Detailed data on patterns of movement, behaviour and interaction produced illuminating findings on factors that can make some public places popular and successful, while others are shunned. Whyte's study foregrounds choices made by human users of public space and argues for the centrality of these preferences in urban design and planning. His methods relied on a remote and depersonalised approach to observation, but more recent writers argue that cities and urban populations must be studied "from close up and within", as the only perspective "capable of

grasping the behavioural patterns not of atomized individuals, but of the multiple, varied and heterogeneous sets of social actors, whose daily lives flow along the landscape of the city" (Magnani, 2005, p. 8). Creative, deconstructive methods are proposed that embrace, for example, new conceptual relationships (Schöbel, 2006), plurality and complexity (Rios, 2008), collaborative approaches (Maginn, 2007), and create "polyphonic and evocative texts" (Attilli, 2007).

Such a text is a lyrical and inspiring ethnography by Stanton (2005), focusing on the lived space of the streets, shops, religious congregations and public spaces of Peckham, and their sensory and temporal dimensions in particular. Stanton draws on eclectic sources from local history and mythology, media and communications theory, and the observation of everyday minutiae from his own unstructured rambles around Peckham, a data collection technique described simply as "wandering and soaking up". Unexpected connections, symbols, and signs become apparent in the process: "In the ordinary details of everyday life there are worlds of meaning that have not yet revealed themselves. Surreal portents of future existences lurk on the shelves of shops, in the design of labels, in the juxtaposition of contents…" (2005, p. 356) Stanton's theoretical and methodological approach neatly exemplifies Attili's vision of urban ethnography bringing together "pluriverses of irreducible inhabitants characterised by relations, expectations, feelings, reminiscences, bodies, voices and stories" (2007, p. 92), as the only method able "to deeply get in touch with inhabitants' life practice, conflicts and modalities of space appropriation/construction which reveal principles, rationalities and potential writings which transgress the ordered text of the planned city" (2007, p. 93).

This review is intended to demonstrate that my study engages with and builds on an existing body of research and thought on the research question. Finally, it would be misleading to create the impression that academic research alone had informed the theoretical basis of this study, when fiction has also been a considerable influence. The writings of W G Sebald, especially *The Rings of Saturn* (2002), which poetically weave social and cultural history, personal reflection, fiction, travelogue and photography shaped the literary aspirations of this text. The dark urban fantasy genre, which renders the familiar city unfamiliar and fantastical, influenced my ethnographic gaze and shaped my responses to the research setting, particularly in terms of conceptualising the simultaneous existence of several different Peckham Squares and the possibilities contained within. Novels such as *Neverwhere* (Gaiman, 2000) and *The Child Garden* (Ryman, 1989) set in a dystopian and entirely recognisable London fall into this category. The deeply unsettling *Ghosts* novella in *The New York Trilogy* (Auster, 1987) was a formative influence on my preconceptions of the process of observation: the central character, a detective, is hired to observe a stranger and record his actions, and is slowly driven mad by the impossibility of separating observation of his subject from observation of himself. Finally a review of the literature would be incomplete without a mention of Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye,* in which a mysterious experiment in participant observation wreaks social havoc amongst the population of Peckham, combining wry insight on the particular social setting of this study with highly pertinent comment on the subject of social research itself.

Conclusion

A review of some of the ethnographic literature on public space provided useful pointers in terms of methodological approaches, theoretical perspectives and research questions. A primary interest when first planning this study was in ways that people use public spaces not 'officially' intended. It was pleasing to then find that social researchers were interested in the same issue, leading me to believe that this project has the potential to make a contribution to the (quite small) pool of research on this subject, while drawing on existing studies to develop new perspectives. The range of methodological and interpretive options made possible by ethnographic approaches became apparent during the course of reviewing the literature, challenging some choices I had made, validating others, and suggesting new courses of action and theoretical positions.

Introduction

This section looks at the choice of and practicalities associated with the chosen methodological strategy. I first discuss why participant observation was seen as a suitable approach for this research site, and then outline the practical detail of the data collection phase of the project. Some of the logistical and theoretical issues arising from these choices are examined in the Project Review (Section 6), where I look back reflexively at the development of the project overall with particular reference to the methodological structure and the advantages and limitations of this type of observation more generally.

Chosen methodology

This project assumes three components to public space:

- physical – the construction, buildings, landscaping, features and fixtures that constitute the material realm;
- social - interactions, relationships, activities, formally organised and spontaneous events, and the things that people do there that constitute the social life of the space;
- symbolic - how the space is perceived, imagined and represented; the image and feel of the space, and the messages that are inscribed in the space that create these perceptions.

Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate to the study of public space, given, as Schöbel (2006) suggests, that *per se* it has no absolute function or significance of its own but rather presents a range of possibilities relative to the context and complexity of the surroundings. An immersive qualitative research strategy which adopts a holistic approach to the research setting and the simultaneous interrelationships of these elements was felt to be most likely to yield the richest response to the research questions that this study began with: 'What is Peckham Square? What was it intended to achieve and has it done so?' The amorphous design of the chosen research setting and its uncertainty of purpose I believe makes this approach more pertinent still.

Whyte (1980) established the methodological validity of using close observation to analyse patterns of use of public space, with an emphasis on understanding social activity and identifying design and planning implications. While Whyte's approach and findings on the human dimension of public space usage are now well integrated into quantitative urban design methodology[4] the qualitative observation of humans by humans still remains an under-used approach in social research and policy on public space. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the relatively small pool of ethnographic studies of urban public space in Britain, and highlight some of the methodological and epistemological issues that can arise in the course of this line of social inquiry.

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[4] See for example the work of Space Syntax in "evidence-based urban design"
http://www.spacesyntax.com/

The choice of research setting in this project reflects two longstanding personal interests, firstly in issues around the social life and design of public space, and secondly in the regeneration of the Peckham area. Walking though Peckham town centre by day is generally an intense sensory experience. The streets are crowded with people and all the senses are bombarded - by the sounds of meat saws, buses, shouted conversations, and gospel, hip-hop and Muslim radio stations playing in the shops; by the smells of dried fish, fried chicken, cannabis smoke, and fumes from the nail and hair salons; by the visual melee of irregularly-spelt hand-written signs, and piled-high fruit, vegetables, clothes and household wares that fill the open-fronted shops and the pavements outside. Observation, as a highly embodied apprehension of the research location was therefore felt to be a most appropriate means of approaching the rich 'sensescape' that Peckham Square sits at the heart of. Ethnographic observation promotes the close observation of the commonplace and the gathering of data in its natural setting, allowing a contextual sensitivity and flexibility needed to apprehend the complexity of social worlds and practices. Observation-based methods enable a focus on "the workings of urban complexity at ground level" (Stanton, 2005, p. 356) that this study hopes to attain, in terms of closely scrutinising a small specific site, and linking the social activity there to a wider context.

Data collection

Observation sessions of between one and three hours' duration were undertaken over a ten-week period, totalling about 35 hours of observation. These covered activities such as the weekly farmers' market

and other organised events, as well as periods during the day and evening when 'nothing' was happening. Preliminary visits suggested that the size and layout of the site would facilitate inconspicuous detailed study of users of the space, although this did not always turn out to be quite the case. For reasons of both practicality and safety sessions were not carried out either very late at night or very early in the morning. Conversations, interactions and other personal experiences occurring at the research site were noted and treated as data. The overall aim was to collect data on what Lefebvre (1991) terms 'spatial practice', that is the appropriation, interpretation and re-creation of the space by its users, by noting types and patterns of usage, looking at who is using the space, what for, how and when, for instance.

While observation formed the primary means of data collection, other more quantitative sources were used to strengthen the empirical foundations of the project. These included maps of the immediate surroundings for local context, photographs of the square and surrounding area (Appendix 2 and 3), and a typology of organised activities that took place in the square (Appendix 4), based on data provided by Southwark's Events department. I attended meetings organised by the Peckham Space arts project, and meetings organised by local groups relating to regeneration issues, particularly the redevelopment of the town centre. I also had meetings with two prominent figures within the evolution of Peckham Square. Emily Druiff as Director of Peckham Space is leading the development of the square's new art space, and provided information and opinions on this project and its social context. Russell Profitt was head of the Peckham Partnership throughout the initial inception and creation of the square in the 1990s and provided documentary sources and a valuable history of how and

why the square came into being. Attempts to contact the landscape architects who designed the square were unfortunately unsuccessful.

Ethical considerations

The observation phase of the research had the potential to raise ethical issues associated with unobtrusively observing people in the use of public spaces without their direct consent. The ethical guidelines of the Social Research Association indicate that "where behaviour patterns are observed without the subject's knowledge, social researchers must take care not to infringe what may be referred to as the 'private space' of an individual or group" and suggest that where practicable, consent should be obtained *post hoc* (Social Research Association, 2003). These guidelines were adhered to in this project: care was taken not to infringe on private activity, and the need to obtain consent did not arise.

Introduction

In this section I present data from the observation phase. The subheadings I use are broad categories, distinct but not unrelated, that developed before, during and after the fieldwork, iteratively informing and being informed by the data collected. I set out the findings on who the users of the square are, and the nature of their interactions with one another; their interactions with the space itself and the main categories of usage that occur; embodied experience of the square and the nature of its peripheral areas; interactions and use of the space that occur during formally organised activities, and the types of institutional, personal and collective power and influence that manifest in the square.

People and interactions

Not very many people linger in Peckham Square: excluding those using it as a thoroughfare, there would normally be around 10-20 people in the square at any one time during the day, and fewer still after dark. The square offers little shelter so that in cold or wet weather very few people will be there; nonetheless in the context of the surrounding congested shopping streets and high-density housing, this is a significant contrast. Several individuals were seen on a number of occasions, mainly drinkers and some other 'regulars', all male. The square's users, reflecting the immediate environs, are mostly black, and again in line with the

surrounding area, elderly people were rarely seen. These demographics were very different when formally organised events took place however. More striking was the high number of wheelchair users in the square, which is perhaps attributable to a layout and design that is more wheelchair-friendly than the surrounding streets and public spaces.

People lingering in the square were often alone or in twos, and there appeared to be little interaction between strangers, although again this was not the case at organised events. Conversations between strangers were more likely to take place under two particular sets of circumstances. Firstly conversations could begin if what Whyte (1980) terms a 'triangulating factor' occurred, for instance an event witnessed by both parties that provoked comment: this was the case on one occasion when a large group of hooded young men who were perceived to be a gang marched through the square, sparking a discussion between two men sitting near me who had not spoken until then. Demographic commonalities also seemed to be a major factor in conversations starting between strangers, in that two people of the same gender and/or ethnicity and/or age were more likely to speak to one another. Where these factors were not involved, the main sense of conviviality in the square came from religious evangelists, drinkers, a Council street cleaner, and a young man with learning difficulties who was often to be seen riding a large tricycle around the square and talking to anyone sitting there. The type of sociability that these individuals contributed to the everyday life of the square could be viewed as somewhat unusual, but in fact were significant strands in the weave of the square's social fabric.

Vernacular use of space

Using Gehl's (2001) typology of 'vernacular' usage, i.e. commonplace local activity in public space, I categorised the activity I observed under the headings of necessary, optional and social. Necessary activities are purely functional journeys and tasks such as travelling to work, everyday shopping and essential errands – activities that do not involve any particular interaction with the space, but occur in that place for reasons of convenience or unavoidability only. Peckham Square appears to be used for this type of activity more than any other; as a pedestrian thoroughfare and as part of a cycle route, considerable numbers of pedestrians and cyclists cross the square during the daytime, dwindling to a continual trickle after dark. Gehl argues that high levels of necessary activity and low levels of optional and social activities are unlikely to create a thriving public space, and at first impression Peckham Square would seem to bear this out. The volume of 'through traffic' can mask the other types of activity that unobtrusively take place around the square, however.

A constant low level of optional activity was observed, which involved more physical involvement with the space, or was made possible or encouraged by its features or character, and included for example sitting on benches, on ledges or on the grass, to eat, read, smoke, drink, sleep, or to just do 'nothing'. The square also gives people somewhere to put their shopping bags down and rest, to feed birds, to sit in the sun, to urinate (perhaps not quite an optional activity!), to use a laptop and generally to experience a much quieter and less crowded space than the streets that surround the square. All fixtures and features in the square were used to sit or lean on, including bollards, cycle racks and steps, even when

benches were available. Activity in this category could have been carried out elsewhere but the square seemed to offer a preferable environment.

Finally in Gehl's typology, social activity depends on the presence of others and evolves from necessary and optional activities. Lying on the cusp of the 'social', phone conversations and text messaging accounted for a large proportion of activity in the square, creating a curiously one-sided dimension of sociability. In more conventional town square usage, Peckham Square is somewhere that people evidently arrange to meet, and where it is possible to sit and have a conversation, or hang out in a looser, more mobile form of socialising. As noted earlier, it was unusual to see strangers talking, and socialising rarely occurred in groups larger than three people. The square is frequented by drinkers, mainly older men, white and black, in quiet twos and threes, who tend to occupy the square's only sheltered places, under the arch and outside the library. The library and the Pulse, although architecturally dominant in the square, contribute little to the sociability of the square although both facilities are well-used: people entering or leaving those buildings often stopped to talk outside, but as the entrances to both face away from the square, this element of sociability is diverted away, neatly illustrating again the power of architecture to foster or prevent interaction. Other activity was witnessed that involved social interaction and utilised elements of the space in specific (and gender-specific) ways – for instance, men sitting at the entrance to the square making comments to women passing by, boys playing football, and people photographing each other in front of the library.

A further category of usage that was observed was what I termed the 'playful-performative', where features of the square were used in a social

way with the apparent aim of gaining the attention or engagement of others beyond the immediate social group. This included young men doing stunts on skateboards and BMX bikes, people dancing on the raised area under the arch with or without music, acrobatic uses of the stage and ledges, two men playing guitars and singing which turned into an improvisation session involving a number of other people, and a use of the slight echo around the square by teenage girls for what I came to think of as 'performative shrieking'.

As another facet of playful use of the space, I feel that children's relations to the square require separate consideration. Children make up a large proportion of the square's users, and interact in child-specific ways with the space, distinct from adult behaviours. The mosaic globes in the centre of the square in particular attract very small children through to older teenagers, and overall the space allows children considerable freedom of movement and opportunities for exploration. Virtually all children did at least one of the following in the square: climbed on the globes; chased pigeons; rode around on bikes or scooters; ran or jumped up and down the steps; climbed on the walls, railings and benches; explored behind the hedges, played on the grass, or swung around the library pillars. The proportion of children that did none of these things was minute, but only adults with small children would engage in these activities, and then only rarely.

A final distinct category of use was that of religious purposes: as well as the formal events organised by churches and religious groups that took place during the observation period, I saw the giving out of pamphlets and attempts to engage people in conversation on several occasions, by an elderly black man in a wheelchair, as well as two young white

Mormon men, a large group of young black people from a local church which included rappers and singers, and various other lone individuals.

Patterned ground and sensescapes

In this section I take a different perspective on the relationship between the physical fabric of the square and embodied experiences and use of the space. Drawing on Amin's (2008) work on 'patterned ground' and Degen's (2002) notion of 'sensescape', I look at how repetitive spatial and temporal patterns of use and the sensual environment combine to construct the character of the square. I then turn away from the centre of the square to look at its periphery and immediate surroundings, to begin a discussion of what the square is at the heart of, contrasting the orderly sensual and spatial constructions of the square with these more complex marginal areas.

Regular waves of pedestrians pass through the square, with the rhythm of these waves reflecting the frequency of buses stopping by the square. Batches of alighting passengers cross the square in single file, a new batch every few minutes, with a usually constant trickle crossing in the opposite direction. This rhythm is punctuated by cyclists darting across the square, bisecting the main pedestrian route. Such is the ingrained nature of these routes that during organised events occupying the square, shoppers still followed the same paths seemingly oblivious to, or perhaps deliberately in spite of, the unusual activity, to the point of walking though stalls and activities rather than around them. Although this continual criss-crossing of the square creates a sense of movement and

flow, these silent lines of people passing through contribute little vitality to the square. Variations to the pattern were observed, as different groups cross the square in different ways - young children in rapid squiggles compared to adults' purposeful linear routes, and groups of school students meandering very slowly indeed. Other entrances and routes besides the 'official' or obvious were also sometimes used; reasons for these choices were unclear and open to possible interpretations, but for example, cycling or pushing a buggy down steps instead of a slope, or entering the square by the delivery area instead of the gate, which could be construed as a deliberate rejection of the 'correct' path, playful flouting of convention, disorientation or misreading of the space.

The square contrasts strongly with its surroundings in many ways. It is almost devoid of noise and smells, the space is open and visually uncluttered, there are usually few people around, and there is no commercial activity. This minimalist sensescape can feel sterile and bleak compared to the sensual density and activity of the surrounding streets, or it can feel like a haven of calm. It was noticeable that the space that separates these streets from the square has its own character, where the physical fabric and use of the space were different again. These marginal areas are darker, narrower and somewhat hidden – gaps, leftovers, spaces with no real purpose, immediately adjacent to the square although not part of it, but with a distinct social life of their own. For example, an alleyway and a small area next to the pub that borders the square appeared to be significant social venues, and would sometimes be full of people, mainly but not exclusively young black men, when the square was empty. The area at the top of the canal path and behind the Pulse were also sites for various somewhat furtive activities – teenagers tampering with a car and running away, an old man rummaging in the

undergrowth, and a young couple clambering out from behind some bushes. Broken ground level windows and graffitied walls at the back of the library suggest other types of clandestine activity may take place there. The square has no clearly defined boundaries, but the distinct physical character and type of activity that characterises these marginal areas creates a sense of demarcation and transition between the square and its environs such that, with the exception of the archway, the square's borders are defined by its users much more than any physical or official boundary markers.

Formal activities and events

I adapted Pryor and Grossbart's typology (2005) of organised activities in a shopping area in order to rate organised events in Peckham Square by commerciality, festiveness (the level of celebration, entertainment or enjoyment associated with the event) and political nature (see Appendix 4). Non-commercial activities such as free arts, music, religious and health-related events accounted for the majority of formally organised activities in the square, with only one commercial activity taking place, the weekly farmers' market. Most events were relatively small-scale one-offs organised by local voluntary bodies, such as churches, charities and campaigning organisations; the biggest events were the annual Green Fair organised by local environmental groups, and Southwark Council's I Love Peckham festival. There was an even spread from low-festivity events like smoking cessation and cancer awareness promotions to highly festive activities such as mass tap dancing and a school carnival. Finally the analysis showed a much higher concentration of non-political events

– only the Green Fair, the Peace on the Streets event and the charities weekend had any kind of campaigning aspect (although religious and health promotion events could arguably be included in this category).

Other activities within this category were regular foot patrols by Southwark Community Wardens, police and Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), and the council street cleaners who spend considerable time working in the square. These patrols form part of the patterned ground of the square and introduce a note of formality, a sense of surveillance and a reminder of the municipal nature of the space. Whether they influence activity in the square is open to question, but they would seem to shape the character and life of the square, discussed below under 'Power'.

Many of the formal activities taking place on the square organised by local groups had a strongly local flavour: events listed in Appendix 4 include Radio Peckham, I Love Peckham, Peckham TV and Tap into Peckham, for example. Accompanying this Peckham-consciousness was an endeavour to promote local pride, redress negative perceptions and generate a positive sense of identity for the area. Speakers at the Green Fair who referred to the media's readiness to show Peckham and its residents in a negative light while ignoring positive events and activities received enthusiastic applause; while the Peckham TV event also aimed to create a new identity for Peckham, arguing that "it is not Peckham that is the problem, it is the media's representation of it"[5]. While "Peckham" is often synonymous with violent crime, deprivation and social blight on one hand, and a by-word for a particular kind of working-class comedy

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[5] Source: Peckham TV press release at http://www.peckhamspace.com/archive/ accessed 1/11/2008

tackiness on the other, there would appear, from the rhetoric at these events at least, to be a strong desire to shake off both of these images which are seen as damaging to local collective self-esteem.

The nature of social interactions at formal events differed from that observed during 'normal everyday life' in the square. For instance many of the people who stopped by the Carve in the Community sculpture display also talked to one another. I found that I was more likely myself to converse with strangers at larger organised events, where perhaps being crowded together makes interaction more probable, or at least less effort. The Carve in the Community event and the Green Fair were particularly successful in attracting diverse audiences, and people seemed more likely to interact with others outside their demographic groups at these events than was normally observed in the square.

Power

The various uniformed patrols of the square clearly signal that activity in the space is monitored and regulated by higher authorities, and officers passed by during most observation sessions. Community Wardens were not seen speaking to anyone, but police and PCSOs often did. Two PCSOs spoke to people playing guitars and singing during a musical improvisation session, who resumed as soon as the officers had left; police and PCSOs were seen searching a young man in the adjacent alleyway, and officers usually exchanged a few words with stallholders at the farmers' market. On one occasion eight police and PCSOs on foot and bicycle converged on the square in a high-visibility exercise stopping

children who were not at school. However, by-laws prohibiting the consumption of alcohol, the distribution of leaflets, and the playing of musical instruments in the square were disregarded on numerous occasions in view of patrolling officers and no action was ever seen to be taken.

A conversation with a homeless Sierra Leonean man in the square highlighted some issues relating to inclusion and community in the context of institutional power within the space and beyond. He confronted me as I took photographs: when I explained the purpose of my research he responded angrily, repeating "We have no representation. People like me have no representation". His sense of marginalisation, it transpired, arose from a consciousness of belonging to 'socially undesirable' groups (street drinkers, refugees), and from a sense of not having an equal voice and equal rights within wider society. Yet his initial approach was framed as an accusation of trespassing on his territory, and challenging my actions in his space. For someone with such a strong sense of disenfranchisement to have a feeling of ownership of the square made a strong statement about the community function of public space in the context of negative perceptions of institutional power.

The square is a very open space, and CCTV cameras and a significant police presence mean that the level of surveillance is high: it is perhaps therefore unsurprising that darker, hidden spaces at the margins of the square are well used. Taking a Foucauldian approach to visibility and social control, the design of the space can be viewed as embodying another form of power, and while the square might be promoted as a community space, accessible and open to all, the marks of ownership by the local authority are stamped everywhere around the square and

visibly reinforced by uniformed officers and technology. The design of public space can also send a message about who is welcome and unwelcome, as Degen notes (2002), exerting a subtler form of power through the types of features and facilities that are provided, so that the art gallery planned for the square for example may advance Zukin's 'pacification by cappuccino'.

Informal manifestations of power and influence were also observed. A large gathering in a central and visible location like the square is a 'show of strength' to onlookers, whether the gathering is, as was observed, of gang members, church groups, or environmental campaigners. It may also denote a sense of owning the space, at least temporarily, and other usages of the square, particularly the performative and deeply patterned types also imprint a territorial mark of ownership.

Finally, the design and physical fabric of the square embodies forms of the power to transform, which I refer to in Section 6 under both 'The Brave New Peckham' and 'The Same Old Peckham'. The Brave New Peckham with its library, health and fitness centre and forthcoming gallery aspires to personal improvement, cultural development, and the enrichment of individual lives and the local social fabric. The Same Old Peckham embodies ingrained patterns of intentional damage and neglect, where windows are broken, walls are graffitied, artworks are vandalised, and transformation is a process of gradual destruction, altering both the material realm and perceptions and representations of the space. The square evidently hosts a spectrum of interrelating sources and types of influence and control, deriving from institutional and legal authority as well as personal and collective force.

Introduction

This study began by asking two questions: what use is made of Peckham Square, and how does this relate to the vision and aims for the space? To begin to shape an answer to the first part of this question, I examined the vernacular everyday use of the space, which includes a variety and complexity of activity far beyond the immediately obvious and functional. I have shown how the use of the space for organised events appears to play apart in forming a positive identity for Peckham, albeit it a reactive one responding to perceptions of continued negative portrayals of the area and its inhabitants. I have also attempted to contextualise the square by looking at its relationship with its immediate environs, showing how the heterogeneous nature of the space, with its internal contrasts, blurred boundaries and indeterminate purpose give a shifting sense of identity to the square, and how this contrasts further still with the square's immediate environment, in terms of physical fabric, spatial and temporal patterns of use, and social life.

In order to answer the second question I looked at how the square functions in terms of promoting the values it was intended to embody – a sense of aspiration, community and inclusion within an accessible, enjoyable space. I examined how the concept of a new heart for Peckham is reflected in the social life of the square, and how power dynamics, use of the space and conceptualisations of the square relate to the creation of this new heart.

I do not intend to try to draw any firm conclusions from these observations or propose any definitive answers to my original questions, but rather to present a 'messy' ethnography of what is a 'messy' space, and suggest some possible interpretations. I highlight some themes and patterns that appear significant in the context and aim to present a 'thick description' of the square, in Geertz's phrase, capturing some of the complexity of the setting and describing not only the activity that occurred there at ground level but the wider social context.

What use is made of Peckham Square?

Gehl's typology of necessary, optional and social activity offered a useful framework for classifying types of use of the space, but did not adequately describe fine-grain of interactions and activity. His vision of convivial urban spaces derives from a classical European, perhaps Eurocentric, model of urban design and civic life, which would also seem to have formed the basis for the development of Peckham Square - a central town square forming a focal point for the community and a local sense of identity. I suggest that this vision has been only partly realised.

The range of activity types observed within the square exceeded expectations, and included unanticipated levels of playful and performative use of the space. My initial impression at the start of the fieldwork was of a space that offered primarily functional/necessary use as a thoroughfare and access route, but little else: the process of detailed and prolonged observation yielded data that contradicted this preconception. The informal appropriation of the space by particular

groups and playful uses of its features, for instance, could be said to denote a sense of ownership or a territorial statement, and intentional damage to the physical fabric of the square could also be construed in the same way. Children's enthusiastic responses to the square represented another form of playful use, and their spontaneous freedom of movement, exploration and creative relationships with the space contrasted vividly with most adults' energy-conserving, functional, linear routes, suggesting a multitude of imaginative interpretations and possibilities within the space.

On an everyday level, the square is a quiet place, and interactions between strangers are minimal. They occurred primarily where demographic commonalities exist such as age, gender or race existed, suggesting a conscious or unconscious preference for interacting with individuals that present some sense of familiarity. Worpole and Knox (2007) note the phenomenon of "self-segregation" where people occupy space in ways that respond to co-existence with strangers, accommodating the presence of others rather than contesting space. This process could be seen at work in people's co-existence in the square and the contact that this facilitated or avoided. Returning to Gehl's model of urban conviviality, it could be construed from this low level of sociability that the sense of community that the square was intended to foster is absent. Other interpretations may also be offered however: the square can be seen as a sensory and social respite from the noisy busy shopping streets nearby, or it may be a place that offers a positive sense of anonymity and individuality away from the crowds, rather than an absence of sociability. The prevalence of male 'regulars' using the square to drink and socialise suggests a gendered dimension to conviviality in public space, as women did not appear to use the space in this way to the

same extent. Both Gehl and Whyte observed a marked preference for occupying the edges and corners of public spaces, attributed to affording a better view of the space and its users: the preference for the marginal areas around Peckham Square represents not a desire for a good view, but a desire to be less visible and more sociable, I would suggest.

A much higher level of interaction was observed at organised events, which I suggest is attributable partly to a crowded space offering more opportunities for interaction than a sparsely populated one, and a waiving of the usual norms of behaviour that tends to accompany celebratory events. Some organised events also demonstrated a distinct 'Peckham-consciousness', based on perceived social stigmas attached to Peckham, against which a provisional sense of community formed, expressed as a solidarity of resentment at consistently negative media portrayals of the area. If the square can be said to foster a sense of community, it is through enabling such gatherings.

How does this relate to the vision for the square?

Data gathered form observation seemed to point to a marked contrast between the conceived space of the original vision for Peckham Square and the lived space created by everyday usage and activity. Damage to the square's physical fabric negates the sense of aspiration that the space was intended to embody, perhaps as an expression of antipathy to the values this aspirational design also signals. If levels of participation at organised events are an indicator of the value of the development as a community space, the square is undoubtedly successful; if everyday

levels of sociability and interaction are taken as a measure, however, it is not. Whether such indicators, operationalising 'social activity' within Gehl's model, are a valid measure of something as nebulous as the value of community space is open to question however. The square was intended to be a new civic heart for the area, to regenerate and revitalise not only the town centre but its inhabitants as well - again, nebulous concepts to operationalise and measure but a public space with such low levels of usage cannot be said to be a significant 'heart' in any sense.

While the usage and activity that characterise the square's everyday life would not at first glance appear to match the original vision for the space, the observation data revealed interesting patterns relating to appropriating, reconstructing and reimagining the space. Particularly striking was the social life of incidental spaces contiguous to the square, contrasting with the lack of conviviality in the open, visible, highly designed space of the square itself. It was noticeable that these spaces were used for different types of activity and that groups sizes and interactions varied from the main part of the square – where groups were usually people in twos and threes, groups in these marginal spaces tended to be larger, more fluid and mobile, and more boisterous. Some streets and businesses around the square are known for drug dealing, and some of the activity observed may have been related. I am wary of reaching conclusions based on observed behaviour alone, and of making assumptions based on stereotypes, but the preference for marginal areas with limited visibility is likely to be at least in part related to illicit activity. The full picture is likely to be more complex however.

This preference for marginal areas, along with the conviviality of numerous locations immediately surrounding the square, such as cafes,

fast food takeaways, barbers, hair salons and nail salons also reflected a preference, I suggest, for a particular way of 'doing' community. A preference for socialising in more intimate indoor spaces, often structured along strongly gendered lines, is embodied in the thriving venues that these shops and businesses provide. I would argue that a classical European model of a town square that forms the heart of local civic life was not necessarily an appropriate one to adopt for Peckham with its majority black African and Afro-Caribbean population. The layout of the square in effect 'designs out' a style of social life that is highly characteristic of Peckham.

What is Peckham Square? (part 2)

Peckham Square is more than a concrete plaza or a space between some buildings: a complex interplay of factors makes the square - people, space, context and history, for instance. While it can be officially presented as a multi-purpose space serving a highly diverse range of users, I hope to have shown that it is in many ways an indeterminate space with a kaleidoscopic, constantly shifting character. Just as the space does not have a definitive purpose, neither does it have a definitive identity: rather the square presents multiple identities, each embodying physical features and patterns of use that construct specific distinctive characterisations. I present some of these other Peckham Squares, which epitomise some of the meanings, identities and constructions that constitute the square as a physical and as an imagined space and bring together some of the themes discussed throughout this study.

A Work in Progress

The square has developed piecemeal over the last ten years, and is still evolving now. Conceived firstly as a formal London Square (Peckham Partnership, 1997), then as a space for outdoor leisure and fitness purposes belonging to the Pulse healthy living centre (Profitt, 2008), the notion of a more loosely-defined multi-purpose public space forming a "new civic hub" (Powell, 2004, p. 24) emerged relatively late on in the development (Profitt, 2008). The square is now increasingly being promoted as an arts and cultural space.

A Place of Heritage

A palm tree and a plaque create a memorial to the radical Caribbean historian Walter Rodney; a photography display on the Peckham Hill Street frontage celebrates contemporary black actors, captioned with motivational quotes, and timber features in the hard landscaping of the square recall the site's industrial past. Connecting the square with local history and black history locates it in temporality and tradition. The overt references to the area's social history and Caribbean heritage send messages about inclusion, identity and belonging, and therefore relate to issue of power and ownership of the space. The emphasis within some organised events on changing negative images and perceptions of Peckham is also relevant to discussions of heritage.

A Place of Utopian Visions

Peckham has a long-established tradition of visionary thinkers, from William Blake's vision on Peckham Rye of "a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars" (Gilchrist, 1998) to the utopian health and social welfare project of the Peckham Experiment, a legacy the square is intended to continue, and more

recently the social idealism that accompanied the square's futuristic library. Numerous evangelical churches use the square for rallies and leafleting, making it something of a spiritual battleground.

A Place for Rest and Play

The square's openness, quiet and non-commerciality offer a very different type of space to the intensity of the surrounding retail environment and traffic congestion. The uncluttered layout allows a freedom of movement that lends itself to play and performance, and the presence of the library and the fitness centre also reinforce the sense of a place for recreation, albeit of the self-improving kind.

An Imagined Space

Peckham Square is not a designated street name; it does not appear on maps, and even its actual name is unclear: the space is referred to as The Square, Peckham Square, Peckham Town Square, Eagle Wharf, "by the library", and "behind the archway". Borrowing from De Certeau, "Peckham Square does not exist: it is a notion" (2000, p. 112) – it is as much an imagined space as a physical one. The square's greatest significance is arguably its symbolic value and its impact at a collective emotional level (Profitt, 2008). The uncertainty of its function and identity make the space more readily available to reinterpretation and reconstruction.

The Brave New Peckham

This Peckham Square embodies creative transformative power, as an uplifting new civic focal point forming "an energising space with a sense of aspiration" (Profitt, 2008). The landmark architecture of the library and the arch were intended as "a shot in the arm" for Peckham (Powell, 2004, p. 88), again with the ultimate purpose of transforming both the physical and social fabric of the area. The present shift towards an arts focus for the square comes at a time when Peckham is being promoted as a new creative and cultural quarter in London, while organised events present a new image of Peckham that highlights creativity, diversity, quirkiness and innovation.

The Same Old Peckham

This Peckham Square embodies destructive transformative power, in particular intentional damage but also neglect and apathy. Damage to lighting means that after dark the square is very dimly lit. Only the first two of the giant letters spelling LIBRARY on top of the library building are now illuminated, its ground floor windows are broken, and the external cladding is scarred and discoloured from repeated graffiti removal. Paintwork around the arch is badly peeling and vandalised, and the mosaic-covered globes have large sections of mosaic missing. Drugs are sold openly in and around the square, and police patrol frequently.

The New Heart of Peckham

Peckham Square was to provide a new physical, social and symbolic centre to Peckham: "a new social heart" (Powell, 2004, p. 64), "the new civic heart of Peckham" "the lively heart of Peckham"(Olsen, 1997, p. 10) and "a stunning concourse at the heart of Peckham" (Peckham Partnership, 1999, p. 2). This heart imagery offers various interpretations.

It may symbolise vitality and strength, characterising the square as a force that powers its surroundings; it can imply a repository of feelings of love and attachment, or denote the epitome of Peckham, a focal point representing the area's defining character.

Future directions for research

This study utilises data gathered from ethnographic observation alone. Incorporating data on perceptions and experiences of users of the square from other methods such as interviews, videos, diaries and group activities, would add a significant new dimension to the research, allowing the findings to be developed and refined further, as well as opening up further research questions. I have endeavoured in this study to avoid making assumptions or suggesting explanations about users' behaviour and activity, but the lack of research and analysis on these areas is clearly a significant omission.

The hypothesis that the layout of Peckham Square 'designs out' a style of social life that is characteristic of the locality deserves, I believe, further exploration, which would benefit particularly from a closer analysis of the public and semi-public social venues that surround and contrast with the square. The racial, gendered and culturally-specific aspects of these social worlds merit close and sensitive attention, essential in addressing a wider question of "which publics are served by 'public space'?" Comparative studies of other regeneration projects with similar aims would be worthwhile in order to look at some of the issues identified in Peckham in a broader national context. Identifying commonalities could

strengthen the policy direction of the research by highlighting good practice or means by which public spaces of this type could be improved, for instance.

Finally it would be useful to carry out further work using observation in the study of public space to question further its methodological value and validity in research in this area. The planning and design of public space is currently dominated by methodologies that rely heavily on quantitative measures and GIS-based software tools in order to research spatial and temporal patterns of use. These could be usefully complemented by methods that take a more holistic and context-sensitive approach to the use of public space; if user experiences are included as well then better still.

Introduction

This chapter looks at some of the challenges that arose throughout the project, in terms both of carrying out fieldwork and working with the theoretical development of the research. I discuss firstly how issues around epistemology and the nature of observation shaped the practical and theoretical direction of the research. I also consider the extent to which my preconceptions matched my subsequent experiences, and how the project evolved as a result. I then look back reflexively at some specific aspects of the project and identify some strengths and weaknesses associated with the choice of research method, approaches to fieldwork, and analysis and theoretical development.

Issues and challenges

Some foreshadowed problems and limitations associated with an observation-based approach had to be considered reflexively throughout the study. A researcher's impressions will be filtered through various conscious and unconscious processes, so that the data that is finally recorded is unavoidably partial, particularly for a researcher working alone. Observation is inevitably a selective and culturally-embedded process, as are the accompanying processes of analysis, assigning meaning to data and developing theory. The quality of the observation therefore depends on a theoretical sensitivity to the complexities of

activity within the setting, close attention to the detail of events as they occur, and ongoing critical reflection on the nature of observation itself. With this in mind, I had to remind myself during the fieldwork phase to keep asking questions such as: What are the social processes that I am seeing here? Why do I assume this is what I am seeing? Why have I chosen to see this situation in this way? What processes of selection and exclusion might I have applied? Are there other ways to see or interpret this?

How I interpreted what I observed, both at the time of observation and subsequently in the data analysis phase, was therefore critical to the validity of the research. The acts of seeing and recording inherently involve processes of selection and assigning meaning, consciously or otherwise, so the observation element of this project could never be value-free and I could not make it so: the prior social and cultural knowledge that I brought to the research site formed an inextricable element of the data. My role in managing the situatedness of my perceptions and expectations, and minimising the extent to which these skewed the data collection and analysis was therefore key. Recognising the impossibility of eliminating bias altogether in a solo observation-based study such as this, I adopted the following strategies to reduce the likelihood of misunderstanding, misinterpretation and misrepresentation.

Firstly, ethnographic research normally relies on a prolonged and thorough examination of the fine-grain of social situations and processes. This implies a way of looking that is different to the casual everyday mode – a rather more purposeful, focussed and questioning gaze, for instance. Maintaining a purposeful and questioning way of viewing the research site throughout the observation phase would, it was hoped,

helped guard against unexamined assumptions creeping in. 'Questioning' in this sense refers not only to my position in relation to the subject of my observations, but also questioning myself, in terms of looking critically at my own responses and assumptions and considering the effect these might have on the processes of observation and interpretation – for instance in keeping in mind questions such as those listed above.

Secondly then, was adopting a reflexive attitude and considering the ways in which my background, values, and previous experiences and knowledge may have influenced the process. The most obvious places to start with this are in terms of race and class: around two-thirds of the population of Peckham are from black or other ethnic communities with a relatively high level of very recent migrants, so as a middle-class white Briton, the groups I observed in Peckham Square were often ones to which I do not belong and whose social behaviour, interactions and norms I was conscious of the possibility of misconstruing. This dynamic brought to mind Phillippe Bourgois' ethnography of crack users in New York (2002) and the ethical tensions he faced as a member of a dominant socio-economic and ethnic group attempting to study the experiences of poverty and alienation in an inner-city Latino community. While I did not encounter the types of harrowing scenes that Bourgois witnessed, I gained a deeper appreciation of his concern to avoid portraying negative stereotypes without censoring his findings, and of the tensions between individual agency and social structure, particularly in the context of racism, disadvantage and marginalisation. At the same time I was wary of over-estimating the significance of 'otherness' relating to ethnic and cultural factors, and of assuming greater levels of social difference than were called for. A longer timescale for this study and a greater level of

participation on my part would perhaps have resolved some of these anxieties – as well as creating new ones, no doubt. I was also conscious that in any ethnographic venture, however strong the feelings of involvement with, and interest in the subject, that a sense of detachment and indifference can also take hold, as I experienced from time to time.

Accepting the impossibility of entirely eliminating cultural bias, and the impossibility of guaranteeing that my observations and interpretations were free of error, I continually questioned and endeavoured to maximise the study's validity. As well as continually giving consideration to alternative interpretations as suggested above, cross-referring within the data already gathered also offered a means of checking for anomalies and inconsistencies, as well as for developing theory. For instance I observed two instances of people using the space in a particular way that I had not consciously witnessed before, which led me to consider whether a new category of 'play and performance' needed to be incorporated into my theoretical framework. Referring back to previously gathered data, I found that this could be treated as a valid category of activity to which other previous occurrences could also be assigned, rather than anomalous incidents for which another explanation was required, and therefore incorporated this new theoretical category into my observation and analytical structure. While none of these methods guarantees validity, attempts to cross-reference and verify what I observed in various ways should have at least minimised the risk of significant error, as well as enabled emerging theory to develop.

Finally, the issue of my own presence within the research site required consideration. The intention was for the observation to remain covert and unobtrusive so as to minimise any impact on activity or behaviour within

the square in any way. One strength of ethnography is in observing social processes in the setting in which they occur, but this holistic approach by its very nature includes the observer as part of the process. I anticipated that the level of my impact in an unenclosed and moderately busy public space was likely to be minimal; however occasional comments indicated that my presence and note-taking did not go unnoticed, so the potential effect of this on other processes must be factored in. I had prepared for the eventuality of my observation becoming apparent, in terms of being required to explain my activities in the case of someone possibly feeling spied on or aggrieved. I also considered strategies involving more covert or more participant styles of observation, if the situation required. In the end it did not, but in light of comments made early on, I slightly modified my approach with regards to visibility and no further comments were received.

Choice of method

The adopted observation method relied on gathering primarily visual data as a solitary researcher working semi-covertly. This method offered major advantages in terms of freedom of movement, ability to adapt immediately to circumstances and inconspicuousness: I was able to choose viewpoints freely, go where there was something to see, move in order to be able to see better, and walk around and observe from different perspectives, without any significant effect on the subject of the observation. This meant that observation sessions were generally fruitful and if there was no activity in the area that I initially chose to observe, the nature of that non-activity was still useful data in itself. In one session, for

instance, when the square had been virtually empty all evening and there was nothing to see except the usual trickle of pedestrians and cyclists passing quickly through, I decided to take a walk around the periphery, to break the monotony and to see if anything was happening elsewhere. I found social activity all around - the outside seating area of the adjoining pub was full and noisy, a group of young men were hanging out in the nearby alley, and the barbers' shops and takeaways surrounding the square were all busy. The striking contrast between the lively margins of the square and its deserted interior began the development of a theoretical strand around culturally-specific styles of social activity in public space and about Eurocentrism in urban design, strands which might not have developed without the freedom to wander and investigate in this way. I was reminded of Whyte's time-lapse filming methodology (1980) for studying similar public spaces at this point, and the limitations that a fixed point of view can impose: the flexibility of this approach to observation allowed the gathering of data that might not be discerned by other qualitative methods, I believe. Furthermore the act of turning away from the centre and looking to the fringes and the incidental, unofficial and marginal spaces subsequently struck me as a typically ethnographic practice, albeit arising unthinkingly out of boredom and frustration initially.

Data collection

I now turn to the collection and content of the data itself. As the fieldwork progressed I began to feel that the adopted method offered the possibility of effectively addressing the research questions that the project

had started with – although raising many new questions and highlighting unanticipated issues in the process – but that the method ultimately was a valid choice and well suited to the subject matter.

At a more practical level difficulties, dilemmas and anxieties of all kinds were encountered throughout the fieldwork phase and the process was far from unproblematic. At organised events the numbers of people in the square meant that observation was frustratingly partial, and even during normal activity levels, I was anxious that I might be missing significant events elsewhere. Accepting my non-omniscience eventually, I endeavoured to focus on the quality of the observation rather than the quantity of data collected. Organised events posed other problems, particularly in relation to the participant nature of the observation. After each event I questioned whether I should have interacted more, interacted less, interacted differently; whether a greater degree of interaction would have meant less observation, and whether the data that interpersonal contact could yield would be worth the time invested. I varied my approaches at organised events to explore these questions further: for example at the Green Fair adopting a completely non-participant stance in order to concentrate on observing the large crowd and volume of activity, whereas at smaller-scale events like the farmers market I felt I could have conversations with stall-holders or customers without the quality of observation being adversely affected. This is not to suggest that these strategies were straightforward selections from a simple continuum, but rather to indicate that there were a variety of factors to be weighed up. The extent of my participation was sometimes beyond my control, as was the case when a large church group were evangelising in and around the square, occupying the space in a way that made being approached by one of their number virtually inevitable. An

encounter I had with a woman from the group who accosted me became confrontational (I did not disguise my personal antipathy to this brand of Christianity) but was ultimately productive: her conceptualisation of Peckham as a spiritual battleground helped develop my characterisation of Peckham as 'A Place of Utopian Visions' and my awareness of the significance of religious activity.

The ordinary fabric of the square's everyday life was dotted with events that could be construed as out of the ordinary, serving an important function in terms of providing a view of a broader field of activity, as well as challenging my own preconceptions of what 'usual' activity might be. The limited timescale of the project made it appropriate to treat these events as anomalous and requiring a new theoretical perspective - a longer period of data collection, multiple observers, or other modifications to the approach to fieldwork would have perhaps allowed a more accurate picture to develop as to their usualness or otherwise. Events categorised as 'unusual' were where the group sizes, types of interactions, or types of activity or behaviour differed from those that I commonly observed, and include for instance a march through the square by about thirty hooded young black men (unusual for group size); the Green Fair (unusual in terms of interactions between strangers), and a musical improvisation session (unusual type of activity). Seeing something of the possible range of activity and responses to the square in the fieldwork's limited timescale gave a broader, more meaningful and more grounded context to the observation, and a greater sense of what I might not be seeing.

Analysis

Finally I consider how the methodological approach related to the generation of theory and the development of justified arguments. The observation data I gathered and worked with was fragmented, partial and provisional, but a continual iterative movement between data, reflexive consideration and theoretical development spun the threads that gradually wove the fragments together. As the data began to cohere around themes, new interrelationships between elements of data and theory also became apparent. For example in drafting my findings I returned to a notion of the existence of several different Peckham Squares that I had sketched at the start of the fieldwork phase but not developed further as a concept. Looking at these notes after the data collection phase, I found that these characterisations of the square linked with theory that had emerged from the fieldwork, which allowed me to not only develop these theoretical strands, but also to interpret and analyse data again in the light of these developing emerging characterisations.

The biggest challenge throughout the fieldwork and analysis related to making sense of what I saw, in a variety of ways. This related partly to practicalities associated with the chosen method of observation, for instance the limited opportunities to gain further information or clarification. These concerns underlined the ongoing importance of rigorous observation and assessment, whereas challenges on the epistemological plane were more daunting still. I constantly questioned the veracity of my perceptions and the assumptions upon which they were based. At the beginning of the fieldwork phase I sometimes found the transition from theory to reality daunting, so that for instance it was

not always possible to connect what I was seeing 'on the ground' with the more abstract conceptualisations of public space I had absorbed from the literature. Approaching the square one category of data at a time made this transition more manageable, by for example focusing particularly on 'interactions', 'power', 'physical use of the space' and so on, in order to gradually build up links between my observations and the literature, eventually bridging the gulf I perceived between the existing body of theory and research and my own.

Finally I return to the epistemological theme that formed the backdrop to the fieldwork and analysis, the constant questioning of what I observed. Asking myself throughout *What am I seeing here? How do I know? What are my assumptions?* acted as a reminder that the micro-actions I witnessed formed part of a bigger picture, to be considered in the wider context of social activity and purpose. They also reminded me of the possibility of multiple interpretations and meanings. Numerous events occurred where I am unable to say with complete certainty what I actually observed; there were also events where it later transpired that my initial reading had been incorrect. While the data and analysis I have presented throughout this study will appear preliminary, tentative and at times impressionistic, the effort to establish theoretical validity and to give justifiable grounding to my arguments has nonetheless been rigorous.

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Appendix 1   **Peckham area**

Appendix 2   **Peckham Square**

Appendix 3   **Photographs**

Appendix 4   **Formal events in Peckham Square
during the research period**