

Article

# Geographies of Encounter, Public Space, and Social Cohesion: Reviewing Knowledge at the Intersection of Social Sciences and Built Environment Disciplines

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## Abstract

This article seeks to address long-standing questions in academia, practice, and policymaking regarding the role public spaces might have in promoting cross-cultural encounters and experiences of social cohesion in socially and culturally diverse urban contexts, and what theories and methods researchers and practitioners might use to objectively evaluate this. To answer these questions, this article carries out a systematic literature review of theories and methods for studying person-environment relationships from a range of social science and built-environment disciplines. The review provides a basis for interdisciplinary knowledge exchange to develop an innovative theoretical and methodological framework that draws together key analyses of social cohesion with recent urban design literature, to hypothesize how key social dimensions that characterise intercultural encounter and their social experience of cohesion link to physical, management, and use attributes of public space design. The proposed framework provides a multi-dimensional account of how public spaces with different design approaches are connected to different experiences of social encounters, which in turn impact varied experiences of social cohesion, paving the way for new knowledge about the geographies of encounters.

## Keywords

diversity; intercultural encounters; public space; social cohesion; urban design

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

At a time of increasing nationalism and heightened political debates around social integration, local, national, and supranational policies in the EU and elsewhere remain committed to ideals of social cohesion and solidarity. These policies recognise diverse claims about cultural identities and support a politics of difference and mutual tolerance. Social cohesion is considered a key indicator of a well-functioning and resilient society, but there are divergent ideas regarding its meaning, value, and how it can be achieved and measured (Fonseca et al., 2019; Friedkin, 2004). Although social engagement has become more digitally mediated (Fung et al., 2013) and

has been affected in various ways by the Covid-19 pandemic, public spaces remain a crucial domain where citizens encounter social differences (Holland et al., 2007; Lownsbrough & Beunderman, 2007; Mayblin et al., 2015; Putnam, 2000). The importance of public spaces in this politics of encounter has been extensively researched by social scientists (Piekut & Valentine, 2017; Sennett, 1974; Watson, 2006). What has received far less study is what role the actual design of those public spaces can have in supporting and encouraging social encounters, acknowledgement, and interaction.

There is recognition within the urban design discipline of the need to develop more socially and culturally sensitive public space design practices and policymaking

to enhance social cohesion (Carmona, 2019; Rishbeth et al., 2018). But there is as yet no framework in place to enable an assessment of the design aspects of public space in terms of their varied effects on social interaction among diverse publics (Peters et al., 2010; Rishbeth, 2004; Spierings et al., 2016). This article aims to fill that important gap. To do so, it provides a comprehensive literature review at the intersection of the social science and built environment disciplines that frame existing knowledge about the geography of encounters. The article seeks to articulate a new research pathway that links design and policy aspects of public space with an assessment of their varied effects on intercultural encounters and social cohesion in socially and culturally diverse contexts.

This article innovates by bringing together a multidisciplinary team to build new links between theories and methods from the social sciences and urban design and between research, practice, and policy. It develops a new conceptual and evidentiary base and an interdisciplinary methodology to increase our understanding of social cohesion in terms of individual and collective experiences of cultural difference within specific public spaces.

## **2. Geographies of Encounter at the Intersection of Social Sciences and Built Environment Disciplines**

Research into the geographies of encounter is a growing, evolving, and multifaceted field, having attracted a wide range of social scientists as well as designers. However, it remains only loosely defined, because of the diversity of research interests involved. Although it has clearly been a central focus for geographical work for the past two decades, it is only a recent interest for the built environment disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture, and planning and urban design. In the geographical literature, the concept of “encounter” appears most frequently in works on (post)colonialism, urban diversity, and animal geographies. These studies highlight that encounters are fundamentally about social differences and are thus central to understanding the embodied nature of social distinctions and relationships and the contingency of identity and belonging (Wilson, 2017).

Within this literature, one topic that has attained prominence is urban diversity, because of the ever-increasing social and cultural diversity of cities. While early sociological studies of urban encounters focused on the anonymity of urban life and the figure of the distanced “stranger” (Simmel, 1903; Wirth, 1938), today’s studies are interested in examining the complexities of inter-cultural, inter-ethnic, inter-religious, and cross-class encounters (Amin, 2002; Clayton, 2009). These studies are driven by a concern to understand how difference is negotiated, constructed, and legitimated within contingent moments of encounter (Brown, 2012; Haldrup et al., 2006). Recent work in this area pays considerable attention to the spaces where encounters occur, whether spaces of work, leisure, and education,

to understand how space shapes and is shaped by the social interactions therein (Leitner, 2012; Wilson, 2017; Wood & Landry, 2008; Worpole & Knox, 2008).

There is a lack of clarity and scholarly agreement around if and how various kinds of spaces and design approaches have succeeded in promoting intercultural encounters and developing social cohesion within and between members of specific social and cultural groups. Social cohesion has been traditionally understood as “the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society” (Manca, 2014, p. 6026), and is often considered an indicator of a well-functioning society (Stevenson & Waite, 2011). But its value is being increasingly questioned given divergent ideas regarding its meaning and how it can be achieved (Friedkin, 2004). The recent proliferation of irreconcilable definitions reflects different research and policy agendas (Jenson, 1998). We still lack clear and operational definitions and know little about how social cohesion is played out in different cultural contexts and among different cultural groups or how it can be achieved in public space. There is, however, an extensive body of knowledge about the overall role that urban design can play in framing and promoting sociability in public spaces, and the roles of different types of spaces, spatial characteristics, and activities in shaping them. This builds on the seminal urban design works of Gehl (1971), Whyte (1980), and Alexander et al. (1977) and has expanded through later studies (Franck & Stevens, 2007; Kaplan et al., 1998; Madanipour, 1996; Marcus & Francis, 1990; Mehta, 2013; Simões Aelbrecht, 2016). More recent research identifies that different design approaches to social cohesion are being proposed, implemented, and theorised, suggesting that there is no “one size fits all” solution (Nielsen, 2019; Simões Aelbrecht et al., 2022).

This article seeks to contribute to understanding in this area by reviewing existing knowledge in the field of geographies of encounter in order to develop new knowledge concerning how public spaces and their design can support social experiences of encounter and cohesion. This work challenges the stream of geographical research which suggests that public open spaces have little potential for “meaningful” contact, understood as longer-term and deeper contact (Allport, 1954/1979) because public spaces are dominated by fleeting civil encounters; those characterised as “momentary” (Lawson & Elwood, 2014), “passing” (Laurier & Philo, 2006), and “ephemeral” (Brown, 2008; Halvorsen, 2015). Geographers have increasingly recognised the significance of fleeting encounters as pillars of public life, although many still contest the value of such encounters, because of their varied temporalities and quality and their sometimes negative impacts on social behaviours and relationships over time (Wilson, 2017). Such research tends to focus on “parochial,” shared, semi-public or private social settings within the public sphere (Oldenburg, 1989), such as spaces of consumption and socialisation—termed “micro-publics” (Amin, 2002; Watson, 2006). It does not

examine the wider range of public spaces available for informal intercultural encounters—spaces that may be public, semi-public, or private, but remain open and accessible for use by the broad public—nor their detailed design (Mayblin et al., 2015; Piekut & Valentine, 2017).

These diverging trajectories indicate a lack of intersection between urban design and social science approaches and understandings of urban social encounters and wider social relations, which impedes progress in research, practice, and policymaking for the urban public realm and cities more generally. Urban design scholars have long been interested in how public spaces support social interactions but have not examined if social encounters are linked to the cultural complexities of people's broader, longer-term understandings, experiences and valuations of social differences and relationships, or what contribution such encounters make to social cohesion within cities (Cattell et al., 2008; Dempsey, 2009; Peters et al., 2010; Uzzell et al., 2002). Conversely, social scientists such as geographers and sociologists have a long tradition of studying social encounters, although they have only recently given attention to the material conditions of the urban settings where encounters occur (Mayblin et al., 2015; Valentine, 2008). Practising planners and designers remain ill-equipped to deal with this particularly complex design task, lacking the skills and intercultural competence to understand the diverse needs of different cultural groups (Beebejaun, 2006; Wood, 2015), let alone to discern what constitutes good practice in public space design.

### 3. Research Methodology

This article's research aims were pursued through a two-part methodology. This consisted of a systematic literature review of current knowledge from social science and built environment disciplines, followed by a knowledge exchange process where the authors worked with a wider team of academic practice and policy experts from those disciplines to organise this material into a theoretical and methodological framework. The methodology was informed by the authors' emerging body of work in this area. This experience brought them an awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary research, and knowledge exchange between research, practice, and policymaking if we want to understand where new knowledge is needed, to produce more impactful and meaningful research in this area, and enhance its prospects of application in practice and policy.

The literature review began with an extensive search for articles that study person-environment relationships. The aim was to understand the existing state of knowledge around the topic of geographies of encounter, with a particular focus on the social experience of intercultural encounters and social cohesion, and their links to public space design, management and use.

Electronic searches were conducted using two online academic search engines (Google Scholar and Proquest)

using the following key English-language terms: "public space," "social encounters," "social mix," "social cohesion," "diversity," "multiculturalism," and "interculturalism." This ensured that the selected papers use the same concepts and adopt similar conceptual frameworks in their research. The search was limited to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles from 2001 to 2022. This corpus represents the largest academic readership and the most productive period of research at the intersection of these topics. The sampling thus excludes books covering these themes, many of which build on earlier peer-reviewed analyses. We acknowledge that this sampling has a bias toward Western, and European contexts, interests and understandings of cohesion and public life. Our search yielded an initial corpus of 25,300 articles. This high volume reflects the exponential growth of studies on "public space," but not all of these studies specifically address the role that the design and management of public spaces play in shaping experiences of "intercultural encounters" and "social cohesion." Therefore, in our second search, we included three additional criteria—"urban design," "planning," and "spatial attributes"—reducing the corpus to 10,800 articles. In a third search, we reviewed the titles and abstracts of these articles for relevance to our study's aims and questions. This resulted in 600 articles, which were then analysed according to their focus, aims, context, theories, methods, and contributions, as illustrated by Table 1. To be eligible for the literature review, articles needed to address the aims and focus highlighted in bold, which we considered key themes in the field of enquiry (e.g., aim to investigate the nature of intercultural encounters in public spaces, and the role that public spaces might have in developing meaningful social encounters and relationships with a focus on the public spaces' social and spatial attributes), and address one or more methods and contributions listed in Table 1. Here meaningful encounters are understood as longer-term, deeper contacts which contribute to reducing prejudice and fostering respect between different social groups (Allport, 1954/1979; Valentine, 2008; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014). This search identified both theoretical and empirical articles that reviewed existing theories and methods and studies that proposed new methodologies. This scoping review yielded only 20 articles meeting all these requirements—a very limited field of focused cross-disciplinary enquiry (Table 2). This narrow sampling of literature allowed focussed insights into our chosen conceptual frameworks, interdisciplinary studies that combine analysis of both social and physical attributes of public space, and rigorously peer-reviewed findings that have been published in academic journals. These articles' full contents were then further reviewed and analysed, as discussed in the following section.

The review results and analysis then fed into a second methodological phase which involved knowledge exchange within a larger multidisciplinary team of contributors. This group includes human geographers

**Table 1.** List of inclusion criteria that guided the selection of papers for literature review.

<p><b>Aims and objectives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand the nature of intercultural encounters and social attitudes towards migrant communities in public spaces</li> <li>Achieve meaningful encounters among diverse communities in public spaces</li> <li>Explore the role/meaning of urban space and interactions leading to social capital and social cohesion in neighbourhoods.</li> <li>Problematise/ Inform current future policies and agendas</li> </ul>
<p><b>Focus</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intercultural encounters in public spaces</li> <li>Spatiality/ materiality and sociality (social and spatial attributes) of the spaces where encounters occur. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Everyday necessary activities</li> <li>Social and leisure activities</li> <li>Traditional public spaces: parks, gardens, streets, other.</li> <li>Non-traditional public spaces</li> <li>Migrant and ethnic/religious communities</li> <li>Young people</li> <li>Research-practice nexus</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Global North</li> <li>Global South</li> <li>Global North &amp; South</li> <li>Single case study</li> <li>Comparative study/ multiple case studies</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theories/ context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conviviality</li> <li>Atmosphere</li> <li>Diversity</li> <li>Superdiversity</li> <li>Multiculturalism</li> <li>Interculturalism</li> <li>Social/Intercultural encounters/ interaction</li> <li>Social cohesion</li> <li>Social capital</li> <li>Social mix</li> <li>Social segregation</li> <li>Contact hypothesis/ zones method/theory</li> <li>Meaningful contact/ encounters</li> <li>Affordances</li> </ul>
<p><b>Methods</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literature Review</li> <li>Observations</li> <li>Interview methods: focused groups, surveys, other.</li> <li>Ethnographic methods</li> <li>Urban design methods</li> </ul>
<p><b>Contributions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inform local policies (multicultural, intercultural, social cohesion, other)</li> <li>Methodological: e.g., Urban design informed methodological approaches, other.</li> <li>Improve urban design practice: intercultural competence skills/ design/management</li> <li>Role/value/meaning of social interactions</li> <li>Role/importance of open and accessible public space and design/spatial attributes</li> <li>Contact hypothesis/ zones as method as well as theory</li> </ul>

and urban designers, embracing academics, practitioners, and policymakers. The team engaged in two knowledge exchange workshops hosted at one participant's UK university, to share their knowledge and experience

around the subject and to identify knowledge gaps in theory, practice, and policy. The workshops were organised by two urban designers (Aelbrecht and Stevens), who subsequently authored this article. Both authors

**Table 2.** List of literature reviewed.

1. Askins, K., & Pain, R. (2011). Contact zones: Participation, materiality, and the messiness of interaction. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29(5), 803–821.
2. Daly, J. (2020). Superkilen: Exploring the human–nonhuman relations of intercultural encounter. *Journal of Urban Design*, 25(1), 65–85.
3. Galanakis, M. (2013). Intercultural public spaces in multicultural Toronto. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 22(1), 67–89.
4. Ganji, F., & Rishbeth, C. (2020). Conviviality by design: The socio-spatial qualities of spaces of intercultural urban encounters. *Urban Design International*, 25(3), 215–234.
5. Koutrolidou, P. P. (2012). Spatialities of ethnocultural relations in multicultural East London: Discourses of interaction and social mix. *Urban Studies*, 49(10), 2049–2066.
6. Kuruoğlu, A. P., & Woodward, I. (2021). Textures of diversity: Socio-material arrangements, atmosphere, and social inclusion in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood. *Journal of Sociology*, 57(1), 111–127.
7. Mayblin, L., Valentine, G., Kossak, F., & Schneider, T. (2015). Experimenting with spaces of encounter: Creative interventions to develop meaningful contact. *Geoforum*, 63, 67–80.
8. Neal, S., Bennett, K., Cochrane, A., & Mohan, G. (2013). Living multicultural: Understanding the new spatial and social relations of ethnicity and multiculturalism in England. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 31(2), 308–323.
9. Peters, K. (2010). Being together in urban parks: Connecting public space, leisure, and diversity. *Leisure Sciences*, 32(5), 418–433.
10. Peterson, M. (2017). Living with difference in hyper-diverse areas: How important are encounters in semi-public spaces? *Social & Cultural Geography*, 18(8), 1067–1085.
11. Piekut, A., & Valentine, G. (2017). Spaces of encounter and attitudes towards difference: A comparative study of two European cities. *Social Science Research*, 62, 175–188.
12. Rishbeth, C. (2001). Ethnic minority groups and the design of public open space: an inclusive landscape? *Landscape Research*, 26(4), 351–366.
13. Rishbeth, C. (2004). Ethno-cultural representation in the urban landscape. *Journal of Urban Design*, 9(3), 311–333.
14. Rishbeth, C., Ganji, F., & Vodicka, G. (2018). Ethnographic understandings of ethnically diverse neighbourhoods to inform urban design practice. *Local Environment*, 23(1), 36–53.
15. Simoes Aelbrecht, P., Stevens, Q., & Kumar, S. (2022). European public space projects with social cohesion in mind: Symbolic, programmatic and minimalist approaches. *European Planning Studies*, 30(6), 1093–1123.
16. Spierings, B., van Melik, R., & van Aalst, I. (2016). Parallel lives on the plaza: Young Dutch women of Turkish and Moroccan descent and their feelings of comfort and control on Rotterdam’s Schouwburgplein. *Space and Culture*, 19(2), 150–163.
17. Toscani, C. (2014, November 12–14). *Public space as urban device for multicultural cities* [Paper presentation]. EURAU 2014: Composite Cities, European Symposium on Research in Architecture and Urban Design, Istanbul, Turkey.
18. Vodicka, G., & Rishbeth, C. (2022). Contextualised convivialities in superdiverse neighbourhoods – Methodological approaches informed by urban design. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 43(2), 228–245.
19. Wessel, T. (2009). Does diversity in urban space enhance intergroup contact and tolerance? *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 91(1), 5–17.
20. Wiesemann, L. (2012). *Public spaces, social interaction, and the negotiation of difference* (MMG Working Paper). Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.

have professional backgrounds in architecture, planning and urban design, and experience in teaching, research and knowledge exchange between research and practice. The authors had previously tested varied formats of knowledge exchange activities and identified group workshops as the best way to facilitate two-way knowledge exchange between research and practice through a combination of activities such as informal presentations

and discussions focused on applied knowledge. These workshop events produced the research framework outlined in the second part of this article.

The team included eight individuals with varied but complementary disciplinary backgrounds and expertise. They included two urban design scholars, a Southern-European female and an Australian male, with expertise in public space design and environment-behaviour

relations in European, North American, and Asian contexts, two British human geographers both male with expertise in inter-ethnic and cross-class social relations in the UK and the wider European continent, two British urban design practitioners, a female and male, working for a British professional practice (Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design) and for a peak professional organisation (Urban Design Group, the urban design professional organisation in the UK), and two policymakers, a British female and North-European male, working on public realm policy in local government (Greater London Authority). The team is all white and Western, and this could result in potential biases, but at least has a good gender balance (five males and three females), different cultural backgrounds, and working experience across a varied range of multicultural environments.

#### 4. Literature Review Results

The 20 reviewed papers were all found to be driven by a common aim: To understand the nature of intercultural, inter-ethnic interactions and encounters among diverse communities, engagement, and social attitudes towards difference, and how these are played out in public spaces, with a focus on their planning, design and/or management. However, their research objectives vary substantially, reflecting a disciplinary divide. Four papers from sociological and geographical perspectives tend to be more geared towards understanding how meaningful encounters are achieved, and in doing so how these can build social capital and cohesion. The 16 papers of more interdisciplinary scope are more interested in examining the role of urban public spaces and their design in these processes, highlighting this as a key knowledge gap in the field. Nine of those papers, with a stronger planning focus, also have a key aim to inform urban policy and design practice so that they better reflect social and cultural diversity. However only three papers, those with a more sociological focus, problematise current policy debates and agendas on segregation (Neal et al., 2013), social cohesion (Peters, 2010), diversity and multiculturalism, and the strategies towards dominant migrant communities that particular societies wish to integrate or assimilate (Toscani, 2014). The research studies in the Netherlands and Belgium focus on Turkish and Moroccan immigrants, while research in the UK focuses on Pakistanis, Africans, and former British colonies.

Although all 20 papers focus on analysing the dynamics of intercultural encounters, only 11 of them focus on the spatiality and materiality of intercultural encounters. These are generally the most recent literature identified, spanning between 2015 and 2022, except for two earlier papers by Rishbeth (2001, 2004), a key author in the field. These papers also tend to be more interdisciplinary, drawing together social sciences disciplines such as geography and sociology, and design disciplines such as landscape architecture and urban design. This attests to the spatial turn in research on encounters

in recent years (Kuruoğlu & Woodward, 2021; Wilson, 2017). These papers address a diversity of aspects including: the symbolism of the design of public gardens, and their potential to respond to the diverse needs of different ethnic groups (Rishbeth, 2004), the atmospheric affordances of the social-material arrangements of the spaces of encounter to understand people's multisensorial engagements with the spaces and objects therein (Kuruoğlu & Woodward, 2021); the role of leisure activities in the spaces analysed (Peters, 2010); and the impacts of both temporary spatial experiments and permanent interventions (Mayblin et al., 2015; Simões Aelbrecht et al., 2022). Most of the 11 "spatial" papers focused on traditional public spaces and everyday spaces of encounter, including parks, markets, workplaces, and other places of leisure and association where everyday interaction and negotiation are compulsory or habitual. This focus suggests that these may be the only spaces that can bring different cultural groups together (Amin, 2002; Wood & Landry, 2008). But five of the most recent papers demonstrate an expansion of attention to a wider range of public space types, many of which are more exclusive and/or private in nature, including railway stations, libraries, and shopping malls.

In terms of context, 18 of the 20 papers are focused on the Global North, with a particular emphasis on the UK and the Netherlands (10 and three papers respectively). These are the two contexts that have experienced the most dramatic changes in the politics of multiculturalism, from denial in the 1970s/1980s to integration in the 1990s and more recently adopting social cohesion agendas in the 2000s (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). Most papers focus on a single region or a single case study, including various cities in the UK (Mayblin et al., 2015); London (Rishbeth, 2004); the UK's East Midlands and Southwest (Rishbeth, 2001) and Northeast England (Askins & Pain, 2011), and the Netherlands (Peters, 2010). Eleven papers provide comparative studies, mostly involving European cities. Only one study provides brief comparisons between the Global North and Global South (Peterson, 2017).

A range of concepts and theories are drawn on within this body of work. Nine papers use "social cohesion" or "social integration" as a frame of analysis of intercultural encounters. These examine the extent, nature, value and use of such concepts as policy measures to evaluate the benefits and meaning of social relations. In most papers, the concepts of "cohesion" and "integration" are used interchangeably. "Cohesion" is recognised as a social goal all societies aspire to, while "integration" is seen as a more problematic term, assuming a greater degree of assimilation into a hosting society. The literature defines them both as outcomes of socially and culturally diverse societies and things that can be measured both through social-economic characteristics and, more importantly, through the perceptions and experiences they generate (Peters, 2010). This is a key theoretical advance in recent research. "Cohesion" is seen

as multidimensional and multi-scalar, experienced across various dimensions or spheres of social life (belonging, recognition, inclusion, participation, and legitimacy) and various scales (nation, city, and neighbourhood), but most effectively empirically examined at the micro-scale of lived experiences in everyday spaces of encounter. Seven papers use the concepts of “diversity” and “super-diversity” to understand how these conditions impact intergroup contact, understanding and cohesion. They assume “diversity” to be a source of mutual understanding, tolerance, and integration, though recognising that it can result in either passive or active engagement and can result in meaningful cooperation. This challenges earlier work that emphasised diversity’s negative effects: prejudice and discrimination (Putnam, 2007). More recent work has shown that the effects of ethnic diversity are highly varied: it can either support or undermine social cohesion (Meer & Tolsma, 2014; Portes & Vickstrom, 2011). In five papers, Allport’s (1954/1979) “contact hypothesis” theory is used to understand the extent to which contact across social and ethnic divides can promote social cohesion or social capital. They see “contact spaces” as having a meaningful role in orienting people’s actions and interactions, and in shaping intercultural encounters. They call for more research to examine differences in types of contact (e.g., casual or regular, interpersonal or inter-group), their effects and mechanisms, and the spaces and conditions under which they occur (Peters, 2010; Wessel, 2009). Other papers use other concepts that offer new perspectives to understand and address increasingly complex and heterogeneous social contexts. These concepts include “conviviality,” a broader range of socialities and relationships, and “atmospheres” and “affordances,” which both help understand the spatial and perceptual attributes of public spaces where encounters occur. These papers highlight the need for more interdisciplinary theoretical and empirical inputs that can help understand and address the increasing complexity of intergroup dynamics in multicultural settings.

Methodologically, 17 of the 20 examined papers are empirical. Many demonstrate the possibility and value of combining multiple methods to pursue rich, triangulated data collection and analysis that can improve studies’ insights and reliability (Peters, 2010). These methods however generally remain limited to the kinds of field observation and interviews traditionally associated with sociological and geographical research. Observations typically examine different types of individuals and groups and their patterns of behaviour in public spaces. Interviews commonly explore individuals’ understandings of their lived experiences, attitudes, and prejudices regarding their uses in public spaces and interactions with differences.

Nine recent, interdisciplinary papers use varied and innovative combinations of methods. Mayblin et al. (2015) combine surveys with life story interviews, audio diaries, ethnographic observations, and architectural

experiments that involve building temporary spaces of encounter with a university and recreation spaces. This draws on the multidisciplinary backgrounds of that team of geographers and architects to develop a well-rounded understanding of experiences of spaces of encounter. Kuruoğlu and Woodward (2021) take a multisensorial and multi-scalar approach. They combine methods from visual and material ethnography, exploring both visual and non-visual sensations and analysing and comparing the micro-scale social, material, and spatial arrangements of spaces and the objects, textures, and surfaces that constitute them, as well as the neighbourhoods where they are located, to provide contextualization of their observations.

The papers’ findings and contributions are wide-ranging, despite their similar research scope and agendas. The more sociological papers suggest that both fleeting and deeper forms of encounters have the potential to challenge and break down prejudices and stereotypes about “the other” (Valentine, 2008), and thus improve social cohesion. They challenge previous work that claimed that fleeting encounters are not relevant for social cohesion, by finding that both fleeting and longer-lasting encounters can be effective, depending on the context and places where they occur, and on their frequency (Peterson, 2017).

The 11 papers that explore both social and spatial dimensions of encounters illustrate the varied roles of public spaces and their material conditions in promoting positive encounters (Mayblin et al., 2015). Those papers indicate that a range of types of urban spaces can help catalyse tolerance toward difference and build trust. They suggest the need for purposefully-created sites of interpersonal and intercultural encounter, for more research and policy attention to how fleeting and meaningful encounters and prejudices arise (Koutrolidou, 2012; Wiesemann, 2012), and further exploration of the significance of sites of chance encounters in helping people live and engage with difference (Peterson, 2017).

The eight predominantly design-focused papers argue that the spatial, material, and sensorial attributes of a place can structure intercultural encounters (Kuruoğlu & Woodward, 2021). They have divergent views regarding the relative importance of the design and management aspects of spaces. Some work emphasizes the need to provide different design approaches to facilitate encounters (open, closed or open-and-closed designs for user appropriations) and/or represent different cultural groups (symbolism, programming of activities; Daly, 2020; Simões Aelbrecht et al., 2022). Others suggest that the management and maintenance of public spaces have more weight and impact on people’s use and experience (Rishbeth, 2004). However, because of the limited range of cultural contexts and types of public spaces studied, they do not provide enough evidence to substantiate these different findings.

The nine policy-focused papers generally point to failures of social and urban open space policies to address

social-cultural diversity and the needs of different user groups, and to recognise the roles of both fleeting and deeper interactions to increase tolerance and build trust (Koutrolikou, 2012), and the role of public spaces as key contact spaces for interaction that can build social cohesion. Several papers suggest a lack of intercultural competence among policymakers and practitioners, and their failure to provide different types of public spaces that accommodate different users' needs and allow chance encounters with differences (Spierings et al., 2016), or to acknowledge new types of spaces and innovative actions and intercultural initiatives (Toscani, 2014).

## 5. Developing a New Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The literature review revealed several theoretical and methodological insights. It also identified significant knowledge gaps, which are key to developing an agenda for future research and debate. One significant knowledge gap is the limited knowledge of the design aspects of public space in terms of their varied effects on social interaction and cohesion, which could inform design practice and policy. The review also highlighted a need to better understand how urban spaces and their social, spatial, and material properties might support meaningful, convivial, both fleeting and durable engagements and encounters, and ultimately build cohesion. Furthermore, it indicates an opportunity to embed social science theories and methods into urban design, and for distinctive research questions and methods about intercultural encounters to subsequently be developed and shaped within the built environment disciplines. These gaps call for more interdisciplinary research in the field of geographies of encounter. It was with this in mind that we formed a multidisciplinary team of academics, practitioners, and policymakers, to develop an innovative and robust theoretical and methodological framework which builds on established theories and methods from built environment disciplines (particularly planning and urban design) and integrates them with sociological and geographical knowledge for studying social relationships, to link the materiality of public spaces with the observed varieties of sociality.

### 5.1. Theories

Drawing on the two knowledge workshops and subsequent work, the team developed and refined a theoretical framework that aimed to address the gap identified in the literature review, by building new links between the social sciences and built environment disciplines in terms of where and how social cohesion develops in public spaces.

The developed framework was built on two key ideas identified during the workshops. The first was the need to adopt theories and methodological approaches from urban design that focus on the spatiality and mater-

iality of social encounters in traditional public open spaces (e.g., parks; Peters et al., 2010) as well as those examining other common-use public spaces, many of which are semi-public or privately owned or managed but available for broad public use (e.g., railway stations; Simões Aelbrecht, 2016), and optimal public settings and socio-spatial conditions for social interaction that can build social relationships and values. The second was the benefit of complementing these design approaches with innovative measures of non-verbal communication and interaction (Goffman, 1971; Lofland, 1998), measures of contact (Allport, 1954/1979) and meaningful and durable contact (Valentine, 2008) and linking them to established measures of social cohesion (Fonseca et al., 2019; Jenson, 1998; Kearns & Forrest, 2000; Putnam, 2000).

The team identified that non-verbal communication studies could provide a range of behavioural indicators and measures of the degree of social interaction and involvement, which are easily recognized behavioural and social cues and considered largely invariant across a variety of European contexts (Scherer & Ekman, 2005; Simões Aelbrecht et al., 2022). These include body orientation; for instance, 60/90-degree stances between individuals within groups indicate to the public (and to observing researchers) an individual's openness to engage with strangers. "Tie-signs" such as greeting behaviours and "withs," i.e., groups of two or more people signal the form and extent of people's affiliation or cooperation (Goffman, 1971). In terms of "social distance," 1.2 m to 3.6 m is the most comfortable distance for engaging with strangers in most Northern European cultures. Adjustments can be made for different cultural norms (Hall, 1969; Schefflen, 1972; Simões Aelbrecht, 2019; Sommer, 1969). These measures can then be linked to other non-spatial emotional and behavioural indicators of the type and level of social contacts, such as "meaning" and "durability" (Allport, 1954/1979; Valentine, 2008).

Through this knowledge exchange work, the research team developed a theoretical framework that draws together key analyses of social cohesion by Jenson (1998) and Kearns and Forrest (2000) to identify four key social dimensions that characterise the social experience of cohesion and to hypothesize how these dimensions link to physical, management, and use attributes of public space design, as identified from recent urban design literature. This framework is presented in Table 3.

### 5.2. Research Methods

The urban designers in the team have identified a range of methods from planning and urban design that can be useful to research the role of public space and urban design in supporting social interactions (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2019). They highlighted the importance of including a context and site analysis and design reviews (Carmona et al., 2003; Roberts & Greed, 2001), to gather and analyse background information on the context and public space in analysis that frames the social encounters



**Table 3.** Theoretical framework: Linking social experiences of social cohesion with physical, management, and use attributes of public space design.

**Belonging and Identity:** e.g., cultural representation of cultural groups and symbolism in spaces/objects/uses that represents the diverse community of users, their identities, and histories (Low et al., 2005; Ristic, 2019); spaces and elements that are focused on activities of making, collaboration, and exchange (Lien & Hou, 2019); appropriations of space through daily use and physical transformations of space on specific occasions (Uzzell et al., 2002).

**Inclusion:** e.g., physical, and visual accessibility into and within a space (Ristic, 2019); good connectivity of public spaces at the city-wide scale (Lien & Hou, 2019); Accommodating the different social and cultural uses and values (Low et al., 2005); expression of hybrid identities in built form (Sezer, 2019).

**Participation:** e.g., participation in the spaces’ design, use and management; integration of under-programmed, temporary, and loose design elements and characteristics that support collaborative action (Lien & Hou 2019); associations between spaces and objects and supportive exchanges and tie-signs (Goffman, 1971), contacts of acknowledgement, greeting and helping (Henning & Lieberg, 1996); meaningful contact (Mayblin et al., 2016); existence of local social networks for different demographic groups (Henning & Lieberg, 1996).

**Recognition:** e.g., visibility to/from the spaces, visibility of the various users they represent (Ristic, 2019; Sezer, 2019) associations between spaces and objects and expressions of civic culture, through cooperation, restrained helpfulness, civility towards diversity; expressions of recognition and acknowledgment of difference (Young, 2000).

in analysis. The context and site analysis typically include analysis of the public spaces’ social, physical, economic, and policy contexts, based on local government policy reports, Census data, and media reporting. But further research is also needed to examine in more detail the public spaces’ design aims, process, and outcomes, to identify how social differences and encounters were or were not addressed in the projects’ design briefs, and to identify specific assumptions, material design attributes, sub-spaces, and contextual factors for further detailed study and analysis. Design reviews are commonly used methods to research these aspects because they can help to assess a space’s design and process against a set of established urban design review criteria—e.g., Quality Reviewer (Cowan et al., 2010), England’s National Design Guide (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019), and UN Sustainable Development Goal #11 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). They require gathering information from various sources: design briefs and plans, site visits, site and spatial analysis, and interviews with key stakeholders of each project (client, developer, design team, planning officers, community representatives, and site managers).

After gathering all this contextual information about the design of the public spaces being analysed, it is necessary to understand how they are used and by whom. The most relevant method in this regard is post-occupancy evaluation (POE), a common technique in the built environment disciplines to assess buildings’ quality and performance in use (Preiser et al., 2015; Zeisel, 1981/2006; Zimring & Reizenstein, 1980), which can also be used to specifically evaluate the successes and shortcomings of the design in fostering social interaction. POEs can include a range of visual and spatial data: on-site observations recorded through behavioural mapping, field notes, photo-documentation, and video

recording, to capture the dynamics and the spatiality of social behaviours and encounters and identify the key spatial characteristics that support and constrain the identified uses and behaviours. We suggest these POE data can be further analysed using non-verbal communication techniques (also known as body language methods), to examine the spatial and performative properties of individual social encounters within these public spaces. This can draw on unobtrusive direct observations using, for example, video cameras to enable later re-examination of behaviour (Hall, 1969; Schefflen, 1972; Whyte, 1980). The behavioural and spatial dynamics of social encounters can be analysed using three key indicators of the degree of social involvement between individuals outlined above: “body orientation,” “tie-signs,” and “social distance.” We hypothesize that these can be correlated to social perceptions of different levels of engagement, to spatially define different experiences of cohesion, but further empirical corroboration is needed.

From a human geography perspective, research on the experience of social encounters with difference requires in-depth insights into people’s collective and individual experiences of the social interactions observed and how these places and behaviours connect to individuals’ enduring social practices, networks and values, and wider patterns of engagement with social difference. Ethnographic methods are popular methods among geographers because they enable a deeper socio-cultural understanding of public space users’ own experiences of the spatial settings and social encounters that have been objectively observed and analysed. Furthermore, they can be used to explore the broader social, cultural, and political contexts of such encounters. Two particularly insightful methods in this respect are ethnographic interviews, such as “go-along” interviews, either with individuals or in groups, where respondents

describe the social affordances and meanings of urban spaces while walking through them (Evans & Jones, 2011) and photo-elicitation, based around photographs of other users' social encounters and their spatial settings (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). Biographical methods are another set of methods that geographers use to integrate the individual, personal dimension into the study of social encounters and urban spaces. This can involve collecting in-depth qualitative accounts of individuals' lived experiences of the activities and spaces being analysed. The methods generally include individual in-depth interviews, personal diaries of people's social and spatial practices (Latham, 2008), and participatory mapping of people's social networks (Emmel, 2008; Emmel & Clark, 2009). This biographical data can be closely integrated into the other ethnographic data elicited earlier, allowing an exploration of individual users' different perspectives on how and why they interact with social differences in public spaces, what gives these encounters meaning and durability, and how these experiences relate to individuals' wider patterns of engagement with social difference.

This knowledge exchange helped the team recognise that it would be useful to combine these six types of methods. These are all established methods in their respective disciplines, and they capture and analyse different types of robust data that this field requires. Therefore, a mixed-method approach, combining six methods of data collection and analysis for studying person-environment relationships, promises to be an effective way to address the methodological gaps that our literature review highlighted. More importantly, it could develop a composite methodological framework which could simultaneously focus on the materiality of public space settings, their social affordances, and varied cultural, social, and biographical perspectives and roles. The strength of this approach is that it can col-

late six key kinds of data that can be triangulated to provide a multi-dimensional analysis of how different case study sites with different types of public spaces and design approaches are connected to different experiences of social encounters and wider consequences for social cohesion.

The team discussed several ways to link these six methods. While there is no definitive answer, we suggest several benefits in following a sequentially nested approach to collect, analyse, and triangulate the data and findings. Figure 1 suggests a suitable sequence. But a research design need not define a strictly linear and fixed process; data collection and analysis can also happen in parallel and in iterative cycles. The research team's experience using these varied methods indicates that the interdisciplinary nature of the research provides a form of triangulation, allowing critical comparison across the data through the different phases of the research.

This methodology promises to develop a pathway for new knowledge by building logical, productive links between specific data types and data collection and analysis methods that are familiar to researchers in the geographical and built environment disciplines respectively. This combination of methods is a key innovation. The team's review of existing literature found no evidence of previous use of this combination of methods in the field of geographies of encounter.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

This article introduced a focus on public space design and urban design in the analysis of social cohesion and geographies of encounter, a perspective largely missing in current research. It did so by reviewing knowledge from social sciences and built environment disciplines and providing the basis for knowledge exchange among

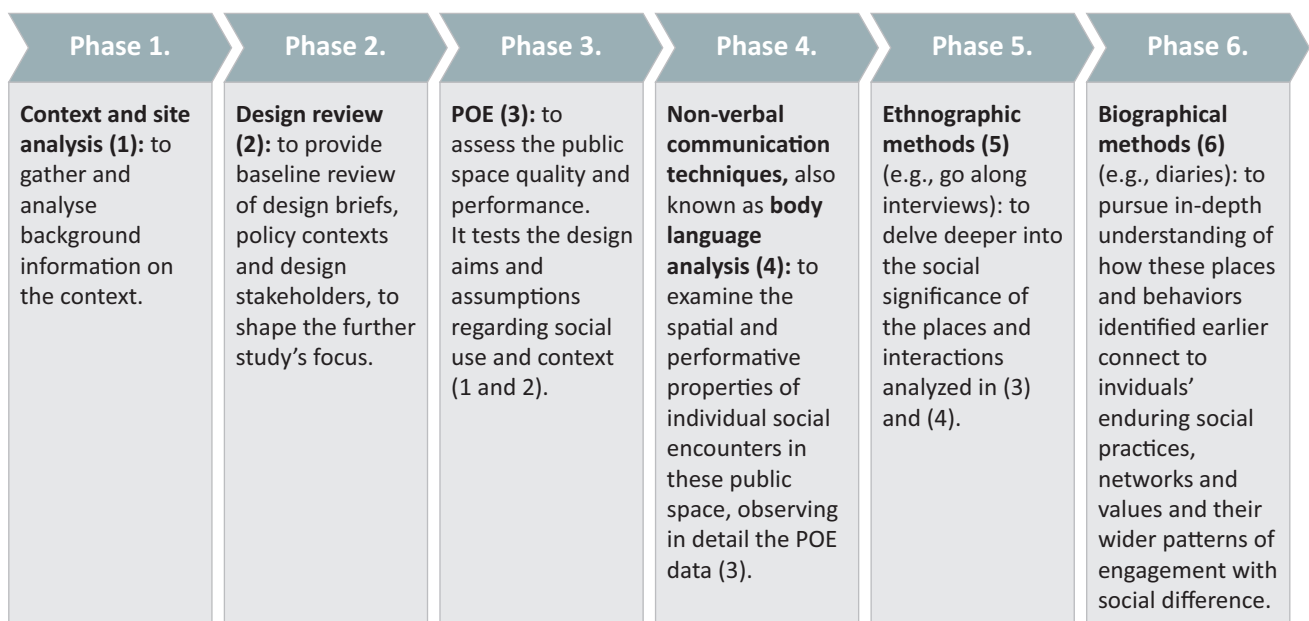


Figure 1. Proposed mixed-methods methodology.

a multidisciplinary team of academics, practitioners, and policymakers. These activities enabled the development of an innovative theoretical and methodological framework that draws together key analyses of social cohesion with recent urban design literature, to hypothesize how key social dimensions that characterise the social experience of cohesion link to physical, management, and use attributes of public space design.

This framework can contribute to further theoretical, methodological, and empirical innovation and discovery in the social sciences and built environment disciplines, particularly human geography, planning and urban design. It builds new links between these disciplinary fields, theories, and methods, demonstrating the benefit of interdisciplinary research in the field of geography of encounters. It points the way toward a multi-dimensional and multi-scalar understanding of the increasing complexities of intercultural encounters and people's experiences of living together in cities. It can develop a pathway for new knowledge by building productive links between specific theories, data types, and methods of data collection, analysis, and triangulation, and by enabling simultaneous focused attention on the materiality of public space settings, their social affordances, and people's varied cultural, social, and biographical perspectives and roles.

The framework builds on the general premise that public spaces and their varied design attributes and approaches are increasingly important media and tools that create opportunities for people's intercultural interactions and experiences of living together. This challenges a dominant social perspective of previous geographical and sociological work (Amin, 2002; Worpole & Knox, 2008) which tends to focus more on the social and cultural dynamics involved in such encounters than the material conditions of the spaces where they occur. This framework can enable researchers to further explore the social, spatial, and material attributes of public spaces, to better understand their role in shaping social experiences of encounter, and to examine emerging types of public spaces that may provide new and effective means of bridging socio-cultural divides.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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