

Lockdown, A Disrupted Place: The Impact of Covid-19 on People's Connections to Places & Their Wellbeing

"Human experience is always rooted in place" – Entrikin, 1989:41

Details:

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Background:

In 2020-21, my master's level research explored people's relationships with places during the UK's first Covid-19 lockdown, with a view to understand how this context impacted their wellbeing.

My work considered people's personal experiences through a more emotional lens, exploring how their feelings towards places have changed. This was considered alongside the intersection that place has with wellbeing in an unprecedented time, where people's access to places was restricted.

Due to the dominance of place and wellbeing literature concerned with natural environments, green and natural places such as parks and waterways were incorporated into this research as a sub-theme.

Methodology:

A total of 10 interviews were conducted in Autumn 2020, with two samples of participants:

Sample 1: Professionals (x 5)

These are individuals who work in the place-based sector and included:

- Retail Consultant
- Regeneration Manager
- Urban Designer / Architect
- Chief Executive Officer of a nature/place-based non-profit
- Place-Based Counselling Therapist.

Prior to the individual interviews with each of the above participants, they were asked to create a mind-map of their understanding of the links between place and wellbeing, which was then discussed in the interview.

Sample 2: Public (x 5)

These are individuals who responded to an open call for participants and had diverse job roles. The only caveat was that to participate in this sample group, these individuals could not have a place-based job role, such as the roles in Sample 1.

Prior to the individual interviews with each of the above participants, they were asked to create two cartographic maps which detailed places in their lives before the first Covid-19 lockdown, and during the first Covid-19 lockdown. These were then discussed in the interview.

All interviews were transcribed, with themes cross-referenced with participants. Transcriptions then underwent a thematic analysis, to understand the commonalities between participants' experiences across both samples.

Key Findings:

In summary, my research found that people's relationships to and with places have been affected by the UK's first Covid-19 lockdown.

- There is a distinct connection between place and wellbeing, which although sometimes direct, is complex.
- Natural environments dominated the findings as specific locations people associated positively with their wellbeing, which was only enhanced by the disrupted context of Covid-19.
- Green space has power: it's practical, but it's also very emotional.
- Things have changed. The status-quo has been challenged. People are more aware of place, wellbeing, environmental issues and what they want and can expect from places.

Detailed Themes:

Connection

- People desire connection. Or, more specifically – they desire places that allow them to feel connected to their environment or facilitate connections to others within that environment.
- Covid-19 has accelerated this and people are more aware of when they don't feel connected to, or connected in a place/space.
- People want to connect to natural environments specifically. For example, smell flowers, breathe in the fresh air, have sand between their toes.
- However, people also want to feel connected to non-natural environments. For example, missing the 'buzz' of the city and busy places which generate a sense of belonging.
- Green spaces such as parks and fields can facilitate this, and was notable to participants, as these were the only places that many felt they could safely connect with others during lockdown.
- The connection to natural environments and places more generally increases feelings of wellbeing for people.

Loss

- People felt the loss of aspects of their lives during lockdown, but they also felt the direct loss of places/spaces in their lives, which negatively impacted their wellbeing
- This research suggests that when people lost access to places, they felt like they had lost a part of their identity i.e. who they are in work / who they are at church / who they are with friends.
- The term "grieving" was mentioned a number of times and there was a sense of Covid-19 and lockdown creating a sense of 'placelessness' with people feeling unsettled and having increased anxiety.
- In terms of natural environments, once again it replaced activities for people, which reduced the sense of loss somewhat. For example – having a drink with friends at the pub became a walk through the park.

Freedom, Control & Equality

- Language and concepts around control were prevalent in the findings. For example, participants feeling 'controlled / restricted / limited' or not understanding the 'rules' or using language such as 'what we're allowed to do'
- The same can be said for freedom, in which participants appeared to desire feeling 'free' and wanting to 'escape' both their homes and lockdown more generally.
- These findings indicate that places are facilitators of freedom both practically and emotionally for people.
- Natural environments were felt to be mostly positive places, generating feelings of freedom due to the open space, fresh air and helping people feel connected to something bigger than themselves.

- However, natural environments were also discussed in relation to control and the need to regulate these. For example, participants discussed how the increased use of green space had created more litter and that these spaces need to be clean and safe for everyone to use
- Finally, freedom and control were discussed in relation to equality. For example, nine out of ten participants I spoke with had access to a garden. Most noted they felt this was a privilege and began to question why everyone does not have access to this. As such, there were discussions around class, equality, spatial justice and accessibility in relation places and spaces, with participant's seeming more aware and/or interested in this due to the lockdown.

Change

- Matthews (2020) referred to Covid-19 as a “transformative stressor” which he identifies as an external influence that can provide opportunities within places, but also expose their weaknesses.
- In the case of the Covid-19 lockdown, this research supports the idea that people's relationships with places did change and might have been altered more permanently for the future.
- For example, discussions of more permanent changes were raised around: working from home, work/life balance, discovering and rediscovering the local, relocating from the city centre and the preference for independent, local places near green space was appealing practically and emotionally.
- A number of place-based issues were highlighted through the Covid-19 lockdown and have been more noticeable to people. For example, a lack of creativity in placemaking or place-based solutions, access to green space and a deeper consideration of how people's wellbeing can be prioritised and align with environmental sustainability.
- Finally, there was increased awareness/interest in living sustainability – both socially and environmentally. Due to the lockdown, participants noted they appreciated natural environments more. For example, hearing the birds sing, seeing wild flowers grow, minimal traffic and cleaner air. As a result, they began to question why it could not be more like this moving forward.

A note for Place Managers:

When considering the future of placemaking in a post-Covid-19 context, these findings indicate that people are increasingly aware of the connection between their environments and wellbeing, which has subsequently begun to change their feelings and expectations of places.

Practical Solutions:

I would advocate for a more emotive approach to placemaking generally, but specifically when considering green space and environmental issues.

People do not just see places practically, but they feel them. They want places to offer different things to daily life, facilitate feeling free and provide them with opportunities for connection with other people, activities, and the environment itself. For example:

- Clean, accessible, safe green spaces
- Consider feeling: environmental psychology, smart, intentional and emotional design.

Place-based aspects that the majority of participants liked and wanted to stay and/or see more of in the future:

- Pedestrianised streets: mainly in city centres, “café culture”, outside space.
- Wildflowers: lack of obsessive curation, nature free to grow.
- Integrated community activity: allotments, orchards, community planting, garden centres with cafes.
- Creative solutions & flexibility: mentioned multiple countries that were not the UK doing it “right” i.e. water fountains in France, sustainable attractive cities in other parts of Europe, city centre beekeeping, DIY projects, community artwork, people taking back their space & using it.
- Greener transport infrastructure: safe, reliable public transport & walking/cycling routes.