Image: Leslie Barson

CO-DESIGNING SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR RESILIENT COMMUNITIES IN POST-COVID CITIES
Granville and Carlton

Summary of results

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research project aims to understand the importance of the community buildings Granville and Carlton for the communities in South Kilburn and surrounding areas, the different kinds of support the buildings and the organisations using them provide, and their importance a social infrastructure: spaces for creating and maintaining social connections. In particular, it aims to understand the relevance of these buildings during the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent periods of lockdown and restrictions, when social infrastructure and networks of mutual support have become more relevant. Since the buildings are about to go through a regeneration scheme to turn it into a mixed-use development, the research project also aims to understand how the lessons learnt during the pandemic can contribute to guide decisions on the activities, services, physical infrastructure and governance of the buildings to create more resilient social infrastructures.

The specific objectives of the project are:

- To understand how the community buildings Granville and Carlton – and the organisations using them – have provided support during the pandemic.

- To co-produce with residents and users of the buildings a collective vision on the kind of activities, services and community support they would like to see on the buildings. This will have particular emphasis on building resilient communities for future scenarios related to climate change and health crises.

- Work with the community on defining which are the main needs in terms of physical infrastructure to develop these activities, services and community support.

- To co-produce with residents and users of the buildings a community-led management governance structure for the buildings, which puts local people at the heart of decision making.

For doing so, this project has used Participatory Action Research methods in order to co-produce knowledge with communities about how they use their built environment, their social infrastructure and the aspirations for the future of their neighbourhood. The researchers have facilitated two co-design workshops with users of the buildings and surrounding residents, attended a Stakeholders Group meeting to discuss the project, and carried out semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, users and organisations. This has been accompanied by a literature review on community spaces, social infrastructure and workspaces in the context of Covid-19.

From this research, the project has produced a series of key findings on the relevance of the buildings a social infrastructure, and a set of recommendations that can inform some of the decisions on the activities, services, physical infrastructure and governance of the buildings. The following pages summarise these key findings and recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS

1. **Lack of community spaces in South Kilburn:** The ongoing and future phases of regeneration of South Kilburn do not provide substantial multipurpose community space. While most ongoing and future phases of regeneration contemplate some community facilities, these do not include multipurpose community facilities, where residents can develop their activities. Instead, these new community spaces – e.g. 'hubs' – provide council services for residents. The planned increase of housing density contrasts with this lack of community spaces, which means there will be a substantial reduction in community space per resident.

2. **Problems of seeking efficiency in the co-presence of services:** According to the report on social infrastructure by the Mayor of London[1], concentrating community facilities and services into centralised hubs – although being efficient for providers – can result in spaces that do not provide a sense of belonging, and which do not encourage communities to take ownership of them and develop multiple activities in them.

3. **Problems with the co-presence of housing, workspace and community facilities:** the presence of housing on the site can challenge some of the community activities, which might end up not taking place because they are too noisy for the residents.

4. **The Granville is the heart of South Kilburn:** The Granville is the main community space and social infrastructure of South Kilburn, which residents and community groups can book to develop their activities. Activities such as the ones organised by Granville Community Kitchen provide a unique space for people to gather. The building is key in providing community activities for the area. The Granville have an important relevance as a place for council officers and representatives to meet local people and discuss about the area.

5. **Strong attachment to the buildings:** Participants have many memories of social activities taking place in The Granville, particularly in the former hall, currently used as enterprise hub. These included all kinds of gatherings, which ranged from private parties to open community gatherings.

6. **Covid-19 and community spaces:** Covid-19 has made evidence the relevance of multipurpose community spaces on responding to emergency situations and strengthening the social infrastructure in the area. Therefore, the future regeneration of the buildings should consider this new evidence when planning the activities of the buildings.

7. **Importance of both the Carlton and the Granville buildings as community support during the pandemic:**

- In the Carlton, Rumi's Cave provided food aid and kept as active as possible with community activities during the pandemic.

- In the Granville, organisations Granville Community Kitchen carried out an essential food aid initiative, which feed many families weekly.

- In addition to this, existing services in the Granville, such as family and wellbeing services or the nursery, provided support during the pandemic, and the enterprise hub re-opened when it was possible.

- The Granville also operated as a Covid testing and vaccination centre.

8. **Need of more emotional and mental health support:** The Granville and Carlton was not able to provide emotional and mental health support during the pandemic, such as bereavement.

9. **Substantial loss of community space:** While Brent Council's South Kilburn Regeneration Team argues that there is only a 5% loss of community space[2], the actual loss is much greater than this. They are not counting the Carlton in their calculations, which have function as community space for the last three years. If we count the part of the Carlton used that has been used as community space, the decrease in community spaces is 76%.

10. **Substantial increase of workspace, and most of it is very rigid:** while the provision of community-based workspaces is very important in Brent, there is a substantial increase in workspace (511% in office spaces and 94% increase in studio spaces). In addition to this, most of the provision consists of closed office spaces, which are very rigid and allow little flexibility. Given the change in working patterns that have taken place during the pandemic, where a lot of people have switch to working from home, co-working spaces need to offer much more so people see the benefits of paying for it.

11. **Loss of green space:** Brent council has a very low ratio of green space per person in comparison to other London boroughs, and this scheme contributes to the reduction of green space. During the pandemic, green space became even more important. They became an essential space to be safely outdoors, with participants reporting benefits to their mental and physical health. For some, it presented also an opportunity to catch up safely with their neighbours while waiting to collect the food aid. In addition to this, food production and gardening is a very important activity at the Granville. The loss of green space can challenge the growth of these activities.

1   Mayor of London (2020). Good Growth by Design: Connective Social Infrastructure. How London's social spaces and networks helps us live well together. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/connective_social_infrastructure_0_0.pdf

2   Interview with South Kilburn Regeneration team

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **No net loss of community space:** In line with the paragraph 5.1.5 of the London Plan 2021, ensure that there is no net loss of community spaces, which constitute an essential social infrastructure as this project has found. The counting of square metres of community spaces should include both the existing community spaces in The Granville, and the spaces that were used as community spaces for three years in the Carlton. This would be a total of 1288.04 sqm in contrast to the 308.4 sqm proposed in the regeneration scheme.

2. **Creative, productive and well-equipped workspaces:** Given the needs of the area, the workspaces provided should seek for alternatives to the model of entrepreneur-led workspaces. Instead, they should be community-based creative spaces that enable collaboration as well as cultural and artistic production, with open access to equipment, such as makerspaces, diverse facilities and tools for arts and crafts such as pottery, and which foster an environment of collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

3. **Address potential conflict between different uses within the site:** The co-presence of housing, workspaces and community facilities can lead to potential conflicts because they have different levels of noise. It is important to address this potential conflict to ensure that community activities are not threatened by the presence of housing. Take the different levels of noise into account when making decisions on how different spaces are used. For example, workspaces that require quietness might conflict with activities such as social gatherings that have a high level of noise.

4. **A welcoming space for socialisation:** the buildings should include a welcoming space with a café for people to gather.

5. **Provide a diversity of types of community spaces,** with different size, atmosphere, facilities and equipment, which can enable a great diversity of activities.

6. **Provide spaces for mutual emotional support**, such as discussion groups on topics that concern local communities, as well as professional mental health support.

7. **Provide activities for young people,** which lead to creating more opportunities for them. Also, services where they can share their worries and their experience. This will have an impact on the safety of the area.

8. **Flexible and equipped open green space**, which provides a place for exercise classes, events and markets. Provide facilities in the outdoor space, such as shelter or movable structures, that can provide spaces for developing a diversity of activities outside.

9. **Local food production and gardening:** Enable the expansion of food and community gardening initiatives taking place at The Granville. Prioritise green spaces at the ground level, which are accessible for everyone, instead of rooftops. Discuss with existing local organisations the green space needs for this.

10. **Inclusive process for decision making:** Engage with different interest groups, youth groups, as well as communities of different cultures and backgrounds, to co-create a vision for the future of the buildings (this can apply to future activities, services and management of the buildings). Include these groups in decision making.

11. **Involve the community in the management of the buildings:** Create a community forum that works on the activities, services, and uses of the buildings. Open the management and functioning of the buildings to a community-led approach.

12. **Resilient funding model:** The funding model for the buildings should be based mainly on cross-subsidy of activities by establishing different levels of rent of space. From free or very low-rate fees for community activities, to higher rates for private celebrations, businesses or commercial activities, which can generate income to subsidise community-based activities. However, this funding model, which heavily relies on rent, needs to be combined with other sources of income, such as the Friends of Scheme, partnership with companies for their CSR or others to ensure resilience in crises like the pandemic, when renting spaces a commercial rate is not an option.