

PLACE QUALITY FRAMEWORK & TOOLKIT

Innovative planning guidance and purpose-led approach:
Embedding health, social impact, inclusivity and equity into the
design and assessment of new development

Natasha Reid



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Innovative planning guidance and purpose-led approach to embed health, social impact, inclusivity and equity into the design and assessment of new development.

Developed by Natasha Reid, founder of **Matter Space Soul**, based on her long-term cross-disciplinary research and evidence-based approaches for a “**Human Performance**” framework.

Implemented for Brent Council in the new draft Residential Amenity and Place Quality SPD.

The draft guidance can be seen here and is current out for public consultation until **30th March 2023**. It is a material planning consideration for this London borough.

The Place Quality framework has been developed for locally-specific contexts and can be adapted and evolved for different places and applications, to support the integration of health, wellbeing and social sustainability into placemaking.

This can include;

- Guidance for other local authorities
- Design codes
- Wider policy and agendas
- Community engagement and participation methods

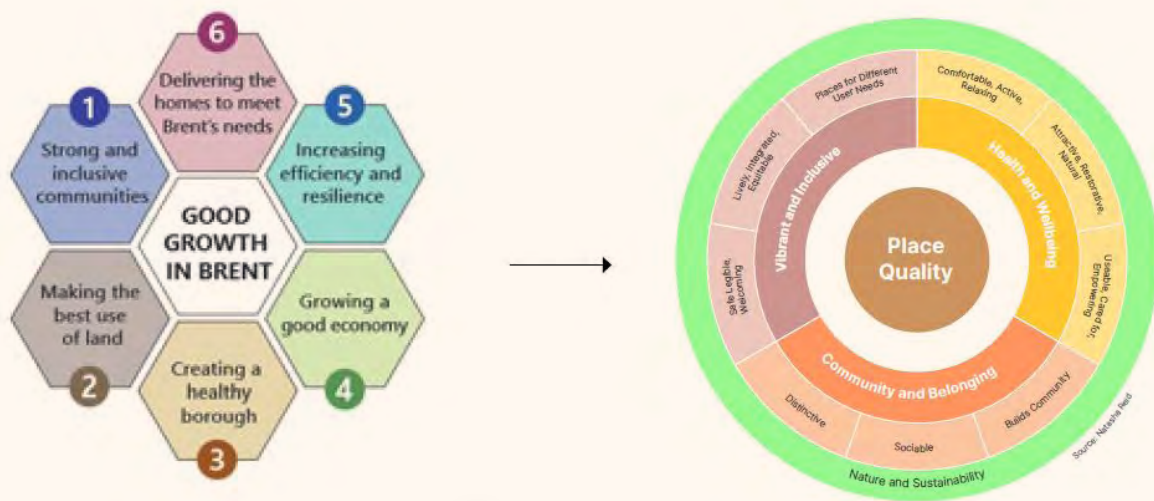
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“With the growing evidence and awareness of the significant effects of the built environment on people’s lives, this guidance will contribute to making Brent a healthy, happy, liveable, vibrant and inclusive place.

It helps us set a new benchmark for “Place Quality” that can guide and shape future development in Brent, ensuring we are maximising opportunities for our residents through sustainable growth that is focused on what matters to people and communities.”

Brent Council



How do we make healthy, socially sustainable, inclusive and equitable places a reality in design, planning and development?



Image credits: Brent Council

Making places that support people's needs

“The design of the built and natural environment is absolutely critical for physical and mental health”

Professor Chris Whitty, Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for England.
Health and Social Care Committee. Feb 2023

There is significant evidence of how places affect people, their quality of life and even life expectancy - as described through the Social Determinants of Health. Reports like the [Marmot reviews](#), set out the critically urgent need to create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities, with proportionate intervention in response to greater health inequalities.

But this research is not translating into practical application fast enough. And at a time of multiple, intersecting crises, there is increasing recognition that the thinking that's gone before cannot solve the complex challenges of today.

Reframing how development is designed and assessed

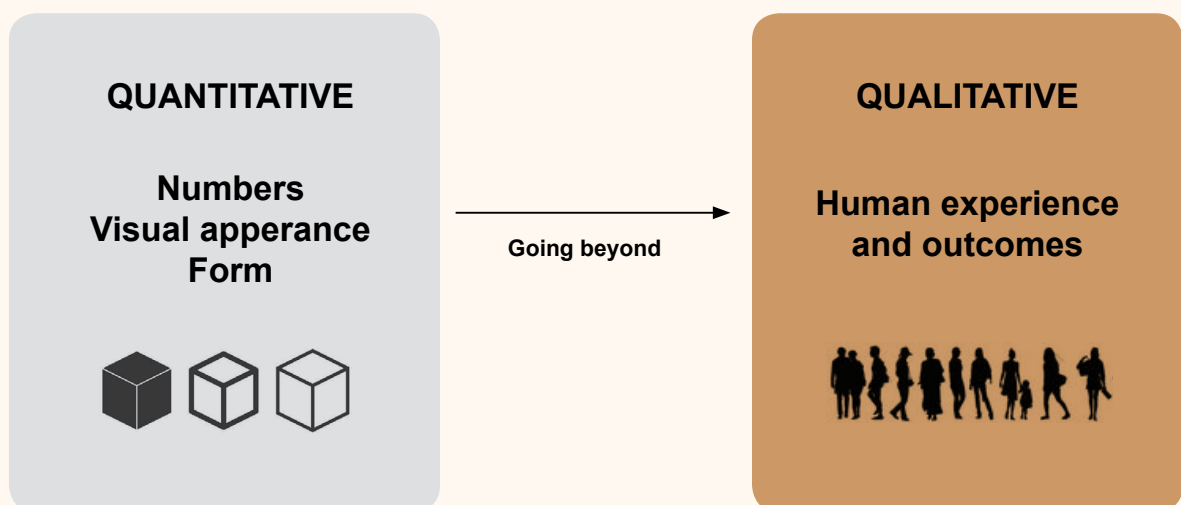
The Place Quality framework and method purposefully reframes how developments are expected to be designed and assessed for planning permission: To put how places impact people front and centre of the process.

It is a new values-based approach, tool and system that prioritises people-focused, socially-conscious outcomes and the human experience of places - to support what matters to people's everyday lives.

Demonstrating benefit for people's quality of life

Crucially, it creates new benchmarks for success by requiring the benefits for people to be defined and demonstrated through design as part of the planning process.

In this way, the expectations go beyond conventional measurements of size, numbers or how a place looks (quantitative factors) – to instead focus on outcomes that enrich people's quality of life (qualitative factors).



Design for quality of life

The qualitative objectives include;

- supporting people's physical and mental wellbeing;
- enabling social connection;
- building strong and integrated communities;
- encouraging vibrancy and intergenerational mixing;
- nurturing a sense of place and belonging; and
- fostering a sense of ownership.

Addressing health inequalities

Focused on equity, the framework sets of a new system of expectations that are proportionate to people's needs, the impact of development on new and existing communities and the relationship to health disparities.

For example, there will be greater expectations for proposals in areas of deprivation or for larger schemes, as well as particular types of developments such as high density, high rise, build-to-rent and co-living.

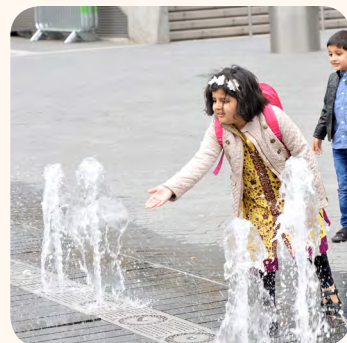
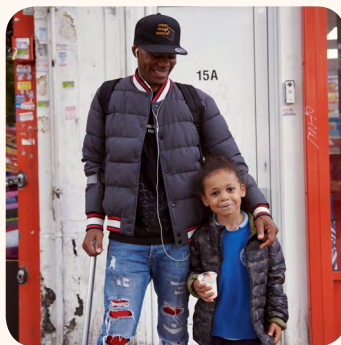


Image credits: Brent Council

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How is it implemented?

To enable a different approach to be implemented, the toolkit offers joined-up, evidence-informed design considerations in relation to the human experience of the built and natural environment, and its impacts on lives. This enables a greater clarity when identifying the qualities (or deficiencies) of development proposals and how the benefits of growth are balanced more equitably.

By providing a step-by-step method, it equips designers, planners, developers and decision-makers with new tools to consider the complex impact of the built and natural environment on people and communities.



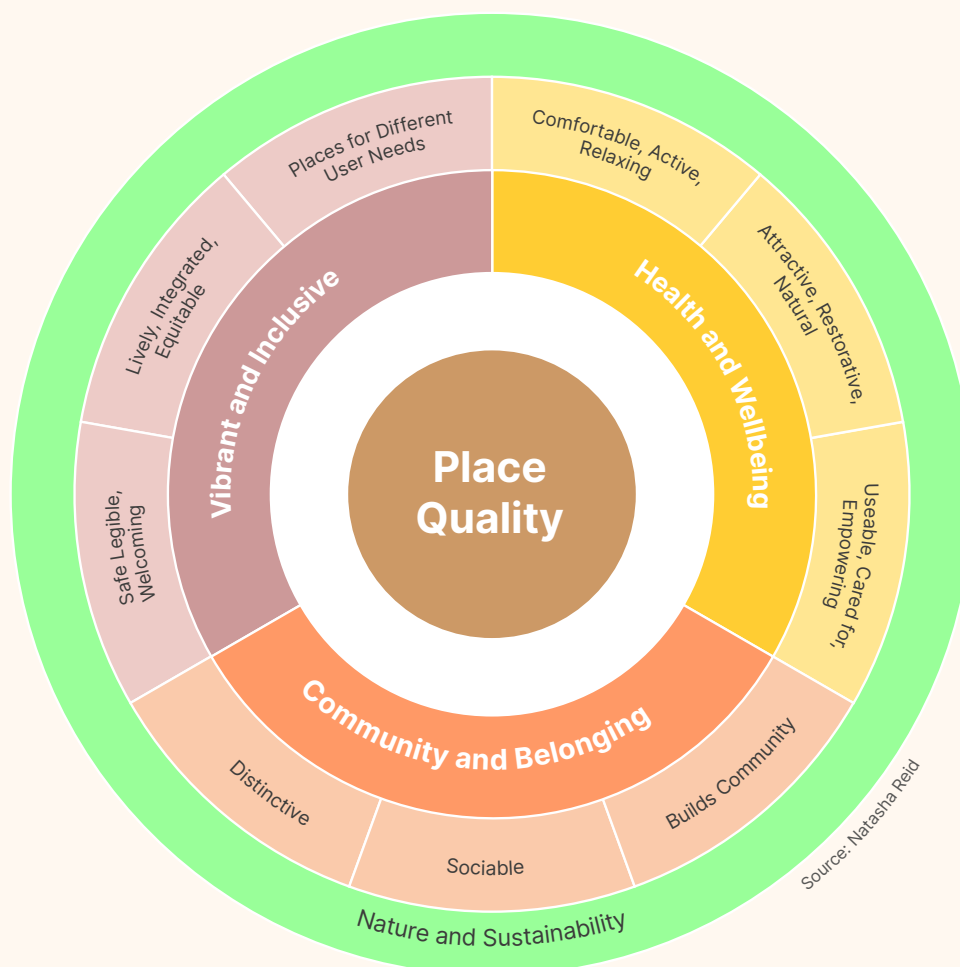
Image credits: Top left; Harlesden Town Garden. Bottom right; Marmalade Lane, Mole Architects and TOWN, David Butler

Thinking differently

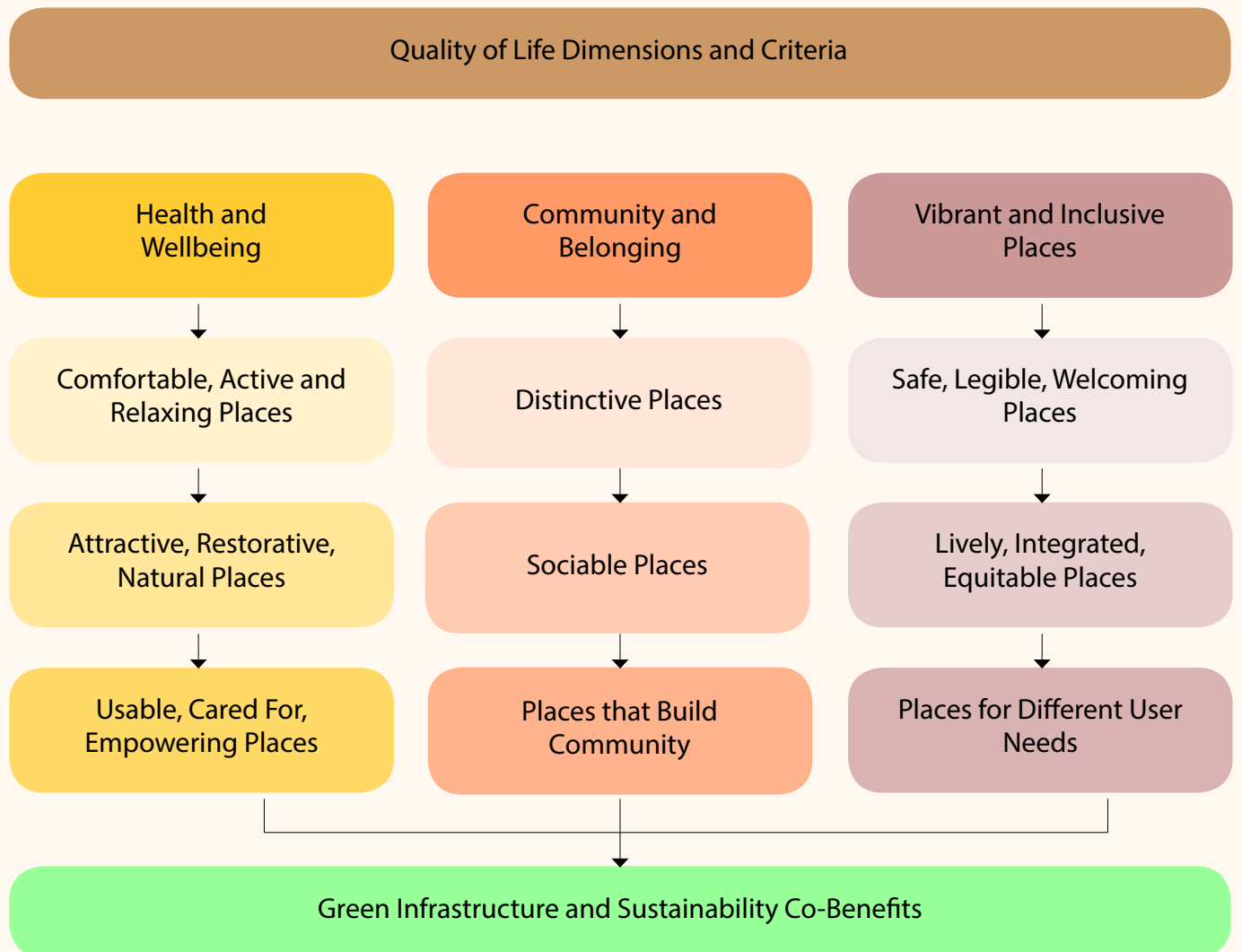
The three dimensions of impact are: Health and Wellbeing; Community and Belonging; and Vibrant and Inclusive Places. There are nine criteria that act as “building blocks” for people-focused places. They are underpinned by an emphasis on green infrastructure, since prioritising nature and green spaces brings many benefits for both people and planet.

“Focusing on effective implementation.. is now key to addressing place-based health challenges and reducing inequalities”

RTPI research paper, Enabling healthy placemaking 2020



Building blocks for people-focused places



Outcomes-focused toolkit

Tool C: Community & Belonging

Baseline

Good Practice

Leading Practice

Is this a distinctive place?

- Does the design of the space support a sense of place for residents or visitors?
- Is it characterful, memorable or related to the local context?
- Does it celebrate local assets, characteristics or the identity of the residents?
- Does the design support pride of place and a common sense of identity?

Is this a sociable place?

- Does the design encourage people to spend time in the space?
- Are there any features that encourage dwelling? E.g. a reason to stay and pause?
- Are there any aspects that create interaction and sociability between users? E.g. shared resources or the arrangements of homes. Has social interaction been prioritised, such as communal gathering or places to sit with neighbours?

Is this a place that builds community?

- Are there factors that support building long term relationships between residents? E.g. places for shared activities? Is there a central space that acts at the "heart" of the development?
- Is a sense of belonging supported in the design?
- Are there any elements of playfulness or cultural activity?
- Are the opportunities for community gardening, including food-growing, composting and spaces that enable people to interact and work together?

Leading Practice

- Does the design go beyond sociability to create social value and social capital?

Residential Amenity Space and Place Quality SPD

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Place Quality Indicators

Distinctive, sociable

Places to sit and pause.

Unity Place, Brent

Seating orientated to activity and views.

Granary Square, Camden



Sociable

Places to sit and talk to neighbours.

Marmalade Lane, Cambridge

Corridors with places to pause and features to look at e.g. art

Canada Gardens, Brent



Builds community

Social interaction is prioritised with shared common spaces for regular gathering and mixing generations.

La Borda Cooperative Housing, Barcelona



Builds community

Community gardening: including food-growing, composting and spaces that enable people to interact and work together

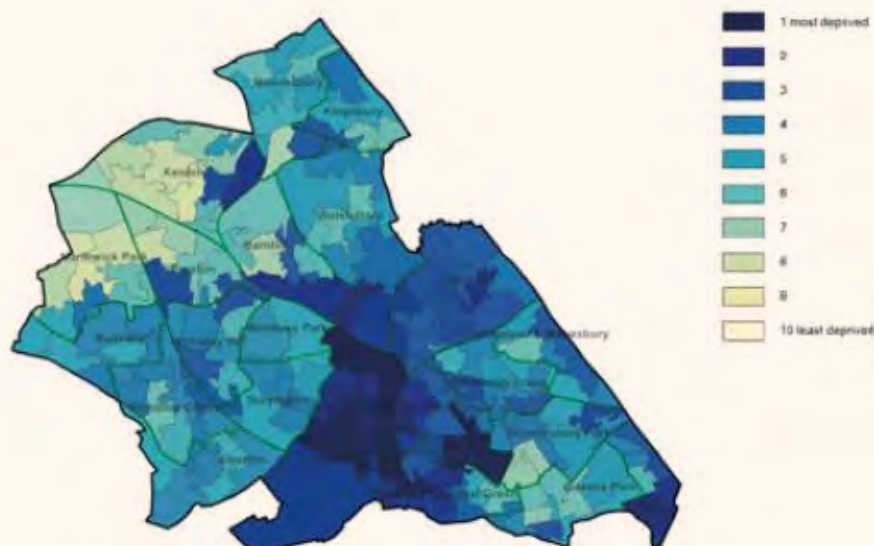
Harlesden Town Garden, Brent



Residential Amenity Space and Place Quality SPD

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Equity: Proportionate expectation to need



Map 2: Indices of Multiple Deprivation in Brent 2019

Benefits for people, communities and industry

The toolkit offers a new and flexible method to bridge the gap between evidence on what needs to be done, and the how. This assists the work of designers, planners, developers and decision-makers and creates awareness of the importance of the built environment in improving health, loneliness and isolation, social cohesion, community participation, inclusivity and equity.

The framework has been shaped to both public sector and locally-specific needs, in a borough experiencing high growth. Rooted in values of equity and empathy, it integrates initial steps towards interventions that are proportionate to need and how we can empower people through place.

The framework and tools have been designed to support communities in discussing what are their needs - with a common language focused on lived experience and qualities of place, not only design.



Image credit: Brent Council

What is innovative about it?

Existing guidance documents often focus on different aspects separately. The Place Quality framework complements and builds on these by joining up wide-ranging aspects and providing in-depth design considerations for practical implementation.

It also draws from leading practice and cross-disciplinary research where limited current guidance exists.

- Shifting expectations for development to human experience
- New system of value
- Outcomes-focused approach, not checklist
- Holistic, multifaceted and relationship-based perspective
- Based on cross-disciplinary research
- Gradual systems change through a flexible format

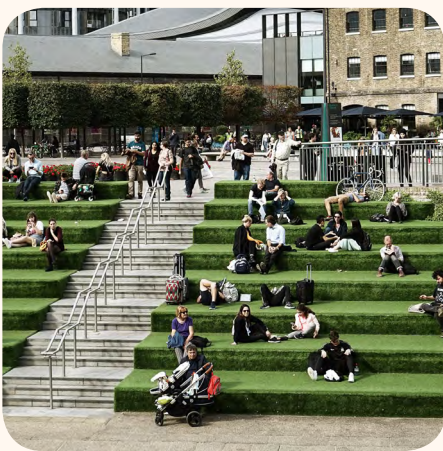


Image credits: Middle; Quintain / Chris Winter. Right; Urban Park, Henrietta Williams

Impact and Outcomes

Benefits for people and communities

- Specifically focused to **people's direct and indirect needs**;
- First step towards **embedding healthy places and social design principles** into planning decisions;
- Highlights the importance of **green infrastructure co-benefits** across individual and social health, together with sustainability

Benefits for the built environment industry

- Provides **knowledge, information and awareness** of the impacts of the built environment and design;
- Equips designers, assessors and decision-makers with **evidence-informed approaches**;
- Enables health and social considerations to be integrated into **everyday processes** without requiring specialist consultants



Long term objective: Changing what is valued

The design of our cities, neighbourhoods, homes and shared spaces can help us lead healthier, happier and more interconnected lives. The framework has been designed to be adaptable for wide application across different contexts and can be developed to the locally-specific needs of places and communities.

Fundamentally it takes the perspective of acknowledging the built and natural environment as our human habitat. And that we need a cultural shift in shared understandings and systems; to reframe mindsets and change what is valued, to achieve the outcomes that matter to people in their everyday lives.

PLACE QUALITY FRAMEWORK & TOOLKIT

Shifting how development is designed and assessed to people-focused, socially-conscious outcomes

- New system for assessing design quality: 3 dimensions, 9 criteria or “building blocks”
- Based on long term specialist R&D in cross-disciplinary, evidence-based approaches
- Bridge between knowledge and practical application; **from the “what” to the “how”**
- Holistic, multifaceted considerations; **not tick-box checklist**
- **Material planning considerations**
- **Shifts how the impacts of places are understood; through psychological, social and relational factors**



Place Quality Framework and Toolkit
Source: Based on Natasha Reid 2019

What's next? Share your thoughts / get in touch

The Place Quality approach is based on the aspiration to make healthy, happy, liveable, vibrant and inclusive places an everyday reality that is accessible to the many rather than the few.

To find out more about the Place Quality framework or to discuss ideas about future collaboration and projects;

please get in touch via natashareid@matterspacesoul.com

[The Residential Amenity and Place Quality SPD can be seen in full here](#)

[It is published for public consultation and comment until 30th March 2023 here.](#)

Please provide any comments to Brent Council through the listed channels. Comments will be published with organisation names.

The SPD (Supplementary Planning Document) has been developed through close collaboration with the teams at Brent Council to shape the Place Quality approach and method for public sector needs and local priorities. Thank you to John Stiles and everyone at Brent involved for all their input, feedback and support; Alice Lester, Gerry Ansell, Ciara Whelehan, Paul Lewin, David Glover, the DM teams who workshopped this together, and fellow PUBLIC PRACTICE Associate Zivile Volbikaite for the SPD illustrations. Thank you to all the councillors involved, particularly Cllr Shama Tatler, Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Planning.

Research background

Natasha Reid has carried out long term research over the last ten years to develop new ways to enable people-focused, socially-conscious outcomes through the design of places, and explore to how address inequalities through the built environment.

This work has often been through cross-disciplinary and boundary-pushing initiatives with many organisations, experts and diverse voices – from working with environmental psychologists and neuroscientists to understand how places impact our brains, moods, feelings and behaviours; to carrying out artistic workshops with refugee children to translate their ideas into a temporary spatial intervention which hosted the UN-High Commission for Refugees.

Her work on [Compassionate Places and a new human experience design framework](#) forms the direct basis of this work (published by the Centre for Conscious Design 2019) and her concept for [“Urban Empathy: The next big shift”](#) (published by Quality of Life foundation 2021) also underpins the overall philosophy and ethos.

This work towards change has been supported through research grants and commissions from the British Council and invitations to speak about this approach at many conferences about new solutions to pressing societal issues, such as the [Mayor’s Homes for Londoners conference](#) 2019. The earliest version of this work won an international competition for New Ideas for Housing held by NLA and Greater London Authority in 2015 – [Intimate Infrastructure: For High Density at a Human Scale.](#)





Shaping places for wellbeing

www.matterspacesoul.com