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Social housing as a social infrastructure: the coexistence of divergent socials on a north London council estate

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines social housing as an "infrastructure of social infrastructures" through a case study of playgrounds on the Hilgrove Estate, north London. Drawing on ethnographic research, surveys and creative interventions, we interrogate normative assumptions about social infrastructure – particularly the claim that "good" infrastructure produces "good" sociality. While Eric Klinenberg's influential work positions playgrounds as sites of loose social ties (2019), we argue that these spaces manifest multiple, often contradictory, socials shaped by micro-spatial design and affective atmospheres. Comparing two playgrounds on the same estate, we show how subtle variations in visibility, accessibility and enclosure generate divergent experiences: openness fosters trust and collective engagement, yet some can feel scrutinized, while seclusion enables teenage autonomy yet provokes adult anxiety. These findings question singular notions of "the social", revealing ambivalence, friction and creativity in everyday interactions. We propose that social housing estates be understood as composite infrastructures – bundles of spaces, practices, and materialities – where social infrastructures intersect and interact. By situating playgrounds within this wider infrastructural system, we highlight the need for urban policy and design to embrace plurality, unpredictability and lived experience. Our analysis reframes social housing as a dynamic infrastructure that organizes, affords and challenges collective life.

Introduction: social housing as a social infrastructure, with or without playgrounds

On 22 January 1964, *Punch* magazine published a cartoon by Australian George Sprod (1919–2003), who was living in London at the time (Figure 1). The cartoon depicts

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"They'd have been better spending the money on a kiddies' playground."

Figure 1. George Sprod's *Punch* cartoon, 22 January 1964. Text reads "They'd have been better spending the money on a kiddies' playground". Credit: Reproduced with kind permission of *Punch* Cartoon Library/Topfoto.

children playing on a sculpture. Two women are looking on, one says to the other: "They'd have been better spending the money on a kiddies' playground". Better to provide social infrastructure (such as a kiddies' playground), the cartoon says, than cultural objects (such as sculptures).

In this paper, we would like to think about social (public) housing as an "infrastructure of social infrastructures", by looking specifically at the provision of playgrounds within housing estates and their use in that context. Following Sprod, the core question of this paper should be: what kind of infrastructure (playgrounds or sculptures) for what kind of social (ruly or unruly kiddies)? Yet, reading his cartoon against the grain, we wish to reverse this question: what kinds of social "play out" in what kinds of infrastructure? To explore what we mean by this, and by way of introduction, we would like to dwell very briefly on Sprod's cartoon. This will set up our entry point into the increasingly

widespread debate about the importance of social infrastructure provision in towns and cities, such as (but not only) playgrounds.

Our first observation is about the cartoon's joke. Arguably, it is making a simple point: children, on modern housing estates, should be provided with playgrounds, not art sculptures. Seven children are depicted hanging from, or clambering over, the sculpture, while four more children chase each other around the plinth. The children are boys and girls, all white, and some dressed to resemble Minnie the Minx or Dennis the Menace from the then-popular children's comic, the *Beano*. What rascals!? Ostensibly, Sprod is laughing about how the children (cannot) appreciate sculpture. But, perhaps, Sprod is also saying that it is laughable to spend money on art for the working class, even though many at the time were arguing the exact opposite (see West, 2021).

Put another way, Sprod's cartoon seems to be making an argument about the provision of social infrastructures on modern housing estates. To paraphrase: provide playgrounds for occupying and socializing children or risk the fabric of the estate being undermined by their anti-social behavior. Viewed this way, this cartoon is less of a joke than a warning. A warning based on an assumption about the relationship between social infrastructure (housing, playgrounds) and the social (in this case, the development of children's social behavior). Thus, the cartoon expresses the assumption that a "good" social relies upon the provision of the "right" social infrastructure – an argument we will see playing out in recent academic debates (which we describe below). The joke, from this perspective, is actually about the ludicrous (middle-class) design principles being embedded in the new council housing estates that were popping up across Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s (see Boughton, 2018 and Young, 2022).

Following that, our second observation is about the kinds of infrastructure inherent in the cartoon. Many late 1950s/early 1960s social housing estates contained common design features. Some of these are visible in Sprod's cartoon. Even in such a simple line drawing, there are (at least) four integral infrastructures on display. Perhaps most iconically, there is the housing block (1). The housing block is shown in two (in the UK, commonplace) styles. There are two 10-storey tower blocks in the background. Alongside, there are low-rise housing blocks, judging by the windows that the women are leaning out of. The trees indicate that the housing estate also has open spaces (2), which would usually include grassed areas, shrubs, and a mix of trees. Albeit evoked by its absence, there is the playground (3). Finally, there is public art (4): the sculpture itself. Its presence commonly indicates that it is both a cultural object for social enrichment and a marker of a civic ideal(ism).

For Sprod, modern council housing either works or does not work for the working class because of the trade-off between the playground and the sculpture. This indicates that the modern estate does not have the right social(ising) infrastructure (where children can play in the "right" way), instead being provided with an inappropriate cultural infrastructure (around which children gather in the "wrong" way). It is anti-social, then, of urban designers to provide the "wrong" social or cultural infrastructure: in this instance, by building a modern council estate *without* a playground. The jeopardy of social infrastructure provision, then, is clear: get it right or it will go wrong. This jeopardy reverberates through recent discussions of social infrastructure in urban geography.

In the next section, therefore, we will explore the place of playgrounds in the social infrastructure literature, as primarily understood within recent urban geography (and as given a new lease of life by Klinenberg's, 2018 *Palaces for the People*). We will find that it is not just Sprod that assumes that the provision of social infrastructure – including the playground – enables a "good" social and is therefore a social "good". Indeed, there has been some attention given to playgrounds as a social infrastructure (such as by Wilson, 2013 and, Vincent et al., 2018). So, we will focus on playgrounds as a social infrastructure in the subsequent section.

Empirically, we will explore the way playgrounds on the Hilgrove Estate in north London produce and are produced by different forms of association and social bonding. For us, this means attending to the (perhaps unruly) entanglement between the social and the infrastructural, but not as a singularity: not, therefore, as "an" infrastructure for "a" social. Indeed, we do not wish to see the playground in isolation from the myriad infrastructures of the estate. This leads us to argue that social housing – the estate – should be seen as an infrastructure of social infrastructures. To demonstrate our argument, we draw on extensive research on the Hilgrove Estate that comprised a survey, participant observation, ethnographic interviews, architectural archive work and creative interventions (in the two-year period after summer 2021). The aim of this case study was not to investigate the playgrounds, nor indeed to evaluate the estate's social infrastructure.

Our survey, for example, focused on perceptions of population change, with results being inevitably skewed by COVID-19 and its lockdowns (see Yazici & Wang, 2024; for a related study, in a similar context, see Sheringham et al., 2023). For context, the council estimates that about 1,600 people live on the estate. We found 60% were living in single-family households. 57% of respondents were white, and 64% below age 44. This compares with the South Hampstead ward 2021 census results, where 51.9% live in single-family households; 62.3% identify as white, and 71.27% are below the age of 44. Broadly, we estimate around about 5.5% are below the age of 5 (that is, around about 80–90 pre-school children), about 4.2% aged 6–10 (that is, about 60–70 primary school aged children) and 5.6% between 11 and 18 (that is between 80 and 90 secondary school or sixth form college aged young adults).

Our puzzling over social infrastructure as an idea was instigated by our research encounters with Hilgrove's playgrounds. To set this in context, let us begin with recent discussions of social infrastructure in urban geography.

Social infrastructure matters

The idea that there is an intimate relationship between the built environment and ways of living within the city is, arguably, a central assumption of both urban planning and urban design. This argument is set out by Richard Sennett in *Building and Dwelling* (2018). For Sennett, there has been a long-standing tension in approaches seeking to solve urban problems through design. On the one hand, there is a tendency to emphasize "building", that is, the physical infrastructure, by engineering the city to enhance city life (exploring the example of Robert Moses). On the other hand, there is an emphasis on "dwelling" in the city, where solutions are designed to promote the social bonds that underpin neighborhoods and communities (examining the work of Jane Jacobs). The desire to resolve this tension

echoes through sociologist Eric Klinenberg's book *Palaces for the People* (2018), although his opposed tendencies are termed the "technocratic" (for building) and the "civic" (akin to dwelling). Klinenberg seeks a resolution through the idea of *social infrastructure.*

> Social infrastructure is the missing piece of the puzzle […] building places where all kinds of people can gather is the best way to repair the fractured societies we live in today. (p. 11)

Klinenberg argues that a wide range of infrastructures are critical for the development and maintenance of social relationships in the city. For him, both the physical spaces and the social organization of those spaces – the infrastructural and the social – shape the way people interact. He says:

> when social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaborations among friends and neighbours; when degraded, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves. Social infrastructure is crucially important, because local, face-to-face interactions – at the school, *the playground*, and the corner diner – are the building blocks of all public life. (p. 5, emphasis added)

The building blocks of "all public life" are held together through social bonds. These social bonds are formed in place through people's sustained and recurrent engagement with each other. Particularly, he says, through doing things that people enjoy doing, whether it is playing or walking in a park, reading books or drinking coffee. Social infrastructures are the building blocks of public life, held together by social bonds that are continually renewed, not by routine or duty, but by pleasure and enjoyment.

Social infrastructures, Klinenberg argues, are not just sites or spaces where people can gather and interact. They also critically enable the possibility of transformative and uplifting experiments in new social relationships. Infrastructures, then, are not merely physical built forms, but also sites and spaces where collective life is made, remade and potentially transformed. Examples include schools and libraries, community centers and markets, parks and gardens, open spaces and – interestingly, for us, playgrounds. That is, for Klinenberg, wherever people can encounter one another routinely. Built into this list is a sense that urban encounters through such infrastructures are inherently good: they promote everyday democracy, equality, health, happiness, safety and healing.

Klinenberg's idea of social infrastructure was almost immediately taken up by urban geographers, most prominently by Latham and Layton (2019, 2022a, 2022b). Their early papers have provided a foundation upon which many others are now building – mostly along the lines anticipated in Latham and Layton's typological Table 1, 2019 (p. 6). Let us dwell upon this article, then. Latham and Layton's paper on social infrastructure seeks to understand "the value of places like gyms, cafés, skate parks, swimming pools, and football fields" and "why these places matter" to the public life of cities (2019, p. 2). In a significant departure from Klinenberg, following writers, such as Ash Amin (2014), Latham and Layton see infrastructure itself as lively and consequently productive of social value. That is, physical infrastructure itself "does things", thereby enabling and constraining the conduct of collective life. It is, they argue, "the background structures and systems that allow social, economic, cultural and political life to happen" (p. 3). This is not to say that people have equal access to the city's technological and social background structures and systems. Far from it. Infrastructure is also a mechanism of exclusion and disadvantage.

From this perspective, infrastructure provision – an accountancy of social infrastructure – can act as a measure of the equality or goodness of the city (Sennett, 2018; also, Amin, 2006).

Our interest in this argument is two-fold: on the one hand, we are interested in what counts as infrastructure; and, consequently, how infrastructures manifest different kinds of "social". The broad argument of the social infrastructure literature is that infrastructural provision – of civic facilities such as libraries, schools, swimming pools, athletic fields and the like; of commercial enterprises such as diners, cafés, hair salons, launderettes, clothing shops, community gardens, courtyards, markets and the like; of public spaces such as courtyards, pavements, gardens and parks; and, through social and community organizations, such as social clubs, religious spaces (churches) and (street) markets – all invite people into collective life. By enabling people to gather, they thereby promote sociality. That is, these social infrastructures convene people in different kinds of assembly, whether it is to enjoy a walk, to cut hair, drink coffee or read a book, enable more than just social interaction; they become the foundation for social bonds that stick (evoking arguments made by Barnett, 2008 and Butler, 2018). This "social bond" is seen as having positive properties, such as enabling people to interact across differences or to be inclusively sociable (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 3).

Unlike Klinenberg, Latham and Layton explicitly connect the idea of social infrastructure to Ash Amin's arguments about "lively infrastructures" and the "good city" (2006, 2014). In his 2006 paper, Amin contrasts the more dystopic accounts of the city (its inequities and injustices, harms and violences) with the possibility of the "good city", where the city "abound[s] with all manner of acts of mutuality, friendship, pleasure and sociality" (p. 1011). Drawing on Massey's (2005) notion of "being-togetherness", Amin argues that attention needs to be drawn to what he calls the "politics of living together" (p. 1012). The demand is to widen the bases of "sociality", of "being togetherness", in the city. Significantly, this also includes infrastructure itself as a form of sociality. Thus, infrastructure itself is a lively part of collective, social life (Amin, 2014; see also Amin & Thrift, 2017): it is through social infrastructure, in this view, that the "good city" can be made and remade.

The question of social infrastructure is fundamentally about how people interact socially in cities: about how people develop a sense of community, neighborliness, friendship, trust and mutual support. In this paper, we will focus on two playgrounds on a north London housing estate to think about how this is an infrastructure and how it manifests different kinds of social. It's not all good. Or, rather, this social is neither singular, homogeneous, nor without conflict. This is, in part, to be sure, about who is and is not included, who feels included or excluded. But this demands attention not just to social infrastructure, but also to the (micro)spatialities of infrastructure and to (micro)conflicts over infrastructure – what it is, how it is practiced and what it means (see Pile et al., 2023).

We would like to make one more observation before turning to playgrounds as a social infrastructure. Amongst the many examples of social infrastructure in the literature (we have listed many already), the public (social or council) housing estate does not appear. Even Klinenberg's discussion of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St Louis (2018, pp. 55–60) omits to mention its social infrastructures or to treat it as a social infrastructure. In one way, this is not strange. This is, we assume, because housing is considered part of the

private sphere, whereas social infrastructure is in the public sphere. If so, this enacts the classic separation of the public and private sphere (as critiqued by feminist scholars such as Pateman, 1983 and Fraser, 1990). This dichotomy then enables the separation of processes of production and reproduction, which are then viewed respectively as lively (political) and individual (personal). In this socio-spatial dichotomy, the house and the home are part of the private sphere, so do not count as part of the lively, collective, public life of cities. Thus, the housing estate cannot count as a social infrastructure, nor even as a site where social infrastructures might coexist and act upon one another.

On the contrary, we wish to argue, social housing is itself a lively infrastructure of collective life and, further, that it is comprises a bundle of social infrastructures. Here, our argument runs parallel to arguments being generated in housing studies about conceptualizing housing as an infrastructure: that is, as a socio-material system that "organises", or provides "affordances" for the social world: see Bergan and Power, 2025, for example. Bergan and Power emphasize the lived experiences of housing, how housing creates possibilities for social practices and how infrastructure is negotiated politically, especially in policy making and implementation. Our question about the entanglement of different lived experiences, different ways of being social, and different infrastructures invites us to consider infrastructure *in context*. To understand this, we will focus on the playground – which itself occupies an ambiguous place in the social infrastructure literature. While the playground hypothetically offers the possibility for creating strong social bonds, these bonds are understood to be limited and fleeting in practice. Let us see how this is understood – so that we can see how experiences of a north London council housing estate match up.

Playgrounds as social infrastructure

For Klinenberg, not every infrastructure affords the opportunity for people to gather, assemble, interact, socialize with one another. He gives the example of public transport. Although people can and do interact on trains and buses, these interactions tend not to enhance civic life, he argues, as they do not involve prolonged, sustained and repeated encounters that can create and sustain deep and durable social bonds (2018, p. 16). Much the same can be said about other infrastructures:

> Different kinds of social infrastructures play different roles in the local environment, and support different kinds of social ties. Some places, such as libraries, YMCAs, and schools, provide space for recurring social interaction, often programmed, and tend to encourage more durable relationships. Others, such as *playgrounds* and street markets, tend to support looser connections – but of course these ties can be, and sometimes do, grow more substantial if the interactions become more frequent or parties establish a deeper bond. (pp. 18–19, emphasis added)

The playground, then, is more a site of looser rather than tighter social bonds. Yet, "countless close friendships […] begin because two toddlers visit the same swing set" (2018, p. 18). Thus, sharing playgrounds with others, and watching over each other's children, creates opportunities for deepened social ties, through trust, mutual support and shared interests (see also p. 29, when discussing childcare centers). Repeated visits to the same playground enable sustained social interactions, which can lead to friendships between individuals and thereby enable larger groups to form. Even so, Klinenberg does

not think of playgrounds as offering the kinds of social interactions upon which deep and durable social bonds can form. At the core of this argument, there seems to be a disquiet with relationships between mothers and families.

Perhaps, the ties are weaker because the work of care is seen as belonging to the private sphere? This makes us wonder whether playgrounds are seen as promoting "looser" social infrastructures precisely because they are associated with mothers, women's labor and women's activism (which can often mobilize around the provision of infrastructures for children). Children's social interactions are similarly seen as either not especially relevant to civic life or a threat to it – unless circumscribed by the provision of the right social infrastructures (as in Sprod's cartoon). This point connects directly with long-standing arguments about the design of playgrounds, which debate how best to build "high quality" playgrounds that foster children's creativity and imagination, and their physical and social development – often set within ambivalent views about risk and safety (see Gill, 2007, 2021; also represented in Sprod's cartoon).

In addition, there is a long-standing view that playgrounds are sites where existing divisions around class, race, gender, (dis)ability, legal status, housing biographies, religion and moral norms tend to get reinforced. A perspective that has been widely challenged (see Wilson, 2013 and Weck, 2019), whilst still acknowledging that socially and spatially structured differences between playgrounds remain (Horton & Kraftl, 2018).

Playgrounds, from our perspective, thus become a test case for social infrastructures, given that they can produce either tighter or looser social bonds – depending, in Klinenberg's narrative, on the depth or shallowness of the relationships that do or do not form amongst mothers. For us, playgrounds offer the opportunity to examine and challenge the normative assumptions built into the social in social infrastructures. Instead of thinking of a singular "social", we can start to see that the social is a multiplicity of shared experiences, some supportive, some antagonistic, and others indifferent. In making this point, we build on work by Wilson (2013) and Vincent et al. (2018). Further, children, including teens, are themselves "lively": they do things – and recognizing this helps understand how playgrounds can function as a place where people linger and interact (a point that has been made vigorously in the children's geography literature: for example, see Thomson, 2005; for a review, see Murnaghan, 2019).

In her study of the playground (2013), Wilson starts with small moments amongst adults – handshakes, quiet conversations, gathering in small groups – during the primary school drop-off and pick-up in Birmingham, UK. For her, the playground is an ambiguous site, where the common needs and experiences of parents can be shared, yet also a place where the differences between parents can be at their most acute (p. 626). Wilson observes:

> whilst the playground can be a space of isolation, segregation and animosity, it can also be a space of affective community and social learning – where fragile relations across difference are assembled and new ways of living with difference are imagined. (p. 630)

One important condition for the emergence of social interactions in the playground, for Wilson, is its physical design. She notes that, in her study, the playground is bordered by hard edges, a main road, school buildings (walls) and fences, allowing only two entry points. Yet, this brutal (as she describes it) bordering is softened by the placement of wooden benches, smaller climbing frames and flower boxes. Overlapping lines on the

open spaces create a series of possible play areas for different games. In this way, the physical layout of the playground mediates the way that children move, gather and play. Yet, it also enables the adults to gather in separate racial groups: there's a gazebo group, the Sikh dads, and the British contingent. The micro-spatialities of the playground orient and shape the movement of children, teachers, parents and carers, but also shape the affective capacities of the space. Social infrastructure – through its physical design and social regulation – shapes bodily movements, emotional responses and social interactions (as Klinenberg would argue).

Critically, Wilson observes, the playground is a space of exposure and surveillance. The playground circumscribes where the children can play, ensuring that they are visible and can be watched over, while the parents tend to take up positions of surveillance around the edges of the playground, the better to watch over the children. Thus, the emotional ties that bind parents and carers are in part driven by anxieties about the safety and the requirement for children to play well, but also about the potential for isolation and bad or dangerous behavior. The sociality of the playground, then, is as much about fear, anxiety and the potential for things to go (badly) wrong as it is about friendship, trust and mutual support (see also Horton & Kraftl, 2018). These counter-valences lead parents and carers into pragmatic and negotiated social interactions, sometimes prompted by a sense of shared backgrounds and values, but at other times forced by circumstances, especially interactions amongst the children themselves, including, of course, accidents and angry exchanges.

Similarly, in their study of primary school children (ages 5–10 in the UK), Vincent et al. (2018) point to the tensions that emerge between adults as they negotiate their children's friendships and interactions at school, and in their playgrounds. They emphasize the social patterning of friendships and diversity of parents and carers. Significantly, they observe parents and carers switching between open involvement with others and defensive avoidance of engaging with social difference. These interactions involve ambivalences toward people of the same or different social, economic and racial backgrounds – and therefore the formation of bonds across various forms of social difference (see their concluding chapter, especially).

Klinenberg continually calls for an attitude of social openness in the face of the various antagonisms that he discovers in social infrastructural spaces (such as, for example, the unhomed using libraries as shelter, see pp. 44–46). Yet, in Vincent, Neal and Iqbal's study, it is clear that people can switch between modes of engagement and disengagement (primarily, in relation to race and class). Thus, Klinenberg's moral injunction for openness may well be met with ambivalence or indifference. Importantly, Vincent, Neal and Iqbal emphasize the ambiguities of people's social bonds around the playground. The playground, then, is not just a site of stronger or looser friendships/social bonds, it is a site where ambivalences and ambiguities play out – amongst adults, between adults and children, and amongst children and young adults.

Like Wilson, we wish to focus our discussion of the social that emerges from the playgrounds on a north London housing estate with its design and its material micro-spatialities at the time of our research. After, we will explore the social ambiguities and ambivalences that make these spaces an *infrastructure of socials* (rather than a social

infrastructure). Let us return to Sprod – and that sculpture. Where are the playgrounds for the kiddies?

The pursuit of ideas: playgrounds and the Hilgrove Estate

We have established, so far, that playgrounds have an ambiguous place in the discussion of social infrastructure provision. In Klinenberg's work, playgrounds share much in common with his signature social infrastructures, where "deep" social bonds are formed, such as public parks and libraries. Thus, playgrounds provide sites of repeated social interaction as well as spaces of pleasure and fun, thereby enabling new social encounters and lasting social connections. Yet, Klinenberg believes that playgrounds are primarily characterized by "looser" social bonds, enabling close friendship groups (between mothers) rather than sustained, durable social interactions. From work on primary schools in the UK by Wilson and Vincent, Neal and Iqbal, we learn that playgrounds are far more ambivalent and antagonistic sites than Klinenberg allows for. As much as they are sites for the development of friendship, trust and mutual support, they are saturated with potential for fear, anxiety and social division.

We build on this analysis through an investigation of an estate in north London: for information about the wider study, please visit: https://opencitywarwick.co.uk. Here, we draw on empirical fieldwork that took place over an 18-month period between summer 2021(as lockdown restrictions began to ease) and Spring 2023. In this period, we conducted a household survey, encompassing about 30% of all households on the estate. The survey was primarily oriented toward asking residents about tenure, experiences of mobility and migration, and neighborliness practices. To supplement this, we blended in a range of qualitative methods. We attended community events, street fairs, co-operative and creative ventures, and other social gatherings. A commissioned creative fellow, Dana Olărescu, worked on an art project titled "The Most Inclusive Place" (2023), which used the playgrounds to access teenagers as well as other users (https://www.danaolarescu.com/the-most-inclusive-place). We conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews with residents about their experiences of living on the estate as well as interviewing members of the Tenants and Residents' Association. We worked with a local youth charity, The Winch, and a local theater, Hampstead Theatre, on various creative workshops designed to enable local residents to express their experiences of the neighborhood.

During this fieldwork, we noticed a lone sculpture (see Figure 2) – which, while giving no indication of its title or provenance, is nonetheless widely cherished by residents.

Sprod's cartoon signals that the location of the estate is London. The sculpture's plinth says: "Erected by the L.C.C.": that is, by the London County Council (LCC). The similarity between Hilgrove's unmarked sculpture and Sprod's cartoon sculpture is stark: compare Figures 1 and 2. As Sprod's cartoon indicates, the Hilgrove sculpture was indeed commissioned by the London County Council, on the recommendation of the Arts Council. The background to the sculpture is itself revealing – as itself a cultural, perhaps even social, infrastructure. That is, as a site of ambiguous and antagonistic making of cultural and social relations on the estate.

Created by Leon Underwood (1890–1975) in 1959, the title of the sculpture is *The Pursuit of Ideas*. It shows two figures running, with only one figure touching the
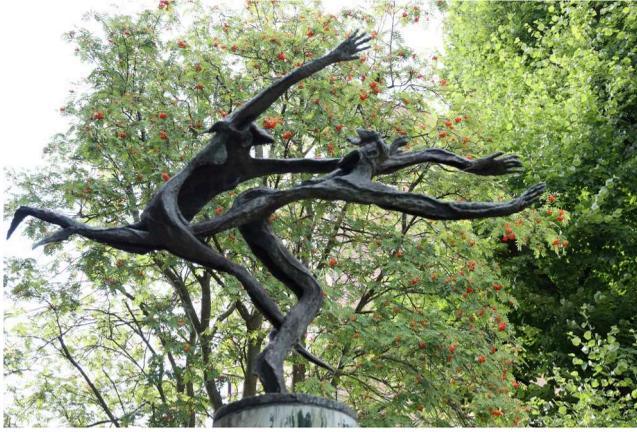
Figure 2. *The Pursuit of Ideas* (1959) by Leon Underwood. Barely visible, behind the trees stands one of Hilgrove's two tower blocks, Langhorne Court. Photo: Steve Pile.

ground. The figures convey a sense of movement, speed and weightlessness (Neve, 1974, p. 162; Whitworth, 2000, p. 139). Perhaps one figure is being caught by the other (and that one has ideas the other hasn't); perhaps both figures are chasing ideas together; perhaps the ideas that are being pursued are the ideals of expressionism or even humanism. Whatever, Sprod's depiction of children running around the sculpture, chasing one another in pursuit of something (or anything, see Thomson & Philo, 2004), now seems rather in keeping with Underwood's intention.

Sprod's modern housing estate closely resembles the Hilgrove estate, too. Around the sculpture, Hilgrove is comprised of tower blocks and medium-density blocks of flats. The trees have grown, of course. *The Pursuit of Ideas* now shaded by overhanging branches. Sprod's accurate evocation of the estate's early build, however, is not found in his assumption that Hilgrove lacks a children's playground. Sprod fails to show that the estate has (and always has had) *two* playgrounds. (A third planned playground was instead used for parking spaces.) We have the opportunity, then, to ask questions about this relationship between the playgrounds, *as a social infrastructure*, and their emergent socials, plural, since there are two of them.

As we have said, Sprod's cartoon prompts questions about how the social infrastructure literature, following Klinenberg's lead, tends to make normative assumptions about the relationship between infrastructure provision and the emergence of sociality amongst the people that use that infrastructure (see also Horton & Penny, 2023). What exactly can be assumed, or not, about the relationship between infrastructure, such as the playground, and the forms of sociality that will emerge from that infrastructure, even if these are presumed to be ambiguous, ambivalent and divisive? This question becomes more significant as we delve into the micro-spatialities of the estate: that is, how the estate is experienced and lived at the scale of the playground itself. As we will see, the social experiences of playgrounds on the estate are not singular, and do not lead toward a single (positive) relationship between infrastructure and the social.

The playgrounds we will explore are on the Hilgrove Estate in north London. The Hilgrove Estate is, by Louis de Soissons' design, built according to the principles of the

Garden City. These principles enact a blend of infrastructure and sociality – explicitly to achieve upward social mobility for the (British) working class by providing good homes in good environments (see Yazici et al., 2025). That is, council housing is a social infrastructure *in its intention*. More than this, public housing estates very often include things that count as social infrastructure: gardens, community spaces, walkways, parking/ garages, access to schools, healthcare, libraries and even pubs – and, almost ubiquitously, playgrounds (and, indeed, the condition and use of the playground often a barometer of the state of the estate as a whole). Thus, the council estate is both a social infrastructure *and* an infrastructure for social infrastructures.

So, we are interested in playgrounds precisely because they indicate that the public housing estate is an infrastructure of socials and an infrastructure of social infrastructures. We will show that the Hilgrove Estate's playgrounds are sites where multiple socials (some "social", others less so) coexist (as with all social infrastructures, we might observe) and that this matters to the kinds of socials – loose, durable and otherwise – that emerge through the playgrounds. For us, much as Wilson (2013) and Horton and Kraftl (2018) do, this means paying attention to the micro-spatialities of Hilgrove's playgrounds.

Playgrounds by design: the infrastructures of social infrastructure

Despite Sprod's assumption that the modern council estate is (typically) built without children in mind, the Hilgrove Estate was built with two integrated playgrounds. Why two? The answer is geography. And this matters. The estate is located on either side of Hilgrove Road. The road is sufficiently wide and busy to restrict movement across it, especially by children. The original architectural plans intended to resolve this problem in two ways: first, by moving the road so it passed through the estate further to the north, where housing provision would be dominated by family-sized dwellings; and, second, by creating playgrounds on both the north and south sides of the road (see Figure 3). The 1956 plan shows the smaller north side would have larger terraced houses alongside maisonettes, designed for families, where the majority of dwellings would have access to private gardens. For this reason, the planned common playground was intended to be relatively small. The south side would contain flats and maisonettes for couples, with fewer homes having access to private gardens. As they were expected to have children, it would have two substantial playgrounds.

Perhaps worth observing, not quite as an aside, that the relationship between infrastructure and the social was embedded in the design of the estate (albeit not quite as Klinenberg might anticipate). The estate should be understood, moving south to north, as inscribing normative assumptions about a "quintessentially English" construction of collective life: heterosexual couples (south) progressing upwards into child-rearing single-family units with gardens (north) (for a fuller discussion, see Yazici et al., 2025).

In the end, Hilgrove Road was not moved. While this undermined the internal spatial logic of family life on the estate, it enabled the north side of the estate to have a much larger playground, as it was now drawn into the space vacated by the proposed road. We do not know the design of these playgrounds. However, we can guess that they would have had swings, roundabouts and climbing frames (using Letchworth Garden City's playgrounds as a guide). Playgrounds at this time made little accommodation
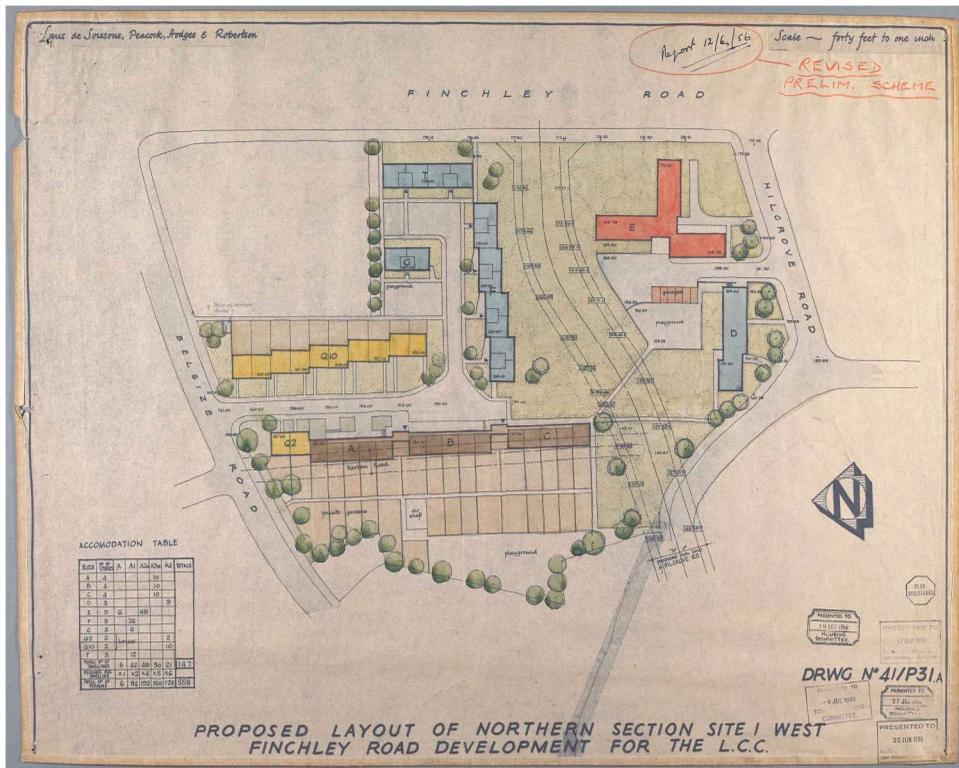
Figure 3. Louis de Soissons' 1956 plan for the "north side" of the Hilgrove estate, showing the proposed new route for the Hilgrove Road and the site of the playground. The "north side" playground now occupies a large part of the area intended for the new road layout, while the rest is mainly green space for resident use. Reproduced by kind permission of the London Metropolitan Archives. Note: The plan for the "south side" is not in the archive.

for parents and carers, perhaps reflected in Sprod's decision to depict the adult women as on-lookers from within their homes. We might observe that the playground was more of a children's space than a social place. Thus, playgrounds have become a site where ideals about the social, childhood and socializing children are enacted, even where this hints at a lack of adult intervention. Although we did not find plans for (nor therefore the intentions behind) the contemporary playground design, as such decisions are folded into annual renovation budgets, we can at least describe them.

Currently, each of these playgrounds has two distinct areas. Both have (a) a play area designed for smaller children, from toddlers and babies to children aged up to 8 or 9. Both playgrounds have playground equipment, such as swings, roundabouts, slides, seesaws and the like. Each play area has a series of benches that allow two or more parents and carers to watch over their children and, perhaps, to talk to one another (and create lasting social bonds?). Both playgrounds also have (b) a multi-use games area. These allow informal groups to play a range of different ball games, but mostly it is used for impromptu soccer and basketball games by teenagers and young adults.

Looked at on a map, or Google Earth, there is little to distinguish the playgrounds – although the multi-use games area on the north side is visibly larger; the north-side play

area being square, while the southside play area is rectangular. There is little or nothing, then, to make us believe that these infrastructures might produce different socials, especially as they are both embedded in the same estate – just different sides of the same road. So, let us take a closer look at the infrastructure of each playground. The materiality of the playgrounds plays an important part in "creating" possible social worlds for each playground (as Bergan & Power, 2025 argue). South-side first.

The south side playground's play area is bordered on the long sides by high walls that ensure a clear separation between the play area and the privately owned luxury flats and townhouses on the other side of the walls. On one short side, there is a high, unclimbable wire fence, preventing access from the greenspace on the other side. The other short side provides access. The pathway down to the entrance gate has steps, making it tricky for prams and small children. There is a low waist height fence, with a swing gate (Figure 4). High enough to prevent smaller children from escaping the confines of the play area, but low enough for older children to vault over should the gate be locked. Every gate has a padlock. It is as if people are not meant to use it.

The south-side children's playground is connected to a multi-use games area by a thin passageway, unforgivingly flanked by a high wall and a ventilation shaft for the Chiltern Mainline railway, making it practically inaccessible for buggy and wheelchair users. The vent shaft has additional high metal fencing above the original cage, clearly designed to prevent people from climbing on top of the shaft (Figure 4).
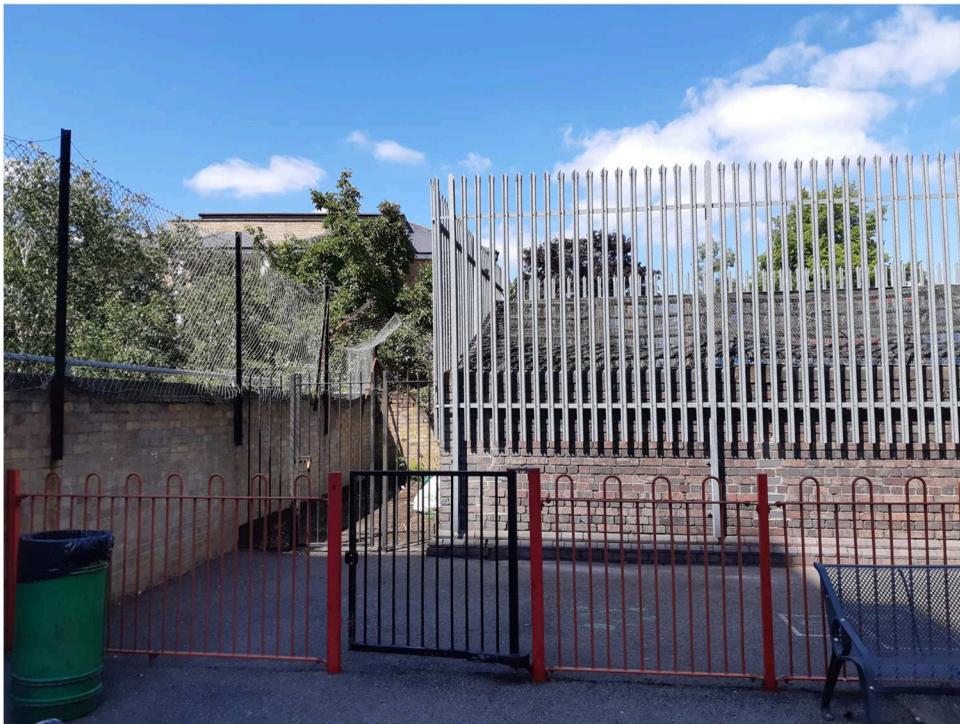

Figure 4. Standing inside the play area, we can see fences upon fences. In fact, there are five different kinds of fencing visible here, with two different gates, each with locks. Photo: Steve Pile.

At the multi-use games area, a sign declares that this is Tayler Court (the name of a nearby tower block). The sign carries a series of restrictions: children under 8 must be accompanied by adults; drug use and skateboards are not allowed. Although the multi-use games area is very close, it cannot be seen from the play area because of the railway ventilation shaft. The multi-use games area can also be accessed from Alexandra Road, which runs beside this part of the estate. However, despite the high and colorful fencing on all sides, it is neither that visible nor indeed welcoming (Field diary, 4th June 2022).

Now, let's turn to the north-side playground.

The busy Hilgrove Road curves around the north side of the play area. An open path leads directly from the road to the small children's play area. This path then divides around two sides of the play area, ensuring two natural access points to the interior of the estate from the road. This path is reasonably busy, with people constantly entering or leaving the estate on foot. On one side, the small children's play area is bordered by a fence, which protects it from a series of parking spots (see Figure 5). Cars are constantly coming and going, adding to a sense of activity and the constant presence of residents. Inside the play area, the equipment is in good shape. The whole play area, though

Figure 5. To the left, we can see the parking that bounds the small children's play area. To the right is the play area. It took patience to take a picture without anyone in it. Although note the unattended baby buggy – and the bag left alone on the bench on the far side. Indicating not just that the area is in use, but also that people trust that no one will walk off with their stuff if it is left unattended. The multi-use games area is in the middle distance. Bounded on the left and far side by high walls. The left-hand wall now has a mural, designed by local young people. Photo: Steve Pile.

having a low fence on all sides, feels open, maintained and available for use. A short path transects and connects the play area and the multi-use games area (Figure 5).

The large multi-use games area is accessed by a single gate, through a high green fence that borders one long side and one short side. The other sides are walled; one wall belongs to a storage building and garages, the other is a high thick retaining wall (designed to prevent a tower block from sliding downhill). The fences open onto the children's play area. This means that those inside the multi-use games area can see outside into the play area – and, critically, the parents and carers of small children can look back and see what is going on inside the multi-use area. This design shapes the movement and visibility of people using both the multi-use and play areas. Even before anyone reaches either area, they can see exactly who is using the area and how they are using it – and therefore users can consider how they will engage (or not) that activity before they arrive.

The playground is not just its play and multi-use area: it is also its walls, fences, access points, benches, equipment and signs (as a minimal, but explicit, regulatory framework). Thinking about the playground as a social infrastructure, therefore, includes the way these fences and walls integrate or separate spaces as well as shape movement and visibility. These routes in and out of the playground afford either an "open" or "closed" sense of space and social possibility. It matters whether movement and, therefore, encounter feels permitted or encouraged or not really allowed or explicitly forbidden. Significantly, for anyone visiting either play area, visibility and predictability matter. It really helps to know what you are walking into. Thus, (un)certainty is critical to the use – and the socials – of the playgrounds, north and south.

The North-South divide: the infrastructure of socials

There are marked differences between the north-side and the south-side playgrounds. In the following account of these differences, we wish to emphasize not only the contrasting social atmospheres of each playground but also the ways that superficially minor physical variations can have profound impacts on the emergence of socials. There are, furthermore, incongruous socials within each playground: parents and toddlers do not form social bonds in quite the same way that teenagers and young adults do. But these teenage and young adult social bonds are not "isolates" or "loose". Not only are they imbricated into one another, but they also create or sustain social bonds elsewhere on the estate that are deep and durable. Infrastructure provision, then, must consider not only the "infrastructure of socials", but also the embeddedness of these infrastructures and socials in wider contexts. This is why we wish to think about the estate as an infrastructure of social infrastructures.

It is in the lived experiences of the playgrounds – not just evidenced in play (and pleasure), or trust (and security), or repeated use, but in its visibility, accessibility, and predictability, its fences, walls and graffiti – that we can start to see how very similar infrastructures shape very different forms of sociality.

Although we have been told it was once otherwise, the south-side playground is rarely used for toddlers. In part, this may be because it was "under repair", or perhaps in disrepair (Figure 6). But we wish to emphasize the "fearful" and "prohibitive" affective atmospheres of the playground. It is forbidding. But it is also invisible – and its sight

Figure 6. In the foreground, a low fence prevents small children from escaping the playground. To the left and right, the play area is bounded by high walls. On the far side, there is a high fence. The play equipment is partially degraded and unusable in places. There is a strong sense of enclosure, of fences and walls. Photo: Steve Pile.

lines make it hard to know what is going on there. It is this invisibility that for 17-year-old Jamari (all names have been anonymised) made the multi-use games area a space in which to really focus on his basketball practice. Although the lack of sight lines may create a feeling of risk for parents and carers with young children, for teenagers this sense of enclosure can also provide much-needed safety and privacy while testing out newfound independence and interdependence.

This "privacy" creates the possibility of surprise encounters, which can be uncomfortable. On one casual visit, one of us turned the corner into the playground only to startle, and be startled by, three teenagers apparently engaged in an experiment smoking something – a brief face-off occurred, during which each party assessed the threat level presented to the other, and ended with the researcher walking away – both not wanting to impose an unwanted level of surveillance on the young people, and also unclear how unfriendly they might be about the intrusion. Not knowing or understanding the tacit social rules of the playground is part of what is at stake. In this case, the tacit atmosphere of the playground hints at an air of potential threat. Indeed, the playground's fencing seems to confirm this. Everywhere you look from within the playground, there are layers of fences and walls (see Figure 5 above).

The fencing (as much as the signage) can be read as a series of prohibitions – do not climb into the private estate next door, or jump, or throw rocks; do not sit on top of the vent tunnel for the Chiltern Mainline railway (and throw things at the trains). Each successive layer of fencing built up around the playground further secludes it; enhancing already good conditions for so-called "anti-social" behavior; diminishing the kinds of "openness" that informally regulate shared public spaces – which Jane Jacobs' termed "eyes on the street" (1961) and Massey celebrates as neighbors "looking out for one another" (2001). That said, the playground has eyes.

While visiting the playground, which is overlooked by Freeling Court, we were hailed by a resident in an upper-floor window almost as soon as we arrived. Wanting to know if we were local officials inspecting the playground, she immediately told us of the playground's problems – recent vandalism breaking one of the fixtures, smoking (who knows what?), and teens from the neighboring school. She said she takes her children to play on the green space at the front of the building, but never to the playground because it feels too unsafe.

Yet, even while older residents would complain about chicken and chips, bones and boxes littering the walkways and drug taking on the playground, the estate's young people are busy making the playground their own. One way this shows is in graffiti. Over a council sign banning drug use, the words "so not halal" had been written, a defiance against the adult order of things, but also declarative of their own social bonds. Bonds of friendship are evident in a smaller patch of graffiti, inked in permanent marker in baby pinks, purples and blues, that declared every member of their group. There are accompanying comments, such as "leng" and "E + L = best mom's". Or, translated, "beautiful" and "E + L = the best, I swear".

On a small green space alongside the south-side multi-use games area, some residents of Tayler Court held a Platinum Jubilee party (in June 2022). The spot they chose is only visible from Alexandra Road and the back windows of Tayler Court. During the party, teenagers gathered along the low wall by the multi-use games area. Helping themselves to pizza, before sitting in a row on the wall. We met Farah (in her mid-teens), who had been asked by her neighbor to paint party-goers' faces. Farah, with her Primary school aged sister acting as her apprentice, patiently painted the faces of the estate's younger children.

Thus, the playground is converted into an infrastructure for a teenage social. The estate affords teenagers ample opportunity to create or find their own spaces. Not just its playgrounds, of course, but also in its hidden green spaces and quirky lock-up areas (and almost certainly places we did not discover). A social, we believe, capable of supporting strong social bonds; bonds sufficiently strong that they enable young people to become involved in nearby youth charity, The Winch, actively participating in the development of new permissive (rather than prohibitive) signage for the estate. That is, in workshops we attended or ran, we saw how friends would support each other in group interactions.

In contrast to the sometimes disquieting friction between different forms of social on the south-side playground, prompting feelings of avoidance, frustration and disrepair, the north-side playground is often packed and rarely empty; well-maintained and mostly respected. The north playground perhaps feels safer for those with young children, because playground users feel they know what's going on, but also because other people on the estate can see what's going on. It feels as if people are constantly in and about the playground.

Indeed, it was the openness (visibility, access, footfall) of the north playground that led to the Hilgrove Social Action Group, supported by The Winch, to use it to exhibit and consult on the proposed new permissive designs for the estate's signage. The high fences of the multi-use area provide an ideal infrastructure for hanging up various designs for new signage on the estate.

On the day of the consultation, a wide variety of residents dropped in – and by word-of-mouth encouraged others to come along. The proposed new signage follows a growing consensus developing around the harms of using "no ball games" signs on social housing estates (Raising the Nation Play Commission, 2025; see also Bornat, 2025). Yet, The Winch had found that Hilgrove's young residents demanded more from their signs: they wanted them to feel welcoming. Inclusive, not just of teenagers.

Signage on the estate declares the regulatory framework for the social infrastructure of the estate. That framework is, by default, explicitly prohibitive. Signs tell people what they *cannot* do: walk on the grass, feed the birds, play ball games, take drugs and so on. By calling for new signage, young people on the estate sought a new social for the estate's social infrastructure. They proposed estate signage that would be friendly and open – saying the estate is "welcome to all", saying "ball games are allowed here" and encouraging social interaction between all residents, young and old, of whatever background.

While this consultation was going on, a small group of mid-teens were rushing around the multi-use area, playing chase, but also clambering up the seemingly unscalable walls, shouting at each other from what are, for us, scarily high vantage points – and generally behaving like the children in Sprod's cartoon (see also Baxter's discussion of "vertical play", 2017, p. 343). Until, that is, they were kicked out by a group of bigger, older teenagers, who wanted to play footie. The younger teens vanish into the estate. Perhaps, these children are using the "depth" of the estate to find or create their own spaces, away from both older teenagers and adults (following a study of Maiden Lane estate in the late 1980s: see Hillier et al., 1989, pp. 8–9). Whatever. Neither group joined in the consultation.

In stark contrast, the teens in the Social Action Group (along with their wider friendship groups and school friends) developed an understanding of the social infrastructure of the playground that could not be further removed from Sprod's depiction of mindless play. At one "Know your neighbours" potluck event in May 2022, a group of four teenagers preparing for their Sociology GCSE demanded of one researcher, "what methods are you using for your research?", while another asked, "are you a Marxist, a functionalist, or a positivist?". After sharing their vision for permissive signage on the estate, and plans to re-design the interiors of the estate's small meeting room, one of the teens, Malia, demanded, "which dead white men are our blocks named for?" (Field diary, 11th May 2022). Malia's question about "dead white men" reveals how she and her friends struggle deeply with the legacy of a specific social, built into – and, literally, written on – the fabric of the estate's infrastructure. These are not Sprod's children.

That children and teenagers have their own views about, and experiences of, the estate is well known at local youth charity, The Winch. They wanted those views and experiences to be reflected in the estate's public art infrastructure. To achieve this, they commissioned an artist to design a mural that would stretch across the long wall of the north-side multi-use games area. (Murals have long been seen as a way of empowering young people, but also of "beautifying" space and suppressing undesirable behavior: see Crath, 2018). The Social Action Group interviewed residents and young people, asking them what imagery they felt would best represent the estate. The mural was completed by the end of 2022 (see Figure 7). In many ways, the mural expresses the way the young people envision and experience the wider infrastructures of the playground and

Figure 7. The north-side multi-use games area mural. The mural depicts the promise of the estate's infrastructure of social infrastructures as its teenagers see it. Nearest to us, we can see the Hilgrove estate, along with *The Winch* youth charity (where IDEAS are), *Ye Olde Swiss Cottage* pub and Swiss Cottage tube station. An old man crosses the road, a pram is pushed by a young woman, while kids scoot. In the center is a willow tree that used to stand on a nearby roundabout, until it was deemed unsafe by the Council and cut down. On the far side is a play area. It shows three young teens sitting on a bench listening to music, while four other children play with the equipment. The children, rather than being Sprod's depiction of an unruly mob, are an embodiment of play, thrown-togetherness and diverse inclusive sociality, as envisioned for the estate by its young residents themselves. And then there're foxes, squirrels and birds, with a wooded backdrop (probably Hampstead Heath). Photo: Steve Pile.

the estate: the mural depicts the estate itself, the tube, green spaces, a much-loved willow tree, as well as a wide range of social activities and interactions.

Significantly, the mural itself does not have one story to tell; it contains contradictory stories of e-scooters versus prams and walking sticks, about lost nature and hopeful ideas, about play and sadness. Even "teenage social" is not singular. We see happy children playing games with one another, using swings and slides. Yet, three teens are shown on a bench, one reading, while two evidently unhappy children sit looking at one another glumly. Nor are teenager socials confined to the playground or to the estate itself. Infrastructure has socials that traverse many social infrastructures. And so, if the north-side playground indicates that it is an infrastructure where multiple socials overlap, in a multitude of divergent ways, then we need to think again about the socials of the south-side playground. Learning from the mural, we can now observe that the south-side playground offers shelter to teens looking for refuge from social and parental oversight, with their "absurd" restrictions and perhaps personally upsetting forms of sociality. Yet, the same seclusion that offers safe space for teenage

experimentation also feels unsafe for a parent with small children. Enclosure both protects and excludes, just as exposure both protects and excludes. Perhaps, to double down on Sprod, the estate needs both playgrounds, with their multiple yet distinct socials, in some form or other? Perhaps. Yet, such a question must address the contradictions in both the social and the infrastructure of social infrastructure.

Conclusion: on not assuming the "social" or the "infrastructure" in social infrastructure

Klinenberg's *Palaces for the People* makes the case for thinking seriously about the social that emerges from infrastructure. This is not just about the "good city" or even the "better city", it is not just about improving infrastructure or even the processes of making infrastructure. For Klinenberg, it is literally a matter of life and death. Thus, Klinenberg takes time to spell out which infrastructures are "social" – and how that "social" emerges in the spaces of those infrastructures. He sees strong and resilient social bonds emerging from the design and maintenance of "good" social infrastructure. Bluntly, a normative assumption is built into the idea of social infrastructure: that is, that a "good" social emerges from "good" infrastructure provision. But this normative assumption does not hold. Playgrounds demonstrate this.

The work of Wilson, Vincent, Neal and Iqbal focuses on the ambivalences and ambiguities of playground spaces. Yes, like Klinenberg, they see the opportunity playgrounds afford for generating strong, or even quite good weak social bonds. They see the ways that parents, carers and young people growing in independence can develop friendship, gain a sense of trust through caring and growing together, often promoted by unexpected moments amongst the children themselves, and for the development of mutual support. Yet, on the other side of the social interactions, they see fear and anxiety, social antagonisms, and social interactions structured by divisions of class, race, and background. The social in social infrastructure, then, has counter-vailing tendencies: toward creating stronger social bonds and toward social antagonisms – based on structures of race or class, but also personal or cultural antipathies.

Our case study confirms this, yet we also see playgrounds as part of a set of overlapping infrastructures, which include the social housing estate, but also micro-spatial infrastructures such as fences, gates and walls, multi-use games and small child play areas. It includes greenspaces. And it includes art. Our argument is that a housing estate is *an infrastructure of social infrastructures*. For example, as we have hinted above, the residents who take their children to the playgrounds also, differentially, make art in the estate's meeting room, use their kitchens to cook for estate potlucks, water the estate's flowers, attend its food cooperative, and provide advice and mutual support in walkways and landings across the estate. Adaptive. Durable. Invisible to the social infrastructure literature.

Our next point is simple: the estate is also *an infrastructure of socials* (plural). As we have shown, near identical social infrastructure provision can produce distinctly different socials, despite the physical and social context of those playgrounds being broadly similar. There are two aspects to this divergence we wish to emphasize. On the one hand, while the plan for the playgrounds makes them look very similar, having very similar facilities, the micro-spatialities of the infrastructure produce a remarkably

different sense of the playground. Critical to these are accessibility via paths that are either enclosed or open, frequented or not, visibility with lines of sight even prior to entering the space of the playground, and a sense of predictability or knowability (that underpins a sense of both availability for use but also safety in use). These micro-spatialities of design – of closedness through fences and walls with openness through paths and flows of people – shape the way that infrastructures shape emergent socials. More than this, though, any infrastructure is not just one infrastructure. An open play area is altered by the provision of fences and gates. Murals and signs matter. They change the affective atmosphere of the place, encouraging inclusivity or providing an air of incarceration. The blend of infrastructures also shapes the social. But this leads to a second point.

There is no one social. We see this right at the outset of this paper in Sprod's cartoon. The complexity of ambivalence and ambiguity is multiplied when adding children into the mix: not just toddlers and primary schoolers, but early, mid and late teens. Just as infrastructure is not a thing, neither is the social. It matters that older residents complain about the behavior of teenagers on the estate. This is more than simply ambivalence and ambiguity. This is more than personal and cultural antagonism. There are also contradictions. Different emergent socials, in the same spaces, do not have to align or tend toward integration or coherence. There can be a social that is considered "bad" emergent in the spaces of social infrastructure.

This is not to dispose of the idea of social infrastructure, but to embed the question "which social for which infrastructure?" into the operationalization of the idea, either in analysis or in practice. But, further, to recognize the plurality of both "social" and "infrastructure". Thus, we must also wonder whether these infrastructures and socials (can) get along together.

By re-situating the social and the infrastructural in their contexts, it is easier to see how and why different socials emerge out of the same infrastructural provision, but also to understand that any infrastructure is a composite – of socials, of infrastructures. For this reason, we do wish to see the social housing estate as a social infrastructure, and valuable as such. This is not just to argue that social housing is – and should be – designed through its blending, mixing and support of a mix of social infrastructures. It is to make the case for social housing precisely because it is a site where the multiplicity of social infrastructures can be provided and sustained. In this, it will matter how these social infrastructures are thought together, in place, in practice and in their lived experiences.

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Research ethics and consent

This research was conducted within the ethical guidelines of the University of Warwick. This includes informed consent, the right to withdraw consent, as well as the anonymisation of all participants.

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