

Animating public space: A case study in 'soft regeneration'

By Regan Koch and Alan Latham

Urban public spaces are at their best when they are democratic, inclusive, and meet the needs of a wide range of people. Yet this is not always the case. Large, upmarket urban spaces are often marked by a sense of exclusivity. In other cases, public spaces become defined by social problems. Antisocial behaviour or fear of crime drives people away.

The Prince of Wales Junction in west London was a case of the latter. Although located at a central point in a busy urban neighbourhood, it was a place where most people did not want to spend much time. Void of activity in the daytime, at night it was a well-known spot for street drinking, drug dealing and prostitution. This article explores the work of trying to make the Junction into a vibrant neighbourhood public space.

Creating a lively public space from scratch is not straightforward. Initially the local authorities concentrated on policing and surveillance. This decreased levels of criminal activity. But it did not invite other, more positive uses onto the site. To transform the Junction into a site used by the neighbourhood, the authorities responsible for the site found they had to introduce a range of new ways of inhabiting the site. Regenerating the public life of the Junction ended up being much more about finding ways of inviting new uses into the site than about the excluding activities that had made it undesirable.

As a case study, the Prince of Wales Junction raises some important questions about managing urban public spaces. What constitutes a good public space? How do different ways of organising a space encourage or discourage social interaction? How do different groups of people come to use or avoid a place? And, what role do policy makers have in creating public spaces that are inclusive and well used?

About the research

This summary outlines an article about a series of policy interventions in a site in west London, the Prince of Wales Junction. One aim of the article is to consider a range of questions about managing urban public space. Another way of reading the article, however, is as a case study in what some call 'soft-regeneration'. Soft regeneration means using social strategies to transform the life of an area. This kind of approach is distinct from 'hard regeneration', which instead focuses on the physical redevelopment of an area to reinvigorate it.

Research for the project was largely qualitative. This included attending neighbourhood meetings, interviewing local residents, police, planners, business owners and those involved in the redesign of the site. It also involved participating in the daily life of the space – for example, one of the researchers worked at a vegetable stall for a period of six weeks. The reason for choosing such an approach was because it allowed a close analysis of how the transformations affected the way people inhabited the site.

Relevance

AQA – A level unit 3, Human option (World cities). Investigates contemporary urban processes in a developed country. Focuses on the management of urban regeneration in response to urban decline.

Edexcel – AS level unit 2, topic 4 (Rebranding Places). Identifies reasons to rebrand an area and the players involved in doing so. Focuses on the material qualities of a public space as a way to regenerate its image.

OCR – AS level unit F762 (Managing urban change). Provides a case study to illustrate how planning and management practices are enabling positive processes of urbanisation.

About the Prince of Wales Junction

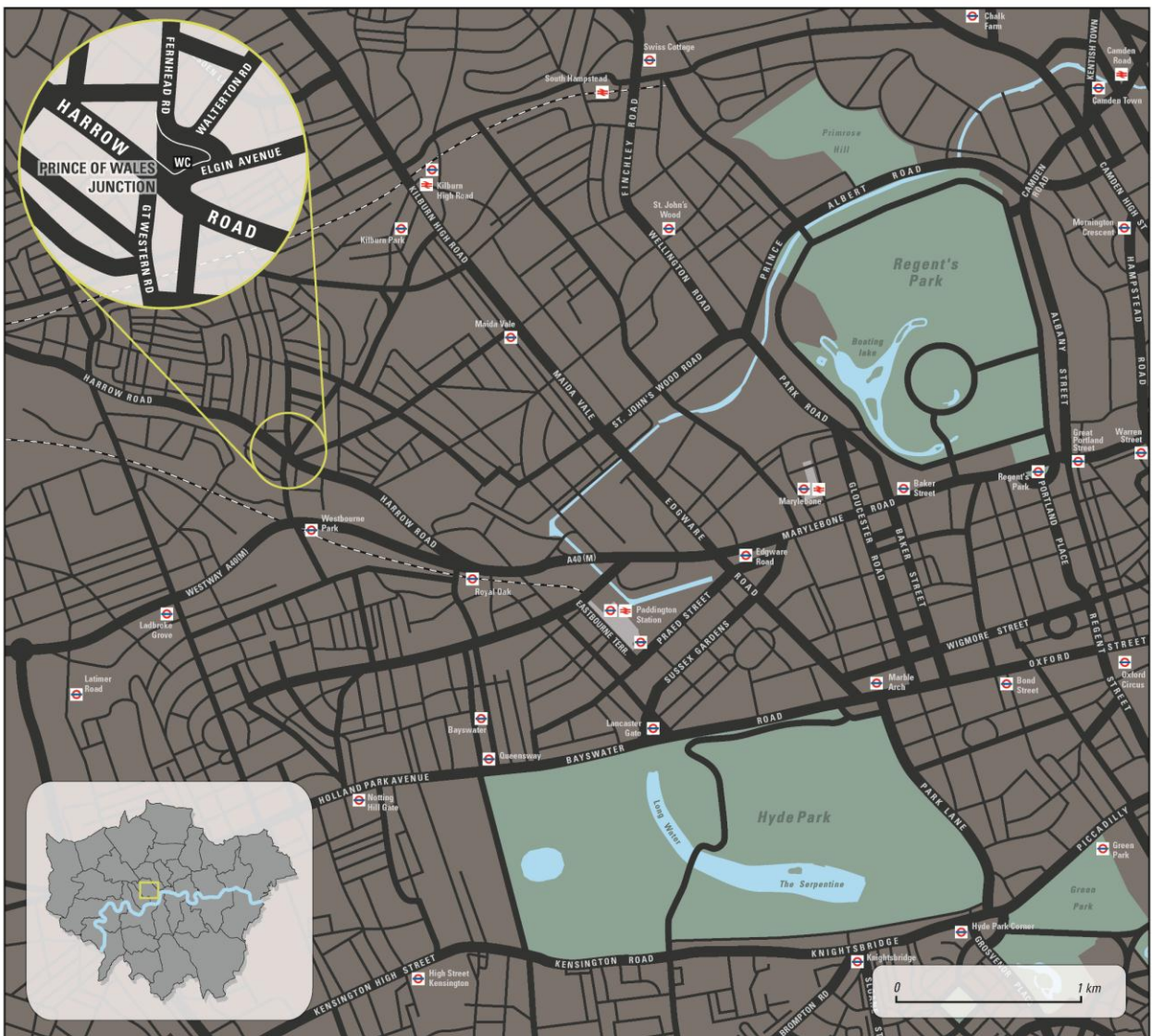


Figure 1: Prince of Wales Junction, West London

Much of West London is very affluent, as might be expected in a world city. That said, within west London there are neighbourhoods that have a fine-grained mix of different socio-economic classes of people. The ward immediately surrounding the Prince of Wales Junction is one such neighbourhood. It is a ward marked by significant socio-economic hardship. Indeed, some areas within it are ranked

among the top 10 per cent nationally for indices of social and economic deprivation, crime and disorder, and ill health.

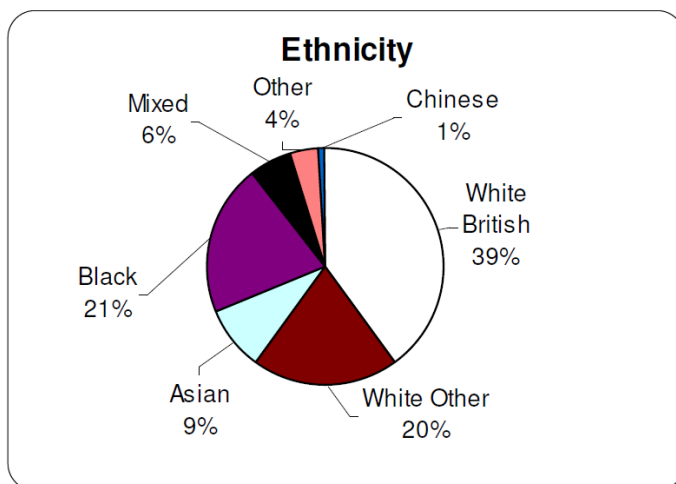
The geographical scale of wards

A ward is a geographical sub-division of the borough, which in turn is a sub-division of the county. Wards are key to the administration of the UK, with local councilors being elected at this level. As of 31 December 2011 the UK had 9,523 electoral wards/divisions, each with an average of around 5,500 residents. London boroughs contain an average of 23 wards.

You can find out more about the Harrow Road ward using the 2009 ward profile provided by Westminster council.

<http://westminstercitypartnership.org.uk/Westminster%20Ward%20Budgets%20%20April%202008/Harrow%20Road%20Ward%20Profile%202009.pdf>

Historically, the neighbourhood around the Junction was largely populated by immigrants and the white working class. In the 1960s and 70s, the Junction and the high street had a range of prominent national chain stores and banks. It also had two supermarkets and a cinema. Over the years, however, the area declined. By the mid-2000s, retail had shifted almost exclusively to low-end convenience stores, fast food outlets, betting agents and 'pound shops'. 20 per cent of the shop fronts sat vacant.



Source: Census 2001

Image: Harrow Road ward residents by ethnicity. Source: Westminster Ward Profiles

<http://westminstercitypartnership.org.uk/Westminster%20Ward%20Budgets%20%20April%202008/Ward%20Profiles%202010.pdf>

The Prince of Wales Junction itself is a five-way traffic intersection surrounded by storefronts. Geographically it is the centre point of the wider neighbourhood. But prior to 2004, the Junction was really little more than a traffic intersection with a small piazza (a paved area) leading to public toilets. The piazza was rarely used in the daytime. The traffic passing through it meant it was busy and unpleasant. At night, however, when there was less traffic, small groups of people regularly gathered to drink on the site. It was also a well know centre for a range of illegal activities such as drug dealing and prostitution.

The need for action

It was only in 2004 when local concern about the area crystallised into official action. Crossing the Junction, an elderly woman had her handbag snatched and was badly injured in the following scuffle. Outraged, residents demanded action from the local council. They were fed up with Junction's crime. They were also fed up with the vacant storefronts and the sense that their community was being neglected.

In response, local councillors, police, social housing providers and neighbourhood groups joined forces to found the Harrow Road Neighbourhood Partnership. Through public meetings, forums and festivals, the partnership brought together local actors with the aim of developing a comprehensive action plan to improve the neighbourhood.

One of the goals of the partnership's plan was to change the space at the centre of the community—the Prince of Wales Junction. They wanted to transform the Junction from being simply the geographic centre of the neighbourhood into being its social centre. The challenge was how to engineer this transformation.

Defining public space

Urban public spaces are those spaces we routinely share with others who inhabit the city. Defining what counts as 'public' is not straightforward. Commonly, public space is defined as those spaces that are publically owned (by some part of local, regional, or national government) and readily accessible to all. However, many spaces become public not through the fact of public ownership, but through how they routinely bring groups of people (or 'publics') together. Think of places like shopping malls, supermarkets, museums, theatres, railway stations, or even pubs (which are literally public houses).

Some of the most difficult issues of living together in cities are concerned with how to manage public spaces. How can planners and other city officials create shared spaces that allow for a multiplicity of uses and styles of inhabitation? How do we intervene to address things like behaviour considered anti-social, without sacrificing important individual or group rights? Under what conditions should we allow one set of private needs or uses—for example, getting from A to B, sleeping, exercising, or parking one's car—to take priority over other potential needs or uses of public space?

A case of soft regeneration

For the Neighbourhood Partnership the first priority was to improve the public safety of the area. This was done in four ways. Firstly, police patrols were increased. Secondly, CCTV cameras were installed. Thirdly, civic watch forums were established. Fourthly, and finally, ten people convicted of drug dealing around the Junction were issued with Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). This banned them from the Junction and the area surrounding it.

The next priority for the Neighbourhood Partnership was to make the Junction into a place that people - other than street drinkers and petty criminals - might want to spend time in. Following a well-established template for local regeneration in the UK, the Neighbourhood Partnership initially tried to attract private developers interested in constructing new apartment or office buildings

around the site. By including a mixed-use element to such a development - a supermarket or a library, for example - the Neighbourhood Partnership aimed to turn the Prince of Wales Junction in a local destination (rather than simply a place to pass through).

Largely because of the onset of the global financial crisis from 2007, no privately-funded project materialised. This forced the Neighbourhood Partnership to develop a more modest plan for regenerating the Junction. In their revised plan, they chose to focus more on strategies for 'soft regeneration' than had the original pre-financial crisis plan. The aim was to find ways to invite a broad range of people to use the Junction as a public space.

The revised soft regeneration oriented plan did involve some physical remodeling of the Junction. The paved area at the Junction was quadrupled in size to make it into a proper piazza. Lighting, water and electricity points were also added. But the main innovation was to establish a temporary market at the centre of the Junction. A private company was hired to manage it, and together with the partnership they recruited 18 market traders. Operating three days a week, it was hoped that the new street market might give people a positive reason to visit the space.

The Junction also underwent a name change. In local publicity material it was rebranded as 'Maida Hill Market'. Funds were provided to organise community events and activities on the space, starting with a grand-opening celebration. Lastly, the partnership supported the establishment of a small café on the Junction. The partnership provided start-up funding and offered reduced rent on the previously vacant council owned storefront that the café occupied.

Taken together, the changes engineered by the Neighbourhood Partnership worked at establishing a whole series of new routines and conventions of use on the Junction. These new patterns of inhabitation would in turn transform the general feel or atmosphere of the space: from one of fear and avoidance, into a sense of welcoming and conviviality.

Aims of the Prince of Wales Junction regeneration

1. Tackle crime and anti-social behaviour

- install two CCTV cameras on the junction
- increase police patrol hours by 240 hours a month
- provide extra funding to make properties more secure

2. Revive the local economy

- help retailers improve their shopfronts and forecourts
- encourage more 'on street events' and assist with the development of a regular street market
- work with the Harrow Road Traders' Association and Harrow Road Neighbourhood Partnership to make Harrow Road more of a shopping destination, with the Prince of Wales Junction its natural focus

3. Improve the street environment

- provide new paving
- improve street lighting
- provide seating
- develop ideas for redesigning the main pedestrian space, incorporating potential use for an

outdoor café, street market, regular events and community projects as and when required

Source: Westminster City Council

<http://www.westminster.gov.uk/services/transportandstreets/strategy/civicsstreets/live/princeofwales/>

Managing public space and urban change

Geographers are often interested in urban public space because it provides a way of addressing issues related to the politics of city life. Much research has examined how certain groups (young people or the poor, for example) are excluded from many urban spaces. In other cases, the publicness of urban space is threatened by powerful interests concerned with profit-making or social control.

Exclusion from public space is certainly part of the story of the Junction's regeneration. Those persons issued with ASBOs were not allowed within 500 feet of the Junction, and had their names and photographs prominently posted in the area. The original market was also relatively upmarket, leaving many residents feeling left out. Recall that if it were not for the financial crisis, the space around the Junction would have likely been handed over to private developers, and presumably private forms of management thereafter.

Yet there is clearly much more going on at the newly regenerated Junction than exclusion or a loss of public life. In all kinds of ways it is a story about a collective effort to make a public space more inclusive. It is about a site known for collecting together a range of social problems going through a process of change to become a more effective public space for the local community. So how might we understand or evaluate these changes?

Firstly, we can think about the **material changes** and how they act into the life of the space. The newly paved surface, for example, laid a foundation for things like the market to take place. Trees, landscaping and good lighting provide a more welcoming environment. Benches present an invitation for people to stay and have a seat.

Secondly, we can see that **new forms of inhabitation** have given the space a new kind of life. On any given day, people can be observed in range of activities: setting up stalls, shopping for groceries, chatting with neighbours, resting their feet, or simply passing through on foot or bike. The café owner's efforts in opening the cafe similarly provide a pleasant space that people want to visit. People often spill out of the shop, extending their social activities into the paved area of the Junction.

Thirdly, we can understand the Junction as having a **very different kind of atmosphere**. When illegal activities such as drug use or prostitution are clearly present in a public space, it sets a tone that makes many people uneasy. For this reason, the Junction was a place people had long grown used to avoiding. However, the material invitations and range of activities taking place on the new Junction provided a sense of sociability or homeliness. They signal that the space can be used for more than just passing through.

Animating a public space

Good public spaces are full of mundane activities. The setting up of the market at the Junction is a good example. Consider one particular Saturday morning in June.

By 7:45 am several traders have arrived and can be seen busily setting up their stalls. One of them is Clive who has travelled across the city from Kent, via South London. Unloading his temporarily parked van will be his most laborious task, but setting up the stall properly requires more effort and attention.

Bananas and apples line the perimeter of his stall, as they are the most colourful, plentiful and inexpensive items. Placing them down low puts them in the sight-line and easy reach of children; often leading to impulse purchases by parents. Fresh herbs go near the cash register. They have the highest mark-up and a well-timed 'so how are you going to prepare these?' will often lead to an extra sale.

Today he has brought an apple press to make juice on site – a proven way to attract curious passers-by. He is full of tricks for animating his stall and keeping customers engaged; always arranging things, putting on demonstrations, calling out with banter, making small jokes and advocating the merits of buying organic.

This extract has been adapted from the original research article.

The project of regeneration at the Junction took place in 2009, but the market still takes place regularly. It is smaller and less upscale than it was in the first summer. Traders selling expensive items such as organic produce or imported meat and cheese did not make enough money to stay.

Now, one of the market's most popular days is Tuesday when a 'jumble sale' takes place. Local residents use tables provided by the market to sell unwanted objects from home. There are sometimes jazz performances on Friday evenings. Local musicians play on Saturdays. Other special events held at the Junction include an Irish Festival, a drum display, a family fun day, salsa dance lessons and old folk's tea. Most days, however, are much more mundane and ordinary.

In many ways, the range of new activities on the site have helped to 'domesticate' the space. They allow for many new people and uses to find a sort of home on the Junction. This also means that the goings on at the Junction are mostly managed in a less formal way than relying on CCTV or the police. Activities such as street drinking and drug dealing do still sometimes take place around the site, but are no longer its defining features.

One clear lesson from the Junction is that small changes can often have big effects. We do not know exactly how certain combinations of materials and objects will work together. We cannot say for certain how people will come to use a space, or what atmospheres might be collectively experienced. Perhaps what we do know is that public space is often unpredictable and uncertain. It is an important arena of urban life that is worthy of our careful and close attention.