CASE STUDY

**Auditing and Mapping Social Connection
Infrastructure in Communities**
Preliminary Summary*

*see end for details

Aims and background

This is an introduction and preliminary summary of a project underway for four Melbourne Councils. The project explores 'Community Social Connection Infrastructure' across four metropolitan Local Government Areas (LGAs). It audits and maps place-based social connection assets and experiences using a typology developed from multiple projects about Social Connection funded by Australian Red Cross (e.g. Farmer et al, 2019). The project will make recommendations regarding investments in Community Infrastructure of Social Connection in the four participating LGAs in the included council regions.

The specific objectives of the project are to:

- Test a place-based approach aiming to progress work towards reducing social isolation and loneliness and promoting social connection.
- Leverage a typology of places and spaces to provide investigation of the current pro-connection places and spaces (assets) in the region as well as 'hotspots' for connection.
- Provide empirical evidence of community experiences within the pro- social connection places and spaces.
- Provide a foundation for understanding the breadth and role of places and spaces in the community.
- Deliver recommendations for future social connection promoting initiatives.

The project undertook these research activities:

- Reviewed the literature and practice with regards to community connectedness initiatives.
- Further developed and populated a typology for categorising pro connection places and spaces across four LGAs.
- Mapped social indicator data and places and spaces to understand the alignment of places and spaces with population characteristics.
- Held focus groups with managers and facilitators of places and spaces to understand perceptions of user experience of places and spaces, and their views about opportunities to enhance current infrastructure.

Social Connection

Social connection is about communal interactions between people. The work of Robin Dunbar (e.g. 1995) shows that social connection goes beyond simple one-to-one contacts, but rather involves being satisfied with 'circles of connection' involving issues of number, quality and 'intensity' of relations. Dunbar depicts connection as represented in the circles of our social networks, from our smaller most intimate circle of close connections to our wider network of known acquaintances.

We focus on social connection in our work because it is a strengths-based concept. We use this as a counterpoint to the frequent discussion of loneliness and social isolation which are deficit concepts. We believe communities and people need to see a positive way forward and actions that can be taken to improve social connection.

The scope of the project is determined by: a) 'Pro-Social Connection' community infrastructure typology: b) physical, hybrid and digital spaces, and: c) that the project takes part in four Local Government Areas.

By considering **pro-connection places, spaces and experiences** and their role in the development of a **community social connection infrastructure**, our project provides an opportunity to combine current knowledge on social connection with empirical data including social indicator data, mapping of physical and digital spaces and insights from key stakeholders.

Social infrastructure and a place-based approach to social connection

Social infrastructure emerges as an important component of connection and wellbeing outcomes (Davern et al., 2017). Defined as infrastructure that meet social service needs across the lifespan, they are "essential services that create the material and cultural living conditions for an area" (Davern et al., 2017, p.195).

Social infrastructure include: health, education, childcare, employment and training facilities; community support agencies; sport and recreation amenities; parks and playgrounds, community development services; appropriately-designed housing; legal and public safety emergency services; public and community transport; arts and cultural institutions; centres for specific groups like older people or young people – i.e. "anywhere that brings people together" (Davern et al., 2017).

A **place-based approach** is defined as "a collaborative, long-term approach to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location. This approach is ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts" (Dart, 2018). We define 'place' as "spaces which people have made meaningful" (Bagnall et al., 2018, p. 20; Cresswell, 2004, p. 7).

Research has highlighted links between the physical environment and social relations which gives the potential for policy action. The Legatum report on wellbeing and policy references an **"environment where there are easy opportunities for social interaction that allow the ability for people to choose when, who and where to meet"** (Halpern 1995).

Types of Spaces: Physical | Hybrid | Digital

We conducted a scoping literature review on spaces and places of social connection that identified types of pro-connection places including; physical places such as third places, incidental 'bumping places', ephemeral places and community groups (see Table). In addition to these – in our contemporary environment, we recognise there are **hybrid or online as digital spaces** which – to date – have been less systematically explored as spaces for local social connection.

Table: Types of Spaces and Places for Social Connection in the literature

Name	Description	Evidence of Social Connection
Third Places Places that are not home or work that allow us to be social, e.g. cafes or libraries	Third places are where people can meet up informally or locations used as meeting places in addition to their primary role e.g. community gardens, parks, beaches or public places such as libraries, churches and commercial spaces such as cafes, book stores and cinemas.	"Public, informal gathering places away from home (the first place) and work (the second place) that have facilitated social attachments through spontaneous opportunities for conversation and the sharing of problems as well as elations" (Vaux and Asay., 2019, p.22).
Bumping Places Places that offer the possibility for incidental interactions	Infrastructure designed for people to bump into each other, e.g. sheltered spaces or barbecues in parks, playgrounds, outdoor gyms. Public art e.g. outdoor galleries, installation art, murals. Noticeboards, community seating	Locations "designed for people to meet e.g. streets, squares, parks, play areas, village halls, community centres" (Bagnall et al., 2018, p.21).
Community Groups Community groups create places to connect around activities with like-minded people, or people that can support, teach or mentor us	Groups found to encourage social connection included: sporting groups, community choirs, education programs, intergenerational art programs and programs to support at risk groups	Research found that a sense of working together towards a common goal helped to overcome perceived class or racial boundaries (Wilkinson, 2017).
Online & Hybrid Spaces Online spaces or spaces that are both physical and online allow for new, alternative or additional ways to connect	Online platforms, such as social media, websites and blogs that allow users to chat or post content. Hybrid spaces connect the online and the offline.	'Hyperlocal' social media such as Neighbourly, Nextdoor or local Facebook Groups and Good Karma Networks have been found to help generate local social capital and provide information. (Page-Tan, 2020; Grace et al, 2020)

Best practice around activating social connection suggests it is beneficial if there is a purpose for people to interact other than a specific focus on forming connections. As such, social connection might be regarded as a by-product of pro- connection places and spaces especially if combined with pro social connection activities.

Framework of Practice for Social Connection

A summary of evidence on promoting social connection suggests key principles for ensuring a community has the infrastructure for optimising the activation of social connection. Building on this, the factors outlined below are key to having a pro social connection community:

1. Focus on **critical components** including: **spaces, places, activities and community connector type people and organisations**, all of which are required for optimising opportunities for social connection.

2. Develop a **foundation** of **safe, accessible places and spaces that provide a mix** and **choice for people to engage with or use.**

3. Ensure the presence of '**incidental**' or '**bumping**' spaces that encourage meeting new people.

4. Facilitate **activities** that include **problem-solving, negotiating** and **working on purposeful tasks** that give best chances for people to meet, build relations and trust.

5. Identify opportunities to build (new) **collective social identities**; a shared identity of living in the same place is a great place to start to build a shared identity.

6. Understand the outcome of social connection is best nurtured as a **by-product of other purposeful activities.**

A Framework of Practice for Community Social Connection

Based on the literature, we constructed an analytical framework intended to give a structure for auditing and planning for social connection in communities, focusing on foundations of safety, choice and access, places and spaces, activities and people as connectors. This framework was tested in the project with four councils.

CONNECTORS   Community connector roles

ACTIVITES   e.g. problem-solving, negotiating, synchronous activity

SPACES & PLACES   e.g. bumping spaces, ephemeral spaces

FOUNDATIONS   Safe, accessible and a choice

Figure: A Framework of Practice for Community Social Connection

What we did: Outline of the Project Methodology

The stages of the project research methods are outlined below. Full details are provided in a final report (details at the end of this Case Study Briefing).

1. Typology of Social Connection Infrastructure

We applied a typology drawing on findings of existing collaborative work and literature by the Social Innovation Research Institute and the Australian Red Cross (Farmer, 2019). We also used material from VicHealth (2010) and existing categorisations of Social Infrastructure in literature (Davern et al., 2017). We identified four base categories of operational physical places and spaces that encourage social connection in the context of Australian LGAs. These were identified as the following:

• Assets, Infrastructure and Natural Spaces

• Community Organisations and Groups

• Public Leisure, Sport, Recreation and Physical Activity

• Arts and Events

These categories helped us to identify places and spaces in each of the four LGAs that could promote social connection. Following consultation with the project working group, we identified sources of social data that would inform an audit and mapping exercise. Data to populate the typology of physical places and spaces was then sourced using the following:

• Publicly available data

• Desk research undertaken by the research group

• Data provided by each local council

2. Identifying online places and spaces

In a second step, searches for **online places and spaces** were used to uncover the location of informal connection or incidental sites within the community. By informal we refer to places and spaces where people meet or interact which are outside of known physical infrastructures sites. Incidental sites are physical sites that may have an identified primary purpose other than promoting social connection. For this reason, our search included connection spaces outside council and community organisation infrastructure.

Overall inputs into the typology generated over 2800 assets (physical and digital places and spaces) across 32 sub-groups. These were then classified into discrete and non-discrete groups for further analysis.

In the final report, we provide a categorisation of the places and spaces, analysis and maps of the distribution of pro connection spaces and places across the LGAs. We also identify the different forms of physical places and functions of multiple online places identified.

3. Social Data Mapping

To better interpret the mapping of places and spaces, we used Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping to develop an understanding of where high volumes of potentially 'at risk' (i.e. of social isolation) individuals may reside within and across the LGAs.

We used ABS census data retrieved from each LGA to generate mapping inputs and variables.

We applied the data at the SA1 level across the LGA. Maps were generated to provide a visual assessment identifying where high volumes of individuals were located within each LGA, with identification of the higher social isolation risk groups. Visualisations and maps were generated.

4. Places and Spaces Asset Mapping

As the second GIS stage, we mapped all identified places and spaces for pro social connection assets that were identified by applying the typology for each of the LGAs. Mapping was undertaken based on addresses and text-based location information, and these data points were mapped to provide a visual representation of assets for each LGA.

Mapping focussed on:

• identifying the location of identified places and spaces in each LGA:

• identifying the 'hotspots' for pro-social connection within each LGA:, and

• identifying where specific forms of places were aligned with higher areas of risk or need (relative to social data mapping).

Outcomes in the final report provide analysis across multiple maps for each of the LGAs and descriptive analysis.

5. User Experiences - Focus Groups

As a final stage, focus groups were held with managers and facilitators of different types of spaces and places across the four LGAs.

The aim of the focus groups was to enhance understanding of the role and function of places and spaces within the community. Focus Groups were structured in six question areas: background, places and community needs; creating connection; barriers and needs; online or digital spaces; COVID-19 impact and recovery; and amplifying impact and connection.
Respondents were inclusive of all LGAs. Thematic coding and analysis was undertaken on the data, and themes and narratives will be provided in the final report to support results and recommendations.

*A full report of this project will be found at Karg A, De Cotta T, Farmer J, Knox J, Adler V, Kamstra P, Aryani A (2020) Infrastructure for Social Connection: researching the existing assets for creating social connectedness and identifying interventions. Swinburne University Social Innovation Research Institute [https://doi. org/10.25916/pzh1-rm04] pending approval and final release of the report

Further information

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FURTHER INFORMATION