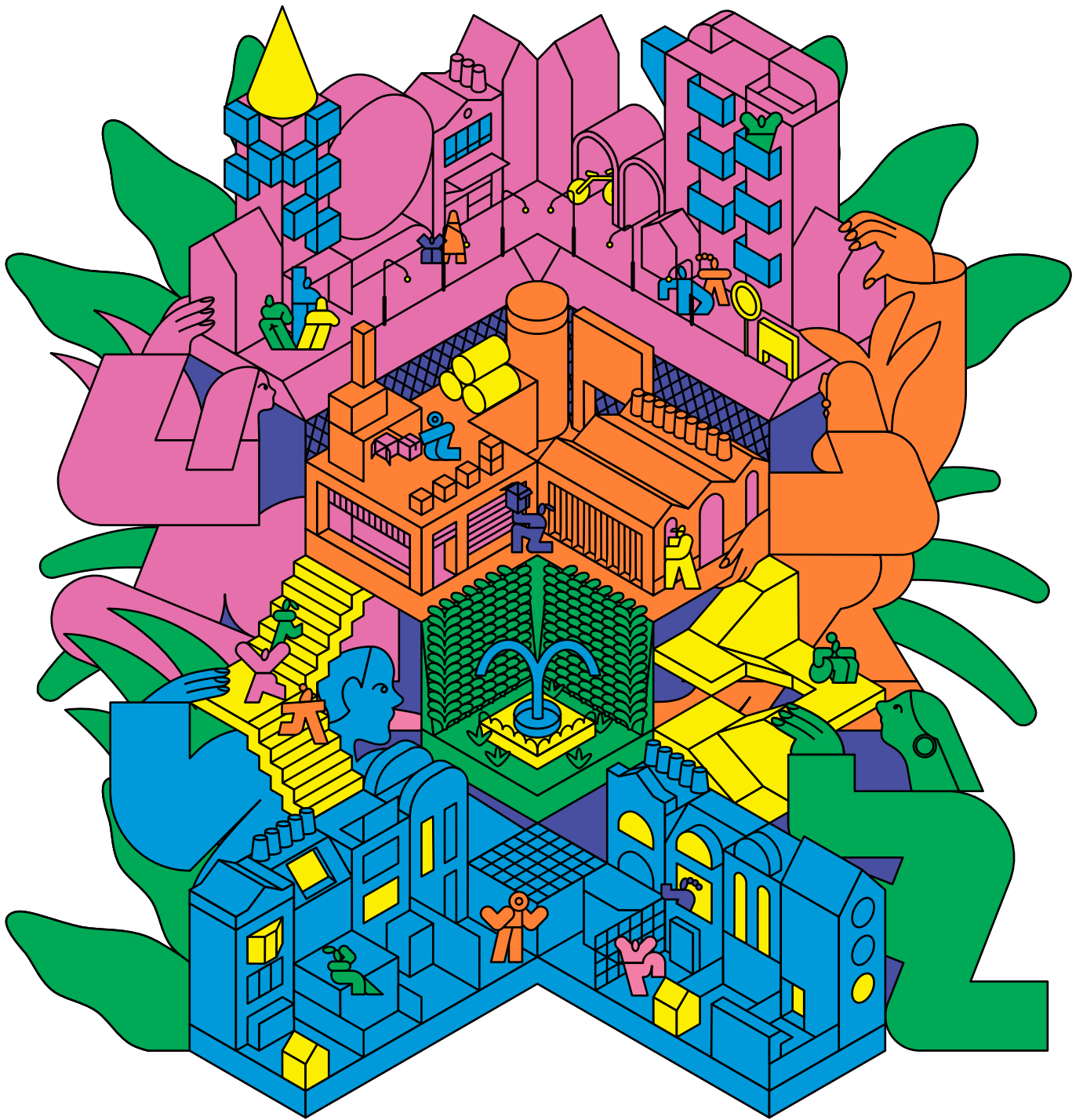# Kinship in the City

URBAN LONELINESS AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

FUTURE SPACES FOUNDATION

FOREWORD

Since launching in 2013, the Future Spaces Foundation has undertaken a series of projects to rethink the spaces we inhabit, striving to make them more vibrant, sustainable and inclusive as we move into the future. People have always been at the heart of what we do.

With its distinct human element and wide demographic reach, urban loneliness is a natural topic of interest for us. For the latest project in our Vital Cities programme, we've teamed up with experts across the built environment industry to explore how the places where we live, work and socialise can both cause and combat loneliness. We're glad to see awareness around this issue rising globally as people become attuned to its impact, particularly on city dwellers.

In this report are a range of ideas for reshaping our cities' infrastructure to build better connections, from visionary proposals to successful existing schemes. The first section offers an overview of a cross-disciplinary roundtable we held on the subject in early 2019, while the second examines loneliness in practice, weaving in insights from our panellists, design concepts from Make Architects and formal recommendations from the Foundation. From here, we present a series of thought-provoking essays, interviews and case studies. Some of the most in-depth discussion involves housing and public realm, though dialogue on the transport, healthcare and workplace sectors also features.

My sincerest thanks to everyone who has contributed to this project. It's been a challenge and a joy to examine urban loneliness across international lines, and to consider the opportunities we have to foster a sense of purpose, companionship and belonging through the built environment. I hope our readers will join us in the effort to transform these ideas into concrete action on the ground.

Ken Shuttleworth
Founder, Make Architects
Chairman, Future Spaces Foundation

CONTENTS

COLLABORATORS

Alex Smith
Founder, The Cares Family

Andre Reid
Founder, KIONDO

Dr Andrew Stevenson
Senior Lecturer, Manchester
Metropolitan University

Daniel Blyden
Design Lead, Impact
Hub Birmingham

Ian Treherne
Ambassador, Sense UK

Imogen Webb
Architect, Make Architects

Joel Charles
Director of Government
Relations and Impact,
Future Care Capital

Katy Ghahremani
Director, Make Architects

Lee Mallett
Founder, Urbik

Dr Ken Shuttleworth
Chairman, Future
Spaces Foundation
Founder, Make Architects

Peter Greaves
Architect, Make Architects

Sara Veale
Managing Editor, Future
Spaces Foundation and
Make Architects

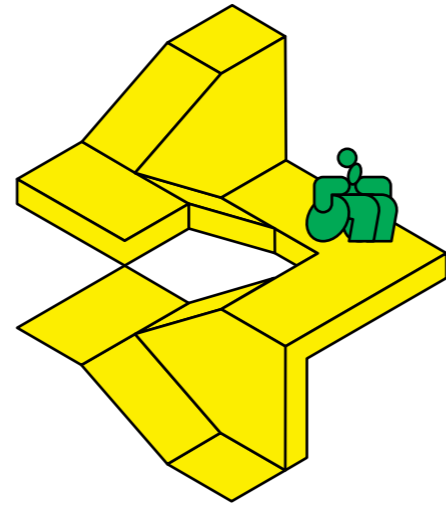# INTRODUCTION

BUILDING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

The idea of loneliness often suggests a lack of human contact. Stock imagery depicts loneliness with pictures of forlorn individuals sitting on their own. Go-to literary references for the lonely include Boo Radley and Quasimodo – recluses painfully isolated from their peers.

Of course physical solitude can prompt feelings of loneliness, but it can also be a peaceful experience under the right circumstances. On the other hand, being part of a crowd and failing to connect with the people in it is a universally disheartening experience. According to a seminal sourcebook on the topic, the soundest way to describe loneliness is "a discrepancy between one's necessary and achieved levels of social interaction." Indeed, it's human kinship, rather than simple proximity, that satisfies people's emotional needs. To put it another way, physical togetherness is not the same as emotional togetherness.
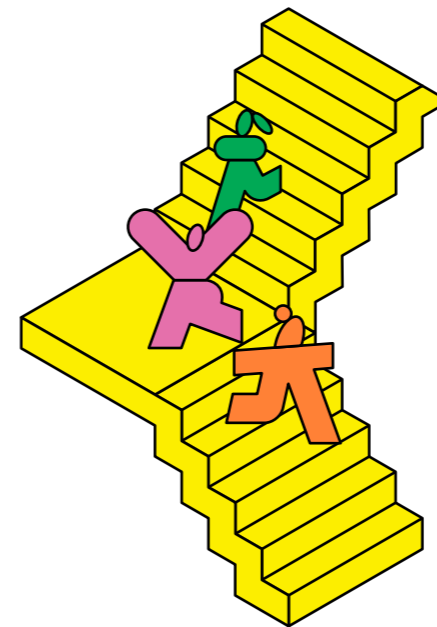
In her 2016 book *The Lonely City*, Olivia Laing writes of the "particular flavour to the loneliness that comes from living in a city, surrounded by millions of people. One might think this state was antithetical to urban living... It's possible – easy, even – to feel desolate and unfrequented in oneself while living cheek by jowl with others." More than half of the world's citizens already live in cities, and the United Nations predicts this will grow to two-thirds by 2050. It's crucial that we reckon with the confluence of urban factors – from poor connectivity to high costs of living – that erode opportunities for social cohesion and put city dwellers at particular risk of loneliness.

There's some debate as to whether loneliness is a growing problem percentage-wise or, as the global population increases, simply a more visible one. There's no question that it's become more prevalent as a topic of social concern, particularly as its health consequences become apparent, including the stark statistic that loneliness can increase someone's risk of premature death by 30%.

Around the world, campaigns, networks and helplines have sprung up to call attention to such consequences. The Australian Coalition to End Loneliness has drawn together research from a variety of universities and agencies to address the physical, psychological, social and economic costs of loneliness in Australia. Over in the USA, bodies like Cigna and the AARP have conducted large-scale surveys measuring subjective feelings of loneliness in American adults, while the University of Hong Kong recently used its Say No to Loneliness project to propose strategies for strengthening intergenerational support and communication among the country's elderly.

Meanwhile in the UK, the cross-disciplinary Campaign to End Loneliness has released formal guidance for local authorities and commissioners to address the issue in older demographics, and dozens of organisations have participated in the Loneliness Lab, devised to combat social isolation among Londoners. The UK government even named an official Loneliness Minister in 2017. Mims Davies, the most recent postholder, kicked off the newly established Loneliness Awareness Week in 2019 with the help of major British charities and businesses.

Thanks to the hard work of these organisations and others, we have comprehensive data on the causes of loneliness, which include physical, social, mental, emotional and

"It's kinship, rather than proximity, that satisfies people's emotional needs."

situational factors. Here at the Future Spaces Foundation, we're particularly interested in the role the built environment plays in facilitating social cohesion. How can we shape the physical spaces around us to improve human connections? This has been a central question for us since we launched in 2013, and one we've examined closely in the past year as part of this research project on the relationship between urban loneliness and the built environment.

The physical backdrop to our lives – the places where we live, work and socialise – has a huge effect on how unified or isolated we feel day to day. From inspiring workplaces to accessible homes to nourishing green spaces, there are many ways urban landscapes can foster positive mental landscapes. This report is an opportunity to question how cities let us down on this front, inadvertently isolating people and exacerbating feelings of loneliness across a range of demographics. By the same measure, it's also an opportunity to explore the power cities have to lift us up, promoting unity and kinship through considered design, policy and social enterprise. The built environment is a transformative mechanism that spans so much of our lived experience. It's crucial that we shape it to build better, healthier, more vital social connections.

A MULTIFACETED DISCUSSION

Addressing loneliness is a complex effort that draws on expertise from many fields, from psychology and social science to public health and the third sector. The built environment industry is likewise cross-disciplinary, spanning architecture, urban design, construction, public policy, engineering, economics and more. A natural starting place for the Foundation's research into urban loneliness was acknowledging the variety of professional spheres associated with this subject and including them in our discussion around it.

In 2019 we held a roundtable to examine the ways that loneliness affects people in urban areas and interrogate the role of the built environment in prompting and potentially relieving loneliness. We invited designers, policy advisers, academics and community organisers to offer both professional and personal perspectives on the issue.

Over the course of the event, the panel engaged in a series of discussions and workshops focused on identifying real-life instances of loneliness – how it comes about, who it affects, and what it's like to experience this within an urban context. The panel's expertise spanned a range of sectors, disciplines and demographics, which was especially useful in terms of considering the experiences of those with disabilities and other marginalising factors, as well as thinking internationally and across ethnic and class lines.

Some of the prominent lines of enquiry that surfaced included the difference between self-imposed and involuntary isolation; the role of technology as both a cause of and a remedy for loneliness; the benefits and limits of public space in fostering meaningful connections; the importance of public engagement and the inclusion of individual voices; the divisive nature of tribalism; and the forms of willpower, funding and organising – both public and private – needed to effect change.

An early line of conversation saw the panellists seek to define the loneliness by describing its antithesis. Initial suggestions included "happiness" and "connection," although Andre Reid, founder of design practice KIONDO, pointed out that "connection isn't necessarily the opposite of loneliness, but more or less the experience that's desired. Loneliness is the inability to share one's entire self with the surrounding world, and could be viewed as a 'force' which reminds us to foster genuine, empathetic connections with our environments."

FSF chairman Ken Shuttleworth welcoming panellists to the Make studio in February 2019.

Panellist Alex Smith jumped in to suggest "togetherness" as the most precise counter to loneliness – not simply engaging with other people but feeling socially connected to them in a way that offers a sense of purpose and belonging. Alex is the founder of The Cares Family, a charity that matches young professionals with older neighbours to encourage intergenerational friendships. He noted the rise of technology and convenience culture and the way these deter natural interaction in public spheres.

"On the way here I bought a coffee from a machine. I had my massive new headphones on, which are soundproofing. I didn't speak to the bus driver, didn't speak to anybody on the Tube. And when I was on the Tube, nobody looked at me. We, in our political economy, have prioritised what's efficient over what's important. We're more interested in what saves time – technology and those sorts of things – than the way we spend time, right? And I mean spending time not just with people you know and are already familiar with, but people who are not like you as well."

As the conversation progressed, the panel's attention turned to the varying scales on which loneliness manifests in people's daily lives. Andrew Stevenson, a doctor of psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University whose research includes a project about community resilience in Guatemala, warned against treating loneliness as an 'all-or-nothing' state.

"As a psychologist, I don't think there are such things as 'the lonely people'. There are people who, at some time during the day, might feel loneliness, and then other times during the day they might feel something else, like togetherness. It's very possible to be lonely with lots of people around you, and that brings up the difference between loneliness and social exclusion. What are the factors which, during those 30 minutes when you weren't lonely, made that?

"Sometimes we focus so much on what makes this bad thing, loneliness. Something we did in Guatemala was try to focus on when things were good. Because things are very difficult living in Guatemala City when you're working on the street. But when things are good, what makes that happen? It's important to get away from homogenising people."

Later, when talk turned to the groups of people most at risk of loneliness, photographer and Sense UK ambassador Ian Treherne brought a personal perspective to the debate by sharing his experience as someone who feels lonely as the result of a disability:

"Last year I was one of the subjects of a book by Nick Duerden called *A Life Less Lonely*. In this book are about 15 different types of people. There are so many different variations of loneliness, myself included. It could be a young person with an illness, an elderly chap who's lost a wife, someone who's got cancer and is no longer at work, and they now can't work and are completely lost.

"It's purpose that drives people. If people have purpose, it keeps them active, involved, engaged. If they don't have that purpose and they're also isolated, it's like a double whammy of being totally cut off. Purpose enables them to get out and distracts them from that isolation and loneliness."

As the day progressed, the discussion shifted towards potential built environment interventions to address loneliness, with panellists debating how to improve day-to-day infrastructure – particularly transport options, housing and public realm – in ways that could imbue citizens with an increased sense of connection, ownership and belonging. Suggestions included rethinking traditional housing typologies to create more community-oriented neighbourhoods, restructuring the planning process to include more engagement of individual voices, and enhancing basic inclusive design principles.

The roundtable was a valuable exercise for exploring the breadth of people affected by loneliness and the potential for private and public spaces to promote meaningful forms of togetherness. The following section of this report examines how some of the themes above intersect across different sectors and locales. It also presents some design-led thinking around the subject from architects at Make.

(Below and opposite) Panellists workshopping ideas for combatting loneliness in the built environment.

VULNERABLE DEMOGRAPHICS

Loneliness can affect anyone, no matter their age or setting, and can express itself as a momentary feeling or a chronic state. The quality of someone's living conditions can be a major factor, as well as their health, financial and social circumstances. Global research identifies the following demographics as particularly at risk, especially within cities.

SENIOR CITIZENS

Statistics around the world show that loneliness disproportionately affects people over 65. Sometimes it's the result of bereavement, retirement or poor health; other times it's limited mobility or feeling out of touch with the pace of modern life. According to a 2016 report by think tank Demos, people over 80 are twice as likely as other age groups to experience severe loneliness – a global public health concern, given the trend of ageing populations and rising proportions of older adults living alone.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

According to the charity Sense, around half of disabled people feel lonely on any given day, with one in four experiencing these feelings every day. Inadequate public services – from insufficient social care to inaccessible public transport – play a significant role in preventing people with disabilities from participating in their communities and pursuing social opportunities. Obstacles also include barriers to employment and a lack of public awareness around disability.

YOUNG ADULTS

A nationwide survey in the UK recently found that 40% of people aged 16 to 24 feel lonely 'often' or 'very often'. And in the USA, a 2019 YouGov poll showed that more than a quarter of millennials (people born between 1982 and 1999) have no close friends. Influences here often include mental health and financial resources. Young mothers, for example, can be particularly vulnerable to loneliness if their income makes childcare difficult to organise, while renters might feel insecure in their tenancy and little sense of belonging to their neighbourhood.

MIGRANTS

Loneliness is a major risk for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers due to language barriers, discrimination, insensitive policies and cultural differences. The loss of status, identity and social networks they might experience in their new country can also be extremely isolating. According to research from British charity The Forum, loneliness is the biggest challenge facing migrants in London.

CAREGIVERS

There are millions of people around the world looking after ill or disabled family members. In the UK alone, three in five people will be unpaid caregivers at some point in their life, according to Carers Trust. This role can be extremely taxing, affecting people's personal finances, employment prospects and social relationships, Recent research from Carers UK notes that eight out of ten carers have felt lonely or isolated as a result of their caring role.
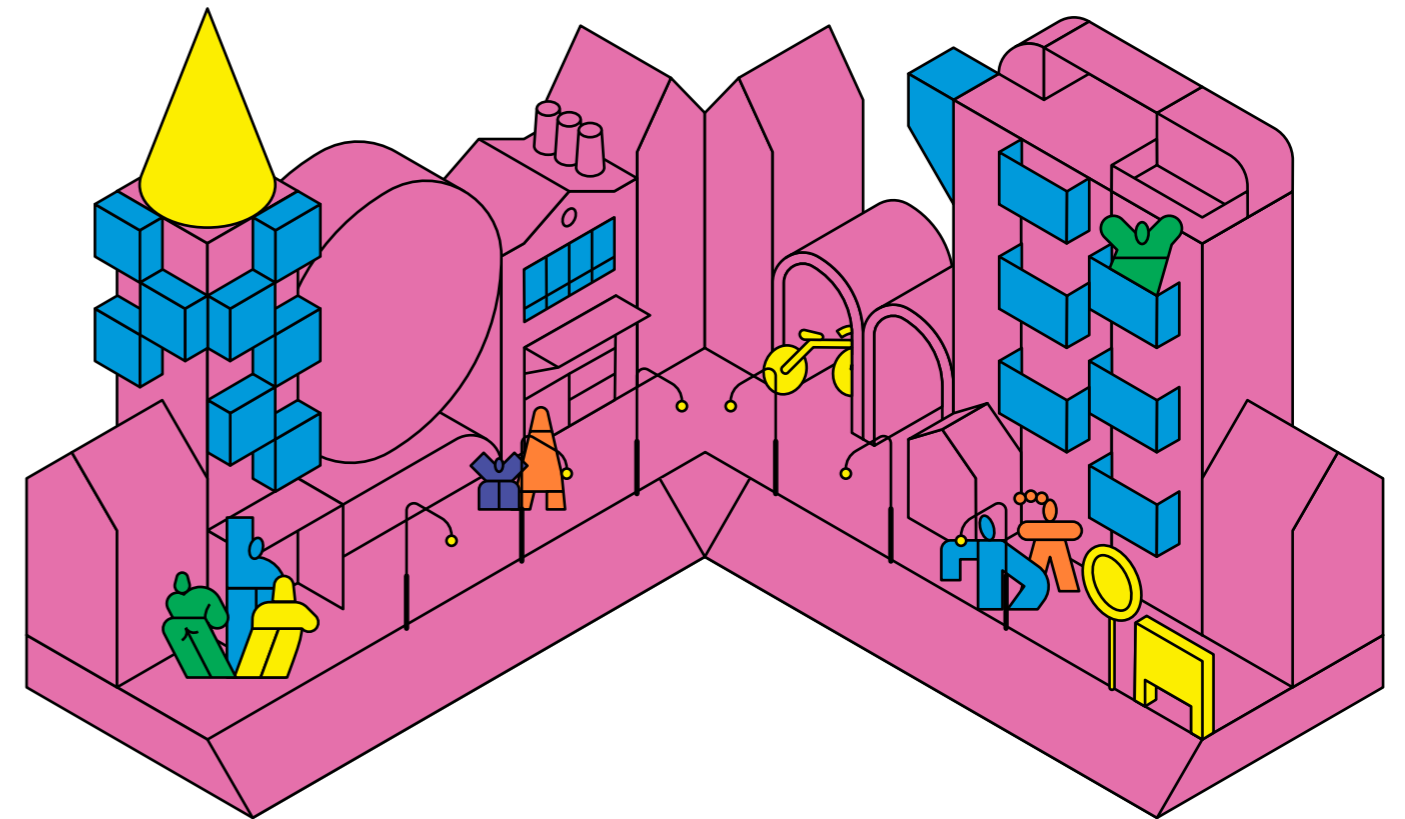
LONELINESS BY THE NUMBERS

The health consequences of loneliness are immense, with the medical establishment linking it to higher risks for heart disease, depression, eating disorders and cognitive decline. These in turn have a serious impact on economies around the world, both in terms of healthcare spending and costs to employers.

£32 billion

Disconnected communities could be costing the UK economy £32 billion every year (Centre for Economics and Business Research)

1 to 5

75% of GPs in the UK see between one and five people a day who have come in primarily because they're lonely (Campaign to End Loneliness)

15

Loneliness, living alone and poor social connections are as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad)

39%

People who feel lonely are 39% more likely to experience severe cold symptoms (University of Houston)

9 million

More than 9 million adults in the UK are either always or often lonely (Co-op and British Red Cross)

£6.7 billion

Social isolation among older Americans costs the US government an extra $6.7 billion in healthcare spending per year (AARP Public Policy Institute)

32% + 29%

Loneliness and social isolation are associated with a 32% increase in risk of stroke and a 29% increase in risk for coronary heart disease (University of York)
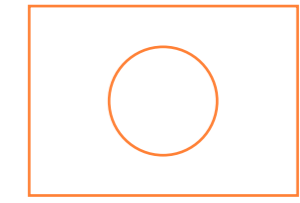
30%

Loneliness can increase the risk of premature death by 30%, putting in on par with obesity and heavy smoking (Brigham Young University)

LONELINESS AROUND THE WORLD

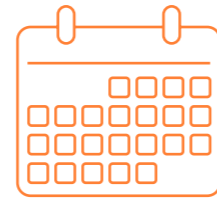## Loneliness isn't bound by age, nationality or geography.

On a global scale, 16 to 24-year-olds tend to feel lonelier than over-75s (BBC Loneliness Experiment)

By 2040, 40% of Japan's inhabitants will be solo dwellers (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research)

6% of adults in the EU have no one to ask for help if they need it (Eurostat)

500,000 older people in the UK go at least five or six days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone (Age UK)
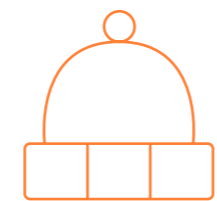
Around the world, empathy levels tend to be higher in people who often feel lonely (BBC Loneliness Experiment)

58% of migrants and refugees in London describe loneliness and isolation as their biggest challenge (The Forum)
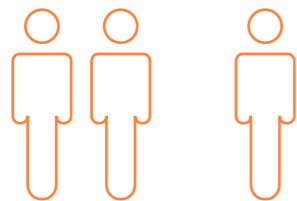
Social isolation is more than twice as high among Europeans in the lowest income bracket as those in the highest (Eurostat)

On balance, winter has not been found to be any lonelier than other times of year (BBC Loneliness Experiment)

In the US, lonely people are more likely to be single and have a personal income of less than $35,000 (University of California, San Diego)

American adults are most at risk of feeling lonely in their late 20s, mid 50s and late 80s (University of California, San Diego)

LONELINESS IN PRACTICE

Housing for the community
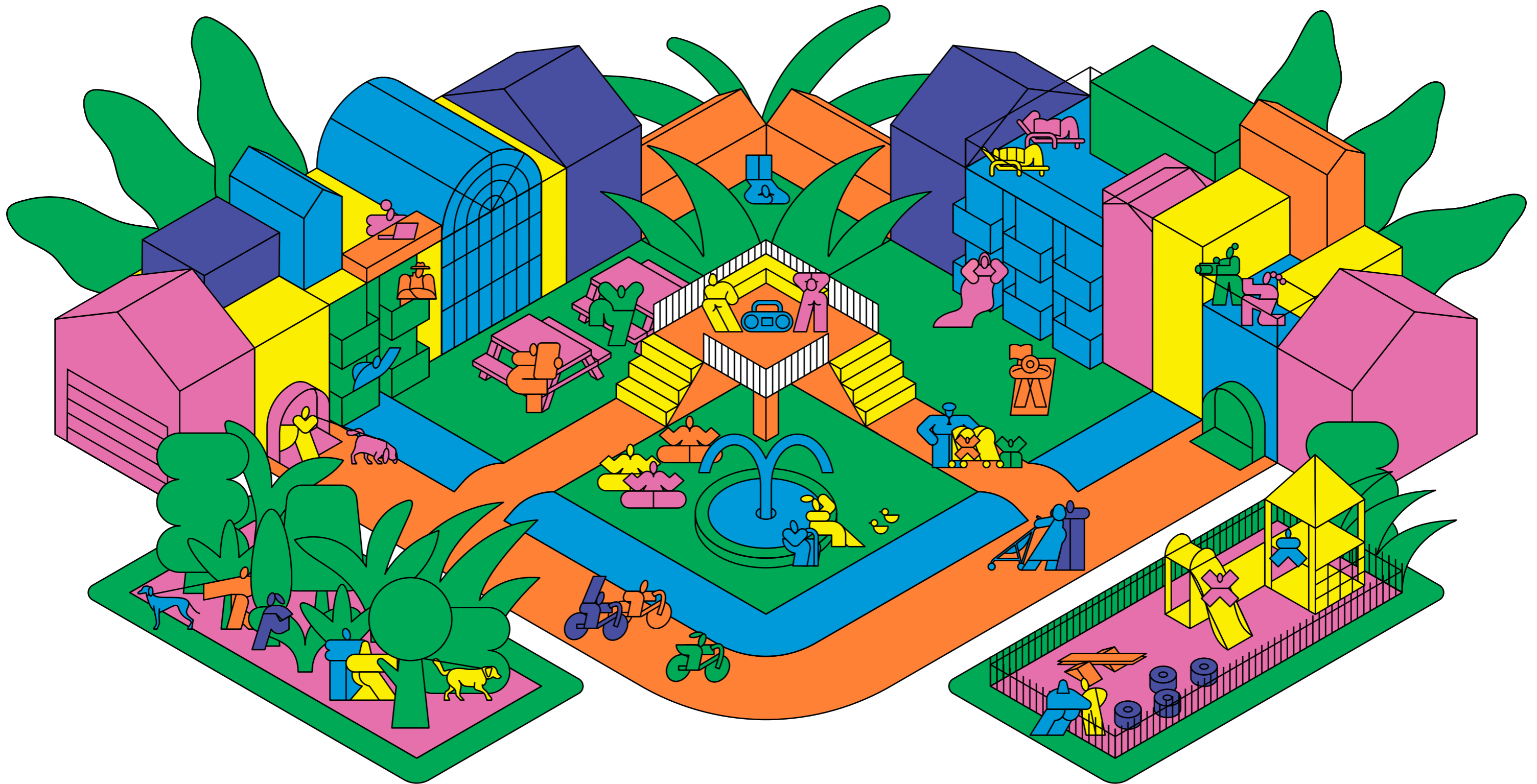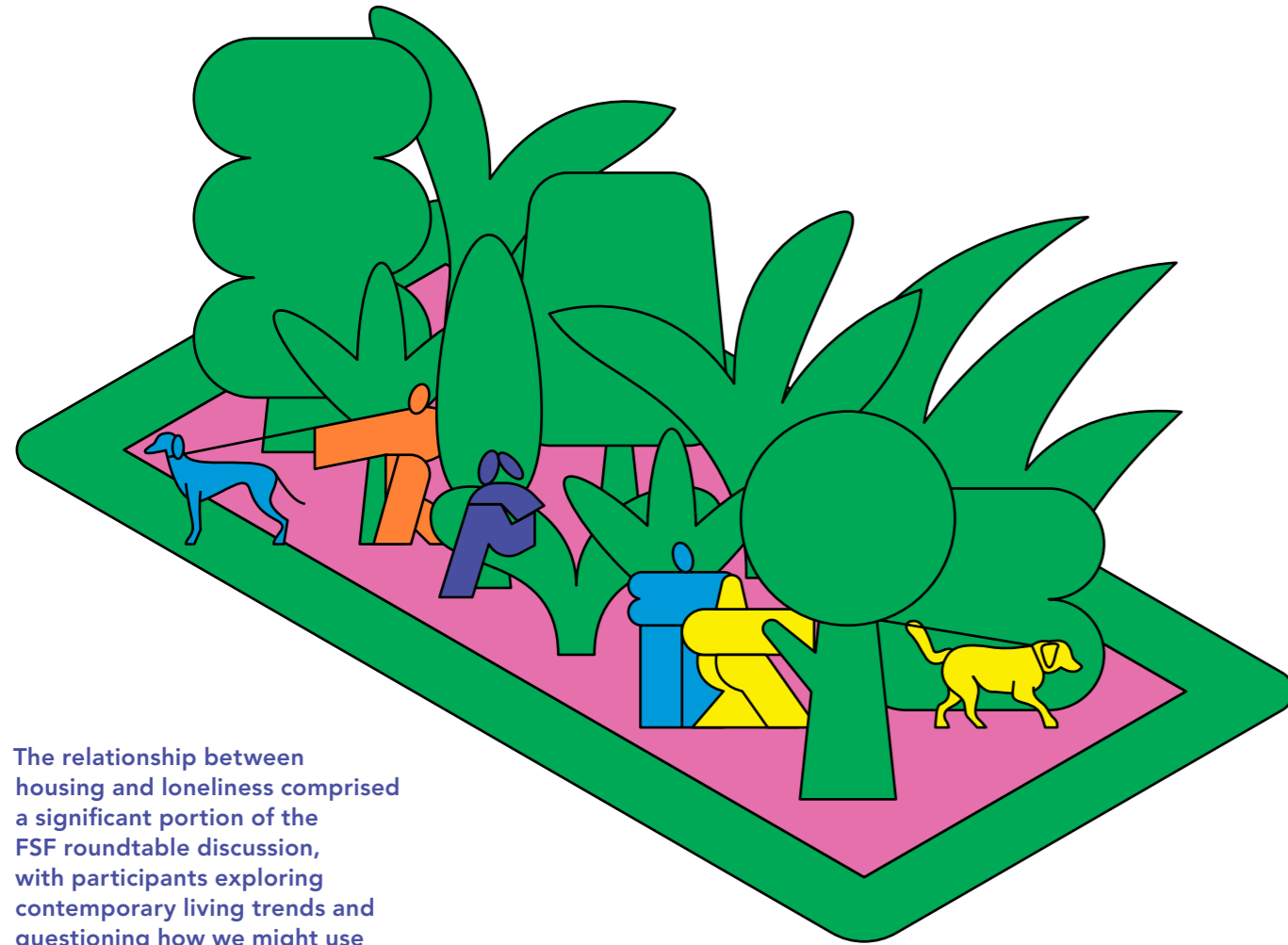
People-focused approaches to housing – from neighbourhood planning to the quality of residences themselves – strengthen citizens' ability to connect and bond.

Substandard housing can increase people's risk for loneliness in a variety of ways.

On a broad scale there's the hazard of poor neighbourhood planning, which can substantially weaken people's capacity to maintain quality relationships with friends and family who don't live in the vicinity. Connectivity between residential areas across a city is key: government reports around the world routinely cite isolated housing as a contributor to loneliness in cities. Citizens on low incomes are at particular risk, since urban rents and house prices are often dictated by the strength of local transport links. This is also a problem for the elderly, the disabled, carers, young parents and anyone else who's provisionally housebound, sequestering them from companions and relatives who might visit more often were it easier to reach them.

Inadequate communal spaces within a neighbourhood or housing development can also heighten loneliness. Recent studies, including a 2015 look at mobility and the built environment, have shown that people who are satisfied with their neighbourhood facilities – for example, local recreation spaces – tend to feel less lonely. The growing push for high-density housing in cities can come at the cost of safe, inviting shared spaces where neighbours can gather and children can play locally. These could be outdoor resources like playgrounds, gardens and courtyards,

or indoor areas like residents' lounges or communal gazebos for local events. Shared spaces are especially important for people who live in care facilities and remote developments, as neighbours tend to be key figures in these residents' social networks.

Finally, the quality of housing itself has a significant impact on people's ability to develop and sustain strong social connections. A 2019 study commissioned by the UK's National Housing Federation shows that more than 8 million people in England live in insecure conditions (for example, unaffordable or overcrowded homes). Meanwhile, 12% of EU homes have structural problems and nearly 600 million people in Asia live in slums, including the thousands of Hong Kong residents who live in subdivided 'coffin' flats, some measuring just 15ft². Homes need to be safe and secure to support residents' health and wellbeing, as well as their capacity and drive for social interaction. They should be places people can be proud of, take ownership over, and feel comfortable inviting friends and family to.

It's crucial to factor in public housing, care homes, assisted living and other forms of social accommodation when considering how to improve urban housing in a way that would address loneliness. A 2016 study on companionship

by Demos found that while loneliness is prevalent among the UK's elderly population, people living in retirement housing feel significantly less lonely than their peers in conventional housing. It's possible that aspects of this model – including on-site amenities and targeted support systems – could be applied to mainstream residential proposals to improve opportunities for social engagement.

It's also important to factor in the rise of solo living, which is prevalent in developed countries like the UK and Japan. According to Age UK, those who live on their own are more likely to experience frequent feelings of loneliness – a crucial point to consider when commissioning and delivering new housing in cities, especially ones with ageing populations.

ROUNDTABLE INSIGHTS

The relationship between housing and loneliness comprised a significant portion of the FSF roundtable discussion, with participants exploring contemporary living trends and questioning how we might use policy and design to migrate towards a more community-focused approach to housing.

Panellist Joel Charles touched on the need for governments to prioritise considered neighbourhood planning as cities grow and densify. Joel is the director of government relations and impact at Future Care Capital, a charity that undertakes research to help shape health and social care policy in the UK.

"I have always been fascinated by the new towns that were built to relocate people who lost their homes during the Second World War. One of the design considerations was how to encourage a sense

of community through the built environment. Shopping hatches, open recreational spaces and leisure facilities were integrated into housing areas to act as focal points for residents to come together. The government should look closely at the national planning framework to consider enhanced provisions for community spaces in built-up urban centres.

"Age and disability should not be overlooked when designing new communities. As our population continues to age, it is more important than ever to look at how people can live healthy independent lives in later life. Future Care Capital has

long since argued that planning policy should ensure our homes and communities are designed for age and mobility so that more people are able to take care of themselves and their families at home for longer."

Andrew Stevenson brought up the "family-oriented discourse that dominates housing," a topic he's encountered in his research into urban living.

"Houses are generally and historically places built for family units, and there can be a sense of inflexibility to whether that kind of accommodation can be built in a way that's not centred purely on the accepted unit of the family. An important

"What would housing look like if it were community-oriented rather than family-oriented?"

question to ask ourselves is 'What would housing look like if it were community-oriented rather than family-oriented?' It's a different way of imagining a house, with an alternative kind of placemaking. Maybe there would be fewer private spaces and more shared spaces, not just inside the buildings but outside too. This idea of a space to reflect a ring-fenced family unit might change to a model with shared spaces built in, like play areas and parks. Perhaps there could be spaces that can be booked and become temporarily private and then go back to being public. That happens in some workplaces already, so the idea could be extended into housing as well."

Lee Mallett, writer and urbanist, noted that rethinking traditional housing typologies could be a starting point for

delivering this community-based vision of housing.

"Rather than individual buildings on sites, you might combine a variety of home offers within a larger block to serve different people's needs. Within a Victorian mansion block, for example, you could have lots of different home types in an efficient arrangement of shared spaces and private spaces that deliver the variety of homes people actually need. That building form might enable us to think about using cities themselves in a more efficient way – you could put these slightly

denser building forms closer to transport modes and reduce the need for people to use vehicles. This would have several advantages over traditional house building models, which simply deliver a market-oriented value for the house builder. New building forms could deliver more benefits."
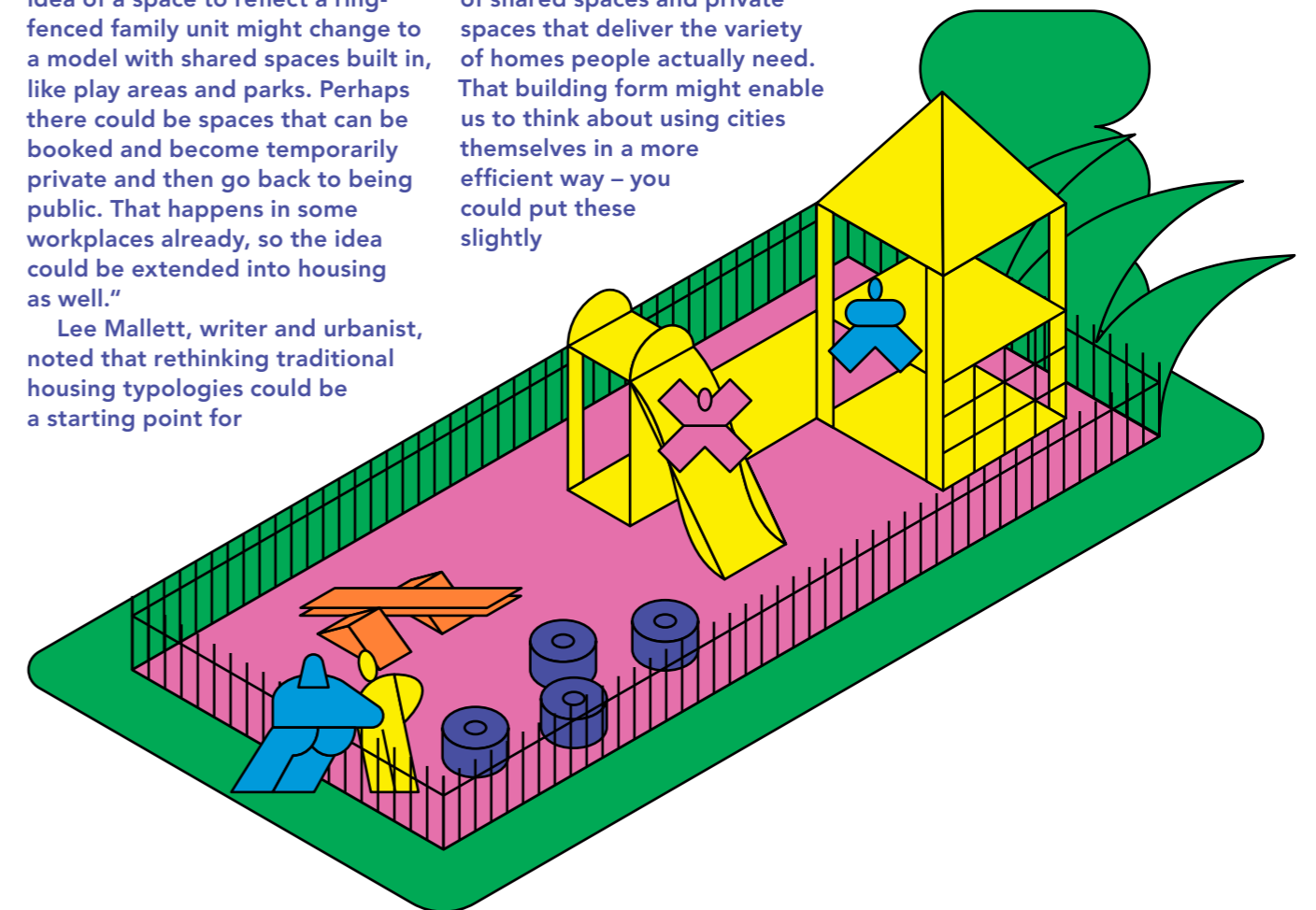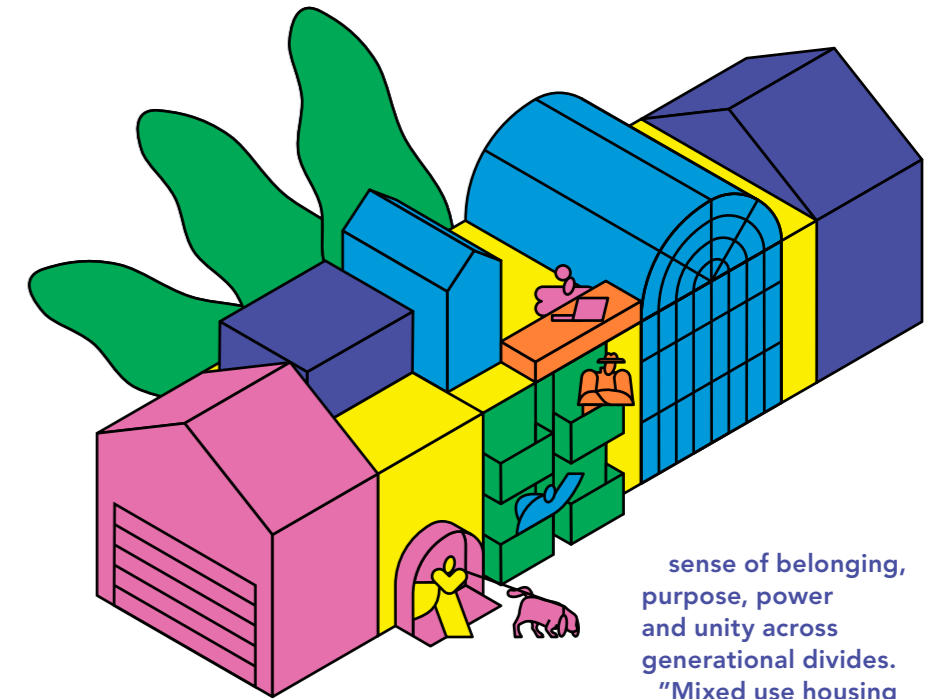
"We're pushing quite hard for a better living solution, not a worse one. It's important that we don't allow unscrupulous development that reinterprets this model as a way to cram more people into the same amount of space and get more money for it."

Exploring new residential typologies is something Make Architects has been doing with its research into 'shared living', a term coined to describe a new generation of housing developments that emphasise communal living and offer amenities beyond the normal scope of a shared apartment or house. Architect Imogen Webb shared how her participation in this research involved examining the issue of loneliness in relation to housing.

"I was working on a private rental co-living scheme aimed at 20 to 30-year-old single people, and I began thinking about how the idea of shared living could be expanded to benefit people of different ages and stages of life. The idea is to put some of the functions you need for living outside of private zones to promote social interaction. You might offer shared kitchens or roof gardens or laundry rooms or cinemas for residents to use together – really nice spaces that are better and bigger than anything you'd have access to when living in an individual flat. Something that started coming out of my research was this whole issue around loneliness and how we could promote community within a housing development while still making sure the private living spaces are suitable for the types of people who live in them, including families and the elderly.

"We're pushing quite hard for a better living solution than what's currently available, not a worse one. It's important that we don't allow unscrupulous development that reinterprets this model as a way to cram more people into the same amount of space and get more money for it. There are some examples of co-living that feel like student halls. It's actually substandard."

Indeed, research around communal living emphasises the importance of social intent: to truly democratise housing and foster meaningful relationships between residents, the community itself needs to have a stake in their development or neighbourhood's operation. Daniel Blyden, lead designer at Impact Hub Birmingham, brought up the utility of technology in engendering this kind of participatory model.

"Open Systems Labs is planning software from the same team that developed the WikiHouse model, which enables digitally fabricated homes with replaceable parts. They realised that all the structures in the planning system need to be disrupted for innovation to truly occur. So, their technology uses data from lots of different sources to simplify that planning process and make it much easier for people to gain planning permission for their own self-built development.

"The architect Walter Segal developed the idea of self-building power. People who build their houses together know their neighbours better, because they've been through that journey of building a community together. When people are involved in the process of making a place, they have a different sentiment towards it and a different sense of belonging."

Alex Smith rounded out the discussion by commenting on the importance of housing that's inclusive of multiple generations. His work with The Cares Family is focused on establishing a sense of belonging, purpose, power and unity across generational divides.

"Mixed use housing is something we have the power to change. I think there's a Northern European, Anglo-Saxon fault line that comes down to individualism at the end of the day, but in Southern Europe and much of Asia, their sense of family is such that they wouldn't, for example, put an older person into a home. The broader community is something that pulls people in and doesn't push people out. That cross-generational thinking, either within or beyond families, is important when we think about people having space to call their own. The built environment is fundamental to this."

RECOMMENDATIONS

From our dialogue, it became clear that improving urban housing in a way that materially reduces people's risk for loneliness means rethinking methods for planning and design, as well as prevailing attitudes towards private space and community life. In particular, we need to consider how to embed the health benefits of quality social connections across the residential sector, and who to empower to ensure any new measures foster meaningful opportunities for togetherness. This will require the concerted efforts of designers, policymakers, researchers, community organisers and more. The Future Spaces Foundation urges these parties to commit to the following:

COMMUNITY-FOCUSED APPROACHES TO PLANNING

National planning frameworks should earmark special funding for housing schemes designed to reduce loneliness among residents. Local authorities, meanwhile, should adopt planning policies that maximise opportunities for neighbours to get to know each other, paying particular attention to the demographics and geographies they represent. Evaluating proposals to build or redevelop neighbourhoods on the strength of their efforts to address social isolation, for example, would embed principles of social cohesion on a residential scale.
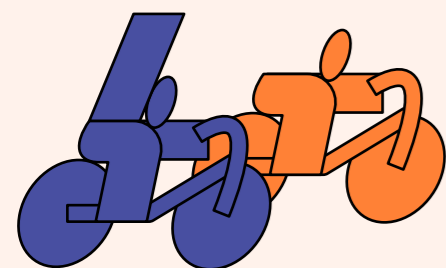
EXPANDED SHARED LIVING MODELS

Architects and urban designers should explore and embrace shared living models that facilitate interaction and relationships among residents. Collaboration with developers and planners would help develop a workable price point for these models so they're inclusive and address the specific needs of the communities they serve.

STATE FUNDING TO TARGET LONELINESS

Governments should fund research into the impact of housing schemes and community projects that seek to reduce loneliness and support social connections. They should also identify demographics at risk of loneliness and allocate funding for programmes aimed at addressing the issue on a local level – for example, meet-and-greets for people who are new to an area.
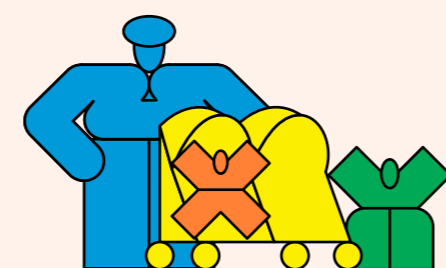
NEIGHBOURHOOD SAFETY MEASURES

By investing in measures that keep neighbourhoods safe, approachable and accessible, local authorities and private developers can ensure residents feel secure and able to socialise in the local vicinity. Adequate funding should be allocated for the maintenance of residential streets and approaches, as well as communal areas within individual developments, including outdoor spaces like playgrounds.

STRENGTHENED RENTERS' RIGHTS

The UK's Office for National Statistics notes that renters are more likely to feel lonely than homeowners. Governments should seek to improve renters' security, and in turn their wellbeing, with strengthened rights surrounding tenure and longevity. Relaxed pet policies, for example, could help foster companionship in vulnerable demographics, particularly older people: research by care provider Anchor shows that 62% of over-65s in the UK say living with a pet makes them feel less lonely.

IMPROVED DATA COLLECTION

Comprehensive data sets that catalogue residential schemes designed to address loneliness among particular demographics would help inspire and enable designers, developers and house builders to pursue similar projects. Governments, charities, local councils, social researchers and digital analysts should collaborate to build such databases and explore how this information can be used to benefit at-risk residents.
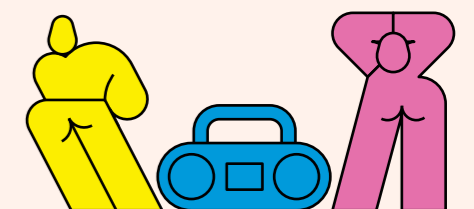
DESIGN-LED THINKING

Concept sketch of a communal garden within a shared living development. The aim is to provide residential accommodation for people across all stages of life and household arrangements, offering a variety of private spaces along with shared ones – from kitchens to games rooms to terraces – that encourage residents to socialise, share resources and build community. Communal gardens make more efficient use of overall space than multiple private gardens and promote socialising that might not happen otherwise. (Sketch by Frank Filskow)
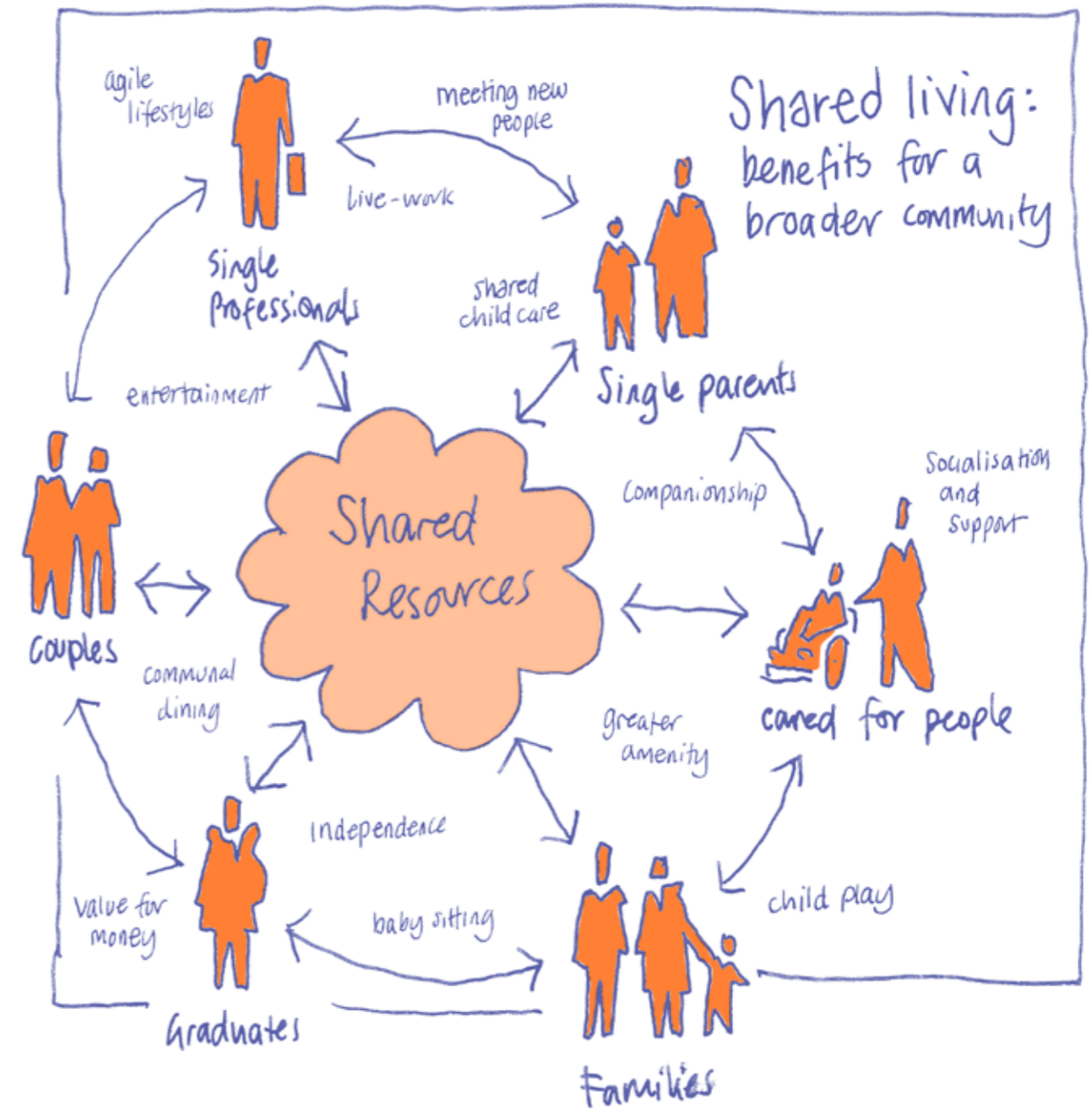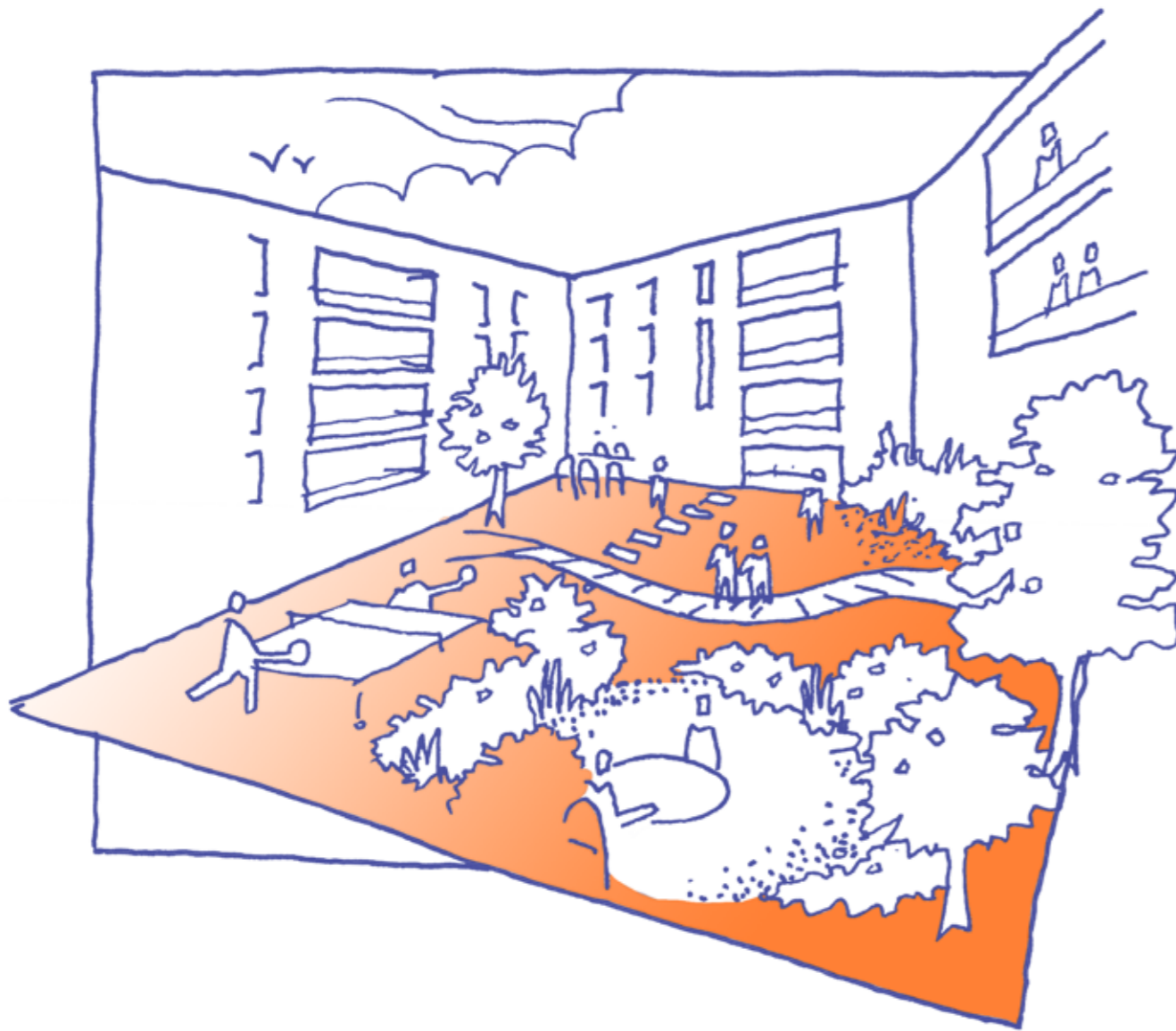
Diagram exploring the community benefits of shared living. Make's idea for shared living takes inspiration from historic living models across the globe while embracing the growing contemporary value placed on shared experiences. Housing developments where people of all ages and family types live alongside each other have the potential to meet both individual and collective needs and to encourage stronger communities through shared resources. (Sketch by Frank Filskow)
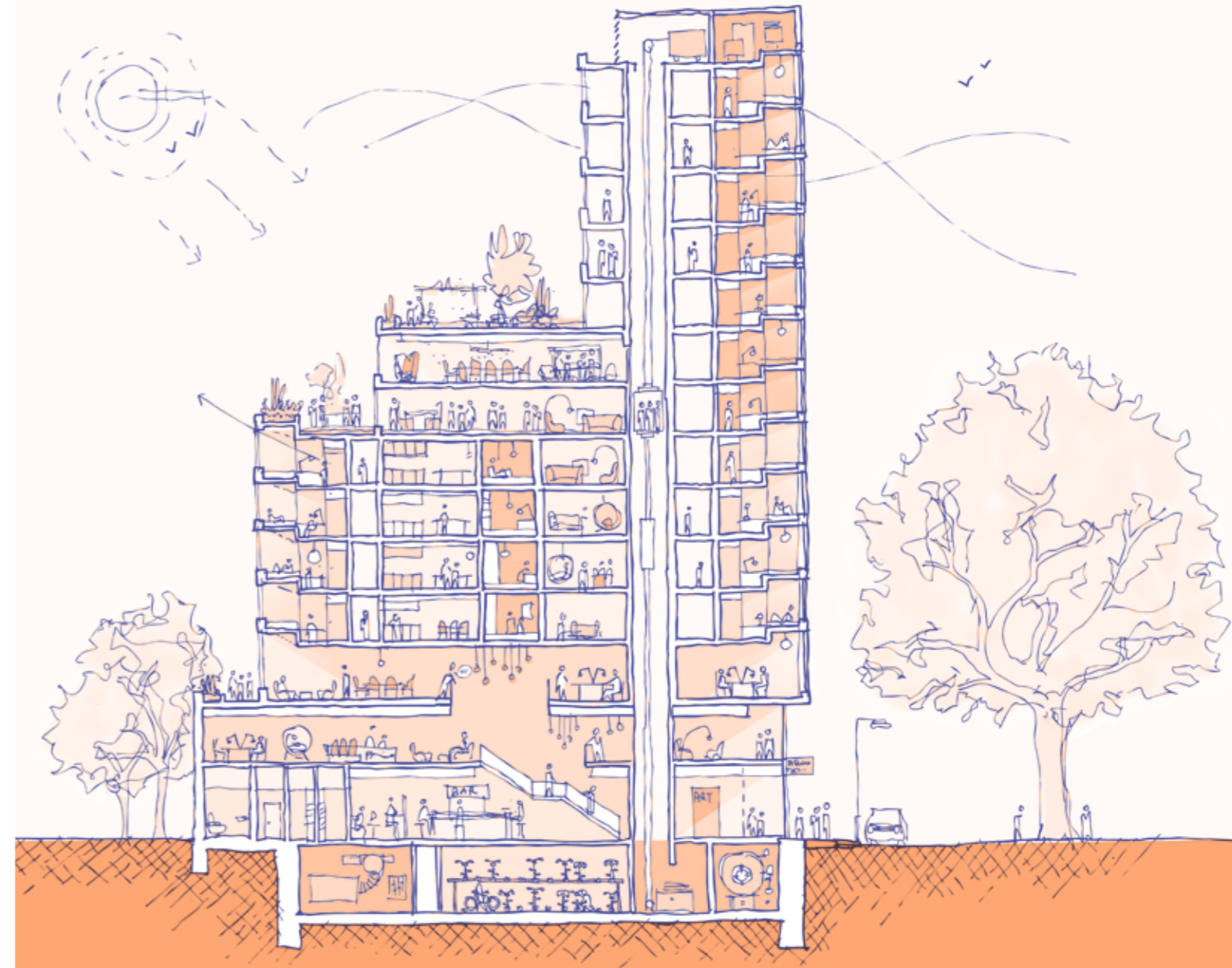
Illustration showing how centralised shared spaces might be realised. A multi-level lobby and atrium could include a coffee bar, workspace for residents, and areas for community events like art exhibitions and classes. On the residential floors, shared kitchens and lounges are at the heart of the plan. Above these are large event spaces that can accommodate group meet-ups, formal or informal, and a bar and games room. These open onto large terraces for outdoor community interaction. (Sketch by Frank Filskow)

Diagrams indicating shared spaces as the heart of a shared living development. Communal areas should be central to any shared living proposal and in some cases could literally form the centre of the plan, with dwellings arranged around communal spaces and lifts opening onto them. With communal spaces included in the arrival sequence and arranged vertically though the floors, people are drawn together across the full volume of the building. (Sketches by Balveer Mankia)

Public space as a social resource

Shared public spaces draw communities together and provide important opportunities for social engagement.
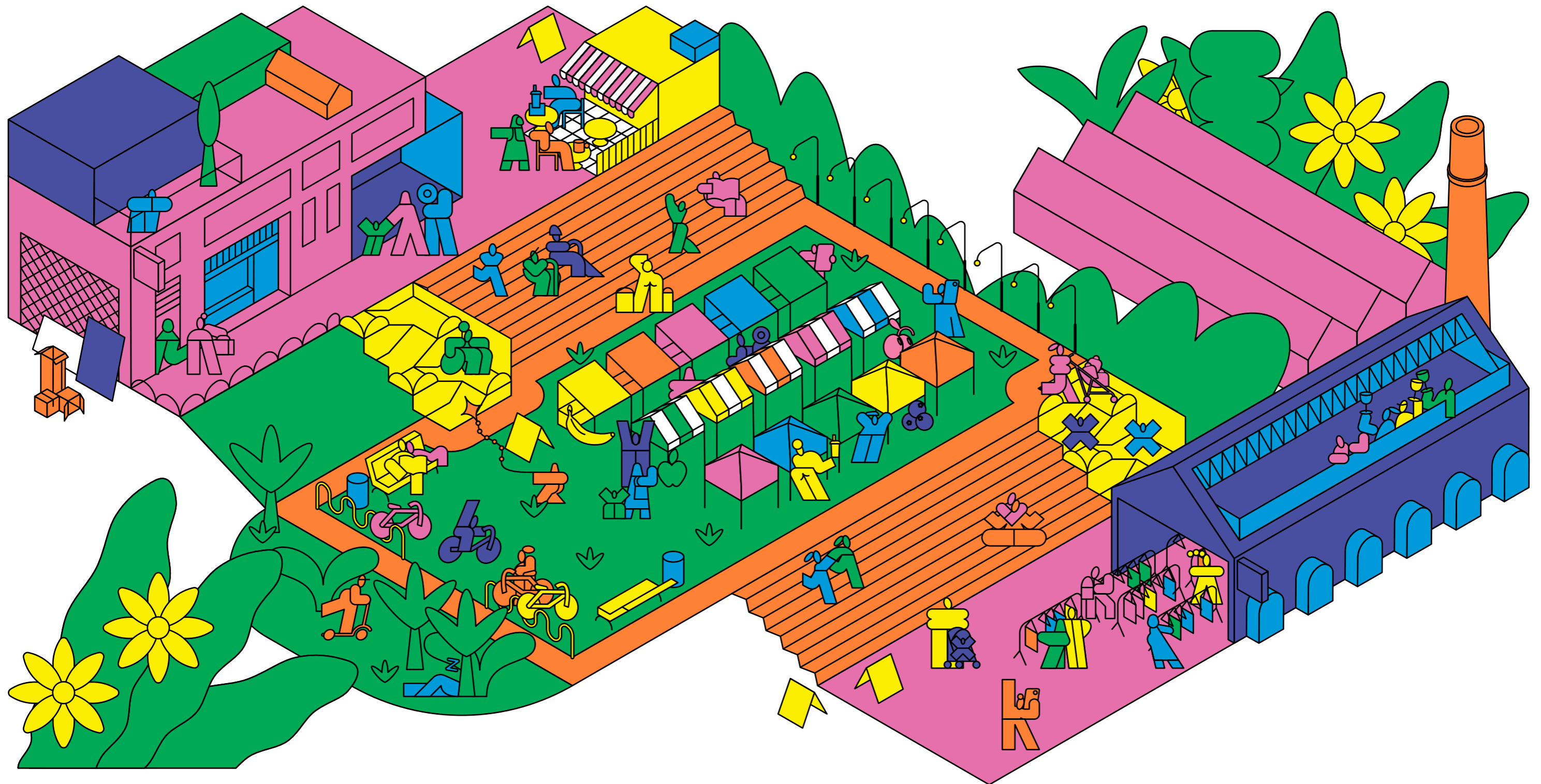
When people don't have ownership over the public spaces in their community, their ability to establish social ties can suffer.

Corporate intrusion in the public realm is a significant factor in this. The private landowners behind POPS, for example – the international acronym for 'privately owned public spaces' – have the power to constrain the use of outdoor areas like plazas and parks, often at the expense of local communities. Sometimes constraints come in the form of unaccommodating amenities, like a lack of seating, which could have the effect of marginalising a garden square that might otherwise be a site for kids to play and parents to socialise. Other times it's a question of access, with owners limiting public opening hours in favour of private engagements; or behaviour, with restrictions on activity in the space, like ball games or protests.

Research by Guardian Cities suggests that POPS are on the rise internationally. It's important to consider this trend in the context of their capacity to sideline important sites for community bonding. As academic geographer Bradley L Garrett has noted, "when space is controlled, and especially when the public is unclear about what the legal or acceptable boundaries of activity are, we tend to police ourselves, to monitor our behaviour and to limit our interactions." At the same time, attention should also be paid to the important role POPS play in

serving the gaps that councils can't always fill.

There's the erosion of high streets, town halls and other civic infrastructure to consider as well. From London to New York to Tokyo, spaces for leisure, commerce and municipal activities have steadily degenerated in recent decades as a result of dwindling funds, changing retail models and increased property prices. A quarter of pubs in the UK have closed since 2001, and in 2019 the average vacancy rate for shops rose to 10.3%. Meanwhile, cities across the United States and China have been hit by a mass closure of malls and shopping centres in the past five years. These kinds of spaces not only offer sites for individuals to shop, exercise and imbibe, but also play a pivotal role in creating shared experiences between friends, relatives and colleagues, giving them a place to interact and connect.

Internationally, many cities have also seen the decline of local community sites like public libraries, playgrounds and youth clubs, typically as a result of government cuts. Hundreds of urban recreation centres around the United States have passed from public to private ownership, while more than 600 youth clubs in the UK have shut their doors since 2012. These sites are crucial for community cohesion, and play

an important role in facilitating positive engagement among vulnerable groups, including young parents, the elderly and those on lower incomes. A trip to a day centre, for example, lets adults with learning disabilities visit with peers while giving their carers a chance to mingle. Without robust local services in play, people across the spectrum face an increased risk of social seclusion.

Urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg's concept of 'third places' – open areas where people can socialise on neutral ground – is a useful consideration in any conversation about the role of public space in preventing and reducing loneliness. Whether they're community gardens, farmers' markets, leisure centres or dog parks, third places have the capacity to establish a sense of community on a local scale, giving people a place to explore new social experiences and a chance to feel like they belong.
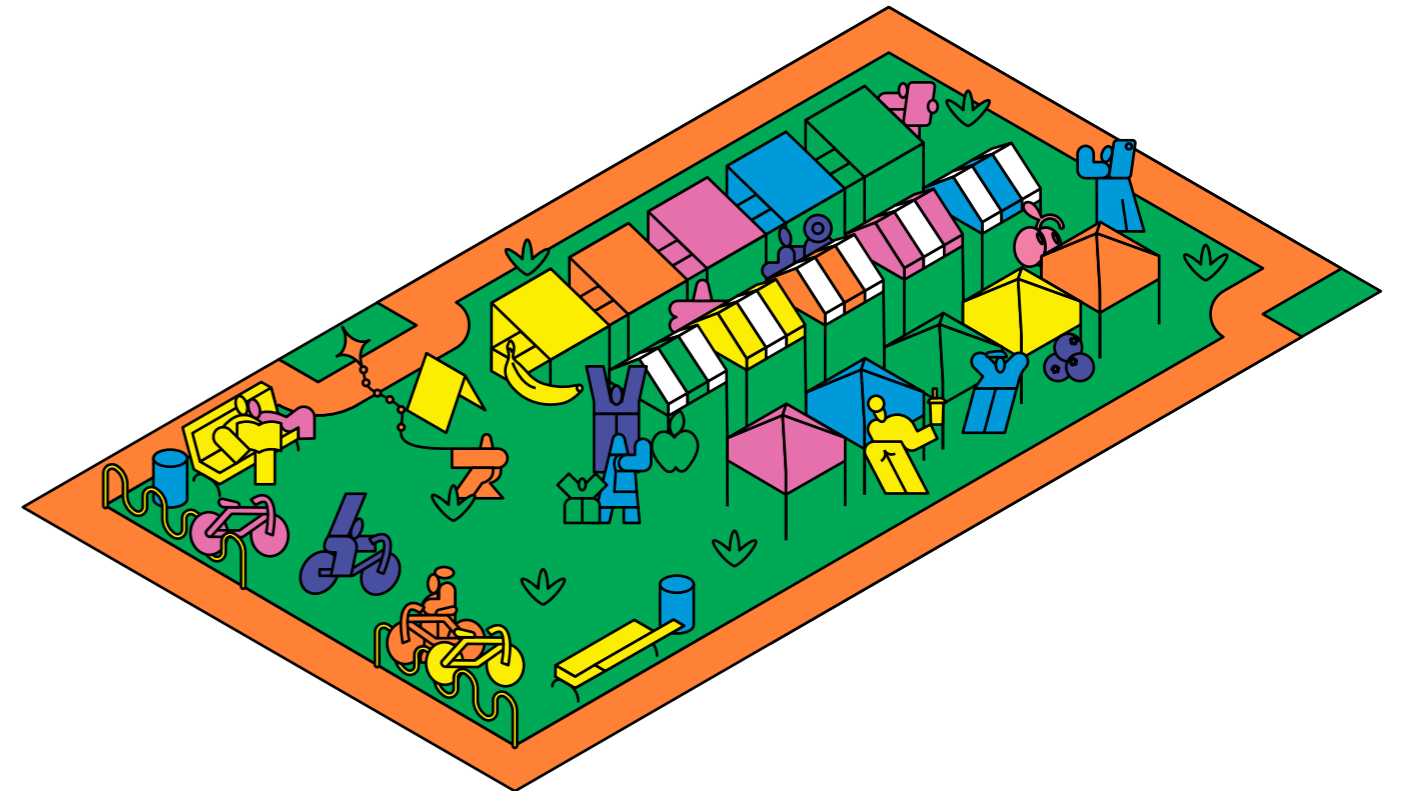
ROUNDTABLE INSIGHTS

A recurring topic of conversation at the Foundation's roundtable was the capacity for public space to influence people's sense of togetherness on both a personal and collective scale. Panellists explored the particular features that help make a town square or high street a beloved site, and discussed how these spaces could be shaped to improve community participation and cohesion.

Architect Peter Greaves, who leads the Foundation's student design competition series, drew a connection between urban milieus and people's capacity to interact.

"For 500,000 years humans lived in small, close communities where we were regularly meeting the same people. It's only been for around 2,000 years that we've lived in large-ish cities, and only 200 or 300 years that we've lived in the metropolises that exist today. There's been a fundamental change to the amount of people in one space and how all those people interact.

I wonder if urban loneliness is in some way a response to that scale.

"To tackle this, we should think about our approach to town squares in particular. It's not just the square itself that's important; it's what defines and surrounds it too. The town square should be a shared public place, with easy access to a high street that includes public services and is surrounded by new models of housing. Addressing loneliness has got to be a holistic thing."

Architect Katy Ghahremani elaborated on the advantages of a robust high street, focusing on "the civic function of retail." Her insight on the topic stems from her work at Make, where she leads mixed use projects like the redevelopment of Hornsey Town Hall, which will re-establish an historic North London municipal building as a community site with new public spaces including a café and an arts centre.

"I'm interested in the role of retail as an extension of the public realm. Thinking commercially about the issue of loneliness could potentially open up some more options and answers that we can develop. I was very lucky to go on a retail study trip to Tokyo, which is known culturally for its issues with loneliness. It was interesting to see how retail centres there were beginning to respond to this. More staid developers are all about commercialising every single square foot of space to drive revenue, but what I saw in Japan, and what I think is coming here in the West, is a push to be more generous with space. Let's create more private public realm, if you like, but fund activities that we can trust to bring people together. I think it's about the role of the
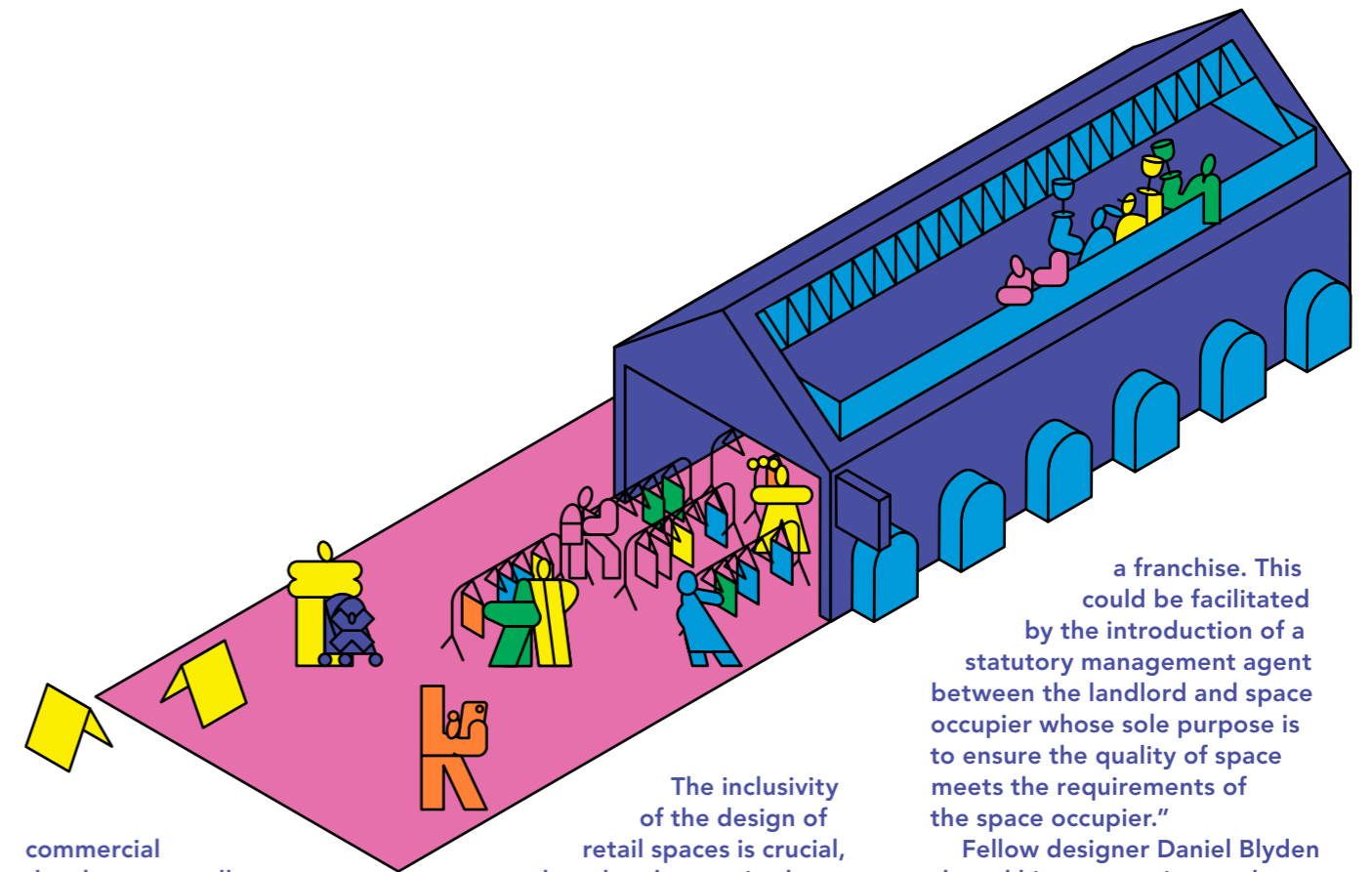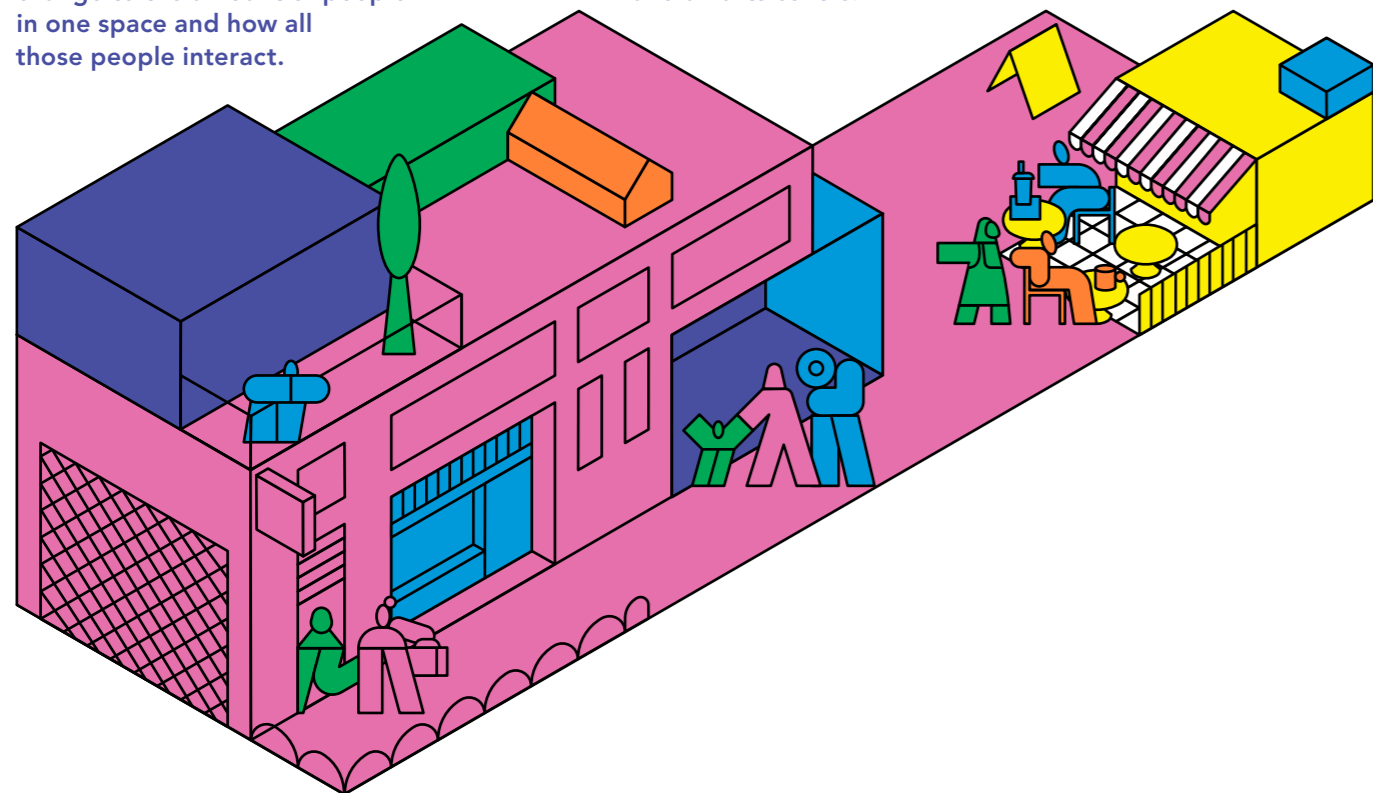
commercial developer as well as the role of the local authority."

Andre Reid agreed that retail spaces can foster a form of "positive consumerism" that facilitates meaningful social connections, an idea he's explored in his role as director of community design platform KIONDO, working in partnership with PoPIN UK.

"Retail spaces can have a positive impact on loneliness.

The inclusivity of the design of retail spaces is crucial, though – the required baseline should be lifted to ensure spaces are more accessible than we see now. And there's an interesting tension to consider for independent shops, like local start-ups in which people from that area want to create a space but don't necessarily have the funds. In this case, maybe we should put the responsibility on the landlord to provide equal or even better-quality space than

a franchise. This could be facilitated by the introduction of a statutory management agent between the landlord and space occupier whose sole purpose is to ensure the quality of space meets the requirements of the space occupier."

Fellow designer Daniel Blyden shared his perspective on the social value of markets in particular, referencing his research into London's East Street Market as part of Lendlease's Loneliness Lab project.

"The market isn't a contested space; you can't tell anyone they don't belong there, because it's public. But the community can see how it's being gradually degraded, and they're losing the passion for it. A lot of the traders mentioned

"The market isn't a contested space; you can't tell anyone they don't belong there, because it's public."

the big retailers setting up right next door. They see this as a huge threat and feel the council hasn't given them the infrastructure that they need, which affects the service and energy they bring to the place. I think this is a microcosm of the loneliness epidemic we see in our public spaces. Irresponsible development means people miss out on chances to connect."

In Andrew Stevenson's experience, the versatility of spaces like markets can hugely influence a community's sense of ownership and belonging.

"It's important to have spaces in cities that are malleable and can be used for lots of things at the same time. A market's a good example because it's a place for selling and buying as well as community activism and learning projects. During my research in Central America, I came across a market called 'The Terminal'. It's several things at the same time. It's a marketplace; it's a tip where people recycle plastic bottles; it's also a bus depot and a meeting space. It looks a mess, really, but the locals had an enormous sense of belonging because they had their own use of it, you know? In different cultures and in different settings, malleable shared spaces have great value for people."

Several panellists mentioned the benefits of extending this kind of flexibility to restaurants and shops, potentially through the declassification of use, with the aim of expanding public access across the day – for example, allowing a gallery to sell artwork and operate as a café or co-working hub during the day and then become an event space in the evening. Andre shared his experience overseeing flexible pop-up stores in Birmingham that host events for a variety of demographics, including those facing an increased risk of loneliness.

"The event spaces were rented out for various minority communities, including people who suffered from Alzheimer's and autism. They used it as a creative space and were able to come
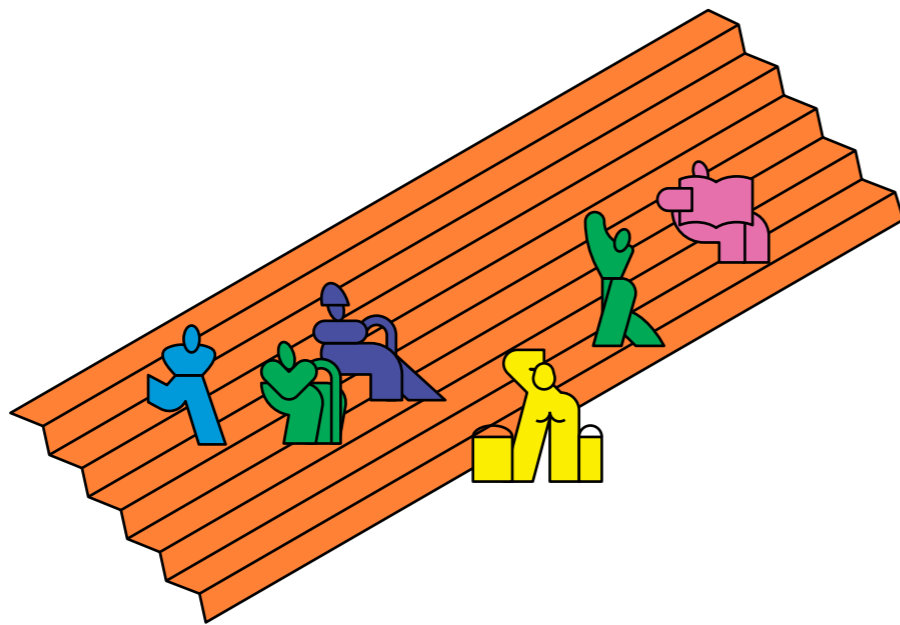
together as a community within it. Being able to change the use of retail spaces means you can use them much more dynamically. This in turn enables us to create more meaningful spaces intrinsic to our human needs for wholesome connection, made possible through the architecture of our spaces."

Sara Veale, managing editor at the Future Spaces Foundation, concluded the discussion by emphasising the importance of allowing the users of such spaces to have a say in their design and operation, not simply the architects and landlords.
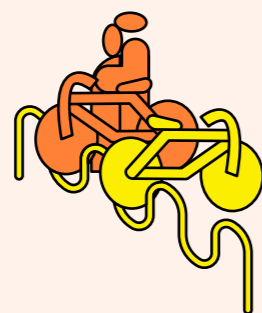
"We need to rethink how public engagement happens in the planning process. It's crucial we include the voices of people who actually suffer from loneliness so they have a chance to say, 'I'm lonely for these reasons, and these are concrete ways that could help me'. Quite often the engagement process is not open to individuals; it's open to organisations that are supposed to be the voice of individuals, and that's where people's needs can fall by the wayside."

"We need to rethink how public engagement happens in the planning process. It's crucial we include the voices of people who actually suffer from loneliness so they have a chance to say, 'I'm lonely for these reasons, and these are concrete ways that could help me.'"

RECOMMENDATIONS

Much of the roundtable discussion around the relationship between public realm and loneliness concerned the growing conflation between public and privately owned space in cities, with panellists exploring how to use the upward trend of privatisation to promote, rather than prevent, community bonding. Funding, design and local engagement are all critical factors in ensuring public areas – from shopping precincts to community centres – foster social connections in an inclusive and effective way. The Foundation calls on landowners, policymakers, designers and community representatives to:

INCORPORATE MORE THIRD PLACES WITHIN CITIES

Open areas where people can socialise without necessarily spending money play an important role in nurturing personal relationships. Local authorities and urban designers should actively seek to design third places – including markets, gardens, plazas, parks and playgrounds – into urban neighbourhoods so communities have safe, vibrant public places where they can spend time with friends, family and neighbours. Policymakers should consider adopting strategies for creating and funding these hubs with a view towards encouraging social connections in the community.

EXPAND REPRESENTATION OF LOCAL VOICES

Governments should offer people a direct say in their area's social resources by specifying higher levels of community engagement as a requirement for planning consent in public realm projects. This effort could work in concert with schemes that aim to address loneliness on a local level – for example, an ambassadorial programme in which individuals from vulnerable demographics are recruited to help identify sites that could be improved.

EXPLORE NEW MODELS FOR FUNDING

Instead of relying solely on public resources to fund important community spaces like leisure centres and high streets, urban authorities should explore opportunities to team up with businesses, charities, philanthropists and investors to deliver this capital. Collaborative cross-sector models, including private/public alliances, can help offer more people access to the youth groups, library services, playgrounds and more that help prevent loneliness and social seclusion.
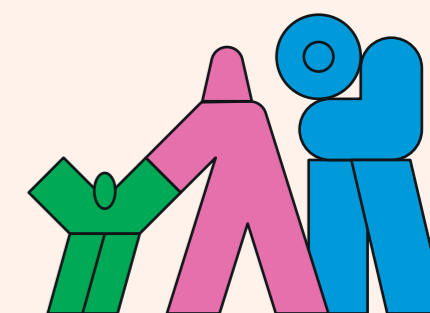
PROGRAMME IN COMMUNITY EVENTS

Community spaces should include social events programmes that enable them to be used to their full potential. Local authorities and local businesses could team up to organise activities aimed at improving people's social networks, from targeted events like block parties to more organic opportunities for socialising (for example, food markets, pop-up shops, craft fairs and exercise classes). Ongoing citizen-led projects are especially important to incorporate: a 2010 study of Dutch neighbourhoods found that shared concerns like community gardens encouraged more participation among neighbours than one-off events like fêtes.

MAKE INFORMATION ACCESSIBLE

Governments should collect and publish information on urban public realm and community hubs to promote transparency around the history, operation and future of these spaces. The mayor of London, for example, recently released guidelines on how the city's plazas and squares are governed in an effort to address concerns around POPS. Authorities should also work with researchers to make data on community services more widely available. This will help councils, urban planners and businesses target their efforts towards the groups most vulnerable to loneliness, including those with circumstances that prevent them from attending everyday social activities.

SAFEGUARD THIRD PLACES

Given their power to influence land uses, local authorities and planners should actively support and safeguard community spaces, including third places and public realm. Any decisions to change these spaces should seek to promote social cohesion and factor in any potential loss of social resources.

DESIGN-LED THINKING

Concept sketch for a vibrant urban development with a mix of uses, including living, working and leisure. The proposal includes a main public realm with restaurants, bars, covered seating and abundant greenery, plus flexible space for markets, art installations, concerts and games that respond to growing customer demands for diverse and engaging environments. With its blurred lines between public and private, the design creates an inclusive place with a distinctive civic character. The aim is to create a piece of the city where everyone is welcome. (Sketch by Grigor Grigorov)
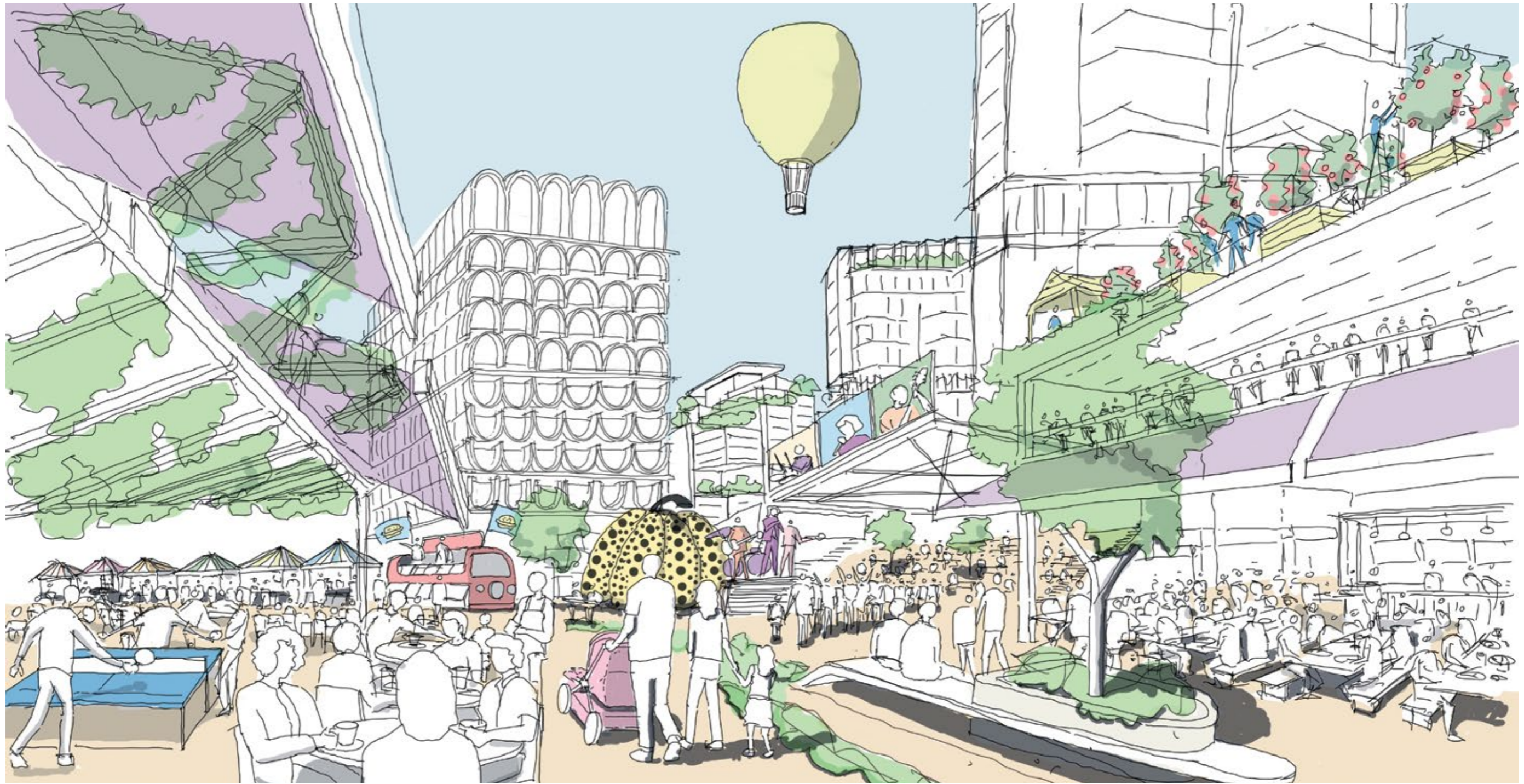
Sketch of The Yard, a concept to draw in production spaces that aren't always readily available in city centres, like kitchens, art studios and workshops. Pictured here is a bike workshop connected to a café, with co-working space above and a restaurant opposite that can also be used for crafts like pottery lessons. The concept developed out of recent research about maker spaces disappearing in urban areas and emphasises local, independent enterprise. (Sketch by Grigor Grigorov)
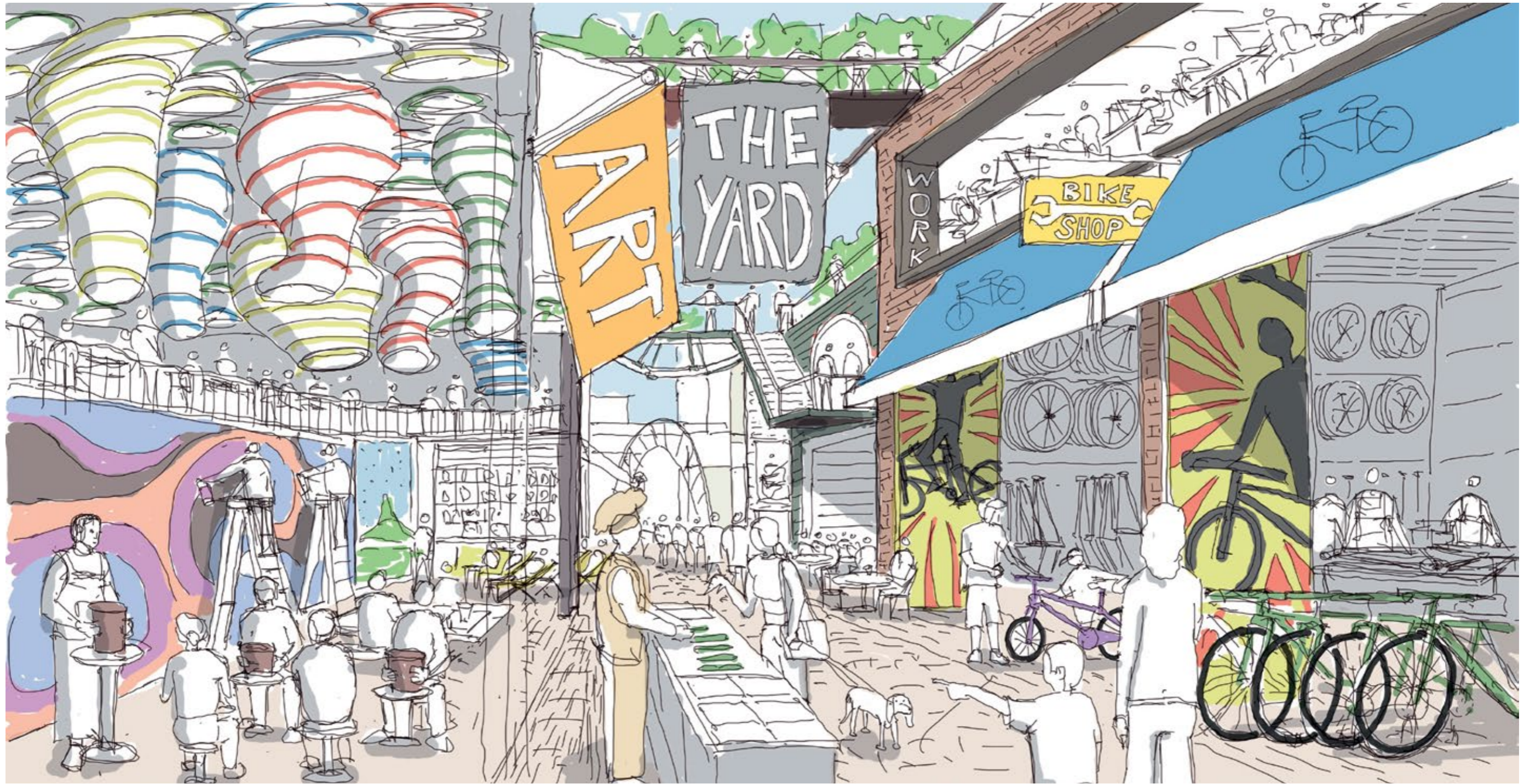
The power of local services

Robust community services are crucial for upholding people's connectivity and overall health and wellbeing.
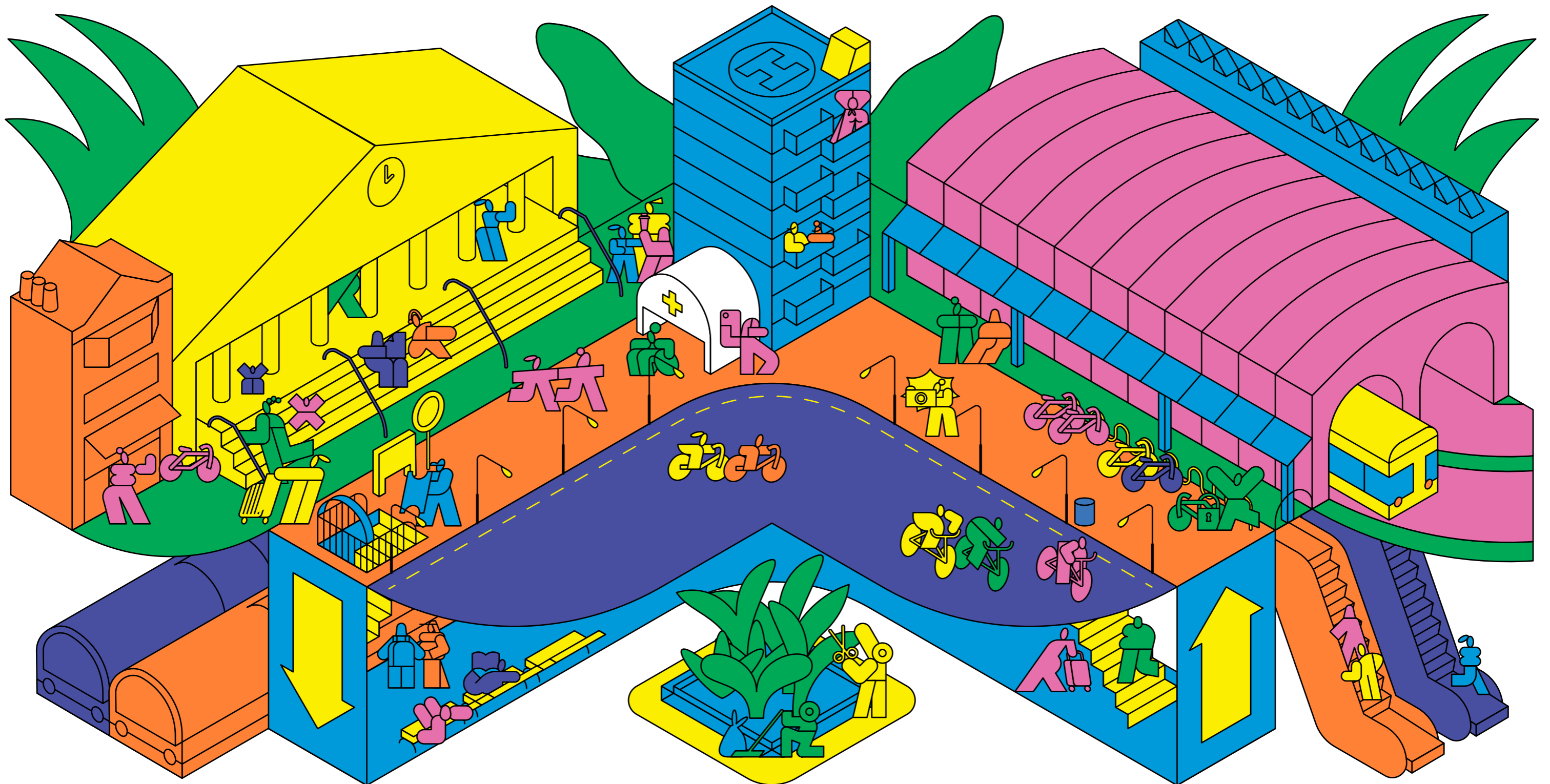
Loneliness is a significant risk to people without accessible local services, which are vital catalysts for social interaction and engagement.

Poor transport infrastructure, for instance, can be isolating in both physical and emotional terms. Without regular, reliable options for getting around town – from rail links to bus services to cycle lanes – it can be difficult for people to nurture social connections, which in turn can affect their self-confidence and independence. The UK government's 2018 report *A Connected Society* highlights the importance of accessible public transport in tackling loneliness, noting that connectivity is crucial for cultivating relationships between relatives, friends and colleagues, and for facilitating incidental encounters between citizens as they run errands or travel to work. Substandard public transport is especially problematic for people with limited mobility, including the elderly, those with disabilities and parents of young children.

The availability of local amenities like shops, pharmacies, cafés, post offices and sports facilities also plays a major role in facilitating social connections. Many studies emphasise the value of having such amenities within walking distance of people's homes, including a 2014 analysis of Glasgow neighbourhoods that found a correlation between increased use of local amenities and reduced levels of loneliness.

A 2015 Dutch report about mobility in the built environment likewise notes the positive effect of nearby amenities on people's capacity and inclination to maintain a social network. The large and inconsistent scale of neighbourhood planning in major cities around the world means that for some people the closest grocery stores and pharmacies aren't always the most useful or affordable; for others, the only options at all are miles away, without direct or efficient travel options. Having these basic services nearby is crucial for enabling people to participate in community life.

The location of medical facilities in cities is another important component in tackling loneliness. In this case, it's a question of overall health and wellbeing, ensuring people have access to services that can help ease the harmful effects of loneliness. Strategically located clinics can provide preventative and curative mental health care to citizens at particular risk of loneliness. Remote facilities, on the other hand, can exacerbate feelings of loneliness both indirectly and directly – for example, a hospital located on a motorway could make it difficult for car-free citizens to reach appointments and for people to visit friends and family who've been admitted.

Finally, it's worth thinking about the positioning of cities' green spaces, which have been shown in research around the world to combat loneliness both directly and indirectly, providing enclaves where people can connect with nature and each other. A dark, secluded park might preclude the elderly from feeling safe enough to use it, while a well-lit, well-tended one can offer a place for people of all ages to unwind, exercise and potentially meet local residents.

On that note, it's crucial that efforts to improve accessibility of local services are inclusive. There's a significant overlap between the demographics at risk of loneliness and those let down by inaccessible infrastructure at large, namely the elderly, disabled people and those on lower incomes. Extended bus services are a great start, but they need to be as manageable for someone in a wheelchair as they are for a non-disabled passenger. Likewise, urban gardens, riverbanks and woodlands should include provisions for people who might need to rest or use a ramp, like families with children in tow.
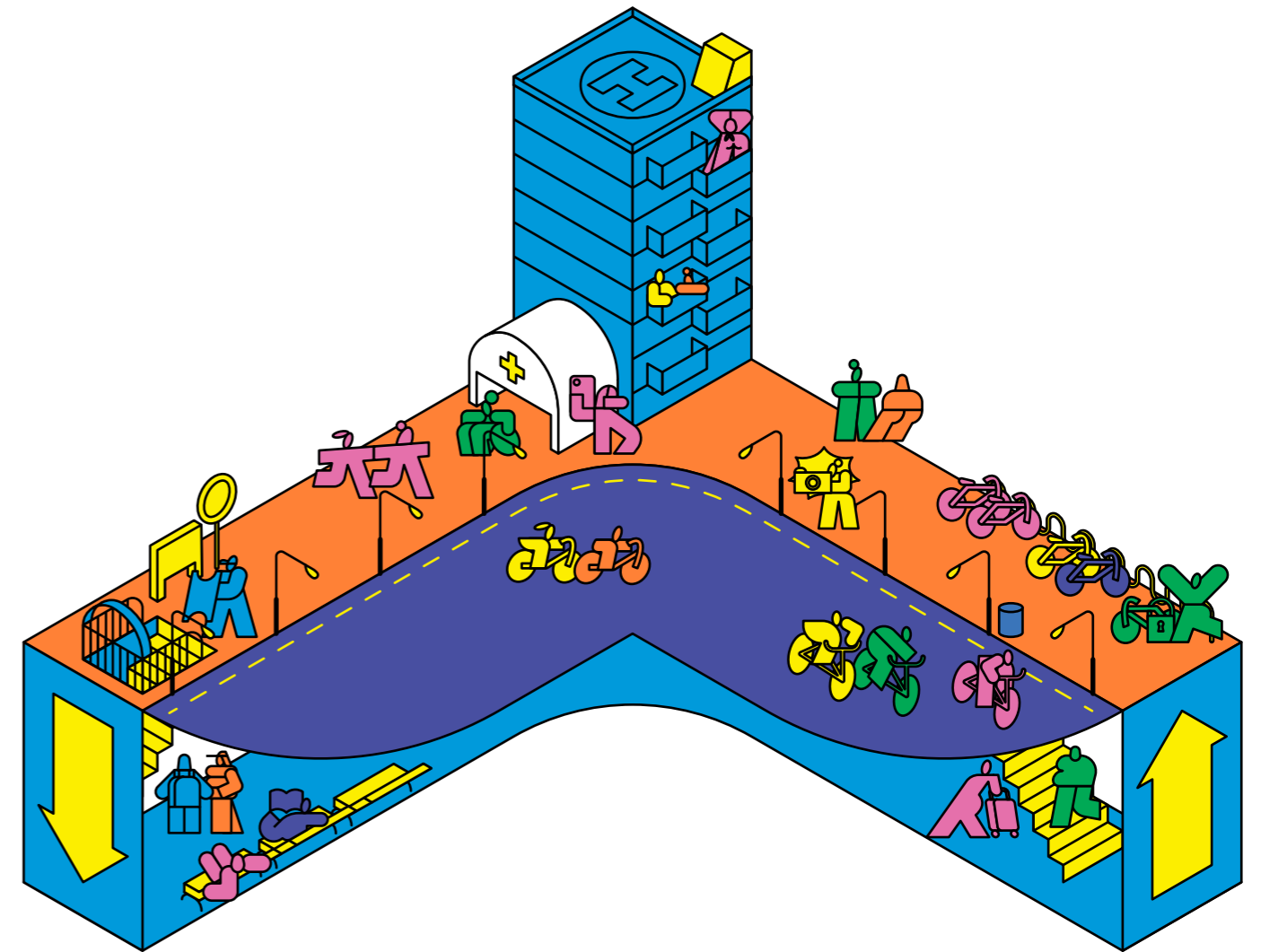
ROUNDTABLE INSIGHTS

Inclusivity was a recurring theme in the roundtable discussion surrounding public service infrastructure and its relationship with loneliness. Panellists explored accessibility in both physical and conceptual terms, highlighting the importance of people-focused approaches to planning and design.

Joel Charles emphasised the need to empower communities to communicate their infrastructure needs themselves.

"If you talk to area access groups, whether it's in a major city or smaller towns, they feel their concerns are not heard strongly enough by local politicians when planning decisions are challenged. Planners need to listen and be more responsive to concerns about the location of critical infrastructure in urban centres. People with limited mobility need adequate access to public transport to use key

community facilities. There needs to be more thought about where new community facilities should go.

"Another problem is the design of street furniture, which can contribute to vulnerable groups feeling isolated in their own community. If you are visually impaired, ease of access in community spaces is important when individuals work out their regular walking routes. If street furniture or commercial A-boards block routes, it can increase the anxiety of those who are visually impaired and leave them feeling

isolated. Designing urban spaces that consider the needs of disabled and elderly people must be at the forefront of city planners' minds as they kick-off the design phase of new community developments."

Ian Treherne shared the personal challenges he's faced navigating city sidewalks, one of the most basic components of shared urban space.

"Being visually impaired, I find the design of pavement quite important. It's probably not something you think about if you're not blind, but for me, it's my path, and I find that a lot of pavements are different textures, different
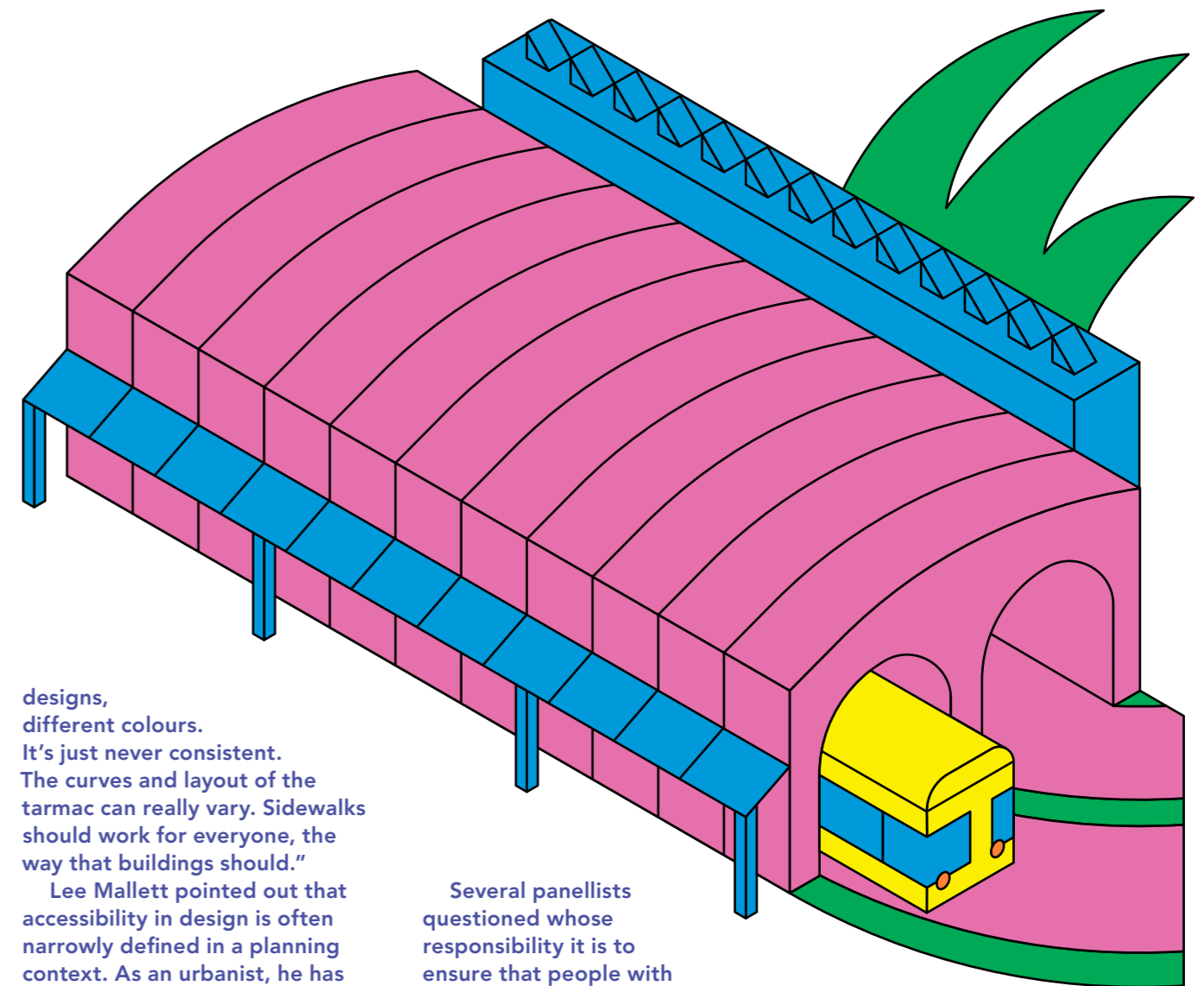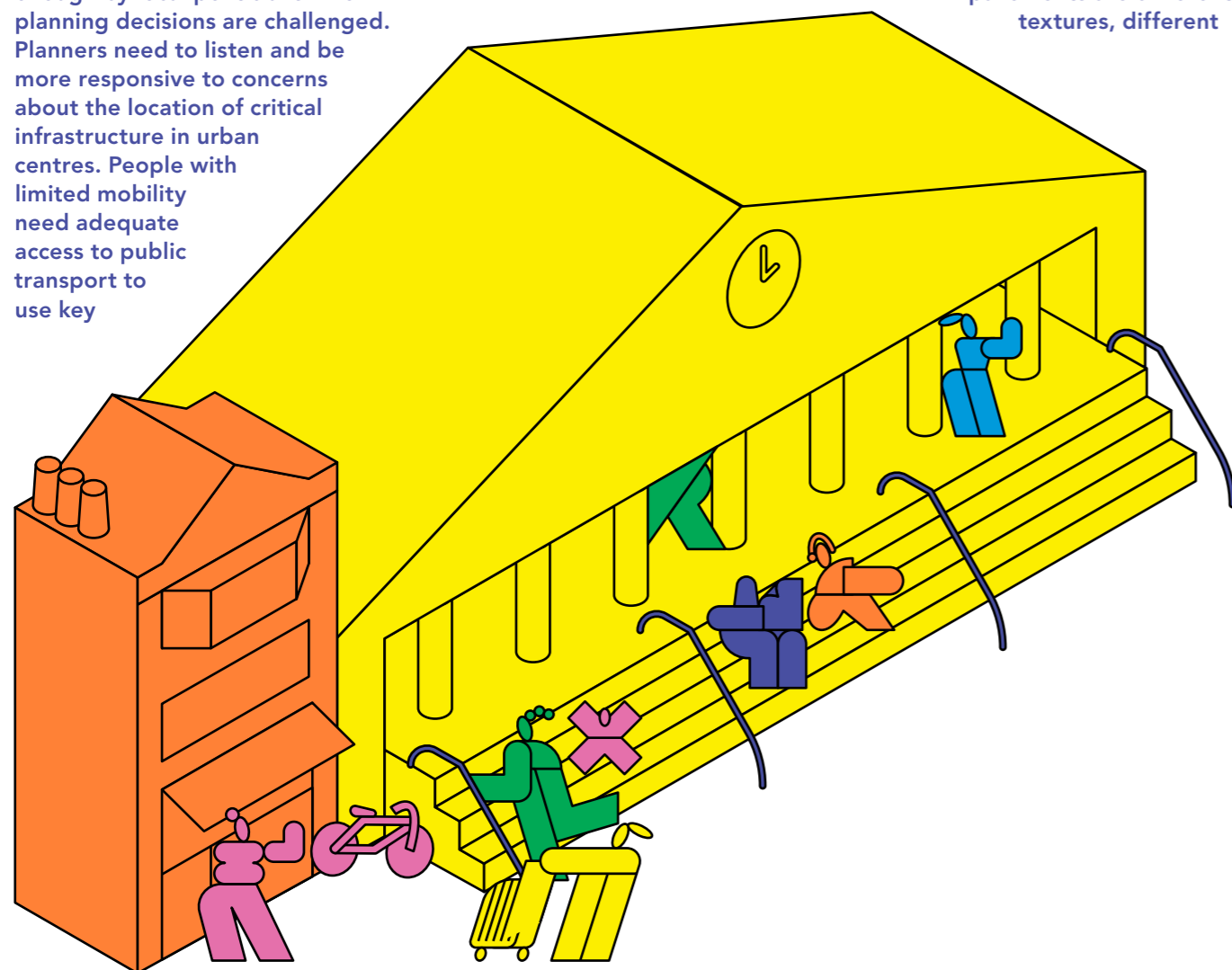
designs, different colours. It's just never consistent. The curves and layout of the tarmac can really vary. Sidewalks should work for everyone, the way that buildings should."

Lee Mallett pointed out that accessibility in design is often narrowly defined in a planning context. As an urbanist, he has significant experience navigating the planning process for development projects in the built environment.

"The notion of accessibility as a means for addressing loneliness and access to services is actually quite strongly enshrined in policy, but it's not identified as a core, broad issue. It's narrowly defined, with lip service paid to accessibility in physical terms rather than its wider social impact. But accessibility is about more than the physical solutions that make a building physically accessible."

Several panellists questioned whose responsibility it is to ensure that people with wheelchairs or prams, for example, have access to accessible toilets and changing rooms in local shops and cafés. Katy Ghahremani noted that in the UK, the onus is typically on the tenant, not the landlord, and the guidelines are not especially strict.

"The landlord only has to provide a provision, which could just be a soil stack for the WC to connect to and a hole in the floor slab for the stair. They don't have to provide beyond that. Just your ground floor disabled toilet is not even a requirement. Disability regulations

are quite strong for lots of other kinds of uses, like employment, but they fall down in public places like coffee shops."

Peter Greaves widened the discussion to talk about potential models for ensuring public services are designed and located in an accessible manner.

"Taking the example of hospitals built in remote locations, I think there are two models that could work. One is perhaps easier, and

"Sidewalks should work for everyone."

"The rapid development of driverless vehicles has the potential to reconnect people who feel isolated from the wider world. But how will big urban centres and other communities factor that into their infrastructure programmes?"

one is radical but would probably work better. The basic model accepts that these services have been built remotely and aims to address this with excellent, highly accessible public transport infrastructure – not just more buses, but also more walking routes and things like that, all designed to address different accessibility issues in terms of wayfinding. This model is about facilitating movement to the place.
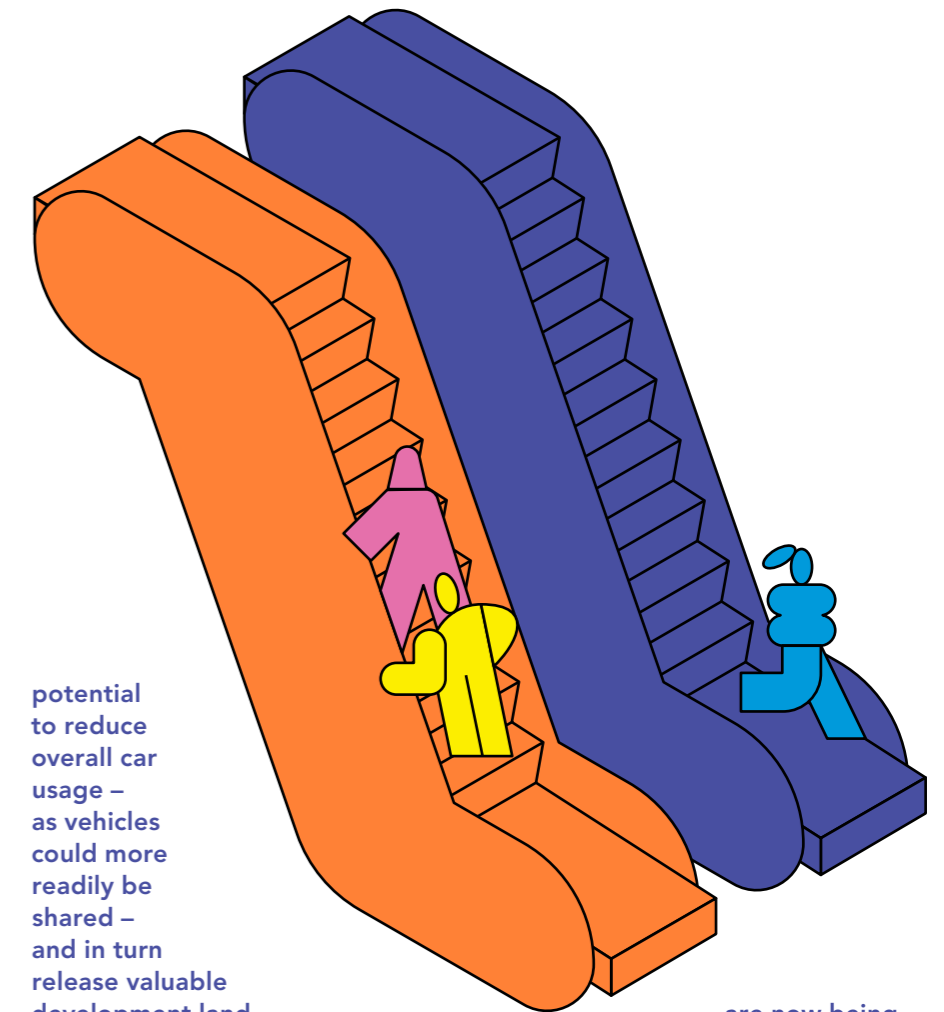
"The other model would be to drop the idea of having important public services located away from local communities and rethink how we can ensure they're in the same place as the people. We have high streets with vacant units at the moment, but the current usage criteria says these have to be shops. Why can't they be turned into walk-in health centres or care homes? Breaking these public services down and bringing them to where people are – decentralising them, if you will – is important."

Peter also mentioned the ongoing integration of new technology into industries like healthcare and retail, and the positive and negative impacts this can have.

"There are pros and cons to how technology gets integrated. In the UK, the NHS is trialling doctor's appointments via Skype, which can be a blessing for those who find it hard to move around in the city. But do you get the same level of care and the benefits of social interaction you would if you were travelling to an appointment and interacting with people there? Have we cut out opportunities for social interactions in the name of convenience?

"Self-driving vehicles are another consideration. The rapid development of driverless vehicles has the potential to reconnect people who feel isolated from the wider world. But how will big urban centres and other communities factor that into their infrastructure programmes?"

Lee elaborated on the emergence of driverless technology, emphasising its potential to reduce overall car usage – as vehicles could more readily be shared – and in turn release valuable development land.

"Having fewer cars in circulation will release so much land currently used for parking and driving, allowing residential areas to move much closer into city centres. If you have robotically controlled cars, you can put them all in one place, which will release even more land. There could be some enormous efficiencies that create serendipitous new proximities, with buildings a lot closer together and streets that offer improved pedestrian environments."

Finally, Sara Veale referenced the 2016 Future Spaces Foundation study *Vital Cities, Vital Connections*, which examined connectivity in 12 cities around the world and found some novel uses for car-free public realm, including repurposed spaces designed to foster social connections.
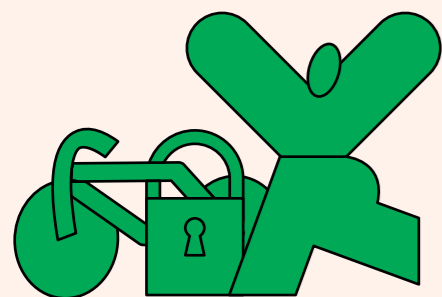
"One of the interesting points that came out of the study was in São Paulo. The city has been trying to make a shift from being so heavily car-reliant, and as a result a lot of empty parking spaces are now being reclaimed as public spaces. One example is something called a 'parklet', which is a tiny green space created out of a couple of disused parking spaces. These are located across the city, right on streets previously dominated by cars, and they're filled with plants and seating. They become places themselves and reframe the space around them, without taking away precious pedestrian space on the sidewalk. All of a sudden, the road has become a safe, cool place to linger with friends."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusivity is key to ensuring that local services, particularly those with the capacity to reduce loneliness, don't marginalise the very people who need them the most. It was clear from our discussion that the aligned willpower of public and private service providers is needed to help citizens nurture their personal relationships, and that there's scope for both direct and peripheral interventions to effect meaningful change. We urge government authorities, urban designers, planners, public bodies and more to:

INCLUDE LOCAL VOICES IN SITING DECISIONS

Listening to people's views on the local amenities that serve them is crucial to understanding the needs of a community. Urban designers and planners should seek to engage local communities when determining where to locate new public services, from transport exchanges to high street expansions. Consultation exercises should be open not just to appointed community representatives but any local resident who wants to attend. More broadly, government frameworks should include robust community engagement as a requirement for land use planning.
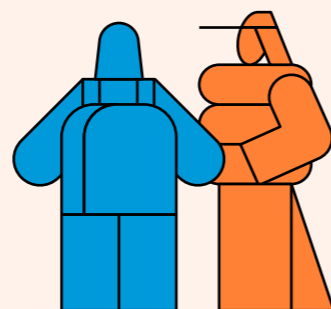
EXPAND AND IMPROVE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Transport authorities should prioritise strategies to expand and develop public transport networks in a way that supports mobility and social cohesion – for example, by introducing free dial-a-ride bus services for people with disabilities. Partnerships with designers, transport providers and community groups could help authorities explore how transport can be used to improve social connections, while industry-wide publishing could disseminate the lessons learned from this and highlight the value of inclusive, accessible transport networks.

IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS VULNERABLE GROUPS

Local authorities should work with public bodies and social campaigns to identify the demographics at risk of loneliness in their area and structure services like healthcare, social care and transport around these particular groups. Efforts could incorporate physical activity, like Sport England's recent grant programme to tackle loneliness in over-55s; or technology, like Orygen's Moderated Online Social Therapy programme, which uses social media to connect young people in Australia suffering from anxiety and mood disorders.

### PURSUE STRATEGIC ALLIANCES TO IMPROVE LOCAL SERVICES

Strategic partnerships between public bodies, charities and private businesses can be effective vehicles for providing much-needed community services. Local authorities should be empowered to pursue alliances with private and public organisations for projects that promote social cohesion. The UK's Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, for example, is working with Arts Council England to raise awareness of the role public libraries can play in addressing loneliness.

### ENCOURAGE LONELINESS-RELATED POLICYMAKING

Governments should encourage relevant state departments to champion loneliness-related policy at both national and local levels. As part of the UK government's current loneliness strategy, for instance, the Department for Transport is extending its portfolio to include a specific loneliness agenda.

UNDERSTAND SOCIAL RETURNS ON LONELINESS PROGRAMMES

Commissioning targeted cost-benefit analyses would help governments, public bodies and charities determine the most cost-effective and socially beneficial means for addressing loneliness in urban communities. Researchers from the London School of Economics recently calculated that every £1 spent on a successful loneliness intervention in the UK delivers a £2 to £3 cost saving for the community. One such intervention is LinkAge, a British community development scheme that has reduced costs in health and social care services among the elderly in cities where they're particularly vulnerable to loneliness.
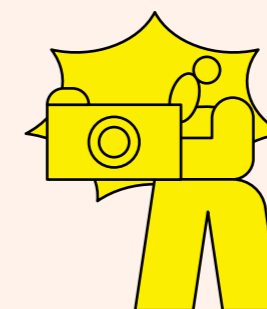
DESIGN-LED THINKING
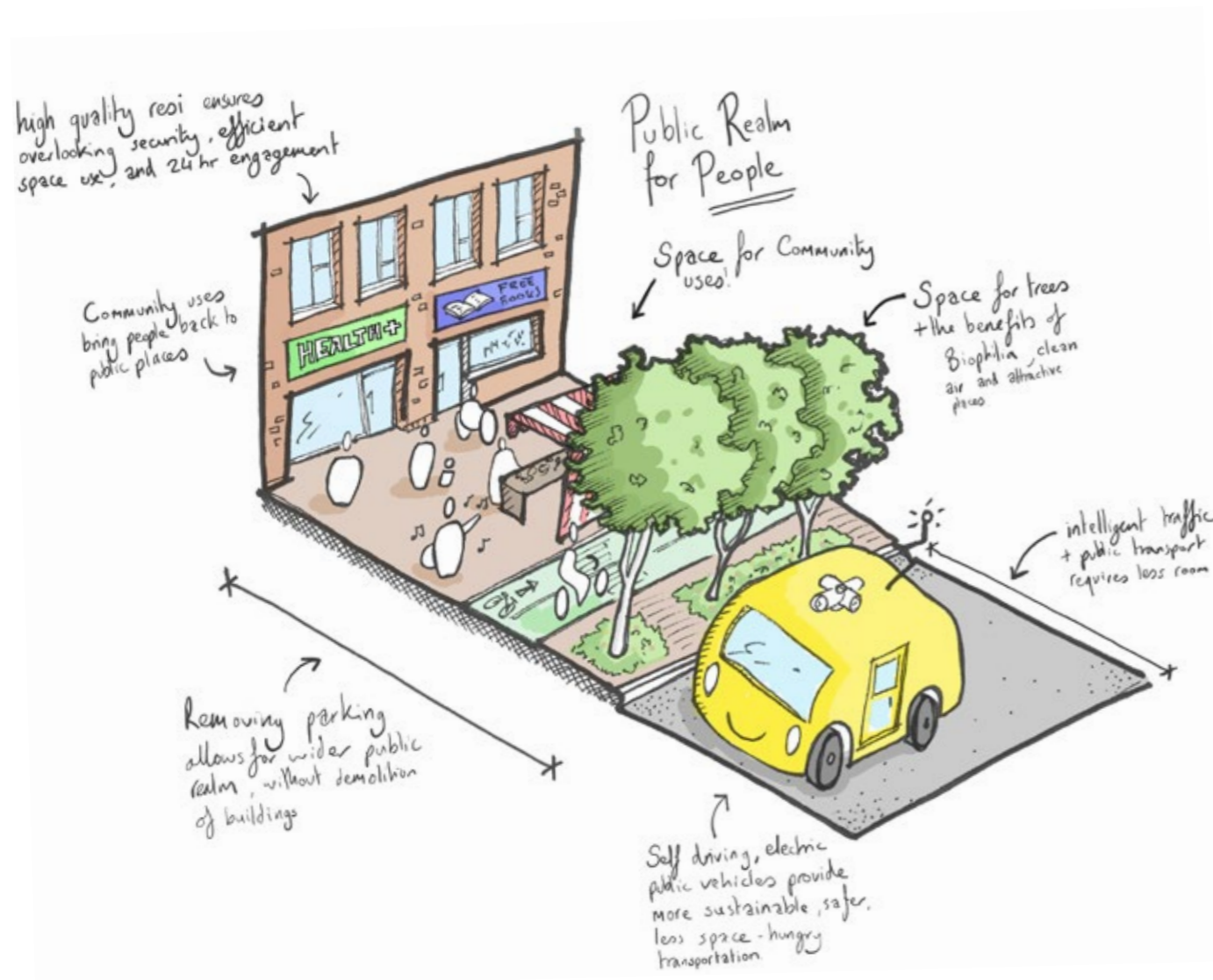
Cartoons demonstrating how to improve public transition spaces to help people move around the city with ease and comfort, with the ultimate aim of preventing disconnection and isolation. The intervention here seizes upon the global shift away from private car ownership to give the huge amount of car-dedicated space on high streets and in transition spaces back to the inhabitants of the city. Combined with smart public transportation, including self-driving electric vehicles armed with traffic big-data, this could reduce or eliminate space required for empty private cars parked along streets and reduce road width. In turn sidewalks could be widened to allow for community uses like market stalls and events, segregated cycling paths could be built for sustainable short distance travel, and more trees and greenery could be planted. (Sketches by Peter Greaves)
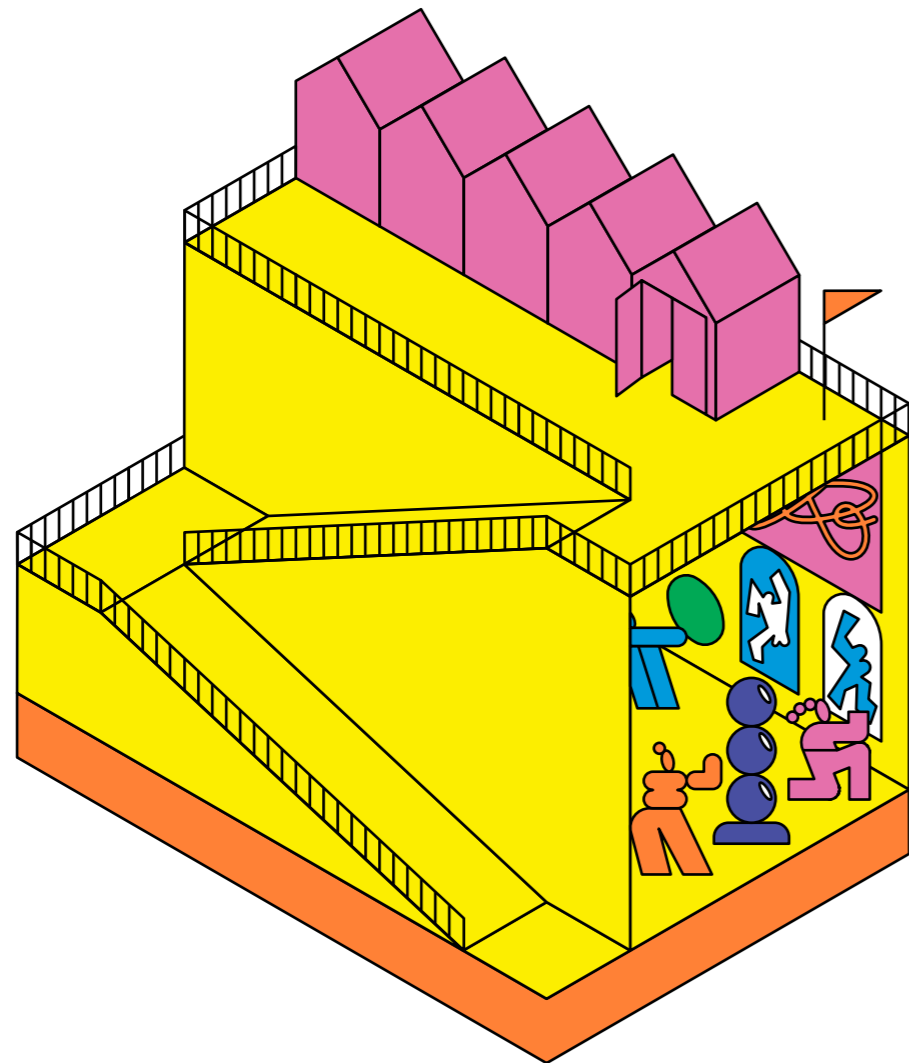

Public Realm for People

high quality resi ensures overlooking security, efficient space use, and 24hr engagement

Community uses bring people back to public places

Space for Community uses!

Space for trees + the benefits of Biophilia; clean air and attractive places

intelligent traffic + public transport requires less room

Removing parking allows for wider public realm, without demolition of buildings

Self driving, electric public vehicles provide more sustainable, safer, less space-hungry transportation

HEALTH+   FREE BOOKS

Public Realm for Cars

Unattractive places lead to low economic sustainability

Unintelligent private vehicles need wide roads.

Narrow Public Realm

Space taken up by empty metal boxes!

Poor Air Quality!

CHICKEN +   BETS!

Sketch showing a carefully designed public realm with high-quality transition and travel spaces, including safe, segregated cycle lanes, sustainable public transportation, attractive covered pedestrian zones with clean air, and access to greenery, trees, and other biophilic elements. People typically spend more time in transition spaces like sidewalks and roads than any other element of public realm. The aim is to give these zones the same careful design and care paid to dwelling spaces, parks and public squares, reflecting how much time people spend using them. (Sketch by Sangkil Park)

INSIGHTS

Encouraging spaces of conviviality

Last year I participated in the Loneliness Lab, an initiative to design out loneliness in London. Hosted by Collectively in partnership with Lendlease, this week-long design sprint saw 32 participants prototype and test ideas across local communities in the London Borough of Southwark.

by Daniel Blyden

The week kicked off with a day-long exploration of the issue to help us to understand and reframe loneliness in our minds as a public health epidemic that's as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes per day. Faced with the complexity of the issue, we were then oriented to think about the built environment and urban public spaces as fertile ground for interventions. We formed teams and embarked upon a week-long experimentation around a chosen sub-theme.

My team headed to East Street Market, Walworth, to observe how people were interacting with each other and the place. We asked one simple question: 'What did you do the last time you felt lonely?' This opened up plenty of conversation, and we discovered that the community felt the market had been blighted by rapid regeneration, the consequent displacement of local people, and a lack of investment into the market and its traders. It became evident how much this open-air market means to local people socially, culturally and even psychologically. One person we spoke to stated: "Whenever I feel lonely, I go outside and connect with new people on this street, even if it's to start an argument with someone. Whatever you can't change, let it go. Free yourself."

The underlying message in this for me was how important it is to have the freedom to find human connection without needing access or permission. It highlighted the significance of streets and open-air markets as spaces of conviviality, especially against backdrops of displacement in which people are experiencing a slow erosion of familiarity with their local environment and, subsequently, their sense of belonging. One thing the people on East Street had

in common, whether conscious or subconscious, was the freedom to roam their streets in the knowledge and even expectation that at some point they would find serendipitous interaction with others.

The experience showed us how big a role the animated and personable market traders and shopkeepers play in facilitating such a vibrant place. Once we realised this, we could identify design opportunities to support their role as hosts of the market's social fabric.

A prevailing question in my mind since the Loneliness Lab has concerned the design conditions needed to facilitate these sorts of cultures in our streets, neighbourhoods, and places where the social and cultural fabric are in decay. What does it take to revitalise open spaces of conviviality?

We've had the privilege to think deeply about these challenges through seven years of research, development and experimentation at Impact Hub Birmingham, taking a systemic approach anchored by people and place. This journey has led us to a new venture: Civic Square, a bold approach to visioning, building and investing in civic infrastructure for future neighbourhoods.

By considering the role of physical architecture and the built environment alongside social and institutional architecture, and by designing business models that are interdependent and regenerative, I believe we can design in a deep interconnectedness across local ecosystems to help address the challenges of loneliness.

Daniel Blyden is design lead at social enterprise Impact Hub Birmingham.

Case study
Connector

A new data platform that seeks to reduce loneliness across the UK

The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) is an international social purpose company, partly funded by the UK Cabinet Office, that uses behavioural science and data analysis to inform policy and improve public services. One of BIT's latest projects is Connector, a service designed to connect residents with local community activities. The project will soon be piloted in Monmouthshire, Wales, with the aim of expanding it to other regions in time.

Connector uses innovative data-targeting techniques to identify neighbourhoods most at risk of loneliness and social isolation, and provides a platform to boost community event participation.

The project also applies behavioural science to explore ways the physical spaces of events can be shaped to address barriers and encourage social connections.

BIT's research is based on observable risk factors that increase people's vulnerability to loneliness, including contextual characteristics, like the strength of social ties in their neighbourhood, and built environment qualities, like the distance from their homes to local shops, services and community hubs. BIT is analysing the impact of each of these factors using national survey data, web scraping techniques and partnerships with companies such as mobile network operators.

By combining new and existing data sets, the team is creating a dynamic loneliness risk map that highlights the areas most likely to contain lonely residents. This information will be made available to the local authorities and form the basis for inviting people to take part in the service. From here, a bespoke broadcast platform will send invitees details of events aligned with their needs and preferences. The aim is to increase residents' awareness of and motivation to attend local community events, and to facilitate access regardless of their age, digital capability and transport options.

Case study
Kampung Admiralty

An award-winning development in Singapore that creates a local community for the elderly

WOHA's Kampung Admiralty, built in 2017, is a residential development in Singapore that integrates housing for senior citizens with retail, green spaces, medical services and more. The development – which layers different functions to create a 'vertical village' – provides on-site care for the elderly and children, and is linked to public transport, with some spaces open to the public. It was commissioned by Singapore's public housing authority to encourage community bonding in a country with severe challenges of loneliness, isolation and depression facing its senior citizens.

The development has 11 apartment blocks with 104 homes between them. In the lower levels is the People's Plaza, which contains a tropical garden as well as shops and cafés. The centre houses the Village Green, which includes small farm plots for residents to tend and strategically placed benches for people to socialise. Upstairs is a childhood learning centre and a hub for senior citizens to enjoy communal activities like art sessions.

Kampung Admiralty was named World Building of the Year at the 2018 World Architecture Festival, where WAF director Paul Finch praised it as "a project with potential lessons for cities and countries around the world."

Case study
Adopt a Student

A cohabitation programme that unites young people and senior citizens in Italy's costliest city

MeglioMilano's Adopt a Student programme arranges cohabitations between students and the elderly in an effort to address loneliness and promote intergenerational companionship. In exchange for rent-free accommodation in a senior citizen's house, students carry out household tasks and spend a set amount of time each week socialising with their hosts. They're also responsible for reimbursing their host for expenses.

The non-profit organisation established the project in 2004 and has now overseen more than 600 placements. The average age of hosts is 79, and most of the time they're female homeowners living on their own. Cohabitations tend to last between eight and ten months.

The programme – part of a broader trend of homeshare initiatives across Europe, Australia and the USA – is a response to Italy's ageing population and rising rents in its cities. Almost a quarter of the country's citizens are over 65, making it the second-oldest population in the world, and a growing number of them live alone, often in homes too big for them to manage. Meanwhile, housing costs, including student rents, have grown dramatically, particularly in Milan, where there's a high student population and a shortage of university residences.

Case study
Men's Sheds

Spaces around the world dedicated to encouraging male friendship

The idea of 'men's sheds' originated in Australia in the 1990s in the wake of a mounting national conversation about masculinity and mental health. "Men don't talk face to face; they talk shoulder to shoulder," is the motto of the Australian Men's Shed Association, which was founded in 2007 to unify and formalise the many men's sheds cropping up around the country. The aim of these community non-profits is to provide a comfortable, encouraging 'backyard' space for men to interact and bond.

Today there are hundreds of men's sheds across Australia, New Zealand, Europe, the United States and South Asia. These have played an important role in reducing loneliness and improving the wellbeing of thousands of men around the world, and in defying negative cultural attitudes about male friendship. They've also helped address the significant health disparity men face in Western countries compared to women, particularly in the diagnosis and treatment of diabetes and depression.

Peter Greaves and Chris Millar, both architects at Make, discuss their experience running separate design competitions around the theme of loneliness.

PETER GREAVES: I work closely with the Foundation, which holds annual student competitions to explore the social impact of the built environment. For our most recent one, we picked urban loneliness as the theme, which is interesting to think about because it has such a wide effect on so many people. Lots of people come to big cities like London for work and don't yet have a social network; cities are also full of elderly and disabled people who find it difficult to move around, which leaves them isolated. The topic fits well with the overall aims and ethos of the Foundation.

Chris, you held your competition outside of Make, shortly before you joined the practice. How did you land on the theme of loneliness?

CHRIS MILLAR: Yes, I ran mine through Bubble, which I started with two friends from my master's course. We found our university work fascinating but felt it often missed out on the real-world implications

of design. We were inspired by the Rem Koolhaas quote: "The areas of consensus shift unbelievably fast; the bubbles of certainty are constantly exploding." We set up Bubble as a platform for designers to be more responsive to the way the world is changing.

Anyone could put forward an idea, and entries could be on any scale, from product to cityscape. The brief asked for design ideas geared towards eliminating loneliness in society. A lot of design competitions want to be flashy and exciting, and seem to miss the point that small, real-world things are important. Loneliness is a massive issue, so it was a good topic to consider in terms of actual daily life.

PG: I agree. Our competitions are aimed at architecture students in particular, so we had each university involved put forward teams of five students each. We started with a one-day design charrette where we talked through some ideas they might

want to think about. But, like you, we kept it very open in terms of scale, so the responses could be anything from objects through to infrastructure networks – any idea they thought would address loneliness within cities.

Each team had a theme word for direction, but we kept these loose and abstract – for example, 'comfort', 'population' and 'movement'. It was really interesting to see how the students interpreted those words and went in unexpected directions. By the end of the day each team had an idea and rough scribbles. We gave them a couple weeks to go away and turn it into a more coherent design piece, which they later presented in person to the judges.

CM: Our scale was a little bigger than that, since we launched the Bubble competition online and made the brief available to everyone. We sent it to various publications, and contacted student reps at top architecture and design institutions around the world.

We ended up with more than 100 responses from almost 30 countries, which was exciting.

In terms of judging, we wanted people who were slightly more out there in terms of their thinking, so we had a few academics from the UK and Australia, plus the founder of *ArchDaily*. Our criteria were bold, smart and beautiful. Bold meaning is it challenging convention, is it interesting and out there? Smart meaning is it effective, does it work? And beautiful meaning is it communicated well, are the drawings nice, are they legible?

PG: We also tried to get a range of judges. We had architects from Make, engineers from BuroHappold and Atelier Ten, and experts in urban design and masterplanning – all building industry professionals, but more than just architects.

When the students returned to present their work, each team had ten minutes to explain their idea to the judges. Afterwards, we discussed them in private. We didn't have formal criteria for determining the winner. What we always say with FSF competitions is that it's all about the idea. There are a lot of considerations – a good built environment intervention should be bold, beautiful and smart, as you said – but above all we tried to judge the idea on how well it attempted to tackle the issue and what effect it would have on the people involved.

CM: The quality of responses we received was really high. I was surprised by how many people flipped the brief to embrace aloneness and explore how if it can be a positive thing if it's done well. The quality of drawings was also impressive. But like you said, Peter, it's not just about the drawing but the whole concept.

PG: It's interesting the different approaches people can take. With our brief, we were very specific about drawing a distinction between aloneness and loneliness – explaining how you can be lonely in a crowd. We took steps to define it early on, with a view towards addressing the negativity surrounding social interactions that fall short of what you want and need as a person. Some of the less successful entries we saw were

about simply putting people together in a place, without much more than that. Realistically, that tackles aloneness but not loneliness.

CM: Do you feel it would have gone differently if you'd run the competition online?

PG: Online would have meant a wider breadth of responses. We wouldn't have had to coordinate everyone to be in the same place at the same time, and the extra volume of responses would have likely produced more diverse ideas. But there was a bonus to presenting the responses in person, I think. We kept the materials requirement simple: an A1 board with a killer image. Being able to speak through their response allowed the students to be quite free with that image – it didn't have to be very diagrammatic or explanatory.

CM: I'm a big fan of university-style crits, where the picture does the talking, but I can definitely see the merit of talking through things. We asked for three square images and minimal text for our submissions. It worked well, though of course I'd be interested to talk to the entrants to hear their side of things.

PG: I was pleased that most of the responses we got actually engaged with the root causes of loneliness and looked to foster relationships between people, whether they're strangers or friends already. The most successful ones gave people a reason to go to a place and encouraged them to share some interactive experience while at the same time aiding movement and making it easy to get there.

CM: The most successful ones for us were actually transitional – so taking places you already go, like a bus or train, and adding elements that foster interaction. I thought the idea of plugging into people's daily lives and giving them nudges was inspiring. We also had submissions for private spaces like housing developments geared towards group living, which is a popular idea at the moment.

PG: If you're thinking about fostering new relationships between strangers, it does make sense to talk

about public spaces. Bus stops already draw hundreds of strangers but give them no reason to interact. Anything that addresses that is really interesting.

CM: What do you think would make a built space 'loneliness-proof'?

PG: I think localised schemes are important, like high streets that give people shared spaces where they can feel a sense of ownership and interact with small clusters of people. Cities are a relatively new idea, and the scale presents problems.

Anything built would need to work in concert with other factors, like a programme of events. Our winning competition entry, for example, envisaged these big drones that fly around cities and get people to follow them, uniting them in the shared interest of discovering what's inside. Once they land, they open up to reveal an interactive experience inside, like an adult ball pool or a guided meditation class. It was kind of mad, which was what we liked about it! The team had the theme of 'comfort' and flipped it to consider comfort as a form of complacency – something that aids and abets loneliness. It's easy to stay inside and not put yourself out there. This was all about drawing people out of their comfort zone and giving them a shared purpose.

CM: Something I realised during the course of our competition is that as architects we tend to think in terms of material and structure – physical things. Judging the competition, however, we didn't really look at the physical structure but the idea informing it. The architecture is a shell for something bigger.

PG: Yes, and that informs design on its own. If architecture is about spaces that allow for bigger things, we need to think outside of the physical shell.

Loneliness is an emotive subject; people can think about it personally. That universality is a platform for exciting, diverse opinions alerting us to things we'd never consider. That's what's valuable about exercises like these competitions. We get to see ideas we might not have stumbled across ourselves, and they inform how we respond in the future, especially in terms of design.

Living with loneliness
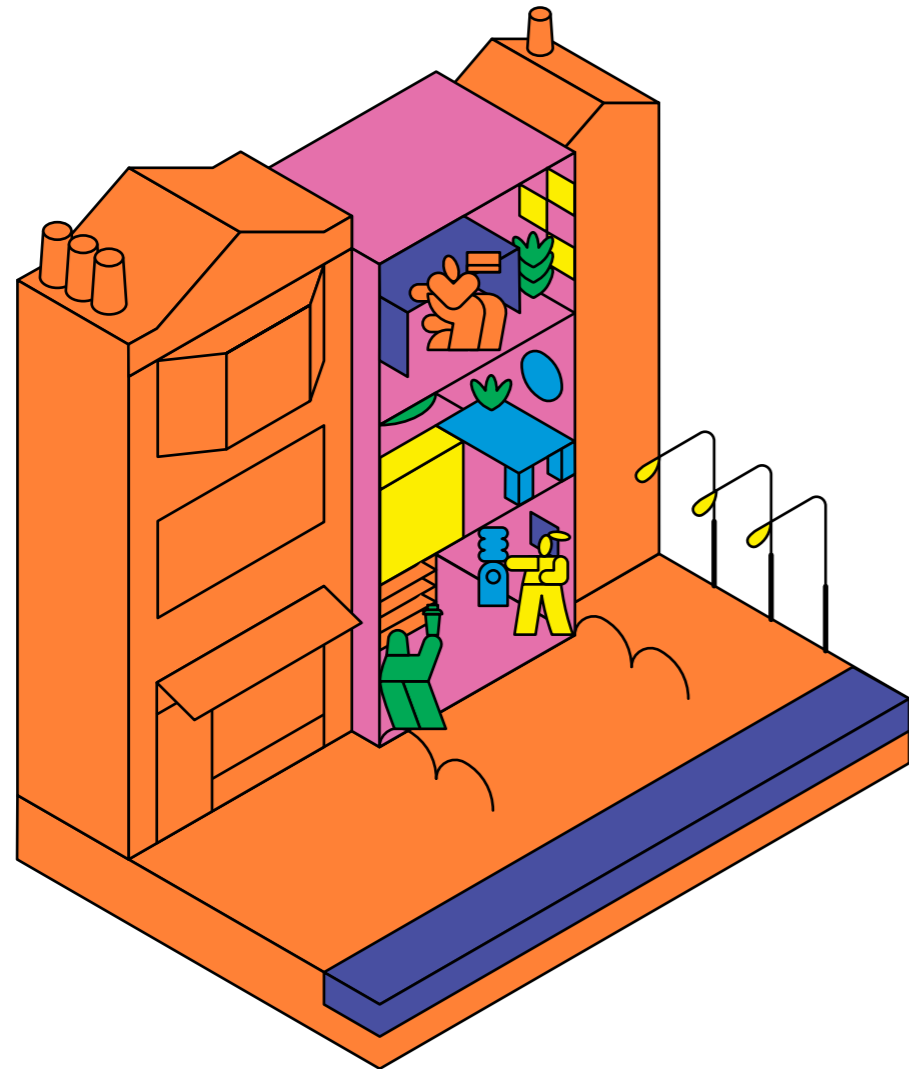
I'm from Southend, and I'm an ambassador for Sense UK in London. I'm visually impaired or, as most might say, blind. I have a loss of 95% of my eyesight, so I have a very small window of sight.

by Ian Treherne

My real-life experiences reflect many of the points of discussion that came up during the Future Spaces Foundation's roundtable on urban loneliness. I spend a lot of time being isolated and lonely. This is something that has become worse for me in recent years. There are loads of different factors that make it worse. It all comes down to a lack of actual connection – being next to somebody or talking to someone, even someone you don't know or might not have anything in common with. I go home feeling so much better when I'm surrounded by people and communicating and talking with them. I can say from experience that loneliness is a massive killer. It's a very emotional thing.

One of my problems is being stuck indoors, isolated. I never thought I would experience such loneliness, because I used to be out all the time; I was always active. But my eyesight has cut me off from the world, and just looking out the window is not enough. I feel like I'm living the life of a very elderly person. My social support has not been very good, which has the effect of making me feel more lonely, more isolated, more disconnected, more cut off. I was supposed to be assigned someone to help me travel to the roundtable, for example, but that didn't happen. I was forced to come to London on my own from Southend, and it was a stressful journey. In those situations, I can look really laid back and cool and calm, but often I'm having a panic attack inside.

I'm a professional photographer. My photography, thankfully, has been a way to connect with people. Getting into portraiture in particular has allowed me to connect with others, to have a reason to get up and out and go meet someone. I love talking to people, finding out their backgrounds, what makes them tick. I've been going blind since the age of 15, and my eyesight continues to get smaller and smaller. This of course makes my life as a photographer difficult.

I'm very interested in the way design can affect day-to-day life for people with disabilities such as mine. Even basic stuff, like the door to a building, can massively impact my experience. When I arrived at the roundtable, for example, I couldn't find the front door. There was no handle. That is a very basic element of design, and it shouldn't be too elaborate. I know how a door works, and I struggled to get into the building until someone caught me outside. Very simple things like entrances and exits can be a struggle for someone like me, but they don't have to be. It's important that design is simple, basic and accessible above everything.

Ian Treherne is an ambassador for Sense UK and founder of Ian Treherne Photography.

Dr Colin Ellard,
professor of cognitive neuroscience at University of Waterloo, shares his thoughts on the emotional impact of urban design

SARA VEALE: You work at the intersection of psychology and architectural and urban design, exploring the way the built environment can influence people's psychological state. Has the subject of loneliness come up in your research?

COLIN ELLARD: To some extent, yes. We don't study loneliness per se, but we study the emotional impact of urban design, which we think contributes to loneliness.

SV: What connections do you see between city design and loneliness? Is the issue mainly related to public realm, or does it extend to the design of private spaces like workplaces and homes as well?

CE: Both. Whether we are thinking about how to promote the kinds of interactions with strangers in public spaces that buffer feelings of loneliness or how to promote connectedness in interiors like workspaces or even

residences, I think that the shape and appearance of space has great power to make things happen (or prevent them from happening).

SV: You've studied the psychology of residential design in cities. Do you think high-density housing design is failing to inoculate people against the isolating effects of dense environments?

CE: With high-density housing, the most important key is to help people find a way to a sense of community. This isn't news at all – we've understood this at least since the times of Oscar Newman's work. The traditional high-rise, for example, doesn't do this at all, because it bunkers people in a beehive of insular units without much motivation to even make acquaintance with neighbours. When there are common spaces in such buildings, they are often buried in the basement or some other place that one has to go out of one's way to

get to. Which, typically, one doesn't! Better designs – and there are many examples – incorporate useful shared spaces in a number of creative ways beyond the usual lobby and party room arrangement. If you encounter these semi-public areas in your residence on a daily basis and find it both useful and pleasant to be there, you're going to build community.

SV: In a 2018 *CityMetric* article you mentioned: "The availability of public space, truly public space in which we feel joint ownership along with other citizens, is decreasing in cities." What does it take for a public space to engender feelings of joint ownership?

CE: A good public place must be perceived to be public. It must be attractive enough that we care about it and take care of it, but perhaps more importantly it has to be seen as accessible and welcoming to all. For example, even if you don't have a special mobility need, a space

that affords use by those who do makes everyone feel more welcome. Sometimes symbols have power. There's a huge amount of chatter about rainbow crosswalks these days, for example. Our lab actually has published research showing that the presence of a rainbow crosswalk makes people feel happier and more trusting of strangers. In short I think measures that signal that those who designed the space cared enough to make the space available for everyone help the most.

SV: In the article you also mention the importance of "generating positive moods in public places" to connect strangers. How can a place achieve this?

CE: The one tried and true method for generating positive mood is the presence of nature. This underlines the importance of good landscape architecture, but it also suggests that elements that are biomimetic may have universal appeal, regardless of whether real nature is involved or not. There are important clues here as to what makes for a good public space. But I think other things are important, many of which we've known about for a long time but have not executed well – variety, complexity (but not too much), geometry which both affords some feelings of enclosure but also promises information.

SV: You've collaborated with architects and planners in the course of your research. Have you come across any design schemes that are particularly effective in fostering social cohesion and meaningful relationships?

CE: I think that some of what I've described above covers some of this. For example, ideas about what works well in high-density residential development have come from seeing ingenious designs from some great architects – Steven Holl and Jeanne Gang to name a couple.

SV: Technology is often blamed for amplifying loneliness, but do you see it playing a role in alleviating loneliness within the built environment?

CE: I don't really think that technology either exacerbates or alleviates loneliness all by itself – it can do either. I do think there are some promising uses of social media, including some start-ups that I've been hearing about recently, which combine the possibilities of the cybersphere with bricks and mortar social design. I think this is likely the key – to use technology in such a way that it is situated in the real rather than simply floating in the cloud, detached from everything.

SV: Do you have any recommendations for built environment professionals seeking to design and develop schemes aimed at combatting loneliness?

CE: I would suggest taking as seriously the psychological effects of a design as they do the material effects. Also perhaps take advantage of the growing opportunities to leverage the human element of design through consultation with professionals who specialise in exactly this. There aren't many of us yet, but we're becoming easier to find!

Design narratives and community bonds
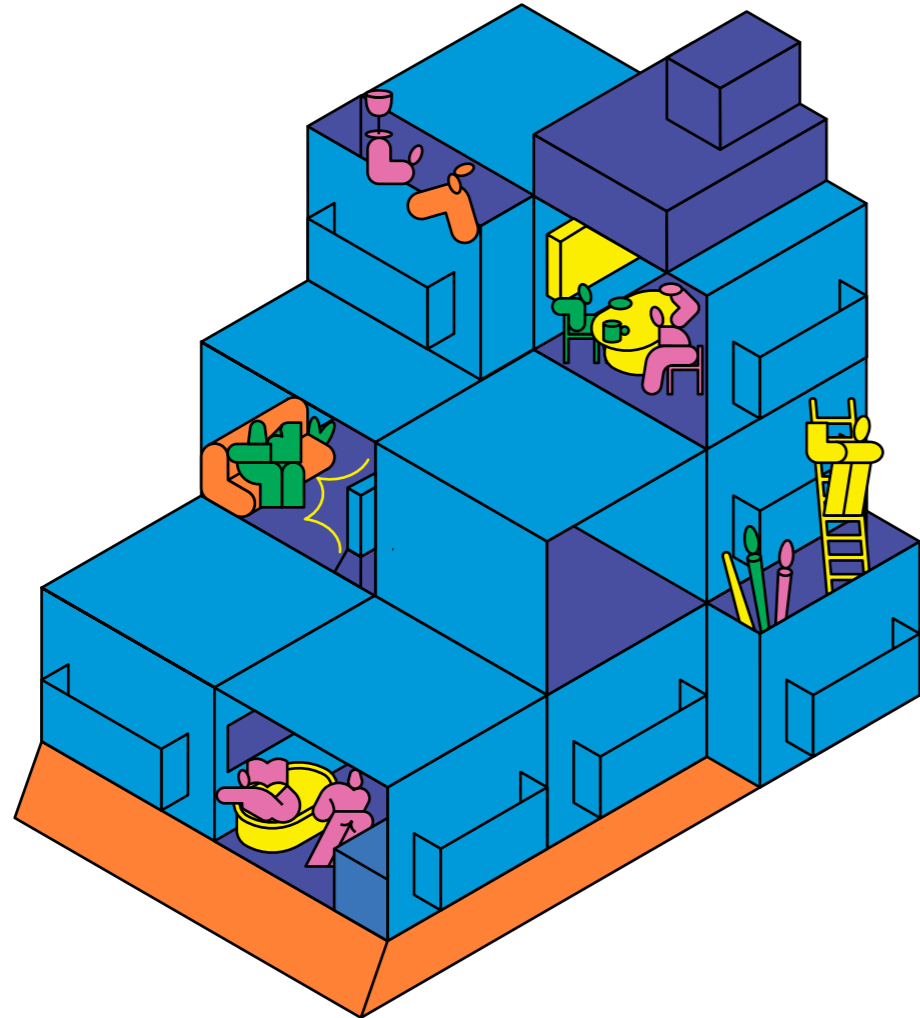
Loneliness is a part of the ongoing struggle in the design of our cities. There's a distinct tang of loneliness when inhabiting an urban environment, where we can feel lonely among millions. Maintaining a socially healthy lifestyle in this environment is an uphill battle most of us share.

As a growing designer, it's in my deep interest to understand this complex issue, which a large number of variables fuel. These variables can be defined when we look at the components that make up a city and how they are designed – the physical and built environment, with its buildings, realms of private and public, and the infrastructure that bonds them. Most importantly, we must consider how we as humans respond to them.

One of these responses involves our movement within a city. A lot of the time, our movement can feel restricted due to the dominance of roads and vehicles, resulting in minimised access and freedom to public spaces. There is no shortage of case studies showing how the restricted parts of our cities can reflect loneliness and social anxiety. Public spaces, such as allocated parks and connections to nature, can be a vital help to our mental health and pro-social interaction.

As an architecture student, I find these observations crucial to our inherited quest to build a better world, or at least rejuvenate it. I think as we adapt and change as a society and generation, it's important to remain connected to the history of our predecessors. In London, the rejuvenation of parts of the city has successfully improved life in those areas. King's Cross and Granary Square, for example, offer a great study of what adapted and repurposed nature can do for a space and a community. Buildings, public facilities and the green pathways of Regent's Canal have been nurtured. I am glad to see that the old granary building was not knocked down but instead converted to another socially responsive use: it now houses

Central Saint Martins, where I'm currently studying for a master's degree focused on narrative environments.

This course encourages students to curate narratives in the spaces we design, as it is narratives that bond communities and the people within them. I hope to bring the slumbering topic of urban loneliness to an open discussion during my studies, weaving all these influences and communicating these discussions through my final project.

Shona Brannan is an MA student at Central Saint Martins, in London.

by Shona Brannan

Case study
Loneliness Lab

A multidisciplinary design lab to combat loneliness in London

The Loneliness Lab, a collaboration between property group Lendlease and non-profit Collectively, is an 18-month project to tackle loneliness in London. The project kicked off in October 2018 with an immersive workshop involving businesspeople, policymakers, designers and civil servants. After identifying opportunities to promote social connections in various spaces across the city, participants embarked on a week-long 'innovation sprint', with teams of ten prototyping ideas in specific places, including parks, workplaces, shops and neighbourhoods.

Their ideas span a range of sectors – from housing to workplace to transport – and have since been developed into live projects. 'Hack Your Halls' seeks to reshape student accommodation in the capital to eliminate loneliness and address mental health, while 'Craftmoves' looks to use the city's public transport to facilitate meaningful interactions between strangers. There are also projects focused on uniting residents in high-density buildings, supporting libraries in their interactive programming and applying technology to foster companionship among the elderly.

To date, more than 100 people from 40 organisations have been part of the Loneliness Lab, including business owners, community organisers, NGOs, local authorities, designers and artists.

Case study
People's Kitchen

A community kitchen founded to address loneliness and food waste in East London

People's Kitchen began in East London in 2011. The idea was to create an inclusive space where people from different backgrounds share skills and stories while transforming food waste into community feasts. People can naturally find their role, whether it's peeling, chopping, tidying or simply turning up for a pay-what-you-feel-dinner, with proceeds channelled back into the host venues.

The founders started out organising a weekly community feast at a music venue, using surplus food collected from local shops. They went on to set up family cook-and-eat sessions on a local housing estate and outdoor dinner sessions at a community playground, utilising these spaces on days they'd normally be closed.

In 2019 the organisation secured a lease on a former café in Thames Barrier Park, in the Royal Docks area, with the aim of transforming it into a permanent community hub and café focused on food and wellbeing. Following a successful crowdfunding campaign, it's currently renovating the building to create a multipurpose space. The plan is to respond to the needs of a growing area, slowly building up a full events programme with surplus lunches, food waste feasts, design workshops, and entrepreneurial programmes that combine community, creativity and commerce for common good.

Case study
Community Rail

A grassroots movement to help marginalised people in the UK use local railways

Championed by the Association of Community Rail Partnerships, Community Rail is a programme to help people in the UK make the most of their local railways. The movement includes dozens of small community groups and partnerships, many of which are focused on addressing people who are at particular risk of loneliness and social isolation because they face barriers to travel.

Efforts include promoting rail discounts, campaigning for railway improvements, advising industry professionals on accessibility, organising community art projects and raising awareness about the social benefits of rail travel. One ongoing programme in Lancashire targets young people with disabilities and special needs, helping them become confident with rail travel and offering work experience in the rail industry. Another, in Manchester, recently engaged 300 LGBT+ students at Manchester Metropolitan University through an art project delivered with the Proud Trust.

The overall goal is to broaden the attitudes of both decision-makers and local communities, and to empower individuals to get out and about and become active members of society.

Case study
Fort Worth Adolescent and Young Adult Unit

A healthcare facility in Texas designed to promote social engagement among cancer patients

The Fort Worth Adolescent and Young Adult Unit at Baylor Scott & White All Saints Medical Center in Texas treats young adults diagnosed with cancer. Patients here sometimes stay for weeks or months at a time, which can be a lonely and isolating experience. The clinic, which opened in 2016, includes a range of communal spaces designed to promote connectivity and peer support among patients, and to encourage family and friends to visit.

The biggest space is a lounge that includes a coffee bar, a TV and game console, and several seating zones for different activities, from one-on-one chats to art therapy. It's naturally lit and offers views over the

Fort Worth skyline. There's also an adjoining games room with pool and foosball tables, and a special 'cocoon room' for patients and their guests to retreat for private visits. This latter space is soundproofed, and can be used for yoga, meditation and counselling, as well as everyday catch-ups.

With the vast majority of patients in hospitals either under the age of 15 or over 40, the clinic offers a considered place for young adults to interact, engage and seek much-needed emotional support.

Bridging the gap
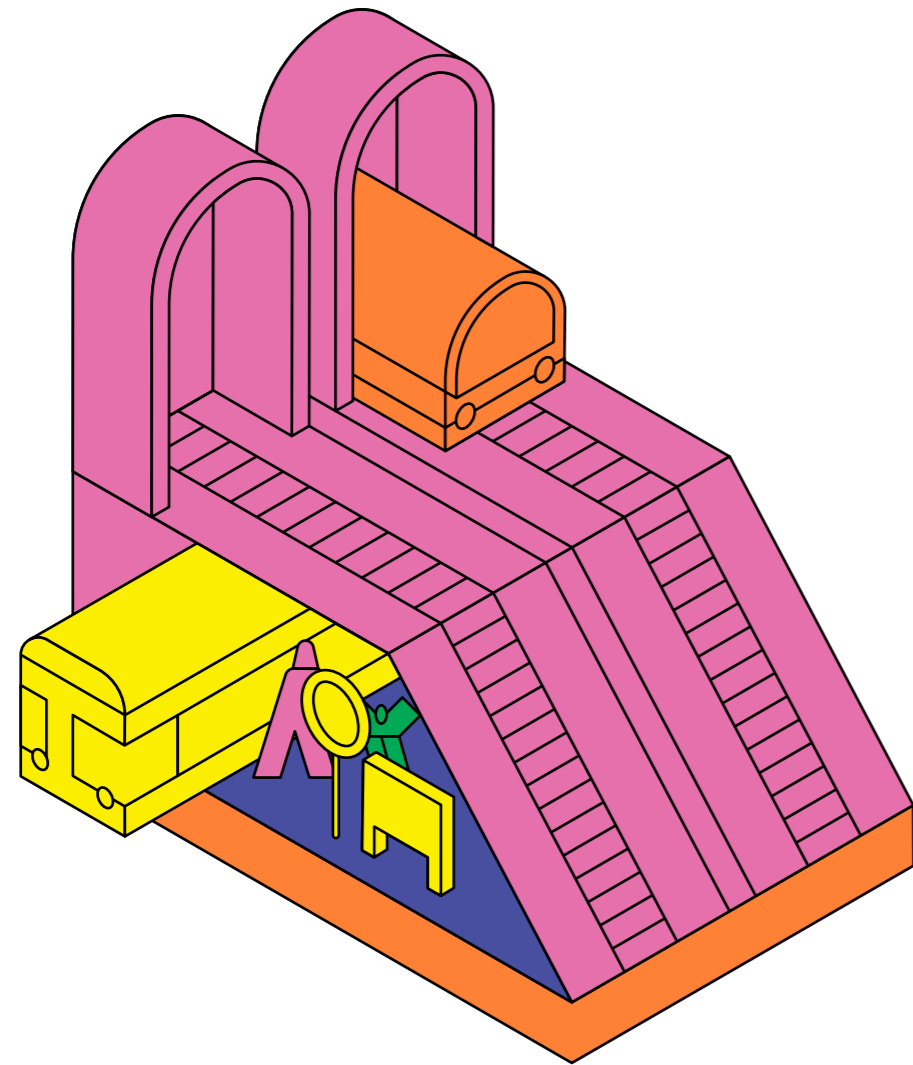
A resonant aspect of the loneliness debate is reconciling the prevalence of this issue with the diversity of its expression. Urban loneliness is a global concern, but it's not a monolith; examples in practice vary wildly around the world depending on the environment and people involved.

by Sara Veale

In megacities like Tokyo and Mumbai, loneliness is intertwined with rapid, alienating bursts of development that fragment landscapes citizens once knew. Residents of mid-size North American metropolises, meanwhile, are prone to a loneliness brought on by suburban sprawl, which generally eschews walkable amenities and other building blocks for tight-knit communities. There are common threads between these places – including the ubiquity of social media and other products of globalisation – but their individual terrains and populations form distinct topographies for mental health.

As built environment professionals, it's our responsibility to examine the unique settings of the locations we work in. This is key to bridging the gap between mere proximity and meaningful togetherness in schemes intended to tackle loneliness, whether they're site-specific interventions or broad-strokes blueprints for change.

At Make, we have studios in London, Sydney and Hong Kong, with live projects across the globe. Some of the considerations our designers face in the UK include social stratification and the so-called death of the high street. These coalesce in efforts to address loneliness in British cities, where public spaces risk injudicious privatisation. There's a growing appetite to repurpose space for community use across the country, but it takes a considered planning approach. With our Hornsey Town Hall project, for example, Make is restoring an historic civic building to create a new neighbourhood arts hub – a scheme made possible through a strategic deal between the local council and a private developer.

In Australia, there are low-density, car-reliant suburbs to contend with, which often miss out on the social opportunities a neighbourhood can reap when housing and public spaces mingle. One approach designers are taking to strengthen social ties here is diversifying the use of business districts, offering valuable communal spaces to workers and visitors who might not have these at home. Make's renovation of a celebrated sandstone building in Sydney's CBD, for example, includes reinstating the adjacent public realm as a vibrant, inviting city square.

In Hong Kong, it's extreme density that's exacerbating loneliness, with homes packed so tightly that many people don't have space to invite friends or family over. This is compounded by the region's low concentration of accessible urban green space, which leaves few places to comfortably socialise for free. One architectural tack is improving residential design to offer better connections to nature and more chances for social interaction. Views and natural light play a major role, as do shared social amenities – features that can be found in Make's Luna and Dunbar Place developments, both of which strive to foster a community spirit that's often lost in high-density living.

None of these examples solve the problem of loneliness on their own, of course. But as actors in an industry increasingly attuned to the human costs of the issue, architects can play a vital role in creating opportunities for meaningful togetherness around the world.

Sara Veale is the managing editor at Make and the Future Spaces Foundation.

Dr Claire McAndrew

of UCL's Bartlett School of Architecture explains her research into design, social science and public engagement

SARA VEALE: Your research explores the transformative possibilities of design and digital innovation. Has the topic of urban loneliness come up in the course of your work?

CLAIRE MCANDREW: Urban loneliness sits within a more general theme of my work, which considers the capacity of design to enhance social ties. This work has taken an expanded view of design's latent potential in the contexts of safety and security, wellbeing and inclusion, identity and distributed work, and the housing crisis. These collaborative projects often take the form of a situated practice that is discipline-agnostic – operating in a space that sits somewhere between architecture, design, psychology and sociology. What pulls them together is the performative: temporary digital installations or infrastructure that overlay the urban condition and invite engagement to realise positive effects.

One piece of research on urban loneliness was positioned in relation to the French anthropologist Marc Augé's theorising on non-place – spaces of transition such as motorways, shopping centres and airports that are neither here nor there. The struggle to define these with the characteristics of place made us question the implications of non-place for the human condition. The negative effects of social disconnectedness are of course well documented, with loneliness and social isolation known to predict a number of physiological and psychological conditions. Although our work signalled the potential in re-choreographing the way people connect with a space and others in it, it also exposed what we came to consider as the quantum life of non-place.

This type of duality is something I'm keen to explore further as a member of the ESRC Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health Network+. Like place and non-place, loneliness and social isolation are related but distinct states. Some might choose solitude and be socially isolated but not lonely. Others might feel lonely despite social contact. So there's value in thinking about the complexity of these states in relation to the urban realm and discussions of positive mental health.

SV: You've written about 'conscious' cities and the idea of 'conversation' between a city's inhabitants and its architecture. What does a conscious city look like? What aspects of it engender meaningful connections?

CM: Yes, I co-authored a chapter with architect Itai Palti in a book published last spring called *Designing Cultures of Care*. The book advocates that "design as a practice of care is practiced in all design contexts, not just explicit 'care' contexts" – a view that seems relevant to the perspectives of this report. Our contribution built upon Palti and neuroscientist Moshe Bar's manifesto for conscious cities, published in *The Guardian* four years ago. For them, the conscious city uses data technology and behavioural science to place people at the centre of the design process. Raising the intelligence of our surroundings in a way that is more sensitive to the pervading moods of people might – they suggest – enable the conscious city to alleviate ailments such as stress, anxiety and boredom.

It is the process through which the sentiment of the street, neighbourhood or city is understood that is important here. Our chapter, 'Seeking Empathy in Conscious Cities', focused on this process and the ethics of the city/inhabitants conversation. For the conscious city, it is arguably questions of computational neutrality and democratic participation that impact on our ability to engender meaningful connections.

SV: Have you come across any design schemes that are particularly effective in fostering social cohesion and meaningful relationships?

CM: In her editorial to the December 2015 issue of *Architectural Review*, Christine Murray asked whether architecture could play a role in curing loneliness. She said: "To combat our collective loneliness, we must be enticed by our natural curiosity to find each other in real space and real time, in places that inspire us to power down and really connect."

The challenge for design schemes is showing which are particularly effective in forging meaningful relationships and a sense of social cohesion. This requires us to look to disciplines outside our own to inform design choices and build an evidence-base of what works. Back in the spring, I published a scoping review of conceptual approaches to wellbeing in buildings with Dr Madalina Hanc and Dr Marcella Ucci at The Bartlett. Our review of the literature suggested that social wellbeing can be considered as intrinsically linked to personal wellbeing: we need others to thrive, and we need to feel well in ourselves to be able to connect with others. This makes intuitive sense, but is perhaps forgotten in projects that "encourage people to gather, play, interact and connect in new ways."

SV: Do you see technology playing a role in alleviating loneliness within the built environment?

CM: I would be cautious at suggesting technology alone can alleviate loneliness, but I think there is an opportunity for it to change the character of spaces and nurture a sense of inclusion within the landscape. One theory has noted that nature and even digital simulations of nature can be anxiety-reducing. Changing the character of spaces in this way is relevant here, as some studies have shown anxiety to be associated with loneliness.

Landscapes of digital interactivity hold a second type of potential, something we have explored tentatively in our work on non-place. One can imagine how layers of dialogue might start to nurture a sense of inclusion within the urban landscape. Digital works that aspire to connect people to one another even in the most ambient of ways could open the possibility for forming a sense of inclusion in 'others'. In other words, we might be able to forge a sense of connectedness to others that inhabit the space. The question is, of course, how can we design an infrastructure for meaningful connections that endure over time?

SV: Do you have any recommendations for built environment professionals seeking to design and develop schemes that combat loneliness?

CM: This is not a one-discipline challenge. We need to unlock our design studios to invite in complementary perspectives if we are to succeed in alleviating loneliness in urban spaces. We ought to be open to working in a shared intellectual space with other disciplines as part of the strive toward evidence-based design schemes and guidance – a space that should extend beyond academic and practice circles to include the richness of lived experience. We might, for example, find benefit in better understanding loneliness and social isolation as lived experience and how this relation plays out in private and urban spaces as people move across these thresholds.

References

Marc Augé: Non-place: an introduction to supermodernity, 1995.

"Social (re)connection: Choreographing architectural gestures in urban spaces", supported by UCL Grand Challenge. Retrieved from ucl.ac.uk.

ESRC Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health Network+. Retrieved from gtr.ukri.org.

Itai Palti, Moshe Bar: "A manifesto for conscious cities: should streets be sensitive to our mental needs?", 2015. Retrieved from theguardian.com.

Christine Murray: "Could architecture play a role in curing loneliness?", Architectural Review, 2015.

Madalina Hanc, Claire McAndrew, Marcella Ucci: "Conceptual approaches to wellbeing in buildings: a scoping review", Building Research & Information, 2018.

David Capener: "Derry has a high suicide rate – but could redesigning the river help the city?", 2018. Retrieved from theguardian.com.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Loneliness is not a modern malaise, but aspects of modern life, especially in cities, have amplified its presence. Communities around the world have also become more open about the issue, with a growing interest in spreading awareness and addressing it head on. We should keep the following factors in mind as we examine urban loneliness through the lens of the built environment.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Researchers at institutions like University of Pennsylvania have established connections between loneliness and social media use, with users vulnerable to social comparisons that can leave them feeling lonely and lacking. At the same time, social media can be a valuable unifier, bringing together communities that might not otherwise reach each other. We shouldn't underestimate its usefulness as a connector and organising tool, particularly for people with limited mobility.

ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Wealth inequality is growing, while governments around the world are under consistent pressure to cut spending. It's important we consider economic status when implementing measures to tackle loneliness, making a concerted effort to address the needs of those who can't afford social activities like eating at restaurants or taking vacations. Research from organisations like the Joseph Rowntree Foundation show connections between poverty and social exclusion, noting that those on lower incomes can find it difficult to participate in society and as a result often have fewer social relationships.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Cities are growing and becoming more ethnically diverse, both organically and through international crises like the European migrant crisis. It's crucial that we remain attuned to the ongoing hitches of shifting populations as well as the social hardship of rapid, unexpected redistribution. Many urban populations are ageing too, which means special attention will also need to be paid to the social needs of elderly citizens.

PROPERTY MARKETS

With rising rents across the retail sector, dwindling public funds to maintain community services, and a global housing crisis that makes home ownership increasingly unaffordable for urban residents, the current property market poses significant challenges for professionals seeking to prioritise social cohesion in their work. But with these challenges come the opportunity to rethink our basic model for what communities look like and how the built environment should be shaped to unite people.

EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

Digital technology is continually improving, influencing everything from marketing to supply chains. Demand for data collection and analysis is on the up, while artificial intelligence is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world. As these technologies are increasingly commercialised, it's worth thinking about how they could be applied to foster social ties in fields like design and public services. Data analytics already play a big role in the healthcare industry – what if this information could be customised for local authorities to offer insights into spending trends on loneliness-related care?

LOCALISM

In many cities, there's a growing push for local decision-making, with communities increasingly vested to address issues like loneliness at a grassroots level. With this empowerment comes responsibility, so it's important to make sure communities have access to bigger-scale support where needed. In the UK, for example, the National Association of Local Councils has teamed up with the Local Government Association to explore how best practice can be shared between central and local governments to address loneliness.
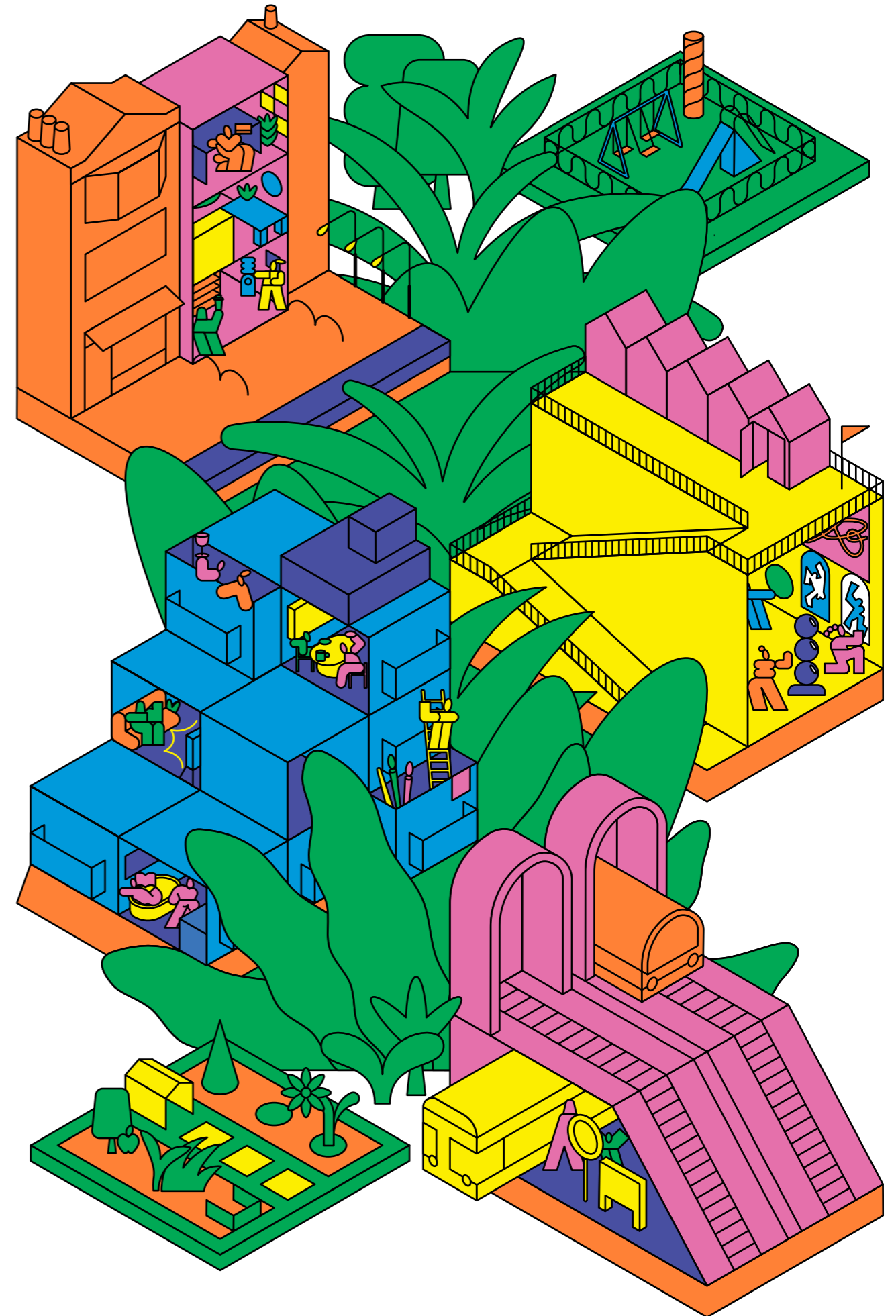
CONCLUSION

A QUESTION OF BELONGING

A recurring motif across the loneliness debate is the value of community and the social benefits of feeling part of something bigger than yourself. Most of us belong to several communities – from our families and friends to our neighbourhoods and professions – and we belong in different ways. For some, formal engagement is key to feeling a sense of kinship, like organised parties and events designed to get people socialising. For others, it's organic, incidental interactions that fulfil them – social exchanges helped along by inspiring spaces like beautiful parks and vibrant high streets.

The prevailing research around loneliness emphasises the widespread extent of the issue and the negative impact it has on individuals' health and wellbeing, as well as society

"Building up individuals is a vital step towards building up society as a whole."

at large. There are countless statistics that illuminate the risks of chronic loneliness, but sometimes it's the more personal warnings that drive this message home – for example, roundtable panellist Alex Smith's assertion that "if you have a heart attack, there are two things that are most likely to keep you alive: one is not smoking, and the other is having relationships that really mean something to you and that you care about."

It's crucial that we create the right conditions for people to enjoy socially rewarding lives, particularly vulnerable people who might not have the income, ability or agency to pursue this on their own. To start, we need to think about how we can promote social cohesion in all kinds of urban places – public and private – to help people find community in different spheres. Having a rewarding work and family life might be enough for some, while others prefer to feel embedded into larger circles based on similar
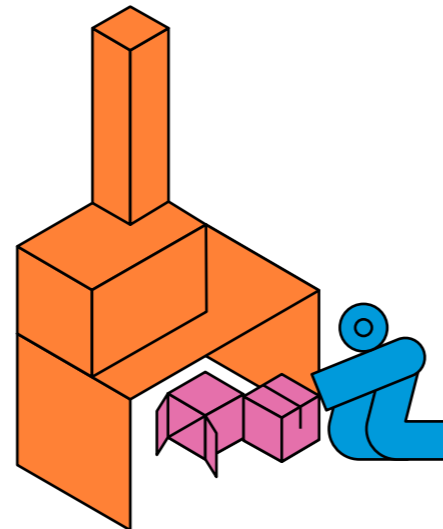
tastes and outlooks, like sports teams and activist groups. For others still, a few close friendships are the best way to feel socially satisfied. People have different needs, and we should bear in mind that what helps one person doesn't necessarily help another.

On that note, it's key we broaden our vision to include private or transitional spheres in our search for meaningful social interaction. Much of the discussion around urban loneliness and the built environment focuses on shared public spaces like green spaces and high streets, but there are prospects to consider in, for example, schools and workplaces, where many people spend the majority of their day. Targeted efforts to foster bonding between classmates and colleagues – like the introduction of well-designed communal spaces – could hugely enrich the social lives of students and workers. Secondary places like buses and trains are also worth considering. With the right interventions, a long commute could be recast as a rewarding social experience.

Finally, building the right foundations for a socially cohesive community requires identifying the overlapping risk factors for loneliness that span all locations, ethnicities and age groups, including income level, mental health and ability. A wheelchair user shouldn't have to miss out on employment opportunities because there aren't suitable transport options for them; likewise, friends unable to afford pricey social outings should have access to free, comfortable places to meet, like sheltered public gardens. For those who live at the intersection of two or more major vulnerabilities, like a low-income senior citizen or a disabled young parent, the social and practical barriers they face can be overwhelming, generating a loneliness that severely reduces their quality of life. Building these individuals up is a vital step towards building up society as a whole.
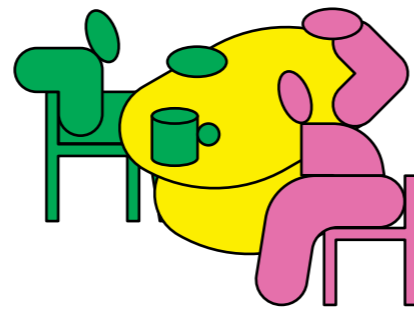
COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS

Thanks to international researchers and advocates, the impact of urban loneliness has been successfully broadcast in recent years, with awareness in cities around the world on the up. By and large, governments, academics, planners and urban designers share the same desire to improve social ties by improving the physical backdrops to our lives. The question, however, is how best to achieve that?

By definition, urban atomisation indicates division, so it makes sense that combatting this – and in turn, the loneliness it causes – should involve uniting different groups across the built environment industry, from policymakers to analysts to architects. Working in collaboration with each other and citizens on the ground, we have the power to enact influential change.

A successful starting place has been framing loneliness as a public health issue. Many recent efforts to promote social cohesion, including campaigns, funding measures and design projects, have been spurred on by concerns about the serious costs of loneliness to people's health and, consequently, to local and federal economies. 'Social prescribing', for example – in which doctors refer lonely patients to social activities – is now fixed in national healthcare policy in the UK thanks to calls from bodies like

## "Working in collaboration, we have the power to enact influential change."

the Campaign to End Loneliness. Researchers agree that targeted loneliness interventions generally result in fewer doctor's visits and hospital stays, reduced use of medication, and fewer admissions to nursing homes.

Along with signalling the importance of social interaction at large, this kind of top-down government approach is especially helpful in embedding anti-loneliness principles in terms of policy, funding and services. It also plays

an important role in broadening social opportunities through other channels, whether it's subsidies to build new community facilities, partnerships to connect isolated people with peers in their area, or programmes to repurpose underused spaces for social events. Government guidance can be particularly helpful in the fight against loneliness – for instance, advice to help schools repurpose certain spaces for community activities like farmers' markets at the weekend – as can alliances between local authorities and local businesses.

Of course, built environment professionals must also take charge. Architects, for example, should put people at the heart of their work, prioritising flexible, inclusive, human-centred practices that promote community bonding, whether they're designing a small-scale housing development or a city-centre masterplan. For urban planners, championing walkability, bikeability and overall connectivity is a must; access to green spaces, community facilities and other building blocks of wellbeing should also be key. Meanwhile, developers should emphasise placemaking in both public and private projects, with a focus on progressive visions and strategies that don't just bring people together but help them connect.

As ever, it's crucial these efforts are inclusive of people of all abilities and circumstances.

A POSITIVE FUTURE

Moving towards a culture of vitality and kinship involves a shift in both structures and mindset.

Practically speaking, it's important to consider the environmental and situational factors that have caused people to feel lonely in cities around the world, particularly those involving ineffective planning and design – the isolated neighbourhoods and overcrowded apartment blocks, the unwelcoming squares and unsafe parks. It's also instructive
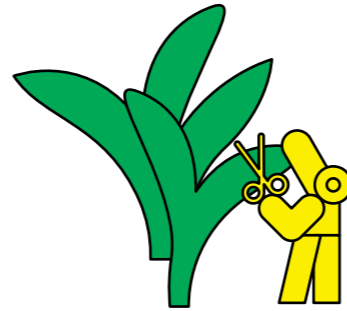
"Our experience of our physical surroundings is a profoundly human one."

to think more broadly about the stigma of loneliness and how that might create a vicious circle for people who experience it. Loneliness is harmful, yes, but there's a danger in pathologising it, as this risks isolating the very people efforts like this report aim to help.

The built environment comprises so much more than the tangible edifices that populate it. As the setting for everyday human activity, it encompasses health and home, space and light. Where a careless design can deepen stress, a well-considered one can promote self-care and deepen people's sense of companionship and belonging. Positive or negative, our experience of our physical surroundings is a profoundly human one.

The modern city presents all sorts of barriers for people to navigate: linguistic, financial, professional, political, cultural, physical. Let's use our urban designs to help break these down instead of propping them up. With inclusive spaces for socialising and environments that nourish our welfare, both physical and mental, our chances of building meaningful support networks improve hugely. The built environment is a valuable tool for not only accessing social opportunities but also nurturing relationships, both new and existing.
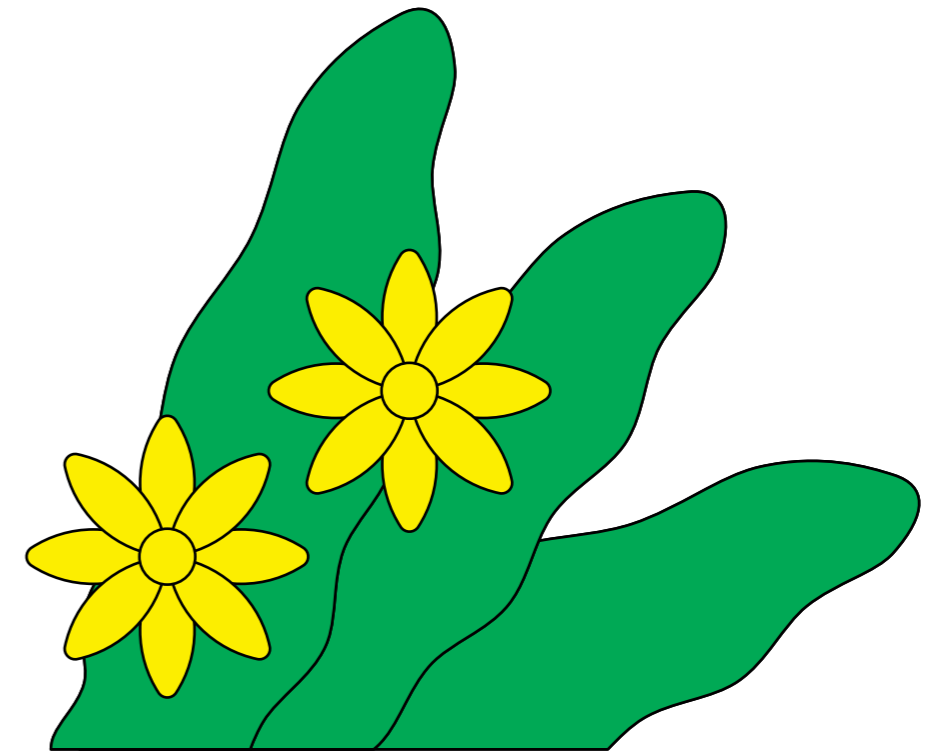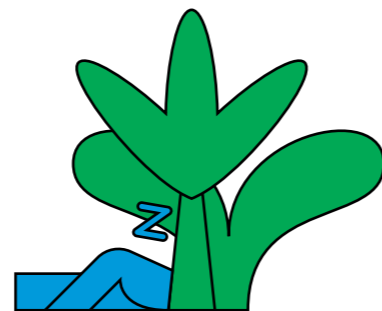
About the Future Spaces Foundation

The Future Spaces Foundation was established in 2013 as the research and development arm of Make Architects. Our aim is to generate new thinking and research to inform the design of the spaces we inhabit.

Our research explores how we can shape the towns and cities of the future, with a focus on the socioeconomic, demographic and technological factors that affect the way we interact and operate as individuals and communities.

Ultimately, we strive for an environment where smart design enables strong communities and allows people to live, work and move around in the healthiest, happiest and most sustainable way possible.

- ⬛ futurespacesfoundation.org
- ✉ info@futurespacesfoundation.org
- 🐦 @futurespaces

Publication team
Kyly Bird, Tom Featherby, Daire Hearne, Ben Hutchings, Katy Ghahremani, Peter Greaves, Ken Shuttleworth, Giuditta Turchi, Sara Veale, Imogen Webb, Sarah Worth

Illustrations
Thomas Hedger

Printed by

References

p. 6 – Letitia Anne Peplau, Daniel Perlman: "Perspectives on loneliness", *Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research and therapy*, 1982.
Olivia Laing: *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, 2016.
Wendell Cox: "What is a half-urban world?", *New Geography*, 2016.
United Nations: *The World's Cities*, 2018.
p. 12 – TNS Loneliness Omnibus Survey for Age UK, 2014.
Sense: *"Someone cares if I'm not there": addressing loneliness in disabled people*, 2017.
YouGov: *Friendship*, 2019. Retrieved from yougov.com.
Carers Trust: "Key facts about carers and the people they care for", 2019. Retrieved from carers.org.
Carers UK: *The world shrinks: Carer loneliness*, 2017.
pp. 12, 14, 15 – All In The Mind, Wellcome Collection: BBC Loneliness Experiment, 2018.
pp. 12, 15 – The Forum: *This is how it feels to be lonely: A report on migrants and refugees' experiences with loneliness in London*, 2014.
pp. 12, 22 – Demos, McCarthy & Stone: *Building companionship: how better design can combat loneliness in later life*, 2016.
p. 14 – Eurostat: "Do Europeans feel lonely?", 2019. Retrieved from ec.europa.eu.
Age UK: *No-one should have no one*, 2016.
p. 15 – Dilip Jeste et al: "High prevalence and adverse health effects of loneliness in community-dwelling adults across the lifespan", *International Psychogeriatrics*, 2018.
British Red Cross, Co-op: *Connecting communities to tackle loneliness and social isolation*, 2018.
AARP Policy Institute: "Medicare Spends More on Socially Isolated Older Adults", 2017.
p. 17 – Centre for Economics and Business Research, The Eden Project: *The Cost of Disconnected Communities*, 2016.
Campaign to End Loneliness: Loneliness Harms Health poll, 2013.
Julianne Holt-Lunstad et al: "Social relationships and mortality risk", *PLoS Medicine*, 2010.
Angie S. Leroy et al: "Loneliness Predicts Self-Reported Cold Symptoms After a Viral Challenge", *Health Psychology*, 2017.
Nicole Valtorta et al: "Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke", BMJ, 2016.
Julianne Holt-Lunstad et al: "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality", *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2015.
p. 22 – Pauline Van den Berg et al: "Ageing and loneliness: The role of mobility and the built environment", *Travel Behaviour and Society*, 2015.
National Housing Federation: *How many people need a social rented home?*, 2019.
Eurofound: *Inadequate Housing in Europe: Costs and consequences*, 2016.
United Nations: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable", 2018. Retrieved from unstats.un.org.
Age UK: *Evidence Review: Loneliness in Later Life*, 2015.
Office for National Statistics: *Loneliness – What characteristics and circumstances are associated with feeling lonely?*, 2017.
pp. 22, 43, 50 – HM Government: *A connected society: A strategy for tackling loneliness*, 2018.

p. 36 – Guardian Cities, *Greenspace Information for Greater London CIC: Privately Owned Public Spaces*, 2017.
Bradley L Garrett: "The privatisation of cities' public spaces is escalating", *The Guardian*, 2015. Retrieved from theguardian.com.
Office for National Statistics: "Economies of ale: small pubs close as chains focus on big bars", 2018. Retrieved from ons.gov.uk.
British Retail Consortium and Springboard: *Vacancy Rate Survey*, 2019.
Bloomberg: "US malls suffer latest blow as retailers cull over 300 stores in 48 hours", 2019. Retrieved from scmp.com.
Reuters: "A China twist: why are malls closing if consumption is rising?", 2015. Retrieved from reuters.com
Unison: *A future at risk: cuts in youth services*, 2016.
p. 43 – Gerard Heins: "Ageing in the neighbourhood: creating caring communities and increasing liveability in Dutch neighbourhoods", *Journal of Urban Regeneration & Renewal*, 2010.
Ade Kearns et al: "'Lonesome Town'? Is loneliness associated with the residential environment, including housing and neighbourhood factors?", *Journal of Community Psychology*, 2015.
Pauline Van den Berg et al, "Ageing and loneliness: The role of mobility and the built environment", *Travel Behaviour and Society*, 2015.
p. 57 – David McDaid et al: *Making the economic case for investing in actions to prevent loneliness: a systematic review*, 2017.
p. 82 – Melissa G. Hunt et al: "No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression", *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 2018.
Joseph Rowntree Foundation: *Poverty, Participation and Choice*, 2013.
G.D. Cohen et al: "The impact of professionally conducted cultural programs on the physical health, mental health, and social functioning of older adults", *The Gerontologist*, 2006.
K.H. Pitkala et al: "Effects of psychosocial group rehabilitation on health, use of health care services, and mortality of older persons suffering from loneliness", *Journal of Gerontology: Medical Sciences*, 2009.

IMPROVING SOCIAL TIES IN OUR CITIES

This report explores the impact of urban loneliness and ideas for reshaping our built environment to improve social cohesion. Produced as part of the Future Spaces Foundation's Vital Cities programme, it builds on our existing body of research into the building blocks of dynamic, socially sustainable cities where individuals and communities can thrive.

FUTURE SPACES
FOUNDATION