



## A progressive sense of place and the open city: Micro-spatialities and micro-conflicts on a north London council estate

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### ABSTRACT

Doreen Massey's progressive sense of place (2005) and Richard Sennett's ethical case for the open city (2018) rely on seeing space as open. It is openness that guarantees an open future, an openness to others, and the possibility of a progressive politics. Curiously, the Garden City, for both, becomes a test case for a progressive sense of the open city. For Massey, her lived experience of growing up in Wythenshawe reveals both the possibility of, and also the undermining of, the possibility of creating a progressive sense of place. In contrast, Sennett sees the Garden City, for all its progressive elements, as ultimately blocking new ways of dwelling in the city. The Garden City, for him, is too closed to provide a progressive sense of place. In north London, we discover a hidden Garden City, with secret gardens. Its micro-spatialities – and its micro-conflicts – enable us to rethink both these accounts of a progressive sense of place and of the open city. Rather than seeing openness in a physical infrastructure of space and place, we wish to emphasize the openness and closedness that emerges from the ways the people encounter, manage and dispute the micro-spatialities of everyday life on the estate.

### 1. Introduction: openness and a progressive sense of place

The recent re-publication of John English's *The Future of Council Housing* (2021, originally published 1982) is a timely reminder of an ongoing interest in the public housing provision in the UK. This concern has led to a large literature on housing policy, but in this paper we take our cue from John Broughton's *Municipal Dreams* (2019). He argues that

council homes – built in large numbers from the 1890s, more after the two world wars – have been, for most of that long history, aspirational housing: the mark of an upwardly mobile working class and the visible manifestation of a state which took seriously its duty to house its people decently (page 3).

We cannot romanticise either council housing or the state. However, what Broughton wishes to recover is the idea that council housing can be “decent”, “aspirational” and “upwardly mobile” – socially progressive – and therefore that their politics should not be submerged under negative

narratives of decline, decay and disaster. Our interest in this argument is less with the catastrophic fate of council housing under successive governments (as John English warned in 1982), than with uncovering how ‘openness’ operates as a principle for evaluating whether council estates can be socially progressive (or not).

Our approach to this question is through the writings of Doreen Massey and Richard Sennett, each of whom offers a different sense of how ‘openness’ as a progressive ideal is to be understood. For Doreen Massey, it is a political commitment to seeing space as open, while for Sennett it is about how to build and dwell in the ethical ‘open city’. Both rely on the idea(l) of openness as a spatial principle for a socially progressive built environment. Our ‘case study’ is the Hilgrove Estate in north London, which was built according to the socially progressive ideals of the Garden City movement. Our aim is to show how understandings of openness lead to different accounts of what might be socially progressive.

We are curious about whether a progressive sense of space requires a

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better understanding of the relationship between open and closed senses of space and place. Questions like this are prompted by a suspicion that openness might not always be progressive. This suspicion has been articulated by others. Thus, for example, Colin Lorne has expressed a concern about the rhetoric of openness in neoliberalism, where strategies designed to produce ‘open economies’ in cities (paradoxically) lead to practices of exclusion or ‘closedness’ (2020).

In the next section, therefore, we will introduce the Hilgrove Estate, establishing it as a Garden City Estate. We then turn to Doreen Massey’s essay “Living in Wythenshawe” to think about the lived experience of a Garden City. From this essay, we take her emphasis on what she calls the micro-spatialities of Wythenshawe. This attention to the detail of lived experience affords an analytic which we will take into the empirical sections of the paper, where we explore the lived experience of the “secret gardens” of Hilgrove. Richard Sennett’s insistence on openness as an ethical principle for understanding the good, or socially progressive, city helps here, as he is keen to think through the ways that the built fabric of the city opens up or closes down possibilities for communities to intervene in the production of the city itself. Hilgrove’s “secret gardens”, from this perspective, become a test case of how residents can, and cannot, intervene to reconstitute space and social relations on the estate.

This approach, we hope, adds to a body of work that is developing around the micro-spatialities of estate. Here, for example, we are thinking of work on council estates by Phil Hubbard and Loretta Lees (2020; Lees and Hubbard, 2022) on renewal and gentrification, by Insa Koch (2016) on disenchantment with the political system and everyday politics, by Lisa McKenzie (2013, 2015) on class inequality, and by Sarah Leaney (2020, 2021) on power dynamics and community formation. In all these essays, there is an attention to a ‘politics’ that sits outside the formal political process (of local Councils), yet which gears with it, whether as disenchantment or as protest or as apathy. Consequently, we have become intrigued by the notion of micro-conflicts.

The phrase ‘micro-conflict’ appears in many literatures (from management studies to international politics). Often, it is tied to a spatial binary: the macro and the micro. Our understanding of the term is tied to Massey’s notion of micro-spatialities, as a lived experience of space and place. For us, micro-conflicts are similarly connected to everyday life, where fleeting disputes take place over seemingly small things – such as, in our example, who does or does not have the key to a padlock. Our understanding of ‘micro’, like Massey’s, is that small does not mean insignificant and, further, that it is constitutive of, as well as embedded within, (sometimes much) wider spatial and social relations (following the non-scalar approach suggested by Marston, Jones, and Woodward, 2007). Details matter in the bigger picture (and there’s more than one picture). Attention to micro-conflicts, thus, might help us understand experiences of disenchantment, protest and apathy on council estates. But, in our case, how residents might engage with the more formal political process. It is on this issue that we conclude.

## 2. Making Hilgrove: finding a Garden Estate on the Finchley Road

The area around Swiss Cottage, in north London, suffered extensive bomb damage mainly due to its proximity to the west coast mainline railway. In 1946, after the war, the London County Council (LCC) approached the Eyre Estate to buy land for housing on the east and west sides of Finchley Road. Not wanting to change the middle-class character of the local area or undermine the value of their land, the Eyre Estate refused the development of municipal housing on the site (Baker et al., 1989; Day, 1988). Following extensive negotiations, the Eyre Estate granted land to the LCC on two conditions. The first was that 25% of the land be used to house higher income groups. The second was that the Eyre Estate would choose their own architect for the development. The Eyre Estate chose Louis de Soissons and his practice de Soissons, Peacock, Hodges, and Robertson (Day, 1988). de Soissons is perhaps

best known for his role as Chief Architect and Master Planner for Welwyn Garden City (Historic England, 2020). Designed to create an ideal, socially progressive environment for the working class (March 2004; Meller and Porfyriou, 2016), Welwyn and Hilgrove have much in common.

De Soissons’ designs for the Garden City and the Garden Estate show similarities in layout and architectural style. Housing in Welwyn is predominantly comprised of semi-detached houses grouped in cul-de-sacs with large front gardens opening onto roads with wide grass verges, mature trees, and contiguous allotments (de Soissons, 1949). Likewise, plans for the Hilgrove estate grouped buildings around cul-de-sacs (Dobson Close and Dorman Way) with mature trees and access to private gardens for ground floor flats, terraced houses (which were given the appearance of semi-detached houses), and lower-storey maisonettes as well as communal gardens allocated per block and private gardens for some upper-storey maisonettes. The allocation of private gardens for some flats and maisonettes, but not for most, have a significant bearing on how one moves through the estate by creating repeat enclosures and exclusions for some, but not others.

These design elements have left a legacy, both in the micro-spatialities of everyday life on the estate, but also in its micro-conflicts and micro-politics. In this, gardens – the estate’s lawns and secret gardens – are critical spaces. So, we will focus on the gardens in the final sections of the paper. Before turning to these micro-spatialities, it is important to note the spatial separation of income groups, built into the original design of Hilgrove estate. Here, the Finchley Road acts to divide social (working class) housing from private (middle class) housing.

The six lanes of traffic, or hard edge of Finchley Road (Fig. 1) separate Hilgrove Estate to the west (to left of the Fig. 1) of Finchley Road from Boydell Court, the high-income housing stipulated by the Eyre Estate (Fig. 2).

Boydell Court, which was intended to be a part of the LCC’s Hilgrove Estate and let to higher income groups was leased to a private company, Odderino’s Rest and Hotel Company, as soon as works were completed in the early 1960s (Day, 1988). Odderino’s made improvements to Boydell Court’s heating provision and tenants’ facilities and a penthouse storey was later added to the blocks. The external appearance of the blocks is almost identical to those on the west side of Finchley Road but the average two-bedroom flat in Boydell Court is around 40% larger than its neighbour, six lanes to the west. In 2022, a four-bedroom flat in Boydell Court cost £9,900pcm to rent, while a 4-bedroom flat on the Hilgrove cost £2,145pcm to rent privately (Rightmove, 2022), at a time when the monthly London Living Wage was £1,941.88 before deductions for tax and national insurance (Living Wage Foundation, 2023). The almost immediate privatisation of Boydell Court adds a financial hard edge to the physical hard edge of Finchley Road, creating a barrier that works spatially and socially.

The separation of the Hilgrove Estate and Boydell Court exposes class-based assumptions about the aspirational needs of residents either side of the Finchley Road. Hilgrove was intended to be progressive by enabling upward social mobility. Boydell Court was what an upwardly mobile working class was meant to aspire to – and if they could not make it across the road, they could move ‘up’ the estate to its maisonettes and houses. This ‘progressive’ sense of the Garden City, as an engine of class mobility, lingers. Yet, as we will see in Doreen Massey’s intimate geography of Wythenshawe, it has also been degraded.

## 3. An Open Sense of Space: micro-spatialities and (the struggles of) everyday life

Just over twenty years ago, Doreen Massey wrote about her life on a Manchester council housing estate, Wythenshawe (Massey, 2001). This remarkable essay oscillates between, what she calls, the micro-spatialities of everyday life on the estate and, in her evocative and now widely used phrase, a global sense of place (Massey, 1991). The essay seamlessly weaves together personal anecdote, with poignant



**Fig. 1.** The Finchley Road is normally thick with cars, lorries and buses, which obscure the Hilgrove estate and make it as hard to see as to access. The Hilgrove Estate is to the left (West) of the picture, behind trees. We caught the road in a quiet moment to better show the side of the estate that faces, to the right (East), the heart of Swiss Cottage – and Boydell Court. Picture credit: Steve Pile.



**Fig. 2.** Boydell Court as seen from the Hilgrove Estate, looking East across Finchley Road. Picture credit: Steve Pile.

reflections about life in Wythenshawe, with a history of the estate, and the opening-up and closing-down of everyday life over time. She recalls:

My parents used to come “here” before the estate was built. Venturing on a weekend across the river and up across the rolling farmland. For Manchester’s working class what was to become Wythenshawe was then a healthy walk, a cheerful day out south of the Mersey. Young lives were then quite spatially confined: bus rides into town, a week’s holiday on the coast, were the furthest you usually went. Years later [...] my parents made sorties to London, occasional trips abroad, visits to daughters who had moved away. This was where we gathered, at weekends, for Christmas. Old age brought a closing-in again – a drawing in of physical spatiality [...] It

is as though their lives breathed out and in again. And the place of this place in those lives was moulded accordingly” (Massey, 2001, page 459).

This breathing in and out of space and place, for us, hints at more than a lifecycle characterised by the expansion and contraction of lived space. Rather, we can think about how places stretch out to other places (through buses, day trips, journeys to work and so on), but are also inhabited and dwelt in (in houses and streets, in doors and windows). These kinds of spatialities make space permeable: a permeability defined, primarily, the spaces of mobility, of moving from “there” (before Wythenshawe), to “here” (Wythenshawe) to “there” (London, abroad), to “here” (Wythenshawe). In. And out. And in. Here, Massey

evokes a commonplace rhythm of working-class life, with its spaces of workplace and home, its timings of weekends and factory fortnight. These rhythms are familiar, yet also highly specific.

Massey's attention to the different rhythms of working-class life is matched by her awareness of how the devastating impacts of neoliberal economic and social policies on the physical and social infrastructure of the estate have changed how "open" space is – and how material space creates different kinds of opening-up and closing-down for different people. To give a flavour of this, let us focus on her discussion of pavements.

When the estate is first built, the pavements were level and well maintained. Yet, under financial restrictions, successive councils had a decreasing ability to maintain the estate's pavements, especially since the Thatcher government of 1979. Even so, Massey is all too aware that council budgets were under pressure long before Thatcher (for corroboration, see Boughton, 2019). Pavements, by the time she is writing, had become cracked and uneven. For Massey, this micro-spatiality 'scales' rapidly for people walking around the estate. Her father, for example, then in his eighties, found navigating around the estate an exercise in mountaineering. Every small crack or lump had to be carefully negotiated. He might as well have been climbing Everest, she wryly observes. Yet, for others, the pavements were a rough track, providing natural hazards that increased the excitement of using them: skateboarders gleefully swerved and jumped their way along the broken pavement.

Thus, the pavement reveals a micro-spatiality of conflicting uses, but also a global sense of neoliberal housing policy and its devastating impacts on everyday life, especially the lived experiences of the frail, vulnerable and marginalised. Massey reports that her father created tactics to ensure the danger of skateboarder collisions were minimised by walking close to walls and hedges, so making skateboarders pass around him in predictable ways.

The Garden City, as an experiment in 'open' living, does not naturally or inevitably produce social mobility, or afford opportunities to realise aspirations. It's a struggle. And struggles can be lost. The social and geographical mobility generated by council housing in the 1950s is both progressive and, to a degree, past, as both Massey (2001) and more recently Boughton (2019) observe. This, we have seen, plays out on the pavements of Wythenshawe, which are open to both elderly walkers and youthful skateboarders. Mediating this micro-conflict requires the creation of closedness: whether it is a style of walking that prevents others from utilizing space freely or in the ubiquitous signage of every council house that details its various (spatialized) prohibitions: "no ball games" being only the most famous.

From Massey, then, we take three things. First, we are interested in how Massey weaves together the (natural and social) histories of space, the micro-spatialities of everyday life and a progressive sense of place. Second, and following from this, we are keen to think through the way that these show a commitment, politically and analytically, to an open sense of space (and here we are deliberately echoing her understanding of Kilburn through a global sense of place). As Massey puts it: "For the future to be open, space must be open too" (Massey 2005, page 12). It is hard to over-estimate the importance of this sentence. That is, Massey's progressive politics is committed to the openness of space; that her histories, by focusing on fluidity, movement, and struggle, create a sense that things could be otherwise; and that the ordinary micro-spatialities of life contain a struggle over openness and closedness. Third, we wish to explore the (implicit) idea that these struggles over openness and closedness might take the form of *micro-conflicts* – and that thinking through a progressive sense of place might require attending to the micro-conflicts of everyday life (such as those between a frail man and energetic skateboarders).

Massey's open sense of place reveals itself in the rhythms of, and in the struggles over the micro-spatialities of, everyday working-class life. This commitment to a political, or socially progressive, sense of openness is echoed by Richard Sennett and his ethical proposition, the Open City (2013, 2018).

#### 4. The Openness of the Garden City: building versus dwelling

In *Building and Dwelling* (2018), Sennett draws a distinction between two opposing meanings of the city. On the one hand, there is the physical, material place: the *ville* (the "building" in the title of his book). On the other hand, the city is a way of life, comprised of behaviours, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs: the *cit * (or "dwelling"). This distinction runs through various attitudes towards urban design, both in terms of the form of that design, but also as an ethics that informs and underpins urban design. To underscore this, Sennett counterposes Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin *ville* with Jane Jacobs' *cit * understanding of street life. Le Corbusier's plan focused on building at the expense of dwelling – and in doing so produced, what he calls, a closed city (see also Sennett, 1990, chapter 7). A plan incapable of adaptability, flexibility and liveability. By contrast, Sennett says, there is Jacobs' sense of the street as a lively, edgy and democratic space. This is the open city, where open "implies a system for fitting together the odd, the curious, the possible" (2018, page 5; see also Lorne, 2020, pages 749–751).

Superficially, Sennett's open city maps neatly onto both Massey's open sense of place and her insistence on openness being at the heart of a progressive sense of place. Yet, it doesn't quite. For Sennett also makes a distinction between two different kinds of open city, two different forms of progressive sense of the city. This distinction, he describes as the Mumford-Jacobs debate:

The Mumford-Jacobs debate is about different versions of the open city. For Mumford, "open" means embracing – an embracing vision, *as in the garden city* [emphasis added], which involves all aspects of people's lives. Jacobs is more 'open' in the modern open-systems sense, favouring a city in which there are pockets of order, a city growing in an open-ended, non-linear way. Mumford has a more closed idea of the *cit *, since he favours orderly and predictable behaviour [...] Jacobs' sense of the *cit * is Chicagoan in her focus on everyday, face-to-face encounters, but pure New York in hating small-town friendliness (Sennett, 2018, page 87).

Sennett argues that the planned Garden City, although setting out a progressive way of life (*cit *), effectively undermines its own progressive possibilities by planning every aspect of life. Thus, the Garden City ultimately is a closed system because it prevents open-ended and non-linear engagements with the material and social fabric of city life. This, we argue, stands in marked contrast to Massey's account of Wythenshawe – a Garden City, by design. Indeed, in the 1930s, Wythenshawe was seen as a bold experiment in social housing, creating a modern way of life for its some 100,000 residents (see Dougill, 1935; Olechnowicz, 2000; Boughton, 2013).

Wythenshawe was designed as an ideal space for the working class to thrive, with industrial sites (making, for example, electrical fittings, sweets, knitted goods, embroidery - and a milk depot), open spaces, shopping centres, footpaths, trees, and easy flow of traffic within the Garden City and between Wythenshawe and Manchester (Hopkins and Hebbert, 2019). Nor was the *cit * ignored: the design kept people away from traffic to improve and save lives, especially those of children; open spaces were for leisure and health; the city was built around neighbourhoods, with the idea of creating communities that would watch out for one another. This is the Wythenshawe, we can observe, that Massey recalls.

For both, what is at stake is a progressive sense of place and space, where "open" and "closed" are both practical and political questions about the future of the city. It is intriguing, in this context, that Sennett sees the Garden City as being operationalised only at a particular scale: 50–60,000, such as for example Welwyn Garden City or Letchworth (Miller, 2010). This renders invisible the many Garden Cities within cities. In London, this includes not just the well-known, such as Hampstead Garden City, but also the less well-known, such as the Hilgrove Estate. The Hilgrove Estate, as we have already seen, conforms to certain features of the closed city that Sennett criticizes, such as roads (that act

as hard borders) and widespread use of walls and fences. Yet, what intrigues us, is how these hard edges might be read against the grain as creating moments where the social and the spatial are reconstituted by residents and, thereby, produce the ethics of the city (rather than disable its possibility).

There is something else in Sennett's ethics – and this is about social openness: that is, an openness to strangers, in the Jane Jacobs' sense. The open city is ethical by being open to others in everyday encounters. Alongside the question of the material edges of the estate, then, must be considered its social edges. We want to know, therefore (broadly), who lives on the estate, how well people know their neighbours, how people come to meet (or ignore) one another, how the design of the estate influences social connection, and what people's mobility and migration experiences are. To understand this, we used a range of mixed methods to explore both the material, social and spatial composition of the Hilgrove Estate.

Prior to beginning fieldwork, we spent time developing relationships with local community organisations, such as a local youth charity active on the estate, and also Camden Council. The aim of this was to gain an understanding of any sensitivities on the estate and ensure high ethical standards. We began our fieldwork in summer 2021 (in between Covid-19 lockdowns) with a household survey, completing 111 in-person and verified online questionnaires, amounting to 30% of all households. We varied extensive door-knocking with online methods to gain a wider reach and more inclusive sample.

Using the relationships we built during the survey, we began spending time attending community events, street fairs and gatherings (adding our dishes and food stories to the estate's potluck dinners), observing Tenants' and Residents' Association Meetings, and spending time with the estate's Community Organisers. We conducted mobile interviews with half a dozen residents while walking around the estate, inviting them to talk us through their relationships and understandings of place on the estate. Working with a local theatre and youth organisation, we held a series of residents' workshops on ideas of neighbourhood and place which included participatory mapping, architectural design and neighbourhood photo-crawls, leading to an exhibition at a local library. Building on this, we worked with a commissioned socially engaged artist, with whom we recruited participants to a further six arts workshops, culminating in a co-produced art installation for the estate that highlighted participants' relationships to and imaginaries of Hilgrove. Alongside this, we have conducted archival research to set alongside oral histories of the estate. This phase ended in March 2023. We have anonymized the participants in the research and sought to disguise the exact location of the "secret gardens". Prior to the research, none of the authors had a personal connection to the estate.

It is easy to observe, from all this, that the lived experience of Hilgrove is characterised by social diversity – *of class*, with right-to-buy juxtaposed with social housing juxtaposed with sub-letting juxtaposed with the odd Airbnb rental; *of race*, with older Jewish residents living alongside Kosovan refugees and north African migrants; and *of family structure*, with the normative two parent two children model being a minority. In 2022, eight of the estate's 370 properties are freehold, 165 are leasehold, and 197 house council tenants. Our household survey found that 26% of the units had one occupant, 55% housed families, and 18% housed other living arrangements; 51% white and 31% ethnic minority, with 18% of respondents choosing the option to self-identify or leave the question blank; with 11% of estate households identified as Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British, and 26.5% Asian or Asian/British. If the Garden City was designed with a particular demographic implicitly in mind (white, working class, nuclear families), this is not (only) who lives on Hilgrove today. This diversity might imply a kind of 'openness to the other' that Sennett sees as the essence of the ethical open city. Alternatively, we are as interested in how 'closedness to others' might enable an everyday ethics that might also constitute what is socially progressive about the Garden City estate.

In the following sections, we consider what it is like to live on one of the hard edges of the estate; what being the self-described 'keeper of the keys' to one of the estate's secret gardens means for a progressive closedness; and the (im)permeabilities of the estate's locks and fences.

## 5. Hard Edges and Locked Gates: borders and permeability

Both Massey's *Living in Wythenshawe* and Sennett's *Building and Dwelling* are remarkable for weaving together intimate observations and with accounts of urban design and the micro-spatialities of city life (see also *Télémaque, 2021*). Paying attention to micro-spatialities helps reveal the social and spatial practices of everyday life. Thus, for example, neighbours would watch Massey's parents' curtains to ensure they were being drawn and opened, checking that the milk was being taken in, forms of social care that express themselves in their details. Yet, these practices are also bounded in specific ways. Curtains show in windows, which also have bars to prevent unwanted entry. Gateways are created by walls and hedges that funnel entrances and exits to properties. Gates are locked. These create permeabilities of different kinds. Permeability, in this sense, is about paying attention to how people (and other things) pass through space and place – and how this passing through is enabled, filtered, prevented and so on. In this sense, permeability is inextricably bound to questions of borders, thresholds and barriers (all versions of "closedness") – and how these are made and work to produce place and space.

Massey recalls as a child running her fingers along the privet hedges that enclosed the front gardens of the Garden City, separating home from street. Sennett, too, is curious about the kinds of edges that are produced by estates. Both Massey and Sennett ask how permeable these edges are: how easy is it to move across these edges; how resilient, malleable, and adaptable are they; who do these edges benefit? Hilgrove is flanked on one side by the Finchley Road. This road presents a challenge for anyone seeking to cross it, as it is major arterial route out of London, going north. Traffic is thick and fast most times of the day. You have to be quick on your feet, constantly alert. There are traffic lights and an underground passage. But neither serve to make the estate more visible nor more porous. Between Hilgrove and the Finchley Road, there is tree-lined lawn that softens the outer edge of the estate visually (*Fig. 1*). Yet, this soft edge renders the buildings almost invisible and a fence prevents access from the street. More than this, the estate is cut in two by a road leading west towards Kilburn (*Fig. 3*).

*Figs. 1, 2 and 3* echo the kinds of hard edges, which prevent porosity, that are so decried by Sennett. Thus, Finchley Road and Hilgrove Road ostensibly create two estates, each characterised by their impermeability: hard to see, hard to get to, hard to move across. In other places, fences prevent access to the estate as do gates that are locked (*Fig. 4*). Locks are a key part of the micro-spatialities of the estate, so we will discuss this in more detail below.

And, yet, the estate is permeable: there are roads to provide access for vehicles (*Fig. 5*) and pedestrian access points, although some are far less obvious than others.

Throughout the estate, there are prohibitions on the use of space (also *Fig. 6*). Whilst there are physical and social permeabilities, there are also regulatory permeabilities, involving not just activities and people, but also creatures (dogs and birds, in particular).

Through our engagement with the estate, we wish to build a picture of the layering of the different kinds of permeability on the estate and their regulation, which is both formal and informal, effective and ineffective. For us, it is critical that permeability encapsulates neither an ontology of open and closed spaces, nor a normative appeal to an ethic of openness, but rather the different micro-conflicts over how to *do* both openness and closedness in practice – and *thereby* to create a viable, welcoming and habitable space.



**Fig. 3.** Hilgrove Road, which ironically divides the Hilgrove Estate into two. These parts are even in different postcodes: NW6 to the north (right of picture) and NW8 to the south (left of picture). Which makes social cohesion across the estate harder to achieve. Picture credit: Steve Pile.



**Fig. 4.** The ironwork Hilgrove gate to the estate. Padlocked. Picture credit: Steve Pile.

## 6. Negotiating permeability: do fences make open spaces?

Spaces of permeability are produced and enacted in the micro-spatialities of edges. Edges work to produce spaces where access is difficult or impossible, where access is easy or even unnoticed, and at other times policed or regulated. Fences become a key marker of the way

that openness and closedness is negotiated around the estate, by demarcating various topographies of inside and outside, accessibility and inaccessibility. Thus, a variety of kinds of fences ring the entire Hilgrove estate; providing various levels of both physical and visual permeability.

The western edge of the estate is a hard border across both sections, broken only by the railway tracks. The edge is marked by a tall brick retaining wall dividing the estate from private neighbours and countering the site's steep slope to the west. High wire fencing has been added to the wall at the southern playground, hardening an already firm demarcation line. Hilgrove's perimeter posits, in many ways, a very practical approach to permeability in the planning of an urban estate; the *ville* responds to the physical and material needs of the site and provides privacy to the residents. Fences at Hilgrove also provide security; they offer visual access only where the tower blocks are set back from the street and by virtue of their height, and interior fencing, provide a remove of their own.

Entries are unmarked and uninviting (informal seclusion) or gated and padlocked (formal). Retaining walls demarcate the site's boundary while holding the earth of the site in place, and the site opens most to its surroundings over the train tracks, where the streets are quietest and where residents experience the most expansive views back out over the city. The estate is tucked within these layered perimeters and sequential borders made up fences, walls, undergrowth and grills. This fabric appears, on the surface, to produce an enclosed space designed to induce the orderly and predictable behaviour sought by the Garden City Movement. Yet, seemingly conflicting stories of use, disuse, appropriation and reappropriation emerge. An example of this is the use of the green spaces on the estate: a progressive, open element of the garden city design, but now a space where openness and closedness are negotiated, through micro-conflicts, in mundane ways. To help show this, we would like to talk about two different kinds of grassed areas on the estate: first, there are the lawns; second, there are the secret gardens. Each reveals different kinds of micro-conflicts over their use – and over how openness and closedness plays out.

Once through the diminutive red security door overshadowed by the bulk of the nine-storey tower and the signage that announces the council's imperatives to not litter or loiter, there is an airy and sunlit foyer that leads out onto the expansive lawns of Redfern House,



**Fig. 5.** The Dorman Way access point for cars and pedestrians to the estate, looking north. It is through this road that kids from Harris Academy (which abuts Hilgrove) access the estate after school. Picture credit: Steve Pile.



**Fig. 6.** Off Dorman Way is a public open space (with a low metal fence). Recently, fruit trees have been planted by residents to create one of two orchards on the estate (the young trees visible in the background of the photograph). The council insist the open space is not intended for dogs and their shit, or for ball games. Except some residents clearly feel otherwise. The permeabilities of the garden are layered and contested, as orchard, (guerrilla) garden, grass, playground, meeting place, dog walking area and so on. Picture credit: Steve Pile.

Sherlock, and Langhorne Courts. These lawns are home to mature plane trees as well as a statue by artist Leon Underwood (1890–1975), commissioned for the estate by the LCC in 1959. Set atop a plinth that could almost be a tree trunk, the *Pursuit of ideas* depicts figures in motion reaching out towards Boydell Court to the east. The statue stands as an ambiguous sign. Some residents see it as a sign of the value of the estate and its spaces. Yet, not for others. As Adam, a white British owner-occupier in his 60s who has lived on the estate his entire life put it: “we’re not supposed to use this green space, we’re supposed to look at it” (Field diary 13th August 2022). A more recent arrival, a French woman living in a house share, agreed with this, saying that she had never seen the lawns being used but does enjoy the daffodils planted there by the council in the spring. This ‘at a distance’ (dis)use of this lawn chimes with many of the cultural associations of the traditional lawn, as something to be seen, appreciated but not appropriated.

The lawn is often a symbol of prosperity, community and productive work (Mustafa et al., 2010). As formal spaces that require regular maintenance, lawns (and their accompanying “keep off the lawn signs”) are often enclosed and owe their cultural heritage to the English aristocracy and the transition to an industrial economy (Robbins, 2012). That residents self-exclude themselves from using the lawns suggest that cultural assumptions about ‘proper’ use and appreciation are self-policed on Hilgrove estate. This implies an impermeability that is produced by dominant cultural assumptions about how space ought to be used. This can be seen as reinforcing the well-designed equilibrium of the garden city that imposes orderliness over nature (Sennett, 2018, page 84) and its residents (Clevenger and Andrews, 2017). Yet, despite the apparent disciplined closedness of the lawns, behind Sherlock, Langhorne and Redfern, there are openings and affordances that lead to unplanned permeability.

The much smaller lawn on the other side of Sherlock Court alongside Boundary Road does not share the austere distanced appreciation of the larger lawns. The lawn on this side of the block is often littered with children's toys and tricycles spilling over from the low fenced private gardens of the ground floor studio flats. This lawn is also the block's premier children's party location:

She said that one of the best things this summer was when a new neighbour put up a bouncy castle on the little lawn for their child's birthday and had all the children on the block round to play on it. (Field diary, 3 October 2021)

When her son, now sixteen, had his first holy communion party, she hired a bouncy castle and invited all the neighbour kids round to play on it.

(Field diary, 7 October 2021)

The experience of the two mothers above, both council tenants who have lived on the estate for more than five years, one of whom describes herself as Congolese and the other, Persian, show how access, scale and ownership over the smaller lawn appears to invite use. In contrast to the longer route that needs to be taken to access the larger lawns, the smaller lawn appears to invite use both through private gardens spilling out onto it, their much smaller scale and its lack of visual over-look from Finchley Road. This illustrates some of the tensions at the core of our discussion. The planned garden layout in Garden City (the *ville*) does not necessarily always preclude unplanned experiments in the possibilities of making place (the *cit  *). This both supports Sennett's suggestion that the planned layout inhibits a 'disorderly' engagement with space and place, but also indicates that residents find novel ways to use and reconstitute space and place (against Sennett). This observation aligns more strongly with Massey's understanding of how different spaces and micro-spatialities within the garden city estate have different affordances, associations and interactions. A site for everyone, open to everyone, does not inevitably mean that everyone uses that space or that everyone feels it is open to them – and indeed that openness may lead people to avoid it or consider it exclusionary in some way. We would like to press this point through a discussion of the 'secret gardens' of Hilgrove. The secret gardens, for us, raise further questions about the normative ideal of openness – and these are about how "closedness" might, perhaps, provide a social infrastructure for inclusivity.

### 7. "It was the robin who showed me the way": The magic of the 'secret gardens' and their micro-conflicts

A walk around Hilgrove reveals layered levels of fencing and access, yet there are sight lines that reveal playgrounds, lawns and open spaces. Even so, two large gardens on the estate are completely hidden to the casual passer-by, and even the determined researcher (despite the benefit of a large-scale map). One secret garden is tightly bordered by two housing blocks, several garages, and a high retaining wall. With no pathways alongside it or to it, this garden has no discernible entrance. Access is either through two high padlocked gates separated by thick undergrowth off Finchley Road, or through a low padlocked gate and over a low fence squeezed between one block and a retaining wall. Neither of the blocks, despite bordering the garden, have direct access to it. Once inside, the lawn is well kept, trees well pruned, and it features several benches arranged companionably. A low fence divides the garden in two, presumably differentiating designated use for residents of the two blocks. Residents speak of the space as magical, an oasis in the city and are sometimes seen to use it for barbecues:

Stood by the garages waiting for workshop participants, I thought I heard some voices coming from the gardens between [two blocks] so went over to investigate. Hopping over the fence, I saw Mathis and two friends getting the fire going in an elaborate barbecue set up. I invited them to our workshop, they invited me over for beer and sausages.

(Field diary, 13 August 2022)

The garden's secluded and padlocked nature protects it from the roaming non-resident teens frequently cited by residents as generating concern by their (presumed bad) behaviour. The garden is explicitly designed for hyper-local resident use only, both protecting its magic and also excluding all but the nearest residents of the estate, and of these only those who have been able to obtain a key to the padlocks (or are able/prepared to clamber over gates and fences).

The other (better known) secret garden has an entrance off Belsize Road through a high gate padlocked shut. It runs the full length of the northern section of the estate, backing up to Nalton house and bordered to the east by the private back gardens of a housing block. The gated entrance at Nalton is also padlocked, although Hilgrove hosts monthly community potluck dinners that sometimes take place on the lawn behind the gate.

A caged vent shaft for the Chiltern railway projects into the space, and every few minutes the whoosh and rumble of a train passes underfoot. Behind the vent shaft residents have carved out an area for a barbecue pit. Immaculately well kept, the spot features a half-circle perimeter built of balanced logs, brush, and sticks, a metal fire pit, and a carefully placed plastic rubbish bag. A site for gathering, hidden even within the hidden garden space.

While inspecting the firepit area, we were hailed by a resident in his early 30s, who had grown up on the estate and lives with his parents. He had seen us and came to ask our business. His main concern was the rubbish that had started to accumulate in the area more in the last few years, as the caretaking staff for the estate was reduced by the council. He said he cleaned up the site himself sometimes, but couldn't keep others away from the firepit, intimating use by people who shouldn't have access to, or don't take care of, the garden. The gated border of the site was too permeable for his taste. The question of who has access, and perhaps more pivotally, who has rightful access is a matter of considerable contention among Hilgrove residents who have privilege of knowing that the two secret gardens are there.

Leonora is a council tenant who has been living on Hilgrove since leaving Kosovo in the early 2000s. She lives in a one-bedroom flat with her teenage son. Her mother, sister and niece live nearby on the Abbey Road Estate (an estate with a local reputation for "bad" tenants). Although her accommodation is overcrowded, she chose not to take up the offer of a two-bedroom flat in Highgate New Town (an estate much lauded by the architectural community). Instead, she explained she chose to stay *because of* the secret garden behind her block (Field diary, 22 September 2021). Of the flats in Leonora's block, only some long-standing council tenants have keys to the padlocked secret garden.

Leonora believes she is one of possibly three tenants with keys and the only one to use the space regularly (Field diary, 11 May 2022). In the only section of the garden that is (just about) visible (through a fence) from the road, Leonora has placed a patio set and hung a rope swing from a tree for her son and niece. In the summer, Leonora spends much of her time here with her family and leaves the gates open for her neighbours to join. There is a small, paved section just inside the main gate that is invariably covered in colourful chalk drawings. To the west of the main gate is a grape vine growing over a pergola, planted and installed by a former resident who recently passed away. Leonora looks after the grape vine in her neighbour's memory.

More recently, Leonora who regularly attends the estate's monthly pot-luck dinners suggested that the secret garden be used for the dinners in good weather (Fig. 7). It was at one of these events that resident young people (and one of the authors) competed in how far they could climb up the trees and marvelled at the fox cubs gambolling near the western retaining wall.

How Leonora and her neighbours use the secret garden in some ways seems to reflect Sennett's sense of the Garden City as providing only partial opportunities for residents to intervene in, and shape, the space of the estate. Yet, this is not quite the full story. It is important that the



Fig. 7. Quiz time at the Hilgrove Connects community dinner with rope swing in the background. Picture Credit: The Winch.

secret gardens are *contested spaces*. The fact that any resident holds keys to the secret garden at all is the subject of ongoing micro-conflicts among members of the tenants and residents' association. There are members of the tenants and residents' association who feel strongly that no one should be able to unlock the padlocks. One member claimed that the garden is padlocked for a reason and should remain so, while another ventured that the garden should remain locked because of the health and safety risks posed by the Chiltern railway ventilation shaft. Yet another member made specific complaints about Leonora's patio set and rope swing, suggesting that they be removed as soon as possible and reported to the council (Field diary, 8 June 2022).

As with the lawns behind Langhorne, Sherlock, and Redfern, and the two playgrounds, there is a tension between perceived intended use of green spaces on the estate, actual intended use and (re)appropriated use. In this way, openness and closedness appear simultaneously. While, on one hand, the closure of the secret garden makes it into a site of welcome and hospitality, opening-up a space of oasis on the estate; it is also seen as something that should remain closed and enjoyed only at a distance by a select few, thus introducing new selectivities over who can be in and use certain spaces. For us, what becomes critical is not whether a space is open or closed, but how the micro-conflicts over openness and closedness are negotiated – the formal and informal rules of micro-conflict through which rules over micro-spatialities are established and practiced. This is the 'political' fabric of micro-spatialities that Massey refers to in her essay on living in Wythenshawe (yet differs from Sennett's 1996 romanticisation of disorder: see also Sandra and Sennett, 2020).

In effect, when Massey describes her father walking along pavements close to walls to avoid collisions with skateboarders, she is describing a micro-conflict. We have witnessed similar micro-conflicts: over who has, and does not have, keys; who polices and who is policed; over tacit and formal rules (see Fig. 6). The normative ideal of openness does not necessarily lead to an inclusive and conflict-free space, especially when micro-conflicts are considered. However, micro-conflicts are evidence of resident engagement. Thus, the lawns become a space lacking in engagement precisely because there are no micro-conflicts over its use. Instead, these are spaces marked by apathy and disinterest. Thus, paradoxically, micro-conflicts become a resource around which to build

inclusivity – as people are drawn into arguments about what spaces are for and who they are for.

So, who should have access to these gardens? Are these gardens private or communal? The Garden City model promoted cleaner, healthier living through planned communal greenspace. This was to be socially progressive, enabling the improvement and upward mobility of the working class. This progressive ideal remains. In July 2020, Land Use Consultants (LUC) published their final report on Swiss Cottage's green infrastructure to Camden Council. The vision was to produce healthy, sustainable and inclusive environments on Camden's green-spaces (LUC/Camden Council, 2020, page 31). Options for the Hilgrove Estate included improvements in the playgrounds, the creation of 'pocket' community growing schemes, better drainage, pollinator-friendly verges, trough planters, outdoor gyms and the like. Hilgrove's 'secret gardens' afforded much potential, so a specific plan for these was devised (LUC/Camden Council, 2022). The 'secret gardens' were to be redesigned: specifically, they were to be opened-up by removing physical barriers, making them more visible and accessible, as well as enabling community gardening.

Residents blocked the plans. They complained that LUC/Camden's plans would make the estate unsafe and insecure. One interpretation is that the Council had challenged residents' sense of ownership of the secret gardens – and been forced to abandon its plans to create a healthier, sustainable, inclusive sense of place. Progress has been thwarted. On the other hand, arguably, what the residents would lose was less about ownership than about the ability to negotiate or argue over ownership and access. The complaint, in this light, was that they could not engage in micro-conflicts over space, as the Council would have imposed its own version of inclusivity, openness and transparency upon the residents. Significantly, instead of the LUC/Camden plan, residents secured funding for three 'growing plots' (for flowers and vegetables) around the estate, managed by resident gardeners (with the explicit aim of teaching others to garden too). Critically, while the Garden City restricts intervention in the physical structure of place (as Sennett argues), its barriers, thresholds and border are all sites where deliberation and argument can 'take place' over what the social and spatial constitution of the estate should be like.

Such questions are the stuff of micro-conflicts. Hilgrove's gardens are certainly not public, with layers of controlled access and persistent invisibility from intentional overgrowth. Surveilled by residents who take on ownership along with caretaking duties, these gardens reflect an openness to communal use at a restricted and highly local scale. So, we must neither romanticise conflict, nor evade questions of power relations amongst residents. Importantly, then, ownership is itself subject to micro-conflicts. This reveals ownership to be more than a question of property or access, but also involving inclusion and transparency as well as safety and vulnerability. Thus, access is a communal resource, produced out of the negotiation of, and micro-conflicts over, open and closed spaces and places. It is on this point that we wish to conclude.

## 8. Conclusion: open space and a progressive sense of place

We began this paper with Doreen Massey's essay on living in Wythenshawe. Her attention to the detail – the micro-spatialities – of life on the estate has drawn us to the micro-spatialities of life on the Hilgrove Estate in north London. We followed its parallels and shared history with the Garden City ideal. While Wythenshawe was explicitly developed as a Garden City, Hilgrove has its own roots in the normative ideal of combining city and country. For Massey, the micro-spatialities of everyday life force her to consider the broader social and economic conditions of life on the estate. Her intention is to establish both the ways in which life is opened up and opened out to the world, but also to bear witness to the structures of power and inequality that constrain life.

Here, we see the normative ideal of openness as a political imperative: to create an open future – to fight against the structural closures imposed by relations of power – means seeing space as open, both

socially and spatially. We saw that this normative ideal of openness underpins Sennett's discussion of the "open city" – a city so porous that there are no restrictions upon space and place. And we have also seen that, in Sennett's dichotomous schema (open versus closed), the Garden City stands as both an open and closed space and place. This leads us to attend to the micro-spatialities of the Hilgrove Estate, seeking to understand not only its micro-spatialities, but also the fabric of open and closed spaces, and their everyday contestation.

We have shown that, as Sennett argues, the design of the Hilgrove Estate itself creates a physical infrastructure of openness and closedness. The Finchley Road creates a hard edge that hides and divides the Estate from the busyness of Swiss Cottage. We have also seen that this also enabled the Estate to be divided between social housing, to the West, and a private development (along exactly the same design principles) to the East. The Finchley Road, then, enacts the kinds of spatial division between open and closed spaces that Sennett castigates. Further evidence of the social restrictiveness of closed spatialities lies in the use of fences and padlocks and, arguably, lawns to create a sense that this Estate is not for everybody – including those who live there.

Yet, this evidence is contradictory. While the lawns are seemingly not for use, they are used. Indeed, two such lawns have now been converted into orchards and vegetable patches by resident action. You can see the young apple trees growing in the background of Fig. 6. More than this, we learned of and were invited into "secret gardens", which residents jealousy guard. And remain fiercely proud of. Yet even this is contradictory. So, we have introduced the idea of micro-conflicts to the discussion. For us, the key to thinking about open and closed spaces is less about whether they are inherently good or bad (as Sennett does), but rather about the nature of the micro-conflicts through which openness and closedness is ordinarily negotiated. Thus, we can see that closedness is a way to protect spaces for vulnerable and insecure people. People use access to keys and hidden gaps in fences to generate (im)permeabilities. Yet, significantly, micro-spatialities ensure that these permeabilities are continually negotiated, paradoxically, ensuring the spaces remain inclusive and welcoming.

This leads to a paradoxical conclusion: micro-conflicts – and the ability to negotiate them – are a communal resource. In contrast, say, to apathy and disinterest. The real problem of both open and closed space, then, is the way that they exclude people from micro-conflicts – the way, we might argue, that they become de-politicized. In this view, we can return to Massey's sense of Wythenshawe. We would argue that her essay reveals the micro-conflicts of the estate – the hedges, the bars on windows, the hindered walking. Our point, then, is that a progressive sense of place requires us to think about how these micro-conflicts create the conditions under which space is opened-up progressively. Or not. And, in parallel, how closedness might also be constitutive of a progressive sense of place. Or not.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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