

## Context

Oxford City Centre is globally renowned for heritage and education, annually attracting:



Yet the City Centre's public spaces face increasing challenges that do not befit the city's status, including:

**Lack of well designed destination spaces to sit and limited green networks**

**Lack spaces for people to informally gather, relax and enjoy the city**

PJA (2018)  
Oxford City Council (2022)

“Evaluating how urban civic spaces can function as ‘third places’ to accommodate informal social life in Oxford City Centre.”

## What is a ‘third place’?

The ‘third place’ is used in this study to encapsulate informal social life and its relationships with publically accessible exterior spaces in the City Centre away from home and work.

Oldenburt (1989)



Whilst the third place is typically understood as spaces such as public houses and cafés, it is ultimately the identified deficit of exterior public spaces in the City Centre, providing a useful framework relating space and how it can provide for human social needs for people to use it for informal social activities / interactions.

Aelbrecht (2022)

## Aim

- 1 What are the key qualities and components of a third place?
- 2 Which spaces in Oxford City Centre have most third place potential?
- 3 What are the current challenges and successes of these spaces to becoming successful third places for social activities?
- 4 How and in what ways can the City Centre improve its performance as a third place?

## Methods

- Literature / case studies** to gain insight of best practice design
  - Public observation** to evaluate performance of city centre spaces
  - Online survey** to gain understanding of contextual subjective issues
- ↓ Output
- Design principles**

# Public Space Third Place

## Designing for informal social life in Oxford City Centre

## Key findings



Fig 1: Framework: qualities of a third place

The literature framework indicates the key qualities and components of a third place public space accommodating informal social life, used along with morphological analysis to identify sites of highest potential:

- Broad Street
- Bonn Square

Findings from these sites indicate that:

- Majority of stays are brief, irregular and passive interactions
- Food, music, space to play attracts longer stays and more informal use
- Public desire for spaces to better accommodate social interactions

## Indicative results

- More flexible and varied types and forms of spaces to sit and relax
- More shade / shelter from weather and sense of enclosure / privacy
- Improved aesthetic appearance from planting and use of materials
- Less motor vehicle traffic / noise and vehicle pollution

## References

Aelbrecht, P. (2022) *Fourth Places: Informal Social Life and Interaction in New Designed Public Spaces*. Cham: Springer Nature. The Urban Book Series.

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PJA (2018) *Oxford City Centre Movement and Public Realm Strategy*. Available at: <https://www2.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/folders/documents/roadsandtransport/transportpoliciesandplans/areatransportstrategies/oxford/03001-FinalReport-RevC2.pdf> (Accessed: 9th April 2024)