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# Far from the “dreaming spires”: staging active travel in suburban Oxford, UK

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## ABSTRACT

Active travel (“walking and cycling”) is promoted because of its benefits to environmental sustainability and public health and well-being. Neighbourhood design, including provision of infrastructure for walking and cycling, can increase social cohesion and can positively affect sense of belonging and pride in the community. This paper investigates the experience of residents living in a suburb of the “Cycling City” of Oxford, UK, who endeavoured to walk and cycle for local journeys. We generated in-depth qualitative insights into regular active travel activity, first through biographical interviews, followed by micro-ethnographic mobile methods with members of the local community to observe and understand how everyday activities on foot or by cycle are performed and experienced. Jensen’s “Staging Mobilities” framework is used to reveal how active travel is “staged from above” and how it is choreographed within the neighbourhood, “from below”. By adopting this framework, we demonstrate how moving beyond the collection of “hard” data of movements between origins and destinations, to a more situated approach generating tacit knowledge from the ground up, can provide a more informed understanding of the broader social and cultural conditions under which active travel operates. This can help policy makers develop both physical and social infrastructures to support active travel so that it may contribute more effectively to increasing community wellbeing as well as contributing to sustainable development goals.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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staging mobility;  
micro-ethnography;  
community wellbeing

## 1. Introduction

“Good health and wellbeing” is one of a collection of 17 key sustainable development goals (SDGs) designed to be a “shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and planet, now and in the future” (UN). Governments and authorities in countries across the globe are focusing on improving the health and wellbeing of their population while tackling the climate emergency. Encouraging people to engage more in walking and cycling (“active travel”), or indeed moving in other physically active ways, whether for transport or recreation, is now widely recognised as a way of improving public health and wellbeing while also contributing to a more sustainable transport system. In terms of

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community wellbeing, there is also strong evidence that neighbourhood design, including provision of infrastructure for walking and cycling, can increase social cohesion and can positively affect sense of belonging and pride in the community (What Works Wellbeing 2018).

This paper responds to a call in this journal for more research into the “relational qualities” of different mobility practices, that is, what they do for the quality of the *relations between people* as well as between them and their surroundings (Te Brömmelstroet et al. 2017) and renewed appeals for scholars to take social life of public space seriously given its role as essential *social infrastructure* that impacts the collective wellbeing of the community (Horgan and Liinamaa 2023). Picking up the concept of social infrastructure, and its importance in facilitating public life, encounter and community cohesion, Latham and Layton (2019), inspired by sociologist Eric Klinenberg’s *Palaces for the People* (2018), have appealed for researchers to mobilise the concept in order to investigate the public dimensions of overlooked spaces and to consider:

...the kinds and qualities of facilities that allow social life to happen, the kind of sociality that is afforded by them, and how this can be recognised as a kind of public life. This might include the design and provision of novel and exhilarating spaces like swimming pools and climbing walls but also involves thinking about the social dimensions of functional spaces such as bike lanes and sidewalks. (p4)

With this in mind, the focus of our paper is *functional spaces*, that is, mobility infrastructure ostensibly designed to “encourage” active travel, and how this shapes and is shaped by the relational and social dimension of walking and cycling practice (Middleton 2018; Te Brömmelstroet et al. 2017). We are interested in how movement through these functional spaces affects social cohesion, sense of belonging, and community wellbeing. Indeed, there has been an increased focus over the past decade on the role that transport plays in influencing wellbeing (De Vos et al. 2013; Ettema et al. 2010; Delbosc 2012; Mokhtarian 2019; Nordbakke and Schwanen 2014; Reardon and Abdallah 2013) and for particularly journeys such as the commute (Chatterjee et al. 2020). However, the focus has been generalisable measures of individual (subjective) well-being and there has been less attention to the importance of social and cultural context and the different times and spaces through which social interaction occurs (Nordbakke and Schwanen 2014). In this article, we adopt a place-based approach to investigate social relations and atmospheres within a specific social grouping and their surroundings and the influence on community wellbeing. We understand *community* in relation to *wellbeing* as a geographically bounded group of people subject to direct or indirect interaction with one another (Lee and Kim 2016) and as more than a sum of its parts such that we need to understand aspects of life as they are lived and experienced *together* as a social grouping (Howarth 2018).

In focusing on the atmospheres of place, we are reminded of David Seamon’s concept of *sense of place* which he defines as, “the specific character, atmosphere, and expressive energy of a particular environment or locale” (Seamon, 2022). If neighbourhood surroundings, and the flow of movement within them contribute to sense of place, it follows that mobility infrastructure in those surroundings can contribute to how a place “makes itself felt”, evoking either positive or negative qualities for different mobile bodies.

Our investigation focuses on the city of Oxford (approximately 150,000 population) in the UK. While the UK ranks poorly in relation to active travel compared to other European countries (Buehler and Pucher 2012; Pucher and Buehler 2008) Oxford is the UK's self-proclaimed "Cycling City", being nationally renowned for its higher-than-average levels of cycling (and walking) – the second highest authority in the UK for cycling after Cambridge. However, provision of infrastructure is variable, and conditions are recognised by the local authority as being "very poor" (Oxfordshire County Council 2020). Oxford, therefore, is not immune to the fact that transport infrastructure planning and design in the UK has traditionally neglected walking and cycling (C. G. Pooley et al. 2013). Indeed, the nature and scale of transport interventions that are required to support active travel has been recognised as being, historically, a low priority in UK public spending decisions (Abrantes, Ellerton, and Haines-Doran 2016).

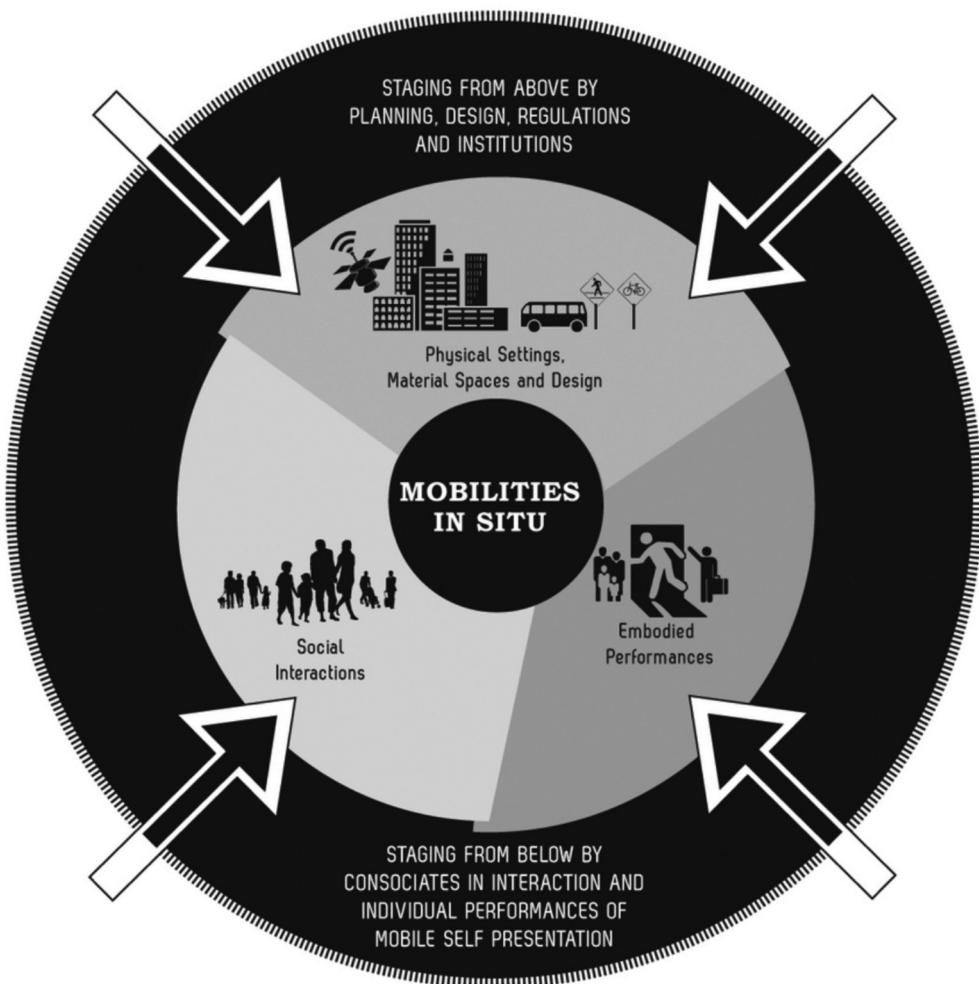
In the next section, we discuss the importance of widening the approach to understanding active travel using a mobilities perspective. Then in section 3, we explain how we used mobile methods and applied Jensen's (2013) "Staging Mobilities" framework, to understand how mobilities are designed, planned, and how they are lived (and felt) on the ground as people perform active mobility. Section 4 reports our findings within this "staging" framework. Section 5 provides a discussion on the implications of our approach and findings. Finally, section 6 provides a reflection on implications for active travel promotion in similar contexts and for future research.

## 2. Understanding active travel using a mobilities approach

Travel behaviour research in relation to walking and cycling has traditionally focused on "determinants" such as cost, time, distance, and the physical environment while reducing personal characteristics to variables such as age, gender etc (for instance Alfonzo 2005; Alton et al. 2007; Cervero 2002; Dawson et al. 2007; Heinen, van Wee, and Maat 2010; Hunt and Abraham 2007; Muñoz, Monzon, and Daziano 2016; Ton et al. 2019). However, scholars have increasingly turned to the critical role of *travel experience* in shaping travel behaviour and active travel modes (De Vos et al. 2013, 2018) and the influence of the *aesthetic dimension* of the urban environment on emotions (Stefansdottir 2014). Attention has also been drawn to the importance of considering the *social and cultural context* in which mobility practises take place and how they become (ab)normalised (den Hoed and Jarvis 2022; Koglin and Rye 2014).

Meanwhile, mobilities research (Sheller and Urry 2006) has opened the possibility of understanding transport and travel by applying qualitative sociological analysis and moving beyond studying mobility as something that is potentially observable – a "brute fact" – to understanding mobility as something imbued with meaning and a way of being in the world that is practised, experienced and embodied (Cresswell 2006, 3). The epistemological underpinnings that guide the mobilities approach opens the opportunity for a wider palette of "mobile methods" to understand the experience of mobility across different political, social, and cultural settings (Buscher and Urry 2009; Buscher, Urry, and Witchger 2011; Fincham, McGuinness, and Murray 2009). It allows researchers to attend to affect, place, meaning, culture and representation – typically concerns of the humanities – and provides a way of researching ordinary, mundane practices and gestures, conversations, and experiences in different contexts.

A criticism of mobilities research is that it fails to consider the material and design-oriented realm (Jensen, Lanng, and Wind 2016). Jensen (2013) has attempted to bring sociological analysis of mobility closer to the material and design-oriented realm by adding the dimension of design and architecture of the built environment to a sociological framing. Jensen's "Staging Mobilities" approach directs the focus towards the way infrastructures, technologies and networks are designed, laid out, and built, and how this relates to the social realm in terms of the meaning of movement to social and cultural practices (Figure 1). In essence, this allows the contemporary city to be understood as an assemblage of circulating people, goods, information, signs, and relational networks that create individual and collective experience while choreographing mobile bodies. The Staging approach posits that mobilities are always being staged and *acts as a framework* to analyse how (and by who and why) staging takes place as it does ("staging



**Figure 1.** Jensen's staging mobilities model (from: staging mobilities, Ole B. Jensen, copyright (© 2013). Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group.

from above”) and how those who are staged perceive and react to their staging (“staging from below”):

Mobilities do not “just happen” or simply “take place”. Mobilities are carefully and meticulously designed, planned, and “staged” (from above). However, they are equally importantly acted out, performed, and lived as people are “staging themselves” (from below). *Staging Mobilities* explores the dynamic process between “being staged” (as, for example, when traffic lights command us to stop or when timetables organise your route and itineraries) and the “mobile staging” of interacting individuals. (as, for example, when we negotiate a passage on the pavement,<sup>1</sup> or when we choose a particular mode of transport in accordance with our self-perception) (Jensen 2013, 4)

Focusing on examples of real-life “mobile situations”, the situational approach enables investigation of individual experiences and collective processes of inclusion and exclusion in the transport system by drawing attention to three dimensions for any mobile situation that is created where social interaction takes place: physical settings and material spaces, social interactions, and embodied performances (*ibid.* p11). By paying particular attention to the way infrastructures, technologies and networks are designed, laid out and built (“from above”) the meaning of movement to social and cultural practices can be grasped (“from below”) through investigation of the micro-ecologies of mobile practices and the extent to which they afford or prevent a person’s mobility. The framework attends to both the instrumental actions of moving bodies in terms of how they negotiate infrastructure and the strategies they use, and the affective and emotional dimensions of mobility, in terms of how they feel about being staged. The Staging Mobilities framework is, therefore, a useful heuristic and analytical framing to understand how infrastructure design made elsewhere (e.g. in planning departments) affects situational mobilities acted out and “performed” by humans on the ground. In recent years the staging framework has been applied, for example, to studies on (e)biking (Dahl Wikstrøm and Böcker 2020; den Hoed 2018), children’s mobilities (Murray and Cortés-Morales 2019) and cruise passengering (Paananen and Minoia 2019). To our knowledge the staging mobilities framework has not been applied to walking and cycling in the UK.

Jensen also appeals for “critical mobility thinking” in the application of his concept to attend to the social repercussions that different mobility arrangements and designs may have in terms of social inclusion and exclusion (Jensen 2009). This applies equally to how mobilities are staged from above and what he terms “power plays” between people staging their mobility from below. It calls on us to question both theoretical and practical taken-for-granted assumptions about mobilities and to address the implications for policymaking and planning. The framework therefore provides a useful heuristic to investigate the impact of neighbourhood design and mobility infrastructure on everyday life and how “relational qualities” of different mobilities (Te Brömmelstroet et al. 2017) can affect social cohesion, sense of belonging, and therefore, community wellbeing.

### 3. Applying the staging mobilities framework

Our study involved extensive qualitative research with 10 residents living in a suburban neighbourhood in Oxford between September 2017 and September 2018. Participants were recruited as part of a project investigating mobility, health, and wellbeing (ESRC

**Table 1.** Participant profiles and journey summary.

#	Pseudonym	Gender/ Age	Years of residence in Barton	Economic status	Driving licence? Car/ MC/Cycle?	Summary of go-along
1	Gunther	M/62	18	Working	N N/Y/N	Walk around local estate taking in the local park (20 minutes).
2	Helen	F/38	3	Maternity leave	N N/N/Y	Walk to collect her child from the school before visiting local library (90 minutes).
3	Mina	F/64	63	Retired	Y Y/N/Y	Walk around local estate and over ring road to green space combining usual recreational routes (120 minutes)
4	Ronan	M/64	53	Working	Y Y/N/N	Walk around local estate using regular recreational route (60 minutes)
5	Giles	M/45	8	Working	N N/N/Y	Cycle into city centre using direct arterial road on way in and indirect return route via quieter streets (60 minutes)
6	Lisa	F/54	8	Working	N N/N/Y	Cycle across city to place of work in western suburb (45 minutes)
7	Maria	F/36	5	Working	Y N/N/Y	Cycle to work through estate and along ring road (20 minutes)
8	Mohan	M/66	5	Working	Y Y/Y/Y	Cycle (& walk) return ride to allotments across estate (20 minutes). Regular walk around estate (70 minutes)
9	Eric	M/44	1	Working	N N/N/N	Walk (and Bus) shopping trip to nearest supermarket (50 minutes)
10	Jeff	M/20	5	Working	N N/N/N	Walk (and Bus) usual early morning journey from home to work in East Oxford using two buses (40 minutes)

Healthy Urban Mobility, Grant Reference ES/N01314X/1) reported in Jones et al. (2019). Criteria for inclusion was that they regularly made journeys in their local area on foot or by cycle (i.e. at least once a week). The participant set (Table 1) included six people who identified as men, half were aged over fifty, the majority without access to a driving licence. Nearly all were in employment and had lived the neighbourhood for five years or more.

A mobile methods approach was adopted that moves beyond conventional “stationary methods” of social science (e.g. an interview with a participant in their home) towards a more situated understanding of mobility through observation of, and enactment in, everyday mobility spaces (Boas et al. 2020; Buscher and Urry 2009). The emphasis on bodily situatedness and situated knowledge can help understanding of interaction with materiality (infrastructure and technology) and other people, and also embodiment and affective disposition, and how this shapes understanding of the world and sense of wellbeing (Ricketts Hein, Evans, and Jones 2008).

Our approach involved a researcher accompanying the participant, and videoing them using a bodycam, while they made a regular journey of their choice either on foot or by cycle as part of a “go-along” interview (Carpiano 2009; Kusenbach 2003). Guided by Jensen’s Staging Mobilities framework (Jensen 2013) the field researcher was tasked with paying particular attention to observing how participants interacted with infrastructure and other people and then to conduct a video elicitation interview (K. Brown and Spinney 2010; Schubert 2009) directly after the journey to investigate the significance of those interactions and embodied emotions. Capturing the journey on video while on the move was particularly important for



the cycle go-alongs due to the inherent difficulty interviewing people side-by-side while sharing the road vis-à-vis talking and walking on the footway or while seated on a bus (K. M. Brown and Lackova 2020).

Six go-alongs were on foot (two of which included a bus journey) and four were by cycle. Half of all journeys were functional, for example to access work or personal business, while the other half were recreational. Journeys typically started from participants' homes and took up to two hours to complete. Most of the go-alongs took place within the local neighbourhood but some extended to other parts of the city. Follow-up video elicitation interviews usually took place in participants' homes directly after the journey or in a third space such as a cafe. Biographical interviews were conducted prior to the go-along to build rapport and understand participants' walking and cycling throughout the life-course in the context of the household, employment, relationships, and current mobility practice (Chatterjee et al. 2012; Lanzendorf 2010).

All fieldwork was conducted by the same researcher (co-author, Spencer) and in most cases, interview material was validated with participants. The act of analysis involved complete immersion in the data by the authors shortly after field data collection and then constant comparison between interviewees' accounts of their mobility to identify points of convergence and divergence (Braun and Clarke 2006). This closeness to participant data allowed reflection and discussion between the author and co-author on what they identified as significant key themes. Joint thematic analysis was aided by using QSR NVivo version 12. The study was approved by Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee (Registration No: 171074) and all participants gave their written consent to the interview and for the use of anonymised quotations and visual material generated during the fieldwork.

#### 4. Findings

Using Jensen's Staging Mobilities framework (Jensen 2013) we examine the relations between moving bodies and infrastructures, things, and people encountered while performing everyday journeys in their neighbourhood. Our objective is to "bring alive" the lived experience of the relationships between people, material spaces and infrastructure designs and the embodied performances taking place at key sites within the neighbourhood while in the process of active travel, and to provide a more informed understanding of the broader social and cultural conditions under which active travel operates and the impact on sense of place, social cohesion, and therefore, community wellbeing.

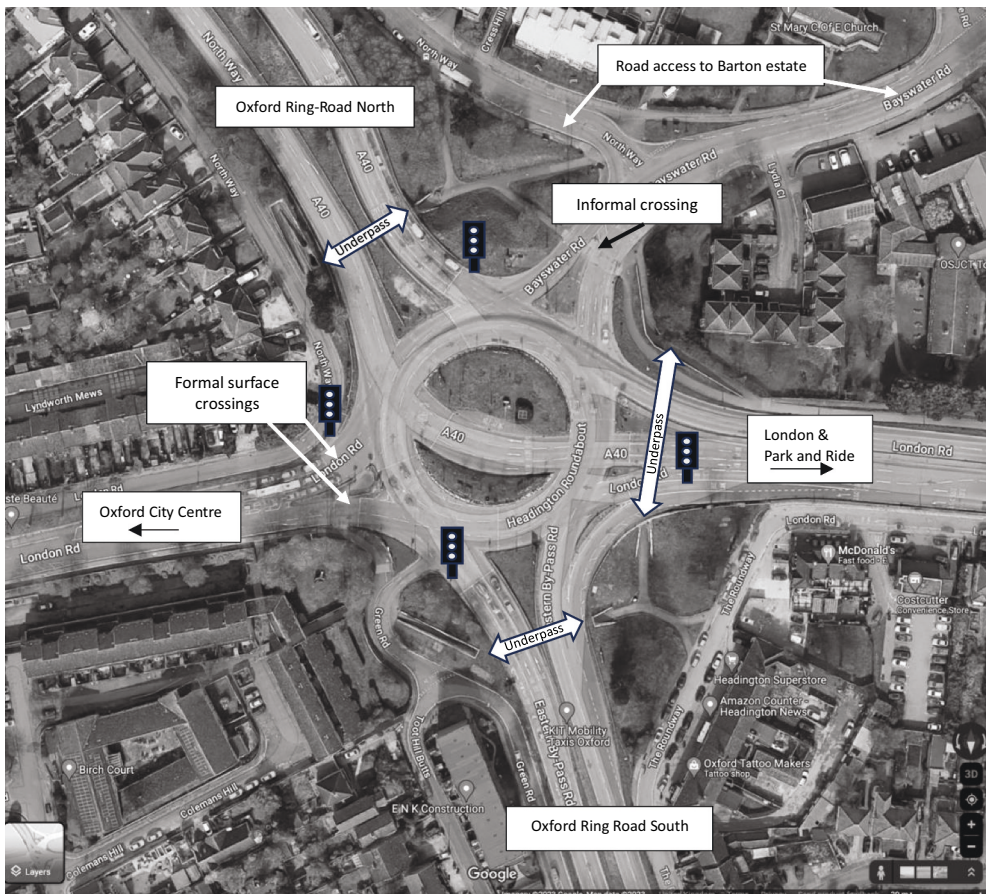
First, we turn to "staging from above" and unpack the local policy and planning context with regards active travel. Then we zoom in on the case neighbourhood and describe infrastructure and systems of transport and mobility. Second, we turn to findings from our go-along interviews to elucidate "staging from below" drawing on our own observations of participants in motion as well as their own utterances about interactions and embodied experiences as they navigated infrastructures either in the field or reflected upon during post-go-along video-elicitation interviews.



#### 4.1. Staging from above: institutions, physical setting, material spaces, and design

The case neighbourhood of Barton (population approx. 4000, map coordinates 51.767205, -1.196120) is situated some two miles east of Oxford city centre and located outside the city ring-road bordering open countryside. The estate is made up of around 1400 dwellings built in the 1940s as public housing and largely consists of semi-detached properties with some blocks of maisonettes and low-rise flats. Barton is one of the most deprived areas in Oxford and is in the top twenty percent of deprived wards in England (Oxford City Council 2015). The inequality in life expectancy from birth in Barton compared to least deprived areas of Oxford City is reported as being, on average, 8.3 years less for men and 6.6 years less for women (Oxford City Council 2017). The number of households without access to cars or vans at the 2011 Census was 38% for Barton vis-à-vis 33% for Oxford City (Oxford City Council 2011).

The Oxford ring-road separates the estate from the city. It incorporates a large, signalised roundabout (known colloquially as the “hamburger roundabout”)



**Figure 2.** Configuration of the A40 “hamburger” roundabout. (map data: Google earth, image © 2023 Maxar Technologies, image © 2023 Airbus).

intersecting the busy A40 and ring-road (map coordinates 51.762936, -1.196773) (Figure 2). The A40 roundabout was “upgraded” in 2004 with £2 M funding from the UK Department of Transport. The aim of the upgrade was to reduce traffic accidents and smooth (motor) traffic flow and to provide some bus priority measures to allow buses to bypass congestion. The resulting “throughabout” allows the continuation of the A40 through the centre of the roundabout and is signalled across all major arms apart from the main access road to the Barton neighbourhood – drivers exiting the estate must yield and use the “black-out” period between signal changes to enter the roundabout.

In a study of transport and social inclusion, using Barton as a case study, Rajé (2007) highlighted how the opportunity for infrastructure upgrade to improve conditions for walking and cycling during this major scheme development were missed. Rajé notes how scheme designs sent out for consultation included the statement, “All pedestrian and cycle facilities will be maintained” as a “benefit of the proposed scheme” and therefore the scheme offered no significant upgrades to underpasses to improve conditions for walking and cycling. This was compounded by omission of a formal signalled crossing at surface level for pedestrians and cyclists travelling across the Bayswater Road arm of the roundabout in the Barton estate. Underpasses available under the ring-road on both major arms of the roundabout, to this day, are substandard. There are signs instructing cyclists to “dismount” and barriers have been installed at entrances to the underpasses. The ring-road, along the city side, incorporates a wide separated walking and cycle path linking to other parts of the city and a path along the A40 links to a nearby bus-based park and ride site (map Co-ordinates 51.761850, -1.181244). Travelling from Barton on foot or by cycle to reach these facilities can be quite challenging because the housing area is in a valley. Access roads slope up towards the city ring road and up in the opposite direction towards the countryside. Two separate private bus operators provide services directly linking the neighbourhood to the city (approx. 20 minutes journey time) and these run every 15 minutes throughout the day. Residents also have access to frequent coach services to London with stops located at the park and ride site and main road into the city.

#### ***4.2. Staging mobility from below: interaction with material space/infrastructure***

Having set the scene of “staging from above” we now turn to “staging from below” and interaction with infrastructure; social interactions; and embodied performances while on the move.

The main theme that emerged was the perception that the neighbourhood was in poor physical condition and felt dilapidated. Words such as “depressing” and “gloomy” were typically used to describe the area. Specific aspects of the built environment were often singled out such as the poor condition of footways, paths, and alleyways, and the apparent lack of maintenance that diminished the experience of walking in the area:

A lot of these [reaching up to tug a brick] are falling off, if you go further along where I live the walls are falling down, and actually, some of them have fallen down, and people have been injured by it. . .It’s hardly surprising that people don’t want to go for a walk is it? You get depressed walking around. Mohan.

You are supposed to be able to walk down here, look at the state of this! Why isn't it being looked after? I know there are costs involved in doing this, but I always think, if you maintain it, it never gets into that state. Ronan.

Participants who took part in cycling go-alongs expressed how they had become so accustomed to potholes – holes in the road – that they almost knew instinctively where they needed to manoeuvre to avoid them. Giles commented, “Potholes are becoming... increasingly worse”. Indeed, we often witnessed participants swerving to avoid potholes, including Maria, who stated during her video elicitation interview, “Here you see me moving around the road slightly to avoid [pot] holes. As it is a familiar route, I know where they are!”.

The sense of neighbourhood decay was compounded by other factors that they perceived to be detrimental to the local environment, namely, domination of motor traffic and the noise and pollution from the neighbouring ring-road. The underpass at the “hamburger” roundabout was a regular point of discussion during our fieldwork because participants inevitably encountered it while moving on foot or by cycle between the neighbourhood and city. Lisa conveyed a common perception that the quality of the underpass was poor and hinted at the disjuncture between murals of dreaming spires that adorned the walls versus the reality on the estate.

It's pretty grim, it's pretending to be cheerful with that mural of some places of interest...the rest of it is really scruffy, a scruffy floor, I don't know when they did that mural, which has been graffitied over [laughs]...I think they need to decorate these places based on the local community, not on Oxford's Dreaming Spires. Lisa

Despite these conditions, participants spoke of how they would use the underpass instead of attempting to cross the highway above because of the volume and speed of motor traffic and safety (a point we return to below). Even where light-controlled (“Pelican”) crossings were provided, they were perceived to inconvenience pedestrians and cyclists because of waiting times.

What's the point in trying to cross the road because, yes there are Pelican crossings, but it means you have to stand and wait, and I know being a car driver that people don't always stop at lights...so it's for my own safety's sake I'd rather walk under the road. Ronan.

### **4.3. Staging mobility from below: social interaction**

Positive social interactions between study participants and people in the neighbourhood were evident during our go-along interviews. This was usually serendipitous, fleeting moments of contact with neighbours on the doorstep or even strangers. Specific sites such as bus stops and the school gates formed points of interaction for parents like Helen, for example, who explained how she welcomed “getting to know” other parents and not just her immediate neighbours since she had started to collect her children from school. Ronan usually conducted local walks from his home on his own but relished opportunity for social interaction, for example, when chancing upon neighbours, acquaintances and even total strangers as his journey unfolded. He explained that he generally comported himself in

a friendly manner ready to acknowledge people with a greeting of “good morning/afternoon”:

Walking is a good social thing really. Especially if you go on the same walk regularly and meet the same person, ‘cos I do that sometimes. There are two girls on my walk up the woods, quite often I’ll see them walking down in the opposite direction, and I’ll say, “hello girls, how are you?”, “Oh we’re fine thank you how are you?”, and then just carry on. You don’t stop and talk. You just say, “hello”, greet and walk on. That’s it <laughs>. Ronan.

Jeff, on his walk to take the bus, explained how he enjoyed interacting with people at the bus stop and while aboard the bus. He explained how he often gave people a smile “to make them happy”. As a frequent bus user, he had also become acquainted with bus drivers and told of how he now greeted them with, “hello buddy!” Performing journeys on foot with our participants gave the impression of neighbourly interaction on the street and a strong sense of community.

While the presence of walking was visible on neighbourhood streets, particularly around school opening and closing times, the same cannot be said about cycling which was conspicuous by its absence. That’s not to say that people were not seen riding bicycles, but during repeated field visits, the notion that Oxford is a “Cycling City” ran counter to our participants’ experience as well as that of the researcher. Maria for example, who regularly commuted along the ring-road cycle path to Oxford Business Park, was conscious that she was in a minority of cycle users in her neighbourhood, “you don’t really see other people cycling in Barton or other cycle users until you get to the ring-road cycle route”.

Participants spoke of how certain interactions with other road users negatively impacted the overall experience of moving around the area on foot and by cycle. There was a perception that the volume and speed of motor traffic in the area had increased and posed a significant threat to walkers and cyclists together with the increasing number of parked cars and vans on the pavement. For Mohan a particular issue was the poor behaviour of some drivers and the “white van man” phenomenon which he felt had become more prevalent in the area due to the rise of the “gig economy”:

We’ve got a white van man epidemic here...where jobs have become...insecure, “zero hours”. They are forced into a sort of pseudo-entrepreneurship...they drive like looneys... they don’t look! Mohan

Despite the instalment of physical traffic calming measures (cushions) and a designated 20mph zone in the neighbourhood, participants felt that this had little effect on driver behaviour.

The (Bayswater) road dividing the neighbourhood and linking to the A40 roundabout was a site that came under scrutiny by participants. During our go-along interviews we witnessed first-hand the sheer challenge and danger of crossing the road at the Barton arm of the roundabout due to lack of formal crossing points. Giles explained how extreme vigilance was needed and how he was concerned about his teenage daughter using this space on her own, “You need to be careful [when crossing]. I spent some time trying to make my daughter pay attention to cars here because they come from, not all directions, but...you need to be vigilant”. We observed the difficulty Helen faced trying to cross the



**Figure 3.** Crossing at the Barton arm of the A40 “hamburger” roundabout (source: authors’ own).

road with three children in tow which she explained during her video-elicitation interview (see [Figure 3](#) and accompanying video):

[Crossing the road] is much more difficult...because drivers don’t check. Whereas people have to slow down because of the roundabout, here [at the Barton arm] they just go quickly out of the street. At the very beginning, when I was using the [child] buggy, I couldn’t get down the road. Helen

#### **4.3.1. Negotiation in motion under the A40 “hamburger” roundabout**

The interaction between those walking and those cycling was raised during our interviews mostly related to negotiating the underpasses at the A40 “hamburger” roundabout ([Figure 4](#)). Lisa questioned why “Cyclists Dismount” signs had been installed rather than “Cyclists Be Careful” ([Figure 5](#)). She told of how she was once “shouted at” by a jogger as she rode her bike carefully through the underpass and how, on another occasion, a council employee cleaning the underpass told her she shouldn’t cycle and tried to block her way. Despite these negative interactions, this had not deterred her from continuing to ride with care through the underpass.

There are signs up saying, “Cyclists Dismount” but cyclists don’t dismount <chuckles> and I never do. And there’s never usually a problem because people try to be careful and you get the odd cyclist who is not particularly careful, but I always try to be careful, I will slow down, I’ll ring my bell so that I don’t hurt anybody. Lisa

Similarly, Maria felt that she wasn’t presenting any danger because her strategy was to always cycle slowly and give-way to pedestrians. She commented during her video elicitation interview: “Now we are going under the Headington [Hamburger] Roundabout which I shouldn’t cycle down, you can see the ‘Cyclists Dismount’ sign which I ignore”. She explained how, if she does encounter a pedestrian, she makes a point of going “super slow” so as not to present a “risk” and as a result had not had any problems ([Figure 6](#)). Nevertheless, she





**Figure 4.** Negotiation in motion under the “hamburger roundabout” (source: authors’ own).

acknowledged that she had witnessed the dangerous behaviour of other cyclists “tearing through” the underpass. Giles explained how he was “a bit cheeky” by not dismounting at the signs but that he “rarely sees cyclists walk” and nobody seemed to care.

Participants of our walking go-alongs confirmed these claims and did not regard most cyclists riding through the underpasses as particularly problematic. Helen, for example typically walked through the underpass with her children and was not perturbed by cyclists:

I feel safer than crossing the road, especially with the kids, there are some bicycles, but I just have to remind them [the children] to keep an eye on the corner...cyclists using the tunnel are usually respectful and some ring their bells at the corner. Helen.



**Figure 5.** Access to the underpass under the A40 “hamburger” roundabout with murals symbolising the “dreaming spires” of Oxford University colleges (source: authors’ own).

#### ***4.4. Staging mobility from below |embodied performances/bodily sensations***

Particular attention was paid to how people described sensations when they moved and how it impacted their mood. The performance of walking and cycling was shaped by bodily capabilities, the nature of journey, and interaction experience with the physical and social environment. There was also a gendered dimension in that women expressed that they were far less likely to go out at night and would actively avoid certain spaces that they felt were threatening such as the underpasses and green space. Ronan and Mina provided examples of routine recreational walking in their local area to get out of the house to escape and explore, de-stress and lift the mood.

Ronan, having been diagnosed with high blood pressure, felt that his regular walks had helped keep this under control. For his walk, he wore walking boots and was equipped with a wrist pedometer and light rucksack containing rain gear and a phone in case of emergency. He also carried a portable radio that he would listen to through earphones on the noisier sections of his route. He explained how walking made him feel:

I do feel good, yeah. I do. That’s part of the incentive as well, to go for a walk, ‘cos it makes you feel good at the end of it. And you know you’ve achieved something, you’re not sat around doing nothing, and it’s making something of your life as well, isn’t it basically? Getting out.

Ronan

Mina’s motivation for taking a regular recreational walk to the park across the ring-road was to take time-out from her caring responsibilities and “escape” the neighbourhood to what she regarded as a much better-quality environment. She explained how she sometimes felt “bogged down” by what was happening in her life – caring for her husband and





1. Maria speedily approaches the A40 "Hamburger" roundabout on separated cycle track at speeds of around 25kph.



2. Easing off the pedals and braking, she slowly descends to underpass passing a sign instructing "CYCLISTS DISMOUNT".



3. Maria brakes sharply to navigate a barrier and is forced to make a tight left turn at the start of underpass.



4. She deliberately cycles slowly past a pedestrian in underpass adorned with murals depicting the "dreaming spires".



5. Maria then slows right down to navigate the obscured right corner on the exit from the underpass.



6. After the corner, Maria stands on her pedals to attack the exit on a short steep slope, while avoiding another pedestrian.



7. Exiting the underpass, she quickly glances right for oncoming traffic before making a left turn onto the access road.



8. Maria continues her journey along the access road next to the busy ring road travelling at speeds of around 25kph.

**Figure 6.** Maria negotiates the underpass under the A40 "hamburger" roundabout (source: authors' screen grabs from chest-worn action camera, shot at 1920 x 1080, 50 fps).

her recent diagnosis of Asperger syndrome – and felt very sad but how she pushed herself by thinking, "get yourself up, get out, don't indulge this, you are alive!". Her routine walks to the local park would end at one of three benches where she would sit and "people-watch" and meditate to be more in tune with her surroundings.

It's peaceful, lovely trees, people playing tennis, lg exercise. And I watch people and think about them, that man with the dog there [points]. ..he doesn't look very happy, a bit distracted. . .I mean I don't know, I'm only guessing! Mina.

Mina had lived in the neighbourhood for over 60 years and perceived that over time it had gone into a downward spiral, and she was concerned by what she perceived as the social segregation caused by private gated apartment blocks on the site of a former public house. This had prompted her to question her feeling of sense of belonging. She wanted to continue to live on the estate but yearned for improvement to neighbourhood attractiveness and the community activities on offer:

I'm aware that I need more sustenance to stay here, if they want me to stay here they've got to give a bit more, that's how I see it. . .I know it's limited, it's only a very small thing, a drop in the ocean going to the park or scooting around Oxford or whatever [but] it's important to my mental state and my physical state. Mina.

The cycling go-alongs we conducted were either for personal business or commuting. Participants spoke of their general riding style and the strategies they used when manoeuvring and interacting with infrastructure and other vehicles and people. On occasions they were able to articulate their feelings and bodily sensations and spoke of the atmospheres they encountered, or indeed tried to manufacture, on their journeys. Giles, for example, described himself as a "a bit of a sloth" when it came to his cycling represented by the comfortable set up of his functional hybrid bike. He would plan his routes to avoid motor traffic and to take in quieter green spaces. He expressed how cycling through different environments could affect his mood:

The old parts have a certain charm that I tend to go out of my way to enjoy. . .and to be perfectly honest. . .there are the opposite. . .areas I like to avoid which are run-down areas that feel miserable. I'm probably unnecessarily hung up on things like that because I feel that they affect me, not just where I live, but the areas I pass through. . .if they are gloomy I tend to come out of the other side a bit gloomier. Giles.

Conversely, Lisa enjoyed what she called "speedy cycling" and was confident riding in motor traffic and enjoyed the challenge. She valued the feeling of control and self-reliance.

I like the challenge of going up hills. . .I like doing it on my own. . .I don't have to rely on people to arrange something, I can just go and do it. . .something that I really enjoy, it is for me, and I feel really happy afterwards, I don't need anyone else. Lisa

Maria, a recreational sports cyclist, stated that whilst she was not anxious about cycling on busy roads, and was "not afraid of a challenge", she felt lucky to have an almost entirely traffic free ride along the ring-road cycle path to the company where she worked (Figure 6, plate 1). To "drown out" the noise of traffic on the busy ring-road, Maria explained how she would often listen to music on her earphones which also enabled her to "switch-off". She described the impact this had on her physical and mental health as profound. Cycling had helped her to develop a sense of resilience for dealing with the ups-and-downs of everyday life:

Cycling can be a wonderful way to both get around from A to B but also improve your health and mental wellbeing as well. It is really simple, the bike ride, but it can have profound effects,

I think, on how you feel about yourself and how you transport yourself in the community, it is really good... If I come to work on a bus I'm still tired, I don't feel like I have woken up yet, I don't feel ready to face the day I kind of want to go back to bed a bit to be honest! Whereas if I ride in, I'm alert, feel positive, in a good mood, ready to go, a much better feeling all round, "I saw something different, I felt something different, I had a good experience, I had a bad experience". I think there is a much wider range of things you can encounter on a bike ride.  
Maria

Giles speculated on the role of cycling as a potential antidote to male "midlife crisis".

I find it very calming to cycle, I have always felt that ... There is something with being able to move around at a faster pace than walking but there is also something of a fluidity ... I'm inclined to believe that it [Exercise] really helps because it's just general wellbeing and it sorts of counters other factors. I mean it's you know, men 40, I'm in the zone where a lot of men start to falter... nothing's happened to me, no trauma or anything so it was just a serotonin dip or something like that. But it feels like it [cycling] helps so I've been trying to do it more since then. Giles

Cycling was generally regarded as therapeutic as it provided an opportunity to get outdoors and interact with the landscape and other people and that this was beneficial to health and wellbeing. However, this did not necessarily guarantee rider's continuous "moment-by-moment" wellbeing while performing rides. Cyclists were at risk of being disrupted by negative interaction experiences with other road users. Lisa, for example, recollected how she "got into an argument" with a car driver who pulled over in front of her path and told of how she would "get frustrated" being slowed down by other cyclists. While Giles, on the other hand, discussed his irritation with other cyclists who, "rode as if they were in the Tour de France".

## 5. Discussion

The mobilities approach takes the position that movement is more than just movement between point A and B and that it is also an integral part of how a place is defined and experienced. In this spirit, we set out to explore the impact of infrastructure on everyday life, sense of place, and wellbeing of people living in a suburb of Oxford, UK, who endeavour to make local journeys on foot and by cycle. We applied Jensen's Staging Mobilities framework (Jensen 2013) to bring sociological analysis of mobility closer to the material and design-oriented realm and how the way infrastructures are laid out relates to the social realm in terms of the meaning of movement to social and cultural practices.

By adopting this approach, we were sensitized to the way spaces and facilities are planned, designed and (un)maintained and how those spaces and facilities are practiced and used. This enabled us to excavate how physical settings and material designs shape mobility "from above" and what takes place "from below" as people negotiate the material environment and engage in interactions and embodied experiences.

While walking and cycling have an observable social dimension our research went beyond simple *covert* observation of social interaction in public spaces (Jensen 2014; chapter 5). We did this by adopting a novel approach combining biographical interviews, mobile go-alongs and video elicitation interviews, to *co-produce with* participants, understanding of the rationales, experiences, and the embodied dispositions while performing journeys on foot and by cycle. This situated empirical approach,

engaging in the regular active travel activities of the local community, allowed us to illuminate experiences of walkers' and cyclists' interaction with infrastructure, as well as the meanings they associated with their *in situ* social interactions and their embodied performances in and across different spaces. Cook (2016), in a review of Jensen's book, *Staging Mobilities*, has also pointed out that the staging framework is fairly static, and tends to focus on *snapshots of journeys* with little sense of how this framework could be applied to a *whole journey*. Our approach enabled us to "mobilise" the staging framework and analyse rich textual and visual data (i.e. video) generated from researcher participation in, observation of, and probing into, participants' whole journeys.

The emphasis on bodily situatedness and situated knowledge allowed us to unpack the "physical, social, technical, and cultural conditions . . . of contemporary urban mobilities" (Jensen 2013, 4) and to understand how this affects sense of place and community wellbeing. This revealed how mobility disparities are maintained and perpetuated within the context of wider socio-economic disparities in Oxford and indeed the UK. We demonstrated how patterns of mobility are social and cultural manifestation of auto-centric thinking that create mobility divides and social stratification. At our case site this manifested itself as danger from fast-moving motor vehicles; difficulty crossing roads; contested interactions between those walking, wheeling pushchairs, and cycling through a substandard underpass; obstructions of the footways due to parked cars; and an unpleasant environment due to noise and pollution.

In the introduction section we also highlighted appeals to take social life of public space seriously (Horgan and Liinamaa 2023) and for attunement to social infrastructures and the public dimension of overlooked *functional spaces* (Latham and Layton 2019). We provided a notable example, the reconfigured A40 "hamburger roundabout", was a notable example of how material design directly affects "relational qualities" (Te Brömmelstroet et al. 2017). State-funded infrastructure ostensibly failed in terms of the lack of ambition to improve existing conditions for walking and cycling (Rajé 2007). In sum, infrastructure design to benefit motor traffic flow failed to adequately provide for current (let alone future) demand for active travel. Moreover, it put those walking and cycling into direct conflict and created "power plays" between users as they negotiate less-than-ideal subterranean space. We drew attention to the challenges people experienced walking, wheeling pushchairs, and cycling through the underpasses due to restricted access and the types of "negotiation in motion" (Jensen 2013) that took place to limit conflict. Scollon and Scollon (2003) have highlighted how socially produced space, the "geosemiotics of space", communicates "sense of place". The cosmetic "upgrade" of the underpass – a mural depicting the Oxford "dreaming spires" skyline<sup>2</sup> – seemingly acting as a crude (and some might say, cruel) reminder of the gulf between the quality of spaces experienced by "town and gown".<sup>3</sup>

Our situational focus of everyday practice of active mobility in the neighbourhood also unearthed how and why relational aspects such sense of place, belonging and wellbeing are augmented or diminished (Te Brömmelstroet et al. 2017). Through attention to articulation of embodied engagements with space we highlighted how participants sensed and articulated the general decay of their neighbourhood and how this negatively affected their mood – Particularly moving was Mina's reflection (during her go-along) on ageing in place and how she articulated her eroded sense of belonging, social exclusion,

and abandonment due to what she perceived was the prioritisation of profit driven real estate and erosion of community space.

Despite this, we also showed how social interactions while walking and cycling form an important part of the fabric of the community and resilience against negative change. These were created through fleeting moments of serendipity while walking and cycling. The benefits of exercise in green space in enhancing self-esteem and mood (Barton and Pretty 2010) was evident in the accounts of our participants who placed a premium on being able to conduct recreational walks from their home through local parks and green spaces. This is important in the context of evidence that suggests that social networks and exercise in mid-life can prevent long-term health conditions (Xu et al. 2023).

While participants who cycled drew attention to the invisibility of cycling in the neighbourhood, and sometimes negative interactions with other road users, the personal cumulative benefits of cycling outweighed this. Protected cycle infrastructure beyond the neighbourhood was appreciated as a space to “turn-off” as was the opportunity to take alternate routes and travel through green space. This chimes with work that suggests that cycle commuters draw on these aspects of wellbeing and joy when cycling to shape their overall “cycling resilience” (Guell et al. 2012). This appears to be a fundamental requirement of cyclists in the UK due to lack of supportive infrastructure relative to more developed cycling nations (Pucher and Buehler 2008).

Insights from our study are set against the backdrop of broader social and political undercurrents that were taking place during this investigation into everyday mobility and community wellbeing. The impact of austerity on both physical and social infrastructure in the UK since the 2008 global financial crisis was acute and lower income communities bore the brunt of its effects (Hastings et al. 2015; Toynbee and Walker 2020) with significant impacts on health and wellbeing (Stuckler et al. 2017) and a general sense of apathy and resentment towards politics and politicians (Harrison 2021). Major reductions in funding from central government meant that local councils lost significant spending power to support neighbourhood infrastructure and a reduction in revenue to satisfy even basic highway maintenance (Almond 2019; Goodier et al. 2024; Hoddinott et al. 2023). As Latham and Layton (2019, 8) point out, “how social infrastructures are *maintained* affects how the provisioning is experienced and how trust is developed”. Our case, therefore, demonstrates the deleterious impact on social wellbeing of the community due to lack of investment in, and maintenance of, infrastructure and how this is exacerbating already existing uneven mobility (Sheller 2018). This is set against the continued dominance of the car system and failure to establish walking and cycling as an integral part of transport planning (Aldred 2012). Investment skewed towards maintaining and enhancing the car system symbolises that citizenship and cultural capital is acquired through assimilation into the “legitimate” mobility (car) culture that dominates society (Bourdieu 1984). It is this continued channelling of state resources towards upholding and maintaining the car system, while overlooking the provision of good walking and cycling infrastructure, that serves to undermine the potential for active travel.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that mobility is more than purely instrumental and can have intrinsic value and impact on health and wellbeing. Provision of

infrastructure for walking and cycling, can increase social cohesion and can positively affect sense of belonging and pride in the community as well as changes in physical activity and other health benefits (What Works Wellbeing 2018). Notwithstanding that the underlying determinants of health inequality are highly complex (Barton and Grant 2006), institutional emphasis in the UK has focused on “adaptive agency” through public health promotion targeted at changing individual behaviour (Bell, Wheeler, and Phoenix 2017) with responsibility for walking and cycling “dispersed” towards health and the environment (Aldred 2012). We argue that this needs to be challenged while structural deficiencies remain unchecked and physical settings, material spaces and design “staged from above” (i.e. by Planners, Design, Regulations and Institutions) fall short of supporting active travel. In the UK, this will require increased and sustained investment from central government on a par with northern Europe to support local provision of good quality infrastructure for walking and cycling. This should be targeted at neighbourhoods with severe health inequalities and low car ownership, particularly in peripheral/suburban areas of cities traditionally designed around car use. Measures should include provision of safe, attractive, and supportive infrastructure for walking and cycling including lower speed limits; improved crossings across major roads; separated cycle paths; training and support to improve knowledge and capacities of riders; and availability of power assisted mobilities including e-bike hire, loan or purchase support schemes that can help people overcome barriers to cycling (i.e. hills, poor health, lack of economic means). Evaluative frameworks should be developed that include indicators to assess impact of (active) transport interventions on community wellbeing (Carnegie UK Trust 2016). This “well-being-oriented” transport system (Roelich 2020) should involve the public in deliberative approaches to planning (GCHU 2022).

Our study is based on an in-depth insight from a small sample of participants. As such we are not able generalise our findings. However, it has been highlighted that for research to have any role in informing infrastructure investments and policy adoption, it must be accessible to those charged with making such decisions (Handy, van Wee, and Kroesen 2014). Adopting an idiographic qualitative approach to understand mobility practises in different social and cultural contexts can help unravel complexities, be more accessible to policy makers, and can inform quantitative studies. We invite other researchers to adopt mobility approaches that seek to unpack the complexity of everyday life and help fill the gaps left by traditional approaches to the study of (active) transport and that investigate the “relational qualities” of modes and their impact on social cohesion, sense of belonging and community wellbeing (Atkinson et al. 2020; Shaw and Hesse 2010).

## Notes

1. “Pavement” in the UK is usually a reference to the hard raised level surface at the side of the road for people to walk on. In the US, this is usually referred to as the “sidewalk”.
2. “Dreaming spires” is used to refer allusively to Oxford in the poem, *Thyrsis*, by Matthew Arnold, first published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in 1866.



3. Often used to describe two distinct communities, the “academic” and the “non-academic”, living within the same university town.

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## Data access statement

Data from this project has been deposited with the UK Data Service. Study DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-854896> For further information please contact [radar@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:radar@brookes.ac.uk) Institutional Repository of Oxford Brookes University.

## Ethical statement

The study was approved by Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee (Registration No: 171074).

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