# Blackbird Leys: What makes a good place

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### Theoretical framework : drawing on urban design literature

### <u>Ian Bentley Responsive environments – a manual for</u> <u>designers (1985)</u>

Ian Bentleys 1985 responsive environments – a manual for designers identifies a number of key qualities which can be used as indicators of what makes a good place. This includes "permeability" which refers to the "the number of alternative ways through an environment" (Bentley 1985) which is important as "only places which are accessible to people can offer them choice" (Bentley 1985). Bentley speaks about how places with permeability have to have a level of visual permeability so that people who don't live in the area must still be able to easily navigate themselves around.



#### figure 1: permeability in Croydon

Variety is another important factor discussed by Bentley. This involves "variety of uses" (Bentley 1985) referring to how a development can be designed to cater to a number of uses such as economic uses i.e. businesses, residential buildings and leisure. variety provides people with a desire to want to access different parts of a city



Figure 2: a variety of shown in blackbird leys with a mixed use development of residential homes above shops

Also mentioned is legibility. This refers to "how easily people can understand its layout. This involves designing a place in a way that people can easily work out where they are in the city. This can be through an easily to understand layout which is often aided by nodes such as recognisable buildings and monuments.



Figure 3: The glow tree in blackbird leys which is a key legible point in the area

### • Jane Jacobs the life and Death of great American cities (2002)

In Jacobs 2002 book the life and death of great American cities she references the work of Ebenezer Howard and his programme to make garden cities. Jacobs states that in these garden cities "the city poor might again live close to nature" (Jacobs 2002) showing the importance of the need to keep green spaces incorporated within cities and that many modern cities may not be focussed so much on doing this. Jacobs speaks about how in the garden cities "industry was to be in its planned preserves; schools, housing and greens in planned living preserves; and in the centre were to be commercial, club and cultural places held in common" (Jacobs 2002). Garden cities were supposed to be a "utopia" away from the main cities.



Figure 4: Green space in Blackbird leys

### • Jan Gehl Cities for peoples (2010)

In Gehl's 2010 Cities for people there are a number of key qualities discussed regarding what makes a good places. Gehl speaks about how to have a good place which people "embrace" people need to feel safe and have a "sense of security". One on side this can relate to how accessible a city is for people whether they are walking or cycling. Gehl speaks about how "Conditions for pedestrians and cyclists have deteriorated as a result. Narrow sidewalks have gradually become filled with traffic signs, park-ing meters, bollards, street lamps and other obstacles placed there" (Gehl 2010). Gehl speaks about how walking has become "far less attractive" as a result of the prioritisation of cars and other vehicular travel and has been responded to with under passes and bridges with crossings being harder do cross. This may pose a problem for the elderly, cyclists and those unable to drive and highlights how the city should be accessible for all.



Figure 5: residential area in bath with heavy traffic

In terms of safety Gehl also speaks about in terms of crime and how the city should be designed in a way that all people of all "socioeconomic groups" (Gehl 2010) and all ages can walk freely around the city with both an "experienced as well as perceived safety" as this is "Crucial for life in the city" (Gehl 2010). This is an important especially in areas where there are problems with crime that are "deeply rooted in social conditions" (Gehl 2010) which in some "highly hit" (Gehl 2010) areas this may have a effect in improving the sense of safety and reducing local crime and is a far better solution than fortifying cities "behind bars and barbed wire" which could ultimately ruin social conditions in an area.

Gehl also looks at the liveliness of a city and speaks about how important it is for places to be designed in a way that can facilitate social interactions for "public space to be alive with many different groups of people using it" (Gehl 2010) . This is important as it achieves the urban quality of vitality which is important as Gehl talks about how "the lively city sends friendly and welcoming signals with the promise of social interaction" (Gehl 2010) as well as an "enjoyable experience" (Gehl 2010) in a place. This helps to reinforce a sense of community and help create a sense of safety through those around them. Gehl through an analogy with an empty theatre speaks about how "something would be amiss" (Gehl 2010) if a place was desolate showing that a lack of vitality would created a perceived sense of a lack of safety.

# Theoretical framework: case studies

### • Gun Wharf, Devonport, Plymouth

Gun Wharf in Plymouth was a £15.8 development completed in 2006 by Midas Homes, DCH and South west RDA.. The project has received multiple awards such as the what house award 2007, CABE Gold building for life 2006 and the National homebuilder award 2007.



Figure 6: Gun Wharf, Plymouth

The development was described as an exemplar project and was a result of both public and private sector investment which led to one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the Uk receiving a huge regeneration. Its described a "mixed income community" and includes a total of 99 residential properties. The development has been designed to include "Home zones" which is a new an unique concept in which the speed limit in the zones is limited to only 12 mph. Also there are no curbs and all boundaries between roads, pedestrian routes and parking bays are defined by different "textured surfaces".

The restriction of the speed limit to 12 mph means that Gun Wharf is much safer for younger children who may want to socialise and play in the streets and the lack of curbs makes the area far more friendly for the less physically able such as the elderly. These characteristics make Gun Wharf more safe for pedestrians and cyclists and provide a friendly and accessible environment for all age groups who use the area.



Figure 7: Gun Wharf being used as a safe social space by the young



Figure 8: Queen Elizabeth park, London

### • The queen Elizabeth park, Stratford, London

The queen Elizabeth park in Stratford received a massive boost in its redevelopment through the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games. The area was largely derelict as industry's moved out becoming a large brownfield site and ended up being one of London's most "deprived neighbourhoods and communities" is now after 10 years on "almost unrecognisable". The area has been regenerated and now includes a vast number of new homes, transport links, "social infrastructure", space for businesses to locate themselves, a number of sporting venues left over after the Olympic games and a shopping centre which is the largest in Europe creating a good level of robustness. The development is also quoted having "biodiverse and extensive parkland and recreation areas" and is said to be accessible to all social groups and is and attractive place to be.

The combination of different land uses In the development it provides residents with variety which makes it a desirable place to be and gives the area a level of purpose. Through the parks and transport links there is a good level of accessibility into the area and other parts of London. Through the vast amount of social infrastructure and extensive parkland, the development gains a good level of permeability and vitality. The social spaces and social infrastructure will enable the development to gain a perceived sense of safety through enabling residents to be more socially involved with those living around them.



Figure 9: green spaces in queen Elizabeth park

#### • Park hill estate, Sheffield

The park hill estate in Sheffield is a grade 2 listed post war brutalist set of flats which was built between 1957 and 1961 and was built as a result of one of the first post war slum clearances which was the worst in Sheffield, suffering from high levels of crime and unsanitary conditions.

By the 1980's the area fell into decline due to a collapse of the steel industry in Sheffield leading to the area becoming deprived leading to may residents moving out. The estate became rife with crime and slowly became a derelict and dangerous " no go area". Any sense of safety or community in the area totally vanished.



Figure 10: Design of the park hill estate post redevelopment

in recent years since 2006 the park hill flats have undergone extensive refurbishment and redevelopment by urban splash who have been working on the site in several phases which are expected to be completed by 2022. since redevelopment started, urban splash have completed their first phase which produced a combination of 260 residential properties and "10,000 sq. ft of work space which have already attracted local businesses back to the area such as a café and south street kitchen both of which provide social space for residents to meet. Socialising through residents is also facilitated through a vast amount of landscaped green spaces located around the flats. Through the mix of social facilities and green spaces, park hill will likely provide residents with a good sense of safety through an enriched community atmosphere created by the development as well as lots of vitality created by the large amount of shared community space.



Figure 11: Design of the park hill estate post redevelopment

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## Theoretical Framework: what makes a good place

### Legibility

A good place must be legible so that residents and visitors can understand where they are in all areas of a development and understand where they are in relation to other parts of the area. This can be aided by clear and understandable routes through a place which can be aided by nodes like a monument or a unique building





Figure 15: green space in Blackbird leys

#### Green spaces

Figure 18

A good place must have a good amount of green spaces easily accessible for all. This is good for residents mental, physical and social well being as green spaces promote engagement with their community due to being an ideal social space.



#### Accessibility

A good place must be designed in a way that is accessible for all. This means being safe and accessible for both the elderly and the young and the less physically able. This could be through reducing the number of curbs and making larger pavements to facilitate room for all to freely move around with out worry



#### Safety

Safety is crucial in making a good place. People who live there need to feel a sense of both perceived and experienced safety. This enables people to function well as a community and not have to fear those around them. People need to feel safe when moving around a place otherwise it will be unattractive and people are less likely to want to return or live there. Safety involves safety from crime as well as other physical hazards around people like traffic.





#### Variety

A good place needs to have a variety of different functions and purposes so that residents and visitors have a reason and a purpose in being there and are engaged by their town or city. Variety can also include a mix of tenure meaning that places are more accessible to live in by people of different socio economic groups.



Figure 19

#### Vitality

A good place must be designed in a way that promotes vitality such as through the idea of having fronts of buildings facing public open space. This will promote a sense of community and enable residents and visitors to develop a perceived sense of safety in their area through being familiar with their community.





Figure 17: A variety of land use shown in blackbird leys with the mixed use development of shops and flats at the front and a tower block of flats behind

Permeability

A good place needs to have a good level of permeability as it provides people with a place that is easy to move around in with multiple alternative routes to their desired location and allows people more choice. Permeability also encourages people to walk or cycle where they live. permeability also works hand in hand with variety.



### Site Appraisal: 1. S.W.O.T Analysis of Blackbird leys 2.

- 1. Blackbird leys has access to a large amount of green spaces such as Blackbird leys park just to the west of the city of oxford college. There is a number of other green spaces incorporated into residential areas such as around the Windrush tower and within the estates either side of knights road.
- 2. Blackbird leys has some variety around the shops with a mixture of shops, residential properties, educational buildings such as city of oxford college and community facilities such as the community centre and the Blackbird leys library. There is also a good variety of transport routes
- 3. The area has a very clear layout and has a number of legible nodes such as the glow tree, the Windrush tower and the shops.
- 4. There is a clear police presence in the area which may help add to a perceived sense of safety.
- 5. The shops seem to be a social space for the community adding to the vitality of the area.
- 6. The pavements are wide and have a large amount of room between them and the roads. Although there are a few physical obstacles on them



Figure 21: The red arrow show the space around the shops used as a social point

### <u>Weaknesses</u>

- The crossing between the shops and the church of the holy family over blackbird leys road has very high curbs making it difficult for less physically able residents or people with buggy's or wheel chairs to cross.
- 2. The traffic around the shops on Blackbird leys road is very heavy while the area around it is used by lots of pedestrians. Often heavy vehicles pass through the area making crossing dangerous for the young and the elderly. This is problem is made worse as the road is located near local schools.
- 3. The street behind the shops just off knights road has a lack of street lights and would seem to be a blind spot making it a potentially unsafe place to be during the night. During the site visit this was made apparently by the constant presence of a PSCO in the area
- 4. There is a large plot of dead space just to the south west of the shops between housing and the shops and much of the local green space could be utilised better with ore things to do in them
- 5. A number of buildings in the centre of blackbird leys are run down or disused. The grade 2 listed church of the holy family is disused and the community centre is run down.

### Opportunities

- there are opportunities for the centre to house more community facilities such as an advice centre helping increase variety.
- The crossing over Blackbird leys road could be altered to have sloped surfaces down to the road to make it more accessible for the elderly and less physically able.
- 3. There is the opportunity to add more street lights into areas such as behind the shops. This will help to increase perceived and experienced safety in the area.
- 4. The dead space just to the south west of the centre can be utilised as car parking space. This may prevent as many people parking along the road by the shops ultimately creating some relief in traffic.
- There is the opportunity to add red lights and a crossing between the roundabout and the church allowing safer crossing for resident and visitors. Many existing crossings are very clear.

### <u>Threats</u>

- There have been multiple promises to redevelop the centre of Blackbird leys which have fallen through and not taken place so there is likely to be some hostility and mistrust from locals.
- 2. Any investments made to date have only had a limited impact and haven't significantly changed conditions and disadvantage experienced in the area meaning future ones may not be as comfortably welcomed by locals
- 3. The community in Blackbird leys is very tight knit so any outsiders with plans to introduce change into the area may be met with mistrust at first.
- 4. Refurbishment of the church of the holy family will be made difficult by the restrictions added by having a grade 2 listing on it.
- 5. Any alterations to the area regarding traffic will be difficult due to the amount of residential properties in the area and the presence of local schools.
- Locals may be defensive to any alterations to the centre due to its use as a social space so redevelopment would have to be carefully considered in how its approached.
- 7. One other threat to Blackbird leys is the stigma created by the blackbird leys riots branding the area as a no go



Figure 23: the red arrow shows the area behind the shops which is poorly lit and may be a source of unsafeness at night 4



Figure 22: the red arrow shows the route for crossing the road which may prove problematic due to high curbs

### Site appraisal of Blackbird leys: Legibility

<u>Landscape</u>

Blackbird leys has been designed to have a very good degree of legibility through a number of recognisable landmarks such as the Windrush tower. The centre of Blackbird leys acts as a central nodal point for the area with four roads i.e. Blackbird leys road, entering the centre. This means that the layout of the main roads also contributes to the legibility of the area as they provide a clear route for people to follow into the centre.



Figure 24: The church of the holy family in Blackbird leys

#### • Blocks and plots

In Blackbird leys there is a very clear distinctions between different block and plots. In the centre there is the mixed used development incorporating the shops with housing situated above. Either side of the shops are two tower blocks of flats and residential houses around it. A large plot of land is taken up by the city of college. There are clear differences in the land use on each of the block and plots which helps to increase the legibility of the area as each point has its own separate purpose or types of buildings.



Figure 25: green – residential block, Brown – community facilities, Black – Educational, Blue – mixed use development

Buildings and open space

There are a number of key buildings in Blackbird leys which are clearly recognisable and act as landmarks which add to the legibility of the area. The most notable structures are the church of the holy family with its uniquely concaved roof, the Windrush tower and the Evenlode tower.



Figure 26: The Windrush Tower

Spatial structure

The spatial structure of blackbird leys is very well laid out meaning that the site has a good degree of legibility. With four main roads moving into the centre of Blackbird leys, its very easy to navigate yourself back into the centre from all directions



Figure 27: The arrows show the movement of the roads into the centre

### Site Appraisal of Blackbird leys: Vitality

Landscape

The landscape in Blackbird leys has a good level of vitality although this fluctuates during the day and varies somewhat around the site. The vitality in the centre is often focussed by the shops due to the fronts facing public open space meaning that people gather outside and tend to the use the area as a social space. The vitality in the area as a whole tends to peak around 3:00 when the college and schools in the centre kick out and later in the day around rush hour . There are a few areas in the centre that are blind spots causing a lack of vitality such as behind the shops.



Figure 28: the shops in Blackbird leys which is a hot spot for vitality

Buildings and open space

The shops in Blackbird leys experiences the most vitality especially when the schools kickout. This is likely because there are a number of shop fronts facing public open space meaning that people gather out the front utilising it as a social space. There is a good sense of perceived safety outside the front of the shops due to them being in clear view of the road and the houses above the shops. However the area behind the shops just off knights road has fewer street light and is a blind spot making the area feel far more unsafe than the front of the shop meaning there is far less vitality.



Figure 29a: The back street behind the shops in Blackbird Leys

### <u>Spatial structure</u>

The layout of Blackbird leys is done in a way that everything almost flows through the mixed used development in the middle. People almost have to pass through it to access other parts of the area meaning that at certain times of day there is a lot of vitality in the area. There isn't any real reason to walk around the back of the shops as it is just cut off as a dead end for cars and there is just a large plot of dead space at the end meaning it is far quieter.



- figure 29B: Dead space behind the shops in blackbird leys
- Blocks and plots

the presence of multiple different land uses on different blocks of land surrounding the small mixed use development in the centre of Blackbird leys such as the city of oxford college and adjoined colleges leaves the area as a central node through which people will often pass through either by choice to go to the shops or because they have to pass through to get home . The combination of houses and shops in the centre , mean people need to access to area as a necessity.



Figure 30: annotated map of Blackbird leys showing some highlighted points

### Site appraisal of Blackbird leys: Accessibility

#### <u>Landscape</u>

The overall landscape in Blackbird leys has some problems with accessibility with one key problem being curbs. In the centre the crossing between the shops and the church and community centre, has very steep curbs which may be problematic as a tripping hazard for the elderly and less physically able people with wheel chairs etc. although on the other the concrete surfaces are rather flat and the general condition of pavements and cycle routes is rather good. The pavements are wide and can accommodate a good flow of people through the area. Sloped surfaces are also used on certain buildings such as the community centre. The traffic in the area both helps and hinders accessibility.



Figure 31: steep curbs on the crossing over Blackbird leys road

Spatial structure

the spatial structure of Blackbird leys makes the area very accessible to vehicles pedestrians and cyclist with a good layout of footpaths, cycle paths and bus routes through the area giving the area a good level of accessibility for people using a variety of transport options. The roads passing through the centre of blackbird leys connect the area up to central oxford and either end of the parish making the centre very accessible. The footpaths are wide to accommodate the movement of many people with few obstructions in the way other than street lights.



Figure 32: wide pavements on Blackbird leys road

#### Buildings and open space

Buildings in Blackbird leys don't seem to often use steps up to their entrances and rather use sloped surfaces such as up to one of the community centres entrances. Many other entrances to buildings are also level with their entrances meaning. This all means that as a whole the buildings in Blackbird leys are highly accessible for people of all ages and physical ability. Open spaces in the area are often integrated into the pavements such as outside the shops meaning that open spaces are easily access from pathways. Although the open space on the roundabout is accessed by a large curb and often heavy traffic which may cause problems for some. Although in other areas sloped crossings are used.



Figure 33: sloped surfaces used by the shops in blackbird leys

Blocks and plots

In Blackbird leys the blocks and plots are intersected by a good network of public footpaths. Theses tend to be wide and have flat surfaces making them easy to use and allowing a high level of accessibility into the area. The blocks containing shops or community facilities often have their fronts facing public open space which in turn makes many of the buildings in the area very accessible by the pavements. All the different blocks in the centre have a main road running passed them and have streets running into them making them very accessible to vehicles. Although this has an opposite effect on the roundabout in the centre through traffic making is harder to be easily accessed.



Figure 34: green space in the centre of Blackbird leys surrounded by heavy traffic and high curbs

### Site appraisal of blackbird leys: Safety



Figure 35: the back of the shops in blackbird leys. There are few street light and the area is a blind Spot to the houses above.

#### Landscape

The centre of Blackbird leys has a varied sense of perceived safety from crime. Outside the front of the shops where there is usually constant traffic and a high volume of pedestrians passing through the area. The presence of employees in the shop and the houses above, as well as the Windrush tower and evenlode tower looking down on the centre, there is a good sense of both vitality and surveillance in the area. There are lots of streetlights and not too many blind spots. However behind the shops is a big blind spot with minimal streetlighting and little pedestrian vitality. Perceived Safety in terms of traffic and other hazards is far poorer due to heavy traffic and large vehicles moving through the area

### Buildings and Open Space

The shops in the centre of Blackbird leys have their fronts facing public open space meaning that more people gather in the area creating a good sense of perceived safety developed by the vitality created. The flats above the shops look down onto the streets and many of the other streets in the area are over looked by houses and the two tower block flats. The area behind the shops has very few buildings or windows looking down onto meaning due to poor visibility it feels far unsafe than the rest of the area.

### • Spatial structure

The spatial structure of Blackbird leys add some level of unsafety to the area. There are 3 roads that flow into the centre of blackbird leys all bringing in a high volume of traffic, often including heavy vehicles. This makes using crossings in the centre feel particularly unsafe especially when there are also high curbs to get over. The road behind the shops is a dead end and doesn't connect up to much other than a plot of dead space meaning it is generally quieter furthering the sense of unsafeness.

### Blocks and plots

There are advantages and disadvantages to the block and plots in blackbird leys. There are a number of blocks of high density residential properties in very close proximity to blocks of school buildings and shops. This causes a high volume of traffic in the area making it feel far more unsafe when crossing roads and for cyclists using the area. However the high density of properties in the area means that there are far fewer blind spots and the surveillance in the area is generally very decent apart from in a few spots.



Figure 36: annotated map showing highlighted points in blackbird leys



Figure 37: Blackbird leys road with a row of houses facing down onto it providing a level of surveillance along with the Windrush tower

### Site Appraisal of Blackbird leys: Variety

### Landscape

There is a good variety of land use in the centre of Blackbird with the presence of the mixed use development of homes and shops, open space, green space, educational buildings and community facilities. There is also a good variety in terms of transport routes into the area such as pavements, bus routes and main roads

Buildings and open space

There is a good variety of buildings and open space in the centre of blackbird leys. In one of the central nodes there is a mixed use development of shops and houses. In another central node on the north side of the roundabout there is a mixture of community facilities such as the community centre and the blackbird pub. Also quite central to the centre are the college buildings and the library.

Furthermore there is a mixture of tenure in the centre of blackbird leys with more expensive detached houses combined with a mixture of terraced housing and flats making the area more accessible for families with different socio economic backgrounds. There is an amount of council flats and housing such the Windrush tower. There is a mixture of green and paved spaces also incorporated into each other in the centre such as around the Windrush tower. However this appears neglected and full of rubbish

### • Blocks and plots

The blocks and plots in blackbird leys don't have much variety on their own but when put together there is quite a lot of variety in the area. The plots to the north of the shops have a mixture of community facilities such as the community centre, the Blackbird pub and the leisure centre behind while the plots to the south and the west mainly consist of a mixture of terraced housing, flats and detached houses and to the east the plots mostly consist of college buildings and the library. Each plot seems to serve separate purposes but this is important in aiding legibility.



Figure 38: one plot opposite the shops showing a variety of community uses

### Spatial structure

The spatial structure of blackbird leys has a decent amount of variety with the area being joined up by a good amount of transport routes that permeate the area. There is a good network of pavements that follow the roads and give accessibility to much of the surrounding area. There is also main roads and bus routes that all go into the area. Although there seems to be a distinctive lack of any dedicated cycle paths meaning cyclists have to use the often very busy main roads.



Figure 39 residential plots (the wind ush tower) situated alongside community facilities (the church of the holy family



Figure 40: variety of green open space and hard surfaces around the Windrush tower

# Mixed media: 3D Model with hand drawn detail

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### Two point perspective Drawing of Blackbird leys

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Not to scale

### What Makes a good Mace

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Safety

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# Two point perspective – altered horizon lines



### One point perspective





### Scale drawings of Blackbird leys coffee cabin



Map of Bladdbord Less Central District





### Map of Bladebird Less Central District





Green spaces

Map of Bladebird Less Central District







Accessibility and Permeability of Bladubink legs • Main Gals

- · Public footpaths I
- · central nodes 🗖
- · Crossings ->

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