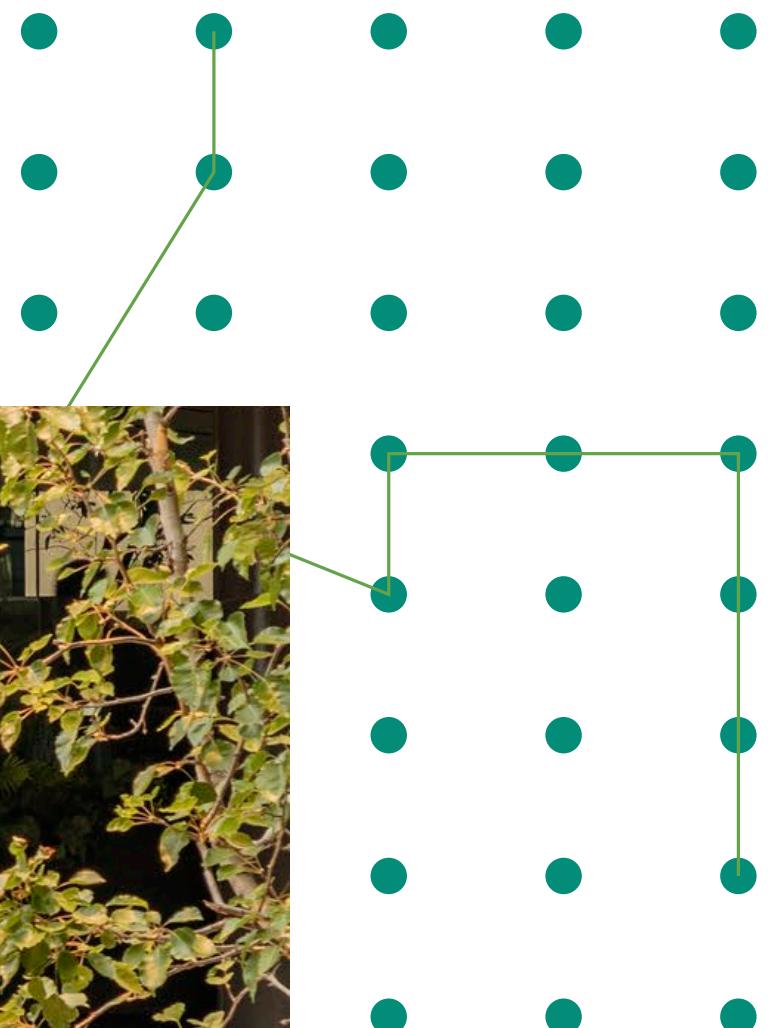




Social Cohesion

Graphic Design
Concept Development

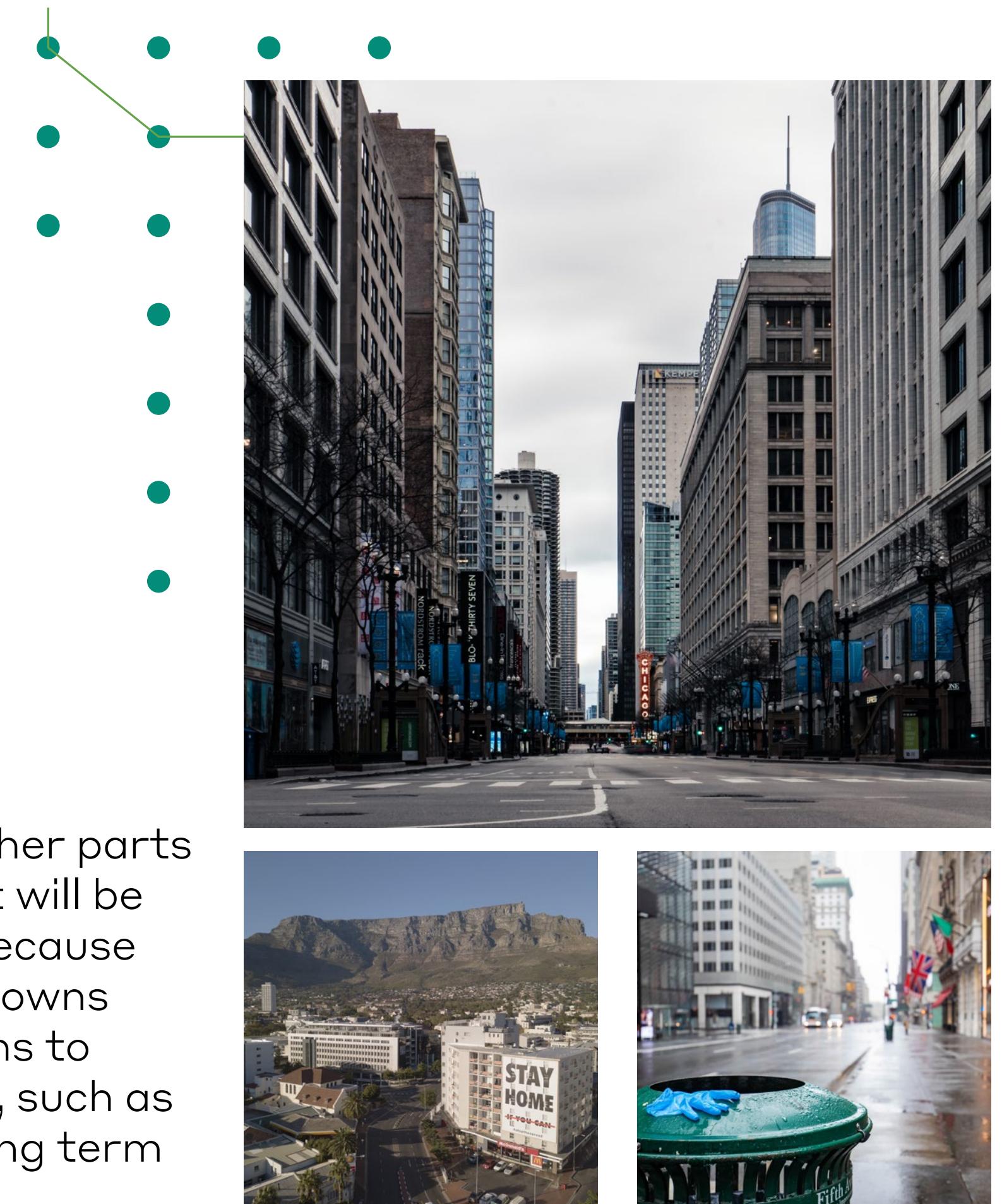


Public places are meant to bring us joy and connection, but after the last year in lockdown they have a new layer of perceived potential risk and harm. As we tentatively attempt to regain ‘normality’ out of the depths of the global pandemic what can we do as designers and planners to contribute to a more inclusive experience of connection, wellbeing, and belonging.



Will things return to the way they used to be, will we still talk to people we don't know in public spaces, will we ever gather in large groups again?

In some parts of the world things have pretty much returned to normal but in other parts of the world lockdown is still the status quo. When answering the question, what will be the long-term social effects of COVID 19, there will likely be localised reactions because of localised policies. Where infection rates have not been well handled, and lockdowns have been prolonged, we can expect these to be more severe. It takes 3-6 months to form a new habit and when you are forced into a particular pattern of behaviour, such as not seeing or touching another person for a long period of time, this may have long term social implications as the pattern becomes an engrained core behaviour.



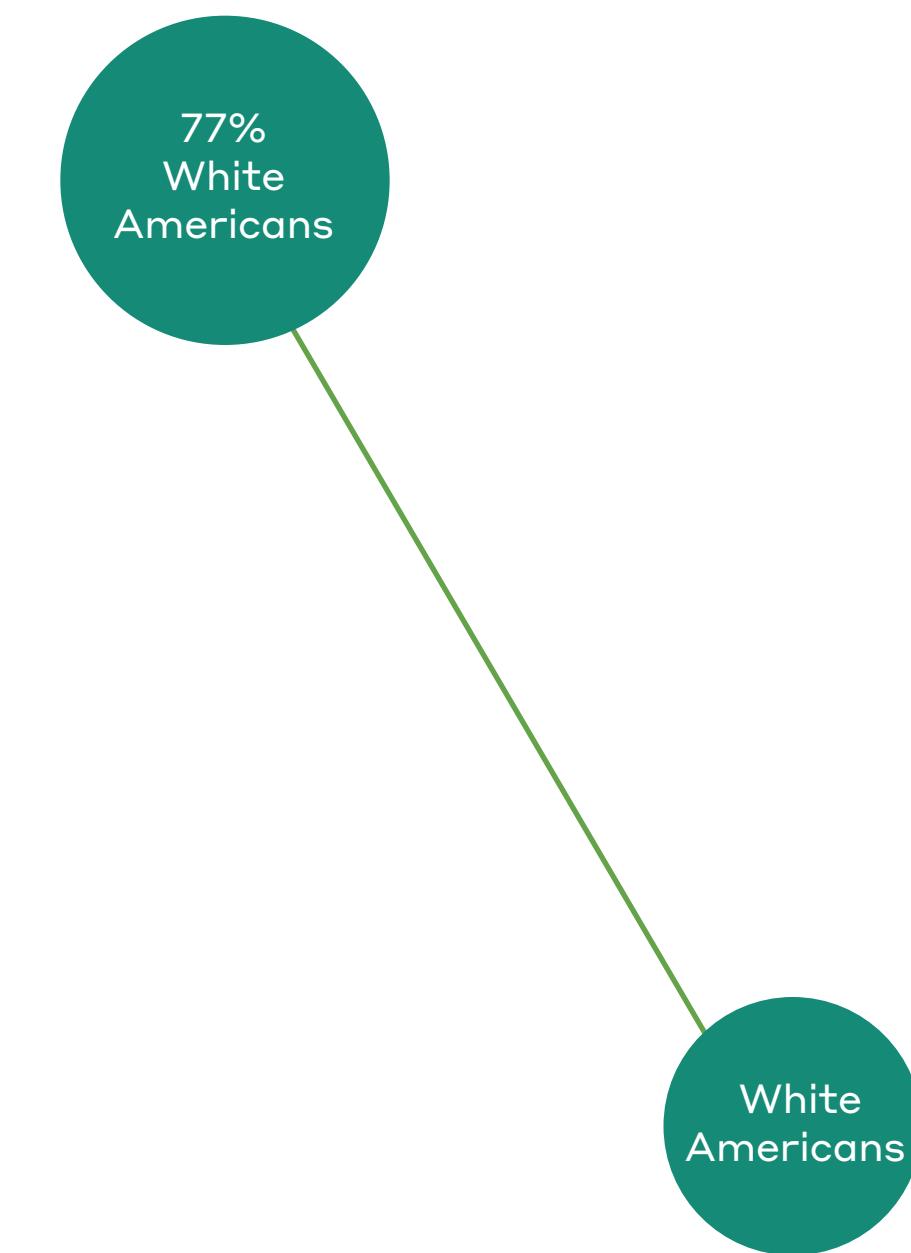
The study states that loneliness is the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2010).

A report published in 2010 examined the link between the quality and quantity of social relationships and mortality risks. The increased awareness of mental health has been promising during lock down, not just patients and health professionals surviving intensely traumatic experiences, but also the public, dealing with the general malaise of everyday similitude and isolation. During lockdown, loneliness was the obvious symptom, but now that some places are easing restrictions, there are other side effects. Studies undertaken during previous epidemics and the current lockdowns show that “the experience of quarantine is associated with higher prevalence of stress-related mental disturbances, such as anxiety, depression, and especially avoidance behaviors” (Kato et al, 2020).

There has been a surge of memes and genuine articles on social anxiety which may mean we are less likely to reach out to others and it may compound the rising trend of cliques and siloes in society as we cling to those already close to us. For the aspects of society that rely on loose connections between people, in particular social cohesion and innovation, this could be devastating.

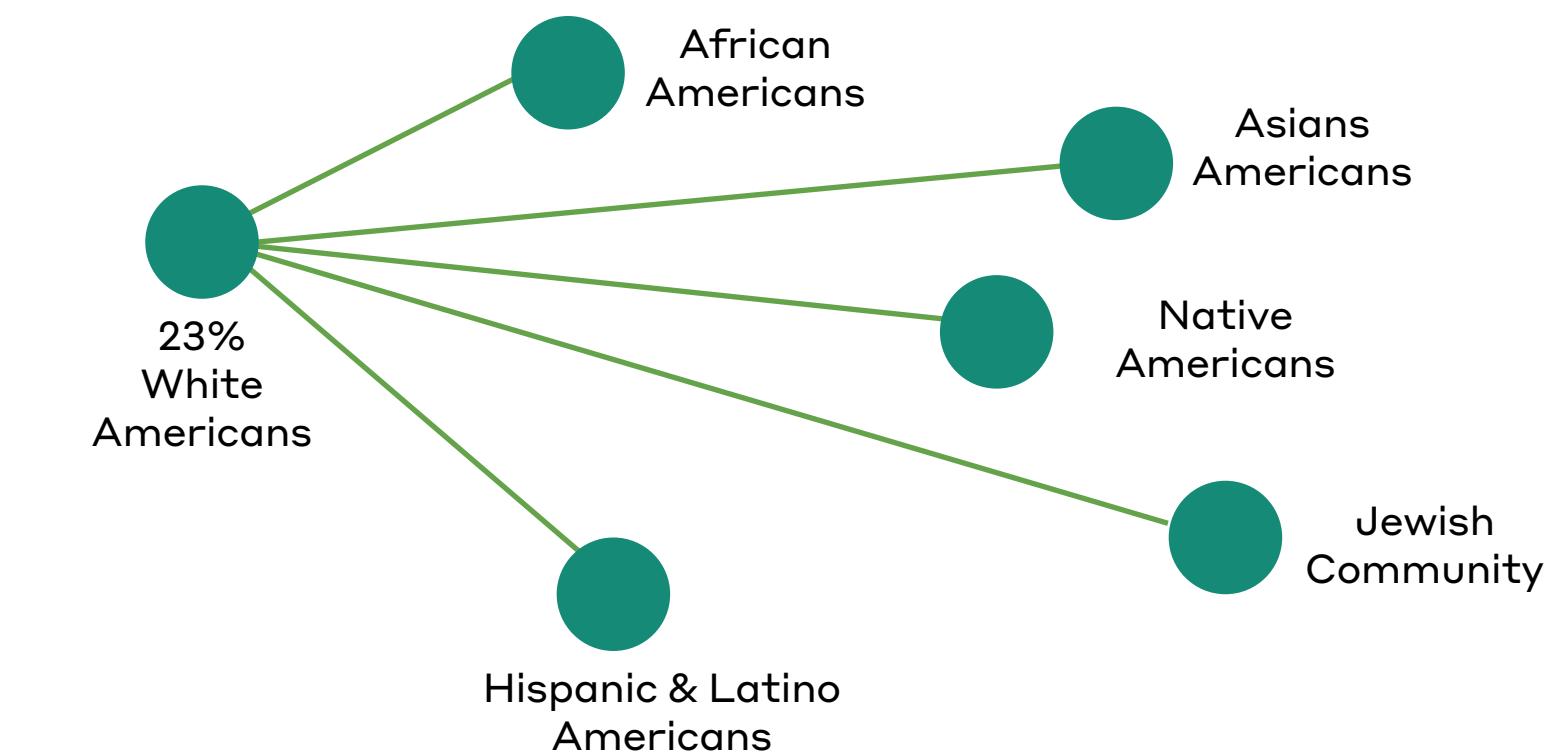


COVID has unintentionally cemented the segregation of ourselves from anyone not in our immediate bubble, which is highly likely to be not particularly diverse (Social Integration Commission 2014; Cox et al 2020).



Connections with people different from yourself, whether close friends or familiar strangers, makes you a more tolerant person (Laurence et al 2018). In the UK, Brexit was a particularly clear moment to reflect on the implications of social cohesion for wider economic and societal outcomes. Subsequent studies on the geography of voting trends showed that more diverse regions had proportionally fewer votes to leave the EU and positive intergroup contact was associated with less desire to reduce immigration (Palma et al, 2019). Trust in others is only impacted where there are high levels of segregation between different ethnic groups in a neighbourhood (Laurence 2017).

For example, the average Briton has 48 per cent fewer interactions with people of different ethnicities than would be expected if ethnicity was irrelevant (Social Integration Commission 2014). This is especially true if you are from the dominant ethnic group, 77% of white Americans report that their core social network includes only people who are also white, remarkably consistent with the average percentage of the number of white people per state in the USA (78%) (Cox et al 2020). Add to this that COVID 19 has compounded the fear of others and resulted in stigmatising effects for certain groups in society that are more intensely affected by the virus (WHO, 2020) and the impact on social cohesion could be felt for many decades to come.



As planners and designers of the built environment, we can try and ensure that housing/jobs, common public transport links and town centres are equally accessible both spatially and affordably, and that place based programs focus on strong unique identities that offer universally loved activities.

What can city makers do to counter this? Studies show that districts with the most mixing between ethnic groups lead to the highest reductions in racial prejudice (Christ et al 2014).

Even in diverse communities, people of different group identities may not always, out of choice or other factors such as affordability, 'hang out' in the same social spaces (Blokland, 2010) but contact in common public spaces, be they schools (policy dependent), parks, food markets (pricing dependent), is considered to promote social cohesion (Echols & Graham 2013). We also know that being singled out as different can be detrimental to social cohesion – as in the stigmatisation of highly visible social housing (Britain Thinks 2019), – but that having a unique identity is critical to a sense of belonging (Herring, 2009). Some identities are universally embraced, again often around entertainment, food and family.



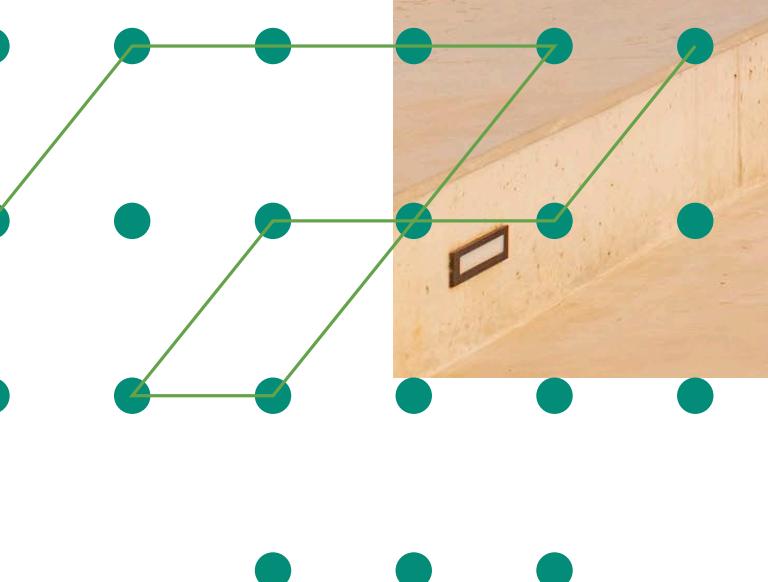
Social relationships in one street market in London were found to be

40%

more socially cohesive than the general community (Bartholomew, 2018) and it was found to be a place considered welcoming by

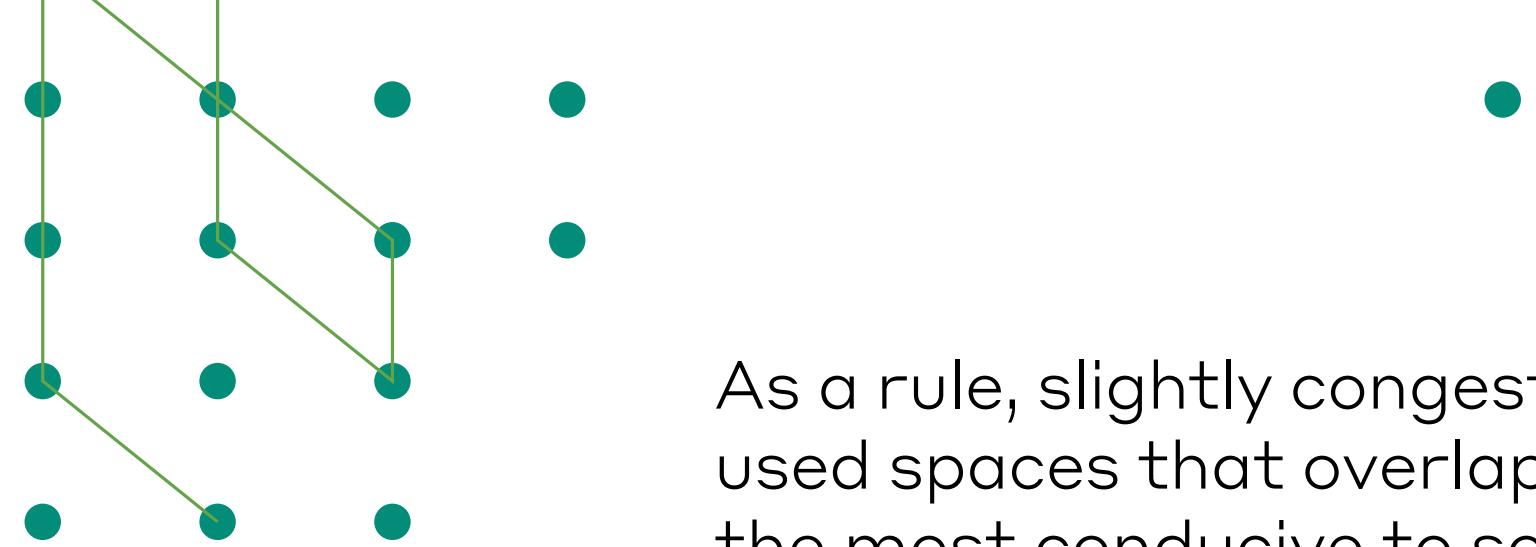
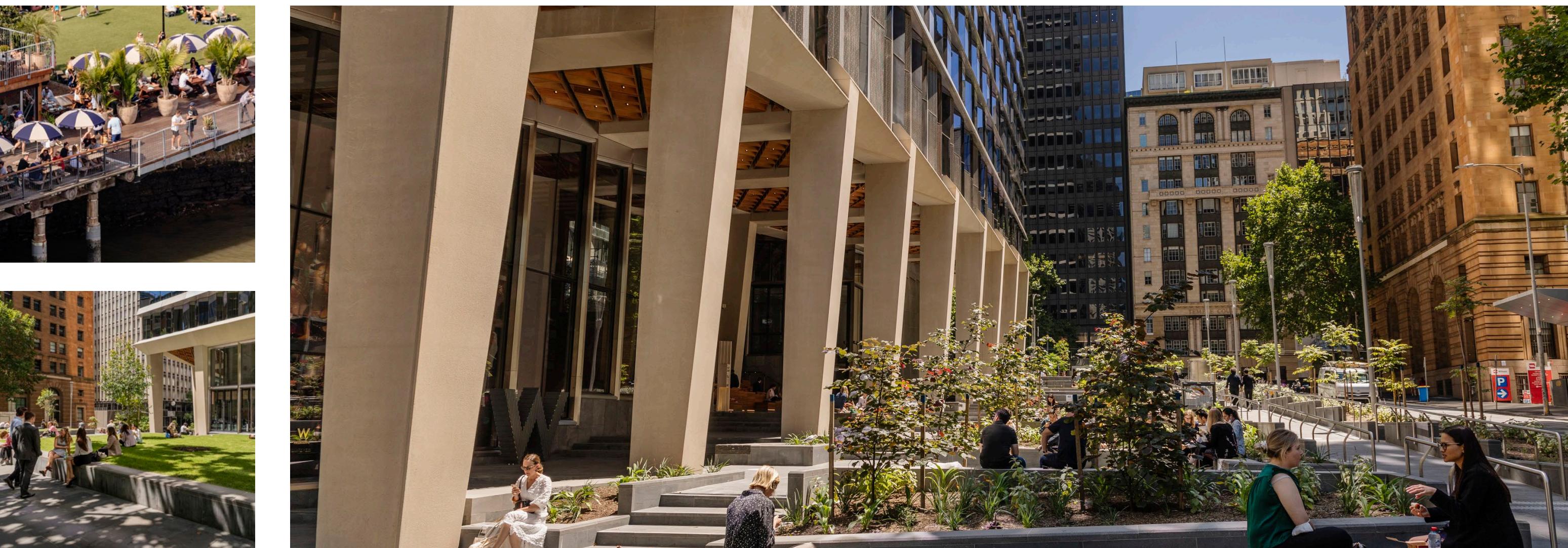
100%

of recent migrant users (Gonzalez, pending).



The ideals of, equal access and welcoming identities also apply to treatment at the public space and building scale. The configuration of space and materiality can send unconscious messages to occupants about the openness, or otherwise, of a place.

For public spaces, locating these centrally can indicate they are valued and encourage natural flow through the site. Clear visibility into these spaces and layers of openness and enclosure once inside means people can choose their level of public exposure. As a designer or developer, be aware of the types of user groups that are present and who is not there, consider how representative the user groups are of the local community and adjust offerings accordingly. Research shows that spontaneous interactions are more likely to happen in the spaces and moments between different activities (Simoes Aelbrecht, 2016). Markets are a practical example.



As a rule, slightly congested, intensely used spaces that overlap novel activities the most conducive to social cohesion (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2019). This presents a difficult problem on the back of the current public health crisis, in the meantime, the responsibility of our neighbourhoods, institutions and work places to promote inclusivity and embrace diversity increase, supporting a return to an even more vital and 'super diverse' (Vertovec, 2007) street.

At the building scale, be conscious of the normative messaging of materiality and style.

For example, the New London Vernacular style has been lauded for being ‘democratic’ (Urban Design London 2012) but lack of diversity in the built environment profession (Jessel, 2019) calls in to question how well design guide led vernaculars represent highly diverse cities. The desired intent, to increase the quality of the built environment, can be positively linked to social cohesion (Dempsey, 2008), but the invisibility of diversity can signal a lack of integration (Sezer, 2019). Strong local identities are a sought-after ideal in contemporary place-making, uniqueness is what makes exploring new areas so exciting and expression of identity allows us to develop attachment to place (Altman & Low 1992). Ensuring that built identity is expressive and also inclusive is a fine balance that only consideration for and co-design with all potential user groups can produce.



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The full outfall of the pandemic has yet to be measured. There have been some incredible moments of human resiliency and triumph amongst the sorrow and suffering. Our public spaces are too important to be a casualty of the crisis, and many governments have made important decisions, particularly around green space provision and improving both the quality of quantity in our cities. As we reintroduce ourselves to being in public, the true importance of public space for enabling social connections can be remembered.

