

Calming, therapeutic or chaotic. What do *you* think of our campus?



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Which spaces in and around the UCL campus do students feel positively contribute to their mental well-being?

What were our aims?

- To determine the range of UCL spaces that improve students' mental well-being through participant-led photography walks.
- To investigate student attitudes toward such spaces through supplementary discussion.

What did we do?

- We approached three UCL students and gained informed consent.
- Participants gave a tour of the spaces which they felt positively contributed to their mental well-being, taking their own photographs of each space. This "movement through space" enabled participants to construct "spatial stories, forms of narrative understanding" for us to use as data (Tilley, 1994: 28).
- We asked guiding questions to understand the reasons why each space evokes certain feelings.

What were our findings?

1. Students distinguished between 'calm' and 'therapeutic' as spatial descriptors

Torrington Place: One participant stated: "the city views and quietness is calming. But the space is used for studying, which is not a calming or therapeutic task". Therefore, the space is effective in its detachment from the city but is limited in its ability to improve well-being owing to its purpose.



The Print Room Café: This also acts as a 'calming' space for another participant, where they socialise with friends. However, the café does not evoke 'therapeutic' feelings as students also use it as a study space. The space has an uncertainty about it and therefore is not always calming.

The Main Library: In contrast, despite it being a designated study space, one participant described a sense of nostalgia. By acting as a comfortable study space it positively contributes to well-being through facilitating the establishment of a routine.



Each participant defined 'therapeutic' space differently, with studying often acting as a barrier to a spaces' potential to feel 'therapeutic'. Even if a study space had calming qualities, it was not necessarily therapeutic. The feelings that spaces evoke are therefore relational and contingent upon associations.

"It's quite a nostalgic space for me as it reminds me of my old school. Coming here has become routine for me now and maintaining a routine is therapeutic."

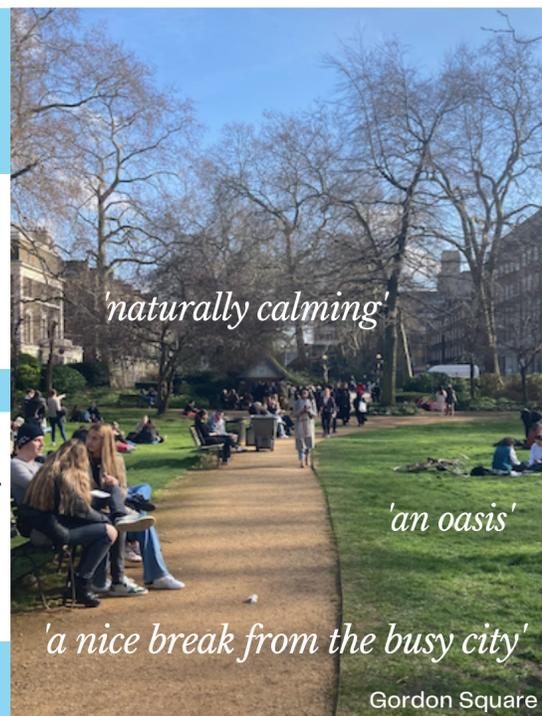


2. Spaces can be therapeutic but their capacity to positively contribute to mental health is restricted by external space (i.e., their positioning within central London).

Student Centre Terrace: One participant found that being able to quickly access fresh air during study breaks was calming and therapeutic. They expressed, however, that seeing news snippets (e.g. urgent humanitarian appeals) on the BT tower, evoked feelings of stress.

"Alerts on the BT tower are often really shocking which makes the space feel less comfortable"

Gordon Square: Another participant enjoyed sitting outside on the grass and found the greenery and sunlight 'calming and therapeutic'. However, they state that "the traffic threatens the space's natural therapeutic quality". One participant stressed the value in perhaps embracing the 'hustle and bustle' of the city in a detached way (e.g. Torrington Place).



What can UCL do?

- Distinguish between study and social spaces – provide more study spaces so that social spaces are used for their purpose.
- Embrace the calming aspects of the city by creating some distance between students and the 'hustle and bustle'.
- Acknowledge the intensity of the city and offer mental well-being support in line with this.