Indoor office workers and outdoor nature
a research report
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study analysed the extent to which city office workers have beneficial experiences with outdoor nature. It particularly considered the degree to which these experiences could be accommodated within the habitual behaviours that make up the daily routines of this growing group. Western societies are spending an increasing amount of their time within sanitised and climatically controlled indoor spaces. This project explored how those seemingly at the forefront of this trend experienced this existence and the degree to which they fought against this condition. The aim was to draw out what this suggested about novel interventions to encourage the most positive urban experience in terms of future worker wellbeing, green space provision, and wider sustainability objectives.

The study took lawyers working in Canary Wharf and the City of London as a test case. Respondents were drawn from a range of firms, with a range of backgrounds, and with various levels of experience. Because the aim was gradually to reveal the social norms now associated with city office workers, the project involved sequential depth interviews with a small sample of eleven respondents. They were interviewed once every three months about how they, and their colleagues, had behaved over the preceding period. How and when had they gone outdoors? What factors had encouraged this experience and what factors had impeded it? Was this experience perceived as beneficial or annoying and how could the situation be improved? In order to answer these questions fully, respondents also wrote web diaries over the course of the study period and took part in a final focus group.

The findings point to various policy recommendations that are detailed more fully at the end of the report. These include the potential for varying indoor temperatures within office buildings over the course of the year and future planning that ensures a variety of small green spaces are scattered across inner city areas of office work.

Key findings:

Being kept indoors

1. Finding: These workers could easily become indifferent to changes in local outdoor conditions that might otherwise encourage them to spend time outside. In this way it was relatively easy for them to ‘forget’ about the outdoors and the potential benefits associated with the nature spaces there.

Implication: In order to foster future benefits, there is much more to consider than creating the most welcoming outdoor spaces. It may be as important for initiatives to identify ways of ‘disrupting’ more usual patterns of activity that keep many people indoors by triggering the very idea of stepping outside.

2. Finding: Younger respondents were much more likely to hanker after a fuller relationship with their outdoor conditions and local nature when at work. Though they still felt they would benefit from them, older counterparts gradually became more oblivious to these kinds of opportunity.

Implication: If we seek to encourage future office workers to benefit from experiences with outdoor nature, they should be ‘caught’ relatively early on when habits are still being established. Otherwise they will adapt to their indoor conditions along with the protracted experience of being kept within them.

3. Finding: Whilst local green spaces were valued, they were often valued in terms of their benefits for an externalised ‘public’ that did not necessarily include the respondents themselves. In this way, they were resigned to their working conditions and they did not greatly challenge them.
Implication: We should not expect much future demand for initiatives that help these workers spend more time outside. It might make more sense to concentrate efforts on enhancing nature experiences in periods apart from the working day, such as evenings or weekends, when they are more amenable to deriving the benefits associated with them.

Organising green space outdoors

4. Finding: It was hard to reconcile the possibility of beneficial outdoor experience with the fact that workplace norms encouraged general senses of ‘purposefulness’ that, in turn, pushed respondents to remain indoors. Certainly solitary practices of sitting and relaxing outdoors in green spaces were difficult to embrace and respondents would travel only short distances to these spaces.

Implication: The benefits of green space should be aligned to opportunities for ‘getting things done.’ This could mean incorporating green spaces into thoroughfares or designing them so that people can do a variety of social things there. Attention should be devoted to the encouragement of walking through and alongside green spaces and various smaller green spaces should ideally be scattered across the city.

5. Finding: The presence of other people outdoors in green spaces commonly prompted the idea of joining them. Seeing those who were not themselves city workers, such as tourists or other visitors, was particularly attractive to respondents because it afforded a brief sense of escape from their everyday pressures.

Implication: Future planning should encourage the mixed usage of local outdoor sites where people of various types and backgrounds congregate. Otherwise these systems of outdoor sociability could eventually ‘shut down’ because there is an insufficiently strong social trigger to prevent workers from retreating further indoors.

6. Finding: Respondents did not like to assume that their colleagues could cope with the physical experience of being outdoors in green environments. Though, individually, respondents felt they could easily do so, people would only propose this kind of experience to close friends.

Implication: It should not be assumed that professional city workers will continue to do such things as sit on the grass in urban nature spaces. Rather the benefits of proximity to these kinds of environments should be incorporated with opportunities for eating and sitting in more commercial settings where the benefits of this experience is aligned with more familiar forms of physicality.

Managing future office conditions

7. Finding: Respondents would like a fuller connection with outdoor conditions in terms of being able to respond to the changing outdoor temperatures associated with the seasons by amending their clothing. This is despite the fact that they were conscious of ensuring they appeared appropriately professional at all times.
Implication: There is scope for a more variable usage of air conditioning within these professional office environments. These workers would be quite willing to adapt to some seasonal change and this would also use much less energy. Though this would require more variability in terms of dress codes, fostering a fuller connection with the seasons in this way would be warmly received.

8. Finding: On-site services were met with a significant degree of ambivalence. Respondents were aware that having them would nominally make them more efficient, but they also felt an insidious sense in which this implied they should ‘never leave’ the building. They knew that, if these services were provided, they would probably find themselves using them in a way that prevented them from outside experiences.

Implication: These facilities should not necessarily be assumed to be universally welcomed by employees. Indeed, if employers seek to encourage their workers to derive wellbeing, they might do better to think of other initiatives than the indoor gym or shop. This was especially so when some respondents felt senses of ‘disconnection’ from life outdoors might build up and eventually encourage them to change their profession.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (reference RES 000-22-21-29). It sought to examine how city office workers, as those seemingly at the forefront of the trend towards increasingly sanitised and climatically controlled indoor existences, related to opportunities for beneficial everyday experience with green space. The wider aim was to use this exercise to distil novel suggestions about how best to steer everyday lives as cities move into the future.

1.1. The benefits of urban nature

Being outdoors with nature has the potential to lead to various social benefits. When people spend time within vegetated spaces in cities this can seemingly reduce crime (Kuo and Sullivan, 2001), alleviate stress (Kaplan, 2001), increase sociability (Sullivan, Kuo and Depooter, 2004) and promote more general feelings of wellbeing (see, for example, Herzog, et al. 2002; Health Council of the Netherlands, 2004). Yet we also know that many people are now reluctant to spend time within spaces such as these (see, for example, CABE, 2005, Burgess, 1998). The most common argument here is that, if these spaces were physically improved in the most appropriate way, things would eventually start to change. In other words, if these spaces were made more welcoming, then people would gradually start to return (CABE, 2005).

Places that bring several social benefits

Yet the propensity to stay away from outdoor vegetation could relate to other issues altogether. It could, for example, be associated with how familiar, or unfamiliar, this kind of physical experience has become and, more fundamentally, whether particular groups are becoming disinclined to venture outside. One interesting idea is that western societies are retreating into a kind of ‘defensive shell’ when faced with the possibility of outdoor public space experience (CABE, 2005). The concern here is that people are increasingly risk averse and they do not therefore engage more fully with the outdoor spaces they are provided because of a residual sense of them being insufficiently safe or sanitised. Cutting down horse chestnut trees for fear of injuries from falling seed nicely illustrates this point. This particular line of thinking alerts us to the possibility that many may now be disinclined to expose themselves to the varied environmental conditions associated with vegetated spaces outdoors. If we follow this line, there is scope for bringing various new insights and approaches to bear on this particular policy issue.

1.2. The rise of indoor societies

One of these relates to the idea of being routinely kept inside. When viewed as a whole, we know that western societies are now generally found indoors. Changing work and leisure patterns have meant that people now spend over ninety per cent of their time within buildings (Kosonen and Tan, 2004; Höppe, 2002). One of the cornerstones to this trend is the assumption that people function most effectively when immediate ambient environments are fixed so they can forget about their bodies and get on with their work. This is despite the fact that doing so evidently uses an immense amount of energy that societies can ill afford to spare. The argument here is that people should feel neither hot nor cold and they should not be subject to any other variations in their ambient conditions. Its widespread embrace by the building community has been fundamental to the spread of air conditioning (Chappells and Shove, 2005; De Dear and Brager, 2001) and the proliferation of facilities such as the shopping mall and the patio heater (Hitchings, 2007).

On one level, this makes a great deal of sense when the prolonged experience of extremes of temperature is instinctively unappealing. Yet, on another, it leads to a situation where people are accustomed to only tightly controlled conditions because they have gradually lost...
the ability or inclination to cope with more unpredictable environmental states. This idea points in new directions with regard to the factors likely to influence the future experience of outdoor greenery. Though people may still want to look upon vegetation, changing sensitivities could eventually culminate in societies where people feel themselves unable to tolerate the unpredictable environmental experiences associated with the places where we find plants (see, for example, Zacharias et al. 2001). As such, rather than focusing too wholeheartedly on the immediate organisation of the sites within which beneficial outdoor experiences are imagined to occur, as is commonly the case with research on this topic (Matsuoka and Kaplan, 2007), it could also be worth stepping back and painting a broader canvas with regard to the wider social dynamics that may insidiously push particular groups indoors.

Superficially, these individuals often seem to be found within quite sanitised conditions as they glide between meeting rooms and look down onto corporate atria. Sometimes they need never descend to the lobby as others come and cater to their needs in terms of food, shopping, laundry and the like. They are also generally expected to present themselves in relatively formal clothes and this may only be easy if you tend to stay inside air-conditioned spaces. In many ways, their routines would seem to epitomise the apparent ‘groundlessness’ of modern metropolitan living (Lewis, 2000, Ingold, 2004) where unanticipated physical experiences are ruled out or, when they do take place, are organised within controlled ambient conditions like those of the gym. We know that air stewards are uneasy about occupying sanitised spaces for extended periods of time (for example, Lindgren and Norback, 2005), that in building studies there are concerns about whether we should devote so much energy to air-conditioning (Chappells and Shove, 2005) and that there is a broader public and academic uncertainty about the health implications of indoor existences (for example, Sunnell, 2004). Yet how did this important group of workers organise their outdoor experience and what would this tell us about the scope for useful intervention?

1.4. Concepts of social practice

In order to answer this question, this study employed concepts of social ‘practice’ (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki et al. 2001) with regard to how groups of people become habituated into the reproduction of behavioural norms that are subsequently subject to only limited degrees of reflection (Giddens, 1984). These ideas had the potential to reveal the full extent to which respondents had retreated unthinkingly indoors and...
the extent to which this situation was felt problematic. In particular, the project sought to consider the trade-offs that members of this social group found themselves making between material wealth, outdoor experience and social wellbeing in the context of wider interests in finding the best means of promoting sustainable societies (DEFRA, 2005), liveable cities (ODPM, 2002) and more general social health (CABE, 2004). Members of this group were potentially the pioneers of some new techniques for juggling the possible benefits of outdoor vegetation experience and the routine ‘temptations’ of staying indoors (Brager and De Dear, 2003). The corollary was that they would provide a particularly provocative case in terms of debating indoor futures.

1.5. A note on ‘urban nature’

‘Urban nature’ in this study was understood in a broad sense. It was investigated with regard to the various biophysical processes at large outside the offices being studied. As such, whilst the study hoped to feed directly into more established concerns for the ways in which respondents related to outdoor vegetation, urban nature was also taken to include less commonly researched elements such as seasons, weather and the climate, more generally.
2 RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. The sample

This research involved a small sample of eleven professionals working in either the City of London or Canary Wharf. The rationale was that it was more important to build a detailed picture of the pressures associated with this group by spending time with a smaller number than to produce a potentially superficial account of the experiences of many. This strategy was also especially important when researching everyday habits that may not have previously been subject to a great deal of personal examination. These eleven individuals were recruited through a variety of means including existing contacts and ‘snowball’ sampling. The sample was stratified along particular lines to maximise diversity and generate a range of opinions regarding their collective experience:

- A similar number from each gender was recruited since this attribute can evidently influence the ways in which office workers are able to present themselves in bodily terms with regard to the expectations placed upon them and the social norms to which they are subject.

- Respondents were derived from a number of firms as individual buildings offer different opportunities and constraints with regard to outdoor experience and different companies may have different cultures with respect to what behaviours were deemed locally acceptable. Respondents from seven different firms were involved in the study and respondents worked in a variety of different practice areas.

- Care was taken to ensure a spread of those who had recently started work in these environments and those who were more established. Four respondents were in the process of completing their training contracts and had less than two years of experience. The remaining seven were more fully established in this profession. This allowed the research to investigate how newcomers initially attempted to organise their experiences and how were potentially socialised into alternative kinds of practice.

A particular feature of this study was the recruitment of individuals who did not necessarily have any significant amount of outdoor experience or particular desire to have it. Many previous studies of urban nature have recruited respondents by approaching those who were already found within the parks and gardens that were of interest to them. Whilst this is an entirely sensible strategy in terms of efficiently finding an appropriately sized sample, the implication is that subsequent findings are potentially describing the experience of an unusual group whose members still like to spend time outdoors. Since the argument behind this specific study was that an increasing number of people now seem to prefer the indoors, it was important to recruit respondents through means that prevented this eventuality.

<table>
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<th>Experience</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
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<td>Male</td>
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Table of respondents
2.2. Practical activities

One year of longitudinal research was then undertaken. At four evenly spaced points throughout this year – i.e. once every season - respondents were involved in hour long depth interviews regarding the ways in which they and others in their workplaces had been responding to the outdoor environment over the preceding three months. Whilst this process involved a thematically arranged interview schedule, respondents were also given space to develop and expand upon different lines of relevant enquiry. Particular themes considered how routines and spaces were structured in ways that made outdoor experiences possible or problematic, what strategies were employing to achieve these experiences, if any, and how these strategies related to wider norms of expected workplace conduct and other more familiar forms of physical behaviour. Respondents were also asked to reflect on their own actions and the conventions at large amongst their peers between sessions. In this sense, although the practical sample was relatively small, the aim was to build a much bigger picture of how contemporary office professionals relate to these issues in a more general sense. To this end, respondents were also given a web blog page where they were encouraged to note events they saw around them in the workplace that either recuperated or ran against more expected ways of outdoor interaction.

By following the behaviour of these respondents as they passed through the year, the project firstly sought to examine the effects of seasonal change on this group. It was possible that their practices were such that it was difficult to amend their behaviour in response to these changes in terms, for instance, of altering their attire if it was cold or having the time to go outside during the summer. Conversely, it may be that the time they spend indoors makes them especially sensitive to outside experience when we know that even small changes in urban microclimatic conditions can have significant impacts on the behaviour of downtown office workers (Zacharias et al. 2001). Secondly, this serial strategy was crucial in terms of exposing issues about which respondents may not always have immediate thoughts and in terms of establishing rapport and trust. More prosaically, this approach finally gave the opportunity to reflect between interviews and develop lines of questioning accordingly - a particularly valuable iterative exercise when dealing with routine activities.

### Interview periods involved in the study

<table>
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</tr>
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<td>1. End of winter</td>
<td>16.2.07 – 27.2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. End of spring</td>
<td>21.5.07 – 24.6.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. End of summer</td>
<td>13.8.07 – 23.8.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. End of autumn</td>
<td>7.12.07 – 5.1.08</td>
</tr>
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Whilst these 44 interviews, alongside the web diary activity, provided the primary data source, a final focus group was also conducted at the end of the interview period. Ten of the eleven respondents took part. The aim was to corroborate speculative findings and provide an important group perspective on the shared social conventions revealed through the preceding interviews. At this point they also completed the ranking exercise discussed in the next chapter.

All the discussion involved in the research project was recorded and fully transcribed verbatim by a known contractor. Interview transcripts were then analysed thematically as one set. This was done with the aid of analysis software and first involved ascribing portions of text to ‘codes’ i.e. categories for later analysis of content and meaning. An initial ‘coding frame’ was
devised from both initial research questions and emergent areas of interest. As the interview transcripts were read and re-read, further themes were developed through the researcher’s interpretation. These were added to the coding frame and transcripts revisited for further assigning of text to codes. At the end of the coding procedure, the text assigned to each code was considered as a whole and interpretations of meaning and significance were made, including comparisons where appropriate. The result is therefore an interpretive thematic analysis that was directed by the initial research questions but also grounded in ideas that emerged through a gradual process of analysis.
3. PROJECT FINDINGS

The following summarises the main empirical findings of the study. Quotes are used throughout to support wider conclusions drawn from analysis of all the interview transcripts. The first four sections deal with the various dynamics that emerged as important in structuring how respondents related to urban nature outdoors and the fifth discusses various strategies that could be adopted to improve this situation.

3.1. Going without urban nature

“I don’t really think about the outdoor environment around my office. I guess the only thing I think about is whether I can read my book and cross the street at the same time in the morning. And most of the time I can”

Anna: interview 1.

Respondents reported how they would often never leave the building until they went home at the end of the working day. The majority spent only brief periods outdoors during this period. The average, including travel time, was a total of about thirty minutes. The shortest was estimated at around ten minutes as one person described a brief hit of stimulating conditions during the brisk morning walk from the bus to the foyer. Whilst this was, in itself, relatively unsurprising in view of their hefty workloads, the more interesting finding related to their evident lack of previous reflection or degree of initial concern. That is to say that, in most cases, this was not something to which they had given much thought or, during our first meetings at least, seemed to care an especially great deal about. Indeed it was only through the process of being involved in this study that many described how they gradually came to consider the extent to which they were inclined to remain indoors and the outdoor benefits that were potentially forgone as a result.

“When I am walking into work it is almost like being in a building anyway. It feels like you are inside almost... because it’s just seas of people going across the crossings and it really doesn’t even feel like being outside. It’s quite weird.”

Samantha: interview 2.

This situation was slightly different for the younger respondents who reported how they and their peers sometimes felt rather ‘strange’ about the amount of time they were removed from the outside world within standardised office spaces. Yet their more established colleagues had evidently adapted to this situation quite well. As such, they no longer felt any particular desire for an increased amount of outdoor experience during the working week. Tellingly, respondents often used the passive voice in discussing these matters. Inclinations to stay indoors were just what they seemed to ‘find themselves doing.’ Because they were busy at work, ideas of more outdoor experience had gradually fallen out of the frame and this was, in turn, experienced in relatively unproblematic terms.

“It’s like being sealed in our little pod and I think, in a way, the bigger these offices are getting and the more high-tech they are getting, the more kind of detached you end up feeling from what’s outside and the rest of the world. Which may be no bad thing when it’s a city... but it is strange”

Fleur: Interview 3.

In one sense this was unsurprising because the whole experiential system they entered into on accepting this form of employment was geared towards encouraging these kinds of indoor normalities. Whist wider urban morphologies still promote outdoor experience through the provision of facilities such as parks and plazas, it is important to remember that these sites must battle against many countervailing tendencies with respect to the controlled conditions that are increasingly provided to our workers. The business suit provides a good example in terms of the way it has come to connote appropriate professionalism now means that those who want to be understood as ‘professional’ require similar ambient conditions throughout the whole year and across the entire globe. This kind of insidious process was certainly evident in this study as some respondents reported how they could ‘find themselves’ wearing almost exactly the same clothing throughout the period of research and this was sometimes without ever especially thinking about it.
“It’s just the same. It’s just the same environment inside the office. I mean I am still wearing winter suits. It doesn’t make any difference at all that it might be sunnier outside. Sometimes because I sit near the window it might get hotter if it is a hot day. But that is the only noticeable difference really.”

Carol: Interview 3.

They did, after all, have many services provided on site in terms of supermarkets housed immediately beneath the building, shops within the firm itself and workplace gyms that were accessed by just taking the lift. Yet, whilst nominally these may be framed as luxuries that other workers might aspire to, these facilities were met with some degree of ambivalence in this study because, whilst on the one hand they were convenient, they also impeded them from going outdoors. In this sense, it should not be assumed that these facilities are especially sought after. Indeed some viewed their provision as a conspiratorial act on the part of employers who were finding ingenious ways of ensuring they would ‘never leave’ the building. Though, of course, they could go outside, the commonplace idea was that employers knew they could easily get out of the habit of thinking about doing so, and they were playing on this opportunity. In this sense, there was a residual sense of ‘lack’ in terms of missing out on the possibility of being outside in a way that they might have been otherwise understood as more ‘normal’, but it was not something they were actively seeking to change at the time.

“And I come into work about 8:30 and then I walked out of the door to get a cab at about one in the morning. And just before I stepped in the cab I thought it must have been a really nice day today because it was still warm. And then I sat in the cab and I thought a whole day has just gone by and I haven’t even noticed it. And you just think, you know.”

Bob: interview 3.

Anecdotes abounded about how outdoor variability in terms of weather could come as something of a surprise on the occasions when they descended to the lobby and ventured outside. Indeed there was a resigned comedy to the way in which they had to return quickly to their desks and retrieve their umbrellas as their human fallibility in terms of being organisationally on top of something as basic as weather was suddenly exposed. Yet this was also entirely understandable because they had limited need to consider the outdoors and they already had many other tasks to be thinking about. Certainly no respondent watched the daily forecast with the intention of amending their routine behaviour accordingly and there was therefore little prior knowledge or thought about what it would be like on individual days. Routine practices were generally well established and so they simply had to cope with what the local outdoor environment threw at them on any given day. Weather forecasts were largely about the weekend only. This was because they had little need of them during the working week when the assumption was they would often be too busy to notice, in any case.

“Well I think it’s like the national trust. I have never been to any of these places but I think that somebody should be doing that and we should be preserving these things”

Anna: interview 2.

Moving now to the possibilities of beneficial green space experience, this meant that this possibility was easily overlooked. The most arresting example of this came when discussing the importance of the park adjacent the workplace of one respondent whose response is presented above. She believed it was important that it was well maintained since these were important resources and they should therefore be safeguarded. Yet this was not really framed as a resource for her. So I asked about how this squared with the limited amount of experience I knew she personally had with this site. As depicted above, her response was that it was similar to being a member of the National Trust, a charity that works to preserve historic buildings in this country. Her idea was that she would probably never see some of the buildings she would thereby help preserve, but she wanted to preserve them anyway. And so it was with the park that was only metres from her workplace. The wider point to take from this account was about a sense of resigned ambivalence. Clearly there was only a limited desire for being within these spaces more often and this was because they had evidently adapted to the perceived norms of their working conditions. The
“You can have whole days when you are just inside, thinking back, and you go and buy your breakfast in the café and go and sit down with it at your desk and, do the morning work and then go and get a sandwich from the café and you still weren’t leaving the building. You can see why they do it as an employer, you know, keep you there. But it does feel like you never get to distance yourself from the building.”

**Fleur: interview 3.**

**Summary points:**
- It was relatively easy to forgo any degree of contact with outdoor urban spaces over the course of the working week.
- Younger respondents found it harder than their more experienced counterparts because they were newly adapting to these lifestyles.
- Certain features that encouraged workers to stay indoors and which might otherwise be understood as luxurious were met with some suspicion.

3.2. Pulling others out from their buildings

“Because my sister travels a lot – she is a buyer. And during a day’s work, she is doing totally different things. Whereas most of the time I am doing the same things, just maybe a different client or different contract, but the same thing. And it is always amazing to me when I am on holiday, how many people are out and about – why aren’t they at work? Because I assume that they are going to be at work they’d be tucked away in an office where you can’t see them… so what on earth are they doing? Why aren’t they at work?”

**Anna: interview 3.**

Yet whilst this first section of this analysis painted a rather bleak picture in terms of the ease with which positive experiences with the urban green could be forgone, this was not always the case. Whilst a number of factors did collectively encourage this kind of ‘forgetting’, this is not to say that opposing elements could not also trigger a converse desire to be outdoors. In this respect, one key factor emerged as relating to the actions of others. In the above quote, one respondent is recalling how she was relatively taken aback by the amount of people she saw going about their daily business outdoors in terms of shopping and other activities when she had some time off. This was because she had fallen into the habit of assuming that most people worked in similar ways to her. The realisation that this was not always the case then came as something of a shock as she was suddenly confronted with an entirely different way of routinely being.

This feeling was consistent with a much wider sense in which the desire for being outdoors was prompted by the observation that other people were already there – their presence acting as an effective ‘disruption’ to otherwise habitual ways of behaving. When the weather got warmer during summer, flurries of emails would start to fly around the law firms of central London, as the idea of being outdoors slowly begun to spread between groups of colleagues. As such, if a good spell of weather managed to persist for long enough, routines were gradually rendered unstable. People became slowly more confident about these conditions lasting and then collectively decided to make time to be together outside. In this sense, there was evidence of what others call ‘weather memory’ (Morgan and de Dear, 2003) triggering new forms of behaviour when the weather was sufficiently stable to achieve this effect, though the ‘social trigger’ provided by the observed actions of others provided the starting point.

“When I worked in Canary Wharf somehow I just got into a different way of thinking about the outside. It was really quite strange. Here it is somehow a bit more like real life here. You know, its not just a concrete city block and there are people doing other things, and tourists and so on. And that is a bit more interesting and it makes a different sort of atmosphere.”

**Eleanor: interview 3.**

Comparable studies suggest that contemporary urbanites are quite sensitive to outdoor conditions since it is only above particular temperatures that New Yorkers, for instance, come out in significant volumes onto their expanses of city green (Li, 1994). Yet the ‘physical’
threshold in terms of physiological comfort only partly accounts for this phenomenon. Certainly what were as important in this study were ‘social thresholds’ with regard to the observed behaviour of others. There were several elements to this process. One was about the way in which the very idea of going outside would come from the observation of others. People would only think of doing it themselves if others were already engaged in this activity – an idea which lends weight to the wider importance of social cues (Cialdini, 2000) in this regard. Another related to how outdoor spaces were more inviting when there were other people to contemplate as certain seasonal socialities (Nash, 1981) gradually took shape. Seeing other people doing different things outdoors was felt to be particularly effective in taking respondents away from their immediate workplace concerns. Some commentators have argued that (Westerberg, 1994), though planners naturally focus on physical infrastructure, people are often more interesting to look at than architecture. In this way, the presence of others was especially important to this study. Interestingly this often was especially so when these were not comparable city workers because visitors could remind you of a life outside business that had momentarily been forgotten.

“I don’t think I would have noticed the lack of summer otherwise. It’s disappointing when you actually think about it, but most of the time I was only thinking about it because someone on the news was talking about there not being any summer and telling me what that means.”

Samantha: interview 3.

Yet the logical converse of this situation is that similar group dynamics can also conspire to keep people inside and several examples did indeed stack up to encourage people to discount the idea of more outdoor time with colleagues or friends during the day. A summer example, related to what was perceived as the daring act of holding a team meeting outdoor during good weather. The trouble here was that certain team members inevitably emerged as too sensitive for this kind of experience. Degrees of shade needed discussion, insects could be a bother, and the suggestion was never made again. A winter example was linked to a festive party where, whilst colleagues were excited about the occasion the journey to the venue and back was the source of some concern. Even though it was minutes away the problem was that this would involve a short period of walking outside the sanitised indoor environments that have come to characterise Canary Wharf. The respondent involved talked about the comic bewilderment associated with this short walk but the more serious implication was that, if the person organising the trip wanted less trouble next time, it would be easier to stay much closer to home.

“People will say lets go to Finsbury circus and I am like ...well it takes us ten minutes to get there and everyone will argue about where we should go and then we will try and spend ten minutes trying to find a space that is big enough for all of us to sit down together. Then people will get their blackberries out and then we will go. I could just skip that altogether”

Joyce: interview 3.

Such situations raise the spectre of the whole system of outdoor sociability this section has been describing ‘shutting down’. Certain social factors could quite easily come together and conspire to push people inside and the resulting absence of others outside would then mean the idea of joining them no longer took seed. This is a precarious situation and group dynamics between colleagues who must collectively figure out what is taken to be correct conduct were important. Studies elsewhere have shown how those people found within parks felt less comfortable if they are not immediately able to leave (Nicopoupoulou and Steemers, 2003). More specifically, if they are waiting for someone else, they are more likely to deem the ambient conditions unpleasant. Whether this is evidence of modern societies being rather unforgiving or whether it belies a new cultural nervousness about the experience of being outside is a matter for debate. Nevertheless group outdoor experience could certainly be difficult for the respondents in this study. It was only quite familiar colleagues who would think about going outside together. Indeed often it seemed to just make much more sense to go outside on your own. This was because you could never guarantee that others would be free, how colleagues would cope with the situation outside could be the subject of some anxiety, and it was deemed best not to assume they would want to go
there in the first place.

Summary points

• During extended periods of good weather, the idea of spending time outdoors did manage to gradually spread through these offices.
• This idea was particularly ‘triggered’ by seeing other people outdoors and particularly people other than office workers.
• Spending social time outdoors was liable to only be done with close friends. The idea of organising other forms of group activity was problematic.

3.3. How it can be hard to benefit

One way in which some researchers have studied the social benefits of outdoor green space is through the notion of natural ‘tranquillisers’ (Chiesura, 2004). Following the idea that looking at vegetation can take our minds away from the stresses occupying us at the time, these studies suggest that, whilst the presence of plants can make people less immediately productive, they can also make them more relaxed and able to think more creatively (Shibata and Sukuki, 2002). This is seemingly also the case in the workplace (Larsen et al. 1998). Yet the question that naturally follows from this finding is one of whether people want to submit themselves to these effects when we also know that, if people are stressed at work, they are also less able to calm down and reach the point where they profit from these opportunities (Regan and Horn, 2005).

One important question for this study was therefore about how easy it was for respondents to potentially ‘tranquillise’ themselves in this way. They were, after all and along with an increasing amounts of others in this country (Southerton, 2003), feeling themselves to be generally busy and this might render such sedating experiences an annoying distraction, irrespective of the time that was potentially available to them for spending time outdoors with city vegetation.

“If you take breaks, you come back so much more refreshed. And there have been times where I have just thought “I just need 2 minutes outside” – it’s not very good because I go across there and I just buy chocolate. But actually that helps. And then you go back and you are like “right, I am going to hit this for the next 2 hours or whatever it is”. But if I have a busy day, there is no way I would come out.”

Anna: interview 4.

A recurrent theme within the interviews associated with this study was about ‘purposefulness.’ The study was especially interested in how certain ways of routinely behaving gradually come to feel like the only possible ones and how other options are foreclosed. One of these behavioural structures was evidently about feeling productive. Generally, these workers had a lot to be getting on with over the course of their day and so, generally, it just made sense for them to get on with it. In this way, just as the change of pace after a holiday was so sudden that some reported negative physical symptoms in terms of headaches and other health matters, the anxiety was that it would be especially hard to resume a working disposition once it had been escaped. As part of a wider attempt in the project to gain access to the internalised ideas sustaining different habits, respondents were presented with a number of hypothetical scenarios. One of these was about what they would pick if given the choice between a guaranteed daily lunch hour or a half day holiday during the week. They all chose the second. Though this was partly about the greater range of options available in terms of making good use of longer periods, this also related to a propensity to continue working. The implicit idea here was that relaxation was much more achievable once the working day was over and you were either at home or out with friends. One respondent described how she was so focussed during the day that she hardly noticed the points when she was outside. When she came out of the tube in the morning and walked to the office she might just as well have been indoors - because she was already thinking about work matters, she was oblivious to the environment around her. The respondent below uses an idea of being ‘disciplined’ which reinforces the view that breaking these routines almost required a degree of onerous effort.

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“I think a lot of people are more disciplined than I am about getting some time away from their desks"
Yet this was not to say that beneficial outdoor experiences were always overlooked by those in the habit of being purposeful. Indeed there were tricks for combing the two. Though comparable facilities were often provided on site, a number of respondents, for instance, discussed how errands were stored up over the course of the day as justifications for a short period outside. This was as much a justification to themselves as anything else, though they could also be subtly mentioned to colleagues as they passed them in order to underline how this was not simply a case of having little work. When the idea of just ‘stepping away from your desk’ has become relatively commonplace in contemporary office work and implies that any time away during working hours is necessarily brief and purposeful, we see the importance of such outdoor ‘alibis’ in terms of collecting dry cleaning, getting some food, or nipping to the bank. As such, these respondents displayed skills that allowed them to affect some degree of outdoor relaxation whilst also being productive.

“So its definitely possible that sometimes people make the effort. Even if its going to get food from somewhere else rather than eating on site. And just being outside for five or ten minutes. People will actually do that even if you can only afford the five or ten minutes to do that, some people would go and do that”

Bob: interview 2.

Yet, having said that, breaks alone outside rarely involved periods of sitting down in parks or gardens. They were much more often accompanied by a walk. This echoes the above idea in terms of people being either unable or unwilling to effect a fuller step change in terms of daytime relaxation and, for some, this was amplified by an anxiety about being seen by others. The nervousness was partly about being thought to be without friends to sit with, but there was also a sense in which daytime behaviour was about meeting objectives: whether completing deals or catching up with others. The point was again about being purposeful and one upshot related to how the quality and preponderance of vegetation was deemed much more important around their home than the workplace. It could have been argued that, given they spend so much of their time in the heart of the city, it might have been otherwise. Yet this kind of experience was evidently much more easily enjoyed at home because, when respondents were at home, they were more amenable to their benefits. In this way, they could potentially act as weekend nature ‘inoculations’ (Hartig et al. 1991), where wellbeing is accumulated over discreet periods and then slowly released. Certainly, when we discussed how outdoor environments could be improved in the week, the idea of better views attracted a revealingly high score. This was because, like many others today, they knew they would seldom find themselves inclined to spend time in the immediate outdoors (Kearney, 2006) and so they would rather have fleeting beneficial experiences by looking out from their offices. A similar situation was the case when we discussed proximity, since it was clearly only those green spaces close to their offices that were likely to be visited.

“Well I feel I don’t really have enough time in the day to think ‘oh, wouldn’t it be lovely if I just gave myself a fifteen minute break now to go for a walk.’ I think that would be fantastic but I know I won’t get into the habit of doing that because I feel I have so many other things to do”

Carol: interview 3.

Summary points:

• Prevailing senses of ‘purposefulness’ conspired against benefiting from outdoor experiences with vegetation. These experiences could disrupt these senses and make it harder to resume a workplace disposition.

• This sensibility could be over-ridden by combining periods of outdoor experience with the determined completion of specific activities. It was harder to do anything more fully relaxing or without objective.

• It was deemed more important to have outdoor spaces near their home environments because it was much easier to benefit from them there. If they were provided at work, only those very close to hand would ever be visited.
There were instances of an attitude that verged on a triumphal determination about wearing seasonal clothing despite being generally inside. One respondent explained it in terms of rewarding yourself for working so hard. The idea was that, because you worked hard, you should be able to buy and enjoy new seasonal clothes. This was even though, as she seemed painfully aware, this behaviour was rather ironic when you were in a climatically controlled environment and when the only people to see would be your colleagues. Yet such changes in practice were also quite precarious in terms of how easily they were sustained. Managing to respond to outdoor weather, whilst also working in offices with relatively standardised ambient conditions, could be difficult. This could lead to perversities such as the above respondent whose personal heater at work was used to counteract the air conditioning and allow her to wear thinner clothes in summer. Though others reported how they could control individual thermostats for each of their offices, it was generally still too cold for them in summer and these settings were perceived as often ineffective in any case.

"Maybe it’s the kind of psyche thing as well: that it’s summer or it’s coming towards summer the weather’s nicer so therefore we should be wearing summery clothes just because it’s summer. I mean, once you are inside, it doesn’t make any difference you just notice that you know it’s brighter outside and yeah you maybe go outside at lunch time for a bit. But practically speaking, it probably doesn’t make any difference."

Bob: interview 3.

One respondent described a colleague who had been telling people around the office about his new winter coat. Yet he was not doing this to elicit any admiration about his personal style or seasonal adaptation skills. Rather this was about the lack of them. The comedy he saw in the situation was associated with how he bought this coat because he thought he has lost his existing one when what he had actually done was leave his coat on the back of his door last year and then forgotten because he had never needed it. Though respondents generally found this story depressing, the point was that he was rather proud – the implication being that he was working so hard indoors that he was rendered oblivious to any seasonal change. In his case, being focussed
meant being ignorant about outdoor change since any fuller seasonal response could potentially connote a worrying lack of work.

“I suppose it is a very little part - it is kind of like the smallest part of climate change or something, isn’t it? I mean climate change wouldn’t matter if we could just have a controlled environment, nothing would matter. I suppose it is the only thing that you see through your office window that has anything to do with the planet or the world as a whole. So if you said “did it snow yesterday” and I couldn’t say yes or no, I would feel like I wasn’t involved in the world in any way, I suppose.”

Joyce: interview 3.

Other instances suggested a more eager stance towards the distractions of seasonal change. One respondent wanted to respond to the winter cold by wearing hats and scarves and this initially seems an unexceptional practice. Yet she also travelled to work by car, then stayed in a conditioned tower until returning home, and was therefore only a matter of minutes outdoors each day. Evidently this was not especially about staying warm. Indeed she sometimes wore thinner coats as a means of both wearing scarves and ensuring she was never too hot. Other respondents talked about wearing thicker clothes and scarves at work during winter. This was despite the fact their offices were climatically controlled and were often amenable to being changed through individual thermostat settings. The implication was that, they could have turned up the heat if they had wanted to, but they did not.

“I had a friend who was told off for wearing trainers in the lift, and she made it quite clear that she only wears trainers because it is the most comfortable for her to walk the couple of miles into work from her flat. And of course she changes her shoes when she comes into the office. So if you have intelligent people who do a good job, I think it goes without saying that they know how to present themselves, so, you know, why make such a point? I also don’t understand why they just waste their time doing it.”

Carol: interview 4.

Whilst there was an evident sense in which respondents struggled to be part of seasonal outdoor changes in terms of varying the ways in which they presented themselves over the year, this was made doubly problematic by the ways in which they also had to manage ideas of professional appropriateness. Interestingly many respondents believed that their own firm was comparatively good in terms of how they were allowed some degree of flexibility in this regard. However, what was also clear was how there were many anxieties about whether and how they felt they could respond to the condition outdoors through their clothing. Often this was because the rules associated with appropriate seasonal dress were hard to fathom and policed in confusing ways. Sometimes these matters would never be verbally discussed and rather involved interpreting what appeared to be disapproving looks from colleagues and more senior figures. At other times they were administered in a manner that was deemed too heavy handed by referring to rule books or sending out stern emails. All this would militate against respondents responding to the changing conditions outdoors: it was commonly just deemed easier to wear what you habitually wore rather than to reflect on whether what you might choose was permissible. This was partly because of the vague sense respondents had about dress codes during summer, for instance, and how this vague sense insidiously encouraged them always to wear similar things.

“The trouble is, once I have gone into the office and I have these heels on, I don’t really very often then take them off and go back into trainers to walk. And, if I needed to go far I probably would, but then the trousers are too long and you have to tuck them in. And I came across a partner the other morning when I was coming in, when my trousers were still tucked up, and the look of disgust was quite severe.”

Joyce: interview 1.

Broad concepts such as summer ‘dress down’ whereby firms take a more relaxed approach to personal presentation during the hotter months were strongly supported. In this way, sensitively worded advice about what seasonal amendments were permissible was understood as a positive thing. Returning to the benefits associated with outdoor experience, policies
of variable dress codes would potentially help instil a sense in which it was deemed possible to have a fuller relation with the outdoors. This may be especially significant when a number of respondents described how it was the desire to have a fuller connection with outdoor conditions that might eventually trigger them to leave this kind of employment. Though they were evidently quite able to cope with the expectations associated with their work at the moment, and though they could easily get caught up in routines that made them relatively oblivious to the outdoors, it was still felt that this unusual and potentially quite ‘disconnected’ existence might eventually prove too much for some, though they often didn’t talk about these matters with their colleagues.

“I’d really love an office where it would be really quite nice to be able to open the window. I have a friend and she sometimes says she can open the window and hear the birdsong in the park, and I think that just would be a lovely experience. I miss it when it’s a beautiful spring day and you have that really lovely balmy breeze that you can feel on your face, and I think it’s a shame when you can’t just open the window and feel that at work.”

Carol: interview 1.

**Summary points**

- Respondents wanted to be connected to outdoor conditions in terms of being linked to seasonal change through things like clothing.
- This was rendered difficult by the provision of standardised indoor environments and the currently imperfect communication of ideas about appropriate business attire.
- These factors could conspire to encourage a sense of ‘removal’ that might eventually contribute to some respondents seeking other forms of employment.

### 3.5. The ranking exercise

As a result of the interview exercise and during the preliminary stages of transcript analysis, a number of possible factors that might encourage respondents to have a ‘better’ relationship with the everyday outdoors were identified. At the start of the final project focus group, each of the ten respondents were asked to rank each of these factors in terms of the perceived efficacy of making amendments to each. These various factors were then debated during the focus group in order to draw conclusions about their relative importance.

**Where would interventions be most effective in terms of fostering a better relationship between your colleagues and the everyday outdoors?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Ranking and score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The nearness of pleasant outdoor spaces to work</td>
<td>1. (1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The physical make up of nearby outdoor sites</td>
<td>2. (3.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More windows and better views from them</td>
<td>3. (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More predictable outdoor weather conditions</td>
<td>4 = (5.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having the idea of going outside occur more often</td>
<td>4 = (5.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased opportunities for working from home</td>
<td>6. (5.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social precedent and the behaviour of others</td>
<td>7. (6.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing restrictions in terms of appropriateness</td>
<td>8. (6.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impeding the distractions of work outside</td>
<td>9. (7.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A less standardised indoor working environment</td>
<td>10. (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Highest possible score = 1, lowest possible score =10)

The first thing to note is that all factors were seen to have some degree of importance. No factors were universally deemed unimportant and each of these possible forms of intervention was therefore understood, by at least some respondents, to have some positive impact. Having said that, some factors were clearly thought more significant than others and this is worthy of discussion at this point:

The most important factor was proximity. Respondents were evidently aware that a variety of factors, some of which have already been discussed, collectively conspired to ensure they would seldom stray too far from their offices during the day. This would suggest that we should persist with a policy of scattered ‘pockets’ of green space across the city, if we seek to cater to this particular social group. Anything more centralised is likely to be ineffective because ease of physical access was so important.
The second most important factor was about the organisation of local sites. Whilst respondents were relatively happy about those sites they already had, they want this quality to be maintained. Having said that, it was also the case that they were infrequently visited and they were also discussed as important for others. It may therefore be that they would like these sites to be well maintained in a more general sense, rather than with particular regard to how this would effect their interactions with these sites themselves.

The third factor was about windows in the workplace. Partly because of the amount of time spent in offices, viewpoints from individual offices were especially prized. Indeed the idea of internal offices would be strongly fought against by this group because this was still perceived as a ‘step too far’ in terms of sealing them off from the outdoors. Though having larger windows with potential views of green space was also perceived as a marker of status, it was also the case that these things were believed to have a discernible impact upon individual wellbeing, even if this was only about momentary glances or knowing they were there.

Forth position was jointly shared by two factors. Firstly the suggestion of more predictable weather conditions attracted quite a high score. Though it is somewhat unlikely that those reading this report will be in a position to engineer the way in which the weather works in cities, this factor is worth noting with particular regard to the likelihood of increased weather unpredictability with the onset of wider climate change. Because it takes some time to disrupt worker routines, future weather unpredictability could easily encourage them to retreat even further indoors.

Forth position was also shared by the idea of going outside occurring to them more frequently. This testifies to the importance and durability of established habits. Respondents were aware that they were able to organise these kinds of experiences if they wanted them. Yet they were also aware that this kind of activity could easily be overlooked. In this sense, they felt they needed their usual ways of behaving to be disrupted. As such, the ways in which this might be done merit further consideration.

Working from home was not especially valued as an idea. This is somewhat surprising in light of the way in which good outdoor environments were deemed much more important at home. It may be that the suggestion was quite removed from their current practice and so it was harder to imagine how this kind of intervention could potentially benefit them in this regard.

Social precedent also received a comparatively low score. This seemed to run against the discussions associated with the interview phase of the research where these kinds of factors emerged as particularly significant in terms of going outside with others and the idea of spending time outside occurring in the first place. This ranking may also be partly explained by the more indirect way in which this factor is likely to have an effect and how it can be more satisfying to think of yourself as independently minded.

Though workplace clothing and less standardised office environments featured quite heavily in the interview phase of the work, it is also clear they attracted some relatively low scores in the ranking exercise. This may be because these factors were more indirect than the others with respect to the ways in which they could be seen to impact upon these processes and, as such, it was harder to imagine the eventual effect of possible changes.

We can conclude that there are a variety of possible points of useful intervention with regard to how we foster the most positive relation between those working within city offices and the spaces outside their buildings.
This study sought to examine those who were seemingly spearheading a wider trend towards certain forms of indoor everyday existence. The aim was to analyse how this group dealt with this experience with particular regard to how they related to outdoor nature. In terms of where employment trends have been headed in this country, these workers were leading the way. The suggestion was therefore that their everyday activities could tell us much about the evolving social scope for beneficial outdoor experience. This final section reflects on the implications of the study findings. It begins by considering what this project suggests for two identified policy areas - the provision of urban green space and the physical management of office workers - before considering how future initiatives might usefully straddle established professional boundaries such as these.

4.1. Implications for urban green space provision

When office workers are not provided windows, studies suggest they often hang pictures of natural scenes (Heerwagen and Orians, 1986). They may well be wise to do so when such scenes can seemingly combat the angry feelings that office workers are increasingly likely to harbour (Kweon et al. 2008). Yet it might also be sensible because contemporary people can easily find themselves forgetting about the outdoor experiences originally associated with these images. Certainly a fuller encounter with outdoor vegetation can be difficult for many office workers today and the reasons why are worthy of some scrutiny. Questions of city nature provision are generally addressed with regard to physical features and design solutions (Matsuoka and Kaplan, 2007) and this is entirely understandable since good design is clearly important. Yet, if these spaces can easily be overlooked, some creative thinking might also have a role to play at this point in terms of identifying events and triggers that make people contemplate the very idea of going there in the first place.

The benefits of green space could usefully aligned with opportunities for ‘getting things done’ in the future. This could mean incorporating them into thoroughfares or designing them so that people can do a variety of things together there. Sitting alone was unlikely in this study because it constituted too great a change of pace and so more attention might be better devoted to the encouragement of walking within green spaces. Future planning would also do well to encourage the mixed usage of local outdoor sites where people of various types and backgrounds are likely to congregate. Otherwise such systems of outdoor sociability could eventually ‘shut down’ because of an insufficiently strong social ‘trigger’ to stop busy workers from staying indoors. This could, for example, be in terms of ‘events’ that might encourage people to ‘try out’ another way of operating during the day. Certainly it should not be assumed that city workers will happily continue to sit on the grass in urban nature spaces. Rather the benefits of proximity to these kinds of environments might be better incorporated with opportunities for eating and sitting in more commercial settings where the benefits of this experience is aligned with more familiar kinds of physical experience. Otherwise it may only be very familiar groups of colleagues who will go there because these spaces are deemed insufficiently sanitised for those we don’t know well.

On the other hand and at a more ‘macro’ scale, we might decide not to provide nearby green spaces to these workers at all. If they find it difficult to fully benefit from their provision at this time, it could make more sense to ensure that home environments are better stocked with vegetation because people are more amenable to the benefits they can provide when they are at home. In many instances, these relatively wealthy workers have already ensured they are provided because they can afford the more expensive homes that have blocks of vegetation nearby (see, for example, Morancho, 2003).

Yet, on another level, if we accept the argument that they are at the forefront of certain social changes, do we want to drift towards the indoor existences associated with such a policy where swathes of future society come only to benefit from these experiences on evenings and weekends? Certainly if we seek to cater to this particular group of workers, it may be important to ensure there is a ‘patchwork’ of smaller green spaces across the city, because otherwise they will be disinclined to venture any greater distance. In either case, this project would argue it is worth considering the wider routines and behaviours within which parks and gardens get ‘caught’ and this means thinking about more than the most immediate factors such as benches and litter.
4.2 Implications for office worker management

How office workers are managed and catered to within the workplace also has important implications in terms of fostering the most positive relation between these workers and the situation outdoors. Whilst this study revealed that some struggles were still being made to achieve a fuller relationship with everyday outdoor nature, it also showed how this was often quite difficult. One of the key factors that impeded this relationship related to the standardised conditions and professional expectations to which these workers were subject. Whilst providing these conditions were, on one level, entirely sensible in terms of offering them facilities that allowed them to work and temperatures that were not distracting, this is not to say that these same conditions did not also have negative implications. In particular, it is worth thinking about their role in a much wider retreat from the outdoors as certain preferences slowly solidify into new, and potentially pernicious, forms of environmental expectation (Hitchings and Lee, 2008). Care is evidently needed when assuming where particular kinds of ambience are expected or desired, if this is not yet necessarily the case.

With respect to the way in which routines are established and then largely continue untroubled, if we seek to encourage future office workers to benefit more fully from experiences with outdoor nature spaces, this research suggests they should be ‘caught’ relatively early on at the point when they are still establishing their habits. Otherwise they will adapt to their indoor conditions along with the protracted experience of being kept within them. Having said that, these respondents did still seem to be quite eager to respond more fully to wider changes in the conditions outdoors by changing their clothes over the course of the seasons. As such, there seems much scope for a more variable usage of air conditioning within these professional office environments than is currently common. As some academics have argued elsewhere, we should not necessarily assume that different groups always want to be provided with the same ambient conditions all year round (De Dear and Brager, 2001) and, for the moment at least, this also seemed the case here. These workers would be quite willing to adapt to seasonal change more fully than is needed at the moment. Encouraging them to do so might promote a more positive relationship with the local outdoors and it would also feed usefully into wider agendas by using much less energy. Similar initiatives to the Japanese ‘cool biz’ programme (see, for example, Tamura, 2007), where the government is encouraging summer thermostats to be set at higher levels, may still be welcome in this country for more reasons than one.

This would require some consideration of dress codes. Currently their seasonal variation is understood is an incomplete way. Respondents were universally supportive of the opportunity to amend their clothing regime in the summer, but this was difficult to do in light of a limited sense of what would be deemed appropriate. Summer ‘dress down’ or ‘smart casual’ policies should be institutionalised more widely across the city and the ways in which they operate should be better communicated. Finally, with respect to other on-site provisions in terms of shops, canteens and other facilities, employers should not assume these features will be universally welcomed by future employees since current employees view them with some degree of suspicion. Whilst the likelihood is they will be used, this will also encourage workers to forgo the possible wellbeing and productivity benefits associated with outdoor experience. These matters may seem comparatively trivial compared to the many other elements employers must consider with respect to worker wellbeing but it should also be remembered that some respondents reported how a wider sense of removal from outdoor conditions may eventually push them to leave this kind of employment.

4.3 Wider dialogues and future initiatives

The idea of indoor futures that this project set out to explore initially seems quite fanciful. Yet the wider trends sustaining this idea are set to make significant impacts. In cities like Singapore, where the movement inside has been more fully effected than here, we know that many people are happy to look out onto green spaces, but they no longer like to touch (Yuen et al., 1999). Questions of how best to disrupt and direct the habitual behaviours that are otherwise spreading through our cities may therefore be key to safeguarding the fullest future enjoyment of urban green space. This was the argument sustaining the research described in
this report and the final conclusion relates the ways in which we intervene in these dynamics. Recent policy agendas that centre on the idea of urban ‘liveability’ have opened up the scope for thinking more creatively and holistically about how change in everyday lifestyles are orchestrated. There is also increasing interest in the ways in which we might most effectively ‘nudge’ human behaviours (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Through these means there is much scope for identifying ‘win-win’ scenarios where various parties, not least those who live and work in our cities, all stand to benefit. One might be about varying thermostat settings through the year because this would use less energy, encourage workers onto city nature spaces, and allow them to feel more connected to the world outside the office. Another might be about safeguarding a variety of smaller green spaces across our inner cities so they can continue to provide wellbeing for those who now feel themselves too busy to travel any further.

Future initiatives could usefully span established professional interests. Building professionals, for example, commonly work with the assumption that people should be provided with quite precisely specified envelopes of ambient air. This is understandable when, in the absence of more detailed studies, they must often work with relatively vague ideas about who their users will be and so they can only guess at the ambient possibilities associated with their patterns of everyday existence. Green space planners meanwhile also have much to think about when making decisions about how best to organise these sites and reflecting on how particular groups of local people might be able to respond to outdoor conditions can correspondingly fall out of the frame. Employers are themselves also very busy and so we often see them take a relatively narrow approach to occupational health that ignores the contextual scope for fostering fuller relationships with the situation outside. By thinking across these established interests, we could devise future interventions that simultaneously encourage less resource hungry lifestyles, better relations with urban nature, and a happier experience of work.


Krenichyn, K. 2006. ‘The only place to go and be in the city’: woman talk about exercise, being outdoors and the meanings of a large urban park Health and Place 12. 631-643.


Executive Summary

1. Introduction
   1.1 The benefits of urban nature
   1.2 The rise of indoor societies
   1.3 Contemporary office workers
   1.4 Concepts of social practice
   1.5 A note on 'urban nature'

2. Research methods
   2.1 The sample
   2.2 Practical activities

3. Project findings
   3.1 Going without urban nature
   3.2 Pulling others out from their buildings
   3.3 How it can be hard to benefit
   3.4 The experience of controlled indoor conditions
   3.5 The ranking exercise

4. Conclusions
   4.1 Implications for green space provision
   4.2 Implications for office worker management
   4.3 Wider dialogues and future initiatives

5. References cited
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