

**Viewfinder Project  
Sheffield**

**Contact: Claire Rishbeth**

**t: 0114 222 0606**

**e: [c.rishbeth@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:c.rishbeth@sheffield.ac.uk)**



The Viewfinder project combined a basic course in photography with research into refugees' perception and experiences of urban green spaces. It took place in Sheffield in 2004 and was a collaboration between the Department of Landscape, Sheffield University and Positive Negatives, a community based training organisation.

The aims of the research were to find out how refugees and asylum seekers perceive and use public open space, including how this relates to their homeland experiences and memories, and to look into what designers and managers can do to encourage use of public space by this population group.

A group of Sheffield resident refugees and asylum seekers, ranging in age from 17 to 45 and originating from Afghanistan, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia and Zimbabwe visited and photographed ten green spaces around the city over a twelve week period. They compared notes on their responses to a range of different green space environments, including formal public gardens, heritage parks, community parks, semi-natural cultural landscapes and parks festivals.

**First Impressions**

The initial response to the green spaces was very positive, and produced feelings of novelty and nostalgia. Elements such as bird boxes and play equipment were new to the course participants and they were surprised to discover that Britain in a place where pleasure and beauty can be publicly shared. More familiar elements such as the scent of eucalyptus in the botanic garden or woodland on the urban fringe conjured childhood memories of Africa and unlocked expert plant knowledge, helping the migrants to integrate past and present locations and make sense of their situation.



### **Engagement or detachment?**

The researchers found that people need to be able to envisage realistic possibilities for life benefits if they are to engage with green spaces. Benefits may include chances to relax, socialise, play sport or enjoy plants. But individuals' life circumstances and cultural concepts can prove barriers to engagement. Is a site safe? How should one behave in the new surroundings? The daily struggle to meet basic needs leaves little time for exploring, and there may not be a tradition of visiting green spaces in the homeland.

High quality, well managed spaces came out on top for this group; whereas semi-natural landscapes were seen as more puzzling or challenging. Limited resources for travel meant that 'near home' spaces in the city centre were favoured for their ease of access. Communal entertainment was particularly important. Other welcome features included free sports facilities, providing opportunities to make friends.

Trainees were very interested to learn about the history of Sheffield through the medium of green spaces, and reported that, as well as the immediate benefits to their physical and mental health from exercise and relaxation, green spaces offered a means for them to integrate into the life of the host community.

In order to make the most of the opportunities, refugees and asylum seekers would benefit from provision of information about the types of spaces available and appropriate activities to do there. They would also welcome assistance in overcoming physical and psychological barriers to participation, such as help in interpreting the cultural idea of parks. Their open, free and inclusive nature needs to be stressed, so that this group can be seen as part of the local community.

At the end of the photography course an exhibition was mounted and is touring both locally and nationally. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

