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An enabling neighborhood gathering place

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# Feeling good in People's House Absalon, Copenhagen: An enabling neighborhood gathering place

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on urban micro public space and examines the intricate indoor environment through users' experiences. Although studies have revealed the role of public spaces in facilitating social encounters and relationships, further empirical work and place-specific analyses are required for an in-depth understanding of how everyday places work in the context of wellbeing. Grounding in assemblage thinking, this study employs participant observation and 18 semi-structured interviews to explore the socio-material setting and enabling properties of the former church-turned neighborhood gathering place, People's House Absalon (*Folkehuset Absalon*) in Copenhagen. Though privately owned, rich public life takes place there every day, which shapes positive human experiences. The unique combination of price strategy, opening hours, and interior material setting appeals to wider generations and allows people to conduct everyday tasks in attendance with others. Simple co-presence in the shared context is considered the most valuable experience by the daytime users. It is associated with gentle feel-good moments, from which various levels of restorative benefits are attained at the user's own pace. However, personal preferences, geographical distance, and free time-related conditions signify a complex pathway to be "in" the place to exploit its wellbeing value. Therefore, further empirical work is encouraged to see beyond neighborhood enabling places as a single entity isolated from people's routinized practices.

## Introduction

On a rainy November afternoon, a small child is struggling to eat a cucumber stick in a neighborhood gathering place. The tiny hands cannot hold it properly. An adult stranger glances from over the laptop at the toddler. They smile at each other before returning to their tasks at hand.

Seemingly trivial incidents like this are everyday events in the People's House Absalon, Copenhagen (hereafter Absalon). Since this former Lutheran church was transformed into a unique commercial premises in 2015, it has offered its users various leisure opportunities, from nightly communal dining to ceramic courses. During the day, however, the vivid pastel-colored church nave is filled with people—mothers and fathers on parental leave, pensioners, college students, flexible workers, and job-seekers. The diverse daytime users appreciate the value of their engagements with the vibrant indoor environment, the gentle "feel-good" moments, and the sense of wellbeing.

What factors enable positive experiences at Absalon? How do daytime users experience these seemingly fleeting moments and relate them

with wellbeing? This article employs ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews to investigate how everyday places work in the context of wellbeing. It addresses the preoccupations in health geography with engagement with everyday public spaces (Banwell and Kingham, 2023; Cattell et al., 2008; Dines et al., 2006). The research focuses on an in-depth investigation of people's everyday experiences in a neighborhood gathering place. It aims to make two empirical contributions to the existing literature. First, it adds insights on the links between wellbeing and a "highly preferred urban environment" (Hartig and Staats, 2003, 105) beyond sites specific to marginalized populations. Second, the study is situated in an indoor micro public space and reveals its enabling properties for human wellbeing.

The article proceeds as follows: First, it discusses the diverse understandings of wellbeing and outlines the relevant literature and conceptual framework that are instrumental in responding to the research questions. The rationale of the chosen methods and a brief introduction of Absalon follow. The results section presents findings about noise and co-presence, leading to the discussion in Section 4 and the conclusion.

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## Wellbeing in geography

Various fields have contributed to advancing the conceptualization of health and wellbeing. Since the World Health Organization raised the understanding of health from a medical issue and connected it with a wider “physical, mental and social well-being” (World Health Organization, 2023), there have been many studies of wellbeing, often falling into the hedonic or eudaimonic traditions (Deci and Ryan, 2008). While the former considers that wellbeing is an outcome of subjective happiness, the latter extends this view and regards the notion as a process of fulfilling human potential, involving meaningfulness.

In human geography, the main contributions come from health geography studies on wellbeing in places. Smith and Reid (2018) discuss that place-based health promotion has gained momentum. However, in current literature, “wellbeing” often appears as “a synonym of health” (Smith and Reid, 2018, 812). In the absence of a coherent conceptual framework, Fleuret and Atkinson (2007) highlight the challenges to operationalizing the conflict between the subjective/objective divide in empirical research.

Severson and Collins (2018) acknowledge the intricate nature of the notion of wellbeing and offer a holistic conceptualization and integral understanding. They regard wellbeing as “a positive focus on various dimensions and experiences that contribute to human potential” (Severson and Collins, 2018, 124). In this instance, wellbeing encompasses health and important experiences for human development that involve physical and subjective dimensions. This article draws substantively on this framework and considers wellbeing as a wide range of positive human experiences.

### From therapeutic to enabling settings

Within health geography, “therapeutic landscapes” (Gesler, 1992) have contributed to identifying the links between health, wellbeing, and place. The settings range from traditional healing or healthcare sites (Curtis et al., 2007; Gesler, 1993) to more diverse health-promoting places (Williams, 2007; 2009). Several studies, however, have highlighted three underlying assumptions. First, places should be intrinsically therapeutic (Bell et al., 2018). The notions of “therapeutic taskscapes” (Dunkley, 2009; Smith, 2021) and “therapeutic assemblage” (Foley, 2011, 2014) both integrate a relational approach and demonstrate that people experience therapeutic landscapes differently at different times, depending on how they perceive and interact with places (Conradson, 2005; Duff, 2012; Finlay, 2018). Second, although therapeutic landscapes expand from treatment to the notion of health promotion (Bell et al., 2018; Williams, 2009), the assertion of “therapy” and its ideological implication has been questioned (Laws, 2009). Finally, Duff (2011) shows that the therapeutic settings in the research literature are innately nature-based rather than urban. This view resonates with the critical reflections within environmental psychology that show the efficacy of natural environments in the health-promotion process (Hartig, 2004; Hartig and Staats, 2003) but also aspire to investigate “the full range of variation” of settings, especially urban built environments.

Duff (2011; 2012) constructs the “enabling places” model, departing from the notion of therapy and natural settings. It is an umbrella concept which encompasses “restorative environments” (Hartig, 2004; Herzog et al., 2003) that refer to settings that promote restoration rather than therapy. The former denotes renewing the “normal ‘wear and tear,’” such as fatigue from a demanding job, while the latter often involves capacities that one never had or that were accidentally lost (Hartig, 2004, 274). Restoration, therefore, focuses on the day-to-day renewal of diminished or reduced resources. Grounded in actor-network theory, enabling places are anchored in relational understandings of place in the context of health and wellbeing. The focus is on the social, affective, and material resources that are central to the experience of health and wellbeing in a wide range of public spaces, from local streets to hair

salons (Duff, 2012).

### Wellbeing in public

Notable contributions linking public spaces with wellbeing are also made by others. Cattell et al. (2008) provide a mapping of various public spaces in a case study area in East London and analyze everyday places that offer opportunities to observe others, benefiting individual wellbeing and community life. Dines et al. (2006, 29) point indoors and underline the supportive role of “closed” public spaces such as cafés in cultivating social ties. Banwell and Kingham (2023) specifically discuss the essential social infrastructure role of neighborhood “bumping and gathering places” for building social connections, exemplified in New Zealand’s schools, pubs, and multiple suburban settings. Alongside these studies, Bell et al. (2018) offer a scoping review of earlier research and discuss three multi-scale dimensions of health-enabling material settings: large-scale countryside or seaside; meso-scale green and blue spaces; and micro-scale environments, including hospitals and allotments.

Social sciences disciplines have also explored the influence of public spaces on people’s wellbeing. For example, social entrepreneurship demonstrates that community-based places cultivate meaningful social relations, thereby contributing to positive shared experiences (Broderick, 2017; Davis-Hall, 2018; Munoz et al., 2015; VIVE et al., 2018). Sociologists study gathering places such as coffeehouses or cafés and discuss their vital role in the general development of civil society (Hetherington, 1997) and community care (Warner et al., 2012). Oldenburg (1999) makes a conceptual contribution by designating public places offering informal and enjoyable social experiences as “third places.” Therefore, public places are critical sites for an individual’s wellbeing but also where public and private intertwines (Shapira and Navon, 1991).

The definition of “public,” however, remains ambiguous. The geography and planning disciplines offer more nuanced conceptual frameworks. Latham and Layton (2019) question the understanding of public as the opposite of private and propose an outward view to include a wider range of places that are not conventionally regarded as public spaces but where “publicness” is practiced. Similarly, the “public domain” framework highlights a pluralistic aspect of public spaces, noting that publicly accessible spaces in cities may not be publicly owned; some publicly managed spaces are in reality used as a transit zone by certain groups of people (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001). Demanding explicit criteria, public domain contains spaces that are “positively valued as places of shared experience by people from different backgrounds or with dissimilar interests” (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001, 11). Here, both discourses assign the term “public” to places based on the actual everyday use. Therefore, private commercial facilities that accommodate shared experiences and positive encounters between individuals with different social backgrounds are *de facto* public spaces.

### Assemblage approach to the study of wellbeing and place

Human geography is central to understanding the productive aspects of places. It offers a range of theoretical frameworks for how places work, exemplified in actor-network theory and assemblage thinking. However, scholars do not often distinguish between the two, applying them almost interchangeably to theorize “a dynamic, lively socio-material world” (Müller and Schurr, 2016, 219). The present research focuses on place formation and encompasses the potentiality of everyday life by drawing on Dovey’s (2009; 2016) assemblage approach to places.

Dovey (2009, 2016) uses Deleuzian ontology and apply “assemblage theory” (De Landa, 2006) to cultivate a relational understanding of place as constantly “becoming” rather than “being.” Assemblage is a whole “whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts” (De

Landa, 2006, 5). Therefore, place is seen as a dynamic ensemble of people and their socio-material environments, and not reduced to its material or subjective experiences.

This practical and theoretical approach is instrumental to understand how specific places work through identifying parts and their relations in assembling the whole. It revolves around the continuous formation of places, the everyday lives and the narratives that happen and the implicit desires embedded in them (Dovey, 2009, 13). Assemblage thinking also acknowledges place as a mode of production at its best. “Good” places produce experiences as well as wealth (Dovey, 2016, 113). In this logic, a place can be involved in the production or the active promotion of wellbeing.

## Case and methods

Sensitivity to the multifaceted nature of public spaces exposes a gap in the existing literature, a lack of in-depth examination of how urban public domain works in the context of wellbeing. This prompts a case study approach centering on people’s experiences in an everyday “micro public space” (Mean and Tims, 2005). Participant observation (Musante, 2014) and semi-structured interviews (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2011) were chosen to collect relevant insights, allowing comprehensive access to people’s actions and spoken opinions.

### Data collection and analysis

This research presents data collected from August 2022 to June 2023. The focus was on the ground-floor use of Absalon, where most users could be found during the day.

The perspectives of everyday users who voluntarily frequented Absalon were considered vital to exploring the day-to-day experience of an indoor micro public space. The sampling was primarily aimed at ground-floor users and course attendees as subpopulations. The author approached the Absalon management, which provided research consent and played a supportive role in identifying the first group of interview participants. Participants were recruited in situ through distribution of information brochures. Subsequent snowball sampling brought the total number of 18 participants, consisting of existing and previous ground-floor users (Table 1). Thirteen of them lived within a fifteen-minute radius and the age range was 18–79. Danish nationals account for more than half of the participants and the occupational backgrounds and employment status varied. Two staff members who used Absalon off-duty also participated. One interview was removed from the analysis due to the interviewer’s recording error. The participants’ names are pseudonymized for privacy protection. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Roskilde University.

**Table 1**  
Participants by function, nationality, occupation, and age.

Pseudonym	Function	Nationality	Occupation	Age
Dion	User & Absalon employee	Local	Employee	34
Line	User	Local	Employee	45
Arnold	User	Foreign	Jobseeker	47
Kasper	User	Local	Jobseeker	58
Emily	User	Foreign	Employee	30
Ursula	User	Local	Retiree	79
Ayden	User	Foreign	Jobseeker	29
Michael	User	Local	Gap year student	26
Cecilie	User & Absalon employee	Local	Student	26
Adam	User	Foreign	Employee	37
Nikolaj	User	Local	Jobseeker	57
Freja	User	Local	Student	18
Markus	Previous user	Local	Student	26
Louise	Previous user	Local	Student	24
Diana	Previous user	Foreign	Employee	32
Robert	User	Local	Employee	45
Else	User	Foreign	Student	25
Katrine	User	Foreign	Student	23

Semi-structured interviews were the most suitable research instrument. They allowed the author to cover a range of themes relevant to the research questions and the freedom to follow up on interesting stories. Participants were asked about their motivations to come to Absalon, what they enjoyed the most, and how would they introduce Absalon to newcomers. 18 interviews in English took place, mostly in Absalon but also in other localities specified by the participants to encourage them to talk freely and openly.

The participant observations were conducted weekly over a six-month period, where the author took part in the daily activities to learn about the explicit and tacit aspects of daytime use (Musante, 2014). It was beneficial to the recruitment process, providing valuable insights into identifying regular users. The observation also exposed the author’s dual role of being a researcher and a user of the place, leading to an insider’s account of the participants’ narratives. The observation data includes field notes and photo registries.

All data were analyzed via NVivo with three rounds of coding, gradually moving from exploratory to more focused evaluation in an iterative manner. This paper also adopted Ingold’s (1993) notion that “attentive” involvement in one’s surroundings should be “blended in” (Oswick et al., 2011) as additional support to conceptualize the empirical findings. Attentive involvement describes a fundamental real-life situation where people conduct everyday tasks in parallel, whereby they “continually feel each other’s presence” (Ingold, 1993, 160).

The extracted themes and concepts were discussed in a series of analytical sessions with course supervisors, offering cultural insights and reflections to make sense of the narratives that were situated in a specific part of Danish society.

## Case study

Absalon is situated in the vibrant Vesterbro neighborhood of Copenhagen, within the urban fabric of apartment buildings and local businesses. The church building was sold in 2013 (Nationalmuseet, 2021) and re-opened to the public as People’s House Absalon. Today, some regard it as a community space, while others call it an event venue. For most, however, it is a gathering place, attracting locals and tourists (Williams, 2023). It is a multifunctional house that opens every day at half-past seven and remains open until midnight each day. During the daytime, it aspires to be “extension of your living room (*din forlængede dagligstue*)” (Poulsen and Thingstrup, 2019) offering a simple menu and exercise classes mostly costing no more than 50 Danish kroner. Each evening, at six o’clock, there is communal dining, followed by themed events, such as Drag Queen Bingo, Silent Disco, and Late-night Flea Market.

The principle behind Absalon was the desire to connect people (Poulsen and Thingstrup, 2019). It is privately owned and founded by the Danish entrepreneurs Lennart and Sus Lajboschitz and is neither a charity project nor a non-profit entity (Poulsen and Thingstrup, 2019). Today, it is run by a team of approximately 50 staff, comprising full-time and part-time employees. It welcomes approximately 600,000 guests every year (Vestergaard, 2023) and is particularly popular in the winter.

The church building is spatially re-programmed and distinctively decorated to accommodate the various happenings. The main entrance has direct access from a boulevard to a 200 square-meter ground-floor space (*Salen*), which primarily functions as a large open hall, with rows of picnic tables and benches and often a table tennis table. The kitchen and bar are tucked in the former vestry area. The first-floor balcony and mezzanine offer more intimate settings, with small clusters of armchairs and coffee tables and access to the multifunction room (*Klubben*) for scheduled activities. On the top floor, there is an office, a large room that can be reserved for meetings (*Tårnværelset*), and a workshop for craft courses (*Børnehuset*). Because the focus is on the ground floor, the words *Salen* and *Absalon* are used interchangeably in the following sections.



## Results

Despite the long Danish winter and the many local meeting places, the participants reported Absalon to be one of the few amenities in the city that offered leisure activities and popular social areas. Each participant had their distinct daytime activities in Absalon with commonalities in their desires to be there and feel good. Absalon was described as open and welcoming in its spatial design and pricing, attracting diverse users. Most of the participants remarked on the presence of children and pensioners, representing each end of the age spectrum. They spoke positively about the background noise, associating it with a relaxed quality. This association encourages laid-back behaviors, including the removal of winter shoes to knit on sofas, or leaving personal belongings unattended under the watchful eyes of strangers (Fig. 1).

### A collage of generations

Absalon appeals to different generations. Line, a 46-year-old working mother, has used the place in many ways over the past eight years. As a freelancer, she had often worked “from home from Absalon.” Line provided a detailed description of the material environment and attributed the wide range of attendees to the friendly interior design and prices.

“It’s very colorful here. They really thought it through with the décor. All the bright pink, green, blue, yellow colors. The furniture is sort of old, eclectic, secondhand. It’s not posh, it’s not fancy, so children are welcome. There is always a bunch of kids running around. There are board games, and you can just see that this is a cross-generational space. I like that old people are welcome, I like that the price is friendly for people on public pensions, and you also see students here, my daughter does homework here.”

Later in a separate interview, Line’s 18-year-old daughter Freja supported the above statement. The juxtaposition of children at large in an indoor open space, well-used furniture, and uplifting colors combine to shape Absalon’s homelike coziness, making her relax with no need to worry about whether she or her study group was disturbing others.

Ursula, a 79-year-old pensioner, appreciated the multigenerational aspect of Salen. As a previous Absalon churchgoer, she continues to visit the place to enjoy a cup of tea and read newspapers. She recently befriended Dion, a 34-year-old customer-turned-staff-member. Whenever they see each other, they chat or share a table before or after Dion’s shift. They both acknowledged that Absalon fostered their friendship, and, while the religious institution no longer stood, Ursula felt that the “love for each other (*næstekærligheden*)” (Tyndale House Foundation, 2013) lived on as an important inheritance.

Else, a university student in her mid-20 s, added a personal reflection to the intergenerational ties at Absalon.

“It almost seems like they’re different ages of my possible life so I could be that old woman in some years, and I could have been that young child.”

However, the age diversity results in environmental noise. It includes babies crying, children’s laughter, footsteps, multiple conversations, and bouncing table tennis balls. It is noteworthy that the random ensemble of noise generated by different ages and activities was positively perceived by the participants (Fig. 2).

### Noise in harmony

In Absalon, noise and harmony co-exist. The daytime noise was accepted as a condition, even by those who use it as a workplace. Arnold, a 47-year-old regular, commutes five days a week to make job applications between spontaneous table tennis games. To cancel out the noisy environment, he purchased an expensive pair of headphones. He laughed jokingly at the tradeoff because the investment meant that he could enjoy a cup of cheap 10-kroner coffee.

The noise generated by a busy gathering place would keep some users away, and Robert illustrated this point clearly. The 45-year-old frequent attendee at courses sometimes decided against from Absalon



Fig. 2. A spontaneous all-around-the-world ping-pong game took place before lunchtime (February 2023).



Fig. 1. A yogi in wooly socks (*hyggesokker*) on a Sunday morning, knitting after a yoga class (Left) and the belongings unattended (Right) (January 2023).

because of the noise. Although he joined the organized program every week and enjoyed the social gathering afterward with other attendees, he sometimes found that there were “too many babies, too much noise.” It was not conducive to peace of mind, and so he chose to leave. This is particularly true for those who live immediately adjacent to Absalon. These neighbors have endured loud music during the evening events and filed complaints over the years. The management has invested in additional soundproofing measures and conducted regular acoustic tests to ensure that the noise level is acceptable.

Most participants considered the daytime noise an essential component in their enjoyment of Absalon. Freja associated the background noise with her sense of ease. In addition to the multigenerational social setting and the worn materiality of the furniture and tableware, the daytime noise inside Absalon encouraged Freja to relax. She grew up in a busy neighborhood, and for her, noise indicates that “there is always something happening,” and people are “buzzing,” which she really enjoyed. She did not interact with others but felt good that people were together and occupied with their own tasks.

Emily, a 30-old flexible worker, found the noise calming. Whenever she dropped by Absalon in between her appointments, she enjoyed being with others, from mothers with babies to university students working on group assignments to pensioners chatting over tea. She did not mind being surrounded by different happenings. She found the experience comforting, like being at the home of a friend:

“It’s a bit like people doing their things in the background. They are doing their own thing, and I can do my own thing. I think also growing up having noise like someone running around or, being in the kitchen or... so for me, it’s very calming, personally, because I grew up with it.”

Louise, a former Absalon yogi in her mid-20 s, provided a different but insightful explanation. She noted that she was going to Absalon by choice to be part of the vibrant social setting. Therefore, Absalon’s noise was an option on which she could make a deliberate and voluntary decision, and ultimately, tune in or tune out of it according to her mood.

#### *Feeling good together*

The daytime noise inside Absalon was considered more than the sum of different activities. For most participants, it was not unpleasant. It was a key element of the easygoing social setting. The soundscape offered individuals a relaxing and comforting framework for their activities.

Nikolaj, a 57-year-old environmental activist, found this framework made him “feel good.” Nikolaj lives alone on a ship in the nearby harbor and frequented Absalon to play table tennis or to catch up with his children over coffee. He is currently unemployed and appreciates the reasonably priced offerings. Nikolaj associates Absalon with the social aspect of Copenhagen’s public life. At Absalon, he experienced a great sense of joy mingling with others, occasionally chatting, and getting to know a little about them. For Nikolaj, going to a place like Absalon was the way to “leave the loneliness” behind.

Another positive sentiment was offered by 37-year-old Adam, who uses Absalon as his office. In between writing emails and online business meetings, he often witnessed mundane but pleasant interludes, such as friends hugging or grandparents and grandchildren playing board games. Observing the positive behavior of others makes him “feel good.” Adam believed that the biggest difference between Absalon and other co-working spaces or regular cafés was that the Salen users were in an environment where they could be with many others and interact with the surroundings by shifting attention to the various happenings.

Ayden, a 29-year-old recent business graduate, could relate to this popular but implicit practice among daytime users. Ayden primarily came to Absalon to work or read, but what he actively sought was the vibrant social setting where he could take his mind off the tasks in hand and observe his surroundings:

“When I read, it’s a lot about also taking breaks, looking around, and seeing what’s happening because it’s quite diverse. Conversations, little kids screaming, running around, new people coming in, (people) playing

cards, board games, playing ping pong... all of that.”

This point is further exemplified in Michael, a 26-year-old gap year student. Growing up, Michael had experienced low self-esteem and needed professional help. In contrast to other commercial establishments, he particularly appreciated the fact that Absalon had long opening hours and inexpensive offerings, allowing him to drop in spontaneously. Michael mostly came to Absalon by himself and would find somewhere to sit, order tea, settle down, and observe his surroundings.

“[...] to just sit and look at people, and I don’t have to spend a lot of money, sometimes I learn more than reading a book. When I get time and look and observe, I can learn so much. I think about who I am in the world, who other people are, all these things, you know, it’s a place to find out.”

Being in Absalon not only made him feel good but also presented an opportunity to rebuild his self-esteem and reflect upon personal life matters.

In short, this section reviewed participants’ general involvement with their surroundings, which was considered a positive experience. The participants felt good in Absalon by being occupied with their activities but occasionally shifting attention to other people. Being in Absalon and witnessing everyday moments helped the participants alleviate loneliness, enhance a sense of comfort and ease, and regain confidence (Fig. 3).

#### **Discussion**

The unique re-assemblage of the former Absalon church continues its evolution as a dynamic gathering place. Owned privately, Absalon is a micro public domain experienced positively by users with diverse purposes and demographic backgrounds (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001). On the ground floor, daytime users conduct their individual activities alongside others and engage with the convivial environment, mostly by voluntarily shifting their attention to the happenings around them. Concurrently, Salen is a socio-material setting that enables users to be co-present with others and to experience restoration through small encounters. Vibrant neighborhood gathering places like Absalon can offer people opportunities to tune in and out their engagement with the surroundings at their own pace. The following sections outline how



**Fig. 3.** A young adult observing the surroundings while reading (September 2022).



Absalon's socio-material aspects coalesce to shape a fluid spatiotemporal setting that enables restorative experiences.

### *Absalon in parts*

The making of Absalon began with dismantlement. The religious elements and qualities that had constituted the former church were disassembled. Then, a distinctive set of missions, materiality, and operational bodies was assembled. The heterogeneous socio-material parts combined to make a neighborhood gathering place, known for its inexpensive offerings, curated décor, and extensive opening hours. Absalon's wide range of users experience a continuous state of "becoming." The users' experience often involves dichotomies in demographic (young/old and local/foreign) and time-related (scheduled/spontaneous and work/leisure) aspects. These pairs "fold into the other" (Dovey, 2009, 22), creating a dynamic flux and leavening the daily inhabitation of the gathering place.

The parts work together to shape a socio-material setting that is flexible in its spatiality and temporality. For example, the living room-like open space furnished with folding tables converts to an event venue at night. During the day, it is often reconfigured with more (or fewer) tables and chairs to accommodate dynamic traffic. What remains constant is that individuals conduct their everyday activities alongside others.

Ingold (1993, 160) states that people do not perform tasks in "hermetic isolation." In real life, they do so in a shared context while attending to one another. Freja and Emily's comments about Absalon's background noise offer an example of attentive involvement (Ingold, 1993). While studying or working, they were aware of the presence of others and enjoyed their company. Ayden's narrative about occasional breaks from reading demonstrates that awareness can be raised in the form of directing attention to one's surroundings. Impromptu yet attentive engagement with what others do in public is an implicit common practice, performed, and actively sought by Absalon's daytime regulars.

People's mutually attentive involvement is intrinsically "social" in terms of temporality (Ingold, 1993). Social time, as opposed to externally imposed clock time, involves an organic rhythm like pulsation or breathing (Ingold, 1993, 157–161). This is expressed in the voluntary aspect of the participants' activities in Absalon. It is an ongoing act that intensifies when people shift their attention from the task at hand to their surroundings. It entails a swift change from planned work (clock time) to resting (rhythm). The flexibility and readiness to switch between two distinct qualities of time happen spontaneously and effortlessly, almost unnoticed by those involved.

Absalon is a combination of the heterogeneous socio-material parts that work together to create flexible spatiality and temporality. This unique assembly not only produces a vibrant indoor micro public space but also enables individuals to spend social time.

### *Restorative properties*

The mutual attentive engagement in Absalon is the regulars' most valued shared experience. They can engage with their surroundings or not, as they choose, regulating their pace of involvement. This spatiotemporal fluidity is the fundamental condition for individuals to experience gentle yet positive feel-good moments.

In exploring the health implications of ordinary public spaces, Cattel et al. (2008) highlight that interpersonal or verbal interactions are not always essential to enjoyable experiences. "'Feel good' effects" (Cattel et al., 2008, 555–7) are derived in a setting where one can observe the nearby activities (Cattel et al., 2008; Dines et al., 2006). The feeling of being close to others resonates well with attentive involvement in a sense that neither experience demands interpersonal or verbal interactions. Instead, the focus is on co-presence in a shared space.

Absalon users describe a trajectory of feel-good effects in attentive

involvement, which largely overlap with day-to-day restoration. Attention restorative theory (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989) identifies different stages of restoration experiences that help pinpoint the various feel-good effects noted by the participants. The first stage involves a sense of "being away" from one's ordinary duties. The second is "extent," where one can find enough content in an environment to allow "directed" mode of attention or involuntary concentration to rest. "Fascination" entails effortless attention where people can attain restorative experiences through devoting minimum effort. A "more peaceful kind of fascination" (Herzog et al., 2003, 160) is achieved by the moderate level of effortless attention combined with the aesthetic beauty of a setting, leading to a deeper level of restoration. Similarly beneficial to peaceful fascination, "compatibility" entails an environment that allows what people want/can/must do. A setting with compatibility demands "quality of the environment and duration" (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989, 197).

The participants' narratives show that Absalon is a restorative environment (Hartig, 2004; Hartig and Staats, 2003) that promotes diverse restorative experiences arising from attentive involvement. While Nikolaj achieved the sense of "being away" from the solitude of everyday life, Freja, Emily, Adam, and Ayden's narratives revolve around gentle fascination, leading to feel-good moments. Michael's reflection on important life matters highlights a deeper level of restoration enabled by compatibility. Absalon's welcoming and undemanding socio-material quality allows him to stay for as long as he wants. In other words, while some enjoy the hedonic outcomes, others engage with the meaningful and eudaimonic aspects of wellbeing.

In addition, as Robert's exposure to noise illustrates, the same person can experience different stages of restoration at different times, or sometimes even the opposite. The vibrant environment usually offered a setting for Robert to bond with his fellow attendees after class. However, the audio vibrancy could also be stressful, causing him to leave Absalon.

Noise is commonly recognized as unwanted sound and environmental stressors alongside crowding (Stansfeld et al., 2012). However, noise exposure alone may not be sufficient to cause disadvantages (Stansfeld et al., 2012). Here, the unique assemblage of Absalon underlines noise as a subject susceptible to judgment, something either good or bad. Similarly, Absalon's restorative experiences are dynamic and multifaceted but also sometimes contested and require compromise, for example, the use of headphones. Absalon's spatiotemporal fluidity allows individuals to shift attention from their activities and increase their engagement with the vibrant surroundings.

### *An enabling whole: more than the sum of its parts*

Absalon is a social setting where restorative experiences take place. Its socio-material parts enliven the cycle of becoming, creating a vibrant micro indoor public space that enables its users to attend to one another. Attentive involvement is linked to various states of restoration, thereby contributing to positive human experiences. From an assemblage perspective, the reassembled totality of the former church enables wellbeing. As Dovey (2016, 113) states, good urban places "produce goods, services, ideas, experiences and wealth." In this vein, this paper argues that Absalon is more than the sum of its parts. It is not merely a product of person-place interactions, but rather a mode for wellbeing production, due to the "mutually reinforcing and reciprocal relationship between people and place" (Cummins et al., 2007, 1835).

However, personal preferences and spatiotemporal accessibility regulate the use of Absalon, excluding some from reaping its benefits. If Absalon were a choice rather than a necessity, as Louise stated, some might opt out. The self-selection aspect requires those who do not identify Absalon as their "favorite places" (Korpela and Hartig, 1996) to attain restorative experiences elsewhere. Moreover, the accessibility is conditioned by geography and time-availability. Louise's discontinued use of Absalon was attributed to the greater distance from her new home. Accordingly, she disassembled Absalon's functions into different

parts. These fragments were replaced with diverse amenities and activities in the city, such as libraries for studying, fitness centers for yoga classes, and local cafés for leisure. Else reflected on the time needed to reap the benefits of the place. She had difficulty imagining her own mother, an immigrant worker and a single parent with two children, having the spare time go there. Absalon was only available for those with dispensable resources, particularly free time. Although this article does not explicitly deal with social class, it is an important parameter that conditions health (in)equity, which is often affected by good/bad access to urban amenities and facilities (Roe and McCay, 2021). In short, personal desires, distances and free time-related conditions signify a complex pathway to be “in” Absalon to exploit its restorative properties.

This study indicates that Absalon offers an important opportunity for jobseekers to conduct job hunting in an enabling environment. It expands the value of local gathering places in facilitating social connections for people who do not socialize in their workplace (Banwell and Kingham, 2023). It indicates that Absalon is to some degree part of a wider welfare network, supplementing formal institutions as a “gathering site without a recognizable code or structure” (Raahauge, 2022, 227). The entanglement of social space and welfare space (Raahauge, 2022) raises questions whether local gathering places can become a strategic model for a new welfare portal. Undoubtedly, further empirical investigation and critical debate about the notion of welfare are needed.

## Conclusion

This paper examines a neighborhood gathering place, People's House Absalon in Copenhagen, and its linkages to wellbeing from the users' perspectives. In particular, the study elucidates Absalon's qualities that transform indoor micro public spaces into enabling places by exposing their restorative properties. It highlights the role of simple co-presence in public spaces in activating various levels of restoration.

This study extracts in-depth insights and exposes how Absalon works by grounding its analytical approach in the understanding of a place as a dynamic assemblage (Dovey, 2009, 2016). Absalon's dichotomies, especially young/old and work/leisure, engender a vibrant gathering place that produces “good” noise. The daytime users consider the indoor auditory experience essential, preferred, and sometimes calming. Absalon, reassembled from a former church, has become an enabling whole that allows its users to voluntarily shift attentions from practical tasks to the surroundings at their own pace. The fluid spatiotemporal quality revolves on attentive involvement (Ingold, 1993), where individuals perform their everyday activities while attending to one another. Different intensities of involvement are discussed and exemplified in various practices. Some are content to mingle, while others take full advantage of the vibrant environment, tuning their engagement to build friendships.

Absalon is a potent example of an indoor micro public space that shapes wellbeing. It offers hedonic outcomes as well as eudaimonic processes where individuals deeply reflect upon purposes and meanings. This typifies the multifaced and contesting nature of health experience within a place.

The performance of everyday tasks in the company of others in an enjoyable way is not something to be taken for granted. The setting needs to be assembled in a way so that the orchestrated parts work in symphony to facilitate positive experiences. Although these insights reveal the restorative properties of a vibrant indoor micro public space, further empirical work is encouraged to see beyond neighborhood enabling places as a single entity isolated from people's routinised practices.

## Ethic

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Roskilde University.

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## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Xiaobo Shen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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