

**The social production of small urban rivers: The (re)making of two
riverside spaces in Lewisham**

Emma Jackson and Louise Rondel

This is a copy of the accepted author manuscript of the following article: Emma Jackson and Louise Rondel (2026) The social production of small urban rivers: The (re)making of two riverside spaces in Lewisham. Sociology. Advanced online publication. The final definitive version is available from the publisher Sage at:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385261432893>

© The Author(s) 2026

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

The social production of small urban rivers: The (re)making of two riverside spaces in Lewisham

Emma Jackson, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London

Louise Rondel, University of Westminster

Abstract

This paper analyses how small urban rivers are implicated in different registers of place-making in Lewisham, London. We discuss the pleasures, possibilities and tensions that come with 'opening up' urban river spaces and the complex range of imaginaries and practices that feed into their production. Using a combination of archival research alongside qualitative methods, we set out how river spaces are produced by informal and formal practices including their rendering in official documents, their maintenance by local river groups (stewardship) and the daily routines of local people (authorship). The paper argues that these sites pose questions about *active* forms of access and about the right to remake place. We further develop sociological engagements with water that have provided a rich account of how people live with water.

Keywords: Rivers, cities, stewardship, authorship, place-making, London

Authors:

Emma Jackson ORCID: [0000-0003-0205-8110](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0205-8110)

Louise Rondel ORCID: [0009-0007-3273-5430](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3273-5430)

Contact for corresponding author:

Emma Jackson: e.jackson4@lse.ac.uk

Introduction

While the riverfront developments of large rivers have been extensively researched (Mah, 2014; Butler, 2007; Raco et al., 2008), smaller bodies of urban water are also rich sites for examining questions of urban development and how we live with rivers in cities (Watson, 2017; McEwen et. al., 2020). This paper draws on a research project exploring how rivers are implicated in different registers of place-making in Lewisham, a borough of South-East London with three highly engineered rivers. In a city in which access to public space is being eroded, and as local authorities increasingly depend on private investment for development and public realm interventions, these river sites pose questions about *active* forms of access, about the right to remake place and the possibilities that watery spaces hold for connection. In order to advance sociological framings of living with water, we analyse the governance and design of river spaces as closely bound to the everyday engagements and deep attachments of local people through practices of authorship and stewardship.

Many of London's rivers are submerged, covered over and some have been incorporated into the sewage system (Ackroyd, 2012). While mythology abounds about London's 'lost rivers', Lewisham's rivers – the Pool, Quaggy and Ravensbourne – are unusual in that long stretches are uncovered, giving rise to a whole range of everyday interactions as well as questions of how they are to be managed. In a context where approaches to living with rivers – including the need to manage flood risk in a time of climate crisis and levels of pollution – are in the spotlight, our examination of Lewisham's rivers provides sociological insights into the relationship between the planning of urban river spaces and how people live, imagine and interact with them.

We examine how river spaces are produced by formal and informal practices, including their rendering in official documents, their maintenance by local river groups and the daily routines of local people and the synergies, conflicts and potential opportunities that arise from these different kinds of place-making on the rivers. Our focus in this paper is on two significant sites where the rivers have been rerouted and opened up that represent different kinds of place-making interventions. We argue that these

interventions stemming from distinct periods of local governance, both open and foreclose the possibilities of different kinds of place-making. For us, place-making goes beyond thinking about questions of access to public space, and refers to the right to remake place, to layer it with forms of meaning and activity through forms of authorship and stewardship.

In defining authorship and stewardship in relationship to governance and planning, we further develop sociological engagements with water that have provided a rich account of how people live with water (Watson, 2017; Bates and Moles, 2023).

Place-making and approaching rivers sociologically

While there is a large body of literature in geography and planning on the relationship between the political/governance of the city and the politics of water (Gandy, 2002, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2004; Swyngedouw, Kaika and Castro, 2002; Kaika, 2005) this has focused less on the everyday ways that people interact, imagine and shape urban blue spaces. On the other hand, in the sociological literature we find a close engagement with people's intimate interactions with water and its affective dimensions (Bates and Moles, 2023, Throsby, 2013, Watson, 2017) but less consideration of how these quotidian practices and imaginaries interact with forms of governance. In order to bridge these approaches, we set out in this section our navigation of these literatures and our use of the term 'place-making'.

The relationship between water, power and city-making is well-established in geography, with Swyngedouw (2004) Gandy (2002, 2004) and Kaika (2005) offering key contributions on how water played a key role in the making of the modern city, issues of privatisation (Gandy, 2004), how fights for the right to the city are bound up with the rights to water (Swyngedouw, 2004) and the impossibility of separating nature from the social (Kaika, 2005). Key to these accounts are analyses of water systems as vital urban infrastructure that are closely bound to issues of governance and unequal access to clean water. Such approaches have highlighted the right to urban water as key to fights for the right to the city in contexts of violent appropriation (Swyngedouw, 2004).

This literature has been foundational to establishing the field of the 'hydrosocial' – pushing against the science of hydrology in order to 'attend to water's social and political nature' (Linton and Budds, 2014) – and to the field of critical political ecologies more widely. These approaches are often employed to examine large infrastructural projects such as dams, hydro-electric power production (Linton, 2010), and the impact of mining on water (Budds and Hinojosa, 2012) and, crucially, the push back against these plans from activists and affected communities (Swyngedouw, 2004). These analyses of the political ecologies of water remain salient in our research context of contemporary London with sewage pollution from Thames Water on the rise (Laville, 2024).

However, the hydrosocial literature has paid less attention to the non-spectacular and embodied encounters and connections that people have with water, especially in places where issues of the right to (potable) water may be less fraught. While we take forward these insights on the importance of governance, ownership and the right to water, we bring this into dialogue with sociological approaches.

Compared to geography, sociology has been slower to engage with water. However, recent sociological work brings a close engagement with the relationship between bodies, water, materiality and belonging. This sociological work also differs from the hydrosocial approaches in that it employs ethnographic, creative and interview-based approaches. For example, Throsby's (2013) autoethnography of becoming a channel swimmer examined the making and sensations of the swimming body that becomes closely attuned to water over time. Materiality and the sensing body are also central to Watson's analysis of water on Hampstead Heath. She argues that 'the specific materiality of water generates particular passions, attachments and a sense of belonging, and which enrolls bodies in new connections.' (2017). Building on this, Bates and Moles' (2022) discuss both the pleasures and challenges of wild swimming for the individual but also the 'vital connections' that are forged between people as they engage with water. While Bates and Moles are analysing wild swimming practices, this

resonates strongly with our participant's accounts of carrying out voluntary work in and on the rivers.

This work does introduce the wider context of ownership, exclusion and power. Bates and Moles situate their study of a swimming lake in the context of how the more open model of the lake was changed into a more regulated and exclusive one. And while Watson frames her paper as focusing on the generative materiality of water (2017), she does contextualise this in the legal tussles over her case study site. Nevertheless, in these sociological accounts, contestations over privatisation and governance are given as context rather than the subject of analysis.

This article also draws on work emphasising the role of more-than-human entities as active participants in the social world; in our case, the rivers (alongside the other things and beings that occupy river spaces). This is a crucial move in the Anthropocene, the designation of a geological epoch which acknowledges the massive impacts of human action on the environment (Ejsing, 2022). But approaching rivers as lively beings is longstanding in indigenous understandings. This is increasingly informing nature recovery projects and, in some cases, it has resulted in the rivers' 'personhood' being enshrined in law (Carriere and Carriere, 2025; Centre for Indigenous Conservation and Development Alternatives, 2015; Whanganui District Council, n.d; Wuraola, 2025; Yarra River Protection [Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn] Act 2017, 2017). Across Anglo-European/American academia, a focus on the active role of the more-than-human has been taken up by actor-network, posthumanist and new materialist theories (although Sundberg [2014] and Todd [2016] remind us that there is little 'new' in 'new' materialism and other such approaches, and positing them as novel can erase indigenous knowledges).

In line with this 'turn' to the more-than-human, attention has been brought to the activity of things in urban studies and studies of space and place (Amin 2014; Bush and Doyon, 2023; Franklin, 2017; Lieto, 2017). In this current, rivers are shown as lively: they carve a path through the landscape, they can flood or they can trickle with different outcomes,

they disperse seeds and carry rubbish downstream, they refuse concrete confines; they too are active in making places and urban social life.

Working across these diverse approaches, we turn to the work of Lefebvre and Massey to build a theoretical framework that can connect across the different scales at which they engage with water and the making of the urban, from the designs of the planner to the seed floating downstream. Lefebvre's spatial triad (1991) has informed the framing of this project and our interest in the ways that spaces are produced by intersecting layers of spatial practices and imaginaries. Lefebvre's framing is highly influential in hydrosocial approaches. For us, his categories of representations of space, representational spaces and spatial practices are useful in approaching space as produced through the coalescing of everyday practices, interventions from planners and developers, and imaginings and practices of how space could be otherwise. We can see the hoardings at new developments as encapsulating the place-making of the planners (representations of space), the imaginary crocodiles that children describe (representational space) and the acts of maintenance by river groups (spatial practices) as corresponding to these categories. However, these categories are not exhaustive and while inspired by them, we do not adhere strictly to them.

We add more nuance - and messiness - to Lefebvre's triad through drawing on the work of Doreen Massey who describes how places are made 'through active material practices' (2005: 118); how we are implicated in the making of places, in spectacular and mundane ways. Massey's work is also useful for moving beyond human interaction with river spaces. She sets out the 'throwntogetherness' of place as 'a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and nonhuman' (2005: 140). This close, embodied relationship between people and water is highlighted in the sociology of water. Furthermore, as people interact with watery spaces and form relationships, this contributes to the making of places and, in a dialogic relationship, these interactions with place shape forms of social life and also act back on the people who are engaged in them (Benson and Jackson, 2014, Jackson, 2020).

To encompass these diverse registers of interaction, shaping and formal planning we use the umbrella term 'place-making'. This carries a range of meanings in different disciplines and practice contexts. In urban planning, the meaning has shifted over time from referring only to interventions to create new places or shape existing places based on top-down initiatives, to include an analysis of how other social processes and actors feed into these planning processes (see Akbar et al, 2021). However, while our use of the term encompasses these more formal interventions, we use it in a more sociological and wider sense (following Benson and Jackson, 2014). This allows us to capture a range of quotidian practices that also feed into the production of river spaces long after these interventions in space have been made. Some of these practices correspond closely with what has also been called 'place keeping'. Defined by Dempsey et al. as 'responsive long-term management which ensures that the social, environmental and economic quality and benefits a place brings can be enjoyed by present and future generations' (2014, 9). While agreeing with their argument about the importance of scrutinising how places are maintained and cared for after they are initially produced, we use place-making in recognition that no place is ever finished, it is always in process (Massey, 2005).

We are particularly focused here on how top-down visions and forms of governance (representations of space) impact on and are subverted by place-making activities that are everyday and often shape river spaces in more subtle ways (authorship) alongside more concerted efforts to shape place through regular acts of care and maintenance (stewardship). Our use of authorship cuts across the two Lefebvrian categories of spatial practice and representational space and encapsulates Massey's active, material, place-making practices. This includes people's actions and their imaginings of place in ways that layer, contest and reimagine the top down ways that river spaces are made. Stewardship also cuts across these two Lefebvrian categories and involves active practices and sometimes close interaction with representations of space, through partnership working and lobbying.

Methods

The project 'Place-making and the Rivers of Lewisham' was conducted from June 2023 until July 2024 and had two strands. Firstly, we carried out policy document analysis spanning 55 years of proposals for Lewisham and its rivers.

We looked at archival materials from the London Archives, Lewisham Archive, and the Centre for Urban and Community Research archive in which Lewisham's rivers are discussed. Documents included Action Area and District Plans from the late 1960s onwards, 1990s' Council newsletters and multi-partner mission statements, and promotional materials for new developments. The archival research has enabled us to trace how the borough's rivers have featured in future visions and how this has changed. It has also permitted us to situate these imagined riparian futures in a broader political-economic context showing a shift towards increased reliance on the private sphere for development and changes to the public realm.

We also examine contemporary local-authority plans pertaining to Lewisham's rivers and how riverside development is to be managed, river-related policy on a London-wide and national level, and reports from organisations such as Thames21 (2020) and the Zoological Society of London (2021). These latter focus on the ecology of London's rivers, advocating for enhancing this further and encouraging citizens to get involved in conservation. The growing overlap between their aspirations and those of local authorities (which increasingly emphasise the ecology of the rivers) is testament to their work and the mechanisms they have built for feeding river expertise and local knowledge upwards into policy (see Jackson and Rondel, forthcoming).

Secondly, we focused on two stretches of the rivers to research more ethnographically the place-making practices that make river spaces. The first is a Linear Park, following the Rivers Pool and Ravensbourne, from Lower Sydenham to Catford Bridge. The second stretch followed the Ravensbourne from its confluence with the Quaggy to Deptford Creek. In order to deeply engage with these stretches we used a range of creative methods including i. conducting 20 walking/on-site interviews with stakeholders along the river (members of rivers groups, artists, council representatives, local

residents) and 18 further short interviews at events and with participants at workshops and river clean-up events; ii. taking part in 11 river activities - such as clean-up events, amphibian counts and bird counts; iii. conducting collaging and photographic workshops along the river and a soundwalk; iv. collaborating with sound recordist Konstantinos Damianikis; v. repeated walking of the stretches. We used this combination of methods to access the experiences and opinions of people who utilise river spaces with a range of frequencies, forms of use and levels of intensity, from passersby to river group volunteers. This paper draws predominantly on the archival and policy research, walking interviews and participant observation.

The walking interviews were conducted *in-situ*. We asked people to choose their favourite part along the stretches of river as a meeting point. This approach echoes Kusenbach's (2003) proposal of the 'go-along' where you let the interview questions be prompted by what you encounter. Like Moles (2008) we found interviewing in place thickens the interview encounter. As well as asking people about river spaces, we participated alongside them in river-related events, letting us experience something of what the participants describe in their interview accounts.

We also organised and facilitated three collaging workshops for members of the public next to the river. We found these workshops a useful way to engage people who were passing by, predominantly families with children, and with different levels and kinds of attachment to the river. While we did not document demographic information, this more diverse group (in terms of ethnicity, age and social background) complemented our interview sample, which was weighted towards older people. While we include observations from one of the creative workshops in the paper, we do not draw on the creative work produced in them here.

The combination of archival and policy research alongside using close-up qualitative methods has allowed us to move between analysing representations of space and these other more lived and perceived registers of space. It helped us gain an understanding of the overlaps and tensions between how the council or developers

envision how space *could* be or *could* be used and how it is *actually* used and shaped in a multitude of ‘unofficial’ ways. It also highlighted how citizens create their own knowledges, understandings and visions, which can sometimes be fed upwards into the local authority’s plans. This approach also reinforced the active role of the river. Plans for flood management, building berms to slow its flow, or stories about falling in remind us that the river always exceeds human intervention.

Introducing the Rivers of Lewisham

[Insert Fig 1 here]

Lewisham’s three rivers – the Quaggy, Pool, and Ravensbourne – rise in the Kent borders, flowing through the neighbouring boroughs of Bromley, Croydon or Greenwich before crossing into Lewisham. At two confluences, the Pool and the Quaggy merge into the Ravensbourne. The rivers run through landscapes of early-1900s suburban terraces, newly-privatised high-rise development where the river has only recently been opened up, well-established parks, and stretches dominated by transport infrastructure before reaching the wharves and post-industrial landscape of Deptford that heralds the Thames.

The borough’s topography has been shaped by the rivers, and the rivers have equally been shaped by the life and development of the borough. They are important ecologically and contribute places for recreation, while also causing problems for the construction of roads, housing or railway lines – and presenting a flood risk. The rivers have been ‘managed’ in different ways over time, for example, the rivers have been moved to make way for transport infrastructure; the Lewisham Extension of the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) runs along the former channel of the Ravensbourne. They have been artificially straightened to make it easier to build around them; and in the 1960s large stretches of Lewisham’s rivers were culverted into concrete channels as a means of flood prevention. The management of rivers and flood risk has evolved and the contemporary push is to ‘renaturalise’ rivers as well as to create floodplains (see Thames21, 2020: 20 on Cornmill Gardens). Where sites along the rivers have been allocated for development in the current Local Plan (London Borough of Lewisham

[LBL], 2023), the policies and guidance for developers emphasise naturalising the rivers, improving access to them and enhancing their ecology and biodiversity.

However, there are also concerns about how development of riverside spaces could exacerbate existing inequalities in the borough. Lewisham has a diverse population in terms of age, ethnicity, socio-economic classification and levels of deprivation, with sharp contrasts between different wards (Office for National Statistics, 2023). The borough is undergoing fast-paced changes with a number of major residential and retail developments and changing populations. This includes the Lewisham Gateway development which towers over the confluence of the Ravensbourne and the Quaggy with 'over 1,000 new homes ... public space, shops, restaurants, a gym, workspace...' (Muse Places, n.d.). Still more developments are planned, and a significant number of site allocations in the most recent Local Plan are adjacent to the rivers (LBL, 2023). Questions have been raised about who these new homes are for and concerns around gentrification and the displacement of the existing residents (White, 2020; Garcia, 2021).

Both the archival and current plans reflect the incorporation of rivers into top-down representations of space that sell new developments or promise to make Lewisham more attractive. The rivers are portrayed as part of a backdrop to social life, a pleasing environment for recreation or consumption. But an alternative, more active, story of living with rivers also lies within the documents (as encouraged by groups such as Thames21 [2020] and ZSL [2021]) that emphasises physical engagement with the rivers.

The Linear Park

Authorship at 'the Pool Rocks'

The River Pool Linear Park was built in the 1990s when the river was moved to make way for a large Sainsburys. The river was also uncovered during this process and a tarmac path was installed alongside which serves as a popular path for dog-walkers,

runners and cyclists. Much of the river on this stretch is open air but encased in concrete banks, due to contamination from the former gasworks. This transformation shows how different representations of space (Lefebvre, 1991) from the industrial and post-industrial eras have produced this river space. At our first site on the Linear Park the river is in naturalised banks. We call this place 'the Pool Rocks' due to large and distinctive rocks on the riverbank. It is a place where the river can get very deep, up to chest height for an adult. The combination of the characterful rocks, this more 'natural' appearing riverbank and a large grassy bank area contributes to its appeal as a play and picnic spot. It is a useful site to think with, in terms of the *authorship* of space through play and acts of imagination.

The space has been modified and utilised by the spatial practices (Lefebvre, 1991) of its users. There is a seemingly never-ending supply of rope swings; when one is frayed and falls out of use, it is mysteriously replaced by a new one, and a recently felled tree serves as a bench to sit on. The rocks figure prominently in children's collages and stories, adding an element of adventure.

Under our gazebo, with craft materials scattered on the ground around us, we invited people to make a collage about the river. As they did, they spoke about what brought them to the river; children told us about mythical creatures who dwell in the river or crocodiles hiding in the undergrowth. But it is not merely the 'official' workshop activities that give insights into the uses of this space. Louise describes the scene in her fieldnotes:

'There are some large rocks which prove a popular spot for toddlers to clamber on or for caregivers to sit and watch as young children tentatively paddle in the shallow part of the river. The whole scene has wholesome vibes. Two teenagers - a boy and a girl around 14 or 15 - turn up and we ask them if they would like to join us in making a collage, they decline, that is not why they are here. The boy takes off his trainers and in shorts, t-shirt and socks, plunges into the deepest part of the river up to his chest. The girl keeps her trainers on and more

cautiously follows him in. Younger children and their caregivers watch with a mix of delight, slight horror and envy! Laughing and knowing they have an audience, the teenagers splash around and jump in and out a few more times before heading off along the path leaving a trail of wet footprints.'

While this extract may capture a day with more structured activity going on than usual, the 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005, 140) of people in this episode and their contrasting activities is not unusual. For example a local childminder describes taking groups of wellie-clad children into the river: 'We pretend that they're fishing because we've got some sticks and we pretend they're fishing rods. We learn about nature and enjoy being in the river.' Play is an important feature of river spaces and it is concentrated in those places where the rivers can be physically accessed. These practices of play are linked to the ways that rivers spark imaginations, a crucial component of 'representational space' (Lefebvre, 1991). These recurring stories of children's imaginations being fired by the river also point to the liveliness of the river itself, and how the particular qualities of water can stimulate creativity and learning.

There is an openness to this space that allows for all of these kinds of layers of place-making. And for the most part, it functions as a well-used public space. But lest this sound too romantic, the openness of the space, combined with the deep water and the fact that this is not an overly surveilled place also brings risk. At one of our collaging workshops, a woman recalled a day when she was walking back from Sainsburys and her small daughter was poking the river with a stick and fell in. The woman leapt in and pulled her out. She reflected 'water does come with danger, you have to respect that'. Another incident at 'the Rocks' that has recurred in participants' narratives occurred in the summer of 2022, where a paddling family uncovered some abandoned firearms (ITVX, 2022).

These interweaving practices of play, recreation, imagination and associations with danger – that cross the lines of Lefebvre's spatial triad – are all ways in which people

author this river space. These both modify the physical layout of the space (rope swings) but also layer it with meaning.

Stewardship at 'Donna's Steps'

A little further downstream from the Pool Rocks, we veer from the river path to a set of steps embedded into the riverbank, framed with wood. Like the rocks, this is a place where you can go right down to the river's edge. We call this spot 'Donna's Steps' after a local river group leader who built the steps with another volunteer. It is an apt location for examining how active involvement with caring for and maintaining the rivers feed into shaping the spaces of and around the rivers. This goes beyond authorship and becomes stewardship.

There is an extensive network of organisations and groups who maintain and care for the rivers and river spaces. This includes the Lewisham Council nature conservation team, Glendale (the private contractors for Lewisham's parks), Thames21, the Environment Agency and volunteer groups. There are regular events where litter picking, berm-building and other river-related activities take place along different stretches of the rivers. These attract a high number of regular, semi-regular and one-off volunteers. Stewardship on the river involves both day-to-day physical upkeep ('spatial practices', Lefebvre, 1991), being part of a network of stakeholders that make decisions about the space (influencing 'representations of space') and negotiating the river itself, as well as rubbish, rats, and rogue plants as lively characters (Massey, 2005).

One of these groups is the Friends of the River Pool (FoRP). Headed up by the dynamic Donna, who took on the group in early retirement, FoRP – a group who are predominantly retired white men – meet up every Wednesday to do maintenance and clear up work on their stretch. This runs from the Pool Rocks to about a mile down to where the Linear Park is interrupted by a car park attached to some hardware outlets. The work is heavy and sometimes dirty, as Emma found out, hauling a trolley entwined with plastic and plants one Wednesday morning in September. This was Emma's first clean-up session with the group on their usual stretch and she asked if it was an

initiation. Her clean-up partner laughed in response 'You stop thinking about it as dirty work, you just see that it needs doing.'

The budget for FoRP comes from Lewisham Council who pay for a contractor who in turn is contracted by Thames21 to lead the sessions. However, Donna has had to advocate to keep this budget which has drawn her into other forums about the governance of the river:

'They wanted to cut us down to a session every two weeks. That didn't work very well for everybody. Because a lot of the volunteers are older, they need that weekly session. ... fitness really goes very fast at that age. So, I decided that I needed to try and persuade Lewisham that we were actually worth funding every week. So I wrote them a very basic business case, just saying, Look, this is what we give you for your money ... Can we have funding weekly, and they gave it to us. But once it started, I then had to follow through ... And that involved attending meetings with lawyers from the council ... and various other meetings.'

By helping to ensure the group's viability, Donna gets enrolled into a whole other set of desk-based stewardship activities. Interestingly, a key concern of Donna's is not just about the necessity of the weekly maintenance work but the need for the volunteers to do the work. Throughout our interviews we found that working on the river had a profound impact on their sense of place. One volunteer explained:

'I retired at 67. I decorated my house, bought a new car, then the garden. I thought 'what we're gonna do now?'. And one day I was walking through the park and I see a note on a tree. 'Come and join us, have fun' .. And I've been doing it ever since ... It's good for your brain ... You get a good feelgood factor after a day's work. And when you walk past something a couple of months later that you've built and you see it growing, maturing, and you see the joy in people's faces when they look at it. '

The work that the volunteers do to maintain and make the river spaces, then, is not a one-way street. These embodied stewardship practices act back on those who are engaged in them, contributing to their wellbeing and bonding them to the river and its park. Another told us at a different session ‘the more you do, the more you see there is to do’, showing how being engaged in these activities draws the volunteers in to engage more with the space. The openness of this space prompts these forms of stewardship, and in turn fosters a sense of embeddedness.

Confluence Park

River as backdrop at Lewisham Gateway

Moving further downstream, we enter the newly-formed Confluence Park in the centre of the Lewisham Gateway Development. Adjacent to Lewisham’s rail and DLR stations, the development consists of a mix of private housing and retail. In the late 1990s, the Lewisham Challenge Partnership (a forerunner to the development) described the rivers at this site as ‘ugly and sterile’ (1999: 9). But the Partnership also saw the potential in opening them up, bringing the rivers ‘back to life to become attractive physical features’ (1999: 9). A few years later, the rivers’ potential was again taken up as part of Urban Renaissance in Lewisham’s scheme to put ‘Lewisham town centre “on the map”’ (Urban Renaissance in Lewisham, 2002: 18). This has been realised in the uncovering of the Ravensbourne and Quaggy in the centre of the development and the creation of a ‘pocket park’. This is a site where representations of space dominate and restrain the potential for other forms of activity and meaning.

In the planning documents and promotional materials for the Gateway site, the rivers are conceived of as a way of enhancing the image of the town centre to attract shoppers, diners and investors (see fig 2). The Chair of the Urban Renaissance in Lewisham invites us to imagine ourselves as future consumers against this backdrop:

Imagine a long summer evening and a short walk to the new park where the rivers Ravensbourne and Quaggy meet. There, at one of the outdoor tables, you can take your time over a nice meal and glass of wine. You’ll be able to relax

after your meal with your friends or family with the sound of the river in the background.

[Insert Fig. 2 here]

In the newly-opened up Confluence Park, the playful, imaginative and care-full actions that were evident along the Linear Park feel foreclosed and the liveliness of the river appears stilled. Unlike the stretch we visited upstream, this site is managed by a private company. There is signage warning of the dangers of the water, reinforced by the very visible orange life-rings attached to the fences. There are also signs stating that it is forbidden to enter the river and walk through the tunnels – although we have been told about people doing this. Regardless, there is no easy way down the banks. In our interview with a local graffiti artist, he comments that this is not a space to which he and his crew come as it feels too overlooked. These features contribute to the sense of closedness.

As part of the project, we often meet here to walk along the river but we never feel quite at ease. The first time we visited, the waist-high gates were closed and locked, so all we could do was look in. It's often too windy to feel comfortable as the high-rise building developments channel the wind. The noise of the construction and the traffic is distractingly dominant, the benches are hard and cold. Most people we see are just walking through, although there is evidence that people linger – discarded drinks cans and other rubbish, spliff roaches, and once a duvet on a bench.

Here, the rivers and the 'pocket park' are repeatedly enlisted to do work in marketing the development and in showing how successful it is (or, rather, will be). Following a throughline from the promotional materials from the early 2000s, the developers Muse Places (2023) explain how 'Lewisham will once again have a beating heart that brings the community together and provides what was truly needed ... The community will be able to enjoy two rivers in the heart of the borough, uncovered for all to see and visit'^[1]. The developers' narratives – in Lefebvre's terms, the representations of space – have

come to define this place. This appears to leave little room for other imaginaries or other more mundane 'active, material practices' (Massey, 2005, 118), such as informal and spontaneous forms of authorship.

Stewardship, witches' knickers and invasive species

In the same way that authorship is constrained here by the top-down impositions on the space, so too are forms of stewardship. From our early visits, we wonder who is charged with maintaining the rivers and riverbanks at Confluence Park – noticing the lack of bins – and speculate that private contractors are responsible. Interviewing Paul (a local environmental activist and chair of Quaggy Waterways Action Group [QWAG]) in the park, he remarks on the shredded plastic (known colloquially as 'witches knickers'):

'all this plastic that's been caught in these newly planted trees, who's going to deal with that? Are they going to get the contractor who might visit the trees once every quarter and look after them?. ... I can count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 bits of plastic that have arguably come off this construction site, who takes responsibility for that?'

There is less evidence of maintenance in the rivers themselves. Rubbish collects before being carried further downstream. At the end of June, there is a crop of Himalayan Balsam (an invasive species which proliferates on riverbanks). The growth of this plant indicates that this is a space that has been neglected and may cause problems downstream as its seeds are carried by the water. The lack of river maintenance is partly due to how the physical environment has been shaped in the process of development. As a river group leader told us, it is a difficult place to work in as the river flows very quickly through this confluence. While some one-off clean-up activities do happen here, it is a space that is missed out by more regular sessions.

This is not to say that there are no forms of maintenance taking place in Confluence Park. The grass is eventually mown and the shredded plastic is removed over time,

presumably by the private company managing the land. But it is not the same kind of stewardship that we have witnessed along the Linear Park, carried out weekly by passionate and highly-embedded volunteers and facilitated by knowledgeable experts who understand the place's particular ecology and topography. Indeed, as Paul describes during our interview in Confluence Park: 'How will they maintain it? I've seen the management plan. It involves using herbicides. We don't think that's right, because you're using herbicides very close to a river.'

Left to the private sector, this maintenance work – which could be damaging to the rivers – is perfunctory. It is the easiest and cheapest way to keep the park looking neat. Possibilities for intervention and stewardship are largely constrained by the developers' priorities and their representations of space.

However, there are forms of less apparent stewardship taking place here, albeit involving a different kind of labour to the physical, visible work along the Linear Park. QWAG have monitored this development from the outset. They have closely scrutinised the proposals and how the design for the scheme has changed, proposing their own ideas for the rivers, encouraging the public to comment in consultations, formally submitting objections and questioning the statements made by the council and the developers. This has required persistent labour over two decades, bringing together knowledge about rivers, ecology, infrastructure and policy, and speaking the language of the local authority and the developers. Ultimately, as Paul tells us:

'It is undoubtedly an improvement on what was here before because the rivers were an embarrassment. They weren't functioning ecologically. They weren't helping reduce flood risk. ... So, we think it's a huge improvement. There are caveats to that ... It's not the scheme we wanted. *At all*. QWAG would have preferred the river to be totally naturalised.'

Through QWAG's tenacity there are some tentacles of stewardship extending into Confluence Park but it is still largely the top-down representations of space that dominate, limiting other possibilities.

Conclusion

We have used two river sites to unpick place-making processes, in particular, how the planning of small river spaces influences the potential for authorship and stewardship and the forms they take. Authorship and stewardship are conceptually useful for understanding place-making and the social production of river spaces in ways that enrich the hydrosocial approach with the experiences and imaginings of those who use, shape and are shaped by river space, recognising the liveliness of rivers. In drawing out these two categories of place-making practices we build on, but move beyond the scholarship of Lefebvre and Massey. We have set out how these practices are not one way but can involve a generative dialogic relationship through imagination and physical interventions, whereby river spaces act back on those who participate in them. We also bring to the sociology of water a careful consideration of how the possibility for embodied experiences of watery spaces and place-making practices are linked to questions of governance and development. While the particular qualities of watery spaces hold the potential for connection, these can be shut down.

Thinking across these locations and using them to ask questions of each other is revealing.

Although both have been enabled by development schemes, these are very different riparian spaces. Confluence Park is a privatised and commodified space, where the rivers have been conceived as a backdrop to consumption and a particular style of city living with limited possibilities for the spatial practices and spaces of representation, or the forms of authorship and stewardship that we saw along the Linear Park. The representation of space as realised in the River Pool Linear Park was driven by the local state at a time and place where the river was not part of a commercial development. The overall aim was to link up river spaces as both a transit corridor and a green space. This plan left room for the involvement of different stakeholder groups and a range of forms of place-making, including in the realm of authorship through everyday practices

of play and imagination and the work of FoRP whose members describe forging a deep bond with the place through their stewardship.

In Lewisham Gateway where the representation of space has been very explicitly forged by developers, the use of space is highly prescribed. In Lefebvrian terms, the spaces of representation – imagined space with potential to pick up other meanings – and spatial practices feel shut down. The practices of authorship and stewardship that make place in colloquial ways, ground people in place and forge a sense of belonging appear to have been intentionally written out. The ability for local communities to mould and connect to the space is seriously constrained and issues of uneven access to green and blue spaces across social groups (The Ramblers, 2020) risk being exacerbated.

Yet this is not totalising. Holding the local state and private developers to account through monitoring, lobbying and scrutinising plans offers a means of intervening in the conceived space of the developers and their logics of profit and forwards alternative representational spaces and spatial practices. This can provide a way of speaking to those in power, and in turn engender more active forms of access.

Access is about more than being able to get into a space. The kinds of authorship and stewardship that we have explored offer active ways of accessing and meaningfully shaping places. Authorship productively bridges Lefebvre's categories of spatial practice and representational space to encompass the multiple everyday ways that people feed into the production of river space. Highlighting examples of authorship and understanding what makes them possible is ever more important as the context of neoliberal and austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012, Tonkiss, 2018) seems to erode these possibilities. Especially as urban waterside spaces are co-opted into development.

Our focus on stewardship brings in acts of maintenance and care into the sociology of water, that has focussed on watery spaces as places of leisure and potential connection. Whilst it can be enjoyable, stewardship as a set of practices bridges practical maintenance and attempts to intervene in governance. It describes how people

accrue knowledge of these spaces while centring the river as an actor. This is important as we learn to live with urban rivers because water acts back, it can be destructive as well as fuelling imaginations and enabling pleasurable connections. As cities and the climate change, the question of how we live with water becomes ever more urgent. The authors and stewards of Lewisham's rivers show us some of the pleasures, possibilities and challenges.

^[1] Lewisham has a poverty rate higher than the London average and significantly higher than the England average (Trust for London, 2024). The serviced apartments in the Gateway are rented from £1800 p.m. Proof is required that the household earns nearly three times the rent or a guarantor who earns four times the rent.

References

Ackroyd, P. (2012) *London Under*. London, Vintage.

Akbar, P. N. G., Edelenbos, J., and Caputo, S. (2021) 'Positioning place-making as a social process: A systematic literature review' *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1905920>.

Amin, A. (2014) Lively infrastructure *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 31(7-8), 137-161.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276414548490>

Bates, C and Moles, K. (2022) 'Bobbing in the Park: Wild swimming, conviviality and belonging' *Leisure Studies* 1–13.

Bates , C. and Moles, K. (2023) *Living with Water: Everyday Encounters and Liquid Connections* Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Benson, M. and Jackson, E. (2013) 'Place-making and Place maintenance: Performativity, Place and Belonging among the Middle Classes' *Sociology* 47(4), 793-809.

Budds, J. and Hinojosa, L. (2012) 'Restructuring and Rescaling Water Governance in Mining Contexts: The Co-Production of Waterscapes in Peru' *Water Alternatives* 5(1), 119-137.

Bush, J. and Doyon, A. (2023) 'Planning a just nature-based city: Listening for the voice of an urban river' *Environmental Science and Policy*, 143, 55-63.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2023.02.023>.

Butler, T. (2007) 'Re-urbanizing London Docklands: Gentrification, Suburbanization or New Urbanism?' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31(4), 759-781
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2007.00758.x>

Carriere, S. and Carriere, M. (2025) 'Indigenous-led Research Helps Restore Fire Stewardship and Biodiversity in the Saskatchewan River Delta. Indigenous Leadership Initiative'. <https://www.ilinationhood.ca/blog/indigenous-led-research-helps-restore-fire-stewardship> (accessed: 23/9/25).

Centre for Indigenous Conservation and Development Alternatives [CICADA] (2015) Indigenous Confluence: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in River Restoration and Sustainable Futures. <https://cicada.world/research/indigenous-confluence-the-role-of-indigenous-knowledge-in-river-restoration-and-sustainable-futures/> (accessed: 23/9/25).

Dempsey, M., Smith, H. and Burton, M. (2014) 'Place-keeping: Open Space Management in Practice'. New York, London; Routledge.

Ejising, M. (2022) The arrival of the Anthropocene in social theory: From modernism and Marxism towards a new materialism *The Sociological Review*, 71(1), 243-260.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261221106905>

Franklin, A. (2017) The more-than-human city *The Sociological Review*, 65(2), 202-217
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12396>

Gandy, M. (2002) *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*. Cambridge, The MIT Press.

Gandy, M. (2004) 'Rethinking urban metabolism: water, space and the modern city' *City* (3) 363-379.

Garcia, F. (2021) 'Goodbye, Catford? When planners label your childhood haunt an "Opportunity Area"'. *The New Statesman*.

<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/society/britains-lost-spaces/2021/02/goodbye-catford-southeast-london-lewisham-gentrification-regeneration-when-planners-label-your-childhood-haunt-opportunity-area> (accessed 16/10/24).

ITVX (2022) 'Big weapons find in Catford as family uncovers stash of guns in River Pool, south London' <https://www.itv.com/news/london/2022-08-08/huge-weapons-cache-including-submachine-gun-found-in-river-by-shocked-family> (accessed 28/11/24).

Jackson, E. (2020) 'Bowling Together? Practices of Belonging and Becoming in a London Ten-Pin Bowling League' *Sociology* 54(3) 518-533.

Jackson, E. and Rondel, L. (forthcoming) Learning from small urban rivers and the people who steward them: How grassroots expertise can inform policy at the intersection of nature recovery and planning. British Academy.

Kaika, M. 2005 *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature and the City*. London: Routledge.

Kusenbach, M. (2003) 'Street Phenomenology: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool' *Ethnography* 4(3) 455-485.

Laville, S. (2024) 'Rise in Sewage Pollution from Thames Water's Ageing Treatment Works'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/article/2024/jul/09/rise-sewage-pollution-thames-water-ageing-treatment-works> (accessed 7/10/24).

Lefebvre H (1991) *The Production of Space*. Trans. Nicholson-Smith D. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Lewisham Challenge Partnership (1999) 'Lewisham: the new commitment to regeneration'. London Borough of Lewisham.

Lieto, L. (2017) How material objects become *urban things*? *City*, 21(5), 568-579.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2017.1374782>

Linton, J. (2010) *What is water? The history of a modern abstraction*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Linton, J. and Budds, J. (2014) 'The hydrosocial cycle: Defining and mobilizing a relational-dialectical approach to water' *Geoforum* 57, 170-180.

London Borough of Lewisham (2023) 'Lewisham Local Plan: Proposed submission document - Regulation 19 stage (January 2023)'.
https://lewisham.gov.uk/-/media/lewisham-local-plan-document_accessible_rev01.ashx?la=en
(accessed: 18/12/23).

Mah, A. (2014) *Port Cities and Global Legacies: Urban Identity, Waterfront Work, and Radicalism* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*, London: Sage.

McEwen et. al. (2020) 'Reweaving urban water–community relations: Creative, participatory river “daylighting” and local hydrocitizenship' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45. 779-801.

Moles, K. (2008) 'A Walk in Thirdspace: Place, Methods and Walking', *Sociological Research Online* 13(4)2 doi:10.5153/sro.1745

Moles, K. and Bates, C. (2023) *Living with water: Everyday encounters and liquid connections Manchester*, Manchester University Press.

Muse Places (n.d.) 'Lewisham Gateway'. <https://museplaces.com/our-places/lewisham-gateway/> (accessed 21/11/24).

Muse Places (2023) 'Lewisham Gateway: 20-years of partnership and perseverance'. <https://museplaces.com/stories/lewisham-gateway-20-years-of-partnership-and-perseverance/> (accessed: 24/11/24).

Office for National Statistics (2023) Census maps.
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps/choropleth> (accessed 26/10/23).

Peck, J. (2012) 'Austerity urbanism: American cities under extreme economy' *City* 16 (6), 626-655.

Raco, M., Henderson, S., and Bowlby, S. (2008). Changing Times, Changing Places: Urban Development and the Politics of Space–Time. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 40 (11), 2652-2673. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a4073>

The Ramblers (2020) 'The grass isn't greener for everyone: Why access to green space matters'. https://cdn.ramblers.org.uk/media/files/ramblers-access-nature-11_0.pdf (accessed: 21/11/24).

Sundberg, J. (2014) Decolonizing posthumanist geographies *Cultural Geographies*, 21(1) 33-47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013486067>

Swyngedouw, E. (2004) *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Swyngedouw, E., Kaika, M., and Castro, E. (2002) Urban water: A Political-Ecology Perspective *Built Environment* 28 (2) 124-137.

Thames21 (2020) 'River Restoration in London: A 20 Year Review'.
<https://www.thames21.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/LRW-River-restoration-report-Final.pdf> (accessed: 27/3/24).

Throsby, K. (2013) 'If I go in like a Cranky Sea Lion, I Come out like a Smiling Dolphin': Marathon Swimming and the Unexpected Pleasures of Being a Body in Water' *Feminist Review*, 103(1), 5-22.

Todd, Z. (2016) An indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29(1) 4-22.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>

Tonkiss, F. (2017) 'Austerity urbanism and the makeshift city' *City* 17(3), 312-324.

Trust for London (2024) 'Poverty rates by London borough'.
<https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/poverty-borough/> (accessed: 24/11/24).

Urban Renaissance in Lewisham (2002) 'Lewisham Gateway Planning Brief'. London Borough of Lewisham and London Development Agency.

Urban Renaissance in Lewisham (2005) 'Lewisham Gateway: The final countdown' *Urban Renaissance in Lewisham: Lewisham Gateway*. London Borough of Lewisham.

Watson, S. (2019) 'Liquid passions: bodies, publics and city waters' *Social and Cultural Geography* 20(7) 960–980.

Watson, S. (2017) *City Water Matters: Cultures, Practices and Entanglements of Urban Water* London, Palgrave Macmillan.

Whanganui District Council (n.d.) Te Awa Tupua - Whanganui River Settlement. <https://www.whanganui.govt.nz/Community-and-Places/About-Whanganui/Our-District/Te-Awa-Tupua-Whanganui-River-Settlement> (accessed: 23/9/25).

White, N. (2020) 'Anti-Racist Mural In London Is Latest To Be Targeted Following Black Lives Matter Protests'. *The Huffington Post*.
https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/lewisham-anti-racist-mural-black-lives-matter-defaced_uk_5f575c7dc5b62b3add457c68
(accessed 16/10/24).

Wuraola, O. (2025) Rivers are increasingly being given legal rights.
<https://www.aru.ac.uk/news/rivers-are-increasingly-being-given-legal-rights> (accessed: 23/9/25).

Yarra River Protection [Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn] Act 2017, 2017.
<https://content.legislation.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-04/17-49aa005%20authorised.pdf> (accessed: 23/09/25).

Zoological Society of London (2021) 'The State of the Thames: Environmental Trends of the Tidal Thames'. <https://www.zsl.org/what-we-do/projects/state-of-the-thames-2021>
(accessed 27/3/24).

Ethics Information

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Sub-Committee at Goldsmiths, University of London

Funding information:

This research was funded by Goldsmiths Strategic Research Fund, University of London.

Dr Emma Jackson is an urban sociologist and research consultant working on place and belonging in urban spaces, and specialising in creative and qualitative research methods. She is an Associate at Art of Regeneration, Visiting Senior Research Fellow in Sociology at the LSE, and Honorary Professor at Goldsmiths. She was previously Reader in Sociology and Director of the Centre for Urban and Community Research, at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her most recent book is 'Walking: A sociological field guide' (2026) edited with Charlotte Bates, published by Manchester University Press.

Dr Louise Rondel is a Research Associate in the Active Travel Academy (School of Architecture and Cities, University of Westminster). Working across urban sociology and environmental studies, her research interests include the relationship between bodies and spaces, questions of socio-environmental justice, the uneven distribution of toxicity, urban infrastructures of distribution and waste, lively materials, and walking and embodied methods. She is currently working on projects on street trees and urban greening and cycling infrastructure.

Figures

Fig 1: The Ravensbourne Catchment, reproduced with permission of Quaggy Waterways Action Group

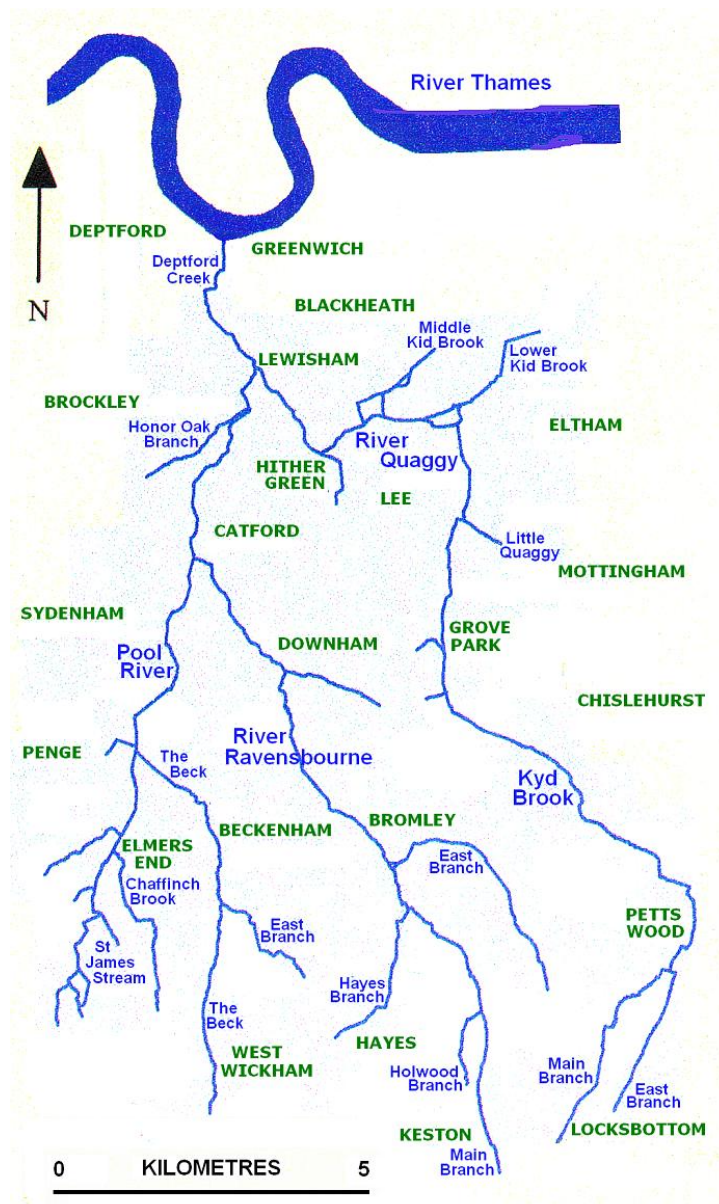


Fig 2: Urban Renaissance for Lewisham brochure in Confluence Park. Image: author.

