Rethinking Community Food Centres

Enhancing social cohesion through food

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Architectural Design Crossovers

London 2022/2023

Figure 2: Photography - Nourish Hub

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Abstract

FOR FINAL RESEARCH

01 Introduction

London is highly diversified. According to the Mayor of London (2017), one in three Londoners is born outside the United Kingdom and more than 300 languages are spoken on the street. These diversities are also noticeable in entertainment, arts, sports, food, culture, and the economy.

The website of Trust for London also indicates that forty per cent of Londoners are Black and Minority Ethnic. Data sets from the London Datastore also imply that ethnic diversity has increased by 110% from 2012 to 2020.

Moreover, London has significant disparities between the wealthy and the poor. According to data on income inequality from the London Data Store, these differences are higher than the rest of the United Kingdom. Due to the city's high land values and the growing wealth of the privileged, the standard of living continues to rise ensuring that people with at risk remain highly vulnerable and making survival even more challenging.

Furthermore, these individuals are adversely affected by other significant current events, such as inflation and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Trussell Trust data demonstrates that not only has food bank usage soared from 2011 to 2021, but a significant event such as Covid-19 has caused food bank usage to double between 2019 and 2020. These numbers indicate how life even becomes more challenging for many Londoners as food insecurity worsens.

Accordingly, these previously mentioned challenges results in the inability to pay rent, feed themselves and their children, consume a nutritious diet, live in poverty, experience social exclusion,

social isolation or loneliness (Barry, 2002; Jehoel et al., 2009; Kenyon, 2013; Sullivan & Picarsic, 2012). Many of these challenges are so called social problems. Demographical data shows that many of these issues have been identified in areas in Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Newham.

Because of previously mentioned challenges social cohesion between groups in areas which are poorly deprived or multiple diversified should be fostered to increase social mixing in neighbourhoods to facilitate the integration of ethnic minorities and the arrival of new migrants (Arapoglou, 2012; Cassiers & Kesteloot (2012); Coburn, 2000; Qadeer & Qumar, 2006). Increasing diversity in London suggests that language, culture, ethnicity, and income could be barriers (Kleit, 2005), what makes interaction challenging.

According to Anderson (2005), food is a kind of communication in determining an individual's identity and social position, and eating is practically always a social activity which brings people together. Further, he argues how food is a social communication system second to language.

Through my personal experiences in an Indonesian culture, I can relate to how food encourage participation, interaction, togetherness, and provides a sense of community. Food acts as a catalyst for social relations and cooperation across groups (Hill, 2002) and inside groups such as family members (Ziker & Schnegg, 2005). Whether it makes people happy, gives them a sense of purpose, or feeds the hungry, food is something interesting that promotes social engagement according to Anderson.

Problem statement.

The first step toward interaction, such as cooking or sharing food, can be difficult if no contacts have been established yet. Numerous communities, organizations and projects are currently addressing this issue. In London, for instance, community centres are frequently dispersed throughout the boroughs, with some having more than others and some areas seeing remarkable clusters. Camden and Hackney have a high concentration of community centres. However, as previously stated, Tower Hamlets and Newham have a larger population but have a much lower concentration of community centres. In addition to the countless social problems, they have a substantial need for social cohesion through community hubs.

Subsequently, it is remarkable that many community centres in London are deprived, have few to no windows, are inconspicuous, unwelcoming, or situated in preexisting structures or temporary locations.

Nevertheless, several London communities aim to aid various target groups through participation and interaction through social activities such as community kitchens, farmers' markets, community cafes, and urban agriculture. However many of them are dispersed or operate on small level, making it diffiult for people to join. Sometimes multiple of these social activities converge in what could be described as community food centres.

However, the number of communities which seek to enhance social cohesion through a wide variety of food-related initiatives within a centre of community facilities, (see O'hara, 2015; Levkoe &Wakefield, 2011), in areas such as Tower Hamlets and Newham is minimal.

Consequently, it could be that these centres do emerge from earlier functions of an existing structure, such as a church, which lead that the total desired programme of the community food hub cannot be accommodated. Or does it involve financial support? Churches and schools, for example, are better funded by the

government (McShane & Coffey, 2022; Skerratt & Hall, 2011).

Aim

This study examines community food centres by analyzing London-based case studies and attempts to address previous social and contextual issues. It further aims to identify whether they can be more extensive structures of the urban social fabric. Eventually, this should provide a more comprehensive insight into how community food centres address social cohesion through multiple spatial activities and determine its necessity to be a more extensive system.

Research questions

■ How can community food centre be re-thought to be a more extensive structure to enhance social cohesion?

□ Why are community food centres needed?

    ▫ How do food relate to people?

□ What factors make it challenging to maintain and support them?

    ▫ Financial, context, its users, programme? Are community food centres, for example, easier to maintain and supported when its users are financially stable?

□ How do currrent community food centres operate?

    ▫ Where are they currently operating?
    ▫ What is their programme?
    ▫ Are there any spatial requirements?

□ How do community food centres relate to other structures or systems that form the urban social fabric?

    ▫ Who are its actors within the hub?
    ▫ What is their cooperative network?

□ How do community food centre adress social cohesion?

    ▫ Which spatial encounters related to food leads into interaction and participation between its users so that they socially cohere?
    ▫ How is social cohesion received by its users?

Figure 3: Photography - The Arc Centre

02 Theoretical framework

This research emphasises what and how social cohesion can be measured and improved if community food centres are integrated into a more extensive infrastructure. A developed city like London faces numerous *social problems*, including *social exclusion*, *isolation*, and *loneliness*, which are addressed by enhancing social relationships (Rook, 1984). Therefore, these phenomena must be initially clarified theoretically.

However, when is a problem social? Schneider (1985) approaches this issue with a theory in which he explains that a problem is social if it is objectively and subjectively determined. Whenever a specific scenario, condition, or event is verifiable, those who find it unpleasant or distressing should be aware that it is against their interests, and a response should be taken. Identifying whether a problem is viewed objectively and subjectively is crucial for determining for whom, by whom, and how it should be addressed.

Social isolation and *loneliness* have been described in various literature (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2006; Malcolm et al., 2019; Perlman & Peplau, 1981).

Perlman and Peplau define *loneliness* as a subjective phenomenon characterised by an unpleasant or disturbing deficit between the actual and desired quality or quantity of social relationships. They have approached it from a cognitive or cognitive discrepancy perspective, as a discrepancy perspective describes a more comprehensive picture of the factors that contribute to *loneliness* and aids in explaining otherwise abnormal phenomena. According to de Jong Gierveld et al., *social isolation* is the objectively quantified

deficit in a person's social relationships, which is frequently measured in terms of social network size, diversity, or frequency of contacts. For instance, people can have sufficient social connections and still feel lonely. On the other hand, people can lack social contact without feeling lonely.

Social exclusion is multi-layered. People become conscious of their exclusion when they recognise when they are treated differently from others (Runciman, 1966). According to Townsend (1979), unequal access to income, basic goods, public services, and citizenship rights are the starting points for understanding poverty and *social exclusion*. Silver (1994) argues that exclusion is a dynamic historical process while simultaneously a static condition which can be referred to as a condition of being *socially excluded* or *excludedness*.

These terms are not the focus of this paper. However, my purpose in touching on them to provide background for my own inquiry by showing how enhancing social cohesion is the desired consequence.

As mentioned previously by Anderson and Gregersen & Gillath (2020), food brings people together, which could enhance social cohesion. He further explains that sharing food is a component of human nature and has led to the importance of public eating facilities such as cafés, coffee shops, coffee houses, cafeterias, bars, and neighbourhood restaurants. These facilities, which can be described as activities, are where interaction and participation occur.

According to Levkoe and Wakefield (2011), the growing number of food initiatives in recent years has been driven by multiple goals, including

environmental sustainability, social justice, and health.

The theoretical framework of *social cohesion* is based on the approach of Fonseca et al. (2018), illustrated in Figure 4, to support a resilient city like London. The framework shows that *social cohesion* is defined by three levels that emerged from previous research conducted by many others who attempted to approach the concept from a theoretical, empirical, experimental, and analytic perspective.

Individual, community and *institutional* levels must all be considered because social cohesion occurs at the intersection of these perspectives. Hence, *social cohesion* is defined by Fonseca et al. as the ongoing process of developing the well-being, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, while simultaneously developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures and granting equal rights and opportunities within society. *Social cohesion* is severely hampered when there is an issue with one of the perspectives. If so, how severe is this impeded?

This question can be evaluated at community centres since they are frequently hindered by formal structures because, as previously stated, not all communities receive support equally. In addition, significant events such as covid could ensure that many communities in London collapse. As a consequence, it becomes more difficult for an individual with the motivation to join a community centre.

This study attempts to investigate the relationship between these three earlier-mentioned levels of *social cohesion*. Individual behaviour concerning a group and the observation of group dynamics will be investigated further in this study by linking them to the spatial programme and configuration of a community food centre. Consequently, an attempt is made to determine the relevance of specific spatial programmes for a coommunity food centre that contribute to improving social relationships.

Moreover, new insights will emerge from further research when the current small local community food centres are interpreted as food centres that can be a more extensive infrastructure.

Furthermore, the level of *institutions* will be implemented in the research. However, it will not address how municipalities and formal institutions should approach human rights since this has more to do with policy and is difficult to address from an architectural perspective.

Hence, a spatial solution can be reconsidered, ensuring that formal structures support community food centres easier. Subsequently, the question will arise whether these facilities will shift into commercial food centres that operate as independent organisations and no longer require government support. What are the consequences?

It has been ascertained that a minimal amount of community food centres are currently on the market in London. Therefore, it is necessary to define the concept of a community food centre, which should not be confused with ordinary community centres or hubs. Communities that embrace the concept frequently adopt a distinctive approach to it. Hence, in this study, a community food centre will define the concept through several studies describing similar concepts (see Feldstein & Barham, 2017; Levkoe & Wakefield, 2011; Matson et al., 2015; O 'Hara, 2015). However, the approach to the concept includes some definitions of a community hub, as some of these centres have overlapping definitions (see Curry, 2011 and Pitre, 2015).

In this research, a community food centre will be characterised as :

A facility with spaces of encounter where multiple food initiatives come together to foster social cohesion and where social, economic, and environmental issues can be addressed educationally.

Little et al. (2016) define *social interaction* as the process of mutual influence that individuals exert on one another during

social encounters. This term refers to the personal physical interactions between individuals within groups. Furthermore, social interaction can be distinguished at the micro, meso, macro, and global levels of analysis. This research will investigate micro, meso, and macro levels of social interaction concerning whether a community centre can be reconsidered to become a more extensive structure.

Social activity is another term closely related to this concept. I define it as activities facilitating interaction between various community members in spaces of encounter.

However, when a person's involvement in *social activities* leads to *interactions* with others within a community, it is defined as *social participation* (Levasseur et al., 2017). Wilcox (1994) explains that the first steps must be taken since participation does not occur automatically but must be initiated by someone, followed by the preparation phase, and then leads to participation.

As a result, social activity, interaction, and participation are closely linked and align with social cohesion. Accordingly, this research aims to define these terms as assets that connect the three levels of social cohesion.
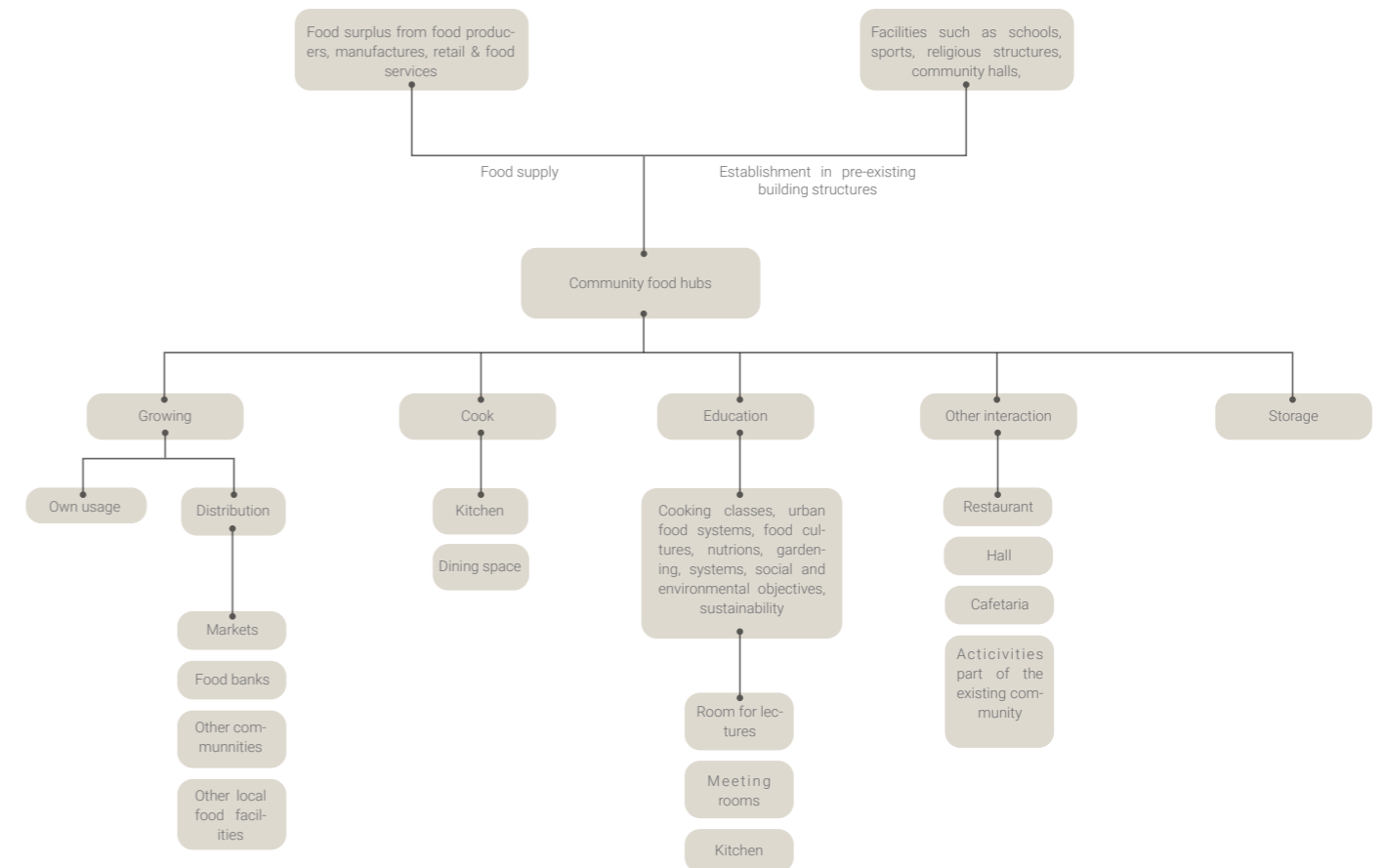
Figure 4: A first systematic diagram of a community food centre organizational structure.

The underprivileged
The disadvantaged
Recipients

**The
individual**

Performance

Participation and

Perceptoins, norms and values

Self-Motivation

Isolation

Loneliness

Interaction

Participation

Social Cohesion

Community Food
Centre

Environment

Relationship and Ties

Process Performance and

Goal Attainment

Human rights

Environmental structures, norms and values

Conflict management and

Decision making

Community

Food Producers
Retail & food services
Communities
Charities
Non profit-organizations
Schools

Institutions

Mayor of London
Councils

Social activities

Exclusion

Figure 5: Theoretical literature

03   Methodology

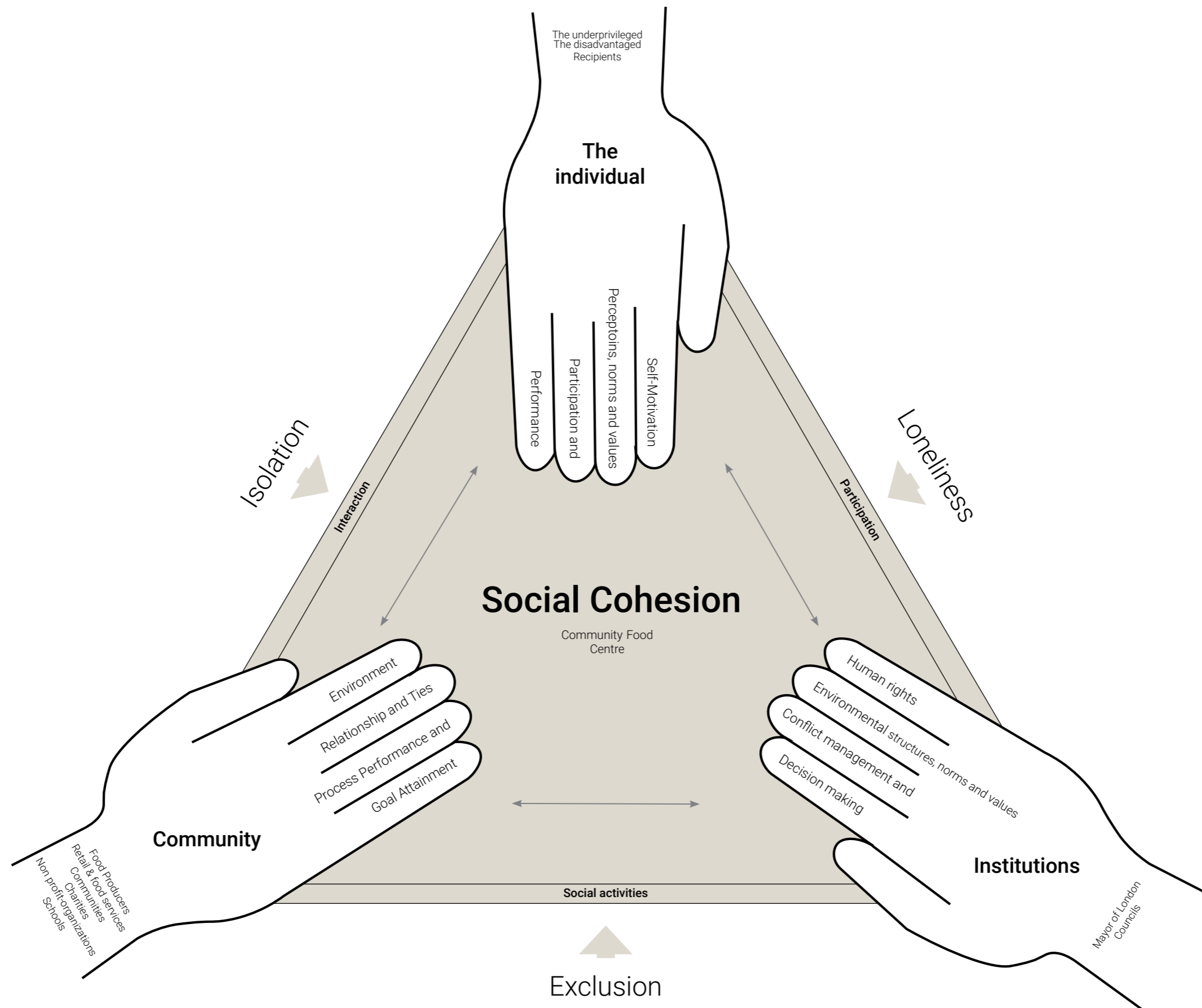First, examining numerous data sets and current maps about demographics, such as income level, culture, age, poverty, ethnicity, and deprivation, will provide a greater comprehension of the location of individuals in need. For this research, the focus group will be the people experiencing social exclusion and food insecurity. In addition, this information will reveal their everyday spatial mobility, leading to the identification of multiple location of interest. Further mapping and field work will lead to a final site for the design phase.

The following four community centres are discussed as a result of online research that quickly concluded there is a lack of community food centres that reflects the concept described in the theoretical framework. The use of case studies will have to answer a large part of the research questions since this provides significant information about how they function, what kind of people go here, what relations they have with other social infrastructures and actors, and a real picture and sense of how social cohesion is handled spatially. Literature provides a number of examples of community food centers that have shaped the concept in this research. Subsequently, it is measured with four case studies.This article will provide new insights to identify an unique approach to community food centres in London which will be leaning more on qualitive research.

The four case studies are analysed through mapping and contextual studies in order to map the social infrastructure, cooperative network and spatial mobility of the users of a community food centre.

This will assist in comprehending how the case studies deal with interaction and participation that provide social engagement and collectivity in which food plays a significant role.

    Since many community centres are established in pre-existing structures, the building type is also considered. Therefore, it is intriguing to observe the extent to which this varies. Moreover, these case studies may also operate at different scales, providing additional information on how these community food centres function. Furthermore, it can be discovered whether the community food centers are part of another building or facility or whether they stand alone.

Ideally, interviews will be conducted with users, employees, and a community centre board member for the four case studies. The interviews provide overlapping or distinctive insights into how people move spatially, using the maps as a starting point. For instance, by examining what people do when they are not in the community or how they interact socially at the community centre.

    The interview will also inquire about current issues and proposed improvements for communal gathering spaces related to food which could assist in understanding their demands, problems, and opportunities for communal areas. Additionally, interviews with its users and representatives at the community food centre would be beneficial because this information will provide insight into how individuals perceive the three levels of social cohesion, which will aid in the design phase.

    The spatial programmes and

organization of the community food centre are identified through fieldwork. Levkoe and Wakefield's research includes examples of programmes at a community food centre, such as community kitchens, urban agriculture, bake ovens, and marketplaces. These can therefore be compared to the case studies discussed. Identifying the programmes simultaneously determine whether they are context-sensitive.

Briefly these interview will offer a more detailed description of the spatial features and an overview of what is occurring, who is involved, and what other activities are carried out.
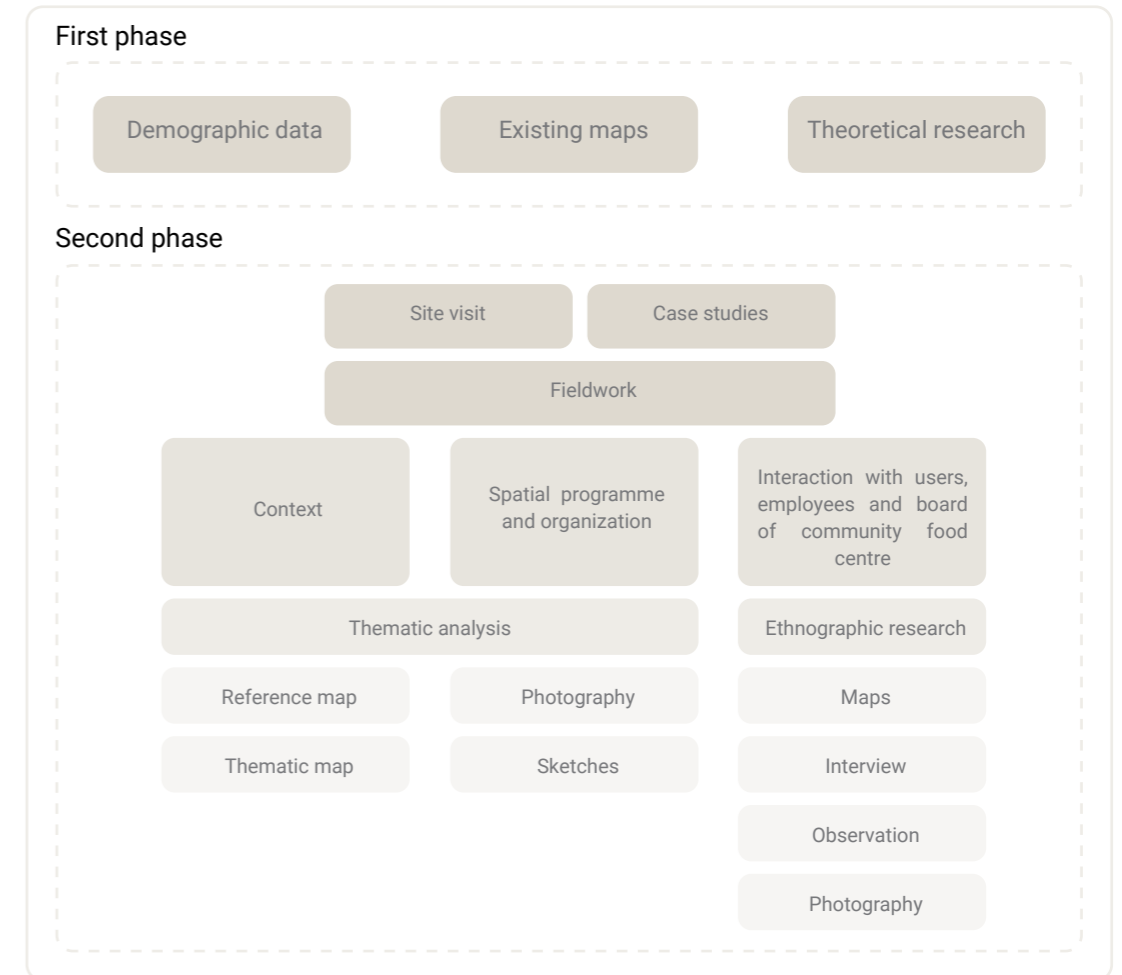
Methods

Figure 6: Methods framework
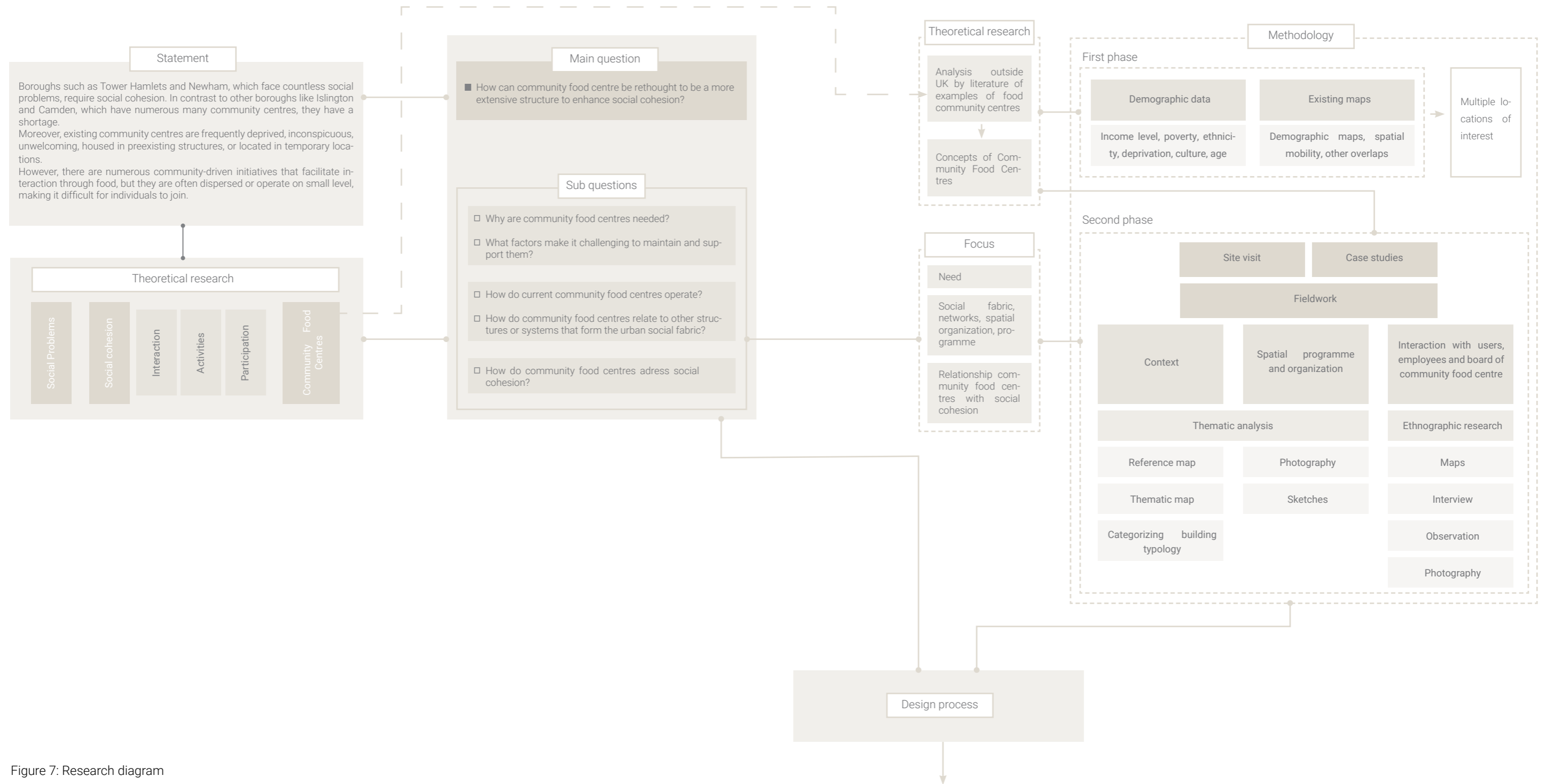
04 Research structure

Statement

Boroughs such as Tower Hamlets and Newham, which face countless social problems, require social cohesion. In contrast to other boroughs like Islington and Camden, which have numerous many community centres, they have a shortage.
Moreover, existing community centres are frequently deprived, inconspicuous, unwelcoming, housed in preexisting structures, or located in temporary locations.
However, there are numerous community-driven initiatives that facilitate interaction through food, but they are often dispersed or operate on small level, making it difficult for individuals to join.

Theoretical research

Social Problems | Social cohesion | Interaction | Activities | Participation | Community Food Centres

Main question

■ How can community food centre be rethought to be a more extensive structure to enhance social cohesion?

Sub questions

☐ Why are community food centres needed?

☐ What factors make it challenging to maintain and support them?

☐ How do current community food centres operate?

☐ How do community food centres relate to other structures or systems that form the urban social fabric?

☐ How do community food centres adress social cohesion?

Theoretical research

Analysis outside UK by literature of examples of food community centres

Concepts of Community Food Centres

Focus

Need

Social fabric, networks, spatial organization, programme

Relationship community food centres with social cohesion

Methodology

First phase

Demographic data

Income level, poverty, ethnicity, deprivation, culture, age

Existing maps

Demographic maps, spatial mobility, other overlaps

Multiple locations of interest

Second phase

Site visit | Case studies

Fieldwork

Context | Spatial programme and organization | Interaction with users, employees and board of community food centre

Thematic analysis | | Ethnographic research

Reference map | Photography | Maps

Thematic map | Sketches | Interview

Categorizing building typology | | Observation

Photography

Design process

Figure 7: Research diagram

05 Expectations

06 References

To enhance social cohesion by bringing people together through food, I would like to create an optimal environment in the form of a centre where several spatial encounter functions converge. Due to this concept, the larger scale, and a variety of spatial functions, there are more activities, which allows more space for community members to interact, participate, and bond.

It can provide multiple perspectives. Problems such as social exclusion, isolation, and loneliness are not the only ones that could be addressed. Individuals can also be educated about climate issues and become aware of the entire food supply chain. For instance, community members may learn and work on sustainable agriculture, eliminating food waste and surpluses. However, you could also provide cooking workshops, cook together or redistribute food among the ones in need. Could it also provide jobs or aid in social integration?

As an architect, it is an exciting challenge to develop the configuration of social spaces of encounter regarding food that positively affects social cohesion and relates to the context and other social institutions.

Nonetheless, there is always some degree of uncertainty. When the community food centre functions as an extensive infrastructure, it may have the opposite outcome. Does the programme fit into the pre-existing facilities, or do the community food centres need to be developed on locations such as brownfields to construct a new building? Is a group or community bond still felt? Alternatively, it could be too large, which may cause a loss of intimacy or could be more problematic when seek ing out engagement and interaction. Still, it can be more than what the current community food centres offer or other small-scale project-like initiatives such as a collective group garden, which are often full. The only question is what the limit is and what scale is involved.

An exciting project is *East London Community Centre* by MacLennanJaunkalns Miller. This newly-built community centre may not be a community food centre. However, it is built with a large programme with a community kitchen, swimming pool, art space, sports facilities, universal washroom and a multipurpose. It is an interesting example of a community centre that can be classified as a large and extensive structure where community members can seek interaction and bond on a broader scale.

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