



People, Spaces and Values: The Commons' Perspective to the Urban Commons

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(Received 06 January, 2017 Accepted 29 January, 2017)

(Published by Research Trend, Website: www.researchtrend.net)

ABSTRACT: The land is pliable and can either be transformed into a stoned civilization or an aesthetic landscape. They are known to be the cornerstone of social and environmental infrastructure, differing in their functions, attracting individuals with contradicting requirements, adding to the vital components of the sustainable communities. The paper propounds the role of urban open spaces and landscape considering the case study of Bhopal, discussing, one's perception of an open space and how different spaces cater and attract different age groups covering social, economic, and recreational aspects along with their belongingness values on the basis of the surveys conducted. This paper examines users' experiences of open spaces of the city, differing in scale under a defined boundary of 5 km². It concludes highlighting the issue of urban commons and the design principles for urban open spaces on basis of study inferences.

I. INTRODUCTION

Urban areas presently cover about 4% of global land area (United Nations Development Programme, 2000). This growth is primarily a result of a combination of population increase, development, and social trends, with the relative importance of these factors varying between regions (Gaston, et al., 2008). Open Spaces are valued not only by environmentalists, landscape designers and urban planners but also by the local communities and residents. The extent, composition and access to green spaces within urban areas have a significant impact on the quality of life of urban populations, (Gaston, et al., 2008) further influencing the ecosystem (e.g. clean air and water, climate regulation), ecosystem resilience and biodiversity.

A. Importance and Functioning of Open spaces

Urban open spaces perform the function of providing structure, shape and form to the urban area. The historical evolution and researches of these spaces gives evidence of the public open spaces used consciously by the ancient cultures in their settlements. Their significance and importance in the settlements' evolution has been changing continually during the development of civilization. (Péter István BALOGH, 2011). Developing sustainable cities is not just about looking into the abiotic and biotic aspects of urban life; it is also about the social aspects of city life, involving citizen's satisfaction, experiences and appreciation of

the quality of their everyday environments, providing space for recreation, preserve scenic value and watershed. Understanding the varied functions of urban open spaces is an important part of helping to improve their effectiveness; both by enabling better management of existing urban open spaces as well as improving the design of new ones (Stiles, 2009). Their functionality has been categorized into:-

(i) Environmental Benefits: Natural landscapes are vital to preserving regional ecosystems amid growing cities. They not only improves air quality, purifies water, wind and filters noise but also abates the urban heat-island effect by their ecological-balancer function, thus helping in creating human and energy efficient cities. They make compact living attractive and viable. (Anon., n.d.)

(ii) Health Benefits: Over 95% of people believe it is important to have green spaces near to where they live and has been associated with better-perceived general health, reduced stress levels, depression etc. (Anon., n.d.) as these natural elements has the ability to function as "natural tranquillizers". (Chiesura, n.d.)

(iii) Social and Psychological Benefits: By increasing levels of social integration, particularly in underprivileged neighborhoods, influencing human physical and psychological health and well-being, they provide opportunities for community participation in caring for the environment.

Well-designed spaces can promote a sense of place and be a source of community pride, helping to reduce crime and the fear of crime. (Regional Public Health, 2010).

(iv) Structural and aesthetic functions: These functions are well defined as articulating, dividing and linking areas of the urban fabric, improving the legibility of the city, -establishing a sense of place and acting as a carrier of identity, meanings and values. (Stiles, 2009).

(v) Economic Benefits: Urban nature can benefit municipalities as well as citizens by reducing the cost of pollution. Aesthetic, historical and recreational values of urban open spaces promote it as tourist destination, generating employment and revenues. Also, natural elements like water, increase property values, and therefore tax revenues as well.

There exist a number of small and large-scale urban common spaces where community gardening, neighborhood improvement districts, neighborhood foot patrols, and limited equity housing cooperatives act as institutions involving several stakeholders that interact and collaborate in order to manage crucial assets for the community—parks, gardens, open space, neighborhood safety, housing, etc. (1st IASC Conference on the Urban Commons, 2015)

II. CASE STUDY – BHOPAL

Bhopal, a capital town of central India has an area of 289.5km² and population of 1,798,218 (Census, 2011). Bhopal offers a mix of traditional splendor with its old and modern city along with lush green environs coupled with natural beauty. (Prashanti Rao, June - 2014) For evaluation, urban spaces are classified at city, community and residential levels, confining to the study of open spaces with the aim of analyzing the level of use of spaces by different age group.

A. Study Area and Methodology adopted for the Analysis

The spatial unit selected for the study is limited to Bittan Market and Shahpura area, among the posh areas of Bhopal (Fig. 1) having less FAR (1 – 1.25), compared to other parts of the city. It has predominant residential and commercial land uses with small pockets of open spaces and having urban forestry areas like Ekant and Shahpura Parks. The community/neighborhood open spaces, here, refer to the open spaces serving a cluster of houses within various colonies. The private residential gardens are parts of individual plots. (Fig. 1 for different classes of open spaces).

An online questionnaire was prepared to capture opinion on four aspects: perception of the place, activities carried out, the environmental features and

public use and participation for maintenance of these spaces. A random sampling strategy was adopted and the questionnaire was administered on site to cover various age groups and gender, restricted to the residents living within the study area (Fig. 1). In total, 80 valid responses (area population of 3000 persons) were obtained and provided useful information (Questionnaire can be accessed from the following link: <https://goo.gl/forms/O7kv51zlmq8NaL212>).



Fig. 1. Open spaces.

B. Analysis

The sample collected comprised 71% of population of age group 20-30 years followed by age group of 17-19 years. Of the subjects, 15% visit the open space on a daily basis; 30% 2-4 times a week, 26.3% weekly; and only 28.7% mentioned that they use the open space monthly.

High level of participation (60%) for maintenance activities was obtained either by joining a volunteering group or through public meetings.

C. Result

Residential open spaces are utilized more than the community or city level open spaces as only 15% people visit such open spaces on a daily basis (age group - 17-30 years) for playing sports and meeting friends. The percentage is less because the study area comprises of the area with large plots with sufficient open spaces in their house and so people do not feel the need to move out of the premises. This suggests that small scale open spaces affect the functioning of the larger spaces. Further people prefer the spaces to be comfortable and pleasing in terms of cleanliness with proper facilities that these spaces lack due to less attention by the authorities and also by lack of awareness among people.

Table 1: Activity characteristics for open spaces.

S.No.	Characteristic	Outcome (options with highest percentage or rating)	
			Frequency
1	Time spent in the park	Less than 15 minutes	20
		15-30 minutes	13
		Less than 1 hour	20
		More than 1 hour	27
2	Activities or usage of the places (the following scores the highest)	Improving health conditions (exercises/ walks)	43
		Relaxation & Peace	59
		Meeting friends	60
		Enjoy the beauty of the surroundings	44
		Play sports	20
3	Important aspects of any open space (Out of the 7 given choices, following 4 choices were given most importance in general)	Aesthetic	35
		Health	35
		Social interaction	28
		Natural environment	25
4	Maintenance/cleanliness and Design or appearance of the open spaces	Good	35
		Fair	29
5	Aspects that reduce the value of open spaces	Unpleasant environment	44
		Unsafe environment	44
		Noise	36

The result shows that these differences in the functioning of each scale of open space is not only defined by the area it acquires but is equally dependent on users' perception of utilizing that space for a certain use which also varies with age groups. Despite of this, Ekantand Shahpura parks are utilized by many for morning-evening exercises and walks mainly because of its beautiful landscape and presence of water body, thus fulfilling aesthetic, health, social interaction and natural environment aspects of an open space that people look for and has been rated highest in the survey questionnaire. This is also due to health and general awareness of the people, that is, population below 17 years best utilizes community open spaces as these areas serves the requirements for sports but lack in facilities that are demanded by the other age groups like peace and relaxation.

III. CONCLUSION

Good lightning, setting back vegetation away from pathways, keeping activity areas open to view from adjacent roads and residential areas, planning roads to

allow controlled access, providing curbs and separation of paths from roads, and using fencing and warning signs are measures that can improve safety and reduce vandalism. (Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development, n.d.). Not all urban spaces of same hierarchy are utilized in same manner. Location and perspective of individuals and society as a whole affect usability and importance of the space. As per the needs and priority, one chooses a particular kind of open space and when people with common perspective come together (such as health benefits), they form social groups developing a bond with others as well as the environment, thus uplifting an urban common to a place having belongingness by many and enhancing the ultimate goal of optimal utilization.

We would also like to show our gratitude to Mrs. Alka Bharat, Professor of Maulana Azad National Institute of Technology, Bhopal, for sharing her pearls of wisdom with us during the course of this research paperwork.

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