Appropriation of the City by the Youth: Parks and Squares as Public Spaces

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Abstract. The article reports on the perception of young people to city parks and green squares as public spaces, or the "third place". Urban green space have multiple benefits for the physical and mental health and wellbeing of urban population. It acts as a factor of the formation of local identity and contributes to exercising the diversity of needs of different social groups. Based on a series of in-depth interviews (n=10), the article argues that the main barriers to attending parks are their remoteness from the place of residence and the lack of time. According to the respondents, an ideal park is divided into several zones according to the needs and interests of different social groups. It contains areas for walking, and playgrounds for children and teenagers. Young people attach particular importance to the landscaping of parks since the presence of flowers, trees, shrubs, lawns has a positive effect on the emotional state. In addition, city parks are expected to have such objects as benches, waste bins, toilets, and cafes. However, the respondents' opinions around the presence of event and entertainment industries are divided: some welcome such activities, whereas others share a negative attitude towards them. In general, parks and squares today are becoming a source of positive emotions and attitudes.

1. Introduction

Today, one of the central issues in urban studies is the study of the transformation of urban space for the needs and demands of different social groups and communities, including the youth. In the concept of modern urban planning, there has been a transition to the “city for people” model, the foundation of which was laid down by the works of an American researcher Jane Jacobs [1], whose writings formulated the basic principles of urban planning based on the everyday life of residents.

Urban residents have a capacity to define their own interests, coordinate and mobilise resources and opportunities, engage in various types and forms of collective behaviour, demonstrate cooperative models of social action aimed at participating in the production and consumption of urban space. Such a position is a label of exercising of the right to the city, which was first formulated by Henry Lefebvre [2]. According to the French sociologist, the right to the city manifests as the highest form of human rights: the right to freedom, to individuality in the process of socialisation, to the environment and residence, as well as the right to creativity, participation in the creation and appropriation of urban
space. An English and American researcher David Harvey [3] developed the Lefebvre’s ideas and suggested that by changing the urban space, the individual changes oneself.

One of the important roles in the urban environment is played by public spaces, which appear as places of social activity of urban residents. The multifunctionality of public spaces lies in their use by residents: walking, work transit, doing sports, street entertainment, children's games, and others. According to Ray Oldenburg [4] these spaces become the “third place” in which individuals and groups spend their time between work or study and home.

Public space acts as a special area for establishing social networks and relationships, forming urban communities that are different in their functioning and purpose, and reproducing urban sociocultural practices. It is the “third place” that becomes a factor of building the urban identity, and a condition for emotional attachment to the city which forms a sense of belonging to the community of residents. For young people, especially, open and accessible public spaces offer wider opportunities for social and communication experiences than rigid institutional structures [5].

Parks and squares with green spaces in the logic of Oldenburg are becoming a "third place" for a modern urban resident. In addition, they act in some way as inhibitors of the negative effects of urbanisation. The increasing development of industrial construction and transport leads to a decrease in the quality of the environment and is accompanied by a deterioration of the individual and group health. Therefore, parks, gardens and squares become the components of the city requested by different population groups. Everyday use of public spaces has changed: there has been a transformation in the perception of public space from a necessary component of a city to its recreational understanding [6].

Spending a significant amount of time indoors leads to experiencing nature-deficit disorder [7]. Urbanisation of life decreases social activity which, in turn, prevents group cohesion. The research has shown that modern urban green space can improve physical and mental health as well as social wellbeing [8, 9, 10, 11]. For instance, residents who live nearby green areas are less predisposed to depression [12] and have higher self-esteem [13], than those who live in areas with limited access to green space. In addition, residents who live next to green areas have better learning outcomes and cognitive development [14].

Researchers have convincingly demonstrated the interconnectedness and positive impact of parks and forests on social cohesion [15, 16]. Green spaces can broaden and deepen social contacts, increase satisfaction with relationships with neighbours, and strengthen a sense of loyalty to the city [17, 18, 19]. Therefore, cities with a higher concentration of parks and green spaces provide people with more opportunities for life satisfaction and happiness [20].

Traditionally, city parks have included various zones (active recreation area, walking area, entertainment area, and others), in which residents fulfill a wide range of needs and interests. Art objects or objects of landscape gardening can also be located in parks. Open and shaded areas, water reservoirs, fountains, flower beds, ornamental shrubs, trees, lawns, organically included in park space, create conditions for recreation and perform hedonistic and aesthetic functions.

Today, one of the urban planning tasks is the modernisation of city parks and the redesign of park space. It seems important to create an accessible architectural and planning environment which contrasts with the city and is capable of satisfying the needs of different groups of urban population.

2. Materials and methods
The main purpose of the study was to analyse the perceptions of young residents of the city of Yekaterinburg (Russia) about parks and green squares. To achieve this goal, we completed two research tasks. First, we determined the frequency and motivation of young people’s visits to city parks as public spaces. Secondly, we described attributes of an ideal park from the perspective of young people themselves.

The primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with young people living in the city of Yekaterinburg. 6 females and 4 males were interviewed. The average age of the respondents was 24. The interviews were conducted in July and August of 2020. The duration of each interview was
around 20 minutes. The interview protocol consisted of 10 open-ended questions which gave the respondents an opportunity to formulate their own opinion.

The interview responses were transcribed and coded. It made it possible to identify the commonalities and differences of the respondents' answers, which facilitated the interpretation of the data.

3. Results and discussions
The results of the interviews suggest that almost all respondents rarely go for walks in parks and squares: 2-3 times a month with a duration from 1 to 2 hours, and mostly, in the evening during the warm season (spring and summer). At the same time, all respondents expressed the need for such walks and regretted that they could not walk more often due to the lack of time. Only two respondents pointed to the fact that squares with green spaces are included in the route of their daily travel to work which suggests that within the city limits, these "third places" would be in demand by young people for a transit travel:

I try to walk for half an hour or an hour every day. I go out during the break: the park is nearby. (male, 28)

I spend about an hour for a walk [in the park], as a rule. This is a transit movement along the route I am following. (male, 21)

The fact of having their own children is becoming a factor that increases the young people daily movement in parks and green squares, but remoteness from the place of residence acts as a barrier that prevents such walks:

My children and I go out for walks every day, but we only visit a nearby park. Yet, we step on the "health trail" [the forest zone at the entrance to the Akademichesky residential area] only three times a year. It's too far for me to go there. My children have scooters and bicycles which eases their way, but it's too far for me to follow them (about 25 minutes of normal-speed walking). When we are there, we walk purely along the trail. We enter on one side and then exit on the other side and walk towards home, it turns out a big circle. (female, 28)

The issue of accessibility of green squares was raised by virtually every respondent:

There are very few parks nearby. You have to go purposefully to take a walk and be closer to nature. (female, 20)

Parks and green squares seem as multifunctional points of attraction for different groups of population. Young people from our study satisfy the need for recreation and refreshment in parks:

It is comfortable to relax in parks. First, I really love green spaces. Second, it is much quieter there than walking along the busy city streets. (female, 22)

... the green colour calms me down ... staying there relieves stress. (female, 19)

Studies from abroad have also demonstrated multiple benefits of green spaces on health. For example, living close to parks reduces stress among children and increases their IQ [21], improves working memory and attention [22], and influences cognitive ageing [23].

Moreover, parks as public spaces perform a safety function:

In city parks, treatment is carried out against ticks and other insects. It also often has artificial lighting at night. The security guard, if available, is also a benefit. (female, 30)

In this case, we are talking about social control in public places: park visitors monitor each other's behaviour, and specially created external structures provide security.

At the same time, half of the respondents pointed out such a challenge as noise which does not allow to relax and enjoy nature:

There are so many kids in parks in summer, and it does not always impact well other visitors because of the noise. And in the evenings, the benches in the parks are occupied either by loud youth or drunk people who want to go on. That is why I don't often walk in the city parks. (female, 26)
Thus, the issue of accessibility of parks is affected by not only the remoteness from the place of permanent residence of young people but also the size of the area which is appropriated by different groups of residents:

_A lot of the elderly people go for walks. You can see that they come and go in circles on purpose: they walk with dogs, they walk with children, they feed ducks and pigeons, they collect flowers._ (male, 25)

An ideal park, according to the respondents, should be zoned. In other words, various needs of urban population are expected be met in parks. First, the respondents noted the need for children's playgrounds and the infrastructure which would be targeted at different age groups, including teenagers:

_We need equipped areas for cyclists, skateboarders, parkour traceurs, etc. It is better to let the teenagers do these sports in safe places and possibly under supervision. It could prevent danger to those around them on the streets of the city._ (female, 30)

Second, the respondents suggested an allocation of a special territory for the elderly as a separate park zone:

_They [the elderly] can socialise and play board games. It is better to make this zone in a more isolated place so that they can enjoy the silence._ (female, 30)

Third, parks are expected have green spaces: flowers, shrubs, trees:

_It is important that there are trees so that you can see the change of the season._ (female, 28).

In parks, according to the respondents, there should be pathways and trails so that there is an opportunity to take a slow walk and enjoy nature:

_... narrow paths, many narrow paths which give a chance to pave your own routines and watch animals - squirrels and ducks._ (male, 28)

Fourth, a third of the respondents drew attention to the need for trimmed lawns in parks:

_I visited London and I really liked Hyde Park. There are beautiful lawns, spacious territory, a lot of greenery, perfect cleanliness..._ (female, 19)

_You need to have a chance to sit on the grass._ (female, 20)

The respondents paid special attention to the placement of such objects in city parks and squares as benches, waste bins, toilets and food concessions. As for the holding events in parks, as well as availability of entertainment shows (for instance, inflatable trampolines and water pools), the opinions of the respondents were divided. Half of them supported the development of the event industry in city parks, since it meets people's needs for entertainment. Another part of the respondents had a negative attitude towards setting up events in parks as they believed that parks and squares should be focused more on contemplation and a quiet pastime.

Parks and green squares, as the results of our current and past research show, are a factor of not only the present, but also the future of comfortable living in the city [24]. Today, according to the respondents, an emotional connection with the city is important. Green zones are designed to give positive emotions and to stimulate feelings that people cannot get on the streets of the city in everyday travel, at work or study. As one of the respondents noted:

_I want to be happy there._ (female, 20).

### 4. Conclusions

The results of the study draw the following conclusions. First, parks and green squares as public spaces represent the “third place” which competes with traditional cafes and shopping malls. They act as a factor of the formation of urban identity and fulfill the diversity of the needs of urban population. Second, young people relatively rarely visit city parks which is due to the lack of time and the distance between parks and places of residence. Third, according to young people, an ideal park should include several zones targeted at different groups of population (children, teenagers, young people, the elderly). Such zoning is an important condition for reducing social tension in attempts to appropriate
public space. Parks are also expected to have benches, waste bins, cafes, toilets and green spaces. Young people are equivocal about organising events and developing commercial services in parks, since it is important for young people to get a positive attitude and emotions from interacting with nature. Street noise should be prevented from entering parks and squares.

5. References
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