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# Green Space in Urban Areas:

# Increasing the Quality of Life of Individuals and Communities

RECN 636 Urban and Community Recreation

Examiner: Dr. Clare Simpson

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*The purpose of this essay is to explain how green space in urban areas improves quality of life.*

*Experiencing green space, both linear and static, in an urban area improves the quality of life for individuals and the community.*

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> Our tribe arose not in cinderbelt but in wild forests and grasslands. Our ears are made not for the stinging scream of sirens but for the sly scratch of a predator's paws and the whistle of wind that warns of impending weather. Our eyes evolved to tease apart not the monotonous grays of cityscapes but the subtle gold, olive, and burgundy hues that signaled ripe fruit and tender leaves, and our brains to reward our sensory efforts with feelings of pleasure.
>
> (Ackerman, 2006, p. 110)

Modern life in urban areas deprives our senses from detecting the natural environment. Our senses have endured evolution within urban areas battered by manmade stress. Despite this deprivation, humans benefit from being in green space. Research supports that being in nature and stimulating these senses improves quality of life. This essay refers to nature in an urban area as green space, which refers to a natural quality of the environment. A natural quality is not limited to, but can include, individually or a combination of trees, water and grass. This essay does not include large scale and rural green space such as National Parks or other natural areas. Rather, it focuses on green space within an urban area. For this essay, an urban area is not defined by density but by aesthetics. An urban area is an area dominated by grey infrastructure or man made development. This can include but is not limited to: buildings and roads. In general, this essay refers to the late twentieth century orient in contemporary American land preservation, which focuses on greenspace that is directly accessible to the population, which is in contrast with the nineteenth and early twentieth century emphasis on the

significant, but remote, national parks and other protected natural areas (Jongman & Pungetti, 2004). As though they were small scale versions of National Parks, green space in urban areas benefits the environment, ecology and economy. Although green space provides numerous benefits in a variety of areas, the argument of this essay, is how greenspace in urban areas improves quality of life for human individuals and communities.

Sprawl has severally decreased the quality of life in urban areas. Sprawl is the result of people moving to the outskirts of cities where transportation is dominated by individuals in automobiles. Sprawl is a "'vast amorphous conglomeration of housing tracts, shopping centers, industrial parks, freeways, and independent towns blend into each other in a seamless fabric of concrete and asphalt" and nothing has succeeded in gluing this automobile-oriented civilization into any kind of cohesion other then that of individual routine (Kenneth Jackson as cited in Jakle, 1994). This individual routine decreases community and individual's quality of life. Sprawl has not imposed new values as much as it has reinforced old (Jakle, 1994). After experiencing the stress of sprawl, people need space free from congestion, noise and a frenzied pace. Individual and community benefits occur by being in space that allows for talking, walking, discovering and relaxing (Ackerman, 2006). These benefits can be provided through static green space, such as a vest-pocket park, court yard or community garden. Static green space in urban areas combats the negative effects of sprawl by increasing quality of life and enhancing community (Little, 1990).

Even though urban areas are crowded "their residents tend to keep to themselves-depriving them of social resources that would make their lives easier" (Chatterjee, 1999, p.

13). The simple addition of some grass and trees, however, can turn anonymous neighbors into a supportive community (Chatterjee, 1999). Green space provides a place for individuals to meet informally with their neighbors. Research shows that people who spend more time in green space have stronger social ties (Chatterjee, 1999). Despite these known benefits, urban areas lack green space that is not crime ridden or deserted (Chatterjee, 1999).

An excuse for a lack of inviting green space is often due to the stigma that parks and gardens are a luxury (Ackerman, 2006). Urban areas traditionally reserve funds for fundamentals like policy, sewers or fire trucks, and consider green space a decorative amenity (Ackerman, 2006). Fortunately, researchers, such as Frances Kuo, have found that green space in urban areas represent a minor public investment with a major pay off. Green space helps people take care of themselves so cities don't have to spend as much money on social, medical and safety services trying to fix their problems (Ackerman, 2006). Rather then a luxury, green space must be seen as essential, argues Martine Petelot, a member of the Jardin Nomade, a small community garden on a vacant lot in Paris' congested 11th arrondissement. Petelot explains how the "'garden allows us to work the earth, to watch things grow. People need to scratch about in the soil, breathe in the scent of plants and flowers, let off steam, and meet other people. For many it is almost like therapy'" (Ackerman, 2006). Green space in urban areas is essential to human social and psychological well-being. "'Without access to grass and trees, says Frances Kuo, we humans are very different creatures'" (Ackerman, 2006).

Kuo's research supports that being in green space has a positive effect on individuals. She found that green space has a restorative effect on human's voluntary

attention (Ackerman, 2006) Voluntary attention is "the kind of intense focus required to work or study, to ignore distractions and concentrate on the task at hand" (Ackerman, 2006, p.111). Voluntary attention is like a mental muscle and people exercise it in nearly every aspect of their life. "It dictates how well we think and how we handle ourselves in difficult situations- whether we roll with the punches or fly off the handle" (Ackerman, 2006, p. 111). Living in a city tests our voluntary attention with its relentless crush of noise and traffic, conflicts and demands. This stress makes humans crabby and impulsive. Being in green space refreshes us, allowing us to surrender to involuntary attention (Ackerman, 2006). With so much stress in urban areas, being in green space is more beneficial than ever. It is effortless and often enjoyable for an individual to experience sensory stimuli from the environment (Ackerman, 2006).

Just as green space has a positive influence on an individual's mental well-being it also has a positive influence on community. Kuo studied the effects green space has on residents in urban areas. The study specifically focused on the Robert Taylor Homes, a cluster of twenty-eight identical high-rise buildings that formed America's largest public housing development in Chicago, Illinois (Ackerman, 2006). Some of the buildings were surrounded by grass and trees and others by concrete and asphalt (Ackerman, 2006). Kuo discovered that people living in buildings with green space had a stronger sense of community and coped better with everyday stress and hardship. Green space made people less aggressive and less violent, they preformed better on tests of concentration and managed their problems more effectively (Ackerman, 2006). For example grass and trees provide a welcoming place for people to gather (Ackerman, 2006). In the stressful and crowded cores of urban areas communities benefit from "the little grove of chestnut trees

outside their apartments where they can mingle in the shade and hear the hiss of the wind" high in the trees (Ackerman, 2006, p.111). People "need big public lawns where they can play together. They need the tiny sprouting plots of neighborhood gardens, where they can set aside the city's stress on time and the temporary in favor of growth and permanence" (Ackerman, 2006, p.111). The effects of Kuo's study can be applied to many urban areas. Sprawl has created secluded homes and anonymous neighborhoods making it difficult for community to exist in urban areas.

In addition to having a negative effect on housing, sprawl also has a negative effect on transportation, for both individuals and the community. Due to sprawl, urban areas are only conducive to transportation by the individual automobile, or car. Sprawl makes non motorized travel difficult because places are spread out (Jakle, 1994). Unfortunately, urban areas no longer provide the conveniences of pedestrian travel traditional to older neighborhoods (Jakle, 1994). Travel that was once close by, at the end of short blocks, is now extended to several long blocks or even several miles (Jakle, 1994). Travel by car in urban areas has become a necessity (Jakle, 1994). This auto-centered lifestyle "has not imposed new values so much as it has reinforced old" (Jakle, 1994, p.293). Transportation by car, an individual routine, reduces quality of life because it is inefficient time wise, reduces socialization which decreases community (Jakle, 1994).

Linear green space, such as a trail or greenway, provides an alternative mode of transportation from the automobile. In *Greenways for America,* Little (1990) defines a greenway as a natural and protected linear corridor. This essay focuses on one of five categories of greenways, a recreational greenway (Little, 1990). A recreational greenway features paths and trails of various kinds, often of relatively long distance and it is based on

natural corridors, canals, abandoned railbeds and other public rights-of-way (Little, 1990). In general, greenways establish 'fingers of green' within the grey of urban areas, connecting people and places (Jongman and Pungetti, 2004). Unlike traveling in a car, greenways allow a physical connection to be made with the environment. Being on a greenway provides all of the same benefits as being in static green space. However; greenways are linear, making them a green space that also provides transportation and more physical forms of outdoor recreation then static green space.

An abstract benefit of greenways is how they link where people live to other destinations, through nature. This benefit addresses the psychological human need and preference for 'nearby nature' (Kaplan et al, 1998). Greenways allow people to incorporate an experience with the natural world as part of their daily commute or recreation routine. An individual benefit of using a greenway is improved personal and social health (Jongman and Pungetti, 2004, p.45). Greenways allow people the opportunity to recreate, exercise and to interact face to face with others in the community (Shafer, Lee and Turner, 2000, p. 164).

Individuals engage in social interactions with others from being on a greenway and these interactions enhance community. Greenways help communities build pride by ensuring that their neighborhoods are good places to live, so that children can safely walk or bike to a park, school or to a neighbor's home (Trails and Greenways Clearinghouse). Greenways help make communities more friendly places to live (Trails and Greenways Clearinghouse). A study found that when greenway "users were asked to provide events that occurred on the trail a majority of those described were social encounters" (Lee, 1999, p.166). Many people specifically mentioned positive encounters with other greenway users

and noted that there was often an exchange of waves and smiles as a part of their experience (Lee, 1999). This study confirms that people experience social benefits while using a greenway. In addition to social interactions, the study identifies qualities of urban areas that greenway users find most important to increasing their quality of life. These qualities include the presence of green space, accessible recreation, residents' pride in their community, community identity, and land use patterns (Shafer, Lee and Turner, 2000) These results suggest that greenways contribute to increasing quality of life by making urban areas more livable.

A lack of linear green space makes urban areas less livable. This deprives people from beneficial forms of social interaction and reduces community. Without greenways, "a distorted kind of community prevails when people and communities suffer the impact of dislocation dictated, for example, by city freeway construction" (Jakle, 1994, p.309). Urban areas with greenways are responsive to human needs by providing social opportunities. Greenways provide a socially interactive form of local movement, connecting communities that are often disconnected by roads (Jakle, 1994). Greenways represent a "community-based, democratic effort dedicated to improving the quality of everyday lives by preserving and connecting remnants of nature near [people's] homes and workplaces" (Little, 1990, p.xi).

Regardless of being in a linear or static form, both individual and community benefits occur from experiencing green space. Due to the impact of sprawl in urban areas, these benefits can be difficult to achieve. However, research by Kuo and others is making the benefits of green space in urban areas known, providing a strong argument for green amongst the sea of grey. Champions of green space in urban areas "hail recent progress in

the greening of cities but warn that much remains to be done" (Ackerman, 2006, p.112). Some urban areas consider space to be all built up, with no room for more green space, says Peter Harnik, director of the Center for City Park Excellence at the Trust for Public Land in Washington, D.C. But if a city has space for one more building, Harnik argues, it has room for more green space (Ackerman, 2006). This argument is well supported. Green space in urban areas provides benefits for individuals and communities by improving quality of life through social interactions. Being in green space allows us to utilize our senses for how they were meant to be used, to experience nature.