

EXPERIENCE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD PARKS IN KARACHI

Shabnam Nigar Mumtaz
Assistant Professor,
Department of Architecture and Planning,
NED University of Engineering & Technology, Karachi

ABSTRACT

The quality of urban spatial elements like parks, playgrounds, squares add character and livability to the city. Neighborhood Park is one such element of urban design. It is why people come to live in a neighbourhood. Substantial research has been done in this field in the west (e.g. Jacobs 1969, Gold 1972, 1977; Hestor 1984) but how people perceive and experience these spaces in third world cities like Karachi is limited. This research tries to investigate how the people of Karachi experience neighbourhood parks provided by the local authorities with its specific climatic, cultural and socio-economic background. This may provide an understanding on how these elements may be planned and designed.

Keywords: Neighbourhood Parks, Karachi, Regulatory Issues.

INTRODUCTION

Parks have become a standard requirement for developing neighborhoods or residential developments world over. Ulrich and Addoms 1981; Ulrich 1984; Verderber 1986; and Kaplan and Kaplan 1989 point out the social, psychological and therapeutic benefits of open public space. Kaplan and Kaplan suggest that nature is experienced as the preferred environment for most people and plays an important role in the recovery from mental fatigue.

According to Dr. Noman Ahmad, "Karachi possesses only 4 percent of land developed as parks, while in developed countries this percentage is around 10 percent"¹. The aim of this paper is to analyze and comprehend how people perceive parks in

their neighbourhoods in Karachi including what is their evaluation of such parks, what are their desires. This data is then compared to the guidelines provided by the local or international regulating authorities for the planning and designing of parks.

BACKGROUND

The public's perception and experience of neighbourhood parks can be seen as part of theoretical development taking place within recreational planning in cities. Locally, the park is not very indigenous to traditional planning practice; traditionally it is a *maidan* with multiple functions. The concept of the neighborhood park in Indo-Pak sub continent was introduced in the colonial period when western ideas of planning were applied locally.

Before getting into further details, a short introduction to the city of Karachi outlining its key attributes is as follows: Karachi has a land area of 518 square kilometer and a gross density of 18,900 persons per kilometer. About 40 percent of its population lives in *katchi abadis* or squatter settlements. In the past and in the present master plan, the area designated for open spaces is 4 percent. This includes the planning exercises, starting from 1974 to the latest strategic master plan of Karachi 2020. The city of Karachi is engaged in building both high density and low density dwelling units. The early developments were mostly done by the public sector but more recently it is the private sector or the builders who have taken the lead. Because of this shift, more and more apartments are being offered to the general public than high density low rise housing. These settlements or schemes as they are locally known follow the regulations that are based on outdated

1 Ahmed, N. "Ways to Beautify Karachi", presented at Seminar organized by the Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF), Thursday, January 5, 2006, at PPF Vicky Zeitlin Media Library, Karachi.

planning principles and ignore the recently established theories on environmental qualities of "neighborhood identity", and "livability". The concept of "livability" means the urban design, which stresses creating lively, safe and attractive streets and providing public amenities like parks, community centers and schools. Both the lack of security in the city and social and cultural norms that require higher level of privacy and security have necessitated the negative approaches of urban design like removing the multistory building from the street to the boundary walled premises with blank boundary walls. Few entrances or higher boundary walls in row houses on the streets are other examples. The presence of a park around such schemes can also lessen such negative impacts. A number of apartment schemes can be seen of such nature.

Parks of different sizes are planned at various scales. Dr. Noman and Amin Shaikh² outline the typology of parks in Karachi. These are listed below:

- Major Urban Parks: These are usually situated along permanent axes or busy streets of the city e.g. Bagh Jinnah and Bin Qasim Park of more than 60 acres.
- Locality Parks: These are those parks situated within the neighbourhood.
- Special Purpose parks: They are distributed throughout the city e.g. Safari Park, Taleemi Park

Two more type of categories in the above list may be added, that is a community park which is larger than and serves more than one neighbourhood. What examples of such parks in Karachi include Nisar Shaheed Park and Aziz Bhatti Park. The other category of parks is the women park. Parks for women are found in certain neighbourhoods to cater for the issue of gender segregation particularly prominent in certain ethnic cultures.

METHODOLOGY

The various aspects of uses and experiences of

neighbourhood parks in Karachi were studied and analysed using qualitative methods of research. The parks selected for survey were based on the observation that the amenity had a fair amount of use by the local neighbourhood residents especially by women and children. Five well known planned residential areas of Karachi were chosen. These areas constitute upper to middle class localities. Physical attributes were noted by observation like various groups of people using the park, facilities provided, the planning and landscaping while user response, liking and disliking was done through a questionnaire filled for the user by the surveyor. Respondents were interviewed from within the park. Some interviews were done from the households for taking their opinions regarding the parks in their neighbourhoods and some personal experiences and observations are also narrated. A literature review was also done for added knowledge on the issue.

Although the opinion and evaluation here may be challenged because the samples taken were in small numbers but it can give generalized ideas regarding opinion of park users and various opportunities offered by these parks or the lack of certain elements.

EVALUATIONS

The physical, social and cultural aspects that determine and affect the use of the park as gathered from the research are elaborated as follows.

Proximity

To experience a park, one needs to visit it. For some, it is an occasional habit or a yo – yo experience, for others it becomes a part of daily life. Among the neighborhood park users, most were reported visiting it at regular frequencies. For some, this means every day and for most working men it means on weekends only. Many visitors responded that they will not come to the park if it is more than 10 minutes away from their home. The nearer it is, the better it is. These

2 Ahmad, N.; Shaikh, A, *Parks and Open Spaces in Karachi – A Contextual Perspective*, in: "Landscaping Parameters", (1994) Architecture and Planning Publication Centre, Department of Architecture and Planning, Dawood College of Engineering and Technology, Karachi.

results match with the findings from Western studies; that is local open spaces experience more frequent use than distant parks.^{3, 4}

The importance of nearby open space in the urban pattern has been discussed by Alexander et al. (1977)⁵, 'People need green open places to go to; when they are close, they use them.' Proximity, from this perspective, is a valued quality in the open space experience that 'pull' or attract respondents to the open space. It was a major factor in respondents' descriptions of their reasons for visiting neighborhood parks.

The convenient location of neighborhood parks to home would account for the high frequency of use. Although most visits to neighborhood parks are made on foot, but cars are also used especially when the women want to visit parks.

Safety of Streets

If the way to the park is not properly lighted, it is not considered safe because many people who go to the park for walking do so early in the morning after morning prayers and streets do not appear safe enough for women to go alone. The other time that people find these parks and the way to it unsafe is after sunset. Some neighbourhood parks are found totally empty after dark. In contrast, there were also instances found where people are also seen using these parks after dark even if there is no light. Many of the parks close after 10:00 pm in the evening.

Elite Culture

In posh localities where the plot sizes are bigger, people have big open spaces within bungalows. Small neighbourhood parks exist at the Defence Housing Society, a largely elite neighbourhood. However, these are observed to be scarcely used by the residents and found to be largely empty. The reasons for this are:

- a. These parks do not offer facilities like walking tracks.



Figure-1: Walking track.



Figure-2: Passive recreation.



Figure-3: Play equipment for children.

3 Jacobs, J. (1961) "The life and death of great American city", Vintage Books, New York.

4 Jacobs J. (1969), "The use of Neighbourhood Parks", Vintage Books, New York.

5 Alexander et al, (1977) "A pattern language", Oxford University Press, New York.

- b. Although they may be at walking distance from residences, walking on the street is considered to be below prestige in such a locality as every household owns at least one car.

Hence, residents either use their own gardens / open spaces within their residences for relaxation or drive to parks where facilities like walking tracks are available.

Gender Issue

In Karachi, a few parks exist which are for women only, to address gender segregation. The idea of gender segregation in public spaces differs from one socioeconomic group to another and also from one ethnicity to another. The traditional Pakistani societal structure portrays the ideal woman as a conservative with little outdoor life. In order to overcome this issue women parks are developed.

Many women do not leave their houses without men. Men generally return to home from work either after dark or just before the dark and there is little time left for such recreational activities. The only type of recreation on week days is watching TV which almost every household owns.

An observation of the number and type of visitors in the park reveals more. In the higher socioeconomic group, more women and children visit the park than the men. In the low income groups more men and children than women visit the park. Because of prevailing gender issues, the location of the park is important in determining its use. Certain activities in Karachi are exclusively male oriented and their presence in the proximity of a park has a psychological impact with a much lesser number of female visitors. Such activities include playgrounds used for sports by boys only, commercial gymnasiums for men only and mosques.

For a neighborhood park the emphasis of use is for the family or more specifically towards women and children. The following factors seem to affect these criteria rather negatively.

- a. Commercial activities in its immediate surroundings which are male oriented like chai / pan shops.

- b. Gymnasium, which is more male dominated or even mosque where more men come rather than women.
- c. High boundary walls.
- d. Play grounds either within parks or adjacent to parks which is one of the traditional ways of planning parks and playgrounds.
- e. Walking distance of the target group to the park if the walking duration is more than 10 minutes then the parks are not considered friendly.

Sense of Identity and Place Making and Sense of Belonging

Most parks have a name and a prominent entrance which gives it an identity but there are also parks which have no name and they are identified with the name of the housing around it. Most neighbourhood parks are closed at night and night time activity is very limited in these parks. Many parks don't have lights. Parks are also empty from morning to afternoon. Most parks lack shady spaces for the day time. Not many water dependent features are found in these parks.

Health

One factor that is increasing the visits to the park is advice by the doctors to reduce weight and exercise, for patients of Diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, cardiac diseases and obesity. The concern and awareness for health and the benefits of such activities are not fully understood



Figure-4: Park with residences on two sides animating the street and making it safer.

among all income groups.

Activities in a Park

Most park users visit neighborhood parks for a stroll, jogging and socializing to experience the nature and open spaces. The seasonal changes also have an impact on the visits to the parks. These parks are visited more in summer than in winter when they can enjoy the refreshing sea breeze of Karachi in the evenings.

The survey results of neighbourhood park users offer insights into the many different ways in which the residents use neighborhood parks. A majority of the neighborhood park users reported doing multiple activities in the park. Respondents talked about the use of the park as a convenient and free form of recreation, as breathing spaces of their locality and just knowing that such space exist comforts them. When they are not using it, they experience it visually as an open space when they are moving around. They socialize outdoors, some times they get to meet their neighbours, make new friendships, enjoy evening breeze and landscaping. They sit while taking care of their children, they exercise, simply watch other people around, and use the park as a quiet place to sit and have a private conversation with loved ones or to escape for a while from the stress of their daily lives. A negative impact of having a park too close is that it may generate too much noise and may disturb the privacy of residences.

According to International standards (Harris & Dines)⁶, neighborhood parks are generally aimed to serve the immediate residential population, approximately 2,000 people or within 1 mile who can walk to the park. It is preferred that these parks be 3 to 5 acres in size, but due to a variety of factors these can be as small as 1 to 2 acres. Typically, a neighborhood park is a land set aside primarily for passive recreation. Ideally, it gives the impression of being rural or natural in its character. It emphasizes horticultural features with spacious lawn areas bordered by trees, shrubs and sometimes floral arrangements and park furniture. It is essential in densely populated areas



Figure-5: Design feature in a park.



Figure-6: Bad conditions of streets and footpaths.

but not required where there is ample yard space attached to individual home sites. These parks could also be developed to address a site-specific need such as a Heritage Park or preservation of a unique ecological feature. These sites must be serviced by all utilities. Neighborhood parks are generally not fenced to improve aesthetics of urban spaces.

The general recommendation⁷ regarding the location of parks is that it should be attached to an elementary school or neighbourhood playgrounds. A separate location is required if this combination is not feasible. The neighborhood park plays an important role in setting standards

6 Time – Saver Standards for Landscape Architecture by Charles W Harris & Nicholas T. Dines.

7 Harris, C. and Dines. N, "Neighbourhood Parks" in: Time Saver Standards.

for community aesthetics. Therefore it should include open lawn areas, plantings and walks, sculptured forms, pools and fountains should also be considered for ornamentations. Creative planning will utilize contouring, contrasting surfaces masonry and other techniques to provide both eye appeal and utility. In Karachi, these parks may deviate on certain issues explained later in the article.

REGULATIONS FOR PARKS IN KARACHI

The Karachi Building and Town Planning Regulations 2002 specifies general standards for land use regarding parks for residential developments under land development works, i.e. with area more than 2.5 acres and greater. According to clause no. 20-4.1.3, the area allocation for parks is minimum 5 percent of the total area of the land in the residential schemes. If we calculate this area for the minimum size of a scheme, it is less than the recommended size of a park. If we calculate this area for the minimum size of a scheme i.e. 5 percent of 2.5 acres it is about 605 sq.yds which is less than the size recommended by the international standards.

In the builder driven schemes e.g bungalows in Gulistan-e-Jauhar, White House located in Gulzar Hijri, the park is usually located with the other public buildings / amenities like school, mosque, playground etc. that usually provides a public space for such activities and fulfills the requirements of 5 percent of the total area of schemes and the housing remains as row housing overlooking streets. In the case of public housing as the area is large, more parks at various locations are found including both along public activities and along the housing as well.

The regulations do not specify if one big park is required or several small parks in the residential areas. Internationally, parks are designed adjacent to schools and the duo generate a focal point for a neighborhood design. This however, is not the case in Karachi because the 3 percent land allocation requirement for educational purposes is often used for madarsahs, which are usually an extension of a mosque, and often located with commercial areas rather than with the residential areas. This is one of the reasons why private schools start opening into converted residential plots. Mosques are male gendered spaces, hence the presence of

a mosque along a park naturally makes the park a largely male dominated space too and women who want to use parks tend to find this disturbing.

Size and Shape

Although size does matter in determining the typology of the park and its function there is no mention of it in the regulations. Odd shape parks are also there at various locations in the city. Size of the parks depends on the functions attached to it.

Parks in the neighborhoods where plot sizes are more than 1000 sq. yards were found under utilized and mostly vacant. In neighbourhoods with plot size 500 sq. yards, parks were found to be in optimum use. The better used parks in Karachi include the following features:



Figure-7: Open Ground along other amenities.

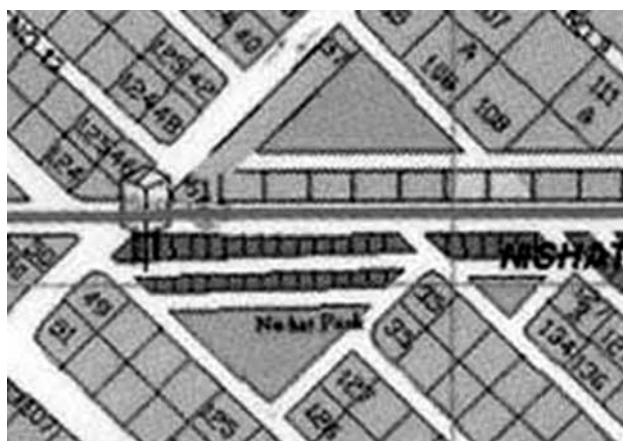


Figure-8: Lay out of Nishat Park in DHA, Karachi.



Figure-9(a-b): Entrance gate, name and boundary wall creating a sense of place and a sense of security and safety. (a-Left, b-Right)

- Walking track
- Play equipment for small children
- Seating space for adults and elderly
- Landscaping for better aesthetics
- Better maintenance
- Better lights

Boundaries

Various types of boundaries have an impact on the adjacent street and neighborhood. Most of the parks surveyed in Karachi have boundary walls and gate. Most of them also have guards. Although one finds all sorts of boundaries prevailing in the city.

- A high blank wall renders a street less animated, less accessible and the aesthetic value of the park is gone and there is almost no sense of belonging.
- A low blank wall creates a sense of boundary which is visual as well as administrative, depicts controlled accessibility.
- A grilled boundary also creates a boundary both visual as well as administrative, with controlled accessibility.

REAL ESTATE VALUE

A neighbourhood that has a good park generally has higher real estate value. Properties facing the park and in immediate vicinity have higher value within the neighbourhood. These facts validate the preference for parks for residents of a neighbourhood, stimulate private investment in

the community and give added economic benefits.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARKS IN KARACHI

In order to make parks an integral part of the lives of the residents of a locality so that every resident of the area benefits from the social, psychological and therapeutic affects of open space following recommendation are made.

- a) Parks should be preferably distributed between residential and commercial zones in a neighborhood so that maximum of population can benefit from this amenity, which would mean raising the 5 percent requirement.
- b) The walking distance from the park to a household should not be more than 10 minutes and should not be obstructed by any major road.
- c) Some residential development should be featured facing the park rather than having thier backs onto the park to enhance safety and security.
- d) Parks should be accessible for special persons.
- e) Parks should not generate significant traffic or noise.
- f) Boundary walls should be designed to make them visually accessible but should also give enough sense of security and privacy to park users of the parks.

-
- g) To make the park as part of the life of the residents it should offer features like decorative lights at festive occasions like Eid and Bakra eid. Some areas may be designated for small birthday parties. This will also ensure the participation of whole family at one time to create a sense of belonging.
 - h) These should be better walking facilities on the streets like footpaths & better lighting.
 - i) Public participation, sustainable designs and better maintenance should be encouraged.
 - j) Boundary walls should be low and should offer visual continuity of open space.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Harris, C., Dines, N., Time – Saver Standards for Housing and Residential Development by 2nd ed 1995, McGraw Hill Inc., UK.

"The Karachi Building and Town Planning Regulations, 2002" reproduced by Zaka Ali, The Ideal Publishers, Karachi.

Ahmed, N. "Ways to Beautify Karachi", presented at seminar organized by the Pakistani Press Foundation (PPF), Thursday, January 5, 2006, at PPF Vicky Zeitlin Library, Karachi.

Ahmad, Noman & Shaikh, Mohammad (1994), *Parks and Open Spaces in Karachi. A Contextual Perspective*. "Landscaping Parameters", Architecture and Planning Publication Center. Department of Arch and Planning, Dawood College of Engineering and Technology, Karachi.

Jacobs, J. (1961) "The life and death of great American city", Vintage Books, New York.

Jacobs J. (1969) "The use of Neighbourhood parks", Vintage Books, New York.

Hestor, R. (1984) "Planning neighbourhood space with people", Van Nostrand, New York.

Kaplan, R., Kaplan, S. (1989). "The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective". Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Porteous D. (1982) *Approaches to Environmental Aesthetics*, in: "Journal of Environmental Psychology", Vol. 2, 5366.

Ulrich, R.S. (1981) *Natural versus Urban Scenes – Some Psycho-physiological Effects*. in: "Environment and Behavior", 1355-2556.

Ulrich, R. S., Addoms D. L. (1981). *Psychological and Recreational benefits of a Residential Parks*, in: "Journal of Leisure Research".

Verderber, S. (1986). *Jury Dimensions of Person-Window Transactions in the Hospital Environment*, in: "Environment and Behavior", Vol. 18, pp.450-460.

Gold. S.M. (1972). *Non-use of Neighbourhood Parks*, in: "Journal of the American Institute of Planners".

Gold. S.M. (1977). *Planning Neighbourhood Parks for Use*, in: "Ekistics".

Alexander et al, (1977). "A Pattern Language". Center for Environmental Structure Serves Oxford University Press, New York.