



Scott Shafer and John Jacob*

URBAN PARKS: The Value of Small Urban Parks, Plazas and Other Outdoor Spaces

It is wonderfully encouraging that the places people like the best of all, find least crowded, and most restful, are small places marked by a high density of people and a very efficient use of space.

– William Holly Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*

Parks strengthen communities. They increase community cohesion by providing a place for people to get together.

– Peter Harnik, Director, Center for City Park Excellence, Trust for Public Land

People need parks. Good parks provide a place for rest and relaxation, but more importantly they are places for spontaneous social interaction. Social interaction is the basic building block for “social capital”—the network of relationships that define the nature of civic engagement and cohesion in a place. Places with good social capital are stable, prosperous places where people want to live and work. They are the “great” cities and towns of America. Places with little social capital are places where people have little pride in their community.

It is not particularly easy to build social capital, but it is easy to build the spaces where social capital can form, and small, urban parks are some of the very best spaces for this. The most urgent need in most cities

is for spaces to which everyone has access. Ideally, no one should be farther than 1/4 mile from an urban park.

A great urban park can be as small as a single house lot. Some of the very best urban parks in America are smaller than 100 x 100 feet. The best size depends on the location of the park and its design. Design is what makes a park great. A well-designed park attracts people, makes them want to stay, and encourages spontaneous interactions between them.



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Lowly, unpurposeful and random as they appear, sidewalk contacts are the small change from which a city's wealth of public life must grow.

– Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Small urban parks can occur in hyper-urban downtown areas as well as in suburban neighborhoods. There are important physical characteristics that should be considered when planning and designing a small park, plaza or other public space.

1. Places to sit. Good seating is the most basic characteristic of a successful public park. Seating can be provided on grass-covered slopes, benches, chairs, walls, ledges, planters and steps.

- Seating should be oriented so that it is both physically and socially comfortable. The best locations for seating are near pedestrian corridors, playing fields or other places “where the action is.” People like to sit where they can see other people.
- People should be able to choose where they want to sit, whether in the sun, in the shade, in groups or alone. This is what makes a park attractive to many types of people.
- Seating height can vary. The useful height of sit-table ledges or walls varies from 1 to 3 feet. The depth of seating may be more important. A bench or ledge that is at least 30 to 36 inches wide allows people to sit back to back, which adds capacity in a small space.



- Seating can be complementary to other uses. For example a grass-covered slope facing a playground gives parents a place to sit while supervising children and a place for kids to slide and roll.
- Seating doesn't have to be fixed. Moveable seating gives users choices and options and is a feature of many well-used urban parks.
- The linear feet of seating space in a park should at least equal the perimeter (in feet) of the park. At least 10 percent of the total open space should be devoted to seating. The more seating there is the better.



The best way to handle the problem of undesirables is to make a place attractive to everyone else. Places designed for mistrust will get what they were looking for.

– William H Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*

2. Safety issues. A park should have good visual access. If people feel cut off from their surroundings they may feel unsafe. Public spaces should be designed and maintained so that they are visibly “connected” to their surroundings. This encourages observation, and the more “eyes on the park” the more comfortable it will feel to users and the safer it will be.

- Making a park feel safe to users can be tricky, especially if it is also intended to provide habitat for wildlife. For example, clearing understory vegetation so people can see into a park might be critical to making the park a success, but the vegetation may be what attracts birds and other wildlife.



While providing wildlife habitat can be one of the objectives of small urban parks, it is important to remember that serving human needs is the primary purpose of these places.

- People prefer places that allow them to see and “read” the area while also creating some mystery—provoking the question, “I wonder what’s over there.”
- Neighborhood parks are best if centrally located with houses facing onto them. Parks become more connected to a neighborhood when given “front yard” status.

3. Water. Water is interesting to look at and listen to. It is calming and refreshing. Some of the most impressive public spaces in America—from New York City’s Central Park to San Antonio’s River Walk—include water features. Water is just as important in small public spaces.

- Water is especially useful when people can touch it. Being able to wade, splash or soak in water features adds greatly to their value.
- The sounds water makes when falling, gurgling and splashing can help mask undesirable background noise and make people feel separated from busy surroundings.



- Even a small water feature such as a pond or fountain can be a focal point and help create a restorative environment.



4. Sun and wind. The weather can affect people’s enjoyment of outdoor spaces. A city’s parks and public spaces can be designed so that the effects of sun and wind help warm or cool a space.

- Parks dominated by grass and trees are much cooler in summer than parks dominated by paved surfaces. In fact, such parks act like air conditioning units and may stay 5 to 10 degrees cooler than the surrounding city.



- Shade trees and awnings in spaces dominated by concrete can greatly reduce glare and keep surface temperatures down.
- Deciduous trees lose their leaves in winter and allow sunlight through to warm an area. In summer they give shade. They are helpful when planted near places where people sit or gather.
- Conifers stay green all year and often have dense lower branches that make them good for blocking cold winter winds.
- A seating area can be oriented in the direction of prevailing winds to take advantage of cool summer breezes.
- Both wind and vegetation can be used to help block noise from a nearby street or other area.



5. Trees. Trees are a key feature of any park or outdoor space. They help control temperature and block wind. They also soften the environment and add color, texture and sound to open spaces. A tree canopy can provide a sense of shelter and human scale in an outdoor space.

- Deciduous trees change throughout the year. Some flower in the spring and show bright colors in the fall. These special characteristics can create focal points for park visitors.
- Native trees (and other vegetation) are often the best choices because they usually require less maintenance and attract more wildlife than non-native species. Consult with local experts to learn about the native trees in your region.
- Trees don't always have to go into the ground. In a mostly paved area they can be placed in planters. Trees are a nice addition even to small parks dominated by pavement.



6. Surrounding streets. The relationship to surrounding streets may be the most important design feature for small urban parks. In commercial districts, parks should

be planned so that stores with windows face the park. Nothing hurts an urban park more than being surrounded by office buildings without ground-floor retail. One of the most important controls planners have for ensuring park success, and the success of urban space in general, is the ability to require that there be a certain percentage of ground floor retail in buildings.

In relatively dense urban residential neighborhoods, the same basic principle applies. Houses should front the park. Neighborhood parks should never be adjacent to fenced back yards.

7. Special activities and features. Features such as art and street performers can help connect people and often lead to friendly interaction. The critic in all of us entices people to stop and talk about a piece of art. A street performer or a game can bring people together and spark conversations. Urban parks can be places that encourage such activities and interactions.



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