

Exploring the people's perception of urban public parks in Tehran

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1 ABSTRACT

Urban public parks play an essential role in enhancing the quality of life in urban areas and are particularly beneficial where stress is a common aspect of life. The social status of users of urban parks has universally been important in their perception of these places. In this paper an attempt has been made to explore the perception of the different groups of population of major urban public parks in Tehran. The extent the people use public parks must be viewed against the increasing privatisation of consumption, including leisure and recreational activities, universally and in Iran, which has been exposed to a number of factors construing to the enhancement of this kind of privatisation. To this end, a dual process of obtaining information from the users and non-users of urban parks in Tehran is done. The first group of respondents was chosen amongst young and educated population with access to the internet. The second group for whom an in place questionnaire was used, were users or potential users of the three major parks in Tehran. This study indicated that the respondents perception of the urban public parks in Tehran include the quality and quantity of green areas, types of activities offered in the parks, the social status of other users, its security, the visibility of law enforcement, the location of the park and their ownership of private means of transportation. Also, it was deduced that the use of public parks has become a major source of leisure and recreational activity for lower income groups. As there is a socio-spatial dichotomy in Tehran, the lower income groups, use the urban parks in the northern parts of the city. This – and the physically inactive lifestyles of many of the more well-off and educated residents – has become major barriers of using urban parks – especially during the weekends and public holidays - in Tehran.

2 PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

In this paper an attempt has been made to explore the perception of the different groups of population about using major urban public parks in Tehran. The manner in which and the extent the people use public parks has to be viewed against the increasing privatisation of consumption, including leisure and recreational activities, worldwide and in Iran - specifically since 1979 - which the country has been exposed to a number of issues construing to the enhancement of this kind of privatisation. In general, this study attempts to explore some of the prominent issues in the production and use of public spaces in Tehran. To pursue the appropriate investigation the following questions can be posed:

- How do people perceive the public spaces of Tehran and their relative problem areas?
- What is the extent the people use public parks in view of the increasing privatisation of consumption.
- What are the differing trends of various socio-economic groups towards using public parks, as part of their leisure activities?

2.1 Public parks and the privatisation of consumption

There are two aspects as to the privatisation of public spaces. One is found in such societies that face diverse socio-cultural impediments that constrain the people to spend their leisure time in their private domains. The other aspect is part of a tripartite categorisation of policies towards public spaces of 'privatisation', 'commodification' and 'commercialisation'. 'Privatisation' of public space signifies the shifting of the planning and management of public spaces from public sector to the private sector (introduction and extension of market principles in the provision of public spaces). 'Commodification' of public space refers to the recognition of public realm as a commodity. 'Commercialisation' of public space means that public realm is used to produce profit rather than to improve the quality of urban space and life. The second course of privatisation of urban public space - which turns them into controlled spaces - has negative consequences attributed to this transformation including denying entry to public spaces for unwanted people (according to such measures as poverty, gender, age, ethnicity or religion). The increasing shift towards privatisation - in

general - has been paralleled by fundamental changes in the usual task and financial ability of the states in different societies (Kirby, 2008; Garcia, 2004; Lloyd & Auld, 2003).

2.2 The Implication and Importance of urban public parks

It has been widely recognised that urban public parks play an essential role in enhancing the quality of life in urban areas and they have a strategic importance for the quality of life of the increasingly urbanised societies as well as being particularly beneficial where stress is a common aspect of life. Urban public parks are appreciated even by their not users. Different factors such as age, sex, social class and ethnic identity affect the way in which urban public spaces in general and urban public parks - as a specific area of concern for this paper – are perceived by people. In addition to positive outcomes, urban public parks might have a negative role on people's perceptions through feelings of insecurity linked to such threats as vandalism and crime (Lloyd & Auld, 2003; Barbosa, 2007).

2.3 Meaning of urban public parks

Public spaces - contrary to private spaces - are accessible to all. The different ways in which public space is used have been the subject of study in different disciplines (such as anthropology, sociology, geography, urban planning and urban design). From a socio-cultural perspective, public spaces are defined as places of interrelation, social encounter and exchange, where groups with different interests converge. From a political perspective, any definition includes a vision of public spaces where people can participate in public life. From a socio-cultural perspective, public spaces and specifically urban public parks are defined as places of interaction and encounter of people and the seat of communication and exchange of information. There is a dual view of urban public parks, the traditional and the new. The traditional view - still widely valid in many societies - considers them as providers of recreational activities and opportunities. The new view exceeds the traditional value of parks and considers the broader contributions the urban parks can make to the vitality and well being of communities and their residents and focuses on how policymakers, practitioners and the public can consider parks as valuable contributor to larger urban policy objectives (such as job opportunities, youth development, public health, and community building) (Walker, 2004; Rogers, 1998 in Garcia, 2004; Lloyd & Auld, 2003). The new view of urban parks can also be applied in societies where the traditional view has not been applied properly.

2.4 Public parks, recreation and leisure activities

Recreation, in a variety of forms, is vital to urban life and has an important role to play in many societies, more or less developed. Given the increasing psychological stresses of contemporary life in all societies, the importance of recreation continue to grow and urban public parks will rise in importance for their role in providing public recreation. Increased recreation and leisure activities – an outcome of the rising standard of living and changing employment and lifestyle patterns in almost all societies worldwide – is accompanied by an increasing demand for outdoor activities. Most of this demand is required by people to be met mainly by the kind of environment in which nature is involved, whether through active (sports and games) or passive activities.

2.5 Urban public parks and urban planning

The success or failure of urban planning in creating or improving public spaces can be assessed through a number of measures such as:

- The park users by age and gender.
- The diverse socio-economic and cultural characteristics of users and potential users of urban public parks.
- The variety of activities offered and taking place in urban public parks.

It has been said that if public spaces achieve satisfactory results in the tripartite above mentioned areas, "they can make a significant contribution in enhancing social interaction and reduce exclusion rooted on social class, ethnicity, age or gender" (Garcia, 2004). The importance of open spaces in addressing these issues affects planning decisions. These characteristics has led to the emergence of various approaches and

planning methods, guided by essentially different concepts of not only urban planning but also intricacies of open spaces related decision-making. In many countries worldwide, open spaces has for many years been regarded as an integral part of planning decisions, in spite of varying approaches to planning (Pasaogullari, 2004; Garcia, 2004; Barbosa, 2007). Urban public parks are the domain and the responsibility of public sector towards their planning, provision and managing. This is a view of urban parks as a public good. The reason that the public sector intervenes is because private sector fails to produce what is considered valuable as a public good and is unable or unwilling to participate in a venture which is not a suitable area of speculation and whose profit gaining prospect is weak. Providing for recreational demands of users and potential users of urban public parks, requires a complex and diverse decision-making system to suit the variety of needs of various population groups (such as different age, sex, ethnic and socio-economic groups).

3 URBAN PUBLIC PARKS IN IRAN

Contemporary urban public parks in Iran are rooted in not only the private gardens and the public parks which started in the 1500 are also rooted in the modernisation movement of the country which started in early 1900. It was in late 1940s that the first European style public park was built in Tehran, accompanied by an attempt to create an organisational structure, i.e., the Tehran Municipality (TM) for their planning, building and managing. Tehran- similar to many capital cities around the world- has been faced with immense growth of its population and compounding urban problems including not only unsuitable access to social and welfare services - including public open spaces - as a place for leisure activities, though this city has always been faced with uncertainties related to the place of planning urban parks as part of an overall process of urban planning. During the early post 1979 period, there was an implicit tendency in the whole society towards privatisation of leisure activities: an increased tendency of the residents towards spending their leisure time in enclosed and private spaces. In early 1990s there was a progressive movement in the TM of the day towards opposing this tendency. Thus was that public spaces, especially urban public parks accompanied by amphitheatres, assembly and concert halls were improved or were erected.

3.1 Introducing the applied process of research and planning urban public parks

Investigating the people's perception is done with the intention of providing an information basis or a decision support system for subsequent decision-making activities related to urban public parks. This can be conceived as a process with a set of pre-defined stages. The first stage involves client definition composed of problem formulation meant for each client group. Once the client and problems are defined, the data is collected resting on the perceptions of the users and potential users of the urban public parks. The data collection stage – based on the identification of the clients of this investigation - considers their social, cultural, and demographic characteristics and their perceived needs, desires and problems. Any sampling technique and method, from participant observation of local communities to a questionnaire survey of randomly selected users and potential users, can be employed to collect the required information. Once clients are categorised into groups and the information is collected, this becomes the basis of later possible scenarios for decisions concerning urban public parks as part of an integrated urban planning and management activity.

3.2 Method of investigation as applied in this paper

A number of routes were selected to produce the necessary information from diverse sources. In addition, in order to pursue this investigation three major parks of this city - having both local and non-local users – and each situated in three major parts of the city (the more affluent northern parts, the central location and the less well-off parts of the city), were selected (Figure 1)

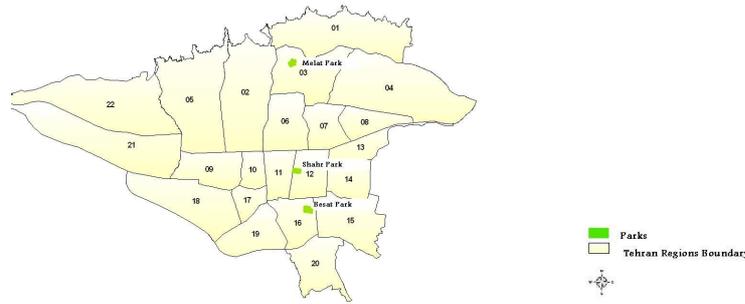


Fig. 1: Location of the three major urban parks in Tehran, selected as case-studies.

In order to investigate the people's perception of urban parks in Tehran, a dual process of obtaining information from the users and non-users of urban parks in Tehran was pursued. The first route was done through a virtual space from a group of respondents with access to the internet. To do this a questionnaire was designed and was put in the internet. An implicit purpose of this route was to test the applicability of obtaining information through the internet in this country. The response to this method was satisfactory as within one month, there were around 250 respondents. This route focused on both users and non-users of public parks and – inter alia – intended to compare the perception of these two groups. The negative aspect of this route of investigation was that the respondents were limited to young (20 to 45 year olds), educated and middle-class population of Tehran with qualifications much above the average for Tehran and the country. The second group, for whom an in-place questionnaire was designed and used, comprises three sub-groups, i.e., (a) users who commute to the three parks on daily and weekly basis or use parks on special occasions (public holidays) coming from distant origins, (b) people who live near the three parks, and (c) potential users of the parks. Considering difficulties and impediments for interviewing people in public places, altogether 50 questionnaires were filled. This route focused mainly on users of the three selected public parks and in this way the intention was to compare the people's perception about the three selected parks.

3.3 Results of the investigation

A number of procedures were used to analyse the information obtained from the the questionnaires and the applied dual path of investigation. First it was revealed that the clients of urban public parks in Tehran can be divided into three groups of (a) constant users who at least once a month use the parks, (b) low users who – even residing close to the major parks – use the parks two to three times in one year, and (c) non-users who use parks once or less in one year. Characteristics of these three categories of population as users or non-users of urban public parks in Tehran are summarised Figure (2).

respondents' characteristics (%)	Age group				Sex group		Marital status		Car ownership		Housing	
	20-25	26-36	36-45	46+	female	male	married	non-married	yes	no	owned	rented
constant users	59	68	84	75	61	72	64	72	68	66	67	73
low users	30	24	9	13	26	20	23	23	23	25	23	24
non-users	11	8	6	13	12	8	12	3	8	9	10	3
all (numbers)	6	17	46	22	122	182	178	126	184	120	179	82



Fig. 2: Characteristics of the three categories of population as users or non-users of urban public parks in Tehran

It was also revealed that the participants considered the spatial and social attributes of public parks as their most salient attribute. Respondents also considered the types of activities, the social status of users, location, ownership of private means of transportation and easy access by public transportation as important elements for increasing the attraction and intensity of using urban public parks in Tehran (Figure 3). Moreover, a sevenfold problem area as is shown in Figure (4) was also exposed by this search.

areas of attraction	enjoying the environment	social activities	getting away from it all	walking	passive enjoyment	active enjoyment / sport	existence of social events
park (1)	0.46	0.27	0.12	0.23	0.08	0.12	0.00
park (2)	0.17	0.25	0.25	0.08	0.08	0.33	0.25
park (3)	0.33	0.08	0.17	0.17	0.00	0.25	0.00

(1)= mellat Park (2)= Shahr park (3)= Besat park

Fig. 3: People's perception of the three major urban parks in Tehran, 2008

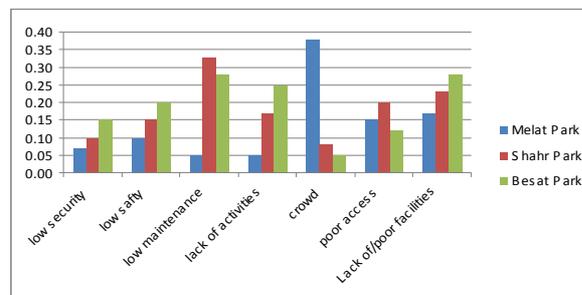


Fig. 4: People's perception of the problem areas three major urban parks in Tehran, 2008

The social status of users of urban parks has been important in their perception. It was deduced that the use of public parks has become a major source of leisure and recreational activity for lower-income groups and a major refuge for lower-income groups of the burden of their routine life in this city. As there is an evident socio-spatial dichotomy in Tehran, the non-local lower income groups who live in dense residential areas of the southern parts of Tehran, use the urban parks in the northern parts of the city. This has become one of the major barriers of using these parks – especially during the weekends and public holidays - by the more well-off residents of the northern parts of the city. Another major factor of low usage of public parks in Tehran – as was deduced from the survey – is the physically inactive lifestyles of many of the better-off and educated sections of this city's residents. This has become a major barrier of the enhancement of their use of public parks as against their personal or gated private open spaces, whether in Tehran or in the holiday resorts surrounding Tehran or in the coastal areas to the north of the country.

4 CONCLUSION

The situation in Tehran seems to be contrary to the situation in some countries in which there is an increasing shift towards privatisation of urban parks. The use of urban public parks has been enhanced especially for the lower-income groups who do not own or have access to properties suitable for spending their leisure time.

In terms of planning and management procedures – an area that is beyond the scope of this paper - one solution to enhance the degree of people's satisfaction from their use of urban public parks is a collaborative approach in which a team made up of community (composed of users and potential users), professionals and experts, politicians mainly at local levels (council and sub-council elected members), focus groups and miscellaneous participants are brought together.

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