The Value of Parks Nearby and Ways to Enhance Them

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Introduction

Singaporeans can be justifiably proud of our parks like East Coast Park, Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park, Singapore Botanic Gardens and the new gem Gardens by the Bay. However, despite the somewhat disproportionate attention given to big destination parks, the smaller parks nearby, which include neighbourhood parks, precinct gardens and rooftop gardens[1], together account for about 50% of all park visits (NParks, 2010, 2012a)[2]. This is not surprising as accessibility facilitates usage: we found that parks which are closer to residents attract more frequent visitors and thus higher usage (NParks, 2010). Parks close to home are particularly important for fulfilling some of the everyday social and recreational needs of people, whether it is a small neighbourhood park or a larger town park.

Given the intent to facilitate ageing in place, our parks will have to be even more accessible and friendly to the elderly. Our multi-racial society and the influx of new immigrants with diverse cultures mean that the shared space in our public parks, especially those which we regularly use due to their convenience, will continue to be significant for promoting a cohesive community by providing opportunities for informal interactions, which also help in the generation of social capital[3]. Whyte (1980) speaks of external stimulus that "provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other", which are present in all great parks. The stimuli can be objects like sculptures or water features, scenic views, buskers, or other things or activities which draw people's attention. Each of our urban parks can and should delightfully serve the people near them as our population continues to increase.

> Some Findings:
> - About 1 out of 2 visits to local parks are to neighbourhood parks[1] (NParks, 2010, 2012a).
> - Frequent users are willing to travel no more than 5 minutes to reach a neighbourhood park, whereas in general people are willing to travel up to 10 minutes to reach a neighbourhood park (NParks, 2010).
> - Young families and the elderly prefer to visit parks nearer to their homes more than youths, young adults and matured adults (URA, 2005).

Everyday Social Significance of Parks Nearby

The convenience of nearby parks makes it possible for them to become very much a part of people's daily lives. The routine needs fulfilled include relaxation, social contact, solitude, and a variety of leisure activities. Besides the functional values, Belinda Yuen (1996) provided some insights into the deeper meanings of the convenience of neighbourhood parks for different groups of users. For mothers with young children, for example, besides meeting the time out and social needs of housewives, their experience of those parks is commonly entwined with the needs met

and pleasures given to their children. They spoke of the nearby parks' value in providing convenient and safe access to "a 'non-materialistic' set of experiences" for their kids, with opportunities to interact with other children, in contrast to the often passive and insular activities of children nowadays such as computer games. Their views support the importance of such parks for children in high-rise living, so that they can be in the playground one minute and at home the next. For some elderly residents, the nearby park is the usual place within their reach where they go to meet old friends. Many teenagers also echoed personal social values for neighbourhood parks where they enjoy gatherings with friends. To young couples living with their extended family, the park downstairs can also be an invaluable place for communication between spouses. For some, the nearby park is synonymous with community activities, for example, festive celebrations organised by the Residents' Committee, where residents interact and ties are fostered with neighbours and friends. These and other personal meanings of parks nearby involving other people are still very much alive today.

The *HDB Sample Household Survey 2008* (HDB, 2010) found that public housing residents who had larger social circles, and higher trust[4] and reciprocity[5] within their social networks were more likely to be happy or satisfied with life. Some studies have shown that parks and green environments (i.e., those with trees and other natural vegetation) can indeed lead to greater social ties, and better mutual trust and support among people staying in the same neighbourhood (Kuo, 2010). The size of social networks, trust and reciprocity are essentially indicators of social capital, which facilitates the pursuit of shared civic objectives. The maintenance of social capital depends on the maintenance of social ties, and it can be said that leisure is a significant arena for fostering social relationships on which social capital depends (Glover and Hemingway, 2005). Hence, parks nearby – given their greenery and significant part in the social life and leisure of residents – can be considered important for maintaining the health of our society. As a shared community resource, parks are significant particularly for bridging social capital between people who are unlike one another, which is essential for community cohesion. It should be noted, however, that passive forms of recreation (which in parks include popular activities like strolling, jogging and relaxing) do not provide the relational basis for building social capital (Glover and Hemingway, 2005).

Whyte, author of *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980), found that the best-used public spaces in the cities are sociable places: he concluded that *what attract people most, it seems, is other people*. We wonder why some parks are so well-used while others are virtually deserted, and perhaps try to address the perceived crowding in certain areas sometimes. Whyte was glad to discover that the urban pocket parks and plazas in his study which were best liked and used most intensively by people were also not too crowded, that is, crowding was apparently self-limiting. Hence, Whyte advised that we should focus on under-use (rather than over-use) of our parks, which are there to meet a range of daily needs of people staying close by, much like how the small city spaces in his study, such as Seagram plaza (about 0.5ha), serve the downtown workers who are near due to their commutes to and from their workplaces. The draws for local residents to the park nearby invariably include strong social aspects as described above.

We will be looking below at some suggestions for creating attractive and sociable parks. But before doing that, we will review some other benefits of nearby parks and the common reasons why people do not visit them.

Other Benefits of Parks Nearby

Studies have shown that nearby parks also offer psychological and physical health benefits, be-

sides social values. Diez Roux et al (2007) established that individuals residing in areas with the highest density of public recreational resources[6] were more likely to report physical activity during a typical week; Giles-Corti et al (2005) found that very good accessibility coupled with attractiveness and large size of a public open space resulted in a 50% higher chance that residents would use it. These suggest health benefits from increased exercise, but there are also recent studies which directly relate access to parks and greenery to lower rates of childhood obesity, lower mortality rates, and lower incidence of diseases (Kuo, 2010). Higher levels of outdoor activity have also been associated with lower myopia prevalence and myopia prevention for children both overseas and here in Singapore (Dirani et al, 2009).

Parks in the neighbourhood also contribute to a community's sense of belonging through both the endearing place of residence that they help to create and, to a lesser extent, the connections with neighbours which they facilitate (HDB, 2010). In fact, more than half the respondents to the *URA Lifestyle Survey 2009* indicated parks and greenery as a feature which makes Singapore special, higher than any other element identified. Some studies support the view that local parks contribute towards the character of communities and the members' emotional identities (for example, Davenport et al, 2010). Thus, our parks collectively provide an important connection with citizens' hearts and help foster a sense of home.

Common Reasons for Non-usage

From the *Park Usage and Satisfaction Survey* completed in 2010 (NParks, 2010), the main reasons given by residents for not visiting neighbourhood parks and parks that are in close proximity are:

* Less facilities / not interesting,
* Lack of accessibility or convenience[7],
* Too small, and
* Busy with work or study.

Means for Enhancing Park Usage

The problem of lack of time (busy with work or study) is common to all parks and somewhat beyond our control. However, we can probably address the issues of lack of facilities and want of interesting activities or attractions. In fact, 'better facilities' is often the top item in people's minds for encouraging increased park usage. These "facilities", as Whyte showed, do not have to be costly or difficult to provide.

Below we will look at some ways suggested by Whyte and others to improve park usage.

1. **Seating.** Whyte found that sitting space is positively correlated to usage of city plazas, that is, "people tend to sit most where there are places to sit." Thus, generous provision of good seating is one way of getting more people to stop for a while at a park. Ample seats should be located along park paths with high human traffic as people apparently like to sit where there are other people around; another sensible placement is around playgrounds and focal points. Whyte suggested a minimum of 10% of the total area for seating for city centre building plazas. For our local parks, where seats are already close to being fully-utilised at times, it could be a trigger to consider adding more, taking into account other relevant factors like increased population density around the park. Being assured from past experience that a satisfactory place to sit will be available can contribute to a person's decision to return to a park.

The seating should be both physically and socially comfortable, which means users have the choice for meeting social and other personal preferences such as social distance. Integral seating or "maximising the 'sittability' of inherent features" is deemed to be the best approach to provide choice, for example, making existing ledges and steps more comfortable as seats. For our local climate, the provision of shade, by trees and vegetation, man-made structures, or a combination of both, is usually crucial. Suitable turf can be also considered to provide inviting sitting areas, particularly carpet grass with finer leaf blades, and especially when coupled with the shade from a tree.

Shaded seats in a pergola

Wide 'sittable' steps around a big tree

Example of Good Seating in Punggol Park

- ✔ Comfortable and variety of seats
- ✔ Well shaded by trees and other means
- ✔ View of the waterbody or activity plaza (focal points)
- ✔ Near to people traffic/concentrations
  - • Joggers, cyclists, tai-chi groups and others
  - • Diners at nearby restaurant and bar

2. **Focal Points and Stimuli for Interaction.** Whether it is a water feature, art installation or an informal open-air performance, all features have the potential to make the park more interesting and trigger casual interactions between strangers looking at the same attraction. Whyte called the process taking place "triangulation". As mentioned in the introduction, the focal points that can act as stimuli for social contact are varied. Water which is accessible, that is, which people can approach and touch is one well-liked kind; for example, play fountains can give rise to conversations between parents as their children have fun together in the water. Community clubs and hobbyists engaged in their activities like kite-flying and tai-chi can draw random onlookers. Groups or individuals making music can inject life into an otherwise boring park as well. In short, focal points draw people at and to a park, and once there is a sense of life in the park given the various activities (both active and passive) which people are engaged in there, more people will be attracted and more potential interactions. Hence, having or facilitating appropriate focal points in a park is a key to popular usage. They also serve to distinguish the park from others, as will be discussed next.

Bishan-AMK Park Water Playground

> ✔ Great seating around the playground
> - Caregivers can easily watch over their children
> - Others may also sit down to enjoy the lively atmosphere and pretty backdrop
> ✔ Adults join in the fun too!
> ◊ Possibility to augment lighting at night

3. **Variety and Place Identity.** People like variety and this applies to open spaces as well. Some respondents of a study on rooftop gardens in Singapore highlighted that roof gardens should be made unique and different from other parks and gardens, indicating a desire for *place identity* (Yuen and Wong, 2005). This want can be said to be true for parks at ground level as well. Hence, careful consideration should be put into creating distinctive places which the surrounding community can readily develop emotional connections to. Such connections can begin with the parks meeting the residents' daily needs, that is, the functional and social values experienced; and they develop as people appreciate more and more the parks' less tangible values, for example, in making pleasant places of abode, being part of cherished family memories, and contributing to the character of local communities. In seeking to refresh a park, it would be ideal if the changes or enhancements are decided through some consultation with the surrounding residents, as that would foster ownership of the place and help to give it its unique identity.

4. **Infusing Nature.** Although a park with little greenery may still serve its basic purpose, having lush vegetation and pleasing landscaping would better satisfy the common need of urbanites for a place to be in touch with nature. Going further, the normally artificial and manicured landscapes in our parks could be replaced with more natural ecosystems. Through careful ecological design, even small parks can host a surprising variety of flora and fauna while minimising maintenance effort. The enhanced biodiversity can be a source of attraction for visitors, and may offer educational opportunities for children. The *Butterfly Trail @ Orchard* is a wonderful example, where butterfly hosting plants introduced at green open spaces along

the Orchard shopping belt attract over 50 butterfly species, and have made possible marvellous encounters with nature right in the heart of our city. Another instance is the small wetland retained within Jurong Central Park, which hosts dragonflies and water birds among other wildlife. Of course, we may have to manage issues associated with human-wildlife interactions, but gradually the benefits of greater urban biodiversity and a more sustainable landscape should become generally accepted.

A dash of nature: Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker spotted at Punggol Park

5. **Community Hub.** Nearby parks when co-located with other community facilities can become a neighbourhood activity hub. That was the case for a small suburban neighbourhood in USA where 3 ingredients – a civic presence of some sort, an open space, and a commercial enterprise – were brought together to create a lively neighbourhood place (Wilson, 1999). The civic presence can be a childcare centre, community club, public library, et cetera. The commercial enterprise may be a mobile food van on-site or a convenience store across the street. In the local context, given our relatively compact towns, there are already such hubs existing, and there should be lots of opportunities for various new combinations that would bring more people to their nearby parks. Since residents at different estates have dissimilar needs, partnering the community is a good practice in efforts to realise parks which function as neighbourhood centres of activity.

Peter Harnik, in his book *Urban Green: Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities* (2010), discusses the competition faced by parks and shows how to create synergies with, rather than resist, food and retail outlets, gyms and other supposed rivals of parks for visitors.

6. **Heat, Humidity and Lighting.** Given our tropical climate, it is no surprise that a significant percentage of non-users put "weather too warm and humid" as one of the top 3 reasons for not visiting parks (NParks, 2010). Providing ample shade with trees and shelters, and effective passive design to induce breezes and improve circulation of air can help to encourage people to visit and stay longer in a park. Even so, these measures often do not go far enough to persuade some people to visit while the sun is up. This is where night-time usage may be attractive – and providing sufficient lighting and a sense of safety at night are basic for promoting night-time visits[8], just like having plenty of shade during the day. As Harnik (2010) puts it, by facilitating night-time usage we are "adding hours rather than acres" to a park to increase its utility and visitorship. Together with the natural features of a park, such as mature

trees (which also provide day-time cooling), appropriate lighting can help to create a night environment or ambience where visitors can comfortably enjoy a sense of peace and tranquillity that is often sought at parks.

7. **Universal Design and Accessibility.** As nearby parks serve users from all age groups in a potentially small space, it is desirable to "make all of a place usable for everyone" (Whyte, 1980). Creating parks that are inviting to the elderly as well as people with disabilities will go a long way towards fulfilling our parks' social and recreational functions. Universal Design (UD) should be pursued for the whole park, besides enhancements to accessibility from the outside[9]. Playgrounds, for example, can be designed for both children on wheelchairs and ordinary kids, and thoughtful features put in for their caregivers as well. Also, access for those living more than 5 minutes away can be further facilitated by extending bicycle-friendly paths, and sprucing up the main routes for getting there, which can include greening up the pathways and improving their lighting.

Tactile map board with Braille for the visually impaired

Railing for support and guidance

Flushed grating

Wide spaces beside seats

Wide, accessible, wheelchair-friendly footpaths

Tactile picture of a plant with Braille at appropriate height for wheelchair users

Some Universal Design features at Toa Payoh Sensory Park

Conclusion

The above are just some suggestions for enhancing our parks for the people living or working close by. Indeed, there are many other possibilities and potential combinations, and the unique characteristics of the park and surrounding community should be taken into consideration for any improvement plan. This article serves to underline the belief that parks of all sizes can do more for the public, and it will be an ongoing effort to reinvent our smaller park spaces, to make them even more appreciated in our *City in a Garden*.

Footnotes

1. In the *Park Usage & Satisfaction Survey 2009*, "neighbourhood parks" was defined as community parks and green open spaces that serve the immediate residential community in HDB or private residential estates, and includes playgrounds, precinct gardens and rooftop gardens.
2. "All park visits" also include visits to the regional parks, park connectors and special interest parks (such as those managed by Sentosa Development Corporation and JTC Corporation).
3. Putnam (1993) defined social capital as "features of social organisations, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" and pursuit of shared objectives.
4. Refers to trust in informal network of family members, relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues, as well as trust in people in the neighbourhood or community in general.
5. Reciprocity refers to people's willingness to help each other.
6. Both park and non-park resources were included; examples of non-park resources are sports facilities like ball courts and gyms.
7. Even though neighbourhood parks are meant to be easily accessible by residents, people staying further away within the service radius (up to 400m) could still find it not convenient enough.
8. "Brighter lighting at night in general" was the top improvement that would encourage people to visit at night from the *Study on Enhancing Night-time Usage of Parks* (NParks, 2012b).
9. Refer to http://www.friendlybuildings.sg for good examples of Universal Design.

Recommended Reading

1. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* by William H. Whyte (1980).
2. *Urban Green: Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities* by Peter Harnik (2010).

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