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Open space quality in deprived urban areas: user perspective and use pattern

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Abstract

This study examines the quality of open spaces in the most deprived areas in Edinburgh from the perspective of end-users; and the influence of the physical and spatial qualities on how open spaces in such areas are used. The study was informed by an extensive review of the literature and a critical analysis of the relevant Scottish policies and guidance. A case study of Clovenstone Gardens in the Wester Hailes district of Edinburgh, was chosen for this study. A four-fold methodological approach was used for data collection and analysis including semi-structured interviews, attitudinal questionnaire, observation study and space syntax analysis. The study showed that both the physical and the spatial qualities of the open space under study did not meet the user's needs and expectations. This includes aspects of cleanliness, maintenance, safety and the open space layout design and quality. On the other hand, accessibility has shown to achieve a satisfactory level.

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1. Introduction

Our green open spaces are the one public service that many people use on a daily basis, that impact on our sense of quality of life and on our physical and psychological wellbeing, and that are free and available to all regardless of their demographic characteristics and socio-economic status. The importance of green open spaces for any

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community is that they provide a space for social interaction, relaxation, restoration and contact with nature and they offer opportunities for leisure activities. This may be best summarized by Carret *et al.* (1992) who defined public open spaces as the common ground where people carry out their functional and leisure activities that bind a community. Open space has been studied widely in the literature. Several authors have discussed open space from different perspectives such as the visual characteristics of open spaces (Lynch, 1960); the visual description and aesthetics of open spaces (Cullen, 1961); the design characteristics of open spaces that help to prevent crime (Newman, 1973); pattern of people behaviour and space quality (Gehl, 1987); and evaluation of the quality of open spaces (Cooper Marcus & Francis, 1998). More recently, the restorative impact of green open spaces on users has been widely reported, see for example (Aspinall, *et al.*, 2013), (Hartig, 2007) and (Catharine, 2011). Other studies investigated the restorative component of green open spaces such as urban pocket parks (Nordh, *et al.*, 2011).

This has resulted in a blossoming interest in both policy and practice on the physical, social, psychological and economic benefits of green open spaces in urban communities, and subsequent increase in demand by the public for sufficient and high quality green open space in residential neighbourhoods.

There are three main factors that are related to the effective use of green open spaces namely, users' needs, quality of the physical features and the spatial structure of the space. Understanding user's needs is a cornerstone for any well-designed open space, the design that attracts people, facilitates their activities and encourages them to spend more time when undertaking these activities (Francis, 2003). The quality of the physical features of the open space has been seen as an important aspect that improves people's satisfaction and quality of life (Beck, 2009), promotes better use of public spaces (Gehl, 1987) and enhances the social, environmental and economic values of cities (Beck, 2009). Similarly, the spatial structure of urban open spaces has shown to be associated with how people move, gather and socialize in these spaces as evident in space syntax theory (Hillier & Hanson, 1984) (Hillier, 1996) (Ozer & Kubat, 2007). In addition to these three factors, the literature suggests that the microclimate characteristics have an impact on people experiences of open spaces (Nikolopoulou & Lykoudis, 2007) (Fontes, *et al.*, 2008) (Tsitoura, *et al.*, 2014). However, this particular factor is out of the scope of this study since this study was undertaken in one season.

The provision for and the access to open public spaces has also a democratic dimension. Since public open spaces, offers a space for expression of diversity and equality, the planning process of such places should involve all stakeholders regardless of their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds (Thompson, 2002). The aim is to ensure equal provision of green open spaces across the society including the most deprived areas and the socially marginalized in accordance with the democratic values.

In spite of this wide interest in open spaces, the most deprived areas still suffer from low quality and poorly maintained open spaces when compared to affluent areas. The *Urban Green Nation* report by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CAPE), the UK government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space, found a clear disparity in quality and quantity of green open spaces in Britain relating to socio-economic backgrounds and minority ethnic groups, with deprived areas having poorer access to green spaces and the facilities that they did have were of poorer quality (CAPE Space, 2010). To the authors' best knowledge there is no similar study for Scotland. In spite of the fact that the Scottish Planning Policy document (The Scottish Government, 2010) states in paragraph 155, page 31: "*Statutory equal opportunities obligations should be taken into account when planning for open space and physical activity*", it seems that there is no policy concerned specifically with the quality of open spaces in poorer areas, nor guidance on how to design for this vulnerable communities.

The aim of this study is therefore to assess the quality of open spaces in the most deprived areas in Edinburgh, Scotland, as perceived by the end-users. The investigation includes three dimensions: i) end users' needs, perception, and attitude towards the open space in the most deprived neighbourhoods, ii) nature of activities which occur in these open spaces, and iii) the spatial structure of the open spaces and its relation to the occurring activities. The case study selected for this research is Clovenstone Gardens in the Wester Hailes district of Edinburgh where mixed-methods approach were used for data collection and analysis including semi-structured interviews, attitudinal questionnaire, behavioural mapping and spatial analysis.

2. Research framework

Although the word 'open space' is used widely in everyday life, it seems that there is no consensus about its definition. This is in part owing to the various types of spaces that can be listed under this generic term (e.g. streets, green areas, parks, squares, markets, etc). In addition, diverse spectrum of terms are used to refer to the open space

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