



The role of natural environments within women's everyday health and wellbeing in Copenhagen, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Urbanisation has been linked with sedentary lifestyles and poor mental health outcomes amongst women. The potential for natural environments to enhance physical activity and mental wellbeing in urban areas is now well recognised. However, little is known about the ways that women use natural spaces for health and wellbeing within the context of their everyday lives. This paper draws on ideas developed in the therapeutic landscapes literature to examine how experiences in different types of green and blue space provide important health and wellbeing benefits for women in Copenhagen, Denmark. As well as facilitating physical exercise, such spaces were found to enable a range of more subtle benefits that helped to restore mental wellbeing through stress and anxiety alleviation, the facilitation of emotional perspective, clarity and reassurance, and through the maintenance of positive family dynamics. However, amongst some women who were overweight, the socio-political associations they made with natural environments deterred use of such spaces. Such findings challenge dominant planning and policy assumptions that equate open public access to natural spaces with universal benefit.

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1. Introduction

Urbanisation has been linked with increasingly sedentary lifestyles and poor mental health. Sedentary living has been identified as the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality, having major implications for the rise of non-communicable diseases and their associated risk factors (Lee et al., 2012). Mental health is also of increasing concern amongst policymakers and public-health officials (WHO, 2008), with urban populations found to be particularly vulnerable to a range of psychiatric disorders (Peen et al., 2010). Research suggests that such issues are gendered, with women in many cities across the globe reporting higher rates of physical inactivity than men (Bauman et al., 2009), and being disproportionately affected by a range of non-communicable conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease as well as by mental health conditions such as depression (WHO, 2009; Dekker et al., 2008). Beyond the level of the individual, the pivotal role played by many women in the wellbeing of households and communities exacerbates the need for research that seeks to understand the factors that influence their opportunities for physical and mental health and wellbeing in urban areas.

In line with what is widely perceived to be good practice in the development of healthy cities, 'natural' environments—namely, those

environments dominated by natural elements such as trees, grass, water etc. (White et al., 2013), are increasingly being considered as key settings for both physical and mental health promotion. Two broad categorisations of environment type have received particular acclaim for enhancing physical activity and restorative wellbeing in urban areas, namely green space (primarily urban parks) and blue space (i.e. water—rivers, canals, coast, lakes). The promotion of such spaces is now becoming evident in a range of urban programmes and policy agendas across the globe, ranging from the WHO Healthy Cities framework, to place-specific initiatives such as New York City's Million Trees programme and London's Big Green Fund, and have been put in place alongside wider initiatives in urban design to combat rising levels of obesity (Townshend and Lake, 2009).

Yet whilst such initiatives are being promoted for their health and wellbeing potential, research focusing on women's use of natural spaces in urban areas (and indeed on gender within urban health more broadly—see Frye et al., 2008) remains surprisingly limited. What literature does exist has tended to focus on a fairly narrow set of issues relating to safety (Wesely and Gaardner, 2004; Wilbur et al., 2002), and to point to the socio-cultural norms that frame urban spaces as either restrictive or inappropriate for women (Chant, 2013; Richardson and Mitchell, 2010). While such issues are clearly of vital importance, also acknowledging more positive experiences is necessary in obtaining a more complete understanding of women's health and wellbeing in urban settings. Krenichyn's (2004; 2006) work goes some way towards this, demonstrating the positive and enriching opportunities provided by urban parks for women in terms of physical

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exercise, mental restoration and social connection. However, Krenichyn's work focuses on women regularly engaged in vigorous physical activity within the context of one predetermined urban park. Considerable scope remains therefore to build upon this work to examine the ways in which women, regardless of fitness, use a range of natural spaces for health and wellbeing within the more mundane – but important – context of their everyday lives².

In this paper, I provide insights into women's use of green and blue spaces in Copenhagen, Denmark for daily health and wellbeing. Dominant literatures within the fields of urban health, planning and environmental psychology have undoubtedly progressed understanding of the health-related potential of urban 'natural' spaces. However, I argue here that incorporating approaches from the therapeutic landscapes literature enables greater understanding of the more subjective, and emotional elements of women's daily health and wellbeing. This in turn, enables the unpacking and contextualisation of what are often broadly defined notions of health and wellbeing and enables natural space use to be embedded within the broader context of women's everyday lives within an interconnected urban and social landscape. While the physical and restorative benefits of natural settings were clearly experienced by the majority of women interviewed, cognizance of the wider socio-political environment—in particular, the prevailing popular and policy discourse relating to obesogenic urban environments, enables us to understand why for some women, such spaces may be deemed far from restorative.

2. Researching urban 'natural' environments and health

In recent decades, research on green and blue space has made significant advances in progressing understanding of the health-related benefits of natural settings³. While the value of these settings for enabling physical activity is now well recognised, they are also known to impact positively on mental health outcomes, both as a result of physical activity and through the restorative properties associated with nature.

Although it has long been assumed that non-urban natural settings offer more restoration than those within urban settings, more fine-grained analysis suggests that many types of natural space e.g. parks, can be equally as restorative as open countryside (White et al., 2013). Research has found that stress reduction and relaxation are key reasons for visiting natural environments, and that proximity to quality green space is an important factor influencing health and wellbeing (Stigsdotter et al., 2010). Research has also found that their social and restorative function means that it is the green spaces closest to where people live that are associated with the greatest health benefits, and that they are particularly important for people who are socially or geographically isolated (Francis et al., 2012). Tyrväinen et al. (2014) argue that even short-term visits to natural settings have positive effects on perceived stress relief compared to a built-up environment. Other studies suggest physical activity in natural environments is associated with reduced risk of poor mental health (Mitchell, 2013), that merely seeing vegetation has a positive psychological effect (Ulrich, 1983), and that contemplating greenery can reduce blood pressure (Van den Berg et al., 2007) and improve mood and self-esteem (Pretty et al., 2005). Although afforded less attention, research has also demonstrated the health-related value of urban blue space for restoration, recreation, social interaction and relaxation

(White et al., 2010; Völker and Kistemann, 2013). Blue-space research to date has focused on water, yet as the empirical data outlined in this paper suggest, there is also potential for future research to examine the wellbeing benefits afforded by the sky.

Despite the plethora of research demonstrating links between urban natural environments, health and wellbeing, we know surprisingly little about the way such spaces are integrated into people's everyday lives (Petersen, 2013), nor the relative influence of particular properties of the environment per se, versus the interactions and activities particular spaces encourage and enable – or may constrain – for different types of health and wellbeing. The very nature of the methods required to elicit and analyse the large-scale data that tends to characterise research on urban public health and on the health benefits of natural settings invariably means that green and blue spaces tend to be categorised and analysed as distinct and separate entities from their urban, 'grey' surroundings. Yet as Burgess et al. (1988) have argued, people do not experience these spaces in a vacuum, and the activities and emotions that take place there are not necessary confined within them. Rather, such spaces form part of an embedded and interconnected matrix of settings through which people move and experience their daily lives. This is especially the case in a progressive urban setting such as Copenhagen, where policy developments mean that green and blue spaces are fast becoming an integral part of the intermeshed threads of the city.

One further downside of large-data analysis is that it leaves little space for more in-depth discussion and understanding of the factors that drive particular behaviours. There is a tendency in much urban health and 'greenspace' literature to assume that natural spaces are inherently beneficial, and that the provision of quality, aesthetically pleasing natural space will in itself mean that people use it to effect improved health and wellbeing. Yet as Hitchings' (2013) examination of office workers in London has clearly demonstrated, this assumption does not necessarily play out within the broader context of people's everyday activities, habits and priorities. Thus while we know something of the various – often pre-assigned – categories of health and wellbeing that are sought and rewarded by spending time in urban natural settings, we know relatively little about the broader context within which such experiences are mediated and felt, nor the ways that individuals themselves define and prioritise their personal health and wellbeing in relation to natural spaces.

Similarly, observational studies commonly used within research on health-environment connections, tell us something of the activities that take place within particular settings, yet tell us little of the 'quality of connection' (Petersen, 2013) or the 'personal and social meanings' (Burgess et al., 1988) that that space or feature holds for an individual, little about any *other* spaces that may be deemed important to them, and nothing about the people who, for whatever reasons, choose *not* to use such spaces (Hitchings, 2013). Thus if we are to more fully understand the health and wellbeing role of natural environments for women in urban settings, it is surely helpful to delve a little deeper to try to understand more completely the perceived function and value of different natural spaces and the properties within them, the broader context within which such spaces are used, and the factors that enable or constrain their role within women's daily lives.

In order to achieve this, it is extremely helpful to draw upon some of the ideas that have underpinned the growing literature on therapeutic landscapes. Such literature has emphasised how therapeutic or restorative benefits can emanate not only in places reputed for their health and wellbeing promoting qualities, but also through more ordinary places encountered within everyday lives (Williams, 2007; Cattell et al., 2008). As Conradson (2005: 338) has forcefully argued, places that are seen as having health and wellbeing benefits are not intrinsically therapeutic—rather, a person's experience of a particular setting “emerges through a complex set of transactions between a person and their broader socio-environmental setting.” The

² The 'everyday' refers to the routines and responsibilities that women enact in their daily lives, and the issues that affect their on-going health and wellbeing within this.

³ Two schools of thought have tended to dominate this research: the first is concerned with the role of natural settings in restoring directed attention and increasing cognitive abilities (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989), whilst the second focuses more on the stress-reducing properties of contact with nature (Ulrich 1979, 1983).

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