



Green justice in the city: A new agenda for urban green space research in Europe



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ABSTRACT

In this short communication, we discuss European urban green space (UGS) research from an environmental justice perspective. We show that European UGS scholarship primarily focuses on functional values and managerial aspects of UGS, while paying less attention to equity in the enjoyment of and decision-making around UGS. On this basis we discuss potentials for European urban green space research to take up a more explicit environmental justice framing to shed much-needed light on injustices in European cities and inspire change in policy and practice.

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1. Urban green space research in Europe

Urban green spaces (UGS) are a key component of urban planning in Europe. In light of the multiple ecosystem services they provide, UGS such as parks, woodlands, street trees, urban agriculture areas and green roofs (see Braquinho et al., 2015 for an overview of UGS typologies) are promoted by scholars and practitioners alike as a means to increase quality of life, by improving residents' physical and psychological wellbeing (Konijnendijk et al., 2013; Ward Thompson et al., 2012). European UGS research has contributed to demonstrating and improving these functional values of UGS (Braquinho et al., 2015; Krajter Ostoić and Konijnendijk van den Bosch, 2015; Konijnendijk et al., 2013; Bentsen et al., 2010; Konijnendijk et al., 2007). For instance, research has shown that UGS counteracts problems associated with urbanization and climate change in European cities such as air pollution, traffic noise, rising temperatures and flooding (Kabisch, 2015; Laforteza et al., 2013). UGS have been found to stimulate social integration and cohesion (Buizer et al., 2015) and to contribute to urban economic competitiveness, through increased land value linked to rising perceptions of economic and social well-being (Panduro and Veie, 2013; Salazar and García Menéndez, 2007). Thanks to

such research, UGS have come to the forefront of European environmental policy as a 'nature-based solution' to help produce socially-cohesive, economically-competitive and climate-resilient cities (EC, 2015a).

2. UGS research gaps

The above research yields important information that can serve to improve UGS functions. Yet, issues of equity and justice in the distribution and enjoyment of and decision-making around UGS are largely absent. This is problematic due to several reasons. First, a number of European countries are experiencing growing income disparity (EC, 2015b; OECD, 2015), and urban gentrification is spreading across the continent (Marcinićzak et al., 2015; The Economist, 2013). Second, immigration is swelling, and some European cities such as in Sweden and Germany are seeing as much as 40 percent of their populations comprised by foreign born or residents with an 'immigrant background' (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016; Statistics Sweden, 2016). Foreign-born persons and residents with an immigrant background are more likely to struggle with unemployment and low incomes (Schraad-Tischler, 2015; OECD, 2012), and the current political crisis and spike in asylum seekers may only exacerbate the situation. Over recent years, European countries have received the vast majority of asylum applications of industrialized nations, with some countries experiencing near record highs (Swedish Institute, 2016). Approximately 714,300

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claims were made in Europe in 2014 alone (UNHCR, 2015). European cities are popular destinations for refugees and municipal budgets are currently being strained by unforeseen social expenditures on top of the anticipated financial challenges accompanied by larger trends of urbanization (Euro Cities, 2016). Such conditions can be expected to broaden and compound the reality of marginalizations in society, including in relation to how public spaces like UGS are experienced. Yet we know very little, particularly in the European context, about the role of UGS in for instance contributing to gentrification, about how the needs and preferences of the changing demographics align or not with current UGS, how changing urban boundaries improve or reduce access to high quality UGS, and if and how urban managers take up issues of diversity and inclusion in their daily and strategic UGS management. In other words, while maximizing societal benefits has long been a key arena for UGS research, the increasing socio-economic and cultural heterogeneity of European cities may require new analytical frames.

In light of the numerous ecosystem services provided by UGS, their presence in cities can be indicative of a high quality of life. Yet, they are also often indicative of privilege and inequality. Environmental justice research from the USA and a few other countries has shown how the spatial distribution of UGS favors, for instance, wealthier residents and how the amenity and landscaping preferences of such residents dominate in such spaces (recent research examples include Wolch et al., 2014; Checker, 2011; Dai, 2011; Johnson-Gaither, 2011). UGS may also contribute to processes of gentrification. So-called 'revitalization' investments in UGS in run-down areas have been shown to displace prior residents due to rising housing prices (e.g. Safransky, 2014; Bryson, 2012; Checker, 2011; Dooling, 2009). This is cause for concern, as many UGS are financed and facilitated by public institutions and thus should enable access and enjoyment by all citizens. At the same time, some cities also see UGS being privatized and/or private UGS such as backyards, communal apartment grounds and corporate campuses being developed, both with strictly controlled and occasionally exorbitantly priced access (see Blok and Meilvang, 2014 for a description of the Nordhavn case in Copenhagen). This is problematic, as vulnerable or marginalized areas and people may be in greater need of the health benefits and ecological resilience provided by UGS (Wolch et al., 2014; Gill et al., 2007). Yet, vulnerable and marginalized people are also less likely to have effective representation within decision-making processes and the capabilities and resources required to effectively claim green areas (Wolch et al., 2014; Ernstson, 2013; Sze, 2007). Such inequities threaten the social and consequently economic and environmental sustainability of urban development (Harris, 2003).

There is a small but growing body of scholarship in Europe exploring the differentiated distribution of and access to UGS in relation to age, religion ethnicity and population density (e.g. Kabisch et al., 2016; Raymond et al., 2016; Kabisch and Haase, 2014; Comber et al., 2008). Some have also examined how UGS use differs with age, income and cultural background and its potential for integration (Raymond et al., 2016; Gentin, 2011; Peters et al., 2010; Seeland et al., 2009; Jay and Schraml, 2009; Van Herzele et al., 2005). A few scholars have shown how claims to UGS are shaped by socio-economic conditions and diverse capabilities (Ernstson, 2013) and how power dynamics need to be attended to in governance processes (Fors et al., 2015; Lawrence et al., 2013). Such efforts are in great need in many more European cities, neighborhoods and urban green spaces. Yet, UGS research (and practice) in Europe largely retains a managerial perspective emphasizing functional values, planning and aesthetics (Konijnendijk et al., 2013; Bentsen et al., 2010; Randrup and Persson, 2009; Konijnendijk et al., 2007). Broadly, terms such as 'social' and 'participatory' in European UGS research tend to sidestep power dynamics (e.g. Nielsen and Møller, 2008; Tyrväinen et al., 2007; Sipilä and Tyrväinen, 2005).

In other words, there appears to be a dearth of knowledge on UGS in relation to social dynamics such as power asymmetries and how exclusions play out in unprecedented social conditions.

For this reason, we call for more attention to environmental justice perspectives in European UGS research, with a hope that such research will eventually serve to inform policy and practice. Environmental justice emerged as a social movement in the US following the civil rights and environmental movements and has since spread to other countries as a source of inspiration for activists, policymakers and academics. As an academic field, it has attended to the processes through which environmental inequalities arise and are maintained (Perez et al., 2015). Below, we describe what a new UGS research agenda could look like for interrogating, and promoting more just, urban green spaces and cities.

3. Interrogating environmental justice: a new agenda for European UGS research

An environmental justice perspective can shed light on the critical issues of exclusion raised above. The nature of distribution, procedures, recognition and capabilities are popular fields of inquiry in relation to environmental phenomena. As such, there are important lessons for UGS research as outlined below.

Distribution is a classical environmental justice concern (Walker, 2012; Schlosberg, 2007). The early environmental justice movement directed attention toward the unequal distribution, both social and spatial, of environmental burdens such as waste facilities (Perez et al., 2015). Eventually, inequities too in the distribution of environmental 'goods', such as resource-rich urban parks, also fell into the spotlight. In relation to UGS, many distributional analyses in cities have shed light on the spatial qualities of environmental injustices. For instance, there are health implications of varying proximities to green spaces, resulting from e.g. access to exercise and improved air quality. Yet, Walker (2012) and Anguelovski (2015) also point out that many such studies assume UGS to be a homogenous environmental 'good'. They call for empirical explorations of how the value attributed to diverse UGS can differ widely. There is also research pointing out how 'goods' can produce bad (or exclusionary) outcomes, such as evident in processes of ecological gentrification (Dooling, 2009; Mancebo, 2015). Accordingly, UGS scholarship in Europe would benefit from more examinations of differentiated distribution of various UGS and the implications over time, alongside explorations into pluralistic notions of quality. In a given city, this would entail:

- a delineation of indicators of quality of various UGS, determined by residents as well as urban planners and other stakeholders,
- the production of multiple definitions of quality,
- spatial analyses of differentiated UGS based upon: i) pluralistic notions of quality, ii) socio-economic characteristics of residential zones, and,
- analyses of change in patterns of UGS distribution and development and socio-economic characteristics in cities over time, with consideration given to what physical and economic changes mean for diverse social groups.

There are numerous ripe cases for exploration of the above agendas. For instance, recent incentive mechanisms such as the European Commission's 'Green Capital Award' are encouraging the expansion and development of UGS in cities (EC, 2016), implying new distributional contexts. Further, authorities in cities such as Copenhagen and Berlin are currently focusing on the elaboration of indicators of quality and citizen preferences (see e.g. Copenhagen's Urban Nature Strategy 2015–2025 and Berlin's Urban Landscape Strategy 2030).

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