Urban sustainability

Over time, the expected functions of urban green space have changed. From their earliest days, public parks have been valued for their contribution to human health and well-being and for providing green oases in congested urban agglomerations (Malchow, 1985; Whitten, 2020). In the late twentieth century, however, rising environmental awareness spurred a focus on protecting natural systems, including green open spaces, for planetary health, going beyond anthropocentric amenity (Baycan-Levent et al., 2009). In particular, concerns around mitigation of and adaptation to climate change became integrated into spatial planning (Hurlimann and March, 2012). The ecological, economic and societal consequences of climate change contributed to enthusiastic adoption of the concept of sustainability as a core tenet in planning policy (Gunder, 2006). This led to increased interest in urban nature in general and green-space planning in particular (Sandström, 2002; Baycan-Levent et al., 2009). Thus urban green space is increasingly expected to contribute to ecological health and environmental resiliency, giving these spaces a more complex purpose beyond amenity and leisure.

Urban greening policies: the London case

London provides an illustrative case of a gap between policy discourse about urban green spaces' role in healthy, sustainable cities, and practical approaches to accommodating access to green space in continually changing cities (Dempsey, 2020). In 2020, London's population stood at an estimated 9,002,488, the largest in its history (ONS, 2021). By 2041, population is projected to reach 10.8 million (GLA, 2021a). Unsustainable growth and the impacts of climate change have been called the greatest threats to the British capital's prosperity (LAEC, 2016). As such, London, like many other cities, has pursued policies to address the economic, ecological and social impacts of its growing footprint. This includes improving the quality, quantity and accessibility of urban green space (GLA, 2018b). The Greater London Authority (GLA) and London's local authorities have established broader urban greening policies, such as green infrastructure and the Urban Greening Factor, that seek to introduce a wider range of green features through development (GLA, 2021a).

The legacy of the Victorian park

Integrating green spaces into urban areas is not a new idea. In the nineteenth century, urban densification and the resulting unhealthy conditions brought attention to the lack of natural areas in European and other cities (Kohout and Kopp, 2020). Motivated by Victorian liberalism, this prompted a turn in the UK towards integrating elements of the natural landscape into the urban fabric (Henneberger, 2002). In particular, this took the form of including publicly accessible parks and gardens in city design (Jordan, 1994). As such, the concept of public parks became a formal tool for addressing social and environmental concerns in rapidly industrialising British cities (Brück, 2013). The idea of 'parks for the people' (Reeder, 2006, 31) centred around the belief that nature – represented by the 'idealised countryside' – was healthy, pure and restorative (Welch, 1991, 6). Thus green-space planning was grounded in mimicking idealised rural settings as a blunt counterpoint to urban growth, rather than in adopting a flexible form of urban green space working in tandem with, not against, density.

Planning past parks: overcoming restrictive green-space narratives in contemporary compact cities

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Abstract

Green-space planning has become a prominent feature in metropolitan sustainability policies, reflecting growing awareness of the multifunctional benefits of extensive typologies of urban green spaces. Yet this article will argue that the existing approach to green-space planning is rooted in traditional ways of thinking about green space's form and function that originated nearly two centuries ago. Calling on empirical research conducted in London, this article aims to demonstrate the gap between the conceptual way urban green space is presented and the practical way it is delivered. Findings suggest that, despite adoption of wider urban greening policies, many practitioners take a conventional approach that parks – as large green spaces – are the 'best' delivery mechanism for access to green space. This article will demonstrate how this is problematic, concluding that broadening green space in planning metrics would improve access to the multifaceted benefits that diverse green-space typologies – including, but not limited to, parks – can provide.

Green Space

Green space is recognised for its positive contributions to human and ecological health. This is particularly the case in cities, where green spaces can mitigate negative impacts, such as loss of biodiversity (Aronson et al., 2017) and urban heating (Aram et al., 2019), caused by continued urbanisation and associated increases in population and development densities (Haaland and Van den Bosch, 2015; Xu et al., 2018). As such, creation and conservation of green spaces have emerged as a prominent policy instrument used by municipalities worldwide to address broad ecological, economic and social issues (Douglas et al., 2017). This is accompanied by an evolving understanding of the multifaceted contributions to urban sustainability that can be delivered by a spectrum of green-space typologies, including vegetated roofs, green verges and street trees (WHO, 2017).

However, this article argues that, despite policy discourse advocating for expansive approaches to urban greening, planning practice continues to emphasise access to green-space benefits through a narrow perspective, namely equating 'green space' with conventional 'parks'. This traditional approach to green space is grounded in ideals established nearly 200 years ago that were based in a Victorian-era 'obsession' (Hulin, 1979, 17) with replicating the countryside in town (Whitten, 2020). This obsession with the countryside stemmed from an anti-urban sentiment that viewed the city as corruptive, dirty and amoral, and thus as a place that needs escaping (Malchow, 1985; Olsen, 1993). This rural idyll remains a powerful influence in contemporary British town planning, including green-space planning (Harrison and Clifford, 2016; Churchill et al., 2019).