ASSESSMENT OF QUALITY OF PUBLIC URBAN SPACES

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Abstract: *Nowadays, urban public spaces and the way they present the cultural and social aspect of the city are concerned as notable issues due urban development plans. In past decades, people's trends to private life, development of informative life, suburban development and the problems occurred by erosion and crowd of internal spaces of place caused less concentration to the patterns of contemporary urban design. This study aims to provide a holistic approach to the concept of urban public spaces and the necessity to reconsider the developmental plans regarding the new tendencies of urban reconsideration and design principles based on previous literatures. As result, the necessity of qualitative promotion of urban public spaces to create social investment and consolidating society's unity is revealed.*

Key Words: *Urban spaces, public urban spaces, social action, special belonging*

INTRODUCTION

Allocation and use of public spaces is a main issue which should be considered in daily routines of cities' residents. Allocation and use of public spaces is an experience which is not equal for everyone, since the factors such as age, sex, social groups and racial minorities affect the comprehension of urban life. Recently, various methods for using urban space was the subject of most studies in different majors such as humanism, social science, geography and architecture, so that public spaces can be defined in different ways that they can complete each other.

In social cultural view, public spaces are defined as places to create and consolidate external relations, interactions, changes and social connection, and spaces in which different groups with different needs and belongings can gather together. Not only these spaces are planed and designed for different sudden uses and activities to fulfill the needs of residents, but they are also defined as open minded spaces [19]. Additionally, when public spaces are used by many people for various activities, they can obtain social identity. In political view, each definition should consider the public spaces as places in which people can have social life and express their needs. In architectural view, public spaces are open and accessible places that are against private spaces (where the access is limited and under control) [5].

Public spaces are able to be defined as contribution view of urban life that can reflect culture, beliefs and values [4]. Although the role of public spaces in cities' unity is totally obvious, nowadays, there is a belief that the high positive quality of urban life in streets and open spaces is necessary for society, which can lead people to enjoy their social interactions [5].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted through several phases, namely literature review, data collection, data analysis, discussion and conclusion. A literature review was conducted encompassing all means available to obtain the widest range of the relevant information from books, articles, and websites related to the performance measurement for stakeholders. The process for data collection includes the following steps: the titles, keywords, and abstracts were scanned with the related keywords. For the abstract, a brief review of the abstracts of the papers was conducted to filter out the less related papers.

PUBLIC SPACE

In oxford dictionary (1993) "public" is defined as "general" and most of the time it is used as antonym of "private". Relating to all the ordinary people, available for anyone to use, relating to the government. Public space is a common area in which people do their practical activities and hold their bonding ceremonies. In the other words, public space is a stage to show the social life.

Francis Tibbalds [19] defines public space: all the parts of a city to which people have physical and visual access. According to this, streets, parks and roundabouts are expanded to buildings around them and show their boundaries. According to his idea, public spaces are the most important part of our cities and townships in which most of the connections and interactions among human take place.

A review of urban rights shows that in legal terms, if a space is considered as a public space (despite innate limitation for public access) possession and access right cannot be an obstacle for public use. Even a mostly private place can be accessible for public and if it is prohibited, it can be demanded from law. Public places cannot legally prohibit the users' interaction; they just can determine its nature? [11]. Definitions of public space emphasize on access to space or various activities without limitation, one of the most outstanding one is social interaction that happens as a result of access without limitation. Consequently, in short speech "public space" can be defined: Public space includes parts of natural and built environment that people access them easily and they include streets, roundabouts and other paths that people can pass (in residential, commercial and local areas). Open space and parks and public/private spaces that people can access them at least some hours a day. Public urban spaces are links to communicate with new people and strangers and history, quarrels and contrasts rose from them; in fact public space is a regulator and organizer of urban communication system while new players are entering the stage. Duties of a public space can be categorized to:

1. A tool for communication
2. A place for interaction
3. Manager and organizer of free citizens.

NATURE AND FUNCTIONS OF URBAN PUBLIC SPACES

An urban space can have agreeable and disagreeable feature according to society's temporal and local needs [9]. Urban space can benefit from outstanding aspects of agreeable system based on the amount of harmony between function and goal, scale and amount of communications, harmony between social groups' daily needs and harmony with the whole urban structure. In addition, to have social and cultural values, urban space is a bed for urban activities and related necessities. Generally, these activities include three different groups [6]; First Group is essential activities that definitely happen and they are not related to exclusive social features. Activities such as; going to school or work, shopping, waiting for a bus and other daily activities. This group of activities needs different levels of social contribution. Second group of urban space activities includes selective activities that happen under appropriate and ideal circumstances. Activities such as going for a walk, staying in recreational places and sitting in attractive areas include a vast range of interactions depended on urban space features. These actives are called final activities since they can be affected by other activities and social spaces. Special conditions of spaces for standing, sitting, eating and playing affect these activities. In urban spaces without needed aspects to consolidate social relations, these activities can just happen slightly that can differ according to individuals' conditions. In contrast, in spaces full of these features, most of the social activities take place. Figure 1 shows the amount of the three activities in a space with and without the conditions. Functionally and physically, urban spaces play an important role in planning and urban development models.

Table1: amount of activities in agreeable
And disagreeable urban spaces [6].

	Acceptable Conditions	Unacceptable Conditions
Necessary activities	**O**	O
Selective activities	**O**	o
Social activities	**O**	O

Many of the urban designing theoreticians believe that public urban spaces as one of the main parts play an important role in a healthy city. This belief is beyond the function of public spaces that is related to when these spaces increase the social investment while many social interactions take place in these places [13].

In theoretical concepts related to a vast range of public spaces' functions such as social unity development to make opportunities for individuals interaction, consolidation of political functions by creating and consolidating free councils in a social democracy, a space for cultural ceremonies [12], a mediator in which individual and group identities develop [12] and a space for public access and distinction from private spaces has been discussed [2]. Research studies emphasize that a public space is a reflection of cultural values and an exercise for reunion of different racial and tribal groups in urban space.

Importance of public spaces in studies of citizenship policies has been also emphasized and it is considered necessary and urgent for urban policies. Lefebvre believes that each society has made a definite social space in its history in which all the various needs of society (economical to social products) has been provided [10].

This attention shows that how a public space is produced via social processes and how it forms our political and social behavior. We share a space with others and we coexist with people with different race, religion, policy and culture [20]. Additionally, using public spaces also shows the social values such as festivals, reunions, cultural events, political and local demonstrations (to practice democratic rights like free council) [1].

IMPORTANCE AND ROLE OF PUBLIC SPACES IN URBAN PLANNING

As many urban researchers have expressed, public spaces like local parks or local gardens are important parts of a city and define unique, attractive parts of a city. Some believes that before modernism in urban dwellings public spaces such as town squares and bazaars were spaces for social communications and in fact, they were considered as places including social actions and reactions of many people who cause these interactions [11]. Additionally, open spaces help people to have the feeling of confidence and trust and increase the feeling of unity and belonging. Indeed, these spaces are beyond a recreation place.

Rogers believes that nowadays metropolises are know by their vast public spaces, and their functional quality is one of the tools for evaluating the power of cities and their ability to create entertainment, natural beauty and open spaces for their citizens.

Public spaces benefit the cities in creating and consolidating urban proud, increasing the number of tourists and economical investment and helping the health and quality of life [14] and they play a main role in urban planning models and socializing the quarters.

Calthorpe [3] in complaining about the decrease of these spaces' role in process of contemporary urban planning and designing mentioned that quality of public spaces has considerably decreased. Parks, schools, libraries, post offices, auditoriums and city centers are scattered and they lack functional value. He also says that the quality of our world is defined by these spaces and they show the value that we consider for our society [3] in cities with hasty development, despite of the resemblance in public urban street and their special built structures, public spaces face fundamental changes in their physical structure that their concept and importance are lost because of sudden growth and the public spaces' quality and quantity have declined. It can be deduced that the sudden growth of cities, especially in developing countries has led to decline in public spaces' function in late 20th century and especially late 1980s. Protesters to this functional decline believe that all the aspects of urban development and planning should be encouraged to consolidate the perception and effective use of public spaces [10] since these spaces are considered as focal places for public and private activities, it should be considered that not only they should function properly, but

also they should have special features among other urban public spaces and they should not occupy residential spaces and buffer areas that are used for activities' separation. In fact, they should be used as main complementary elements. For instance, it is essential for local parks to be designed regarding to two important aspects of effective and ineffective social uses. These parks should reflect and consolidate environmental factors applying the social unexpected fields. Their form should be attractive and relevant to their environment more than just being a place to live [3] on the other hand, considering the main role of public spaces in constant development of the cities, new methods of urban planning and designing have repeatedly emphasized on the importance of restoration and reconsideration of public spaces as places in which social interactions and urban experiences take place [7, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21].

For instance, public parks, as the main compound of massive quarters, are the enjoyable live spaces in these areas. They also present urban facilities as the places for local meetings, entertainment, looking after children and spending spare time (such as having lunch) [3].

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Access to public spaces can be studied as one of the main factors in physical aspect of a public area. This issue is really important since it should facilitate the use of this space and also regulate the threats of social environment function (such as safety and security). Studies show that the access to public spaces without considering their social aspects can be one of the effective and preventive indexes in improvement and consolidation of social interactions in public spaces [21]. Although nowadays attention to these spaces in urban planning and economical systems has been neglected, facts show that access and desirability of urban public spaces are issues that influence on reduction of negative effects caused by sudden urban growth. It seems that in comparison with growth in economy and population of cities, public urban spaces have a longer way to go to reach the contemporary standards of cities to create a healthy life [13]. In a research about the quality of public urban spaces based on the evaluation of 150 repliers' opinion and analysis of the results, it is shown that the most important factors for the users are access and hygiene and in contrast, the least important one is physical maintenance. Based on a study of more than 1000 urban public spaces in different countries around the world, 4 main factors in qualitative evaluation of urban public spaces are:

- Access and linkage
- Comfort and image
- Uses and activities
- Sociability

It's obvious that the judgment about the importance of public spaces' quality depends on individuals' personal understanding and people may overestimate or underestimate different factors since they are affected by many environmental and cultural aspects. Therefore, it should be kept in the mind that the judgment of local users is more valuable than the random users, because they constantly interact with the public space. It is essential to understand that all these qualitative factors are used together to form a general experience and may prevent presenting a solution and a definite effort to refine the quality of public spaces. Considering the points mentioned before and the qualitative combination of important activities in urban planning and designing, following factors can be considered in users' evaluation of public space quality:

1. Hygiene: If these places are hygienic.
2. Access: How accessible are these spaces and how much diversity is possible in them.
3. Attractiveness: How attractive they are.
4. Comfort: If people are comfortable while they are spending time in these places.
5. Participation: Which type of people does it include?
6. Liveliness and dynamism: How much of the space is useful and how possible are the live activities to take place?
7. Function: How possible are different activities to take place in the space.
8. Distinction: Does this space have a unique and evident feature?
9. Safety and Security: Are these spaces safe and secure?
10. Power and health: How much are the health measurement during the time?

Cultural and social differences appear in architecture and also affect the access to the public space and the perception of these spaces, as an example, in a research by lynch (1960), the differences in using and accessing to the public space and the visual perception of different races and sexes have been studied in four American cities. Lynch figured out that the different social groups have different perceptions.

Various races, social groups and sex in Los Angeles did not have identical perception of the public space, for instance, they remember different dimensions and details of the public spaces. By using visual perception, this study shows that the citizens' movement affects their perception of the city. More movement makes a complicated and various image of the city in mind while less movement limits the perception of the city [1]. In addition to the functional importance of public urban spaces, considering the users without any sex discrimination is essential. To be précised, quality and desirability of these spaces are recognized based on the number of the male and female users and on the other hand, the features of these spaces' users. If the public spaces are successful in these two fields, it can be claimed that these spaces can play a significant role in increasing and refining social relations and decreasing the deprivation caused by social level, race, age and sex [5].

CONCLUSION

In years, urban space has been an area for social functions and fundamental researches of society and many activities related to private organization such as family. Therefore, not only the change process of society's private organizations is expanding and getting more complicated, but also public and urban spaces have developed, and nowadays we face variety of social and public spaces which belongs to public and in which social functions take place. On the other hand, urban

space as a place for social functions plays an important role in facilitating the relations and refining the social structure. Since an urban space has a role in facilitating and refining the social structure, it connects with social methods and sometimes consolidates or weakens them. Therefore, because of its generality, definiteness and repetition, it has social effects. In political view to public spaces, in most of the developing countries, since the power-based systems prohibit the civil methods which are mostly in form of political reunions in public places and demonstrations, urban public spaces are a stage for political shows.

Thus, controlling the streets means having power, and demonstrations and riots are serious threats for power-based beliefs [21]. Beside this point of view, interactional and social view with physical view of public spaces trigger the concepts such as social investment, social actions and unity of society and lack of them in cities is a factor of social instability. Therefore, it seems that attention to public spaces is an inevitable fact of our cities in new century that can be considered as a revision in development management of the city.

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