

# Unused Public Spaces in the Maltese Urban Environment

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**ABSTRACT:** In the densely built environment we live in today, the need for open spaces around buildings is considered essential. This also depends on what kinds of spaces are actually available, irrespective of their use, they are still significant. A public space is designed for the public; hence, an important statement is based on the fact that the values of a public space must be initiated on an understanding of why people frequent public spaces, how they use them and what they eventually mean to them. That is the reason why user participation is very important in these circumstances. Eventually, one can analyse whether or not a place is successful based on the values perceived. Open spaces provide an invaluable role and contribution towards regeneration, healthy living, social inclusion and culture, all leading to an improved quality of life for the people.

## 1 URBAN SPACE AND PUBLIC SPACE

### 1.1 *Open public spaces*

Open public spaces, whether used or unused, give an idea of constructive environmental quality and serve as an attraction to the surrounding area or neighbourhood. Various researchers have shown that successful public spaces are ones that, satisfy the needs of their users, are autonomous in their accessibility, and are meaningful for the larger community and society. On the other hand, unsuccessful public spaces, which are either unused or misused, reflect the opposite and are generally associated with negative factors.

Although research regarding open public spaces has been an undergoing process for nearly half a century, and most of the theories relate to one another, no one exclusive document manages to combine all the information together for the use of professionals, as well as students.

### 1.2 *What constitutes an unused public space?*

Essentially, the aim of this study was to analyse public landscaped areas which were designed in such a manner to be utilised for various needs, mostly recreational. Through different case studies and their comparisons, it resulted that although certain places were well designed, they were still unused. The fail-

ure of a place refers to a place, which is either underused or used in a way that it was not meant to. Generally one tends to point the finger towards the design of such a space, whereas it could be that the real failure lies within an inadequate economic and social analysis, amongst other factors. Many studies have been undertaken regarding open public spaces. Nevertheless, some motives for making public space do not adequately reflect users' needs.

Through literature review, observations, surveys, interviews and discussions, one can try transforming any place into an improved area for the community, providing safety, attractions, recreational facilities and communication tools. Case studies, site visits and the use of photographs will help open space designers and users to identify those essential user needs that must be well thought out in the planning, design, and management of such open public spaces.

## 2 PUBLIC SPACE AND PUBLIC LIFE

### 2.1 *Meanings, value, nature and forces*

The meaning and development of an *urban space* should be incorporated with the design philosophy and aims behind such spaces. According to Krier (1979), *urban spaces are defined* as all types of space between buildings and geometrically bounded by elevations.

*Public space* is an open space designed for the public and related activities. In actual fact, public spaces have arisen out of numerous diverse forces, which are directly related to the historical milieu of public life. The evolution and current uses of public spaces are important considerations and the terminology of the square is the starting point in understanding public spaces. Main types of open space in and around various towns may be classified under different titles. These may include *linear recreation spaces*, mainly for active and passive recreation. *Central open spaces*, including multi-use activities, and *recreation orientated housing developments*, where facilities are provided within residential areas.



Figure 1. Public space in Zuid Park, Ghent, Belgium.

## 2.2 Public space and public life

Three different issues, relating to the relationship between public spaces and public life, were considered. The '*values of public space*', relate to the reasons and results in public space development, where three basic parameters exist where, spaces can be seen as responsive, democratic and meaningful spaces.

Public space should also be taken in relation to public and private life issues, on the basis of everyday routines and observations. The '*forces shaping public life*', revolve around the various factors affecting life, consisting mainly of social, functional and symbolic factors. The effects of transportation and movement on public spaces are another important issue.

*Perspectives of public space* are another relevant issue. According to Carr et al (1992), three critical aspects have been described, which are, the '*needs in public space*', including the association of comfort, relaxation, passive and active engagement and discovery in public spaces. '*Rights in public space*' relate to access, freedom of action, claim, change and ownership of public spaces. '*Meanings and connections in public space*', makes one aware of the significance of public spaces to people and the connec-

tions that evolve, as well as the creation of meanings relating to public spaces.



Figure 2. Public space in a park, Wiesbaden, Germany.

## 2.3 Important factors and design ideas

Several factors and design ideas determine the success and failure of public spaces. This section will try to point out the basic factors and approaches which, affect and relate to open public spaces in general, such as, access, ecology, landscape and planting, boundaries, site furniture, play equipment, surfaces and maintenance.

The association of children with open spaces has been given importance, thus the relevance of public space as play space. Considerations of good play spaces and psychological and sociological aspects have also been tackled. Whether informal or formal play is provided, kids need opportunities in public spaces, rather than equipment.

## 2.4 The local context

The case studies tackled, will take the reader of this dissertation to four different villages in the Maltese urban environment. These are *Santa Luċija*, *San Ġwann*, *Mosta* and *Marsaxlokk*. The selected neighbourhoods all form part of government housing schemes, whether a *Government Housing Estate* or a *Home Ownership Scheme*. Six open public spaces have been undertaken as case studies, within these particular neighbourhoods. These observations were based on the approaches, theories and other data collection gathered throughout the course of the study.

Results of these surveys have shown that these spaces are not actually used appropriately, in certain cases. Most of them have been seen to be unused at most times of the day, especially where no play equipment was available. Maintenance and lack of

features, such as shade and comfortable benches, were issues that proved to bother residents and users. Some spaces were also frequented by undesirables at particular times of the night. Out of six spaces two spaces proved to be more successful than others, which both include playing fields.



Figure 2. A typical example of an unused public space in San Ġwann Housing Estate in Malta, which was one of the case studies tackled.

### 3 SUCCESSFUL SPACES

#### 3.1 *What makes a place great*

The key attributes that classify spaces to be successful, are:

- *Accessibility* - as forming part of social networks, street life, day and night amount of people, diversity and interactivity.
- *Activities and uses* - relating to land use patterns, sustainability, activity, vitality, usefulness and uniqueness.
- *Comfort and image* - perceived with safety, cleanliness, walk-ability, seating, attractiveness, crime statistics and environmental data.
- *Sociability* - in relation to accessibility, convenience, proximity, continuity, legibility, transit usage, vehicular and pedestrian activity and parking reliability.

Recommendations regarding the different approaches and factors in creating a public space have been suggested.

Research has shown that successful public spaces are ones that are responsive to the needs of their users, are democratic in their accessibility, and are meaningful for the larger community and society.

Significant principles need to be established in creating successful public open spaces. They are considered more important when communities try to envisage their own 'place'. There is a difference between creating a 'place' and just another design exercise. This difference can be achieved through surveys,

observations and experimentations, sustained by good management.

Broader social factors also need to be considered at concept stage and these comprise:

- Public welfare, which has always been a primary motivation for creating or improving public space.
- Environmental and visual enhancement of the neighbourhood.
- Economic development.

Essentially, the incorporation of the design with all the forces mentioned, should involve a larger group of people and professionals, and not just the designer. This way would lead to a more successful and functional 'place'.

#### 3.2 *Why many public spaces fail*

It has been seen that a number of public spaces tend to be designed 'intentionally' more to be looked at rather than to be used. Although they are kept neat and clean, they are vacant most of the time and in certain cases result in vandalised areas or are used inappropriately. This strongly indicates that something is wrong, whether design-wise, management-wise or perhaps both.

Design failures include:

- Lack of good seating
- Lack of shade and shelter
- Lack of gathering points
- Poor entrances
- Visually inaccessible areas
- Lack of surveillance
- Dysfunctional features
- Uninteresting paths and areas
- Excessive segregated areas
- Lack of light fittings

Problems related to the *management* of such spaces, include:

- The domination of vehicles around the area
- The number of dead zones around the space
- The lack of maintenance and care
- The lack of attractions which affects the people's sense of belonging

#### 3.3 *Moving towards a different approach*

The approach taken in the planning of public spaces usually tends to be either project-driven or related to a political reason, always depending on available funds. This means that the design of new spaces, may come about as part of a complete development project, or as a political statement. In other cases the approach may be targeted towards the wellbeing of the community.

It is common practise that, the community is involved after the design process is complete, when it is a known theory that the community should be elicited before. Therefore, they should be given the opportunity to implement their visions in the early stages of the design process. In reality, designers, planners and the management team need to revert back to the theoretical aspects of this topic and induce such practise in the concept stage.

Uncovering the ordinary citizens' talents and incorporating them meaningfully in the process, would be the first step in creating a successful space. Ideally the community must work together and form a working group representing broader entities. The council alone is not enough. A community's vision tends to be more realistic and practical with innovative ideas, not just at design level but also in the running of such a space.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, success, as observed, depends on many factors, and it is *impossible* to rate spaces according to the appropriate number of users, as this depends on several variables as mentioned throughout the whole study. However, if a place feels uncomfortable, empty and detracting, then not enough users frequent it. Conversely, if it is pleasant to stay in, busy but not annoying, vibrant and enjoyable, it incorporates the right number of users.

It is important to keep in mind that a successful space is highly used, but if vacant most of the time or taken over by negative uses, as seen in some of the case studies tackled locally, it may be classified as an *unused public space*. If applied well, the recommendations could change this term to a certain extent, as social factors and perceptions cannot be changed easily.

#### 5 REFERENCES

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