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Sense of place or sense of belonging? Developing guidelines for human-centered outdoor spaces in China that citizens can be proud of

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Abstract

Creating livable cities through cultural development is important not only because of the inherent value of culture itself, but also because of the social, economic, and environmental benefits afforded by communities with increased pride and attachment to places and people they share the city with. This is increasingly more critical for children and young people, as educating them to become better citizens, it also do strongly relate with development habits and their awareness of interacting with outdoor environments surrounding them. For inhabitants of cities to live an enriched life in every means, they require more than just the infrastructure and the trappings of material wealth: They require an attachment to a place, a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose, of which, a sound cultural development can help generate.

Given the central government's recent emphasis in the 13th 5-year plan on encouraging creative and innovative industries, it is relevant to generate programs on cultural development focusing on younger generations. Through this, municipal governments can improve the quality of life and empower the young generation to shape the long-term prosperity of their cities.

What are various ways to develop solutions based on strengthening community relations? What are the dynamics of relationship of people with each other from different social milieu? Potential discussion areas include deployment of policies such as providing grants for artists and innovators, creating tax incentives that encourage corporate social responsibility programs, and restructuring public processes to ease among different social milieu of same generation as well among different generations.

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1. Introduction

All around the globe, municipal development efforts that target the regeneration of green, urban spaces are often sites of social segregation for certain age groups, most vulnerable to the effects of top-down, fast-paced change at home [1]. Evidence indicates that urban and social considerations intersect, given the relationship between green, built space and standard of life – or “livability” – within the context of functional amenities, cultural heritage preservation and mobility accessibility for users. Among these groups, children and young people are particularly important. However in China, when these groups are taken into consideration, there is a third group that is also need to be taken into account: The elderly. Currently in China despite the growing elderly population and their care needs, many people belonging to this age group live with their children after they get married. Many young couples, through sense of more traditional Chinese cultural and familial norms, hold intergenerational relations in high regard. This dynamic, shapes shape the upbringing and societal setting of the next generation, thus conflating the built space needs and wants of the elderly and the children. As children spend a lot of time with their grandparents and taken care by them, this condition interestingly co-locates these two age groups within urban spaces together. Therefore in this paper we have chosen to focus on the elderly, alongside with children and young people.

Outdoor green spaces play an array of critical roles, ranging from recreational outlets to exercise facilities, to tourist attractions. At their core, they are intended to serve to citizens of the community in which they are located. Green spaces within urban settings have been found to improve cognitive development in primary schoolchildren [2], and are conducive to positive general health – disproportionately benefiting the elderly and the young [3]. The elderly and the young also constitute a large demographic of green space and public park users, partly owing to the rapid shift from more traditional Chinese typologies of *Hutong* or *Lilong* style housing equipped with courtyards, to isolated apartment blocks bereft of any communal space. This indeed reinforces the need for shared spaces outdoors for the young and old in mind within the context of China. Yet, these groups’ specific needs are often neglected if parks are created in the top-down, opaque design and maintenance process as they have been in recent Chinese history.

As such, the design process of public outdoor spaces should be inclusive that factors in the needs of the community and the age groups within. To involve the general public, and their various nuanced opinions, as active contributors rather than passive users is essential in order to curate spaces suitable for diverse social groups - not least to build a sense pride and strengthen emotional ties to the hometown. We propose two major themes: ‘Interactivity’ between stakeholders and ‘dynamic feedback loops’ as ways to incorporate the needs and desires of population more comprehensively. Within the extent of this paper, we will attempt to pull together examples reflecting the current related situation in China and later, we will investigate a number of related case studies from around the world as examples of the success of community involvement in park development and maintenance suggesting potentials to adapt these processes to improve policies in China.

2. Interactivity between stakeholders in designing public spaces

2.1. Community Involvement

Chinese urban, public space planning procedure - that is, planning, managing and designing - is currently conducted predominantly by city planners and government officials, and without the input of community members [4]. The late 1970’s witnessed to an overwhelming shift towards municipalities adopting Western-style open space models, under the “City Cosmetic Movement” inspired policies implemented throughout China [5]. This top-down decision making approach often fails to adequately gauge community interests - it is based on professional estimations rather than public wishes - thus resulting in spaces that are largely unusable by the majority [6]. It is a common sight on many outdoor spaces in Shanghai. *The Music Square* at Yanan East Road in Shanghai seen in Fig. 1 (a) and *Yanzhong Greenland Park* at People's Square seen in Fig. 1 (b) for instance, have lawns on which people are prohibited to step foot on to play sports or have picnics [6]. To ameliorate these issues, Chinese cities should

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