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Authors(s)	Lennon, Mick
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Green Space and the Compact City: planning issues for a ‘new normal’

Mick Lennon

School of Architecture, Planning and Environmental Policy

University College Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

The paper traces the emergence of urban public green space as an issue of concern for planning. This is used as a platform to discuss the emergence of the compact city idea and how this conceives the design and use of such spaces. The paper then identifies a series of issues that need to be prioritised in future research for the planning of urban green space in the ‘new normal’ of social distancing consequent on Covid-19. Issues requiring attention and a series of outline examples of potential solutions are grouped beneath four categories: form & features, distribution, connectivity and resilience.

Keywords: Green Space; Urban Density; Planning, Social Distancing

Planning was born of disease. It evolved as a response to the sicknesses of the nineteenth century industrial city, such that the early days of what were to become known as ‘planning’ and ‘public health’ were indistinguishable in what has since been termed the ‘global north’. Indeed, support for addressing matters of public health enabled governments to interfere with private property rights in the public interest, and through leading to a framework of policies and laws, helped establish planning as a distinct discipline. With a focus on unhealthy miasmas (‘bad air’), overcrowding and a growing fear of social instability, new designs emerged across Europe and North America from the 1880s through to the end of the second world war that sought to advance a means for planning a healthier city. Such designs targeted the moderation of congestion through strategically controlling densities and ensuring the availability of ample public open space. Enhancing proximity, access and exposure to green space was central. However, such ideas ultimately found little realisation as they were overtaken by the motor car in the post war era, most notably in North America. As suburbanisation became a norm across many cities in the global north from the late 1950s,

concerns emerged on how poorly managed sprawl was resulting in declining social cohesion, traffic congestion and a host of environmental ailments.

It is against this backdrop that planning began to turn full circle: where once it had fought density it now embraced it. Specifically, a new cohort of planners began to re-examine older urban neighbourhood configurations that the previous generation of practitioners deemed bad for public health (e.g. Peter Calthorpe, Andrés Duany, UK Urban Task Force). From early endeavours in the 1980s to emulate the positive characteristics of traditional neighbourhoods in North America, this effort has developed in theory and practice to become widely endorsed by planners over the ensuing decades (Silver, 2010). Commonly referred to as 'new urbanism', at the heart of this approach is the 'compact city' concept wherein places of work, rest and play are contiguously arranged in medium to high-density public-transit orientated settlements. For example, in Europe and North America this vein of thinking has developed apace in recent years with innovative concepts such as the 'superblock' of Barcelona (Bliss, 2018) and the 15-Minute City of Paris (O'Sullivan, 2020) being touted as ways to reconcile compactness with quality of life. Set in the context of mitigating and adapting to climate change, compact city morphologies are seen by many to supply environmentally responsive and responsible solutions to housing, employment, education, community and recreation needs by enhancing resource efficiency and reducing land take. Additionally, the compact city idea is thought to offer an answer to the unyielding pull of cities in an era where expanding populations are pushing against the limitations of environmental resources. In this context, several dense Asian cities now lead the way in demonstrating how integrated services provision, technological innovation and multi-layered infrastructures can disentangle the concept of 'density' from 'congestion'. Indeed, when compared with the impact of Covid-19 on low density settlements in Spain and northern Italy, many compact cities in Asia, such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Taipei have shown how density and disease are not crudely equatable. Instead they have demonstrated how a highly communicable disease can be managed in dense urban environments through household confinement, extensive testing regimes, social distancing, as well as the informal and formal policing of behaviour in public spaces during a phased relaxation of restrictions.

Nevertheless, with density comes the ongoing challenge of social distancing. This challenge is becoming ever more real as many governments conclude that some form of social distancing may be required till a vaccine becomes widely available. Aided by technology, this may be negotiated in compact city environments through novel approaches to the organisation of work, education and travel patterns. Nonetheless, it now seems apparent that the lifting of restrictions will be partly predicated on how public spaces are used. This throws into relief a limitation on how the compact city idea has been considered to date; namely conceptions on the design and use of green space. This is because compact city approaches most commonly plan for and promote the intensive use of public green space (Jim, 2004). Proximity, access and exposure have conventionally been to the fore in conceiving such spaces as an anchor for health and well-being in the design of compact urban environments. Here, parks for recreation (e.g. soccer, skateboarding, jogging) and leisure (e.g. boardgames, picnicking, 'hanging-out') are envisaged for activities that are undertaken in spaces shared with others¹. This has become problematic in compact cities where new working, schooling and mobility circumstances resultant from the pandemic has prompted an increase in green space use, which renders social distancing a challenge. On occasion, the intensity of such use has compelled municipal authorities to close such spaces to the public (e.g. the controversial decision to temporarily close Brockwell Park, London). It thereby seems reasonable to infer that the quantum, configuration and distribution of publicly maintained green space in those compact cities currently under stringent lockdown conditions will prove problematic for social distancing as restrictions are relaxed. This suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of peoples' use-desires and needs from green space as we transition to a 'new normal' of protracted social distancing. In this context, identified below are a series of issues that have been comparatively neglected in compact city approaches that may need to be prioritised in future research for the planning and design of public urban green spaces. While each is presented under a themed heading, it is important to note that all are interactive and should not be considered in isolation.

¹ While the health benefits of 'nature contact' has become an important topic of research, policy and design in recent years, the primary thrust of the compact city approach to public green space is contoured by a concern for the efficient use of scarce land in dense urban environments. Hence, the focus is normally placed on shared spaces for recreation and leisure use. Issues of 'nature contact' may be encompassed within this but are not conventionally the central principle guiding the planning of such spaces.

Form & Features

Evidence indicates that people of different life course stages, gender identifications and cultural backgrounds have a different range of use desires for green space: some seek spaces for passive retreat and restoration, others for sporting activities and diverse forms of social engagement. Teenagers, pregnant women, middle-aged men and the elderly exhibit different patterns in the use of green spaces. Those from a diversity of cultural backgrounds also seek to use public green spaces in different ways. Witness for example the intensive use of public green spaces to celebrate the end of Ramadan or for Chinese New Year celebrations. Alternatively, such spaces may be used on a more regular basis in different ways by different minority groups, as is exhibited by Filipina household staff in Hong Kong who use public urban green spaces to socialise following a busy working week in which they may otherwise be isolated from their countryfolk. Correspondingly, trend analysis suggests that each age, gender and cultural group displays different attribute preferences (Douglas et al., 2017; Rishbeth, 2001). Furthermore, evidence also indicates that quantitative studies using conventional menus of green space characteristics to inform design approaches often fail to account for the multifaceted range of interacting affordances that people seek from such spaces (Lennon et al., 2019). Consequently, public green spaces in compact cities frequently fail to respond to the specific preferences of users that could be utilised as a means to manage social distancing. For example, in the case of life-course associated preferences, designing green spaces that facilitate physical segregation between different cohorts in ways that nevertheless respond to their use desires may enable social distancing in a manner that maximises the enjoyment of public green spaces by various users across life-course stages. This could be achieved by attracting cohorts to different sub-spaces within a public green space at different times of the day in a manner that facilitates segregation between vulnerable and less vulnerable users yet facilitates multiuse over the duration of the day by different cohorts. Here one could imagine a flower garden with wide grassed and hard surfaced circulation areas including benches and open grass areas that is designed for restful retreat by the elderly in the morning and by children in the afternoon for play or as a socially distanced outdoor classroom. Hence, the 'thinking templates' used to inform the design of intensively used green spaces in compact cities may need to be rethought. In this sense, future research may require a more nuanced account of the complex array of user desires in a way that facilitates a spectrum of communability from solitude to sociability in a varying

environment catering for a multiplicity of use-desires, and not just a multitude of users (Corkery, 2015).

Distribution

Managing social interaction in a new normal of prolonged social distancing highlights the importance of green space distribution. Cities restricting outdoor access have witnessed a greater intensity in the use of neighbourhood parks with a corresponding decline in the use intensity of larger urban parks, which may require a commute that is currently prohibited under movement restrictions. As the gamut of restrictions is relaxed, planners may thereby need to give greater priority to the provision of a decentralised system of parks. Issues of equity will come into play here as proximity, access and quality become important dimensions of how a 'just environment' is planned in response to the spatial demographics of a city's socio-economic context. Of importance here is that the provision of new public urban green spaces does not result in the displacement of socio-economically vulnerable groups from their traditional neighbourhoods and their subsequent concentration in other less well serviced and less green areas of the city. Research suggests that this can occur as localised gentrification stimulated by the creation of new public urban green spaces leads to unaffordable rents and house prices (Anguelovski et al., 2018; Gould and Lewis, 2016), or an unwillingness of landlords to renew leases consequent on redevelopment pressures or the financial attraction of converting their properties from tenancy to holiday rental (Cocola-Gant and Gago).

Connectivity

It may also be necessary to rethink current practices in compact city approaches that frequently conceive green space in an isolated fashion. Here, it may be beneficial to consider facilitating scope to extend one's stay through a networked series of varying green space configurations nested across scales, whereby local pocket parks connect to larger urban parks (Lennon et al., 2017). This could enhance the amenity value of green spaces by providing greater opportunity for those seeking exercise, such as joggers, who may find that smaller parks are not responsive to their use desires. In doing so, it may simultaneously help disperse users across a wider space, hence aiding social distancing.

Resilience

To date most thinking with respect to resilience-proofing cities has been conducted within the broad framework of adaptation to climate change. However, the current pandemic suggests that in a globalised world of dense cities accommodating over half the planet's population, the concept of urban resilience needs expanding to include health. In the context of green spaces, this may encompass rethinking the use of such spaces to facilitate multifunctionality. Here the concept of 'green infrastructure' is helpful in that it involves reconceiving planning and design rationales, as well as looking for opportunities to retrofit urban environments in ways that enhance the multifunctionality of urban green space. Research in this field may need to allocate greater attention to how interstitial and liminal spaces along with rooftops can be designed to enrich the range of health benefits provided by green space to urban residents. For example, green spaces could be planned and/or retrofitted to furnish commuting avenues that enhance resilience in urban mobility, while designing green roofs as proximate, accessible and pleasant environments could provide 'safe spaces' for vulnerable people to enjoy the green outdoors, while concurrently assisting adaptation to climate change through helping to manage drainage and mitigate the urban heat island. Such joined-up thinking could help furnish a spatially integrated means to advance UN Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good Health & Well-Being), 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) and 13 (Climate Action).

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