

**Beyond Green: The Interplay of Urban Green Space Naturalness,
Walkability, Social Cohesion, and Mental Health – A primitive Study
Proposal for Poznań, Poland (1st part of the study)**

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Expanded ABSTRACT: Urbanization can be regarded as one of
the most important changes happening globally in the twenty-
first century. By 2050, it's expected that about 68% of people
will be living in cities. It is believed that shift can drive
progress and innovation, but of course there will be challenges
like overcrowding and social pressures. For example, during
the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, cities
experienced economic growth and at the same time serious
issues like poor living conditions and disease outbreaks were
encountered by many; these problems should be solved and to
do so, many European cities—such as London, Paris, and
Berlin—started developing public parks to heal the urban life
and provide a much-needed escape for their residents.

If one wants to understand the importance of green spaces,
they probably should study the history of urban green spaces
(UGS). Tracking back the course of events in twentieth
century, one can notice that the focus was mainly on making
cities look nice and providing places for people to relax. Fast
forward to now, and we see these green areas as bonding parts
of our cities that contribute to sustainability, mental well-being,
and community bonding. Organizations like the World Health
Organization (WHO) and the European Union are recognizing

the role of green spaces as vital for preventing health issues, highlighting how important they are for our overall quality of life.

Even though there's a lot of discussion among scholars about urban green spaces, much of the focus tends to be on numbers—like how much green space there is per person or specific vegetation indexes. Unfortunately, this often overlooks the more personal stories and experiences that show how policies, planning, and expert opinions shape our understanding of how greenery in cities can bring people together and improve our well-being. This study aims to fill that gap by taking a closer look at documents related to Poznań, Poland, exploring both its historical context and current conversations about urban greenery.

Research questions:

1. How do different groups, like researchers, city officials, and policymakers, understand the connection between the naturalness of green spaces and our mental well-being?
2. How do the documents show that green spaces in our cities help bring people together and build trust within communities?
3. How do walkability and accessibility play a role in discussions about green spaces in research and policy?
4. What ideas and concepts come up in the research that help us understand the connections between these topics?

Hypotheses (sensitizing assumptions):

H1: Research and expert opinions show that having access to well-maintained green spaces can really boost our mental well-being and help us feel less stressed.

H2: Urban green spaces are frequently regarded as essential venues that promote social cohesion. However, the way we discuss and understand these spaces can differ significantly based on regional contexts and the perspectives of various academic disciplines.

H3: The importance of walkability and accessibility is frequently emphasized as fundamental to ensuring that the benefits of green infrastructure are equitably distributed among all community members.

Methodology: the current work uses a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing on secondary data to explore the intricate narratives encircling the green spaces. The sources of this data include academic journals, urban planning strategies from municipalities like Poznań, and policy briefs from reputable organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Commission. To gather relevant materials, both libraries and online databases have been utilized. Through thematic coding, the aim has been to uncover and analyze recurring themes related to the natural characteristics of green spaces, their accessibility, and their psychosocial impacts on communities.

This study takes a unique approach by focusing on document analysis instead of conducting interviews. This method allows for a comprehensive synthesis of knowledge and a thoughtful evaluation of differing viewpoints. By examining the historical and contemporary framing of green spaces, the study enhances our understanding of their role as vital infrastructures that contribute to health and social capital within communities.

Introduction

The significance of urban green spaces has been explored from various perspectives, such as their ecological benefits, contributions to climate resilience, and enhancement of the visual appeal of urban environments. However, there is a growing recognition of green spaces as essential social infrastructures that influence community dynamics, including how residents engage with one another and foster a sense of belonging. Research indicates a robust connection between urban green spaces and improvements in mental health, as well as the strengthening of neighborhood relationships (Jennings Bamkole, 2019; Veckalne et al., 2025).

Despite the recognized importance of green spaces, their integration into planning policies often lacks consistency. Many municipal strategies tend to focus primarily on quantitative measures, such as the number of hectares of green space available per

inhabitant, rather than considering more subjective qualities. These include aspects like the perceived naturalness of these areas and the opportunities they provide for social interaction among residents. This project aims to explore how both academic and policy discussions articulate the functions of green spaces. It will also assess whether the social and psychological dimensions of these spaces are adequately reflected in planning practices.

Poznań, a medium-sized city in Europe, serves as a compelling example of the dynamics at play in urban development. As the city undergoes rapid growth and implements new municipal policies focused on sustainability, it provides a valuable context for exploring how global discussions about urban greenery are reflected in local policy frameworks. This examination sheds light on the ways in which broader environmental conversations are translated into actionable strategies at the municipal level.

Methodology

Data sources: This study utilizes a qualitative approach that relies on a careful examination of documents, drawing insights from both library archives and online resources.

Data sources:

- Academic journal articles and books on urban planning, environmental psychology, and social cohesion.
- Municipal planning documents and strategies from Poznań and comparable European cities.
- Policy briefs and guidelines from WHO, European Union, and UN-Habitat.
- Data collection: content will be collected through library visits, academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar), and institutional repositories.

Data analysis: In this study, we will employ qualitative content analysis to examine the data collected. The sources will be systematically organized into four key

thematic categories: (1) the naturalness and quality of green spaces, (2) the relationship between green spaces and mental health, (3) the impact of green spaces on social cohesion and trust, and (4) considerations of walkability and accessibility. This approach will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the various dimensions associated with green spaces.

This approach enables us to cross-verify evidence without the need for primary fieldwork, highlighting the importance of interpreting both policy and academic discussions.

Discussion

An examination of library and online resources reveals that urban green spaces are frequently viewed as essential infrastructures that serve ecological, psychological, and social purposes. However, it is important to note that different sources often place varying levels of emphasis on these aspects, leading to diverse interpretations. To enhance understanding of this topic can be done by utilizing three analytical frameworks that provide deeper insights into the complexities surrounding urban green spaces.

1. Environmental Justice

Environmental justice highlights the significant disparities in access to environmental resources, particularly in urban settings. In numerous European cities, it is evident that affluent neighborhoods often have greater access to well-maintained parks and tree-lined streets, while marginalized communities frequently find themselves in areas with neglected or hard-to-reach green spaces. This inequity is often witnessed in policy documents concentrating only on the whole of the green spaces available not paying much attention to the important issue of unequal distribution. In Poznań, for instance, such an approach may inadvertently reinforce existing socio-spatial divides. Therefore, adopting an environmental justice perspective emphasizes the importance of considering "who benefits" from urban planning decisions, ensuring that equity is a central concern in the discourse surrounding green space development.

2. Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory emphasizes the vital role that social networks, trust, and reciprocity play in fostering community connections within shared spaces. Green areas serve as important "third places," distinct from the workplace and home, where informal interactions can take place and collective community strength can flourish (Sampson et al., 1997). However, it is crucial to notice that not all green spaces provides us with the same level of engagement; the design of these areas significantly affect their effectiveness. While policies that prioritize well-manicured “prestige parks” may enhance visual appeal, they often prove to be ineffective when it comes to the creation of inclusive environments where diverse community members feel invited and valued. This perspective highlights that building social cohesion requires thoughtful and intentional planning, rather than merely providing green land.

3. Salutogenic Urbanism

The salutogenic perspective emphasizes the importance of creating environments that promote health and well-being. Elements such as diverse vegetation, ecological authenticity, and sensory richness contribute to the restorative qualities of urban spaces, helping to reduce stress and bolster psychological resilience (Nguyen et al., 2022). However, it is often the case that municipal policies prioritize the quantity of green spaces over their quality. Salutogenic urbanism is simple; it calls for quality over quantity and gaining first-hand experiences from people who have on site daily experiences in these green areas in order to exhibit a deeper understanding and in order to make better bridges between the current literature and the practical aspects.

Considering all these factors, this analysis displays a continuous tension in the discourse surrounding urban green spaces. On one hand, academic literature underscores the psychosocial benefits that these spaces provide, such as improved mental health and community cohesion. On the other hand, planning documents often prioritize quantifiable metrics, focusing on measurable aspects of green space rather than their qualitative impacts. If we fail to fill this gap, cities may not fully

benefit from the potential of green spaces as vital infrastructures for health and community well-being.

Moreover, the frameworks emphasize that factors such as equity, thoughtful design, and the lived experiences of residents play a crucial role in determining the transformative impact of urban nature. It is not merely the amount of greenery that matters; rather, it is how these spaces are experienced and accessed by diverse populations that truly shapes their effectiveness in fostering healthier and more connected communities.

Conclusion

This study highlights that urban green spaces serve a purpose that extends beyond mere environmental benefits; they are essential foundations for health, community cohesion, and social justice. By mixing insights from both academic research and policy discussions, the study reveals that attributes such as naturalness, accessibility, and walkability are consistently recognized as key factors contributing to psychosocial well-being. Through the lenses of Environmental Justice, Social Capital Theory, and Salutogenic Urbanism, we uncover three important insights:

1. The importance of equity cannot be overstated; it is essential for green space planning to actively confront and remedy the socio-spatial disparities that exist in both access to and the quality of these vital areas.
2. Building community trust begins at the local level. When design fosters opportunities for everyday interactions among diverse groups, it naturally cultivates social cohesion and strengthens relationships within the community.
3. Health promotion takes a proactive approach, highlighting the importance of green spaces as essential preventive infrastructures that significantly contribute to public health and community resilience.

For urban planners in Poznań and similar cities, this suggests the need to look beyond traditional metrics like “green area per capita.” Instead, they should take a more comprehensive perspective that takes into account the lived experiences of residents, prioritize inclusivity, and emphasizes the quality of design in green spaces.

One of the primary limitations of this study is its dependence on secondary data, which may not fully reflect the subjective experiences and perspectives of residents. Nevertheless, the study's strength lies in its ability to weave together historical, scholarly, and policy discussions to create a cohesive framework. To enhance our understanding further, future research could incorporate geospatial equity mapping or conduct comparative analyses with other European cities, thereby enriching the insights gained from this work; this rudimentary and primitive research can lay the foundation for deeper future studies, including research proposals for urban planning and national-international initiatives that serve the well-being of all the citizens.

PTN: This scientific commentary is the first in a series of interconnected interdisciplinary studies related to the

Subject, further studies and experiments are being conducted to show deeper understanding regarding the hypothesis and main questions.

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