

Towards a Liveable and Sustainable Urban Recreational Park: A Study of Users' Perception and Preferences

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Abstract

The provision of recreational parks is aimed at ensuring a liveable, sustainable and natural environment for the urban populace. But there is an important aspect of the users' preference for, and perception of these public facilities. This study looked into the liveable and sustainable state of a recreational park in Akure, Nigeria, in relation to its use. The method of study was through the analysis of literature on urban recreational parks, a case study, and the use of structured questionnaires to generate responses from the stakeholders. The study discovered that the design, sustainability, liveability and patronage of an urban park are a function of several factors. The study observed these factors to be: activity provided in the park, the natural environment, maintenance, accessibility and sense of territoriality of the users. The paper recommended among others, an in-depth study of users' needs, demands, satisfaction and preference for recreational spaces by the planners and designers, and a maintenance and management program incorporated into the proposal for the design, redevelopment or renovation of the parks. The paper concluded that although these factors vary from place to place, the more we understand why people prefer to go to certain places, the more effective we will be as designers, landscape architects, and managers of liveable and sustainable environments.

Keywords: liveability, maintenance, sustainability, urban area, recreational parks.

1.0 Introduction

Urban parks are emerging as one of the most important spaces in the urban fabric. They are multi-purpose public spaces in the city that offer social, economic, and environmental benefits. According to AbdulMalek and Mariapan (2009), urban parks can be regarded as public spaces, which cater to the needs of urban dwellers and the community as a whole. In other words, parks are designed to promote public health and to give some aesthetic value to an urban setting. People need parks, avenues, and a lot of greenery in their neighbourhoods. Going by the study of Jim & Chen (as cited in Ahmad, Mariapan & Habib 2011, p.1), urban parks are known as places for recreation, activity, and enjoyment. They have also been defined as places which include formal landscape, playground areas, adult's recreational areas, as well as open space areas. They play a main role to keep social communications among urban dwellers (Cranz as cited in Ahmad, Mariapan & Habib 2011, p.1). Furthermore, Daneshpour and Mahmoodpour (2009) stated in a related study that "it has been widely recognised that urban public parks play an essential role in enhancing the quality of life in urban areas and they have a strategic importance for the quality of life of the increasingly urbanised societies as well as being particularly beneficial where stress is a common aspect of life". Olotuah (1997) also opines that, "an index of the standard of living in a community is defined by the quality of its environment". Therefore, the holistic planning and design of open spaces bring about convenience in a built-up environment as the nature and prevailing situation of the environment calls for an immediate restoration of natural values. Sustainability of the human environment aims to achieve stable and comfortable indoor and outdoor environments by providing adequate functional spaces and services (Fadamiro & Atolagbe 2006). By definition, to say an urban park is liveable and sustainable is to say that it has met the needs of its users and that it has not constituted a nuisance to the general environment. If an urban park is liveable, then it means the managers and patrons of such park find it suitable for them. Ahmad, Mariapan, and Habib (2011 p.1) asserted that some "parks fail to attract people to visit and use them. They cited El Goli, a park in the city of Tabriz, as an example of a park that people do not use frequently as they had before. They furthermore opined that one of the factors presumed to contribute to the problem of idle parks is that the parks fail to provide the activities people prefer. Peoples' perception and preference for urban parks also depend on such factors as age, sex, social class and ethnic identity. These factors affect the way in which urban public spaces in general and urban public parks are perceived by people (Daneshpour & Mahmoodpour, 2009). In addition to positive outcomes, urban public parks might have a negative role on people's perceptions through feelings of insecurity linked to such threats as vandalism and crime (Lloyd & Auld, 2003; Barbosa, 2007 as cited in Daneshpour & Mahmoodpour, 2009).

2.0 Urban parks, liveability and sustainability.

Urban public parks are defined as places of interaction and encounter of people and the seat of communication and exchange of information (Daneshpour & Mahmoodpour 2009). Urban public parks have been viewed from two angles: the traditional and the new. The traditional view is still extensively acceptable in many places; this

view considers urban parks as suppliers of “recreational activities and opportunities”. On the other hand, the new view goes beyond the traditional principle of urban parks and considers the wider contributions the urban parks can give to the “vitality and well-being of communities and their residents and focuses on how policymakers, practitioners and the public can consider parks as valuable contributor to larger urban policy objectives (such as job opportunities, youth development, public health, and community building)” (Walker, 2004; Rogers, 1998 in Garcia, 2004; Lloyd & Auld, 2003 as cited in Daneshpour & Mahmoodpour 2009, p. 688). Liveability is defined as ‘quality of life’ as experienced by the residents within a city or region. Sustainability is the ability to sustain the quality of life we value or to which we aspire. In operational terms it is often viewed as enhancing the economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being of current and future residents (The World Urban Forum, 2006). In creating a liveable and sustainable urban park, the perceptions and preferences of the users are of utmost importance. This is because if the users consider the parks not liveable, then the sustainability of such park may be at stake because the revenues generated from the users are being used to sustain and keep the parks functional. When the revenues are not coming, the sustainability of the park is not certain. Therefore there is the need for a perception and preference survey of the users at the proposal stage of the project.

3.0 Urban development and urban recreation parks

Erubami and Young (as cited by Okpoechi, 2006), described an urban area as the centre of attraction with various sophisticated urban infrastructure that serve as urban magnets for migrants from the rural hinterland. Urban development, on the other hand, has also been defined as “the social, cultural, economic and physical development of cities, as well as the underlying cause of these processes” (University of Oslo 2014, “Urban Development”, para.1). This definition of urban development is somewhat similar to Nsiah-Gyabaah’s (2004) definition of urbanization which he stated as “the outcome of social, economic and political developments that lead to urban concentration and growth of large cities, changes in land use and transformation from rural to metropolitan pattern of organization and governance, and it is increasing in both the developed and developing countries” However, Hall (2007) posited that though urbanization is a fundamental “precondition for development, it doesn’t, of itself, guarantee development”. He further stated that “there’s good urban growth and there’s bad urban growth”; and that controlling urban growth so that it brings about economic advancement, alleviation of social exclusion, and ecologically sustainable forms of development, embodies the crucial challenge for urban managers and planners in this new century. This connotes that a considerable enhancement of economic development and the reduction of social exclusion may be achieved by the creation of urban recreation parks. Benefits of urban parks abound and numerous studies have shown that urban parks, recreation, and green space help grow local economies by attracting businesses, improving property values, increasing tax revenues, protecting natural resources, creating jobs and improving public health. Beyond the enhancement of a nation’s economic base, the American National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA, 2011) stressed that access to parks, green space, and recreation opportunities has proven to be an essential part of the answer to many urban questions such as declining economies, poor public health, and higher rates of crime. They added that “increased access to parks, green space, and recreation opportunities is essential to becoming a healthier nation and reducing unsustainable health care costs. They remarked that public parks contribute to the reduction of storm water runoff, enhancement of groundwater recharge, mitigation of urban heat island, and reduction in energy demands. All these ultimately ensure safe communities and neighbourhoods and sustainable protection against environmental contamination.

4.0 The study area

Akure, a city in the South western region of Nigeria, the capital of Ondo State is located on the intersections of Latitude $7^{\circ} 17^{\prime}$ North of the equator and Longitude $5^{\circ} 14^{\prime}$ East of the Greenwich Meridian. Its location gives a favourable climatic condition and makes it “ideal for greenery” while it is known for its dual maxima rainfall periods and a monthly temperature range between 25°C and 29°C . The humidity ranges from 66% in January to 85% in September. Akure is one of the economic nerve centres of Ondo State, a leading producer of mineral resources and cocoa in Nigeria. Akure, with a population of 500,000 in 2006 as against 190,000 in the 1991 census, has expanded over a large area due to varied developmental processes.



Plate 1: City main axis - Oba Adesida Road, Akure.

Source: <http://www.ondostategovernment.net/people.php>, 2010.

4.1 Alagbaka biological park

This biological garden popularly called “Abe Igi” in Yoruba language, which means “beneath the trees”, is located along the Akure-Owo Road in the area called Alagbaka in Akure. It was fashioned after the famous “Agodi Garden”, sited opposite the secretariat in Ibadan, and called “Alagbaka Gardens”.



Plate 2: Unattractive entrance (right)

Source: Field Survey, 2010

On public holidays, parents and guardians used to bring their wards to relax; but the now insecure nature of the garden is a major factor that discourages them.

It is patronised largely by a male-dominated clientele comprising public servants, bank workers, other white-collar jobholders and people from all walks of life as a place to relax after a hard day at work.

The park was a State Government Botanical Garden Initiative under the Ministry of Agriculture, the Department of Forestry in particular. It was created to serve as a picnic ground for Akure citizens but has since been converted to a “cool spot” (drinks joint) when its management was handed over to the Ministry of Commerce.

4.2 Research Population

According to Babbie (1986), a set of observations relevant to a particular study is referred to as a population. This supports the Asika (1991) definition, which gives population as “being made up of all conceivable elements, subjects or observations relating to a particular phenomenon of interest to the researcher.” The research population consisted of the public in the city of Akure. The public was chosen because they are the potential users of all recreational spaces and parks in Akure. However, the population was restricted to adults above eighteen years of age who live and work in Alagbaka, Akure. It was restricted to the adult population because it was taken into consideration that children and teenagers have different reasons and needs for going to a park and

the activities of children and teenagers in Akure are largely subject to their parents' approval and supervision. Even though children might be a reason for going to the park, parents still decide whether to go or not to go. Mitra and Lankford (1999) opined that to make sure that the sample covers all groups of people in the demographic sample, it is important to obtain a representation of the different groups of people based on each group's percentage. However, to get more reliable results and minimize error in the statistical analysis procedure, an approximately equal number of each group was surveyed.

4.3 Research Design

Research methods were designed to emphasise descriptive findings obtained from questionnaires. Olotuah (2005) identified survey research as a means of obtaining information on a defined population or universe - in this case, the selected recreational space in Akure, Nigeria. Mitra and Lankford (1999) also suggested that it is important to understand the objectives for the procedures before designing the research instrument. The necessary steps embarked upon for this procedure included the following:

- Physical and theoretical examination of the site in respect of location/distance from users. Identification of theoretical user population was done through the use of maps, photographs, local authority information, local knowledge, and library;
- Field survey of the site in relation to access and determinants for use, roads, footpaths and others;
- User profile based on sampling throughout the day and throughout the week. Compiled data helped to establish existence, substantiate users and use patterns, as well as length of visits, accessibility means, frequency of visits, purpose of the visit and quality of the experience;
- Survey of future user population, administration of questionnaires to dwellings and buildings within study area. Acquired data helped to substantiate user or non-user patterns and the reasons for patronage.

Data were obtained using questionnaires to determine factors that affect access to these spaces and their effects on the development of the environment in an emerging city as well as the expected impact on future development and enhancement of healthy living in a rapidly urbanizing city. The questionnaire method was chosen for its provision of insight into people's beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviour. It can also reduce the interviewer's influence on participants based on the style of questioning (Sommer & Sommer, 1991).

4.4 Sampling Frame and Techniques

For the purpose of this study, the population that provided data for the questionnaires and findings were:

- State and Federal Public Servants with their offices close the vicinity of the location of the selected urban park;
- Residents within the vicinity of the selected facility;
- Others, such as patrons of the spaces during questionnaire administration. Regardless of their professional or social background, respondents were randomly selected among the visitors; and to ensure that responses show immediate experiences, responders were encouraged to fill in the questionnaires during their stay at the park. At various parts of the park, questionnaires were distributed at different hours of the day during weekends and weekdays. The formats of responses were either closed or open.

5.0 Data analysis and discussion

A total of 200 questionnaires were administered in an attempt to acquire adequate information. This was done by using higher-level students (400 level and the postgraduate diploma students) of the Department of Architecture, Federal University of Technology Akure, under the supervision of the researchers. Training was done alongside their field experience to enlighten them on understanding the questionnaire and how to administer them. The number of collected questionnaires was 196, and these were collated, amounting to 98% of the administered number.

Frequency distribution was used to provide information regarding distribution and cumulative frequencies of the different data obtained from the questionnaires associated with certain factors and variables. A mean measure was used to determine the average number of participants associated with certain variables. The frequency cumulative effect and mean measure could tell how many participants chose certain variables and each variable's average; this made it easier to measure each participant's response.

Factor analysis was used to provide information about peoples' needs. The analysis provided lists of groups of people's activities, and the list provided information on the most and least preferred activities. The analysis was done through comparison of each variable mean correlation. As Kaplan and Kaplan noted, "If a correlation between two variables is relatively high (close to 1.0 and above 0.8), then if one knows how much one of the variables is liked, one can predict fairly accurately the extent of preference of the other variables" (Kaplan & Kaplan 1989). Furthermore, "The analysis of the most and least preferred variables can be very useful" (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) and can provide insight into peoples' needs and preferences.

6.0 Research findings

Table 1: Participants' Distribution

Distributions	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
A. Overall Participants	196	100.0
B. Gender Distribution		
Male	101	51.5
Female	94	48.0
Missing	1	0.5
C. Age Distribution		
18-25 yrs old	45	23.0
25-40 yrs old	87	61.7
40-50 yrs old	15	7.7
50-60 yrs old	11	5.6
60 and above	2	1.0
Missing	2	1.0
E. Level of Academic Attainment		
Tertiary	87	44.4
Secondary	73	37.2
Primary	34	17.3
Missing	2	2
F. Type of Employment		
Public Servant	104	53.1
Private Sector	74	37.8
Self- employed	7	3.6
Others	2	1.0
Not Applicable	9	4.6

Source: Field Survey, 2009

The findings suggest that people still patronise this recreational park even though their facilities are not well maintained; as people might not have any other place to enjoy the outdoors and engage in park activities, they still visit these spaces in a bid to relax.

Regarding social class, the data show an uneven distribution. The mean analysis of the variables concerning socio-economic groups shows that the mean for participants who hold a secondary school certificate and come to the recreational facility is 1.54, while participants who hold a Bachelor's Degree and above is 1.67. Meanwhile, the mean for participants who are government employed (public servants) is 1.70, while the mean for participants who have other employment status is 1.00 (Mean analysis; 1.0 is for "not at all" and 2 is for "yes"). These findings support the conclusion made by Walker and Kiecolt (1995) who suggest that socio-economic level plays a role in influencing people to go to the park. The data suggest that people in the lower income group are more likely to use the park than the higher income group.

In terms of gender distribution, the number of male out-numbered female visitors to the recreational facility, and 51.5% of all respondents (patrons) were male, while 48% were female. However, 64.4% of people who indicated that they had not visited the facilities within the past year were female (Table 2). Mean analysis indicates that the males' score is 1.72, and the females' score is 1.58 (Mean analysis; 1.0 is for "not at all" and 2 is for "yes").

Table 2: Gender Distributions among users of recreational facilities in Alagbaka, Akure

Distributions	Male	Female	Total
Not at all	26 (35.6%)	47 (64.4%)	73
Yes	66 (53.7%)	57 (46.3%)	123
Total	92	104	196

Source: Field Survey, 2009

7.0 Factors influencing clients' perception and preference for the recreational park

Social Class: From content analysis of the question regarding why participants do not come to recreational facility in the study area, the most popular reason cited was that they were "busy" (37%). In this context, "busy" means that the participants have no time and are too involved with work. The question therefore arises: does social class stratify "busy" people? A contradictory evaluation of "busy" responses with employment type disclosures shows that only 5 out of 15, or 33.3%, of those who cited "busy" as a reason for not going to recreational facilities in Alagbaka, Akure fall within the self-employed, private sector and others status. This suggests that the amount of leisure time available is not tied to employment type. In addition, the tentative conclusions of this data suggest that, as far as this recreational facility is concerned, social class is not a major

influence upon the decision to go to the these facilities.

Accessibility: There are two types of accessibility: physical and psychological. The distance of the recreational park to where people live, the time it takes people to travel, and the method of travel were considered for physical access. Psychological access is of two types, visual and social. Visual access is typically related to the conditions of the park and its impression of security to its users. Social access relates to signs and symbols, which indicate that only certain users are welcome in the park. Visual and social accesses are closely related to context and the sense of welcome that the place offers (Carr, Francis, Rivlin & Stone, 1995).

With respect to physical access, the data suggests that 59.7% of respondents who indicated that they had not been to the park within the past year lived more than five kilometres from it. Only 10.4% of them indicated that they lived within two kilometres of the park. In addition, 10.8% of the respondents stated that they did not go to the park because it was too far from where they lived. On the other hand, of 124 respondents who indicated that they had been to the park, 49.3% reported that they lived within five kilometres of it, and 50.7% reported that they lived more than five kilometres from it. While the number of park users who live more than five kilometres from the park is nearly equal to those who live less than five kilometres away, the question arises: how do respondents who live at the greater distance travel to the park? The data indicates that 41.9% of them travelled to the park by car, and only 11.9% took public transportation.

Another question that came to mind was if 41.9% of the participants who travelled to the park by car occupy a strong economic position? The data shows that 48.6% of participants whose employment type was below the private sector travelled to the park by car. The findings suggest that accessibility to this recreational facility is thus highly related to how people travel.

Sense of Territoriality: Sense of territoriality represents another influence on respondents' decisions to visit the recreational park in the study area. To understand if sense of territoriality affected respondents' decisions to visit the recreational park, the respondents rated their feelings about security, comfort, and pride towards the park using a five-point Likert scale. The data (Table 3) suggests that participants who indicated that they had not patronised the park within the past year had a mean value that lie within a neutral zone (interval $2.5 < x < 3.5$) for the first three variables, security, comfort, and pride. For the remaining three variables, insecurity, discomfort, and nothing, the mean value lies within the moderately low zone (interval of $1.5 < x < 2.5$). The data suggests that people who had not patronised the recreational park within the past year had neutral feelings towards the parks.

Table 3: Mean for Sense of Territoriality toward recreational spaces in Alagbaka, Akure.

Presence	Secure	Comfortable	Pride	Insecure	Uncomfortable	Nothing
Not at all	2.5410	2.7377	2.5410	1.8852	2.2131	2.2381
Yes	3.6230	3.8618	3.2683	2.1500	2.0826	1.8934
Total	3.2623	3.4891	3.0272	2.0608	2.1264	2.0108

Source: Field Survey, 2009

Other Factors: In addition to the factors that the literature review identifies, three factors emerged as important influences upon participants deciding whether or not to go to recreational park in Alagbaka, Akure. These factors are activities provided in the recreational spaces, presence of a natural environment, and park maintenance.

About 34% of participants who patronised this facility within the past year, and 12% of the people who did not, indicated that they engaged in active recreation during their leisure time (Table 4).

Table 4: Content Analysis of Respondents' Leisure Times

Content	Patrons		Non-Patrons	
	Frequencies	Percentage (%)	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Active recreation	42	34.1	9	12.3
Passive activities	40	32.6	18	24.8
Special interest	10	8.1	6	8.2
Computer related activities	5	4.1	23	31.5
House keeping	23	18.7	15	20.5
Social and family	3	2.4	2	2.7
Total	123	100	73	100

Source: Field Survey, 2009

8.0 Recommendations and conclusion

This study has identified some factors that influence urban park patrons: sense of territoriality, activities provided natural environment, and park maintenance to mention a few. Factor analysis has revealed seven issues under which participants' needs and preferences may be classified. There are many other factors related to park use and preference. However, it is important to understand that these factors vary from place to place. The more we understand why people prefer to go to certain places, the more effective we will be as designers, landscape architects, and managers of these places.

The literature review suggests that the aesthetic quality and beauty of the natural environment attract people to

parks and open spaces. By this, it is clear that the natural environment is a factor influencing participants' decisions regarding patronage of the recreational space in the study area.

The following recommendations are therefore proposed:

- On the issue of park maintenance as another decisive factor that emerged from the analysis, respondents cited lack of the maintenance and litter as factors in their negative perceptions of the parks as a reason not patronising recreational spaces in Alagbaka, Akure. If the park management improved its maintenance programmes, this would also improve activities and attract more people to the parks.
- A park maintenance and management program should be incorporated into the proposal for the redevelopment or renovation of the selected recreational spaces in Alagbaka, Akure Nigeria. This program should be integrated into the earliest phases of the design and planning process. A regular park maintenance schedule must be developed to ensure that the park is always in good shape. The affected ministries and agencies should make park maintenance their highest priority in managing the selected recreational areas in Alagbaka, Akure.
- Studies on how to conduct better park maintenance and management should also be of top priority for researchers in the landscape management field. They should develop maintenance and management programmes that are sustainable, efficient and affordable.
- Researchers should conduct cost-benefit analysis to weigh the costs of maintaining recreational areas against the patron recreation and leisure needs.
- A feasibility study on how to allocate open spaces in the city should be done to unearth both the problems and benefits of such a measure.
- The aesthetics of the recreational park is essential and it should therefore be upgraded. The need for this improvement in its aesthetics is needed to enhance the function and status of the park; this will make it liveable and attractive. A recreational park that lacks the touch of natural beauty will fail to meet the recreational needs of the users.

Finally, the survey indicates that it is important for park planners and administrators to reconsider their prioritisation of park maintenance. There are many other factors related to park use and preference. In conclusion, the findings from this study can be applied to most park and open space systems in the city of Akure in particular and Nigeria as a whole. For further research, it is imperative to comprehend how urban spaces have become more important as a result of urban migration and rapid urbanisation.

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