ROLE OF PUBLIC SPACES IN SOCIAL COHESION AND INCLUSIVITY

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Abstract

The review paper explores on the idea of how a well-designed public space can help enhancing social bonds, trust, and a sense of community amongst people from various economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Public spaces that are inclusive and equitable can help bridging the gap between different clusters in the communities, reducing societal rift, and promoting positive social interactions. The study also focuses on design elements like accessibility, spatial layout, seating arrangements, and presence of green spaces, thereby examining how these factors affect social integration, inclusivity, and belongingness amongst people. Additionally, it also talks about the importance of public spaces in hosting community events and cultural exchanges, which further strengthen social connections. As cities face rapid social and economic changes, it is crucial for architects, urban planners and policymakers to prioritize public space designs that foster unity and minimize inequality. The research emphasizes on the thought of how designing of public spaces helps in creating a cohesive, inclusive, and well-connected urban community.

Key Words: Public spaces, Social cohesion, Community spaces, Inclusive design.

1.INTRODUCTION

Public Spaces as a Site for Social Interaction

Cultures and climate differ all over the world, but people are the same.

"Cultures and climate differ all over the world, but people are the same. They will gather in public if you give them a good place to do it"

- (Gehl, 2010)

The connection between urban public spaces and social cohesion is an increasingly important area of research. Studies in this field examine how city spaces influence social bonds, trust, and a sense of community. Public areas like parks, streets, plazas, and squares act as places where people from various social, economic, and cultural backgrounds interact. The diversity of people present in these spaces help in meaningful exchanges, promoting inclusivity, and fostering connections between different cultures and ideas.

Well-designed public spaces are those that are accessible, safe, trustworthy and welcoming to all. This helps strengthening the feeling of belongingness and community amongst the people. Elements of design such as seating areas, green space and play zones create environments where people feel at ease. Urban spaces created to host cultural events, festivals, or community gatherings further encourage inter-cultural communication and strengthen social bonds across different groups in a society.

Understanding Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is a valuable and essential characteristic of a community, yet it is at a risk of fading away since societies around the world are experiencing rapid social and economic transformations, such as growing economic inequalities and increasing social polarization (al, 2006). The meaning of social cohesion varies with respect to its context (Kearns, 2001).

For example, in a city with culturally contrasting population, the social gatherings that take place in public spaces located in the center of the city (also known as threshold spaces) facilitate social integration and community cohesion (Aelbrecht, 2016). For the residents of a multi-ethnic neighborhood, local public spaces such as the shops, community centers help the people build social relations and enhance a sense of community amongst them (Cattell, 2008). Whereas, in the case of urban streets in the town, the prolonged history of social and community activities helps visitors and locals feel more connected to the place as well as to create a stronger sense of belonging (Ataöv, 2020).

The Role of Public Space in Building Trust and Creating a Sense of Safety

Public spaces that encourage in person interactions and shared community activities can help build trust and a sense of safety among individuals and groups. Frequent use of public spaces allows residents to develop familiarity with one another, which can fade hindrance and promote a sense of mutual respect amongst people (Pacheco, 2017).

Activities that occur in public spaces, such as markets, mandis, festive and cultural community meetings can create shared experiences that help establish trust. Furthermore, people's perception of safety in public spaces has a direct relationship with their sense of social trust. If a public space

feels unsafe or poorly maintained, individuals may avoid it, thereby reducing social interaction and trust-building.

How do public spaces affect society?

Public spaces affect society by shaping how an individual and communities interact, engage, and coexist within the environment. They provide a forum for cultural expression, civic engagement, and social exchange, contributing to the development of thriving, inclusive, and resilient communities.

Public spaces also play a critical role in promoting equity by ensuring that all residents regardless of their background, have access to areas that support their well-being and foster a sense of belonging (karwaan, 2023).

Public Spaces and Social Cohesion go Hand in Hand

Accessibility and availability of public spaces play a major role in determining its role in social cohesion. Public spaces that are designed such that they are equitable and inclusive can bridge the gaps between different socio-economic and cultural groups. Urban planning that provides an upper hand to the posh or the elite neighborhoods can create disparities in access to public space, which is unfair and may create social divisions and hence hindering social cohesion. On the other hand, public spaces located in neighborhoods with a mix of all kinds of socio-economic backgrounds provide opportunities for all varying groups to interact amongst themselves. Areas with a high degree of social integration tend to experience greater levels of social cohesion (Qi, 2024).

Well-designed public spaces have a huge impact on individual and community well-being, which in turn exerts influence on social cohesion. People who have access to green, tranquil, serene spaces experiences benefits such as less stress, better mood, and a greater sense of belonging to the community. These health benefits may lead to positive interactions and stronger social ties. In contrast, poorly designed or overcrowded spaces can contribute to environmental stress, which may erode trust hence hindering social interactions.

Impact of Design Features on Inclusivity and Social Cohesion

The designing of public spaces plays a major role in shaping the interactions that take place within them. However, while it is commonly acknowledged that public space design can influence social dynamics, there remains a need for more detailed research on the same. The physical and environmental aspects of public spaces can either promote diverse social interactions or create barriers to engagement and inclusivity. Below are some of the key points that have to kept in mind while designing a public space.

a. Layout and Spatial Organization

The spatial layout of a space impacts how the people are going to use it, which likewise affects the social interactions that occur over the place. For example, open and flexible layouts are likely to encourage spontaneous encounters and informal interactions, creating opportunities for people from different backgrounds to engage in. In contrast, enclosed spaces may isolate users and restrict interactions. Spaces that are designed with multiple entry points can encourage movement and engagement, thus leading to higher social mixing.

b. Seating spaces and Social Interaction

Seating spaces or seating arrangements are a crucial design feature that impacts how people interact in a given space. Studies have shown that the arrangement of seating, whether it is scattered, grouped in clusters, or arranged in a circle can facilitate or hinder social interaction in their own way. Additionally, seating that is designed to be accessible to a wide range of people, e.g., seating that accommodates individuals with disabilities or seating that caters to different body types etc fosters inclusivity by ensuring that every individual is able to use and enjoy the space to their fullest.

c. Green Spaces

The presence of greenery and natural elements in public spaces is another important design feature that influences social cohesion and inclusivity. The design of a greenspace—its layout, structure, surrounding community dynamics and amenities—is also important to building social cohesion. Activities that take place within the greenspace can lead to increased social cohesion (N. Kabisch, 2014). Community activities like festivals, religious events and concerts can provide a way for people to meet each other, have interaction and therefore increasing the perception of shared culture (Wang, 2015).

Public spaces that incorporate green areas allow people from diverse backgrounds to share a common interest in nature and outdoor activities, thus fostering informal interactions. Moreover, green spaces can also provide areas for community-based initiatives such as gardening projects, environmental education, and other recreational activities, which further promote inclusivity and community wellbeing.

d. Accessibility and Universal Design

One of the very important aspects of inclusivity in public space design is accessibility. Spaces must be designed to make sure that all individuals, regardless of their physical abilities, can access and fully engage with the spaces. Universal design principles, which focus on creating environments that can be used by all to the greatest extent possible without the need for adaptation.

For example, initiatives such as accessible pathways for specially abled, ramps, tactile surfaces, proper signages and auditory signals can make a major difference in ensuring that people with disabilities can also access and use public spaces. Beyond just accessibility for specially abled, equal accessibility to other marginalized groups, such as the elderly, parents with strollers, and low-income individuals is also

equally important. Also, accessibility to a space can also include improvements in transportation to the particular public place within the community (L. Groshong, 2020).

3. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, public spaces play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion by bringing together a place for people from all sorts of social, cultural, and economic backgrounds to gather around in a place altogether and interact with one another creating a sense of trust amongst the community. Keeping in mind to design these spaces with good proficiency by incorporating factors like accessibility, proper layout and tranquil green areas offers room for people to connect, share experiences, and strengthen their sense of belongingness to the place. As cities continue to urbanize and face rapid changes, it is important for architects, urban planners and policy makers to focus on creating fair and accessible public spaces that unite people and hence reducing social divides. Ultimately, thoughtfully designed public spaces plays a significant role in building social cohesion, creating environments where people from all backgrounds feel safe, involved, and connected.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a 5th year student of Architecture. I have keen interest in research work and sustainability in architecture, and how architecture can help us create a better world to live in.