The green-space experience as a tool for planning at small scales

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In traditional green-space planning approaches, we rely typically on characteristics such as form and function. However, for a visitor it must be his or hers experience of a green space that is important for the perceived quality and ultimately the value of a green space. But what is this experience? Can we measure it? And how can we use this knowledge in planning, designing and managing for quality in urban green-spaces?

In a Swedish context, Berggren-Bärring and Grahn (1995) developed eight park characteristics as a concept for urban green-space planning. The development was based on a large survey of urban park use in three Swedish cities. The eight characteristics were described with a mix of words related to both the abstract experience as well as the physical environment causing the experience. Since 1995, the eight park characteristics have been further the developed by Grahn and his colleagues, slightly changing in content and exact wording over the years (see Grahn & Stigsdotter 2010). Compared to other versions of the experience perspective (see Lindström & Jönsson 2009), the work of Grahn and his colleagues can be characterized as a 'cognitive' perspective. Following this line of work, we now talk about the experience as a visitor's sense/feeling of 'nature', 'serene', 'richness in species', 'space', refuge', 'prospect', 'cultural/history' and 'social'.

The eight characteristics have not specifically been developed for use as a practical tool and using them in practice has proved to be difficult. Several practical applications have been developed over the years in Sweden, Finland and Denmark. These methods have in common that they use the characteristics of the physical environment associated with the experiences to identify green-space values. However, when green-space values are identified in this manner they should be 'translated' back into user experiences and benefits related to these experiences. Problems arise since the relation between physical characteristics and experiences is not 1:1. In other order words, the characteristics do not always lead to the same experiences and vice versa. Whether or not visitors get a certain experience when visiting a location with certain characteristics may depend on many factors such as personal and professional background, health, weather, season, other people present, state of mind, and how the elements are composed.

To overcome such problems, we have – on a preliminary basis – suggested an approach that takes its starting point in the 'other side' of park characteristics; the experience. We went back to the original eight park characteristics and sought to identify the 'experience' behind each of them. The assumption is that the value of a green-space is easier identified through mapping of experiences than mapping characteristics. In the mapping process some green-space experiences may be identified as lacking in the proximity of a residential area. Planning should therefore seek to promote such experiences through investments and/or maintenance in order to increase the value of the green-space. With this outset we have sought to develop a planning method based on integration of the experience with knowledge of local preferences and planning needs.

The method is developed through a number of 'tests' at smaller scales e.g. a park (in contrast to the application at the regional scale or the level of the overall green infrastructure, e.g. Caspersen and Olafsson 2009). The test has been undertaken with students, researcher and professionals.

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Each test had a common outset in a specific urban green-space with the purpose to learn to identify and map experiences while highlighting development potentials. The tests have been organised slightly differently in each case. Based on our experiences with the tests, we presently suggest and discuss a four-step method for using the experience in urban green-space planning.

The four steps are:

1. *Planning context*: identification of the planning context and needs for a specific green-space. This can be done through either an expert or stakeholder approach.
2. *E-Mapping*: learning of the experience perspective in the local context, adjustment of measurements of experiences, and mapping of sites into 'E-maps'
3. *Deliberation*: discussions with experts and/or stakeholders about the development potential based on step 1-2, and development potentials
4. *Write-up of a final report* on the development potentials based on step 1-3

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