

# *The need for pluralistic spaces in the contemporary individualistic world*

## *Special focus on Kerala context*

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**Abstract** —Despite the fact that the multidimensional values of pluralistic spaces in the public and private domain constitute the core of urban sustainability, their importance is not adequately addressed in the context of developing countries. Rapid urbanization always demand for the deprivation of open spaces. What needs to explored is the likelihood of the loss of pluralistic spaces due to rapid urbanization, changing urban lifestyles and culture and technological advancements, particularly in the context of developing country like India. This study is basically focusing on the context of Kerala which is a clear cut example of getting individualistic over the past couple of years. The extent of parks and open spaces in the urban areas of Kerala is far below the standard norms.

**Keywords**-Urban open spaces; pluralistic space; individualistic world

### I. INTRODUCTION

It is an established fact that open spaces are important for our wellbeing and to foster a community. Early urban planners put in massive efforts to incorporate natural environments to their cities. These spaces were to be essentially socio-petal and hence support community health and well-being. They tend to give people an opportunity to interact with their natural environment and in turn shapes the physical, mental and societal health of a community.

### II. PLURALISTIC SPACES/URBAN OPEN SPACES IN A CITY

Obvious or apparent, every community has some sort of pluralistic space. In some cases, it is

remarkably obvious, for instance, a rolling green and shady park with walkway and benches and water bodies, a plaza enclosed by building facades where people gather together and get themselves engaged in some sort of interaction and activities. But there are other spaces that go unnoticed and are rather ignored in the list of pluralistic spaces in a community. Back alleys, neglected courtyards, and stairways may escape our notice among a city's most underutilized and potentially valuable assets. It is a fact that they belong to everybody and perceived as belonging to nobody. And yet if they are claimed, and owned, and developed, they can be harnessed to strengthen and enrich their communities.

From another standpoint, pluralistic space in general is defined as the meeting or gathering places of multiple users that exist outside the home and workplace that are generally accessible by members of the public, and which foster resident interaction and opportunities for contact and proximity. (Jacinta Francis, Billie Giles-Corti, Lisa Wood, Matthew Knuiman, Pages 401-409, ISSN 0272-4944)

There are numerous health benefits associated with access to public open space and parks. Access to vegetated areas such as parks, open spaces, and playgrounds has been associated with better perceived general health (de Vries, 2003; Maas, 2006), reduced stress levels (Grahn, 2003; Nielsen, 2007), with reduced depression (Morita, 2007) and more walking (Li, 2005; Giles-Corti, 2005). Moreover, there is a substantial body of evidence demonstrating that increased walking improves physical and mental health (Manson, 2002; Fritz, 2006; Murphy, 2002; Tsuji, 2003). Physical inactivity is a major public health risk (World Health

Organisation, 2002).Worldwide, mental health is a leading cause of burden of disease (WHO, 2003).One study found that people who use public open spaces are three times more likely to achieve recommended levels of physical activity than those who do not use the spaces. Users and potential users prefer nearby, attractive, and larger parks and open spaces(Wolf, 2008).More specifically, the benefits from participating in sport and physical activity include:

- Improved physical health and wellbeing – with reduced risk of lifestyle related diseases, higher survival rate of other diseases, improved quality of life and long term health, and, in young people and children healthy growth and development.
- Improved mental health – builds individual self-esteem and self-image, reduces stress, improves concentration and enhances memory and learning.
- Enhanced social outcomes – encourages social interaction and development of social skills, improves social networks and social capital, increases community cohesion and pride, safer communities
- Reduced healthcare costs – improved physical health and the building of stronger families and communities helps lower health-care costs, reduces the costs of social intervention and plays a role in reducing crime and social dysfunction (WA Department of Sport and Recreation, 2009)

The enormous rate of population growth along with the growth of urban development, leads to drastic exploitation of the nature resulting to an unhealthy and unwealthy ecology, which is alarming to the urban dwellers. Cities in many developing countries are experiencing the problems like deterioration of air quality, higher air temperature, increased noise levels, greater psychological stress and decreased sense of community.(MiyarRukunuddin Ahmed, Rakibul Hassan,2005)

These facts increasingly recognized the need for urban greenspaces. With lack of greenspace, the exponential population increase in the twentieth century will make physical, social, psychological and environmental hazards in the third world countries.

### III. KERALA: EVOLUTION OF OPEN SPACES

Kerala has always been known for its quaint villages with their own unique history and culture. We had vast stretches of paddy fields, rivers, streams, lakes ,pondsand rocky lands. This openness had been also replicated in the interiors as well-a network of open space starting from the interior courtyards, the huge front yards and backyards, the surrounding property which sometimeshad the family ponds around which the activities concentrated. The villages had maidans and playgrounds for the young people which is lacking in the present scenario. The village

square would be the commercial hub with the market area and other small shops where people gathered in groups to interact with eachother which is quite absurd in todays present life.

Congregational spaces existed in the temple and church complexes. There were also spaces which served seasonal usage only, as related to festival times of the year. The lakesides and riverbanks were active areas depending on the time of day.These open spaces were mostly occupied by the youth and the presence of women in most of these areas was rare. This was partly due to the existing social setup. But the major reason was the houses which stood in the middle of large plots never gave any reason for searching outside these precincts for recreational areas and interaction spaces(aparna,2008)

#### A. Temple grounds

One of the most important pluralistic space existed which invited multiple age groups specially during festivals.



Fig 1. Picture of Koodalmanikyam temple and Vadakunathan temple,Thrissur

#### B. Markets

In rural areas, the market is a weekly affair. It is important as an interaction place. The market place is a lively and colourful space with transactions and bargains been made, shoppers catching up on one another and so on.



Fig 2



Fig 3

Source: George-easaw-blogspot.in source: Richard folks

#### C. Riverbanks

It carries a vital role in the recreational pattern of the people. The riverbank (puzhakkadavu), is a major vast open space. It also has a seasonal purpose. When rivers dry up in the summer season, the riverbeds present a large play area for the children.



Fig 4 Fig 5

Family ponds (kulakadavu) also had been a very active interaction space of the past.



Fig 6 Fig 7

#### D. Kaavu

In Kerala in almost every nook of big houses of rich families and temples, there was a thick piece of jungle called Kavau or Sarpakavu (grove or serpent grove). This place has a mystical aura to it due to the supernatural beliefs associated.



Fig 8. Kuramkulam bhagavathi temple: devikajai

#### E. Aalthara (banyan tree grove)

The temple complex included a banyan tree (aal) which invariably would have a platform built around it (thara). This constituted the quintessential 'aalthara' immortalized in film songs and writings.

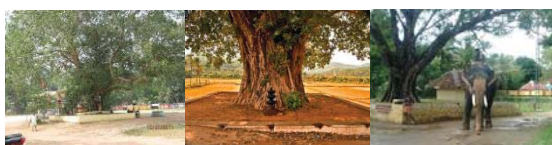


Fig 9 Fig 10 Fig 11

Source:Kavassery veliyaveedu

#### F. Paddy fields (paadam)

Kerala was once termed as the rice bowl of India. Its image was often associated with lush green paddy fields. The fields were very active social centers as well with most villagers earning their living, working in the fields.



Fig 12 Fig 13

#### G. Kavala (village center)

The village center gains importance due to the location of the only bus stop in the area. There will be some local shops ie, grocery, barber shop. The place is made lively by the daily presence of a certain group of people who consider the kavala as a very important meeting place.



Fig 14 Fig 15

### IV. KOZHIKODE CITY

#### A. Profile of the city

Obvious or apparent, Urbanization is catching up the state of Kerala. Presently the state has 5 main cities Trivandrum, Ernakulam, Kollam, Thrissur and Kozhikode. If you take Kozhikode city, the scale and pace of the process in the district is unprecedented. The district now leads the state in urbanization with 67.15% of its population living in urban areas as opposed to the state average of 47.72%, according to the town planning authorities. The urban population in the district has swelled from 11 lakh in 2001 to around 20 lakh in 2011. "There has been an unbelievable rate of urbanization, which is unparalleled in the state. It is fast acquiring a metropolitan character and it is next only to Kochi in the development surge. This could be a major driver for economic growth and development. Over 52 villages bordering the city limits have been transformed into urban areas. As per data released by Govt. of India for Census 2011, Kozhikode is an Urban Mass coming under category of Million Plus UA/City (The times of India, 2012). **Kozhikode city** is governed by Municipal Corporation and is situated in Kozhikode Urban Region. (census2011.census/metropolitan/418-kozhikode)

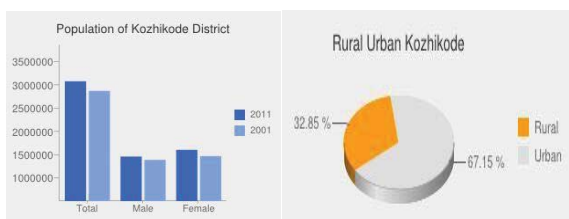


Fig 17 Diagrams showing the population and urban growth of kozhikode



Fig 18 Google map-karaparamba-2002 fig 19 karaparamba-2007



Fig 20.Karaparamba 2013

Over the years the available open spaces are being taken up by building units.

**B. Identification of the area**

Residential areas lying at the core of the cities have been identified and questionnaire surveys and face to face interviews had been conducted.

General condition of the places-Highly densified region having closely packed residential units leaving no open spaces between, offering the residents of the area no interaction as such between each other. All the units are segregated from one another by solid compound walls which could be another reason or literally the most evident barrier standing between two families. Other than their immediate neighbors, these people do not have any interaction /communication as such with the rest of the families in that particular residential area. Is that because of the lack of a pluralistic space that they themselves keep away from a communal interaction? Of course they do lack such a space. The people residing here actually crave for communal interaction spaces in their locality so that they can bring in all the residents and interact with each other which they think is very essential in the current scenario where the society is getting highly individualistic.

**V. COMMONLY USED EXISTING OPEN SPACES WITHIN THE CITY**



Fig 21. Mananchira square; fig 22. Calicut beach;

Fig 23.Sarovaram park

Admittedly, the stress on the few existing parks, gardens and playgrounds has been stark. It is impossible to have an early morning walk in any of these open spaces without bumping into someone. Very few people can boast of a neighborhood playground. Amidst all the development activities, very little land has been set aside for parks and playgrounds. Since these spaces are few and far between, the accessibility of these spaces is another question. People residing around these spaces could access it by walk but what about the people residing outside the circle? There is no other option left other than taking a bike/a car. In the present days, these are too crowded for comfort as well.

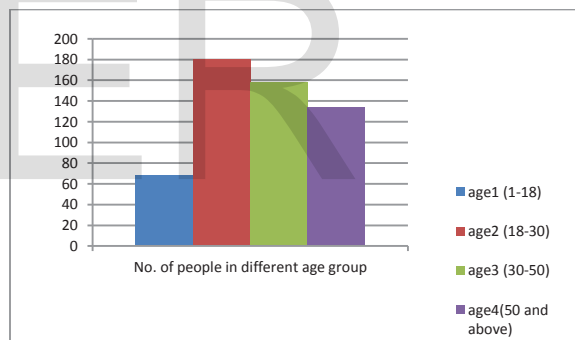


fig. 24

A total of 60 houses had been covered.

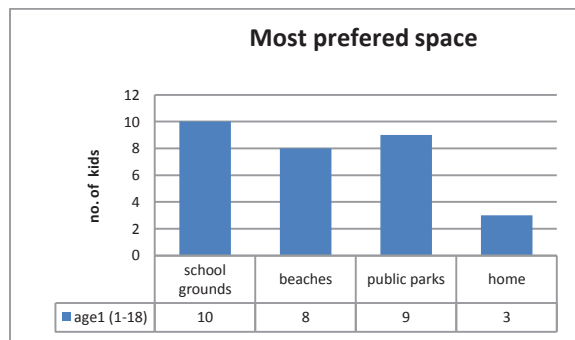


Fig.25

It was found that most homes have nuclear families with both parents working. The victims are

the children, who lead a life alienated from the rest of society and with no space even for playing. Absence of playing space prevents children from putting their creativity to use.

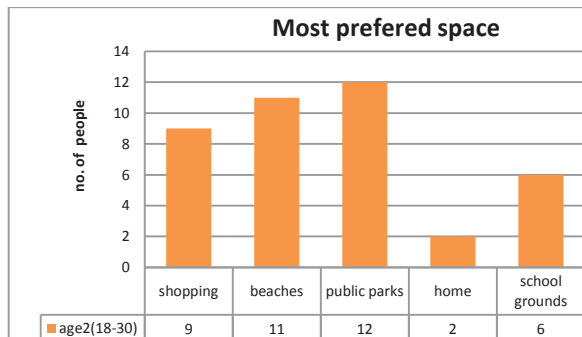


Fig 26

One reason stated by many women was that park spaces were often predominantly used by men of all age groups. Teenagers and children used the area for playing while adults lounged about. This puts off most women from using these areas freely.

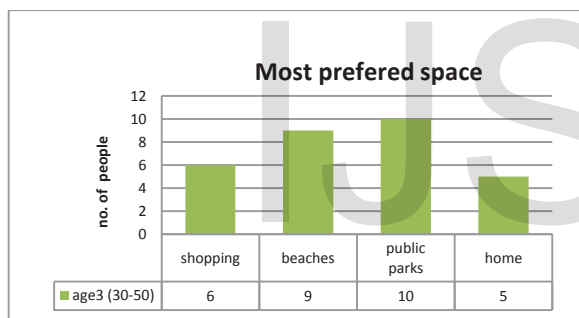


Fig 27

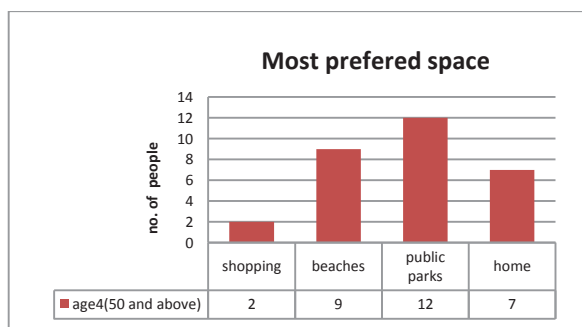


Fig 28

People falling under this group demands for a designed space in their residential area where they can go relax in the evening time. At present they are forced to stay at home since most of the available spaces are now occupied by buildings.

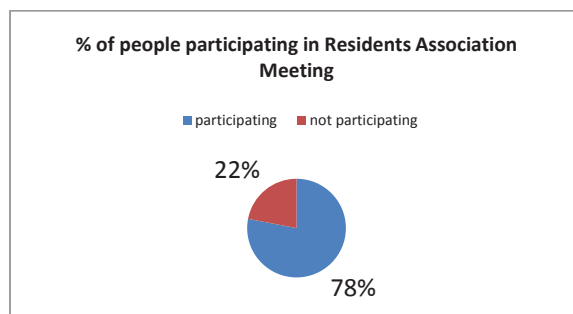


Fig 29

In cities, some residential wards have active residents association where as in some wards it remains inactive. And there are places where they don't have any sort of association programs to bring in the people together.

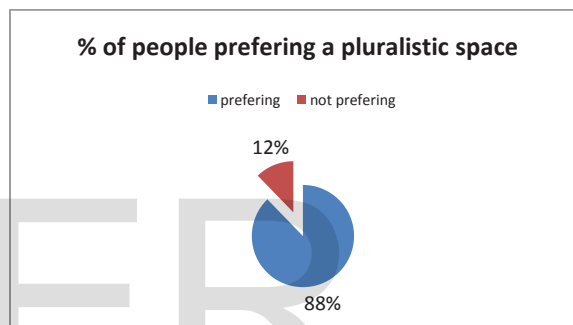


Fig 30



Fig 31

From the responses it is evident that the major need is felt for playgrounds and walking stretches.

## VI. TRIVANDRUM CITY

### A. Profile of the city

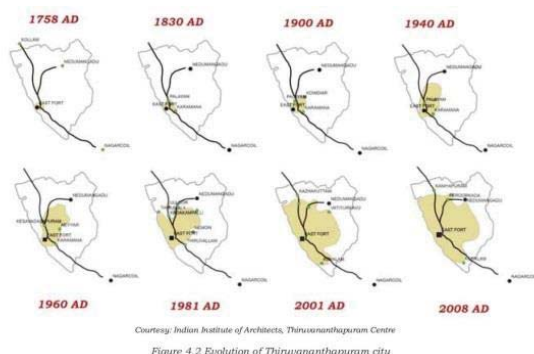


Fig 32 Source :Trivandrum master plan

Trivandrum city, on the southern end of India, is the capital city of the state of Kerala as given below.

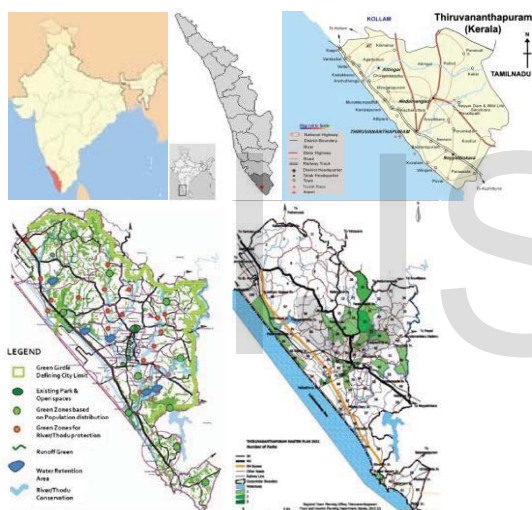


Fig.33 map of India showing location of Kerala,Kerala map showing location of Trivandrum,map showing the urban open spaces of Trivandrum

City of Trivandrum is bestowed with a good network of water bodies and green open spaces. However this has been totally misused and the further development of the City has to be envisaged conserving and reviving the existing blue-green network and evolving a pollution free city. (Tvm-corp-masterplan-draft)

In the city, 21 wards have exclusive playgrounds and 23 wards have parks. There are 65 wards with neither parks nor play grounds. Only 3 wards have more than one play grounds. Parks, playgrounds, green spaces and other open spaces are necessary for the availability of fresh air. These areas also form part of recreation to the general public. Open spaces

also serve as islands of nature, promoting biodiversity and providing a home for natural species in environments that are otherwise uninhabitable due to city development. An open space hierarchy has to be provided for the city for the improved leisure and recreation.

### B. Existing open spaces within the city



Fig.34 picture of trivandrum museum;fig 35 kanakakunnu palace; fig 36 beach



Fig 37. puthirakandam maidan;fig 38 chandrasekhar stadium;fig 39 gandhi park

A residential from the centre of the city had been identified and a questionnaire survey and face-face interview had been conducted. Results have been diagrammatically represented. 60 families responded to the study.

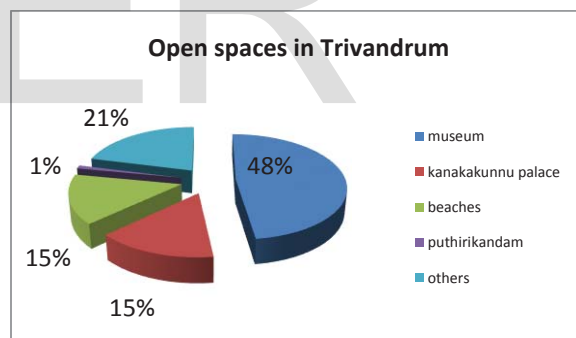


Fig 40

Almost half of the city agreed upon the museum premises as the most people friendly open space to be found in the city. There was an equal number of voters for the Kanakakunnu palace grounds and the beaches around Trivandrum like Veli, Sangumugham and Kovalam. Then there was a lesser percentage voting for Puthirakandam and some other local residential parks such as the Kowdiarpark. The museum grounds are favoured by many due to its central, open location and easy access. Earlier women were often disturbed by eve teasers and loitering men. But with the increase in security, this problem has been solved. The beaches are mostly favored by the youth, especially the youth who consider the rides to the beach as part of the

enjoyment. Among the newly added parks, one which the public has openly accepted is the Gandhi park opposite the Chalai market.

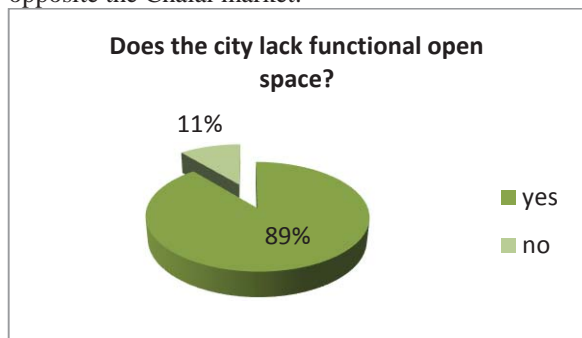


Fig 41

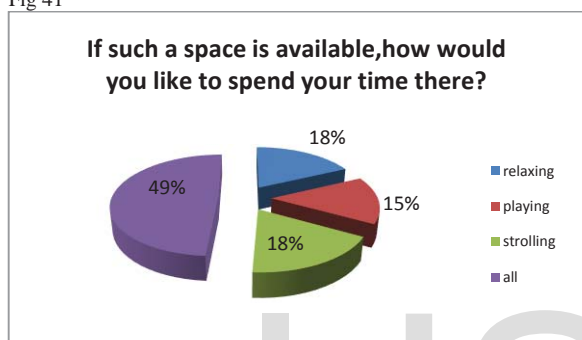


Fig 42

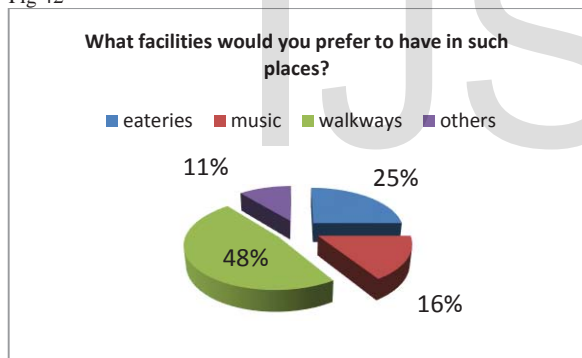


Fig 42

48 % cited walkways as the major facility to be provided, emphasizing the lack of exercising areas.

Open spaces do not figure high on the list of priorities of the town planners or, for that matter, the residents of Trivandrum city. With Trivandrum having started to resemble an urban sprawl with endless rows of houses, the balance between settlements and open spaces has been disturbed as never before. Admittedly, the strain on the few existing parks, gardens and playgrounds has been severe.

## VII. FINDINGS

Almost 75% of people agreed upon the museum premises as the most people friendly open space to be found in the city mainly due to its central open location and easy access. Half of the population admitted that they rarely or almost never took the time off to spend time in such open spaces. The reason given was mostly the long distance and time spent. They preferred to visit such area during the evening hour.

An overwhelming 89% agreed that Trivandrum lacked proper public open spaces.

This shows how much the urban citizen yearns for the open spaces. The major need is felt for playgrounds and walking stretches. The need for exercise and some fresh air is felt by all. And a place for people to gather together.

## VIII. INFERENCE

There is this particular group of people in every city who are forced to limit themselves to home due to space constraints and poorly maintained open spaces. Also most of the residential wards especially in cities lack a space as such for the people to walk and explore. Main roadways could be one option if the space available is limited, only if it is provided with well designed active sidewalks. If you look at the psychological aspect, nobody would ever prefer to be in an enclosed space unless they are forced to. A community living condition is absent in present day life. People never find time to indulge in healthy discussions—they neither want others to indulge in their affairs nor they interfere in others matters. They have this feeling somewhere lying deep inside them that if they do so, they will have to spare more time some day for some reason with them. It's the society which molded the people to be more individualistic. Through the surveys being conducted, it was so evident that people actually did crave for spaces which could bring in people together. But nobody really had the hope of getting this need implemented anywhere. Nobody wanted to take up the initiative though they demand for such places. Some people remarked that they never did find time to spend in outside world. Can that be a justification? It's not that you don't get it, it's just that you don't try for it. It would be easier for the new generation people to get accustomed to the changing society. That's because they had never experienced the past. People who had experienced it find it very difficult to cope up with the changing society. But would these changes bring good to you people? Think about it!

Increasingly, the design or redesign of public places requires a participatory process where the eventual users or representatives of the same, are involved in the design process.

### IX. GUIDELINES

- Every residential ward should be provided with designed pluralistic/open spaces taking into account the size and shape of the area.
- Should be accessible and be a multiple user friendly space considering the demands of all age groups
- Create an awareness that the place is available for use and is meant to be used.
- Should organize frequent activity programs so as to make sure the space is active throughout and thereby ensuring a healthy interaction between people.
- Should be furnished to support the most likely and desirable activities.
- Provide a feeling of security and safety to would-be users.
- Should be a space offering relief from urban stress and enhance the health and emotional well-being of its users
- Offer an environment that is physiologically comfortable at peak use times in regard to sun and shade. Windiness and the like,
- Be accessible to children and disabled people.
- Incorporate components that the users can manipulate or change  
E.g.( sand play in child care, raised garden beds in housing for the elderly, interactive sculpture and fountains in urban plazas).
- Be easily and economically maintained within the limits of what is normally expected in a particular type of space (eg. a concrete park might be easy to maintain but is not what a park is expected to be).

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