

Urban Spaces (1980) and in *City* (1988), calls attention to the need for “sittable space” that is comfortable and properly oriented, spaces that have access to sunlight, trees, water, and food, among other amenities. In stressing this point, he states that it is particularly related to choice: “sitting up front, in back, to the side, in the sun, in the shade, in groups, off alone” (1980, p. 28).

Some of these points will be further discussed later in this chapter in a section dealing with the way spaces are used. A useful finding from the research of Project for Public Spaces (Madden & Bussard, 1977) is that the people they studied preferred to be seated facing pedestrian flow and avoided seating where their backs were turned to all or part of this traffic.

Social and psychological comfort is a deep and pervasive need that extends to people’s experiences in public places. It is a sense of security, a feeling that one’s person and possessions are not vulnerable. Crime is a common concern and a reality in many public places and cannot be ignored in an analysis of their qualities. Across many cultures and times women have been threatened in public spaces, making them less comfortable to use. In a study of found or informal spaces, local neighborhood sites were especially noted by women to be places where they felt safe, surrounded by familiar faces in a neighborhood they could trust (Rivlin & Windsor, 1986). But for many women the streets in their home neighborhoods are dangerous and local parks cannot be used. Their range of movement is constrained by the challenges to their safety, a condition little changed over the years.

Attention to features that reduce threats to safety are likely to increase comfort in settings (Franck & Paxson, 1989). In some cases this may involve space management policies, the use of personnel to ensure the security of users. In other cases design features can enhance the openness, providing visual access into the site. Concern for safety is one of the reasons why people avoid parks or plazas that have barriers to visibility. In their study of Bryant Park in New York, Nager and Wentworth (1976) found that the very features that helped to make the park a pleasant sanctuary from the midtown noise and crowding, the ornamental wall, fence, and shrubbery, obstructed visual access, creating safety problems and discouraging some people from going into the park.

Relaxation

Relaxation is distinguished from comfort by the level of release it describes. It is a more developed

state with body and mind at ease. A sense of psychological comfort may be a prerequisite of relaxation – a lifting of physical strains, moving the person to a sense of repose. Relaxation frequently is cited by designers as their intent in planning space, and the description of a site as “relaxing” defines the experience possible in the place more than the physical setting, although the two are clearly interrelated.

Urban open spaces, particularly parks, traditionally have been viewed in the United States as places of relaxation and respite for the harried city dweller. However, some authors have argued that this perspective has been overstressed. J. B. Jackson (1981) claims that American designers and policy makers have devoted too much attention to landscaped parks, designed for relaxation and contemplation, and have overlooked the public’s need for active recreation areas. Whyte (1980, 1988) has demonstrated convincingly that many users of small urban parks and plazas seek liveliness and some form of engagement with the life of a city, rather than retreat from it. The growing interest in community gardening also points to the need for the public landscape to accommodate active recreation. Despite the validity of these arguments, there is evidence that people also look for spaces that accommodate repose and relaxation and offer a brief pause from the routines and demands of city life.

Research in a variety of public spaces indicates that urbanites do frequently seek out settings for relaxation. Becker (1973, p. 453) reports that a large proportion of the users of Sacramento’s downtown pedestrian mall liked its “quiet relaxing atmosphere,” although this was not what the retailers had desired. In another dense and active context, Nager and Wentworth (1976) found that interview respondents in Bryant Park reported their most frequent activities as relaxing and resting. Users of Greenacre Park, a Manhattan vest-pocket park (cited both by Burden, 1977, and in our own research), viewed the space primarily as a place for relaxation.

In examining the factors that support relaxation, the element of respite from or contrast to the adjacent urban context appears to be prominent. Separation from vehicular traffic, as in the case of pedestrian malls, often makes it easier to be relaxed, although it also may increase user concern about safety and security during low use times.

However, as we have noted, setting off a space from adjacent streets and sidewalks can present safety problems as well as benefits. Indeed, the Paseo del Rio was generally considered unsafe in San Antonio until, in the 1960s, commercial activities – especially