

Public green spaces: More than just parks; public spaces are a social nexus

Public spaces in disadvantaged communities are often non-existent. But they are crucial spaces for socialization and fostering a sense of community. Case studies illustrate how community-based pocket parks and micro-garden can positively impact the livability of poorer communities (reducing crime, building trust, and improving livelihoods). Explore ways to incorporate public green spaces in disadvantaged communities.



In Phnom Penh, public spaces are becoming increasingly scarce. A recent assessment by [the United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\)](#) found that the ratio of public space in Phnom Penh has decreased [from 1.1 square meters per person](#) in 2014 to only 0.67 square meters per person in 2020. This statistic places Phnom Penh at a lower rank compared [to other cities in the region](#), such as Singapore, which has an average ratio of 7.04, Seoul with 14.66, and Ho Chi Minh City with an average of [13.7 square meters per person](#).

The city continues to expand rapidly, with most new public spaces being created for residential areas, which do not benefit the public. This lack of space has become a significant issue, especially in disadvantaged communities that almost have no public spaces.

Nonetheless, public spaces are crucial for improving the living conditions of these communities. Phnom Penh must find ways to incorporate additional public spaces, particularly in marginalized neighborhoods.

Public spaces benefit children and the elderly, increase confidence, and promote safety. According to the UK's Design Council, public parks and green spaces are very important as they provide a safe environment for children to play, do sports, and encourage other activities. The elderly also benefit from public spaces for their

health. Studies have shown that community parks positively impact living conditions in impoverished areas by reducing crime, building confidence, and improving the livelihoods of vendors.

The perception of safety in public spaces is intrinsically tied to the vibrancy and activity within those areas. Environments bustling with human activity — such as pedestrians, people dining at street-side cafes, children playing, and elders engaging in conversation — foster a sense of security. In stark contrast, walking through desolate areas characterized by high walls and closed doors, devoid of human presence, often evokes feelings of unease and insecurity.

Therefore, these activities are crucial as they attract people who serve as natural surveillance for the area. This informal surveillance network fosters a sense of safety, thereby enhancing the overall well-being of the community. Increasing the activities and vibrancy in an area can be both simple and cost-effective, such as repurposing a vacant lot, as demonstrated in the following case study.

In 2021 and 2022, the Child Poverty Action Lab, in partnership with the Better Block Foundation, undertook a project to revitalize a vacant lot. This space was transformed into a vibrant area hosting events such as basketball games and film screenings. By introducing these activities and creating a hub of human interaction, the project significantly enhanced public safety.

Data collected after the intervention found that maintaining vibrant public spaces led to a decrease in crime. Violent crime dropped by 59% compared to 2019, with a 20% decrease in arrests. Overall, this area, which was one of the highest-risk neighborhoods in the police department's jurisdiction, fell to number 463 on the same ranking list. This intervention also demonstrated that vibrant and well-utilized public spaces could be a key to safer neighborhoods. Human activity in the community plays a crucial role in promoting safety in an area.

Finally, we should not overlook the environmental benefits such as reducing heat impact, flood mitigation, and reducing air and noise pollution.

Incorporating public parks into the community



Given the current context, creating large parks may not be feasible for Phnom Penh. However, small green public spaces can still be integrated into the city. Numerous small public spaces can be scattered widely among various neighborhoods in Phnom Penh, making them accessible to citizens.

As shown in the above case study, temporary small public spaces (Pocket Parks) offer flexible usage and require low investment, while

maintaining the same positive outcomes. Implementing such solutions on a larger scale would be beneficial, and local authorities can start by identifying vacant land or locations that can be converted.

Firstly, locations classified as public land should be prioritized for conversion. Areas under flyovers, often left vacant, dirt paths, and places adjacent to canals should also be targeted.

Siem Reap has already demonstrated the strategy and benefits of improving a foul-smelling canal running through a community into a green public park. This intervention increased the city's public spaces with the

development of a new park, featuring additional footpaths. The park, located along the canal, includes a 625-meter walkway extending from National Road 6 to Samdech Preah Mohasena Tep Vong Road.

Moreover, communities can work together to temporarily transform private vacant land. Although more challenging than improving existing public spaces, the benefits of public spaces can motivate a community to persuade landowners to accept such interventions in the short to medium term.

Landowners can also benefit when their land is used as a vibrant public space. For example, they can benefit from lower property tax payments because their land is no longer classified as vacant. Additionally, they may be able to rent out stalls for vendors as part of the arrangement.

Secondly, while large-scale public space interventions may be more challenging, they are still achievable if vacant land can be found. In recent years, Phnom Penh has relocated some industrial areas to the outskirts or provinces, presenting opportunities for brownfield development, which is the redevelopment of former industrial areas to meet different needs.

Houtan Park in Shanghai provides a good example of the redevelopment of a former industrial area. This public space restored a section of the Huangpu Riverfront by transforming an ironwork factory, landfill, and shipyard into a green park. It includes riverside walkways and a natural wetland ecosystem. Additionally, this public space functions as natural infrastructure for water purification, treating 1,900 cubic meters of wastewater daily.

Public spaces

A community can benefit from social, health, environmental, and economic advantages by incorporating small gardens and parks. Especially for disadvantaged communities, these benefits include increased social trust, safety, and economic benefits created by public spaces.

Adding green public spaces is not only more feasible than creating large parks but also offers greater flexibility and inclusivity for communities. Urban planners and local authorities should collaborate with communities to convert vacant land into vibrant, bustling public spaces.

This short research article presents the viewpoints of young researchers on the aspect of development under the theme:

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*Please note that this is not an in-depth researched article and does not reflect the point of view of the Samhakum Teang Tnaut Organization (STT).