

Evaluating Public Spaces of Dhaka City in Terms of its Desired Role in the Public Realm

Sheikh Rubaiya Sultana Munni¹, A.K.M. Masud Parvez²

¹Department of Architecture, BRAC University

²Department of Architecture, the Ministry of Housing and Public Works

ABSTRACT

Generally, Public space is an area of public activity and interest, a public space is a social space. The parts of city (whether publicly or privately owned) that are available, without charge, for everyone to use or see, including streets, squares and parks are public domain or realm. The public realm at its best is an incomparable teacher of social skills and attitudes; children and youth learn through observation, imitation and participation how to relate and behave with a diversity of others (young and old, poor and well-to-do, healthy or disabled) (Crowhurst, Lennard, 2004) The importance of public space is unlimited for urban life and livability. It works as a breathing space for the city and the city dwellers as well. There is a need to fulfill lot many criteria or principles to turn a public space successful. In Dhaka city there are some public spaces such as- Ramna Park, Suhrawardy Udyan, Dhanmondi Lake, Botanical garden, Chandrima Uddan etc. Though they are not sufficient for a mega city like Dhaka, their scales are good enough. However, there are always questions about their performance. Are they successful as public space? Are they satisfying the urban need as public space? This paper attempted to understand the quality, the criteria, and the importance of a good / successful public space by reviewing literatures. Then the study tried to make a checklist for studying good public space regarding their performance, and finally the paper put two of the local public spaces within the checklist created through the literature review to evaluate how they are performing as public space.

Keyword: Public space, Criteria, Evaluation, Dhaka city.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dhaka has already been evolved as a mega city. Huge population and unplanned urbanization creates a crisis in its urban environment. Dhaka has little amount of open space and day by day the amount is decreasing. The more important thing is that the amounts of existing open spaces are not working properly. So it is important to ensure two things, firstly, there should be sufficient amount of open spaces for the city dwellers and secondly, the existing public space should play their role properly. As it is not an easy task to create more spaces in the dense city like Dhaka, rather it is easier to try including essential criteria for successful open space into the existing open spaces.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To understand the quality, the criteria, and the importance of a good / successful public space by reviewing literature.
- To build a checklist of good / successful public
- To evaluate existing public Spaces of Dhaka based on the checklist.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Christopher Alexander, Bentley, Project for Public Spaces (PPS), Kevin Lynch, Jan Gehl and many scholars have identified tangible, intangible or generic attributes that makes a space lively and livable through their theories and philosophies. People’s feelings, uses and experiences of the space are indicated together with the interaction of functions and space. Jane Jacobs advocates for functional diversity, which will result in a constant flow of people in the urban spaces (Jacob, J 1961). Henri Lefebvre state with Jacob, the public space should be a mixture of function. Sense of place and place identification is an important issue (Lefebvre, 1991). Kavin Lynch stresses the importance of the identity connected to specific spaces. He says that “if the environment is visible, organized and sharply identified, then the citizen can inform it with his own meaning and connections.” (Lynch, K 1960). Lynch describes the statement as imageability. The visual permeability has a great importance. It is coherent with crime prevention and feeling of safety.

Inclusiveness and accessibility has a both a physical and mental aspect. It inspires social integration. Community involvement is one of the most important things. Gehl makes difference between necessary/functional activities, optional/recreational activities and social activities in public spaces. He explains necessary activities take place regardless of the quality of the physical environment; optional activities depend to a significant degree on what the place has to offer and how it makes people behave and feel about it (PPS). When public spaces are successful they will increase opportunities to participate in communal activity. In the parks, plazas, markets, waterfronts, and natural areas of our cities, people from different cultural groups can come together



Figure 1: What makes a great place?

Source: <http://www.pps.org/reference/grplacefeat/>

in a supportive context of mutual enjoyment. Frequent meetings, encounters and exchanges of ideas among citizens – these qualities of the public realm are a fundamental requirement for citizens’ well-being (Aristotle). Successful public spaces respond to the needs of their users, are democratic in their accessibility, and are meaningful for the larger community and society (Francis, 2003).

There are some essential dimensions of Public Realm (Carmona M, 2003: 119 - 210. 5)) such as - Social - (Safety and security, Mobility, Accessibility and exclusion); Visual - Hard and soft landscaping; Functional - Comfort, Relaxations; Passive engagement; Active engagement; Continuity of place So A Great Public Space always promotes human contact and social activities; ensure safe, welcoming, and accommodating for all users; promotes community involvement; reflects the local culture or history; has a unique or special character; has visually interesting design and architectural features.

The PPS speaks about four key attributes and there are some tangible and intangible issues under these key attributes (Fig 01) and they almost cover all the essential dimension of public realm.

PPS also introduce five accepted indicators to know when a place works for people (PPS 2000: 81-83)

1. A high proportion of people in groups use the space.
2. A higher than average proportion of women uses the space which indicates safety and comfort.
3. Different age groups use the space, together and at different times of the day.
4. A range of varied activities occur simultaneously.
5. More activities of affection are present, such as smiling, embracing and holding hands.

Though these theories are formulated through the study on European public spaces, this inspiration can be a guide in evaluating existing public spaces of Asian cities. Along with these, there need to formulate local attributes. It is very much true that priorities differ from context to context. The study of Asian public spaces may be helpful to frame up the guiding principles.

4. DESIRED ROLE OF PUBLIC SPACE IN DHAKA

The culture, tradition and lifestyle of the people of the south Asian city indicate that the role of the open space should be a communal space for social life. It should offer many benefits: places where people can display their culture and identities and learn awareness of diversity and difference; opportunities for children and young people to meet, play or simply ‘hang out’. All have important benefits and help to create local attachments, which are at the heart of a sense of community. It

should vary according to the time. Public open space must play a role in shaping public behavior or indeed even a sense of the commons.

Evaluation of Public Spaces in Dhaka

To evaluate the public spaces of Dhaka city, two cases have been selected one is *Ramna park* area and another is *dhanmondi lake*. For this study, the sites were investigated and observed. Along with the physical study, the users of these open spaces have been interviewed in terms of four major key attributes of Public spaces.

5. RAMNA PARK

Comfort and Image. Ramna has a very especial image. The area is safe in morning and evening. However, night is not safe for general people. The area is very attractive and charming. There is enough provision for jogging, walking, exercise and sitting. Various types of vegetation make the area very comfortable. It is preserving the important variety of plants and ensuring eco-friendly environment. Majority of visitors think that the area is moderately attractive, safe and comfortable. That means they are quite happy. However, it is not well maintained. Regarding the point “crime”, the day time is safe, but in night there happens mugging and illegal activities. Maximum built form of this area is government building and there condition is good. Sanitation system inside the park is not well enough.

Access and Linkage. The access of the area is not good. There is little option to come to the area by foot. There is Very limited option for rickshaw and bicycle. People need to have car to come here. The area is surrounded by busy vehicular road mainly and some part of its periphery is

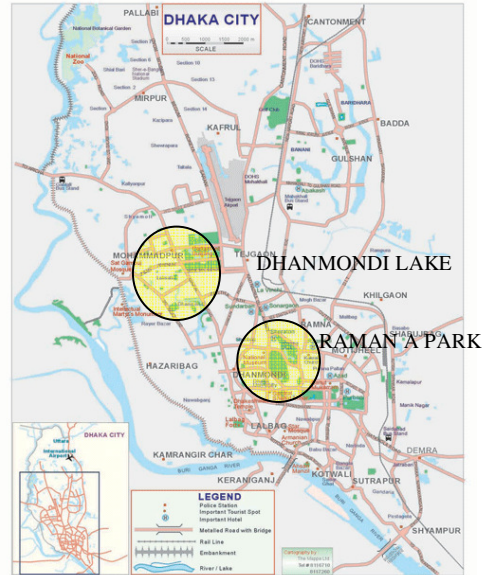


Figure 2: Dhaka city map showing two cases Source: <http://pediabd.blogspot.com/>



Figure 3: Land use Pattern of Ramna Park area

Source: Survey, Design studio, DoA, BRACU

obstructed by buildings like Hotel, Hospital and restricted club. Visual connection is not enough. There are boundary wall which makes visual barrier. Car, bus, CNG driven auto are the mode of transport in this area. Among them, Car is prominent. Slow moving vehicle is very negligible.

Uses and Activity. In present day, three major public uses are - *Raman park*- usually works as an open space *Suhrawardy Uddyan* -it is also an open space, however, there is a memorial for our freedom fight *Shishu Park*- work for children's amusement. There are several activities in Ramna area. Different activities such as walking, gossiping, resting, exercising, sleeping, vending are happening around the day time.

Sociability. Though in few years back the condition of safety and security was very poor in Ramna area the scenario has improved nowadays. People including the women feel safe to come here.

Dhanmondi Lake

Comfort and image. Dhanmondi Lake is comfortable for the users. There is some claim about safety issue, from the user's point of view the area is safe in daytime. The visitors recommended that the area is moderately safe, attractive and comfortable. However, the area is poorly maintained. The built form of the area is comparatively new and majorities are 6-storied height. Initially the area was designed as residential but presently there is some mixed use development.



Figure 4: Activities inside Ramna Park; Source: Design studio, DoA, BRACU

Figure 5: Green of Ramna Park

Figure 6: peoples' gathering at 6pm



Figure 7: Dhanmondi lake area, Source: Design studio, DoA, BRACU

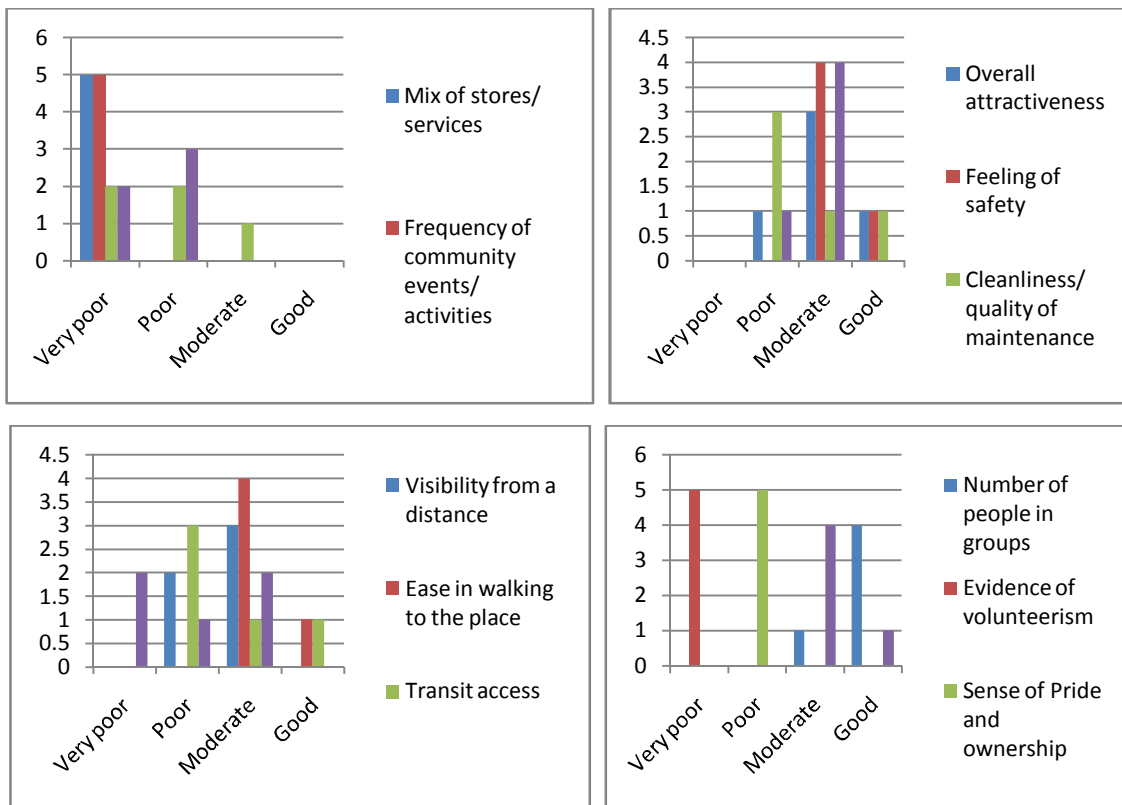
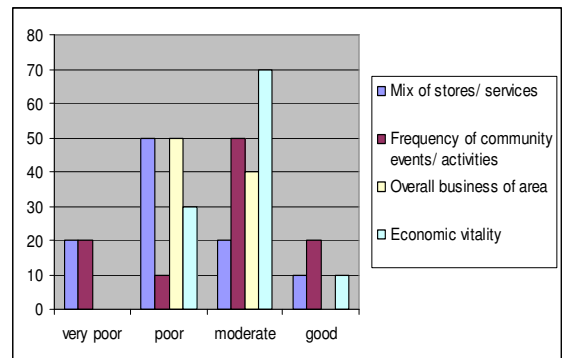
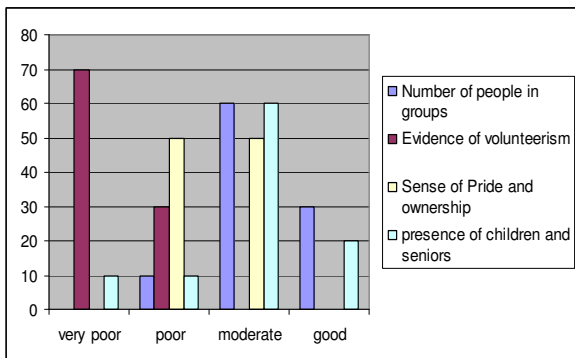
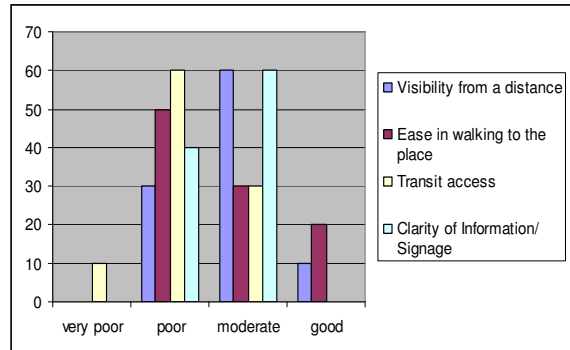
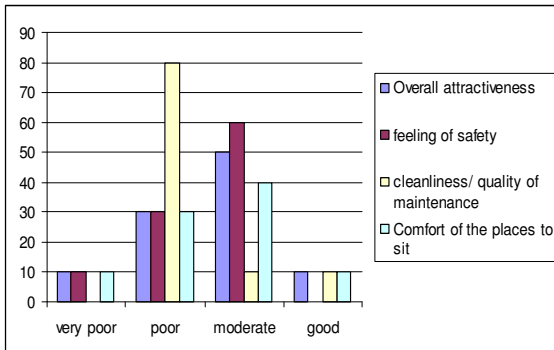


Figure 8: Survey findings, (Based on four key attributes) for Ramna Park; Source: Author, 2013

Access and Linkage. The physical and visual connection of Dhanmondi lake with other area is comparatively good.

Use and Activity. The main use of this area is recreational. There are several activity like walking, sitting, gossiping, live performance, eating, boating and vending.

Sociability. The area has a good image for whole Dhaka city. People come here from every corner of the city. However, the public activities like performances, large gathering of people sometimes disturb the residents.



6. REMARKS

Putting these two local case studies into the four key attributes and five indicators generated by PPS, it seems that these cases somehow working for the city dwellers though these are not satisfying all the criteria of successful public spaces. Maybe that could be a reason that the ratio of public space with the population is too low and people are trying to be happy with what they are getting from the existing spaces. However, there must have efforts to keep more public open space and ensure to fulfill the requirements of a successful public space in an urban area for the healthy living pattern of city dweller.



Figure 10: Peoples' participation in Dhanmondi Lake

Source: Author, 2013

7. CONCLUSION

It is very necessary to know the principles of successful public realm through theories and international best practices. So that one may learn what is the standard situation for public realm. However, there is no alternative to study local people and local cases to know the attributes which will get priority for creating a successful open space in a particular context. Every city has a unique character and it acts according to that character. The paper is just an initiative looking towards some attributes of successful public space which can make people satisfy in their day to day urban life.

REFERENCES

- [1] Carmona M , Heath T , Oc T , Tiesdell T , *Public Places - Urban Spaces: A Guide to Urban Design* , Architectural Press,2003
- [2] Francis, M. *Urban Open Space: Designing For User Needs*, Island Press, 2003.
- [3] Jacobs, J. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House, New York, 1961
- [4] Lefebvre, H. *The Production of Space*, Wiley-Blackwell,1991
- [5] Kevin L.*The image of the city*, Cambridge Massachussettes, MIT Press, 1960.
- [6] Parvez, M.“*Connectivity and Public Square as urban generator in Hong Kong*” unpublished Masters Dissertation, the University of Hong Kong, 2006.
- [7] Project for Public Spaces (PPS). *How to Turn a Place Around, a hand book for creating successful public spaces*, New York, 2002.
- [8] Suzanne H. Crowhurst Lennard, Henry L. Lennard. *Principles of True Urbanism*-<http://www.livablecities.org/articles/principles-true-urbanism>
- [9] Information on <http://www.pps.org/reference/grplacefeat/>