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# Interventions in spontaneous developed public spaces

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## ABSTRACT

Public green spaces are very important in the urban structure, both on environmental and social level. Renovation may be necessary, but the process must involve complexity.

The objective of this research is to define the main criteria of a successful renovation process, using two case studies - the Lucius-Burckhardt-Platz in Kassel, Germany, and the 'Parku i lodrave' in the city of Peja, Kosovo, where the recent intervention had rather negative effects. The paper considered aspects as community activity, key functions, visual elements, accessibility, safety, well-being and maintenance.

The transformation of these spontaneously developed, liveable spaces into renewed but abandoned parks was explained by the lack of correlation between the analysis of function, public needs, and the dominance of aesthetics.

## KEYWORDS

public spaces, urban interventions, spontaneous living spaces, liveable cities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Open public spaces are present in various forms, as city parks, neighborhood parks, mini-parks, squares or plazas, pedestrian sidewalks, greenways, playgrounds, waterfronts or beaches. Many open spaces are used and developed spontaneously, thus making them functional and by the need and desires of the neighborhood. In the most situations, people can find spaces and locations that are developed spontaneously as a result of human needs [1].

Intervening in public spaces is sometimes needed, but should be taken into consideration many elements and factors during the design process, especially in spaces that are functional and well used. According to C. Ren and G. Medvegy [2] their article explains clearly how a location is more than just a physical space because it has a history, feeling, experience, and meaning for those who are connected with it [2].

Referring to the book of M. Ganis [3] about the redevelopment of inner city spaces, in which people have invested emotionally, psychologically or symbolic value can stir the passions of communities and also create expensive development crises [3].

There are a lot of interventions in public spaces which witness that they are mainly focused on visual appearance rather than functional elements and the finished projects are more a visual experience and not touched or felt by the users. Talking about the public space or its own character one of the keys is to provide people with a safe and welcoming place referring to S. J. Alamoush, N. H. Ja'afar, and A. Kertész [4].

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According to the nonprofit organization *Project for Public Spaces*, [5], which is dedicated to create and sustain, public spaces are frequently connected with the term place making. When public space is empty, vandalized and mis-used this is generally a sign that something is mistaken either along its design, its management, or both [5].

Various examples show how open urban spaces developed and used spontaneously have been transformed into dysfunctional spaces as a result of ignoring various elements mentioned above, as well as additional weak design qualities, lack of access to the site, materialized surfaces, ignoring previous functions, lack of gathering points, and reduction of green spaces, explained by M. Francis [6] where most of the time's user conflicts come where their criteria and need are not met, lack of access, or over-design [6].

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1. Theoretical overview

To understand the potential negative effects of interventions in public spaces this paper is leaning on the overview of the relevant studies. In this relation certain research topics were defined as significant, which are the measurement of the quality of urban design, the livability assessment of public spaces and the analysis of public needs, on which the community use is based on.

### 2.2. Two case studies with different perspectives

Based on the overview this study introduces two public parks developed spontaneously but abandoned after a local urban intervention - the Lucius-Burckhardt-Platz in Kassel, Germany, and the 'Parku i lodrave' in Peja, Kosovo. The perspective in time as the source of data is different.

Analyzing the situation of Lucius Burckhardt Platz the study integrates previous research, especially an article from the suburban introducing the history and the impact of the intervention [7], also publications at that time, and a 2017 study edited by researchers of the University Kassel about the appropriation of open space [8]. Analysis of accessibility, green infrastructure and their quantity before and after the intervention, and the use of this space were carried out.

Understanding of the situation of the 'Parku i lodrave' in the city of Peja, is carried out as ethnographic research (since the 1990th), in which the possibility of observing and explaining an urban space as a resident from early childhood to the present day, later becoming an architect, was given. Analysis of accessibility, functionality, and relocation of previous elements, the addition of new functions, green infrastructure, and the use of this space was carried out.

### 2.3. Interpreting results in the light of the theory

Reconciling previous studies, achieved theories and the results of the case studies highlight the criteria of importance, which all design processes should consider. The comparison of analyzing methods and the evaluation based on own experience helps to emphasize basic aspects.

## 3. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF THE CONTEXT

### 3.1. Livability assessments of public spaces

The academic literature related to livability, and evaluation of public spaces according to the preferences and perceptions of the citizens is extensive. What can be considered an important milestone for urban studies is Jan Gehl's book [9] with its main goal to contribute to achieving the envisioned lively, safe, sustainable and healthy city. Obvious aspects are defined, which are contributing to develop own criteria for the analysis [9]. In the last decade, several studies dealt with the assessment of the qualities of urban spaces. An overview about the different methods used in L. M. Farahani and C. Maller's [10] study, giving a framework for understanding perceptions of and preferences for green spaces [10].

### 3.2. Measuring the quality of planning

An interesting research field is aiming the measuring of the quality of urban design, often related to walkability, also to quality of public spaces. The research of Clemente and Ewing [11] operationalized the urban design qualities in their book as imageability, enclosure, human scale, transparency and complexity [11], in accordance with Gehl's aspects [9]. Although the study is focusing on walkability, the criteria are easily implemented in public spaces. The most obvious indicator for a well-designed public space can be pointed out as the increasing, or constant use, which can be connected to the local community or visitors also.

### 3.3. Appropriation of urban places – a study of University Kassel

Various forms of urban use have been witnessed throughout the last few decades, also in the context of the so-called community urbanism. Impressive examples of civil initiatives were collected at the United States pavilion at the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale. The exhibition material is available as an archive of actions, the interest and impact of communities are impressive, because they were optimistic and open to use new tactics and new ways to create livable, sustainable and accessible cities [12].

Related to Lucius Burckhardt Platz - one of the case studies - researcher of the University Kassel edited a book [8] about the different ways of appropriation of urban places. They defined three different types of appropriation, through three different ways of interpretation of the Kassel process. One would be the appropriation moved by the daily needs connected to this place, as second the appropriation based on design and finally the appropriation as a protest. The types can be related to the case studies and bring interesting aspects for evaluation [8].



## 4. CASE STUDIES – ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### 4.1. Case study 1 – Lucius Burckhardt Platz in Kassel, Germany

The source of data for this case study was a detailed description of a group of authors from the initiative ‘Lucius-Burckhardt-Platz bleibt!’ the story about the struggle for legitimacy and sovereignty during the redesigning process of the campus of the University of Kassel [7].

**4.1.1. History of the place.** By 2011 the public space between the old and new campus of the University Kassel was developed spontaneously. It is located next to the canteen, university apartments, offices, and lecture rooms, as well as a cafeteria and parking lot. A bike repair station was established, designed, and built by students of architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture of the university. This open public space served numerous interests, with trees and green, well divided into easily understandable zones, mobile benches, and chairs, following the course of the day – a place to slow down (Fig. 1).

In 2008 among others the University Kassel gained the opportunity for significant campus development. A design competition was announced without involving the neighborhood; the results were short-presented and made clear, that the place is foreseeing significant changes. To strengthen the local connection, local activists organized civil interests – and the place was named after Lucius Burckhardt, a former professor of the University Kassel. Lucius Burckhardt (1925–2003) was a Swiss sociologist and economist. He was an important thinker of architectural theory and design theory, and the founder of strolology or promenadology – the science of strolling as a method in the field of aesthetics and cultural studies to become aware of the conditions of perception of the environment and enhancement of environmental perception itself.

**4.1.2. The intervention.** Despite all interest and engagement of the neighborhood in 2016 the square was finally closed, ‘cleaned’ and for further development as open space



Fig. 1. University café and the bike station around 2005  
(Source: with the permission of Archive Initiative Lucius-Burckhardt-Platz bleibt, Kassel, [7])

defined (Fig. 2). The university management was not available for discussion and stated that all development plans would aim an open space representing the university and not the neighborhood; therefore they cannot involve citizens in the planning process. To avoid a tougher protest, they promised to plan and implement only slight changes in the use of the square.

**4.1.3. Evaluation.** Following the case of Lucius Burckhardt Platz, can be noticed a complete transformation of a vivid ‘biophilic’ urban space into a contemporary square, in which the materialization, the stone as unique material prevails. It turned from a space full of life and activities to an almost empty one. The status of greenery, from a space filled with grass and unpaved ground, bushes, and tall trees where all of those created a livable atmosphere, which turned into a much less green one, an urban space without life, just to walk through, (Fig. 3).

### 4.2. Case study 2 – ‘Parku i lodrave’ in Peja, Kosovo

‘Parku i lodrave’, which means ‘Playground park’, is located in the city of Peja, western center [14], (Fig. 4).



Fig. 2. Preparing for the renewal 2011  
(Source: with the permission of Archive Initiative Lucius-Burckhardt-Platz bleibt! Kassel, [7])



Fig. 3. Former Lucius Burckhardt Platz, today Mönch K36  
(Source: with the permission of Creative Commons Attribution and Share Alike [13])



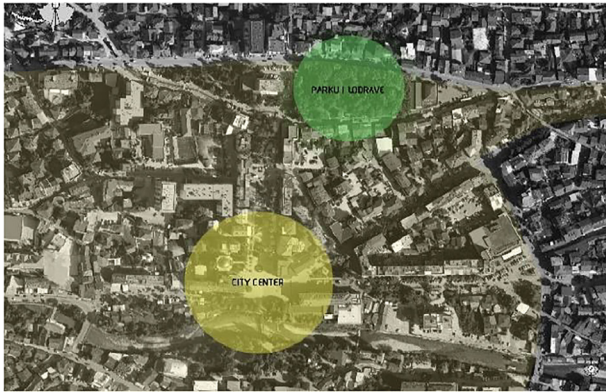


Fig. 4. Aerial view of Peja city  
(Source: Kosovo, Cadastral Agency [14])

**4.2.1. History of the place and before intervention.** ‘Parku i lodrave’ is an open public space and has existed for more than 50 years there. In the 1950th it functioned as a city stadium called ‘Pehlivon Mejdon’ in which mainly football matches were played. But later probably due to its closeness to the residential area and the city center it has been turned into a city park, which continues to be today.

The park is bordered or defined by a low stone wall and arched gates identifying the access to it. Before the recent intervention the park very actively was used (Fig. 5). Although the facilities were not well defined and even basic elements as benches, sports fields, and artificial lightening were missing.

**4.2.2. After intervention.** In 2019 the redesign and the renewal of the park was almost finished, but the local community was not happy with the design process, for some reasons. The main elements of the intervention were the change of the materialization of the pedestrian path; new lighting; the replacement of the playground next to the main road, a private parking lot and the trash containers (Fig. 6), and the decorative water pond on the former place of the playground, connected with narrow canals from the river-canal along the south side (Fig. 7).

In the north the park is bounded by the main road that connects the city with several educational facilities, also the Regional Hospital, the Patriarchate of Peja, some Mosques, the Catholic Church, and the National Park ‘Bjeshket e Nemuna of Rugova’ – a very frequented connection by the city dwellers and tourists as well.

A part of the south side of the park has been given to private businesses, mainly the cafeterias for use as an



Fig. 5. The daily use of the park  
(Source: with the permission of B. Lipa, 2012 [15])



Fig. 6. The playground after intervention  
(Source: B. Lleshi, 2021)

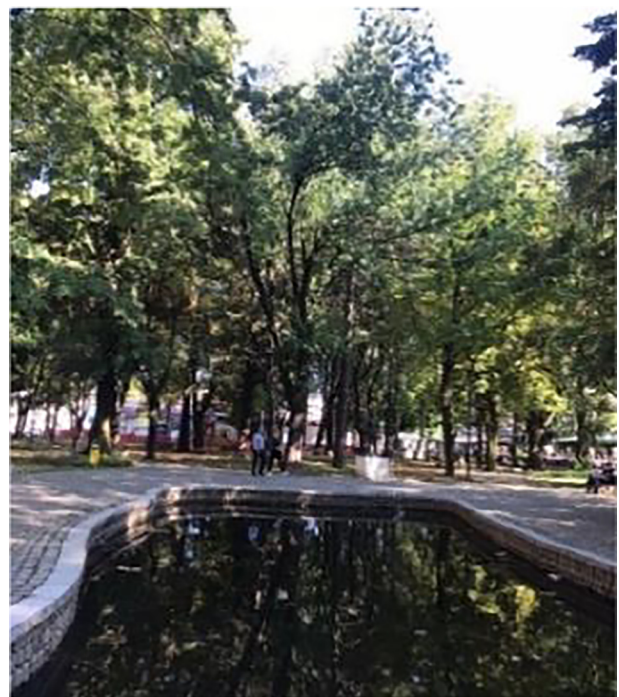


Fig. 7. Water pond on the playground’s previous space  
(Source: B. Lleshi, 2021)

additional space for their business. On the east side a new branch of the city kindergarten has been built and a part of the park is under use by the kindergarten as an outdoor playground. On the west side, a building was built, which is currently unused but it is said that it will be a community house for elderly people.



**4.2.3. Evaluation.** As explained there were significant changes implemented at the renewal in 2019, both in function and appearance, but it led more to a decrease in safety and functionality and the abandonment of this public space.

The replacement of the playground closer to the traffic, cars and trash containers was not an appropriate choice. The creation of the canals, which are at the intersection of the pedestrian path interferes with free movement and creates insecurity for some users, especially elderly people, young children and people with special needs (Fig. 8).

There are also maintenance problems, as the water canals are in the territory with quite large deciduous trees, where in autumn they are blocked by leaves stopping the circulation of water, resulting in a stench and a bad smell (Fig. 9).

**4.3. Study results**

Interventions in open urban spaces mainly aim to improve the quality of life, providing spaces with appropriate designs that respond to the needs of residents and users. An important aspect is to have a public place suitable for all ages, to provide maximum access and usability also to people with special needs; to raise the level of security and sustainability of that space, and increase the use of the place to have a positive and long-lasting result.

This research has chosen two sites in different countries and analyzed both projects after the intervention based on the results of the theoretical overview, emphasizing the main



Fig. 8. Crossing of the water canal at the intersection with pedestrian path  
(Source: B. Lleshi, 2021)



Fig. 9. Pollution of the water canals  
(Source: with the permission of Vrojtuesit e Lagjes - Peje, 2021 [16])

aspects as a community activity, visual elements and change, accessibility, safety, and maintenance. Figure 10 presents the results summarized, divided into columns (representing before and after), and refers to the quality of the interventions in two cases through circles expressing the results experienced in the physical environment.

Significant is the decrease in community use, as the places have been functional before the interventions. Their

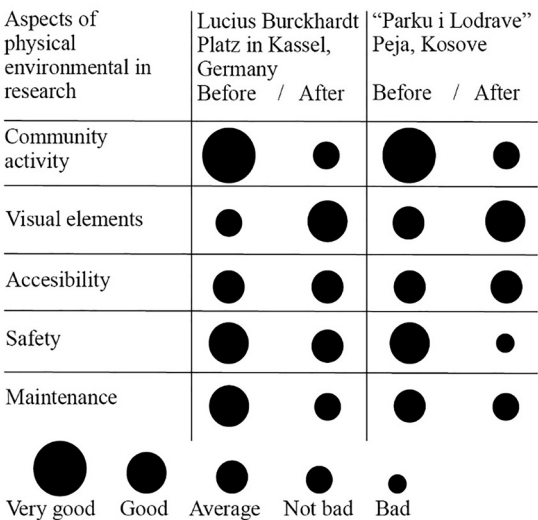


Fig. 10. Analytic diagram based on the results  
(Source: B. Lleshi, 2021)



redesign was carried out without a good understanding of the neighborhood citizens' needs.

In both cases an increased implementation of visual elements can be witnessed, although these elements led to an increasing need for maintenance (e.g., the pond in Peja, or the questions of the surface rainwater management), causing difficulties inaccessibility of the park (e.g., water canals in Peja). Aspects of use were also rewritten by the design concept's visual elements, whereas the lack of shadow places for sitting or the moving of the playground near the garbage disposals and the traffic are disadvantages of the intervention, turning functional spaces into dysfunctional ones.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The paper investigated public green spaces undergoing renovation, using two case studies where the local intervention had rather negative effects. The considered aspects of the evaluation were community activity, key functions, visual elements, accessibility, safety, well-being and maintenance. The results showed that the lack of correlation between the analysis of function, public needs, and the dominance of aesthetics and visual appearance brought the use of the parks out of balance. Local communities sometimes are prepared and would like to get involved in the planning process as much as in the maintenance of public spaces.

When the planning actors ignore this willingness and interest for any reason, which could be the lack of time, or the very strong preconception of the client or the authorities, they can miss the right understanding of the needs of the citizens. This leads to a well-meant, appearance representative designed urban space, but sadly not fulfilling the expected results.

People with different perspectives can be found in the urban community where: the older generation can have a history connected with places, middle-aged adults may have various innovative ideas and needs, and children need safe and flexible recreational places or playfields. Collaboration with the local community or interested users would contribute to a project that might benefit both the user and the investor party.

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old video of the 'Parku i Lodrave' in Peja, because it was very difficult to find old photos or videos. Also a thank you goes for the possibility of online access to the Kosovo Cadastral Agency webpage, which is managed by the Ministry of Economy and Environment in the use of aerial images, and measurements of the park space.

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