

Parks and Revitalization

Providing Mental Health in Urban Spaces



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The NBC sitcom “Parks and Recreation” advocates for the development of parks. The first season of the show focuses on an empty pit where, after listening to the community members’ concerns, Pawnee, Indiana Parks and Recreation employee Leslie Knope takes on the project of turning the pit into a park. In Season 1 Episode 2, Knope explains the significance of this park, saying, “Why do I want to build this park so bad? Maybe because a pit filled with garbage isn’t the best that we can do in America.”

This sentiment illustrates why we value parks in our communities because, instead of eyesores like pits full of garbage, parks provide a space to enjoy the outdoors and engage with other residents. Knope’s passion for parks and her community is contagious throughout the show, as she convinces fellow government employees, residents and the audience to rally behind the development of this neighborhood park.

Knope always places emphasis on the betterment of her community and its health over the course of the seven seasons of the show. The consideration of the community should always be a priority when developing greenspaces in our cities, especially since parks can have a profound impact on the mental health of city residents.

According to the United Nations, 54% of the world’s population lives in urban areas and that number is expected to grow to 66% by 2050. As we become an increasingly urban species, it is important that we don’t lose our greenspaces to parking lots and apartment buildings. It is clear that we already value parks in our cities, since Central Park is visited 42,000,000 times annually, Lincoln Park in Chicago is visited 20,000,000 times annually and Forest Park here in St. Louis is visited 15,000,000 times annually, according to the Trust for Public Land Use.

However, while some cities pride themselves on their parks, other cities fall behind when it comes to providing

greenspace amenities to its citizens. The Trust for Public Land Use reports that Minneapolis is the highest-rated big city for public parks, with 95% of its residents living within a ten minute walk from one. Other highly-rated cities include Chicago, Boston, New York and San Francisco, all with parks in walking distance for at least 90% of their residents. Not only do these cities have large parks, but also neighborhood parks scattered throughout the city. Other cities, including Jacksonville, Louisville, San Antonio and Nashville all have especially poor park access, with over 60% of their residents not having walkable access to a park. In Charlotte, the lowest rated big city, only 26% of people have walkable access. These cities are falling behind in terms of greenspace, and this can have negative consequences for these cities and their residents.

Our parks can do more for our mental health than most people might think. One benefit is that parks provide people a space for exercise, whether that be walking, running, biking or playing sports. The Mayo Clinic reports that regular exercise can help ease depression and anxiety as well as improve self-esteem and mental well-being. Parks, importantly, also function as a space for social interaction. Having positive social interactions can improve mental well-being through increasing self-esteem and empathy along with promoting feelings of support and belonging in a community.

Parks can also help combat air, noise and light pollution, which all have an impact on mental health. Noise and light pollution can delay and interrupt sleep and, according to a study from John Hopkins University, individuals with sleeping problems are 10 times more likely to experience depression. Poor sleep can also worsen symptoms for those who have mental health disorders like depression and anxiety. Parks are able to create better sleeping conditions for community members, as they serve as a barrier to noise and light pollution.

It is important for greenspaces to be near living spaces, even if that just involves planting trees between the street and the sidewalk, because their proximity can limit the effects of air, noise and light pollution. Trees and parks can also help with air pollution since they absorb heavy metals and other pollutants so that we do not breathe them. The American Psychological Association reports that there is a link between air pollution and depression, as well as a link

between cognitive decline later in life and air pollution. In the United States, low income, inner city neighborhoods are disproportionately impacted by poor air quality. This means that these neighborhoods must be prioritized when planning greenspaces in a city to try and negate some of the harmful effects of air pollutants that they have been experiencing for years.

Mental health problems are more common in cities, and urban living increases the risk for developing depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and cocaine and heroin addiction according to the World Health Organization. In order to combat the high prevalence of mental health disorders, cities need to do what they can to promote better mental health for their residents.

Not only can a city impact a resident's mental health, but mental health problems can have a huge negative impact on cities. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the direct and indirect cost of mental health is over 5% of the gross domestic product. Despite this spending, there is still an unmet need for treatment, meaning that this spending must be increased in order to provide enough services to support those with mental health disorders in cities. Some of the direct costs include health care, social care and disability costs.

However, many people do not receive the treatment they need and cities rarely are able to provide access for everyone to the services needed. Mental health can affect many aspects of people's lives, and can lead to higher rates of physical health problems and even mortality. An individual's employment, finances, relationships with friends and family and their ability to be a part of an urban community can all be impacted by mental health.

When considering the challenge of mental illness in cities, it is clear that investments need to be made to improve the lives of residents. While it may not seem like a priority for cities to spend money on greenspaces, parks really can have a huge impact on people's mental health. According to research done at the University of California, San Diego, separation from nature is detrimental to human development, health and well-being. The study found that depression was 33% higher for those living in areas with the fewest greenspaces, compared to those living in neighborhoods with the most. Over time, living near a greenspace can have significant improvements on mental health, with individuals who moved to greener areas having significantly better mental health recorded three years after the move.

A successful park takes more than just throwing some playground equipment on a patch of grass and calling it a day. Parks need to be carefully planned and maintained if they are to enhance the quality of life of their visitors. Parks quickly lose their utility and value if the general public views the area as unsafe. Bryant Park in New York City was once an unsafe place where people lacked comfort and security when they visited, however the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (BPRC) was able to reclaim this space in the 1990s. Bryant Park has a great location in midtown Manhattan but, before the revitalization, few people went there except for drug deals.

Crime and lack of maintenance both made the park seem like an undesirable place to be. However, the biggest

issue was that there was nothing to do inside the park. When tackling the revitalization, BPRC made sure that the space would be used for public events like historical park tours and concerts. They also added food kiosks, a stand for buying theater tickets and a restaurant to give people more reasons to visit the park. The park was also made to feel safer by adding more lighting and opening up the entrances to give a better line of sight to guests. These changes doubled the number of annual park visitors, which in turn reduced crime by 92% according to the National Recreation and Park Association.

An important part of revitalization and creation of parks is maintaining the authenticity of the community. Gentrification is a very real danger to urban areas, as it can drive out long-term inhabitants and undermine the respected culture of an area. Instead of increasing police and patrolling, BPRC made the park more secure by adding safety features and making it a desirable place for community members; they mitigated crime through greenspace improvements and not militaristic forces. A balance between making safer conditions and preventing the removal of a community's culture is essential to the successful growth, installment and acceptance of greenspaces.

It is clear that greenspaces are important to our mental health, but how we determine where we put parks, how we revitalize them and how they should be designed is dependent on the community that the parks will serve. In a neighborhood with lots of children, a park with playground equipment and soccer fields would be a good fit. In a neighborhood with an older population, it is more important to prioritize a lot of seating and clear walkways. Overall, the goal should be to beautify parks for the people that will use them. Community input is essential when it comes to design, since citizens should feel both enriched by green spaces and invested in their well-being. Having parks that the community values will mean that they are better maintained, widely utilized, and able to have a significant impact on people's lives.

The development of the pit into a park in "Parks and Recreation" was not portrayed to be an easy process. Characters in the show faced many barriers to its development, and the park ultimately was not completed until the seventh season of the show. Despite the long process, the results were worthwhile since the park transformed and improved the community greatly. There was no longer the danger of an open pit full of garbage or the eyesore of an empty lot. The park, though small, still provided a great space for the community to come together and enjoy the outdoors.

The success of this park was attributed to Parks and Recreation employee Leslie Knope's passion for her community. Her emphasis on communal involvement should be an emphasis of every park development project. The goal of parks should always be to provide for the community, since neighborhood greenspaces can have incredible impacts on the mental health of nearby residents. Prioritizing mental health in the planning of greenspaces should be commonplace, because a park's purpose is not just to beautify a city, but also to be utilized by the community. Parks are for the people and should be planned by the people, making the people themselves a priority in the development process.