

BOOK REVIEW

Innovative Approaches to Researching Landscape and Health.

Open Space : People Space 2

Catherine Ward Thompson, Peter Aspinall & Simon Bell (eds)

London, Routledge, 2010, 287pp

As health concerns arising from the prevalence of 'lifestyle diseases' rise, this book is a timely reminder of the range of approaches and evidence supporting the connections between the physical environment and health. Here, landscape is viewed in its broadest sense as being both urban and rural, public and private, natural and manmade and varying in scale from street trees through urban parks to the wider countryside. It also takes a holistic view of the breadth of professional interest in the value of landscape for health incorporating landscape architecture, urban design, public health, psychology, housing and education amongst both professional interest and in its contributors.

At the start, we are reminded of the costs to the health service of long-term illnesses such as depression, heart disease, asthma, diabetes and cancer and of the human conditions such as obesity and stress which can also contribute to these. It is these 'non-communicable' diseases that, as researchers and practitioners, we are now seeking to address; and the environment and human engagement with the environment is increasingly seen to play an important role. The book arises from this recognition and from the work carried out by the OPENspace Research Centre in exploring access to green space. It comes specifically from a conference organised by the research centre in 2007 which brought together many of the international contributors to this book to discuss their research and further the debate on the links between landscape and health.

The book is divided into four somewhat overlapping sections, addressing theoretical approaches, evidence, methodologies and practical applications, with each section reflecting the breadth of the contributors.

In part 1, the theoretical approach is covered by first considering affordances and perceptions and then by looking at behaviour mapping particularly in relation to the use of the landscape by children. Harry Heft's discussion first of what we mean by perceptions of the environment and then of affordances helps to explain how the features of the landscape have differing uses and meanings for individuals and hence how affordances help us to see the environment through the function of its features. As action-related properties of the environment they are also useful in helping to consider its value for physical activity and healthy living. In contrast to this theoretical view of the value of the landscape, Robin Moore and Nilda Cosco present a practical approach to mapping how the landscape is utilised by children in three contrasting settings. The behaviour mapping approach enables us to see what features have the most intensive use and how they are used. There is also some discussion of various methodologies used for mapping and the outcomes achieved.

This approach starts to yield evidence into what features work best in promoting healthy behaviours in children.

In part II, three different approaches are presented on 'Evidence on the relationship between landscape and health', first by taking the widest view of the available evidence linking landscape and health, then addressing the evidence on the urban environment and physical activity before looking at a specific small scale intervention. Sjerb de Vries, in his exploration of the evidence into mechanisms linking green space with human health, selects four main routes: improving air quality, reducing stress, stimulating physical activity and facilitating social contact, as being potentially the most significant in addressing the associated health problems but also being the ones for which most evidence exists. His comprehensive analysis however, points to the inconclusiveness and sometimes conflicting outcomes of the work to date and to the need for further research to support future activity and policy in this area. He also considers whether achieving one outcome is compatible with the others: for example a wide open space for vigorous activity might exclude those seeking stress reducing calm, or that casual social contact through passing neighbours on a pleasant walking street is different from the opportunity to sit and chat in a small square or park. Fiona Bull, Billie Giles-Coti and Lisa Wood's discussion on active landscapes reaches beyond green space into whole neighbourhood design and the availability of good data through time to properly analyse causality. They point to the value of good GIS data and the limitations and costs of accurate and comprehensive layers on which to build good research. The third part of this section comes from a very different perspective and considers the design and use of a therapeutic garden in addressing stress induced exhaustion. Grahn and colleagues have worked together to bring landscape, medicine, and psychology to bear in addressing the problem through carefully managed exposure to a variety of landscape types within a controlled 'garden' environment. As well as detailing the garden layout and treatment methodology, this chapter also embraces the more medical side of treatment and benefit.

Part III considers methodologies from a psychological perspective, first considering the personal projects approach and then exploring peoples' preferences through the use of conjoint analysis. Brian Little's exploration of the approach of personal project provides an insight into human flourishing through the relation between people and environment in the pursuit of personal projects as an essential core activity of human wellbeing. In the second part of this section, Peter Aspinall describes and discusses the potential for conjoint analysis in discovering what people's real preferences are. The advantage of this technique is that, rather than considering features in isolation when other biases might distort the findings, by presenting collections of features and asking people to choose between two options, their ratings of an individual component is deduced from the overall evaluation of a range of options containing different combinations of features. He uses two examples of where this has been used to highlight the methodology and potential for this to determine the underlying preferences for landscape features.

Part IV moves the reader into practical applications with Ruth Conroy Dalton and Julienne Hanson discussing the potential for space syntax methodologies, conventionally used in the built urban environment, to be used to better understand how and why people are more or less motivated to walk and explore the local landscape. Their analysis is that there is much potential for the use of these techniques but that interdisciplinary expertise needs to be brought to bear. Catherine Ward Thompson's contribution, as you might expect from an editor and one at the core of the OPENspace research centre is wide ranging, both reflecting on the contributions of the authors to the debate and also the historical context and how this work has an appeal in addressing whole population public health. She discusses the evidence challenges and the range of techniques which have developed the research thus far and details some of the l'DGO research project's work which has contributed significantly to the debate – too much to go into here.

Simon Bell's concluding chapter provides a thorough summing up of the preceding pages and draws across the chapters to discuss the need for evidence which is appropriate to the audience – he notes the differences between the medical and other communities expectations and reiterates the call for multidisciplinary cooperation. He also provides a valuable discussion on the various methods and their limitations as well as ways forward which would combine methodologies for maximum efficacy in drawing out the human and physical variables which collectively determine how a landscape is used and by whom.

Overall, this is an interesting and thought provoking addition to the literature on health and the built environment which not only details some new ways of approaching research in this area but also provides a comprehensive summary of the evidence so far and possible future direction for new work. The chapters are however less than cohesive as a whole volume with some going into quite specific and detailed discussion about one specific area of analysis or case study whilst others are much more broad reaching in their coverage – perhaps exactly what we should expect from an edited volume with such a diverse range of well-qualified contributors. This is a minor complaint and I feel better informed and even inspired from reading it.

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